

Dewey, Piaget, and Frosted Mini Wheats

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By Alfie Kohn

In case you are not familiar with the cereal called Shredded Wheat, it is basically hay. Many of us who are members of the species *Homo sapiens*, rather than, say, *Equus ferus*, do not find hay appetizing, even when it is pressed into small packets and sold in a brightly colored box. This may explain why, in 1969, Kellogg's introduced a variant called Frosted Mini Wheats, which made the hay somewhat more palatable by coating it with 11 grams of sugar per serving. (For purposes of comparison, Shredded Wheat has -5 grams of sugar per serving. Attempting to chew it actually extracts sugar from your body.) More than 70 million boxes of Frosted Mini Wheats are sold every year.

I would argue, however, that the relevant contrast to Frosted Mini Wheats is not Shredded Wheat but Cheerios. I love Cheerios. For many years I have patiently endured teasing – from my children and, before them, a series of roommates – about my prodigious consumption of, enthusiasm for, and loyalty to Cheerios.¹ Cheerios are simple, nutritious, and extremely tasty without the need to add anything other than milk, and even that isn't entirely necessary.

I mention all of this because it recently occurred to me that the adjective “sugarcoated” appears in not one but two important books about education. *Moral Classrooms, Moral Children* was written by Rheta DeVries (who studied with Jean Piaget and, along with Constance Kamii and Eleanor Duckworth, was one of the key thinkers who worked out the educational implications of his theories) and Betty Zan. The book draws from Piaget’s distinction between “autonomous” relationships between adults and children, which are defined by mutual respect and cooperation in order to promote children’s independent thinking and moral growth, on the one hand, and “heteronomous” relationships, which are defined by a demand for deference to authority, on the other hand. DeVries and Zan observe that the latter “can range on a continuum from hostile and punitive to sugar-coated control.”²

Bullseye! If I say to a child, “Do this, or here’s how I’m going to make you suffer,” it’s pretty obvious that I’m using my power to compel compliance. But if I say, “Do this, and you’ll get that” – or if I marinate the child in praise afterward for doing what I wanted – well, I’m still using my power to compel compliance. I’m taking something the child wants or needs, such as my approval, and turning it into an instrument of manipulation. It’s still hay under all the sweetener.

DeVries and Zan are urging us, first, to acknowledge what’s really going on when we dangle stickers, points, special privileges, or a treacly, smiley “*Good job!!*” in front of children to elicit obedience; and, second, to reject *any* flavor of control and instead support their growth as independent thinkers and moral agents.

The other book I have in mind is even older and more famous: *The Child and the Curriculum*. In it, John Dewey described how a curriculum that’s based on students’ questions and connects with their experiences has “an inherent attracting power.” But

creating such a curriculum takes time and skill, and it also requires the adult to make the learners themselves the “center of gravity” in the classroom. It’s considerably easier, Dewey pointed out, just to take a prefabricated lesson, which may not be particularly relevant or meaningful to students, “and then by trick of method to *arouse* interest, to *make* it interesting; to cover it with sugar-coating; to conceal its barrenness by intermediate and unrelated material.”³

These days an awful lot of such sugarcoating is done digitally – for example, with apps that add points and levels to “gamify” a list of decontextualized facts or skills that students are required to master. When you get right down to it, much of ed tech is really an exercise in sugarcoating. But so are plenty of well-established analog schemes: desperately perky sidebars in textbooks to distract students from the dreariness of the main text; contrived word problems in math to create the appearance of relevance for what is still just an exercise in mechanically applying formulas and algorithms; classroom test-prep sessions restyled as TV game shows in which students are made to compete to see who has crammed more bits of useless knowledge into short-term memory.

So if those are some of the Frosted Mini Wheats, what are the Cheerios? Throughout his work, Dewey, along with generations of educators influenced by him, described how outstanding teachers help students to think in increasingly sophisticated ways about the world in which they actually live. The curriculum is crafted around their experiences; it taps their questions and feeds their curiosity. It offers problems that kids want to explore, often by means of interdisciplinary projects that they help to design.

In short: For DeVries and Zan (channeling Piaget), the temptation to be avoided is sugarcoating control in the form of “positive reinforcement”; the alternative is to work *with* kids to support their social and moral development. For Dewey,

the temptation to be avoided is sugarcoating lessons in a vain effort to disguise their lack of value; the alternative is learner-centered education that supports students' intellectual development (and sustains their enthusiasm).

In both domains, these recommendations meet considerable resistance, of course. Many teachers and parents regard rewards (whether tangible, symbolic, or verbal) as substantially different from, and preferable to, punishments. They often resist the message that carrots, just like sticks, are about control and heteronomy. Supporting kids' autonomy requires a very different way of interacting with children that can be unsettling for adults who are accustomed to relying on – and modeling – power.

As for the intellectual realm: The whole standards-and-testing edifice of our education system consists of expectations and outcomes that have been devised by distant authorities, imposed on students (and teachers!), and enforced by exams to ensure “accountability.” These standards are often breathtakingly granular in their specificity because the whole approach is rooted in an outdated behaviorist model of learning. And precisely because the learning isn't personal, an entire industry stands ready to profit from artificially “personalizing” it. An awful lot of folks are invested in this diet of shredded wheat with its lectures, worksheets, textbooks, quizzes, homework, grades, and rubrics. And, sure, if that's your point of departure, you'll be tempted to add a spoonful of sugar to help it go down a little easier.

That's why the real challenge is to follow Dewey in insisting on a very different point of departure. The first step toward doing things differently is to realize what we've really been doing all along. Which is why the metaphor of sugarcoating can be so revelatory: It induces us to jump up and exclaim, “Hey! It's still just hay!”

NOTES

1. This could be, but probably should not be, described as cereal monogamy.
2. *Moral Classrooms, Moral Children: Creating a Constructivist Atmosphere in Early Education* (Teachers College Press, 1994), p. 46. Ed Deci and Rich Ryan took a different rhetorical approach in making essentially the same point: They described rewards as “control through seduction” (*Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior* [Plenum, 1985], p. 70). The problem is that this turn of phrase, while also quite effective, is much less conducive to my labored breakfast-food metaphor.
3. *The Child and the Curriculum* (University of Chicago Press, 1902/1990), pp. 148, 208.

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