From 1979 until 1985, I taught a course on existentialism to high school students. It was not my only teaching experience but it was far and away my favorite. Between terms, I fine-tuned the reading list and perfected the lectures, looking forward to the next year when I could teach it again — rather as one might tinker with a new car in the garage before proudly bringing it out. It wasn’t until years later that I began to realize just how little I understood about teaching. The idea of a teacher with a ready-made course just waiting to be taught to students makes about as much sense as a young, single person with a ready-made marriage who needs nothing more than a partner to have it with.

Once I was out of the classroom, I came to understand that a course is created for and with a particular group of students. I didn’t see it that way before because I wasn’t thinking about learning, only about teaching. I was trying to find the most efficient way of giving students the knowledge and skills I already had, which meant that I was treating the students as interchangeable receptacles – rows of wide-open bird beaks waiting for worms, if you will. (Some beaks are defiantly closed, of course, but there are plenty of in-service workshops available on how to “motivate” those birds to open up.)

I would like to be able to say that my current ideas about education spring directly from my own classroom experience, but they really don’t. They spring from watching teachers who are better than I ever was, from reading remarkable research, from talking and listening and thinking. My own classroom experience serves mostly to make me wince in retrospect. It’s the basis for a lesson not in pedagogy but in humility — and it reminds me how hard it is even for reasonably smart, humanistic, well-intentioned people to put the good stuff into practice.

* 

This book is not an account of how I learned but an indication of what I’m learning. It is a collection of nineteen essays that have appeared in Phi Delta Kappan, Educational Leadership, Education Week, the Boston Globe, and other publications; all but one were written in the 1990s, and the majority since 1995. The shortest essay is the title piece, which appears at the end and consists mostly of a chart; the longest is a discussion of self-esteem that identifies the two major schools of thought on the issue and then proceeds to criticize both of them. With the exception of some minor tweaking, I’ve left the original text of these articles alone. I have, however, added a postscript to the oldest piece in the bunch (“Suffer the Restless Children”). One article (“Television and Children”) appears for the first time in this anthology.
When I look at these essays together, the strongest impression they leave me with is the diversity of topics. Unlike people who devote their entire careers to a single issue such as discipline or assessment, I have pursued whatever questions seemed compelling to me. There was no Ten-Year Plan informing this process, no calculated decision to write on specific topics in pursuit of a grand unifying theory, no predictable linear sequence laid out in advance. After all, children rarely learn that way (although they are often taught as if they did), and evolution, too, is more a conglomeration of accidental connections and dead-ends — more a bush than a ladder, as Stephen Jay Gould likes to say. So, too, is this collection. Although some of these articles led to others, the whole is identifiable primarily in the sense that the parts were all written by the same person.

Yet when I try to look at this book as a reader, I think that one can discern an agenda, a sensibility, that runs through it. It offers an invitation to reconsider some of our most basic practices and premises as educators (and, incidentally, as parents). Thus, the chapters ask such questions as: Will kids really act better if we teach them social skills? Do some kids really “have” something called attention-deficit disorder? Is the very act of watching television really bad for you? The operative word in each case is “really”: How sure are we of what we have assumed?

At least as often, though, these essays are not asking “Is X true?” so much as “Have we asked the right question here, or asked it the right way?” What I think I’ve been trying to do is reframe the way controversies are presented and suggest more meaningful questions than the ones we tend to ask. For me, the meaningful questions are generally the radical ones – and I use radical in the sense suggested by the word’s original Latin meaning, which is “of the root.” Thus, to take just a few examples of what follows in this book, I argue that:

* We ought to call a moratorium on our national frenzy to “raise standards” and ask what assumptions about children and schools are built into that endeavor.

* We ought to refrain from conducting elaborate, time-wasting discussions about how to stem grade inflation, because the real problem is not the number of students who get A’s but the number who are taught that getting A’s is the point of school.

* We ought to reflect on the well-intentioned quest to get kids to read more and ask what the usual strategies are doing to how kids read and why they read.

* We ought to rethink the search for better methods of assessing students’ work – because our motives for assessment matter more than our methods, because too much attention to student performance threatens to undermine learning, and because there are disturbing implications to construing what goes on in classrooms as “work.”

A few years ago, I received – and accepted – an invitation to speak to a fourth-grade class that had just finished reading excerpts from one of these articles (“Grading”). A week or so after my visit, a batch of thank-you letters and reflections from the students arrived in the mail. One boy’s note read as follows:

Dear Mr. Kohn,

I’m glad you came in because it helped me understand your theory. I was wondering though why you disided to spend you life time doing this  I mean I disigrie with [some] things but I wouldn’t spend my lifetime disigrying.

