Teaching the Expectant Student – My Philosophy of Education

I believe that the desire to learn is an undeniable component of the human condition. Outside of the basic ability to eat, drink and be sheltered, the ability to learn and grow is the most important contributor to human happiness and success. I read a book by Mark Lilla for a philosophy course in college. In it, he characterized humans as expectant beings, theorizing that people are reactionary; that they lean forward in expectation of what is to come at all times. To me, this means that we look outwards; we constantly absorb what we see and seek to understand what happens to us. We live in constant admiration of the life that occurs in our view and anticipate what will happen next.

In a word, we are innately *curious*. This makes us innately stellar students. For this reason, every society in history has prioritized the development and maintenance of a systematic way of educating its people. In our society, the school is where we harness the innate curiosity of each young person and use it to develop them into intelligent and contributing members of society.

The less philosophical, more pragmatic definition: school is the place where young people learn the information deemed necessary to succeed in our society. School is where children observe social norms and customs, and learn to act consistently with them. School is where we seek to direct the curiosity of children to productive tasks to keep them from engaging in unproductive behavior. In more recent years, the advent of technology and increased diversity of our students has made school the place where children learn about the global community, the similarities and differences that make us who we are, and the responsibility we have to others.
As I prepare to become a middle school educator, I’m learning more about the numerous and varied challenges of teaching in today’s world. It is overwhelming and exhilarating at the same time. I know that my thoughts will change as I learn, and that my methods will change and improve as I apply my ideas in the classroom. I hope that the series of beliefs expressed below will make me better prepared to begin a career in education (and continue a career in coaching) that will be challenging, ever changing and transformative, for me and my students.

I believe that, in children, we see the truth to Lilla’s assertion most clearly. Children are reactionary beings. They constantly observe their surroundings and mimic the behavior that is modeled for them. Thus, I believe that teachers are role models, first and foremost. As an English educator and coach to middle school children, I need to remember that my students are always watching. They look to me for information, yes, but they also watch how I communicate it, how I respond to their questions and what I do when I don’t know an answer. I want to model good communication skills by using clear and accurate language. I want to be patient when they have questions and compassionate when they are confused. I want to show them that it is ok not to know every answer, but that it is their responsibility to seek the answers they need. These skills are particularly useful to middle school children as they navigate the transition to young adulthood.

I believe in leading, teaching and coaching by example. I have found that my players react most positively when I am involved in the learning process. I often do drills with them, scrimmage with them and even run sprints with them. This shows my players that learning is a lifelong endeavor. It also communicates my passion for what I do and how that passion makes me successful. These are powerful examples that I hope to set for my future English students. One of the most wonderful things about reading is reacting to what you read, understanding how it makes you feel and forming an opinion or response. I want to be present and active when we read in class – I want to be passionate about their
ideas and contribute my own. I want to structure my lessons to provide space and time for me to be actively engaged in activities. I want my students to expect 100% engagement from me, and I want to meet that expectation.

I believe that children value authenticity. They know when someone is being “real” with them because they spend so much time watching others. I want to be my best self for my students, while showing them that it is ok to make mistakes and have bad days. In my weaker moments, I want to show through my actions that it is your reaction to stress and disappointment that matters most.

I believe that children want to learn new things, to be challenged, and to become more. As expectant beings, children lean forward in anticipation of what will happen next. As a teacher, it is my job to meet their excitement with a curriculum and spirit that pushes them forward at all times. This will require me to know each student as an individual and to understand what the best next step is for them. Knowing my students on a personal level will also help me to understand the challenges they face at home, the norms of their cultures and how both will affect them as learners.

I want to show my students that I care about them by providing loving discipline. As an educator, I will set high and clear behavioral expectations for my students. When they do not meet these standards, I will hold them accountable for their actions – and show that I have faith in their ability to make better choices. I will not yell or belittle my students when they err. I will look them in the eye, like I would an adult, and ask that they do better. A struggle may result, and the change may not happen overnight, but when they do make a better choice, I will celebrate with them in a moment of self discovery. They will have just become more than they thought they could be.

I expect that my students own their educations. If they have questions or concerns, if they aren’t getting what they need, or if I have upset them, I want them to come to me. I will strive never to turn away a student who speaks to me respectfully about a concern. In fact, I will applaud them for
caring enough about their education to take that step. I want to encourage parents of my students to stand by this expectation. In middle school, children must learn to identify their problems and communicate their needs to those who can help. I will encourage my parents to ask their students about class, I will keep them informed about what we are learning. I will also ask them to give their children the chance to address their concerns with me themselves, when possible.

When parents do have an issue that they would like to discuss, I will be welcoming and non-defensive. Parents want first to be heard, so I will listen more than I talk. When I do offer an opinion or suggestion, I will do so clearly, with a thought out response that shows my respect for their opinion and their child’s success.

I want to be honest about the challenges that exist in our world. I will have students that are part of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities. I will coach girls who feel insecure about their bodies and their emotions. I will work with disabled students, and with those who have special needs. I will teach children who live in poverty, whose concerns are much larger than their scores on my English quizzes. It is my job to fight this inequity by being aware of their realities and working to meet them where they are. I will engage my students and their parents in discussions to understand the unique challenges they face. I will show these families that I want to understand, even if I can’t relate.

I will introduce the ideas of social justice, equality and moral responsibility into my lessons. As an English teacher, I will use the incredible literature that has been written on these themes to challenge my students to think about the world that is bigger than they are. I will ask them not solely to read, but to react, to draw parallels to our world. I don’t want to hide difficulties from my students, or feel sorry for them. I want to empower them. This world is flawed, but there is nothing more beautiful than when people overcome these flaws to make a better life. That is the goal of education as I see it: to stand behind our students as they lean forward into a future that is brighter.