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# Book Reviews

Jay C. Thompson, Jr.  
Book Review Editor

## Increasing Effectiveness with Students: Do You Listen to Reply, or Do You Listen to Understand?

What does it take to get educators to listen to, discern, and reflect upon issues and viewpoints raised by students? Often we listen for the purpose of responding: discerning the message may get lost in the process. The adage "seek first to understand" may be applicable. In working with students we must also consciously listen to understand. This represents an important contextual shift; it also, however, opens new opportunities that potentially enhance learning for both students and teachers. It is critical that the fragile balance between challenge and success in learning also contain a focus upon an environment that promotes engagement, inspiration, and personal growth. As educators are increasingly called upon to become facilitators of learning, such an environment becomes essential.

Many important issues and viewpoints must be explored systematically. The following books provide additional keys to unlock further understandings about the behaviors needed for better communication. Hopefully this process will enable us to enhance our understanding.

*The War against Boys:  
How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Boys*  
By Christina Hoff Sommers

New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000

Reviewed by Bobby G. Malone, Department of Educational Leadership,  
Ball State University, Muncie, Ind.

*The War against Boys* is a compelling book. The social problem of gender equity—or perhaps more accurately stated, the social inequity being perpetrated against young American boys—is its main theme. The author begins by examining the work of Carol Gilligan, "the matron saint of the girls crisis movement" (p. 17). Feminist writers in general have portrayed the adolescent girl as one whose "sense of self worth would have been an accelerating downward spiral" (p. 15). After documenting how effectively this picture has been marketed, Sommers points to the paucity of evidence supporting it. She states, "If the nation's girls are in the kind of crisis Gilligan and her acolytes are describing, it has escaped the notice of conventional psychiatry" (p. 18).

The author notes that only in sports can boys be said to be outachieving girls. In school engagement, perhaps the best predictor of academic success, boys trail girls at an alarming rate. Boys tend to score better on standardized tests, but as Sommers points out, a greater percentage of girls takes the tests, so that girls whose parents never attended college or even graduated from

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high school are more likely to take the tests than boys from similar backgrounds.

The school climate for American boys is unfriendly. Girls are viewed through a “literary victimology” that has been promoted in such writings as “Failing at Fairness”; “How America’s Schools Cheat Girls”; “Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls”; and “School Girls: Self-Esteem and the Confidence Gap.” These feminist writers, says Sommers, view young boys as the culprits.

Sommers says school curricula have been utilized to reeducate young boys about how they should behave. “Quit It,” a 1998 K–3 teacher guide and curriculum, is used to teach anti-harassment and antiviolenace by rendering little boys less volatile, less competitive, and less aggressive. Sommers examines common misbehaviors that occur in schools. Bullying, teasing, and taunting are typical and most are gender related. Such behaviors occur more often with boys than with girls. How are administrators reacting? Nan Stein, the co-creator of the program, replied, “I’d say they are in a panic . . . so many lawsuits with so many monetary damages.” Sommers concludes that the fear of ruinous lawsuits is forcing schools to treat normal boys as sexist culprits.

The author examines the premise of Gilligan and her followers: society, having been constructed incorrectly, must be torn down and reconstructed. The basic assumption is that we are all essentially androgynous. Traditional claims of male superiority due to the natural differences between men and women do not, says Sommers, excuse the approach being used with young boys today.

Gilligan’s theory about boys’ development has three main tenets, says Sommers: 1) boys are being deformed and made sick by traumatic separation from their mothers; 2) seemingly healthy boys are cut off from their own feelings and relationally damaged; and 3) the well-being of society may depend on freeing boys from “cultures that value or valorize heroism, honor, war, competition. . . .” To Sommers, the feminists’ approach is unacceptable, meddlesome, and subtly abusive. “Educating boys more like girls” is not a harmless social-engineering experiment.

Boys are more likely to fight, swear, throw tantrums, and threaten others, and they are more likely to be harmed by a lack of directive moral education than girls. Sommers believes that many adults have defected from the task of civilizing their children; they have instead abandoned the children to fend for themselves. She cites specif-

ic court decisions that have abetted such parental permissiveness.

