

Introduction

As I enter my fourth consecutive teaching year, I have far more awareness of this role now than ever before. When I think back to my very first cover letter, I believe the children are the future; teach them well and let them lead the way." I wrote the opening line to Whitney Houston's incomparable song, The Greatest Love of All. I had yet stepped the first foot into the classroom but felt this one stanza was the framework of my teaching methodology. There was much for me to learn about becoming a teacher.

Teacher Breakdown

I am an American, woman of color, caramel in complexion with waist length dreadlocks and a little bang to play with that I style differently. The quintessential feminine kind of dresser, skirts, dresses, pretty shoes are my go to wardrobe choices. My clothing taste is considered expensive by most and my uber curvaceous figure, ample in both the shelf and balcony regions of a woman's body, is accentuated by those preferences. If this were a photo the caption would read:

High energy, fast talking, wordologist
Culturally diverse, high end style no apologist
Clearly well read, lover of alliteration
Truly animated with dramatic flair
If life were a drag show
She's the BEAUTY QUEEN, winn-ER

I am very friendly, sweet and polite. I easily get along with most but probably a little socially awkward. I want to have a lot of friends who share some of my interests but since I move around every few years I rarely make much connection with new people. In my workplace, I interact more with the students than the teachers. Usually the students share with me their energy and humor whereas, the adults drain the motivation and fervor that I possess. I attend the pep rallies, games,

and fun activities whereas my coworkers opt to stay in their classrooms and chat among themselves.

Education is a strongly held value of mine both, formal and informal. My formal education includes being an AIG in elementary, honors and advanced placement in high school, a bachelor's degree in Business, graduate work in Psychology and social work and, this current teacher certification endeavor. Learning is lifelong, in my opinion and as long as I breathe, I know, I will be learning something. Reading is the key to all that I know; I read avidly. I can comprehend, interpret and synthesize reams of information with ease. I am the creative, crafty type. I spend my days cooking, baking, cleaning, sewing, planting or whatever else. Also, I am a vegan. I do not consume animals or animal by-products. I believe in the life and wellbeing of animals and do not regard their bodies as sustenance for my life. I eat a plant-based diet which includes plenty of vegetables, fruits, legumes, and grains. And although the teaching profession interferes, I prefer to lead an active lifestyle.

This story comes from my very first year of teaching. Mind you, I was lateral entry, no teacher classes, only the Praxis, youth development and tutoring work experience. I had a good heart. There were some rules and procedures enforced and I tried to develop some semblance of routine. Beyond that, I was winging it. There is one student, I remember like it was yesterday.

The student highlighted in this case study will be called Marshon. The format is a blog entry for a monthly teacher journal that has a few thousand regular viewers.

Student breakdown

Marshon is a young male, 14 or 15-year freshman. He considers himself African American and Puerto Rican, I recall him making this description early in the semester. I believe he lives with his mother, single, but is close with his grandma. They live in the low-income housing development across from the school. I am uncertain if he has any siblings outside the house but, it seems that he is the sole child in his household. Unlike most of his classmates, I never hear him mention any sibling rivalries or responsibilities. Marshon is a hefty guy and always talks about the deliciousness

of bacon. He is unconcerned about fashion, wears nondescript clothing, canvas sneakers and is often put together hastily. He listens to music regularly. I know this because he enters the classroom daily with his earbuds blaring. He is very talkative with a booming voice and deeply southern drawl. He enjoys socializing with his friends and classmates far more than cooperating with the teacher. His conversations are hardly on topic and often vulgar or explicit. Many times, the redirection I give him is regarding the nature of his conversation and its inappropriateness.

Academically, Marshon is average. He is literate and capable of completing assignments. But lacks self-control and personal motivation. He will have an outburst whenever I insist that he gets on task. I am unaware if he is affiliated with any sports or recreational activities.

Management Challenge

Marshon is enrolled in my first block Teen Living class. Every morning he comes into class without any intention of getting started. Morning after morning it's the same thing, "Marshon remove your earbuds, 2) get your starter material, 3) take a seat and get busy. Still, ten minutes later, he has yet to complete these routine procedures. He argues when I ask him to do these simple tasks. He never knows which textbook to grab, although there are only two textbooks in the room, Creative Living and Food for Today. "Part of the name of this course is in the title, where is the confusion?"

