



Professional learning and development that honors students' identities

BY ANDY HARGREAVES AND DENNIS SHIRLEY

Who are you? It's a simple enough question, but pose it to anyone, and you'll get fascinating responses. "My hair is my identity," one high school student told us. "I'm a gamer," said another. Others assert their identities as Swifties, goths, or athletes. Throw in race, gender, nationality, and religion, and we soon see how gloriously complicated human identities can be.

As educators, we squander huge opportunities for inclusion when valuable discussions about identities are oversimplified and hijacked for partisan purposes. But this is just what has been happening.

Legislators in 18 U.S. states have passed laws restricting the teaching of race and gender, arguing that these are inherently divisive topics that pit groups against one another. A RAND Corporation report (Woo et al., 2024) observes that even in the 32 U.S. states that have not passed such laws, most educators say they avoid lessons referring to race or gender because they are "afraid of verbal or physical altercations with parents."

Identity talk need not degenerate into culture wars, however. In fact, if you ask people to describe three aspects of their identity — as we regularly do in our classes, workshops, and in everyday conversations — you quickly learn that everyone loves to talk about

their identities once they are offered the opportunity.

By stimulating such conversations, professional learning and development can help all of us to understand better who we really are and how we can belong to something bigger than ourselves.

Learning about identity calls on us to go beyond aspects of professional learning that are generally acknowledged as key to quality and effectiveness, such as the embedded, student-focused, and collaborative nature of learning. Those aspects are necessary but not sufficient to address the central role that identities play in schools.

An additional aspect of such learning is acknowledgment of



complexity because identities are multifaceted and wonderfully unique. Too often, when identities are addressed through implementing culturally responsive teaching or anti-bias training, for example, there is a tendency to take a simplistic approach that puts people into specific, discrete categories.

The reality is that most of our students and their teachers have multiple, complex, and even contradictory identities. This matters greatly because it's hard for young people to succeed or be well if they feel they need to hide significant parts of themselves because their identities are stigmatized for being different or stereotyped to fit into a program or a category.

So, the urgent question is this: Can our schools help our students flourish in the fullness of their identities? We believe the answer is yes — if education professionals can get beyond categorizing people because of one characteristic that supposedly supersedes all others, whether it be race, gender identity, privilege, disability, or something else. By acknowledging and embracing complexity, we can make

identity a vital foundation for inclusion, achievement, and equity in education.

With these considerations in mind, this article draws on two research programs — in collaboration with 10 school districts and with a national network of 41 schools attempting innovation for greater inclusion after COVID-19 — to examine the complexity of students' identities and what it means for rethinking professional learning and development.

THE FULLNESS OF IDENTITIES

Formulaic approaches to learning about identity categories, such as allocating a month for studying one kind of identity or affinity groups based on a single identity category, fail to address the complexity of people's identities.

Ten percent of all Americans currently identify as mixed-race, an experience that can bring both richness and a sense of not belonging to traditionally defined categories. Similarly, bisexual people sometimes feel they are between and beyond two worlds, not fully accepted by either gay or straight communities (Dodge et al., 2016).

People with mixed social class identities can feel a pull between their identities, too. For example, people with working-class origins who attend elite colleges sometimes feel torn between embracing their new attachments and abandoning their parents' working-class culture or remaining true to their roots while feeling ill-at-ease among the middle classes they have become part of (Lehmann, 2014). Yet few curriculum texts engage with and celebrate the intersection of multiple identities, even as they honor specific ethnic, cultural, gender-based, and neurodiverse groups.

What do complex identities mean for professional learning and development in schools? When it comes to treating our students fairly and fully, educators need to consider and carry out intentional moves that engage with young people's identities to improve outcomes for all of them.

THREE STRATEGIES

Let's look at three practical and inspiring approaches to professional learning and development that have arisen from our collaborative research with schools and fully embrace the

complexities of students' identities.

- **Whole school for the whole child:** Mobilize the whole school to engage the fullness of each whole child.
- **Essential for some, good for all:** Appreciate that what is essential for some students is often good for all students.
- **Self-determined learning:** Empower students to develop their own identities with self-determined learning.

Whole School for the Whole Child

Everything in life is interconnected. It's not just ecosystems, societies, and schools, but ourselves. We don't think, or feel, or act in isolation. We do all these things at once. Too often though, as Sean Slade argues in *The Power of the Whole* (2023), we categorize people into separate bits with tests, checklists, and curriculum units.

Since we know that most identities are multiple, not singular, we need to engage with our students in the fullness of who they are. This is far from easy. No teacher can know everything about everybody in their classes all at once. It's too much to ask. It takes a whole school to do this. Working as a whole team, in the everyday context of helping our students achieve, is the essence of high-quality professional learning and development.

In their research project in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia, Andy and his colleague, Jess Whitley, listened to a vice principal describe how her school adopted a collaborative focus on the whole child in its efforts to be responsive to the school's African Nova Scotian students, one of the most marginalized populations in Canada.

"We looked at our 10 most vulnerable students," the vice principal, who is African Nova Scotian, said, including those who were African Nova Scotian, after the COVID-19 pandemic. School staff who knew these students then filled in a simple template they had created in a professional learning community (PLC) meeting

that identified their challenges and what's working.

From there, they considered what else they could be doing. They checked whether support and interventions had been fully implemented or whether they needed to look at the child again through another lens, such as a trauma-informed lens, to understand them better.

