Education to change lives

Education is not for the faint hearted. When I say this, I mean that your heart needs to be full of love for the little ones you are going to teach, and remember you are not there to tell the students about different subjects, you are living those realities and showing the students how to learn and be better people in this harsh world.

I will share a little about my journey of life up till now and share with you what God placed in my heart.

I had a lively childhood, always going on adventures and exploring the wilderness in Tanzania. Experiencing the beauty of that land, but also the pain the people carry. During my childhood years, I recognized the need of doctors in Tanzania. With my love for sciences I wanted to pursue that dream. I came to America in 2014 and started on my pre-med track. But I was yet to truly learn what it means to learn. I did two years, experiencing the MI winter and loathing it at first. For almost 6 months I did not see the sun and everything looked black and white. I was not doing too great on my courses either and it almost seemed futile.

So, after two years of college, I went back to Korea to serve in the Korean Army. Since I was born in Korea I had to serve the mandatory service. During which I learned a lot. People kept saying the army is a waste of time, and I realized why they say that. It is because people are literally wasting their time. You are given so much free time in the army that most just nap, or watch tv the whole time. No wonder people think it is a waste of time. I decided not to waste my time there and started to read. I read 50 books a year and served for 21 months. During which time I learned that you get of life what you put in. After my service, I was planning on going back to Calvin to finish up my studies, but that did not work out right away.

Financially I had to work for a year and so I decided to teach English at a private institution and earn my way back to Calvin. At first it was only a gig for my way back, but I realized that God had other plans in mind. As I was teaching these students English, I had 7 year old students who came in at 9:00pm-10:00pm. Sorry, I have to repeat that one more time, 7 year old kids at 9 at night! They should be running around in the playground playing hide and seek with their friends and sleeping after their exhausting play times. I taught elementary, middle school, secondary, and even adults English and I realized that I was not only teaching the contents but helping the students grow into better versions of themselves and learn how to be an upstanding and effective citizen in the societies they are in. Education is not only about teaching content but about teaching young people how to navigate this harsh world and life.   
  
There was one particular student that was struggling in school and socially. I was his teacher but also someone he could come and talk to about the struggles he had. He eventually ended the year with the most improved in science and that pointed at not my ability to teach, but my ability to help the student see the bigger picture as they are struggling through each day and help them see the big picture of life and why the students are learning what they are learning.

The moment I decided to teach for a living was one Sunday, at the church I was attending the pastor was doing his report after a short mission trip to Malawi. He showed pictures of these 7 year old triplets who did not have a home, where they slept in an abandoned roofless building getting soaked when it rained. They did not have a family either, only three of them, they would travel miles for food and water, and in my mind it was all unveiled. I grew up with these types of kids all my life in Tanzania, and I only recognized the medical needs and not their educational needs. I realized they were too young to be searching for food at that age, it should be provided along with an education that would bring hope to them.

It was the stark difference between the 7 year old kids I taught and the 7 year old kids that are trying desperately to live each day and survive that touched my heart. I still remember that day so clearly, with teary eyes I went to my knees and dedicated my life to God saying “I will be an educator for you Lord and build schools for those children You love so much.”

I came back to Calvin and changed my major to education, and I had a blast. I enjoyed learning and all the ideas of education invigorated me. One thing that changed the way I think was the reason why people panic. It was about cognitive load theory, and in a simple version it is because our working memory, where thought is being processed in real time, is very limited. We can only think through a limited amount of thoughts at a given time. But when that thought process is impeded by one's own doubts and other thoughts start to invade one’s thinking process then it can get overloaded and it needs to reset for the brain to start thinking again, that is when people panic. If you want to learn more about this, you can come talk to me or research cognitive learning theory. It's fascinating how this one lesson about learning can implicate so much of how I will teach. I realized that I used to panic a lot and although I am a capable person, because of all the self-doubt my brain would be overloaded frequently rendering my thoughts useless. But once I learned about the cognitive workload, I started to think things slowly and one thought at a time, and I also learned how to trust myself to do the good work and be able to think deeply.

That was my first lesson on how to learn. I was learning what it means to really be able to learn effectively. I needed to learn what it means to learn effectively so that I can teach that and I can be an effective teacher.

