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Kayla M. Nelson

Brigham Young University - Provo, [kayla.marie.n@live.com](mailto:kayla.marie.n@live.com)

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Kayla Nelson

### Harry Potter and the Analysis of a Hogwarts Education

When the Harry Potter phenomenon began, readers consumed the pages of the mystical and exciting life of The Boy Who Lived. This obsession with a hidden world of witches and wizards in Great Britain instilled an excitement for the unknown and fictitious. Everyone wanted to know how Harry Potter would survive, who he would be fighting, and what mystery he, Hermione, and Ron would need to solve. With every book and movie release, the love for the wizarding world only grew and the story of Harry became more and more complex. One of the greatest pulls of the books was the magical and, sometimes, dangerous school where young witches and wizards learned to control and use their magic. Hogwarts is filled with bumbling ghosts, poltergeists, goblins, house elves, enchanted suits of armor, moving staircases, magically appearing feasts, and talking portraits. Not only does it contain all of these fantastical creatures and objects, the subjects are quite exciting as well. A young witch or wizard is able to study a vast number of subjects: Defense Against the Dark Arts, Potions, Herbology, Transfiguration, Charms, and Divination. To a generation of students forced to study math, English, history, health, and science, the idea of exploring the subjects at Hogwarts is too good to be true. The Harry Potter books became an escape for many students who felt restricted, uninspired, and simply bored in school. They would hope for a chance to be educated like those witches and wizards; many would pray and wait for their own Hogwarts letter to come by owl and take them to a new and better learning experience. But would Hogwarts be a better experience? While Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry prides itself on its hands-on learning experiences and a stimulating (albeit, a bit dangerous) environment, the school struggles with governmental standards and qualified teachers.

In Hogwarts, there are many different teaching styles at play. There are a variety of subjects with a specializing teacher; each instructor has their own approach to teaching and education. Due to the fact that Hogwarts is a magical school where young witches and wizards are meant to learn how to use and control their magic, it can be assumed that there is a certain level of hands-on education that must be instituted.

Because how can a witch or wizard learn to use magic without the use of a wand? John Dewey, educational theorist, describes some of the most important aspects of a successful education as hands-on learning, focus on student interest, and connecting school and learning to everyday life (“Dewey, John”). In the more successful teachers at Hogwarts, there is a definite suggestion that each of these fields are filled and focused on within the classroom.

JK Rowling uses parallelism to compare and contrast the teachers and their teaching styles. She places classes next to each other in Harry, Ron, and Hermione’s schedules in order to create a stark contrast of teacher successes, failures, shortcomings, and quirks.

The classes of Professor Trelawney and Professor McGonagall nearly always fall concurrent to each other in the schedules of the main characters. These two professors are opposites in nearly every way. Professor Trelawney, hiding sherry bottles and once heard muttering about “nasty accusations”, has an over-reliance on alcohol and finds odd joy in predicting the untimely death of her students (*The Half Blood Prince* 541). Seen more often as a fraud than not (and even McGonagall cannot hold her tongue concerning it), she is constantly attempting to build up her reputation by using naïve students to have her predictions come true. In *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, she abuses her role as teacher and uses the extremely nervous and shaky Neville to prove herself by predicting his clumsiness and saying, “after you’ve broken your first cup, would you be so kind as to select one of the blue-patterned ones?” (104). When he, of course, does drop the teacup, the gullible students assume she used her seer powers to predict when, in actuality, she exploited a nervous young wizard into believing he would drop the cup. This exploitation of her students’ characteristics creates an uncomfortable and fearful classroom environment. It also shows Trelawney’s willingness to use students as stepping blocks to show her success as a true seer. Besides this, she also puts down students in order to set herself higher upon a pedestal. Trelawney makes an example of Hermione’s objectiveness to Divination referring to her logic (which aids her in every other subject) as an inability and lack of power by saying:

I am sorry to say that from the moment you have arrived in this class, my dear, it has been apparent that you do not have what the noble art of Divination requires. Indeed, I don't remember ever meeting a student whose mind was so hopelessly mundane. (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 298).

Trelawney's cruel words are meant only to serve to her own reputation. There is no thought to what these words may do to a student. Not only this, she abuses the fact that Hermione is the top student in her class which, due to her know-it-all attitude, creates an opportunity for the students who may envy her academic status to tease her. Several of her students, after this episode, "looked deeply impressed" by Professor Trelawney (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 299). She opens up a student for abuse from other students in order to push the power of her own clairvoyance onto the class.

