

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

Nobo Komagata

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Goal

My view of the goal of primary and secondary education (both at home and at school) is to guide children to be peaceful. That is, I hope that all the children be free from fear and hatred, full of kindness and compassion, and willing to take part in building a peaceful community. Virtually all other areas, including academics, are important only in support of cultivating the children's inner peace. If we are preoccupied with *our own* children's "success" with respect to academic and other achievements, this can lead to a lot of suffering in this world.

Motivation

The most important point of education must be to respect students' intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivators, such as fear of punishment, attraction to prizes and honors, and winning a competition, would *undermine* their intrinsic motivation. Unfortunately, since the current practice of using extrinsic motivators is so deep-rooted, many teachers and parents are not even aware of their detrimental effects. For example, the systematic use of material rewards employed in PBS/PBIS would ruin students' intrinsic motivation and help encourage obedience, as discussed in one of my essays (<http://nobo.komagata.net/pub/Komagata13-PBS.html>). I also believe that learning occurs only when students are in charge. Even various adolescent and youth problems, including drug addiction, seem to stem from excessive control by adults and not letting children practice good decision making on their own. Then, the best tool during this transitional period must be *our trust towards children*, not our agenda forced on them.

Homework

Especially at the elementary and middle school levels, I am against giving homework. Research shows that homework does not enhance students' academic ability at these levels. Rather, homework can permanently damage students' inherent interest in the subject by forcing children to do the work when they are not willing. I occasionally say to my daughter, "If you don't feel like doing homework, you don't need to do it. I will write a note to the teacher." Note that by not doing homework, we will accept the consequences (e.g., lower grades or even harsher ones), which are not at all our concern. It seems to be more important to save children's genuine interest in the subject so that when the time comes, they are still willing to learn it with interest.

Standardized Tests

As I believe that high-stake standardized tests are obstacles to students' intrinsic motivation to learn, I am strongly against them. I actually say to my daughter, "when you take a test, don't take it seriously." I have been discussing this point with my daughter and she makes her own decision regarding to whether to take such tests (she did take those tests in the previous years).

Sample references: *Beyond measure* by Vicki Abeles; *Punished by Rewards* by Alfie Kohn; *On becoming a person* by Carl Rogers; *The happy child* by Steven Harrison.

My favorite quotes:

- "In educating the whole child, tests fail." (Steven Harrison)
- "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)
- "What kids need to protect them from addiction are the fundamentals of a life: a sense of meaning and involvement, purposeful activity and achievement, caring about themselves and others, and the ability to manage themselves. The importance of these values and skills is not surprising. What's surprising is that we've lost sight of these being the best antidotes to addiction." (Stanton Peele)
- "Human beings only become addicted when they cannot find anything better to live for and when they desperately need to fill the emptiness that threatens to destroy them ... The need to fill an inner void is not limited to people who become drug addicts, but afflicts the vast majority of people of the late modern era, to a greater or lesser degree." (Bruce Alexander)
- "[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)."