

A Little Pregnant...Alternative Education and Behaviorism

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The tone of this paper, whether the reader finds it vitriolic or passionate is both intended and purposeful. Having spent over twenty years within the 'belly-of-the-beast' struggling to undo or repair the damage done to children by the proponents, minions, indeed the system itself, of the dominant behaviorist model of education, we are alarmed to see any sycophantic responses within Alternative Education to this model and its practices.

The traditional and predominant behaviorist model of education in the United States has failed. Yet, like any anachronistic institution, it is able to survive by maintaining control over the vocabulary of practice and discourse. Consequently, Alternative Education programs are left to 1) use the lexicon of behaviorism to define, explain, and justify their practices, i.e., "value-added assessment", "passion for excellence", "sequenced curriculum", "essential skills"; and/or, 2) adapt their practices to suit behaviorist terminology and standards, i.e., "productive mental habits", "time-management", "positive pressure", "student competencies". Either action, not only makes Alternative Education a willing host to behaviorist parasitic practices, but desecrates the sanctity of Alternative ideology.

Since authentic Alternative Education operates within a paradigm different than Behaviorism, any shared terminology has distinctly different meanings. For example, cooperative learning as an alternative practice is distinguished by dialogue, mutual humanness, and a sense of community intentionality. Cooperative learning as a behaviorist reality is relegated to an assigned project by a contrived group, (teacher designated 1 high, 1 low, and 2-3 middling students). The project parameters, content, and assessment are pre-determined by the teacher and without context for the students. Thus, any attempt at philosophical or paradigm translation (Alternative to Behaviorism) of the term cooperative learning would be comparable to injecting the analytical description (reductionism) of the parts of a rotting apple (behaviorism) into a dialogue (humanness) on fresh ripe oranges (alternative education).

Alternative educators must reject the calls for synergy and synthesis shilled by the self-appointed paradigm peacemakers with their neo-hybrid offering, such as Ackerman's(2003) "best of what we know of teaching[behaviorism] and learning [progressive and alternative educational practices]."1

The duplicitous nature of these behaviorist charlatans and carpetbaggers will quickly turn synergy into lethargy and synthesis into absorption. When any alternative practice is absorbed by the dominant model it is fated to: 1) being co-opted by behaviorist misinterpretation, contextual learning becomes Tech prep; 2) entirely dismissed, accepting the student as a co-learner; or, 3) relegated to tolerated addendums within the traditional curriculum, such as experiential learning. The following example represents all three. A sales representative for an industrial technology classroom (shop), excitedly points out that with the use of computer modular units, shop teachers will never again have to sweep up sawdust. After proudly describing how each unit is aligned to the various national and state standards, the sales rep could barely contain his enthusiasm about the monitor 'mother board'. "With this board, each student's screen can be displayed. If you need to tell the class something, you can lock their monitors and type your message across their screens. Just think about it, you can go the entire year and never speak to a student!" It is a frightening harbinger when curriculum specialists can reduce one of the most hands-on and engaging subjects within the curriculum to a sterile, visually-presented, sequence of facts. Or when isolated tasks of replication that come only after the so-called real learning of the scripted computer program are equated with experiential learning.

And to think, we always thought that making sawdust was one of the great things about shop.

Those attempts by Alternative programs to define their service of students with the artificial and arbitrary (though consistently touted as research-based) criteria of the dominant model are an abandonment of principle. Aligned curriculum, standardized 'anything', scripted higher order thinking programs have nothing to do with authentic learning and everything to do with reductionism, profit, and self-perpetuation. Promotion of high scores on standardized tests, scorecards on student enrollment in 'prestigious' colleges, championships in college bowl-like academic competitions, etc. are equally futile attempts by Alternative programs to gain credibility in the empty, diabolical eyes of the behaviorist model. These efforts not only, serve to contaminate alternative practices, but represent a pusillanimous refusal by Alternative educators to take a stand on the rightness of their own principles.

The naïve tolerance of some and the self-serving submission of others within Alternative Education have compromised the Absolute Principle: Alternative Education is incompatible with Behaviorism. Just as one cannot be a little pregnant, neither can an Alternative program be a little behaviorist. Alternative Education that maintains, adapts, absorbs, or responds to any behaviorist practice is a variant of behaviorism and not Alternative at all.

Additionally, to those Alternative educators who approach the behaviorist monolith seeking acclaim, credence or acceptance for authentic Alternative practices: a warning! You will be condemned to Sisyphus-like futility, as vocabulary is manipulated, the bar raised, and standardized dehumanization mandated.

