Stupidity & Tears

On high-stakes testing, cooperative learning, *punitive models*, and more

GARA LAMARCHE
& HERBERT KOHL

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Gara LaMarche: Herb Kohl's most recent book *Stupidity and Tears: Teaching and Learning in Troubled Times* (The New Press, 2004) is very timely, because we live in an era when the educational values and policies in New York City are (forgive me, if I'm a little opinionated here) dominated by young M.B.A.'s in love with Powerpoint, and not educators. When the national dominant values in education adopt the language of the criminal justice system in a punitive model, a voice like Herb's becomes something like an ancient language that we must preserve until that time when there will be more speakers of it. Herb, you've written 40 books, which is in itself rather daunting, I must say. What prompted you to write this one?

Herbert Kohl: Well, first of all, my need to write. I think my family feels that if I'm not writing I'll get in trouble. What prompted me to write *Stupidity and Tears* in particular was one incident that I witnessed about three years ago.

I decided that I needed to get back in the classroom and work directly with kids. So I worked with a number of classrooms at Sanchez Elementary School in San Francisco, and one bilingual classroom. In the latter, I would say three-quarters of the kids were learning to speak English and about one-quarter were in transition. And there was this wonderful teacher who was completely bilingual. I went in, and I did theater with the kids. And by the way, there wasn't *one* Spanish spoken in that room, there were twelve—from all different parts of Latin America and the Philippines. They didn't even understand each other necessarily. But they understood each other more than *I* understood all of them. But I managed to communicate with them because I know body gestures, and I know what motivation means.

I was doing all this, and all of a sudden I was told: "Don't come this week." (The teacher was so happy in having me come; we were working on a backup system so she could really make the translation for the kids without ruining their integrity, their intelligence, their dignity, their sense of self respect.) So I said: "I'm going to show up." And she said, "*Please* don't."

I'm stubborn, and so I showed up. It turned out that the day I did was high-stakes testing day for the kids. According to the State of California, the teacher has to give the kids all the instructions for the exam in English. She cannot answer *any* queries in Spanish. And they have these little (what we now call) "open court police," you know, all these educators who come around and make sure that you're on script. And I'm watching all this going on, and the kids are sitting down knowing—which is what I personally think is evil—that the teacher is giving them a test that they're going to fail. It's a situation in which everybody is trapped in a stupid rule.

Afterwards, the kids left in total frustration, of course, and the teacher was crying in the corner. She said, "I feel so stupid. They *made* me stupid. They have forced me to conform, and I can't stand it." And that's when the title occurred to me. Because I *had* to write about the experience.

GL: One of the things that appeals to me a lot about your book is the various glosses on the word *stupidity*. You have a story about these young students of yours years ago, I think in East Harlem, and how you visited their homes and saw how they acted differently at home than in school. You realized, perhaps, that they acted "stupid" in school for a reason.

HK: That's right. I had two kids, Alfredo and Narcisso. I'm twenty-three years old, teaching at P.S. 145 up on Amsterdam and 105th Street, and the kids are falling off their desks. Whenever I thought I had anything under control, one or the other of them (in what seemed to be a highly orchestrated cello-and-piano duo) would disrupt everything. Like, one would fall off the desk. Then once he got back on the desk, the other one would open the window and try to throw something out of it.

I started teaching January 1st and I'm the fourteenth teacher that they had and they thought they were going to conquer me, which they weren't. I mean, I knew that. They didn't know that, but I knew that. I look at these kids and I'm saying: Wait a second, *they* know cooperative learning. Right?

One of the things I've learned over the years as a teacher is to turn the negative into the positive. It's terribly important to be able to look at what other people might consider behavior that should be punished, behavior that is negative, as creative behavior. I mean, these two kids were being very creative. When Herb gets upset over here, and then gets me under control, then (and this is a kind of logical thinking) we will relax for 3.2 seconds and get him upset over there.

I just had a terrible time my first six months teaching. When I started coming in earlier, they would show up. I'd think to myself, "Oh no, I'm coming earlier to clean up the mess from yesterday, and they're going to come and cause me more trouble now?" But instead they cleaned up with me, they asked me to teach them how to read, they got really motivated. I thought for sure that this was going to generalize to the classroom. But the other kids come, and the boys don't change at all.

One day, one of them says: "Would you come over for dinner to my parents' house?" I say, "Okay." I go over for dinner—now here are these two kids who are driving me up the wall—and they walk me up the stairs, they are perfectly polite gentlemen, they are articulate, they are explaining to me that the fish is bacalao and that their father used to be a fisherman in Puerto Rico. And I'm asking myself, wait a second, are these the same kids?

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But I had another thought, one which has really stood me well throughout my entire career as an educator: The schools are crazy, not the kids. This institution is taking these smart kids—who know how to behave, who can change their modes of behavior at will—and creating some deep distress.