McGonagall is quite the opposite of Trelawney. Stern and organized, yet not unafraid to bend some rules. McGonagall's classroom demands respect, and respect is what she receives. Hermione, who has only ever spoken against Divination and Trelawney, especially gives this respect and watches McGonagall closely. Following Professor Trelawney's first lesson in which she predicts the death of Harry, McGonagall assures the class that "seeing death omens is [Professor Trelawney's] favorite way of greeting a new class" (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 109). This assurance from McGonagall causes Hermione to laugh with relief, showing her faith in her professor's opinions and words. McGonagall's faith and love for her students is evident when she encourages Neville in his sixth year, saying "it's high time your grandmother learned to be proud of the grandson she's got, rather than the one she thinks she ought to have" (*Half Blood Prince* 174). She encourages her students to do their best and, when necessary, builds them up with confidence. However, she is not a soft and constantly coddling professor. After giving this compliment to Neville, he "blinked confusedly... Professor McGonagall had never paid him a compliment before" (*Half Blood Prince* 174). Her infrequency of compliments show her focus on the curriculum. She gives compliments that are deserved. McGonagall is respected by her students due to her fairness and consistency.

In the *Prisoner of Azkaban*, Snape and Lupin are rivals, both in their past and in the classroom. Lupin is the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher Harry and the rest of school always hoped they could have.

Lupin's classroom is one that is welcoming and interesting from the first day. Lupin focuses intently on hands-on education. He immediately has the students facing and warding off an unknown creature (the boggart). J. K. Rowling, author, uses the boggart to create a symbol within Lupin and his teaching. In the very first lesson, Lupin encourages each student to face their own fear, the boggart, and send it away with laughter. The students entered the classroom filled with anxiety of the unknown and left having fought their own demons and feeling more confident than when they arrived. Neville Longbottom was an especially important aspect to this lesson. He entered and was particularly drained, nervous, and unconfident from Snape's lesson immediately prior. To make matters worse, Snape tells Lupin in front of the whole class that Neville is essentially hopeless to all education (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 132). Lupin, despite hearing this, takes Neville and gives him the opportunity and confidence to prove otherwise. Lupin gives hope to his students. He encourages and he uplifts them. He also creates lessons that the students feel are relevant to their lives after Hogwarts which is essential to a well rounded education (*The Ultimate Harry Potter and Philosophy* 215). This relevance is extremely clear when, throughout the books following, Harry, Ron, and Hermione run into many of the magical creatures Lupin teaches in his lessons, including boggarts and grindylows. (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 153). Lupin also takes a stab at exams. Rather than having his final exam in the great hall or classroom as most of the other teachers, Lupin decides to take the students outside and do an obstacle course. He uses this alternative type of assessment in order to help the students have a more practical test, more fun, feel more at ease, and less stressed. Professor Lupin's teaching style instills a sense of trust in the students and creates an environment that brings about positive learning.

Where Lupin is loved, Snape is loathed. Snape's behavior as a teacher is appalling. Snape and Lupin's classes are paralleled with each other, creating a stark contrast between their likeability and teaching abilities. Snape is a master of potions; his opening speech for the first year students gave an insight into his character when he says, "I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death—if you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 136). This introduction to Snape's character shows his disdain for students and his terrifying expectations of perfection. He

immediately creates an environment that makes his students uncomfortable and feels hostile. Right off the bat, his students feel as if they are not good enough to be taught by Snape. Professor Snape also is extremely cruel and unfair toward his students. He picks on Neville Longbottom relentlessly. At one point, Snape, in front of the whole class, asks Neville “if anything penetrate[s] that thick skull” of his, causing Neville extreme embarrassment and terror (Prisoner of Azkaban 125). This attack on Neville’s intelligence in front of the class show Snape’s utter disregard for the feelings of his students. Later, when asked what his biggest fear is, Neville responds that it is Professor Snape (Prisoner of Azkaban 134). Snape’s anger and cruelty get in the way of his teaching in every lesson. He focuses on abusing his students rather than teaching them. In *The Half Blood Prince*, Harry carries around Snape’s old potions book (unbeknownst to either of them) and his “best subject had suddenly become Potions” (Half Blood Prince 318). Harry was able to learn from Snape when Snape wasn’t actually present to harass and abuse. When Snape is around, he cripples the students’ abilities to learn through the classroom environment he creates.

Exams in wizarding education occur every year for students at the end of spring term. The only exceptions to this are the fifth and seventh year students who are required to take the ministry given, standardized tests that supposedly determine their future successes as witches and wizards: the Ordinary Wizard Levels (OWLs) and the Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Test (N.E.W.T.). The grades in these tests determine the future of the students as functioning members of the wizarding world.

