

# Democracy and Hope in Public Education:



## An Interview with Herbert Kohl

BY RICHARD J. PRYSTOWSKY AND  
CHARLIE MILES

In February, *Paths* editors Richard Prystowsky, Charlie Miles, and Samara Miles spoke with Herbert Kohl in San Francisco, at his apartment. A tireless advocate for public school reform for the past three decades, Herb is the author of many influential books, including *The Other Classroom*, *36 Children*, “*I Won’t Learn from You*” and *Other Thoughts on Creative Maladjustment*, *Growing Minds*, *Should We Burn Babar?* and, most recently, *The Discipline of Hope*. Warmly provocative and poignantly candid, he talked with us about his own past, his ongoing efforts to enfranchise students—especially those who are traditionally disenfranchised—and his views and visions of the goals of public education.

The interview began with a brief discussion of school vouchers.

**Herb Kohl:** You know I think that vouchers are just another reactionary agenda. Some hip people enjoy supporting the idea of vouchers, but in effect, this will do nothing but damage poor kids.

**Charlie:** Why is that?

**HK:** Well, let’s just think about it, and if you want to get some real documents on it, take a look at Rethinking Schools in Milwaukee. [<http://www.rethinkingschools.org/>] They’ve done a whole book on the voucher movement and they have done some really extraordinary work on the voucher system in Milwaukee.

Why is that? Well, let’s see. What are we spending now on public education for kids, on the average? About \$6,000 a year. Vouchers? \$2,000 to \$2,500 a year. That’s why. The big question. Let’s say that it is *your* family. If *you* are going to take that \$2,500 a year, you’re going to know how to do it. You’re good middle class people and have a very clear sense of how to get the best for your kids and can, most likely, find a way to supplement that money so that you can choose a good school. Now, if you’re poor and you’re going into a school that charges \$6,000 a year for tuition and all you have is a \$2,500 voucher, where are you going to make up that difference? You’re not.

Not only that, but the good private schools aren’t going to accept you. With a \$2,500 voucher, you’re not going to The Dalton School that charges \$18,000 a year, unless you are at the top 2% of your class. So who’s going to be left behind in the public schools? The poor have no choice. And who is going to be abandoned?

The same people who are abandoned right now. So this is not something that is going to improve things.

In addition, in a democracy, if you have a voucher then everybody qualifies for that voucher, right? In New York City, there are approximately 350,000 students currently enrolled in Catholic schools, all of whom will, then, qualify for vouchers. So, now we take \$2,500 times 350,000 students who are currently outside of the system. Are you going to pay more taxes to keep the same money in for those kids who stay in the system? No.

Vouchers are part of a strategy for the privatization and demoralization of public education, based—from my perspective—on an abandonment of poor kids and the cynical idea that they can't learn. We don't need them to learn; they are disposable. To me, this is just another right-wing strategy that some hip people have adopted.

However, the idea of choice within public school systems makes sense. On the other hand, if you want to deal with charter schools and all, you have to worry very seriously. I was listening to National Public Radio this morning, and I heard that a charter bill passed which basically removes the idea that charter schools have to have equity clauses built into them in order to be established. In other words, a lot of the charter schools, especially in the South, are ways to shift money from public education into the old white citizenship, into those segregationist private schools that were established after the civil rights movement. At that time, whites removed their kids from public education and put them into private schools in order to maintain a segregated system.

## PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND EDUCATION

**Richard:** Some people accuse homeschoolers, and maybe others in the alternative education community, of abandoning public education—abandoning the kids, abandoning the system—instead of supporting the idea of a democratic public school system. How do you feel about that accusation?

**HK:** I think it is to a large degree true. First of all, let's take the homeschooling movement. This is not one single movement. There is a fundamentalist Christian part of the homeschooling movement that is very strong and that is definitely abandoning public education. It definitely has an anti-democratic, Christian, fanatical vision of what kind of country this should be. Given that I'm not a Christian, it frightens the hell out of me. Now that doesn't mean that there aren't very good homeschools, because some are more ecumenical. Probably there are some Universalist Unitarian homeschoolers.

Then there is the second part, which is the hippie homeschoolers, the post-hippies. There are a lot of people who really understand the injuries and wounds and damages that can be created by authoritarian schooling, who want their kids to have a freer, more open way of functioning. These people feel that because they have, for the most part, the qualifications, the education, and the money, they can provide adequately for their children at home without having to have their children "suffer" the public schools. They also have the social nexus and the time so that they can socialize their kids with other kids and with other parents who are similarly placed. These people tend to be white and politically fairly progressive. They would totally, and I think appropriately, deny that they

have any mal intent towards the children of the poor or people of color. They just tend not to associate with them, just tend not to hang out with them, and the word *them* comes up a lot. So that's another part of the homeschooling movement.

And then, you know, I guess that the third part of the homeschooling movement is made up of people who are just dropping out, people who are just interested in their children to the exclusion of others. There is also a tiny, tiny strand of people who are concerned with social and economic justice, though I think that this is rather a smaller group.

There are people within the homeschooling movement for whom I have great respect. For years, for example, I have been trying to push Pat Montgomery, who I know and respect, toward dealing with the whole question of equity and justice in the homeschooling movement and towards the idea—the lack of which to me is the one thing that I find depressing in homeschooling—that there is a responsibility not just for your own children, but for other people's children as well. If you have no responsibility for other people's children, then you have no regard for democracy.

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My kids, all three, attended public schools from kindergarten through high school. They did not always have good experiences. Some of it was really quite frightening. Some of the teachers were terrible—all of the ceremonies of humiliation, all of the battles.... I, too, graduated from public schools, in New York City, and my wife went to public schools in Cleveland, Ohio and in California. We all went through good and bad times, but there is a kind of deep sense of socialization, the ability to know people who are different than you are, the capacity to be friendly with people who you never thought you would encounter in your life.... And given that I come from a Yiddish background, I don't think that pain is all bad. I really don't think that it is always good to be happy; besides, I don't even know how that could happen.

**C:** It is nice to imagine, even though you might never find it.

**HK:** If you even tried to find it, though, you would hurt yourself, because if you want to find total happiness, then you get into real trouble.

**R:** What would you say to a homeschooling family who might say, "Well, we homeschool because we don't want to sacrifice our kids to a system that does not have their best interest at heart. We think that by taking care of our own family, and by engaging our family in the larger community, we *are* helping other people. We aren't just looking out for ourselves. Also, the question of socialization is such that, if there is any reason not to send our kids to school, then that is it. We don't have metal detectors at our front door; we don't have security guards in our driveways." And so on. In

other words, there is a large segment of homeschoolers who, I think, might respond to what you are saying by saying, “It is precisely because we care so much about family and community and the future generations that we do this.” What would you say in response to them?

**HK:** The first thing I would say is that it is not my business to tell people what to do with their children. In other words, I won’t make *any* decision for anybody else’s family because I don’t think it is appropriate. The second thing I would say is that if they see other people’s children going to these terrible schools, what are they doing to change the schools? In other words, are they simply dropping out of them, or are they engaging in some effort, some public and political dialogue to change the schools in some way.

