



The role of culture and traditions in how young children's identities are constructed

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how cultures and traditions influence the construction of young children's identities. Identity is conceptualised as a constantly changing narrative based on how an individual sees him or herself and how s/he is perceived. We all have multiple, intersecting identities. Different meanings of culture are discussed, highlighting norms and values, 'culture-as-the-arts', and space for growth. Primary and secondary socialisation is emphasised, recognising the influence factors such as gender, race, class and religion. The effect of the home and of the macro-culture and different micro-cultures and traditions is considered. In relation to children's spirituality, trusting relationships and hospitable environments, and the need to counter messages given by an individualistic and consumerist macro-culture are highlighted. An apprenticeship approach is advocated, where adults encourage questioning and strive to maintain children's sense of agency, with a gradual transfer of power as children become older and/or more confident. It is suggested that researchers and practitioners should take more account of external factors such as gender, race and class in relation to children's spirituality.

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Introduction

This article considers how cultures and traditions influence the construction of young children's identities, drawing on ideas many of which are explored in greater depth in Eade ([forthcoming](#)). I discuss this particularly in relation to children's spirituality, recognising this as only one element of children's identities. By young children, I mean, broadly speaking, those under the age of 11, though I distinguish between early childhood (up to the age of about 7) and pre-adolescence (between about 7 and 11 years old), while being wary of the idea of linear developmental stages.

Many of the concepts, notably identity, culture, race and class, as well as spirituality, are complex ideas, the meaning of which is fluid, often contested and varying to some extent between cultures. I therefore explain what I mean by these

terms, drawing on the relevant literature, recognising that readers will inevitably approach the issues raised with assumptions from their own cultural contexts.

The first section explores identity to argue that one should see this in terms of multiple, intersecting and constantly changing identities rather than one fixed identity; and emphasises that identities are constructed actively from an early age. The next section considers the term culture, highlighting three loosely linked meanings: norms and values, culture-as-the-arts, and space for growth. Culture is the medium in which identities are constructed, with the distinction between macro- and micro-cultures useful in this context. Traditions are seen as manifestations of culture, encapsulating sets of broadly shared beliefs and practices built up over time.

This is followed by a consideration of how children's identities are constructed, emphasising primary and secondary socialisation, where the influence of the home is central, with subsequent groups and micro-cultures and the traditions that they represent significant but less so. Much of the knowledge involved is tacit and procedural. Children must retain a sense of agency with guided participation, with example, practice and feedback key processes in environments which enable rather than constraining children's exploration, imagination and creativity. Factors such as gender, race/ethnicity, socio-economic class and religion and how these affect the construction of identities are then explored. The discussion is linked to the literature on children's spirituality, emphasising the need for a holistic approach with trusting relationships and hospitable environments. An apprenticeship approach is advocated, with adults mainly guiding and facilitating, with a gradual transfer of agency as children become older and or/more confident, with adults' role often counter-cultural in a macro-culture based on individualism and consumerism. Adults must exercise judgement based on attunement to the needs of individual children and groups. The conclusion summarises the argument, suggesting that factors such as gender, race and class should be considered more in future research into children's spirituality.

Identity and multiple identities

Bruner (1996, 35–36) argues that the single most universal thing about human experience is the phenomenon of 'self', highlighting two aspects of selfhood. The first is agency, the sense that one can initiate and carry out activities on one's own, though even the most cursory consideration of young children – and we all – indicates that agency does not mean acting entirely on one's own. The second is that of evaluation, in that individuals evaluate their how well they have done in relation to what they hoped, or were asked, to do. Bruner calls the mix of these two 'self-esteem' combining a sense of what one believes, or hopes, oneself to be capable of and what one fears may be unachievable. How self-esteem is experienced and expressed by children varies according to culture and background and,

as we shall see, is strongly affected by the views of other people, especially adults and, increasingly, members of the peer group.

Bruner's view reflects a useful distinction between substantive and situational identities (see Woods and Jeffery, 2002). The former are more enduring, but less open to change, and the latter more context-related, fluid and transient, though situational identities may strongly affect individuals' sense of identity and actions, unless their substantive identity is firmly rooted. This distinction helps to explain why contexts and environments matter so much in the construction of identities – a point discussed in more detail in a later section.

