Episode 97: Alfie Kohn
Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue, a podcast about teachers talking writing. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

If you have just a minute, please subscribe and follow along on whatever platform you're listening on. And if you don't mind, please rate and review the podcast. That just helps people find us.

In this episode, I talk about with Alfie Kohn about the purpose of education, rewards and punishments, grades, standards, and rigor, homework and resisting traditional systems and structures.

Alfie Kohn writes and speaks widely on human behavior, education, and parenting. He has written 14 books and has been described in TIME Magazine as "perhaps the country's most outspoken critic of education's fixation on grades and test scores." Kohn has been featured on hundreds of TV and radio programs, including the *Today Show* and two appearances on *Oprah*. He has been profiled in The Washington Post and The Los Angeles Times, while his work has been described and debated in many other leading publications.

Alfie, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You have written widely on education, and I thought that we could start with you talking about the purpose of education. So based on your experiences and expertise, having written 14 books and given hundreds of thousands of lectures, what do you feel is the purpose of education or what should it be? And then maybe even more specifically, how do our traditional systems and structures work against that purpose?

AK: Wow, with the second part here, we've got an hour just on that question. Well, I see the ideal purpose of education as some combination of, for an individual child, helping that child to grow, to flourish, to become a good person and a good learner who loves learning. But at the same time, I think there's also a social purpose to education, which is to strengthen the idea of democracy in the fullest sense of that word, which has to do with giving people more say about their lives, including at work, at home, at school and elsewhere. So, there's both the idea of helping to actualize individuals and to help society become everything it can be.

Unfortunately, most of the implicit purposes of education reflected in what policy makers and other key constituents, like corporate executives, mean when they talk about the need to improve schools, has less to do with democracy or individual growth and more to do with the economic realm. In the case of the individual, equipping each student with a bunch of skills so he or she can outdo everyone else at getting better paying jobs. And the collective goal seems to be more about helping the graduates of this country to acquire the skills and dispositions they need to suit their future employers so the employers can beat their counterparts from other countries. So, it's not about learning for its own sake. It's not about the fullest sense of enrichment. It's more about dollars and about victory.

So the second part of your question was, what about, if I understood it correctly, what about our education system gets in the way of meeting the goals I like, which would be the first two that I mentioned. And the answer is just about everything that's traditional. Everything from segregating kids by age to focusing on a bunch of old facts rather than deep understanding, to the use of traditional assessment with grades and tests. They focus on competition rather than collaboration and excluding students from most important decisions about what and how they're learning.

Homework, grades, tests, quizzes, an emphasis on isolated facts and skills, none of this helps kids to become deep thinkers who love learning or good people, which is why progressive thinkers are interested in making root, radical changes, not merely tweaking the status quo, not just so kids will learn more facts and do so more efficiently, but so we're more likely to reach those very different, more humanistic goals.

SW: You mentioned grades. One part of your research focuses on intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. I'm thinking specifically about your book, Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes. In this book you talk about extrinsic motivators like grades and how grades and incentives don't foster risk taking, and how grades work against some of the primary purposes for learning. You also say that both rewards and punishments are "two sides of the same coin." Can you talk about that? Can you talk more about how rewards and punishments work against education and learning?

AK: Well, when we talk about motivation, many of us are inclined to think of it as a single entity, such that it's like on a hydraulic lift, it can go up or down. You can have more or less of this stuff called motivation. And, of course, we want kids to have more of it. So then we ask, how do we motivate them? But the reality is that there are different kinds of motivation. And the kind matters a lot more than the amount. The most common distinction made by psychologists, which is still a bit of an oversimplification as most dichotomies are, but is still a hell of a lot closer to the truth than that single entity model, is to distinguish between intrinsic motivation, which means you get a kick out of what you're doing and find it meaningful or valuable in its own right, and extrinsic motivation, which means you do a task in order that you can attain something outside of, extrinsic to the task. Normally, it means getting a reward or avoiding a punishment.

