

Core Beliefs Essay

The Science and the Soul of Teaching

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Abstract

Framed within strong academic relationships and high expectations, I believe by combining effective instructional methods grounded in research, with the essence of what it is to nurture a child to a love of learning and discovery, a teacher can build a habit of success in each student, creating within them an intrinsic desire to learn.

Key words: academic relationship, high expectations, effective instructional methods, habit of success, intrinsic motivation

The Science and the Soul of Teaching

We've all seen that child sitting off to the side, doing their own thing, often not by choice. I spent the better part of my childhood as that child. I loved crawling around on my hands and knees, pretending I was a horse. It didn't matter if I was outside in the mud, in the living room, or driving to the grocery store. My imagination was always galloping over some obstacle and corralling my four younger siblings into some imaginary tale. I'm sure I was looked upon as a little different, or maybe even 'odd' by many, but my parents were mostly supportive of my equine obsession—offering me leeway to really be who I was as an individual. Having that freedom, without criticisms or discouragements, allowed my curiosities and learning to flourish in a way that only I could direct them; as they were intrinsic to who I was. Now, as I enter into the teaching profession, I hold fast to the value and importance of each child's individualism as the foundation for his or her particular path of learning. I believe that by combining the science of well-researched instructional methods with the intangible qualities that make up the heart of teaching, connecting teacher to students, I will be able to best serve those I teach. In practice, authentically engaging in academic relationships with each individual student, building on their strengths, knowing what learning challenges they may face, and setting high expectations for each, students will experience a wider avenue of success as a lifelong lover of learning.

In an authentic academic relationship, both the teacher and student bring to the classroom their true self. It is more than just an exchange of knowledge between student and teacher that occurs within the confines of the classroom walls, it is an exchange of

self. Building solid relationships with students is the first step in attaining high academic achievement in students. (Gentry, M., Steenbergen-Hu, S., & Choi, B., 2011, p. 117) In order for students to be truly engaged, they must leave all trepidation at the door.

Students must take risks, and be their true selves, without fear of ridicule or rejection. In creating a classroom space that is welcoming, inclusive of all cultures, abilities, and personalities, the platform from which to construct great learning is built. Students need to support each other's learning, and know that they are in an environment that encourages fleeting confusions, exploration, and values the collective wellbeing of the class. Once students realize they are not limited by social rejection or ridicule, and are supported in taking academic risks, they are much more likely to accept small failures that lead to significant learning experiences.

Because no two children are alike, differentiation within the realms of instruction and academic relationship is essential. According to Carol Ann Tomlinson, "Differentiated instruction is responsive instruction. It occurs as teachers become increasingly proficient in understanding their students as individuals, increasingly comfortable with the meaning and structure of the disciplines they teach, and increasingly expert at teaching flexibly in order to match instruction to student need with the goal of maximizing the potential of each learner in a given area." (2003, p.3) Practiced masterfully, differentiated instruction holds within it key pieces innate to student motivation. When emphasis is placed on constructing relationships where students feel genuinely valued, students are more apt to reveal natural interests and inherent weaknesses.

Being individuals, students have different areas in which they are academically challenged. By scaffolding instruction and embedding a variety of teaching and learning approaches into my teaching methods, I can more adeptly engage students where their own interests lie, turning “learning differences into learning strengths” (Strahan, D., et al., 2012, p.3). This is a critical piece of differentiated instruction that requires responsive teaching techniques, adjusting teaching methods to the natural learning tendencies of a particular group of students. Students who learn better verbally, will enjoy discourse and group work, while students who are reflective learners will value independent learning and time to think about tasks before doing them (Hawk, T. & Shah, A., 2007, p. 9). Routinely incorporating different teaching methods and strategies into instruction gives each child a more flexible entry point to success, mitigating learning challenges they may face. Building on students’ unique strengths by using knowledge of varying learning styles and abilities, and structuring students’ learning experiences with student success in mind, I will provide ongoing opportunities for student success, which I believe to be the quintessential key to intrinsic student motivation. Individual student successes will not necessarily parallel another’s, but are of equal importance.

In addition to fostering student success, I feel one of the greatest responsibilities a teacher has is setting high expectations for each student. Setting low expectations devalues student efficacy, and tells the students they aren’t capable of tackling challenges, which is a critical component of long-term academic success. “If you expect kids to succeed, they will.” (Gentry, M., Steenbergen-Hu, S., & Choi, B., 2011, p. 117) I believe in not only in setting the bar high for students, but for myself as well. I cannot become complacent in my teaching, as teaching is one profession in which there is no

top. There is always more to learn, and room to improve. Teaching is an ever-evolving process.

If it is through science that effective teaching methods are distilled, then it is through “reasons of the heart” that teaching has a soul. The intangible essence of teaching is the element upon which the academic relationship between student and teacher is built. It is the force behind the restless night spent pondering what missing piece might make a difference for that one student in the back of the class. It is at the very heart of every great teacher, the force in which all hope lies for each student’s success both personal, and academic. It is at the very core that intrinsically motivates me as a teacher, the desire to give of myself to see each student grow in community with others, gaining knowledge of themselves and their learning, that will guide them on their path to continued success.

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