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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *The Age of Identity*.

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Who This Book Is For

This book is written for the vast majority of educators, families, school board members, and everyone else invested in education. It speaks to everyone who wants their children—and, if they think about it for a moment, other people’s children—to succeed, be well, and belong. It appeals to all of those who sometimes feel that they themselves are treated unjustly, unfairly, and unkindly, as they try to do what’s best for kids.

It’s a book that strives to get past the culture wars and the more volatile aspects of identity politics that divide communities into villains and victims, or aggressors and aggrieved. It moves beyond treating each other as singular, oversimplified, and often stigmatized identities. It rejects the ways in which people feel they are portrayed, and sometimes pilloried as one-dimensional beings, defined by or demonized solely because of their race, disability, privilege, or gender identity.

Our book urges readers to honestly confront exclusion and oppression wherever it exists within and beyond our schools. Yet, it also moves beyond discussing what to do about these injustices in languages of accusation, indignation, guilt, and shame.

Identity issues affect all of us and are the responsibility of all educators. What kinds of people children are and need to be now and in the future is at the heart of child development, of moving through adolescence, and of entering the adult world. Identity issues and even identity politics aren’t just about particular groups, or other people, of one kind or another. They concern all of us.

Identities are also multiple and complex. All of us are many things, not just one. We may see ourselves and each other in terms of our race and ethnicity, our gender identity, our nationhood, or our stage of life. Other, less discussed aspects of identity may include our line of work; being a twin, a mother, or a grandfather; being a cancer survivor; or having a passion for marathon running, cooking, or musical performance.

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To treat and categorize people in relation to just one aspect of their identity, however important, even where we mean well, is an insult to their dignity as full human beings. It turns people into boxes to be ticked or adversaries to be defeated. We must strive to understand our kids as whole beings, in all their complexity, with many changing facets to who they are and what they might become. Appearances, especially first appearances, can be deceptive. What we see isn't always what we get.

We want this book to inspire readers to address not just what should be attacked, opposed, canceled, or removed, but also, and mostly, what can be done together. We envision a time when dynamic communities of rich diversity will create success, fulfillment, inclusion, and belonging for everyone. In this quest, it's important to appreciate we are all imperfect and make mistakes from time to time. None of us has all the knowledge and all the answers. Humility is a necessary milestone on the road to humanity.

When we get down to it, in practical everyday language, we will appreciate that what is essential for some groups of our kids will usually benefit all of them—safer schools, a richer and more engaging curriculum, and more diverse pools of skills and talent. We will all get to know each other better and will accomplish more together. We will find ways to discuss disagreements and differences in a spirit of goodwill and with a mindset of civility that respects and protects one another's dignity.

This is what most people want. Those very few who believe they have nothing to learn from their opponents, and who engage in culture wars and identity politics to advance their self-interests, or to distract their rivals, are not the people for whom this book is written. For everyone else, let's begin.

Preface

Education and Human Development

This is a book about one of the most abiding aspects of education and one of the most compelling and controversial issues of our times: identity.

Since schools were first founded, from the ancient Greeks onward, education has been about more than accumulating knowledge and skills.¹ It has addressed how to develop people and help them form their character, and how to shape whole societies and civilizations. From its Latin origin, *educere*, education is not about drumming ideas into people. It is about leading people and their ideas out.

The Catholic, Jesuit tradition, in institutions like our own Boston College, is dedicated to education as a process of human formation.² The German and Northern European philosophy of *Bildung* imbues public education with a spirit of self-cultivation and unifies identity and the self with the broader society.³ Culturally responsive teaching addresses how the content of the curriculum should enable students from diverse backgrounds to feel like they are included, engaged, and belong in their school environment.⁴

In virtually every country, education contributes to nation building by cultivating belonging among young people, through developing their sense of collective identity. The International Baccalaureate and the British Commonwealth's Duke of Edinburgh's Award program both include service to the community as a significant part of their curriculum. With threats to democracy, to voting rights, and to the privacy of voter information, educational systems in many nations are also rediscovering the importance of making democracy a central part of young people's experiences in school.

Who are we? What will become of us? What can we be part of? How will that make the world a better place? These questions are fundamental to how people experience education. In the words of the classic French

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sociologist and former teacher Émile Durkheim, education shapes the generations of the future. Many teachers today still recognize the truth in the old dictum that they don't teach subjects, they teach children. Parents want their kids to succeed. But they want them to be happy and fulfilled too.

By design or default, identity is always integral to education. We can't avoid it, even if we try. In the four decades spanning the turn of this century, though, it looked like the world was making every effort to subordinate identity and human development to the global drive for increased economic performance and educational achievement. Identity issues were overlooked and ignored. They were rendered invisible.

From Achievement to Identity

From the 1980s onward, more and more schools and school systems were thrown into what we have called an *Age of Achievement and Effort*.⁵ Educational policies reflected priorities to bring about more and more economic growth, as measured by gross domestic product, rather than focusing on sustainability and quality-of-life factors such as happiness, meaning, purpose, inclusion, and sense of belonging. Performance measures in education mimicked performance targets in economies. Education policies were defined by efforts to drive up standards, narrow achievement gaps, outperform competitors, race to the top, benchmark against the best, spend more time and effort on formal learning, deliver measurable outcomes, and improve results.

