

Powerful Lessons My Students Taught Me



Shantel, an eight-year-old girl who decided *she* was in charge, challenged me greatly throughout my first year of teaching in an inner city Atlanta school in 1969. On one particularly trying day, I expressed my frustration to a colleague as we walked to the auditorium for an after-school parent teacher association meeting. I was venting as we took our seats, and then I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around and saw Shantel and her mother, who had heard every word. My “take me now, Lord” prayer was not honored. I apologized again and again, but the damage was done.

I learned some important lessons that day. Confidentiality, professionalism, and integrity are critical in our profession. We hold the lives of children in our hands and damaging words can inflict pain we can only imagine, even if done unintentionally. Apologies are welcomed when sincerely given. Forgiveness is precious.

Professional Growth Opportunities

As a former elementary school teacher and elementary principal for 17 years, I held in my heart the many children who I taught or who attended schools I led. Each child had a story. During those crazy busy days as a principal, I promised myself that I would write those stories down before I forgot them. I retired and became a

university professor, and I used those stories to make the world of teaching and school leadership come alive for my adult learners. I promised my adult students that if they were reflective practitioners, their best professional growth opportunities would be the precious children sitting in the seats of their classrooms who would teach them more than any textbook or college course ever could.

I decided that I needed to be a reflective practitioner as well. As a result, I wrote *Children I Have Loved, Lessons I Have Learned* (2014), a collection of vignettes describing the children who had touched my heart and what I had learned from each one. I came away from that process with powerful lessons about advo-

cacy, humility, respect, acceptance, perseverance, and hope, all of which should guide our practice as caring, nurturing, and ethical educators.

Speak Up for Students

As educators, we must be advocates for all children. I remember sitting in meetings with vocal, informed, and insistent parents and noting that the decisions that were made for them differed from those made for another child with similar needs whose parents may have been uninformed and hesitant. Our moral responsibility is to ensure that the best decisions are made for all children and that there is no disparity in results based on who is speaking up for the child. We need to be the ones to speak up for the children.

Admit Mistakes

We are human beings, and we make mistakes. We do not always know the best decision for a child, and we need to be able to admit that. We need to be open to accepting the input of others without being defensive. I remember what a freeing experience it was for me as a young teacher when I realized that looking at a problem objectively, without taking the criticism personally, allowed me to solve problems more effectively. I learned the importance of being honest and admitting errors in judgment. Most people are willing to move forward and work together to do what is good and right for the child.

Build Relationships


Respect happens over time through many interactions as we prove to others that we are honest, caring, and ethical people. During my 40-plus years in public education, I worked with many families who were different from me. But we shared common beliefs and values because we wanted what was best for the children we served. We wanted those children to be safe from harm, and to be cared for and valued. Relationships are a critical piece of respect, and they take

time. While time is very much in short supply these days with all the demands on teachers and school leaders, relationship building is important. My mantra was, "People are more important than paper," a belief that guided me to save the paperwork for after the students, teachers, and parents were gone for the day.

Pass the Baton

One of the hardest lessons I learned was that of acceptance, realizing that I could not save every child or fix every situation. At times, it became obvious that a child needed more than we could give and it was time to "pass the baton" to the therapist, physician, or to personnel in another setting. That being said, it is important that we don't give up at the first sign of difficulty. We must persevere by making the calls, visiting homes, and sending personal notes—whatever it takes to connect and make a difference. The time to step aside becomes clear, particularly when medical, psychiatric, or legal help is needed. The realization that our role has ended (at least for the immediate future) is a difficult one, but we must focus on the child and what is best for him or her.

Create Havens of Hope

Our schools must be havens of hope where children feel safe and know they are loved and respected. They must know they will be held accountable for their actions and decisions. They need to know that we hold high expectations for them, and we will provide the support and the encouragement they need to meet those expectations. We have to give our children a vision for the future and model how to set goals and accomplish them even during challenging times. Students need to see a future for themselves that is positive, where hard times are temporary, and possibilities exist. They need to believe that happiness and success are real and possible. 

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