not only want you to know dry facts; not only looking to a knowledge of facts, to that knowledge. I want the heart stirred as well as the intellect.
why should educators care about white rage?  
nick covington

starting off right: writing a pro-student syllabus  
chris mcnutt

to have, not be had  
brennan dignan

supplying a more responsible, equitable classroom  
chris mcnutt

free school teaching: a journey into radical progressive education  
chris mcnutt

waiting  
lisa biber

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chris mcnutt

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why should educators care about white rage?

nick covington

Released before “economic anxiety” and the “politics of resentment” defined our narrative about the outcome of that November’s election, the thesis of Carol Anderson’s 2016 “White Rage” comes early in the prologue titled “Kindling”:

“What was really at work here was white rage. With so much attention focused on the flames, everyone had ignored the logs, the kindling. In some ways, it is easy to see why. White rage is not about visible violence, but rather it works its way through the courts, the legislatures, and a range of government bureaucracies. It wreaks havoc subtly, almost imperceptibly. Too imperceptibly, certainly, for a nation consistently drawn to the spectacular — to what it can see. It’s not the Klan. White rage doesn’t have to wear sheets, burn crosses, or take to the streets. Working the halls of power, it can achieve its ends far more effectively, far more destructively.” (p. 3)

“The trigger for white rage, inevitably”, writes Anderson, “is black advancement”, and Anderson follows both black advancement and white rage through the most explosive periods in America’s racial history, which the reader comes to understand through the brutal clarity and consistent facts of the historical narrative to be the story of an entitled white supremacy:

• The outright violence in the form of mass murder, lynching, and the “crypto-slavery” of the Black Codes, granted authority through the Supreme Court’s decision in Plessy v. Ferguson, which characterized Reconstruction in the period following the Civil War as white America resisted the citizenship rights and equal protections provided to African Americans in the 14th amendment.

• The law continuously wielded as a weapon of white supremacy against African American bodies which enforced every aspect of geographical, social, economic, and cultural segregation and the mass obliteration of constitutional protections in response to the Great Migration of the post-WW1 period.

• The decline of overall American educational attainment as collective punishment following the opportunity for historical course-correction provided by Brown v. Brown, for which white America instead blamed “black parents…for the interruption of their children’s education, since blacks had chosen integration over education” and portrayed “the federal courts and the NAACP as the aggressors.” (p. 87).

• The “rollback” of Civil Rights-era gains throughout the 1970s and 80s as the Burger and Rehnquist Courts delivered rulings directly challenging the mandates of Brown and the Voting Rights Act, brought “reverse discrimination” into the national conversation about race, while Nixon and Reagan presided successfully over a Southern Strategy to broaden their political appeal to working-
class Northern whites to secure a political majority while giving plausible deniability to white supremacist policies and a new War on Drugs, as Anderson quotes Nixon Chief of Staff Bob Haldeman, “[Nixon] emphasized that you have to face the fact that the whole problem is really the blacks. The key is to devise a system that recognized this while not appearing to.” (p. 104).

- The othering of America’s first black president as a “Muslim, black nationalist, socialist, foreign, Arab, Kenyan, un-American immigrant monstrosity” (p. 156) in the wake of the 2008 election and later the mainstreming of organized hate groups who had otherwise operated at the fringes of society. Accompanying this othering was a fraudulent state-level legislative purging of voter rolls and mass disenfranchisement as protection against supposed “voter fraud” (or alternatively, the demographic transformation of political coalitions) which culminated in the 2013 death blow to the Voting Rights Act in Shelby County v. Holder. In this same period Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, Walter Scott, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Rekia Boyd, and Eric Garner became headlines and household names as victims of unpunished police violence (which led white America to conclude that “All Lives Matter”). And in June 2015, a 21-year old white man radicalized by resurgent and emboldened online hate groups hoped to start a race war when he entered the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston and murdered nine black worshipers. (Incidentally, the suspect, boasting a Confederate States of America license plate on his car, was arrested without violence. Police later bought him Burger King and described him as “quiet”, “calm”, and “not problematic”.)

So why, as educators, should we particularly care about this history lesson, why should we care about “White Rage”?

What Anderson makes so apparent in her narrative is our inheritance of America’s supposed racial “past” is really our present mythologized through the lens of national progress as a form of self-preservation — white self-preservation — to erase our contemporary connections even to recent history:

**Confronted with civil rights headlines depicting unflattering portrayals of KKK rallies and jackbooted sheriffs, white authority transformed those damning images of white supremacy into the sole definition of racism. This simple but wickedly brilliant conceptual and linguistic shift served multiple purposes. First and foremost, it was conscience soothing. The whittling down of racism to sheet-wearing goons allowed a cloud of racial innocence to cover many whites who, although ‘resentful of black progress’ and determined to ensure that racial inequality remained untouched, could see and project themselves as the ‘kind of upstanding white citizen[s]’ who were ‘positively outraged at the tactics of the Ku Klux Klan.’ The focus on the Klan also helped to designate racism as an individual aberration rather than something systemic, institutional, and pervasive. Moreover, isolating racism to only its most virulent and visible form allowed respectable politicians and judges to push for policies that ostensibly met the standard of America’s new civil rights norms while at the same time crafting the implementation of policies to undermine and destabilize these norms, all too often leaving black communities ravaged. (p. 100–101) (bold mine)**

This is the historical and contemporary context in which our communities, and the laws and means of policing them, exist; the ecosystem out of which our school systems, policies, and curriculum are staffed, developed, and implemented; and of course the everyday environment in which our students, their families, and we ourselves live, work, learn, and teach. What and how we teach are not and cannot be separated from this context and the past events that inform it, neither in the way that it shapes our environment nor our perception of our place and our role in and apart from it; however, in understanding and recognizing our connection to this not-past, we can be prepared to call-out and resist the shifting language of white supremacy in our systems and institutions whose contemporary manifestations continue to haunt us through:
• Inadequate and inequitable school funding formulas which ultimately drive inadequate and inequitable educational outcomes.

• De facto segregation of America’s public schools.

• Voucher schemes and so-called "school choice" legislation that seek to funnel public money into private institutions where there is fertile ground for discrimination.

• "Zero tolerance" and discriminatory disciplinary policies that isolate, suspend, and expel students of color at a higher rate than white students.

• Ability-grouping, tracking and limiting curriculum opportunities for students with low test scores, low grades, inconsistent attendance and absenteeism, etc.

• The consequences of white rage manifested as economic and social impoverishment for entire regions of the country: "The states of the Deep South, which fought Brown tooth and nail, today all fall in the bottom quartile of state rankings for educational attainment, per capita income, and quality of health." (p. 96)

• A generational wealth gap, which prompted Ta-Nehesi Coates to remark that, "Perhaps no statistic better illustrates the enduring legacy of our country’s shameful history of treating black people as sub-citizens, sub-Americans, and sub-humans than the wealth gap."

• A carceral state that boasts the highest prison population in the world and simultaneously imprisons five times as many black Americans as whites.

• The restriction and abridgment of voting rights in poor communities, which are traditionally and often deliberately communities of color, and limiting the restoration of voting rights for felons.

• Immigration policies that target marginalized and vulnerable communities and separate families and children from their parents and caretakers.

Reflecting on the national impact of Brown in the face of declared “massive resistance” from the Jim Crow South prompted Alabama congressman Carl Elliot to wonder aloud, "Whatever happens in America’s classrooms during the next fifty years will eventually happen to America.” (p. 91)

As we shift our understanding from racism and white supremacy as an "individual aberration" expressed through outright violence and open discrimination — viral videos of police shootings or Civil Rights-era images of dogs used against nonviolent protesters — to something “systemic, institutional, and pervasive” — say, that black students are three times more likely to be suspended from school than white students — , it is so vitally important for us as teachers to understand our individual and collective complicity, how our supposed “colorblindness” fails us and the children we teach, as well as our individual and collective power to resist these structures in our classrooms.

In their 2017 article, The “New Racism” of K-12 Schools: Centering Critical Research on Racism, Kohli, Pizarro, and Nevárez summarize their analysis of over 4,000 articles focused on racial inequity in education research as they relate to the structural analysis of racial oppression in schools. They describe “colorblind ideology” as a form of racism that “erases the contemporary, lived, and systemic oppression of communities of Color” and argue that silence “maintains and legitimates racism” and constructs hostile environments for students of color:

Another prominent theme to emerge from the literature was the manifestation of colorblind racism in schools. Despite attempts to equate colorblindness to equity, qualitative and conceptual studies demonstrate how silence around race maintains and legitimates racism, thus constructing hostile racial climates for students of Color (Castagno, 2008; Chapman, 2013; Love, 2014) and teachers of Color (Amos, 2016; Kohli, 2016; Souto-Manning & Cheruvu, 2016). Steeped in deficit thinking, colorblindness reduces any visible racism to the actions of a few ignorant individuals (Hardie & Tyson, 2013). This allows systemic mechanisms of racism (e.g., tracking, curriculum, student surveillance) to be ignored as explanations for racial inequality and replaced by individual-based rationales (i.e., students of Color are lazy, behaviorally challenged, intellectually deficient; Donna Y. Ford, 2014; Rozansky-Lloyd, 2005; Tarca, 2005). (Kohli et al.: The “New Racism” of K–12 Schools, 2017, p. 189)
While teachers and schools who see themselves as well-intentioned might view “colorblindness” as expressing a safe neutrality, it is a snake-oil salve whose true intent is to prevent us from seeing and addressing the way that systems center and privilege a particular type of identity, often specifically white but also blended with other narratives about race, gender, and class. A more inclusive and equitable — a more humane classroom — is the opposite of “colorblind”. Inclusive, equitable practice works consciously to see these barriers to success and attempts to remove them at the level most in our control: the classroom.

