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**The Conscious Teacher**

**By Deborah Nichols Poulos**

*The Conscious Teacher* is about all kinds of strategies and techniques educators might employ to become more effective teachers. In an accessible, conversational style, Deborah Nichols Poulos presents unique approaches to teaching that will inspire new and veteran teachers alike.

She begins with her personal story of not being able to read all through elementary school. Her early failures convinced her she was dumb. At first, she struggled, but when she still failed, she adopted an *avoidance strategy* that served her well until junior high. An experience in the seventh grade flipped a switch and started her on a journey to becoming an outstanding student and, later, to applying the lessons she learned as a child to her own teaching

What makes *The Conscious Teacher* unique are the inspirational lessons that are unlike what most teachers get in their teacher-education courses or student teaching. Ms. Nichols Poulos points out, for example, that from the very first day, it is important that students learn they will be treated with dignity and respect no matter what. And especially helpful are the steps Ms. Nichols Poulos employs to set up a behavior management plan that works.

She explains the strategic steps she takes before school starts—how essential it is to get to know each student before they walk into class on that first day. She also illustrates how setting up classroom routines helps students know what to expect and how to make the best use of every minute. And she emphasizes the importance of the *parent-student-teacher team* and includes many examples of how to communicate with—and involve—parents, even those who may be difficult.

Foundational to her program are reading and writing. Among other things, she lays out the steps for students—even as early as fourth grade—to write five paragraph essays and their own student-authored books, and to research and write reports that include bibliographies. When she differentiated curriculum to support all students’ needs, she found their learning accelerated.

All teachers will appreciate her ideas about how to teach the basics of math, as well as advanced math concepts. And her ideas for teaching the arts are inspirational, as she describes in detail how her fourth graders performed Shakespeare’s *Hamlet, Macbeth, King Lear, Julius Caesar,* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream.* She also shows how to integrate social studies with literature and writing. Her experiences taught her that young students are much more capable than many people realize.

*The Conscious Teacher* is an indispensable guide for all new teachers. Many of the ideas Ms. Nichols Poulos provides will also be an eye-opener for parents and experienced teachers as well. *The Conscious Teacher* is simply a *must have* for anyone truly interested in giving young children a positive and solid foundation for their later schooling.

**Praise for Deborah Nichols Poulos’ *The Conscious Teacher***

**(Read what leaders in education, her former students, and former parents of her students say about *The Conscious Teacher)***

**What Educators Have to Say**

*There is no occupation that is more important and less appreciated than that of a teacher. So many of us who succeeded did so because of a conscious teacher. I am thrilled that a Conscious Teacher has written this important book. Too many teachers have not taken the time to share their amazing insights. I am grateful that Deborah Nichols Poulos has written* **The Conscious Teacher** *to make new teachers aware of the ideas and techniques that well-prepared and truly conscious educators can employ to improve the lives of their students.  Bravo Deborah!*

Delaine Eastin, Former State of California Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1995-2003

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**The Conscious Teacher***, by Deborah Nichols Poulos, is more than a comprehensive ‘how to’ guide for both future and veteran teachers. It is an up close and personal look into how she became the teacher she describes for her readers. In many ways the book is a memoir of how she became the premier master teacher she models.*

Dr. Margarita Jimenez-Silva, Director of Teacher Education and Associate Professor, School of Education, University of California, Davis, CA

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**The Conscious Teacher** *is a superb resource for educators, parents, and school administrators seeking tried-and-true advice on teaching. Written by a teacher with many years of experience, this book covers a range of topics from how to set the stage for effective learning to how to provide differentiated instruction within the classroom. All of this is done in a very accessible and engaging manner that leaves readers feeling inspired and eager to employ the book’s techniques.*

  Cynthia L. Pickett, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Psychology, University of California, Davis

Ph.D., Social Psychology, Ohio State University, 1999

M.S., Social Psychology, Ohio State University, 1996

B.A., Psychology, Stanford University, 1994

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*Deborah Nichols Poulos’ remarkable book,* **The Conscious Teacher,** *grew, as she describes, from her early humiliating academic experiences. It’s a deeply personal and passionate depiction of all she learned that led her to teach and share. We owe her a debt of gratitude for sharing her personally derived wisdom. I was moved in so many ways on each page.*

*As a social psychologist and participant in the “human potential” movement of the 1950’s-1970’s, I am particularly impressed with her focus on establishing a social system; a culture based on a set of clear values:*

*- respect for individual differences.*

*- individualized, personally meaningful, learning goals.*

*- clear behavior standards with agreed upon consequences.*

*- a team approach: teacher-parents-child engaged in open discussions of all issues, negative and positive.*

*- an open learning environment that is caring and personal, where continuous feedback is given.*

*As I write this one word jumps out: “loving.” I wish I’d had such an early education. To read her wisdom is a revelation in enlightenment.*

Vladimir Dupre, AB (History and Political Science) Oberlin College, 1943.

