

My career path to teaching was not one where I decided I wanted to become an educator at an early age and then follow the four year plan of obtaining my college degree in Education. It was more of a step-by-step process, going from point A to point B over a span of several years, which led me to this often overwhelming and demanding, but always rewarding profession called teaching.

There were no teachers in my family, so there were no footsteps to follow. My intent early in life was to become a doctor, specializing in pediatrics. Helping to pay for college, I worked a couple of jobs that were medically related, one being an aide in the surgical department at a local hospital. The other was working in a busy doctor's office where I was his "gopher". (One day, he asked me to take his Cadillac to be washed and detailed. It was a definite perk of the job!) Upon graduating from college with my second degree, I obtained a job teaching adolescents in a psychiatric hospital. Within 6 months, I was approached by the activity therapy director about an opening in her department. During the time I worked there, I became acquainted with several individuals in the community who were working in schools. Because of my strong educational background and my work with adolescents, I was offered the job of Lead Counselor for the Communities in Schools program at the high school I graduated from in 1977. I loved my job working with the staff and students at the school. About a year later, budget cuts for the CIS program were imminent, so I returned to the psychiatric facility and became the at-risk program coordinator for Positive Steps, an intervention program for troubled adolescents and their families. Three years later, the hospital closed and I moved back into the medical field, educating patients about medications and allergies, teaching patients how to administer injections, and being on call for the physician. (It was about this time that I applied to Medical School and was not accepted, crushing my lifelong dream to become a doctor.) Feeling dissatisfied and unchallenged with my position at the doctor's office, I applied for a Science teaching position at an alternative school for the Clear Creek ISD. While there I taught 6<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade Science and tutored a Chinese college student after school. I truly enjoyed the job and was able to help the students reach a level of success they had never experienced prior to their placement in the program. Three years later my husband and I moved to Southeast Asia as missionaries. During our 2 years overseas I was able to teach English at an orphanage. We also hosted a few of the boys in our home during holidays.

I was pregnant when we returned to the States, so I became a stay-at-home mom with our son. As William got older, I took some part time teaching positions at his preschool and our church. When he began school, I became a substitute teacher and then a Math and Science Specialist at a local junior high school. I taught 6<sup>th</sup> grade Science for 2 years, and now I teach 5<sup>th</sup> grade Math and Science and have implemented a new program for 5<sup>th</sup> grade called Launch which integrates math, science, and robotics. I am also a lead teacher for a NASA program called Imagine Mars.

It is probably evident at this point there has been an underlying theme of teaching in my life. I believe the factors that influenced me to become a teacher have been my life experiences, coupled with the fact I enjoy learning. The author Ruth Beechick, in *An Easy Start in Arithmetic*, said, "A teacher who loves learning earns the right and ability to help others learn". I think this statement is reflective of any good teacher. And I believe the willingness to learn from our students validates us as people who do not have all the answers, but are willing to provide an environment where both student and teacher can learn together. Albert Einstein said, "I never teach my pupils. I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn."

I consider one of my greatest accomplishments in education to be the provision of a nurturing environment in which my students can learn. Although I have been instrumental in bringing new programs to the school, like the 5<sup>th</sup> grade Robotics Launch program and Imagine Mars, I see the bigger contribution as working hard and caring for my students, as well as encouraging and mentoring other teachers and staff members at Story. It's not about what I do as an individual, but what I give to others that hopefully has the greatest impact on those around me, student and teacher alike. William Glasser, an American psychiatrist and the author of numerous books on school improvement and teaching, once said, "When you study great teachers...you will learn much more from their caring and hard work than from their style". The greatest lesson my students have learned is that I not only care about their academic success in school, but also about them as individuals who can bring the same type of care and concern to those around them.

As a teacher, involvement in the community is important because it helps bridge the connection between schools and families. According to “Teachers Leading the Way.....Voices for the National Teacher Forum, April 1998, teacher involvement results in teachers and schools gaining support, local residents becoming more confident in their schools, and teachers understanding the community better, helping them to address the needs of students more effectively. I believe community involvement outweighs almost anything else we do as teachers outside of the work within our own classrooms.

My participation in community activities over the past few years includes:

1. Relay for Life – I have led and participated in Relay for Life with a team of teachers and paraprofessionals from Story Intermediate for the past 2 years. I helped organize fundraising activities and have participated in the overnight walks.
2. K-Kids (an extension of Kiwanis International) – I have served as faculty advisor since its inception at Story Intermediate in Palestine, Texas. My homeroom raised money for UNICEF and donated items to the local animal shelter. On a recent Saturday, I oversaw a group of students helping to walk the dogs on a special adoption day for the shelter.
3. Refuge of Light – I have been involved in the establishment of a home for teens rescued from juvenile sex trafficking. I have been a part of local awareness campaigns, fundraising activities, and helped construct a safe house.
4. First Baptist Church – I have been a part of numerous community activities through my church, including serving on various committees, helping establish a MOPS group (Mothers of Preschoolers), serving as head of the Preschool Department and organizing several community outreach programs, including the planning, construction, and registration of floats for the local Christmas parade. I also participated in a mission trip to Ethiopia, providing medical assistance and educational supplies to a village outside of Addis Ababa.

