

Learning, Authenticity and Childhood

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Abstract

Children are authentic and remind us of the drive to know by and for ourselves, which is indicated by characteristics such as their curiosity and desire to explore. If, through the educational process they are encouraged to exercise such authentic knowing, then can there be any better aim of education? The first section discusses the relation between education and authentic knowing.

The way we perceive and conceive children affects our practices in upbringing and teaching them. The next section comes forth with a challenging conception of 'Childhood' that is characterised with aspects that augment authenticity. The child can be conceived as an active decisive agent in the teaching-learning process as well as in negotiating the significant roles that the adults can play. Research in neuroscience affirms the innate nature of mind as authentic.

If children are authentic, it becomes imperative for education to facilitate the child with an environment that encourages curiosity and the urge to explore rather than restrict. The third section is an attempt to look for what in education constricts the scope for authenticity and how teaching and parenting can encourage authenticity. Finally, I share some ways from my teaching experience in both school and college that seem effective in this regard.

Keywords: authenticity, knowing, children as knowers, curiosity

Introduction

As a teacher-educator, whenever I offer the new entrants of teacher education programmes, who are already graduates and post graduates, to ask what they really want/care to know, they feel lost. They respond mostly with blank expressions followed by a mix of amused observations about themselves. Whenever I pose the same question to children from primary classes, they mostly have many wonderful queries, that often make me wonder what made such a query emerge in that child. I often think of this immense, yet mostly lost, marvellous human capacity to be original and authentic in what they want to know for themselves, not due to any pressure/problem.

This difference in responses of young children and our educated youth makes me question a few things about upbringing and institutionalised

education – what is it about education that makes learners know and do a lot, yet lose interest in knowing? Why are they merely acquiring knowledge and is this what we mean by 'learning' or 'knowing'? Perhaps, knowing is about competencies that equip them for employment, so they learn the required and expected skills, and, perhaps turn heedless to understand anything around them or about themselves. Does this knowledge and education, then, enable us to live well? Or, is our well being limited to our earning power and thereby economic development at larger scale, perhaps becoming skilled for global market? Can well being or human flourishing be a consequence of learning without any love for it? If we learn without any love or deep interest, can it make us happy at work or in life? If we are making children grow up to be easily governable and marketable humans, not really knowers, what

kind of well being, society, and growth in knowledge can we anticipate? Do we not seek self-governed and self-directed humans? Can they be so without wanting to know, questioning, finding and knowing things for themselves? These questions forces us to reflect on the kind of educated persons do we imagine our children to become.

Education and Authenticity

Based on the teaching experience with children and students in higher education, it seems that institutionalised education does not allow, enhance and sustain this urge to know, explore, inquire, understand. Instead, it makes them acquire or just access some compiled knowledge that may make them useful and productive, not really knowers rather than picking up on children's intrinsic motivation, which, perhaps, gets diminished through schooling. This may be the effect of education being linked to 'work'. We value education as an instrument for economic independence and growth, almost bypassing the authenticity in knowing and doing.

With such an understanding, a related and pertinent issue to understand is, 'what makes a teacher effective?' Is good teaching about the command on subject knowledge, along with mastery in pedagogy, or teachers' love for learning, or understanding of students at their levels and vision for development of students, or in the ability to live up to the official criteria of what counts as successful teaching? The quality concerns in education are also dealt with accordingly- structurally, with benchmarks, and criteria on which observations are possible, missing the qualitative aspects in the experience of learning.

When we don't care to know for ourselves, such knowledge can't work in our life, even if it serves for a living; we don't inquire, and our researches become superficial. We simply, half-heartedly know and do whatever officially counts in getting us grades and degrees, achievements for positions, and recognition. The learning is as per requirements or expectations from outside, not from our whole selves.

Considering the issue of quantity and quality, quality is perhaps possible when our subjective wholesome engagement is there in what we do, not having to prove and get stamps of approval and ranks from outside agencies, which quantitatively change our lives and whatever we do.

