

*Rustam Kurbatov*

## Farewell to Arms!

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### To a strong school!

School is all about coercion.  
The obvious kind—the yelling, the threats,  
and the parent summons.  
The concealed kind—which incidentally is  
far worse—the persuasion, the admonitions,  
the attempts to influence.

The problem is not that students are bad or  
teachers are mean.  
The problem is in the nature of school itself,  
in the system.  
The system that can function only through  
coercion.

Thus, being called a *strong* teacher is the  
highest compliment on professionalism a  
teacher can receive.

If you work in a school you need to be  
strong!  
Strong enough to suppress the onslaught of  
children's energy.  
Strong enough to make a child do some-  
thing he doesn't want to do.  
All the while making him think that he is  
actually doing it of his own free will.

Weak people have no place here.  
Only strong teachers can maintain discipline  
in the classroom.  
Only strong teachers can achieve good  
results.  
It is only the strong teachers that children  
love and remember with gratitude.

To say that "school is all about coercion" is  
not meant as an insult.  
It's a simple fact.  
The system does not work without teachers  
forcing students.  
In other words, it's all about coercion.

Teachers have a rich arsenal at their disposal  
for coercing students.

However, there is one universal and reliable  
tool that has been proven to work.  
Educators have yet to think of anything  
better, and are unlikely to do so any time  
soon.

It's foolproof and produces immediate  
results.  
Moreover it's virtually painless. Many kids  
even enjoy it.  
To say nothing of their parents!

In case you were wondering, I am talking  
about *grades*.

### Freedom at last...?

Should we give our students grades?  
That's a silly question. It's like asking if  
we should brush our teeth in the morning.  
Grades have always been with us and  
always will be; there's no avoiding them.  
School is inconceivable without them.

The fact that some humanitarian  
teachers like Shalva Amonashvili and  
Cfflestin Freinet have managed to do  
without grades doesn't mean a thing. It's  
a purely marginal phenomenon, if not  
outright heresy.

Article 15.3 of the Russian legislation  
"On Education" states that "an education-  
al institution is entitled to choose its own  
evaluation system, the forms, procedures  
and recurrence of intermediate student





Photo from the author's archive

performance reviews." The fact that in the 16 years of this law's existence only a small number of schools have made use of it and switched to ungraded education is beside the point. This law undermines the sancta sanctorum of the Russian school—the five-grade scale. Or any grade scale, for that matter... At any rate, renouncing grades need no longer be seen as an act of heresy, or as an act of complacency worthy of Gogol's famous character Manilov. No, it is now a legislated choice. We have been granted freedom, and it is up to us to decide what to do with it.

The question "Should we grade our students?" is a legitimate one. It is a question each and every teacher should ask himself or herself. This is a topic for serious and careful consideration, so both sides of the discussion deserve a chance to have a say here...

### Pros and cons

#### *The pro-grade position*

The arguments of supporters of the traditional system are very convincing:

1. Without grades students will stop working. Yes, studying is hard work and our goal is to teach children to work. You can't rely on "interest" alone; sometimes you need to let children know that certain things simply "have to be done."
2. Without grades parents won't be able to tell how their children are doing at school. It is much easier to give a label—3, 4 or 5—than to spend thirty minutes trying to explain what a certain student can or cannot do.
3. Grades provide a clear system of values for children. Without them, children will not understand what is acceptable behavior and what is unacceptable.

Without grades, poor students will have the same status as good students.

4. Grades teach children about real life. Without them poor students will think that "it's all good" and be destined for a harsh wake-up call when, after graduation, they stumble upon the reality of adult life. It could lead to disaster.
5. The five-grade scale is simple and widely understood. In North America they use letter grades—A, B, C, etc.—but the principle is the same. Indeed, everyone in the countries of the former Soviet Union knows what it means to get a grade of *three*, and can tell the difference between a *four minus* and a *three plus*. The five-grade scale is in our blood.
6. Students themselves ask to be graded. It's true.
7. Lastly, the idea of "renouncing" grades has a very romantic ring to it. But everyone knows that it's Utopian. Just as everyone knows where such Utopias and other social experiments lead.

