Language Arts: Autobiography – Race through Time

EDUC5211

Section: 11

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Date: November 8th, 2021

**Introduction:**

*“Our greatest natural resource is the minds of our children.” – Walt Disney*

Day-by-day, year-by-year, we go through variations of the same routine until suddenly, we are forced to acknowledge we lost our inner child along the way. This autobiography is a written cinematic feature of a race through time. My time. I am no longer a spectator of my own life as I watch it pass by; but merely acting as a mirror through this reflectional storytelling of the greatest hits of my education experience. So sit back, enjoy, and hold all applause until ‘*The End.*’

Growing up in Leamington, Ontario, the tomato capital of Canada, has been not only a privilege, but also an honour. The small town community has taught me to appreciate and value the immense amount of support provided by other members. I remember the healthy food programs where local farmers partnered with our elementary schools to provide vegetables such as cucumbers, tomatoes, and peppers for snacks. This particular memory is a staple in my reminiscent journey because my father, who also attended Queen of Peace Catholic Elementary school, was one of those farmers. I felt a sense of pride when my classmates glowed with excitement as the prospect of free food came our way. Thus, the relationship between business, family, and school often collided in this respect and it was beneficial to all. The relationship blossomed further as my parents were very active in my school community; whether it was my mother volunteering to supervise fieldtrips or my father attending almost every school athletic event. As I graduated elementary school and began to attend Cardinal Carter Catholic Secondary school, there were communities that followed me and provided stability for my learning. The main community that aided in my education transition was my Church.

As Leamington is a small town, Queen of Peace and Cardinal Carter are both affiliated with St. Michaels Parish. My priest, Father Patrick, still provided ceremonies, confession, and mass at school which made me feel less alone and helped me adjust to the new environment. Although being part of such a small community provides benefits, it also has negative aspects that really became apparent when I moved away to St. Catharines. My transition to Brock University highlighted the lack of diversity represented in my hometown schools and the influence religion had on our entire education system. Religion heavily influenced the ways in which the curriculum was shaped and what content was provided. I remember an assembly was held in the theatre room and a pro-life guest speaker attended. A girl in my grade asked a question pertaining to abortion and she was quietly passed over and escorted out. That same girl invited a prom date from a different school and she was denied acceptance because they were of the same gender. Her mom is a teacher at Cardinal Carter and to my knowledge, she did not address her faculty about the situation. It was once again, quietly passed over. The composition of teachers and administrators at my school were also lacking in diversity. Out of the small school, there were no faculty members belonging to the black community and only one of my teachers represented the Asian community. Transitioning to Brock University nurtured my confidence in critical thinking which pushed me to question the seemingly “perfect” education system by debunking the layers prohibiting social reform.

**Educational Experiences:**

*“The past can hurt. But the way I see it, you can either run from it, or learn from it.”* -Rafiki, The Lion King

*Episode 1: Six-Year-Old Runaway*

Envision a six-year-old sitting at the kitchen table with her siblings doing homework after school on a Wednesday afternoon in the midst of winter. A mother is preparing food for dinner before the father gets home while simultaneously watching over her three children. This was my life every day after school. My mother would always keep an eye on my eldest sister as she has always been outspoken with an extroverted personality; whereas I, the middle daughter, tended to be more reserved and introverted. As my sister received help from our mother with her homework, I sat patiently time after time waiting for my turn. I was in grade one at the time and dealing with my first experience with mathematics. I could not grasp the concepts or the course material which was clearly just simple addition and subtraction, but nonetheless, a hard feat for a six-year-old.

The situation was not uncommon. I was denied attention time after time that in retrospect, developed my ability to problem-solve independently. In hindsight, it also made it challenging for me to seek help even at the age of six. I shouted at my mother to help me, to hear me! In the heat of the moment, I stated with full confidence, “If you won’t help me, then I’m running away!” God bless my frustrated mother as she shouted back at me, “Okay! Do it! Run away! Let’s see how far you get!” What do you think a stubborn six-year-old did? I went to my shared bedroom with my four-year-old sister trailing behind. I took out my Spice Girl suit case and packed only the necessities; which included my Barbie collection and my little sisters favourite toys. I slipped on my coat, boots, and mittens. I turned to my younger sister and proceeded to slip on her coat without zipping it up, slip on her tiny boots on the opposite feet and lastly, I opted out of the additional hat or mittens. As we were all bundled up, we headed out with one last look to our mom that is stunned in disbelief, but, set in her ways of teaching us a lesson; her house is the best we are going to get. Little did she know, the power I held at the ripe age of six propelled me to drag my four-year-old sister all the way to the end of the block. In our wait to cross the street, my former kindergarten teacher recognized us and pulled over. Busted. The runaways were driven back to their house where an angry pissed off mother awaited our arrival.

