Herbert Kohl’s *I Won’t Learn from You* is a lesson in how to not-teach. He discusses in detail the ways in which student not-learn and their motivations behind these conscious decisions. Educators and future educators should look at this collection of essays not as examples of ways in which students are defiant or excuses for their behaviors, but as a way in which teachers need to be defiant and need to actively employ the tenets of creative maladjustment. Kohl has created a philosophy in which students and teachers work in collaboration to become the architects of student education and eventual success on both sides. Some of the essays were less than earth shaking, however the moments where Kohl is on par shine so brightly that the overall message of inspiration and “hope-mongering” cannot be denied, ignored, or overlooked.

One of the most compelling moments in the book comes when Kohl discusses his experience with deaf children. The setup of the schools was a shockingly tangible example of the largest issues facing urban teachers and students today. By approaching it from a different angle, Kohl makes those issues only more clearly defined and obvious. Deaf children being forced to speak verbally and being forbidden from using their preferred method of communication, sign language, has direct parallels to curriculums that ignore the most basic aspects of a student’s cultural, personal identity. The juxtaposition is eye opening and makes the treatment of students in both types of institution seem borderline abusive. The hearing teachers at the deaf schools who did not learn sign language had no real way of communicating on any meaningful level with their students. The parallel in urban schools would be teachers who refuse to accept the uniquely distinctive cultural needs of students as individuals. As *Sista Talk: The Personal and The Pedagogical* (2005) by Dr. Rochelle Brock explains, nether situation is educating students as whole people.

Kohl addresses this phenomenon in urban settings as well, the Latino students who were surprised to hear a teacher question the validity of a text book. Those students are engaged by Kohl’s question and become active participants in their own learning when they begin to discuss why the invalidity of the textbook dehumanizes them and invalidates their cultural experiences and heritage. The students abandon their positions of not-learning when they actually are allowed to see themselves in the curriculum. Kohl revisits the denial of cultural connections and refusal to see students as whole people when he describes his experiences working with Puerto Rican fifth graders in New York. The school districts absolute prohibition of speaking Spanish to students reflects such a level of ignorance and bias as to be infuriating. These same students, just like their deaf counterparts, did not perform well on
high stakes tests that were given to them in English. For the deaf students prompts were based in hearing world situations or delivered verbally; for the Spanish speaking students prompts reflected the bias and willful inexperience inherent in systems that forbid students to be communicated with through means that are most appropriate for them. In both schools rather than trying to create successful, fulfilled students the schools had created systems in which their students would absolutely fail. The lack of realization by these institutions that the students were not actually the ones who had failed is staggering, but symptomatic of systems in which students are treated as test scores and not people.

Kohl’s philosophies and beliefs overall are incredibly valid and often inspiring. However, there may be a danger lurking below the surface of some of those tenets. Kohl talks extensively about students who refuse to learn because they feel that learning the material would compromise them in some fundamental way. Kohl should be applauded for his conscious decision to abandon gender, race, and ethnically biased language, but in some subjects these biases do not exist. The student who refused to learn Algebra because it was racially unjust would have some serious explaining to do. Math transcends the boundaries that exist in most subject areas. The only place in which biases might exist are story problems, but fundamentally they still depend on logic and number manipulation. At some point the idea of not-learning might begin to sound more like an excuse than an act of passive resistance. Overall Kohl’s point moves beyond this concern, but it still exists and could be off putting for some educators.

The creative portion of the project that I had designed to illustrate and address the important ideas in the book was really an exciting idea to me. I had planned on picking specific people from each section of the book and then writing letters, cards, or notes from their perspective to the author Herbert Kohl. I would have then put them all in a mailbox and presented the concept to the class. Pulling envelopes at random I would have read each personal correspondence and discussed why the person was important and how they helped to illustrate Kohl’s philosophy.

My first letter would have been from Akmir who appears in the “I Won’t Learn From You” chapter. It would have been a note scribbled to Kohl after the two men had left Akmir’s high school and before Akmir had gone out to see his friends and eventually lost his life. Akmir would not have been gratuitous in his appreciation for Kohl’s help, as both men were learning equally from each other. He would have addressed the situation by briefly thanking Kohl for accompanying him, and he would have discussed how surprised he was to find someone so willing to abandon the language of the dominant racial culture, to subvert the dominant paradigm, his shock that Kohl would be that ally. It would be important to express that Akmir did not want to die, that Kohl’s “hope-mongering” had helped him to remain cautiously hopeful for his future despite the constant setbacks.

Another letter would have been written by Uncle Julius. He would have talked about the importance of not just teaching what you love, but loving what you teach. Julius would have addressed the strength necessary to unionize people in the service profession and how proud he was of Kohl for
mirroring that strength when he stood up for the rights of his students…even if it did almost lose him a few jobs. It takes incredible fortitude to pursue what is right and just for others at your own expense.

Another letter would have come from the deaf girl who came to Kohl’s college class. Kohl did not know her name, he did not even know if she was eight or nine, but he knew that she was in pain. After naming this child Lily, I would have allowed her to express how grateful she was to look into Kohl’s eyes on that day while she was standing in front of a class full of adults struggling, and knowing that someone knew how much she longed to raise her hands and truly speak. I had other letters planned, however these three seem like the most essential ones to go into detail about. I had gathered all the stationary and was even planning on asking other people to write the letters so that I could use different handwriting for each individual. I might still do it, I think it would be a great reminder of the things in this book that were vitally important and remarkably touching.

References