

Book reviews

The discipline of hope: learning from a lifetime of teaching, Herbert Kohl, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998, 350 pp., hard cover, \$24.00.

Twenty-five years ago I read the book *36 Children* by Herbert Kohl who detailed his first teaching position in New York City. Kohl was a peer of Jonathan Kozol, John Holt and other educators who thought that schools could function much differently with some creativity, flexibility, and improvisation mixed together in an atmosphere of respect between students and teachers. Kohl maintains this radical edge throughout his career and reflects upon the lessons learned along the way. This book goes beyond education and is more about the change process itself: the commitment you and I make to build a better future for the individuals who have come to us for support. Providing hope that a better future lies ahead is perhaps the best we can offer.

The General Highlights of this Book:

- Herbert Kohl believes that there is no one current method or way of doing anything. The key to success is understanding the dynamic interplay of several relationships at work in any given situation. The teacher/instructor must know how to improvise his/her skills to the ever changing circumstances of each day. There is no set pattern of expectations without the understanding of unpredictable events and their role in the learning process.
- Much of the content is a summary of key events in which Kohl experimented with his ideas about how to structure the learning process across multiple environments; i.e., kindergarten, college, high school experimental class, teacher training. The premise that a good teacher can discover how each person learns best and build upon that knowledge is consistently applied across age levels and cultural diversity. Each learner brings a rich history of prior experiences that give clues about how to proceed in a current undertaking.
- The book *Teacher* by Sylvia Ashton Warner plays an important part in affirming the organic nature of curriculum and the choice of materials that emanate from the local environments and cultural context of the learner. Kohl cites Ashton Warner's classic as a foundation upon which good teaching emerges.

- Theater and music are two vehicles through which Kohl places the context of curriculum. Consistent with multiple intelligence approach, this visionary educator uses a multi-sensory approach to the learning process. Within a group of learners there exists individuals with talents that can be applied to current situations to motivate all to a higher level of appreciation and accomplishment of desired outcomes.
- This publication is foremost the chronology of a person living out his convictions as the author questions what new, exciting discoveries are just around the corner. The reader travels with Kohl from east coast to west coast and with students from middle school to high school to college to kindergarten. Each location and age group presents unique challenges but each are also approached with the same reverence for the learning process.

Specific Areas of Excellence

- *At its core, it (teaching) is not mechanical or technological. I have always thought of myself as a teacher the way others think about themselves as gardeners, painters, composers, mathematicians, and poets. I am a craftsperson of learning, working to refine what I do with young people to the point where it is both free and structured, spontaneous and disciplined, innovative and classical, fun and very difficult.* (p. 10) The paradox of supporting individuals is captured in this quote. For example, we should know the principles of learning well but not necessarily when we are going to implement that knowledge. Spontaneity knows no schedule. But our skills are put to their most intense scrutiny in times of unpredictable challenges. I also like Kohl's comparison of the craft of teaching and its equivalent stature to other vocations of people who provide inspired works. To witness a talented instructor or teacher of a difficult to learn skill is art.
- *...school reform. . . People have systems to sell, and yet I've never encountered a system that meets the needs of all children or that measures its success on the basis of how every child does. Just about every attempt at school reform seems to try*

to fit the child to the system rather than help teachers, students and communities build education that works for them. (p. 51). There is much relevance in this statement if we transfer its message to adults with disabilities and the packaged vocational assessment evaluation tools and preparation programs that purport to help diagnose and prepare individuals for employment. The manufacturers of these products have a “method” or “system” to sell and provide a detailed analysis of what the individual fails to do well. Based on this deficit analysis, predictions are made about the level of work and “model” of service. As Kohl cautions, they don’t work! A person-centered approach to assessment relies on listening to an individual tell of his/her dreams, interests, talents, ambitions, and skills upon which a successful work experience can evolve with designated supports.