PhD. (Human Development) University of Chicago, 1956.

Hanover & Grinnell Colleges, Assistant & Associate Professor, 1948-64, &

University of Kansas, Associate Professor of Psychology, 1965-68.

National Training Laboratories in Applied Behavioral Sciences,

Director, Regional Office, 1968-70, President 1970-76.

Private Psychotherapy Practice in Family Therapy, 1976-2002.

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*Debbie Nichols Poulos was one of my students in education courses at the University of California at Davis.  I have followed her professional career since that time. I know she looked at each individual student and evaluated their strengths and weaknesses, providing individual and group activities to address their unique needs.  She was a TEACHER, not a 9-4 sort of person.  She was always on the lookout for ideas that would be meaningful for each student.  Debbie kept in mind the subject that the students needed to master.  She worked hard to integrate subjects into meaningful educational experiences.  Debbie continued to experiment and grow every year.  She continued to grow as a teacher and as a woman.*

*When she retired, she turned her creativity to quilt making.  She visualized what the quilt would look like, and used colorful fabrics and designs to create unique finished projects.  The same was true of her teaching.  She knew what she was trying to accomplish in one year with her students.  She created unique plans for them, helping each to progress through individual and group activities as far as they could go.*

**The Conscious Teacher***is easy to read and understand, giving teaching techniques for the novice as well as for the experienced teacher.  It is broken down into short precise examples that can be adapted to an individualized teaching approach.  It is both a practical and a visionary book.  I would recommend it be given to each beginning teacher or teacher at any level.*

S. JoAn Skinner, Supervisor, Dept. of Education, 1962-1990, University of California, Davis.

Lecturer: Introduction to Education; Reading; Early Childhood Education; Creative Problem Solving; Seminar with Student Teachers

Director of the original Head Start Training Program for the State of California

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*Teaching the whole child is the way to describe Debbie Nichols Poulos—she truly saw the whole child and “Walked the Talk.” Our daughter was so lucky to land in her 6th grade class when we moved to Davis. She made a difference in her life that year and in many years to come. She was an exceptional teacher and person.* **The Conscious Teacher** *is truly a valuable addition to teacher education literature.*

Carole Plack, Yolo County (CA) Office of Education, Teacher Evaluator and Parent

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**The Conscious Teacher** *is written by a brilliant educator who has spent a lifetime seeking to help children achieve their full potential. I recommend it highly.*

Madhavi Sunder, Professor, Senior Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, UC Davis School of Law.

President (2016), Davis Joint Unified School Board

AB (magna cum laude Social Studies) Harvard, 1992; JD Stanford, 1997

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**The Conscious Teacher** *should be required reading for any new teacher at any grade level; it can also be an invaluable resource for even the most experienced teacher.  Ms. Nichols Poulos offers detailed and specific suggestions for creating a classroom of mutual respect and high expectations by teachers in varied circumstances from elementary through high school.  She offers advice from her own experiences.  Her comprehensive examples of what to do and her respect for students, teachers and parents create a handbook of useful plans and, even more important, a framework for how to nurture students so thate real learning can happen.*

Naomi Feldman, BA Bard College (History, Economics and Political Science)

MAT Northwestern University

Teacher, Evanston Township High School 1972-1995 (Combined Studies-History and English-Humanities, AP European History)

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*When Debbie read the first chapter of the yet unnamed* **The Conscious Teacher** *to the memoir writing group that I facilitate, comments ranged from: "I wish you had been my teacher!" to from other teachers in the group, "I'm sorry I didn't have your book when I was teaching. Such innovative and inspirational ideas." It has been a joy for us to share this writing journey with Debbie.*

Joan Callaway, Author: *It's an Ill Wind, Indeed; The Color Connection: From a Retailer's Perspective*; *Invisible to the Eye*

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*My first teaching assignment was at Fairmount Elementary School in the outer Mission District of San Francisco.  Except for two short student teaching assignments in the spring of 1960, I had basically no clue as to the unlimited number of dimensions that were involved in teaching. My education classes in college had focused on curriculum with very little attention paid to the interpersonal, interactive aspects of teaching.  What an incredible first day of school when I stood in front of 42 fourth graders of mixed cultures and realized that I was their "teacher"! And, not only that, but I was responsible for modeling characteristics that I wished them to learn—respect for others, kindness, caring, sharing, curiosity, love for learning . . .*

*At that time, the SFUSD did not have teachers' aides, so it was just me and the kids—those beautiful, expectant faces of all shades and colors.  It's been many years since that memorable day, and the details have faded, but I would like to think that I did some of the things that Deborah Nichols Poulos suggests in Chapters One and Two of her book—get acquainted with your students, have them get acquainted with one another, learn about their families and cultures, and above all practice respect and caring for all.  For me, those first two chapters lay the groundwork for being a successful teacher. The remaining chapters are filled with rich nuggets of excellent techniques in the various subject areas. The author did an outstanding job in these chapters as well.*

**The Conscious Teacher** *should be required reading at the college level for all students preparing to be teachers and distributed to all first year teachers before that momentous first day of school.*

Patricia McCallister, B.A. (Education/Psychology), 1958 & General Elementary Teaching Credential, 1960. California State University, San Francisco.

