

Understanding Children Anew Beyond 'Teacher-Taught' Paradigm

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Who Should Learn from Whom?



Children belong to the world of

senses, emotions, and experience, whereas the modern literate adult belongs to the mental world of text, reason, concepts, and categories. In a way, we — children and adults — belong to two different worlds. As adults, we miss the holistic child due to the categories in which we are trapped. Learn, play, work are three of these categories; and serious, frivolous, and boring are the values that usually get attached to these categories. Accordingly they are also allocated specific spaces, timings, and priorities. Jinan states, "The most misunderstood aspect is the play and toys of children. We have gradually eliminated free and independent play from their lives and have invented toys that we imagine children would like to 'play' with." Jinan's initial framework to observe children was based on 'how to teach children better' and, as he freed himself from this frame, he began a study based on 'how children learn'; one more shift changed this to 'how learning happens.' Within the 'teacher-taught' paradigm there is no room for exploring how children learn. Jinan says, "The child was always there. What changed was my perception. I saw the child was just living, spontaneously, innocently, fully belonging to nature. Culture, seen as a separate category, is the beginning of the cognitive crisis of modern man." At the Sadhana School, a village school, 40 km from Pune, India, adults have been documenting children's free play for a year to understand children afresh. With more than 3,000 video clips on various self-initiated activities by children, without adult intervention or mediation, Jinan remains a fascinated observer of how children learn about life around them, inherent values of collaboration and care, and how they compete with themselves to perfect what they want to do. Children play out whatever they have experienced or observed through play and toys get made in the process to aid this play. From observing how children play naturally and autonomously, we can also understand what children are meant to learn as per the priorities set by nature. "Play is autonomous," observes Jinan. "We must be able to differentiate the child as a state of mind and play as a quality." The following are observations conducted at Sadhana School: one of the first roles a child plays is mother. Children imitate the caring behavior of the mother; hence, the first thing the child 'learns' is to be nurturing, to take care of another person. So learning in children takes place in the realm of experience itself and the repeated play is nothing but 'experiential' reflection. Jinan's enquiry of who should learn from whom is an invitation to educators and non-educators: "What I would like to explore is to see how children can help us in examining our alienation from our natural *beingness* and initiate a journey. Children learn the world as it appears in front of



them and we, the adults, learn the fragments through text that is too conceptual.

Children learn as per

life's need to sustain life. It is existential learning, whereas we learn to get degrees. Hence, we have these categories: academic knowledge, scientific knowledge, and so on. Maybe children could help us to re-examine many of these aspects that are taken for granted. What is learning? What is knowledge? What is science?" Conversations with Jinan take me on a journey to re-imagine school as an evolving learning space, for both children and adults, not as an alternative model, but a potent paradigm-shifting initiative. My own initiatives at Child at Street 11, Singapore, have had an influence of such potent sharing with minds that

help me move 'beyond the beyond,' retaining the authenticity of cultural contexts of children and families with everyday research and revelations — we continue learning. Jinan continues weaving new multiple threads into understanding children afresh. The modern individual is fragmented in every way. As the child is introduced to the world through non-contextual, fragmented textual information, the child gets fragmented in every way. Mind and body are fragmented; knower and the knowledge are fragmented; and integral and holistic knowledge is fragmented into subjects, art, and language. Context, Content, and Pedagogy Children learn from the moment they are born, perhaps even from the time of conception. Mother, father, and other people in the family, house, village are the first teachers of the first content in the first learning space. Whatever children experience is the content of their minds: this includes value, beauty, and knowledge. Learning is loosely used to mean only knowledge; this leaves out values, emotions, and so on. The focus is on the quality of being rather than quantity of information. Just this one choice, inspired by Jinan's ideas of being with children, has impacted the way we function with children in Child at Street 11, Singapore. The children's smiles and their energetic high-fives are evidence of this positive shift. Children imbibe/learn whatever they experience. If you regulate and structure a child's experience, the child will imbibe that regulation, as well as the demand to conform. This kills their spontaneity and natural beingness. Everything that happens in the school is the content for the child. Teaching is an authoritarian act. True learning is a democratic process; it is not regulated, structured, quantified, or tested. Democracy is our natural condition, while authority instills anti-democratic values. Embracing this paradigm requires a shift in our thinking about the role of the adult as teacher, guide, and facilitator. Some more weaving of ideas from Jinan and his team of learners continue to inspire, provoke, and invite reflections in the context of Children's Rights — the youngest citizens of the world. Being in the realm of the unknown: Awe Being in the realm of the unknown ensures awe, humility, and deep respect for life and nature. Children need the opportunity to figure this out by themselves; this brings out a different set of cognitive conditions: *Children deal autonomously with the task. They do something experientially. What is innate in them is revealed.*

Self initiated activities: Autonomy

Self-initiated activities with self-satisfaction as the motive that enables the child to engage autonomously with the world. Only minimum interference from the adult can ensure this. [Experiencing the world: Play](#) Children understand the world through play. Any self-initiated activity done for self-satisfaction is play. A child trying to bite his foot is play, making sounds is play, bouncing on a sofa is play, trying to slide on smooth surfaces is play, and everything a child does to re-experience through imitation is play.

Enhancing articulation: Language

The child's language cannot be separated from the experience she is having of the world. There is integrity between experiences and the language(s) she uses to express or articulate. We regularly impose artificial categories and divisions on children through language. Creating conditions rather than conditioning The idea is to enlarge the scope of school to include the whole community. This allows the natural, biological process in children through which they can lead sustainable, content, and harmonious lives: in harmony with nature, culture, society, family, and self. In an environment of freedom and trust, children can grow naturally. This happens when we avoid dividing their time in school into separate categories of playing and learning into subjects like language, mathematics, and science. The school then becomes a space for the awakening of intelligence, sensitivity, creativity, observation, self-initiative, and self-discipline. At Sadhana School, explorations of how learning happens continue with Jinan, the gentle, white-bearded social activist and child advocate. Now children come to school and sit together discussing any matters related to life in the school that they are interested in. Informal groups of children engage in conversations with adults about anything and everything under the sun, lending importance to their experiences. Roughly 60 percent of the time children play; 20 percent time is dedicated to drawing, and 20 percent is for articulation and sharing. By tuning in to the principles of natural learning, we better understand how children learn and our role as facilitators and co-learners. Chief among these are the concepts of freedom, trust, and harmony that serve as the foundation upon which everything else is built. Visit www.kumbham.org and www.youtube.com/user/sadhanavillagepune

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