

Gleanings #1: Resources on Inclusion, Gender, Classroom Management, and Assignments That Require No Thinking

April 2007

Gleanings #1

Resources on Inclusion, Gender, Classroom Management, and Assignments That Require No Thinking

By Alfie Kohn

GLEANINGS – A new feature in this space that will appear from time to time: Mentions of (and snippets from) articles and books written by various people – some just published, some discovered belatedly – and likely to be of interest to anyone drawn to the work on this website. To wit: five resources worth checking out:

** Mara Sapon-Shevin's new book, *Widening the Circle: The Power of Inclusive Classrooms*, isn't just an argument against segregating kids with special needs. It's about inclusion as a deeper commitment, about our discomfort with differences, about the arrogance of expecting "those kids" to fit in to*

the mainstream. The book is full of sly observations about disability and social change, noting that “you can’t say you can’t play” doesn’t go far enough, and revealing how arguments against inclusion often assume a traditional approach to instruction that actually isn’t ideal for any students.

* Speaking of differences (and segregation), someone at a recent lecture stood up during the Q&A to thank me for talking about children – rather than about boys and girls as two distinct species. Harvard psychologist Elizabeth Spelke recently reminded us that “we don’t have a male brain or a female brain; we have a human brain, with a whole lot of commonality.” At a time when entire careers are being constructed on the claim that we should segregate children by gender – and that boys are suffering a unique crisis – it’s well worth reading Rosalind Barnett and Caryl Rivers’s article in the Winter 2007 issue of *Independent School*: “Gender Myths & the Education of Boys” – or their slightly shorter essay “The Difference Myth,” published in the *Boston Globe* in October 2007.

* Few of us can pick up anything by Deborah Meier without feeling illuminated, refreshed, perhaps a bit startled. That’s even true of her short essays, such as the foreword she wrote to Chris Gallagher’s new book, *Reclaiming Assessment* (Heinemann, 2007) – a useful review of Nebraska’s struggle to pursue more authentic forms of assessment at a time when the most appalling forms of standardization are justified in the name of “accountability.” Says Meier: “Even if we teachers and parents have been attacked by friend and foe alike for resisting reform, we forget at our peril that our capacity for resisting is our true salvation.”

* In “What Are You Thinking?”, which appeared in last October’s *Educational Leadership*, Katie Wood Ray distinguishes between memorizing the definition of an ellipsis and asking kids what they’re thinking about an

ellipsis. The latter, she adds, requires them to “have a writing life in which to imagine...how they might use” it. Then she tells a story about being a guest writing teacher in a fifth-grade classroom where the students had been assigned to write persuasive letters to the principal about changing the school: “I asked the first student I met with (who had written about four sentences) to tell me why she had decided to start her letter in the particular way that she did. ‘What were you thinking?’ I asked. As one of the observing teachers noted, the young girl looked at me as though she had just had a frontal lobotomy. All my wonderful wait time provided no answer. I finally realized it was because there wasn’t any answer. The student hadn’t been asked to do any thinking or decision making in this writing at all. The topic had been assigned, a graphic organizer told her exactly what to include in each part, and when I sat down next to her, she was simply transferring information from the organizer to a worksheet on which she was supposed to write the letter. The point is, it’s difficult for students to answer questions about their thinking when the work they are doing doesn’t require them to think.”

* Finally, have a look at “Contradiction, Paradox, and Irony: The World of Classroom Management,” a 10-year-old essay by Barbara McEwan Landau. It raises troubling but vital questions about our need for control, the ubiquitous demand for quick fixes, and a tendency to reproduce the very cruelties to which we were subject as children. Even educators committed to thoughtful curricular practices may resort to “authoritarian management measures, despite the contradiction,” she observes. This essay was originally published in a little-noticed academic-press anthology, but Landau has just posted it as a pdf file, so you can read it [here](#).

Back to Blogs