Gara mentioned something interesting about this: A lot of the aggressive behavior (of kids who fail) comes from the fact that they don't want to fail again. So they would rather become behavior problems, because at least their peers will respect them, than look stupid to both the educator and their peers.

Another example of what I mean when I say "stupidity" has to do with the California Test of Basic Skills (CTBS). I was teaching kindergarten and first grade in Berkeley in the '60s, incorporating feminism and civil rights into my discussions. Then, I had to give all the kids the CTBS. One of the questions on the test—I'll never forget this, my daughter Erika was in that class at the time—includes a picture of a woman with a mop, and asks the students to complete the following sentence: "She loves to: a) mop; b) pop; c) hop; d) cop." A little team of these wonderful proto-feminists came up to me and said, "But Herb, *she don't like to do it.*"

They knew the right answer, but they refused to give it. I knew that for some of these kids that one little question might make a major difference in their school careers. So what do you do as a teacher, when you know they can read it, they know the answer, and they're giving you a deep critical analysis of it for their age? I say, Go with the kids. So they got credit for not answering.

GL: In your book, you say that you cannot lead a classroom except through the consent of the governed. One striking example that you bring up is the way young children in Birmingham, Alabama, in the wake of the church bombings, in effect led Martin Luther King, Jr., in a certain direction. How we take our cues from children. That's very unfashionable these days with the dominant educational philosophies that we're dealing with, but I'd like you to talk just a little bit about the ways in which you've learned from children.

HK: I have been functioning under a lot of pressure in trying to keep my program going. It is a teacher education program for teachers who have a commitment to social justice and to quality teaching. I was looking for a hobby, you might call it, but I don't do hobbies too well. If any of you know San Francisco, there's this place on Clement Street called the Joseph Wu Art Studio that teaches traditional classical Chinese painting and calligraphy. I was put in a beginners class in traditional Chinese landscape painting. And who's in the beginner's class? On my left is a four year old, next to her is a five year old, then at the end of the table is a seven year old, across from me are two five year olds, and one six year old, and me. That's the class.

Talk about learning from children! We're all painting the same things: monkeys, panda bears, then we move up to the landscape. And the teacher is brilliant—he's very Buddhist. I have never heard one negative thing from him for any of the kids, ever. If you understand anything about classical Chinese painting, you're doing it on rice paper with black ink and you can't erase. There are no erasures. This is the total opposite of high-stakes testing. "The work is unimportant, it's your engagement with the brushes."

One day, this little girl turns to me and says, "You don't have the right point on your brush, do it *this* way." And now I'm getting the mastery of the brush. But the point is that you have to be fully attuned to the learning context in which you're working in order to learn from children, in order to be affected by young people, because in effect, they have important things to say but they're not trained to say them in the way that we teachers are over-trained to say them.

Audience Member: What has most influenced your teaching?

HK: I have been influenced by reading, believe it or not. One great influence on me was A. S. Makarenko, who ran the Gorky Colony from 1917 to 1924 and wrote a book called *The Road to Life*. The notion in that book that influenced me the most is that of temporary leadership for temporary brigades. Terribly, terribly important in my understanding of how to build a group to deal with the problem and then disband the group after the problem has been dealt with. This is the opposite approach to creating a new bureaucracy that will proceed to forget the problem for which it was created and become itself a problem for others.

Another great influence on my life has been Fritz Redl. An East European exile who fled from Hitler, he later ran a bunch of schools in Detroit. He's written an unbelievably good but very dated book called *Controls from Within: Techniques for the Treatment of the Aggressive Child*. It's really about the development of self-discipline, which has been incredibly important to me. I once had the occasion to meet him and he once told me a story that has had a lasting effect on me.

Redl was with these kids in Detroit, some of the most difficult kids in the city. He takes them to a lake and they go swimming. One kid tries to drown another kid, and Redl pulls them out. He takes the kid who is being drowned aside and says, "Calm down, go back in." Then, he takes the child who is trying to drown the other kid—here's the place for the punitive system, right?—and he says to the kid, "I'd like you to sit in the sun here for a while. You can't go in the water. But I'll tell you something, the water is cool. It is really beautiful. The lake is marvelous today, and I've noticed that you know how to swim. My goal of keeping you in this hot sun right now is to get you in the cool water. But you can't enjoy swimming if you try to kill somebody, because then I'll have to come in, and I don't feel like swimming today. In other words, Redl's using a little Yiddish humor and a kind of teasing, but basically he's saying, "I trust you to be able to make the decision to go back in and not hurt anybody, but I'm not going to let you do it until you believe you're ready to and you understand what the circumstances and conditions are." The whole question of trust and respect is condensed into this little story.