



The Think Inclusive Podcast

Season 8, Episode 5

Alfie Kohn | Does Behaviorism Belong in the Classroom?

Alfie Kohn (00:00):

The best educators honor and take their cues from the interests and questions and experience of the learners themselves -- the curiosity that all human beings start out with -- and try to work with kids to create a curriculum that arises from and honors that inner experience.

Tim Villegas (00:31):

Hello, and welcome to season eight, episode five of the Think Inclusive podcast presented by MCIE. I'm your host, Tim Villegas. This podcast features conversations and commentary with thought leaders in inclusive education and community advocacy. Think Inclusive exists to build bridges between parents, educators, and disability rights advocates to promote inclusion for all students. That's right, y'all. All means all. To find out more about who we are and what we do, go to thinkinclusive.us the official blog of MCIE, and check us out on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

Tim Villegas (01:14):

Now, if you've noticed that I'm trying to talk quietly, it's because it is early in the morning and everyone in the house is asleep. A line of storms, including possible tornadoes are headed in our direction and they're supposed to hit this morning. So I'm getting this intro recorded while I can.

Tim Villegas (01:37):

Now today on the podcast, we have a very special supersized conversation with Alfie Kohn, prolific speaker and author on the topic of human behavior, education, and parenting. Notably "Punished By Rewards." We discuss whether bribes or positive reinforcement are really the same thing, as well as answer the question, "Should educators abandoned behaviorist ideas altogether?" Mr. Kohn had requested that we make this conversation available to all of our listeners. So we have decided to publish the complete and unedited version. If you're a patron of the podcast, you can access a library of unedited interviews on Patreon. Go to patreon.com/thinkinclusivpodcast to become a patron today. Your contribution helps us with the cost of audio production, transcription, and promotion of the Think Inclusive Podcast. Thank you for helping us equip more people to promote and sustain inclusive education. Stick around. After the break, our complete interview with Alfie Kohn.

Tim Villegas (02:57):

How do you know you're an inclusionist? In 1997, Ellen Brantlinger from Indiana University first used the term "inclusionist," which for many means someone who wants to get rid of special education. Decades of research show better outcomes for people with disabilities when they are included and authentic inclusion is happening in schools and districts around the country and the world, some nearing 90% inclusion rates or above for many years. This progress did not just happen, but is the result of careful

planning led by educational visionaries and the implementation of strategies that promote effective inclusive education. It's time to bring back the moniker of inclusionist to mean a collaborator for inclusive practices. Not simply someone who wants to throw the whole system away without replacing it with something better. If this resonates with you, you are an inclusionist. And do we have the newsletter for you! The Weeklyish is for inclusionists. Subscribe at [weeklyish.substack.com](https://www.weeklyish.substack.com)

Tim Villegas (04:33):

So I'd like to welcome to the Think Inclusive podcast, Alfie Kohn, who writes and speaks widely on human behavior, education, and parenting. He's the author of 14 books and hundreds of articles. And when it's safe, he lectures at education conferences and universities, as well as to parent groups and corporations. Welcome to the podcast, Alfie.

Alfie Kohn (04:56):

Thank you very much.

Tim Villegas (04:57):

Or is it Mr. Kohn or whatever you want? How do you, how would you like for me to address you?

Alfie Kohn (05:07):

I guess Mr. Kohn is fine since we're not friends yet, it would seem a little odd to presume a first name basis. I wouldn't call you by your first name, but it doesn't matter that much.

Tim Villegas (05:17):

Okay. Well, thank you, Mr. Kohn. okay. So the reason why I wanted to have you on the podcast is I had always heard of your work and I finally sat down and read some of it. I definitely read I went through "Punished by Rewards" and if you're not familiar with Think Inclusive or us our parent organization, which is the Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education our audience and our organization we're all about how do we create inclusive environments for students with disabilities to be educated with their peers, as opposed to being separated and segregated in other classrooms. And, you know, we do a lot of work in that. And one of the things that is all around education is a PBIS and this idea of positive reinforcement.

Tim Villegas (06:22):

And so my first question to you to our to our for you to address our audience, because a lot of our audience is educators, you know, is there a difference between bribing and positive reinforcement? Because we have a lot of teachers who, you know, well, they don't bribe, we're not going to bribe students but we are going to implement some sort of positive reinforcement to, you know, help students learn or help students do things. You know, like following directions and stuff like that. So why don't you address that first?