An authentic learner can be characterised by his effort to know things first hand, that is, by oneself and for oneself. It implies activating and using all of one's attention and abilities. The motivation to know and choice in knowing are his/her own, the queries are pursued with passion, the knowledge has personal significance, relevance, and worth, therefore the queries as well as understandings are his and he lives his knowledge. In that sense, the authenticity is never without active wholesome engagement, meaningful learning, and living with integrity. Such knowledge is not away from one, rather it is internalised, therefore transformative, not merely performative. It lends meaning and direction to one's life, there is confidence in what one knows, and that enables man to take one's decisions, trust oneself, and be responsible.

Therefore, when learning is not authentic, our knowledge remains inert, useless, a burden, as acquired, accessed, and told, which may make us knowledgeable, but such knowledge may not help us in taking significant decisions about development. Thereby, the knower and knowledge remain separated. We may never feel sure or convinced enough to base our life-decisions on such knowledge. A lot of stress and insecurity seeps in this way and we feel lost and can't trust others or what we are made to know. Since we lack clarity and courage to stand by such acquired knowledge, we feel compelled to follow others, hoping that they may be right, being easily influenced, pushed. This makes hegemony, domination, governability easier.

An authentic knower decides, chooses and acts through every moment being true to self, without having to prove or change these to fit the established norms. In this sense, it is a journey from deep intention, as if we write our script of

life through everyday living. Being an authentic knower is to be secure and confident in self, stable and clear as to what, why and how one wants to understand. The four aspects of authenticity, if they can be called so, interplay with each other (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007, p. 79)-

- a) awareness-self view, understanding self requires watching oneself, tracking ones feelings, and being reflective, (thereby they know what they really want to know and why is it worth) which requires
- b) evaluating oneself - as far as possible, impartial, unbiased, sincere observation and appraisal of ones actions, thoughts, decisions, processes, which definitely affects
- c) behaviour- actions that are neither compulsive nor impulsive, but are expression and extension of oneself, implying integrity, consistency, sincerity, which in turn have an impact on
- d) relational orientation- living as socially responsible beings, not in isolation, working on themselves in close relationships, openly express themselves and listen too. Accept differences and individuality and find ways to live without domination and power play. (ibid)

If we all can become authentic this way, the world would seem a saner, healthier, trustworthy place. The people would be individualistic, accepting differences, democratic and unpretentious. It undeniably stands as a great vision for life, for the well being of all, and a sound aim of education.

In case children are born authentic and naturally grow up as authentic, educating them to be authentic and autonomous as one of the highest aims of all learning in liberal perspective would be conceivable. We need to see how children are, what in home and family works towards developing their authenticity and whether and how all institutional education promotes or denies it. The basic concern is to encourage authenticity which enables a child in many ways. Is it natural in childhood, as my experiences with children over years tell?

Childhood and Authenticity

Looking for what makes children authentic; we find that they naturally engage in free exploratory activities with things, people, and phenomena. For example, one such activity- play opens scope for authentic knowledge and relationships. This exploratory activity becomes an important process in the child's ability to explore herself in setting out for what interests her, what one loves to experience, try and explore further, which help in encouraging authenticity.

A study by Murray clearly indicates that children as explorers actually initiate their own study even in play, while getting away from the assigned tasks with the feeling of having to do something that makes their learning concrete. The exploration which comes out in the form of curiosity formulates an important aspect which needs to be built upon for the development of self- esteem, self -awareness, and self-governance, and thereby, authenticity.

For children everything they encounter is new, exploration and curiosity are natural and I think each can precede the other. Curiosity may not be in form of a query or question. They may try to experience it, play with, that is, explore, which makes their senses, observations, perceptions, and manual manipulations increasingly active and refined. The query can turn into a methodical inquiry also. The inquisitiveness may arise as a question, which is completely their own, not what they are expected to ask or know. Childhood is considered a period of being, when children make sense of their world as they actively interact with it (Corsaro, 1997). Childhood is characterised by curiosity, play, explorations which naturally express their wanting to know from and for themselves, not guided, directed, as expected.

One relatively new conception of childhood, called, Agentic Child, is and given by Reggio Emilia. This conception is away from seeing child as miniature adult, or the noble child, the evil child, the out of control child, the adult-in-training, the child as victim; rather, it challenges

the notion of the innocent, helpless child, as a child is viewed to engage in social activity, participating in her education and lives (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998) and co-constructs childhood with adults (Corsaro, 1997). And “the adults are not snowballing the children, rather, they interact with these children as co-learners who negotiate” (Woodrow, 1999).

