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GRIEGO: This teacher succeeds because she believes

By **Tina Griego**, Rocky Mountain News ([Contact](#))
Thursday, March 6, 2008



Judy DeHaas / The Rocky
Linda Alston, an award-winning teacher who has long worked in low-income schools, reads with kindergartner Ashante Pierce, 5, at Howell Elementary in Montbello on Wednesday.

This is turning out to be "inspiration week" here in my corner of the paper. On Monday, I told you of the remarkable students in the running to win Daniels Fund scholarships. Today, I bring you a remarkable teacher.

Linda Alston last appeared in this newspaper in June 2006. That was when she received the inaugural Kinder Excellence in Teaching Award. A national prize - \$100,000 to do with as she liked. (She invested most of it.) That award came on the heels of other national prizes.

Alston started teaching for Denver Public Schools in 1989. She's now at Howell Elementary in Montbello. It resembles the schools Alston has served nearly all her career: low-income, largely minority.

Scholastic has just published Alston's book *Why We Teach*, and it prompts my call to her classroom where a child answers: "Good afternoon. Ms. Alston's class. Elisa speaking. How may I assist you?"

Elisa, 6 years old, cute as all get out, informs me later that answering the phone is one of her jobs. They all have jobs in Alston's class: meteorologist (reads the weather report); accountant (does the head count); historian (marks the date, day and year).

What's your job title, I ask Elisa.

"Afternoon receptionist," she says.

Let's talk for a second about expectations. "High expectations" is the mantra of the day, repeated so often it tends to lose meaning. It's become a fuzzy- wuzzy concept, broad and vast and vague enough to disguise mediocrity.

I will tell you I have high expectations of students. And then I will remind you that during my year writing about North High School, I found myself thrilled that half of the graduating class was going to college or vocational school only to realize - a thunderclap - that had this same proportion been college-bound at ThunderRidge High School in Highlands Ranch, where I also spent a year, I would have been appalled. So easy it was, this insidious ratcheting down of my expectations.

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So, I stop when I get to one particular passage in Alston's book. It comes right after she describes how she succeeded with a second- grade class that chewed up and spat out teachers like old gum. "What I did was very simple," she writes. "I believed in myself. I believed in the children . . . The answers lie in one's fundamental beliefs about children."

And that summation, straightforward as it is, simple as it sounds, is what every master teacher I have ever known has said about why they succeed with their students.

They believe and their students know it.

"Here's the tricky thing," Alston tells me. "People think they believe in children. They'll say, 'Unequivocally, I have high expectations.' But bring them into my classroom and they look at the plants on children's tables and the fine china my kindergartners use to serve our guests tea and they say, 'Oh, if this were my class, we couldn't do that. My kids would make a mess.'"

"It's that self-fulfilling prophecy. If it surprises you that my kindergartners are reading, then how can you have believed in them? If you had faith, why are you surprised? So, then what people go to is, 'Oh, they must be the exception.' And my answer is no. No, they are not."

Alston says she believes all children, not only those who are poor, not just minorities, suffer from this lack of adult faith in their capacity to learn. Still, she chooses to work in lower-income schools because she knows these students need the extra support, and if they do not succeed in school early on, they will find it harder to do so later. They may drop out, she says, join gangs, die in the streets.

"I am railing against that possibility," she says. "Their very lives are at stake . . . I am not perfect. I don't have all the answers. I get frustrated. And then I get back to work. That's what commitment is. What are we going to do? Just give up on children?"

We talk in her lovely classroom with its plants and colorful posters, the air smelling faintly of sandalwood. Her students work at their own stations, coming to show her their writing or counting or reading. She praises them and they glow and preen and start the next page. I see words like "dignity" and "philosophy" and "integrity" in their reading material, heavy stuff for a kindergartner, I catch myself thinking.

"What does integrity mean?" she asks her class. Hands shoot up. "When your parent or teacher or nobody is looking and you do the right thing," a boy answers.

Alston said she did not write her book only for teachers, though there is much for them to ponder. It is her celebration of children. From it she hopes we are moved to re-examine our beliefs and reaffirm our commitment to them.

I feel a tap on my shoulder. Six-year-old Marlen is at my side, smiling. "I invite you to have tea with me," she says, gesturing toward a table set with silk flowers.

Why, I tell her, I would love to.

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In person

* Linda Alston will talk about her book, *Why We Teach - Learning, Laughter, Love and the Power to Transform Lives*, from 1 to 4 p.m. Saturday at The Bookies, 4315 E. Mississippi Ave., Denver.

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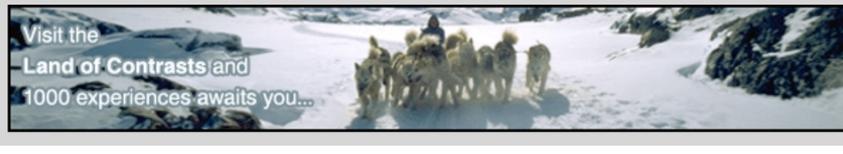


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