When I finally stopped laughing, I started to take this letter seriously, accepting a nine-year-old’s
challenge to think about what I’m spending my life doing – and what most of the essays in this book are about. Only the articles in the last section explicitly talk about what I think we should do (as opposed to what we should stop doing): turn classrooms into caring communities, give students more opportunities to participate in making decisions, and so on. But I feel obliged to remind myself periodically that the criticism of popular practices, the “disigrying” with conventional wisdom that describes most of these articles and much of my career is also informed by a vision of what should be. Though I will own up to having something of a contrarian streak, I rail against a lot of what goes on in schools chiefly because those practices threaten to eclipse the values I am trying to affirm. Rewards trouble me because of what they do to intrinsic motivation; traditional discipline and character education offend me because of how they derail moral development and fail to meet children’s needs.

* 

This process of opposing in order to affirm began in the early 1980s, when I was thinking through the destructive consequences of competition. When my study of that subject was published in 1986 (as No Contest: The Case Against Competition), I was led off in three separate directions, all of which had the effect of pulling me toward the field of education (as opposed to social criticism and human behavior more generally, where I had dwelled to that point).

First, the search for practical alternatives to competitive structures led me to cooperative learning, which just happens to take place in schools. Beginning with a common-sense recognition that students are likely to benefit if they can exchange their insights and information, I eventually realized that collaboration is even more important as a means of facilitating how people think, and that took me off in the direction of constructivism. In the late 1980s, if you had told me that cooperative learning was a big part of your classroom, I would have grinned and congratulated you. By the early 1990s, I was starting to reply, “Hmmm. What kind?” – wary of the versions that I came to call “group grade grubbing” (because of their reliance on artificial inducements for teamwork) and suspicious of a model of cooperative learning that simply spices up the traditional curriculum and fails to challenge a teacher-centered, behaviorist model of instruction).[1]

Second, the research I had uncovered suggesting that excellence and competition are not only different ideas in theory but actually pull in opposite directions in practice – that is, all the studies showing that people work or learn less effectively when they are competing – forced me to come up with some explanations for this counterintuitive finding. One reason that competition typically backfires is its status as an extrinsic motivator, an attempt to use something outside a task (namely, the possibility of winning a contest) to get people to try harder. Extrinsic motivators are not only less successful than intrinsic motivation (that is, interest in the task itself) but tend to undermine intrinsic motivation, along with the quality of one’s performance. All of this took up scarcely half a dozen paragraphs in No Contest, but eventually led me to wonder whether extrinsic motivators are counterproductive even when no competition is involved.

I published the answer in 1993 as Punished by Rewards, which looked at the failure of our ceaseless attempts to “motivate” people by dangling goodies in front of them at school, at work, and at home. All three arenas interested me, but I was particularly drawn to what I was finding out about schools – and to the alternatives to using rewards (or punishments) to get students to work harder or behave themselves. I came to see the problems of traditional grades as well as the promise of some alternative forms of assessment (if used sparingly and for the right reasons). I started to think about the tendency to overemphasize the teaching of skills, the influence of behaviorism on contemporary character education, the absurdity of reading incentives, and the limits of “positive reinforcement” along with other troubling aspects of popular discipline programs – and I addressed all of these topics in articles that appear in this volume.
Third, I looked hard at the commonplace assumption that we compete because it’s “just human nature” to do so and found not a shred of evidence to support it. Instead, logic and research strongly suggest that we compete because we’re raised that way rather than born that way - an inconvenient conclusion insofar as we then face the responsibility of doing something about the institutions in our culture that compel us to work against each other. But again, an answer triggers more questions: What else do we attribute to “human nature” because it’s convenient rather than because it’s true? Is there good evidence to support our casual belief that competitiveness, aggression, selfishness, and laziness are more natural than cooperativeness, nurturance, generosity, and curiosity?

The result of that research project was a relatively academic book published in 1990 called The Brighter Side of Human Nature: Altruism and Empathy in Everyday Life, which I don’t mind telling you has sold dozens of copies. But again, the practical side of me was unsatisfied. Having laboriously attempted to prove that it is as natural for humans to help as to hurt, I wanted to say something useful, to offer some way of actively promoting the prosocial. This immediately led me to think about children and schools. I had been invited in 1988 and 1989 to speak about competition at the annual conference of the National Association of Independent Schools, but in 1990 I switched gears and prepared a talk entitled “Caring Kids.” I then published an expanded version of that lecture in the March 1991 issue of Phi Delta Kappan. The article resulted in an invitation to develop one- and two-day workshops for Phi Delta Kappa, which I conducted, on and off for several years, all over the country. From how to help students become compassionate, empathic people, it was a short jump to a number of related educational topics, such as those addressed in this collection.

NOTE

1. Two of my publications on cooperative learning are not included in this anthology: “Learning Together,” which is chapter 10 of the revised edition (1992) of No Contest; and “Group Grade Grubbing vs. Cooperative Learning,” Educational Leadership, February 1991, pp. 83-87, my first article to appear in an education periodical. I have, however, included a discussion of why cooperative learning has so often failed to take root, which appears here as chapter 5: “Resistance to Cooperative Learning: Making Sense of Its Deletion and Dilution.”

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