Teacher Grades 1-4, San Francisco Unified School District—1960-69

Teacher Grades 1-6, Siskiyou County, California—1969-79

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**The Conscious Teacher** *is a valuable guide for anyone considering the teaching profession as well as those already in the classroom. The sections on behavior management and differentiation will be helpful for parents as well as teachers. Nichols Poulos writes with compassion and the kind of understanding that comes from experience. I wish I had read this practical yet inspiring guide as a young, inexperienced teacher. It would have made a world of difference!*

Ann Martel-Corley, BA (European History & Elementary Credential), UC Berkeley.

Teacher Grades K-3, Mt. Diablo Unified School District, CA

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**What Former Students Have to Say**

*As an elementary school student in the 1980s, I experienced a number of different teaching styles and philosophies, ranging from the laid-back to the authoritarian. I have mostly positive memories of my early education, but Deborah Nichols Poulos stands out as truly exemplary. I am now a parent and fellow educator myself, and have spent considerable time reflecting on those teachers whose practices most effectively supported and developed each student's potential.*

*Debbie’s fourth-grade class offered a unique dynamic, emphasizing a commitment to mutual respect, shared discovery, individual freedom of creativity and exploration, and clear and appropriately challenging expectations. She encouraged us to be independent thinkers and to take intellectual risks. This was most evident in her emphasis on the value of perseverance and how she created an environment that pushed us to experiment with different problem-solving approaches and learn from our mistakes. In a "gifted" class of mostly over-achieving nine- and ten-year-olds, many of whom had up until this point taken academic achievement somewhat for granted, learning how to fail—and then try again—was one of the most important lessons Debbie taught us, and one I wish were more commonly prioritized in American education.*

*Furthermore, she emphasized the process of learning as much as its product, as well as the more elusive social-emotional skills students develop when they learn how to work with others and navigate academic struggles and challenges. Too often, these so-called "soft" skills are placed in opposition to academic success, but Debbie demonstrated that empathy, fortitude, and curiosity were necessary--not incidental--to intellectual rigor. I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to be in her class, an opportunity that helped to build a foundation for future academic achievement and, more importantly, instilled a commitment to lifelong learning.*

*I wish I’d had a college version of***The Conscious Teacher** *years ago when I started teaching First-Year Composition. Having real-life, pragmatic examples of how people move through and structure their teaching responsibilities would have been so very helpful. My textbooks were more abstract and theoretical in nature, which would have been fine for an experienced educator, but were not as useful for someone struggling to imagine just “what” it was I would do in the classroom, let alone “how” and “why” I would do it.***The Conscious Teacher***blends teaching philosophy and practical application in an accessible, exciting way; I can't wait to buy a copy once it is out.*

Karen M. McConnell, Teacher of composition and poetry, University of Michigan

BA 1999 and MA (English) Boston College, 2006

PhD (English Language and Literature) University of Michigan, 2013

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*Deborah Nichols Poulos was my 4th grade teacher, and my favorite throughout all of elementary school for the lasting positive impacts she instilled within me.  There are three areas that come to mind most when thinking about that year.  The first is how she helped me to discover my love of performing.  She helped the class to develop a quality production of Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar, and recognized my budding talents by giving me the role of Cassius.  Discovering a love of acting gave me a concrete passion (I wasn’t an athletic kid) and helped develop my confidence and public speaking skills, which have been lifelong assets.*

*Also, her method of teaching writing, especially during the Student Authored Book Contest process, instilled a love of storytelling.  I told my Mom that it felt like I was learning to write all over again, but in a way that made sense to me and made it interesting and fun.  And lastly, I feel Ms. Nichols Poulos helped to develop the beginnings of critical thinking, which was something I built on throughout my academic years, and what I credit as being the single most important trait that has helped me succeed in my career.*

*I’m excited for the students who will learn in these same ways from teachers who read* **The Conscious Teacher***.*

Jennifer Wilson Owens, Senior Strategy Consultant, Kaiser Permanente

BA (Media Studies and Communication) Scripps College, 1997

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*One of the best things about Ms. Nichols Poulos was her high expectations for all students. She believed in every child's capacity to learn and access high-level material (novels, plays, math concepts), even if the way a child learns is different. Just by being a student in her classroom, Debbie taught me about differentiation before I had ever heard it used by professors in my education classes. Now, as a teacher myself, I still find inspiration from my memories of Debbie and the projects we did in her classroom. My own students are reaping the benefits of Debbie's teaching, almost a generation later.*