It's not a good idea to tempt children. Perhaps grades are evil, but rejecting them altogether would be an even greater evil. Without honest and objective evaluation people would lose touch with reality.

#### *The anti-grade position*

And now for the arguments against grades:

1. The five-grade scale is a lie. What does a 4 or a 5 actually mean? Let's refer to the text titled *Manual of the five-grade scale evaluation of academic achievement and behavior...*, ratified by the USSR People's Commissar of Education back in 1944. This is the document we are supposed to use as a guide for grading students. It informs us that

*The grade 4 is given when a student knows all of the required program material, understands it well and has thoroughly processed it. He gives the correct answers to questions (within the curriculum). He is confident and aware... He uses the standard Russian language in his written and oral work, and does not make any mistakes.*

So what, in your opinion, is the difference between a 4 (good) and a 5 (excellent)?

2. In reality, the five-grade scale is actually a three-grade scale. A grade of 1 is an admission of outright failure on

the part of the teacher; a grade of 2 represents zero knowledge, a failure on the part of the student; so that leaves only 3, 4, and 5. That being said, the gap between a "weak" 3 and a "solid" 3 is enormous.

3. The five-grade scale is biased. Whereas in math and the Russian language there are at least some objective criteria (the number of mistakes on a test), with other subjects it's all in the hands of the teacher. A *four* in one school may be a completely different grade from a *four* in the neighboring school—not to mention all the other schools in the entire country.
4. Grades divide up the student body. Poor, good, and excellent students are partitioned into separate groups, and the barriers between these groups are virtually insurmountable. It's not unlike the system of castes in ancient India, with Brahmans and Untouchables.
5. Grades do not provide an incentive for learning. Fear of punishment, a stroke for the ego?—Yes. Incentive?—No. People are motivated only when they are interested, or when they can see the practical value of the knowledge offered. Grades interfere with both incentive and interest.
6. Grades destroy trust between a teacher and a student. Trust and sincerity are inherent in children. They expect the same from adults. And what do they get for all their heartfelt efforts? "Good boy, you get a 4 today."
7. Finally, it's not just the children's minds that are damaged by grades. There are irreversible processes going on in the minds of adults, too. Think of the psychological damage they suffer when they are forced to evaluate everyone's behavior on a five-grade scale basis. This is more than an educational problem—it's a medical one!

It may seem that the arguments in support of grades are the more persuasive. However, there is one more argument against grading...

### **Giving grades is very unpleasant.**

It's awful to see the fear in the eyes of children who are facing possible failure. It's awful to hear them beg "let me try just one more time" and "please don't give me a 5." It's even worse to see a teacher's firm hand writing low grades in

the grade-books of students who treat him with nothing but trust and even love...

Thus it makes sense to consider not only the children but ourselves, too. If we don't want to lose the ability to feel, sympathize, and love when working in a school, we should surrender this right—the right to evaluate another human being.

Try going without grades for a week or two. Announce a short-term moratorium if you will. Everything will fall into place. If the students are interested in what you are telling them, they will listen without the grades. If not, there is no force in nature that will make them do so.

And at this point we'll have to think about the quality of education, rather than about grades. And *that* is the whole point of the moratorium.

### **A different school**

However, a moratorium can't go on forever. You can't reject the grading system without changing the school itself. It'll only make things worse. For instance, how will a teacher make a student rewrite a quiz now? Will he try to persuade him, talk about diligence, and appeal to his conscience? Useless! It's better to just grade them. Even distributing 2s is better than giving morality lectures.

This is only the declaration of a truce. We shall lay down our weapons. We are ready to talk.

The talks should be honest and consistent. Both the child's and the grown-up's interests should be respected.

### **A child's interests?**

1. A child wants to experience *strong sensations*.





Children are interested in everything: They like looking out of the window, studying pictures, listening to scary stories and funny anecdotes. So what do schools give them? Instead of interesting stories they get paragraphs and summaries; instead of experiments they get graphs and formulas; instead of free expression in their native language they get grammatical analyses of complex sentences; instead of observing nature they have to study Mendeleev's table. Watching and feeling are replaced by abstractions!

If we want genuine cooperation from students we must speak their language, a language of feelings and sensations. In order really to understand something, an adult has to see it and feel it. All the more so with children. True understanding of concepts is constructed by synthesizing direct experience, observation, and description.

