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Educating for Authenticity? A Discussion of Impression Management in the context of Cross-Neurotype and Cross-Cultural Communication with Possible Implications for Education

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Abstract: *One of the most significant challenges that neurodivergent individuals face is the struggle to maintain a sense of authenticity when confronted with strong pressures to conform to the behaviors and norms expected by the majority. This issue arises in everyday settings, with notable implications healthcare and professional contexts and especially in educational settings. In this paper, we will explore whether a radical shift in the current educational system is necessary to safeguard the authenticity of vulnerable individuals, considering authenticity as a right rather than a privilege.*
First, we will examine how educational practices often sacrifice the authenticity of autistic students, encouraging them to conform to neurotypical behaviors through masking and impression management techniques. Such approaches can have significant consequences, including heightened stress, emotional exhaustion and suicidality. Similarly, foreign-born students face pressures to assimilate, which can lead to the suppression of their cultural identities and a loss of self. Drawing parallels between the experiences of autistic individuals and immigrants, the paper explores how both groups navigate social spaces that demand conformity to either cultural or neurotypical norms, often at the expense of their authentic selves.
In the second part of the paper, we will take into consideration the opportunity and the ethical urgency of possible solutions for preserving the authenticity of minority groups as those we analyze (although parallels and implications can be extended to other marginalized identities), such as incorporating neurodiversity and cultural diversity into the curriculum, adopting more flexible assessment methods, and providing training for educators on recognizing and supporting authentic self-expression. The paper also presents arguments favoring reforming educational settings to preserve authenticity, emphasizing the potential benefits for well-being and equity. However, it balances this perspective by considering the challenges of such reforms, including pushback from administrators, acknowledging the need to prepare students to navigate broader social norms as long as the social spaces are dominated by neuronormativity, and the practical difficulties of implementing systemic changes. Ultimately, the paper highlights the complexity of the issue and calls for a nuanced approach to fostering authenticity in education.

Keywords: *authenticity; autism spectrum disorder; cross-cultural communication; impression management; masking; camouflaging.*

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Introduction

The prevailing therapeutic approaches to autism tend to focus on teaching social skills that align with the expected behaviors and norms of the majority group. Similarly, in educational settings, autistic persons are often pressured to mimic neurotypical behavior rather than being encouraged to express their authentic selves. This usually involves suppressing natural behaviors such as stimming, echolalia, and monotropism, which are considered disruptive or uncomfortable for others. Instead, individuals are taught scripted responses, encouraged to maintain eye contact, display specific emotional expressions, and conform to certain body language norms (such as staying still or avoiding movement). They are also urged to initiate social interactions even when uncomfortable and to hide their discomfort, especially in situations involving unwanted physical contact. These practices frequently result in individuals masking or concealing their authentic responses, ultimately stifling self-expression, spontaneity, and the ability to communicate their genuine needs.

As new therapies and autism advocacy develop, the dominant approaches in autism intervention start facing the pressure to acknowledge the implications of the fact that autistic people tend to think, move, communicate, and interact differently, which requires not necessarily support and accommodation for daily living activities, but widespread awareness and acceptance. The same requirement is to a certain degree true for immigrants and newcomers arriving from different cultures, trying to accommodate to a new social and educational environment. In both cases, there is a strong push for the assimilation and attenuation of otherness, which arguably could strip them of their authenticity, or even autonomy. In the following pages we will try to describe these efforts to conform, which are coined as "camouflaging" and "masking", their facets, and possible negative effects; and, then, we will turn to looking at ways in which cross-cultural communication and education practices could inform how we see, interact with, and support autistic persons, in their terms.

The idea of this research came to mind while observing the intensifying discussion around intersectional aspects affecting the conceptualization and, through these, the measurement and therapeutic approaches to autism, and specifically, of what autistic persons do to fit in, and conceal characteristics constructed as indicative of their otherness (Patton, 2019). Both autistic and foreign-born individuals put

on masks in everyday conversations to conceal a social identity or simply to navigate social situations dominated by norms of feeling, expression and pragmatic rules of interactions that are either unfamiliar, or, – in many cases – not proper or natural to them, as they would spontaneously manifest around others from their own "culture", either we refer to neurodivergent/autistic 'subcultures' or ethnic/national ones.

The decision to analyze both autistic individuals and foreign-born students within the context of the masking phenomenon in educational settings stems from shared experiences of navigating environments that prioritize conformity over authentic self-expression. These two groups are vulnerable groups that are often subject to societal pressures that demand assimilation to dominant neurotypical or cultural norms, leading them to engage in masking behaviors – whether consciously or unconsciously.

While many marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ+ individuals, also engage in identity concealment or "masking" to navigate societal pressures, the focus on autistic individuals and foreign-born students in this analysis is grounded in their unique experiences within educational systems that often prioritize neurotypical and culturally dominant norms. Unlike LGBTQ+ individuals, whose identity concealment often relates to personal safety or social acceptance, the masking experienced by autistic and foreign-born students directly intersects with the structured demands of education, such as classroom behaviors, learning methods, and communication styles. These groups face distinct challenges in educational environments that routinely emphasize conformity to a specific set of neurotypical or cultural standards, making their experiences particularly relevant to discussions on how educational systems enforce, or could alleviate, pressures to suppress authentic self-expression. This focused comparison allows for a deeper exploration of how institutions can be reformed to better accommodate both neurodiversity and cultural diversity.