The week-long grounding and swift swat to the rump ensured only one thing; patience is a virtue. A virtue that I did not yet possess and a virtue that my mother was losing as the antics kept coming. The lesson I thought I learned from this experience was to not get caught next time, however, the true lesson was to be patient and understanding. Children need to feel reassured that they are being heard and seen. I remember the feeling of being forgotten and neglected in that moment; it stuck with me even after all of these years. Now, it is a story told at Thanksgiving but upon reflection, this lived experience signified the patience, energy, and attention needed to effectively teach children. It has encouraged me to reflect on my own growth and development in regards to understanding the demanding needs of children that cannot be ignored.

Tip for the future teacher in me: Believe children.

Tip for the future mother in me: Child lock all the doors.

*Episode 2: In the Lead for Drama Queen*

Fast forward, play. No really… I ended up in a theatre production of Annie in my grade eight year. Let me preface this memory by stating I was the introverted shy kid who dreaded any form of public speaking, let alone acting, and never won anything in my life; so you can imagine my surprise when I not only participated in Annie, but also received the end-of-the-year grade eight drama and arts award. If you ask my wonderful grade eight teacher, it was because I excelled in both sectors. However, I knew for a fact that my acting was mediocre at best and it was really my artistic abilities that carried weight in that decision. Furthermore, there was another factor that aided in my supreme shock and that was because everyone knew another girl in my class was gunning for that award. She was talent in a nutshell. Loved to act, very extroverted, competed in every art competition, whereas I was always hesitant to do those things in fear of failure; but, something clicked for me. Grade eight was a defining year in my life when I played every sport, participated in every event, and attempted to be as active as I could in my last year at Queen of Peace. I felt as though I coasted by under the radar throughout elementary school and I finally wanted break free from the middle of the pack. A newfound confidence emerged and I began to apply myself more. The irony of this scenario is that I pushed myself to excel at things I did not necessarily enjoy expecting a reward for them. In the end, I was rewarded for something I always had a passion and raw talent for, art. The confidence pushed me out of my comfort zone and it encouraged me to showcase that art. One of my pieces was published in a religion magazine and my ‘*Nightmare Before Christmas’* booth at our Christmas carnival took first place.

This lived educational experience signifies the power and influence an effective teacher has on their students. If it was not for my grade eight teacher empowering me to make a change and rewarding me for those changes I had made, then I would not be pursuing teaching as my passion. Mrs. Pannunzio shaped my expectations for every teacher I had moving forward. She embodied the role of an effective teacher by empowering her students and molding the foundation for a warm and welcoming environment. I truly felt as though I could be myself in her class and open up. The encouragement, motivation, and raw genuine communication she had with my class made us all better students, but most of all, she made us leaders.

Tip for the future teacher in me: Empower children.

Tip for the future mother in me: Always attend parent/teacher night.

*Episode 3: Slipping Through the Cracks*

Rewind, Mathematics… AGAIN? Just as the roller-coaster reaches a high peak, it comes rolling down at an alarming speed. The wind slicking my hair back and forcing pressure against my cheeks as my stomach drops and a scream rips me from the inside out. Mathematics. Grade ten functions. Passed with a 52. My palms still get clammy from thinking of the anxiety induced environment. As my nerves heightened, my mathematic abilities derailed further and all common sense was lost. My teacher, let us call him the man who shall not be named, never had a meeting with me, or my parents, about my grades and never checked in on me or inquired if I needed additional help. He would constantly call on me in class and send me up to the board to answer questions. At this point in time, I reverted back to the introverted shy kid. He took away the confidence I worked so desperately to get and in turn, I never developed a bond with him. As a cherry on top, he gave me my very first detention from a uniform infraction. Only jerks give out detentions instead of warnings for wearing a non-sanctioned sweater during the middle of winter. I felt as though that whole year set me back to elementary school. My father began to notice the slip and how it affected other aspects of my learning and development. This experience affected not only my motivation, but it also impacted my behaviour and communication I had with my other teachers. As I watched others excel in high school, I felt like I was being left behind… again. Running near the back of the pack now instead of my comfortable middle. I felt as though I was sprinting to catch up but I was out of breath, losing steam. I needed water. I needed just one person to help me, to hear me! My parents heard my distress and hired a tutor for me but the concepts and course material were just not sticking. The faculty and educational advisors were not listening or picking up on my ques for help. So I settled for a 52. This particular teacher stole my newfound confidence and set me back to the introverted shy student that sat at the back of the class praying for my teachers not to call on me.