2. A child wants his work to produce **results**.

Children are naturally active. When they are young they need to climb on things, run, jump, assemble and disassemble toys. They need to play. As they become older it's important that their activities involve substance and produce results: the kind of results they can hold in their hands, show their friends, and boast about to their parents. It makes perfect sense: You did something and here's the result...

There can be no work without material results. The only exceptions to this rule are the socialist economy and the schools.

How can children see the results of their work? By solving an open-ended math problem; writing their own texts for literature class; conducting hands-on research in physics, chemistry, or biology; creating imaginary dialogues with people of different eras for history class... All the children's masterpieces—and I use the term without a hint of irony—can be published in a school journal or video-taped.

3. A child wants to **think for himself**.

Children like to ask questions. "How? Why? What for?" are all signs of natural curiosity. Unfortunately, this curiosity seems to evaporate after the first few grades. Everything is pre-digested at school—questions, answers, everything. All you need to do is listen, remember, and repeat.

True cooperation, a truly child-centered school, is a school where the teacher does not give ready answers. Moreover, he doesn't pose "ready questions" either. All he does is lead students to inquiry, investigation, and surprise. It's the student who must ask the question. If there's no question, there's nothing to answer... Without the unexpected there is no true thinking.

4. A child wants to **communicate**.

Teenagers go to school to hang out. Learning is secondary. And what happens? Communication is reduced to ten-minute breaks and the occasional note passed in class.

If we want to build a child-centered school we must give students plenty of time—as much as half the school day—to talk with one another and work in groups.

5. Children like to be **successful**.

Success, the feeling that "I can do it" and "I am doing well," is beneficial to our nervous system. No child or adult will work without it. Why then are there so many "unsuccessful" students in our schools? Do they not want to learn? No, that's not it. Every child wants to find out about new things, and every child appreciates praise. Every child *wants* to learn until he is told time and time again that he *can't*. He can't solve problems, or spell, or write stories...

To avoid undermining a child's self-confidence, and to maintain an atmosphere of success in the classroom, a school must reject the system that imposes universal requirements on all

students. Every child should get an assignment he is capable of completing, and a good grade when he completes it.

This, then, is the children's agenda. They want their work to be well organized and enjoyable; their thinking to be independent. Is this so different from what we grown-ups want?

A school built on this foundation is more than just a child-centered school. It's a school with a common, shared language, a dialogue between grown-up and child. It is a space with two connecting streams: the children's *interests* and *thinking* as the main value of adult culture. Admittedly, this doesn't bear much resemblance to school in the traditional sense. Taking a leaf from John Dewey and Célestin Freinet, let's call it a *workshop*, for in this school children are not only learning, they are working to construct knowledge on their own. They are crafting their own understanding.

Such schools don't need grades. There is simply no time for either teachers or students to think about such matters as grades. Sound improbable? Take a look at the material from the work of the Ark Lyceum, (pp. 24-25)

But what about progress reports? and final results?

For ongoing evaluation we use a List of Individual Achievements (or in our case the *Route Chart*). It's a list of the main steps and stages of work on a topic with "passes" marking the completion of said work.

The final result is a collection of a student's creative works (in our case it's *Almanacs* and the journal called *Lyceum Gardens*). This portfolio contains a student's most interesting works, the masterpieces carefully completed and collected throughout a semester or school year.

### **Farewell to arms!**

Yes, school as we know it is all about coercion. And grades are the main source of that coercion. How can you talk about cooperation with a gun to your head? First we have to disarm and then we can work together.

