

"Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence."

Student Teacher

Anthony was neither a leader nor a role model. In fact, his teachers and his parents were constantly chastising him because he was disruptive, ate too much, and had a hard time staying focused on a task. I met Anthony when I was a counselor at a local summer camp. The counselors had the usual duties of keeping kids from smoking, drowning, and killing each other. We made God's eyes, friendship bracelets, collages, and other clichés. We rode horses, sailed boats, and hunted snipe.

Each counselor also had to teach a three-week course that was supposed to be a little more "academic" than the usual camp fare. I created a class called "Things that Fly." I met with fifteen students for an hour a day as we designed, built, and flew kites, model rockets, and balsawood airplanes.

Anthony signed up for my class. Anthony stood out from my other students for many reasons. He was larger and louder than the other middle school kids. He was also the only African American in the class. The camp was located in a well-to-do and predominately white neighborhood. In a questionable effort to promote economic and racial diversity, the camp organizers developed a strategy of busing inner-city kids out to the burbs. But despite the best efforts of the organizers and counselors, the inner-city kids and suburbanites tended to stick to their own groups during most activities and meals.

Anthony was not a good student. He had been kept back a year at his school. He talked out of turn and lost interest when others were talking. In my class, Anthony got some good laughs when he smashed his kite and threw the pieces into the wind. His rocket never made it to the launch pad because he crumpled it in a fit of frustration when he couldn't get the fins to stay on.

In the final week, when we were making airplanes, Anthony surprised me when he drew a sketch of a sweep-wing jet and told me he wanted to make a "really cool plane." Like many of Anthony's teachers, and perhaps even his parents, I had largely given up on him. Now he suddenly showed a spark of interest. I didn't think the interest would last, but I helped Anthony get started on a scale blueprint for his plane. I worked one-on-one with Anthony and had him use his project to demonstrate to his classmates how to cut, glue and mount the balsawood framework. When the frames were complete, we covered them with tissue paper. We mounted propellers and rubber bands. Anthony, with all his thumbs, created something that looked a bit like his original drawing despite some wrinkles and extra glue.



Our first test flight saw Anthony's plane nose-dive straight into the ground. His plane had a lot of wing area in the back and too much weight in the front. I expected Anthony to grind his plane into the earth with his boot. He didn't. He wanted to make his creation work. The class returned to the classroom to make adjustments, and Anthony added some big flaps to the wings. Our second test flight surprised the whole class. As many of the planes stalled, twisted, and nose-dived, Anthony's flew straight out from the hillside and landed gently a good 50 yards away.

I'm not writing about Anthony to suggest that I was a good teacher. I wasn't. In fact, I had quickly dismissed Anthony like many of his teachers before me. At best, I had viewed him as a distraction in my class, and I felt my job was to keep him from sabotaging the experience for the other students. Anthony's ultimate success was a result of his own motivation, not my instruction.

Anthony's success wasn't just his plane. He had succeeded in making me aware of my own failures. Here was a student who was never taken seriously and had developed a bunch of behavioral issues as a result. I never stopped to look for his potential, discover his interests, or get to know the kid beneath the facade. I had grossly underestimated Anthony, and I am grateful that he was able to disillusion me.

I like to think that I'm an open-minded, liberal, and non-judgmental person. Anthony taught me that I'm not there yet.

