

# Authenticity and Educational Change

DEBBIE MEIER

*Coalition Campus Project New York, New York*

*One of the greatest clichés of educational change, indeed of our time, is that of authenticity. There is no shortage of advocates for authentic leadership, authentic learning and authentic assessment. In this chapter, Debbie Meier cuts through the hackneyed phrases to ask what, if anything there is to this idea of authenticity, and to the idea of authentic learning that motivates many change efforts.*

*What is authentic and what is artificial, Meier asks? How can anything in schools be truly authentic, when schools by their nature, are so artificial? Are authentic things necessarily good and inauthentic ones bad? How do we decide on these things? Meier teases her readers with examples that provoke creative discomfort around the idea of authenticity, which she uses to push the discussion much further than other writers in the area have done.*

*In the end, she finds some of the answers to these demanding conceptual questions in practice and draws upon her own experience of transforming Central Park East school in New York to do so. It is here, she shows, in attempts to build powerful, meaningful learning for students in disadvantaged neighbourhoods that the possibilities of authenticity are ultimately to be found.*

Schools were invented as a replacement for the most authentic forms of education – those that stemmed naturally out of families, neighborhoods and work places. They were from the start, by their very nature, artificial. Schools have been in the business of imposing upon us, *out of context*, the stuff that “context”, does not, it’s assumed, naturally supply. It reminds me of modern nutrition: having taken all the natural nutrients out of food we spend a lot of money and energy devising systems for getting it back artificially.

The dilemma is that artificiality is both the *raison d’être* for schools and the stumbling block to their success. There are limits to how many nutrients we can absorb artificially, and how useful they are out of context; but there aren’t alternatives unless we reorganize the entire society that surrounds us so that the raising of the young is once again woven into all aspects of modern life. We can probably only go so far in this direction, and the best solutions probably aren’t accessible to vast numbers of our children – at least in the near future.

But artificiality doesn’t have to be a bad word, and authenticity isn’t a guarantee of good education. Playing scales on the piano over and over is surely “artificial” – but so is the piano and what we do on it. Whether it’s justified depends both on how much we value its end purpose and whether we conclude it’s a good route toward reaching such an end. The proof of the pudding doesn’t even depend on how boring the task may seem, or how easy or hard it is to accomplish. We can

only defend or attack the repetitiveness of the exercise if we examine it in relation-ship to its ostensible purpose. Any task can, in a way, be viewed as authentic if in our interpretation it's in keeping with its purpose. Practicing scales was, it so hap-pens, an exercise I did with my mind and heart turned off, and the scales not surprisingly never helped me develop musicianship. But that's not to condemn scales, nor evidence against their potential authenticity under different circumstances. Let's look at some examples that might help us burrow more deeply into the meanings that authenticity might carry.

- A 9 year old student tells his teacher that he wants to make his story longer. "I want more words" he insists in Spanish – "mas palabras." He and his companion spend hours over a period of several days seeking words that will "add to" the story. It's not clear why he wants it longer, or what he thinks the new words add, or why his friend so eagerly joins him in this arbitrary self-assigned task. But his persistence, and his friend's eagerness to help him, stand out in a class that generally requires continuous external motivation. In some way that his teacher cannot discern, he is driven by a problem of interest to him.
- Teachers in a South Bronx school, seeking "authenticity", decided to study AIDS as a science topic: to think of ways to help their community tackle the crisis better. They read the most relevant daily accounts, and listened to local spokespeople on science and health-related issues. The students were bored, passive and unengaged. Could there have been a topic more "authentic"? Less than a mile away a similar group of students studied flatworms, about which they perceived no relevant purpose, except that it was the next chapter in their textbook. (No doubt the teacher could explain the purpose.) But they came into their lab eagerly, and were filled with enthusiasm at what appeared to me entirely trivial information about the anatomy of worms! Were they being scientists in a lab, much as a 4 year old is mommy in her play house? Had they created a make-believe but for them still authentic experience?
- My cousin learned to cook authentically – at her mother's side – and found it trivial and boring even though her mother was famous for her cooking skills. My neighbor learned to cook by loving food and poring over cook books to get it just right.
- A math teacher, in an effort to be authentic, has given students worksheets consisting solely of real-life examples in the use of ratios to solve real problems. The examples are both lively and amusing and require mental effort to solve. In fact, however, the students are no more intrigued by these "real life" examples, than by fantasized problems or pages of routine algorithmic tasks. Their value might lie in the fact that they more nearly represented what ratios are all about, not alas in their capacity to engage the minds of the students. Yet in talking with the teacher afterwards she explained her purpose as being to make math "more interesting and entertaining" by presenting students with real-life-like examples. She had been attracted to this particular program not because it was mathematically more authentic but because it might prove more