Seeking a teacher living with heart

Jiryung Ahn
University of British Columbia

We are not human beings who can think by ourselves. Memorize – to take a test

There is an unbearable silence.

I was educated in a very different educational system compared to the one experienced by many people I meet in North America. When I think about my school life, I recall over fifty students crowded in a small classroom, learning within a rigid educational atmosphere...

Regardless of an individual’s ability or moral values, the aim was to have each student enter university. There was a mechanical relationship between teacher and student. We were indoctrinated with correct answers, required to accept them without thinking. A good teacher was one whose teaching skills worked to raise students’ grades on the university entrance examination.

We are not human beings who can think by ourselves. Memorize – to take a test

There is an unbearable silence.
The unforgettable stern look of regulating authority is in my teachers' eyes...

We shiver in fear.

Even now, the moment beats so vividly...

May. 1989

After finishing our mid-term exam, our class rechecks the answers for Tradition Korean. One of my classmates asks whether or not there is another possible answer to one of the questions. We all agree that the teacher has confused our understanding of the question.

But our teacher ignores our opinions. He blames us, saying that we have not studied enough to know what he wants us to say in response to that question.

My friend does not give up.

My teacher becomes angry; his face turns red, his voice high-pitched. He retorts that what he says is the right answer, that there are no exceptions.

We shiver again...

We are not human beings who can think by ourselves.
Memorize – to take a test
Authority over students.

Although what I experienced was an extreme case, as a whole, we had to follow the hidden rule: What a teacher said was, by definition, the truth. A teacher’s authority placed him or her as high above us as the sky, and we, as students, had to obey the teacher’s authority.

I've had a hard time trying to get used to another educational system.

Being schooled in Canada requires a different “I.”

There is a big gap in-between...

We are not human beings who can think by ourselves.
Memorize – to take a test
Authority over students.
I am learning to live with my own voice.

I am puzzled. Here, in Canada, being schooled means respecting each student as a precious being.

Teachers are also human beings who are learning with their students. They do not claim to know all the right answers.

We are not human beings who can think by ourselves.
Memorize - to take a test
Authority over students.

I am learning to live with my own voice.

When I entered my first classroom in Canada, I was the only one who sat straight in the chair, my body tense, my face frozen. I was still in the old classroom located on the other side of the Pacific Ocean...

We are not human beings who can think by ourselves.
Memorize - to take a test
Authority over students.

I could not find any hierarchy between teachers and students. Everybody was equal in the classroom. Though space for play was provided, I could not play. Shamefully, I did not know how...

We are not human beings who can think by ourselves.

Last September, I had the chance to work in a childcare centre in Vancouver as a volunteer. It was a new experience. At first it seemed like chaos, but there was a hidden order. Teachers did not force children to follow the rules: There was a good harmony between freedom and obligation.

Unlike my country’s childcare centre where there were over thirty-five children with one teacher in one classroom,

Authority over students

there were only fourteen children with two main teachers and several assistant teachers like me in this classroom.

Whenever teachers spoke, they started by saying, “Why don’t you...?” , “How about...?”, “Let’s...!” They emphasized children’s opinions. And I asked myself, What do children learn within such
an atmosphere? How do these children, I wondered, feel about their teachers?

**I am learning to live with my own voice.**

I have been a student since I was the age of five. In kindergarten, I was educated for “rightness” coupled with “have to.”

“Don’t do that!”

“Do this!”

**Memorize – to take a test**

My teacher’s voice still echoes in the rim of my ear…

Although I was educated in a severe, conservative educational environment, I remember that the sixth teacher in my life was a sincere mentor—a teacher of heart.

When I was in grade five, I was a weak and shy child. However, my teacher gave me encouragement. Although I was not a sociable child, I was a model student who was studious in my own work. He always watched me.

One day, he called me to him after class. He recommended that I enter a competition for scientific novel writing.

What?

I answered right away that I could not do it.

**On the one hand, it was a really big challenge for me; but on the other hand, I was afraid of being competitive with other students. However, with his persuasion, I could not help but agree to do it…**

I passed the first round, winning for my school,

and then the second round, winning for my hometown.

Finally, I won a prize for coming third in Korea!

I could not believe it.

**After that, I took pride in myself.**
My teacher just smiled without saying anything.

I exclaimed in my mind that I did it, yes, I did it.

I am learning to live with my own voice.

My teacher was the first person who opened the door and invited me to take a step into the big world by myself. He acknowledged my ability.

I am learning to live with my own voice.
I am learning to live with my own voice.

Thanks to him, I could see my potentiality. It was a turning point. He is still in my mind and soul.

Without him, I could not sense my inner self. Even now, he is still saying to me from my heart. "Don’t give up! There are unlimited possibilities for you.”

How can I interpret and express my understandings about teachers of the heart?

I am learning to live with my own voice.

We are not human beings who can think by ourselves.
Memorize - to take a test
Authority over students.

I am learning to live with my own voice.

I’m still questioning.

About the Author

Jiryeong Ahn is investigating the issues of children’s play and peer relationships, children’s social studies and early childhood teacher education through narrative inquiry and hermeneutics. She is a graduate student at the Centre for the Study of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.