

“Well, Duh!” – 10 Obvious Truths That We Shouldn’t Be Ignoring

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By Alfie Kohn

The field of education bubbles over with controversies. It’s not unusual for intelligent people of good will to disagree passionately about what should happen in schools. But there are certain precepts that aren’t debatable, that just about anyone would have to acknowledge are true.

While many such statements are banal, some are worth noticing because in our school practices and policies we tend to ignore the implications that follow from them. It’s both intellectually interesting and practically important to explore such contradictions: *If we all agree that a given principle is true, then why in the world do our schools still function as if it weren’t?*

Here are 10 examples.

1. Much of the material students are required to memorize is

soon forgotten.

The truth of this statement will be conceded (either willingly or reluctantly) by just about everyone who has spent time in school – in other words, all of us. A few months, or sometimes even just a few days, after having committed a list of facts, dates, or definitions to memory, we couldn't recall most of them if our lives depended on it. Everyone knows this, yet a substantial part of schooling – particularly in the most traditional schools – continues to consist of stuffing facts into students' short-term memories.

The more closely we inspect this model of teaching and testing, the more problematic it reveals itself to be. First, there's the question of *what* students are made to learn, which often is more oriented to factual material than to a deep understanding of ideas. (See item 2, below.) Second, there's the question of *how* students are taught, with a focus on passive absorption: listening to lectures, reading summaries in textbooks, and rehearsing material immediately before being required to cough it back up. Third, there's the question of *why* a student has learned something: Knowledge is less likely to be retained if it has been acquired so that one will perform well on a test, as opposed to learning in the context of pursuing projects and solving problems that are personally meaningful.

Even without these layers of deficiencies with the status quo, and even if we grant that remembering some things can be useful, the fundamental question echoes like a shout down an endless school corridor: Why are kids still being forced to memorize so much stuff that we know they won't remember?

Corollary 1A: Since this appears to be true for adults, too, why do most professional development events for teachers resemble the least impressive classrooms, with experts disgorging facts about how to educate?

2. Just knowing a lot of facts doesn't mean you're smart.

Even students who do manage to remember some of the material they were taught are not necessarily able to make sense of those bits of knowledge, to understand connections among them, or to apply them in inventive and persuasive ways to real-life problems.

In fact, the cognitive scientist Lauren Resnick goes even further: It's not just that knowing (or having been taught) facts doesn't in itself make you smart. A mostly fact-oriented education may actually *interfere* with your becoming smart. "Thinking skills tend to be driven out of the curriculum by ever-growing demands for teaching larger and larger bodies of knowledge," she writes. Yet schools continue to treat students as empty glasses into which information can be poured – and public officials continue to judge schools on the basis of how efficiently and determinedly they pour.

3. Students are more likely to learn what they find interesting.

There's no shortage of evidence for this claim if you really need it. One of many examples: A group of researchers found that children's level of interest in a passage they were reading was 30 times more useful than its difficulty level for predicting how much of it they would later remember. But this should be obvious, if only because of what we know about ourselves. It's the tasks that intrigue us, that tap our curiosity and connect to the things we care about, that we tend to keep doing – and get better at doing. So, too, for kids.

Conversely, students are less likely to benefit from doing what they hate. Psychology has come a long way from the days when theorists tried to reduce everything to simple stimulus-response pairings. We know now that people aren't machines, such that an input (listening to a lecture, reading a

textbook, filling out a worksheet) will reliably yield an output (learning). What matters is how people experience what they do, what meaning they ascribe to it, what their attitudes and goals are.

Thus, if students find an academic task stressful or boring, they're far less likely to understand, or even remember, the content. And if they're uninterested in a whole category of academic tasks – say, those they're assigned to do when they get home after having just spent a whole day at school – then they aren't likely to benefit much from doing them. No wonder research finds little, if any, advantage to assigning homework, particularly in elementary or middle school.