For the agentic child, curriculum is co-constructed through adult-child collaboration, where both children and adults strive to enhance their understandings of issues important to them (Woodrow, 1999). The agentic child is viewed as a capable actor who doesn't leave himself completely at the disposal of adults. We are considering a conception of that child who takes a lot of responsibility for what, how, and why she likes to learn and do. The child co-constructs the nature and degree of role the adults will play (ibid). The active agency of the child in determining what she will pursue and also the relational orientations with others indicates becoming authentic.

The agency of the child is further brought forward by the capability in children for ‘goal oriented behaviour’ as quoted in various neuroscientific researches. Alison Gopnik writes: “Children aren't just defective adults, primitive grown-ups gradually attaining our perfection and complexity.” Instead, different children have very different, though as complex and capable minds, brains, and forms of consciousness as in adults, but “designed to serve different evolutionary functions” (Gopnik, 2009, 9). This new respect for the capacities of children partly rests on findings in neuroscience whereby “babies' brains are actually more highly connected than adult brains; more neural pathways are available to babies than adults.” (11) Perhaps this partially explains why children have wide range of interests, and broad, wholesome understandings which they may not be able to articulate.

Teaching for Authenticity

Hundreds of books and articles by experts in child development and authentic learning have

pointed to dangerous and inappropriate practices in public education. Some of the most mandated educational policies are shockingly inconsistent with the evidence provided by research as to how children learn. The lack of the evidence about the success of mandated programmes proves that at no given age the standardisation of acquisition of knowledge should exist given the variability of human mind.

Yet, the growing focus on industrial model where one-size-fits-all standardized education completely ignores research and moves even farther from natural and developmentally appropriate school cultures and practices. When a child has to undertake specified capsules of fragmented knowledge and perform competently over a set of tests, they come out not knowing whether and what they care to know, their drives and concerns in life are shaped and controlled. So, do the child and authenticity in childhood get overlooked when educational choices follow the competitive market or corporate trends? Educational aims, policies and practices succumb to the forceful larger discourse of development and survival, and child's development befits that frame more than what the above studies and human potential liberal education envisions. Education, when shaped by global pressures and competition, shapes humans as products that produce, global citizens or a-cultural beings, as commercial commodities that can compete globally and consume well for development. So we drill and push our children towards whatever sells in the global market.

Given such scenarios, concerns like the love for experience, curiosity and what children want to know, lose sight and scope. Struggle, pressure, timed activities is what children experience. The release is thrill and entertainment, because the love and genuine interest in learning is not catered to. The more the pressure, more the conformity and race for ratings and credits, closer the competition, and less would be the scope for authenticity.

With children and adults living in automated or ‘groping and coping’ mode, there is hardly any scope for the authentic, imaginative and creative

human potential. We just need authenticity and autonomy to break out from such human conditions. The path of cultivating authenticity comes through deliberately not conforming, risking disapproval, not succumbing to prevalent norms and pressures that seem so powerful and are applied as ratings, rejections and (dis)approvals in many forms in school policies and processes.

Considering the critical importance of authenticity, we need to look for ways to encourage it and enable authentic learning. That the significant adults can contribute towards children's capacity to eventually become autonomous is morally important, and widely accepted (Feinberg 1980). For this the adults who interact with children, both at home and school, have a significant responsibility in developing child's capacity to be responsible for how he is.

Since parents as significant adults play an important role by addressing what they value more in their children- being nice to others, successful, creative or original and authentic, parents need to think if they should structure child's time and life so that he is easily managed. Is that really caring for child's well being?

Anne-Marie Slaughter (2015) brings out few relevant inputs for parents. The central point made in the book is that "individuals who never invest deeply in others miss out on a huge part of themselves". In other words, she says, "Care does not just benefit those cared for, but is also a process of self-actualization or growth; it develops an entire dimension of ourselves as fully human." (Anderson, 2016). We can say that to be authentic, we as adults need to care to develop care in others, at least our children.