The authors (Kohli et al.) discern the “importance of racial literacy for both students and teachers, shifting their understanding from an individualized to an institutional analysis of racism”. In their analysis from the section titled “Confronting Racism”, the authors identify components in teacher practice from the literature that support the shift to inclusive practice:

- Teacher ability to understand and discuss racism. Teachers with high racial literacy supported students’ recognition of institutionalized racism (Kohli et al., p. 194).
- Racial literacy and anti-racist pedagogy improve student ability to process and confront racism (ibid).
- Critical pedagogy is specifically identified as “a prominent mechanism for developing students’ ability to navigate and deflect racism” (ibid).

These practices that facilitate students’ ability to navigate and process racism also contribute to positive racial identity and positive self-concept which correlate positively with academic achievement (ibid).
We can’t take on the world’s challenges without first acknowledging the structural boogeymen that live in our own classrooms. This work is not easy, but it is necessary. (Minor, We Got This, p. 37)

In his book, We Got This: Equity, Access, and the Quest to Be Who Our Students Need Us to Be (2019), educator Cornelius Minor provides a template to help us inventory the ways in which we can work to identify and resist oppressive narratives and structures in our classrooms and work to make our schools more equitable from the inside-out: “They are not just character traits. Racism, sexism, ableism, and classism are systems. They are the rules, policies, procedures, practices, and customs that govern a place and lead to consistently unequal outcomes for specific subsets of people.” (We Got This, p. 31)

Which groups in your classroom or school consistently benefit more or less from the way things are? How can you change your classroom or the way your system does school so that the groups who benefit less from the way things are have more opportunities to succeed?

Minor challenges teachers to make a list of the kids that we worry about and sort them into groups, identifying similar characteristics and trends of each group. As Minor prompts in the text, “Depending on where you work, you will notice that your groups may even have a specific ability, class, gender, or race dynamic...Do not ignore this...we cannot ignore the reality that for many, school does not work because its mechanisms do not take into account the aspects of their identity that are not white, male, middle-class, or able-bodied” (We Got This, p. 37). He then asks teachers to identify the things students have to do to be successful in class, describe classroom or teacher factors that might be getting in the way of their success, and finally list actions or strategies you can do to remove the barriers of success for each group of students (We Got This, p. 39–40)

As Minor reminds us, it is a choice to engage in this work, but understanding our long history of “white rage”, its place at the center of our immediate context, and the cost of “colorblindness” for every student but especially for students of color, maintaining systems of oppression is a choice, too:

The hard part of knowing that oppression lives in systems too is understanding that systems don’t change just because we identify them; they change because we disrupt them. This is a choice. Change is intentional. Allowing the system to run as it always has has it also a choice — one that denies many students access to the opportunities that we have pledged our careers to creating. (We Got This, p. 31)

This work is necessary, but we need not do it alone. Below are links to several organizations connecting teachers to resources, texts, lesson plans, and communities of educators in developing inclusive and racially literate classrooms, growing our capacity to recognize and resist oppressive structures, and consciousness raising through changing narratives about marginalized and vulnerable populations:

- Teaching Tolerance | Diversity, Equity And Justice
  Teaching Tolerance provides free resources to educators-teachers, administrators, counselors and other...
  [www.tolerance.org](http://www.tolerance.org)

- Facing History and Ourselves
  Empowering teachers & students to think critically about history & to understand the impact of their choices.
  [www.facinghistory.org](http://www.facinghistory.org)

- What We Do - Teaching for Change
  Teaching for Change provides teachers and parents with the tools to create schools where students learn to read, write...
  [www.teachingforchange.org](http://www.teachingforchange.org)

- Zinn Education Project: Teaching People’s History
  The Zinn Education Project promotes and supports the teaching of people’s history in middle and high school classrooms...
  [www.zinnedproject.org](http://www.zinnedproject.org)

And of course you can always read and share HRP’s own Restorative Justice Primer, explore additional Restorative Justice Research & Readings, and listen to Cornelius Minor discuss his work and We Got This on our podcast, Things Fall Apart.
The words we use to structure our syllabus can have a lasting first impact on how students view our class. Intentionally or not, the verbiage and wording of our attitude toward students is reflected in our writing. Last December, I wrote of the many issues found within classroom syllabi, and I want to dig deeper into what we should be writing. (The following quotes are taken from that piece.)

Of course, all of this should be tailored to your classroom — there are simple changes that mean a lot (especially when we use this to outline our own philosophies in practice.)

**Student First Language**

School is not a prison. We should not treat our students as if they’ve preemptively done something wrong. Detrimental tone is commonplace:

- “If it becomes clear that you are rereading in order to avoid work, I will require that you read a new book.”
- “There will be homework almost every night (moan, groan). Yes, there is homework on Fridays!”
- “After I greet you, SILENTLY go directly to your seat and immediately copy the homework in your tracker, then do the bell work. AFTER bell work you can turn in absent/late work, ask me other questions, get a drink of water…”

- “This is the place to gather information...[when you] are bored of looking at Facebook, ran out of music on your iPod, already texted everyone you know five times, were wondering what your teacher’s name was, figured you might want to catch up since some of you might think grades are important…”

If this is the first impression students have of your class, how do you think they’ll judge you? No person wants to be put down or assumed to be doing something wrong, and I’d highly disrespect those who initially disrespect me. There’s absolutely no reason to judge students. (Notably, even if they have done something wrong. School is a place of learning, which goes beyond memorizing traditional academics.) To presume students don’t want to learn or that they will dislike your classroom policies mirrors your distaste for student behavior and self-image of the course’s procedures.

Instead, we can craft syllabi that value students for who they are.

**Classroom Expectations**

During this course, you will expect to encounter, question, and empathize. Most of this course is in your hands. You will guide, cooperate, and compromise to ensure each project is successful. Throughout, we will always ensure that we work together to find solutions that are realistic and also, not patronizing or demeaning. It is expected that you will respect your classmates, your community, me, and yourself. Due to our limited class time, it’s expected that you stick to your work as much as possible. If there’s ever any concerns or personal issues going on, please let me know (it doesn’t need to be specific!) so we can come up with an action plan going forward.

Please ask questions! If you don’t know what to do next or have a concern, reach out.

Our classroom will be tolerant of each other and each other’s viewpoints. We all come from different backgrounds. We do not discriminate because of race, color, national origin, religion, sex or sexual orientation, economic situation, or handicap with regards to treatment. Harassment and hurtful comments will not be tolerated.

These expectations are firm and direct, yet not patronizing. I’m not insinuating that students are going to do anything wrong — but I’m setting firm guidelines on how this class will operate. Further, I use language that establishes myself as a partner — a friend — who is there to help, not judge. I want to explicitly state that I will help them in times of need, and I’m not going to be upset if they’re behind on work or need extra assistance. Again,
school is not a job, it is not prison — it is a place to learn — and it is my goal to find solutions that work for students.

I place an emphasis on tolerance and cooperation to center classroom policy and expectation on the group rather than on me. I don’t police my classroom because I want power over my students, I want them to keep each other in line to maintain mutual respect. Again, I am not making judgement calls of my students nor “pre-calling them out.” Nothing feels worse than someone assuming that you’re doing something wrong because of your age or past behavior. We must be very careful of using the phrases “it is a privilege” or “your responsibility.”

What power differential are we establishing when we police what is a privilege and what is a responsibility?

**Student First Responsibilities**

There is absolutely no reason to restrict bathroom access. Even young children are more than capable of using the bathroom on their own. If the tracking of students is an issue with administration, find the most efficient and nonjudgmental way of letting students “go.” **It’s an utterly absurd and dehumanizing policy to shame students for using the restroom,** and I couldn’t imagine being called out at a staff meeting for taking a quick step out. Will some students potentially skip a class because of this policy? Perhaps. But that’s the point of teaching responsibility. That’s when I step in and have a one-on-one conversation about why a student missed class for a substantial period of time. (And rarely are they skipping class. Students have a lot going on and educators need to empathize before anything else.)

Almost any interaction that involves freedom of movement or speech should be considered on a case by case basis. We should lean on the side of allowing students freedoms. It should be self-explanatory, but if we’re controlling what our students can and cannot do as human beings, we are policing more than just educating. Obviously, there are certain circumstances that warrant supervision, but simple things (talking while working on assignments, checking one’s phone, getting a glass of water) should be allowed in a caring, student-centered environment.

**Student First Assessment**

There’s no reason to impose faux rigor through “engagement grades.” Participation, “behavior grades”, and “work ethic” are not a measure of engagement, but of compliance. As Susan Cain writes in Quiet, introverts struggle in classrooms that force conversations. In addition, the stress and anxiety that’s mandated in grading for answering questions or speaking in a discussion is not part of the learning process. **People do not learn in high stress situations.** The idea that stress is key to performing well is not true. Just because you potentially had to “go through it in school” does not mean it’s good practice.

As Susanne Vogel and Lars Schwabe researched in 2016, **While stress around the time of learning is thought to enhance memory formation, thus leading to robust memories, stress markedly impairs memory retrieval, bearing, for instance, the risk of underachieving at exams.** Recent evidence further indicates that stress may hamper the updating of memories in the light of new information and induce a shift from a flexible, ‘cognitive’ form of learning towards rather rigid, ‘habit’-like behaviour. Together, these stress-induced changes may explain some of the difficulties of learning and remembering under stress in the classroom. Taking these insights from psychology and neuroscience into account could bear the potential to facilitate processes of education for both students and teachers.