4. Students are less interested in whatever they're forced to do and more enthusiastic when they have some say.

Once again, studies confirm what we already know from experience. The nearly universal negative reaction to compulsion, like the positive response to choice, is a function of our psychological makeup.

Now combine this point with the preceding one: If choice is related to interest, and interest is related to achievement, then it's not much of a stretch to suggest that the learning environments in which kids get to make decisions about what they're doing are likely to be the most effective, all else being equal. Yet such learning environments continue to be vastly outnumbered by those where kids spend most of their time just following directions.

5. Just because doing x raises standardized test scores doesn't mean x should be done.

At the very least, we would need evidence that the test in question is a source of useful information about whether our teaching and learning goals are being met. Many educators have argued that the tests being used in our schools are

unsatisfactory for several reasons.

First, there are numerous limitations with specific tests. Second, most tests share certain problematic features, such as being timed (which places more of a premium on speed than on thoughtfulness), norm-referenced (which means the tests are designed to tell us who's beating whom, not how well students have learned or teachers have taught), and consisting largely of multiple-choice questions (which don't permit students to generate or even explain their answers).

The third reason is the problems inherent to all tests that are standardized and created by people far away from the classroom – as opposed to assessing the actual learning taking place there on an on-going basis.

This is not the place to explain in detail why standardized tests measure what matters least. Here, I want only to make the simpler – and, once again, I think, indisputable – point that anyone who regards high or rising test scores as good news has an obligation to show that the tests themselves are good. If a test result can't be convincingly shown to be both valid and meaningful, then whatever we did to achieve that result – say, a new curriculum or instructional strategy – may well have no merit whatsoever. It may even prove to be destructive when assessed by better criteria. Indeed, *a school or district might be getting worse even as its test scores rise.*

So how is it that articles in newspapers and education journals, as well as pronouncements by public officials and think tanks, seem to accept on faith that better scores on any test necessarily constitute good news, and that whatever produced those scores can be described as “effective”? Parents should be encouraged to ask, “How much time was sacrificed from real learning just so our kids could get better at taking the [name of test]?”

6. Students are more likely to succeed in a place where they feel known and cared about.

I realize there are people whose impulse is to sneer when talk turns to how kids feel, and who dismiss as “soft” or “faddish” anything other than old-fashioned instruction of academic skills. But even these hard-liners, when pressed, are unable to deny the relationship between feeling and thinking, between a child’s comfort level and his or her capacity to learn.

Here, too, there are loads of supporting data. As one group of researchers put it, “In order to promote students’ academic performance in the classroom, educators should also promote their social and emotional adjustment.” And yet, broadly speaking, we don’t. Teachers and schools are evaluated almost exclusively on academic achievement measures (which, to make matters worse, mostly consist of standardized test scores).

If we took seriously the need for kids to feel known and cared about, our discussions about the distinguishing features of a “good school” would sound very different. Likewise, our view of discipline and classroom management would be turned inside-out, seeing as how the primary goals of most such strategies are obedience and order, often with the result that kids feel less cared about – or even bullied – by adults.

7. We want children to develop in many ways, not just academically.

Even mainstream education groups have embraced the idea of teaching the “whole child.” It’s a safe position, really, because just about every parent or educator will tell you that we should be supporting children’s physical, emotional, social, moral, and artistic growth as well as their intellectual growth. Moreover, it’s obvious to most people that the schools can and should play a key role in promoting many different forms of development.

If we acknowledge that academics is just one facet of a good

education, why do so few conversations about improving our schools deal with – and why are so few resources devoted to – non-academic issues? And why do we assign children still more academic tasks after the school day is over, even when those tasks cut into the time children have to pursue interests that will help them develop in other ways?

Corollary 7a: Students “learn best when they are happy,” as educator Nel Noddings reminded us, but that doesn’t mean they’re especially likely to be happy (or psychologically healthy) just because they’re academically successful. And millions aren’t. Imagine how high schools would have to be changed if we were to take this realization seriously.