Only when children love to know, do they put their whole attention, thinking, being into something. Then the quality of engagement is intense, wholesome and so are the gains from such engagement. That is a way of being full, whole, and happy. In case, parents care deeply for their children, they should take the kind of decisions that enable and free both themselves

and their children, not deciding and fixing everything for children. Some of the parents share from their experience ... for sane parenting (Anderson, 2016):

"you can engineer the life you want your kids to have, but it may not be the life they want to have. You have to encourage them to pursue their passions. And you have to spend more time on them than you spend on anything else". (Anderson, 2016)

"the most impressive people are those who found what they love and do it with great passion and discipline, ground-breaking or not". (Anderson, 2016)

It is being said that the child has the capacity for authentic learning which adults can encourage or spoil. We need to notice how much a child learns in the first three or four years of life, without really having to teach, to recognize and appreciate the success of authentic learning. If adults wanted to broaden the learner's opportunities for active learning as the child grows up by expanding the learning environment, it can further support authentic learning. The interconnectedness of all knowledge and therefore the interdisciplinary nature is a fertile basis for research as well as better understanding for real life.

This explains the importance of the early childhood educators in the lives and education of young children. Perceiving children as agentic rather than powerless and incompetent may facilitate this transformation. Sorin highlights that "a number of policies and practices relating to young children are being reviewed and rewritten, seemingly use the construct of the agentic child" (Yelland & Kilderry, 2005).

It is the construction of knowledge rather than imparting knowledge that can allow scope for authentic questioning, search, and inquiry, to allow creation of any knower. It may be relevant to have a glimpse into how 'authentic learning' has been seen through ages. We will briefly consider how J J Rousseau, Maria Montessori and John Dewey considered learning, child and teaching.

Rousseau contended that it is not the children that are evil, but society. Rousseau also disagreed with the authority-driven "teacher as teller" mode of teaching. He believed that true teaching was based, not on authority and control, but on a loving bond between teacher and student, within which the two could explore matters of interest together. He trusted children to find things out for themselves and recommended that teachers "do everything by doing nothing."

Montessori supported Rousseau's "well-regulated freedom" in which adults meticulously structured and curated environments within which children had a great deal of choice and movement. She argued that self-regulation can only occur when learners have the opportunity to see how their choices play out in the real world. And like others, committed to educating the whole child, Montessori rejected the common use of external rewards and punishments in favour of the intrinsic rewards that come from authentic, natural learning. She believed that when children's developmental needs are met, they develop qualities what characterise authenticity, like love of work, spontaneous concentration, love of silence and of working alone, sublimation of the possessive instinct, power to act from real choice, independence and initiative, spontaneous self-discipline, and joy.

Dewey's concept of education stressed meaningful activity in learning and participation in classroom democracy. Unlike traditional authoritarian modes of teaching, which promoted rote learning, his idea of learning was with personal involvement by students and with curriculum that is relevant to students' lives. Therefore learning-by-doing and development of practical life skills are placed crucial to Dewey's idea of "progressive" education which implies progress in each learner and thus society.

The Lab School, founded by Dewey in 1896, with intent of testing learning theories, stresses the following characteristics of education as on website (<http://learninginmind.com/authentic-learning.php#ref-authentic-15>).

- The freedom to truly be an authentic individual;
- The opportunity to explore one's real interests; and
- " An environment that allows the unique self to flourish within the broader community".

The education offered by them has been quite popular also. Attending to features common to the three, we observe that child's freedom to explore and choose is common to each, even if guided. Teaching is guided by child's moves more than prescriptions and directions to and by teachers or authorities. This freedom to explore, experience and inquire for themselves improves initiative and motivation, and then rewards of learning are completely their own. The personal engagement in knowing comes naturally with wanting to know for oneself and therefore we find ways of knowing, evaluating for ourselves until one is convinced, therefore involves viewing critically and reflecting. The nature of query itself can shape the nature and method of search.

This kind of process of knowing disciplines and regulates us. An alertness, open-mindedness and keen sense of observation, analysis and judgement are thus integral with the process of knowing. Creating scope for authentic learning thus makes all externally enforced practices, like imposed curricula, dictating set questions, exercises and methods to do them, and structures to evaluate learning, in institutions redundant. We increasingly find that teaching time is less than time for all other procedures. Teachers do not have freedom to select what will be taught next day in government schools as of now. It is centrally dictated on-line. Authenticity is a far from conceivable notion in most institutions today.

The importance of early years of development is further highlighted in an understanding that people form their own personality during this early experiential phase by a teacher, Loris Malaguzzi and parents in the Reggio Emilia area in Italy after World War II.