I learned a lot about how people learn and how to be an effective teacher and I had a chance to utilize my learned skills as I student taught at Byron Center Christian middle school and taught for a year at The Potter’s House.

Another technique that I learned that seemed to work with the students was the timely use of private praise. There was a student who was not cooperating in class, seemed to be disconnected and in their own world. But sometimes the student would put in some effort. I recognized that and gave a small verbal praise privately while other students were working on their works. This seemed to make the student more willing to engage in class and answer more questions.

The reason I share this is that in education, although teachers are professional entities we need to create real and meaningful relationships and connections with the students to leave an impact on them. Instead of embarrassing the student in front of the whole class with a praise, some students work better with private praise, and that allows for a rapport to grow between the teacher and the student. Which will be the starting point of the growth that we will see.

As I learn what it means to be an educator I want to recognize the needs an educator has and how those needs can be met, also I have been learning how to meet the needs of the students themselves as I am teaching. My teaching is twofold, learning how to teach so that I can teach other teachers how to teach as well.

Quite a few students ask me “why do we have to learn this?” or “How does this help me with my life?” To which I answer with an analogy. I tell them that I think each knowledge is like a thread, and that then combines with other thoughts, concepts and ideas to create a woven tapestry of wonder. Which is then the students' thoughts and who they are learning to become. A single thread is interwoven to create a shirt, or a massive blanket, and likewise, each thread of thought is learned and intertwined in the minds of the student which then creates a map that they can navigate life through.

As I mentioned earlier I have a vision of helping those students who need help get the education they so deserve. With proper education the triplets who suffered so much could help change their own country into a better place by recognizing the need the country has and coming up with brilliant solutions to tackle those problems. That means I want to be able to teach people how to be leaders of their own community and niche they are in.

I want to eventually build schools and come up with a school curriculum for the students of Tanzania and East Africa, high quality education for the locals in Tanzania so that they can learn and try to better their own countries.

The biggest problem with this right now is, most people who go to a prestigious and good school end up leaving Tanzania and settling elsewhere, like America for example. Instead of going back and trying to better the community in Tanzania. Nonetheless, I want to build a school system that will educate the next generations of East Africa and help them help themselves.

To be able to effectively build schools and run them, I would need more experience as a teacher and attend graduate school. I am planning graduate studies in school administration and learn what it means to run an institution. The workplace I am in right now seems like the right place for me to grow, since there are many different socioeconomic levels at the school we teach. Also since it is a private institution the work positions seem very flexible and I can keep advancing in my career and vocation. My supervisor was a science teacher who got promoted to assistant principal, so I could follow his path. Or our school works with colleges where the teacher teaches collegiate level courses and can even get paid by the university the class is affiliated with. That is why the school seems like a good fit since I can keep growing both as an educator and an administrator at the school in the long run.

I would want to eventually build enough capital and network with colleagues, peers and other missionaries to then make the vision and calling God placed in my heart to completion. I want to build a system or foundation that will allow for short-term and long-term mission trips to East Africa and build schools and curriculum that will help grow the future of East Africa.

My parents are still in Tanzania and running a school of their own. They started with preschool and now they are looking for an expansion for higher level education beyond high school. Although my dream grew divergently from my parents, it seems like our goals in the end are convergent.

Education is the key and hope and that is what I try to teach for the students who do not want to learn sometimes, I tell them that it is a privilege and something that opens up doors for the future. There were challenging moments, and times when I thought I was not an effective teacher, there were tiring times and days that I wanted to just rest. But not a single day or minute did I want to quit. Teaching young people life is a tremendous feat and as hard it is, it was a rewarding job. I had a wall of fame where each student would write me a note or draw me pictures, whether artistically inclined or not, it didn’t matter, their appreciation for me was enough and it fueled my passion for teaching them and reminded me of the good work I am doing.

Education is a powerful tool that can change people’s lives. It can give hope and change the reality the students are facing. It can change the projectile each student may have been facing. Teaching about learning and learning about learning is my life long vocation. To create environments that allow for these types of growth in countries that have no infrastructure of education set up is also what I want to do. So I hope some of what I said may touch your heart, and you may see the need of education not only here but in the countries that need it and we can all walk side by side in this journey of life and help others learn how to learn and change their communities for the better.