Therefore, the use of “Popsicle stick” questioning or calling out non-speaking students is going against leading educational research. I remember deeply the anxiety I felt within classrooms where compliant speaking was assumed. The stress of knowing I hadn’t spoken in a couple weeks and was afraid of judgement by peer and adult. Then, I may get called upon and not know the answer. Does the teacher think I’m dumb now? Do my peers think I’m stupid? Absolutely none of this is required, and many students learn by simply listening to discussions.

These are real concerns and make no sense in how we design a classroom. Further, the racial implications of judging students on “behavior” and “work ethic” are biased and dangerous in their use (Gregory et. al., 2016).

Grades, if they must exist, should be determined by a student’s conveyance of knowledge and process of designing complex experiences (which can be done through portfolios or conversations between teacher and student.)

Another percentile category, extra credit, is unneeded at best and inequitable at worse. Typically, extra credit assignments involve long hours spent outside of school (or horrendously, spending money), which disproportionately affects students with a lack of resources. An unscientific review of classroom syllabi showcased “taking pictures on vacation of historical monuments”, “bringing in tissue boxes”, and “staying after school to watch a 2 1/2 hour documentary.” What we’re saying by this practice is that if I...
can’t afford extra classroom materials, I’m worse academically than my classmates, or if I don’t have the time nor money to arrange rides, I’m judged worse than others. None of this makes sense. Just let students retake assignments.

To take it one step further, organizing grades within percentiles eliminates valid alternative pathways for students to showcase learning. If I state that 50% of my grade is homework and another 50% is tests, yet a student aced all their tests and doesn’t complete homework, does that mean they still fail? Am I grading their knowledge, test taking ability, or compliance after school? Why not make homework and tests optional? I believe we should keep our assessment open. Knowledge can be demonstrated in many ways. As stated in my syllabus:

The Digital Media & Design portfolio strand requires the following content (see next page) to be displayed at some point. Due to the amount of coverage, I will suggest specific pieces to present at each portfolio meeting[∗]. This may be different depending on where different students are at in their work.

Students will bring their own works within a creative confine. For example, you may be required to present a piece that utilizes at least two font families and an image. That could be a lot of different things! And depending on what you present, you may knock a lot of other content off our “required list” as well. At times, we may suggest reviewing skills to boost our foundational knowledge.

∗We have a monthly portfolio check-in where students conference, showcase their work, are given feedback, and remediate/go on to other targets as needed. I don’t want students to focus on “gaming the system” and figuring out what Excel-sheet breakdowns are possible to pass my course. All of the language I use is focused on learning and grades are rarely mentioned. When a grade is required, the student and I discuss and come to a conclusion, together, on what it will be.

Student First Access
If materials are required for your course, the school has an obligation to pay for those materials. Public schools are for everyone, including those with non-privileged backgrounds. This is an uphill battle — it is not the norm for schools to provide teachers with budgets to purchase materials for their students. Including a simple note, “Please see me with questions or concerns.” at the bottom of your material requirements page is a start, but educators should be working together to eliminate any financial requirement to participate in a public service.

Other simple access issues can be addressed in the syllabus or on the first days of class, such as: having snacks on hand for students who want them, being available before and after school for academic and nonacademic questions/concerns/ assistance, introducing yourself as a resource for help if they need it. The real work of teaching, I find, is not in the academic connections I make with students, but the emotional support, structure, and resources I find for those that need help the most.

In Closing
Almost every syllabus includes a parent/student contract at the end. “I agree that I’ve read and will follow the syllabus.” In this hand-off, we’re finalizing that this is “our domain” and what we say, goes.

Remarkably, the same teaching ethos of “never smile until December” has been passed down in our syllabi. I used to write my syllabus the same way and believed that I should set the tone of my classroom early on: “obey me.” But looking back at my own experiences in school, I’ve recognized how harmful the practice is of establishing the classroom as an authoritarian regime. The stressors we place on students when we set rules that dehumanize them, or judge their ethics, are not beneficial to learning and will hurt them — psychologically, emotionally, and academically.

Learning is relational. It’s driven by an intrinsic drive that can be bolstered by teacher support. Any barrier we enact between the relationship we’re developing is harmful for both of us. Our syllabi should reflect our focus on the individual’s well-being and our goals for the course (it’s not perfect, this is my syllabus for the upcoming year).

I recognize that many districts require certain verbiage on every syllabus that may include rules or policies that go against student first language. However, we can communicate and/ or "creatively noncomply" to lessen these tensions and find ways to counteract these proposals.

In high school, we were required to sign a hand-book to use the restroom. It was a school wide policy that students could only have this book signed 3 times a quarter, and teachers were required to sign-out in the book. My English 11 teacher went to great lengths to ensure we knew that he was on our side of this ridiculous policy, and would sign his name in the book without a date. “If they ask you, just say I forgot to write it.” Sometimes he’d even step into the hallway to make sure no one called us out.

It may seem like a trivial thing, but I trusted and respected him for this. I knew he had my back, even though I never even used the privileges he granted. That relationship instituted by his trust of students bled into us being more comfortable asking
questions, participating in class, and going to him when we had problems. The “chill teacher” approach often means “the teacher who respects me.” It’s a ridiculous thing when you think about it. But our blind observance to prison-like school policy does have a substantial effect on the culture of our rooms.

Our focus of compliance is destroying livelihoods and emotionally damaging children. To conclude, here are excerpts from Naya Green, Haanya Ijaz, and Karla Sanford’s piece on culture in their buildings, who are high school students who contribute to Student Voice.

Every day was another struggle to get up. I was up until two AM every night, finishing work. I had no one to turn to teachers didn’t seem to acknowledge or realize how much of a burden school was, and administration did nothing to help or fix it.

It requires constantly pushing yourself. Teachers are always piling on assignments, which is anxiety-inducing, and there’s no time or space to step back and re-align. Any day off for self-care makes it that much harder to catch up, and it’s easy to start spiraling under the pressure. How do you get an education when the act of going to school triggers a panic attack? It’s a vicious cycle and it becomes hard to function.

One might think that such a small community would be adept at nurturing its students through the most formative years in their lives — and the school must be given credit for the proficient college counseling suite which is separate from the guidance counseling suite, the lack of class rankings, and the peer counseling system in place. However, every year, a member of the senior class gives a talk about their anxiety or depression and how it got worse at this place. Why is this so?
As I am sitting down to write this post, I am doing so from Hong Kong. I have taken a position as the College Counselor at The Harbour School (THS) which is a small progressive international high school. While I enjoyed my professional experience at Bennington College, I am excited to finally get the chance to put my progressive ideas into action in a more direct way. The high school at THS is only a few years old and has yet to have an official college counseling program. My aspiration is to be iterative and creative, working to empower the individual while ensuring that whatever we cook up aligns “true” to the progressive framework THS has in place. This brings me to the thrust of what I wanted to speak to in this post: Robert Kegan’s developmental theory and its potential relevance to the crazy world of the college search and selection process.

Robert Kegan, if you didn’t already know, is a now-retired developmental psychologist, and former Harvard professor, who wrote/co-wrote a handful of books over the years. While his work is infused with others that have come before him, Piaget and Maslow, his niche is the transition from young adulthood into adulthood, and the gradations of development that continue throughout someone’s life as an adult (99% of developmental psychological theories focus on infancy through childhood).

Kegan’s work has been coined “constructivism”, where one constructs meaning out of whatever experience they are having. The order of complexity at which you are constructing meaning is determined by the developmental stage you are residing at, which is referred to as “developmentalism.” The higher the stage, the more complex your meaning making system is as you always incorporate, and have access to, all previous stages. As an example, at level 4 you would have access to 1-4, but at level 3 you don’t even know that a level 4 exists. It’s also worth mentioning that most people will be on a continuum of sorts, moving away from one stage and towards another.

Here is my quick and dirty understanding of the first 4 Kegan stages, however for our purposes here, 3 and 4 are the most relevant. I have cobbled these definitions together from a variety of sources that include two of his books, In Over Our Heads and Immunity to Change, videos I found online, and articles published by others. For a more elaborate, yet digestible explanation, check out this Medium post. Or, hear it from the man himself here.

Stage 1 (reflexive/impulsive) - from birth until around 5. At birth a newborn has no sense of being separate from its environment. It’s impulsive. It is totally identified with its needs and wants those needs to be immediately met. It is merged with its environment where it perceives everything as being part of itself.

Stage 2 (concrete operational/categorical/pre-conventional) - ages 6 to 11’ish. The child now realizes that it is a separate self and that things have definite categories. The underlying logic is self-concerned, “what is in my best interest?” Others are either obstacles or assets in getting their needs met. They use people as a means to an end. Empathy hasn’t come online yet. They understand rules and will follow them only so that they do not receive punishment, not because they have an understanding of how their actions may affect other people. This is totally normal for an 8 year old, but is pathological for an adult (otherwise known as narcissism).

Stage 3 (socialized mind/tribal/cross categorical/conventional) - 12 years old into adulthood. According to Kegan, of all of the stages, stage 3 is most represented in adult populations around the world. Here they are authored by their culture and heavily influenced by what others think of and want from them. Empathy comes online (but usually only for those within the group). They use external validation to derive a sense of self and meaning. The focus is interpersonal. Their world view and values have been adopted by whatever their cultural “surround” is without any critical thought as to why they believe what they do. They are “had” by their beliefs rather than “having” them.