By applying insights from cross-cultural communication to cross-neurotype communication, we can ask whether it is time for a shift of focus in education from deficit-based approaches to ones that regard neurodivergent social preferences and interacting patterns as cultural differences. Thinking of autistic differences in the same terms we regard cultural differences that arise naturally can also help shift ableist mentalities that frame autism in mainly social and communication deficits. As such, the question that arises is whether the education

system, along with society and legal institutions, has a moral and legal obligation to protect authenticity rather than impose assimilation to neuro-normative or dominant cultural norms, or if such protection is not their responsibility.

Two opposing answers will emerge. The first one is that rethinking the educational system in order to support individuals in their authentic selves rather than pressuring them to conform is an urgent moral duty. This perspective is backed by the idea that such changes could foster a more inclusive and supportive educational environment for autistic individuals and immigrants, allowing them to maintain their authenticity while navigating new, complex or uncertain social dynamics. By allowing autistic individuals and immigrants to express their emotions and behaviors in ways that feel natural to them, we grant them the agency and the right to be fully authentic in social contexts. Societies should move away from enforcing rigid definitions of normality and social competence, and instead, create spaces where authenticity is valued and protected. Additionally, – as plenty of research demonstrates (Harter, 2002; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Wood et al., 2008; Lenton et al., 2016; Sedikides et al. 2017; Seto & Schlegel; 2018; Ryan & Ryan, 2019) – authenticity is strongly connected to well-being. And since we have the right to be happy, then we arguably have a right to the conditions of happiness, one of them being authenticity.

The second, opposing answer is that, while the idea of reforming the education system to support personal authenticity is interesting, there are also strong counterarguments that challenge the notion of a right to authenticity. One perspective argues that most individuals engage in impression management, sacrificing elements of their authenticity to be accepted, maintain relationships, or avoid offending others and it is hard to find the qualitative and quantitative difference between the typical, everyday impression management and autistic masking and camouflaging. If we view authenticity as a private, personal state, then it is inevitable that everyone compromises their authenticity in public spaces to a certain degree. Consequently, guaranteeing a right to authenticity could undermine genuine interactions by imposing artificial conditions on social behavior. Additionally, while individuals may have the right to pursue happiness, this does not automatically entail a right to happiness itself, nor to all the conditions that might facilitate happiness, such as authenticity. Just as there is no guaranteed right to humor, sexual fulfillment, or meaning in life, the concept of a right to authenticity may be overreaching. Therefore, it may not be

necessary to enact sweeping reforms in the education system to protect something as subjective and fluid as personal authenticity. This second view suggests that the call for radical reform may overstate the need for systemic changes that enforce authenticity, while potentially overlooking the complexities of social interaction and individual adaptation.

Definitions and dimensions of authenticity and masking

Across social sciences, humanities, and everyday language, being an authentic person is roughly characterized as being "real", "genuine", or "true to oneself". In psychology, authenticity is closely tied to an individual's self-concept and is often understood as a form of self-congruence, or more specifically, the alignment between a person's internal characteristics (such as emotional needs, preferences, values, and motivations) and their external behavior. This congruence is commonly linked to living a fulfilling and psychologically healthy life (Harter, 2002; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Wood et al., 2008; Lenton et al., 2013; Sedikides et al., 2017; Seto & Schlegel, 2018; Ryan & Ryan, 2019).

While there is general consensus on the positive impact of authenticity on well-being, defining and operationalizing authenticity remains a point of contention among scholars. A recent debate is whether authenticity should be characterized as a trait (Wood et al, 2008; Kernis & Goldman, 2006 or as a state (Schmader & Sedikides, 2017; Sedikides & al 2017). A trait is long-lived and is defined as a stable, although not continuous, pattern of thinking, acting, and feeling, while a state is a short-lived phenomenological, and context-dependent experience, that is not necessarily tied up to someone's personality.

This distinction carries significant implications. If authenticity is considered a trait, it may be seen as a privilege reserved for those with a strong, self-assured personality, implying that not everyone can be authentic. However, if authenticity is viewed as a state influenced by specific settings, then everyone experiences moments of congruence with their true selves. In this case, it can lead us to question whether it's necessary to adapt environments, such as educational institutions, to better support disadvantaged individuals, like those with autism, in achieving a stronger sense of alignment with their true selves. The changes we might advocate for would focus on reducing the pressure on autistic individuals to engage in impression management techniques, such as masking and camouflaging.

There are various definitions of masking in the literature, most emphasizing the suppressive aspects of impression management to help individuals "blend in." A recent definition, noted for its clarity and simplicity, is offered by Miller et al. (2021): "Masking is a term used by the autistic community to describe the suppression of aspects of self and identity to 'fly under the radar' or 'appear normal,' using conscious (i.e., mimicking facial expressions) or unconscious (i.e., unintentionally suppressing aspects of one's identity) means. We use 'masking' as an umbrella term to capture experiences that have been referred to as 'camouflaging,' 'compensation,' and 'adaptive morphing.'" (Miller et al., 2021).

