

# The Why Axis

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## The Why Axis

By Alfie Kohn

It shouldn't be surprising that progressive teachers are often called upon to defend what they're doing. Sometimes they're asked reasonable questions by open-minded parents who simply don't understand: "Why don't you give tests?" "Why are the kids spending so much time in groups?" And sometimes they're challenged by people on a mission to root out everything nontraditional. Either way, having to keep explaining the rationale for student-centered teaching takes time and energy. It also takes a certain skill set that even some brilliant teachers may lack, with the result that they struggle to offer a satisfactory response even to questions they have heard many times.

Some years ago, therefore, I hatched the idea of supporting such educators by convening a brain trust of leading theorists, researchers, and practitioners to create – and then disseminate – concise defenses of various features of progressive education. I imagined a set of handouts, each consisting of a single (double-sided) sheet that responded to a common question. The idea was to lay out the case briskly, making liberal use of bullet points and offering a short bibliography at the end for anyone who wanted more information.

One of these "Why Sheets," for example, might explain a teacher's decision to create a curriculum based on kids'

questions. Or for setting aside time each day for a class meeting. It might defend helping students to understand mathematical principles rather than just memorizing facts and algorithms. Or it might lay out the case for avoiding worksheets, or tests, or homework, or traditional bribe-and-threat classroom management strategies.

Eventually I started thinking about creating additional Why Sheets to help administrators defend enlightened schoolwide policies: why we don't track students; why we push back against standardized testing and never brag about high scores; why we have multiage classrooms; why we've replaced report cards with student-led parent conferences; why we use a problem-solving approach to discipline in place of suspensions and detentions; why our commitment to building community has led us to avoid awards assemblies, spelling bees, and other rituals that pit kids against one another.

In short, any practice that's constructive yet still controversial would be fair game for one of these punchy handouts. The idea was to help educators explain why they do what they do – and, equally important, why they deliberately *avoid* doing some things. The sheets would be made available free of charge, uncopyrighted, and accompanied by an invitation to distribute them promiscuously.

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As I say, this idea occurred to me a long time ago. (How long? Well, let's just say that, back then, the most promising method for distribution was a cutting-edge technology called fax-on-demand.) For a variety of reasons, alas, it never got off the ground. But the justification for it seems no less relevant today. I say this because, while some of my email consists of questions from teachers and administrators about what they should do, a lot of it concerns how to explain what they're already doing, how to defend themselves to curious, skeptical, or hostile administrators, colleagues, or parents.\*

Of course we want to keep challenging ourselves and our colleagues to make sure what we're doing with kids *does* make sense. We shouldn't persist with a given practice just because it seemed appealing at one time or has come to feel comfortable to us. (Even progressive approaches can harden into traditions.) "Because I [or we] have always done it" isn't an argument for doing it some more. But if, upon reflection, we remain convinced of the value of doing things that raise eyebrows or hackles, we'd be well advised to figure out an effective way to bring others along.

Teachers and principals, perhaps working in small groups, can create their own versions of those Why Sheets I once imagined. They take time to research, write, and polish, but once an elementary school teacher has drafted a short piece to explain why she teaches reading *in a context and for a purpose* (rather than cultivating a phonics phetish), or once a high school teacher has crafted an explanation for why he rarely lectures or relies on textbooks – well, it's done and can be offered to parents (and to students!) for years.

If any of my books, articles, or blog posts can be helpful in supplying research citations, arguments, or even simple turns of phrase, I invite teachers to incorporate them in their homegrown handouts. That's what they're there for. And I know many other authors and presenters feel the same way.

But whatever resources you find useful, do pause regularly to anticipate – and refine your response to – questions about why your teaching diverges from the mainstream. If we want to preserve the kind of education in which kids are helped to make sense of ideas, it's not enough just to do it, or even to do it well. We have to be ready to help other people make sense of that commitment.

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\* Indeed, there may be an even more compelling need for *succinct* summaries in an era

of quick tweets and emoji-laden text messages, when links even to medium-length articles are accompanied by warnings that “This is a long read,” when many people’s first impulse for getting up to speed on an author’s work isn’t to read one of his or her books but to search YouTube for a (short) lecture to watch.

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