In the British Wizarding world, there is a high emphasis on going to school and getting a lot of OWLs and NEWTs. These grades are important for the future of the students. The successes they experience at Hogwarts are regarded as irreplaceably important to these young witches and wizards. However, despite the great importance placed on education, there is no education or certification (besides an interview with the Headmaster) set in place to become a teacher or educator. The students are encouraged to focus on classes that best suit them and to take classes that will lead them to their career goal. Harry wants to be an Auror, so he must take NEWT level potions and defense against the dark arts. If Neville wants to be a Herbologist, he simply must continue succeeding in Herbology. The career paths seem simple, but what happens when ideas,

goals, and intentions change? In colleges all over the United States, between “20 and 50 percent of students enter college as ‘undecided’” and are unsure which path to choose as their major (Freedman). In a college environment, students struggle to decide on their career path and major. The pressure set upon students to decide their future is huge. And who is to say that once the decision is made that it is the right one? In fact, it is estimated that “75% of students change their major at least once before graduation” (Freedman). It is significant that college aged students are struggling with these decisions while, in Hogwarts, fifteen year olds are expected to begin testing into their careers. In *The Half Blood Prince*, Harry experiences extreme sadness when he realizes that, because of his Exceeds Expectations in Potions, he will be unable to fulfill his dream of becoming an auror for the Ministry of Magic (100). In his fifth year of school, Harry is faced with the idea that, because of a grade, he cannot be the adult he wants to be. How is that a healthy thought process for a fifteen year old student?

Fred, George, and Percy Weasley show the ways that OWLs and NEWTs can, and sometimes can't, aid a wizard in future progression. Percy Weasley aspired to be respected (probably due to the constant disrespect he received from his brothers, Fred and George). Percy managed to procure the spots of Prefect and Head Boy while at Hogwarts, positions he felt ennobled him quite nicely. Percy's pride for his accomplishments caused him to walk “with his chest thrown out” so that no one would miss seeing his Head Boy badge (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 71). His efforts in Hogwarts led to his internship with Barty Crouch Sr. and, later, employment for the Minister of Magic. Percy worked hard, knew what he wanted, and managed to acquire it because Hogwarts could support that career path. Fred and George are, in some ways, very similar to Percy while not quite fitting the mold that Hogwarts creates. Both Fred and George are obviously extremely talented wizards, they managed to figure out and use an extremely complicated map of Hogwarts when they were only eleven years old (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 192). They lived up to their own expectations of becoming the school tricksters and were very proud of it. One of their tricks, turning an entire hallway into a swamp, was left as a memorial to their genius by Professor Flitwick because “it was a really good bit of magic” (*The Half Blood Prince* 848). This gives evidence to their fantastic magical abilities. They learned a

lot, but didn't see the glitter in excelling in exams saying that they are "not fussed about N.E.W.T.s...the Snackboxes are ready to roll" (*The Half Blood Prince* 574). The twins are so confident in their business (Skiving Snackboxes are an extremely popular candy that helps get students out of class) that they have no worries about how they do on their tests. So, they dropped out. Fred and George left Hogwarts, saying "I think we have outgrown full-time education", and set off to start their own careers (*The Half Blood Prince* 674). Fred and George managed to become some of the most successful businessmen in London. In the midst of the terror and unknown in *The Deathly Hallows*, when many businesses were closing down, Weasley's Wizard Wheezes becomes a thriving joke shop. The twins' prowess for fun and magic, even in the midst of terror, gives them an edge. These drop outs became far more successful than Percy despite the fact that their education was cut short. Fred and George are examples of how the education system doesn't always measure intelligence and abilities accurately.

Standardized testing in America is a controversial subject within the educational system. While many feel it is essential to creating a standard of education and giving students a bar to rise to, there is a vast majority of people who nearly demonize it. (put in the research about standardized testing in America. Look into Britain's as well.) These tests claim to accurately depict what students are capable of and their possible prospects for success in the future. The Weasley twins took their OWLs, the standardized test required for fifth year Hogwarts students, and did not do well. Mrs. Weasley scolded was furious because the twins "didn't get as many OWLs as she expected" (*Goblet of Fire* 55). They only received seven passing grades between the two of them, meaning that one twin passed three out of nine subjects and the other passed four out of nine (*Half Blood Prince* 103). Poor test scores in standardized testing are said to mean that a student is lacking skill or understanding in that particular subject. However, as Fred and George proved, grades don't necessarily indicate intelligence level. The idea that grades determine intelligence gives the student receiving the grades the thoughts that their worth or success is attached to the grade they receive. To make matters worse, the grades the students receive for standardized tests such as OWLs are filled with derogatory and demeaning connotations. The passing grades are rather common place, with O for Outstanding, E for