Jenkins (2014, 51/2) makes the distinction between 'self' as how each person feels and understands him or herself privately and 'person' as how s/he is seen by others, though the latter is especially influential for young children. In Holland et al.'s (2003, 3) words, 'people tell others who they are, but even more important they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are. These self-understandings, especially those with strong emotional resonance for the teller, are what we refer to as identities.' The perceptions of other people, especially those whose opinion one cares about, affect one's sense of self, particularly for those who have fragile identities. Who we feel that we are and are seen to depend to a large extent on the groups to which we belong.

Identities must be coherent and robust but flexible to cope with a rapidly changing world. The difficulty is that there are frequently many competing and conflicting identities on offer, especially since many of the structures of family, community and religion which provide a secure sense of identity and belonging are more fragmented than in the past and where an individualistic macro-culture offers the promise of happiness and success based on looks, possessions and consumption.

All children have multiple, interlinked identities for instance as a 10-year-old boy, a Hindu, as quiet and sociable, a good reader and a keen cricketer; or as a 7-year-old girl and an only child, as Welsh, as energetic and thoughtful, but slightly serious, as a wonderful singer – and in both cases having many more identities. For a very young child, easily identified aspects such as his or her name, the language s/he speaks, where s/he lives and being one-who-can-walk are important markers of identity. For slightly older children, being no longer a baby or a bed-wetter may signify crossing difficult thresholds. When children enter more formal settings such as faith-based groups, nurseries and schools, they acquire new identities, and existing ones are challenged, for better or worse. As children approach adolescence, appearance and popularity become increasingly significant. While many of these may seem to adults relatively insignificant or mundane, these markers of identity may matter more to the child and be easier to understand than abstract ideas, related to national or religious identities.

Put simply, identity is about who one is and becomes. As such, it is associated with ideas such as character, though as discussed in Eade (2016) character is best seen as comprising a broad range of qualities and dispositions, rather than mainly

as involving 'grit' and denial of emotion. Some elements of identity seem to be genetic, and relatively unchanging, such as one's temperament, while others are influenced by culture and experience and by factors such as gender, race, social background, physical ability, language and religion. Some – mostly superficial – markers of identity are voluntary and can be changed, while others are not and must be accepted and incorporated into an individual's emerging sense of identity.

Taylor (1989) suggests that identity is best seen as a constantly changing set of narratives (see also Bruner 1996). Narratives help to arrange and categorise disparate and often-confusing experiences. We each find and create our identities in telling our story, both to ourselves and others. Children's identities are created slowly and re-negotiated over time, taking account of expectations which vary between different cultures and parts of children's lives.

Cultures and traditions

How identities are constructed must be understood in relation to culture and traditions. Culture is like the background which is always there, even when we are not aware of it; and the lens through which everyone interprets, understands and makes sense of experience, even when they do not recognise this. Drawing on Alexander (2000, 163–4), I here highlight three loosely related meanings, referring to:

- the (often-implicit) norms, values and beliefs of a group;
- 'culture-as-the-arts' as in the idea of a 'cultured person'; and
- the space(s) in which nurturing and growth happens.

However, the word is frequently used in other, potentially confusing ways, for instance as a shorthand for ethnicity, as in the term multi-cultural.

Borrowing Bronfenbrenner's (1979) idea, culture is 'nested' in the sense that any individual inhabits several different cultures. We all live within many intersecting and overlapping micro-cultures and sub-cultures, so that personal identities are nested within several collective identities. As Bronfenbrenner suggests, culture operates at different levels simultaneously, though with varying layers of influence. He identifies up to six layers in which the individual child, or adult, are nested, but I here only distinguish between macro-cultures and micro-cultures, which may present different, often-conflicting messages.

One example of a macro-culture is that of the culture of a society, whether national or increasingly international, as manifested in the expectations and the language used; and expressed through, and shaped by, many types of media. Religious traditions provide another type of macro-culture, though I suggest below that these are less homogeneous than is often thought.

