

MISTY S. SALTER

8. TEACHING WITH THE HEART

Teaching Students with Special Needs

I can remember the very moment that I knew that I wanted to become a special educator. I had spent several years visiting a special education classroom in our elementary school. I had been working with a young boy named Gunner on learning to tie his shoes. One day, while volunteering at our local Special Olympics, Gunner walked up to me with the “biggest smile that I have ever seen” and said, “Watch this.” He bent down and tied his shoe, all by himself, right there in front of me! To say that I felt a sense of overwhelming joy in that moment would be an understatement. I was just as excited that he could tie his own shoe as he was. I knew in that very instant, even though I was only in middle school at the time, that I wanted to become a special education teacher.

SPECIAL EDUCATION WAS/IS MY CALLING

I've got this all figured out... or do I?

When the time came to graduate high school and to move on to college, my career aspirations of becoming a teacher of students with special needs had not changed. After writing countless essays for scholarships, I was afforded the ability to attend Georgia Southern University. Over the course of two years, I completed my core studies and was then accepted into the Teacher College, where I studied Special Education. I began working at an elementary school as a long-term sub the day after my graduation from college. I really thought that I had it all figured out. I could handle teaching in my own classroom in the upcoming year. I had all the tools – or so I thought I did, anyway.

When I began my first official year as a teacher, I was assigned to a self-contained classroom that housed a range of disabilities and ages. There were students with cerebral palsy, autism, and fragile X syndrome. This one classroom housed all of the students in the school with significant disabilities, so the ages of the students varied from five to 13. Of course, I entered the classroom with big plans and aspirations of all the milestones that the students would achieve while I was their teacher, but no one prepared me for the emotional and physical toil that the job would take on my personal wellbeing. I can remember countless times of

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joy and excitement in that particular classroom when a student would achieve a task or say a new word, but I can also remember many tears and “What should I do next?” moments as well.

A moment that changed my perspective....

One moment that I will not soon forget happened my first year as a teacher, in the above-mentioned self-contained classroom, 11 years ago. There was a student in the class, Jason, who was non-verbal and had been diagnosed with autism. He would have moments of rage in which he would become physically aggressive. It is still my belief today that the aggression that he displayed was purely from his own frustration of not being able to communicate his wants and needs in a manner that others could understand. When he would get overly stimulated, he would also bite his own forearm, causing bruising and scarring.

One particular day of teaching, Jason stands out in my mind as a turning point in my understanding, or lack thereof, of the emotional turmoil that some of the students are under. As a class, the students and I were attempting to complete our daily group calendar time. Jason became extremely frustrated during the group activity and began to bite his arm and rock backward and forward in his chair while making loud moaning noises. I allowed Jason to remove himself from the group in hopes that being able to move around would calm him down. Even though he was moving freely around the room and was no longer required to sit at the table, he still seemed to be very distraught, and his behaviors were intensifying. In an effort to help Jason, I thought that I would try to talk to him. Little did I know that my voice was apparently the last thing that he wanted to hear. Almost immediately after I began talking to him, he reached over, scratched my face, and then bit my arm. It all happened so quickly that I was unable to avoid the encounter. I was in shock at the moment. It took me what felt like several minutes to release my arm from his grip. Once I had freed my arm from his tight grip, Jason turned away from me and then began to go after other students in the classroom. At this point, I had to physically restrain him on the floor. He was absolutely beside himself. He was crying, screaming, and continuously trying to bite himself and me anywhere he could. I tried to release him slowly after about a minute, but he immediately lashed out toward my paraprofessional, attempting to bite her. I again had to restrain him. This went on for about 30 minutes.

I was both physically and emotionally drained by the time I was able to calm Jason down enough to let him go. I felt as if I had failed this child. He was frustrated beyond my understanding, and there was nothing that I could do about it. We were both bruised up and completely exhausted. I had to go to the hospital to receive a tetanus shot because the bites had broken the skin. No one prepared me for any of that. I had no idea when I graduated college that there would come a day when I would be bitten and bruised and have to restrain a young child. It was a devastating

experience. More than anything, my heart ached for Jason. I had many restless nights praying of ways that I could help him.

