

What is Good Teaching? A Conversation with Alfie Kohn ([alfiekohn.org](http://alfiekohn.org))  
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Ken Futernick: Hi everyone, this is Ken Futernick with another Teacher Stories podcast. My guest today is Alfie Kohn, and for those of you don't recognize that name, Alfie is the author of 14 books about teaching and education, the most recent of which is, Schooling Beyond Measure. He's also authored countless articles on themes like motivation testing, homework and behavior management. One thing I love about his work is that he gets us to reconsider common practices many of us assume were good for children, like rewarding kids for their accomplishments, in a recent blog post on his website, which is [alfiekohn.org](http://alfiekohn.org), Alfie said, "My job is to pose unsettling questions and present surprising research to suggest the possibility that traditional practices may actually be undermining our shared long-term goals for kids, and to offer at least a glimpse of some alternatives." So welcome, Alfie. Thanks for joining us today.

Alfie Kohn: My pleasure.

Ken Futernick: Great, and since the stories we post are about teachers, I'd love for you to talk a bit about what you believe are the characteristics that make teachers successful. And I'm hoping you might also raise some thought provoking, even unsettling questions for our audience.

Alfie Kohn: Well, I suppose you can't answer that question until you're clear on what you mean by effective. What is it we're looking for? And unfortunately, when we don't ask that question, it's answered by default in the more mainstream way that an effective teacher is one who controls the classroom and has students who are compliant and probably produces higher test scores. So those goals would lead to a very different set of characteristics for a teacher, then if we had different, and I think more ambitious and humanistic criteria. So every conversation, every article, book, presentation that deals with effective teaching I think, must begin by addressing this head on. If you're looking to produce, for example, students who are thoughtful, who are critical thinkers, who are caring and compassionate, who love learning, who really get excited about playing with ideas, then that's going to call for a very different set of criteria.

If you have very mainstream assumptions about what teaching is supposed to look like, if you take for granted that the teacher's in front of the class doing most of the talking and that instruction consists of transmitting information to passive receptacles, then you'll say things like, "Well, an effective teacher is one who can command the student's attention, who knows how to put together an interesting lecture, and so on." But if you're questioning those basic premises, then you might say, "Well, an effective teacher is somebody who does a lot more listening than talking."

If your goal is for students to be thoughtful and play a role in making decisions about their learning, then the teacher is not someone who uses mainstream classroom management strategies. So, I get excited when I walk into a classroom and it takes me a minute to find the teacher, because he or she is probably

squatting by a group of students consulting with them as they plan their interdisciplinary project. If I mostly hear the teacher's voice, it's louder and more frequent than the students' and the teacher is always front and center, then I worry because that's not a student-centered classroom, and it's not a learning-centered classroom.

Ken Futernick:

Alfie, if we go back to the fundamental question we ought to be asking when we think about what it means to be a good teacher, or we read an article or a book about education and we ought to be thinking about, What is the purpose of education? one of the things that you said is that we need students who are questioners and challengers, and many of course would say we want kids to behave, to follow instructions, to do as they're told. Why do we want questioners and challengers? And might that be a little intimidating to a teacher or someone who is thinking about teaching and they're afraid that their classroom is going to be out of control if you get a bunch of kids in the room who are questioning and challenging?

Alfie Kohn:

Well, I'm not sure how to answer your first question, "Why do we want this?" This gets to very basic values, very basic assumptions, both empirical and normative beliefs about the kind of society we want to live in, what we think humans are capable of becoming, why we think schools exist. And if somebody says to me, "I think the purpose of schools is to create docile citizens who do what they're told." That's very difficult. Just as it is with somebody who thinks, "I think we should judge a country by whether it has the military might to conquer other countries. As opposed to a place that cares for its citizens." It's not easy to talk people out of that.

But as I travel around the country and beyond, I often begin my presentations by asking, "What are your long-term goals for your students?" And when I speak to parents, I ask the same question about their own children. And there's a remarkable degree of consensus where most people say, "What we want are kids who are happy, ethical, successful problem solvers, critical thinkers, curious, compassionate, and so on." And that means that what I do for a living then is to say, "You say you want this, so why are you doing that?"