At first, some of these measures gave needed direction to school systems. Before long, however, they took on an unstoppable logic all their own. Many important aspects of human development were sacrificed to the lemming-like rush toward the cliff's edge of never-ending achievement gains. Preparation for competitive tests and examinations left little or no time for arts, social studies, physical education, or learning outdoors. A vast industry of cram schools and grind schools grew up, along with other private tutoring services after school. Homework increased. Student engagement suffered. Anxiety and other kinds of ill-being began to affect young people's mental health. In the *Age of Achievement and Effort*, identity issues were officially irrelevant.

Things started to change from about 2010, though. A new age emerged of *Engagement, Well-Being, and Identity*. Our book is one of three we have written on each of the three parts of this age.⁶ This one is concerned with the *Age of Identity*.

From 2009 up to 2018, we undertook two long spells of working with a representative sample of 10 of Ontario's 72 school districts in a consortium to analyze and advance the agenda for inclusion that they had been asked to move forward by the province's Ministry of Education.

Inclusion was originally a more sophisticated way of thinking about how to support children with special educational needs. It was about shifting from an emphasis on legally and psychologically identifying individual children with exceptionalities and providing interventions and supports for them, to creating environments where collaborative teams of teachers used differentiated instruction with the assistance of technological supports that could enable all students to succeed.

From 2014, under a new premier, Kathleen Wynne, for whom Andy was an education adviser, the province, and, therefore, the 10 districts in our consortium, deepened the approach to inclusion, equity, and well-being. Excellence was defined broadly beyond literacy and mathematics to make the school "a compelling, innovative and engaging place to learn for all students." Equity was about "inclusivity and respect," "regardless of ancestry, culture, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, language, physical and intellectual ability, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or other factors." Well-being would promote "a positive sense of self and belonging" to develop the "whole child." *Achieving excellence* made inclusion and identity central to attaining equity and excellence.

Educators in our districts developed innovative projects to promote aspects of these new policy directions. Working with our diverse team of graduate students, we undertook case studies of each of these districts and held twice-yearly retreats with them in Toronto. It was the educators' interests, not ours, that took us into new terrain that addressed student learning and engagement, well-being, and identity.

In addition to an online technical report and several peer-reviewed research articles, listed at the back of this book, the products of our work are now spread across four books—*Five Paths of Student Engagement*, *Well-Being in Schools*, *Leadership From the Middle*, and this final volume: *The Age of Identity*.⁷

This is how we came to the topic of identity. We followed the interests of the educators in the 10 districts. We didn't decide to study and then write a book about identity. In many ways, the *Age of Identity* wrote us!

We have brought to this book the evidence of this research along with occasional references to other projects in which we have subsequently

been engaged, the intellectual traditions in which we have been trained, and our interpretations of key contemporary sources on identity. At times, we have included reflections on our own biographies and identities. We have used all this to contribute to the field of identity in education in a way that may vary from accounts by people who have researched the topic in a different way, at a different time, in a different place, or from a different standpoint.

We do not presume to offer a definitive work on identity, or to provide comprehensive coverage of any or all types of identity. But we hope other researchers, educators, and readers in general will find things of value here that will deepen and challenge their own thinking on identity in schools today and help us bring together our different perspectives to work for the good of all students.

The Identity Agenda

As this book goes to press, we find ourselves in an intriguing historical moment. On the one hand, identities are being oppressed and excluded everywhere simply because of where people were born, what they look like, and how people in power respond to that.

- Economic inequality and the poverty that results from it are at their highest levels since before World War II.⁸ According to Oxfam International, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the richest 1% acquired almost twice the world's wealth as everyone else put together.⁹
- Despite the *Black Lives Matter* movement, violence against and victimization of Black and Brown people continue to be inflicted by law enforcement officers on minority communities in many countries.¹⁰
- A 2023 survey in England of students' feelings about their safety in school found that less than half of those with "a gender identity other than male or female" or of those who were gay or bisexual felt safe compared with approximately three quarters of heterosexual students.¹¹
- In Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom, children who find themselves to be refugees, for no other reason than the geography of their birth, are sent to live in

camps in conditions of squalor deliberately designed to deter other refugees.¹²

- In the United States, the only country that has refused to sign the 1989 *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, minors are imprisoned with adult felons.¹³ More than a dozen U.S. states still shackle some pregnant women prisoners to their beds, in spite of protests by the American Medical Association.¹⁴
- In Canada, communities have been exhuming the remains of maltreated Indigenous children from residential schools that forcibly separated them from their language, families, and communities until as late as the mid-1990s.¹⁵
- The Russian war against Ukraine is attempting to erase national and cultural identity by, among even more cruel methods, forcing teachers in occupied territories to communicate in Russian and to remove Ukrainian cultural content from the curriculum.¹⁶
- Climate change, and the resistance of the traditional energy industry to combatting it, is posing the greatest and ultimate threat of all to the identities of the world's rising generations: extinction.¹⁷

