Getting Hit on the Head Lessons (#)
Suppose you have a negative reaction to a certain educational practice but you still want 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 this is a good thing to help students become caring and compassionate, for example, or to work at reversing segregation. Simply assert that everyone is ultimately driven by self-interest, or that people naturally prefer to be with their own kind. Presto! All efforts to bring about changes are as well-meaning but unrealistic.

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 our species. A search of the archives of this very publication reveals that various individuals have taken this tack in support of many different policies, including standardized testing (“It’s just human nature that when performance is measured, performance improves”). The use of standardized tests to promote the idea that many teachers, too, consider it “insane” to subject first graders to a 45-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 kindergarteners: “Our philosophy is, the sooner we start giving these students tests like the Stanford 9, the sooner they’ll 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 kids get used to doing homework when they’re older. Even good teachers routinely engage in bad instruction lest their kids be unprepared when more 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 are nearly unanimous in their opposition to the practice of academic excellence in kindergarten and first grades. Yet even educators who know this is true often fail 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 children accept it as inevitable and less likely to realize that there’s something amiss. Yet another researcher goes on to say that even if this is true, it’s still bad policy because it reinforces bad habits that last a lifetime. Students will carry this idea to other courses and schools because it becomes natural for them.

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 jobs. 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 “I see, in effect. I have somehow missed the chance to put something meaningful into my own life; 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 have come to see their behavior as the norm, 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 lest their kids be unprepared when more bad instruction comes their way.

While such assertions are never accompanied by evidence (presumably because it doesn’t exist), they do prove remarkably effective at shutting down discussion. Those against whom this rhetorical ploy is used find themselves stymied because it’s not easy to defend something utopian, or to oppose something unavoidable. Even good teachers routinely engage in bad instruction lest their kids be unprepared when more bad instruction comes their way.

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 jobs. 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 “I see, in effect. I have somehow missed the chance to put something meaningful into my own life; please educate my children so that they will do better.”

Perhaps the preparation argument even fails on its own terms by virtue of offering a skewed account of what life is like for adults. Our culture is undeniably competitive, but cooperative skills are also valued in the workplace — and competitive schooling (spelling bees, awards assemblies, norm-referenced tests, class rank) discourages the development of those skills. Adults are evaluated at work on the basis of how actually they do their jobs than by standardized test results. Nor, for that matter, is there much after graduation to justify the practices of same-age groupings or 50-minute periods. In school, we’re not making schools for little kids more like “real life”; we’re just making them more like schools for older kids.

So if these practices can’t be justified as pragmatic preparation, what else can they be justified as? In the case of vertical justifications, the assumption that whatever isn’t enjoyable builds character and promotes self-discipline. Mostly, though, this phenomenon may be just one more example of conservatism masquerading as realism. When children spend years doing something, they are more likely to see it as inevitable and less likely to realize that there’s something amiss. The idea is to make education so familiar that children simply accept it as inevitable.

In history, their critical sensibilities are stillborn. Debatable policies are never debated. BGUTI becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Even if a given practice did make sense for those who are older — a very big if — that doesn’t mean it’s appropriate for younger children. Almost by definition, the “adult” defense ignores developmental differences. It seems to assume that young children ought to be viewed insistently as future older children, and all children are just adults in the making. Education, in a neat reversal of Dewey’s dictum, is not a process of living but merely a preparation for future living.

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