Cultural Exploration

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*“We are one spirit, one song, and our world will be harmonious only when we make the time to care.*

*For ourselves.*

*For each other.*

 *For our home.*

*You don’t need to be a Native person to understand that – just human.”*

*~ Richard Wagamese*

Definition of self is a complex introspective process where one tries to make sense of how heritage, opportunities, and experiences combine to influence the essence of who we are and who we strive to become. I was born on August 30, 1976, and as the story goes, for the first days of my life it was unclear as to whether or not Dad would be a single father. Fortunately, Mom lived and two weeks later I was baptized Nadine Theresa Rozek. Subsequently, I was raised in what can be labelled as a working class Catholic Canadian home. Dad worked in the mining industry, as a shovel operator, while Mom was a homemaker. 4 ½ years after my birth, I was the oldest of four, with three younger brothers.

Mom’s parents were both raised in Vancouver, and their parents were immigrants from England. Mom had a younger brother, and their father died when she was 14-years old. My Grandmother quickly remarried, moving to Powel River and leaving them both to be raised by one of her sisters until graduation. Dad’s parents married right after World War II, where my Polish-Canadian Grandfather had been an explosives expert. He married my 15-year-old French-Canadian Grandmother and moved her to Rossland, B.C. away from all their family and friends. She was young war bride who only spoke French in a community where all her neighbours spoke Italian, where together they were all learning English. They had five children, including Dad – the middle child. Dad struggled with his health for most of his teenage years and lived in Children’s Hospital for his grade 9 and Grade 11 years. He did not graduate from high school, and as a result, he held a strong stance in our household that education was the priority, second only to family.

We lived in the same house in Kamloops from the time I was two years old, and Mom still lives in my childhood home. Throughout my childhood, Dad lost his job multiple times due to the volatility of the mining industry; however, he ensured that there was always food on the table, and that we did not miss out on opportunities both athletically and academically. His hard word was evident through his rough hands, the hands of a man who would do anything for his children. Currently, my brother’s and I are all married, university graduates with children of our own. Two years ago, Dad died suddenly at 64, leaving the four of us feeling vulnerable and a bit ‘lost’.

My upbringing and my experiences have obviously influenced how I view education and the world around; it would be naïve to think differently. When I first moved to Vancouver to attend University of British Columbia (UBC) I remember the overwhelming feeling of leaving a bubble that I did not know I was actually living in. My high school graduating class of close to 500 students had only a handful of visible minorities, and in the simplest sense, the majority of my peer groups had been raised in similar homes to mine. I was not naïve to the diversity of the world, instead I had not been exposed to a culturally diverse population in my immediate life. When I moved into the dorms at UBC, I quickly found myself immersed into a multi-cultural landscape that included three roommates who ate very differently and classmates with varied perspectives. Many stereotypes that had been expressed to me throughout my childhood were quickly overturned with an expanding group of friends from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. During my first 6 months at UBC I remember being overwhelmed with my learning curve. Many of my biases ‘slapping’ me in the face with actual realities, breaking down so many assumptions that my parents and community had inadvertently passed on to me.

Those early years at UBC led to me redefining how I saw the world and my place in it. Therefore, by the time I entered teacher education I naively felt ready for the complexities of teaching. Again, I was proven wrong on my practicum, as I found myself practicing my chosen craft in an inner-city school, where on the third day of my full practicum, a student’s father overdosed on drugs, while the next day a different student’s mother was arrested for prostitution. Again, I found myself on a steep learning curve, this time over the realities of true poverty in Canada. The impact of my practicum made me see my role of teacher as far more than I had idealistically envisioned.

From this formative experience as a new teacher, I have evolved and adapted throughout my career. Each year refining how I view myself as an educator and how I view the students in my class. I was fortunate in my earlier years of teaching to experiences some vastly different school climates. After my practicum in an inner-city school, my first extended assignment was in a ‘typical middle class’ neighbourhood. More stability, students who fit the idealistic vision of the schooling I had entering teacher education. The following year, I found myself in a fundamental choice school, where parents believed they had input in every decision I made. It was once again eye-opening, for I had to find ways to appease a very demanding parent group. From that point on, I found myself bouncing around through a variety of schools, not by choice, but by circumstance. I frequently found myself at the wrong end of a seniority / contract issue, never really putting roots in a school until over 10 years into my career. Due to the fact that I had to experience such a diverse set of schools in the first 10 years of my teaching career, I know I have a better understanding of the complexity of the role of teacher, and how this role can alter based on the culture of a school. Through the years, I have also met many new teachers who are unprepared for overzealous parents, cultural diversity, or the gut-wrenching stories of students from impoverished homes. I believe that we can and should do a better job of preparing pre-service teachers for the diversity of schools they could end up in. In an idealistic situation, I believe we could help by providing them with practicums in at least two very different schools. Many new teachers will find themselves in inner city schools, and often they are not prepared for the complexities of both culture diversity and poverty. This leads to many of them leaving the job due to emotional and workload burn out. I know teacher burnout is a very complex topic, but I do believe one part we can help with is by providing more exposure to diverse schools before they actually enter the profession.