- . . . *creating specialties and master’s degrees based on categories of student resistance to rigid and contentless learning should be abandoned. Instead of creating more degrees in special education we should be spending more time developing creative teachers and complex learning environments.* (p. 73) This statement creates some cognitive dissonance. Currently I teach graduate courses that assist students to obtain a master’s degree in special education. Although generic in scope, this degree helps to legitimize the differentness of what it takes to assist individuals to learn new skills when they have been labeled with a stigma of disability. Perhaps, instead I should be encouraging students to study about the unique and different ways of creating more stimulating learning environments for all students regardless of a label so that they will be better prepared to implement changes in the direction of full inclusion in their own career path.
- *Figuring out how to teach someone to read is like working out a jigsaw puzzle when you don’t know the larger picture you’re working toward. You have to get hints and clues from the student and use all the techniques and skills your craft provides in new constellations for each child* (p. 170). I like this analogy of not really having the full picture whenever we work with people. We have approximations of what the future might hold for an individual and what dreams there are for that person’s life. At best we make educated guesses about how to proceed with our supports but we must be willing to change our view of what is right

based on the ever changing input of information we receive from the individual, significant people in that person’s life, shifts in community activities, and the relative instability of the political climate that pervades most lives of the people we support. At best we offer a package of supports and components of which can change based on the frequent collection of information about the outcomes we are observing.

- *I spend a lot of effort keeping “failure” out of list of possibilities and like to think of someone I’m having trouble helping learn to read as simply a person who has not yet learned to read. . . . There is never a point at which I am willing to say someone will never learn to read. This may be absurd, but to teach well you sometimes have to make absurd assumptions in favor of your students.* (p. 172) This value reminds me of Marc Gold’s Try Another Way approach. In my earlier days of professional development I remember hearing Marc Gold’s comments, “And if that doesn’t work, try another way. . . and if that doesn’t work still, try another way!” When an individual is not successful in acquiring a targeted skill or activity, we must place more responsibility on discovering different teaching approaches rather than placing the blame on the person and his/her label.
- . . . *as a teacher you have to become a good improviser, adjusting, changing direction, and feeling your way - while maintaining order and projecting confidence when you may still be unsure of the direction you want to take with a particular group of students. . . the habit of innovation.* (p. 195) A resourceful and successful facilitator of supports understands this statement by Kohl. Each person presents such unique circumstances no exact set of supports can be assembled that look exactly like the set of supports for anybody else. The blending together of creative ideas from people who have a caring, committed interest in a person, results in a plan of action open for modification and refinement each step along the way.
- *You cannot step twice into the same river, for fresh waters are ever flowing in on you. We step and do not step into the same river, we are and are not.* Heraclitus (p. 265) This quote reminds me that each day brings a unique, different contact with the individuals I may be asked to support. No two days are the same. I am mindful of the present as events unfold in ways I have never experienced before. The imagery of the river is a good one

upon which to reflect. It also reminds me of a statement by Rene Dubose - *Trend is not destiny!*

Areas In Which This Publication Can Be Enhanced:

- There are several resources by Kohl that had an impact on his values and philosophy of teaching including Sylvia Ashton-Warner's *Teacher*, *Homer Lane's Talks to Parents and Teachers*, and *Ben Shan's The Shape of Content*. The interested reader is urged to review some of the writings of these influential guides.
- Kohl has written over 40 books beginning with a classic *36 Children*. Certainly, one way to enhance your appreciation for this current book would be to browse through several of his earlier works or read in more detail those offerings mentioned more frequently in this book.
- Discussion groups among colleagues are increasing as a means of staff growth and development. Kohl's books would be an excellent selection for a group to read and draw connections from whatever current work each member of the group concentrates. In fact., I distributed a book for review from the New York Times to a group of 24 upper level students in a curriculum development course and requested each person make ten connections in successive order starting from the content of the book review. This exercise shows the diverse paths different people can take to bring meaning to current interests/work in their current life and head in a direction no other student will end at.

Common Threads Throughout This Publication:

- The mutuality between student and teacher both individuals as learners is a common theme throughout Kohl's book. The teacher learns more about the craft of instruction and organizing the context of the learning environment as the student acquires new skills and competence. The emergence of a truly satisfying experience occurs when the joint benefits are realized by the instructor and student.
- *...the discipline of hope: the refusal to accept limits on what our students can learn or on what you, as a teacher, can do to facilitate learning.* (p. 9) The title of Kohl's book is defined in the beginning pages and permeates each page thereafter. This value is certainly applicable to all situations in which we support others, both within the context of a school setting and with adults for whom we provide assistance.