In other words, to talk about effective teaching and school practice and policies, they should be aligned with our own widely shared long-term objectives for students, and currently they're not. We say we want them to be lifelong learners--that phrase comes trippingly off the tongue instantly--and yet we engage in practices like giving grades or homework, which quite clearly undermine that goal and make kids less excited about learning. Or we say we want kids who are compassionate or independent thinkers, and then we engage in classroom management practices that again, get in the way. So, you can't have both. You either have to go with these goals and make changes in your practice to accommodate those goals. Or you have to throw out the goals and just get the easy stuff.

So that's for your first part of your question. The second part is, might this not be challenging to a lot of teachers? And the answer is of course. And that gets to one of the things I would put very high on my list to answer your original question of, What is an effective teacher? Yes, it's somebody who knows the content and thinks deeply about these questions. If you're going to do really good math

teaching, for example, where you're not just teaching kids to memorize math facts and algorithms, but to really understand mathematical principles, you have to know math pretty well, even to teach elementary stuff. You can't just stay one chapter ahead of the kids in a textbook.

And second, we want teachers of course, who also understand learning, who really get pedagogy as opposed to just knowing stuff about science or literature, which is completely different from knowing how to help children learn about it. But then I would add to that list, we want teachers who have the capability and the disposition to not be in control, to share authority, to welcome irreverent challenging questions, who deeply are committed to the idea of questioning authority on their own and understand that for kids to be critical thinkers and questioners, that the teachers have to welcome challenges to their own authority, not just to the government or corporations out there. Rather than having this unsettled thought that, "Why are the kids giving me a hard time? Why don't they just do what I tell them?" You cannot raise critical thinkers, you cannot raise democratic citizens unless you as a teacher, not only are open to but actively encourage kids to challenge you. And to change a classroom from a doing-to environment, to working-with environment, where the teachers first impulse when there's a problem is, "Let's have a class meeting to figure this out together."

Ken Futernick: So your idea of critical thinking is different than I think the mainstream concept, which is that we're going to think critically about something we just read something out there, but in fact we're going to allow you to encourage you to think critically about what's going on in the classroom right here. And I want to encourage you to raise your concerns and talk about how you think the classroom, in fact, even I, myself as a teacher could be doing better.

Alfie Kohn: Right, great teachers talk less and ask more. And they welcome those challenges to their own authority, and the first question is... I mean look, children learn how to make good decisions by making decisions not by following directions. And so the best teachers are those who have the psychological capability of not needing to be the authority figure or they need to be, as one teacher said to me once, a great high school math teacher whose classroom I visited, he said to me, "I'm in control of putting the kids in control." So only at a second order level did he say it's ultimately a bit on me, but he's not going to be the one making those decisions.

And by the way, this vision of critical thinking departs from the mainstream version in other ways, too. First of all, it's critical thinking of a community, not just of separate individuals. And second, it's not just critical thinking as a set of discreet skills that one has, like being able to take apart the hidden premise of a sentence or recognize logical errors. It's critical thinking as a disposition, as a desire to challenge the way things are and to ask hard, radical questions, not just the capability of doing that. So what great teachers do is they don't just impart to kids the skill of being critical thinkers. They help to nourish that desire to say "Yeah, but why is that? Does that really make sense? And if it doesn't, what can we do about it to oppose something that is unjust?"

Ken Futernick: Yeah, I remember John Dewey wrote a lot about the importance of dispositions and it's really taking something that we all think we do as teachers, which is to impart knowledge and to develop skills. But really, I think what he raised and

what you're raising is the idea that, how does that translate into how we tend to act?

Alfie Kohn: Right, and it's true of critical thinking, but it's true of other stuff, not unlike like reading. We don't just want kids to be able to read, we want them to pick up books on their own time when they don't have to. And so, our practices aligned with those goals that we have for kids that have to do with what they want to do, not just what they're able to do.