This inquiry-based approach involved joint learning by diverse educators focused on equity and inclusion for students in the greatest immediate need. It entailed centering the student, as the vice principal put it, so that each educator understood "what they bring to the table, and then you're teaching around them" and the fullness of who they are.

This all-encompassing framework was not just focused on the data points that show up on tests, but instead on real kids with significant struggles and, importantly, on multiple aspects of their strengths and challenges. It enabled students to show not only what they know but, more importantly, who they are.

Essential for Some, Good for All

From the very beginning of Ontario's inclusion strategy in Canada in the early 2000s, educators asserted that what is essential for some is often good for all. This principle was not unlike that of the Universal Design for Learning framework that was pioneered in the U.S. to educate students with special needs. In Ontario, though, the principle was infused into PLCs in ways that applied to many other groups with diverse identities.

In our project studying change strategies in 10 Ontario school districts, we found that PLCs prepared educators to incorporate Indigenous traditions and pedagogies into classes that included significant numbers of Indigenous students. The strategies included learning in circles, land-based pedagogies, and a sense of belonging to something bigger than oneself along the lines of traditional "grandfather

teachings." What was good for these students can be good for all students.

For example, a school in the post-COVID network that was focused on innovation and inclusion had no students who officially self-identified as Indigenous, but it used Indigenous design expertise to incorporate classroom furniture and learning areas in inclusive circles and ellipses rather than hierarchical rectangles and rows.

In many Indigenous cultures and communities, meeting in circles and ellipses means that no one has the seat of power at the head of the table, everyone can see everyone else, and sometimes talking sticks can be passed around so that the person who holds the stick gets to talk while everyone else listens. Everyone has their chance to hold the stick and contribute. It's a highly participative and inclusive use of space.

As another example, our research has identified schools and their PLCs that have taken steps to protect all students from bullying, not just the LGBTQ students who might have been the initially intended beneficiaries.

Similarly, while gender-neutral bathrooms can support transgender students, they can also turn school bathrooms into better places for everyone with more imaginative and modern designs that, for instance, make the areas outside the toilet stalls usable and visible to everyone (which prevents bullying) and ensure the stalls themselves are more private, as in many modern restaurants. These examples show that the idea of "essential for some, good for all" can build inclusion for students who have many different identities.

Self-Determined Learning

If you want to know a student's identity, who's the best person to ask? The student, of course. Instead of presuming things about our students and then planning lessons for them, we need to spend more time asking students themselves and using their

responses as a point of departure for teaching and learning together.

Michael Wehmeyer and Yong Zhao (2020) call this *self-determined learning* because it emphasizes autonomy and choice and supports students in activities that they value. Wehmeyer and Zhao say one reason for declining student engagement between the elementary years and the last years of high school is that beginning around 8th grade, student learning is often characterized by mandated curriculum and imposed assignments. Little choice for teachers means less engagement for students. Students can accomplish more when educators introduce more choice and self-determination with effective scaffolding and support.

After visiting an experimental high school, a principal in the post-COVID network introduced an innovation called The Genius Hour. For one hour a week, students in a small fishing and farming community could pursue their own passion project, then strive to become a “genius” in it.

One student made a solar panel that helped heat up her chicken coop after hatching chicks at school. Another used mathematics and the physics of sound to turn a recycled church pew into a guitar.

Teachers who were skeptical at first changed their minds when they realized what their students had accomplished. The students showed who they were and what they could do in ways that went far beyond teachers' prior knowledge of them.

A teacher in another school in the network experienced the same transformation. She had, by her own admission, been resistant to her school's proposed project to engage middle school students in a working-class town in growing, cooking, and distributing food in the community. She believed the students needed to concentrate all their energies on improving their literacy skills.

However, the skills involved in the food project are not only useful for real life but are traditionally valued skills

among this working-class community. As we argue in our book *The Age of Identity: Who Do Our Kids Think They Are ... and How Do We Help Them Belong?* (2024), being working class (which doesn't always mean low-income or poor) is an identity that often gets overlooked in schools. The food project provided an unusual opportunity connected to the students' working-class identity.

The teacher wasn't aware of this potential connection. She wanted to knuckle down and teach literacy in a more structured way. Her chief concerns were about relinquishing control to the students to lead their own learning. “When the kids are driving the bus and I don't know which direction we're going in, I can't plan ahead,” she said.

But her principal kept pressing her to get involved. This was collaboration with hard conversations thrown in. Eventually, the teacher capitulated to please her principal. Then she discovered what her students were capable of doing. “If I had not seen the successes of the kids, I think I'd still be on that road to fear,” she said.

THE MANY FACETS OF IDENTITY

Too often, we let identity issues polarize us in relation to young people's education. We treat intersecting identities as subtractions and sources of division rather than as additions or even multipliers of people's capabilities.

Instead, let's offer professional learning and development that promotes the idea that identities affect everyone, are intriguingly complicated, and are a key to inclusion and equity.

This means returning to the core principles of high-quality professional learning and development but with a more inclusive twist. All the examples we have described are embedded in innovative and inclusive practices designed to change learning for the better. All of them are collaborative efforts by inclusive teams focused on inclusive improvements.

And all of them concentrate not just on improving outcomes for student learning, but on building partnerships with diverse and gloriously complex whole students as part of the improvement process. But they are also explicit about the importance of identity.

If we recognize that we need the whole school to know the whole child, that what is essential for some students is often good for all of them, and that students can determine more of their own learning as authors of their own identities, then identity issues can uplift our students and liberate how we approach our own professional learning and development.

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