My philosophy of teaching is probably different than most educators because when I graduated from college my intention was to become a doctor. There were no teachers in my family, so teaching was not something I saw myself doing. It was only after not being accepted to Medical School, in combination with a multitude of “teaching” experiences that led me to the classroom.

The interesting part of my story is that so many of my life experiences had something to do with teaching. From being a substitute teacher, activity therapist, and at-risk program coordinator in a psychiatric hospital to serving as lead counselor for a Communities in Schools program in my hometown. From teaching patients how to administer allergy injections as a medical technician to serving as an interim teacher to missionaries kids and tutoring school age children at an orphanage in Southeast Asia. From working as a volunteer coordinator in Harare, Zimbabwe, to being an English language tutor to a college student from China. It seems that the paths God placed before me always involved teaching. And for that, I am grateful.

My teaching philosophy consists of what I call “The 4 Cs”, Caring, Committed, Conscientious, and a little Crazy.

The following is a brief description of each:

1. Caring – If I do not care about my students as individuals, I will never reach them as potential learners. From day one, they must feel they are in a safe environment and know I care about them, not just their grades or academic accomplishments. I support them, hug them, praise them, and cry with them. They know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, I care. One of my students recently asked me to attend her dance recital. It was on a Saturday morning and I really was not in the mood to go. Still, I reluctantly got up early to attend. To my surprise, I was the only person she knew that showed up. I knew I had done the right thing by coming to watch Elizabeth dance. Theodore Roosevelt once said, “Nobody cares how much you know, until they know how much you care.” This is an absolute truth for teachers.
2. Committed – I must be committed not only to my students, but to my fellow teachers, my teaching teams, my administrators, and my school. I must be willing to give 100% both inside

and outside of the classroom. Sometimes it is difficult to face each day with that level of commitment, but the end result always outweighs the difficulties. A teacher's commitment is tantamount to their success.

3. Conscientious – Teaching is difficult at best. It takes a constant diligence that few other professions require. I must make painstaking efforts to prepare for my students every day, not knowing what career path they may choose after graduation. An unknown source once said, "Teaching is the one profession that creates all other professions." I have been given the privilege to train those who will build our future and I must be conscientious about how I teach these up and coming leaders.
4. A Little Crazy – You have to be a tad bit crazy to survive being a 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher and I think my students will testify to that fact. One day I used a drum set in my room to help teach sound, pitch, and vibration. Some days I start the class talking about what I am thankful for and give the students an opportunity to do the same. Other days we start with telling jokes, singing, and dancing. One day I told the students we were going to celebrate mistakes because I do not see mistakes as a bad thing, but instead see them as opportunities to learn and grow. Now we celebrate mistakes on a daily basis. During a UNICEF drive at our school, every day I showed Katy Perry's Unconditional video which she made while serving as a UNICEF Goodwill ambassador. (It speaks of the unconditional love we should have for others). The students loved it and we all sang it together. A little crazy? Yes, but my students have learned to embrace my craziness.

In recent years there have been a number of public education issues that have come to the forefront, including bullying, high stakes testing, and school vouchers. While these are important, it seems the issue most difficult to address and resolve within schools is the effects of poverty on children. In 1964, Lyndon B. Johnson declared a War on Poverty in America. Fifty one years later this battle is still raging. Although the poverty levels have decreased from 26% in 1967 to 16% in 2012, childhood poverty persists across the United States.

In Texas, the incidence of poverty among school age children is even more staggering. According to a recent report by the Southern Education Foundation, 6 out of every 10 public school students in Texas live at or near the poverty level. Some larger districts, like the Houston ISD, report poverty numbers as high as 80% (Binkovitz & Zaveri, 2015) and this trend has carried over into smaller districts, like my own. In Palestine ISD, 75-80% of all students are economically disadvantaged, based on eligibility for free and reduced lunches. Why are there so many children in Texas who live in poverty? What are the causes, how does it affect students in the classroom, and what are the possible solutions to such a widespread problem?

Eric Jensen (2009), in his book *Teaching with Poverty in Mind*, identifies six types of poverty, three of which I believe are closely associated with areas like Palestine, Texas. **Situational Poverty** is usually temporary and can be caused by natural disasters, divorce, or recurring health problems. **Generational Poverty** occurs when at least two generations have been born into poverty. It is usually difficult for these families to escape from the poverty cycle. **Rural Poverty** is found in smaller towns where single-parent homes are prevalent and there is a lack of services available to the family and fewer opportunities for a quality education.

