

# From the inside out and the outside in: Reflections on identity construction

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*Guest Editor*

## Identity Quiz

Is identity in my blood or in my heart?  
Is it my DNA or my roots?  
Is it where I've been or where I'm going?  
Is it the way I look?  
.....Or the way I see?

Answer: All of the above.

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Identity is at once deeply personal and intensely public. By this I mean that it includes the aspects of our being that are most private and unspoken as well as those that everyone can see and use to pigeon-hole us. It is also what people imagine us to be—as incorrect and flawed as those perceptions might be. What you see is almost always far less complex than what you get. Identity is formed and reformed as we grow into new roles and shed the trappings of our past. At the same time, certain aspects of identity are “constants” that give us a sense of belonging and continuity. We make each other and make and remake ourselves through our choices (Greene, 1993) and through the roads taken and untaken. In the language of complexity theory, our identities are emergent, reflexive, and evolving (Mason, 2008). That is, they are unfolding, refer back to earlier states, and are constantly in flux.

The essays, research papers, and poems in this issue explore the tensions within and between personal and professional identities from multiple perspectives and in a variety of contexts. Some of these essays are grounded in personal experiences and perspectives (see Cooper, Park, Rowe and Tolson), and some tap the voices of insiders but take an outsider's look at identity construction in terms of heritage identity and profession (see Allaire, Lopez) or reveal

profound identity shifts due to a traumatic historical event (see Choi). One of the papers offers advice on how to help students explore and unpack aspects of their own identity in ways that encourage a deeper and more respectful understanding of diversity (see Soetoro-Ng). Collectively the essays, research papers, and poems in this issue reveal the complexity, fluidity, and evolving nature of identity and the ways in which it is constructed from the inside out and from the outside in.

Identity is implicated in every dimension of our lives but it is also true that among our social institutions, the educational arena is particularly subject to identity tensions and possibilities. Schools are sites where identities are regularly noted and displayed (McDermott and Varenne, 1995), sometimes contested or debated, occasionally valued, and rarely ignored. Historically, schools are the place where civic values are instilled and immigrants and other non-mainstream children are forged into citizens and pushed toward “normal.” To say that identities are forged suggests that they become solidified and that individuals are hammered into shape by the schools, society, and curriculum like a blacksmith forges and forms metal. Certainly identities are produced and reproduced intentionally and unintentionally through the manifest curriculum as well as the

hidden curriculum. But school identities are also forged in the sense that they are faked. Schools are full of “wannabes” and pretenders, kids trying on new identities and seeking to belong. Schools are places where identities are fastened, unfastened, and refastened according to the spoken and unspoken values and norms of the community (Reed, 2005), and almost everyone feels at some moment in their school lives as if they are not quite “enough”—thin enough, smart enough, popular enough, pretty enough, black enough, white enough—the list is endless. There is no social institution in the U.S. that brings people of such linguistic, cultural, racial, and socio-economic diversity into greater propinquity as public schools. For these reasons a discussion of identity is of particular relevance to educators and worthy of a special issue of *Educational Perspectives*.

Another powerful shaper of identity is geography. Although most of these papers are not explicitly about Hawai‘i or Hawaiian identity, it is significant that all of the contributors have lived here, studied here, or visited here. The authors have some connection to the place and to the cultures of these islands. This is a powerful reminder of the way in which places and spaces are conducive to certain kinds of conversations. Like classrooms that invite us to reveal our deepest thoughts and reflections, some spaces open us to possibilities for growth and exploration. The ethnic and cultural diversity of Hawai‘i spurs conversations and makes allowances for difference and celebrations of inclusiveness. This issue on identity emerged from the social and cultural context of Hawai‘i where cultural identity is a central theme in art, music, dance, humor, cuisine, and daily life, and cultural fusions are the norm rather than the exception. But this collection does not only focus on ethnicity as a definer of culture, it also looks at other aspects of identity construction and experience as well. Each contribution is previewed below.

### **Witnessing**

In her work on the Korean Kwang-ju massacre that took place May 18–27 1980, Sheena Choi reminds us of the ways in which witnesses to tragedies can bear lasting scars that penetrate their being and lead them

to make political and personal choices later in life. In her interviews with residents of the provincial capitol city of Kwang-ju who witnessed the tragic massacre, Choi discovered that tragedy prompts a solidifying identity. She reveals how the residents of the city of Kwang-ju were privy to a terrible national secret and developed a community of memory that marked them as separate. This is a paper about the way that seminal events in people’s lives leave an indelible mark on their psyche that forms identity scars and changes the trajectories of their lives.