This lived educational experience held great significance in shaping my passion for teaching. I want to right the wrong. I want to be the Mrs. Pannunzio. I want to be present in my class every day as opposed to merely lecturing and grading. I want my students to feel heard and seen by providing them with the attention they need and supporting them throughout all of their learning challenges.

Tip for the future teacher in me: When a student calls, answer.

Tip for the future mother in me: Stay vigilant.

*Episode 4: Miss Independent found her Footing*

Bags are packed, car is packed, snacks are packed, cooler is sitting shotgun at my feet as my mom climbs in the driver seat. Que ‘*Living on a Prayer’* by Bon Jovi and set it to repeat.

As we hit the highway, I vaguely note the feeling of my educational baggage sitting in the back seat as I ran from my small town to the city of St. Catharines. I ended my elementary years on a high and now I am beginning a new journey to University on a low after the self-destruction posed in high school. Brock University was going to be my fresh start to begin again… after first year that is. Second year was my year of growth and development educationally and personally. After I shed the freshman fifteen, got over the initial shock of failing my first course in Astronomy, and moved in a house with seven girls; I finally found my footing again. Moving into a student house pushed me to do better and focus on bettering myself. The life lessons were flooding in and it was not until I received my first 30/30 on an essay arguing the Feminist perspective on bio-reproduction that I finally felt rewarded again. It was like grade eight swarmed me in a flashback as I was once again being empowered by professors that actually cared about what I had to say. The self-improvement I made socially, physically, mentally, and emotionally throughout university was being rewarded through my academics. Once I took the time to ensure my mind was healthy again, I applied myself more in class and excelled academically. It felt like that one moment of success acted as an acknowledgment of all of my hard work and it was bliss. I was happy paying bills, living on my own with family four hours away, and volunteering with Niagara Sexual Assault Centre hotline and Big Brothers Big Sisters as I was paired with a grade four student struggling in school. I found my footing. I began to push through the pack and pull in the lead once again.

This lived educational experience impacted my life in the best way possible. I learned independence and seized the opportunity to reclaim my agency. My undergraduate degree is in Women and Gender Studies so you can imagine the immense support and community I was armed with. I felt like I finally found a place where I belonged and in doing so, was presented with a multitude of professors who provided examples day after day of what effective teaching can produce.

Tip for the future teacher in me: Let students find their agency by setting their own expectations.

Tip for the future mother in me: Let them move away. Empty nesting won’t be so bad and they make tracking easy with ‘find my iPhone.’

*Episode 5: First Place*

The truth is; life got messy after university. I graduated on a high and was working with Niagara Sexual Assault Centre when life took a turn. My parents divorced and my family needed me to come home; so I did. I was floating in time for two years unsettled and not knowing what to do with my life. At the time, I was working as a nanny to two wonderful children during the pandemic when I realized they are what makes me happy. I got out of bed in the morning because I had a purpose. Two children were relying on me to aid them in their education at a time when milestones pertaining to social, physical, mental, and emotional development were hard, if not impossible, to access. Just as I was struggling, they were right alongside that struggle. For two years, I watched them grow and blossom into two bright kids but it was not without hard work. When I initially started working with the baby, he was only five months old and the daughter, just four. We worked together day after day to hit the milestones they were supposed to be at. The baby was slow to sit up, crawl, walk, and talk but eventually managed. The stage of verbal development was when his parents and I began to worry. As his father is hearing impaired, they decided to take him to a speech and hearing specialist but all results came back clear. They were provided with a list of speech techniques to practice with him daily; which were ultimately my responsibility since I was watching him for seven hours a day, five days a week. I noticed the changes immediately and felt a sense of accomplishment and content. My aunt took notice and suggested I work with her at St. Louis Elementary school as an emergency assistant. I jumped at the opportunity and began my new venture into the education environment. The close-knit community I witnessed when walking in that school startled me. Everyone was genuinely happy to welcome me aboard which I know is not always the case. Every week the school called me to supply at least three times a week and that was when I knew I was where I belong. My passion aligned with my career. I had an opportunity to heal myself by focusing on children’s learning development and I took it. Now I am proud to say I am pursuing my Bachelors of Education degree at the University of Windsor. I would say I finished the race in first place but I am beginning to realize that life is a marathon and not a sprint, so I leave you with; to be continued…

Tip to the future teacher in me: Focus on the students. Stay consistent.

