

Feel Bad Education And Other Contrarian Essays On Children And Schooling By Alfie Kohn April 5 2011

Feel Bad Education and Other Contrarian Essays on Children and Schooling by Alfie Kohn: A Critical Examination

Alfie Kohn's work, particularly his collection of essays, including the provocatively titled "Feel Bad Education," challenges conventional wisdom about children and schooling. This article delves into the core arguments presented in Kohn's essays, exploring his critiques of traditional educational practices and offering a nuanced perspective on his contrarian views on **child-centered learning**, **intrinsic motivation**, and **grading systems**. We'll examine Kohn's key ideas, their practical implications, and their lasting impact on educational reform.

Kohn's Critique of Traditional Schooling: Beyond Rewards and Punishments

Kohn's central thesis, woven throughout "Feel Bad Education" and other essays, centers on the detrimental effects of extrinsic motivators like grades, rewards, and punishments on children's learning and development. He argues that these methods, common in most traditional schooling models, undermine **intrinsic motivation** – the inherent desire to learn for the sake of learning. Instead of fostering a genuine love of knowledge, Kohn contends that such systems cultivate a focus on performance and external validation, ultimately hindering deep understanding and critical thinking.

This critique extends beyond the realm of simple rewards and punishments. He tackles the very structure of schooling, arguing that the emphasis on competition and standardization creates a stressful and often alienating environment for children. He questions the efficacy of standardized testing, viewing it as a blunt instrument that fails to capture the richness and complexity of individual learning styles and potential. The pressure to conform, he argues, stifles creativity and individuality, leading to a generation of students who are adept at test-taking but lack genuine intellectual curiosity.

Kohn frequently uses the metaphor of "compliance" versus "engagement" to illustrate this point. Compliance, driven by external pressures, leads to superficial learning, while engagement, fueled by intrinsic motivation, results in deeper understanding and a lifelong love of learning. This distinction forms a central theme in his analysis of **school reform** strategies and their impact on children's well-being.

The Power of Intrinsic Motivation: A Child-Centered Approach

A cornerstone of Kohn's philosophy is the belief in the power of intrinsic motivation. He argues persuasively that children are naturally curious and eager to learn, but this innate drive is often squashed by the rigid structures and reward-and-punishment systems prevalent in many schools. He advocates for a shift towards child-centered learning environments that prioritize student interest, collaboration, and inquiry-based learning. This means moving away from a teacher-centric model where knowledge is passively received, to one where children actively construct their own understanding through exploration and discovery.

Kohn's work emphasizes the importance of creating learning environments that are engaging, challenging, and relevant to students' lives. He suggests fostering a sense of community and collaboration within the classroom, encouraging students to work together, support each other, and learn from one another. This collaborative approach not only enhances learning but also cultivates valuable social and emotional skills. The emphasis on **student autonomy** allows children to take ownership of their learning, fostering a sense of responsibility and self-directed learning crucial for lifelong success.

Beyond Grades and Rankings: Rethinking Assessment

Kohn's criticism extends to the pervasive use of grades and ranking systems in schools. He argues that these methods are inherently unfair, promoting competition and anxiety rather than fostering genuine learning. He highlights the detrimental effects of grades on children's self-esteem and their motivation to learn. Students may focus on achieving high grades instead of developing a deep understanding of the subject matter.

Kohn proposes alternative assessment methods that focus on evaluating learning outcomes in a more holistic and less stressful way. This could include portfolios, projects, and presentations that showcase students'

abilities and understanding in a more meaningful way. His suggestions involve a shift from judging students against a pre-determined standard to understanding their individual progress and growth.

The Long-Term Impact of Kohn's Ideas: A Lasting Legacy

While some of Kohn's ideas might be considered radical or even controversial, they have significantly influenced educational thought and practice. His critique of traditional schooling methods has spurred a global conversation about the need for more child-centered, engaging, and intrinsically motivating educational approaches. Many progressive schools and educators have embraced his ideas, implementing alternative assessment methods, fostering collaboration, and prioritizing student autonomy. The movement towards project-based learning and inquiry-based approaches reflects the increasing influence of Kohn's work.

The long-term impact of Kohn's work is reflected in a growing body of research that supports his arguments. Studies have shown that intrinsic motivation is a stronger predictor of academic success than extrinsic rewards, and that collaborative learning environments can enhance both academic achievement and social-emotional development. The enduring power of Kohn's work lies in its ability to challenge us to rethink our assumptions about what constitutes effective education.

FAQ: Addressing Common Questions about Alfie Kohn's Work

Q1: Isn't competition necessary to motivate students to achieve their full potential?

A1: Kohn argues that competition, particularly the kind fostered by ranking systems and grading curves, actually undermines motivation. While a healthy degree of challenge is essential, competition often leads to

anxiety, stress, and a focus on winning rather than learning. Collaboration and mutual support, he suggests, are far more effective in fostering achievement.

Q2: How can we effectively assess student learning without using grades?

A2: Kohn suggests a range of alternative assessment methods, including portfolios, projects, presentations, and performance-based assessments. These methods allow for a more holistic evaluation of student learning, focusing on understanding and application rather than simply memorization. These assessments can also be more closely aligned with the learning goals and provide meaningful feedback to students.