Stage 4 (self-authorship/global/post-conventional) - usually enters sometime around the late 20s and early 30s,
if at all. Internal authority develops. Whereas stage 3 is interpersonal, stage 4 is intrapersonal. The inner voice is recognized and cultivated. The individual now has the ability to self-author and transform their own belief system (epistemological transformation). They are a lot less likely to be held hostage by what others think or expect of them. They construct a filter through which claims being made on their attention are evaluated and acted or not acted on. They get behind the wheel to drive vs. getting in a car to be driven. They now “have” beliefs and are no longer “had” by them.

Note: There is a really fascinating component to Kegan’s work that I won’t go into too much here, the subject-object relationship change that occurs at each stage. The subject of the previous stage becomes the object of the next. That which you were once identified with, and unconscious of, can now be “objectified” and evaluated. That’s why at stage 3 you are “had” by the values whereas in stage 4 you “have” them).

So how does this tie into college counseling? My first blog post for the Human Restoration Project was an attempt to articulate what I believe are the core components of a good college search and selection process. Looking back on this now, it occurs to me that I was basically putting forward a stage 4 proposition. As a refresher, here are the three core criteria I mentioned in that post.

1. The student has a sense of who they are and are unlikely to be influenced by outside agents. They see their community as a network of mentors or consultants to use, not authorities to delegate choice to.
2. The student has a sense of purpose or at least an understanding of interests that have been differentiated from the dominant paradigm. Or if they have adopted those interests, can articulate why they are important to them as an individual.
3. Have a good sense of the kind of environment that will help facilitate the meaningful pursuit of that purpose or those interests.

The problem is that our current approach to a high school education, and the college counseling programs that are born out of that approach, work to further handcuff students in stage 3 thinking, not promote stage 4 capacities. Whereas we should be nudging students along from heteronomy towards autonomy, we are actually stunting their growth and making them less equipped to deal with the complexity of making an informed college choice.

For example, it is estimated that around 30% of college freshman drop out after their first year of school. When someone is firmly cemented in stage 3 thinking, attending a college they chose based on criteria they didn’t develop, thrown into in a new cultural “surround” that is unfamiliar and not as predictably validating, studying something that was essentially chosen for them without any real understanding of why...well, I think the results speak for themselves. For those who do go on to graduate, a vast majority never work in their chosen field of study. STEM is a surprising example on this front. Not only are people who choose to study STEM the most likely to change majors, but only 50% of STEM graduates work in a STEM field. Our cultural surround is so STEM crazy, it’s no wonder it has become the study area dejour for the stage 3 college bound student.

Another interesting and relevant concept that I’ve found incredibly useful, not only in my own life, but also applied to the world of college counseling is the concept of trying to apply technical solutions to adaptive problems. In the college counseling world what that looks like is trying to cram a bunch of college information into a student’s head earlier and earlier. What that looks like in education is No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top. Instead, we should be working to empower students by designing tasks that promote autonomy while encouraging them to take ownership of their own education; not constricting choice, emphasizing low-level rote memorization, and demanding compliance.

Lastly, I believe that progressive education has the best shot to promote autonomy and stage 4 capacities. Although Kegan’s research suggests that stage 4 doesn’t really come online until someone’s late 20s or early 30s, I believe we can help to quicken up that evolution or at least plant seeds that may bear fruit down the road. Not only will it serve the individual well in their career trajectory, but it will also help to foster independent thinkers capable of making sense of the world at the level of complexity it demands.

The scary part of what happens next is the attempted deployment of these ideas in a real world context. One thing for sure is that I’m going to make mistakes, which is why I am so thankful that an online community like HRP exists. I’d be very interested to know if there are other developmental theories progressive practitioners have connected with or if there are resources you think I should check out. As I encounter the need to make adjustments, I’d love to have more tools in the toolbox.
supplying a more responsible, equitable classroom

chris mcnutt

As we’re kicking off another exciting year of education, I’m making my annual trip to the store to resupply our classroom. And each year, I reflect on what I could buy to make my space a little more equitable for all — whether that be small things we’re unable to get at home, or just little things that make my space slightly more human-centered.

I haven’t always purchased these things, but I plan on it as I reflect on doing better. And I couldn’t find an existing list that focused more on utility than decoration. Admittedly, as I was creating this list, I was challenged by including supplies I felt were “weird” or “out of place”, yet when I looked at the statistics of what our children need, everything seemed necessary.

I recognize the struggles around teacher pay, supplying our own classrooms, and the undeserving place teachers find themselves in, and I completely agree that these purchases aren’t possible for all. I would not be able to furnish my classroom in this way even a few years ago. In the wake of “#clearthelist” and DonorsChoose, it’s continually depressing that we feel obligated to make these purchases. That being said, if it is possible, this list can be a starting point. In our grand scheme, we should be organizing, having discussions, and demanding action of the school district to supplement all of this. Further, check regional non-profits such as Crayons to Computers for assistance in your own purchasing.

*All of the following are Amazon links. Amazon isn’t the perfect (or really even an objectively good) retailer, but is by-far the cheapest in most scenarios.
Participating in an anti-human capitalist system is not an endorsement of its practices.

Snacks, Lunch, and Breakfast

No School Hungry reports that 74% of educators have a student who comes to school hungry, which has serious ramifications on their academic performance, but more importantly is just not a situation we should want for any person. Having healthy food in an inconspicuous, yet accessible location for those that need it is important to serving our youth. (Further, No School Hungry supplies after school lunches through a federal program.) The following are supplies that are intentionally nonperishable.

*Many of these include potential allergies. Be sure to collect and check information before hand.

- **Quaker Instant Oatmeal**, 18 count. $4.52
- **Kellogg’s Nutri-Grain, Soft Baked Breakfast Bars, Strawberry, Made with Whole Grain, Value Pack**, 20.8 oz (16 Count.) $4.38
- **Quaker Chewy Granola Bars, Variety Pack**, 58 Bars. $10.72
- **Blue Diamond Almonds Lightly Salted, Low Sodium**, 100 Calorie Packs, 32 Count. $14.24
- **Custom Trail Mix** (self-serve in bulk.) $10+
- **Wonderful Pistachios, Roasted and Salted**, 1.5 Ounce (Pack of 24). $14.66
- **Campbell’s Soup on the Go, Chicken & Mini Round Noodles**, 10.75 Ounce (Pack of 8.) $12.08
- **AmazonFresh Colombia Ground Coffee, Medium Roast**, 32 Ounce. $14.72. *For teenagers. Adolescents shouldn’t be drinking more than 1 cup of coffee’s worth of caffeine a day, regardless this is a great substitute for students who bring in fizzy drinks for breakfast. Plus a coffee pot in your room = the fresh smell of coffee every morning!*  
- **AmazonBasics Pre-sharpened Wood Cased #2 HB Pencils**, 150 Pack. $12.49
- **BIC Round Stic Xtra Life Ball Pen**, 60 pack. $5 (with Prime.)
- **Lysol Disinfecting Wipes, Lemon & Lime Blossom**, 320ct (4X80ct.) $11.52

Signals to Welcome Students

Simple imagery — such as a sticker on a laptop or desk, or small poster, can let students know that you’re supportive and caring, and acknowledge them in the room.

- **Human Rights Campaign Sticker. (Free)**
- **Symbols of Pride**
- **Women in STEM Posters**
- **One World Posters"
Clear Classroom Rules, Procedures, and Layouts

Structure is not to be confused with strict or mundane. People want structure — a similar protocol to follow whenever they want or need something, but they don’t want to be regimented or commanded. Classroom rules (which can be developed as a community) can be displayed and reminded from time to time through a community circle. Further, common structures may include a schedule written on the board, light music while learning, a lack of over-the-top surprises, and a normal speaking tone/volume.

While adding decorations can make a room look nice, overdoing it has negative ramifications — especially for students who become easily overstimulated. Simple decorations in one space of the room, or if possible, sustainable plants and natural lighting, can make a home-like environment without a punishing array of motivational quotes and imagery. Further, installing softening fixtures to filter fluorescent ceiling lights can help as well (see Cozy Shades Light Filters (Pack of 3) $35.42.) Student work can be placed in a small, non-taxing area as well.

Access and Equity

Restricting or punishing students for not having supplies tends to get in the way of learning more than it “teaches responsibility.” More often than not, students who attend my class without supplies struggle with obtaining them — and many need much more than just basic classroom supplies.

Instead of demeaning, we need to make connections through our work, become friends and coaches in addition to academics, and navigate students and families toward additional assistance outside of school — whether that be a lack of resources, discrimination, or mental health assistance (e.g. The Trevor Project’s helpline, Children’s Hunger Alliance, Child Mind Institute.)

Because all these purchases are centered on substance, not just aesthetics, try reaching out to administration to see if these purchases can be made. Even in districts where funding is tightly regulated, you may be surprised on what administration simply doesn’t know. When you expose them to these facts, statistics, and purchases (and their relatively low costs), they may supply it — and in turn, this may lead to major changes throughout the building.

Free School Teaching: A Journey into Radical Progressive Education by Kristan Accles Morrison is an exemplar of what self-directed, progressive schooling looks like. Morrison, a traditional educator turned learning partner, writes of her experiences at the Albany Free School in New York. Within, she details every facet of a free school education — from discipline to grading to curriculum, often with initial bewilderment that turns to amazement at what children can do without the traditional path. In many ways, Morrison is deprogrammed from a stern, legacy-style teacher to one who embraces the free school philosophy. She opens with,

But traditional school worked for you! You turned out okay! I often get this response from people when I propose the idea that perhaps school in America is doing more harm than good for children and for our society. This declaration has given me pause a number of times, but I’ve finally come up with a question in rejoinder — ‘Am I, or other ‘successful students,’ really okay? Or would I be a different, better, person had it not been for how school shaped me?’ Very few people, most particularly those who were the ‘winners’ in the school game, ever take the time to contemplate if our schooling experiences may have molded us in negative ways, ways that run counter to our society’s highest intellectual, political, and moral ideals.

