To Change What We Do, Consider What We Believe

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By Alfie Kohn

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Creativity — in education and in general — might be defined as the capacity to look at one thing and see something else. You observe a classroom, for example, in which students get to decide whether it's really necessary to do school assignments at home, and what you see is a respect for kids that could extend to giving them responsibility for any number of other decisions that, like homework, are usually the sole prerogative of teachers.

Or you're introduced to an approach to teaching math that has students actively constructing meaning around fundamental concepts, and what you see is a truth about learning no less relevant to the social and moral realm: Children need to make sense of ideas like fairness or honesty (rather than being exhorted to accept prepackaged virtues) exactly as they need to make sense of ideas like equivalence or place value (rather than just being taught procedures to practice and memorize).

Or you visit Reggio Emilia schools in Italy — a remarkable program designed for young children that led the influential early-childhood educator Lilian Katz on her first trip there to remark that she thought she had died and gone to heaven — and what you see are principles just as applicable to educating older students.

To think creatively about education is to draw on an array of overlapping progressive and humanistic principles. Consider, however, not only the principles themselves — for example, how to teach in a way that is more authentic, less standardized, and often messy — but the broader issue of what educators believe and its relation to what actually happens in schools. It's the connection between beliefs and practices that I'd like to explore here.

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A significant number of teachers, when asked, are unable to name a theory about learning that supports what they do in their classrooms.[1] But teachers' actions are still informed by their assumptions about what classrooms are supposed to look like, whether children can be trusted to make decisions, and so on — even though they may not have named these beliefs and may not even be aware of holding them. Such beliefs are typically rooted in their own educational experiences: Teachers, as the saying goes, teach the way they were taught rather than the way they were taught to teach. (Their teaching may also reflect the way they were *raised*.[2])

The result is that what might be called progressive proposals are often dismissed as "unrealistic" — or as appropriate only for some kids (or in some kinds of schools) — because they pose an unsettling challenge to beliefs that are pervasive in our society and accepted by many educators.

The most optimistic interpretation of that dismissal is that at least some of those beliefs are held more widely than

deeply and therefore might be sloughed off once they're illuminated and examined. When I was working on a book called *Punished by Rewards* a couple of decades ago, I came across a delightful article by a psychology professor named Harry Hom who recounted how he had described one of the classic studies about motivation to his college classes over the years. The study, conducted by Mark Lepper and his colleagues, asked preschoolers to draw pictures with Magic Markers. Some were promised a reward for drawing; some weren't. The question was what effect, if any, that reward would have on the children's interest in drawing a week or two later. Overwhelmingly, Hom reported, students predicted that the kids who had been rewarded would be more enthusiastic about drawing later on. But just the opposite is what actually happened, a result that scores of studies subsequently confirmed with subjects of different ages across many cultures engaged in a variety of activities. The more that people are rewarded for doing something — drawing, reading, sharing, you name it — the more they tend to lose interest in whatever they had to do to get the reward.

But here's the fascinating part. Once the result of Lepper's study was described — and possible explanations for it were reviewed — it made perfect sense to almost all of Hom's students, many of whom even claimed they "knew it all along." What initially seemed counterintuitive wasn't just accepted as plausible but quickly became intuitive. Well, of course! Rewards may induce children to do something, but then they're doing it just to get the reward, so once there's no longer a reward available they're less likely to engage in the task than they were before — and also less likely to do it when compared with kids who weren't rewarded in the first place.[3]

Inviting teachers to rethink the nature of motivation may just be enough to dislodge their beliefs, which, in turn, may nudge them to rethink their practices — including the use of grades, stickers, praise, and programs like PBIS, Class Dojo, or

Accelerated Reader. These programs — based on a long-discredited behaviorism that is still widely accepted in popular culture — are likely to be not just ineffective but actively harmful.

But why limit ourselves to the question of rewards? Invitations to reconsider one's beliefs on a variety of topics could have a similarly liberating effect. And in each case, it may be possible to find, share, and discuss the reasons for research findings as a way to provoke change.

Another strategy, meanwhile, is to invite people to reconsider their beliefs by drawing connections between what they do and what others have been doing to them. In workshops, I sometimes ask teachers to name the reasons cited by administrators for telling rather than asking — that is, for making decisions unilaterally instead of allowing teachers to participate in the process. The answers come quickly, and sometimes disgustedly: "They claim there's not enough time to decide things democratically." "'We have information you lack' — but of course they're the ones withholding that information!" At this point I ask: Do you ever use similar excuses to justify excluding students from making decisions about what happens in the classroom?

If teachers understandably resent the way they are micromanaged and manipulated in the name of accountability (for example, with merit pay) — how they're "done to" instead of "worked with" — then that provides a potentially powerful opening to ask them whether they, too, may be doing things *to* students (for example, with rewards such as grades and behavior management plans) rather than working *with* them.

To put it differently, are their beliefs leading them to treat kids the way they, themselves, are treated by their superiors — as opposed to the way they *wish* they were being treated?