Based on a factor analysis of the CAT-Q, a camouflaging assessment tool designed to examine autism from a subjective, internal perspective, Hull et al. (2020) identify three grouping factors, derived from data on 354 autistic and 478 non-autistic adults: mimicking and copying allistic social norms (compensation), repressing autistic traits (masking), and performing and pretending (assimilation). Compensation primarily involves copying and imitating language tone, nonverbal communication, and facial expressions observed in others or media (TV, internet, books), and repeating or using learned scripts. Masking refers to the active suppression of natural behaviors, such as constantly monitoring one's own and others' reactions, forcing eye contact, or appearing relaxed and comfortable while simulating interest in conversations. The third dimension in Hull's model (2020), assimilation, captures the subjective experience of needing to put on an act, where spontaneous self-expression is sacrificed in order to appear "normal."

It is believed that most late-diagnosed autistics evade diagnosis well into adulthood because they unknowingly engage in camouflaging, compensation, and morphing, assuming that everyone functions this way in daily life. To a certain extent, this impression management is true for everyone; we all construct a persona, and create scripts for high-pressure situations (e.g., job interviews, meeting a fiancé's parents, making a marriage proposal), which can induce performance anxiety. As William James observed, "properly speaking, a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind. To wound any one of these images is to wound him. But as the individuals who carry the images fall naturally into classes, we may practically say that he has as many different social selves as there are distinct groups of persons about whose opinion he cares. He generally shows a different side of himself to each of these different groups."

(James 1950, 294) However, allistics do not feel the need to perform constantly to the same pervasive, continuous, and exhausting degree that autistics do, even though they may also mimic, imitate, and rehearse behaviors, expressions, accents, or phrases.

There has been a growing effort to understand and describe both the positive and negative causes and consequences of masking, while also disentangling the lived experience of autistic individuals from prevailing preconceptions and misconceptions (Pearson & Rose, 2021). We believe that many questions remain unanswered, and that cross-cultural psychology and communication could offer valuable insights for exploring some of these issues further.

Consequences of masking

In the case of autism, masking is suspected to contribute significantly to late diagnosis or underdiagnosis, particularly among women and girls. This often results in them missing the appropriate care and support, as they tend to express autism in ways that do not align with current diagnostic criteria (Hull et al., 2020; Bargiela et al., 2016). Many parents are unaware of the consequences of masking until later in their child's life. Delayed diagnosis leads to a vicious cycle in which individuals become increasingly dependent on masking as a survival mechanism.

A lack of diagnosis often leads individuals to rely more heavily on masking, which can become permanent. This form of masking is both cognitively and emotionally taxing, requiring significant cognitive control and leading to substantial metabolic costs, ultimately resulting in autistic burnout (Raymaker et al., 2020). These authors define autistic burnout as a combination of chronic exhaustion, loss of skills, and reduced tolerance for stimuli. Autistic individuals interviewed in the study describe cumulative life stressors and barriers to accessing support, leading to a perceived inability to relieve this growing burden. This is often exacerbated by a lack of empathy from neurotypical individuals. Participants in the study suggested several strategies for recovery or replenishment, including seeking social support, managing expectations, taking time to decompress, and embracing autistic ways of doing things.

Living behind a mask daily leads to a life devoid of spontaneity, naturalness, and the ability to be oneself or feel accepted for who one truly is. While masking offers the safety of concealing a stigmatized identity, blending in or passing may come at the cost of having an

unstable sense of identity (Chapman & Bowell 2022). Many psychological and educational interventions, as well as family systems, emphasize techniques that encourage masking, aiming to replace autistic behaviors with neurotypical responses and habits.

This constant invalidation leads to self-consciousness, a sense of inauthenticity, and even a sense of lacking autonomy. As one's identity and spontaneous expressions are repeatedly rejected or questioned, dissociation can occur, particularly in the form of interoceptive disconnection. One of the participants in Miller et al.'s (2021) study expressed the long-term consequences of years of masking as an acute loss of connection to their true self: "I feel that I am grieving for the little girl who just wanted her own space and peace to read and play with dolls. She was forced to be someone else. I feel as though I am wearing a different person. I don't know where I went, or who I could have become if I hadn't been forced to be someone else." (NT woman, 48) (Miller et al., 2021, 3).

Hull and colleagues (2017) found in their qualitative study that not being one's true self is a consequence of camouflaging, affecting not only how individuals present themselves to the world but also their sense of authenticity, to the point where it feels like "lying about who you are," making it "hard to keep track of their authentic self" (Hull et al., 2017, 2529). In other studies, autistic respondents reported masking to avoid stigma and ostracization, even when they valued and felt pride in their autistic identity. However, hiding this identity often leads to a heavy burden of inauthenticity: "I don't care about being different, I like my differences (apart from things feeling really stressful and no confidence) but I don't want to deal with people's negative and sometimes evil reactions. I feel like the weight of a black cloud is hanging on me having to be this fake version of me. (Female, 48)" (Hull et al., 2017).