Echoing Alfie Kohn’s “…And I Turned Out Just Fine!”, Morrison spends a considerable amount of time talking about the perception of free schools and their radical differences to the overwhelming
number of public schools in America. At the Free School, students have no set curriculum, they’re free to do virtually whatever they want (without hurting each other, they must physically attend school), and the student/teacher ratio is 4:1. The school is set up to be stimulating — providing a library, wealth of resources, and other curious things to engage students if they’d like to be.

Of course, the perception from most traditionalist teachers would be that students who aren’t forced to engage in the curriculum simply won’t engage with it. As Morrison states,

In the process of interacting with the world and making meaning from those interactions, the Free School students do come into contact with those subjects or skills that make up the curricular content in traditional schools, but they experience little of the sense of disconnection, unreality, or alienation that is so much in evidence for students in traditional schools.

Time after time, Morrison details how the narrative counter to traditional schooling — simply letting students drive themselves based off of intrinsic motivation — not only led to students to be incredibly curious and creative, but tackle the traditional subjects that the schooling establishment craves.

Not only do the Free School students have exposure to traditional academic subjects through their individual curricula, they also get to experience a different, social and emotional curriculum — one that is largely missing for many students in traditional schools...

...[they] experience democratic governance and diversity, they’re actively involved in the ‘real world’ (the world outside the school building), and they encounter opportunities to develop their skills of interpersonal interactions and interpersonal understanding. Both curricula — the academic and the more social/emotional — work in tandem to gently guide students to an understanding of what it means to be fully human.

Because the school is so small, students and faculty are able to easily move around the community. Students often want to visit local museums or attractions, and much of their interests are based on what’s going on in the surrounding area.

Yet it’s not that students have complete free reign. There is, of course, a place for the educator. Morrison describes her role as a guide — not in the traditionalist “fake-out” of creatively finding ways to have students ease into mandated curriculum — but through building relationships and imploring students to step outside their comfort zones. As she explains,

Free school is clearly an embodiment of many progressive educators’ visions. These students are not passive or dependent recipients of education for it is they who are choosing what they study and when and how. And while they receive assistance and guidance from teachers, they are not controlled by teachers to the same degree as students in a traditional school. The students at the Free School get to focus on the process of constructing meaning and connections; they are not constantly pressured to “perform” to outside mandated standards. This shift in focus from products to process allows the students in the Free School to be more cooperative than competitive.

In practice, this means that Morrison and her fellow teachers spend most of their time casually connecting with students — talking, playing games, reading, watching videos. Free School Teaching has an anecdote or story every few pages that comes from casual connectivity, where students have moments of brilliance from what would be typically seen as an “out of school” activity.

In this environment, it is necessary for the progressive teacher to seek to know the students, to find out what interests them, troubles them, and connects to them. Doing this is no easy, one-dimensional task; rather it involves a multifaceted approach that one must
take with the child, an approach that involves close and distant observations, informal and formal interactions, and a great deal of empathy. In all this, the teacher must be herself with the child and seek to connect with the child's interest and struggles. Once the connection is made, once an interest comes to the fore, then the progressive teacher must think carefully about what she knows about the child and determine how she can best serve that child's quest to make meaning.

Throughout, Morrison raises points that challenge the reader — especially if they’re an educator within the public school system. I would consider myself a progressive educator, but the level of connectivity that Morrison feels with her students is beyond where I am currently. For example, she writes of opening up, and the great feeling of being able to feel a full range of emotions as an educator. She writes how the “holding back” of anger and sadness within the classrooms derives students of a true appreciation of how their actions affect the adult in the room, and the realization that it was okay for her to cry in front of children.

Sometimes, the Free School system felt bewildering, solely because of how deceivingly complex it is. Putting students in a room with no objectives means that there’s no guidebook to follow — it’s entirely based off of personalities and connections. And there’s still a place for a teacher to be a teacher, which makes the experience even more hard to navigate. Morrison writes,

...sometimes the teacher will simply step back and be supportive, loving, and trusting, and at other times the teacher will actively instruct, guide, or push, and so on. The progressive teacher, in that she has no set body of knowledge to transmit, is not interested in the students’ ‘performance’ regarding knowledge retention; rather the teacher is more interested in the process of meaning making, which in her mind signifies growth and change...

...Through active or passive means, the Free School teacher tries to help the students move forward in their quests for meaning. This is a subtle, delicate, and quite intuitive dance on the part of the teachers for they must weigh all sorts of information about what they know of the individual child, what the activity or situation is, how the child initially reacts to the teacher’s actions, and so on. The role of the Free School teacher in figuring out how to best serve the child is exceedingly complex and it is folly to believe that by allowing children to pursue their own interests that the teacher has no role to serve, for, indeed, the role is pivotal.

The reason why Free School Teaching is so powerful is the reflective nature it forces the reader to have — it makes us question all teaching practices and whether what we’re doing is “best for kids.” If these students are successful and having great opportunities presented to them, what steps should we be taking to lessen the barriers between systematic legacy education and self-directed education? Is this a place for some students, or does it work for all?

Within, one will be introduced to:

• What happens when discipline problems arise at a school without any uniform discipline system?
• Are students to motivated to learn any math, science, social studies, or English?
• Will students be prepared for college and/or career?
• What does learning look like when students don’t receive information directly from a teacher?
• How does one communicate that play is learning?

Morrison details story after story that paints the landscape of what school is like for these students and teachers, offering a valuable perspective as someone who has worked in a traditional school. The constant paradigm of traditional schooling vs. self-directed learning allows educators reading this work to understand where Morrison is coming from, as well as grasp new ideas that really push the envelope.

I recommend Free School Teaching for any educator who is curious about Sudbury Schools, Free Schools, Democratic Schools, and/or self-directed education centers, as well as what progressive education could look like when wholly embraced, and who wants examples rather than pure pedagogy.
Happy early days, my friends in education.

I stepped back into my classroom for the 11th year after another summer of learning and growth. I was armed with new ideas, a thicker suit of armor to protect my sensitive empath soul, and, of course, a heart full of unconditional love. I ditched my plans to go over the syllabus on my first day, choosing instead to have students engage in a series of stations to break up the monotony of their day, giving them a chance to move rather than to sit and get.

One of these stations included a “Meet Me” survey for students to fill out information about themselves. I’ll come back to this in a moment.

I stood at my door, which I had decked out in shiplap paper and adorned with the words “Hello, in case no one told you today: I believe in you. You belong here.” I greeted each student with a smile and an enthusiastic, “G’morning!” No one spoke back, but I figured, I just need to wait. I started each class with my usual energy and didn’t get flustered when we had to ditch the stations because technology was not working in our favor. I didn’t even get ruffled when I tripped over a pencil and dumped an entire cart of iPads on the floor in the hallway in front of the student body. I kept smiling widely even when students shuffled out of the classroom silently after the bell, ignoring my cheerful, “Have a great day!” With every beat of my heart, I tried to exude nothing but love and excitement to see each and every student I encountered.

I played a game with students on day two, then set them to finish a personality assessment they had started so I could go through their “Meet Me” survey answers and start to get to know my newbies and see how my seniors had evolved since last year.

The first survey was mostly blank.

That didn’t faze me, though I thought it odd. We had some tech issues; maybe this student was rushed for time.

The second survey was mostly blank. And the third. And the fourth.

The fifth one said “Idk” for every answer except where he put his nickname.

The tenth one said, “I’d rather be dead.”

The 23rd one said, “School is nothing more than an instrument to beat the joy out of childhood.”

One after the other, mostly blank survey after survey, except a lot of “School sucks,” “I hate this,” “I’d rather be sleeping,” “I am never happy here.”

“I don’t have a favorite subject.”

“No one here really cares.”

“I don’t read and you can’t make me.”

One hundred and eleven surveys later (I have 127 students, so who knows what happened to the other ones), I shut my laptop and closed my eyes. I knew I had my work cut out for me this year, but it couldn’t be this dismal already, could it?

I sought out the counsel of my teacher bestie. She suggested maybe they had done too many “getting to know you” things on day one and that’s where the lack of effort and negativity was coming from.

So on day three, I stood in front of my class and asked what had happened. “Did you fill out too many of those surveys?”

Silence. They shook their heads. “No,” someone piped up, “yours was the only one.”

“Did you think I wasn’t going to read them?”

I tried again. “Do you really hate school that much?”

A resounding chorus of “yeah” blasted me back.

I paused, and then I said, “I am so sorry. I am so sorry that the joy of learning has been taken from you for so long.”

We talked some more and then moved on to a book speed dating activity so they could choose their own reading material. I walked out of the building on day three feeling good about the day’s work, but wondering how long it would take to earn their trust and truly restore humanity to my classroom.

The cloud that hung over me dissipated, though, when, on day four, tiny beams of sunlight began to filter through. This time, when I stood bouncing on the balls of my feet outside my room, genuinely excited to see each student passing through the door, many of them greeted me in return. Indeed, many students, even ones that normally wouldn’t bother to do so, gave me a smiling “hello” in the hallways.

The vibe felt so different than it had the first three days. Students were more social, smiling more. There was an energy humming as we worked on setting up notebooks, sharing scissors and tape, passing glue sticks to one another. I buzzed around the room, collecting scraps of paper to recycle, and received genuine thanks. Several students paused to engage me in conversation, one group of them actually seeking my advice. When the bell rang, most of them wished me a good weekend. One of them called me “Mom.”