Molly Shannon, 4th grade teacher, Lafayette School District, Lafayette, CA

B.A. in English, UC Berkeley, 2002

St. Mary's teaching credential, 2007

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*In the 4th grade, school was for real, for the first time in my life. It was because Debbie Nichols Poulos was my first teacher to take students -- and our effort -- seriously. We were expected to read, to write, and to study math seriously.  She devoted class time, every day, to "silent sustained reading": reading, in class, quietly, for long enough periods to actually get into and enjoy long books -- real books -- with chapters and everything.*

*And writing in her class was serious as well. She got us to write our own books, and it was real writing that she expected. She made time for us to write drafts of our books, to write improved revisions, and to illustrate them -- I remember it being a long and involved process -- and then we entered them into a citywide book contest. When I won an award in that contest, Debbie’s pride made me feel like I’d won a gold medal in the Olympics: she was so excited, and I felt like a hero. Debbie had high expectations – of herself and her students – and rising to the challenges she posed was a turning point that made a difference in my life.*

*She was a serious teacher; I became a serious student. I learned a lot that year about reading, writing, and math, but I also learned about the value of focusing and working to get better. In her class, I discovered that effort matters, and the accompanying feeling has stuck with me for several decades so far.*

*Now many more students will have the opportunity to learn from the ideas Debbie shares in* **The Conscious Teacher*.***

Vinci Daro, PhD, Director of Mathematics Learning, Understanding Language/Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity, Stanford University, Palo Alto, CA.

BA 1995 (UC Santa Cruz), PhD 2006 (UNC Chapel Hill)

**What Parents of Former Students Remember**

*Ms. Nichols Poulos was my son's 5th grade teacher and, although a bright child, he had certain behavior issues which created challenges in the classroom. Debbie was the only teacher my son had throughout his schooling that I felt really understood him. She knew how to work with him to help him achieve his best potential; to feel cared about and accepted at school. Her skills, knowledge and abilities, along with her compassion for her students, made her an outstanding teacher. She was unforgettable to her students and their parents alike.*

**The Conscious Teacher** *is a treasure trove of information new, as well as veteran, teachers can use to achieve the same success with their students.*

Sue Woods, Mediator/Facilitator; Center for Collaborative Policy, CSUS

BA (1975) Social Welfare, San Diego State University

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*Kindness contributes to the birth of all possibilities! Debbie Nichols Poulos carried her innate kindness of self into her classrooms where her students, my daughter, Jenny, among them, were enthusiastically encouraged to be curious, learn about themselves, and delve into things all new and exciting. She lent her gentle voice and smile in uplifting support whenever needed by energetic fourth graders striving to be independent and competent learners. It is gratifying that her experience and insights are in* **The Conscious Teacher** *to teach others to be better than they expected to be! Thank you for the profound lifetime work that produced such a legacy.*

Evelyn Buddenhagen, Former Program Director, Explorit Science Center, Davis, CA

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*Despite it being over 30 years since my daughter was in the fourth grade, I have fond and vivid memories of an extraordinary year with two devoted teachers, in tandem, who provided an enriching and respectful experience. One of the teachers was Deborah Nichols Poulos.*

*My daughter Jenny, at that point in her life, had no idea that school could be a place of challenge. But with encouragement to reach her potential, using step-by-step instruction, she flourished under Ms. Nichols Poulos. She remarked to me one day, several months into the school year, that she felt like she was learning everything for the first time—how to write, how to think critically, how to work in groups, how to read for comprehension, as well as enjoyment, and how to assess her individual strengths and weaknesses.*

*And now Ms. Nichols Poulos has written* **The Conscious Teacher** *to help other teachers to engage students the way she did. How fortunate they are to have an opportunity to learn from her years of experience.*

Barbara Wilson, Mother of Jennifer Wilson Owens, Davis, CA

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*Debbie was a profoundly sensitive teacher who had a talent for inspiring her students to do things that they (and their parents) might never have guessed possible. A Shakespeare play—memorized and performed by her Fourth Graders!  What a special evening that was.  Thank you, Debbie.  Your students and their parents will never forget you.*

*Every teacher, aspiring teacher, and parent should read* **The Conscious Teacher***.  Deborah Nichols Poulos has distilled her years of experience in teaching elementary school into a readable and moving blueprint for educational success.*

Tim Shannon, Shannon Government Relations, Sacramento, CA.

Father of Molly Shannon

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**Foreword**

*The Conscious Teacher,* by Deborah Nichols Poulos, is more than a comprehensive ‘how to’ guide for both future and veteran teachers. It is an up close and personal look into how she became the teacher she describes for her readers. In many ways the book is a memoir of how she became the premier master teacher she models.