### **Hiding in Plain Sight**

In her essay on coming out of the ethnic closet, Ikumi Park describes the painful negotiation of identity as a third generation Japanese of Korean descent. Weighing the threat of being revealed as a Korean ethnic in Japan where Koreans face discrimination and social marginalization, Park tells the story of a woman who refuses to hide her ethnicity behind a Japanese pass name and the family crisis that ensues with the slip of a tongue. In her provocative discussion of identity, Park leads us to wonder about the relative stress of maintaining a hidden identity versus negotiating the visible markers of minority status every moment of every day.

### **Dancing to a different tune**

When Sharon Rowe joined a hula hālau, suddenly all that she knew about teaching and learning was called into question. In her essay “A Haole in a Hālau: Situating Identity, Practicing Learning,” Rowe explores the pedagogies, protocols, and practices of learning hula but, more than that, she reveals “the extent to which culture drives our expectations of the learning process” (see Rowe). As she describes in detail her struggle to “think Hawaiian” that unfolded over a period of twenty years, she not only helps us to understand the complex world of hula but also explores the challenges that face people who experience pedagogical displacement.

### **Navigating Rough Waters**

Franklin Allaire is concerned that there are too few Native Hawaiians entering the field of science, so he goes on a quest to understand how three Native

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Hawaiian science teachers reconcile their indigenous heritage with their work as science educators. Allaire uses a “talk story” approach to uncover the tensions and complementarities that arise in the lives of indigenous science educators. He discovers that they have each developed a unique pluralistic identity that melds aspects of their traditional culture, beliefs, perspectives, and practices with scientific knowledge and pedagogies. His paper delves into the complexities of identities and challenges the duality of Western vs. Indigenous in a way that provides insight into its complexity.

### Tools to reflect on Identity

Joanne Cooper begins on a whimsical note and moves into an insightful discussion of journaling as a pathway to exploring identity and the intersection between the personal and the professional. As she points out, journals are not merely a repository but the act of “journal keeping is a way to read your own thoughts, to mine them for understanding” (see Cooper). In her essay, Cooper provides insights about the process as well as specific journaling techniques. She helps us to understand how journaling can be a valuable tool for unlocking, uncovering, and revealing identity and for reconciling our multiple roles.

### Patriotic Acts

Other tools for prompting reflection on identity are offered in Maya Soetoro-Ng’s article. She makes the claim that identity is chosen as much as it is ascribed and that the democratic context of the U.S. provides a unique setting in which individuals can exercise the freedom to “choose themselves into the world” (Greene, 1993). She draws upon her own biography to show how aspects of her identity (and that of her brother, President Barack Obama) have been contested and negotiated and subjected to scrutiny and debate. She offers five exercises that teachers can use to help their students take a more systematic as well as a thoughtful and nuanced approach to thinking through the process of identity construction. These exercises are designed to help students to become more sensitive, more appreciative, and more respectful of human differences.

### A Memorial

The final piece in this issue of *Educational Perspectives* comes from Leslie Lopez who memorializes a beloved faculty member of the College of Education, Dr. Al Carr. In her essay, she reminds us that *Educational Perspectives* has its own history and identity. Lopez’s contribution pays tribute to Dr. Carr by tapping into the collective memory of his family and current and former faculty members. Her contribution grounds this issue in the historical context of the college and reminds us of the ways that our predecessors have shaped our practice and our own sense of who we are.

### Conclusion

The evolution of this issue of *Educational Perspectives* is worth noting. It began with an idea among several faculty members over a decade ago. Some retired, we all got busy, and it was put on the back burner, so to speak. The idea reemerged about three years ago when a group of us got together to discuss what an issue of *Educational Perspectives* on identity might look like. Along the way others joined, resulting in the diverse perspectives and approaches that are included here.

We suspect that anyone who reads all of the articles in this issue will say, “but you left out so much!” “How can you talk about identity and not discuss gender, social class, religion, age, sexual orientation, or any of a number of identity markers that could, should, and must be addressed in the identity conversation?” Our response would be, “You are absolutely correct. We left out too much!” Nevertheless, we are content that we have contributed to the ongoing conversation about identity construction and negotiation in a way that leads to possibilities for new and different inquiries and conversations. This is just a starting point.

The “Identity Quiz” poem that precedes this essay highlights the common “either/or” approach to identity construction that reflects our usual discomfort with ambivalence and our cultural preoccupation with categories. The poem asks if identity is “the way I look....Or the way I see?” For too long the emphasis has been put on the way we look and not enough

on the way we “see”. The way we see the world is contingent upon a whole host of factors. Among these are our histories, the languages we speak, our experiences, the geographic spaces that we occupy, and our willingness to conform to or resist the identity categories that dominating cultures press on us as we go about “composing a life” (Bateson, 1989). The poem concludes with an affirmation that identity is “all of the above.” Indeed it is! And far more.

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