At the football game that night, I saw a former student who had graduated two years ago. “Hey,” he said, “my brother says your class is the only one he likes so far.”

Maybe it was Friday. Or maybe, just maybe, I won’t be waiting too long for them to accept all the love I have to give.
game design, classroom design, and the faux use of gamification

Chris McNutt

“Gamification” is a popular buzzword — whether it be corporations wanting users to excitedly spend money or educators motivating students through extrinsic rewards. Consistently, well-meaning educators are seeking gamification to encourage students to meet their standards.

I’ve written about the issues with gamification and whether or not it’s good pedagogy (I don’t believe it is in its widely used state.) However, that does not mean game design has no place in the classroom.

Rimworld is an incredibly successful video game that has sold over 1 million copies. In the game, the player manages a colony of crashlanded denizens who often fall victim to various disasters on a wild planet — starvation, raiders, wildlife, etc. The player has little control over the actions of its colonists, instead giving them tasks which they may or may not abide by (and as a result, losing is often inevitable.) Impressively, almost all of Rimworld — from its artwork to its programming — is developed by a single person, Tynan Sylvester.

Sylvester, surprised by the positive reaction to his game, published his ideas on design in his book, Designing Games: A Guide to Engineering Experiences. Further, he publishes ideas on his game design blog.

Sylvester offers a game design perspective that is vastly different than many mainstream developers — and educators could take note of what “gamification” could actually mean. Rather than crafting experiences which explicitly tell the player what to do, the player is crafting their own stories using the system the developer lays out.

Blog: “The three levels of designer”
Adopted from Tynan Sylvester’s blog.

1. Child Level: Basically reciting stories of what you want the player to do.

2. Balancer Level: Having understood that level 1 is broken, with an understanding that cross-cutting concerns, balance, and decision-making are important, seeks to complexify and balance and diversify decision-making to produce elegant and deep game systems.

Can create well-balanced, abstractly interesting mechanical systems. The problem with level 2, though is that it works on abstract, mechanical-level analysis of systems, which doesn’t relate directly to what players actually want from their games: emotions.

People working at level 2 can end up “balancing out the fun” of a great goofy design, or complexifying a game until it’s so deep that it becomes intimidating and drives players away, or working endlessly on details that players just don’t care about, or ignoring easy wins because they depend on mechanically-irrelevant pushing of emotional buttons.

3. Emotioneer Level - Having mastered level 2, with an understanding that people’s emotions respond to stimuli besides balanced gameplay, seeks to pull heartstrings as much as possible while asking the minimum of cognitive effort from the player.

Uses level 2 skills effortlessly to produce the foundation of balanced, elegant gameplay, on which to generate varied, emotionally-relevant experiences which aren’t necessarily balanced or complex or deep or mechanically elegant.

Requires broader thinking than level 2 because while maximizing balance/elegance/crosscutting concerns is a relatively narrow problem, human emotion triggers are absurdly complex and varied.

The vast majority of games use level 1 design. The player is told what to do, the designer builds the world around them, and engagement is assessed by how well the linear narrative is shown. Often, the tutorial is “Press X to do X.” and players simply follow a series of steps with the game playing out in front of them. The level of engagement is through great storytelling, graphic and audio design, and gameplay loops (the level of fun doing common tasks.) Sometimes choices are offered, but the result is linear (If I do X, then X happens every time I play.)

In the gamified classroom, level 1 design mirrors its gaming counterpart. The teacher builds the world and they present the narrative upfront. They tell students exactly what to do and the students repeat those steps. Engagement (or in some cases, compliance) is through great storytelling and design of the linear experience. This manifests itself like over-the-top experience systems, gamified “escape rooms”, lessons within a theme, and other game-related tasks.

The problem is that these game systems are one-offs. Once someone experiences the game they’re focused on the rewards of it. If I teach a lesson and its point is learning a new idea, am I engaging in learning or in the game? How connected is the game to actual learning? Further, is there any value in “playing the game” again, or is it all just a storyline that could have been told in other ways? Is the extrinsic motivator of the game more appealing than the content being delivered? Is the theme more interesting than the actual content?
Level 1 design is used by mobile developers as well — having the player complete a series of tasks, usually encouraging them to spend money to continue their progression. Whether it be flashing lights, competitive advantage, gambling, or some other advantage, the developer is manipulating the system to force engagement/monetization of the player. The parallels to classroom gamification are obvious — by creating over-the-top experiences filled with flashy props and pop culture references, educators can masquerade students toward checking off a learning objective.

Yet level 2 design is much more complicated. Rimworld is level 2: rather than building a game that produces a linear narrative, players have free choice within the systems built by the developer. When starting my colony, I choose exactly where I want to settle, how I’d like my settlers to behave, what gameplay style I want to follow, and even how I can win (if I want to win at all!) Success is defined on my terms, and the game can progress as slowly or as quickly as I want to push its systems.

From choosing where to settle, to how the colony is built, to what to focus on, to how to win (whether a “victory condition” or just a personal “win”) is entirely up to the player.

It’s not about winning, nor is it about completing objectives. In fact, Rimworld offers little storyline, instead allowing the player to manipulate their environment and utilize their imagination — like a dollhouse. The task at hand is entirely up to my decision-making. And although there are plenty of ways to lose, the “survival rules” are setting a solid foundation to my imaginary stories.

Sylvester explains this concept in the first chapter of his book:

**Systems and Rules**

Adopted from: Designing Games: A Guide to Engineering Experiences by Tynan Sylvester

GAME DESIGN isn’t in code, art, or sound. It’s not in sculpting game pieces or painting game boards. Game design means crafting the rules that make those pieces come alive.

BY THEMSELVES, chess pieces are just tiny decorative sculptures. But when we move those pieces around according to a special set of rules, those little statues come alive. They will create a nail-biting finish at a high-stakes tournament. They will generate a world of puzzles in the newspaper. They will spark friendships, tell stories, and teach lessons found nowhere else in the universe.

But not just any set of rules will do. In fact, most sets of rules for pieces on a board won’t do any of these wonderful things. Many will collapse into simple, repetitive patterns as players use the same winning strategies over and over. Others are nightmarishly difficult to learn. Still others are so hard to follow that the game becomes a plodding number-crunching exercise.

The unique value of chess is in how it generates a perfect rhythm of puzzle and solution, tension and release. That value isn’t in the pieces or the board. It’s in the game design — the system of rules that drives the game’s behavior. A game designer’s job is to craft systems of rules that create these kinds of results.

What does level 2 design look like in the classroom? How can we design experiences with base rules that encourage students to craft their own scenarios?

These questions are markedly similar to the role of a progressive educator, especially one operating within the public school system: pairing the values of democratic education, self-direction, community building, critical pedagogy, and choice with those of standards, oversight, and
testing. Game design offers a new perspective to “gamifying” or designing a classroom in this way, as long as we acknowledge the important distinction between level 1 and level 2.

**Level 1 Classroom Design**
Taking a normally boring lecture topic and designing an escape room themed around it. Students love the activity and the tasks, and likely bring away a lot of knowledge of the topic. There’s a lot of energy in the room. They clamor for more escape rooms and similar “gamified” classes. It’s certainly better than traditional school.

**Level 2 Classroom Design**
Taking a normally boring lecture topic and letting students choose their own way to demonstrate understanding. Students are inspired through real-life connections such as a speaker, field trip, or choice/relevancy of the given topic. The teacher helps facilitate each individual/group to additional “real life” opportunities, while providing structure (e.g. resources, deadlines, minimums) to provide a ruleset.

Level 2 might not be as zany as level 1, and it probably isn’t as buzzworthy — but the learning outcome is motivation surrounding academics rather than games. The desire for more content isn’t because of wacky fun, rather students crave more real-world opportunities. Choice is important — whether it be the topic, the way to demonstrate the topic, or whether or not to even choose the topic. (In certain districts, there’s a certain level of choice that a teacher can offer — walking the tightrope to lean in favor of students is a difficult, yet worthy task.)

The structures that we provide in level 2 design allow students to flourish. I’ve fallen victim to not setting enough rules. If students don’t have the proper support, they will be overwhelmed. If the task is seen as too large or trivial, confusion will set in — and confusion often leads to stagnation. Just saying “show me this by the end of the week” without any prior knowledge or skill-building in the topic and/or practice of self-directed education is not going to lead to successful results for a sizable number of students. This is not to say that a restrictive rubric needs to be set or students should have their hand-held the entire way, but baseline rules are useful in adapting to a progressive mindset and self-directed attitude.

A huge factor is flow, as Sylvester explains in Designing Games,

*Flow makes time seem to disappear. Hours can seem like minutes when a player is utterly engaged in an activity. It is the perfect form of escapism because it strips everything else out of the mind. In flow, we don’t worry about bills, relationships, money, or whether we’re going to get screamed at by a drill instructor.*

*And flow is pleasurable because it is built on a continuous stream of tiny successes. Flow appears when a player is presented with a challenge that is perfectly balanced against his ability level. If the task is too hard, flow breaks as the player becomes confused and anxious. If it is too easy, the player gets bored.*

*Graphed, it looks like this:*
Flow is the foundation for most good game experiences. It works at all intensity levels and emotional valences. Heart-pumping action games, contemplative puzzlers, humorous social interaction games — all can create flow because each occupies the player’s mind without a break, and without overfilling it. And in any case, if flow is broken, the other parts of the experience fall apart. Nearly all games have to maintain flow to work, and many problems with bad games come down to nothing more than breaks in flow.