Alfie Kohn (06:59):

Well, bribery is just an impolite term and positive reinforcement is just a euphemistic term for rewards. So for somebody to say, I'm doing the latter, but not the former is a little bit disingenuous. In both cases, it's about saying to kids "do this and you'll get that," which is not that different from punishment in which we say to them, "do this, or here's what I'm going to do to you." In both cases, we are doing

things to kids to get them to comply, rather than working with kids to help them become more self-sufficient, caring, lifelong learners, curious, happy, ethical, whatever our long-term goals are. And the research finds that rewards, whatever we choose to call them, or punishment are effective at getting one thing. And only one thing ever. Temporary compliance at an enormous cost.

Alfie Kohn (08:04):

So, I mean, if I threatened to hit you, if, unless you sit down and I'm bigger than you, you'll probably sit down. So I can say, see threats work. What does it do to the kids' relationship with me? What does it do to the child's understanding of why it might make sense to sit down? Of course, we don't ask those questions. In the case of rewards, if I offer to give you a hundred dollars right now to take off your shoes, you'll probably do it. And I can say, "see, rewards work." And similarly, if I offer a verbal reward after the fact, as in "good job, I really liked the way you took your shoes off. You're a good shoe taker-offer." That might reinforce behavior for next time. But what does it do to kids' understanding of the reason for this action -- assuming there was a good reason, which there may not have been -- absolutely nothing. What does it do to our relationship? Again, it has a negative effect. Now, instead of being seen as, you know, an enforcer to be avoided (if I had punished you), you've come to see me as a goody dispenser on legs, which is no closer to seeing me as a caring ally. And rewards, like punishments, make kids less committed to and interested in whatever they had to do to get the reward. That's what hundreds of studies have found with kids of all dispositions, neurotypes, genders, cultures, ages, the more you reward somebody for doing something, the more they tend to be less interested in it. So if you reward a kid or offer a prize for reading, then reading has now just become a little less interesting to that kid. If I praise the child for sharing, that child has just become a little more selfish and less likely to share next time when there may not be something in it for him.

Tim Villegas (10:23):

Hmm. So I'm certainly not here to defend behaviorism...

Alfie Kohn (10:28):

I hear a "but" coming.

Tim Villegas (10:28):

... Here's the but! But I believe as educators, we have a certain paradigm, right. Or a understanding of how learning works, right. So is the paradigm, the antecedent, the skill or behavior, and then the consequence is that paradigm flawed or is it is like, how else do we explain learning? And I, and I understand the very problematic issues with, you know, ABA like, and I really appreciate your article on autism and behaviorism. And so just saying that, how else can we conceptualize learning except for that kind of linear thinking, is there another way to think about it?

Alfie Kohn (11:29):

Well, yeah, the best educators right now don't use the behaviorist paradigm. The best educators now, the ones most likely to help kids become lifelong learners, good people, and so on, have a very different set of understandings, or if you like paradigms, about child development about human psychology, and about learning. For example, the best educators honor and take their cues from the interests and questions and experience of the learners themselves -- the curiosity that all human beings start out with -- and try to work with kids to create a curriculum that arises from and honors that inner experience. The paradigm of behaviorism, going back to B. F. Skinner -- which incidentally was developed on lab

animals, even though he wrote most of his books then about people -- denies, dismisses trivializes, or simply writes off the whole idea of inner experience and looks only at behavior, the actions on the surface that you can see and measure.

Alfie Kohn (12:49):

And as a result, miss most of what's going on, which is one of many reasons that rewards at best are not very effective at getting anything beyond temporary compliance and at worst actually make things worse because they ignore kids reasons, their motives, their values. In fact, they, it ignores the kids themselves and only looks at the behaviors they engage in which we try to reinforce or extinguish or shape as if they were lab animals. So if that's what you mean by paradigm, I mean, I'm not sure if the operative word here is paradigm or learning, but in either case there's a range of ways of looking at learning and a range of kinds of teachers, classrooms, and school systems, depending on whether they're still stuck in the old behavior is to view in which all motivation is a matter of what happens in the environment to reinforce behaviors and looks only at the surface behaviors.