Micro-cultures are more local. For young children, these include most obviously the home, but also the smaller groups to which they belong, whether formal ones

such as a nursery, a faith-based or scout group or school or informal ones such as a group or friends or supporters of a football team. These have a more immediate effect than macro-cultures in the construction of children's identities, for good or ill, because of the closeness of the relationships involved.

Cultures are normative, and regulatory, in that they indicate how people should act and think, as well as descriptive, how people do act and think. For instance, the culture of a group, such as one defined by gender or religious faith or a nursery, a choir or a club, helps to indicate how one should conduct oneself – and discourages those who may be inclined to deviate from doing so. But such micro-cultures also provide spaces for exploration of what being a member of such a group entails, and how to act appropriately. In this sense, culture operates like a framework which can be, or seem, restrictive, but provides boundaries which may help avoid confusion. However, this discussion takes too little account of the extent to which the word culture implies judgements about the types of experience and knowledge valued in a society, especially in terms of 'culture-as-the-arts' with implications, to be explored, related to power and inclusivity.

Traditions are a type of culture, either as a macro- or a micro-culture, in that they encapsulate beliefs and practices passed from one generation to the next. Traditions tend to be associated with an unchanging, even ossified, view, taking little account of changing circumstances. So, for instance, many people see religious traditions as inflexible, with a particular set of beliefs and practices to be adopted in order to be part of the group. Although some traditions are like this, Macintyre (1999, 222) writes that 'traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict', with Winston indicating that 'Macintyre understands a tradition as a living argument, not a set of precepts to enforce conformity' (1998, 21). However, traditions can also be conduits through which the wisdom of existing communities and previous generations – and the cultural identities associated with these – are passed on, although these may need to be adapted to a new context.

This discussion highlights the link between identity and culture – and traditions – but without considering how the messages embedded in the latter are conveyed and internalised. To explore this in relation to young children, the next section considers how identities are constructed.

The construction of identities

Identity is frequently discussed as if it were formed mostly in adolescence. Recognising that adolescence is usually when identities, and the beliefs and values which accompany these, are most explicitly challenged, I suggest that the foundations of identity are established and constructed earlier, from early childhood. This is broadly in line with Erikson's view (Erikson 1995, 2000), though providing a rather different emphasis from many of those who draw on his work and concentrate on the years during and after adolescence.

Bruner (1996) emphasises that young children are active meaning makers, right from the start, implying that they must retain a sense of agency if they are to construct the robust but flexible identities necessary for a world of change. As indicated above, EAUDE (2016) highlights that identities involve qualities and dispositions, such as resilience, empathy and compassion, although those accorded most priority will vary to some extent according to culture. For instance, qualities such as patriotism, modesty and ambition are not only understood differently across cultures but the importance ascribed to them varies.

Children's identities are constructed and negotiated, necessarily, throughout their lives. In thinking how this happens, Berger and Luckmann's (1967) concept of primary and secondary socialisation is useful. Primary socialisation takes place within the home and the immediate family in which a young child grows up. Secondary socialisation occurs within different environments – and therefore cultures – such as the extended family, local community and other groups including, for some children, those related to a religious faith. While these all exert some influence, as do formal settings such as nursery and later school, they are usually less influential than the home. Moreover, as Bruner (1996, 38) indicated, 'school, more than we have realized, competes with myriad forms of "anti-school" as a provider of agency, identity and self-esteem – no less at the middle-class suburban mall than on the ghetto streets.' The peer group becomes especially influential as children approach adolescence – and the growing pervasiveness of technology and advertising, much of specifically targeted to appeal to young children means that the pressures identified by Bruner in the 1990s are even stronger now.

As Salmon writes (1995, 63), 'identity ... is forged out of interaction with others. Who we are is inextricably bound up with who we are known to be.' Identities are constructed reciprocally with the child trying to make sense of a range of often-confusing emotions and experiences. This process starts with how babies' models of attachment are shaped as they respond differently to potentially distressing experiences. Rogoff (1990, 155–6) emphasises how parents work with (and steer) infants' focus of attention. The interaction between baby and prime carer, usually the mother, through gazing, smiling, talking, touching – the list is endless – is how babies learn to make sense of experience.

