

## ARTICLE

## My Engagements with Metropolitan Children: Problematizing their 'Agencies' in Constructing Everyday Worlds and Suggestions for Changes




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Childhood, chronologically spanning eighteen years, is the most crucial and interesting phase of an individual's life. Characterized by a certain level of physical, emotional, and cognitive maturation, Western developmental psychologists have always assessed children in terms of a few specified indicators of progression and subjected them to persistent quantitative evaluation for measuring, analyzing, and comparing their progression against some standardized yardsticks of development. Children are considered to be socially different from adults and increasingly identified through attributes like 'vulnerable', 'immature', 'innocent', 'naïve', and 'carefree', yet in the continuous process of growth and development. However, social science discourses (like Anthropology and Sociology) have tried to move beyond this narrower, universal, and generalizing way of defining childhood by dwelling deeply into their relational worlds and layers of multiple constructed meanings. Researchers in these domains no longer highlight the mere dependencies of children on their adult caregivers and try to focus attention on their agentic positions, and their role in decision-making, voicing, and channeling their opinions for matters related to their everyday lives. Children's narratives find a special place in different ethnographically guided child-centered research; raising pertinent questions about their rights, independencies, advocacies, and empowerment that undoubtedly throws light on their encounters, relations, and interactions with adults, within and beyond any institutional space.

My interest in children and understanding the phase of childhood heightened substantially instead of my doctoral journey that reframed my perspectives about children and approaches for conducting relevant research. Inspired by the theoretical framework of New Sociology and Anthropology of Childhood, I headed to set out my planned fieldwork in different 'carefully selected' and 'institutionally permitted' pre-school settings, predominately located in Eastern and Southern parts of the Kolkata metropolis. It took me nearly two years to complete the tenure of fieldwork, leaving behind some unforgettable memories of 'engagements' gathered through persistent challenges in doing child-centered ethnography, ethically-grounded manner of conversation, and reorientation of my positionality as a researcher for deeper access to children's conceptual worlds, which is different from adults' visions. Subsequently, it made me realize the everyday problems of these urban children (mostly hailing from upper-middle-class backgrounds), coming to private schools at tender ages and gradually bringing into the folds of a competitive culture of neoliberal educational practices to emerge as competent 'citizens' at later phases. Both schools and families function conjugatively in academically and socio-behaviorally training and disciplining children; often suppressing their voices, and hindering their interests in pressing their demands in different domains of everyday schedules. Despite the anthropological and/or sociological legitimization of children as independent social actors, most Indian caregivers hardly pay heed to children's perspectives, their independence in the meaning-making process, and their potential to influence everyday decisions.



Children's agencies are increasingly problematized within and beyond the urban institutionalized spaces as their constructed relational worlds are not merely seen as products of their understandings and manner of interpretations but indeed incessantly shaped by adults' expectations and prioritization of societal rules. As years roll on, children are ultimately rendered as 'docile', 'compliant' individuals who have silently accepted the institutionally acclaimed prescriptions, being mediated by their adult caretakers through rigorous disciplining practices and early academic pressures. In most cases, it happens against their wishes, and children's behaviors are skillfully regulated through seldom verbal negotiations, tactical procedures, and even punishments, enforcements, and coercion. Adults always want to curb the children's acts of resistance, thereby complicating the grounds of adult children's relationships as well as affecting their creativity, freedom, and sense of autonomy in framing their everyday lives and independently perceiving the world around them.

All these intensify the need for bringing certain changes in the early educational system and parenting practices in familial contexts. While researchers and policy-makers have always discussed issues like educational rights, child abuse, gender-based discrimination, and health and nutritional conditions, urban children who seemingly hail from 'privileged' family backgrounds are extremely marginalized in the face of educational competition, unrealistic adults' expectations, and stricter regulatory attitudes from adults. Indian educational policies and so private schools from metropolitan areas lack avenues for children to create meaningful spaces within institutional contexts and voice their opinions to influence the decisions about the curricular framework, everyday class activities, evaluation procedures, class schedules, and manner of arranging home assignments. Though beset with intrinsic difficulties in practicing the same at early learning spaces, both teachers and parents/guardians should take age-appropriate initiatives for facilitating the expression of their interests as well as sharing feedback/suggestions, which need to be appreciated and rightfully implemented, whenever required. Adults should think of ways of making children feel empowered in different institutionalized scenarios and enhance the decision-making abilities of children from early stages by instilling certain social-behavioral skills (like public speaking, careful observation, active listening, and analyzing adults' perspectives) that would help them to logically argue and confidently place their demands. Group activities should be part of everyday curricular practices, enabling children to build conducive relationships with peers of different interests and temperaments as they synchronize with them and pay heed to respective ideas and related practices. Likewise, adults (especially school teachers) should remain attentive to each child's interests, desires, and potentialities for designing individualized curricular practice and pathway of learning (particularly through play-based experiments and activity-based assignments) for early stages, rather than homogenizing their learning outcomes and universalizing their learning experiences against some pre-disposed institutionalized academic benchmarks and criterion for standardized evaluation. As children progress to higher grades, schools should provide them opportunities to form structured student forums, committees, and councils that could work in partnership with teachers and/or school administrative bodies to influence policy developments and incorporate guidelines about their institutionalized lives. Similar practices should also be followed at family levels, thereby highlighting the significant role of researchers in making adults recognize children's rights in framing everyday decisions and redress the power differentials in existing children-adults relationships.