EDUCATION WEEK

September 30, 2015

Do This and You'll Get That

A Bad Way to Defend Good Programs

By Alfie Kohn

When we're not sure people will support our cause, it's tempting to link it to something more popular. Because x may be controversial (or may simply lack broad support), we hitch a ride on y, an outcome that reflects mainstream values. It's a strategy widely used in education, although we may have failed to notice the pattern — and consider its risks. To wit:

* Play. The current cult of rigor has led to fewer opportunities for young children to explore, invent, and just be kids. But rather than take a stand in favor of the irreducible value of such activity, we defensively list the putative practical benefits of fooling around. Play is "children's work"; it teaches academic skills, promotes language development, offers opportunities for conflict resolution, and so on.

* Social-emotional learning (SEL). Let the headlines tell the story: "Study Finds Academic Payoffs in Teaching Students Social Skills" (Education Week); "Whole Child Program Boosts Reading, Math Scores" (ASCD SmartBrief). A Teachers College report published earlier this year even tried to quantify "The Economic Value of SEL."

* Music education. Lending new meaning to the phrase "instrumental justification," efforts to bring music to children's lives are often defended on the grounds of improved performance in math or a boost in general cognitive capabilities. (When was the last time you heard someone justify algebra as a way to help kids be better musicians?)

* Preschool. The economist James Heckman may be the most prominent proponent of the financial benefits of early-childhood education, but today you'll get millions of hits by Googling "preschool" and "investment." Forget its potential to enrich children's lives — the reason to get behind nursery school, we're told, is that it will enrich the treasury by reducing government spending — once we see tots as "human capital."

* School itself. The logical conclusion of this strategy is the use of economic criteria to justify the very idea of giving children a good education. Politicians and corporate executives reflexively invoke the "competitive 21st-century global economy" whenever they want to make a case that schooling matters.

*

What I'm describing isn't limited to our field, of course. Generosity is often promoted by citing the benefits that will redound to the giver (2013 article: "Charity Can Get You Laid"), while social programs to address infant mortality or homelessness are, like universal pre-K, routinely justified on

economic grounds. I don't question the good intentions of people who talk this way; they're doing what they believe is most expedient to rally support for important initiatives.

But there are four serious problems with this strategy — all of them uncomfortably relevant to education.

1. It devalues the very thing you support. Scores of studies have found that offering people a reward for doing something (such as reading or helping) tends to reduce their interest in whatever they had to do to get the reward. One reason for this effect, though not the only one, is that anything presented as a prerequisite for something else — a means to another end — comes to be seen as less desirable. The recipient of the reward figures, "If they have to bribe me to do this, it must be something I wouldn't want to do."

This applies to programs and causes, too, because the implication of emphasizing the extrinsic benefits of, say, SEL is that there's no reason to support it other than those benefits, no intrinsic value to fostering social and emotional growth. We're implying that language arts and math are the only important disciplines, or that test scores are the sole outcome we ought to care about, or that financial gain is the ultimate criterion by which to gauge the value of our activities.

This is particularly ironic in the case of play because the whole point of play is that it has no point. Play is about process, not product; it has no goal other than itself. But this same pernicious paradox also shows up with any activity we care about: It will be even harder to support something once we've suggested that it acquires its value from something else. As teacher-blogger Peter Greene implored recently, "Do not defend a music program because it's good for other things. That's like defending kissing because it gives you stronger lip muscles for eating soup neatly….Defend it because it is music, and that's all the reason it needs."

2. It's a bargain with the devil. The consequences I've been describing are likely to result even if x does reliably bring about y. But if doubts should develop about the empirical connection being alleged, you're really sunk. You've bet the house on a horse that didn't come in.

In fact, researchers Peter K. Smith and Angeline Lillard have independently suggested that assertions about academic benefits derived from play may be overstated. Likewise, the case for the "Mozart effect" has been greatly exaggerated: In the classic study on the topic, music proved beneficial only with respect to spatial reasoning, an effect, moreover, that didn't last long and was demonstrated only with college students. As for education itself, a student's school achievement is only weakly related to his or her subsequent workplace performance, and there's little correlation between a nation's average test scores and its economic vigor.

Once such findings become widely known, the case for funding and supporting education is likely to be far weaker than if we'd never emphasized economic results in the first place. The same is true of using academic outcomes to promote play, music, or social skills.

3. It may enhance the legitimacy of whatever we're using as the justification. I've been arguing that "Do this in order to get that" deprives us of an opportunity to build a constituency for "this." (Every time we argue that preschool pays financial dividends down the road, we've missed another chance to defend the value of preschool, per se.) But we also may be bolstering the value of "that."

Such a result may not trouble us when the claim is that SEL or the arts raise achievement in core academic subjects; that's not an objectionable outcome. But if the supposed benefit is framed in terms of higher scores, we're helping to legitimate standardized tests. And as for claims that preschool, or education itself, yields economic benefits — well, do we really need to reinforce the

appeal of money relative to other values in our society?

4. It may change how we pursue favored programs to increase the chance of realizing that other result. If you’ve marketed preschool as ultra-early vocational prep, it’s more likely to be taught in a way that’s developmentally inappropriate. If you’ve claimed SEL can raise test scores, don’t be surprised if SEL programs start to incorporate test-prep-like instruction. And a 2012 study showed that when students are persuaded to stay in school mostly so they’ll earn more money later, they become less engaged with the learning itself.

Some people already know all of this, of course. There are folks with a proud history of defending art for art’s sake, supporting the “whole child” without feeling compelled to mention academic skills, understanding that young children aren’t just future grown-ups, and insisting that you can’t put a price on thinking deeply. We ought to embrace and expand these efforts rather than offering bad reasons to advance good ideas.

To be notified whenever a new article or blog is posted on this site, please enter your e-mail address at www.alfiekohn.org/contact-us.