Tim Villegas (13:55):

Yeah, that's a good point, Mr. Kohn, cause I feel like I've read in an number of parts in your work where you talk about setting up the environment for learning. So isn't, is that not, you know, it just antecedent strategies and another way of describing it?

Alfie Kohn (14:20):

No, no, I understand the confusion, but of course the teacher has, has a role to play in working again with kids, not just doing things for or to kids to create a culture, a climate, a curriculum that will be most effective, but most effective at tapping and nourishing the intrinsic interest within the children. That is the starting point of everything for everybody who's outgrown behaviorism. And that old model that frankly, wasn't even all that accurate in reflecting human experience, you know, 80 years ago. And certainly now cognitive science, the science of human motivation has come away past that antecedent notion. Now, we now understand that there are different kinds of motivation that people have. There is intrinsic motivation where you get a kick out of something and find it worthwhile, meaningful, joyful in its own, right? And extrinsic motivation where something extrinsic to or outside the task is sort of goading you or inducing you to do it, namely getting a reward or avoiding a punishment.

Alfie Kohn (15:40):

Now, the research finds not only that, those two things are very different, helping another kid or sharing my dessert with her because I think that's a good thing to do and she gets pleasure out of that dessert, is completely qualitatively different from doing it because somebody is going to give me a patronizing pat on the head and say "good sharing," or give me a sticker. But the research also finds that intrinsic motivation, that desire to help, to paint, to write, to do math, to clean my room, whatever it is is adversely affected by any extremes it can do. So it's not just that those two are different. It's that the whole model that collapses the two and just talks about motivating kids and arranging the environment and so on. And the behaviorist model is overlooking the fact that those rewards, including verbal doggy biscuits for jumping through our hoops, actively undermines the intrinsic interest that we're hoping kids will have and take away and want to continue doing good stuff, even when there's nobody around to give them a doggy biscuit for it. This means that exactly like punishments, even if we euphemistically refer to them as consequences, rewards are not just ineffective and for the long-term and for the stuff that matters, they're counterproductive.

Tim Villegas (17:20):

So would you say then for educators, and we know a lot of educators who want to build strong relationships with their students, who want to survey and who are surveying their students about, you know, interests and passions, and that they desperately want to build up that intrinsic motivation. Right. So what I'm hearing you say is that, for all of those great practices that teachers are doing, if they overlay on top of that, this idea, a behaviorist view, even if it's just a little bit, even if it's just a portion of how they approach teaching that it could counteract or have a negative effect on what they're already doing that is good.

Alfie Kohn (18:17):

Yes. I'm afraid that's exactly right. So they don't do it to be nasty. They don't do it because they're stupid. They do it because they've been marinated in behaviorism in our educational system, which manifests itself in various ways, not only with garbage, like PBIS and class dojo and red, yellow, green tags, and other ways of treating kids like pets, but also in standardized testing with scope and sequence top-down curriculum that breaks everything down into little bits and then offers, you know, reinforcement at each stage like most versions of classroom management and all of this leads you to do this stuff and assume that it's either necessary or innocuous or even helpful. So teachers with the best of intentions are pulled into becoming Skinnerians, but the reality is every time you do anything like PBIS, any point-system, stickers, gold stars, grade rubrics, extra privileges, and so on you know, money, any, any kind of treat that's offered as, as an extremist inducement makes your job a little bit harder in the long run, because that much more of kids' intrinsic motivation has evaporated.

Alfie Kohn (19:44):

And so, because this is really distressing to hear if you've been, you know, broadly socialized as an educator to do this stuff, to, to say, "good job" a lot, you know, "good job, good job." Yeah. I call it well, nevermind. It's something we do in a, in a sort of knee jerk fashion, and a little bit of harm is done every time we give that patronizing pat on the head, because it's an extrinsic inducement. So we tell ourselves, well, I don't want to do it forever. So we'll just give the kid a, a jumpstart, you know, we'll, we'll offer an extrinsic inducement at the beginning, and then we'll fade it out as the intrinsic interest kicks in and takes over. Unfortunately, the research overwhelmingly demonstrates that this is a fool's errand that by virtue of offering the sticker, the star, the praise, the grade, you have set your goal back.