Throughout, however, *The Conscious Teacher* provides a wealth of resources valuable to any teacher who strives to be effective in meeting the diverse needs of K-12 students. It also serves as a helpful resource for parents engaged in their children’s education.

The book is divided into six parts with subsequent sections:

In Part 1, Section One, *On Not Being Able to Read*, Deborah recounts her struggles with reading and the impact this had on her own education trajectory. She reminds us of the struggles faced by many of our students who fall through the cracks even when teachers and parents are well intended.

In Section Two, *On Not Being Able to Do Math*, Deborah recounts her frustration with math content, and we cheer when she finally has a teacher who makes a difference. She calls her story with math a “cautionary tale” that we should all take to heart.

Sections Three and Four, *College* and *After College*, lead us through Deborah’s decision to become an elementary school teacher and give us glimpses into her personal life from the early years through her retirement.

In Part II, *Before you Decide to Become a Teacher,* Deborah provides valuable advice for anyone considering entering the teaching profession. Her insight offers readers a realistic view of the hard and often unseen and unrecognized work that it takes to be an effective teacher. From explaining that teaching is not an 8 am to 3 pm job, to sharing that some school issues are bound to keep you up at night, Deborah walks us through the commitment necessary to truly master content and know your students.

In Part III, *How To Get the Job You Want: Consider Substitute Teaching*, Deborah presents us with advice about becoming an excellent substitute teacher and the value of that experience when seeking a full-time teaching position. She explains that substitute teaching allows you to get an inside look at schools where you may want to teach and also for you to become known, giving you a step up when it comes to applying for jobs.

In Part IV, *First Things First: Set the Stage for Effective Learning*, Deborah shares time-tested strategies for creating an inclusive classroom culture, as well as for establishing classroom norms with high expectations for learning. She shares specific strategies for working with parents that join the teacher and parents as partners working toward the shared goal of supporting each student. Deborah also reminds teachers of the need to prepare ahead for when a substitute teacher is needed and the importance of making that process as smooth as possible for all involved.

Part V, *Instruction in the Classroom*, gets right to the core of how to teach the content areas of the curriculum. Deborah walks us through her teaching “gems” across the content areas: reading, language arts, technology, math, social studies, the arts, and physical education. This part is the equivalent of being given access to the file cabinet of a veteran teacher where all the best of the best information about content and strategies are kept.

Part VI, *Teaching Gifted Students*, addresses a student population too often overlooked in our teacher preparation programs and in professional development in our K-12 schools. Deborah discusses how she met the academic and socio-emotional needs of her gifted students. And she advises us how to deal with the transition for students from regular self-contained classrooms to self-contained gifted and talented education (GATE) classrooms. Furthermore, she shares strategies for meeting the range of multifaceted needs of gifted students, including intra- and interpersonal giftedness.

As the Director of Teacher Education at the University of California, Davis, I am honored to be asked to write the foreword for *The Conscious Teacher*, by UC Davis alumna Deborah Nichols Poulos. Throughout her 27 years of teaching, she impacted hundreds of lives and created learning communities within her class- rooms that appreciate, respect, and meet the needs of all learners. We are proud to call her one of our own. We look forward to sharing her experiences and time-tested strategies with new and veteran teachers in our programs.

In my work to prepare new teachers, I draw heavily from two equally important sources: 1) research focused on issues of teaching and learning, and 2) experienced preK-12 educators from diverse content areas, communities, and educational settings. While we can teach pedagogical approaches and have student teachers learn about and practice specific strategies, what we can’t teach is what Deborah defines as being a *Conscious Teacher.* We indeed want all of our educators to be thoughtful and to consider the impact that each and every decision has on each and every student. She calls for us to move away from a one-size-fits all per- spective and, instead, to consider the needs of the struggling reader or the gifted student in our classrooms. Deborah also reminds us that effective teaching is grounded on universal principles that include kindness, integrity, and consciousness.

As the head of teacher education at UC Davis, I have to look at the big picture. We are currently experiencing a critical teacher shortage in our country (Castro, Quinn, Fuller, & Barnes, 2018). Persistently lower salaries (Miles & Katz, 2018), increased teacher certification requirements (Shuls, 2018), and the low status of the teaching profession (Skaalvi & Skaalvik, 2015) are leading many teachers to leave or not enter the profession. In my two decades in teacher education, I have become convinced that the most effective recruiters into education are teachers like Deborah who look back at a career in education and speak to the power and joy of shaping their students’ lives. The many praises from community leaders, the countless testimonies of her impact from former students, and the endless praise from parents of former students, individually and collectively, speak to her influence as a conscious teacher. Each and every student deserves a teacher like Deborah.