Under circumstances that are very difficult, I have great compassion and sympathy for people who choose homeschooling over something else. I think it is a question of *how* you’re willing to fight, *what* you’re willing to fight, how you do that engagement. It is just that I am much more humble about something like that. I have my own passions, but I don’t like to legislate other people’s. I’ve also been around long enough to know that you can’t.

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**R:** What about people who choose some of the other alternative education routes—free schools, democratic schools, and so on? Would they be subject to a similar charge of abandoning the system?

**HK:** Well, it depends upon who you’re talking about, because I know a bit too much about all of those things to think that there is any single way to describe them. El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice [<http://usanetwork.com/functions/justone/puente.html>] hasn’t abandoned the public schools, nor have the New Visions High Schools, nor have many of the schools in Chicago, nor the schools that are beginning to develop in L.A. and out here in San Francisco. It is not a monolithic thing. It’s where you engage yourself, what your principles are, what your beliefs are, how consistent you try to be with your beliefs—because no one can be totally consistent with their beliefs. People make compromises all the time. I think it is a trap to make very broad judgments about free schools and alternative schools, because they differ so much.

**R:** Well, let me ask the question very specifically, then. We’ve published some profile articles on the Albany Free School and on the Sudbury Valley School. Dan Greenberg, at Sudbury Valley, as you know, talks very specifically about SVS’ approach as a democratic approach. Sudbury Valley was established precisely because he felt that the standard system was anything but democratic. And there are lots of Sudbury Valley clones, as you know, around the country. What would you say to folks who are pursuing that angle in terms of their possibly “abandoning the system?”

**HK:** Well, you know, in some ways they’re absolutely right. The question is, what is their public engagement?

In other words, one can create what I would call a small, so-called democratic community in the midst of a non-democratic society, or a society that is struggling towards democracy. But, what are they doing beyond themselves to deal with the anti-democratic trends in our society right now?

And if people choose to go that route, the question is, what else are you doing? It is not enough to simply say, “I have a little democratic school somewhere and we are all happy and democratic.” They’re not, because they’re going to walk into the supermarkets, and they’re going to walk down the streets, and they’re going to avoid certain neighborhoods, and you know, they’re part of the world.

How do you situate yourself in the larger world that is not as fully democratic as you think you are? I say *as you think you are* because some schools are fully democratic, but some are not democratic. Some are run by autocrats. Some are run by people who put a very heavy hand on democracy. Some are run by people who truly do believe in democracy. There is an entire range from some of the Summerhillian ideas to what might be called a *pedagogical democracy*, which comes from the adults to the kids. You get punished if you’re not democratic.

So, what is your engagement, what is your engagement in the larger world that you live in? This is not to judge any of those schools, because I haven’t been there, I haven’t visited them. I have a high regard for the work and effort and energy that they put into what they do. I am just raising questions, just a bit of a troublemaker.

**C:** You said that when your children were in school, they had bad experiences and that sometimes their teachers weren’t the best. How did you respond when your kids came home and said they were unhappy in the classroom? Did you involve yourself with the teacher, identify yourself?

**HK:** I was on a school board for a while. I got on the school board and fought, sometimes successfully but most of the time unsuccessfully, to change things. I taught in the schools. We ran a summer camp at our place in Point Arena. Our family life outside of school was rich enough so that the kids got a lot of things and we supported them.

But, I have to say that, as our kids got older they fought their own battles. We have three kids. The youngest is 29 and the oldest is 32. They are all doing wonderful things, all wonderful people. When they got to high school, they didn’t want us to fight their battles for them, although we certainly supported them in their battles. They fought battles against racism, against sexism, sexual abuse. By the way, they all went to college, and they all have B.A.’s. Not a computer scientist or, by the way, a schoolteacher among them!

Certainly, the school authorities would never come to us and say, “Look your kids are acting up,” when they were acting for some form of justice, because they knew that Judy and I would support the kids and their friends. But, in a sense, what was very good was that they fought their own battles, with support from us and from many of our friends. When our kids were growing up, we lived in a complicated, interesting social environment, with many wonderful people around. We had a very diverse group of friends, from all over, who themselves were committed to the same issues that we

were. The kids saw this happening in everyday life and had an understanding of struggle.

**R:** I want to push you on something here.

**HK:** You can push me on anything.

**R:** One of the things you are very sensitive to is the extent to which people with privilege get privilege in the system and the extent to which people without privilege have a harder time. When your kids were involved in a particular kind of demonstration and so on, did it ever cause you any kind of anxiety—the fact that you are Herbert Kohl, the fact that school officials knew who you were, the fact that you were on the board? Did your standing give your children a kind of privilege and protection that someone who was poor and who didn't have connections wouldn't have had?

**HK:** It gave them more visibility, but not more protection, I guarantee you.

**C:** Perhaps it made it worse for them?

**HK:** That's right. It did make it worse for them. They were targets because of that. We had to talk about that. There isn't any protection when you are in such a minority and when things are so charged. But, if you know something about my background....

### GROWING UP IN THE BRONX

**HK:** I grew up in an immigrant family. I lived in the Bronx in New York with my grandmother and grandfather who were both immigrants, fleeing from Eastern Europe. My grandfather was an old socialist, a union person, and we all lived in the same house—my grandfather, my grandmother, my two uncles, their wives, my mother, my father and myself, and then eventually my brother and sister. The notion of struggle was there from the day I was born.

Remember, these people were struggling for the establishment of unions. My grandfather was in the Carpenters and Joiners. I used to work construction with my grandfather when I was a kid. This was a working-class community that had its struggles; anti-Semitism was ripe. On my mother's side of the family, there were people that were Italian, Native American, and who knows what. My mother's mother was a suffragette and used to work for Vito Marc Antonio, when he was a congressman from East Harlem.

None of this seems out of the ordinary to me; it isn't anything that I invented. It is just something that I grew up with. We weren't a very religious family, and of course there were different religions on different sides of the family. For me, the idea was that a person makes these struggles. If I didn't, my grandparents would be very angry at me, so I didn't have to justify it on complex moral grounds. It just seemed like what ordinary, decent human beings would do to help each other.

**R:** So, your childhood helped influence your sense of affiliation with people who are struggling. Yet, to what extent might a poor black kid from South Central L.A., for example, say, "What kind of a ghetto are you talking about?"

**HK:** Well, let's put it this way. We have had as much hatred in my family from Jews as from not Jews. I've

never had any feeling that Jews are immune from hatred and vitriol and rejection. Remember, as I have said, on my mother's side of the family there were many people who were not Jewish, and these two sides of the family did not particularly love each other. Nor did they particularly talk to each other, except on occasion.

