
The content of Humanizing Education exists in contrast to, and even in conflict with, the current extensive literature on the strategic implementation of school reform. The book is an inspiring work that differs significantly from the resources I have been reading recently on the topic. This collection of essays from the Harvard Educational Review focuses on community activism, the empowerment of students, and radical alternatives to existing school governance rather than simple restructuring and creation of data teams.

The essays are arranged in three sections. Part I addresses student rights and student-directed learning with an emphasis on students in poverty gaining influence in improving their education. In the opening essay, “An Insurrectionary Generation,” Jay Gillen writes: “The educational system will not be pried apart from the caste system by adults. But young people in poverty inherit a legacy of struggle that one day they will claim.” What Gillen terms “the radical alternative” is evident in other essays on grassroots community efforts in Part II of the book, which deals with participatory democracy in community schools. In her article, “Nationalist Ideologies, Neighborhood-Based Activism, and Educational Spaces in Puerto Rican Chicago,” Ana Y. Romos-Zayas observes that pro-Puerto Rican independence activists have led a change in Clemente High School where “intergenerational and interorganizational barrio concerns are articulated.”

Part III closes the book with articles that highlight the “radical empathy required for a truly shared, common struggle against dehumanizing educational conditions.” From urban schools in the U.S. to rural communities in Nicaragua in 1980, the theme of struggle and perseverance is characterized as the essential ingredient for true change—more than reform and nothing less than radical reinvention.

The unifying theme of these essays is a call for “power to the people” and resistance to a well-meaning establishment that justifies its usurpation of that power. After more than four decades in this profession, I found this clarion call for action reawakening the revolutionary spirit that existed at the time of John F. Kennedy’s election in 1960. Perhaps with the election of Barack Obama, who is referenced frequently in these articles, a renewed hope for radical change is emerging.

Reviewed by Ed Smith, Principal, Salish Ponds Elementary School, Fairview, Oregon.

As a school leader, do you ever feel underappreciated, isolated, and overworked? If so, this book proves that you are not alone as it describes the real-life dilemmas of being a school leader. Author Robert Evans provides school leaders with seven secrets that he drew from the works of other writers and his experience working with leaders of more than 1,200 schools and other organizations during the past 30 years. The book emphasizes the fundamentals of school leadership and aims to simplify them for readers.

Evans begins his book by exposing the flaws in many of the management theories written and created by leadership gurus. As an example, Evans critiques the book Good to Great and calls its methodology “shallow” since the author uses stock price as a criterion for greatness. He questions whether stock price was “truly the proof of leadership and organizational excellence” by revealing how many of the great companies’ stock prices plummeted during the 2008-2009 financial crisis. Evans argues that “there are many ways to lead successfully” and challenges his readers to “not chase some ideal—a composite list of virtues from the management bookshelf—but to be the very best of who they are.”

Evans accurately portrays the challenges school leaders face every day and uses historical and psychological contexts to help readers understand the issues. He illustrates the dilemmas that school leaders encounter such as constantly being in the public eye, being a manager as opposed to a leader because of the unexpected daily interruptions that come with the job, and feeling isolated, especially when it comes to making major decisions.

Evans does an excellent job humanizing school leaders as he urges them to “look out for number one.” He understands the level of commitment that school leaders invest into their organizations and jobs, but encourages them to live a balanced life by choosing life over work, setting high expectations but being realistic, and treating themselves to something good every once in a while. According to Evans, it is the journey that is important, not the destination. Seven Secrets of the Savvy Leader is a great book that can help principals discover the savvy leader within.

Reviewed by Kaivan Yuen,Principal, Towers Elementary School, Torrance, California.