Put simply, attachment theory (see for instance Goldberg 2000) suggests that babies develop internal working models which:

- are constructed as a response to anxiety during early infancy through the baby's relationship with the prime carer;
- influence how the baby regulates emotion; and
- strongly affect how babies act and interact with other people.

These models may be secure or insecure, with the latter usually divided into avoidant, anxious (or resistant) and disorganised and affect how emotions are processed for a long time into childhood and beyond.

Secondary socialisation, especially the relationships formed in different groups, and the types of group to which children belong, exerts differing levels of influence, but the extent of this always depends to some extent on prior experience and factors external to the child, since the construction of identities takes place within a social context, and networks of power (see Bellous and Clinton 2016), rather than being just an individual journey.

Many of the processes involved operate tacitly, with cognitive ones used more and becoming more apparent after the age of about 6, as children are better able to self-regulate. Children learn procedural and interpersonal knowledge mainly through watching, predicting and mirroring what they see, mostly unconsciously. Such learning becomes embedded by practice to make responses habitual or second nature, with this reinforced by positive feedback, whether non-verbal or verbal, both from the child him or herself and other people. Intrinsic motivation is embedded through a sense of control being internal, habituation and becoming empathetic towards other people more than by an approach based on tangible reward and/or the fear of punishment.

Bruner (2006) highlights the importance of different types of representation in embedding learning. He categorises these as enactive, iconic and symbolic. The first two are more influential in embedding deep learning, especially for young children, though, throughout life, as Wall (2010, 75) states, 'embodiment is more primordial even than language'. This is not to say that symbolic representation (especially through language) does not matter but that other forms of representation exert more influence with young children. Moreover, language tends to enable learning more when children talk and engage in conversation rather than when they just listen passively, given the importance of children's agency. In relation to abstract ideas, such as beliefs and values, it usually helps if the child sees and understands what these entail, but s/he needs to enact them if they are to be internalised. However, since the construction of identity occurs within a social context, all the processes discussed above are affected by external factors, especially those considered in the next section.

The influence of factors such as gender, race/ethnicity, class, (dis)ability and religion

In discussing these factors, one is entering dangerous territory, both in the sense that these are complex, contested contexts and that these may threaten some basic assumptions. Such factors do not determine how individuals' identities are constructed but they do affect this especially in terms of individuals', and groups', beliefs about themselves and how they should act. This section can only touch on some extremely complicated issues.

Gender is not the same as sex, which is biological, but is socially constructed. The distinction between boys and girls is one which most children and adults make, from very early on. For example, names, the colour of clothes,

the types of game played, and the interactions and responses expected are markers of gender identity which help to shape children's views of how roles associated with masculinity and femininity should be performed. The expectations associated with these often become self-fulfilling as children internalise such messages and these are frequently reinforced within the child's peer group and by the messages of advertising from an early age.

The terms ethnicity and race are often used interchangeably. Ethnicity – and in some cases the home language associated with this – is not a matter of choice and how this is perceived may be a very important marker of identity. While the idea of separate 'races' based on biology is discredited, views of superiority and inferiority based on conceptions of racial – and ethnic – difference remain very pervasive. Moreover, how race is treated and discussed differs between societies. For instance, Hirsch (2018) argues that in Britain people are taught not to 'see' race and to believe that race does not matter, even though issues of power associated with race and ethnicity permeate British society. She argues that, in contrast, race is discussed more openly in the United States, though outcomes in relation to poverty, physical and mental health, educational attainment and many other measures in all societies vary considerably between ethnic groups, largely as a result of racism, though one must also recognise the cumulative effect of different forms of disadvantage, as discussed below.

Class is a particularly complex and slippery idea, not least because how it is perceived and operates varies significantly between societies. However, Reay (2017) highlights two main meanings related to:

- socio-economic background and level of family income;
- values, norms, beliefs and practices, which indicate status and what is deemed to matter.