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Look, if kids in L.A. say to me, "You're not worth anything to me," I will say, "Okay." I will go away. I am not a fool. You don't help people who don't want to be helped by you. If, on the other hand, I am smart enough, ingenious enough, crazy enough, surprising enough to get kids engaged in things that they otherwise wouldn't be engaged in, I'll try. I've done this, most of my life. And I haven't had much trouble. Well, you always have some trouble with some kids, but nobody has ever said that to me. But also, I've been living in a multiracial, multi-cultural world probably from the time I was three years old.

**R:** I get the sense, when I read about your growing up in the Bronx, that your own sense of seeing the Bronx, as you say in one of your pieces, contextualized in a larger world, and so on—that you want very much to help other struggling kids be able to contextualize their own worlds similarly. Can you talk about that drive in you, where it comes from, and so on? Am I right about that, that there is a lot in your background that...

**HK:** Sure there is. I said that before. I said that that came with the chicken soup, you know. It is something that I think I have always known that I have to do.

My family benefited from public education. Even though my mother and her sisters never finished high school, there was a deep sense of loyalty. They didn't finish high school for one reason only; they had to go to work. There wasn't any choice. It wasn't like home-schooling, where you can choose this kind of thing. When you grow up really poor, you have to work to support the family. My mother's father died when he was young, as I understand in an industrial accident.

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I went to public schools. You may not believe this, but when I was a student at Bronx High School of Science, in 1954, I was head of the New York City Inter-GO Council, which was the student body that represented all the high schools in New York City. The vice president was a man by the name of Bob Maynad. I don't know if you know who he is. After his long career in journalism, he became the associate editor of the *Washington Post*, was the ombudsman for the *Washington Post*, and owned the *Oakland Tribune*. He became the only African American to own a major metropolitan newspaper. Bob was the vice president of the Inter-GO Council.

We basically organized a student strike in 1954. The strike was over a series of articles by the *New York Daily News*, having to do with the idea that high school kids were unruly; that they had unbridled sex; they were involved with drugs and violence.

I wrote about this in *The Discipline of Hope*. We students went out and struggled with the misrepresentation of what was happening. Eventually they found out that all of the pictures—they had these pictures, all of white people, by the way—were fake. They were all posed by professional models.

(Laughter)

Absolutely true! There was a retraction, which I still have. I have saved them since 1954, so I have the originals. The retraction in the *Daily News* said, “Oh, we’re sorry, we just thought this would make the point more dramatically.”

**C:** What was the point in doing this? Was it just to sell newspapers? Why would they misrepresent things?

**HK:** To get tough on kids. You know, they were talking about what was called “The Blackboard Jungle.” There were very few Irish kids in the New York City public schools at that time because most of them went to

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Catholic schools. Italian kids went to the public schools, as did Jewish, Puerto Rican, and black kids. The target was primarily the Italian, black and Puerto Rican kids. Some of the Jewish kids were included, but they were considered to be exceptions. The idea was to be able to destroy the notion of progressive education, the very thing I have been fighting for all my life.

In a sense, I was party to that. I was at Bronx High School during the McCarthy era and we lost half of our staff because they took the Fifth Amendment. I was involved in student protests against McCarthy because my family was leftist, and issues of oppression were on the table every day. When I say on the table, I mean on the dining room every day. I have been through all of that, seen all of that, and understood that when you destroy public education you destroy the capacity for people to grow in public consciousness and to feel some connection with the society as a whole.

#### **DEMOCRACY FOR A FEW?**

**HK:** You can destroy public education in several ways. One is by having lousy schools. But you can also destroy it by removing people who don’t have to go there from the public schools. Then we have no public fabric. We have no real understanding of human rights, the Bill of Rights, the whole existence and meaning of democracy. *Democracy does not mean democracy for a few.* Democracy means for everybody, and those people who have a fundamental commitment to democracy therefore have to have a fundamental commitment to those whose lives have no democratic choices within

this so-called democracy. Democracy does not equal capitalism. It is not democracy for the rich. It is not democracy for the privileged. It is not democracy for the middle class. It is for *everybody*.

Anyone who isn’t enormously distressed by the fact that one quarter to one third of our children are living in poverty and are hungry every day has got some *real* moral problems. There is some deep deficiency within that. But if you don’t know that, it is not your fault. And a lot of our kids will never know that because they have been removed from a context in which they can either experience it directly or even be told about it.

**R:** One of the issues that comes up a lot is the question of whether or not public education in its present systemic form can be reformed. What do you have to say to those who might argue that public education—again, in its present systemic form—is *not* about democracy. It never was about democracy; it was about mainstreaming people into factory...

**HK:** Neither was the Constitution when it was created. When was America really about democracy except in the struggles for democracy? Remember, when we started the Constitution, it said that *white men with property* could vote. Right? White men of property! That’s it! Slavery was institutionalized. Why is there a Bill of Rights? The reason is very simple. It wasn’t included in the original Constitution, otherwise there wouldn’t have had to have been amendments.

**R:** I think it is very clear that the thing that most Americans love about their freedom is not in the Constitution; it is in the Amendments.

**HK:** No, no, no! A lot of Americans don’t love what they experience about “*their freedoms*.” I mean, the idea of “*the Americans*” is insane. If you talk to people in the Delta of Mississippi and ask them what they like about their freedoms, they will tell you that it is Antebellum South, right now. I’m sorry. I went to a small town in Texas, and I remember being stopped by some cops because I was riding in a car where there were black and white people—and this was very recently—and the cop said, “Are you part of the civil whats movement? *Civil whats* never come here!”

I mean, this stuff about *the Americans*. What about Mexican immigrants in southern California, and the freedoms that they have? Now, there are latitudes of freedom that we have here that are marvelous. They are wonderful, and this is not to put them down, because we are very lucky. You wouldn’t want to live in Kosovo. You wouldn’t want to live in Uganda or in other places, so this is not to put it down. But, to have this arrogant idea that there are “Americans,” because what that means, is “us white people.” Whenever anyone talks about the privileges of the Americans, they are really talking about white people.

**R:** How can the public ed. system, then, help the folks you are talking about?

**HK:** First of all, there are major reform movements that are very interesting in public education: the Cross Cities Campaign, for example, that comes out of Chicago deals with twelve major cities in a series of alliances. Norm Fruchter is at the Institute for Social and Educational Policy at NYU [<http://www.nyu.edu/isep/>]. Many people are connected to networks of school transformation. The idea of saying that schools can’t be transformed is like saying that the South couldn’t be transformed in

the sixties because the system was legally segregated and that that's the way it was. Just because it is that way doesn't mean it has to stay that way. It's just that comfortable people don't like to take risks.

**R:** Okay, but if you change things to the extent that you are talking about, you have essentially changed the system systemically, haven't you? Perhaps here many of us find common ground.