The double bind of camouflaging often increases its damaging effects, as highlighted by this situation: "If individuals attempt to camouflage but are ultimately unsuccessful this may further increase the social, emotional, and psychological harm resulting from their camouflaging efforts." (Hull et al. 2017). Over time, this exhausting cycle leads to severe psychological reactions, as illustrated by Pearson & Rose (2021). Disconnection from oneself is often compounded by disconnection from others in the context of masking. One of the inherent complexities of masking, which can be termed the masking paradox, is that it ultimately undermines the goals it is meant to achieve.

While it may create opportunities for mutual understanding and connection, it can simultaneously sabotage the chances of establishing strong, lasting interpersonal trust.

A similar double-bind effect is seen in the literature on immigrant perceptions, particularly in cross-cultural communication. In her PhD thesis, Dr. Alexandria West demonstrates that frame-switching affects bicultural individuals' perceived authenticity, which in turn impacts their well-being and dating prospects. Acting according to the expectations of the host culture, rather than their heritage culture, makes individuals seem less authentic, which results in social costs, such as reduced perceptions of likeability, trust, warmth, or competence (West et al., 2020).

A common consequence of the stigma associated with autism is social withdrawal, even when the individual is eager for companionship and connection. This is often an attempt to avoid the burden of masking and concealing their true self (Milton & Lyte, 2012; Milton & Sims, 2016). This withdrawal, of course, reduces the opportunities of finding social support and the broader benefits of being socially embedded.

An individual who habitually masks may feel stripped of their agency, and this lack of acceptance diminishes their chances of living a fulfilling life, as reflected in reduced well-being scores (Milton & Sims, 2016). Isolation, combined with the pressure to emulate neurotypical behavior and the long-term effects of habitual masking, is suspected to contribute to the high rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidality among autistic adults (Hirvikoski et al., 2016). This mirrors the effects of frame-switching and passing as a majority member on immigrants' well-being (Garcha et al., 2023).

Hull et al. (2020) showed that camouflaging is a risk factor for mental health issues in autistic adults without intellectual disabilities, regardless of gender, especially at higher levels of camouflaging behavior, with the strongest associations being with generalized and social anxiety. Cassidy et al. (2018) suggest that camouflaging is a predictor of suicidality, which, combined with unmet support, is unique to autistic individuals in their studied sample. Recently, Van der Putten et al. (2024) showed in a pre-registered study that while there is a moderate association between camouflaging and mental health symptoms, this is not the case for all groups. The strongest correlation between masking and mental health issues appears in the group that reports high negative affect and strong autistic traits.

Some broad parallelisms between autistic cultures and immigrant cultures

Sometimes emotional cultures differ so much (for instance, Japanese respondents seem to evaluate others' emotions not only by attending to facial expressions but also by exploring the emotions of those around the target; or in Eastern cultures, suppressing high-arousal negative emotions doesn't seem to have the same negative psychosomatic effects that this emotional regulation strategy has on Western subjects (Mesquita et al., 2019), to the point that we could call newcomers members of other neurodiverse tribes.

In addition to marginalization, different stigmas turn into emotional invalidation, which over time could lead to lowered emotional self-efficacy. Chronic non-adherence to different emotional norms and display rules causes both autistics and non-native newcomers to face subtler forms of abuse and victimization. These forms of mistreatment are more challenging to detect but can have debilitating long-term effects, as societal pressures to conform to the "rules of the place" impose conformity. This is evident in both the prescriptive nature of cultural orientation programs for acculturating individuals and in conversion-based therapeutic approaches like ABA for autistics. Linehan (1993) explored the concept of emotional invalidation, which occurs when an individual's emotions are belittled during formative years, leading to disturbances in emotional regulation. Camouflaging and masking are employed to avoid the invalidation of one's identity and emotions by detaching themselves from a stigmatized identity, but in doing so, the individuals complicate their relationships with their experiences, leading to a shaky sense of identity, an unstable sense of self, and a diffuse sense of inauthenticity.

Many stigmatized minority groups, such as BIPOC and LGBTQ communities, also resort, consciously and unconsciously, resort to high levels of masking for similar safety reasons. Masking in autistics and blending in among immigrants are adaptive mechanisms that help them cope with chronically invalidating evaluations and ostracism. This underscores the critical importance of communication patterns to an individual's clear sense of self and emotional and overall mental health. Emotional invalidation, as a passive form of abuse, often goes unnoticed and unrecognized for its long-term developmental effects. Emotional abuse, in the form of neglect, unresponsiveness, or invalidation, affects one's general self-efficacy (Witkowski, 2017) and the ability to regulate emotions. Such phenomena hinder the individual's attempts to secure

agency, autonomy, and a sense of optimism necessary for daily struggles, independence, and potentially thriving. One effect of emotional invalidation is increased aggressiveness, a symptom frequently attributed to autistics and a "staple" of anti-immigrant rhetoric.