Q3: Aren't rewards necessary to encourage good behavior and effort?

A3: Kohn argues that rewards undermine intrinsic motivation. While they may produce temporary compliance, they fail to cultivate a genuine interest in the task itself. He suggests that creating engaging and meaningful learning experiences is a more effective way to encourage effort and good behavior.

Q4: Is Kohn advocating for a completely unstructured classroom?

A4: No, Kohn is not advocating for chaos. He supports structured learning environments but argues that these structures should be designed to foster engagement, collaboration, and student autonomy, not to control and coerce students.

Q5: How can teachers implement Kohn's ideas in a practical way in a traditional school setting?

A5: Teachers can start by incorporating elements of child-centered learning, such as incorporating student interests into lesson plans, utilizing collaborative learning activities, and providing opportunities for student

choice and autonomy within the constraints of the curriculum. Gradually shifting the assessment methods towards more holistic and less stressful approaches is another practical step.

Q6: What are the main criticisms of Kohn's work?

A6: Critics often argue that Kohn's ideas are idealistic and impractical to implement in large, diverse school systems. Some also question whether a complete absence of extrinsic motivation is realistic or even desirable for all learners. However, the core tenets of his arguments continue to generate valuable conversations about improving educational practices.

Q7: How does Kohn's work relate to current debates about education reform?

A7: Kohn's work is highly relevant to current education reform debates, particularly those focusing on issues like standardized testing, teacher evaluation, and the role of intrinsic motivation. His emphasis on child-centered learning, student autonomy, and authentic assessment aligns with many current reform efforts aiming for more personalized and engaging educational experiences.

Q8: Where can I find more information about Alfie Kohn's work?

A8: You can find a wealth of information on Alfie Kohn's website, which includes his books, articles, and blog posts. His books, such as "Punished by Rewards," "The Homework Myth," and "Beyond Discipline," provide detailed explanations of his philosophy and practical strategies for implementing his ideas in classrooms and homes.

Rethinking the Classroom: A Deep Dive into Alfie Kohn's "Feel-Bad Education"

Alfie Kohn's compelling 2011 assemblage of essays, "Feel-Bad Education and Other Contrarian Essays on Children and Schooling," kindles a much-needed conversation about the deficiencies of contemporary pedagogical practices. Rather than only condemning the current state, Kohn provides a provocative alternative, based in a deep understanding of child development and acquisition. This examination will investigate Kohn's central claims, emphasizing their importance and practical implications for educators and parents together.

Kohn's main thesis focuses around the harmful results of extrinsic incentives in the classroom. He maintains that dependence on grades, awards, and rivalry compromises inherent motivation – the genuine delight in understanding for its own sake. Instead of fostering an enthusiasm of knowledge, this technique produces an environment of tension, strain, and achievement-focused demeanor. Kohn backs his claims with substantial research and practical examples, painting a vivid picture of how the current system fails many learners.

Another essential subject in Kohn's writings is the critique of standardized assessments. He illustrates how these exams, designed to gauge performance, often lower the curriculum to memorization memorization, restricting creativity and critical thinking. The attention on consequential examinations also adds to the anxiety felt by both educators and pupils, constraining the scope of educational possibilities.

Kohn champions for a more caring approach to schooling, one that stresses inner motivation, teamwork, and student autonomy. He suggests exchanging competition with cooperation, and marks with increased important feedback that concentrate on progress and grasp. He promotes teachers to develop captivating and demanding educational contexts that cultivate interest and a lifelong appreciation of education.

Kohn's notions may seem unconventional to some, but their ramifications are significant. By changing the emphasis from external motivators to intrinsic motivation, we can cultivate a more engaged and passionate learner community. This change requires a fundamental re-evaluation of conventional instructional techniques, but the prospect benefits are significant.

In conclusion, Alfie Kohn's "Feel-Bad Education" offers a powerful and pertinent analysis of the present situation of teaching. By questioning conventional opinions and presenting a convincing perspective for a more ethical and successful teaching structure, Kohn encourages us to reconsider our method to teaching and to stress the welfare and growth of children.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs):

Q1: Is Kohn advocating for the complete abolition of grades and tests?

A1: No. Kohn claims that the excessive dependence on grades and high-stakes testing is damaging. He recommends finding more significant ways to judge progress, that focus less on contestation and more on unique development.

Q2: How can teachers implement Kohn's ideas in their classrooms?

A2: Teachers can begin by altering their attention from external motivators to internal motivation. This includes generating stimulating teaching experiences that foster inquisitiveness and a love of learning. Promoting teamwork and offering positive feedback are also crucial approaches.

Q3: What are the long-term benefits of adopting Kohn's approach?

A3: A change towards Kohn's recommendations can result to greater inherent motivation, decreased anxiety levels, and a more beneficial attitude towards schooling. This, in effect, can lead in improved educational achievement and a lifelong love of knowledge.

Q4: Are there any criticisms of Kohn's work?

A4: Some detractors assert that Kohn's concepts are infeasible to apply in large scope educational contexts. Others propose that outside rewards can be successful under certain situations. However, these criticisms often omit to account for the severe problems Kohn highlights, such as the damaging consequences of high-stakes testing and the overemphasis on grades as the primary metric of success.

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