Ken Futernick: You talked about a related concept--learning by doing--and people in fact associate that, those who remember John Dewey, associate that with him. I think many people kind of misinterpreted or didn't understand fully what he was talking about. But by that you mean that, I think you mean, that teachers should do what they want their students to do. So, you talk about teachers showing multiple versions of an essay they're writing. And I don't know if you had a chance to hear one of our podcasts, but one of the teacher stories on [teacherstories.org](http://teacherstories.org) is about a teacher named Tavis Danz who teaches mindfulness to his students, and he does that in a way that I think you would call "deep modeling." He talks to his students about mindfulness, but in this podcast, he tells a story about a challenging situation he experienced when being mindful was really useful and doing that he said required being vulnerable. And I suspect you say being vulnerable is a characteristic of good teachers. And can you say a little bit about why that's important and why it's so hard for teachers to be vulnerable?

Alfie Kohn: Part of it is the fear that you alluded to in your earlier question, often a false dichotomy. Either I'm in charge or there's just chaos and no learning happens. Either kids are orderly, and they do what they're told, and I use punishments and rewards to make them obedient or else all hell breaks out and nothing constructive happens. So, we have to take apart how that's a false dichotomy and what false premises underlie it and understand that in fact, no real meaningful learning happens when kids are just doing what they're told. That kids have to be in a position where their questions, their concerns and interests with the help of the teacher are actually driving the curriculum, and their responses and solutions to problems that come up, including interpersonal problems, are the way that life together in the classroom is handled.

So that does require a teacher to gulp and to feel vulnerable. And of course those who are most accustomed to being in control and most need that for their own emotional reasons are the ones who are going to feel the most vulnerable. Although I guess part of the purpose of your example here of this teacher was just, you got to set an example, you've got to model, talk about your own experiences and so on, not just learning by doing, but teaching by doing. That deep modeling reference I think is to an article I wrote that deals with a lot of these questions, which is on my website called, "Challenging Students and How to Have More of Them."

Ken Futernick: Yeah. And I think the irony was that in this particular case where this teacher, Tavis, was sharing his own story about an experience he had where he had to kind of remind himself that there are situations in the world that I can't change, but I can change how I react to it. And that's the story he told, and I'll let listeners listen to the story as it's quite a good story. But what is really fascinating is that

that one of his students shared that story with her father who was experiencing a difficult situation of his own, and she says to the father, "You know, dad there's some things in life you really can't change but you have some control over how you respond to it."

New Speaker: And so Tavis gets an email message from the father and the subject of the email was "Mindfulness," and he thought, "Oh no, maybe I've crossed the line. Here's a parent who thinks that I shouldn't be straying from the traditional curriculum talking about 'mindfulness.'" But in fact, the parent wrote to Tavis to tell him how thankful he was for sharing that story with his daughter and the rest of the class because it's helped him think about something. So, it really made sense to the fifth-grade student, and she even understood it well enough to share it with her father.

Alfie Kohn: Which is heartening, I guess. Although while it's not the main point of our discussion today, I must say that I bristle a bit at the substance of that little lesson because I think, at least my emphasis would be on the far greater number of topics where we automatically assume this is something I can't control. All I have choice about is how I react to it. That is a very conservative idea that keeps existing institutions and practices in place because people decide that it's just like the weather and we are limited to only how we respond to the reality rather than taking a step back and asking, "Do I, or more importantly, do we, really have no control over this or is it something that we can question and challenge and ultimately reverse?"

That's part of my larger concern about how even a focus on "mindfulness," or "growth mindset," or self-regulation, which are so popular these days, really serve the interest of the people and institutions currently in power because they locate the fix within the kid's head. Here's a skill for how you can deal with these institutions and the way we're teaching you as opposed to asking, "Does this make sense or can we, and should we change it?"

Ken Futernick: Yeah, I know you've spoken and I'm quite sympathetic to your concerns and criticisms of the concept of "grit" because really it's about getting kids to tolerate intolerable situations rather than questioning them-

Alfie Kohn: And so is mindfulness.

Ken Futernick: It can be, but I just have to say in this particular example, the situation that he couldn't change was that his three year old daughter had become very sick and was throwing up on a night that he had finally gone out with his wife and got a call that said, "Your daughter's sick and you're going to have to come." And he said, "I could have just let that turn the weekend into a terrible weekend, but I decided I can change how I react, because there's nothing I can do about my daughter's throwing up."

Alfie Kohn: I see, well that's a very specific case outside the educational sphere, yeah.

Ken Futernick: Right, right.