"Get.the.book. and.sit.DOWN!", I'd say. Did I clap as those words came out my mouth? I'll say no for memory sake. (Laughing a bit in embarrassment as I recall those claps.) During the independent practice time of the lesson, Marshon chats with his friends, excessively. When asked to quiet down, get to work; suddenly it wasn't him talking, he would always claim. He brags that his mother says he doesn't have to listen to or follow the teacher. Says his mother tells him he has the right to go to the bathroom even without the teacher's permission. Basically, he asserts that he is instructed to be defiant in class. He expresses classic work avoidance. One particular class session, Marshon was agitated with being in class. He was talking too much, distracting his neighbor so I asked him to

switch desks to the one closest to me. He slowly dragged himself and belongings to the new seat. When he arrived, he began making claims that something smelled bad in the area, started sniffing around saying that it must be me. He refused to sit in the right direction, and so on and so forth. I asked him to stop complaining, get back to work. He mumbled something about me not being authorized to tell him what to do. Allow me to take this moment to describe our learning environment. My classroom is too small, especially for a class this size. Thirty student desks were aligned in narrow rows with just enough walking space between. I constantly ask the students to put their belongings beneath their seats so I wouldn't trip as I patrol the room. On another day, as I walked past Marshon's seat he begins to yell, "You kicked my bookbag!" I did not know what he was talking about. I just looked at him, dumbly. Again, he yells "You kicked my bag! "S@!t!" "I should kick you bi--!" I had had enough, " You know what, I'm going to write you a referral!" I proceeded to my computer to begin filling out the Educator's Handbook form. Then I noticed Marshon on the phone, making this irate claim to whoever was on the line. I heard, "My teacher kicked my book--." I got up from my seat, stormed over to Marshon, picked up the assaulted bag and carried it out the door. Well, it was more of a drag across the floor, toss into the hall and a door slam behind it. But that bit of detail is trivial. "Boy, get out! Pick up your stuff and go to the principal!" I demanded.

I'd say this is the most egregious action I had seen from him. I sent in the referral with a detailed note to the principal. She held a conference with him and his grandmother that day. Later, I spoke with his mother and took the opportunity to share with her Marshon's usual actions. I spoke to his mother, nearly seven minutes without any interruption. When she did speak, she indicated that she was unaware of these situations and shocked at her son's behavior. She did not combat anything I told her and confirmed that the instances I shared with her sounded like pattern Marshon behavior. She said he was argumentative and procrastinated at home, too. She assured me that he was not being told to come to school and disrespect the teacher nor disrupt the classroom. Marshon's mom

thanked me for my efforts when working with him. After the call, I felt relieved that the mom supported me and hopeful for some change in the student's behavior.

Today I am better equipped to navigate the Marshon's of the world. I still have the overly talkative, distracted and unfocused. Differentiated instruction helps in this situation. When I design the learning activities that challenge the students to work but not so much that they quit I find that all engage. I meet the students' needs because I have learned their interests and preferences. I now post routine procedures around the classroom which serves as a self reminder. I am far better with my own attitude, I do my level best to not take things personally. Also, I strive to build relationships with the parents. I am a work in progress but I definitely show growth. The next paragraph is how I engage and motivate my classes today.

Any casual observer of my classrooms can say that my classes are filled with verve. Verve--vigor and spirit and enthusiasm—is the term used to describe the musicality, movement and expressiveness which flows through those with ancestries in West Africa. Boykin (1983) defined this as an intense energy and body language which remains lively and stimulating. These students have a tendency to attend to several concerns at once and to shift focus among them rather than to focus on a single concern or series of concerns in a rigidly sequential fashion (Boykin, 1983). My students are talkative and active the entire class period. Some people view my classes as rowdy, however, this only shows their lack of understanding. I recognized that my students are energetic and restless; it is difficult for them to remain still for 90 minutes.

So, I incorporate movement into my classroom procedures. They have opportunities to move around some. They pass out and collect papers, come to the board to write vocabulary, or move around to form groups. Even though these are very brief chances the movement is helpful for the students. Sometimes they break out into spontaneous singing, I don't allow them to get carried

away with it but, I will allow them to finish a verse. Other times, I will burst out in song. After they get the song off their proverbial chests they students are more pleasant, seem to have lifted spirits and are able to complete the assignment or activity. Many of the students love dancing, so I will incorporate dance tiny dance moves in our activities. One Friday per month we went outside to run, jump, flip, and dance for a while without disturbing the other classes. I will even play music during independent practice, classical music. I use these tactics to help motivate and engage the students but to also, show them how to utilize the verve pulsing through them. These are the ways in which I have learned to channel my own energy and enthusiasm. Research has shown that students who are more positively motivated have strong beliefs in their competence in different tasks, are intrinsically motivated to learn, and have clear goals for achievement. Students with lower motivation for achievement often are characterized as lacking or being relatively low on these different characteristics (Guthrie, Wigfield, 2000).

Summary

Some goal orientation theorists have defined and measured work avoidance as a goal of some students; such students are motivated to avoid doing their schoolwork rather than to engage in it (Seifert, K., Sutton, R. 2009). Marshon proves to be one such student. Other theorists discussed students who were apathetic about learning, which means they de-valued learning and did not engage in learning activities (Brophy, 2004). Many of the other students fall in the second category. As their teacher I strive to listen to legitimate complaints and adapt my lessons to accommodate learning styles or preferences. I encourage my classes to participate by including activities that stimulate them. I believe they can learn and grow and I know they are our future.

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