**HK:** That is absolutely right. The question is how to change it systemically.

**R:** Yes. And how do you reach those people in places like the Deep South? How does the reform movement reach them?

**HK:** How do you do it? You find out who is doing it and you see if you can be useful. There is a reform movement in the South. It comes though Southern Echo which is located down toward the Delta, as well as through Bob Moses's Algebra Project, based in Jackson, Mississippi. There really are people who are doing this. Do you know about the Alliance Schools in Texas? Communities are being organized and are working on developing quality public schools, some of which are very good, some of which are in process. Then there are the ACORN Schools. ACORN, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, started out dealing with housing for the homeless but has now done a lot of school work. They have schools in New York and in other places. Chicago Public Schools are doing things. It is not as if this isn't being done.

Perhaps the people who you are talking about aren't connected with the people who are doing progressive work in the public schools. I think it is a matter of connections. Do you know the National Coalition of Educational Activists? [<http://members.aol.com/NCEAWeb>] Their next convention is going to be in L.A. this summer. NCEA consists of students, parents, community organizers, teachers, administrators, and other educational activists, across the country, including union people who meet once a year. They are really exceptional.

They are also involved with *Rethinking Schools* [<http://www.rethinkingschools.org/>], which I believe is the best educational journal in the United States. It comes out of Milwaukee. I think a lot of the alternative people are not directly connected with either abandoned industrial communities like Cleveland, Cincinnati, Toledo, Detroit, or with large cities like L.A., New York, and in a fundamental way Chicago, Houston, Dallas, Fortworth. Many of the people who are doing work in urban settings are very busy; they are fighting major battles all the time, in some cases with real successes and in others with losses, because it is a very difficult struggle.

So, who reaches out to whom? It seems to me that it is incumbent upon those people who don't think the system can be reformed to look at those attempts that seem to be fairly effective in creating fundamental changes in public schooling—with some genuine effect in a positive way—before they continue the critique without knowledge of what's going on. These people are logical allies. It seems to me that people who are in the alternative movements should make the most equitable schools they can, but to just throw the rest out in the garbage is just a fool's game.



PHOTOS BY JACOB MILES - PRYSTOWSKY, SAMARA MILES, AND CHARLIE MILES

## NATIONALIZATION OF STANDARDS

**R:** Let's say we begin to make some of these connections, which I am hoping that this magazine does. I hope that we can reach more audiences. What do we do in the face of what seems to be a growing nationalization of standards, a growing conformity to standards, to standardized testing, and so on? How do we transform a system with all this good will and energy, when from up top there seems to be such a movement and pressure to undermine it?

**HK:** This is a very difficult question. I think the potential effectiveness of the standards movement derives directly from those failures that the public schools have had, particularly with poor kids, but it also derives from some desire to stratify kids. This society needs computer technicians. This society needs people to clean bathrooms. Society needs engineers; society needs people who are going to work on the streets, and put out fires, and police-sealed communities. The people who control society understand that it is not necessary for everyone to succeed in school, and in fact, if everyone succeeds in school, then we are not going to have anyone to pick the crops. There will be nobody to work down in the valley, nobody to work in the hotel and restaurant industry in New York, except for certain people who will come in and only do it temporarily, if the schools succeed with their children. So part of what the standards movement does is to elevate standards, but it provides no opportunity to learn that equalizes the occasion for poor kids to learn. So the standards movement is just another form of elitism.

The idea is that *your* kids can come up to the standards, and *my* kids, if they wanted to, but the kids in Hunter's Point and other communities can't because they don't have the resources, neither in the schools nor at home, to do it. It is not because they *can't* humanly do it, because they can. There is no desire to make that equalization a reality. That is one of the other struggles we have to work on. Kentucky has been working on the equalization of funding and of resources and of schools. Until we introduce the notion of equal opportunities to learn into the standards thing, it is just another very difficult thing to fight.

But I am not opposed to saying that we want all the kids to read. And I am not opposed to saying that if the standards movement, at a certain point, becomes followed by an equal opportunity to learn movement, then things can break out from there.

On the other hand, only teaching to high stakes testing is insane. And the high stakes tests are insane. They are counter to anything that really has to do with critical learning and critical thinking. If you really want to talk about that, you should call Monty Neal at FAIR TEST, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. There is an entire literature on alternative ways of assessing student skills. There are people who know more about it than I do, people who have devoted their lives to working on that.

I think that the important thing is that these are all very important issues. If you just opt out, then you aren't dealing with those issues at all.

**R:** So once again people with means can afford to provide for their kids to help insure that the kids perform well on the tests, and can find other ways to keep their families' privilege; the other kids, whose families cannot afford to help them in such ways, are going to be left holding the bag, so to speak.

**HK:** Yes, ask Kaplan about that.

**R:** Yes, I know. We paid for our older daughter to prepare for the Graduate Record Exams through Kaplan. And I used to supervise the Law School Admissions Tests and the Medical College Assessment Tests at our college in Irvine [CA], which is an affluent area. I don't think there was one kid who took the tests who wasn't prepped. Now what's going to happen to the kid in South Central L.A. who can't afford Kaplan?

**HK:** Who doesn't even know that Kaplan exists! Who doesn't even know that these test program preparation classes are there! Eventually, the public schools will contract to Kaplan, so that they won't teach anymore, they will just prepare kids for testing, without teaching them anything. It is just a nightmare!

You know, I have been doing this for a long time and I don't believe that in the course of my lifetime we will see the kind of victories that it seems to me to be necessary. But, I see that as no reason not to continue trying.

**R:** From your work, I get the sense that you feel as Dr. King did about getting to the promised land with his fellow black Americans struggling for civil rights. He said, "I might not get there with you," but he clearly believed that African Americans would get there. I get the sense from you that you feel similarly, that the struggle is what's important, not whether or not you particularly see...

**HK:** Democracy is what is important. Opportunity for everybody is what is important. I don't believe that I am big enough, or important enough, or powerful enough to achieve a lot of things, nor can any one person do it. But there are many, many people. I think that the role for people like me right now is to develop young leadership, to help young people see some of the struggles that they may go through, and to give them the power that they can responsibly use. It seems to me that that is the role, and that is what I am going to be trying to do in the next couple of years.

**R:** So, how crucial is hope, in your view? You have a line in the essay "The Tattooed Man," in your collection of essays "*I Won't Learn from You*" and *Other Thoughts on Creative Maladjustment*, "Seeding hope is at the center of the art and craft of teaching." You go on: "Creating hope in oneself as a teacher and nourishing or rekindling it in one's students is the central issue educators face today" (42). You have a new book called *The Discipline of Hope*. The concept of hope appears almost everywhere in your work. Can you talk a little bit about the importance of this concept of hope to this larger project?

## SUSTAINING HOPE

**HK:** The first thing to do is to distinguish hope from optimism. If you describe the way you feel as optimistic it means, in a sense, "expecting to achieve certain things." That is, you are optimistic that you will get there, and all. Hope is much more of a metaphysical concept. It is much more spiritual. Hope is the idea that this can't all *be* for nothing, that there really is some deep, wondrous, positive feeling in human life and human beings that will eventually lead to a decent, convivial world for most of the people.

But you know, there will always be some people who are unhappy. I think that what I really mean by hope,

and the reason I talk about hope, is to distinguish it from the need to see large-scale rewards for your work at any particular time. For example, in the sixties, we tried to change all the schools. It didn't work. Well, now am I going to become a corporate executive, a professor, go into the computer world?