Alfie Kohn: But how many times have you heard this same rhetoric from teachers who are just been beaten down into a kind of apathetic passivity? "Well, there's nothing I can do about standardized tests." Or, "There's nothing we can do about the fact that we have to turn in a grade for students, even though the research clearly shows that grades undermine interest in learning and depth of thinking." Or, "I'm supposed to hand out homework, that's not my policy." That assumption that it's just like the weather is what keeps these counterproductive practices in place forever rather than people saying, "Wait a minute, these are decisions that have been made for me, for us, for our students that we could organize to oppose." And that ought to be our first response, certainly within the educational sphere, is not how do we implement it, how do we do this more efficiently? But should it be done at all?

Ken Futernick: Yeah, yeah. No, once again, I think that's the... What I love about your work is that you get us to think about things that... And even those of us who think we're being progressive and doing the right thing and teaching something like grit and mindfulness. And I think in many of these things there are moments and they may be examples where it does fit and it does make sense. But I think what you've... There was even with people that consider themselves progressive to rethink and question some basic assumptions and go back to that question, "What is it that we really want from our kids? And is this practice getting us to achieve that goal?"

Alfie Kohn: Right, and then the next step is to ask about what do amazing teachers do. How do they help to promote those goals? How do they elicit students' ideas rather than just telling students facts? How do great teachers promote effective collaboration among the students and help to turn a classroom into a caring community? I think one of the things that great teachers do is they don't just talk about lifelong learning as a goal, pay lip service to it. But every decision they make about what we're going to teach, the curriculum, how we're going to teach the pedagogy, is made with an eye first not to whether kids will do well on a test or even what skills or bits of knowledge they will acquire, but the first question guiding all of their daily decisions is, Is this going to help kids become more excited about learning, or will it possibly even have a negative effect or no effect?

So, these long-term goals that I spoke of before that most teachers agree on when asked in a workshop, I want kids to be ethical, to be caring, to love learning, etc. That really for great teachers informs their daily practice. They use it as a North Star to navigate by rather than just saying, "Oh yeah, that would be nice." And then look past it and just think about filling kids full of facts or skills.

Ken Futernick: Yeah, the question, "Will they like learning and will they want to do it when they're away from the classroom?" Is very separate than, "Will they learn what I'm teaching, so that they will do well on the test at the end of the month?"

Alfie Kohn: Right, that's right. And there are layers of problems with that. I mean standardized tests measure what matters least, and that's could be a whole separate conversation about how the best teachers by almost any criteria do not necessarily raise test scores. They may have no effect on the scores at all. Whereas, really mediocre, unimpressive teachers may raise test scores, so you

would never ever judge the quality of a teacher by test scores. And there's good reasons based on research for saying that.

But once you peel back that layer, even if you used more authentic forms of assessment, more meaningful and valid criteria for assessing learning, you're still interested not only in how much kids know, you're interested in the attitudes and goals they have with respect to learning. And so, your thoughts about what makes a great teacher will have to be yoked to those attitudinal or dispositional outcomes, not just to achievement, even by a better metric than standardized tests.

Ken Futernick: Listen I have two, that I think are probably short questions for you. One is I just wonder if you have a story of your own, about a teacher you had or have observed along the way, who exemplifies some of what you've talked about today?

Alfie Kohn: I don't have a single teacher I can point to, I think of my own. I have been fortunate enough to be able to visit many, many classrooms and see extraordinary teachers in action, and I have notebooks full of little bits of things that I've seen and heard that have impressed me and influenced me and that I've written about, when a teacher says to me, I think a teacher in Maine said this to me, "The longer I teach, the less I talk." I found that very impressive. Or to watch a teacher who just takes a second in a primary school classroom, there's a child who scrawls all over the Blackboard and she pauses a moment before erasing it to say, "Is this okay to erase? Is this important to anyone?" Just those throwaway moments of respect for children, or another teacher in Ohio who said to me, "My goal I think is to be as democratic as I can stand." Although I asked to append to that the phrase "and to be able to stand a little more next year than I could stand this year."