Why did I not know how much my heart would hurt??

I wholeheartedly believe that the teacher education program through which I received my training was a good one. I learned many important skills on how to teach students with a multitude of disabilities. However, no one ever taught me how to teach my heart to handle the heartache. There was no class on teacher self-preservation. No one told me that my heart would hurt so bad for these children that I would not know what to do with all the built up emotion, and there was definitely no one who told me that I would have to take a trip to the emergency room (on multiple occasions) to receive a vaccination after being bitten or to have a nose put back in place. Yes, my nose was dislocated one time by a five-year-old little boy. While that was extremely painful, more painful still were the feelings that I had of failure. I wanted to understand these students, to help them, to take away their pain.

I believe that most educators whom I know are extremely optimistic. We all have an image in our minds of standing in front of the classroom, teaching little boys and girls (or young men and women, depending on “the level that you teach”), and empowering them to become active learners. We want to be “the best that we can be”, and we expect the same of our students. That is why, when an educator has moments of “failure,” it tears them him or her down, or it did me, anyway. No one taught me how to deal with the realization that there are some instances that may occur that I will have no control over. Maybe there is a fear in teacher education programs that teaching the “nitty gritty” might scare potential educators away. I am not sure, but I do think that it would have proved beneficial for me, had someone told me that the job was hard on the heart.

Or, quite possibly, maybe someone did tell me that my heart would break almost daily for my students. Maybe I just did not listen, or maybe, as my students say, I used my “selective hearing” when the topic came up. Whatever the case may be, I was not prepared for that part of the job. I was not prepared for the raw emotions that I would feel when I hear another student teasing a student in my class. Or when I hear another educator coldly discussing how “that kid” will never make it or “that kid” will never be able to do anything. Eleven years later, I still struggle with the emotional aspect of being a teacher of students with special needs. I have many years to work with the same group of students and to develop a relationship, a bond, with both them and their families. I take them in as my own and do everything that I can to ensure their success while they are under my guidance in school. I work to make sure that they have options after high school and goals to work toward.

To me as a special educator, it is hard to understand how everyone does not feel the same compassion toward my students that I do. Yes, the student mentioned earlier, Jason, attacked me on numerous occasions. Yes, he lashed out at others in

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the room multiple times. Yes, he would yell so loudly that other teachers would come in and check on us. But at the end of the day, he was a child. Jason was a child who needed help and was not able to express his feelings or his needs. All that he wanted was for someone, anyone, to understand what he was thinking/feeling but did not have the words to say. As his teacher, I am supposed to know what he needs. I am supposed to be the one with the skills to help him. I am supposed to be the one who can figure out what is going on when no one else can, but there were times when I could not, and those are the times that resulted in the fits of rage and physically aggressive behaviors. Those were the sleepless nights, tossing and turning, trying to figure out what I could do better the next day. How could I help Jason? What does he need from me?

As educators, we are our toughest critics...

I continued to work with the students in that self-contained classroom for three years before moving to another school district. While I truly believe that I learned more in that classroom than I could have learned from a professor, I continue to posit that I would have benefited greatly from some sort of preservation class. It is my belief that the majority of educators are critical theorists. We begin our career with a notion that we will be the ones to change the world, to teach the kids what others could not – that, with us as their teachers, they will achieve all things. We know with every fiber of our beings that we can be the ones to make that difference, so when we are faced with a situation like the one I have discussed, our hearts are torn. We blame ourselves. We punish ourselves, and we cannot rest until we figure out our next move to ensure success for all the students in our classroom.

I do realize that many educators may never be faced with a situation in which they are physically attacked by a student. As a matter of fact, I pray that most are never put in that situation. While I know that many educators will not face the same situation, I assert that, somewhere along the way, they will blame themselves for a student whom they cannot reach. They will spend countless hours pondering, pacing the halls, wondering what they could have done differently, better. Whether we want it to be or not, the heart is involved in what we do all day, every day. It would be a disservice to our students if it were not. I am not suggesting that we harden our hearts and just teach with no emotion; however, I do posit that someone needs to tell future educators that their hearts may hurt from time to time, but they should never give up!