**Life-Writing**

Emily Barron

University of Northern British Columbia

EDUC 446-3

Karine Veldhoen

November 1, 2021

My experiences thus far in my life have felt reasonably basic (for the most part) and followed a cookie-cutter guideline to meet my parent’s expectations. My parents had always maintained high expectations for myself and my siblings; above-average grades on report cards, full commitment to the sports/extra-curriculars we participated in, and ensuring our behaviour was superior all that we interact with to keep the family’s reputation consistent. Both of my parents are respectable educators themselves, which is likely where the fixation on success stems from. Due to these expectations, I worked hard to excel at everything I did. I worked part-time at a local coffee shop and dance studio at the earliest age that I could, which was thirteen. At the same time, I was a competitive dancer, attending dance classes for around twelve hours a week. I also was an avid participant in school clubs, like the Leadership Club and Student Council, as well as after-school band and music classes. I had to figure out how to manage my time wisely from a young age. This was tedious at the time; however, I am incredibly grateful for having done this. These jobs were not hard, but they did teach me important life skills and lessons.

From there, I began to work at a daycare at the age of seventeen. This job was easy to attain, despite being young and uncertified, due to such a high demand of Early Childhood Educators. I absolutely adored this work. It felt so fulfilling emotionally and mentally for myself, watching the children grow and thrive with the help of my work. There were obviously some challenges, such as children’s behaviours, tension within a female-dominant workplace, etc. There seems to be a significant gap between the First Peoples Principles of Learning within schools in comparison to preschool/daycare. I can acknowledge that with early learners, curriculum implementation can be slightly more challenging/limited, but there had never even been any Indigenous art or books or toys. I had not really witnessed much about Indigenous culture representation within the daycare setting at all and, in all honesty, had not really learnt much about how to cater to children who have grown up from a wide range of socio-economic viewpoints.

I kept my jobs at the daycare and dance studio for a long time. This is the work that I did throughout my college degree. I could not really complain, the hours were very laid back, I had bonded well with some of my coworkers, and it allowed me to further increase my skills in a leadership position. After a little while, things felt quite comfortable and easy at these workplaces. I had established myself as a competent and committed worker and was respected as such. The connections that I had formed with the children were immeasurable and I felt the most fulfilled I ever have.

This year, things changed quite drastically. In knowing that the dedication to my schooling was going to increase significantly, I decided that it was probably best to slow down on my work. It had been a year of online, asynchronous schooling prior to this, so I was used to working full-time. It was a hard decision to make to step away from my daycare work, but I knew that teaching was the career I had always dreamt of doing and that I needed to create the adequate amount of time within my schedule to be successful. Because of this, I chose to commit to on-call work as a non-certified substitute teacher and CUPE worker for the Coast Mountains School District #82. I had assumed that this would be the necessary change of pace to ensure I did not get burnt out or overworked. I had gotten many calls each day and had subbed for almost every day of the month of September. I quickly realized that on-call work was not going to work for me. Every day I would find a new excuse to not go to work, whether it be because it was an age group that I was not comfortable working with or a school I was not familiar with. In turn, I was feeling guilty and disheartened because I was not making money and I felt lazier than I ever had before.

One day at the end of September, I took a sub job at the local middle school as a First Nations Support Worker. This was a job that I was not very familiar with, and I was nervous to show up. The day went quite smoothly, as the position was a vacancy, which meant that for the day I was just circulating between grade nine classrooms and helping where needed. Feeling satisfied with the day, I was on my way to hand my binder back to the secretaries when I got stopped by one of the vice principals, who asked me if I would be willing to stay on staff full-time. I was shocked and incredibly taken aback, as I knew that I would be the last resort since I had no previous experience or knowledge in this field at all. She let me have a day to think about it before responding to her offer.

As I mentioned previously, the on-call work was simply not for me, so I took the position at the middle school. I was fearful of doing so, but I personally felt the need to seek a comfort in a consistent position that allowed me to form connections with the students. I was skeptical, knowing that I was not qualified or experienced in this field, but took the position anyways. My first few weeks were very chaotic, as they continued to shuffle all the Education Assistants and First Nations Support Workers’ schedules. It felt as though every time I began to make a real emotional connection with students, my classes would be shuffled, and I would be back to square one. This became incredibly disheartening.

After four weeks of what felt like completely disorganized chaos, I finally settled into a rotation with grade nine English and Social Studies classes. I had a meeting to finalize the list of names for the First Nations students that I am supposed to check in on and assist, as well as just chatting with daily to ensure that they each feel welcome and safe in school. Genuine connections began to form, and I felt so fulfilled and so happy in knowing that I was benefiting some of their lives. After so many unsettled feelings for the first spurt of time at the school, I was growing in confidence and competence in the job.

Just as I thought things had settled nicely, I was accused by a co-worker by being too culturally incompetent to complete the tasks necessary within a job like this. This co-worker felt this way specifically because I am not First Nations, nor do I have any post-secondary diplomas specific to this type of work. I felt shocked and completely taken aback. I wanted to yell in her face, but I also wanted to curl into a ball and shut my mouth forever. Instead, I let her finish her rant, and then I stepped away from the conversation quietly to reflect.

At first, I felt like it was perhaps true. I do feel insecure in my work sometimes, as I am not First Nations. But then I took the time in my reflection, prior to taking any action, to consider all the good things that I am doing. I know that I may not have any experience, but I am present every day for those students, trying my absolute hardest to make them each feel comfortable, safe, happy, and valued in the school setting. I am learning new things about the job all the time. This correlates with the First Peoples Principle of Learning that states that “learning involves patience and time” (2006). Because of this, I know that I am doing the very best that I can in the situation, and I also know that it is more important for these kids to have somebody who cares than nobody.

The school’s administration backed me up in the situation, as I had to have an official hearing about the incident. It ended in an apology, but it did fray my feelings on the school’s atmosphere, as I no longer feel safe to be nearby that co-worker and I kind of fear being pushed into a small corner in that same manner again. This scenario has prevented me thus far from obtaining a personal sense of connectedness and place in the work environment (2006). But I have also learnt a lot about how to cope with those hard emotions within a workplace, as well as allowing myself to trust my gut and knowing that what I am doing is incredibly valuable to the students I have the privilege of supporting. For much of my life, I have been complacent and simply put up with being treated poorly and then blaming myself. This scenario forced me to step back and feel proud of myself and my work for the first time. It has given me a deeper meaning of exploring my identity and figuring out who I want to be as a person but also as a professional (2006). I am still working each day to integrate the First Peoples Principles of Learning into my daily work life, as well as ensuring that I am fulfilling all expectations of myself in this new role.

References

The BC Ministry of Education and the First Nations Education Steering Committee. First Peoples Principles of Learning (2006). http://www.fnesc.ca/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/PUB-LFP-POSTER-Principles-of-Learning-First-Peoples-poster-11x17.pdf