

A LESSON LEARNED FROM STUDENTS

Three years ago, I stepped out of the comfort zone of a private East Coast college and into the harsh, gritty world of inner-city Los Angeles. I became a middle school teacher to students with special needs. At the time, I did not realize that this job would challenge, turn upside-down, and ultimately change many beliefs I thought I held before I stepped over the threshold.

Situated near the Watts Towers, epicenter of the 1965 riots, and surrounded by four public housing projects, it is a school with peeling paint, graffiti, and young souls crying. It is the stereotypical inner-city school, plagued with the problems of violence, gangs, teen pregnancy, and poverty. It is a school that is part of the urban cycle of underachievement and dreams destined to die before adulthood.

I became a teacher here to try to help break the cycle, to give my students a voice and a chance. I did not realize that, along with being an educator, I was about to become a mother, a father, a probation officer, a counselor, an advocate, and a friend. I did not realize the impact my students would have on my heart.

In addition to living in a neighborhood they call a ghetto, my students have disabilities ranging from dyslexia to autism to cerebral palsy and mental retardation. Looking at most, you would not be able to say they have a disability. You would not know that not one of my 8th graders can read above a 3rd-grade level, that some are working to spell their name while others are working to control their anger. Many are leaders in the school, some excel in class, some excel at gangbanging. They are each unique, and they have each taught me something.

When I first started teaching, I was angry: angry at the situation my students were living in, angry at their disabilities. I wanted to smash down the wall of autism that locked Jane inside herself. I wanted to wrench cerebral palsy from the bones of Michael. I wanted to rewire a neural circuit to make the letters on the page of a book stop dancing for Anne.

Anger soon melted away into a state of

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sheer exhaustion. I was tired of fighting what seemed to be an endless battle. I was tired of looking into the eyes of students and seeing a hardness that no 14-year-old should possess. I was tired of hearing about the latest shooting in the neighborhood, the latest lockdown that the school had to go on because of shots fired nearby. I felt like I had taken on something much larger than myself, something that not a single individual could help to fix.

Somewhere between grading papers and fretting about the state of the world, the fog lifted and I began to see my students as kids. Yes, they are kids who have been short-changed of many things simply by being born in the wrong place at the wrong time. Yes, they are kids who have been put at a disadvantage because they were born with a disability. And yes, they are kids who still possess potential and the ability to teach me every day.

My students have taught me that life can still be beautiful when it is tipped on its side. My students have taught me that permanence is not real, and each moment must be lived. My students have changed my belief of what success really is. I no longer believe that success is the perfect job, the big salary, or the best house. Success is living up to your full potential. It is acknowledging your faults, learning your strengths, and believing that you can overcome.

When I leave my teaching position this summer to pursue another degree back on the East Coast, I will feel guilty. A part of me will feel like I am giving up before I should, like I am abandoning my students even though they will be moving on to high school. Then I will remind myself that I am not truly leaving them. For the past three years, I have given everything I had to my students, and in turn they have left an impression on me greater than any essay could describe.

I may have taught them lessons in math, science, and history, but they taught me lessons in perseverance, faith, and success. This I believe. ■

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