

Lessons from Children

In the spring of 1985 I graduated from college with a Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education. A few years later I went on to obtain certification in Early Childhood Education and a Master's Degree in Reading Education. The university taught me a lot about cognitive development, methods, and approaches to behavior management. However, the true foundation of the teacher I was to become wasn't formed at the university; it was given to me by children. The first four years of my professional career turned me into a teacher.

I grew up in the suburbs of a big city and attended a state university in a moderate-sized city. When I began teaching I entered a new and unfamiliar world. I was hired into a rural county that I was told had the lowest per capita income in the entire state. There was some old money among a few white residents, a lot of agriculture, and remnants of segregation. There was no movie theatre, no shopping mall, and no public transportation. There were a couple of private schools attended mainly by students from wealthy families. Students from poor families were the main attendees of the county's public schools.

My first teaching appointment was a memorable event. I was filled with energy and excitement, feeling fully qualified by my education degree and successful internship experience. I did not yet understand that schools are shaped by communities, and communities by people and their history. There is a culture to each school and to its students. I was in for a rude awakening.

My first day on the job was two weeks into the school year, so I had no formal introduction, no pre-planning, and no idea what my classroom looked like until I walked in to start teaching. What I pictured in my mind was far from what I encountered.

The classroom was practically bare. There were desks, reading basals, and a blackboard. There was an old wooden teacher's desk with a matching straight-back chair. There was a blackboard at the front of the room and an empty bulletin board at the back. Beyond that, there was nothing. No paper, no books, no pencils, no crayons, no markers, no chalk, no erasers. Nothing. The students' most frequent response to any direction I gave was, "I ain't." I felt stripped bare – no respect, no authority, no supplies, no experience.

To begin solving my dilemma, I relied heavily upon what I had learned in college. I developed a behavior plan straight from the books. When it wasn't working, I tried another one, and then another. I tried to teach reading as I was taught to do, but I was not familiar with the basal series being used at the school. I tried to use the positive reinforcement and system of rewards that I had used during my internship, but I didn't get the same results.

I went home with a headache each day and spent my weekends crafting lesson plans that would help me "start all over" with a new plan and a renewed spirit each Monday. I was often discouraged, but I never gave up. I knew that I could be a good teacher, and I was determined to figure out how. I used trial and error, I observed other teachers, I drew upon my childhood experiences, and I learned from the children.

By mid-January, I began to feel encouraged by small successes. My students were responding to me with respect. I had learned how to be resourceful and had, at minimal cost to me personally, attained enough pencils and primary writing paper to make it through the first year. I learned how to make a few boxes of crayons go a really long way. I learned that most teaching is done by modeling. And I learned a very important lesson: if you want to be truly successful in the classroom, you have to truly *know* your students and their community. Education and behavior management are not "one size fits all" commodities.

When I look back on my first year of teaching, I am filled with sentiment and gratitude. This was the place where I began to learn most of the lessons that would sustain me over the course of my teaching career. These beautiful children, and the ones who followed them over the next three years, were my teachers. And I was eager to learn.

These decades later, I feel compelled to write as a way to pay tribute to the wonderful children I came to know and love in my first four years of teaching. I created new names for them, their community, and their school, but everything else is real. Some of the greatest truths I've realized came from those children. I don't know where they are today. I think about them, dream about them, and pray for them. They are adults now, but in my mind they are forever young and innocent, and I am forever grateful to them.