Which Criteria Do Young People Use to Perceive Teachers as Authentic or Fake?

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Abstract

Both cultural optimists and pessimists see schools and mass media competing for the attention of children and adolescents. Mass media are however winning this confrontation. As the media provide entertainment as well as challenges, both parties see a clear danger for schools to be perceived as a dull place, where teachers try to force tedious information unto pupils. But maybe the reality is more nuanced, as we suspect pupils have different expectations towards the formal and the informal based on the main selection tool for information: authenticity. We expect the way pupils perceive schools and teachers as authentic, is essential in explaining why they value the school as a source of information.

Understanding authenticity will make a fundamental contribution to the better understanding of the interactions going on inside the classroom. Through the analysis of empirical data based on qualitative research, we examined the following question: which criteria do young people use to perceive teachers as authentic or fake? We found 4 important criteria that pupils use to perceive their teachers as being authentic: a profound knowledge of the subject, a passion for the job, the importance of a unique experience and a well balanced distance between pupil and teacher.

Authenticity has always been an important concept in working and talking with young people. Rogers has described how one needs to be authentic, besides being empathic and trustful in communicating with pupils (Rogers, 1979). The importance of authenticity in our society, and more specific for young people, has increased during the past 2 decades because of 3 closely related evolutions that all revolve around the importance of choice: the evolution in youth culture from common subcultures to a more individual eclectic composition (Polhemus, 1997), the evolution towards an experience-economy (Gilmore and Pine, 2007) and the evolution towards and the breakthrough of a 24/7 information society (De Bruyckere et al., 2010). People nowadays need a way of coping with what Toffler has called 'information overload' (Toffler, 1984). Several authors see authenticity as the main selection tool in a world that has become more and more fragmented. An individual has to make his or her own choices on his or her own responsibility, based on authenticity, being true to ones self (Boschma & Groen, 2006; Gilmore and Pine, 2007; Sweetman, 2004;...).

But what is authenticity?' Many different definitions exist in scientific areas such as philosophy (e.g. Dercks, 2000 Taylor, 1992; Trilling, 1974), psychology (e.g. Erickson, 1995; Etzioni, 1968;May et al., 2003; Kernis & Goldman, 2006), sociology and cultural studies (e.g. Barker & Taylor 2007; Moore, 2002; Peterson, 1997) marketing (e.g. Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Hughes, 1994), education (Kreber et al., 2007).

Instead of trying to delineate one comprehensive definition of authenticity, we follow the lead of Gallie (1956) by calling authenticity an essentially contested concept. It is much more pragmatic/interesting to look at which criteria a person or a group of persons use to define someone or something as being perceived as authentic in a specific context. So far, this strand of research has barely been pursued. There exists some research on criteria people use to perceive a brand as authentic (e.g. Van den Berg et al. 2009, Millet et al. S.D) or how young people perceive themselves as authentic (Ullman, 1987). This perspective remains however absent in educational contexts. Nonetheless, we expect authenticity to be of crucial importance in the classroom.

Both a cultural optimist as Steven Johnson (2005) or a rather cultural pessimist as Neil Postman (2006) see schools and mass media competing for the attention of children and adolescents. Mass media are however winning this confrontation. As the media provide entertainment as well as challenges (e.g. games for Johnson), both authors see a clear danger for schools to be perceived as a

dull place, where teachers try to force tedious information unto pupils. But maybe the reality is more nuanced (cfr also Roe et al. 2001), as we suspect pupils have different expectations towards the formal and the informal based on the selection tool for information: authenticity. We expect the way pupils perceive schools and teachers as authentic, is essential in explaining why they value the school as a source of information.

As school have become 'just' one of the sources of information and if indeed the selection of information is based on a perceived authenticity, then it is crucial to know what makes pupils to see education as fake or real. In this research we want to focus on teachers. Earlier research has shown that the role of teachers is central in the working of schools, for the learning of cognitive skills (e.g. maths, reading) but also for non-cognitive matters such as attitudes or values (Creemers, 1994; Kavadias, 2003; Scheerens & Bosker, 1996). Recent research has also shown that teachers themselves see authenticity as one of their most important characteristics (Gennip & Vrieze, 2008). We want to focus on the criteria pupils use to judge teachers as authentic. So far, this research question has not been pursued yet, but as it is them who need to be reached, it is essential to know which criteria they use.

