THOUGHTS ON TEACHING & LEARNING

By

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1994 National Teacher of the Year

"What is as important as knowledge?" asked the mind.
"Caring and seeing with the heart," answered the soul.

-Flavia

We are responsible for our children, they are our future,
if we let them down, they will let us down,
If we teach them correctly, they will teach their children correctly
and society will continue on and on....

-Cliff, a homeless student

My teaching philosophy encompasses the whole child, I believe that education should fully engage the mind, heart and soul. To teach is to cooperatively create a community in which all members are equally valued and participate as both teacher and learner. Teachers must respect all students and believe that each has a vast potential to learn. Teachers must not merely accept their students' difference, but must learn to prize and celebrate their diversity (including age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and physical disability.) Educators must develop curriculum that is meaning-based and illuminates the connections that exist between all people and all things. Only after these vital preconditions have been met can the development of academic proficiency be pursued.

It is crucial that schools empower students to become informed, compassionate, and honorable participants in our democratic society. Rapid technological changes, shifting balances of power, increasing cultural diversity, and the gradual realizations that we are members of an interdependent global village demand new skills, new paradigms, and a more comprehensive world view. Education must play a pivotal role in the preparation of a proactive citizenry that can meet the challenges of the 21st century.

My class is structure to meet the diverse needs of my students. I embrace a student-centered educational philosophy that recognizes the importance of addressing the entire hierarchy of their personal and education needs. My lessons reflect my students' needs and interests and are geared toward their individual ability levels. I do not limit my student to only what is grade appropriate, but focus on what is developmentally appropriate. My lessons are fluid and continuous in order to ensure continual growth. It is paramount to teach not just details but also the process of integrating and applying what is learned.
Actions speak far louder than words. Although the lessons and materials I use as a teacher are an integral part of my school, it is the behavior and philosophy of teaching I model which has the greatest impact on my students. Unconditional acceptance is a personal priority. All students I encounter, whether they are attending class or engaging in street survival activity, know that I will not judge them. I do not look at where they are in their lives, but instead help them look at where they can go. Respect is a word that cannot only be heard; it is seen and felt in my class. It is my passion for education and love of my students that has enabled us to strive beyond the extension of our reach.

Public education faces many issues today: violence in schools, inadequate funding, vouchers, bilingual instruction, and school reform efforts, all within schools that must meet the educational challenge of a culturally diverse student population. Regardless of fluctuation in funding, changes in political climate, or varying educational philosophies, the academic community needs to respond effectively to increasing diversity—there is not one model American. Successful education of 21st century students will require constant innovation.

Educators can respond positively to the needs of all students in many ways. Teachers must begin with a passionate commitment to understanding and prizing the cultural uniqueness of students, diverse learning styles, and individual academic needs. Teacher attitudes and expectations are crucial in the learning process. Positive attitudes foster increased student effort and facilitate student success.

The 21st century will require all teachers to adopt a 21st century attitude and teaching philosophy. What some perceive as a crisis should be viewed as an opportunity. Tomorrow’s students will provide tomorrow’s teachers with the opportunity to grow, learn, and flourish. Educators can play a crucial role in determining the future of our society. We must understand this responsibility and open our hearts and minds to all students. Their souls are in our hands.