

Lessons Learned: Jarring Epiphanies From the Classroom

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There are many reasons why teachers get into the profession, but chief among them is a love for children and a love for their subject area. Most teachers grew up enjoying school, missing rarely, and have many fond memories of their time as students. However, teachers frequently are confronted with huge differences in the lives of their students when compared to their own. These issues are many, but often come in the form of apathy, chronic absenteeism, poor health, poor living conditions, and other issues that are tied to the culture of poverty that can be common in portions of nearly every public school in America. When this occurs, teachers must learn to overcome and serve all their students, despite a disconnect from their personal attitude and experiences. In this chapter, the author reminisces about several former students from his career who have taught him lessons and forced him to adapt to remain an emotionally relevant teacher. These stories are targeted to beginning teachers who will soon be walking into their own classrooms.

BACKGROUND AND WORLD VIEW

No one knows it all. However, like many others with substantial experience in their vocation, I have developed a lens through which I view many aspects of daily life. Serving as a teacher and administrator has revealed key insights concerning how students, parents, and teachers function on a daily basis. For example, most teachers get into the school business because of two things: 1) A love for children, and 2) A love for their content area. The extent to which either is more important often shifts, depending on the instructional level of teacher. That is, more elementary teachers will state a prominent love for *children* as a motivator for teaching, while more secondary teachers may state a strong love for their *content* area as their reason for working with children. A commonality among all teachers, K-12, is their *own* schooling. With few exceptions, they were, themselves, good students who enjoyed school, were seldom absent, and lived in middle-class homes where parents supported the local school system.

Educators with this background typically experience some jarring epiphanies during their first year of teaching. Imagine loving school since kindergarten, succeeding throughout the elementary through high school years, and stepping into the classroom as a newly-minted teacher ready to share that passion with young learners only to be confronted by student apathy, poor attendance, abuse, neglect and, most especially, poverty. This was certainly my experience. I grew up in a supportive home where education was important. My parents taught me to read before I entered kindergarten and, with a registered nurse for a mother, I rarely missed school unless I was truly ill. I was generally a successful student who had many opportunities. While my family was certainly not wealthy, we knew very little about the intimate details of the culture behind the poverty cycle.

The term *Poverty Cycle* is often used to describe the cyclical nature of the lives of those mired in poverty wherein they frequently struggle to escape the patterns, norms and ways that they are used to. According to Abramsky (2013), breaking the cycle of poverty can prove to be very difficult and, “involves thinking holistically about big ticket items such as housing, healthcare, education, criminal justice systems, drug treatment, mental health programs, banking and labor markets” (p. 236).

In the subsequent sections of this chapter, I share some of my personal experiences and how they influenced me as an educator. Some are stories from my time as a classroom teacher and the last comes from my time as an administrator. There are several cases where students’ lives were shocking to me, representing instances where I was presented with children struggling through adverse childhood experiences. These represent some of my attempts at becoming an emotionally relevant teacher, a professional who strives to empathize with students and who works to reach them where they are.

“So THAT’s Whose Truck That Was in the High School Parking Lot This Morning!”

The Start of a Teaching Career in Small Town America: Master, OK

I could write a vanilla description of the town of Master, OK, complete with the usual statistics of population size, number of local businesses, median income, and a history of the town. However, I find it much more descriptive to explain the town and its people with a short story of the first time I ever stepped foot in this community looking for my first teaching job.

It was early June of 1996. I had just graduated from Oklahoma State University with a degree in secondary education and was on the hunt for a job teaching math. I was 22 years old and four weeks away from my wedding. My fiancée, Kimberly, was still in college and had about a year and a half of school left before she, too, would be looking for a teaching job. I had a few hundred dollars in my checking account and I needed to get things settled soon--very soon.

I spent my spring break filling out job applications and submitting them to several local schools and districts. I actually applied to every public school district within forty-five miles of Pioneer, hoping that someone would have a math vacancy. Other than one offer to teach and coach at a private high school in Oklahoma City, I had no promising prospects. The hour-long commute was not enticing, so I turned down that offer. There was a persistently strong rumor that a position was going to open up at the Pioneer school where I was student teaching, and I kept checking in with my cooperating teacher, but there was no news and no guarantee.

Thankfully, the Master High School principal called and invited me to a job interview for a math position. I ironed my best pair of khakis and dress shirt, put on my most professional tie, and drove the

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