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Goals Reflection Essay

Who is You and What You Gonna Do?

The profound existential questions comprising my title came forth from the mouth of students in the ebb and flow of run-of-the-mill days in the life of an educator. These questions, and the stories from which they were born, serve as a framework for the development of my goals as an educator and succinctly summarize my feelings toward my role as an educator prior to enrolling at Michigan State. Having entered the field of education through a less traditional route as a member of Teach For America, I had gained a passion for education but needed some more knowledge of the field at large. My goals, by pursuing a master's degree in education, were to develop a more solid philosophy of teaching, philosophy of learning, and other tenable descriptors of what I mean when I tell people that I am an educator. Furthermore, I wanted to figure out what specific role I wanted to have within the vast field of education.

Having taught mathematics for quite some time but at the time I entered my master's program, I knew that I no longer wanted to teach that particular subject. I also felt that working in the traditional educational classroom setting might not be what I was best fit to do within the field at large. For example, my many seasons of coaching high school and middle school soccer, solidified to me the importance of mentorship. Working day in and day out with a small cohort of players allowed me to see their growth and development in skill and in character both. In addition, the fact that I maintained robust and consistent relationships with former players of mine reinforced that whatever I was doing in that realm really was meaningful. My inclination as an educator was more toward how to best cultivate life skills and social/emotional learning in the youth with whom I interacted. Thus, I looked to the diverse sampling of coursework offered through my master's program to help me figure out my specific niche within the professional realm of education.

I am glad that my excitement toward the field of education has not waned but, instead, risen as I see students that I work with growing and learning. Given the both the philosophical nature of the goal I set out with and considering the mundane backdrop in which they were asked, the questions that framed them still provide a

foundation for the continued learning and growing I will do as an educator. Thus, in the end, I am still working toward my overarching and ongoing goals of discovering my place in the field of education, but my master's degree has expanded my horizons about who I will be and what I can do. After this formal schooling, I can better articulate what I believe in concerning teaching and learning and better understand the many facets of education that can fulfill my passion to provide mentorship to young people. I greatly look forward to the stories that will follow in my continued work in education. Likewise, I look forward in anxious anticipation to the questions that those stories may pose and the answers they just very well may provide.

WHO IS YOU?

The setting of my first story is my first ever day of teaching. The day began with an inspirational speech from our Chief Educational Officer. She charged us, among other things, to keep discipline in the small things (like dress code compliance) so that the big things worked out without a hitch. Moments later, after I dropped my fifth-graders off at music class, I turned and headed back down the hallway to my classroom. Walking toward me in the hallway was a little kindergarten-aged girl, with dress shirt untucked and cardigan slung lazily about her shoulder. I bent down on one knee and softly said, "Pardon me young lady – remember what the CEO said today about doing our best in the small things? Please tuck your shirt in and put your cardigan on properly." She stopped, regarded me for a moment, and then said, "Who is you?" She then walked passed me without heeding a word of my request. I stayed in kneeling position pondering the existential meaning to that exact question for several moments, the rest of that day, and the one-hundred seventy-nine more that followed that year.

WHAT YOU GONNA DO?

The second story is set in the middle of that same trial by fire first year of teaching. My students were working diligently on the independent practice portion a standards-based mathematics lesson when I heard a loud banging on the wall of our trailer near the entrance. At first, the banging was tolerable but it progressively loudened and increased in cacophony with the addition of shouts and groans. At this point, I figured I should check it out. A colleague from the trailer across from me, a sixth grade teacher, had employed the highly unrecommended and unfortunate classroom management technique of removing a student from the instructional environment.

When I opened the door, I observed the removed student, Jane, wailing on the fading gray outer wall of my make-shirt learning space. We all knew Jane. She was prone to disruption and no one had figured out a way to help assuage these disruptions to get her under instructional control. I said, pleadingly, “Jane, could you please stop banging and yelling? Your peers - my students - are working hard on a mathematics lesson inside and it’s disrupting them.” She stopped for a moment, looked at me, then smiled at me. A start, I thought. Then, she resumed banging, harder this time, and yelled, at the top of her lungs, “What you gonna do?” I paused, looked at her, pondered the question, and then went back inside without doing anything else. That question lingered that day and the rest of that day and each day since in my journey as an educator.