So it's not just that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are different. And it's not even just that intrinsic is better, although that's true. It's that intrinsic motivation tends to be undermined by extrinsic motivators. This is one of the most frequently replicated findings in the fields of social and developmental psychology. To put it slightly differently, the more you reward people for doing something, the more they tend to lose interest in whatever they had to do to get the reward. And this has been found across cultures, across genders, across ages, across tasks. It's an extraordinarily important finding. And, in fact, we should never even be asking the question, how do you motivate students? Because you can't motivate them, anyone other than yourself. You can make people do things. That's what carrots and sticks are for. But you can't make them want to do it, to have that intrinsic motivation.

Now, extrinsic motivators, some are slightly more egregious and destructive than others. But, basically, rewards are not really better than punishments in the case of what they both can do. And the only thing they can ever get is temporary compliance, but at an enormous cost. And it doesn't matter, by the way, if you use euphemisms to make yourself feel better about bribing or threatening kids, calling it a positive reinforcement or logical consequences. It still bribes and threats. That's how it's perceived by the person you're doing it to. So if you threaten a punishment or consequence to a student for not doing what you want or for doing what you don't want, the kid comes to think, ask, "What do they want me to do, these people with more power than I have? And what happens to me if I don't do it?"

And if you offer a reward for pleasing or impressing you, then kids will come to ask, "What do they want me to do, these people with more power than I have? And what do I get for doing it?" In neither case does this help kids develop a commitment to the action or value. In neither case does it help kids become more thoughtful or caring people. It makes them more self-centered and it teaches them that it's all about power. When you have more power than other people, you too can wield rewards or punishments to make other people comply with whatever you want them to do, regardless of whether it's reasonable, or whether they have any say in it. I'm trying, basically, to summarize an entire book here in a couple of minutes.

Let me finally talk, you asked about grades in particular, which of course, are a subset of rewards and punishments. The research finds that if you took a big group of kids and you gave them all the identical assignment to do, and then you randomly assigned them to either a grade group, where they're told this counts for a grade, or a non-graded group, remember given the identical assignment, but no grades attached, you would find on average three robust differences in the two groups. The students who were led to focus on grades, first, are now less interested in the task than the kids given the same assignment with no grades. To the best of my knowledge, every study that has ever looked at the difference between grades and no grades with respect to interest has found that grades tend to kill excitement or interest in the specific task, in the field they're working in, like math or writing, and in learning itself. Grades destroy curiosity.

The second effect is that kids led to focus on grades will, if given a choice, pick the easiest possible task. Not because they're lazy. Not because they lack a growth mindset. But because they're rational. Duh! If the goal here is to get an A, of course, I'm more likely to reach that goal if I have the shortest book or the most familiar topic to work on. Grades kill intellectual risk taking. And the third effect is that students trying to do it for a grade tend to think in a shallower and more superficial way than students doing the same thing without a grade. Because again, the goal is not to explore deeply, to look from various perspectives, to challenge premises. The goal is to figure out how to game the system in order to get a good grade.

So the problem is not with certain kinds of grading systems. And the problem is not going to be solved by doing things like standards-based grading or having fewer kids get As because we're

focused on the pseudo issue of grade inflation. The problem is with grades themselves. And in a broader sense, the problem is with the whole idea of extrinsic motivators.

SW: Let's talk about standards and the meaning behind words like "rigor" and "accountability," which come up frequently in national conversations and narratives on education. How does this terminology, so "rigor," for example, undermine some of the values you've been talking about, like curiosity, innovation, and creativity?

AK: Well, it's a slightly different answer with each term. I mean, if we're bunching all the terms together, then we can only offer a vague generalization, like you got to be careful about the language you use, which can have different meanings. But all right, let's take the term rigor, for example. The emphasis on rigor is mostly about difficulty. This is like politicians and corporate executives who talk about raising the bar, which is a term, I think, that was originally developed on show horses, which may tell you everything you need to know about how these people view children. The emphasis on difficulty, on making things more challenging, assumes that stuff is more worth doing if not everybody will succeed.

