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PROLOGUE

The Schools our Children Still Deserve

Alfie Kohn

The title I originally had in mind for the 1999 book that became *The Schools Our Children Deserve* was *Better Schools Than We Had*. The idea here was that we want our kids' education to be superior to what most of us received (and I use that last word deliberately, with its implications of passivity). You'd think such a desire would be uncontroversial; after all, parents say they hope their children will be more successful in conventional terms than they, themselves, have been: more years in school, more prestigious careers, and so on. But when it comes to the *type* of schooling people want for their kids, there's often a strong traditional undertow. Regarding any familiar pedagogical practice -- homework, grades, tests, worksheets, lectures, discipline -- it's as if the default parental posture is, "Hey, if it was bad enough for me, it's bad enough for my kids."

The problem with my title wasn't the sentiment but the syntax: It could be read with an emphasis on "had" rather than on "we," which changed the meaning. Also, Houghton Mifflin's marketing department, as I recall, was less than enthusiastic about it for other reasons. So I sent half a dozen new possibilities to my editor, along with a batch of subtitles that promised a critical look at *tougher standards* and *traditional classrooms*. My e-mail archives inform me that my six alternative title suggestions were as follows: *The End of the Old School*, *The Case Against Traditional Education*, *Will They Ever Learn?*, *The Schools Our Children Deserve*, *Why Back-to-Basics Is Taking Us Backwards*, and *Drill 'n Kill*.

I had two reservations about the one the publisher selected. First, it seemed broad, vague, bereft of bite -- certainly not what you'd imagine seeing in the *Journal of Educational Controversy*. It reminded me of a committee-chosen theme for an education conference whose sessions could be about virtually anything. (This year, it's "The Schools Our Children Deserve." Last year it was "Working Together to Create a Brighter Tomorrow.") Second, the title seemed to echo E. D. Hirsch, Jr.'s book that had just come out, *The Schools We Need*. Ultimately, though, I was reassured on both counts: The subtitle, *Moving Beyond Traditional Classrooms and "Tougher Standards,"* would be sufficient to signal the book's perspective, and anyone who compared my book with Hirsch's would realize that the difference between their titles made a statement in itself -- about changing the conversation from what adults demand (e.g., for students of a given age to memorize a prescribed bunch o' facts) to what kids deserve (e.g., a curriculum that emerges from, and enriches, their questions about themselves and the world).

The book covered a wide range of subjects -- enough so that I could cannibalize (or, as publishers like to put it, "repurpose") various sections in shorter writing projects for years to come, and also enough, as it turned out, so that I'd later find myself stymied in trying to come up with book-length topics that I hadn't already addressed. In effect, it was two books in one. The *macro* half dealt with school reform: the push for accountability, tougher standards, and standardized testing; the *micro* half dealt with pedagogy and curriculum -- contrasting progressive and traditional classroom practices.

I've had occasion since the book's publication to think about the relationship between those two categories.^[1] While they obviously overlap -- a state law that imposes high-stakes testing affects what Ms. Dewey can do tomorrow morning with her sixth graders -- I've noticed that some people seem to make a lot more sense when they talk about one realm as opposed to the other.

For instance, certain scholars of cognition and pedagogy who demonstrate a keen sense of what can be done in classrooms to help children learn have enthusiastically endorsed the idea of prescriptive state (or even national) standards. Their assumption seems to be that the best and brightest theorists, using government as their instrument, ought to reach into classrooms and *make* the instruction more thoughtful. I find this at once naive and arrogant, troubling for moral as well as practical reasons. Some of these thinkers have contributed significantly to our understanding of the limits of a behaviorist model of learning -- and the importance of having students construct knowledge rather than passively absorb it -- but they assume that *teachers'* behaviors can (and should) be controlled from above, that public policy ought to be based on a model of *doing to* rather than *working with*.

Conversely, consider the case of Diane Ravitch, a prominent conservative education scholar, who has undergone a conversion experience and begun to write trenchant critiques of the corporate-style version of education reform that many of us have been decrying for years: merit pay (mostly based on test results), more charter schools (which often siphon public funds to for-profit companies), less job security for teachers, and so on. But when the conversation turns to what happens *inside* classrooms, she remains steadfastly traditional. By way of analogy, imagine a health care critic who cheers

progressives with her brilliant arguments for a single-payer plan and fiery, if belated, attacks on insurance companies -- but, if asked what doctors should actually be doing in the examining room, waxes nostalgic for the curative value of leeches.

It's interesting to think about the classrooms *and* the educational system children deserve, and to draw connections between what a progressive approach looks like in each domain. Of course, one always has the burden to show why such an approach really *is* what children need and deserve. It would be presumptuous, or at least lazy, to assume that whatever practices we happen to like are best for students. But these days it's particularly important to make a case for progressive schooling because punitive, corporate-style, test-based versions of school reform are regularly defended as being "for the kids." Indeed, "putting children first" has become a catch phrase for policy makers and pundits who treat public school teachers and their unions as piñatas. And their data-centric demands typically prove no more beneficial to kids than to educators.

The essays that follow were written by people who take children seriously and understand the importance of speaking out against practices that are not in the best interest of those children. I'm honored if my work, or even the second-choice title of one of my books, served as the inspiration for bringing their thoughts together.

Notes

[1] Speaking of repurposing: The following two paragraphs are taken from the introduction to [my recent book](#), *Feel-Bad Education...And Other Contrarian Essays on Children and Schooling* (Beacon Press, 2011). The premise of that essay, incidentally, is that while any number of crucial educational controversies are worth discussing -- consistent with the title of the journal you're now reading -- some precepts that are *not* controversial are also important because they are as widely ignored in practice as they are affirmed in theory.