Alfie Kohn (20:45):

Now there's more damage to be overcome. Now it becomes a little harder to restore, to revive, to resuscitate the intrinsic interest in helping, in reading, in doing whatever. And all of this is even tougher for teachers in the field of special education, where as the late Herb Lovett, whose books I highly recommend on this topic, once put it: "The only two problems with special education in America is it's not special. And it sure as hell isn't education." We find ourselves in a position where we think, you know, with kids who don't have special initials following their name, you know, neuro-typical kids or whatever, we wouldn't treat them this way. But with "those" kids, you know, you gotta treat them like pets. And of course the research shows you're doing more damage as kids with special needs and challenges start out with the same curiosity about the world, the same connection to other people, but now it's much, much harder for them because of the sticker systems, the point systems, the praise and all of that, which has systematically undermined that desire to do the very things we want them to do.

Tim Villegas (22:21):

I love that you brought up Herb Lovett. "Learning To Listen was one of my favorite books, even as an early special education teacher. I guess here's where I want to go with this. Cause I you know, as far as people who are proponents of inclusion I can definitely see that this type of thinking like what you said about othering students with disabilities and already the documented kind of abuses that ABA has, you know, has had, and practitioners of ABA on students with disabilities. I can see that as a huge barrier to, to inclusion. Would you agree that that students with disabilities, if, if if we weren't as focused on compliance and, you know, everyone doing the same thing test scores, that it would be easier for students with disabilities, even significant ones intellectual disabilities, autism you know, whatever it would be easier to include students and not separate them?

Alfie Kohn (23:49):

Yes, absolutely. The one size fits all approach and for that size to be a matter of doing well on a badly designed standardized test, clearly complicates our desire to do almost anything desirable in education, whether we're talking about social, moral, or intellectual development. There's no question about that. So the broader, the richer, the deeper your objectives for kids and your way of assessing progress, the less likely you're going to be to do these sort of pull-outs, which segregate and stigmatize and stratify kids. There's absolutely right. But what a tragedy, if we argue for inclusion only to subject all the kids in a single classroom to punishment and rewards, you know. That's sort of like, you know, reading and writing teachers, ELA teachers who have become much more sophisticated in the way that they teach reading and writing with, you know, readers workshops and so on only to turn around and use rubrics to sort them and classify them. So kids are now trying to get a four. In other words, the assessment hasn't kept up with a pedagogy in this case, by analogy.

Alfie Kohn (25:03):

Inclusion is a lovely idea when teachers are trained and helped to see the value of that, not very different from school systems that call it inclusion because, but they've really just ended pullout systems to save money. That's never going to end well, if that's the motivation. So we pull everybody in the same classroom only to be having a, doing to management system there and not take advantage of how we can have a working with approach without you know, carrots and sticks. You know, the distinction between the method and the goal here that we're talking about is I think is absolutely critical. And PBIS is a great example of that.

Alfie Kohn (25:50):

You know, PBIS, and again, reward systems, let's be clear, I'm not indicting the implementation of such systems or programs. I'm not saying it's not being done right or with fidelity. These kinds of programs that rely on rewards and punishments basically on control, even if it's sugar coated control, are inherently damaging by their very nature. It can't be fixed. The B in PBIS is behavior. It announces itself as Skinnerian system, but the reason it backfires, always backfires, even if it's sometimes gets us resentful, temporary compliance, is not just because the method is flawed, counterproductive to research and disrespectful and thus ethically problematic. The problem with these kinds of programs like PBIS is the goal is the problem. They, they don't turn out kids who are compassionate, who are risk takers, who are independent minded, because that was never the objective with all of these systems, not only the high intensity traumatizing versions with autistic kids like ABA, but even with PBIS and many of these other systems, the goal was never about helping kids be who they tend to be. The goal is to get them to do whatever the people with the power demand. It's all about compliance. So with many of

these systems, which again can be used sometimes in schools that have inclusion and other schools that don't, the goal is deeply offensive and problematic, married to a method that is deeply problematic. You've got the worst of both worlds.

Tim Villegas (27:59):

Hmm. So we're really close to our 30 minutes, so I want to make sure that...

Alfie Kohn (28:07):

You want to kick it, add another 10 if you've got, I'm okay with that.