And it turns out, when you think about it, that when people talk about raising standards, what they mean, in effect, and I've written about this in some detail, is they mean standards that all kids will never be able to meet. Because if everybody met the standards, they would just take that as prima facie evidence that the standards were too low and had to be ratcheted up until some students were unable to meet them. Now, the fact that the students who are unable to meet the standards, or be sufficiently rigorous, are disproportionately likely to be students of color, students whose first language isn't English, students with special needs and so on points out something about the inequity at the core of the tougher standards movement. But beyond that, it points to something else in our culture, which is the idea that everybody can't be excellent because excellence has been implicitly defined in a zero sum way.

It's about beating people. It's about winners and losers. That's why people become apoplectic with rage at the idea that everybody, or almost everybody, in a class can get an A. Now, putting aside the problem here is with using grades at all, the idea is that if everybody is succeeding, we must be content with mediocrity and we need to raise the bar some more so that some people fail. So there's this idea of artificial scarcity at the core of the American idea of excellence that plays itself out in various ways, especially with our school system, but not only that. I have visited many classrooms and schools that are rigorous, that I wouldn't send my dog to, because it's mostly about a high-pressure situation of trying to see, how hard it is to get students to jump through hoops. And students are not thinking deeply, necessarily. It's not good for their mental health or certainly for the connections and relationships among them.

But the adults can brag about how prestigious or elite the institution is because of how hard it is to succeed. Conversely, I've been in many classrooms where there is a real deep, rich, meaningful sense of playing with ideas and constructing meaning, where it's not necessarily characterized by difficulty. So rigor is, I think, exactly the wrong way to go. And of course,

there's various other words, as I guess, you've implied where we got to be really careful about the actual meaning. And sometimes that changes over time. It used to be that we wanted a developmentally appropriate education. But sometimes developmental just means that kids get to pick which of the adult-defined tasks they do when.

Or another word that used to mean something else is engaging. We want kids to be engaged with what they're learning. That had a different meaning at one point. Now, in many cases, it just means really compliant. So we could take any word and have fun with it to unpack what's been going on.

SW: You mentioned earlier having issues with homework. Back in 2006 you published a book called The Homework Myth. What makes homework problematic?

AK: The research finds, as best I can tell, and this is still true some years after I published my book on this topic, not a single controlled study has ever found any benefit to any kind of homework or any amount of homework for kids below high school. If you are teaching kids who are 11 or 12, let alone 6 or 7, and you are assigning homework, which is to say making them work what amounts to a second shift of academics when they get home from a full day in school, that is not based on any good evidence of any benefit. In fact, newer, better studies call into question whether homework is even beneficial, let alone necessary, even at the high school level. But below the high school level, the correct question is not how much homework, but why would we ever do that?

And when people then are presented with this, what the evidence actually says, and it doesn't support the idea of this, they often fall back on the notion that, "Well, yeah, but homework for younger kids has some non-academic benefits. It teaches good work habits, independence, self discipline and responsibility." I devote a chapter in my book to what I would call collectively, an urban myth. I wouldn't call it an urban myth, because people in the suburbs tend to believe it, too. And again, not a spec of evidence has ever supported that folk wisdom about this. Homework is the ultimate example of something that is all pain and no gain. And thus, it becomes really interesting to find out why in the absence of supportive evidence, teachers are still assigning and parents are still accepting this practice that mostly creates anxiety, frustration, family conflict and a diminishing excitement about learning.

SW: Alfie, what future directions would you like to see policy makers take, but also what actions would you like to see teachers and individual classrooms take to resist traditional systems and help reform education?

AK: Now, that question is just too big for me to be able to get my arms around, I'm afraid. I mean, it's obviously important, but it's too broad to do anything, or at least, I can't figure out what to do with it. It depends on which issue is considered of most importance to a given individual who's asking the question. And what opportunities are available in order to make a difference on this versus that, on the person's tolerance for risk, on who the other people are

around. It's just too much. It's like, take a few minutes to say how we should have a better society. I mean, what do I do with that? And the only thing I can say, as a generalization, is that when there's bad stuff going on in a given school, and by the way, the answer to that will depend on what your point of entry is, a student will have a different set of options than a parent, than a teacher, than a principal, than a certain citizen and so on.