However, the decision to stop using coercion raises another problem: the need to change the nature of schools, to rethink educational methods and content. Only then can we step back completely from



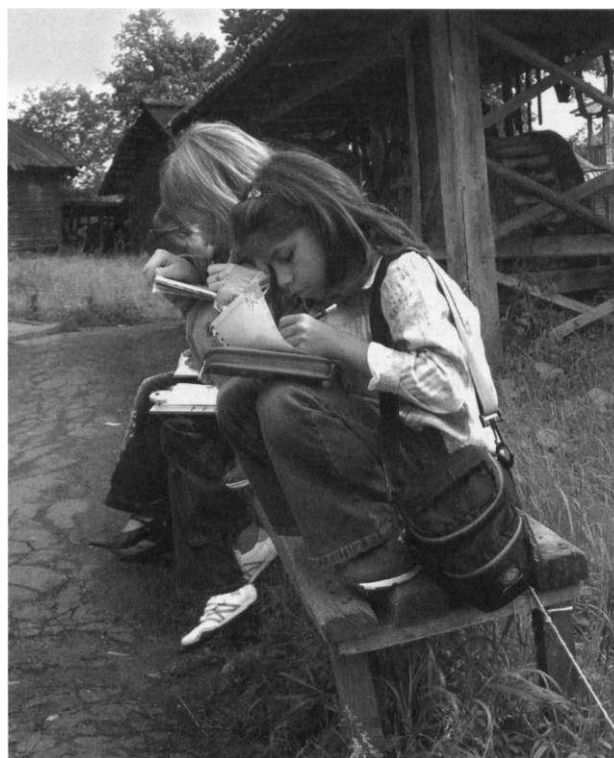
the five-grade scale and other scare tactics, leaving ourselves only a single tool for influencing our students.

Our Words: genuine talk, dialogue, conversation, communication.

And then we can breathe a sigh of relief and say, "Farewell to arms!"

### **References**

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## APPENDIX. Illustrative Curriculum from the Ark Lyceum

### ***Science, elementary school***

We ask the children to tell us in written form what they would like to learn about and are really interested in...

Here are just a few of their questions:

1. Why do monkeys no longer evolve into people?
2. Where is the end of the Universe?
3. What is wind?
4. Why do people speak different languages? Why couldn't they decide on just one?
5. How do ducks survive in difficult environments?
6. Where did reflexes come from?
7. Why are some people geniuses and others not so smart?
8. Why do people like to eat different things?
9. Why do children look like their parents?
10. Why does the mixture of gases on the Sun cause warmth?
11. If humans are the most developed beings on the planet, why can't they breathe underwater?

What do we do with these whys?

Together with the children we search for the answers. Now this represents a true Science program.

### ***Foreign language: French***

"Let's make a film and send it to France. You'll talk about yourselves, talk about the school... In French of course." Made the film, mailed it to France. They watched the film at the Marie Curie School in the Paris suburb of Bobigny. "Super! You've made a great film! We made one, too, and we'll send it to you..."

A month later we receive a film from Bobigny. Children of all colors send us a warm African/Asian hello:

*"Hello, Russians! My name is Adjani, my parents are from Mali. Dance is my passion. I love African cuisine... In other words, everything my Mom makes..."*

We are near the end of the second quarter. Outside the window it's always rain or snow, it gets dark at 4:00 in the afternoon, and we have a math test next week. And here suddenly we have passion and dancing, a dazzling smile on a wide black face, and African cuisine...

"We are going to make a video tour of our school and send it to them", the fifth-graders say.

Made it, mailed it.

And no one asked about the grades...

If teachers who read *Thinking Classroom* want to write to Russian kids from the Ark Lyceum, we'll send you a film about our life, too!

### ***Primeval History***

We don't just study history.

We travel with the children in a Time Machine. For real. One of our first trips is to a primitive society.

What do you think is the first thing fifth-graders want to know about hunter-gatherer societies?

How they raised their children: what was OK, and what warranted punishment...

(Thanks to the classic work by the American anthropologist Margaret Mead on the islands of Eastern Samoa we know a lot about child rearing in a primitive society).

Like true travelers, the children write a travelogue...

*Here on the island the children start helping the adults at a young age. They do many different things: For example, girls as young as two help by sweeping and placing fruit cut up by their mothers into clay pots, while two-year-old boys gather firewood. By the age of five boys are climbing trees as tall as 30 meters. ... Older children keep an eye on their younger brothers and sisters. (Den Nem)*

And then the students put themselves into the place of "those people" for a while and write letters to us, the people of the 21st century. Here is an example:

*Dear people on the mainland!*

*I hope you get my letter, which I am sending in a bottle by sea. I am writing to you from one of the islands of Eastern Samoa. I am ten years old. I have many brothers and sisters and of course a mother and father. Older kids raise the younger kids here. I am always taking care of the young kids, teaching them about things, feeding them and fetching water. Sometimes I climb up a palm tree for coconuts... (Lyusy a, Zubova)*

Do these fifth-graders have time to think about grades when they are gathering firewood or climbing 30-meter palm trees?