8. Just because a lesson (or book, or class, or test) is harder doesn’t mean it’s better.

First, if it’s pointless to give students things to do that are too easy, it’s also counterproductive to give them things that they experience as too hard. Second, and more important, this criterion overlooks a variety of considerations other than difficulty level by which educational quality might be evaluated.

We know this, yet we continue to worship at the altar of “rigor.” I’ve seen lessons that aren’t unduly challenging yet are deeply engaging and intellectually valuable. Conversely, I’ve seen courses – and whole schools – that are indisputably rigorous . . . and appallingly bad.

9. Kids aren’t just short adults.

Over the past hundred years, developmental psychologists have labored to describe what makes children distinctive and what they can understand at certain ages. There are limits, after all, to what even a precocious younger child can grasp (e.g., the way metaphors function, the significance of making a promise) or do (e.g., keep still for an extended period).

Likewise, there are certain things children require for optimal development, including opportunities to play and explore, alone and with others. Research fills in – and keeps fine-tuning – the details, but the fundamental implication isn't hard to grasp: How we educate kids should follow from what defines them as kids.

Somehow, though, developmentally *inappropriate* education has become the norm, as kindergarten (literally, the “children's garden”) now tends to resemble a first- or second-grade classroom – in fact, a *bad* first- or second-grade classroom, where discovery, creativity, and social interaction are replaced by a repetitive regimen focused on narrowly defined academic skills.

More generally, premature exposure to sit-still-and-listen instruction, homework, grades, tests, and competition – practices that are clearly a bad match for younger children and of questionable value at any age – is rationalized by invoking a notion I've called BGUTI: Better Get Used To It. The logic here is that we have to prepare you for the bad things that are going to be done to you later . . . by doing them to you now. When articulated explicitly, that principle sounds exactly as ridiculous as it is. Nevertheless, it's the engine that continues to drive an awful lot of nonsense.

The obvious premise that we should respect what makes children children can be amended to include a related principle that is less obvious to some people: Learning something earlier isn't necessarily better. Deborah Meier, whose experience as a celebrated educator ranges from kindergarten to high school, put it bluntly: “The earlier [that schools try] to inculcate so-called ‘academic’ skills, the deeper the damage and the more permanent the ‘achievement’ gap.” That is exactly what a passel of ambitious research projects has found: A traditional skills-based approach to teaching young children – particularly those from low-income families – not only offers no lasting benefits but appears to be harmful.

Corollary 9A: Kids aren't just *future* adults. They are that, of course, but they aren't only that, because children's needs and perspectives are worth attending to in their own right. We violate this precept – and do a disservice to children – whenever we talk about schooling in economic terms, treating students mostly as future employees.

10. Substance matters more than labels.

A skunk cabbage by any other name would smell just as putrid. But in education, as in other domains, we're often seduced by appealing names when we should be demanding to know exactly what lies behind them. Most of us, for example, favor a sense of community, prefer that a job be done by professionals, and want to promote learning. So should we sign on to the work being done in the name of "Professional Learning Communities"? Not if it turns out that PLCs have less to do with helping children to think deeply about questions that matter than with boosting standardized test scores.

The same caution is appropriate when it comes to "Positive Behavior Support," a jaunty moniker for a program of crude Skinnerian manipulation in which students are essentially bribed to do whatever they're told. More broadly, even the label "school reform" doesn't necessarily signify improvement; these days, it's more likely to mean "something that skillful and caring teachers wouldn't be inclined to do unless coerced," as educational psychologist Bruce Marlowe put it.

In fact, the corporate-style version of "school reform" that's uncritically endorsed these days by politicians, journalists, and billionaires consists of a series of debatable tactics – many of them amounting to bribes and threats to force educators to jack up test scores. Just as worrisome, though, is that these reformers often overlook, or simply violate, a number of propositions that *aren't* debatable, including many of those listed here.

This essay is an abridged version of the introduction to Feel-Bad Education...And Other Contrarian Essays on Children and Schooling (Beacon Press, 2011)

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