Hope cannot be disciplined because it is a driving feature of one's life to say that *there is this goodness there, somewhere*. I believe that there can't be any hope unless one believes that, at the core, there are so many good things in people, even the most recalcitrant of people. And so, you don't give up because you haven't gotten to the core yet. You're sort of striving for that core; you're reaching out, struggling to bring it to the surface.

The other thing about hope is that hope involves risk. If you have hope you absolutely have to understand that to sustain hope you will take risks in your life, and those risks may involve hurting you. Many people involved in the civil rights movement have understood that it may cost them their lives. But because of the hope, the risk becomes part of the conception of life. Life without risk, life with total security is not worth living.

You know, I am an existentialist, fundamentally. When I was in Paris, I had the privilege of sitting around and listening to people like Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Simone de Beauvoir and all those people in the cafés of Paris in 1958-59. I spent time reading all of their works and a lot of time thinking. I was trained as a philosopher and a mathematician. I truly came to believe that you have to find a way to struggle with *mauvais foi et bon foi*, that is, bad faith and good faith. What that means is, when you do something, do you take a responsibility for it or not? You live in good faith if you take responsibility for what you do, even if what you do is screwed up. People are going to screw up all the time. You know, it's not that you're pure. It's that, "Okay, I did this. I really did this. I'm the one who did it, and I chose to do it." That's *bon foi*. That's good faith. *Mauvaise foi* says, "I didn't do it." Or, "Well it happened to me." Or, "I was feeling bad that day." Or, "I had too much to drink." Or, "My friends told me to do it." Or something like that. You live in bad faith because you don't take responsibility.

I think that if you live on the basis of hope, what you have to do is to take responsibility for what you do—good, bad or worse. That is a deep part of my thinking. Things are imperfect; people are imperfect. But there is that goodness there. That goodness can come out, can emerge from all the complex things that we live through. And it is *that* that drives you. And the beauty of it, for me, is that I see all that emerging in children. And so I can see my hope confirmed in the students that I teach.

When I say children, the funny thing is that for me, children now is anybody under the age of 35. (Laughter) It just has to do with age. When I see people feeling that they can be something that they wanted to be but didn't think that they could be, or learning something they didn't think they could learn, or reaching out to people they didn't think they could reach out to, then that's a confirmation of hope. Hope is constantly fed, if you work at it, by that kind of goodness in people and that kind of curiosity in people that is always emerging. As long as you're open, always sensible to that emergence, your hope never diminishes. You can get discouraged, but that's not the same thing as losing hope or diminishing the hope you have.

Or you can say, as I said before, "I'm probably not going to see this." Do I think I am going to see the elimination of poverty in the United States in my lifetime? The elimination of racism? In my lifetime? You've got to be kidding!

**R:** But you are going to work to see the end.

**HK:** Well, you've got to contribute to it because it might happen. Just might happen. Just conceivably.

**R:** Does hope counter despair, then, in these kids, especially in the ones who have such struggles?

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**Hope is constantly fed, if you work at it, by that kind of goodness in people and that kind of curiosity in people that is always emerging. As long as you're open, always sensible to that emergence, your hope never diminishes. You can get discouraged, but that's not the same thing.**

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**HK:** Yes, hope counters despair, but it also counters something else. It isn't just hope and despair. There's cynicism. Despair is self-destructive. You see a lot of kids who hurt themselves because there's a hope/despair thing. Cynicism is worse. I mean, if I don't care, I'm out to get my own, and I'll get you. That can be in the business world, or it can be on the streets. Those are not kids with despair. Those are the kind of kids who say, "I'm going to go out a millionaire or I am going to go out young and in glory." Real cynicism. Coldness. Despair is a warm feeling, but cynicism is very cold. It is chilly. It's when you look at someone and see that they really have no feelings, except maybe for themselves, but you're not even sure about that, sometimes.

**R:** You subtitle the essay "The Tattooed Man: Confessions of a Hopemonger." Do you see yourself as a hopemonger?

**HK:** No, it is purely willed behavior; it comes from the existential part of me. Those of us who have

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**Do I think I am going to see the elimination of poverty in the United States in my lifetime? The elimination of racism? In my lifetime? You've got to be kidding!**

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struggled for as long as I have, have every reason to be discouraged. I have to will that. I may have sources of strength, but it is willed behavior. I will to be that way rather than some other way. That is not to say that sometimes I don't get a little discouraged, because I do. But no, it is willed behavior. It is chosen. I *choose* to be hopeful.

**C:** Is that why you call your book *The Discipline of Hope*?

**HK:** Yeah, that's right. It is a discipline.

**R:** So you work at hope.

**HK:** Oh, yeah, absolutely.

## THE ROLE OF THE ARTS

**R:** How can we do this with kids in the school, in the communities? How can teachers, so many of whom want to do the right thing...

**HK:** We have got to give them things that they enjoy doing. We have to celebrate the arts. We have to give kids an opportunity to express themselves. We need to give them a chance to speak to each other over issues and not constantly take them back to a boring set of curriculum. We have to give them a chance to dance, to sing. It seems to me that success in school is frequently dependent on the degree to which people feel themselves physically, as well as intellectually, comfortable with being themselves in that environment. Being there. And so the question of *how you be there* becomes as important as the content of what you learn. So, I would be obsessed with the arts, with theatre, with music. I teach theatre all the time; that's my favorite thing to do. I absolutely love it.

**Sami:** In schools, they always cut the arts programs first.

**HK:** That's right. And it is terrible, stupid, because they cut out part of the heart of the students. You know? What they are doing is destroying the heart. And the mind can't work well without the heart. I don't come from a theatre background, but everybody was theatrical when I grew up.

My first experience with theatre really is interesting. I used to go to the Park Plaza Theatre in the Bronx. I would pay \$ .25 to go, every Sunday morning, maybe it was Saturdays. We would see cartoons. Then, if you hid in the men's room, you could stay and see the grown-up movies that came on after the kids' cartoons. So, my parents would give me a quarter and I would go the movies once a week. They would know where I was, know when I had to come back, and I would stay for four or five hours. I must have been ten or eleven. Most of the kids who went were Italian or Jewish, a couple of black kids, a couple of Puerto Rican kids. You know, we would all line up.

One Saturday, all the Irish community came out. They are all dressed, and there are no other Jewish kids in sight. There are no Italians, blacks or Puerto Ricans in sight, nothing. But the Irish community is completely out, with kids and grandparents, and all. So I get in line. Maybe there are some funny cartoons for the Irish, you know? Who knows what's going on? I'm a very curious person, so I am willing to go places where I shouldn't be. Sometimes it is dangerous and sometimes it is very useful.

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**I want to encounter them as people, not as people who have a history or a record, but as people who have the capacity to choose their lives, who have the capacity to make their lives new, if they care to.**

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So I stayed in line and I came up with my \$.25, and it turned out that it costs a buck, but I didn't have it. An Irishman who lived next door to me gave me the \$.75. So I went in.

