

# Kim Shea ~ Personal Educational Philosophy

In reflecting upon my philosophy of education, I think of it in terms of both the teacher and the student perspective; as well as the outcomes...

## The teacher perspective

For teachers, or those aspiring to be teachers, there are so many critical elements to success. The ones that come to mind quickly are passion, faith, respect, and a clear understanding of the importance of interpersonal relationships.

Why passion? Teaching is an incredibly rewarding profession, but also very trying; those who rise to the top must have a true passion for their trade. I say this because there is no ‘arrival’; the profession is constantly evolving, and the teacher’s individual classroom is constantly evolving. There is no moment at which one can declare that all has been figured out, rest on their laurels, and move forward with a cookie cutter approach. We are constantly challenged to think on our feet, and be willing to do an about face when something that we thought would work so well (or has worked well in the past) is suddenly ineffective. Being a teacher demands that we be open to constructive criticism, recognize that our learning never stops (any more than that of our students does), and requires us to be masters of time management. Anything less than true passion for this amazing profession grossly inhibits one’s ability to hit these points and be an exceptional teacher.

Why faith? We are so completely invested in our students’ academic, personal and social success; and that means that the waters are often muddy. It’s imperative that during the inevitable challenges each year

brings, we never lose hope, and that we realize the neediest of kids tend to ask for help in the ugliest of ways. It's critical that we keep our eye on the prize (student success) and remain both steadfast and consistent in this quest. Without faith that our goal is both meaningful and achievable, we couldn't possibly accomplish what we need to.

Respect and a clear understanding of the importance of interpersonal relationships go hand in hand. If a classroom is to be effective, then it must be ruled by respect; not fear. A student who feels respected will almost always put forth their best effort. Teachers must forge dignified and valuable relationships with all students; we cannot demand respect unless we are willing to give it in return. A healthy teacher/student relationship will overcome the adversity that comes with every school year, and will usher the student to a 'place' in their learning where he/she can flourish.

### **The student perspective**

Students come to us with their hearts on their sleeves, even those who try to appear apathetic. They are experiencing significant development every year of their lives; academically, socially, and personally. Our role is to guide them; teaching them how to think rather than what to think. If we are to connect with them, and leverage their curiosity, then we need to ensure that they feel valued, safe, and challenged.

The very first moment that a student crosses the threshold into our classrooms, that student should immediately feel as though they are a valued member of a team. Nobody is going to thrive if they perceive themselves to be somehow insignificant. They may survive, but they won't thrive.

It is imperative that the student feels safe in our classrooms as well; far more than merely physically safe. Kids need to feel safe taking risks with their learning, and not be held back by fear of ridicule or failure. At the beginning of each school year, the first homework assignment I give is to google famous inventions that happened by accident. Students are often befuddled as to why the math teacher is handing out a non-numbers oriented task. When they arrive in class the following day, their shining faces tell the story long before the words come out of their mouths. Enthusiastically, they discuss major medical advances (the pacemaker), simple pleasures (the chocolate chip cookie), famous toys (the slinky), etc., that were all mistakes. The result of an experiment gone awry. I connect this realization to the fact that the people behind all these accomplishments felt safe taking risks. Knowing that they could fail miserably, before their innovation began, these people still ‘went for it’ anyway. I want students to recognize that not trying is far worse than trying and not getting it right the first time. When I make a blunder with my math on the board, I gleefully point it out and remind them I’m no more immune to mistakes than anyone. Even better is when a student spots the error first. I hope it helps them realize that success and perfection are two entirely different concepts, and that the road to success is paved with mistakes.

Lastly, students must feel challenged. I’ve found that there’s a fairly persistent culture of learned helplessness in education. If we allow students to begin each task by raising their hand before trying, or to fall into that abyss of being unable to work independently, then the clear message we are delivering is ‘No, you’re right, you can’t!’ Obviously, the message we need to deliver is ‘Yes, as a matter of fact, you can!’ It’s not easy to take students down the path to independent learning; there’s often a measure of anxiety that they experience when they find the teacher

passing them the baton. I'm willing to bet that this is more symptomatic in middle school; we see the transition from kids who enter our schools while still having babysitters, all the way through to having one foot in the door of high school. I consistently try to challenge my students, and make them feel worthy of striving for more. When they begin to feel more capable, and flash that bright smile of emerging confidence, I often respond with a friendly 'See what happens when you use your brain instead of mine?'

### **The outcome**

'Why? What do I need to know this for? When am I ever going to use this again?'

These are all common phrases that we hear from students. So, why indeed? One word sums it up perfectly - freedom! Education provides people with more freedom than anything else does. An educated individual has greater financial freedom, is capable of living an independent life, and is highly adaptable. Changing job markets, varying economic conditions, and many other factors can box people into a life where they have few choices. The higher the level of education, the less likely this is to happen to a person. Freedom. Choices. Self reliance. That's why...