Tim Villegas (28:10):

... I do have some time if that's okay. Yeah. I want to make sure that we get your thoughts about, you know, if, if PBIS is not the thing. Right. is it as simple as saying to, to, to teachers and educators, "Okay. We're going to, we're going to toss PBIS out. We're going to toss any sort of behavior is thinking out, right. Just want you to develop relationships with your students. We want to do, you know, we want you to create engaging lessons. You know, ywe want to get rid of grades, we want to get rid of homework and all that stuff. Is it, is it that simple or is it, is there something else that we can implement systematically to make our schools better? And you know, and create the kinds or foster the kinds of learners that we want.

Alfie Kohn (29:18):

Yeah, of course it's not, it's not as simple as that. Getting rid of rewards and punishments, getting rid of the bad stuff isn't necessary, but it's not sufficient. If you got rid of all reward systems today, kids are not going to leap up and yell, "Hooray! Now we can be intrinsically motivated. And it's sort of interesting to think about why they wouldn't do that. One reason is because getting rid of that stuff is, as I say, vital, but it's not enough. Another reason is they may have gotten addicted to these rewards. I'm using that very loose sense, not as strict addiction. But, you know, remember extrinsic motivators undermine intrinsic motivation. So if they've been subjected to this stuff, you know, sometimes for years it's gonna be quite a job to try to resuscitate the curiosity about the world and the intrinsic motivation to learn and to connect to others that they had at the beginning before you reinforced it right the hell out of them.

Alfie Kohn (30:24):

And a third reason they won't yell hooray is because you did it to them. First, you did the rewards to them. Now you're doing the abolition of rewards to them. You can't move from a doing to approach to a working with approach. In a way that itself is a doing to, which means it's gotta be more collaborative. It's got to possibly be, be gradual, but it certainly is a matter of eliciting their experience with being treated like pets. And then creating an increasingly democratic structure where together, we figure out what we want -- all of us -- and what's a good way to get there. Now that depends on the kid's capacity to articulate this stuff, their age, their developmental age and so on. And that's where it takes.

Alfie Kohn (31:22):

And look, to be crude about this. You know, any idiot can offer a goodie to a kid who jumps through hoops. It takes much more talent and effort and time and care and courage to figure out how to create an engaging curriculum with kids. Something that, that, as I say, responds to their questions about themselves in the world, rather than just give them a worksheet, you know, or give them a textbook to read. It takes a much more skilled and savvy educator to work with kids, to create a caring community

and to get together periodically in class meetings to decide how we're going to solve problems together. I mean, I've seen those kinds of class meetings across the country and abroad. When it's done right, it just takes your breath away. Instead of a list of rules and consequences and so on. So yeah, this stuff is harder, but remember, we're comparing it to something that's actively damaging, not just ineffective, don't compare it to a perfect world.

Alfie Kohn (32:38):

And I've written books drawing on the books written by many other people before me who play this out and talk about what does it mean to create a learner-centered lesson that is truly about understanding ideas from the inside out, rather than just cramming forgettable facts and skills into short-term memory. How do you do that? How do you hold the democratic class meeting? How do you do that when kids who are young and restless. How do you do it if they haven't experienced that before? How do you do cooperative learning on a regular basis? There's a lot that has to be done in the pedagogy and the curriculum and above all, in bringing the kids into it, because, you know, at the end of the day, kids learn how to make good decisions by making decisions, not by following directions.

Alfie Kohn (33:38):

And it's one thing to kind of nod at that and say, yeah, I guess that's true. And it's something else to A) figure out how to facilitate that working with approach in a classroom and B) get over your own need to control kids and really part with some of the authority. Because I mean, I've been studying this stuff for 30 plus years, and I can tell you the more I look into reward systems, the more convinced I am they are really all about power and powerlessness. And every "good job" and sticker teaches kids, "I'm the one with the power to reinforce this stuff. So you have to do what I tell you." And on some level, even though it's sugarcoated control, you know, it's, it's sort of something that a lot of adults come to rely on and are nervous about parting with. And so we have to do some serious introspection to make sure we're psychologically capable of divesting ourselves of some authority in order that kids can become truly astonishing learners and caring people.

Tim Villegas (34:50):

That's an interesting question, Mr. Kohn. Are we capable? Yes. Here's my other question. I think you touched on it in your book, "Punished by Rewards," about change, about changing our behavior, right?