Many have argued that teacher retention presents an even greater challenge than recruitment. We know that a significant number of teachers leave the profession within the first five years. Nieto, in her book *What Keeps Teachers Going?* (2003), writes about teaching as evolution, as autobiography, as love, as hope and pos- sibility, as intellectual work, as democratic practice, and as shaping futures. Nieto discusses how, in spite of all the challenges inherent in teaching, teachers who persevere do so because they are able to embrace these various aspects of teaching. In this book, Deborah speaks to each of these areas through her reflections and the resources she shares with both those preparing to enter the classroom and those who are experienced teachers.

Deborah, in concluding her book with *Final Thoughts*, reminds us of the many rewards inherent in a teaching career. It is evident throughout the book that she embodies what it indeed means to be a Conscious Teacher. Her call to action for all teachers to “be creative, to work hard, and to see that every single student benefits from his or her year in our care” is one that is timeless and that reminds us of the great responsibility and privilege it is to teach.

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**Preface**

The ideas I share in *The Conscious Teacher* have been in the back of my mind for a long time. They have germinated since I retired from teaching in 2000. My husband had been telling me for years that I needed to publish my teaching experiences so others could learn from them.

It was in my memoir-writing group, however, that the project gathered momentum. I had joined the group in 2013. At first, like the others, I shared the writing I was doing to tell my life’s story. But when the group learned I had written about my teaching, they wanted me to share that work instead. Once I read the first excerpt, they urged me to set aside my autobiographical memoirs and focus instead on putting my teaching ideas into a book before it was too late.

Having people enthusiastically support my work and say it was important enough to be published was in itself extremely encouraging. But their saying “before it is too late” made me realize that they were right on point, bringing a sense of urgency to the task that I hadn’t felt before. The fact is that I am living with an incurable illness that is going to take my life sooner rather than later, and I needed to prioritize.

I have ALS, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (Lou Gehrig’s disease). It has slowly taken away my ability to control my muscles, and it will, before long, take my life. My illness required me to retire early, and now I suddenly realized I shouldn’t delay any longer in writing the book and getting it published.

It wasn’t as if it were a difficult task. I didn’t have to study or do research. All I had to do was reflect on my 27 years of teaching and write about what I had learned and put into practice. In the fall of 2015, I picked up what I had begun a few years earlier and started writing in earnest.

To show what can happen when teachers allow students to slip through the cracks, I begin the book with **Part I—My Own Story**, about not really learning to read until I was in the 7th grade, and how I overcame this devastating failure and became a strong student. (Not until after college did my Mom tell me that—as a five-year-old—I’d been tested as gifted. I had gone through my first six grades not learning to read, thinking I was stupid. Evidently my parents thought I was just lazy. And no teacher ever looked into why I couldn’t read.)

There is no doubt that my early experiences in school gave me an insight into what can happen to bright students (or any student) through no fault of their own. But these experiences were also behind my developing many of the ideas I later used in my own teaching. I didn’t want any of *my* students to languish as I had with unaddressed issues, and I wanted *all* of my students to be taught in ways that allowed them to enjoy learning.

The main part of the book, however, is what I learned from teaching: **Part IV (First Things First: Setting the Stage for Effective Learning)** and **Part V (Instruction in the Classroom)**, in which I discuss a variety of practices educators might use in each curriculum area to become more effective teachers. These are unique approaches that are not normally found in teacher education courses, and many of which may even be new to veteran teachers. Much of what I share was developed during my longest single teaching experience—eight years teaching a fourth grade gifted class. But the methods that I learned there work just as well when teaching *any* students.

First there are the general practices that are useful in all classes. High among them are the importance of “knowing” each student before the first day of school, always treating students with dignity and respect, and using differentiated approaches to address all students’ unique learning needs. I also describe my behavior management plan that works.

And I emphasize why it is important to involve parents. I provide a variety of examples of how to work with them (even those who challenge you or your methods), and I stress the importance of establishing a *parent-student-teacher team*, which I explain is like a three-legged stool: each leg must do its part for optimal learning.

I also suggest what I have found to be effective for teaching each standard subject in the elementary curriculum. For example, basic to all teaching are reading and writing, and I show how even fourth grade students can learn to write five-paragraph essays, student-authored books,and research reports that include bibliographies. Another example: by integrating writing with social studies (i.e., by requiring good writing when working on reports and journals), a teacher can reinforce the principle that following established writing conventions is important across all subjects of the curriculum. I have also expanded upon what is usually taught for art and drama. For example, my fourth graders have performed Shakespeare’s *Hamlet, Macbeth, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Julius Caesar,* and *King Lea*r. Young students are much more capable than many people realize.

With the ideas I share in *The Conscious Teacher* as a foundation, I hope to inspire and empower other teachers to trust their insights and to confidently develop their own methods of engaging students in ways that both support and challenge them to reach their full potential.

I hope *The Conscious Teacher* will become a guide for all *new* teachers, and I believe it will be an eye opener for many *experienced* teachers *and* *parents* as well. In the end, this book is directed at all who are truly interested in giving children a positive and solid foundation in their elementary years.