### ***fodern History***

Russian History in the 9th Grade. Let's set aside our textbooks. After all, we are living among people who took part in, even created, this history. Let's ask them about "the old days": life in the times of Stalin and Khrushchev, the period of "stagnation". What were our parents and grandparents like when they were fifteen like we are now? What were their lives like? What did they think about? What did they believe in? Such was the beginning of a two-month project in our History class, which we called "Through the Eyes of a Teenager"...

The majority of our research was devoted to the years of World War II. Clearly we were not talking about the war as portrayed in history textbooks—statistics, battle charts, and the heroic deeds of the people—nor even the war depicted in stories told by veterans (for the simple, sad reason that these people now are over ninety years old...) We were talking about a different, unexpected war. A war survived by ten- to fifteen-year-olds. There were no battle stories here, only "ordinary life" on the home front and under occupation.

*During the war my grandmother and her parents lived in the center of Moscow, on Molchanovka Street. Her parents worked in a factory and when there was a lot to do they spent the night at work. At the time my grandmother was five years old, yet she stayed home alone. When an air-raid warning sounded she would take her little backpack, which held all the items she needed, and go to the bomb shelter in the Arbatskaya metro station (Dasha Odintsova)*

*During the war my grandmother lived near the city of Chelyabinsk, in the village of Nizhnyaya Petropavlovka. Her mother, my great-grandmother, had died a month before the war. Her father was conscripted into a forced labor brigade. Five children were left alone. My grandmother, who was the oldest, was fifteen at the time...*

*They had nothing to eat, especially in the spring. But they wouldn't touch the seed potatoes. They knew that if there was nothing to plant it would only make things worse. They were starving, but like all families—even a family consisting of five children—they were obligated to pay regular property taxes: 450 liters of milk per cow a year. The cows, however, didn't always produce milk...*

*There were no matches or soap in the village. They would leave a stick burning for the night so as to have something to light the stove in the morning... (Sasha Kurbatova)*

*My grandmother lived in the town of Bogoroditsk in near the city of Tula. The Germans invaded the town in November of 1941... People were scared, as they'd heard a lot about the viciousness of the fascists. They hardly ever left their homes. When a woman went outside she took her children with her, just so if something happened they would all be together...*

*"Once," said my grandmother, "I met a German soldier in the street and he gave me a piece of candy. I took it but I wouldn't eat it. Then, using gestures, the soldier explained to me that he'd left a child back in Germany, and that he didn't want to fight or kill people..." (Vitya Kovalev)*

*My grandmother told me this story: "In 1941 I was twelve years old. We lived in the village of Buzlanovo, near Krasnogorsk... The Germans were approaching. They started bombing. The other children and I ran to the trenches. Grandmother Mas ha left her pig behind and left the doors wide open. All she took was the samovar. We would sit in the trenches and wait for word that the battle was over. Sometimes we had to spend the night there. The old women would pray to God, and we would laugh because almost nobody believed in God then..." (Dasha Lysenko)*

The five-year-old (Dasha Odintsova's grandmother) taking her little backpack to the bomb shelter; the burning sticks hidden for the night by Sasha Kurbatova's grandmother; the candy that Vitya Kovalev's grandmother refused to eat and, finally, Dasha Lysenko's great-great-grandmother Masha with her pig and her samovar: that's the war for us now.

This isn't just a history lesson. This is an attempt to revive something that died in 20th century Russia: the memory of our ancestors, the genetic memory of our people. There were ripple effects from our project: One girl went to another city for her vacation with the specific purpose of talking to her grandmother. A boy made an international phone call to his grandmother. Another girl brought in a letter from the front written by her great granduncle, and the death notice his family had received a mere month later... One grandmother decided to write a detailed and comprehensive memoir. Grandparents told their grandkids things they had never told their own children. As a result, the parents of our ninth-graders learned something for themselves, too. So what is this? Is it history, or is it something more?

