It Takes a Community

SEL at a Juvenile Detention Center

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I was a senior in high school when I became pregnant with my first son. I was nineteen when I had my second son, and I was 20 when my son’s father was killed in a car accident; leaving me to raise 2 boys on my own.

I share this with you not because this is going to be an autobiography of my life, but because as I continue my 19th year of teaching and working with Cleveland’s children, I have found that 3 things profoundly impact the level and success of social and emotional learning in a classroom. First of those three things is the educator or facilitator in the classroom. The background, experience, and knowledge of the person leading the classroom, deeply shapes the way they approach teaching. When I began teaching at the age of 24, I already knew what it was like to be a mom and the tremendous amount of love and responsibility that accompanies that role. I could look at the kids I was working with and think about how I would want my own children to be treated. This instinctively led me to want to create a classroom environment that was caring and warm. I also knew loss and had my own encounters with poverty, so I understood that some days figuring out where you are going to sleep at night was more important than any world history lesson that I had planned.
My background and experiences made me very aware of the social injustices that plague our students. I became more than a teacher over the years. I also became an advocate and activist. When teachers are aware of the history of discrimination and oppression that continues to affect many of our students and their families, or when they have experienced the obstacles that poverty presents, there seems to be an easier avenue for a successful social and emotional learning model to be present in that classroom. Educators need to be trained about the impact of poverty on learning and brain development, as well as the impact of violence, stress, nutrition, and trauma on learning and brain development. Authentic examinations of the segregation and discrimination in our country would also help. Which leads me to the second factor that I’ve noticed can influence social and emotional learning in a classroom...
Curriculum.
I am fortunate to have the principal who hired me three years ago, right when I was about to quit the teaching profession entirely. I felt that politicians and business leaders had hijacked my profession. I was no longer allowed to be creative in the classroom or integrate a critical pedagogy. The focus was all on testing and data. I didn’t feel like I could do what was necessary to help kids. However, at the detention center, the focus is on what is best for students. This includes their social and emotional development, as well as their academics. So, we start each day in my class with our daily gratitude statement because research shows us that thankfulness leads to happiness and that happier people are more successful people. I also teach students the 4-7-8 breathing method to help out with anxiety and difficulty sleeping. We reflect on our performance each day, and students are given an opportunity to share with me any thoughts or feelings they may be having.
We also set short term goals to think about how to get to our long term goals. Goals are related to academics and behavior. I am able to teach the value of having a growth mindset, and to offer students opportunities for success. With all kinds of numbers around testing and discipline and data that neglects the humanity of children, students bear the burden of labels like “failing”. Is it any wonder performance gaps still exist? Every child should be given the opportunity to taste success. Once we feel it and enjoy it, we want more, right? We believe we can get more if we’ve tasted success once. I wonder how education can be structured so that all students have more opportunities for success, and don’t end up in a place like the detention center.
Finally, the third element is community. It takes a community to raise a child. We can’t expect schools or police officers to do it all for us. I began working with a group called the National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ) my first year teaching. We took students to a weekend diversity camp every year sponsored by this group. I realized that not only do our students need exposure to the world out there that awaits them, but our community needs exposure to our students, who are too often portrayed in absurd Hollywood productions or mass media outlets as being unintelligent and menacing. I have worked with dozens of groups over the years, and the response from the folks who work with our students is filled with just as much gratitude and fulfillment as the responses from our students. They love the kids and through changing their proximity to the students, hopefully their narrative has changed as well.
Thanks to the generosity of the innovation grant this year, I have been able to integrate art, service learning, and social and emotional learning with a community partner who finds local, national, and international artists to engage in interactive projects with my boys. Small stipends are offered to artists who spend their time with us, and our 1st artist, an Italian muralist, spent 2 sessions painting and creating with the young men, yet declined her stipend because she said the experience meant so much to her. Thus, we’ll actually be able to bring in an artist we weren’t originally planning on having into our classroom.
In this slide, you see images of self reflection and self awareness. One student’s image is a description of the voices he hears when he isn’t on his medication. Another image is a comic strip from a student processing his experience. You also see a joy in the process of creating; evident in the meticulous attention to detail.
What happens when you make school about living life instead of just a place to learn how to make a living? Our kids come from a city where 2000 kids have elevated lead levels in their blood every year, from a city where violence and segregation are the norm, from a city that Forbes rates as one of the top 10 most dangerous cities year after year. From this city, among these kids whom city leaders want to leave behind and forget, is a resilience, brilliance, and insatiable desire to express gratitude and give generously. In classrooms with social and emotional learning, the child is the focus, and school becomes a place they want to be.
I'm in 4 groups to keep a growth mindset & trying to strive for better.

...some visitation forms so you can come see me when I graduate.

I never would have been able to do the things I did & display great work ethic and I did that from having a positive growth mindset...

I really appreciate the Harry Potter books.

I try to stay up & keep a smile on my face...

Oh!! I'm writing a book... I'm gonna try to prevent other young males from cities...

Kids realize there is more to life out there, and they want more. They deserve more. We should be providing every child with what we would want for our own children.

5-7 minutes isn’t enough time to address the injustices in the juvenile justice system, nor is it enough time to discuss our country’s system of mass incarceration: the new Jim Crow. And my students’ stories, full of heartache and tragedy, are not mine to share. But thank you for allowing me to share my experiences and thoughts with you today.
Desmond Tutu said “My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together.” I hope that all of you have a place that connects you to the humanity of others, like I have at the juvenile detention center. And I hope that one day ALL of our schools are places that acknowledge and honor the humanity and art that exists within real teaching and learning.