So, it's more a matter... Or watching a high school math teacher who I saw once, who when he proposed to have a test on Friday, now put aside the fact that he was still using tests instead of more meaningful, less destructive, authentic forms of assessment, but given that he was going to do a test, the kids in the class felt safe to say, "We're not ready." And instead of replying to them, "Well I guess you should have studied." He said, "Well, when will you be ready?" Which implies that he understands the point of assessment is, let's check in about this when you can show me what you know, it's not to play "gottcha," or to use it as an extrinsic inducement to coerce them into studying stuff they understandably have little interest in doing, which is the more traditional use of quizzes and tests. So I can't write a thousand words about a teacher I had who impressed me in every particular, it's more a matter of collecting bits that I've observed in classrooms that together add up to I think, inspiration.

Ken Futernick: Yeah. Well I think what I'm feeling good about is that the teacher stories that I'm collecting, they're mostly about teachers who truly care about their students and have had a profound impact on their lives, because they did care about them. And there's a woman who's in her 60s who is now doing cowboy poetry and she traces it back to a seventh grade English teacher who recognized that she had a talent for writing and helped her become a better writer and sent an essay off to a national children's publication that got published. And it wasn't until her 60s that she realized, "I think I remember that I had a teacher who told me I had

something to say and help me say it, and I think I want to do it through poetry." So, she now performs at cowboy poetry events around the country, which is a reminder of the really important effect teachers have on our lives.

And I think I would just like to end, Alfie, with this question, because it concerns me in some of my work being a teacher educator and that is, the number of people entering the teaching profession has declined dramatically across the nation in recent years, and it's led to some really significant teacher shortages, that means that some students—they tend to be students in poor communities and students of color—get assigned teachers who are not fully prepared. They get assigned substitutes and they experience this churning of teachers, of people coming and going. I wonder if you have some thoughts about why so few students want to come teachers today?

Alfie Kohn:

Yes, so I'm not sure they're original or will say anything people haven't heard. Before I say a few words on that though, just one quick follow up to your last story about teachers caring, which really a point that could occupy us for a half an hour all by itself, and I just want to say it briefly. It's not enough for teachers to care about their kids. Students have to experience that care as being unconditional, which means something that they never have to earn. What I care about is how students will answer the question, 10 years later, "When you were in so-and-so's classroom, if you ever acted up or didn't do the assignment or didn't behave well or whatever, did you ever have the sense that your teacher cared about you less, was less excited about you?"

New Speaker:

And what matters most is that sense of no matter what I do, that care never dims. It's not conditional on my jumping through hoops. So, the unconditionality of teachers' care is the most important aspect of it. Anyway, to your question about why, the teacher shortage comes and goes over time, it's different in one place than another. It's always been a lot harder in certain districts and States than in others. We don't pay teachers a decent wage and to say we don't have enough applicants at what we're offering is not a statement about an inherent shortage, but about the fact that teachers are often underpaid. But there's some research going back a few decades showing that it's not only about money and that in a lot of places it's about teachers being over controlled and under trusted. And, as my friend Debbie Meier likes to point out, kids are watching while they see politicians and administrators distrust and overregulate us as teachers.

So, the whole accountability movement, what the corporate style top-down test-driven approach to school reform really undermines the autonomy of teachers. There aren't many teachers who are compelled to follow a scripted curriculum, to put objectives and outcomes on the wall and teach to them. That's not education, that's training, and the teachers are not being treated as professional educators, but merely as trainers who are carrying out the mandates and often very specific dictates of people who are far away, who've never even met these kids.

And that doesn't appeal to the most talented, prospective teachers. They would say, "Why would I want to do that unless I can't find another job?" The people you'll want teaching your children are the people who not only have the capacity to do everything we've been talking about for the last half hour and that your whole work is about here in finding excellent teachers. We need teachers who are allowed to act on those capabilities rather than being over controlled. And so,

what we need for great teaching is not just for individual teachers to have that or the other characteristic. It's for the decision makers to work with teachers rather than doing to them, so the teachers can work with students rather than doing to them.

Ken Futernick:

Well Alfie, that's really terrific. Thanks for addressing that question. And I just want to thank you again for joining us on, Teachers Stories, you've given us lots to think about, especially those of us who are or were teachers or parents for that matter. So if you enjoyed this podcast, I hope you will share it with your friends and colleagues and with that I think I'm going to sign off. Bye everyone.