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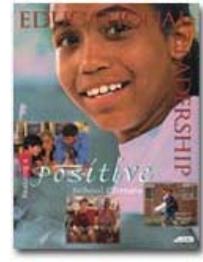
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Realizing a Positive School Climate Pages 8-13

### The Discipline of Hope: A Conversation with Herb Kohl

Marge Scherer

**Author and educator Herb Kohl talks about how to provide a rich, challenging, and well-crafted education for all children.**



It's been 36 years since Herb Kohl had his first taste of life as a teacher. In his now classic work, *Thirty-Six Children* (New American Library, 1967), he described the sometimes overwhelming challenges of creating a positive classroom in a dysfunctional, poverty-ridden urban school district. Thirty-nine books and possibly as many classrooms later, Kohl continues to grapple with the challenges of creating environments where kids feel they belong and where they learn to love learning.

Founder of the Open School Movement, Kohl has never been timid about suggesting an overhaul of the traditional system. Neither has he stopped teaching all these years, sometimes even volunteering to teach without pay in order to test his ideas for reaching learners. He's taught students of all ages from kindergartners to adults, including his own three children at different stages in their lives. In living rooms, storefronts, and experimental classrooms, he has taught everything from science to performance art, teacher education to reading. Here he reflects on his teaching journey and discusses the qualities of classrooms that inspire hope.

**Your latest book is called *The Discipline of Hope* (Simon & Schuster, 1998). Tell us what that means.**

I wanted to convey that unless you project hope for your students, your efforts to teach them to read, write, and calculate won't make a profound difference. A teacher's task is not only to engage students' imagination but also to convince them that they are people of worth who can do something in a very difficult world. When children don't have access to resources, it's very easy for them to give up on hope. And if you give up on hope, what's the point of learning to read? What's the point of passing a Regent's exam if you believe the college won't accept you? What's the point of doing well in school if you know at the end of schooling all you will get is a McDonald's job?

**How do you instill this capacity to hope? In your book you talk about the little things that make a difference.**

Let's talk about the big things first. The first big thing that makes a difference is respect. If you don't respect the people you teach and you don't have a feeling that your students are of equal value to yourself—that they can become potentially almost anything—then you won't teach much to your students.

Second, realize that humiliation is absolutely a sin when it comes to good teaching. You may have to figure out a new way to deal with kids who defy you, but humiliation has to go out the window. The wonderful lyric from "The Wall" by Pink Floyd goes, "We don't need no education/ We don't need no thought control/No dark sarcasm in the classroom/Teacher leave the kids alone." Of course we do need some education, but dark sarcasm has to be removed from the teacher's repertoire of strategies.

**Beyond the teacher's affirmation of students, what else is needed? What characteristics are**

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### ***essential to positive school culture?***

Let's say that we solve all the discipline problems in the world. We still have the problem of making school a place where people would like to be. I recently visited a school where the classrooms were spotless and the kids obedient, but the kids seemed to have surrounded themselves with blocks of ice. Because the environment had been distanced from them, they distanced themselves from the bad environment.

Everybody needs a place where they can be around things they love. What I do is put up the most beautiful things I know—posters, games, puzzles, challenges—and let children know these are provocations. These are ways of provoking them into using their mind. You have to create an environment that makes kids walk in and say, "I want to see what's here. I would really like to look at this."

These things may have nothing whatever to do with what you intend to teach during the course of the day, but they do feed into the notion of a learning community—a curious community where invention, creativity, and imagination are encouraged.

### ***Do you think that a classroom should reflect the popular culture, or are kids already too immersed in the popular culture?***

I'm what you might call classical, multicultural, and popular. All of the above. I do a lot of Shakespeare with kids because Shakespeare deals with fundamental human themes.

I also use writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Victor Hernandez Cruz. They all express a commonality in difference. Their question is, How do we live in a decent way? When you center learning on the basic appreciation that we are all living a common life but can be ingenious about how we shape life, kids will be engaged.

### ***How do you respond to those who stress skills and content and back-to-the-basics in the curriculum?***

I believe that every kid should be fully literate—in math, technology, literature, and language. How you teach literacy is the central pedagogical issue.

And I'm content-obsessed. Why teach unless you are teaching something? I love making accessible something I've learned. Students can reject it or they can transform it. This is the compelling reason that keeps me teaching. When you learn new things, you have to reshape what you knew in the past.

### ***Is this idea related to what you call "situational teaching"?***

Right. At the same time that you are teaching multiculturalism, the classics, and everything else, you have to respond to the situation. India explodes three nuclear bombs, for example. Do you ignore that and say India and Pakistan are not in my curriculum? The question of nuclear threat is in everybody's mind. How is the President going to act? What is going to happen internationally? Students live in a historical situation, in a social, political, and economic moment. Those things have to be part of what we teach.