Both are linked to education, occupation and status, but in different ways. So, levels of wealth, values and status may co-incide, but they may not. The connotations of class in terms of norms, values and status vary significantly between societies, but the effects of material poverty are common to all societies. Those who are poor are disproportionately affected in terms of physical and mental health and opportunities. Moreover, the expectations of adults and children's aspirations and educational outcomes are often lower for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, so that such children find it harder to feel, and to be, included in formal settings such as schools which exemplify a set of values different from those which children experience at home.

Ability is a term which covers many traits, both physical and mental, some permanent and some temporary. People with disabilities are still frequently seen in negative terms, though attitudes have changed, in my view for the better, substantially in recent years. Some cultures and religious traditions retain views of disability where this may be seen primarily in negative terms.

And, in most cultures perceptions of ability are often, consciously or otherwise, affected by gender, race and class, with consequences both in terms of inclusion and adult expectations.

Religious affiliation is in many respects a different type of factor from the others discussed above; and has links with spirituality discussed in the next section. Moreover, many societies have changed so that many children grow up with little awareness of the language and practice of religion, while for others it forms a central aspect of their family's, and consequently their, identity. However, religions contain within them considerable varieties of practice and belief, often associated, at least at a local level, with race and/or class. So, for some children, religious traditions form a basis on which identities are constructed, while for others the effect of these is at most slight; and children may easily internalise the stereotype that one manifestation of religious belief and practice indicates how all members of that religion think and act.

While this section has treated each of the factors separately, one must recognise that the effects intersect. Each on its own may present barriers many of which are small and may be hard for those who do not face them to see. However, where more than one operate, the effect of disadvantage may make success elusive and contribute to low self-esteem, disengagement or even hopelessness. For instance, being black and poor tends to increase disadvantage, while being black, poor and male may do so even more in terms of self-esteem and outcomes. And Reay (2017) indicates how being a working-class girl tends to affect self-esteem adversely, but in ways that differ according to academic success. These factors operate in complex ways, which may necessitate strategies which vary for particular individuals and groups and this section has only started to scratch the surface of complex issues related to these different factors.

The link with children's spirituality

Spiritual development is one among many elements of identity, such as physical, emotional, cognitive, moral, social, cultural and aesthetic. Priestley (2000) questions whether the idea of spiritual *development* is helpful, arguing that its use within economics and psychology with connotations of a gradient of improvement, value, and end-product, suggest an inappropriate Piagetian view of sequential stages. He argues instead for the metaphor of growth. In principle, I accept that development is in some respects misleading in that spirituality does not develop in a linear, predictable way, as with physical, and to a large extent cognitive, development. However, the metaphor of growth seems to present similar difficulties, although it conveys the sense that spirituality needs to be tended. For convenience, I use the term development, recognising its limitations.

In Eade (2005), I argued that spiritual development involves the search for identity, meaning and purpose. These accords with Hyde's (2008) view of spirituality as the search for connectedness and meaning. Both writers emphasizes the

centrality of questions, most of which do not have easy answers and some of which are puzzling and sometimes painful. Such universal questions can be explored within or outside religious traditions, following McLaughlin's idea that spirituality can be 'tethered' to or 'untethered' from religion (see Best 2014).

Hay with Nye's (1998) emphasis on relational consciousness highlights that the processes involved are not just individual but involve interaction, and relationships, both with other individuals and in groups. It is worth recalling Hull's words (1998, 66), 'spirituality exists not inside people, but between them.' Hay with Nye argue that value-sensing (along with awareness- and mystery-sensing) is one of the three dimensions of children's spirituality, with Hull (1996, 1998) seeing spirituality as inevitably value-laden, so that it makes little sense to talk of spirituality, *per se*, rather than the spirituality of a particular group or society. Hyde (2008, 141–159) emphasises material pursuit and trivialising as key factors undermining children's spirituality. The former accords with Hull's (1996) (often-forgotten) fierce critique of the materialism and individualism evident in most present-day societies. I would add these have increasingly led to narcissism and brittleness. The danger of trivialising does not mean that children should always be serious and not enjoy themselves, but it does suggest that children should be encouraged to explore what really matters to them and the cultures in which they live. However, I suggest that the literature on children's spirituality takes too little account of the external factors mentioned above and concentrates too much on individual and interior processes.