Exceeds Expectations, and A for Acceptable. The failing grades, however, can be quite shocking: P for Poor, D for Dreadful, and T for Troll. These grades show the lack of empathy and respect the ministry of magic (who puts forth these tests) have for the students. If a student were to receive a T grade, the implication is that they are as thick as a troll, a drooling, slow-moving creature that speaks only in grunts, and therefore their place in society is far lower than the other students who received passing grades. In *The Half Blood Prince*, Hermione, the top student in her year, was shaking in fits almost unable to open the results of her test because of her anxiety. She knew that her entire future rested upon her grades, her ability to go forward and pursue the career path of her choice was resting on the results of her OWLs (Half Blood Prince 101). This intense pressure is far too much for sixteen year old students. Far too much of Harry, Ron, and Hermione's futures falls upon the results of their OWLs tests, creating tension and anxiety about their futures.

The cancellation of exams in the Harry Potter series happens several times. In *The Chamber of Secrets*, the end of year exams are cancelled due to the recent ravaging of the school by an ancient and deadly Basilisk. In *The Goblet of Fire*, Harry is exempt from the exams due to the trauma of witnessing Cedric Diggory's death and the return of Lord Voldemort. And, again, in *The Half Blood Prince*, the cancellation of exams occurs after Dumbledore's death. This is an exceptional commentary on the value of education in the Wizarding World. While all of these cancellations are dependent on extremely dangerous circumstances, the nonchalant cancellation and lack of response from parents or government officials shows the sometimes low priority that witches and wizards place on education. While there is a great deal of importance placed on getting OWLs and NEWTs for prestigious careers, not taking the tests or graduating from Hogwarts is common for thriving witches and wizards throughout the wizarding world. It is also significant that, even though the Harry Potter series takes place at a school, the amount of time spent in classrooms is significantly less than the parts of the story filled with adventure, rule breaking, and hanging out with friends. Most of the portion of the Children's Literature genre that takes place in schools does not focus on the schooling of the characters, but rather "sports and friendships frequently trump classes, making it seem as if the school story is about school in name only" (Gruner 217). Hogwarts is famous in literature

for its fantastical adventures and odd teachers, not its pedagogical practices. This focus on something outside of the schooling of the students may indicate J.K. Rowling's intention of learning outside of the walls of pedagogy.

Harry is one of the most accomplished wizards in his school, not because of what he was taught by his professors but through his experiences outside of the classroom. According to John Holt's theories:

Children do not need to be made to learn, told what to learn, or shown how. If we give them access to enough of the world, including our own lives and work in that world, they will see clearly enough what things are truly important to us and to others, and they will make for themselves a better path into that world than we could make for them. (Holt 157)

Harry was given the circumstances to learn what was important to him and how the world worked. Because of these experiences, Harry is much better equipped to begin life after Hogwarts than any of his peers. He has learned what was important to learn in order to survive. In his fifth year at Hogwarts, Harry starts a secret organization dedicated to learning the ins and outs of Defense Against the Dark Arts in which he is the teacher (*Order of the Phoenix* 390). His teaching, outside of regular schooling, helps a couple dozen students to learn defensive spells. Neville Longbottom, notoriously nervous and accident prone, even manages to begin to progress (*Order of the Phoenix* 393). The process of getting out of the classroom to learn is significant. The adventures of Harry, Ron, and Hermione lead to more learning experiences than most of their classrooms do. In Margaret Booth's essay "What American Schools can Learn from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry" she says:

The three heroes of the series constantly find themselves in the process of discovery learning, in which they experience real problems for themselves and must discover how to solve each one without the aid of teachers or other authorities at school. However, all schools should provide their students with the proper support that will guide them through the process of knowledge-getting. And in truth, Harry, Ron, and Hermione certainly become experts in the process of knowledge-getting as the stories progress. (Booth)

Because of the experiences of these three friends, they were able to gain the experience necessary for a successful future. Harry and Ron never took their NEWTs and yet, because of their experiences fighting Dark Wizards at seventeen years old, they were hired by the Ministry of Magic.

While, for many students and fans, Hogwarts seems like the ideal place to learn and grow as an adolescent, it may not be the most pragmatic. Not only because it exists in a magical and fantastical world full of unicorns and magic wands, but because of the many issues that mirror many that occur within our own education systems such as under qualified teachers and government standards. Hogwarts obviously exhibits a more exciting learning experience, but, at times, it is a miracle that Harry, Ron, and Hermione learn anything at all while being surrounded by the dangers of ancient snakes, runaway trolls, and resurrected beings seeking revenge on an adolescent boy. And, overall, it seems that Harry has learned far more outside the walls of Hogwarts. Hogwarts may seem like the educational gold mine, but it has a long way to go before it is anyone's perfect school.

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