Alternative Education has a compelling mandate: Accentuate and maintain the inviolability of alternative practices. To do so, Alternative educators must shed, resist and remove twin albatrosses. The first of these is the Orwellian-like control of the vocabulary of educational practice and discourse by the Big Brothers of Behaviorism:

Children = “vital elements in America’s new workforce” – CORD;
Learning/instruction = “productive mental habits” – Dimensions of Learning;
Curriculum = “standardized core knowledge” – William Bennett, E.D. Hirsch, and America’s Choice;
Accountability = “positive pressure/accelerating student progress” – BattelleforKids;
Punishment = “commensurate consequences” – Judicious Discipline Institute
Tech prep = “world-class skills” – National Center on Education and the Economy; and,
Double block periods = “safety nets for solid academic performance” – High Schools That Work.

The second albatross is the efforts to gain recognition, validity, or acceptance from societal forces that push the behaviorist model of education:

Business Roundtables on teacher quality, school curriculum, etc.;
Real estate listings citing district test scores;
Blue Ribbon certification for schools;
Newspaper reporters parroting Department of Education media releases;
Journalists who specialize in educational issues;
Bi-partisan dogmatists fronting as national commissions, centers for educational research, or consortiums on educational policy; and,
Textbook publishers, all their subsidiaries, and testing services.

We offer a call to reflect: the first step to liberation. We ask practitioners within Alternative programs to critically reflect upon their programs to identify and remove any vestiges of behaviorist ideology, vocabulary, or practice. We have reviewed three program areas of major concern: Curriculum; Competition; and, Behavior Management.
Curriculum

Curricular development is defined by the responses to:

What is the nature of the child;
What does learning look like;
What is the role of the teacher; and,
What is the purpose of education?

Unfortunately, curriculum and its delivery in the United States have been dominated and dictated by a behaviorist response. Children are seen as unrefined raw material, economic units, and/or empty vessels. Learning is passive, isolated, sequential, and aligned. Education, in the words of Tucker(1992) is a “cradle to grave”² indoctrination and selection process to fill the 21st century workforce, where teachers are relegated to mental disciplinarians, social engineers, and transmitters of data. Curriculum within most American schools consists of an imposed sequence of standards and student competencies. The embodiment of paternalistic reductionism, this curriculum serves to perpetuate and reify a social, economic, and educational caste system. What Alternative practitioners need to understand is that when imposed as a script for learning or as an orthodoxy from which one must not stray, there are negligible differences between Hirsch’s “What Every 4th Grader Should Know” and Sizer’s “Essential Skills”.

Alternative Education educators must recognize that any curriculum outside of the child, no matter how enriching one may think it is, assumes both a hierarchy and incapability. The hierarchy created by imposed curriculum is between those who determine, control, and deliver the curriculum (federal and state departments of education, textbook publishers, national business entities), and those who receive and have no say in the curriculum (teachers

and students). By its very nature, imposed curriculum is a division between those who are capable and act - the curriculum specialists - and those who are incapable and are acted upon – teachers and students. Paulo Freire(1970) referred to this as “banking education” and said, “The more students work at storing the deposits [imposed curriculum] entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world.”³ Thus, imposed curriculum serves to quiet the curious; deflate the spirited; dull the intellectual, and create a present-day version of H.G. Wells’ Eloi, creatures unable to fend for themselves.

Competition

Competition is a manifestation of the core behaviorist principle of rewards and punishment. This is a principle straight out of the Business Roundtable, not from what we know about how children learn. Rochester psychologist Edward Deci (1995), for one, has shown “all the rewards, rules, and regimentation that were so widely used to motivate school children were themselves the villains, promoting not an excited state of learning but a sad state of apathy.”⁴ We call on Alternative educators to reflect upon their use of competition in three areas: programs/classrooms; student-teacher; and community.

a. Program and classroom activities where students compete against one another or where winners and losers are declared (explicitly or implicitly) have no place in child-centered programs, at any age level. Activities where students or groups of students are ranked and awarded points based upon the ranking is also harmful to students and serves no purpose in an environment of learning. Competition as an inherent trait of humankind and a reality which students must ‘get used to’ are behaviorist truisms that serve only to reinforce a selection process. Additionally, programs and classrooms that use competitive ‘test-prep’ Jeopardy games, where groups earn bonus points, candy, or pizza parties reduce learning to conditioning and learners to laboratory rats.

b. The insidious nature of competition extends to the teacher-student roles. Within traditional education, these roles are distinct and hierarchal. The teacher teaches, the student is taught. The teacher knows everything and the student knows nothing. The teacher is presented as the necessary opposite of the student and draws authority from this hierarchy. Consequently, teachers must compete against the student for knowledge and win - that is, know more than the student; or only present information, topics, and problems to which she has already won -that is, knows the answer. Staying one page ahead of the students, teacher-proof curriculum materials, and subject specific computer programs are manifestations of teachers winning the knowledge competition. And if the teachers can’t win this rigged game, there are always grades.

c. Competition also destroys the community that is core to any Alternative program. As an example of this, we presented a series of open-ended problem-solving activities to two groups of elementary school children. To one group, the activities were presented as a competition. For the second group, the activities were presented as open-ended problems.

