

WinkWorld May 2003

Alfie Kohn spoke at Modesto Junior College this past month. Many graduate students and teachers in the area attended. It has been thrilling to watch the ripple effect of his presentation. We sent several letters to him, which teachers wrote. However, I was so inspired by the reflections of Karalee McClymott that I asked to share her thoughts in the form of an Open Letter to Alfie Kohn.

Thank you, Karalee, teacherofenglish@hotmail.com

Dear Alfie Kohn,

I recently heard you speak in Modesto, CA. As I entered the conference I really had no expectations except to attend another conference where a monotone speaker talked about himself for three hours. I was proved wrong. You were animated, charismatic, and humorous; all of these qualities kept my interest the entire time. But, more important than your presentation, was your message. The night before your presentation I was at the gym with my friend. We were working out to, not only physically better ourselves, but to clear our minds and feel mentally better. We are both teachers, and we were both frustrated with our classrooms. We kept tossing around ideas of how to make the students "obey," work more, complete tasks, and stay focused. We have very different approaches to managing our classrooms, and we could not seem to agree with each other. She pointed out the flaws in my ideas, and I pointed out the flaws in her ideas. All we could agree upon was that next year it would be different. We would change things from the start. The only thing we were sure on was that we could not change our rules in the middle of the year. Consistency was the key!! We knew that much. Oh well!! Next year we would get it right from the start and keep it that way all year.

The next day I drug my friend to your conference telling her that if she went with me I would take her out to lunch - my treat. She agreed, feeling the same way I was, yet another conference with only a little spark of hope that it would be even remotely be useful. We were once again proved wrong. Since attending your conference neither of us can get your voice out of our heads. I find myself hearing your mocking "good job" when my colleagues talk to their students. I also came upon a booklet that specifically told the teacher to say "good job" to the students. It made me chuckle, and then it made me think - What had we become? A society that prompted one another on cue what to say and how to discipline kids. I also thought a lot about your idea of punishing by rewards and about the case studies that you presented. I wondered if I punished by rewards, did I make students feel left out, was I part of the problem? I had to stop and reevaluate my classroom practices. Exactly what was I promoting, where was I going with my ideas, who was I becoming and more importantly who was I making others become? Left with my thoughts I went about the next few days slowly changing my practices to include - not exclude students. I began to realize that contrary to what all classroom management classes had thought me before, you can change your classroom rules and environment at the end of the year by simply including, not excluding student voices.

The behavior in my classroom has always been wonderful, but the motivation to do work (homework to be exact) is not always as wonderful. Why was it like a pendulum - sometimes great, sometimes horrible? What causes the shifts? How could a whole class be so

unmotivated all on the same day? What was wrong with them? WRONG !! What was wrong with me? Reevaluation time. What was I doing to cause these huge swings? Lack of love as you put it, pulling away when I did not get the results I wanted. The students are my world, so when I realized that I pulled back my love it crushed me, just as it had been crushing them.

My classroom has regained the atmosphere that it once possessed. Motivation for myself and the students has been restored. Is the classroom perfect? No! Is it more inclusive? Yes! Is it moving forward? Yes!

A few days ago the teacher aide in my classroom, a young girl of seventeen, came into my classroom very upset. "What is wrong?" I asked. She replied, "I am in so much trouble. I got caught ditching school with my car, and I had my boyfriend with me. He was in the back seat, and I was in the front, and we were hanging out talking. My mom who was picking up my little brother saw us and got so mad, she took away my car." I quickly responded, "I guess you will not do that again!" To which she replied, "No, I just won't get caught next time." Alfie Kohn's exact words "next time I won't get caught" rang in my ears. Punishment and kids - exactly how do we handle things?

My boyfriend and I have been dating for six and a half years, and during this time we have come to agree on how to raise and punish the kids we don't even have yet. That is until I heard you and the teacher aide demonstrate that taking away things does not have long-term effects. When had I become? Was I so removed from being a kid that I forgot what it was like? Had I forgotten how I reacted to things; how I avoided being caught at any price; how I wanted to be included in the decisions? Hearing your conference has turned my life upside down, and although I have no clear-cut solutions or answers I appreciate that you made me think of the questions. My world is a mess that needs sorting, cleaning, and throwing out of old ideals and rules. Mostly, I wanted to thank you for making the conference more than just remotely useful, but for making it life changing.

Sincerely,
Karalee McClymont