As a result, of so much movement in my early years of teaching, I have never felt an attachment to a classroom. I always worked under the belief that my time at each school would be short; therefore, my focus was on the students I had been given for that year. For the past few years, though, I have found stability and a home at Yorkson Creek Middle School in Langley. It is a located in a rapidly growing community and is composed of six feeder elementary schools, from a large geographical area, that is both ethnically and socio-economical diverse. Diversity at Yorkson Creek can be further defined by the understanding and recognition that our school population is diverse through a variety of lenses including but not limited to a student’s reading level, athletic ability, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, personality, and cultural background. As a result, the complexity of the needs at the school are multi-layered and as such individual classrooms are mini-ecosystems that are reflective of the school and community. In the creation of classes, administration and past teachers are mindful of each students story, as they know it, trying to balance individual needs in a collective classroom environment. The teacher contract further influences the composition of said classes by limiting a specific diverse category of learners labelled under the umbrella of ‘special needs.’ The individual classroom ecosystem is complex and organic, even with that initial thought placed into composition, how those individuals come together and how they react to you the teacher cannot be predicted, for what influences our identity can change through experiences and opportunities throughout that school year. As such, the culture of the classroom is not static, it evolves and is created through the shared experiences of the teacher and the students. The classroom teacher is thus tasked with honouring what students bring into the classroom, recognizing both their academic and socio-emotional needs.

Since the beginning of my career I have changed from viewing my classroom as mine to ours. It seems like a trivial change on the surface, but it has made all the difference in how I view my students and honour how they can and should impact the classroom. I always strip the walls and reset the furniture, allowing us to organically create the space that is necessary for the students to grow in. The bare walls become a canvas of their creativity, through assignments that invite them to show their individuality. One of my favourite beginning of the year assignments is for them to create a mosaic that represents themselves. We use recycled materials to create the mosaic pieces, and these are the first pieces to adorn the walls of our learning environment. This is followed by class created mottos in place of traditional rules. These ‘rules’ can often be distilled down to universal values that all cultures share – respect self, others, and place. Another strategy I use to build community is through literature. Great literature and stories can help break away from focusing on what makes us different and help us see the universal struggles and triumphs that make us human. By reading about diverse cultures and experience, students see that we all strive to belong and be accepted, that the human experience transcends our differences.

15 years ago, I was led down a path where my name changed from Rozek to Keyworth. It was a slow process, for I was already teaching, and I had defined my early teaching identity as Ms. Rozek. The transition started with hyphenation and ended with me adopting the new identity of Mrs. Keyworth. It is as Mrs. Keyworth, though, that most of my growth as a teacher has occurred. For with this name, I have refined my practice. Also, with this name, my greatest accomplishment to date happened – the acquisition of my favourite name – Mom! A name that has further impacted how I see myself in all aspects of my life, including the classroom.

When a teacher walks into the classroom each day, they need to be aware of the biases that they may be bringing with them. There needs to be a self-reflective process through which we acknowledge that new bias may develop, often unintentionally. For me, a big hurdle is reconciling how I parent with the parenting choices the parents of students in my class sometimes make. There have been several times where I have not agreed with a choice that parent makes, not because it is the wrong choice for their child, but because I would not make that same choice for my own children. This is one of the biggest biases I need to keep in check now, as my own children are now the age of the students that I teach. However, being a parent has also, I believe made me more empathetic for the tough choices that other parents have to make. Since becoming a mother, I know that I approach parents with greater compassion and understanding for how hard it is when your child is not meeting the high expectations you have set for them.

It can feel paralyzing to be everything for every student. In the realities of a modern classroom it is impossible to differentiate and individualize everything, for time is not infinite and if we attempted to do this with each lesson, we would quickly find ourselves burning out. Instead planning is about little manageable changes that create a community of belonging, trust, and acceptance. The simplest way is through relationship. A relationship that starts on the first day of meeting a student by taking time to honour a child’s chosen name, learning it, even if it is hard for you. The relationship needs to be reciprocal. Teachers need to allow students to know them. Students love when I tell them about my own children and my life experiences. For the past 14 years, I have started the year with a quiz about me, that we correct and discuss. This activity is powerful, for it allows them to see that I am more than just a teacher, that I, too, am a human. Taking time to learn and understand each student’s interests and passions allows me to connect with them and understand how to motivate them. As the year progresses, I check in with myself as to what biases may be creeping in about particular students and what assumptions I may be making from my position of power as the teacher in the classroom. I use my knowledge of the students to advocate for them for extra services and support. My job is to know the whole child and understand what each of them needs from me to be successful. Communication with home is an essential part of this, so I try to also cultivate relationships with parents, taking time to listen to their perspective about their child, for they know them best. Throughout the year, I carve out time each week to check in with each child to see if anything has changed in their world, so that I can make adjustment to help them. In the end, it’s about creating an environment where openness, empathy, and kindness flourish. Utilizing my little ecosystem to empower students to be seen and heard, ultimately creating a community where we all feel included and respected, where we are all just human.