

My Not-So-Mainstream Position about (High School) Education

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Goal

I would like to live in a peaceful world. I guess (almost) everyone, including children, would like too. Unfortunately, we, adults, have failed to build such a world (need evidence?). No wonder, many children and young adults do not aspire to live in our world. There are signs everywhere: drug addiction, suicide, violence, etc. They are victims. What can we do? Our best bet might still be “education.” But it must be a kind of education that would enable them to actually build a peaceful world by themselves. *They* are the ones who need to tackle all future problems ... when the time comes.

Problems

Adults’ failure in world building is tightly coupled with the failing state of the current mainstream education. The current mainstream education is not at all useful for students to build a peaceful world. So, it is a mistake to force adults’ **failing agenda** on students, e.g., curricula based on state requirements, absurd school rule, etc. However, it is the act of *forcing* that is even more damaging. **Forcing** and **excessive control** by adults deprive students of practicing creativity and decision-making skills. The terrible consequences are blatantly clear these days. Forcing also kills students’ intrinsic motivation, the most important but fragile component in learning. For example, it can be easily killed by **extrinsic motivators**, such as fear of punishment, attraction to prizes/honors, and winning a competition. The underlying theme here seems to be adults’ **mistrust** for students. Would students trust adults then?

Homework and Standardized Tests

Both homework and high-stake standardized tests can permanently damage students’ intrinsic motivation by forcing students to do the work when they are not willing. I occasionally say to my daughter, “If you don’t feel like doing homework or taking tests, you don’t need to.” Of course, we are willing to accept whatever consequences (e.g., lower grades or even harsher ones); that is not at all our concern. It seems to be more important to save students’ genuine interest in subjects so that *when (or if) the time comes*, they are still willing to learn those subjects with interest and on their own.

College

I don’t think that a college degree or experience by itself is essential for the above-stated goal. But still anticipating successful college admission, many parents are preoccupied with *their own* children’s academic and other “achievements.” The resulting pressure is toxic for students and society. At the same time, I’m not categorically against college. If (a big *if*) students *really* understand what it is and how they are going to use that experience (for the same goal), they could certainly benefit from it.

Meaningful Questions

Are we really taking students seriously? Who are they? What do they want? What are their problems? How can we *help* them address their problems on their own? We, adults, should *at least* ask these often-ignored questions (<http://komagata.net/nobo/pub/Komagata17-StudentsProblems.html>).

My favorite quotes:

- “We have created a society that is morally bankrupt, and the victims are our children who have lost faith in authority due to our moral duplicity. This is the cause of school shootings.” (Stephan Said)
- “I think it is time that we say it out loud. School is prison.” (Peter Gray)
- “Educators teach what they know—and most have as little firsthand knowledge of the modern workplace ... The labor market doesn’t pay you for the useless subjects you master; it pays you for the preexisting traits you signal by mastering them. ... Trying to spread success with education spreads education but not success.” (Bryan Caplan)
- “[T]elling kids they’re smart causes them to fear doing anything that might disprove this praise. That leads them to avoid pushing themselves and making mistakes, just the sort of striving that drives learning. ... it might also make them prone to cheating as well.” (Jessica Stillman citing Carol Dweck and other researchers)
- “In educating the whole child, tests fail.” (Steven Harrison)
- “When you take a test, don’t take it seriously.”
- “An educated nation cannot be created by force.” (Vilho Hirvi)
- “A happy person, fulfilled in their connection to their friends, family, and community and in the expression of their vocation, is likely to be useful and productive in their life and to help weave the collective fabric of a functional society. What else should a society need from education other than the happiness of its people? What else should we demand for our children other than their happiness?” (Steven Harrison)
- “Men had better be without education than be educated by their rulers.” (Thomas Hodgskin?)
- “The task of the educator is to provide experience. ... The work of the teacher is like that of the artist; it is a shaping of something that is given, and no serious artist will say in advance that he knows what will be given. ... Education must be lived. It cannot be administered.” (George Dennison)
- “[T]here is no right education except growing up into a worthwhile world. Indeed, our excessive concern with problems of education at present simply means that the grown-ups do not have such a world.” (Paul Goodman)
- “[M]ost of the really good and creative students who emerge from traditional public schools do so *in spite of* the school and its curriculum, not because of it.” (Allen Graubard)
- “The true test of intelligence is not how much we know how to do, but how we behave when we don’t know what to do.” (John Holt)
- “If the younger generation does not take pride in becoming like its elders, then the society has lost its own continuum, its own stability, and probably does not have a culture worth calling one, for it will be in a constant state of change from one unsatisfactory set of values to another.” (Jean Liedloff)
- “Teaching is overrated. Good teachers don’t teach.” (the title of one of my essays)
- “Learning is possible only when there is no coercion of any kind. And coercion takes many forms, does it not? There is coercion through influence, through attachment or threat, through persuasive encouragement or subtle forms of reward. Most people think that learning is encouraged through comparison, whereas the contrary is the fact. Comparison brings about frustration and merely encourages envy, which is called competition. Like other forms of persuasion, comparison prevents learning and breeds fear. Ambition also breeds fear.” (J. Krishnamurti)
- “[C]onsequences don’t teach kids the thinking skills they lack or solve the problems that set the stage for their challenging behavior.” (Ross Greene)
- “In Finland, “school readiness” has a different meaning than it does in the United States: it’s not about kids being ready for school, it’s about schools being ready to meet the needs of each child.” (Christine Gross-Loh)
- “The only important questions are those without a unique answer.” (my reaction to standardized tests)
- “[I]f we watch how people’s brains respond, promising them monetary rewards and giving them cocaine, nicotine, or amphetamines look disturbingly similar.” (Daniel Pink)
- “[I]f we want our children to behave well, we have to treat them well.” (Bruce Perry)
- “By 2005, parents surveyed by the Lucile Packard Foundation for Children’s Health named homework as the greatest cause of their kids’ stress, far more frequently even than divorce or family financial troubles.” (Vicki Abeles)
- “[W]e as a nation are not only making our kids miserable in the moment; we may actually be building a ticking time bomb of illness that will someday turn this generation of overstressed children into a generation of unhealthy adults.” (Vicki Abeles)
- “The pressure to perform--and its shadow, the fear of failure--represented a silent epidemic. Our competitive, high-stakes culture was the culprit. Our children were the victims.” (Vicki Abeles)
- “The proper question ... is not, “how can people motivate others?” but rather, “how can people create the conditions within which others will motivate themselves.” (Edward Deci)
- “Then, why do we send our daughter to a (public) school? In addition to get to know other people, she can also learn a whole lot about real-world problems (i.e., the current state of education).”