- Kohl uses this image of a dramaturge to capture the role of a teacher. *A dramaturge assists in any way possible or useful and works with all of the parties involved in the development of a performance.* (p. 328) Kohl views himself as an educational dramaturge. This role is one that captures the essence of his function throughout his career as well as the consultant function he is more apt to play in his current work.
- Kohl acknowledges that only a minority of administrators hold most of the same values that provide the foundation upon which defines education. However, creativity can flourish even under the most under funded and under appreciated work environments. Listening to the spoken and unspoken messages from students provides the cues for how to modify and change existing curricula and teaching styles for a more effective outcome.

Recommendations of its Utility to Rehabilitation Professionals:

- We can emulate the values held by Kohl who sees each person as a new learning opportunity to advance his own skills as a positive support in each individual's life. Setbacks are occasions to figure out a different approach that may assist more people in the future because of a current unsolved challenge.
- Primarily written as an introspective journey through his career path, Kohl's message has applicability to all who support individuals to achieve quality-of-life outcomes in their lives. There are numerous similarities in the values espoused by Kohl and person-centered planning. This book warrants a high priority in your reading list.

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When spider webs unite: challenging articles and essays on community, diversity, and inclusion, Shafik Asante, Toronto, Ontario: Inclusion Press, 1997, 135 pp., soft cover \$15.00.

Shafik Asante was a human rights activist who died of cancer on September 5, 1997, at the age of 48. His work was international in scope. He was the founder of the New African Voices Alliance and the Director of Community Awareness Network. He was active in various campaigns against the privatization of city services, and served as campaign manager for Max Wein-

er's 1987 run for city council in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Shafik gave workshops on community organizing and alliance building to various groups including Americare, Partners in Policymaking, Toronto Summer Institute on Inclusion, Community & Diversity, YMCA and the federal administration on developmental disabilities (United States). This book is a collection of essays and articles written by Shafik and focuses on issues including community, alliance building, "ableism", "villaging", leadership and organizing. Shafik makes some astute observations on the way the American society treats people of color, people with disabilities and women. He not only brings these issues to the surface, but also offers advice on how people who want to change this society can begin to take leadership roles and organize themselves so that their voices can be heard.

The General Highlights Of This Book:

- One of the essays focuses on what Shafik refers to as "villaging", which originates from the African saying, "It takes a village to raise a child." Simply stated, he says villaging means that people need people. It is the understanding that people should be supportive of one another all of the time or whenever help is needed or requested. Villaging, Shafik says, is you seeing your child as being mine as well, and me seeing my child as being yours. Helping each other to raise our children will give us the security of knowing that even when we aren't home, someone is looking out for our children.
- Shafik gets right to the point and provides helpful guidance about becoming more active in the community. His essays on alliance building not only explain what alliance building is, but how to do it! He defines an alliance as a coming together of a people who agree to work together to accomplish a common, agreed upon objective. Shafik outlines the seven steps in organizing an alliance, which are clear, concise, and helpful to anyone who has cause and wants to get people involved in it.
- Shafik discusses inclusion throughout the book, however, one essay in particular is dedicated entirely to the question, "What is inclusion?" He asserts that the accepted definition of inclusion in the United States is not acceptable to him. He says it has been accepted that inclusion means, "inviting those who have been historically locked out to come in." This definition, he claims, has good intentions, but must be strengthened. He raises a thought-provoking question: "Who has the authority or right to invite others in? And how did the

inviters get in?" This is a very good point. Who does have the right to say who is "in" and who is "out"?

- One of the major themes of Shafik's essays is the celebration of diversity as he tells stories and uses analogies to clearly express how beautiful diversity can be. Shafik's writing is refreshing as well as enjoyable to read because the essays are written as he would talk, thus allowing his passion and excitement to shine through.
- Another major issue Shafik explores throughout his essays is labeling and how it can be used by society not only to degrade and put down minorities and people with disabilities, but also to separate "us" from "them". He says that we label people to make s look different from, or better than, people we consider to be "the others". He compares events in history, such as the treatment of Native Americans, Africans, and Jews, to the way people with disabilities are treated today. Shafik is very straightforward and honest when he discusses how society treats people who are considered different", than the majority.