Sommers’ concluding chapter, “War and Peace,” is presented as an appeal to common sense. There is no reason to use the oppression of girls as a reason for oppressing boys, she says. She refers to the recently published *Between Mothers and Sons*, where self-described feminist mothers provide wistful insights into the “soul of boys” and question cherished prejudices when they do not square with the mothers’ own experiences.

The mother of a son, Sommers maintains that interference and indoctrination by misguided feminists have altered the natural process of boys being boys. *The War against Boys* is informational, confrontational, and filled with “ah-ha” moments. It is an excellent literary experience that delves into the social problem of boys and girls trying to grow up.

***The Schools Our Children Deserve:  
Moving beyond Traditional Classrooms and  
“Tougher Standards”***  
**By Alfie Kohn**

Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999

Reviewed by Marilyn Quick, Superintendent,  
Prairie Heights Community School Corporation,  
LaGrange, Ind.

What’s it all about, Alfie? It should come as no surprise that the man who brought us *Punished by Rewards* (1993), an attack on the practice of rewarding students with stickers, pizzas, A’s, and other extrinsic motivators, would move to another educational target. In his latest book, Alfie Kohn turns his attention to tougher standards, “high-stakes” testing, and what he considers an overemphasis on student achievement. His main thesis in *The Schools Our Children Deserve* is that the cry for tougher standards has diminished student achievement and opportunities to become critical, creative thinkers.

Why does Kohn oppose the vogue for high-stakes achievement testing and tougher standards so strongly? According to the studies Kohn has reviewed, achievement-oriented students underperform learning-oriented students when a task involves real thinking. Observing that traditional education has not been successful, he adds that we are foolish to expect that it would improve student achievement in the future. Emphasizing the “basics” relies on facts that come and go. What matters more than the information itself,

Kohn claims, is the capacity to acquire and use information.

In Chapter 4, "Getting Evaluation Wrong: The Case against Standardized Testing," Kohn concludes that, at best, a school's high test scores are probably meaningless. At worst, they mandate instruction that omits many rich experiences in order to prepare students for the test.

Kohn illuminates other problems with the tougher-standards movement. Lawmakers who would not order physicians when to recommend dialysis dictate a reading method to be used in the state's schools. More tests, more homework, more drill, and more days have not improved the quality of education. Kohn believes that business interests have prevailed and the purpose of schooling has become preparing workers for future employment rather than individual personal fulfillment and the creation of a more democratic society.

Kohn would abandon the knowledge-transmission model and embrace constructivism, in which students become "meaning makers." To improve schools, Kohn advocates starting with student interest. Achievement will follow student interest, he says. His other proposals for improving education include providing lessons that begin with essential questions; decision-making opportunities for students; cooperative learning; more student writing; a focus on mathematical processes; alternative assessment; and project-based learning. Kohn also urges parents and school districts to boycott their state's high-stakes testing programs.

Although *The Schools Our Children Deserve* is targeted toward parents, it challenges assumptions held dear by many educators and might provoke some interesting dialogue at staff meetings. When I witness the frustration in one of our district's schools as it strives to track each state standard and assess a myriad of discrete facts and skills, I find Kohn's explanation for the lack of school achievement more and more plausible.

The last third of the book contains an extended section with research, notes, and references. A chart alerts parents to "what to look for in a classroom" based on Kohn's principles for schools. For example, a "good sign" during class discussion is students addressing one another directly. A "possible reason to worry" (p. 236) is students waiting to be called on or the teacher directing or involved in all discussion exchanges. Overall, Kohn's book raises important questions with a light, enjoyable format and vivid examples.

***Engaging Minds:  
Learning and Teaching in a Complex World*  
By Brent Davis, Dennis Sumara, and  
Rebecca Luce-Kapler**

Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000  
Reviewed by Glenn Peoples, Education Manager,  
Indiana Web Academy, Intelenet Commission, and  
Indiana Department of Education, Indianapolis,  
Indiana

*Engaging Minds* will disturb some individuals, particularly those who pay attention to what the book says and implies about teaching and learning. Davis, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler have unraveled the Gordian knot of the teaching-learning process so that teachers can better apply the results of the summarized research to ensure the success of their students. At the same time, teachers may appreciate the complexity of the teaching-learning process more deeply.