Research Question

Understanding authenticity will make a fundamental contribution to the better understanding of the interactions going on inside the classroom. Through the analysis of empirical data we want to examine the following question:

- Which criteria do young people use to perceive teachers as authentic or fake?

The empirical analyses will feed the development of a conceptual framework for defining authenticity in formal and informal learning settings. This will give us the possibility to formulate an alternative to the theory of competition between the formal learning contexts and the informal world of pupils.

Methodological Choices

As a philosophical concept authenticity has seldom been operationalised. Our current research tries to fill this gap by using a qualitative inquiry in the form of semi-structured interviews of pupils, focusing on the micro level of education, the classroom. This qualitative approach was chosen because the subject of the meaning of authenticity and the criteria used by pupils are still unexplored matters. As we are interested in the perceptions, mental processes, feelings and understandings of pupils, without a clue on the possible dimensions of authenticity, our choice of methodology gets restricted to the more exploratory research designs (Ragin, 1994). In order to tackle the research questions we first work on conceptual theory building. A grounded theory approach seems the most appropriate way to work in this area where little theory has been developed (Glazer & Strauss, 1967; Granton & Caruso 2004; Ragin 1994). As our focus is on the meaning of authenticity in a specific context, we also have to take the level of analysis into account, i.e. the micro level of the pupil. This specific focus on the micro level suits the turn that took shape in the last decades of last century in the field of educational sociology, as the classroom is the place where the interaction between pupils and teachers truly happen (e.g. Brint, Contrairas & Matthews, 2001; Jackson, 1990).

Data Collection and Analysis

We have collected already the data and analysed it to a large extent:

1. We developed a first draft of the scheme for the semi-structured interviews and piloting the interview scheme with 36 students.
2. We collected 41 semi-structured interviews with pupils between 15 and 19 years old, all in the 4th, 5th or 6th grade of secondary education in Flanders.
   The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour. The audio of all interviews was digitally recorded and transcribed. Pupils were picked randomly, taking the difference between gender and grade at school into account. Our purpose was to maximize the variance in meanings of authenticity. As we reached a saturation point in interpretations of authenticity, we stopped after 41 pupils interviews.

3. In the interviews the pupils were asked for elements they see that make a teacher being perceived as authentic or fake inside a formal learning context, but we also examined the criteria for the perception of authenticity with guiders of young people in informal settings as youth movements, voluntary music classes, sporting clubs, …
4. All interviews were analysed by at least 2 researchers working separately, who regularly met and discussed their findings. In the initial interpretations we focused on establishing categories. As analysis method we've chosen for a grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to explore which criteria these pupils use in perceiving authenticity, followed by the ethnomethodological approach of Garfinkel as means of interpretation.
5. Validity can be a point of discussion in qualitative research, we did crosscheck in 2 ways:
   a. The initial findings were tested in 2 focus groups (2x7 pupils of 17 and 18 years old).
   b. The initial findings were checked with 3 researchers on authenticity and youngsters from other fields of (youth) research (i.c. marketing, leadership, youth culture)

Results

We discovered 4 distinct criteria that pupils use to perceive teachers as being authentic:
1. The knowledge of their topic as main criterion. A fake teacher is one that doesn't know what he or she is talking about.
2. Passion. A very important second criterion, which pupils translate in bringing in the actual context and being up to date. They need to feel that teachers are constantly involved in their topics and teaching.
3. Uniqueness. They want a unique experience and want to be approached as an unique individual in a unique class group.
4. Distance. Don't stand so close to me, pupils don't want a teacher to be their friend. They want a teacher to be interested in their live, but to be prudent in sharing his or her own personal background.

It seems a lot has to do with the authenticity of the role rather than the authenticity of the person. Everything is based on expectations. You are authentic as a teacher if your actions concur with the expectations that pupils have of the profession of teaching, and that is that they can learn something.

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