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Kohn, Alfie. (2011) *Feel Bad Education: And Other Contrarian Essays on Children and Schooling*. Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press.

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Feel Bad Education is the latest of twelve books written by Alfie Kohn. As in many of his previous books, *Feel Bad Education* is a collection of essays written by Kohn on a wide variety of topics dealing with children, school and parenting. The overarching theme of this book is that the current trends in schools all seem to focus on rigor above high quality schooling. If we continue down this path, the joy of learning will be lost to all involved. His essays are short and easy to read, and each one questions the current trends that are so often taken for granted in today's schools. This book forces the reader to question their current beliefs and to re-evaluate what is truly best for children both in and out of the classroom.

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In the introduction, Kohn lists twelve ideas that he refers to as “Obvious Truths that we Shouldn’t be Ignoring.” These twelve statements are things that are often seen in America’s schools and then a short explanation of the author’s thinking. For example, Kohn’s obvious truth number 6 states that “Just Because Doing x Raises Standardized Test Scores, Doesn’t Mean x Should be Done.” He then argues that standardized tests scores often do not measure the learning that we value most and therefore any curriculum that improves results on these tests may actually be taking away from the real learning that should be happening in the classroom. By the end of the introduction, readers have a solid understanding of Kohn’s personal beliefs about education including but not limited to: his disapproval of the standardized testing movement, a belief that all students are different and should therefore be taught in different ways, that kids need to know that they are safe and cared for in order to succeed, and that a harder curriculum is not always the better choice for students. The remaining five sections of this book have each have three or four essays that build upon Kohn’s core beliefs for education and children.

Section One, “Progressivism and Beyond”, begins by looking at the difference between traditional teaching, where students sit and teachers lecture, and progressive teaching. Progressive teachers value the whole child, a strong sense of community, social justice, intrinsic motivation, the students’ active roll in learning, and a deep level of understanding rather than memorization. In Kohn’s opinion, a strong shift needs to be made from the traditional format to a more progressive point of view. Kohn says that in our traditional schools, “curriculum is being done *to* children rather than *with* children.” When this happens, students do not have a voice in their learning and for many of them the tasks they do each day are meaningless and unrelated to their own lives. Learning should be a collective process where children are asked to help shape the curriculum and teachers’ voices aren’t the only ones that count. For this to happen, though, teachers are going to need to accept a level of vulnerability and have the courage to walk away from “tradition.” Kohn acknowledges that this is never an easy task.

Section Two, “The Nuts and Bolts of Learning”, takes a closer look into the idea of learning. Kohn argues that

teachers are continually under pressure for their students to pass standardized tests. So that no time is lost and that the greatest number of kids can pass the tests, many teachers are taking away the child's choice in the curriculum to create a controlled learning situation and ranking students to see which students need additional instruction. These two changes can have very negative effects for students. In many cases, students either lack the motivation to achieve when their choices have been restricted or in dire situations, students may feel the need to cheat in order to meet the impossibly high requirements and keep up with their peers. A closer look needs to be taken to see what is really important when it comes to learning in the classroom, and to make sure students are able to succeed in the classroom environment.

Section Three, "Climate and Connections", builds on the first half of the book and discusses ways that teachers can make the classroom a warm and caring environment. Kohn goes about this task by pointing out first what teachers are doing wrong when it comes to creating a caring classroom community. For example, many teachers discipline students by removing them from the situation (such as a time-out) or verbally praise the children who excel in front of their classmates. Both of these actions send messages that the teacher only accepts students when they conform to the norms and meet high academic expectations. Students who fall short of these lofty expectations may be inadvertently lead to feel like they are not a welcome part of the classroom and/or disliked by the teacher. Kohn pushes for teachers to provide unconditional teaching where students are appreciated and accepted for the positive qualities they bring to the classroom and where the teacher talks to the child privately when they misbehave to help them understand the reason their behavior needs to change.

The final two sections, "Education Policy and Psychological Issues and Parenting", look at the policy that has created such a competitive and rigorous school climate and finally at parenting for thoughtful children. Kohn points to issues such as competition, National Standards, and 21st Century Schooling as a few of the main causes that education has shifted from a thinking institution to one of regulation and ranking. At school we hope for conformity and it seems that American society is

also pushing for this same thing when students are at home. Kohn critiques the television show, “Supernanny”, not for its great ability to turn around unruly children, but for the use of the same technique on every family when every family is clearly quite different. The Supernanny comes in to a home, watches for a while, assigns a new schedule and then tells parents that they are the people with all power. The children are forced into a new pattern of compliance without explanation or the ability to voice their concerns. Kohn does not believe that the family’s situation should have been left unchanged, but finds many parallels between the episodes and what is being done in our schools. The children’s lives are being altered to one of regiment and structure and no one asked the children for their input. If we continue down this trend, our students will lose their love for learning and the ability to speak up for the things they once had passion for in their hearts. Schools will become a cruel place where thinking has been lost and following is the expectation.

Feel Bad Education opens our eyes to the reality of our current school system and the unfortunate consequences of many of the current practices we are creating each day. This is a must read book for anyone who is involved in education and clearly explains the opposite point of view for these commonly argued issues in education. It allows for educational professionals to question their current practices and beliefs and make a clear decision about what they are doing to create a safe and challenging school environment for children. Kohn’s book that has an overall negative tone, but clearly shows the possibilities for a brighter tomorrow if the current trends are shifted.

About the Reviewer

Nicole Van Gasse is a doctoral student in Educational Leadership at Portland State University. Her areas of interest are elementary education, student motivation and effective teaching strategies.

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