

Five Bad Education Assumptions the Media Keeps Recycling

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By Alfie Kohn

It very rarely happens that the cover of The New York Times Book Review, which represents some of the most prestigious intellectual real estate in the United States, is given over to a discussion about education. When that does happen, as it did last Sunday, it becomes clear why “school reform” just perpetuates and intensifies the education status quo.

A certain ideology, along with a set of empirical assumptions, underlies most conversations about education in this country, most of what actually happens in schools, and most proposals for change. These assumptions are accepted by the overwhelming majority of politicians, business leaders, and journalists. (Whenever three entities are involved in something, the usual metaphor is a three-legged stool. Here, I find myself thinking of the recycling logo, in which three bent arrows are arranged in a triangle, each one pointing to another in an endless loop.)

Progressive critics have complained to one another about how corporations, corporate foundations, and a corporate sensibility drive education policy. The creation of the Common Core “State” Standards is only the most recent example. We’ve also pointed out that Democratic and Republican public officials sound remarkably similar when they talk about schools – similar to one another and similar to the business community. But much less has been said about how journalists who cover education tend to reflect and feed this same mainstream – and, I think, deeply flawed – view of education.

That third arrow was conspicuously on display in the Book Review as one journalist and author, Annie Murphy Paul, summarized a book by another, Amanda Ripley. I haven’t yet read the book, “The Smartest Kids in the World and How They Got That Way,” but the reviewer appears to accept just about all of what she takes to be the author’s key assumptions. The resulting review (titled “Likely to Succeed”) offers a cautionary collection of problematic premises:

- 1. America desperately needs to turn to other countries for solutions because our students’ performance is “mediocre.”*
- 2. The best way to judge educational success or failure is by looking at standardized test scores. High scores are good; low scores are bad – full stop. And high scores are defined in zero-sum terms: The point isn’t to reach a certain level but to outscore students in other countries.*
- 3. The primary objective of schools is to transmit to children the “knowledge and skills to compete in the global economy.” (This statement actually comprises two premises: that education should be understood primarily in economic terms, and – just as with test results – the goal is not to succeed but to triumph over others.)*
- 4. Similarly, from the individual student’s point of view,*

the main reason to learn is that doing so is a prerequisite to making more money after one graduates. A U.S. student is quoted as asking two Finnish girls why they seem to care so much about what they're studying, and they supply what Paul and/or Ripley regard as "the only sensible answer": Studying hard will eventually result in a "good job." Alas, we're told, this "irrefutable logic still eludes many American students."

5. A key ingredient of success is "persistence" – knowing "what it [feels] like to fail, work harder, and do better." Putting children on a "hamster wheel," with "relentless and excessive" pressure to succeed at any cost, may have tragic human costs – for example, in Korea – but this is said to be preferable to the less intense pressures said to be experienced by American students.

(There's actually one more set of interesting premises in the review, which is that Finland's process of selecting only top candidates to be teachers initiates a "virtuous cycle" in which "better-prepared, better-trained teachers can be given more autonomy, leading to more satisfied teachers who are also more likely to stay on." Notice that (a) selecting "top" students to be teachers is equated with offering better preparation and training, and (b) it's assumed that teachers who weren't at the top of their class or provided with a certain kind of training shouldn't be given autonomy. Thus, the process of micromanaging teachers, imposing detailed prescriptive curricula and pedagogy, is justified because all those barely qualified teachers require it.)

Along with many other writers, I've tried to challenge each of these premises. The first one is really the cornerstone of the others: It's because our students are at the bottom of the barrel that we have to turn to other countries to learn how education ought to be done. This turns out to be nonsense, as I pointed out in a recent essay called "'We're Number Umpteenth!': The Myth of Lagging U.S. Schools," and as

Iris Rotberg, Richard Rothstein, the late Gerald Bracey, and others have explained for some time.

While the occasional journalist and even politician may acknowledge that, just possibly, we're overtesting kids, almost all take on faith that test scores are appropriate for judging a student's, school's, state's, or nation's education status. If it turns out that standardized tests are inherently flawed indicators – not just misapplied, overused, or badly implemented – then all judgments based on those numbers would have to be rethought. Suddenly one would realize that it's possible for awful teaching, and unimpressive intellectual capabilities, to produce high test scores. And for superb teaching, and creative thinking, to yield relatively low test scores. That of course would call into question every article or book that judges "smart kids" or "successful schools" on the basis of standardized test results.

*The third premise is based on a value rather than evidence, so one can only argue, as I have **elsewhere**, that there's something deeply disturbing about regarding children mostly as future employees and reducing education to an attempt to increase the profitability of corporations – or, worse, the probability that "our" corporations will defeat "theirs."*

Some of the least inspiring approaches to schooling, and the least meaningful ways of assessing its success, follow logically from thinking of education not in terms of its intrinsic worth, or its contribution to a truly democratic society, but in the context of the "21st-century global economy."

*The fourth premise – that "the only sensible" reason for kids to take school seriously is their own eventual financial gain – also reflects basic values, but here there are some relevant data. For example, a **study** published last year in the "Journal of Educational Psychology," which built on a great deal of other research, found that "highlighting the*

monetary benefits that education can bring...could very well discourage youths from fully engaging with learning."

As for that last premise: To be honest, I find it deeply depressing to consider the possibility that anyone could regard the misery visited upon children, the sacrifice of their childhoods on the altar of higher grades and test scores – all in the name of cramming them full of more facts[1] so they can squeeze out another few points on a do-or-die test – and say, "Hey, we ought to treat our kids more like that!" (Ripley is quoted as saying that, despite its excesses, she would "reluctantly pick the hamster wheel" to the American approach because it "felt more honest.") By contrast, some folks closest to these nightmarish regimens of tutoring and psychological stress are saying it must stop. A South Korean education official surveys the damage and says, in effect, "What do high test scores matter when we're destroying our children? We're struggling to move beyond this stifling test-prep version of education, and you Americans want to imitate us??"

Part of the ideology underlying the hamster wheel sensibility is the current glorification of grit, self-discipline, and the alleged benefits of making children experience more failure and frustration. I've challenged these modern versions of the Protestant work ethic in a forthcoming book called "The Myth of the Spoiled Child." What's striking, though, is how so many journalists have uncritically accepted a set of principles based on a combination of conservative ideology and bad psychology. (I challenge you to find a single article in the mainstream press that raises meaningful questions about the value of self-discipline or grit.) And of course these assumptions fit beautifully with all the other premises – about mediocre U.S. students, the value of standardized tests, and an economic rationale for education.

Come to think of it, the synergistic relationship among politicians, businesspeople, and journalists really is

captured by that three-triangle logo because the principles in question are endlessly recycled. One of the key features of the conventional wisdom, the dominant ideology, is that we no longer recognize it as such because we hear it so often. There's no food for thought here; everyone just knows that our students are lousy, or that raising test scores would improve our economy, or that grit is good; there's no need to defend these propositions.

Food for thought? Listen – I'll gladly eat the front page of the New York Times Book Review if it ever features a book that challenges these premises.

NOTE

1. Many books and essays about “smarter kids” or the “new science of learning” turn out to be mostly about techniques for memorizing facts more efficiently, not about meaningful learning – in the sense of understanding ideas from the inside out. But that's a journalistic misrepresentation for another day.

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