On the other hand, in response to all this, groups who want to protect their privileges are twisting and turning aspects of these very real forms of social exclusion into full-scale culture wars. This is an *Alice in Wonderland* world of identity politics—of excessive focus on and moral panics about a tiny number of hot-button issues involving a few controversial textbooks and novels, statues and plaques, or bathrooms and pronouns.¹⁸ The purpose of these fomented moral panics is to stoke up culture wars and inflame *identity politics* on a few symbolic issues to fill up the media bandwidth. This diverts people's anger and indignation away from massive economic and racial oppressions that have devastating consequences for monumental numbers of people with marginalized identities.

The expression *identity politics* goes back to a group known as the Combahee River Collective.¹⁹ The Collective was a Black, feminist, lesbian organization in the 1970s, which felt that much of the feminist movement was racist and that parts of the civil rights movement were sexist and homophobic. It was an early example of what is now known

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as *intersectionality*. In a famous statement it made in 1977, the group introduced the term *identity politics* to help articulate its own feelings of oppression. Since then, like the term *woke* that has similar origins, *identity politics* has often been turned into a term of abuse by opponents of equity and inclusion.

This is a shame and an outrage. Identity politics are about the real differences that make many students prone to being marginalized and oppressed. They are a gateway into inclusion because they pinpoint who needs particular attention and why, as well as how the whole school culture needs to shift to make these accommodations possible. The point of identity politics should not be to put us into categories that set us against one another. It should be to include all of us, and bring us all together.

Historically, identity is a relatively recent phenomenon. In *Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition*, Stanford University professor Francis Fukuyama argues that traditional societies had no need for any concept of identity or even of the self.²⁰ In agrarian societies, there were few differences other than biologically ascribed ones of age or gender.

Social roles are both limited and fixed: a strict hierarchy is based on age and gender; everyone has the same occupation; one's entire life is in the same small village with a limited circle of friends and neighbors; one's religion and beliefs are shared by all; and social mobility is virtually impossible.²¹

There was no pluralism, movement, or choice—no need for anyone to distinguish themselves from anyone else. The world was what it was, and you were what you were. There wasn't much more to it.

With modernization, though, people took on new jobs, moved to cities, and met other kinds of people. Trade expanded, imperial colonization took place, mass migrations across continents and oceans occurred, and the printing press spread new ideas. Elites started to have leisure, time for reflection arose, travel and tourism evolved, women eventually took control of their own reproductive choices,

and other life opportunities arose for them. Ideas of dignity and democracy took root, and oppressed and marginalized groups started to rebel and assert their rights. Television and then the internet spread images of how to look and to be, and medical science made it possible to hide the signs of aging, treat physical disabilities, and eventually enable people to affirm their gender identities.

In a couple of hundred years, a great deal happened. Now new identities are asserted, defended, and transformed all the time. *The Age of Identity* is not about finding or revealing our identities. It's about creating them anew.

The sense of liberation that comes with near-limitless choices, however, is coupled with feelings of what British social theorist Anthony Giddens calls “radical doubt.”²² “Modernity actually undermines the certainty of knowledge,” Giddens writes.²³ As a result, we find that we no longer have confidence or clarity about who we really are.

Catalan sociologist Manuel Castells is more metaphorical. When traditional authority has collapsed, he says, “The king and the queen, the state and civil society, are both naked, and their children-citizens are wandering around a variety of foster homes.”²⁴ However, Castells also points to new social movements of those who have experienced discrimination and who struggle for inclusion—women, people of color, disabled groups, and the LGBTQ+ community among them. These groups form the backbone of contemporary *identity politics*.

IDENTITY IS . . .

A universal part of modern human and educational development.

An integral element of adolescence and growing up.

An essential aspect of equity and inclusion.

A process, a quest, and a struggle.

Formed through relationships with others.

Something to acknowledge, represent, and celebrate.

Something that must sometimes be critiqued and challenged.

Multiple, complicated, and intersecting.

Presented differently to different groups and audiences.

Sometimes fluid, but never boundless.

Inseparable from who has the power to define it.

Often attacked, stigmatized, and suppressed.

Sometimes invisible, overlooked, and ignored.

An expression of personal uniqueness.

A resource for collective belonging.

LOOKING AHEAD

In this book we look at how education is affected by and in turn actively forms our identities and senses of ourselves. Identity is who we are. Including and engaging with diverse identities is essential to equity and achievement. Throughout this book, we will touch on all 15 statements and ideas about identity listed on the previous page.

We are living in a time when identity is all the rage—literally as well as figuratively. Hopefully, our research, and its illuminating examples, will help educators, parents, policy makers, and school board members move beyond rage to reconciliation. In the final chapter, we provide principles, protocols, and strategies to help people engage with diverse identities while also creating an educational and social world where we can all learn to live together to advance the common good.

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