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Regardless of the strategy we choose for inviting change, we need to be transparent about our premises and goals. If we don't bring them to the surface and defend them, others will take their place by default. Show me a school where people blithely announce they do "whatever works" (rather than making a case for specific goals) and I'll show you a place tacitly defined by behaviorism, where learning is conceived as the transmission and mastery of discrete skills, where the focus is limited to observable behaviors, where people are manipulated with incentives and what children do is relentlessly reduced to "data." If we don't ask, "What are we looking for here? What matters most to us, and how can we tell whether we've been successful?" then we'll just be evaluated on the basis of standardized test scores. By default, educational quality will be defined in terms of mere "rigor" — the difficulty level of whatever students are made to do.

The same is true of the purpose of education itself. If we don't defend certain reasons for having schools in the first place, then the purpose, supplied by politicians and corporate executives, will be all about economics — "competitiveness in a global economy" — rather than what benefits children or supports democracy.

If you're in a sailboat without a map or a destination, you can get up a good head of speed, but only in the direction that the prevailing winds are blowing. And who ultimately benefits from that? Whose interests are served when, for lack of active conversation about which way to travel, we fall back on just getting students to show up, sit down, and swallow a list of facts about minerals or modifiers or monarchies so they can produce impressive scores on unimpressive exams?

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So let's assume that we've taken this advice. We've examined our beliefs, decided that we can stand by them, and made them admirably transparent. Now what? Our collective challenge at

this point is to make sure that what we're doing with students is consistent with those beliefs.

Perhaps you've noticed that there's often a striking discrepancy between what people say and what they do. Nearly everyone condemns the practice of texting or e-mailing while driving, yet more than a quarter of adults admit to doing just that. A significant proportion of middle schoolers who reported having cheated in school also said they believed cheating is unacceptable. Corporal punishment is endorsed by fewer parents today than a few decades ago, but the practice itself seems just about as prevalent as it used to be.[4]

And in education? Monitoring ourselves and our colleagues for signs of a divergence between what we think makes sense and how we actually teach is critical to doing right by kids. Alas, such consistency too often proves to be the exception. It's common, for example, to declare that we want kids to be "lifelong learners" — and then proceed to rely on grades, homework, lecture- and textbook-based instruction, and other practices that make children noticeably less excited about learning. So, too, for curiosity, which is widely viewed as a desirable attribute, yet rarely promoted (and sometimes actively discouraged) in classrooms.[5]

There's no shortage of possible explanations for such discrepancies. Among them:

* a lack of time to do what one believes is valuable,

* a dedication to those beliefs that is less than wholehearted (since agreeing, when asked, that *x* is a good thing is not the same as spontaneously emphasizing one's commitment to it),

* a failure to notice that one's teaching is at variance with one's beliefs (or may be undermining the realization of one's long-term goals for students), and

* the presence of external pressures — for example, to keep

tight control of what students do, and to use leveled reading systems, rubrics, reward programs, or scripted curricula, the point being to raise test scores rather than to promote intellectual exploration, authentic literacy, and excitement about learning.

To grapple with these possibilities — and, in the last instance, to summon the courage to push back[6] — is to engage in a venture that is both ongoing and collaborative. Getting better at what we do entails continued reflection and discussion about what we believe.

NOTES

1. Colorado researchers asked 722 experienced elementary and secondary suburban teachers, about half of whom had advanced degrees, to do exactly that, and 83 percent couldn't come up with one. (Kathryn S. Whitaker and Monte C. Moses, "Does Learning Theory Influence Teaching Practices?" *European Journal of Teacher Education* 11 [1989]: 143-46.)

2. If "teacher education programs…are often relatively insignificant influences on subsequent classroom teaching," it may be because teachers' "disciplinary experiences in their families of origin are predictive of the strategies they select for classroom management." Those who punish students, for example, are disproportionately likely to have been punished themselves as children and discouraged from questioning parental authority. (Charles Kaplan, "Teachers' Punishment Histories and Their Selection of Disciplinary Strategies," *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 17 [1992]: 258-65; quotations from pp. 258, 263.)

3. Harry L. Hom, Jr., "Can You Predict the Overjustification Effect?", *Teaching of Psychology* 21 (1994): 36-7. The study in question: Mark R. Lepper, David Greene, and Richard E. Nisbett, "Undermining Children's Intrinsic Interest with Extrinsic Reward," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 28 (1973): 129-37. For many more such studies, see my book *Punished by Rewards* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993/1999).

4. Texting: More than 96 percent of U.S. drivers said it was unacceptable to type

text messages or e-mails while driving; in the same survey, 27% admitted to doing it — and one can only imagine by what factor that statistic understates its actual occurrence. Another survey painted an even more disturbing picture, with drivers regularly engaging in smartphone activities.) Cheating: Eric M. Anderman et al., "Motivation and Cheating During Early Adolescence," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 90 (1998): 84-93. Spanking: "Even as the percentage of Americans who approve of spanking has fallen dramatically in the last half century, the actual incidence of it has barely budged" (James H. Burnett III, "What If Spanking Works?", *Boston Globe Magazine*, June 17, 2012, p. 18.)

5. See Susan Engel, *The Hungry Mind: The Origins of Curiosity in Childhood* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), especially chapter 5.

6. See Jesse Hagopian, ed., *More Than a Score: The New Uprising Against High-Stakes Testing* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014); and Alfie Kohn, "Encouraging Courage," *Education Week*, September 18, 2013.

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