In 1971, James Ross, then a professor at University of Wales, held that plant physiologists were guilty of trivializing their field by striving to reduce biologic mechanisms to unitary explanations. Ross argued that only by understanding the vast complexity of plant physiology could one appreciate the science itself. Education, as a discipline, is apparently following a self-destructive course similar to that of the plant physiologists of that time.

By reducing the highly complex process of teaching and learning to a handful of "best practices," the education profession appears to be trivializing the very act of teaching. But as the authors point out continually and eloquently, the teaching-learning process is complex because the underlying science of stimulation, observation, mental integration of data, and therefore perception is complex; because intelligence, culture, and diversity add to the complexity of the teaching-learning process; and because self-concept, the use of technology, and other variables impact the ability of children to express intelligence. In short, the acts and processes of teaching and learning are, according to the authors, more of a complex, ecologically driven notion than a checklist of behaviors leading to success.

The authors' explanation of how teaching and learning are "complexified" will seem natural to any practicing teacher. Inherently, teachers have always known that the acquisition and demonstration of knowledge is difficult at best; the process of teaching and learning typically crosses the inter-

faces of experience, language, culture, and age. An illuminating example of the authors' complexity argument is in the section titled "Discerning Abilities," where, following an extremely clear discussion of normal and abnormal, the analysis moves on to intelligence and its complexities; developmentalism; and the futility of linear curricular construction based on developmental stages. Further on in the chapter, the authors examine classroom structures that support the teaching-learning process for children at different developmental stages, though approximately the same age.

This work summarizes the complexities of teaching and learning. Further, it provides a clear and useful discussion of what some professors have come to call the indefinable: Teaching, Learning, and Knowing. In *Engaging Minds*, research relating to a clear understanding of these previously ponderous topics serves to clarify these concepts for teachers. The work also provides teachers with balance-beam discussions that summarize the polarized stances of several theory groups: teacher versus child-centered classrooms, mental models versus behaviorism, and other topics. The work is useful, coherent, clear, and written in an unambiguous and inimitable style. *Engaging Minds* is a book for teachers and aspiring teachers to read, use, and perhaps become a bit unsettled over.

***Multicultural Education in Middle and Secondary Classrooms: Meeting the Challenge of Diversity and Change***

**By Joan A. Rasool and A. Cheryl Curtis**

Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 2000

Reviewed by Cathy J. Siebert, Department of Educational Studies, Ball State University, Muncie, Ind.

It is rare indeed when a book lives up to its glowing dust jacket reviews. Yet such is the case with Joan A. Rasool and A. Cheryl Curtis's *Multicultural Education in Middle and Secondary Classrooms: Meeting the Challenge of Diversity and Change*, a work that fills a void in the field of multicultural education.

As the authors explain in the preface, *Multicultural Education* is designed to emphasize the link between multicultural education and teacher as change agent. Becoming a multiculturalist does not mean exchanging one curriculum for another; rather, it is a process of acquiring new knowledge and developing an ability to reflect critically on one's own and others' ideas about society, culture, and schooling. Finally,

becoming a change agent involves having the courage to move forward and implement practices and policies that create a more equitable education for all students (p. ix).

Balancing the theoretical with the practical, Rasool and Curtis structure their work into two sections. Section One provides a comprehensive and readable overview of the field of multicultural education. A brief history of multicultural education examines the various, often-competing definitions of the term. Race, class, and gender in the classroom are considered, as well as the issues of cultural learning styles and racial identity in learning. These chapters provide a persuasive argument for teachers serving as critical-change agents in their classrooms.

Section Two applies the theory to practical classroom situations. Chapters Four and Five emphasize effective decision-making, implementation of instruction, and classroom management. Chapter Six focuses on instructional strategies, with Chapter Seven exploring assessment issues. Chapter Eight considers the role of school-family-community partnerships, followed by a critical look at diversity, special education, and multiculturalism. Chapter Ten is a call for teachers to serve as change agents, while recognizing the challenges and obstacles facing teachers who accept the charge to become "the most effective multicultural teachers possible" (p. x).