Alfie Kohn (35:16):

More important than our behavior, are our beliefs, our attitudes, our needs, our own inner life. And there's, I mean, the answer is obviously there's a range of capability and willingness to do that. And some people need a little more invitation and a little more help in coaching. Some people need a little more, some people may need psychotherapy to get over their need to be in control. Maybe they feel they don't have much control over their lives the rest of the time. But those kids are going to do what I tell them. You know, I've been to hundreds of classrooms where I've seen an enormous range. I've seen some teachers where I just say, "Oh my God, I wish I lived here. So my kids could go to, could be in this classroom."

Alfie Kohn (36:03):

And I've seen others where I think I wouldn't send my dog to this school. You know, and these reflect a lot of structural factors too, not just teachers capabilities. But yeah, there's a range and all of us can move. This is the takeaway, I guess, is wherever we are on this continuum, all of us are capable of

moving in the right direction. Albeit from a different starting point and at a different pace, to become a little less controlling a little less dependent on, on the traditional kinds of teaching than we were before.

Tim Villegas (36:53):

I wonder what advice you would give educators who, you know, see that there's something inherently wrong with behaviorist thinking. But are stuck in a system that, that, you know, the, this is what they're supposed to do, right? This is, this is what their administration, or what, you know, the principal or whatever, this is the system where we're rolling out. What you have to do. What do they do? What, what do educators do, who are not sure that they want to partake in this? How can they change their system?

Alfie Kohn (37:43):

Well, at the end there, you added a little wrinkle to that. You're talking now about teachers who aren't convinced. I thought we were talking about those who are convinced, but face structural barriers.

Tim Villegas (37:57):

That is where I was going. I, I'm not sure how that, how my question got changed, but that, that is. Teachers, educators who have who are up against structural barrier barriers, for whatever reason that want to move away from behaviorist thinking and methodology.

Alfie Kohn (38:17):

Okay, good. So now we're talking about a different problem than what we were just talking about, which is teachers who may have the kind of internal barrier, because they've internalized this, and they still believe that with those kids, you need to offer rewards or whatever. Now we're talking about teachers who, who get it but find it hard in the institutions they're in to do it. And here, I think you have to move on two tracks at once. And the short run, you do what you can to minimize the harm of the, of the system, of the structural constraints of, of a school or a school system that still gives grades, despite the proven destructive effects of letter and number grades and rubrics, or standardized tests, or a school-wide program like PBIS or requirements for homework. You do what you can to make that stuff as invisible as possible to the kids as long as possible.

Alfie Kohn (39:18):

And the long-term track you're working on simultaneously is organizing and mobilizing other people who share your concerns. Some of whom are parents, some of whom are your fellow teachers, to try to change those structural constraints rather than shrugging and saying, "that's just the way life is. It's like the weather, you know, we have this system." Because many structural changes that are mind-boggling in retrospect have been made by people who refuse to simply say "that's life" and they've changed it. Now, how does that play out, you know, day to day for a teacher?

Alfie Kohn (39:59):

Uh it depends on, I get emails like this here at my website, you know, every week. And I, and I have to apologize and say, I can't give you very specific advice, because I don't know you, I don't know your background, your values, your risk, your tolerance, risk tolerance for risk. Um I don't know your administrators and the kind of relationship you have with them, and the extent to which they can be persuaded with research and good arguments. I don't know if you feel alone or there's three or four of you who are ready to riot. I don't know what your priorities are given that we can name 10 different

things that are distressing about the status quo. All I can do is say in each case, don't do anything more to kids that's damaging than you absolutely have to in order to keep your job. Don't censor yourself. You know, if, example: somebody says to you, "you've got to have a classroom management plan." Okay, fine. You can fulfill the letter of the law while making sure that your classroom management plan is democratic class meetings for the kids to decide with you on how we're going to solve problems involving no rewards and punishments.