Deborah Nichols Poulos

September 2019

**Acknowledgements**

First of all, I must thank my memoir-writing group for encouraging me to share what I had learned from my years of teaching. This was the motivation and inspiration I needed to renew my work on a project that had lain dormant for far too long. Thanks to these friends—and the leadership of Joan Callaway—I got going again. Over almost a year, at each meeting the group made their comments about what I had just written and continued their encouragement and critiques. This group primed the pump so that this book began to be fleshed out and, for the first time, vetted by others.

One member, however, took it on in detail. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my friend, Judy Wydick, who copy-edited and helped to organize the manuscript. She is a former English teacher, and her back- ground in writing vastly improved *my* writing. This included paying close attention to how each chapter was organized. She went through the entire manuscript over and over again, offering her enthusiastic encour- agement and insightful critiques.

And thanks to Katie Jeannerett and her team at Page Publishing for shepherding the book throughout the process, from editing to publication.

I am grateful, too, for the loving support of my many women friends. Many of these women I’ve known for almost fifty years: Marlene Bell, Dawn Daro, Ginny Heitz, Gail Johnson, Jan Jursnich, Pat McCallister, Elinor Olsen, and Sue Woods have supported me in countless ways through the years.

Then there is my quilt group, which has maintained our connection through monthly gatherings since 1999: Cynthy Bissell, Ann Driemeyer, Cindy Finley, Bobbie Hewell, Deborah Kitchens, Debbie Perry, Heather Roemer, Sherri Wallace, and Louise Zabriski. I also must mention another friend, Robbi Henle, who is extended family of the quilt group. And at University Retirement Community, JoAnn Diel, a special friend and supporter, stands out among many friends here because she has become much more than indis- pensible in working on my quilting projects.

I have been especially buoyed by any time I get to spend with my four adult children and thirteen grandchildren, even though they are not directly related to writing this book. They are John Stewart Poulos and his children Kady (23), John Michael (21), Lindsay (19), Nicholas (16), and almost five-year-old twins Wesley and Kennedy; Alexandra Poulos Fullerton and Michael, and Elsie (26), Graham (23), and Annie (20); Matt Taggart and his children Samantha (13) and Jack (11); and Kelly Taggart Scavullo and Andrew, and Azalea (11) and Oscar (8). I am especially grateful for the efforts Kelly makes to bring Azalea and Oscar for overnight visits from San Francisco every few weeks. I hope for many more years to interact with all my grandchildren and watch them grow.

Foremost, I thank my husband John, who has always believed I offered a unique perspective that I should share, and who was the first to encourage me to write this book. He has been steadfast in his support for me and for this project. None of this would have been possible without his help. His love sustains me.

**Introduction  
A great deal of time, energy and creativity go into teaching**

Teaching elementary school children is an incredibly rewarding career. Teachers truly change lives. But it does not happen easily. A great deal of time, energy and creativity go into classroom teaching, and many people do not realize that it is also an incredibly *demanding* career. Anyone who is thinking of becoming an elementary school teacher has much to learn beyond what is taught in teacher-education programs.

The first thing an aspiring teacher should know is that being an elementary school teacher isn’t easy simply because the subject matter is “elementary.” And these teachers do not have short workdays with weekends and summers off. To be successful, classroom teachers should expect to be at school from 7:30 to 5, to take work home each night, and to plan a summer that includes in-service training to expand and improve their teaching skills. Learning to teach effectively is an ongoing process that never really ends.

**Teacher training falls short of truly preparing teachers**

Even more important is recognizing that they can’t achieve success by passively going through the motions of giving routine textbook and workbook assignments. Standard texts and traditional approaches generally do not do a sufficient job of *engaging* students in learning. In order to address the diversity of needs in any elementary classroom—and truly engage students in the learning process—teachers must seek and develop their own curricula.

Further, I don’t believe standard teacher-training courses and student teaching go far enough to pro- vide essential guidance for *beginning* teachers. This is especially true in the area of classroom management. The result is that many teachers meet their first classes without being properly prepared. By default, they tend to engage in an authoritarian relationship with their students in order to control their behavior and to tell them what they should learn.

It took me several years of teaching and a variety of *experiences* to realize that there are many strategies that are *not* taught in either teacher education courses or student teaching that are invaluable when working with young children. I devised my own effective organizational and student behavior management systems, created a unique learning environment, and developed my own curriculum to address students’ individual needs. Seeing how well the children responded, I learned to trust my insights and instincts and slowly devel- oped confidence in my own ways of teaching. I found these to be *far* more effective, and these are the ideas I present in this book.

**Why I take elementary education so seriously**

The main reason quality elementary education became so important to me was that I had a reading disability that affected my entire education, and when I became a teacher, I had a keen interest in seeing that none of my students experienced what I had.

