Core Beliefs Essay: “Joe Dirt”

Educational Psychology

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Abstract:

Joe Dirt was a movie from around a decade ago that had a very strong message: No matter what life throws at you do not let it bring you down. This is a story of “Joe Dirt” and how he has shaped my core beliefs on what makes an effective teacher. I believe that having meaningful relationships with your students is at the core of being great teacher. I will look at a particular student along with some professional writings to support these beliefs.

As a substitute, I walk into the classroom on the first day of a three and a half month, seventh grade, special education teacher I am nervous to say the least. I have heard stories from many of the other teachers in the school. “Look out for ‘Johnny’” they would say or “‘Austin’ has a real temper so don’t let him be with other students alone”. I thought to myself, how bad can it be? I have always gotten along with kids just fine. Little did I know, I was going to face challenges and have triumphs of which I have never experienced before. This SPED position has shaped my core beliefs to of teaching to revolve around relationships with the students you are teaching. I am not trying to discount content knowledge, but I believe that if you are unable to form meaningful relationships with your students you will never be an effective teacher.

Austin was a student in the seventh grade special education program. He was an often quiet (and a little redneck looking) kid with Redwing work boots, a flannel shirt and a mullet. Not just a little mullet, but a full on Kentucky waterfall. He was there for reasons related to his behavior and emotional disturbance. I was able to see his temper and frustration first hand when Austin threatened a student on the first day of class. With his fist cocked back and blood vessels bulging from his forehead I had to walk him to the other room to calm him down. “But they are calling me Joe Dirt” He said “and I don’t care what you say I’m going to hit them.” Austin’s Individual Skill Provider (ISP) was there for the whole thing yet did not say a word. After I talked him off the ledge Austin returned back to the class, but sat at my desk for the remainder of the class. What was I going to do with Austin?

The next morning, I made it a point to find Austin and greet him with a smile and a “How’s it going?”

He shrugged his shoulders, “Ok, I guess.” His ISP was standing there again with a look of judgment and minor disgust.

The night before I had taken it upon myself to look into Austin’s life a little more. After having a meeting with the principal I seemed to find out what made him click. I found out that he has been living with his grandparents and he only goes to his dad’s house on occasion. His grandfather is an electrician. I have found my in. My dad and grandfather are both electricians as was I before I came to Alaska.

“Just ok?” I asked, “Isn’t any day above ground a good day?” This may have been a shocking thing to say to a normal seventh grader, but not to Austin. Being he typically spoke like a man who was about seven times his age I thought I would be right on his level.

“You know, you’re right!” Austin said, “My grandpa says that all the time.”

“You’re kidding me! Mine too! He is an electrician back in Wisconsin where I’m from.” I said.

“My grandpa is an electrician too!” Austin began to smile.

“Wow, that’s cool. My dad and brother are too. And you know what else, I used to be an electrician before I started guiding and teaching.”

“Every night before I go to bed I read from the electrical code book. Someday I’m gonna be an electrician.” Austin’s smile continued to grow.

From that point on Austin and I were like best buddies. I worked on relating the school work that he had to do with becoming an electrician. He continued to do his school work at my desk and not because he had to, but because he wanted to. He had this real sense of pride in his work all of a sudden. Austin would feverishly work to complete a math assignment because he now knew that math was a very important part in being an electrician. Not only did I help him realize that, but he confirmed it with his grandpa. Overtime, Austin slowly began to pull his grades up and even started forming some new friendships among his peers.

There was still one problem in Austin’s mind; his ISP. He did not like having someone follow him around and looking over his shoulder all the time. I can relate I thought. I told him I would see what I could do about the ISP and he would have to prove to me and the rest of the school that he did not need one. So, Austin was on a new mission. To regain his independence.

Austin has taught me that the most important thing when it comes to teaching is building strong relationships with your students. I believe that a teacher can have all the content knowledge in the world, but if they cannot connect with the students it is worthless. “Forming strong and supportive relationships with teachers allows students to feel safer and more secure in the school setting, feel more competent, make more positive connections with peers, and make greater academic gains” (Hamre).

Your ability to connect with all of the students in your classroom can make all the difference in their will to learn. All people, both children and adults, are more likely to do something for someone they like and respect. If the students do not like you they at least have to respect you. I believe that you can’t have one without the other. When a student can relate to school, not only just with their peers, but with their teachers as well, it greatly increases their academic engagement (Howells, 2014). I am happy to report that, not only was Austin relieved of his ISP, but he continued to improve his grades, made new friends and didn’t receive any form of disciplinary action for the rest of the school year. I can’t wait to see him in eighth grade.

References:

Hamre, B. K., & Pianta, R. C. (2006). Student-Teacher Relationships.

Howells, K. (2014). An exploration of the role of gratitude in enhancing teacher–student relationships. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *42*, 58-67.