It was the Abbey Theatre of Dublin performing *Playboy of the Western World*. Some of the most famous Irish actors ever were there. And I got hooked. I used to sneak in to the second half of Broadway plays, because I never had any money to go into the first act. I found out how to do that from a friend of mine, who was an usher. So I saw 50 plays, some of the most famous plays ever done, only from Act 2 on. I saw Patty Duke

in *The Bad Seed*, Fredrick March and Florence Eldridge in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, some of the more extraordinary plays that were put on with the most amazing actors and actresses that you can imagine. And I just loved it.

Of course, I had to figure out what had been going on in Act 1, so I got real smart about theatre; I came to understand how to pick up drama in the middle.

It wasn't until I was teaching in Berkeley in the 1960s that I decided to do theatre with the kids myself, high school theatre. Have you ever seen the movie called *Billy Jack*? It is about a woman who runs a free school and who falls in love with a Native American guy who comes back from Vietnam. All the kids in the free school were part of my theatre troop. I did all the theatre stuff with the kids for that movie. One of those kids is now a producer for WNET. Another one is the leader of the Saturday Night Live band. Another is a famous jazz drummer who does studio sessions in Amsterdam and Geneva. One is an artist in Paris. Incredible, interesting kids. They are all in their late forties now.

As a teacher you are always on stage. Whether you like it or not, you are doing theatre. What made it possible for me to do theatre with kids is that I realized that I was doing theatre with kids my entire teaching career.

**R:** Also, as a teacher, when a student comes into my class—to use the example you gave, and forgive me for making it something of a metaphor—I try to figure out what was Act 1. I am coming in in the middle.

**HK:** Yet, I want to make sure that Act 1 doesn't make a difference. I try to eliminate my students' past history when I encounter them. I don't really care. I won't read about their past history, I won't find out about their records, their grades.... I want to encounter them—and this is the other existential part of me—I want to encounter them as people, not as people who have a history or a record, but as people who have the capacity to choose their lives, who have the capacity to make their lives new, if they care to.

**R:** So, you put the predetermined script and roles aside.

**HK:** Pure improvisation. That is to say, I very carefully plan things and I am willing to drop anything at any moment to go with what really seems to make sense. If there is an analogy, it is that of the jazz musician. Jazz has real structure; there is a chordal structure and a harmonic structure. To be a good jazz musician you have to be a good musician. Then you have to let all of that go, so you are doing two things at the same time. For example, I have to hear, if I am a jazz musician, all of the ways in which all the other musicians are playing in order to realize what my contribution to the whole is going to be.

The same thing happens with teaching. Good teachers have to have this sensibility for the presence of all of their students and let that develop. That sensibility is so important. It is teachable, but some of it is intuitive, instinctual. Some of it has to do with the fact that you care about all of these people's lives.

**R:** We'll be publishing an article in this issue [David Stern's "Freedom or Structure: One Teacher's Journey"], written by a seasoned educator, who says, in effect, "You know, I see good points in terms of people who say just let kids develop whatever they are develop-

ing—basically, leave them alone—and yet I see lots of kids fall through the cracks.” What he is trying to argue for is a certain amount of freedom within structure, a certain amount of telling kids, “Okay, develop on your own, but let’s be sure that you do x, y and z, too.” It sounds as if you are somewhat, in your own way...

**HK:** I have never been a Summerhillian. I have never believed that kids should do whatever they want to do, because I know what they want to do. What they want, first of all, is not to be in school.

**R:** In your essay “The Tattooed Man,” you talk about the influence of Mozart’s music on you, and how someone introduced Mozart to you, and so on. You say, “I know I could not have invented Mozart myself, and contrary to some educators who would have us believe that children create their own worlds, I know that worlds created by individuals are tiny and that children need to connect with culture and history as much as they need to be free to contribute to them” (58). I was wondering if you could expand upon that.

**HK:** Let’s say that someone is potentially an incredibly talented pianist but they have never seen a piano. Where is that piano going to be? Or, perhaps someone could really work on computers but has never seen a computer. Someone may have the capacity to do it; it may be a particular gift. They have a particular genius for it, but they have never seen a computer. They don’t know what a computer is all about. That person isn’t going to create a computer. Someone who is a musician is not going to build a piano, you know. She isn’t going to start from scratch.

Some people think of caring as letting kids only do what they want to do. I don’t think that is caring. I think caring is trying to expose kids to the riches of the world, to what they don’t know. What are you offering? Teaching, to me, has a lot to do with offering, offering resources, options, opportunities, and all. Teaching also has to do with setting limits. People can’t kill each other, smack each other, tear each other’s work up without kids becoming discouraged and not doing work. To say that kids “make the world” is to say that Nelson Rockefeller’s kids have the same opportunities as kids growing up with no opportunities in some poor community somewhere. To me, this is all an abstract, intellectual game of reconstructionist notions.

Kids don’t reconstruct math; they may rediscover mathematical things, but they don’t discover them without people who know about algebra, calculus or even arithmetic presenting them with the opportunity to discover it. They may construct for themselves ways of thinking about these things, but they don’t construct language. If you take a baby and take the baby away from any contact with people who speak a language, that baby is going to really have hard times. If you take a baby born in the U.S. and bring him up in Italy, he will speak Italian with the accent of the region he was raised in, and not English, if everybody around him speaks that. So, there is a kind of foolishness that comes out of a dogmatic Piagetianism. I don’t believe it at all.

In my teaching, I have seen kids learn an enormous amount, discover an enormous amount, but I had to provide a lot of the occasions upon which the discovery took place.

**R:** What if they, on some of those occasions, decided that they didn’t want to learn? I don’t mean that creative maladjustment, that creative response, that says, “I don’t want to learn this because it is racist, against my culture,” or something like that. What if a kid said, “I don’t want to read. Period.”

## COUNTERING SCHOOL FAILURE

**HK:** It depends upon who the kid is and what the context is. If it is a kid who has experienced failure in learning to read in his past school career and my judgement is, since teaching involves judgement, that the kid is afraid to learn to read but really has to become functional, then I will find a way to seduce him, force him, compel him, charm him, or think of any other way I can to get him to read. I won’t get off his back.

**R:** That’s the story of Barry, right? The kid in *I Won’t Learn from You!*?

**HK:** Yeah. Often poor kids who have experienced school failure by the time you encounter them don’t believe that they can do something, so that they resist it in a crazy way. The one thing you don’t do is repeat the structures of failure. What you have to do is to give them different options and opportunities to learn things that they haven’t learned before. A teacher has to be creative in approaching those subjects.

But I don’t think you let kids go that way, and especially if you know that if you let a kid go in the third grade they are going to be dead on arrival in the sixth grade. And people can say, “Well, but in the alternative schools it is not the case.” That may be. Far be it for me to make that judgement. But I know that if you are poor and you are growing up in an urban ghetto and you can’t read by the time you are in the sixth grade you are dead in the water. And I don’t want to see that happen, to any kid.

