Keeping it together

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Identity, Culture and Belonging: educating young children for a changing world

Tony Eaude, London, Bloomsbury, 2020.
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In choosing to write about culture and identity, Tony Eaude knows he could hardly fry two bigger fish. His carefully organised and clearly written book explores ways in which culture, broadly defined, impinges on identity, and in particular how the concentric cultural spheres within which younger children grow have a bearing on the shaping and re-shaping of those children's changing understanding of themselves. Flashes of self-deprecation and stories from his own extensive experience as a teacher and headteacher leaven Eaude's text, in which sociological mappings of aspects of culture are lucidly explained, arguments about the constructed nature of identity straightforwardly pursued, and the fruits of wide reading deftly conveyed.

Eaude states his position at the outset. Children need to have a 'robust but flexible sense of identity to thrive in a diverse, changing and uncertain world' (p1). A prime concern is how education, especially in its formal mode, can enable the formation and preservation of just such a sense of identity.

Eaude's book is divided into three parts, and each part into three chapters. The opening part surveys the general terrain. It considers how identity and culture have been, and might be, defined; how these concepts intersect; their relationship to the idea of belonging; and the implications which then arise for society and school. Eaude acknowledges that 'identity' is, paradoxically, multiplicity of identities, and 'culture' should be seen as 'an amalgam of micro-cultures within a macro-culture which is increasingly global in reach' (p5). Part two explores how children's identities are shaped. Eaude gives a central place to the importance of imagination, creativity and a conception of the child as a meaning-making agent. Part three considers how adults in school, at home and in wider society may best meet the challenge of our cultural moment in order to enable children to flourish. Eaude underscores the importance of a holistic approach to education. The child must be conceived of as a whole person, and education as a consequence re-made radically to revise or supersede current approaches to curriculum, assessment and pedagogy. As might be expected given his previous writings, Eaude strongly urges the value of the arts and humanities within a broad and balanced curriculum, along with what he calls an 'apprenticeship' model of learning. In each chapter, main points are put forward at the outset and summarised at

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the end. The arc of argument which coheres each part is summed up as a prelude to the next part. A culminating conclusion reiterates the book's most urgent ideas.

While ensuring that academic citation does not clutter his text, Eaude draws on a broad range of academic reading to underpin the information he presents and the claims he makes. Rather than drill down deeply into the manifold uncertainties and complications which infest both 'identity' and 'culture' as areas of thought, he instead opts to cover a lot of ground in a general way, pointing out major features of the landscape and then, for the most part, moving on. This approach helps readers find their feet and orient themselves in the terrain, while running the unavoidable risk that particular sites of interest are passed over too quickly, and faultlines left unexplored.

Eaude declares his own point-of-view, and regularly puts the reader on alert as to his biases. He holds that teachers and other adults must inform themselves about, and be sensitively attuned to, the cultural beliefs children may bring to their work in school. It is equally important, in his view, for the school to find ways to respect or esteem these beliefs alongside, or in relation to, those values it seeks to endorse and inculcate. School can and should help children to 'recognise, understand and question often deeply ingrained assumptions associated with their, and their family's and community's, identities' (p13).

Mingling here and there with the measured and qualified language Eaude characteristically employs when explaining a position or making a case is another register, marked by a certain decisiveness, even a moral urgency: 'Children must …', 'Teachers or adults should …' (see especially chapters 6, 7 and 9). I think this stylistic tension may stem from Eaude's principled commitment to arguing for a particular kind of education, while nevertheless striving to be mindful of how he is positioned, and loyal to the tenets of self-questioning and open-mindedness which mark his thinking. 'Adults', he writes on page 13, 'should be wary of believing that their own assumptions and ways of thinking about nurturing and educating children are correct'.

Much of what Eaude argues for is likely to meet with approval from readers of this journal. He upholds a view of the child in which 'any individual is more than the sum of his or her separate parts, and … the different elements of [children's] identities are all linked and influence each other' (p134). He advocates dialogic approaches to teaching, and, against the instrumentalist versions of English and maths which currently prevail, desires a better-balanced curriculum in which arts and humanities are foregrounded. He recognises the importance of physical and mental health for any child's wellbeing, and so for their flourishing. He sees the child as capable, and requires teachers to see the child so. He acknowledges the child as possessing funds of knowledge which are valuable in themselves, even if school may disregard them. He consistently underlines the power of structural racism to do educational damage. He calls out sexism. He accepts that social class powerfully determines educational disadvantage and generates relative educational failure. He is alert to issues of disability. About the matter of academic 'ability'

he is less forthrightly critical than I would wish – and when he states that 'teachers must differentiate if children's individual needs are to be met' (p180) he conveys precisely the position to be rebutted. As regards gender, the conversation in our culture about this issue is being radically changed by trans people and those who identify as non-binary, and a new edition of this book may want to return to the discussion.

Culture has been characterised as a weaker, secular version of religion. Eaude is willing to engage with religion itself as an aspect of identity, and of culture too. He acknowledges his own lack of religious faith, but recognises the importance of organised religion as a significant marker of selfhood in the lives of many individuals and communities. This has major implications for the way schools operate. He notes that in societies such as the UK that are termed 'WEIRD' – the acronym stands for Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich Democracies – an ethos of individualism is not shared by all communities whose children are educated in those societies' schools. He wonders whether the idea of a discrete individual identity, distinct from identification with the community, self-defined and self-pursued, might not be an intrinsically secular notion.

The principal world-changing power Eaude speaks of is globalised capital. Identities are, to a great extent, derived from, and expressed through, choices and allegiances which the configuration of that power makes possible. Through patterns of consumption, the notion of 'identity' becomes itself a commodity in a world which mystifies the relationship to the process of production in which each of us is enmeshed. Eaude addresses this state of affairs, though these aren't the terms he uses. He cautions about the impact on younger children of forms of media, including social media, which influence 'by advertising and subtle messages … and … help create a world characterized by immediacy and gratification which tends to favour simple solutions and to discourage sustained and critical thought' (pp57-8).

Today's young people may feel obliged to corral a set of (often conflicting) identities into what Eaude calls 'a coherent narrative of identity' (p60). He is aware that this can result in the emotionally costly grind of privatised re-making of oneself, rather than the happier prospect of a unified and consolidated personhood. Teachers, and those who aspire to teach, alert to questions of culture and identity, and to the immense power which the need to belong exerts on children especially, will find Eaude's book very helpful. It offers a cogent, wide-ranging and very readable survey and discussion of matters central to the formal education of young children.

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