The next section considers the implications for the types of environment which help children in constructing a robust but flexible sense of identity, bearing in mind the unequal power relationship between children and adults and often between children and children.

The implications for learning environments

As Champagne (2009, 2) suggests, 'identity cannot be "taught". It is rather experienced, supported and developed, like a language, within a community.' Cox (2017) highlights the importance of guided participation in communities of practice (see Lave and Wenger 1991). EAUDE (2014) discussed the type of environment suitable to nurture young children's spirituality – and I would now add help in the construction of robust but flexible identities. In arguing that such environments must be hospitable that article emphasised that these should be safe, welcoming, inclusive and not too competitive.

The idea that the environment must be safe is probably uncontroversial. Unless children feel safe, they are most unlikely to take the risks and ask the questions which encourage their creativity and search for meaning. While they need to be protected from harm, learning also involves challenge and there is a danger of young children being over protected. While adults have to, and

usually have a strong desire to, protect children, they must also try to equip children to cope with difficulties and uncertainty when adults are not present.

That environments should be welcoming and inclusive may also be uncontroversial in principle. Structure, routines and rituals help young children to belong and feel safe, as long as they do not become constraining. However, children from many groups have historically not been welcomed and have been excluded, whether deliberately or not. For instance, girls, children of colour and those from working-class backgrounds have in most societies and school systems not been accorded the same attention as others- and been disproportionately excluded, both literally and from the more intangible benefits of education. Despite recent changes of attitude in society, such exclusion remains prevalent, especially in children feeling disengaged from school learning. Education should involve opening up alternative possibilities and removing or reducing barriers which undermine children's sense of identity and agency. Such barriers may be:

- societal, such as discrimination on the grounds of gender, race and socio-economic background;
- situational, such as the lack (or the cost) of a broad range of opportunities; or
- attitudinal and motivational, such as lack of confidence and negative feelings about education.

However, such barriers are often invisible to, or at least hard to see, to those who do not face them, though all too apparent to those who do. For young children, especially those from groups which have been historically disadvantaged, an inclusive environment must present a broad range of opportunities. This involves, among other things, children's existing 'funds of knowledge' (Gonzales, Moll, and Amanti 2005), the types of knowledge, frequently practical and procedural ones, associated with working-class and minority ethnic communities, not greatly valued in schools, being valued and built upon.

The idea that environments should not be too competitive is more controversial, especially since schools tend to be competitive and the macro-culture encourages comparison with other people. It is understandable if parents from groups which have been historically disadvantaged and continue to be so should encourage their children to be highly competitive in order to succeed. However, making meaning is inherently non-competitive and for every winner, there are losers (see Hyde 2008). Hyper-competitive environments tend to undermine some children's self-esteem, especially those from groups already disadvantaged and often making those who succeed fragile. Intra-personal competition where children try to improve on their previous best is a better basis for children to strengthen the qualities and dispositions associated with a robust but flexible identity.

The implications for adults

While arguing that how adults interact with children matters more than specific curricula or programmes, EAUDE (2016) highlights the centrality of curiosity and imagination in moral education and the importance of play (see Winnicott 1980), drama and story in encouraging these. EAUDE (2017, *forthcoming*) emphasises similar points, and the importance of the humanities and the arts in children learning to understand themselves and other people, arguing for a holistic view where education is not seen as a frantic race.

These discussions led to my advocating an approach based on apprenticeship, which helps especially in developing tacit knowledge. An apprenticeship approach (see Rogoff 1990, 2003) emphasises the learner working alongside someone with more experience and learning particularly by example and practice, over time; and treats the person learning as-if capable, relying on facilitation, feedback and guidance, much of it unconscious, more than direct instruction and imposition. Adults must provide space for children's exploration rather than seek to impose particular beliefs. While adults may need to 'scaffold' children's learning, such scaffolding must be temporary, if children are not to become dependent on it.

