

Feel-Bad Education

The Cult of Rigor and the Loss of Joy

By Alfie Kohn

"Why are our schools not places of joy?" This question, posed by John Goodlad exactly 20 years ago, was both a summary of his landmark study of American classrooms and a plea for his readers to realize that a place called school didn't have to be as bleak as it was.

Today things are different, of course. Today we rarely even ask the question.

That so few children seem to take pleasure from what they're doing on a given weekday morning, that the default emotional state in classrooms seems to alternate between anxiety and boredom, doesn't even alarm us. Worse: Happiness in schools is something for which educators may feel obliged to apologize when it does make an appearance. After all, they wouldn't want to be accused of offering a "feel-good" education.

Not much chance of that, though. Children these days are likely to be on the receiving end of a curriculum specified by powerful and distant others. Those in poor neighborhoods can count on having to sit through prefabricated lessons, often minutely scripted, whose purpose is not to promote thinking, much less the joy of discovery, but to raise test scores.

Students tend to be regarded not as subjects but as objects, not as learners but as workers. By repeating words like "accountability" and "results" often enough, the people who devise and impose this approach to schooling evidently succeed in rationalizing what amounts to a policy of feel-bad education.

Countless adolescents, meanwhile, face the prospect of a dishonorable discharge from high school purely on the basis of their performance on a state test. Those of their peers who are more successful at the rating-and-ranking game don't worry about diplomas. Rather, they are under pressure to attain stellar scores on a different exam while maintaining impossibly high grades and a collection of impressive extracurricular activities. The objective is to assure their admission to the sort of college to which no one's admission is, in fact, assured.

Even in the absence of active misery, the mood in many schools calls to mind Thoreau's famous phrase: quiet desperation. Students count off the hours remaining until dismissal, the days until the weekend, the weeks until vacation. It is the common experience of tots and teenagers, strugglers and achievers.

This situation isn't entirely new, of course. Joy has been in short supply in some classrooms for as long as there have *been* classrooms. But I join Deborah Meier in wondering whether things are worse now, not only because more people are less happy but because this is taken for granted; we don't even see it as a problem that requires our attention.

To be sure, it's theoretically possible to get carried away in the opposite direction. One could adopt a philosophy of hedonism that emphasizes pleasure to the exclusion of all other goods. One could even set up a classroom in which students are always having a good time but rarely learning anything of value. But neither that philosophy nor that practice was particularly common even during the storied '60s; today, both are vanishingly rare, beholden as we are to a cult of rigor.

It's simply stunning, therefore, that some traditionalists actually complain about an excessive concern with children's happiness. Earlier this year, I came across an essay by an administrator who attempted to explain the supposed inferiority of U.S. schools by asserting that, whereas parents in other countries ask their children, "What did you learn in school today?," American parents ask, "Did you enjoy school today?"

Would that it were true! The author Frank McCourt, who taught at a prestigious New York City high school for 18 years, told the journalist John Merrow that only once in all that time had a parent ever asked him, "Is my child enjoying school?" Instead, all he—and, presumably, the students themselves—heard from parents were questions about test scores, college applications, and getting the work done.

It's one thing to try to justify a state of enforced joylessness. But how is it possible to deny the reality, to turn things inside out and claim that we're *too* concerned with wanting children to be happy at school? Such a claim may be unjustifiable, but its style is not unfamiliar. It's one more example of how a distorted description of educational reality is advanced in order to justify a traditional *prescription*. Thus, those who insist that our schools are run by a cabal of constructivists who have turned them into hotbeds of Deweyan progressivism are usually attempting to rationalize the use of even more direct instruction of isolated skills, even less opportunity for students to play an active role in their own learning.

"Back to basics"? When did we ever leave?

I'm not accusing anyone of harboring a sinister desire to make children miserable. I am saying that some people tend to worry an awful lot about the prospect of excessive enjoyment. I suspect that those who dedicate themselves to the task of arresting any real or imagined outbreak of feel-good teaching often believe that if children seem to be happy in school, then not much of value could be going on there.

I call it the Listerine theory of education, based on a famous ad campaign that sought to sell this particular brand of mouthwash on the theory that if it tasted vile, it obviously had to work well. The converse proposition, that anything appealing is likely to be ineffective, is not limited to the realm of schooling. Just as [efforts to undermine public education \(masquerading as a solemn commitment to leave no child behind\)](#) are part of a larger campaign to privatize democratic public institutions, so does an attack on suspiciously enjoyable classroom practices reflect a deeper and wider sensibility. "Feel-good" is an all-purpose epithet, standing ready to disparage almost anything that is too pleasurable.

There's work to be done! Life (or learning, or whatever) isn't supposed to be fun and games! Self-denial—whose adherents generally presume to deny others as well—is closely connected to fear of pleasure and redemption through suffering, and the whole package has a pedigree that is not only philosophical but theological. Who says religion has been banished from the public schools?

There's a clear line of sight to this dogma from a sterile classroom whose children are sweating over worksheets. You can also see it pretty clearly from the administrative offices where people in suits decree the elimination of recess or even build elementary schools without playgrounds.

The irony is, appropriately enough, painful: Academic excellence, the usual rationale for such decisions, is actually far more likely to flourish when students enjoy what they're doing. "Children (and adults, too) learn best when they are happy," as Nel Noddings observes in her book *Happiness and Education*. How they feel—about themselves, about their teachers, about the curriculum and the whole experience of school—is crucially related to the quality of their learning. Richer thinking is more likely to occur in an atmosphere of exuberant discovery, in the kind of place where kids plunge into their projects and can't wait to pick up where they left off yesterday.

Numerous studies have demonstrated how interest drives achievement—ongoing interest in a general topic more than transient interest in a specific activity, and excited interest more than the casual, mild kind. Regardless of age, race, or aptitude, students are more likely to remember and really understand what they've read if they find it intriguing. The interest level of the text, in fact, is a much better predictor of what students will get out of it than its difficulty level. (Incidentally, the same general connection between affect and achievement shows up with adults, too. After all, how do we expect to attract and retain good teachers when neither they nor those whom they teach have much occasion to smile?)

But in pointing this out, I fear that I'm appearing to accept an odious premise—namely, that joy must be justified as a means to the end of better academic performance. Not so: It's an end in itself. Not the only end, perhaps, but a damned important one. Thus, anyone who has spent time in classrooms that vibrate with enthusiasm needs to keep such memories alive in all their specificity to serve as so many yardsticks against which to measure what we've lost: 6-year-olds listening to a story, rapt and breathless; teenagers so immersed in an activity that they forget to worry about appearing cool;

those little explosions of delight attendant on figuring something out.

I am convinced that historians will look back at our era of ever-higher standards and increasingly standardized instruction as a dark period in American education. What were we thinking, they will ask, shaking their heads, when we begrudged children the right to spend their days in a place that provides deep satisfactions and occasional giggles? How did we allow this to happen?

In a news report about what has been stripped away from children's education in order that they can spend more time on test preparation, a spokesman for a large school district defended such policies on the grounds that they were handed down from above. "We haven't had recess in years," he acknowledged. "They say this is the way it's going to be, and we say, 'Fine.'"

Why are our schools not places of joy? Because too many of us respond to outrageous edicts by saying, "Fine."

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