Rulesets in a level 2 classroom could consist of: guest speakers, note-taking exercises, demonstrations of learning (documentation checked consistently), podcasts, brief examples, structured time (being extended overtime to complete self-direction), frequent check-ins, involving the parent/guardian/student in conversation, providing ample resources/articles/books, completing the directive alongside students, a final deadline, and community circle envisioned disciplinary rules (with reminders.)

This runs counter to rulesets in a level 1 classroom, which would consist of: a set of directions to follow (or must be followed to be successful), a predetermined single assignment or set of assignments to choose from, a teacher-centered theme or activity, an extrinsic reward for completion, numerous assessments and check-ins that look the same for everyone, and constant disciplinary redirection by the educator.

Then comes level 3 design, which relies entirely on emotion. Unlike level 2, which is focused on everyone still producing a similar outcome (albeit in many different ways), level 3 is entirely on experience. The outcome is too complex to write for as its based on human emotion.

Classrooms have a unique opportunity to meet level 3 outcomes, or at least blend levels 2 and 3. If we can design systems that cater to what our students care about — and inspire them to make a positive difference in the world — we can make our classrooms life changing. When students are passionate about their learning, they truly can change how the world operates in rapid fashion. (Just look at the recent climate change strikes led by children.) And if every classroom had this constant emotional connection — and had educators and students working in tandem to remove old school methods of constant control and direction — we would literally build a better society.

the schools our children deserve by alfie kohn

My early journey to thinking differently about school was piecemeal before finding Alfie Kohn. Neil Postman’s *Teaching As A Subversive Activity* was like probing a loose tooth, exposing the tension between what school was and had the potential to be. Starr Sackstein’s *Hacking Assessment* helped me understand the practical structures I could use to put my budding student-centered ideas into practice and resolve some of that tension; however, one book put all of the contradictions of school into focus at once, reoriented my perspective on children as learners, reframed motivation, and gave me the language — as well as the research — to explain not just what felt so wrong but what I could do about it: Alfie Kohn’s *The Schools Our Children Deserve* (1999).

I first encountered Alfie Kohn as a new parent and an increasingly frustrated early career teacher, skeptical of the behaviorism I saw in school — though at the time I lacked the language to describe why it unsettled me — and the messages communicated to parents by society about so-called “accountability” and control in our relationships with children.

In contrast with the methods books I had read for coursework and professional development, Kohn’s voice spoke to me with an urgency, a moral weight and clarity which framed dry topics like grading and standardized testing not merely as disagreements over syllabus language and school policy but as a moral conflict for which the continued reluctance and resistance to change came each year at a growing cost. Kohn’s work can be a gateway into humanized, relational parenting and student-focused educational
practices, but it can also be a cause for frustration once harm is made apparent, prompting conscientious individuals to take action inside unsupportive and unresponsive systems.

This is an overview of The Schools Our Children Deserve, its key ideas and takeaways, and a brief analysis of Kohn’s ideas through the lens of the two decades passed since the book’s original publication. Have we moved beyond traditional classrooms and tougher standards? What progress has been made and where can go from here?

Though Kohn has published entire books singularly focused on the topics of motivation, competition, homework, standardized testing, among others, The Schools Our Children Deserve manages to elaborate on each of these aspects of his vision for progressive education. What’s more, Kohn supports each topic with an incredible volume of research and related literature — my paperback edition contains 94 pages of notes and references. Each chapter focuses on Kohn’s analysis of the issue and synthesis of the research supporting his interpretation. Here’s my take on 5 of his big ideas from the book:

**Intrinsic Motivation > Extrinsic Motivators**
Vital to understanding Kohn’s impact on education is the notion that extrinsic motivators simply don’t work the way we think they do. They may motivate children and students in the short-run to accomplish a task but their will to perform ultimately runs out when the rewards vanish. In getting our children and students to perform we insidiously undermine their intrinsic motivation to learn, read, dance, and even make pro-social choices. This may be the central idea of Kohn’s vision of education as systems make decisions and incentivize outcomes for schools, teachers, and students based on the pursuit of measures of achievement, and as the hazards of extrinsic motivation extend from the sticker charts and Positive Behavior Intervention Supports of elementary school to letter grades and standardized test scores that dominate high school life.

*An emphasis on achievement “suggests that this emphasis (1) undermines students’ interest in learning, (2) makes failure seem overwhelming, (3) leads students to avoid challenging themselves, (4) reduces the quality of learning, and (5) invites students to think about how smart they are instead of how hard they tried. (p. 28)*

**Futility & Harm of Grades & Grading**
Not only are grades unreliable communicators and grade-related bookkeeping an unproductive use of precious teacher time, like any of the extrinsic measures Kohn criticizes, grades don’t work as we think they do to motivate students. The incentives created by grades also undermine what we say we believe are the goals of education. According to Kohn, *grades tend to reduce students’ interest in learning, reduce students’ preference for challenging tasks, and reduce the quality of students’ thinking.* “The evidence suggests that, all things being equal, students in a school that uses no letters or numbers to rate them will be more likely to think deeply, love learning, and tackle more challenging tasks” (p. 189). So if I want my students to be motivated and interested in learning; if I want them to take risks and prefer challenging tasks; and if I want to improve the quality of their thinking; why would I choose to invite grades into my classroom?

*[The abolition of traditional grades] is based on the observation that almost*
Even standards-based grading, despite its current popularity, often fails to address the negative consequences of grades and of being graded in its inconsistent implementation and fatal attachment to traditional incentives. Kohn refers to SBG in a recent Tweet as “lipstick on a pig.”

Futility & Harm of Standardized Testing
Kohn dedicates the entire fourth chapter, “The Case Against Standardized Tests”, to dispelling the myths about standardized tests and their use in schools. Beginning with our cultural “preoccupation with that which can be seen and measured”, Kohn writes, “Any aspect of learning (or life) that resists being reduced to numbers is regarded as vaguely suspicious. By contrast, anything that appears in numerical form seems reassuringly scientific…” (p. 75). These tests, which take up so much of our national conversation and energy around “school improvement”, measure little of what schools can control and even littler of what is worth learning and doing. To exacerbate the damage, norm-referenced test results — which report student results in relation to other students — are frequently interpreted and used incorrectly in educational decision-making about children, schools, and curriculum. The net effect is that the purpose of school seems to be more about managing standardized quantitative measures of inflated and artificial importance. Kohn laments that success, performance, and achievement have become the organizing principles of schooling while curiosity, discovery, and exploration are “nowhere to be seen or heard” (p. 88).

Cooperation & Collaboration > Competition
In his public appearances and lectures, Kohn frequently asks his audiences to list their fondest hopes and outcomes for their own children. While it might be difficult to imagine that any healthy response to this exercise would rely too heavily on relative measures of wealth, health, or happiness — “I just hope they do better than…” — embedded throughout the structure of school is education as a competition for the purpose of sorting out the “winners and losers”. Setting aside competition in education as a perpetuation of systemic injustice and social and economic inequality, Kohn makes very clear the rational case against competition:

The research supporting these claims is there for anyone who cares to find it. These studies show quite clearly that:

Students who have come to equate success with doing better than others are more likely to think in a “surface level” way.

Students are more likely to attribute the results of a competition to factors outside their control (compared with how they explain non-competitive success or failure).

A competitive learning environment causes students to dislike school and show less interest in a given subject.

People of different abilities tend to learn more effectively on a range of tasks when they’re able to cooperate with one another than when they’re trying to defeat one another.

And so on and so on. If competition were a consumer product rather than an ideology, it would have been banned long ago. (p. 38)

Working With > Doing To
This last big idea is one of Kohn’s broadest critiques of the traditional model of school. The “doing to” model encompasses classroom structures like seating charts and bathroom policies; instruction and assessment strategies that presume outcomes and rubrics and weigh kids accordingly; and a standardized curriculum model emphasizing coverage, transmission, and passive recall of information. But at the core of Kohn’s criticism of the traditional “doing to” model of school is an implicit — and sometimes explicit — distrust and disrespect of children as learners:

These adults basically don’t trust that kids turned loose on arithmetic problems could ever find their way to the right answer without being handed a step-by-step procedure. They don’t believe that kids can do justice to controversial issues in social studies and complicated themes in literature; they must be told what’s what. (By the same token, it’s assumed that kids are incapable of deciding what kind of classroom environment they want to have and must instead be rewarded and threatened into meeting the teacher’s specific expectations for how to behave.) (p. 65)

When students “fail” to learn by the measures of the traditional model it is assumed to be the student’s fault and they are given a double dose of “accountability” to make up for it, as Kohn writes, “The more that traditional methods fail, the more they are prescribed.” (p. 66) So-called “at-risk” or “failing schools” in which the students come from predominately low-income communities of color “suffer most from a proficiency-driven curriculum” where the stakes for standardized testing are highest. Drill-and-kill direct instruction curriculum has been shown to slightly improve test scores in the short run, but the research is damning for its long-term
impact on student mental health and it keeps students trapped in the kind of
low-level thinking valued and assessed on exams. Kohn cites a study of 32
California preschool and kindergarten classrooms which demonstrated higher
reading test scores for the “basic skills” classes compared to a “child-centered”
classes and showed no difference on math assessment between the two,
while the children in the basic skills
class had “lowered expectations of
themselves, worried more about
school, were more dependent on
adults, and preferred easier tasks” (p.
217).

Key takeaways
The Schools Our Children Deserve
is a representative sample of Kohn’s
powerful critique of the “old school”
as well as his positive vision for
progressive education (what Kohn
calls “nontraditional” teaching). It’s
also a book for educators exasperated
by mainstream professional
development texts prescribing a
recipe for teaching to the status quo —
“here’s what works” — and want a new
language to describe and challenge the
contradictions between the mission
statement hung in the foyer and the
reality of school.