Disguising and controlling one's emotions and impulses habitually comes at the expense of authenticity and can even lead to alexithymia, which is often associated with autism (Kinnaird et al., 2019). Some researchers cautiously indicate (due to methodological limitations) that the severity of alexithymia, or the difficulty in processing and conveying emotional information, is rooted in developmental factors like emotional socialization and abuse. A recent study suggests that maladaptive emotional ideologies (e.g., invalidation, non-acceptance, emotion-related shame/guilt, blame, suppression) mediate the relationship between risk factors for alexithymia and symptom severity (Edwards et al., 2017).

Neurodiversity and autism researchers have drawn parallels between masking—common in the autistic experience—and blending/passing in cross-cultural communication, such as code-switching and frame-switching practiced by underprivileged groups, including ethnic, racial, religious, sexual, or gender minorities. Autism is often pathologized, even though many autistics don't view their condition as a form of pathology. Instead, they consider their autistic identity value-neutral (Bagatell, 2007; Botha et al., 2022).

Immigrants or foreign individuals—tourists or sojourners—are not always viewed negatively (e.g., violent, disruptive members of gangs or rapists in the case of migrants' portrayal by far right politicians and media) (and similar threatening and negative stereotypes have been connected to autism - "active shooters" have been suspected of autism, as noted by some participants in Botha et al., 2022). Positive stereotypes, such as the "good immigrant" (Campos Ramales, 2019) or the idea of autistics having high intelligence or special abilities (Wood & Freeth, 2016), complicate group perceptions. Whether positive or negative, stereotypes or rigid societal perceptions affect one's sense of belonging and well-being by reducing the incentive to have one's identity defined by others, and express one's true self freely, with the expectation of being accepted for who one truly is. Both immigrants and autistic individuals, when denying elements of their identity, "detract from their identity and self, and in turn erase their experience and needs" (Botha et al., 2022, 440–441) and remain trapped in "a current social hierarchy in

which autistic people were subjugated, judged, undervalued and erased" (Botha et al., 2022, 442).

Autistic and neurodivergent adults report that their social navigation is dominated by a pressure to enact familiarity for others, which requires impression management techniques like masking and passing in various interpersonal and professional contexts, to hide characteristics and behaviors that reveal their difference and otherness (Patton, 2019). Avoiding being perceived as awkward, difficult, or uncomfortable by others is a common motivation for both passing and autistic masking. These behaviors help smooth social interactions, influence others' motivation to interact with them, and avoid being victimized, dehumanized, or infantilized. Masking also helps reduce awkward, alienating, and dehumanizing interactions with well-intentioned people, who may adjust their behavior in ways that again highlight one's difference or difficulty.

Some of these behaviors exist to some extent in neurotypical individuals as well, though certain elements are specific to autistics, such as suicidal thoughts or trying to hide behaviors considered unusual, like spontaneous reactions to loud stimuli (Miller et al., 2021). Other researchers highlight that camouflaging also occurs in non-autistic individuals and is associated with poor mental health, including heightened levels of depression, anxiety, and stress (Somerville et al., 2023). The results suggest that it's not the presence of subclinical autistic traits linked to poor mental health, but rather camouflaging itself, with a stronger association found among women. Based on these findings and observations from a qualitative study on camouflaging that asserts suffering is not inherent to autism (Botha et al., 2022), Somerville et al. (2023, 5-6) conclude that "autistic suffering results from being neurodivergent in a neurotypical world that demands conformity, and the discrimination, isolation, and victimization resulting from this."

In all cases, some form of stigma or the risk of marginalization or victimization is avoided, both by neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals. Interestingly, autistic individuals perceive masking in various ways. For some of the participants in the study by Miller et al. (2021), masking is considered a normal behavior, a neurotypical standard they strive to emulate to allow for social connection. Others expressed that they had been unaware for years, or their entire lives, that they had been masking, and were shocked to learn that not everyone resorts to this cognitively taxing form of self-presentation. Instead, for many, self-expression is spontaneous and effortless.

To some degree, what Miller's study participants pointed out is true for almost everyone's daily experience. Most individuals have complex and multifaceted identities that shift depending on the situation they are in. We all practice switching between different versions of ourselves, each with its own speech patterns, jargon, dialects, and mannerisms. The persona we present to a jury or admissions committee is vastly different from the one known to our grandmother, and it may also differ significantly from the one we show to a romantic partner, especially in the early stages of a relationship. This identity may evolve over years of being together. Balancing our personal and professional lives often leads us to emphasize one identity over the other, feeling more authentic in specific roles. Regardless of our situation, allegiances, or identification with the surrounding culture, we constantly navigate and manage multiple identities.

However, this exploration seeks to point out that researchers need to make a bolder and more articulate attempt to determine the qualitative and fundamental differences between every day "mask switching" that allows smooth transitions between social contexts and the masking required by underprivileged, marginalized individuals, such as neurodiverse individuals. Being able to demonstrate this, we will be able to bring stronger arguments to attempts to downplay the importance of accommodations that serve autistic individuals and test other ways to mitigate the psychological risks of masking.