In an apprenticeship approach, young children should not always be separated from older children and adults, but sometimes be incorporated into groups and traditions by learning the practices involved, and so coming to understand and explore the meaning behind them and what they symbolise. Such an approach involves adults (or more experienced learners) showing how rather than talking at children; and exerting authority while enabling a gradual change over time of who is in control, as children become older and or/more confident, though this may vary at different times and contexts. Children should be expected to act with increasing levels of self-regulation and accountability, both individually and as a group. Children's cognitive processes need to be strengthened partly through language and the thinking that results from that, but without adults relying on cognitive processes. Moreover, children must believe, and be helped to believe, that attributes such as intelligence and ability are not fixed or dependent on one's background.

Since children learn a great deal through example, the role models which adults present exert considerable influence. Who adults are, and how they act and interact, matters more than what they know. However, Jackson et al. (1993, 286–7) write that the word 'role model' can seem too 'heroic', with the teachers they studied speaking of 'humbler virtues' such as showing respect for others, being a 'good sport' and showing that it is okay to make mistakes and to be confused. Such a view highlights fairly ordinary, everyday qualities, such as respecting children, especially when they make mistakes, having a good sense of humour, without abusing one's power, and being humble enough not to know and to admit one's errors.

Adopting an apprenticeship approach is not easy, not least because it requires judgement and sensitivity in situations where one is unsure. It involves challenging some of one's assumptions and trying to change ingrained habits, many of them unconscious. Adults should not be 'blind' to issues of gender, race and class as this tends to result in these being overlooked. Adults must try to become attuned and sensitive to the difficulties and barriers that children face and be prepared both to challenge their own stereotypes and encourage children to do so. Children should be discouraged from thinking that only other people operate within a culture, which tends to exoticise those who are different and overemphasise differences, when children must explore both similarity and difference if they are to avoid stereotyping other people. Moreover, I suggest that adults should challenge many of the norms of a macro-culture based on individualism and consumerism; and so act in some respects in counter-cultural ways. Teachers, especially, should encourage children at least to question the messages from the macro-culture and from their own culture and traditions, while remaining sensitive to the latter.

Conclusion

I have argued that identities are constructed as a constantly changing narrative and that factors such as gender, race, class, (dis)ability and religion exert a considerable influence on how this happens. The idea of primary and secondary socialisation emphasises early experience especially in the home, as well as the role played by other groups and the traditions associated with them. While recognising that formal settings such as schools matter, the construction of identities occurs throughout each child's life, with the peer group gaining in influence as children approach adolescence.

I have argued for a holistic approach, where spirituality is seen as only one, albeit an important, element of identity. While play, stories and the humanities and the arts provide valuable contexts for the exploration and construction of identities, how children engage in these activities matters more than the activity itself.

I have emphasised example and practice, more than cognitive processes, in how young children construct their identities. Seeing what the abstract words associated with beliefs and values mean, by these being exemplified in practice, helps to make these more comprehensible. Even more, beliefs and values need to become internalised by children acting in these ways, so that children become intrinsically motivated to act in appropriate ways in different contexts, rather than through the promise of reward or the fear of punishment.

From an early age, children must have a sense of agency with the role of adults in a relationship mainly based on the idea of apprenticeship with a gradual transfer of control from the adult to the child. This involves adults guiding and facilitating and helping to minimise the barriers which children face, many of which are hidden to those in positions of power. It also highlights the need for inclusive and welcoming

environments, where children experience trusting relationships and the qualities and dispositions expected are exemplified by adults and increasingly children themselves. Since adults have to nurture and challenge and to protect and equip, they must exercise judgement, based on attunement to the needs of individual children and groups. Moreover, their role should be to some extent counter-cultural in the current climate of individualism and consumerism.

This article has only touched on complex and contested issues, inevitably from my own perspective as a white, middle-class English man. Such issues have not been considered in enough depth in the literature on children's spirituality. I hope that this will stimulate further research and discussion, in relation to gender, race, class and (dis)ability, especially from those who come from cultural perspectives different from my own.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Tony EAUDE was the headteacher of a multi-cultural first school in Oxford, UK and has worked independently since 2003. He has written a wide range of books and articles related to young children and their holistic development, details of which are on www.edperspectives.org.uk

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