If I were going into a class today, I would go to the Internet and print out maps for my kids. I would talk about the history of India and Pakistan and why these nations are adversaries. I would pull out all the books I have on Mahatma Gandhi and about the non-violence movement in India. I'd shape a curriculum that has depth and complexity but allows the kids to have a coherent sense of the moment in which they are living and how the event is likely to affect their lives.

I was teaching when President Kennedy was assassinated, when Malcolm X was assassinated, when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, and I responded on a very visceral level. Some teachers thought the most important thing was to get on with class. And I thought the opposite. I was frequently criticized for dwelling on a political topic. But because everybody is thinking about it, you might as well attempt to understand what this phenomenon is all about.

### ***Wasn't one of the reasons for the criticism that people were afraid that you were going to express your own political opinion and persuade the kids to think your way?***

That's absolutely right, and when I was younger I did do that.

### ***You've mellowed a little?***

I haven't mellowed one bit, but I've learned that you really need to let people form their own opinions. I've moved away from an attempt to influence students to adopt my own views. You have to present enough information and create the context and conversations so that people discover things for themselves. If they don't discover things for themselves, they don't have true conviction. And the idea just disappears.

### ***Let's turn to the problem of violence and how schools are handling it. There are many discipline and conflict resolution curriculums in use now. Each time a violent incident rocks us, schools respond with stronger precautions. What do you think about preventing violence with zero-tolerance policies?***

I see one thing as an absolute. You can't prevent violence with violence.

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And how can you talk about no tolerance of violence in a violent society? That's the irony. What's your authority, how do you use it, and what are your sanctions? I don't have glib answers.

What we must do is offer to kids who are potential perpetrators of violence a more attractive way of using their intelligence, energy, efforts, frustration, and rage.

In this society we have abandoned some of our communities. We have neighborhoods with no services and no stores, where the only traffic is street traffic and drugs and prostitution. In some places, violence is the only economically viable alternative to passivity and being brutalized.

In the midst of these nightmarish communities, wonderful families are trying to nurture their kids. The problem is showing kids a door out of the violence that surrounds them. And unless schools can work collaboratively with law enforcement, the legal system, and social services to change the tone of the environment, we won't succeed. We can't eliminate violence.

A lot of blame can be laid right at the door of what has been called benign neglect. When communities in the inner cities were burned and looted—and I'm not trying to justify that—the strategy was not to rebuild the communities but to simply neglect them. What we're seeing 20 and 30 years later is the result of this benign—I call it malevolent—neglect. And we have the same malevolence in the way in which the welfare program is being implemented. Any teacher who cares about the kids and works hard in the social climate we have now is a hero, you know.

***Many people are giving up on the public schools, and some teachers are dropping out of the profession.***

People are giving up on the public schools when what they should do is turn their anger on the politicians and the economic interests that have given up on the community. It's not the public schools' fault that we have communities that are abandoned, neglected, disposable, and dysfunctional. What is very heartening is that some wonderful young people entering teaching really do have a social mission again. The service and the magic of teaching have become much more interesting to a lot of people than they were 10 years ago.

***What other trends in education are you hopeful about?***

I'm hopeful about the development of alliances among communities, school people, and innovators at universities. And I'm happy that the curriculum is being fundamentally reconstructed in order to respond to the diversity of this nation. When I started teaching, it was inconceivable to have an African American, a Latino, or an Asian literary voice in the curriculum.

And I'm very hopeful about the fact that a lot of poor communities are taking control of the educational situation and are demanding standards and excellence.

Even the fact that the schools have become a ground of contention to me is a very positive thing. I like disagreements. The question is, How do we get a variety of voices to enter the argument about what the schools should become?

***Throughout your career, you've invented alternatives to traditional schools. What is your view of a proposed voucher system through which families could choose among alternatives?***

The most dangerous trend I see is the voucher system, which could lead to the idea that education is not an entitlement—that if you want an education, you have to pay for it. I would be somewhat more sympathetic to vouchers if the vouchers would be the price of an education at an elitist private school. If someone wants to invest \$20,000 a year in every child, I might really be interested in discussing how we go about doing that. But they talk about \$3,000 a year. Who can set up a school with that?

In New York, 500,000 students attend private schools and religious schools. Now, if everybody qualifies for a voucher, we will have the same pot of money but 500,000 more students. Who is going to pick up the cost of that? Vouchers would diminish the amount of money going to the poorest of the poor.

On the other hand, I advocate choice within the public school system. I'm not resistant to a change in the nature of authority, freedom for educational styles, and alternative ways of looking at things within the public school instead of a monolithic system. But the privatization really bothers me. If I'm going to educate poor kids, I don't want to take 20 percent profit off the top of the money. I want to put that 20 percent into the education of the kids.

***You're often described as the father of the Open School Movement. How would you characterize that idea today? Is it an idea that's now more metaphorical than typical?***

Well, it's funny. The title I proposed for the book that was later named *The Open School* was "The Non-Authoritarian Classroom." But my wife said that that was just a terrible, negative way of casting a very positive idea. So we went through all the other possible words and the only word that made sense was *open*. The notion was that within an open educational environment, you have to have a very structured, pedagogical infrastructure. Even though the kids have many choices, you know where everything is and can monitor all the activities.