In favor of preserving authenticity in educational settings: some practical suggestions for supporting autistic and foreign-born individuals

Given all the above considerations, advocates of inclusion might argue that to preserve the authenticity of both autistic and non-native students in educational settings, it is important to rethink existing mindsets and practices that often prioritize conformity and adherence to social norms. Several practical recommendations might be proposed. These include incorporating examples of diverse emotional and social behaviors in SEL lessons to highlight the validity of different ways of interacting; teaching all students about neurodiversity and cultural diversity as part of social and emotional education, thereby normalizing differences in communication and behavior; and providing professional development opportunities for teachers focused on neurodiversity, masking, and the cultural challenges faced by immigrant students. Additionally, classroom practices could be developed to allow for

alternative forms of participation and communication, respecting individual student needs. The implementation of flexible participation criteria and assessment methods, such as project-based learning or portfolios, would allow students to demonstrate their knowledge in various ways. Educators could also encourage the use of students' unique interests and cultural backgrounds as a foundation for learning, creating space for individual expression in the curriculum. Furthermore, disciplinary policies could be reformed to avoid penalizing behaviors stemming from neurodivergent particularities or cultural differences. Lastly, policies could more explicitly and strongly protect the rights of students to express their neurodivergent or cultural identities within educational settings, by fostering acceptance and belonging.

In the context of a wider debate on accommodations for students that are different (Aronowitz, 2015), we think it is opportune to answer the question we anticipate about the goal of designing educational spaces for authenticity: Are all or, at least, some of these potential recommendations truly necessary? The arguments for fostering authenticity in educational settings rest on both ethical and practical considerations, suggesting that allowing students to engage with the world on their own terms may lead to better educational and psychological outcomes. While acknowledging the complexity of implementing such changes, this section presents the case for reforming educational practices to support the authentic self-expression of neurodivergent and immigrant students.

Probably the main argument for preserving authenticity in education is its direct link to well-being. As mentioned earlier in this paper, research in psychology has long established the relationship between authenticity and mental health, with individuals who are able to live in alignment with their true selves generally experiencing higher levels of life satisfaction, self-esteem, and emotional resilience (Harter, 2002; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Wood et al., 2008; Lenton et al., 2016; Sedikides et al. 2017; Seto & Schlegel; 2018; Ryan & Ryan, 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2000). For autistic students, the act of masking their intrinsic behaviors—such as stimming or avoiding eye contact—frequently results in increased stress, heightened anxiety, and what has been termed "autistic burnout," a condition characterized by chronic exhaustion and emotional depletion (Hull et al., 2017). Similarly, foreign-born students often encounter pressures to assimilate, which may involve modifying their accents or suppressing cultural practices, leading to experiences of alienation and identity loss. By promoting authentic self-expression,

educational institutions have the potential to cultivate environments that enhance emotional well-being, thereby enabling students to succeed both academically and personally.

Beyond the individual level, preserving authenticity in education could contribute to a more inclusive and equitable learning environment. When students are pressured to conform to narrow standards of behavior, such as neurotypical communication styles or culturally dominant norms, it reinforces a system that privileges some students over others. Neurodivergent and foreign-born students, whose natural ways of interacting may differ, are often placed at a disadvantage, both socially and academically. Encouraging authenticity, therefore, may help reduce systemic inequalities by allowing all students to participate fully in the educational experience without the need to hide or suppress aspects of their identity. This approach aligns with broader movements toward inclusive education, which emphasize the importance of accommodating diverse learning styles and cultural backgrounds (Armstrong, 2012).

From a pedagogical standpoint, fostering authenticity has the potential to improve learning outcomes. Traditional educational models often rely on standardized methods of assessment and instruction, which may overlook the diverse ways in which students learn and demonstrate knowledge. For example, autistic students may possess intense interests in particular subjects or excel in non-traditional learning modalities, such as visual or tactile engagement. Similarly, foreign-born students may contribute unique linguistic and cultural knowledge that can enhance classroom discussions and offer alternative perspectives on the curriculum. By adopting more flexible assessment approaches, such as project-based learning or portfolios, and encouraging students to integrate their personal interests and backgrounds into their educational experience, schools may better facilitate authentic learning (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2018). Teacher training is another critical component of this argument. Many educators are not fully aware of the subtle ways in which students, particularly those from neurodivergent or immigrant backgrounds, mask or camouflage their authentic selves in the classroom. Professional development programs that focus on neurodiversity and cultural competence could help teachers recognize when students are suppressing their true identities, and provide strategies for supporting these students in a way that honors their individuality (Gay, 2018). Such training could enable teachers to foster an environment of acceptance, where alternative forms of communication and participation are encouraged. This would

reduce the pressure on students to conform to rigid norms and allow for a wider range of authentic expression in the classroom.

While fostering authenticity might seem abstract or difficult to quantify, its practical implications extend to school policies and disciplinary practices. Traditional disciplinary policies often penalize behaviors that are seen as disruptive but are, in fact, reflective of neurodivergent or culturally specific ways of engaging with the environment. For example, stimming or speaking a native language might be viewed as inappropriate in certain educational contexts, leading to punitive measures. Advocates for reform suggest that schools could shift from punitive disciplinary models toward restorative practices, which focus on building relationships and addressing conflict through dialogue rather than punishment (Gregory et al., 2016). Such practices would allow schools to accommodate behaviors that stem from neurodiversity or cultural differences, recognizing that these behaviors are not inherently problematic but simply different.