There are many points of entry to making change for each of a series of different issues. But the one thing that I think is common is that when there's bad stuff going on, when schools, and kids, and teachers are judged by standardized test scores, standardized tests measure what matters least so that low scores can be a good sign sometimes, and high scores can be a bad sign. Or all work, rewards and punishments, grades, whatever it is, you'd have to try to work on two tracks at once. In the short run, minimizing the damage of the status quo. And in the long run, organizing and mobilizing people to challenge the policies that we've come to take for granted, treating it just like the weather, and realizing it's not like the weather, that these things can be questioned and challenged and ultimately reversed. So that the next generation doesn't have to come up with stop-gap, short-term measures.

So that plays out differently with each of these examples, like testing or bad classroom management systems and discipline programs. Now, in the case of grades, for example, if I'm a teacher and I'm forced to turn in a grade at the end of the term, and I can see the damage this is doing to learning, in the short run, I'm going to avoid ever giving kids grades on individual projects and assignments, which I'm not required to do. Even if I have to turn one in at the end, that's one thing I can do in the short run to minimize the damage, make grades as invisible as possible to kids for as long as possible. And the other thing I'm going to do if I have to turn in a grade for them at the end of the term is I'm going to let them pick their own grade, thereby neutralizing, or as one high school teacher I know says, neutering grade. So it's no longer about being a bribe or threat, a mechanism of manipulation.

And by letting kids pick their own grade, it's a powerful act of trust and respect. But, that's the short term. In the long term, I'm going to be talking to people who share my concerns about grades, other teachers, administrators, parents, so that we can move to a grade-free school that's about learning, not about collecting that. And so there's that same short term, long term balance with respect to everything that we need to do. But again, the priorities that people will choose for which issue, or issues, to start with and how to go about it will depend on the situation that they're in and the priorities they have.

SW: By that question, I'm thinking about how teachers are under different systems and how those structures shape pedagogies and practices. So you mentioned, for example, standardized tests. Teachers in most high schools, I imagine, can't say we're not doing standardized tests, in short, because there's too much power held by state governances and policies, state mandates that influence curriculum and the real actions teachers can take. You could probably argue the same thing about grades depending upon the positionality of the teacher and their institutional authority, for example, a grad student vs. an adjunct vs. non-tenure track vs. tenure track faculty.

Or you might even look at something like feedback on student writing and see there are different constraints and affordances when someone's teaching a 2-1 compared to a teacher teaching a 5-5.

So you got to look at the conditions and the teachers and the systems and the structures, and also the support and the resources that teachers have in their individual context. I guess, what I'm trying to say by that last question, or what I'm hoping to get at is asking you for maybe some practical, smaller steps teachers can take within their institutions, within their classroom contexts that, as you mentioned earlier, could "minimize the damage."

AK: And it sounds like your rewording of the question is sort of like putting most of the weight on the short term, what do we do in the meantime? And I do have suggestions for that. But I just want to now try to respectfully push back on each of those things to say it is equally important and has always been important for social change, not to just shrug and say, "Well, there's not much we can do about the larger picture or the structures here. So what can we do in our little corner of the world?" And say, "No. That's a profoundly conservative point of view." In the name of realism, we are capitulating to structures that can be changed. And in many times in history have been changed.

So, I want to say to the frustrated, test-giving teacher, "Here's an anthology published a few years ago. Look it up. It's called, *More Than a Score*, which talks about teachers organizing to boycott standardized tests, not just do a little less test prep in their classroom." Or to the teachers who are frustrated with grades to say, "Here's examples of how grades were unrolled at the whole school level, because the teachers said we can no longer in good conscience give them." I think it's really critical not to...I mean, nothing is more powerfully conservative and likely to perpetuate a bad status quo than people with good values who say, "Yeah, we can't do anything about the structure. Let's just try to make it a little less harmful tomorrow."

You can. We can by organizing make a lot of those important changes. And part of my career has been collecting examples from all over the place of teachers who said, "No. I can't do this anymore." We have to start organizing, and we do that because our kids deserve more than temporary, piddly, stop-gap measures to try to minimize the harm.

SW: Thanks, Alfie. And thank you, Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.