

Getting Hit on the Head Lessons (#)

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, 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 change can now be dismissed 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") and extrinsic incentives ("Human nature . . . has always demanded, for peak performance, a potential reward consistent with effort put forth"). A lack of interest in school policies on the part of parents, a resistance to change on the part of teachers, even the practice of holding adolescent boys back a year to enhance their athletic prospects ("redshirting") have all been casually attributed to human nature.

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. Here's another option for those who would rather not have to offer a substantive defense of their views: In response to a humane and respectful educational practice, they can 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 also 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 they need to be prepared. 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 will get them ready for what they're going to face in the next grade. Lilian 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 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 denouncing the use of standardized testing with young children. One Iowa principal conceded that many teachers, too, consider it "insane" to subject first graders to a 4½-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 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 benefit, either academic or attitudinal, to the practice of assigning homework to elementary school students. Yet even 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. No matter: Young children must be made to compete because – well, you get the idea.

I realize, of course, that many readers regard these practices as desirable in their own right. They may believe that competitive struggle brings out the best in children, that grading students is a constructive form of evaluation, that standardized tests accurately assess the most important aspects of learning, or that, after a full day in school, kids ought to take home more assignments regardless of whether the data show any advantage to doing so. My beef here isn't with people who hold such beliefs. It's with those who admit these practices may be damaging but defend them on BGUTI grounds.

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 BGUTI defense ignores developmental differences. It seems to assume that young children ought to be viewed mostly 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.

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 much joy and meaning 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 do nice things only in order to receive some sort of reward, or who avoid antisocial acts just because they fear the consequence to themselves if they're caught. But are these the kinds of people we hope our kids will become?

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 the bad things they're going to encounter later is to do bad things to them now. I'm reminded of the Monty Python sketch that features Getting Hit on the Head lessons. When the student recoils and cries out, the instructor says, "No, no, no. Hold your head like this, then go, 'Waaaah!' Try it again" – and gives him another smack. Presumably this is extremely useful training . . . for getting hit on the head again.

But people don't really get better at coping with unhappiness because they were deliberately made unhappy when they were young. In fact, it is experience with success and unconditional acceptance that help one to deal constructively with later deprivation. Imposing competition or standardized tests or homework on children just because other people will do the same to them when they're older is about as sensible as saying that, because there are lots of carcinogens in the environment, we should feed kids as many cancer-causing agents as possible while they're small to get them ready.

To be sure, we don't want students to be blindsided by destructive practices with which they're completely unfamiliar (although this seems rather unlikely in our 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 the form of discussion rather than immersion. One need not make students compete, for example, in order to help them anticipate – and think critically about – the pervasiveness of competition in American culture.

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. Similarly, adults are more likely to be evaluated at work on the basis of how they actually 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 short, 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 is driving BGUTI? One sometimes catches a whiff of vinegary moralism, 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 *things could be otherwise*.

"You'd better get used to it" not only assumes that life is pretty unpleasant, but that we ought not to bother trying to change the things that make it unpleasant. 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 whose primary mission is to prepare students for a dysfunctional high school environment soon comes to resemble that high school. Not only does the middle school fail to live up to its potential, but an opportunity has been lost to create a constituency for better secondary education. Likewise, when an entire generation comes to regard rewards and punishments, or rating and ranking, as "the way life works," rather than as practices that happen to define our society at this moment in history, their critical sensibilities are stillborn. Debatable policies are never debated. BGUTI becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Finally, there is a remarkable callousness lurking just under the surface here: Your objections don't count, your unhappiness doesn't matter. Suck it up. The people who talk this way are usually on top, issuing directives, not on the bottom being directed. "Learn to live with it because there's more coming later" can be rationalized as being in the best interests of those on the receiving end, but it may just mean "Do it because I said so" and thereby cement the power of those offering this advice.

If a practice can't be justified on its own terms, then the task for children and adults alike isn't to get used to it, but to question, to challenge, and, if necessary, to resist.

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