Educating the Juvenile

Shannon Bentley

“Ms. Bentley! Trevis keeps touching my arm!” “Ms. Bentley! This girl won’t leave me alone!” “Ms. Bentley! If he keeps messing with me, I will knock him in his face!” The voices of angry children echoed across room 21 at Garden Holmes Elementary school. I smiled at their feisty “seven year old going on 30” attitudes. These kids were considered the worst students of the school – I never saw it. I saw children who were willing to complete their work in excellence, willing to do extra activities to keep themselves busy, and willing to work in silence – anything that would satisfy their teacher Ms. Bentley. Garden Holmes did not have the best reviews to be considered a school of excellence – the school was far from it. The students appeared juvenile; their actions were compared to the way a high school student acts; it is unusual in an elementary school setting. Teaching these kids was nothing to my sister Tynisha – she saw the students as children who needed proper guidance in order to become successful. She formulated various tactics and created strategies to motivate her students to successfully complete their work. During her lesson plans, she would always remember that the students’ education comes first and not their record of behavior.

The teachers at Garden Homes typically sent Tynisha the worst students to ever teach. To define worst, these students were involved in negative behaviors such as: fist fights with other students, threats directed to teachers and nude pictures brought to school. According to their previous behavior records, yes – they were the worst students, and they were only in the 2nd grade. Tynisha never saw it that way. She began class by introducing incentives to offer students such as candy, popsicles, chips etc. as long as the students finished their work. Isn’t it absurd? How could a teacher offer chips and candy to students with a violent record? “Teachers who are afraid of children will be taken advantage of,” Tynisha always said. “As long as you show them that you are the adult, and they are children, then they will leave you alone.” Giving treats is an incentive to get the students to finish their work, keep them busy and refrain from disputing with other students. Surprisingly – the reward of treats actually works!

One day, I observed her incentives in action – I was a part of it also. I went to the teacher’s lounge and obtained orange cream popsicles out of the freezer and brought them back to the classroom. The students saw the orange cream popsicles in my hand, staring consistently as they did their work. Tynisha responded, “Okay class, Shannon has orange cream popsicles in her hand. If you are finished with your work, you may have one, if not – then continue to work, so you can receive your treat for the day.” The students went from slow paced to working at a faster rate to get their work completed. It was a race that needed to be won. Next thing you know, one student comes up with his math paper to be corrected – it was Trevis. “Great job – you may get your treat from Shannon.” “Oh yeah! I’m going to eat it really fast!” Trevis exclaimed in joy. All of the students gazed in jealousy, with a hint of determination to finish their own work. “Ms. Bentley – I’m almost done with my work too!” said Dontavion. “Great! Keep working at it.”

Tynisha smiled.

More students began to hop out of their seats, jumping in the air with excitement as they finished their work, in order to receive their Popsicle. I noticed that using incentives encouraged the students to finish their work. Most of the students successfully got C’s or higher, which was a great start for the ones who struggled. Once the bell rang, they happily lined up in front of the door to be dismissed to their school buses. They stood in line licking their orange cream
popsicles, spilling the juices and ice cream on the wooden floor, catching every drop before it left the stick. “I love ice cream!” Trevis said as he walked out of the room.

I decided to return back to Garden Holmes to observe the kids more and tutor them on their work. “What’s happening pimping!” a student bellowed as I walked in to the classroom. I giggled at his strange reaction to my presence. He was one of the worst children Tynisha could ever have. He was suspended at least 10 times in the 1st grade; he talked back to his old teachers and kicked one of his teachers in the leg. I was afraid that he would attack me in some way, since he had previous notions to do so with others – his name was Remington.

When I met Remington, he was the sweetest child a teacher would ever have. He loved it when I helped him with math, giving him different strategies to complete his assignments; he would use the strategies to the best of his ability. “What school do you go to?” “How old are you?” “Are you really Ms. Bentley’s little sister?” He was full of curious questions that I wasn’t afraid to answer. I looked through his negative behavior record, and I was focused on the positive Remington – he never tried to lash at me. “Here! Take one of my school pictures, so you can remember me!” He gracefully handed me the photo, cheesing very hard as if he had a crush on me. He wasn’t the student that previous teachers’ described. Remington was a sweetheart to Tynisha, because he always tried to impress her with his work. When he struggled, he would get off task and bother other students, but once Tynisha or I interrupted and redirected him back to his seat, he stayed focused again and attempted to finish a few more problems.

On a day that I wasn’t present, Remington brought a condom to school and showed it to other students in the classroom. Tynisha saw him in action and called him to stay in class during recess. “Why did you bring a condom to school? Other students should not see it, because their parents are going to want answers, and you could get in a lot of trouble. You don’t need to bring it again, but since you did, I’m just going to keep you in from recess, so you can think about what you did,” she said sternly. How is it possible my readers, that all she took away was recess? Any teacher that would have found a student with an item relating to sexual encounters would be given a suspension, or worse – an expulsion. She treated him like a child.

He made a mistake – all children do. Students are growing to know everything related to the world – not just needed academics. If they are not being taught right from wrong at home, then it will be reflected at school. Students in the Milwaukee Public school district usually deal with a lot of issues at home. In Remington’s case, his mother was never around; I was told that she was a possible drug addict, and his grandparents could barely take care of him in their old age, and Tynisha knew all of that. Students are more vulnerable to bad behavior when they are not receiving any attention from home. She treated him like she would an A student, Remington made a simple mistake, and the punishment resulted in respect that he gave her for the rest of the year.

Do you think that I would lie to you, readers, about the strategies that my sister uses to educate all of her students? I will tell you about a time, where a substitute had to take over Tynisha’s classroom for a day. She was sick, and she needed a sub to take over her classroom for the entire school day. Upon her return, teachers swarmed around her left and right telling her of the mess that happened while she was gone. “They were just wild!” one teacher proclaimed. “They would not listen to her, and she’s been teaching for years!” another teacher stated. “I don’t know what you do, but they acted like they did when they were in their last year teachers classrooms!”

Tynisha smiled – all she could do was smile.
There could have been many reasons as to why the students’ acted the way they did. Every child hates a substitute teacher and would do anything to annoy them. However, it was due to the lack of the strategies being implemented, therefore, the students represented who they were in the past. Threats to call parents were ineffective, threats of referrals made no changes in behavior, and students were yelled at like animals for their wrong actions.

Spending time observing Tynisha’s techniques and working with her students helped me decide my major in education. I was able to believe that all students, no matter what their behavior is like, deserve to be treated like a child, a student, and not as a delinquent. Earn the respect of the students, my readers, is a key way to ensuring success in their future education. I understood what it meant to become an effective teacher. I learned how to properly use teaching strategies and to establish a teacher-student relationship, which can change the way students learn while modifying their behavior at the same time, just like little Remington. He was child that was misunderstood, and Tynisha knew better than to just judge him – instead, she embraced him. As a future educator, it is important to know and understand these methods of instruction to ensure that all of my students needs are met.

Soon, I will be the next Ms. Bentley.