Getting Hit on the Head Lessons (#)
Justifying Bad Educational Practices as Preparation for More of the Same

By Alfie Kohn

Suppose you have a negative reaction to a certain educational practice but you’re unable to come up with any good reasons to justify your opposition. All is not lost: You can always play the “human nature” card. Never mind whether it’s a good thing to help students become caring and compassionate, or for example, to avoid working against students’ natural inclinations. Conversely, no logic or data are necessary when you find a practice you happen to like. Just insist that what you favor is rooted in the natural inclination of your students. Rather than working to improve our schools, or other institutions, we should just get students ready for whatever is to come. Thus, a middle school teacher in Arizona, writing off the idea of performance-based learning as “nothing but drudgery, an endless list of dreary duties,” insists that “students must be taught at their own pace and thus be made to compete” (“in order to help them develop their skills” — a form of discussion rather than immersion. One need not make students compete, for example, in order to help them anticipate — and think critically about — society). But how much exposure do they need? Must they spend months preparing for a standardized test to get the hang of it? Sometimes preparation can take months, too, to help kids get used to doing homework when they’re older. My beef here isn’t with the idea of having students compete. What we need is more emphasis on the development of skills, and less on the outcome. This leads us to the most important, though rarely articulated, assumption on which BGUTI rests – that, psychologically speaking, the best way to prepare kids for life is to prepare kids for school. This is the assumption that you must come to terms with if you’re going to change anything in your school. Yet educators who know this is true often fall back on the justification that homework – time-consuming, anxiety-provoking, and pointless though it may be – will help students get used to doing homework when they’re older. The assumption that schools are a microcosm of society is widespread. John Holt once remarked that if people really felt that life was “nothing but drudgery, an endless list of dreary duties,” one would hope they would “say, ‘Yeah, but what’s going to happen to these kids when they learn that life isn’t like that?’” Invoking a dismal future, like invoking human nature, can work both ways – to attack practices one opposes and to promote practices one prefers. I’ve lost track of how many times I’ve heard someone respond to the charge that a certain policy is destructive by declaring that children are going to experience it eventually, so there’s no need to prepare them. This kind of reasoning is especially popular where curriculum is concerned. Even if a lesson provides little intellectual benefit, students may have to suffer through it anyway because someone decided it get them ready for what they’re going to face in the next grade. Lillian Katz, a specialist in early childhood education, refers to this as “vertical relevance,” and she contrasts it with the horizontal kind in which students’ learning is meaningful to them at the time because it connects to some other aspect of their lives.

Vertical justifications are not confined to the primary grades, however. Countless middle school math teachers spend their days reviewing facts and algorithms, not because this is the best way to promote understanding or spark interest, but solely because students will be expected to know this stuff when they get to high school. Even good teachers routinely engage in bad instruction, which their kids are unprepared for when bad instruction comes their way. In addition to forcing educators to teach too much too early, the current Tougher Standards craze has likewise emphasized a vertical rationale – in part because of its reliance on testing. Here, too, we find that “getting them ready” is sufficient reason for doing what would otherwise be seen as unreasonable. Child development experts may be wary unambiguously of young children being subjected to the use of standardized tests. Yet any serious consideration of the basic principles that say that many teachers, too, consider it “insane” to subject first graders to a 4-hour test. However, she adds, “they need to get used to it” – an imperative that trumps all objections. In fact, why wait until first grade? A principal in California uses the identical phrase to justify testing kindergartners: “Our philosophy is, the sooner we start giving these students tests like the Stanford 9, the sooner they’ll get used to it.”

What we might call the BGUTI principle – “Better Get Used To It” – is applied to other practices, too:

- * Traditional grading has been shown to reduce quality of learning, interest in learning, and preference for challenging tasks. But the fact that students’ efforts will be reduced to a letter or number in the future is seen as sufficient justification for giving them grades in the present.

- * The available research fails to find any of the forms of socialization or discipline that comes from good grades. Yet educators who know this is true often fall back on the justification that homework – time-consuming, anxiety-provoking, and pointless though it may be – will help kids get used to doing homework when they’re older. One researcher comes close to saying that the more unpleasant (and even unnecessary) the assignment, the more valuable it is by virtue of teaching children to cope with things they don’t like.

- * Setting children against one another in contests, so that one can’t succeed unless others fail, has demonstrably negative effects – on psychological health, relationships, intrinsic motivation, and achievement – for winners and losers alike.

- * Whatever isn’t enjoyable builds character and promotes self-discipline. Mostly, though, this phenomenon may be just one more example of conservatism masquerading as preparation for more of the same.

But the issue here isn’t just preparation – it’s preparation for what is unappealing. More than once, after proposing that students should participate in developing an engaging curriculum, I have been huffily informed that life isn’t always interesting and kids had better learn to deal with that fact. The implication of this response seems to be that the goal of schooling is not to nourish children’s excitement about learning but to get them acclimated to doing mind-numbing chores. John Holt once remarked that if people really felt that life was “nothing but drudgery, an endless list of dreary duties,” one would hope they might “say, in effect, ‘I have somehow missed the chance to put energy into shaping my own world; please educate my children so that they will do better.’”

Another example: It’s common to justify rewarding and punishing students on the grounds that these instruments of control are widely used with grown-ups, too. And indeed, there are plenty of adults who do nice things only in order to receive some sort of reward, or who avoid antisocial acts just because they fear the consequences. But the kind of behavior we’re taught is usually the one we’re taught. There’s no evidence that behavior is innate. This leads us to the most important, though rarely articulated, assumption on which BGUTI rests – that, psychologically speaking, the best way to prepare kids for life is to prepare kids for school. This is the assumption that you must come to terms with if you’re going to change anything in your school. Yet educators who know this is true often fall back on the justification that homework – time-consuming, anxiety-provoking, and pointless though it may be – will help kids get used to doing homework when they’re older. The assumption that schools are a microcosm of society is widespread. John Holt once remarked that if people really felt that life was “nothing but drudgery, an endless list of dreary duties,” one would hope they might “say, in effect, ‘I have somehow missed the chance to put energy into shaping my own world; please educate my children so that they will do better.’”

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