According to Jensen (2009), the effects of poverty on a child in the classroom are numerous. There is often a high tardy and absenteeism rate due to limited transportation or a parent's negative attitude toward the school. Students may be disengaged due to a lack of proper nutrition and typically do not get enough sleep. They are also more likely to display "acting-out" behaviors, are impatient and impulsive, have inappropriate emotional responses, and lack in politeness and social graces. A student living in poverty may feel alienated because no one

at school has made an attempt to have a relationship with them. And, most importantly, the rate of dropping out of school is higher than that of their middle and high income counterparts.

How do we, as Texas educators, resolve the issues of poverty within our schools? First and foremost, we must develop meaningful relationships with these students and their parents. They must know that we care deeply about them. We must also become more educated about poverty and be willing to change our perceptions of students who seem disengaged or act out, asking ourselves “Why is this happening in our classrooms?” Gail Connelly (2014), NAESP executive director believes districts must find ways to provide a high-quality preschool education, stating, “Kindergarten readiness may be the most important factor determining an individual’s success in school and beyond”. Ericka Guynes, principal at Earl Boyles Elementary, a Title 1 school in Portland, Oregon says she relies heavily on “community resources and partnerships to positively impact my school community, such as a bi-weekly food pantry, after school programs, and Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports programs” (Cox, Guynes, Jackson, & Macer, (2014)). Personally speaking, I think it all goes back to relationship building with students and parents. We, as Texas educators, can implement every known program and resource within our schools, but unless these students know that we care, nothing will work. The bad news is there is no silver bullet. The good news is educators have the ability to disrupt the cycles of poverty. How will we respond?

#### Bibliography

Binkovitz, J.E. & Zaveri, M. (2015, March 15). With 60 percent of public school students in or near poverty, Texas seeks answers. Retrieved from <http://tpr.org>.

Connelly, G. (2014, March/April). Poverty matters. *Principal*, 93(4), 56.

Cox, T., Guynes, E., Jackson, M., & Macer, S. (2014, March/April). Perspectives on poverty. A principal, superintendent, parent, and social worker weigh in on mitigating the impact of poverty on the nation’s schools and children. *Principal*, 93(4), 8-11.

Jensen, E. (2009). *Teaching with poverty in mind. What being poor does to kids’ brains and what schools can do about it*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Within the past few years I have participated in a number of activities focused at strengthening and improving the teaching profession within my school. One thing I have done is to serve as an informal mentor to new and existing teachers on campus. Oftentimes the conversation seems to center around various teaching strategies and techniques, but sometimes it can be about the mundane activities of our day, like how to enter grades into the computer. Whatever the conversation is about, I always try to end it with a word of encouragement because I believe encouraging others is one key to improving the profession.

Sharing ideas with colleagues is another tool I use to enhance the profession at school. I teach Math and Science, so I have the opportunity to collaborate with both departments, strengthening cross-curricular instruction.

One of the most significant contributions I have made is the implementation of a 5<sup>th</sup> grade program called Launch, a Project Lead the Way curriculum which integrates Math, Science, and Robotics. I attended training last summer and have been responsible for organizing, planning, and initiating the program on my campus. This has required the integration of technology and other resources necessary to establish a successful program. I have collaborated with other Launch teachers in our district to ensure the successful.

Another significant contribution is the work I do with Lucinda Presley, director of *Institute where Creativity Empowers Education Success (ICEE Success)*, to bring a program called "Imagine Mars" to our campus.

Ms. Presley and I have worked together to train other teachers in the use of PIE (Playful and Inventive Exploration) within the classroom. I have also helped organize Skyping sessions with some of the key engineers at the Jet Propulsion Lab in California involved in the *Mission to Mars* program. These sessions have been aimed at assisting teachers to review important Science concepts with their students. They have also allowed students to talk to experts in the field of space exploration.



In 2013, the Educational Testing Service researched poverty among school age children and found that 22 percent, or one-fifth, of American school children live in poverty. According to the 2013 Texas Kids Count report by the Center for Public Policy Priorities, 60 percent, or more than 3 million, Texas public school students have been identified as economically disadvantaged. How does this impact the education of these students? And, what does this mean for Texas educators?

For the student, living in poverty often means living in a household that is food insecure, being without access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food. This alone creates a myriad of problems, such as an increase in illness, fatigue, inability to concentrate and perform well in school, and higher levels of behavioral and emotional problems. In addition, these students typically score lower than the state average on all STAAR tests. Should we, as educators, expect these students from impoverished families to perform on the same level and with the same rigor as their middle class counterparts, or do we adjust our thinking and focus more on academic growth over a period of time? This is a question that deserves our consideration.

For the Texas educator, how do we respond to this ever growing problem of poverty within our state? First of all, we must educate ourselves on how this affects our students not only academically, but socially, emotionally, and behaviorally. We must understand the impact that poverty plays on our students every day, from not having a nutritious meal to being tired, sick, or emotionally drained. We must embrace these students and realize we can make a difference, not underestimating the influence we have on them. We must reach out to the families and let them know how important it is to help their child. We must overcome our own prejudices and stand up as advocates for these children. I am not going to pretend or insinuate that any of this is going to be easy, but it is something that we must do as educators in this great state of Texas to ensure the equal and fair education of all students.