Promoting Identity in Schools:
12 Principles to Advance Inclusion and Equity

By Dennis Shirley and Andy Hargreaves

Who do you think you are? This question is usually meant as a challenge. If you think about it, though, it can also be a call for introspection about your identity. This holds special urgency for all educators now.

These days, you can hardly go to a school board meeting or check your social media feed without learning about a controversy related to identity issues. What should educators do when they are told to remove library books that some have deemed "inappropriate?" What are leaders risking when they declare their reservations about the content of antibias training? What about the U.S. teacher who was fired for questioning her school system's ban on the popular song "Rainbowland" that advocates for 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion?

Educators are on the front lines of a new Age of Identity. It's a time when an innocent misstep can not only lead to a serious dressing-down by the powers that be. It may even get you fired or lose you a job offer that you thought you had in the bag.

We first recognized the educational importance of identity in our work with 10 boards organized in a consortium organized by the Council of Ontario Directors of Education. We learned how identity matters for all young people and their teachers because it can provide a sense of security and belonging. Most of all, we found, it matters for those who are stigmatized or patronized because of one aspect of their identity, like their race, religion or disability.

Since then, identity issues have become not just a concerned focus for greater inclusion. They have turned into a tinder box of politicized emotion. The issues have become so intense, polarized and complicated, that many leaders don't know what to do.

In response, our new book, *The Age of Identity: Who Do Our Kids Think They Are … and How Do We Help Them Belong?* sets out 12 principles to help school leaders steer discussions into and through the identity storms they are confronting.

12 Principles to Advance Inclusion and Equity

Sympathy: to feel intensely *with* and not just have empathy *for* the suffering of others.

Bravery: to be courageous in standing up for the rights of others, even when it risks unpopularity.

Solidarity: to bring people into fellowship and learn to live in peace together.

Dignity: to recognize that all human beings, even and especially those with whom we disagree, deserve honour and respect.

Generosity: to value others' strengths and not let forgivable flaws or occasional errors negate their contributions.

Forgiveness: to accept that colleagues make mistakes and make allowances when they do.

Civility: to manage disagreement with others with dissident views about identities with active listening and human decency.

Humility: to recognize when egos are getting in the way and to accept that we haven't got it all figured out just yet.

Irony: to bring ourselves down a peg or two sometimes, with a bit of self-deprecation.

Authenticity: to express oneself fully and freely without impinging on others' ability to do so too.

Rationality: to deliberate on identity questions with respect for evidence and logic.

Practicality: to anchor our ideal strategies in the concrete realities of our everyday work lives.

The principles fall into three clusters that leaders can use to organize discussions in their schools.

Cluster #1: Three principles of *sympathy*, *bravery* and *solidarity* can lead educators and communities to ask: How shall we undertake the important work of promoting our students' identities, even when this is difficult and acrimonious? What drives us? What is our purpose? How can we truly feel for and feel with those who suffer unnecessarily in our classrooms, schools and societies? How can we stand up courageously for the lives of others who are marginalized, excluded and oppressed, even when we are faced with criticism, conflict and opposition?

Cluster #2 addresses the principles of *dignity, generosity, forgiveness, civility, humility* and *irony*. These are about how to be and how to live together as we engage in difficult deliberations regarding equity and inclusion. Our identities are often complex. All of us have multiple identities and should never be stereotyped according to just one or two of them. Also, though we want curriculum texts to be inclusive of all kinds of identities, we usually ignore mixed racial heritages, forcing children to belong to one category or another that may misrepresent them. Sometimes, our identities may even be conflicted. We seek full integration of newcomer identities, for example, only to find that some of these can be patriarchal or can mistreat others who don't have cisgender identities. Most of us try to do the right thing but we may then find we are often unintentionally implicated in the very exclusions and oppressions we want to resolve. It's in just these difficult moments when we most need guiding principles.

Cluster #3 comprises three culminating principles of *authenticity*, *rationality* and *practicality* that are touchstones of engagement with those around us. These compel us to investigate: How do we draw honestly and reflectively on our own life experiences, including our own wounds, as well as on science and evidence, to uplift all our students? How do we address all these things, not just as ideals or abstractions, but in practical terms that will work in the here and now?

The controversies that school leaders are facing aren't going away. Banning books and songs, or censuring colleagues who express dissident opinions, may offer short-term retribution for some, but will not open people up or bring them together. A better approach is to search for things we have in common, appreciate and learn from our differences, be honest about where each of us has fallen short, and make amends when we do. *The Age of Identity* calls on us to be our best selves. Let's come together and use these 12 principles to ensure that all our young people can thrive in the fullness of their identities. ꝯ

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