Alfie Kohn (41:21):

You're told you have to give grades at the end of the term, all right. But you can do what teachers are increasingly doing around the country to ungrade their classroom and say, I will never put a letter or number grade on any individual assignment that kids turn in. Even if I have to turn in one for them at the end of the term. And I'm going to let the kids participate in deciding what their end of term grade is. They told me I had to turn in a grade. They didn't tell me I have to decide on it unilaterally. So you're always looking for ways to kind of make the best and subvert the system that doesn't really make any sense. Also, depending on the kid's age and capacities, you can bring them in on figuring out together and lay out your dilemma for them. You know, there's this school-life system, you know, they're doing accelerated reader, you know, which is an excellent way to destroy kids' interest in reading, by limiting which books count and giving them a doggy biscuit for it.

Alfie Kohn (42:26):

You're going to watch kids lose interest in reading in order to get prizes for reading books. So work with the kids to figure out can we opt out of this, or can we participate, you know, with holding our nose and not take it seriously because we're going to have these class discussions to understand why this system is so bad. So there's many different ways that a teacher can selectively ignore or strategically subvert a truly terrible system of mandates and structural requirements. While carefully figuring out what, if anything I really have to do. And in some cases, even administrators have mixed feelings about the rules and the policies, and may be persuaded by a teacher who says, "I think our goals for the kids are the same X, Y, and Z. Here's some research, here's some examples of programs around the country that use a very different and more successful way of reaching our shared goals." And who knows, maybe you not only are able to get away with something that's very different from what you've been told to do, but you've planted a seed of doubt that ultimately leads to those structural changes that will make life better for all the kids.

Tim Villegas (43:56):

What you're saying is very relatable to our audience and educators who have the same feelings about segregated education. The parallels are excellent.

Alfie Kohn (44:15):

And why we do inclusive education as with the other stuff is as important as how we do it. Do you know Mara Sapon-Shevin book "Widening the Circle?"

Tim Villegas (44:27):

I'm familiar with it and with the name. Yeah.

Alfie Kohn (44:32):

So she does a nice job in that book, "Widening the Circle" of talking about not only how to create a more inclusive classroom, but to ask the bigger questions of why we should do that, who benefits, and why we're stuck to the status quo.

Tim Villegas (44:46):

Right. I noticed in your article, I think in the autism and behaviorism we talked about Norman Kunc and Van der Klift. Do you know them?

Alfie Kohn (45:01):

I know them, they were good friends in addition to people. Norm is one of only three people I've ever done a workshop with and I have a high bar before I do that, so, yes.

Tim Villegas (45:11):

Okay. Okay. I didn't mean to, I didn't mean to name drop no, I feel, you know, definitely Norm and Emma, where the we are running in the same, you know, inclusion and advocacy circles. And I met them a while ago. And I think they're, they're doing fantastic work. And so I, so I really appreciate, I really appreciate all your thoughts regarding this topic. I think our audience is going to find this fascinating. And you are so prolific in your writing and speaking, there's just, there's a lot. So considering our conversation, well, if somebody wanted to say, "Oh, I should read a Alfie Kohn book." What is, what would be the one to start?

Alfie Kohn (46:07):

Well, they're not sequential. I would recommend that people go to my website, which is alfiekohn.org, A-L-F-I-E-K-O-H-N. And then just look at the description of each of the books and see what, if anything grabs you. The one you mentioned is probably closest overall to most of what we've been talking about. "Punished By Rewards," which just came out in a new edition with a new afterward, updating the research on the destructive effects of rewards. But I have other books that deal just with standardized testing, just with classroom management, just with homework. And then an overall book that deals with traditional versus more progressive approaches to teaching and learning which is called "The Schools Our Children Deserve." So it depends on the individual's primary interest in terms of which book, but I'm glad you're framing it that way in terms of which book, you know, because these days a lot of people say, "Oh, I'd never heard of this guy. Sounds interesting. Oh, I think I'll go look on YouTube." You know?

Tim Villegas (47:22):

Well I typically end the podcast with a non-education related question. Are you up for that?

Alfie Kohn (47:30):

Depends what it is, but we can try.

Tim Villegas (47:32):

Okay. Okay. Well, let's go with a safe one. So I know that you're from Boston. Does that mean you're a Red Sox fan?

Alfie Kohn (47:39):

No, not really a sports fan at all.

Tim Villegas (47:41):

Okay. So we won't go with that. Okay. So sports is off the table. Is there anything any TV series, book series, something that you're reading or consuming or, you know, like the kids say these days, "bingeing that is, that is really taken you that you'd like to share?"

