Those Who Can’t

“He who can, does. He who cannot, teaches.” – George Bernard Shaw

Unfortunately, this old adage and its various permutations serve to pollute the minds of the general public and their stereotypical views of teachers. I recently had a conversation with a fellow educator who threw this quote at me after his complaint that very few teachers are business-savvy and could never cut it in the business world. While I found his statement offensive, it made me consider that he is not alone in his opinion. In today’s society, teachers are viewed far from the respected, revered leaders of the past. Instead, they are held by many in low regard as the aforementioned quote depicts. However, for the most part, teachers are extremely capable professionals who possess the ability to do anything they teach others to do.

The lack of respect I feel has contributed to my growing disillusion with the teaching profession. Not because I can’t teach. Not because I don’t enjoy watching children learn and inspiring children to become the best person they can be. Not because of the multitude of challenges I face daily. I have become disillusioned by the soul-sucking expectations set forth by a government that regards academics in such high regard that they forget that our children are not A’s, B’s, C’s, D’s, or F’s. Our children are not collective data. But if the data doesn’t show that our children are progressing by grandiose, sometimes impossible, leaps and bounds, the public is quick to point out the ‘terrible state of education and the teaching profession.’

Unfortunately, I view each child as a unique individual, not a letter grade or a test score. I view my classroom as a place to grow, learn and develop into a productive person that can persevere and succeed in today’s world. I learn about their talents, their interests, their dreams, and their desires. When a child enters my room, we talk about their life, their family, and their dreams for the future. I haven’t gotten to the point where my focus is on “the data”. My focus is, has always been, and will always be on the child. This does not always bode well for me, especially when my success as a teacher is based on my classroom data.

As a group, I believe educators – or perhaps administrators and government officials – tend to forget that curriculum is only part of education. As I recall my first teaching job, I think of a first grade student who became my greatest joy. And my greatest challenge. He couldn’t have been more than four feet tall, sixty pounds at best. His dark skin was covered with faded white scars that screamed the story of the abuse he endured at his fathers’ hands during his first seven years of life. He was angry and justifiably so. He had been identified as trouble. He was violent, defiant, disruptive, and a bad influence on every other child in the classroom. He had a smile that could light up a room – a room that he would tear apart moments later on a whim. His classroom antics didn’t anger me, but I quickly became frustrated and overwhelmed with his resistance to anything educational. My principal at the time offered me some advice that changed my entire outlook on education and teaching.

“Tiffany,” she said, “in this classroom, education does not come first. The mental health of these children is the priority.”

From that moment on, I put curriculum and content into my bag of tools, but I have always remembered her message to me. My students come first; NOT the data they generate. Children are fragile, and many times, we forget that they have needs we ignore or simply cannot see.

The lesson I take away from this experience and the many similar experiences I have had since is that as a teacher, I make an impact on every student I come into contact with. There are hundreds of other professions I could enter, many less stressful and less emotionally painful. It is not because I can’t do anything else. It is because I know I can make a difference. I can teach, but I can also do. While I mull over Shaw’s quote, what continues to come to mind is that the words could be made true with very little editing. Therefore, I propose the following revisions:

“He who can, does. He who can do anything, teaches.”