

3-1-2010

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### Recommended Citation

Alexander, R. (2010). Invited Essay: Philosophy of Teaching. *Perspectives In Learning*, 11 (1). Retrieved from <http://csuepress.columbusstate.edu/pil/vol11/iss1/13>

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## **Invited Essay: Philosophy of Teaching**

**Rebecca Jean Alexander**

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I prefer to first describe my philosophy of teaching from a concrete view and then from one more abstract. For me, personally, becoming a master teacher took years of never giving up, trial and error, and teaching in five states. Yes, those experiences shaped my core values, which I still hold close every time I enter a classroom. I often ponder those life lessons taught to me by the many children who crossed the threshold of my room. As adults, do they remember me? Do they know what they taught me? They put their hands on my life and shaped a part of my creed, by which I still live.

In Florida, there was Nikki, who inspired me as a first year teacher to strive to become a better teacher. Both of her parents were college professors. I spent most of that first year just trying to stay two steps ahead of her. Her patience with my entrance into teaching was endearing. Nikki quickly taught me that there would always be students who would enter my classroom in September and already know what I planned to teach that year. It wasn't enough just to give her more work, I had to learn how to move her ahead. That was a humbling lesson for a first year teacher.

Meet Oliver. I remember a cold Saturday morning in Kentucky when I went to a run-down home to pick up this gifted student and take him to a regional science fair. Oliver lived with his grandmother, and I knew he couldn't attend the fair unless I took him. He later told me that no one had ever done something like that for him. He taught me about being an advocate and giving back to make a difference in the life of another. He showed me that giftedness

comes in all ethnicities and socioeconomic levels and that it wasn't right to not see that.

In New York, there was Amy. I took over teaching her class after her teacher was arrested for molesting her. Through that class, I observed how fragile life can be and that the safety of a classroom is sacred. Together, we put learning back in the class and learned to trust and feel safe again. Amy taught me about the innocent trust that students place in their teachers. That trust is precious and should never be broken.

Moving to a more abstract level, I believe that the ultimate goal of teaching is to prepare good citizens for our democracy, and we do that in the field of education by first making sure that we have leaders, administrators, and teachers who can apply theory to practice to create an inclusive environment for all, not just a few, learners. Despite John Dewey's (1929) proposal that nothing is as practical as good theory, theory is sometimes not included in many educational decisions. Mott and Ross (1957) believed that denying a role for theory leads one to collect facts with little or no purpose in mind about how they are to be used. They characterized practicing without theory like the indiscriminate scurrying of a rat in a new maze. When one observes education dealing with current issues, the vision of scurrying rates becomes a reality which leads to the question of the purpose of theory.

Today the field of education is striving to adapt to a changing environment with many issues. In times of survival, when resources are limited, resources must be reserved in order for an organization to excel. The role of the educational leader is crucial to the survival of education as a

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public organization. Therefore, administrators and teachers must provide the leadership required to move education from its present state to a more desired state (Hitt, 1998). Those who are able to understand and apply theory to practice will be better suited to successfully lead their organizations during this period of adaptation. Such an approach, however, requires a new paradigm for education...one that requires a strong partnership between higher education and K-12. With that in place, theory will guide inclusive practices, and students will grow to become active and useful members of our society. And yes, Nikki, Oliver, and Amy will be productive and happy citizens. And I will have made a difference.

Rebecca J. Alexander, Ed.D., is currently the administrator of gifted programs for Hanover County Public Schools in Virginia. She has been a teacher, differentiation specialist, curriculum specialist, division-level administrator, trainer of teachers, and administrator for more than 30 years. Her areas of scholarly interests are leadership and the change process, beginning teacher retention, and increasing diversity in rigorous classes and programs

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