The formation of both foreign-born and autistic identities is heavily influenced by relational elements. The degree to which societal narratives—internalized by caregivers, educators, and broader social networks—are allowed to circulate and take root will significantly affect the quality of life and authenticity for both groups. Following Iftode et al. (2022) and Mihailov et al. (2021), who emphasize that significant others are co-authors of one's self and that authenticity is inherently intersubjective and socially constructed, educational settings play a crucial role in shaping individuals' sense of authenticity. As these authors point out, the co-authors of our self-narrative have the power to shape our identity, often in ways that may lead to the individual's tacit acceptance of externally imposed narratives. Like any collaborative process, the dynamics of power cannot be ignored, as they influence the nature and quality of the input from co-authors. This is especially evident in the early stages of life when educational environments contribute significantly to the content of these narratives.

Legal frameworks may also offer a compelling argument for preserving authenticity in education. Existing international and national human rights laws already provide a basis for protecting the rights of individuals to express their cultural and neurodivergent identities. For example, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) emphasizes the right to full participation in education for individuals with disabilities, including the need for accommodations that allow these individuals to engage with their

learning environments on equal terms. Extending this framework to include the right to authenticity would ensure that neurodivergent students are not forced to mask their identities to succeed in school. Similarly, policies that protect the cultural rights of immigrant students could be expanded to safeguard their ability to maintain and express their cultural identities within the educational system (García & Kleifgen, 2010).

Finally, fostering authenticity within educational settings has broader societal implications. Schools play a critical role in shaping the next generation of citizens, and the values they promote will likely influence how students view diversity, inclusion, and individual differences as they move into adulthood. By encouraging authenticity, schools can help cultivate a culture of acceptance and empathy, where diversity is seen as a strength rather than a challenge to be overcome. This cultural shift could have far-reaching effects, promoting social cohesion and reducing stigma both within and beyond the school environment (Armstrong, 2012). It also helps to counteract societal tendencies to impose rigid standards of normality, standard performance, that may exclude or marginalize individuals who do not fit neatly within those frameworks.

In sum, allowing these students to engage authentically in their learning environments can enhance well-being, promote equity, and improve educational outcomes.

The case against a general reform of educational settings to foster authenticity for autistic and foreign-born individuals

While the arguments in favor of preserving authenticity for autistic and foreign-born students in educational settings are compelling, it is important to anticipate the backlash that will naturally arise, especially in underfunded educational systems, to serve a tendency to critically assess whether a general reform aimed at fostering authenticity is both practical and necessary.

The case against a general reform of educational settings to foster authenticity for autistic and foreign-born individuals can begin with a fundamental distinction: while individuals have a right to pursue happiness, this does not entail a positive right to happiness itself, nor to all the components that contribute to a happy life. Elements such as humor, sexual fulfillment, or finding meaning in life are undeniably important for personal well-being, but they are not guaranteed rights in the legal or moral sense. Similarly, the preservation of authenticity, while

valuable for individual well-being, is not necessarily something that educational systems must actively promote or guarantee at all times.

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that most people, regardless of their neurodivergence or cultural background, engage in some level of impression management. In public spaces, we often sacrifice aspects of our authenticity to be accepted, to form meaningful relationships, or to avoid social friction. If we understand authenticity as a state rather than a permanent trait, it becomes clear that everyone compromises their authenticity in various contexts, particularly in public settings. This, however, does not imply a loss of happiness or fulfillment; rather, it reflects the complexity of social interactions where different norms and expectations come into play. Therefore, it would seem unrealistic to some to expect educational institutions to foster authenticity in a way that would prevent such natural compromises from occurring. This is why, distinguishing quantitatively and qualitatively between impression management in neurotypical individuals and masking in autism is an urgent conceptual and empirical research project. The evidence of the negative effect of this in autistic populations, which we covered in this paper suggests that the consequences of relinquishing one's authenticity are truly debilitating. Mobilizing massive personal resources in this constant impression management effort is robbing neurodiverse students of opportunities and resources that they can deploy in learning.

Additionally, other voices could say that while authenticity is valuable, it is not the sole consideration in education. As critiques of social-educational learning programs insist, the insistence on secondary values such as authenticity could be watering down educational targets of a more measurable nature. However, schools have the responsibility to prepare students to navigate diverse social, professional, and civic environments, many of which have established norms and expectations. Encouraging all students to express themselves authentically at all times may conflict with the demands of these broader contexts and this is part of being part of a neuro-normative world where unmasking is still not safe. For example, while an autistic student may feel most authentic when engaging in behaviors such as stimming, or a foreign-born student may want to use their native language; these behaviors may be seen as interfering with the collective learning environments. Educators may struggle to balance competing demands: encouraging authentic expression while maintaining order, structure, and fairness for all students.