Though my teachers taught as best they could at the time (I entered kindergarten in 1950), I never learned to read in elementary school—primarily due to my moving from one school to another at a critical time in first grade. But not only did my teachers not try to find out why I was having problems, my par- ents—both loving, thoughtful, college-educated teachers—did not intervene when it was clear that I wasn’t doing well.

I detail my own story in the first part of the book. You will see how my personal experiences taught me the significance of getting to know each child and the importance of learning different approaches to dealing with *all* children—not only those at grade level but also those who struggle and those who are far ahead of their classmates.

My background also helps explain why it has been so important for me to **work** *with* **my students**. When I first began teaching, I felt the approaches I’d been taught separated me too much from my students. Rather than being above them, *dictating* to them in an authoritarian role, I wanted to be on a more even foot- ing where we would *work together,* where they would participate more in the learning process. In this book, I discuss the many ways I learned to make this happen.

**Two factors that may explain why I was so successful as a teacher**

It wasn’t until I was writing about intra- and inter-personal intelligences in the last chapter of this book that I realized that these two intelligences applied to me. To explain briefly, a person who is intra-personally gifted has a strong sense of self and is adept at knowing and managing himself. A person who is inter-personally gifted has a strong sense of others and is adept at relating to, understanding and interacting with others. And I believe that knowing myself well and being able to relate well to others in large part facilitated my teaching. These characteristics and how I used them inform all of what I have to say throughout the entire book.

I discuss these more fully and suggest that if you aren’t familiar with these attributes (or don’t naturally have the advantage of possessing them), you should learn about them, as it will make reading this book much more meaningful. And that is because much of what I say in the book teaches how to employ characteristics like these to better address the needs of students.

**Why it is important for parents to be engaged in how their children are taught**

Parents are in the best position to be advocates for their children’s academic and social-emotional needs. And more than ever before, they must be engaged in how their children are taught. This is true for all parents, but especially for parents of students whose work is generally *below* or *abov*e grade level.

Given my own early school experiences, I’ve always been especially concerned about the children at both ends of the spectrum. Many of the ideas in this book apply directly to them, for teachers should be taking care that students who may be struggling get the kind of help that will work for them, while at the same time challenging those students who are working above grade level.

If a parent sees something in this book that might assist her child, she might mention it to the child’s teacher. Parents, in fact, may be the best ambassadors for introducing teachers to this book. At the very least, they can supplement their children’s education at home with many of the ideas presented here. Parents may also find behavior management ideas that are helpful to them.

With this in mind, I have comments directed to parents at the end of each chapter, suggesting ways they can help their children or ways they can work with the teacher to help them.

**Why I chose this title for the book**

I have deliberately called this book *The Conscious Teacher.* When it was in draft form, a friend asked if I didn’t mean *The Conscientious Teacher*. After all, a teacher *should* be conscientious, working hard to do every- thing in her power to help a child learn and develop a good sense of self. But that is not what I wished to write about.

Instead of following standard norms, I want teachers to self-critically *think* and *consider what to do* rather than act out of reflex or commitment to pedagogy that might be outdated.

What I present here diverges from many of the norms teachers learn in teacher-training programs. I attribute my own success to approaching teaching differently. To be a truly effective teacher, a person must *consciously* think *beyond* what she has been taught. I believe incorporating the following elements leads to truly effective teaching:

1. *Kindness.* Zen Buddhism teaches a doctrine that enlightenment can be attained through direct intuitive insight. It emphasizes **ethical actions, charity, tenderness, benevolence, and sympathy.** These ideas resonate with me. The approach to teaching I present in this book comes from sev- eral years of direct intuitive insights that are embodied in the Zen approach (something I had not realized at the time I was learning to teach), in which one must *consciously* make choices—choices that include these traits. And I believe my approach relies on all of them, as well as **empathy**— essential elements for both relating to others in all settings and to good teaching.

2. *Integrity.* Operating out of integrity means that you make a personal choice to hold yourself to a consistent standard of honesty and fairness. When you model these characteristics to your students you send a powerful message.

3. *Consciousness.* This is defined as having “an executive control system of the mind.” Being truly *conscious* enables one to have an “awareness, subjectivity, the ability to experience or to feel, to have a sense of self.” These qualities enable a person to be confident about her perceptions. In the realm of teaching, rather than simply following rules learned from textbooks and a master teacher, I developed the confidence to evaluate for myself what are the best approaches for my teaching, what works for me—through *conscious*ly making choices based on my everyday experiences.

In the end, I learned that truly effective teaching is an ongoing process of *actively thinking about* what is best for each student (and working with each one to bring out his/her full potential), *carefully including* new, effective approaches and ideas that have evolved from my experiences. I am *always thinking about and improving upon* the systems and techniques I am developing in the classroom—a constant work in progress that calls for *consciously* observing, and applying, what works best. Thus the title: *The Conscious Teacher*.