**R:** Yet, in an alternative setting in which the classification of third grade or sixth grade doesn’t really matter, all of those concepts are already in question. So what if you let a kid find reading, so to speak, at his or her own pace and in his or her own time?

**HK:** The problem is, they don’t find it. Have you read Lisa Delpit’s *Other People’s Children*? She answers that question more eloquently and more thoroughly than I can do. She argues that progressives who let their own kids learn at their own rate and in their own way can do so because they feel assured that their children will eventually learn; however, when it comes to other people’s children, they are basically damaging them.

**R:** But, Dan Greenberg says that, although at Sudbury Valley no child can be forced to do anything by anybody at any time, by the time the students leave there at age eighteen, they are all reading and writing and so on. What about the argument that says, “Well, as a matter of fact, kids will all learn to read if we just give them their space”?

**HK:** The streets are very tempting. If you are growing up poor and living on mean streets, you don’t have any space in which to do that. That comes from a position of privilege. There are other things to do on the streets that are going to tear you away from the time and the education and the opportunity to do it. If the people at Sudbury Valley can figure out a way to get all the schools in

America to have the resources—the time, the effort, the energy, the grace, the comfort, the lack of danger, the lack of violence that Sudbury Valley has—then let them go ahead and do it. I welcome them.

**R:** You know, what you keep coming back to is the position that lots of progressive, liberal ideas continue not to account for the realities of the lives of poor kids, kids from ghetto areas, kids who don't have the luxury of those kinds of choices, and that for you, the public school venue is still where these changes are....

**HK:** It is all we've got. And if we abandon it, then the kids will have nothing. If we impoverish it, they will have less. That is right. I believe that, very strongly.

**R:** Can you talk about the role of storytelling in teaching and learning? You write about that and see it as very important. For our readers who aren't very familiar with your work, can you talk about that a bit?

**HK:** Well, stories are how people reach each other. Teaching is the unfolding of many stories and so it is, in essence, a long series of nested stories that are unfolded. And it is not just my stories but also the kids' stories, stories that come from their community and all. People listen to stories. They don't listen to preachments. Well, some people do at church, although I don't understand that too well. But even in good sermons, it is all stories, parables, riddles, puzzles.

In effect, storytelling both creates a community bond and gives people an opportunity to discover their own voices. I think the crucial thing is the discovery of voice. How do people learn to voice who they are, what they think, what they believe in, what they know. Storytelling also allows you to be funny. If you can't be funny in the classroom, you can't succeed. There has to be some fun in there. Most teachers who burn out do so because they aren't having fun anymore.

There has to be an opportunity not only to have fun, but also to share a part of yourself that you feel like sharing. And I think when teachers tell stories it is that sharing part of oneself that elicits trust. Storytelling is definitely a part of my own background. At every dinner, everybody had stories to tell and only got about one out.

**R:** So I am a third grade teacher, and I am reading this interview. I am fascinated by it, and I think, "So what can I do? Tomorrow, I am going to go into my classroom. I want to do this storytelling thing. What can I do?"

**HK:** Say something about yourself. Think about what you are teaching, think about yourself in school, when you learned it, or think about someone in your family who did or didn't learn it, and tell a story about yourself.

**R:** And the kids, what can I have them do?

**HK:** You figure it out. You're going to be a teacher. I'm not going to tell you what to do. That's too formulaic. Basically, you want to ask the kids what they think. And then listen. But, one thing you got to do is say, "I'm going to give a half an hour to this conversation." That's the major commitment. And if you can't fill up a half an hour of conversation with your class, then you got to figure out how to do it. You simply have to figure out how to create a time to tell stories.

Take a book. Take a simple book, a children's book. I got one yesterday. It is called *Click Clack Moo: Cows that Type*. It is an interesting book. So I would ask my third grade class what this book is. I don't care what

reading level it is. The cows are typing to the farmer and basically say that the barn is cold and that we want some electric blankets and if he doesn't do it, they will go on strike. They left a note on the barn door saying, "Sorry we're closed, no milk today."



**R:** There's your unionist background coming up again!

**HK:** That's right. And they basically take up for the chickens, and now there's no milk and no eggs. Then they win what they want, but unfortunately they give away the typewriter, which is their instrument of power, so we would talk about that. However, the ducks, who were given the typewriter to take to the farmer, don't. They start typing; they start organizing. So now we have lots to talk about. But the point about talking about it is not to test it, not to come to a conclusion, not to tell people what to think, not to say that if you don't tell me exactly what is in this book you are going to get a B or C, or an A if you can memorize it. Talk about it. And that's where storytelling comes in. That's what *bonds* human communities together.

Then kids can come to you and say, "I want to learn this but I don't know how." That is one of the most important things to say. "Yeah, I want to learn how to read but I don't know how to do it. Everybody has tried to teach me to read but nobody has told me how to read or nobody has shared this with me. Nobody has given me the power and strength to understand what I need to do to go about doing things like this."

**R:** From what I understand from reading some of your work, isn't it true that storytelling, fiction, literature also enables one to see beyond the world one is in?

**HK:** Poetry, in particular.

**R:** You talk about how the ghetto limits one's visions, and so on.

**HK:** Not the ghetto, being upper class limits vision! Don't think about people with limited vision as only being poor. Sometimes poor people have a much bigger vision than people who are wealthy and protected and ghettoized in their white alternative communities.

**R:** For either group, storytelling, fiction, is a way out.

**HK:** Poetry. Theatre. The same thing. These are all ways to see a larger human world, but also to love lan-

guage. I think that if anything, you don't write as much as I do unless you have a certain level of language. Write for its own sake, for the sake of its own existence, not for anything else.

**R:** Charlie read me a passage in the *Discipline of Hope* about the teacher in you wrestling with the educator in you. This comes up elsewhere in your work, also. Where is Herb Kohl now with that struggle?

**HK:** Wrestling. You never end those struggles. Since I am going to be doing a lot of teacher education over the next couple of years, one thing that has been bothering me a great deal is how much does the teacher in me get them—the young people that I have an opportunity to work with—to conform to what the state demands as opposed to what I know in my heart would be in their better interest. And that is the same struggle: the educator versus the teacher, right? I wrestle with this all of the time. I don't know where I am going to come out at any particular time.

I know that ultimately I get very wicked, and the educator overcomes the teacher, I am pretty sure. But how it happens, is different every time. You know, I talk about that in *Discipline of Hope*, about situational teaching. If you ask me before I begin the class how it is going to come out that way, I can't tell you. I have to be there first, feel the presence of everybody, know what I can get away with.

(Laughter)

**R:** There's your existentialism again.

(Laughter)

Much of my writing is based on stuff that I've read and that I know. I don't display it, annotate it, or show it because I prefer to tell stories in my own way, and so I try to inform my writing with what I know and what I think as opposed to being an academic writer.