Furthermore, while the promotion of authenticity is often framed as an ethical imperative, it must be weighed against the collective

needs of the student body. Educational environments are, by nature, shared spaces where individuals must negotiate their differences to create a functional learning community. While accommodating individual needs and peculiarities is crucial, it is equally necessary to maintain a balance that allows all students to learn in a structured and supportive environment. Reforming education to prioritize authenticity may introduce new tensions between individual expression and collective order, changing the current approaches to classroom management.

It is also important to consider that educational systems, while imperfect, are designed to cultivate a set of common skills and knowledge that enable students to function in a shared society. Teaching autistic students the pragmatics of majority communications, while avoiding to invalidate their own way of expressing themselves, needs to be doubled by teaching the "neurotypical" teachers and students the skills to understand and communicate with autistic peers. This commonality is not inherently at odds with the preservation of individual identity, in fact it grants the learner the skills and agency to choose the parameters of their communication reducing the uncertainty that comes with a complex social world. In fact, many educational practices already allow for a degree of flexibility in how students engage with learning but they are not necessarily the most effective ones. Project-based learning, differentiated instruction, and culturally responsive teaching all represent ways in which schools can accommodate diverse needs and backgrounds without requiring wholesale, resource-intensive reform.

Moreover, critics of such reforms might argue that an overemphasis on individual authenticity could undermine the importance of cultivating adaptability, resilience, and social competence—skills that are essential for success in both personal and professional spheres. Learning to navigate social norms and expectations is a part of developing social intelligence, which allows individuals to function effectively in a variety of environments. While it is important to ensure that students are not forced to suppress their identities to the point of harm, it is equally important to teach them how to negotiate their authenticity within the constraints of different social contexts. An educational system that encourages students to express their authenticity without considering the broader social framework may inadvertently do a disservice by failing to prepare them for the complexities of real-world interactions.

Finally, it is worth considering that aspects of authenticity itself is not always synonymous with positive outcomes. For some students, particularly those who may struggle with impulse control or emotional regulation, certain "authentic" behaviors could be disruptive or harmful. Encouraging authenticity without appropriate boundaries or guidance could lead to a misunderstanding of what it means to express oneself in a socially responsible way. For this reason, any reform that promotes authenticity must also include provisions for teaching students how to balance their individual expression with the needs of others.

Conclusions

As seen above, while there are legitimate reasons to support the preservation of authenticity for autistic and foreign-born students, the argument for a general reform of educational settings to prioritize authenticity is not without its challenges. The subjective nature of authenticity, the practical difficulties of implementation, and the potential for unintended consequences suggest that a more measured approach may be warranted. Rather than pursuing radical, expensive changes, educational systems might benefit from incremental reforms that focus on acceptance and enhance flexibility and inclusivity without compromising the core functions of schooling. By carefully balancing the need for authenticity with the broader goals of education, schools can create environments that support both individual expression and collective flourishing.

The discussion of authenticity in educational settings, particularly regarding autistic and foreign-born students, highlights the complexities of balancing personal identity with broader social norms. A conclusion is that maintaining authenticity is crucial for the psychological well-being of individuals who face pressures to conform, whether due to neurodiversity or cultural differences. Students with ASD, who often mask their natural behaviors to fit into neurotypical expectations, and foreign-born students, who may feel pressured to downplay their cultural identities, experience significant emotional costs, including stress, burnout, and a loss of self. The importance of supporting authentic self-expression within educational environments is emphasized as a means to foster inclusion and emotional well-being. However, while promoting authenticity can offer benefits such as improved well-being, equity, and enriched learning experiences, it also presents challenges. A shift toward authenticity in education requires careful consideration of practical limitations, such as the need to balance

individual expression with the collective needs of the classroom. Moreover, the broader social and professional contexts students must navigate may demand some level of conformity, making it necessary to prepare students for these realities. Ultimately, fostering authenticity in education requires nuanced reforms that acknowledge the importance of individuality while ensuring students develop the adaptability needed to succeed in diverse social environments. By providing flexible assessment methods, teacher training, and inclusive disciplinary practices, educational institutions can create spaces where authenticity is valued without compromising the structure and functionality of the learning environment.

Future research could delve deeper into the long-term impacts of masking behaviors in both autistic and foreign-born students, particularly regarding their emotional, psychological, and academic outcomes. Longitudinal studies could track these individuals over time to explore how prolonged identity suppression affects not only their well-being but also their social integration and academic performance. Such research would help to clarify the potential benefits of implementing educational reforms that promote authenticity, providing concrete evidence for the importance of addressing identity-related stress in these populations. It would also offer insights into whether early interventions, such as flexible teaching approaches or targeted mental health support, can mitigate the negative consequences associated with masking.

Additionally, future studies could focus on testing and evaluating specific interventions designed to foster authenticity in educational settings. This might include experimental research on the effectiveness of inclusive teaching practices, such as differentiated instruction, culturally responsive pedagogy, or project-based learning, in reducing the pressures of conformity. Research could also examine how teacher training programs on neurodiversity and cultural sensitivity impact student outcomes, particularly in terms of emotional well-being and engagement. By identifying which strategies are most successful in supporting both autistic and foreign-born students in maintaining their authentic identities, future research can provide valuable guidance for educators and policymakers aiming to create more inclusive and supportive educational environments.

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