For Group 1, the activity was: Build the tallest freestanding tower from 2 sheets of paper. For Group 2, the activity was: Build a freestanding structure that is between 100cm and 120cm from 2 sheets of paper. The following delineates those behaviors demonstrated by each group during this activity.

<u>Group 1 – competition</u>	<u>Group 2 – problem activity</u>
secretive throughout activity	shared ideas
accused others of stealing ideas	made suggestions to other groups
demanded strict adherence to parameters	made parameter allowances
created wind currents to disrupt other groups	created wind barriers to protect towers of others
celebrated when other towers fell	celebrated the efforts of others
high level of frustration	offered encouragement
cheated by using objects inside towers for support	

For Group 1, the focus of the activity became winning with no exploration of the academic concepts or principles, even within the winning solution. Dialogue was replaced with pleas of “help me”, “how do I make mine taller”, and “he took my idea”. The competitive nature of the activity left one winner to gloat and all the remaining losers to feel inadequate. Needless to say, such a result has no place in any type of education, save behaviorism and elitism.

Behavior management

Within the behaviorist paradigm, behavior management is synonymous with compliance. Whether couched in the terminology of ‘positive discipline’, ‘logical consequences’, ‘judicious discipline’, or any other attempt at soft-soaping, the final action is always student compliance. Those so-called alternative situations where the student, in collaboration with the teacher, is allowed to create the rules and consequences are: 1) a disgusting exploitation of children to divert responsibility from the teacher, and yet relinquish none of the teacher’s authority; and, 2) disingenuous attempts to mask behaviorist practices. After all, the fact that students replicate the only model they have known does not validate that model.

The following is another example of masked behavior management:

Do nothing to stop a learner from learning;

Do nothing to stop a teacher from teaching.

Few would find fault with the admonition, ‘Do nothing to stop a learner from learning’. Indeed, what could be more sacrosanct? Yet, this innocent statement can easily mask or couch the harmful implications of: ‘Do nothing to stop a teacher from teaching’. The first implication is that teaching is an activity done to and outside the learner. The second implication is that the teacher is separate from the learner and teaching is separate from learning. This separation inherently implies hierarchy. Since within a hierarchy, the teacher takes on a greater significance than the learner, this phrase becomes an edict, not an admonition. Edicts, by their very nature, demand compliance and carry an implicit justification for punishment.

Alternative educators need to recognize that the myriad of techniques, strategies, and prescriptions offered within the literature on behavior management are mere variations and masking of behavioral conditioning. To that end, any behavioral approach, which refers to, includes, or disguises any of the following or similar terms, has no place in alternative programs:

<u>Behavior Management</u>	<u>Imposed</u>
Symptomatic	Positive discipline
Prescribed	Prompts and procedures
Compliance	Judicious discipline
Extrinsic	Psychoeducational

Under the guise of America first, creating a well-trained and productive workforce, and performance improvement, Corporate America trumpets the use of behaviorist ideology within our schools. The not-so hidden by-products of this heralded call are mandated economic, intellectual, emotional, vicarious, and spiritual exploitation of children. The purpose of this exploitation is to perpetuate and reify a social, cultural, economic, and educational caste system that nourishes and sustains the corporate bottom-line.

Children and childhood are being annihilated in the name of vigorous economic growth and future competitiveness. The anomie once evidenced by sufferers of long-term oppression is showing up in 3rd and 4th graders. Alternative educators who accept, promote, and utilize behaviorist practices need to realize they are feeding our children to the insatiable beast of corporate greed. We call Alternative educators to constant reflection, stalwart vigilance, and active rebellion against the unrelenting and incessant dehumanization of all behaviorist practices. Ridding itself of behaviorist vocabulary and no longer judging itself by extrinsic behaviorist standards are initial steps in purifying Alternative Education. Once freed from being tolerated and superficially accommodated, Alternative educators must refrain from being tolerant or accommodating. Alternative educators must stand on the rightness of their practices and principles. It is this rightness that gives hope for restoration and reclamation not only of our children’s collective intellect, humanness, and capability, but our own!

Endnotes

Ackerman, David B., “Taproots for a New Century: Tapping the Best of Traditional and Alternative Education”. Phi Delta Kappan 84 (2003): 345.

2 Tucker, Marc, letter to Hillary Clinton, November 11, 1992. Washington, D.C.: National Center on Education and the Economy.

3 Freire, Paulo. 1970. Pedagogy of the Oppressed. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, p.60.

4 Deci, Edward L. and Richard Flaste. 1995. Why We Do What We Do. New York: G.P Putnam’s Sons, p.22.