**HK:** Actually, your work is always storytelling.

**C:** I so enjoyed your essay on Alder Creek. It was just beautiful.

**HK:** Judy and I were at Alder Creek two or three days ago. Oh! It has changed so much this year! The whole path of the creek has totally changed. It is running further north and the driftwood is at a different place now

and it is just fascinating. Every year it just changes. You know, it is the same river, but it is not. That is one of my favorite things that I have written. I enjoyed writing it.

**C:** Well, I can tell, I think, when I am reading somebody who likes words and enjoys their writing. It shines through.

**HK:** I consider myself, as a writer, not an educational writer, but a writer who happens to write about education. I probably have more friends who are writers than who are educators. I have a lot of friends, and I founded the Teachers and Writers Collaborative. I work with all kinds of writers from all over the world, with PEN and Freedom to Write, Writers in the Schools, all that stuff. It all has to do with the privilege of being among other people who are really high on writing. It is great fun.

**R:** In a final comment, do you have any words of hope for the many teachers out there who are struggling to do the right thing?

**HK:** I think that because hope comes from a sense of community that the most important thing is to not do it alone, to search out other people, other teachers, either in your community, or across private and public schools, or in any different place. Build not merely alliances, but friendships. Groups of teachers can join others who are similarly struggling with questions of hope. Hang out a bit with them.

Don't try to put your school behind you but integrate that into your social life in a way that is positive and reflective of other people doing similar things that you can like. I, for example, have been talking to Pat Montgomery and a few other people in the alternative school movement and in the private school, the National Association of Independent Schools, as well as the public schools. There is absolutely no reason why teachers across all those sectors can't meet with each other and communicate with each other. They need each other for support.

My feeling is that that kind of meeting—for example, a gathering that is not sectionalized according to public, private, or homeschool, but focuses instead on issues of equity, justice, and caring about kids and teachers—would be very useful and very important. We need to feel ourselves as part of a whole movement, rather than separate. That's one way to do that. And in that way, the sharing of resources is made more possible.

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## A Resource List: Books by Herb Kohl

Kohl is the author of over 40 books. Below are brief summaries of some of his most well-known works, as well as summaries of several of his lesser known or newer works. In all of these books, one finds stimulating, provocative, heartfelt teaching principles that remain timeless.

**36 Children** (1967 original, 1990 reissue, New American Library Trade). In this classic chronicle of an inner city school, Kohl describes his teaching experiences in a sixth grade Harlem classroom. On Amazon.com, one reader from Lubbock, Texas, wrote recently about what he had learned from this book, which he recommends to all teachers and teachers-to-be: "Be challenged to teach out of your comfort zone. Allow your sweet spirit to be given to kids who fall asleep in class because the gun shots at four a.m. woke them up and [they] are afraid to go back to sleep. Be reminded to learn from your students and allow students to teach you. Wherever you are, make your classroom a safe place to share, learn and grow."

For locating old copies of this or other out-of-print books listed below, visit <http://www.biblioind.com>.

**The Discipline of Hope: Learning from a Lifetime of Teaching** (1998, Simon and Schuster). Reviewer Joel Neuberg (from *Booklist*, February 1998) wrote, "At the age of 60, the prolific Herbert Kohl looks back on 38 years of teaching at every level from kindergarten through college. The first third of the book focuses on the first two years of Kohl's career, teaching sixth-grade children from African American and Puerto Rican neighborhoods in New York City—the same period covered in Kohl's classic work, *36 Children* ... Set against the social events of the time—from the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War in the '60s and '70s through the widespread abandonment of public schools in the '80s—Kohl's account demonstrates his unwavering commitment to the learning process. Of interest to anyone who sends a child to school, this compelling mix of theory and autobiography will be most useful to teachers looking for inspiration." <http://www.simonandschuster.com/>

**"I Won't Learn from You": And Other Thoughts on Creative Maladjustment** (1995, New Press). In this book of five essays, Kohl uses masterful storytelling skills within personal reflections of his own teaching and life experiences to illustrate how and why children learn and become "active creators of their own values." In the final essay, Kohl describes *creative maladjustment* as "breaking social patterns that are morally reprehensible, taking conscious control of one's place in the environment, and readjusting the world one lives in based on personal integrity and honesty—that is as it consists of learning to survive with minimal moral and personal compromise in a thoroughly compromised world and of not being afraid of planned and willed conflict, if necessary" (p. 130). This definition is followed by many descriptions of how this concept plays out in the classroom as well as within the broader political dynamics of teaching. Throughout every essay, as is common to Kohl's work, one finds students always at the core of Kohl's com-

mitment to the "struggle for public education." <http://www.thenewpress.com/books/iwontlrn.htm>

**On Teaching** (1976, Schocken Books). As Kohl describes in the preface, "This book is for people thinking about becoming a teacher as well as for people in teacher training and for people who are in the classroom and think of themselves as still learning how to teach. It is about the specifics of working with children and developing curriculum material. It is also about educational politics, the social structure of the school, and the ways in which the feelings we have as adults affect the work we do in school." This book covers the motivation for teaching, the craft of teaching, and the politics of teaching.

**The Open Classroom: A Practical Guide to a New Way of Teaching** (1969, Random House). This book is one of Kohl's early responses to working in an authoritative school environment that had more to do with controlling students than with teaching them. Kohl describes in great detail both the struggles, problems, failures, and successes of teachers trying to create non-authoritarian classrooms and the "battles with self and system" that teachers encounter in public schools (p. 15). The "open classroom," which he suggests as an alternative to teacher-directed classrooms, takes time to develop, yet in the end is worth its own reward; based on participation rather than compulsion, it validates and honors students' sincere desire to learn.

**Should We Burn Babar?** (1995, The New Press). Kohl examines children's literature and the power of stories as he reflects on ways to address well-loved children's books whose core messages need to be challenged. He looks at colonialism in the Babar books, racism and misrepresentation inherent in the usual telling of the Rosa Parks story, sexism in Pinocchio, and the absence of adolescent literature that questions economic and social structures at deeper levels. As you read these essays, you get a better sense of what to look for in *how* a story is told and to question what isn't told within each story. Kohl's answer is neither to burn books nor to ignore other beloved cultural icons (such as Barbie), but to encourage critical awareness and a "social imagination" (freedom to imagine the world other than it is). In the final essay, drawing from his readings of history, Kohl challenges the "good old days" perspective on public education by telling the story of a fictional family making its way through the trials and tribulations of America's school history. <http://www.thenewpress.com/books/shouldwe.htm>

Other books that Herb Kohl has written or edited include *Teaching the Unteachable: The Story of an Experiment in Children's Writing* (1967); *Golden Boy as Anthony Cool: A Photo Essay on Naming and Graffiti* (1972); *Half the House* (1974); *Math, Writing & Games in the Open Classroom* (1974); *Basic Skills—A Plan for Your Child, a Program for All Children* (1982); *Growing Minds: On Becoming a Teacher* (1985); *A Call to Character* (1995); *The Plain Truth Of Things: A Treasury* (1997).

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