So where does that leave us?
Perhaps as we look at Postman’s
now half-century old Teaching As a
Subversive Activity as a product of the
counterculture’s mistrust of authority
and suspicion of the authoritarian
aims of education in the context
of the Vietnam War and Cold War
anti-communism, “white rage” in
the reaction to the progress of the
Civil Rights movement and the Great
Society, and other political and cultural
flashpoints of the 1960s. Kohn’s
published work belongs in some ways
to an earlier era of the conditions and
debates over public education more
relevant to my experience of school
as an “old Millennial” graduating high
school under No Child Left Behind
than of the high school students I teach today.

The education system has undoubtedly taken steps in Kohn’s direction: NCLB is dead (though we live in the fallout of punitive accountability and “performance gaps”), and we’ve moved past Race to the Top. Though “high performing” schools are still pressured to improve AP scores and expand course offerings, since 2016 at least the AP humanities exams have undergone a restructuring in an attempt to move away from assessing merely rote memorization. A growing criticism of the testing industry and a spotlight on rigging and discrimination in the college admission process has lead some colleges to adopt the Mastery Transcript and has led graduate programs to drop GRE requirements. Mainstream skepticism of decades of flat NAEP scores have led teachers and systems to move beyond accountability to focus instead on best serving communities and combating sources of inequality. A renewed conversation around equity and antiracism has pushed restorative justice to the center of educational decision-making, and arguments bolstered not in the least by Kohn’s work and two decades of other research exposing the harm of grading have supported a growing numbers of teachers who are “going gradeless.” And even though state budgets have been ravaged by privatization and tax cuts, desperate and conscientious educators in Arizona, Oklahoma, Colorado, Virginia, West Virginia, and elsewhere have successfully gone on strike to wrest power back from enemies of education to help improve salaries and improve working and learning conditions.

But like early sailors who dared not risk losing sight of the shore, we always seem to keep the “old school” in our minds-eye as we think about students and systems. PBIS, for example, as a means of controlling and rewarding student behavior is widely practiced at all grade levels across the country. It has a mandate in my own state even as restorative justice approaches are becoming more widespread. There is a schism in the way educators talk about which practices are or aren’t supported by a narrowly defined cognitive science of learning which treats students as data to managed and attempts to replicate the results of controlled experiments in a live classroom environment. Alternatively, teachers are offered individualistic solutions and are encouraged to bear the burden of raising test scores and rescue students from oppressive systems simply by “teaching like a...”. Funding for public schools is a smaller portion of state & federal budgets, and politicians have cynically used the results of standardized assessments and the narrative of “failing schools” to push voucher programs that put public money into private pockets.

Even two decades after The Schools Our Children Deserve, Kohn responded briefly to this “new world” of behaviorism in a Sept 2018 article titled “It’s Not About Behavior”: “Some of these variants are marketed as new innovations. But if competence or proficiency is still defined as the mastery of discrete skills or bits of knowledge, it reflects the same Skinnerian model that was developed on rodents and pigeons. Similarly, grades are no less destructive just because they are ‘standards-based.’ Formative assessment can be as reductive as summative tests, particularly if it’s done continuously. Reward programs are controlling and counterproductive even when they’re implemented with a cute app.” So although our cultural and educational context has certainly changed as we head into the third decade of this century, clearly we’ve still got work to do to move our classrooms, schools, and systems toward collaborative, equitable, humanized outcomes for kids. Alfie Kohn’s voice continues to be a vital part of that effort.

Nearly all of Alfie Kohn’s work is available on his website, which is frequently updated, and he is active on twitter @alfiekohn. Check out our interview with Alfie Kohn on our podcast “Things Fall Apart.”
potential as early as possible. Increasingly, kindergartens are sacrificing playtime for greater academic seat time in pursuit of distant future rewards. Career ready kindergarten has arrived.

Below I have paired two contrasting kindergarten videos that caught my attention this week. One shows a "perfect start to the day" at a 'no excuses' Brooklyn elementary school focused on 'college readiness’ from day one." The other is a Montessori inspired kindergarten in Tokyo featuring an innovative design which gives children the "freedom to range around the classroom and learn via discovery."

The videos piqued my interest because, over the past few months, my wife and I have engaged in a fierce battle passionate discussion about how and where we educate our children. As our eldest edges ever closer to kindergarten age, it’s decision time, and we are on the clock.

So which is better, kindergarten with an academic or play-based focus?

What is the purpose of school?

Every parent wants the best for their own children...The issue is that not all the parents really know what is best for kids — they think it’s high grades, and that they have to be better than others, and that’s not the case. — Pasi Sahlberg, From play to pressure; a Finnish perspective on Australian schools.

At a time when children’s mental health issues are on the rise, more kids than ever are overweight and obese due to sedentary lifestyles, and risk-averse parenting has strangled opportunities for unstructured free play, asking five-year-olds to sit for hours to learn discrete facts, motivated by the possibility of wealth and success in the distant future, just seems like a recipe for disaster. But educating for future-readiness is hardly a new idea.

In 1916 John Dewey argued that using school as preparation for a remote future rendered the work of teacher and student “mechanical and slavish.” More recently, Dr Susan Engel, author of The End of the Rainbow: How Educating For Happiness (Not Money) Would Transform Our Schools, proclaimed,

We are so hell-bent on teaching disadvantaged children skills (both academic ones, such as reading, and social ones, such as obeying rules) that will lead to a job that we fail to teach them the pleasure of being part of a literate community, how to make their work meaningful, or how to draw strength from the group — skills that might offer them a satisfying life. Just as bad is that middle-class and privileged children are pushed to view every stage of their schooling as a platform for some future accomplishment ending in wealth. This deprives them of the chance to figure out what they really care about, how to think about complex topics with open minds, and how to find a sense of purpose in life.

Personally, I don’t look at the knowledge-rich, strict-warm, procedure and routine based learning in the first video and think “I want that for my kid!” In programs like this, kids don’t just learn to read and write, they also learn that ‘success’ requires compliance, correct posture and correct answers. They understand that learning is motivated by punishments and rewards. They know that the teacher is the most important person in the learning process.

According to Dr. David Whitebread, the physical benefits of play are mostly well understood by educators and parents, but “the emotional and cognitive benefits of play are not...
nearly so well recognised, either by parents and the general community, or by educational and other policy makers.” In contrast to the school readiness crowd, Professor Engel believes,

*School should be a place where children feel joy, satisfaction, purpose, and a sense of human connection, and where they acquire the habits and skills that will enable them to lead happy lives as adults.*

But at the end of the day, for parents who choose academic readiness kindergarten programs over more balanced play-based programs, the sacrifices are worth it, right?

**Little To Gain, Much To Lose**
*The sooner a child starts reading the better. Who’s got time to play? Children must learn to read in pre-k or kindergarten, or they will be left behind, never catch up to their peers, and suffer life altering consequences. This is how many adults think, the stress is palpable.— Pasi Sahlberg, Let The Children Play.*

In a 2015 report titled* Reading Instruction in Kindergarten: Little to Gain and Much to Lose*, Professor Nancy Carlsson-Paige reported that “research shows greater gains from play-based programs than from preschools and kindergartens with a more academic focus” and that “no research documents long-term gains from learning to read in kindergarten.”

*The age of onset of reading is not predictive of ultimate intellectual aptitude or achievement. - Carol Black, A Thousand Rivers.*

As Pasi Sahlberg notes in *Let The Children Play*, many children are just not developmentally ready to learn to read in kindergarten. Highlighting the work of Professor Carlsson-Paige, Sahlberg states “there is no research showing long term advantages to reading at [age] 5 compared to reading at 6 or 7.” And “The research is clear, faster is not better when it comes to reading in the early years.”

As for kindergarten, it could be argued that in some ways, it is the new third grade. How? It used to be that kids were given time to academically grow at their own speed without being declared failures by first and certainly second grade if they couldn’t read. Kids intellectually develop at different rates, and one of the most damaging aspects of the “earlier is not only better but necessary” philosophy is that this natural process is no longer respected. — Valarie Strauss, *Kindergarten the new first grade? It’s actually worse than that.*

So not only do school-readiness programs rob children of the opportunity to develop vital skills and habits through free play, they do so without significant long-term benefit. As if that wasn’t bad enough, keep in mind that some families pay for this privilege, wrongly believing the scarcity, exclusivity and expense associated with many of these programs is ‘what is best’ for kids.

Now that kindergarten serves as a gatekeeper, not a welcome mat, to elementary school, concerns about school preparedness kick in earlier and earlier. A child who’s supposed to read by the end of kindergarten had better be getting ready in preschool. As a result, expectations that may arguably have been reasonable for 5-
and 6-year-olds, such as being able to sit at a desk and complete a task using pencil and paper, are now directed at even younger children, who lack the motor skills and attention span to be successful. — Erika Christakis, *The New Preschool is Crushing Kids*.

I will leave you with this quote from play advocate Dr Peter Gray:

If we love our children and want them to thrive, we must allow them more time and opportunity to play, not less. Yet policymakers and powerful philanthropists are continuing to push us in the opposite direction — toward more schooling, more testing, more adult direction of children, and less opportunity for free play.

It is past time to push back. Beware the career-ready kindergarten.

Some of the books and articles that informed this blog post:

- [Beyond Champions and Pirates](#) by Benjamin Doxdator
- [A Thousand Rivers](#) by Carol Black
- [How the New Preschool Is Crushing Kids](#) by Erika Christakas
- [Children today are suffering a severe deficit of play](#) by Peter Gray

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