Tip to the future mother in me: It is okay to ask for help.

**Conclusion: Why Do I Want To Teach?**

*“You are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think.”*– Christopher Robin, Winnie the Poo

I did not choose teaching. Teaching chose me. Nature takes course in the most exciting and unexpecting ways at the most delicate times and you can either answer its calling or be a fool and ignore it. In elementary school, I was presented with a situation that required patience and understanding that in turn, could be misconstrued as wanting to be seen or to be heard. This educational experience represents a pinnacle in my childhood learning development. Furthermore, this experience has influenced me to become a teacher by igniting a desire to understand, nurture, and challenge the minds of children to unmask their full potential. It has influenced me to explore the limits of a child’s mind by studying each students’ zone of proximal development. As I approached my final year of elementary school, I found my footing and broke out of my shell with the support and empowerment from my teachers. This educational experience influenced me to become a teacher by acting as a foundation for what effective teaching can produce. This experience influenced me to be that effective teacher by guiding my students learning and education through their highs and supporting them through their lows. It has shaped me to become a facilitator of education instead of an authoritarian lecturer.

High school was my downfall in regards to my education, but through the process of elimination, I found what I would and would not want in a teacher. This era of my life has to be one of the most significant experiences to shape my passion for teaching and has heavily influenced the ways in which I want to teach my students. So many children slip through the cracks at some point in their life and I feel as though it is my duty as an educator to do everything in my power to prevent that from happening. The side effects of ineffective teaching have stained my memory. My agenda is to heal students who had negative education experiences and model effective teaching from inside my classroom. In addition, I wish to show kindness and compassion to all of my students by utilizing weekly class meetings and one-on-one conversations to check in on not only their academic growth, but also their mental health.

University provided me with the independence and agency to pursue my passions. If it was not for those crucial years living four hours away, I would not have been prepared to take on the lowest point of my life thus far. Although I lost my footing along the way, the lessons I have learned shaped my desire to become a teacher. Once I saw the influence professors held amongst their students and the support and assistance they provided in helping us find our sense of agency; I knew I wanted to be a part of shaping the minds of future generations through a social reformist perspective. This educational experience influenced me to become a teacher because of the environment and atmosphere pertaining to acceptance and inclusivity. The maturation I experienced during those four years away prepared me for the crisis I had waiting for me at home. By diverting my attentions and focusing on the educational development of children, I found my sense of belonging once again. It was not until I physically worked in the elementary school environment that I knew teaching was the right fit for me. Everything clicked during this educational experience. It influenced my decision to become a teacher by cementing my passion for teaching by aiding in my realization that I can heal myself by educating others from adolescence.

I want to be a teacher. Not because it is a right fit for me, but because it is my calling. As I sit back and reflect on my own educational journey that shaped the person and teacher I desire to become; I can only hope to be the most effective teacher I can be. My top ten priorities and goals I want to accomplish in my work as an educator include, but are not limited to; transforming student learning in regards to social reform, create a sense of community within my class, establish an acceptance for inclusivity and embracing culture for students and staff, provide equitable opportunities for learning experiences to all students with learning needs or challenges, improve student services by providing reputable resources to accommodate student and staff needs, build strong relationships with students, staff, and administration, partner with school communities to support student learning and well-being, providing a welcoming environment that facilitates student learning, create a safe space that focuses on students mental health, and to seek social justice where needed.

The lessons I took away from each educational experience including; patience, empowerment, presence, agency, and focus, act as a foundation for becoming an effective teacher. Patience is a virtue I will practice every day when walking into my classroom with a fresh mind. Student empowerment is a core belief that will be provided throughout every lesson. Presence is a characteristic I will obtain when entering school grounds by being attentive to each students’ needs; in addition to assessing every student around me from the minute I enter, to the minute I leave. Agency is a concept my students will possess and I will always respect. Focus is a practice I will always seek to establish from my students to ensure their optimal engagement during lessons. Most of all, EXCITEMENT is a feeling I hope to always entice when proposing the hook to each of my lessons. Where there is excitement, there is fun, laughter, and engagement which ultimately taps into children’s imaginations. This creates a pleasurable experience that will likely be stored in their long-term memory. I wish to harness a child’s superpower of imagination instead of merely taming it.

*“That’s the real trouble with the world, too many people grow up*.” – Walt Disney

*The End*