Alfie Kohn (48:08):

Not at the moment. I feel like you've caught me at a moment where I'm looking for a new series that I can get excited about.

Tim Villegas (48:19):

What was the last one that you were excited about? Only if you're willing to share.

Alfie Kohn (48:28):

No, no, I'm not. I'm not being guarded or coy about this. I'm just trying to remember. Cause some of this stuff fades as soon as I've, as soon as I finished watching it, it's more like somebody has to goose my memory by saying, did you see X? And I can say, "Oh yeah, I loved it, hated it, indifferent to it," whatever it is. I watched, I very much like "Better Call Saul," which is a prequel series to "Breaking Bad" and miss the fact that it's late because of COVID with a new series. So that's, that's one thing I liked and I'm sure I'll think of three more, either both comedy and drama series, as soon as we hang up.

Tim Villegas (49:13):

Yeah. so I, well, if you like "Better Call Saul," does that mean that you're, you were a fan of "Breaking Bad?"

Alfie Kohn (49:19):

Oh yes. Yes. Terrific. Amazingly, yeah. Good stuff. I just rewatched by the way, the entire series of "The Wire" a few, a few months ago, which is probably the best thing ever on television with the possible exception of "The Sopranos." And I enjoyed it all over again even more than the first time.

Tim Villegas (49:44):

That's a, that's a great reminder because I believe, you know, when Netflix used to you know, mail you DVDs, instead of streaming.

Alfie Kohn (49:53):

They still can I, I just, I had that I had a subscription up until literally three weeks ago to that.

Tim Villegas (50:01):

You got DVDs from Netflix?!

Alfie Kohn (50:01):

Yeah. The only reason I stopped, I mean, the reason I started is because, because little by little, the streaming Netflix became a worse for looking for movies. They shifted mostly to TV and mostly to their own production and they lost the licensing rights to more and more movies. Whereas you could get almost anything movies, relatively new ones and classic ones by DVD. And I still have a DVD player. But the reason I, I quit my subscription is because the quality of even that started to decline, but I don't, I'm sorry. I interrupted you. What were you going to say about that?

Tim Villegas (50:45):

Oh, I think I said, I think I was going to say when my wife and I've worked for first got married and we had the DVD subscription. We I think we, you know, saw the first couple of seasons of "The Wire" and then just blew off and, and I've always meant to go back to it. But that's another reminder. So thank you.

Alfie Kohn (51:05):

It's streaming on the HBO service by the way. Yeah.

Tim Villegas (51:08):

HBO Max. Yeah. Yeah. Oh yeah. This is not, this is not an endorsement for any streaming service by the way.

Tim Villegas (51:18):

Okay. well, this has been a absolutely fascinating conversation. Mr. Alfie Kohn, I really, really appreciate your time. Again, for those of you who are listening, please check out the website and the books. And I would specifically for our audience if you have time and I'm going to put this in the show notes to check out the autism and behaviorism blog post that you wrote earlier this year. Oh, no. Last year, actually 2020. Yeah. Yeah. That went by fast. All right. So again Mr. Kohn, thank you for being on the Think Inclusive podcast.

Alfie Kohn (51:58):

Thanks for having me. I appreciate your interest. I enjoyed this.

Tim Villegas (52:07):

That will do it for this episode of the Think Inclusive Podcast. Subscribe to the Think Inclusive Podcast via Apple Podcast, Google Play, Spotify, or on the Anchor app. And while you were there, give us a review so more people can find us. Have a question or comment? Email us at podcast@thinkinclusive.us. We'd love to know that you're listening. Thank you to patrons Pamela P., Veronica E., Kathleen T., and Mark C. For their continued support of the podcast.

Tim Villegas (52:42):

This podcast is a production of MCIE, where we envision a society where neighborhood schools welcome all learners and create the foundation for inclusive communities. Learn more at mcie.org. We'll be back in April with two episodes, teacher and paraprofessional dynamic duo Megan Gross and Nancy Brundrett, as well as Jenny Kurth from the University of Kansas. We will discuss what support for inclusive education looks like in the Poway Unified School District with Megan and Nancy. And with

Jenny, how do participation plans help schools to effectively include students with disabilities in general education? Thanks for your time and attention. See you next time. And be safe.

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