

Passing the Baton: Beginner to Mentor

By Josh Patterson

The Hand-Off

I am an educator and I am a runner. Each role encompasses a journey in which I've found joy. From novice teacher and runner to assistant principal and race participant, I've grown. It is interesting how many similarities can be found between running a race and beginning a teaching career.

Like the relay racer reaching for the baton from the previous runner, the novice teacher enters the classroom holding onto the knowledge acquired from coursework, field experience, and the wisdom of cooperating teachers. In a baton relay, the difficulty does not come in the backstretch where the baton is firmly grasped, but in the hand-off. As a beginning teacher, I wondered about grasping that baton. What if I fumbled and dropped it? To become a successful runner, the beginning runner must rely on intrinsic motivation to move through the necessary levels of training, regardless of external factors. The same is true for novice educators.

To prepare for teaching, I'd spent four years training specifically for this race; there was no turning back. The hand-off had been made. I knew that I was made for this career. Though I began the course with a lot of book knowledge and less practical teaching experience, I had no doubt that I would be a successful educator.

That attitude kept me on course, through the disenchantment of ideals meeting reality and various personal frustrations. I remember being discouraged when I learned how many extra requirements teachers were expected to perform, frustrated by the importance placed on standardized testing, and disheartened by the lack of parental involvement, especially of those students who needed it most.

Bothered by these obstacles, I began to reflect on my frustrations and successes. What were those things that got me through tough times? What practices would I continue the following year? I put them down on paper. Looking back at what I'd written, I noticed an interesting trend. Never was I greatly frustrated by my students. Neither was my passion for teaching dampened.

What got under my skin stemmed from my views on situations beyond my control—the system of schooling and society in general. That was not where my greatest focus should be.

Focusing on the Road Ahead

Though I readily noticed these obstacles along my course, I continued to run, developing my own pace and fine-tuning my focus. Teaching, after all, was not about me. Because of my inexperience, I had taught my students in the way I had come to understand the concepts. Eventually I realized that effective teaching occurs when the instructor looks through the eyes of the students, understanding what they need to be successful.

I also learned the importance of relationships. If I wanted my students to care about what they were learning, I knew that I had to develop respect—a respect that required openness and trust. Such a rapport, I realized, was what I also needed to receive the mentorship from experienced faculty members. The best teachers don't run alone. These mentors modeled from personal experiences. They drew on my strengths, helped me in my weaknesses, and supported me through an authentic, trusting relationship.

Cutting the Runner's Tape

Through much preparation and during the course of my running, I developed a sustained passion for teaching—a passion that changed the outlook of my future, to continue my race long after cutting the runner's tape. Since that first year, I have wondered what allowed me to remain steadfast during difficult times. Again, intrinsic motivation kept me on course.

I believe that as teachers traverse the traditional stages of professional development, internal desire and purpose are what anchor them through the inevitable storms inherent in the service fields. Endurance keeps runners and teachers on track, and flexibility allows them to adapt to changing courses.

All educators bring something different to the classroom. Yet, for them to impact their students, teachers must have an anchor to hold them steadfast.

Passing the Baton

In running the course of teaching, many teachers will have the opportunity to pass the baton to another educator. Within a few years after my own student teaching experience, I was assigned a student teacher. His name was Bernard. It was my turn to assist in the development of another educator. Because of the support I had been given, I wanted to provide the same for Bernard—to let him discover his pace toward a successful race. Initially, I modeled the principles of effective teaching that I had gained as Bernard actively observed. Over time, I slowly handed the stick to Bernard because student teachers gain the most from the experience when they are allowed the most practice. In a baton relay, one cannot partially hand the baton to the next runner. The exchange must be completed fully. Each runner, every teacher, must grasp the baton and pursue the finish line—a destination, by the way, that is never truly reached. Each year is its own race.

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