In each chapter the authors include a variety of perspectives on the topic, reflected in brief writings by prominent teachers and researchers in the field. For example, in Chapter One, "Creating a Context for Multicultural Education," Ira Shor considers education as socialization and the politics embedded in public education, whereas George Will argues against multicultural education. On the topic of preservice education, James A. Banks launches a passionate argument endorsing education for freedom. Through such readings, Curtis and Rasool have assembled thought-provoking, often controversial perspectives that should stimulate readers to examine their own beliefs and actions critically.

In addition to the range of perspectives illustrated through the readings, Rasool and Curtis also provide a set of discussion questions and suggested activities at the end of each chapter. Once again, the authors' determination to balance theory with practical application is demonstrated in the questions they pose. For example, Chapter Three, Question One, asks readers to "[r]eview

the characteristics of field-independent and field-dependent learners” but then prompts readers to consider their own learning styles, influences on their learning styles, and how well their learning styles match with instructional styles used in schools. The readers are then asked, given their analyses of learning styles, to reflect on how they can “accommodate students with different learning styles” (p. 90).

Although the authors clearly situate their work within critical theory, readers are encouraged, through a careful scaffolding of readings, discussion questions, and activities, to construct their own understandings of multicultural education and their personal commitment to the role of teacher as change agent. Although many works provide persuasive arguments for multicultural education, Rasool and Curtis move beyond the rhetoric to facilitate the translation of the theoretical into the practical. Although the authors are quick to point out that teaching in ways consistent with critical theory is not easy, readers should leave the text with concrete visions of what needs to be done in classrooms and how they can go about the work in ways that make “learning accessible to all learners” (p. xvii).

***Ethical Leadership and Decision Making  
in Education***

**By Joan Poliner Shapiro and  
Jacqueline A. Stefkowich**

Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001

Reviewed by William L. Sharp, Department of  
Educational Leadership, Ball State University,  
Muncie, Ind.

The purpose of *Ethical Leadership and Decision Making in Education* is to help students reflect on their own values and their professional beliefs as present or future school leaders by using the ethics of justice, care, critique, and the profession. The authors, who taught an ethics course together, asked several of their graduate students to write real-life moral dilemmas as case studies with a series of questions for discussion. In addition, the authors added a chapter on how they taught ethics and how their own life experiences have influenced their values.

The authors used a “multiple paradigm approach” to this discussion of ethics:

- “justice”—situational ethics and happiness for the greatest number of people
- “critique”—debating the issues and making people rethink their own values

- “care”—the need to consider multiple voices in decision-making as well as loyalty and trust; and
- “the ethics of the profession”—administrators’ need to develop their own personal ethical code, considering the needs of their students first.

The point of the book is that, before deciding what action should be taken, a practicing administrator should use all four models to examine the real-life dilemmas he or she faces. For example, a dilemma may not be just a question of right or wrong. The best interests of the students should also be considered.

The graduate students wrote sixteen case studies for *Ethical Leadership and Decision Making*. The range of topics, though, is restricted. For example, five of the sixteen cases deal with issues of sex, two are about special education problems, and two are concerned with minorities. In short, the cases presented in this book are not altogether typical of those faced by administrators. The first five cases, for example, concern a teacher working in an adult video store; artificial insemination; a textbook about a man’s male roommate; AIDS education; and dissection of live frogs. Although cases dealing with textbook censorship and a teacher’s employment outside school are presented, there are no questions about the legal implications, something that administrators should ask before taking action.

Although many books include a paragraph or two about the author, this book has nearly nine pages of such information (in a book of about 100 pages). One author discusses how her work in a women’s study program has raised her consciousness toward injustices, e.g., sexism, race, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, and disability. These feelings certainly seem to be expressed in the selection of the case studies for the book.

I currently teach in a department that trains future school administrators. We have been discussing the need to include ethics in our curriculum in some way, especially in light of the recommendations of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) and the standards set by our own state. A case study approach to teaching or discussing ethics is a good one. Although this book is a step in that direction, it might have been improved by including more cases that are more typical of the problems encountered in today’s schools.