The goal in an open classroom is for kids to learn better, not simply for kids to be happy. During the '60s a lot of teachers promoted the idea that openness meant feeling, not learning. And architects interpreted openness as meaning no walls. Open structures are hopeless and can drive you crazy. People have no

privacy. There's absolutely no coherence to the environment. The teachers feel inhibited by other teachers. The kids are always looking across those little barriers. To me that had nothing to do with open education. That was just open architecture. And that touchy-feely stuff also had nothing to do with open education.

What delights me now is that educators today believe that quality learning is learning that engages students. We know that kids need opportunities to construct the way in which they learn. The curriculum must be shaped not only from what adults know but also from how kids learn and what they're interested in. These complex ideas are much more common now than they were when I started teaching.

***Didn't your idea of the open school also suggest the need for balance between individualized education and group learning?***

I would never use the phrase *individualized learning*. Individualized-learning programs are often a series of tracks for children, suggesting that all are trying to get to the same place but at different speeds. Whereas in personalized learning, the goals may be the same, but the paths may be different.

In personalized learning there's a personal relationship between teacher and child. As a teacher you respect the unique way a child perceives the world and accordingly shape the way a child is going to learn. And you respect the learner as a person who is connected to a family, the world, and the larger things in life.

Learning completely on your own is a form of alienation and depersonalization. The teacher and kids in class become atoms separate from all the other atoms until they go out on the playground.

***You mentioned that new teachers are entering the profession with a renewed sense of urgency. What's your advice to them about how to retain their hopefulness when they get into a tough situation?***

The first piece of advice I'd give to new teachers is to shop around and interview the school. Ask, Can I work in this place? If you know a school that you passionately want to work for, volunteer as a sub, and sacrifice for a bit rather than take a job in a school that you know you'll hate. In New York alone, 25,000 to 30,000 teachers in the next five years will retire, so you will have the opportunity to choose.

The other recommendation is learn, learn, learn. Learn to translate what you know so that you can share what you care about with your students. In addition to teaching them things that they have to know, you will have a unique way of contributing to them. Part of the craft of teaching is to be knowledgeable yourself. The other thing I would advise: Look for colleagues. Don't ever think that you have to do it by yourself.

Develop appropriate arrogance and appropriate humility. Of course you think you know better than anybody else and you are younger and fresher and you have more energy and you really care more about the kids. I felt all of that when I started teaching, but I was very lucky. Older teachers came up to me and said, "We love your chutzpah and your commitment to the kids, but let us show you a couple of things about teaching." Without them, I wouldn't have survived. Remember that we have wisdom, knowledge, and craft in our profession. Take advantage.

***A reviewer in The Washington Post criticized The Discipline of Hope as the view of a purist. She suggested that your vision for education is not applicable in ordinary situations with ordinary teachers. How do you respond to that?***

I'm not setting myself up as a model teacher or as somebody who has to do the daily grind all the time because I haven't done that. I haven't wanted to do that, quite frankly. I've always been desperately interested in learning about children and how knowledge gets conveyed from one person to another.

What I intended in my book was to talk about how one can teach every child. All my life I have been driven in and out of the system and on the boundaries of the system and to the periphery of the system, recovering kids who were damaged by the system, nurturing those inside of it who were bored to tears, and trying to provide complex and exciting learning for all children. It is no excuse to say, "It's real hard to be a teacher in a real school." Then change the real schools. Schools exist for the kids. Kids don't exist for the salaries of the teachers or for the system. By keeping a kid in a class with a tired teacher, we are damaging that child. It is our responsibility to teach the kids no matter what it costs.

And by the way, to say that typical teachers can't do creative things is to denigrate the brilliance in almost everybody.

***You're an idealist, but not a purist?***

I'm an on-the-ground, hard-nosed, tough idealist and romantic. Being a romantic means believing the world can be different from what it is now. And if you don't believe the world can be different from what it is now, you might as well quit. Why teach in a school that is failing if you don't believe things can be different?

***Before we close this conversation, tell us something about your family. I was very interested in your having taught all three of your children.***

My children are now 28, 30, and almost 31. They all have BAs. My oldest, Antonia, is a graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design, a painter, and the creative manager of a company that designs

marvelous scientific toys. My daughter Erica is a community organizer and is currently getting a master's at UC-Davis in economic development. She helps poor communities rebuild themselves. And my son Josh, the youngest, is a contemporary classical musician who is a composer and a conductor. They are all superb, wonderful, lovely people. And Judy and I just celebrated our 36th anniversary.

I had an argument once with someone from the Moral Majority who accused me of lacking family values. He assumed I'd been married five times and that my kids ran around with bare feet and all. I told him I had probably been married longer than he had been alive and intend to be married twice that long. As for teaching, I think I have another 36 years to go.

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