**Breaking Down Biases through Practicum Based Experience**

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I pride myself on how unique my family is. From the time I was 8 years old, we had several children who struggled with unstable parenting, coming and going from our small single-family home. We had two sisters whose mom went to jail, a pregnant teen, and siblings whose parents were substance-using. My house became a refuge and a safe place for many of these children who were facing family problems that made their homes hazardous. Throughout the seven-year period that we fostered, I learned a lot about different ways of life, mental health struggles, and how to be an ally in the journey of healing…..or so I thought until a student at practicum challenged my thinking.

Going into to practicum I assumed that I would be one of the better Teacher Candidates to support students exposed to adverse childhood experiences. As well I thought I could provide support for students who came from complex family lives with compassion and knowledge, since I had such a unique childhood. However, I realized that my experience provided a bias. The second day of practicum I was asked by my TM to take a student to practice one-on-one reading. I was told he was behind in their novel study and would need help to catch up. Very quickly my biases and assumptions started to bubble up. This student was deemed a “troubled student.” He was given full time CEA support, failed the majority of assignments, which were rarely completed, and exhibited behavioural problems due to the toxic stress he was exposed to at home. He was not even allowed to leave the classroom unless accompanied by an adult, which meant no bathroom breaks by himself. Honestly, when asked to read with him, I was less than excited. I assumed going into the reading that I would have to help him decode a majority of the words and that we would struggle to get through a page due to the slow pace. I instantly changed my behaviour and put myself in a position to get the reading done but had no expectation of connection occurring. Gabe Simon (2013) argues that students who come from risked backgrounds, or ethnic backgrounds are less likely to create a relationship with their teacher creating more behaviour problems. However, I was quickly proven wrong.

We sat down at a table in the spare room off the classroom and he began to read to me. He flew through the first three pages with excellence and smoothly decoded big words that might have caused me to stop and pause. I realized he is a very smart and capable child despite his behaviour being the glaring side of him that people focused on.

The third day of practicum, I walked into the classroom to be informed by the TM that she had removed his CEA from the classroom as he had become too reliant on the support. I was panicked for sure. I knew that he was smart but thought that due to his behaviours, the class would get out of hand resulting in more work and frustration for the teacher. Again, this student proved me wrong. Simon (2013) states that resiliency in students comes from teachers that hold high expectations of their students and that when teachers provide purposeful guidance, students can overcome their adversity. Not only did the student complete all the assignments by himself, but his behaviour improved to the point where he was enjoyable to interact with.

I thought I was equipped to deal with students who displayed behavioural problems because I would be able to understand that their background situations were out of their control and, therefore, their behaviour was reflecting a need that had not been met. I thought I could be this angel to come and save students from the difficult teachers who didn’t understand them; only saw them for their behaviour. Yet, I did exactly that. According to Simon (2013), teacher’s expectations of students are influenced by what they know of their social situation. I would have never given him the chance to try and prove himself by removing his CEA. My experience with troubled kids was that, while they were more than their behaviour, they did have limitations on their capabilities. My sister’s boyfriend, for example, had no parental figure forcing him to attend school and keep up with his learning. He fell behind and later had behavioural problems that led to drugs and gangs. He was only capable of so much because his background had not supplied the tools to build his confidence and resiliency. I had applied that bias to the student in my practicum. I had only seen his struggles and placed his behaviour as his limitation. I thought that he would never rise to the potential that other students might. I assumed this student would be behind in their reading abilities and incapable of managing a classroom without a CEA because of his behaviour, because of his home life. That student was probably further ahead in understanding concepts than most students in the class. Moreover, students in lower socio-economic status schools often feel that teachers, administrators, and the curriculum are imposed on them (Edmunds et al., 2015). Having the CEA constantly hoovering over him when he was capable of the work tells the student that he cannot be trusted or because of his behaviours that he is not smart enough. It places the behaviours above the person. Considering this student was in grade six, he created a teacher fulfilling prophecy and created a low self-esteem and academic aspirations, which according to Edmunds et al. (2015) is very common with poverty stricken or unstable homelife students. Unfortunately, teachers before my TM had the same thoughts as me and held him to a lower standard due to his sociocultural status. However, it takes one teacher to see through the risk label and hold him to a higher standard to show him that he can accomplish more academically.

Robin T. Burns (2002) states that “the person is a product of education whose talents and creativity needs to be cultivated, in one narrative in order to serve the nation better” (p. 24). Even when the student was given a chance to demonstrate his abilities and move beyond the label of high risk, I viewed the need for him to succeed in school as a financial one, so that he could make more money and break the cycle of poverty. While we want all our students to succeed financially, I realized that the idea of academic success equating financial improvement in our adult lives is another bias I carry. I come from a middle-class family that views school as a tool to move up in economic status. When my Teacher Mentor decided to take the CEA away to give him responsibility and accountability, she was following Burns theory (2022) that school should be there to give experiences and build the potential. Moving forward, I need to approach lessons, and my role as a teacher, as something that builds a resilient student rather than pushes students to fit in to societal economic standards of the upper class.

When interviewing my mom about her elementary school experience and how students with behaviours were dealt with in the classroom, her answer was that, they were not. Students who struggled to the point of needing extra support such as a CEA were segregated from the rest of the class and placed in a special need’s classroom. She stated that there was no accommodations or encouragement of individuality, no matter the home life. Students either followed expectations, or they got the strap (D. Perreault, personal communication, November 25, 2022). Unknowingly, I had a bias that supported that type of militant schooling. I only saw his behaviour and thought for sure he would fail without the CEA. My TM, though, saw through his behaviour. She gave him a chance to rise to the expectations and challenge himself in a way that the “old” school system would never have allowed. Based on policy *K-12 Funding- Special Needs,* this student should have had CEA support as well as counselling and psychology services that he qualified for but was not receiving (Province of British Columbia, 2002). The policy, while new to my mother’s generation, is not new for us. It was created in 2002, yet, this low SES school has no counselling services for students with difficult home lives. I do believe that this student would have benefited more from psychological services than learning services. This experience creates a future goal for me to take courses in navigating counselling needs of students along with trauma-informed practice in order to attempt to fill a gap that our school district has.

Moving forward, as a teacher I need to get to know my students and create equity-based opportunities for them. Teachers who create a community-based classroom with high expectations and relevant learning for all students have learners that are more engaged and better behaved students (Simon, 2013). McGuire and Meadan agree that teachers who create inclusive environments where every student is given the opportunity to grow are more effective (McGuire & Meadan, 2022). I carry a unique background into teaching that can be beneficial but only if I view the opportunities as endless for all children.

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