Specific Areas of Excellence:

- *...my friends and I were not afraid of what we knew about them. We feared what we didn't know, and what our youthful minds imagines.* (p. 70.) I believe the main reason why many people are reluctant to have their children in the same classes with students with disabilities is out of fear of the unknown. This fear is not only found in the educational setting, but also in the community. People who don't have regular contact, or any contact with people with disabilities, can fear them because they don't know them on a personal level. I thought Shafik's observation was a very accurate one.
- *When we take the should love pressure off, we create the conditions where genuine friendships and partnerships may thrive.* (p. 69) Shafik acknowledges that building friendship and community are two different entities. He says community is the soil in which friendship takes root. Too often, people with good intentions try to force friendships without taking the first step, which is building community. Instead of telling people that they must get along and be instant friends, we should be creating opportunities and environments where this may occur naturally.

- Shafik states in his essays that he does not care for the term “disability”. Instead, he says that more often than not, we are referring to people with unrecognized abilities. He emphasizes that no human being is completely disabled. Everyone can do something. In reference to the prefix “dis”, he mentions how the younger generation uses it today to mean to ignore or to abuse in some way or another. Any word you think about, actually, that begins with the prefix “dis”, means something negative. So, instead of emphasizing what people cannot do, Shafik asks why we can’t emphasize what they can do: their abilities, their ableness! Once again, he makes us stop and think about how we put people down with labels so automatically, that we don’t even realize when we’re doing it!
- *Holding office or some appointed position does not make you a leader. Only holding solutions can.* (p. 84) The quote is taken from one of Shafik’s essays on leadership, and includes issues of defining leadership, commitment, responsibility, and accountability. He stresses the characteristics of good leadership while at the same time implying the characteristics of bad leadership. As he says, you can be in an office or an appointed position, but unless you have some new ideas and know how they can be implemented, you are not necessarily a leader. In this essay he also comments on empowerment: one who does not speak for the people, but helps them organize so that they can speak for themselves. To me, this is a characteristic of a courageous leader, because doing this involves giving up some control.

Areas In Which This Publication Can Be Enhanced:

- Try out some of Shafik’s ideas in your own neighborhood! In one section, he tells a story about the grandmother who raised him. “Nanny” decided that she wanted to turn Shafik’s neighborhood into a community because she felt that people needed to get to know each other. She used food as a way to help bring people together. Nanny would cook on Friday nights, Saturday and Sunday afternoons and open her doors to her neighbors to come in and eat. Her only requirement was that all the food

had to be eaten in the house. This way, people sat down and started talking, getting to know each other, sharing stories and bonding. They walked in as neighbors, and left the house as “community”.

- Inclusion Press provides a video tape with the same name as this book. In the video, purchased separately, Shafik is presenting at The Toronto Summer Institute on Inclusion, Community & Diversity. In addition, the video concludes with a slide/quotes/music celebration of Shafik’s life and work. Additional information can be obtained from the web site: <http://inclusion.com>.

Common Threads Throughout This Publication:

- Shafik not only speaks about his philosophy of life, but the realities of life. He speaks openly about his long-term battle with cancer. In fact, Shafik’s Map, an instructional video, details an in-depth discussion of how Shafik builds a core network of support to help him realize his dreams for both his work and personal commitments.
- Shafik’s courage, determination, and drive are ever present in each of the essays contained in this book. He represents a person who lives in his values and speaks from experience of building community under significantly adverse conditions.

Recommendations Of Its Utility To Rehabilitation Professionals:

- All people who work with people with disabilities will benefit from reading this book. It is quick, easy-to-read, enjoyable and packed with powerful messages.
- In addition, this book would be a good resource for families and individuals with disabilities. The message of building alliances and promoting empowerment would be welcomed by care providers and family members.

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