This is approach that emerged out of progressive and cooperative early childhood education to suit each individual child, community and culture. It is based on the idea that children express their ideas in "a hundred languages" and should be facilitated in learning these symbolic languages (eg., painting, sculpting, music, drama) in everyday life, essentially, "Nothing without joy!". The program is based on "principles of respect, responsibility, and community through exploration and discovery in a supportive and enriching environment. This environment is driven by the interests of the children through a self-guided curriculum".

There are no "Reggio Emilia Schools" other than the original. Unlike Montessori, they have no training program for teachers. Schools that use the Reggio Emilia principles are called "Reggio-inspired" schools. Still, the approach has found its way into a number of schools in the U.S.

Many of today's alternative learner-centred schools blend aspects of Montessori, Reggio Emilia, Dewey, Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences, and other child-centred, inquiry-based educational philosophies consistent with natural human development (ibid).

The methods of authentic learning are limited only by imagination. But the approach of the Reggio Emilia offers Principles seems to form a fair basis. Basic to all these principles is a trusting, respectful, and nurturing relationship between adults and student learners without which any method or approach can fall flat. (ibid)

Reflecting on the meaning and complexity of authenticity and its doability, a blog article conveys that there are consequences of pursuing authenticity. Authenticity, being a conscious choice and not an automatic expression of care, often emanating from an internal "should" is quite contrary to the prevailing trends. Yet it highlights that experience of becoming more alive and grounded, more able to navigate relationships, because of being able to reach this integration. Therefore the writer suggests _ For a

vibrant life, try replacing niceness with truth spoken with love.

Sharing some of the fruits of these explorations, the writer proposes some not very difficult to ways nurture the authenticity child is born with :

- by not imposing body of knowledge, but encouraging construction for learning;
- offering freedom of choice in why, what, how each child prefers to explore; exposing to a wide range of experiences and activities;
- encouraging them to evaluate their own decisions and actions, rather than for approval or to avoid disapproval; free from fear, authority, having to prove and perform;
- living true to themselves, not adopt norms and practices without examining,
- offering platforms for debating, exchanging and sharing understandings
- with honest, open and loving relational orientation ...

This can be done by someone who values authenticity, and lives authentically.

Now in case we are convinced that children are authentic learners, and care enough to educate for authenticity, there are implications for all adults to address our lives and ways of being and living. The roles we play as parents, significant adults and importantly as teachers, the nature of teacher education- all need reorientation. We have to find ways to address how the structure, system, mechanisms, procedures, practices and processes in schools that don't find ways to encourage authenticity but exercise control and authority in many hidden ways.

Concluding Remarks

I see that so long as students' curiosity is alive, they have their own questions besides and beyond the prescribed and tested, they are trying to make sense of things, authenticity is alive and can develop. When they are not easily convinced, need to explore further, experience by themselves , try enough, pursue further even if not in classes because they want to settle it for

themselves, it is good sign for authenticity. Then they usually have insightful comments, queries, or original observations to supplement or critically view something and do not become anxious about how elders or system evaluates their growth.

If we allow easy time and free spaces within classrooms to think, reflect, pause, ask, share their view, experiences, authenticity can be cultivated. They develop an open mind, view things carefully, think and act responsibly. They listen to others with respect, trust the teacher, observe, think, feel express in increasingly refined ways. When we do not play authority or expert, we can engage with them in their inquiry, search together. When we don't teach them mainly to perform, we assign tasks that they are likely to engage with deeply.

Effective teaching is a lot about generating interest, arousing curiosity, love for learning,

encouraging questioning, daring and sharing experiences to facilitate figuring out how learning and knowing can be relevant. Very often this becomes their platform for living what they know and understand. Also it further enables them to take their direction and pursue knowing in their individualised ways but without fear of being judged and half-heartedness. This makes them learn with keen earnestness and enthusiasm, never as a burden they carry for certain extrinsic ends.

Increasing instructions, directions decreases scope for their thoughtfulness. A democratic environment where teacher and students decide the learning together works well for all to live it. Increasing control, surveillance and closely structured curricula, time frames and evaluation processes reduces possibilities for free and motivating wholesome learning necessary for encouraging authenticity.

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