

To be a Teacher is to Build Connections: My Personal Pedagogy Statement

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"What matters beyond the reading, writing, and numeracy that are presumably taught in the elementary and secondary grades?" (Aronowitz, 2008, p. xii).

Going through the school system, I often felt as though I could blend into my surroundings and that teachers neither noticed nor cared what I was doing on any given day. I watched as friends began to form relationships with teachers in junior high school, often bringing coffee or staying after class to chat, but I never understood how I was supposed to build such a relationship with my teacher. I decided I was not a student that teachers cared to talk to and was never actively proven wrong. Since I lacked any personal connection to my teachers, perfectionism and anxiety pushed me to succeed for the first eight or nine years of my schooling. Eventually, this became draining and took a toll on my mental health. By high school, I barely had the motivation to graduate. I encountered numerous teachers throughout high school who may have been incredible people and who likely would have been willing to support me during the difficult times that I faced in my personal life. Still, I never felt like I had the opportunity to reach out. After experiencing what it is like to observe a classroom and coach, I know it wasn't my job to reach out. My teachers were unaware of the impact that a minute a day of relationship building would have made.

Looking back, I can understand why my teachers never prioritized connecting with me: I had a healthy home life with parents who were involved in my schooling, I was bright and fully able to complete any tasks given, and my social life was not lacking. I appeared to be an easy student who did not seem to need a teacher. During my practicum experience, I have seen how desperately some children need extra adult support and attention in their lives. Coaching teachers do not ask me to help the top student in the class with an assignment, and why would they? The

student is doing just fine on their own. But I do not believe school is simply about facts and knowledge. School is at least twelve years of a child's life where we expect them to grow into the person they will be out in society. Regardless of their academic success, an effort should be made to connect with the child during these years.

These personal experiences powerfully shape my pedagogy, but I also know each child is an individual searching for something unique from their schooling. The countless philosophers and theorists who believe in different outcomes, environments, lesson plans, assessments, and more show how individual education needs continue into adulthood. However, in my eyes, the center of almost every theory is the idea of knowing your students. "Maslow before Bloom" is the theory that ignited my realization of the importance of teaching students from a humanistic perspective. I grew up in a well-off family, and the schools I attended matched the socio-economic status of my neighbourhood. During my observational practicum, I experienced a school with children who had different needs than in the schools I had attended as a student. For them, teachers were providers of a safe space and, for those participating in the breakfast program, food. One student who came in late clearly could not focus until the teacher offered her a granola bar; the child's whole demeanour changed once they were fed. It seems outrageous to expect a child to learn if they have to focus on surviving.

Other individual struggles are less obvious, both in their presentation and solution. What about a student who is far above grade level but their parents want the student to stay at their peer level? I can provide differentiated assignments to go along with lessons, and maybe the student can occasionally attend a class at a higher grade level, but how can I make each day feel worthwhile to the student? The class may also have a student who is a first-generation immigrant and is just learning English. I can do my best to learn their language and research how to teach

students who do not speak English as their first language. Still, to keep the rest of the class engaged, I will likely have to talk faster and at a higher level of English than this individual may understand. The student will constantly be learning English and developing their skills, but what can I do, within the constraints of teaching 24 children at once, to make each day a positive experience and worth the child's time? The only answer I have is to build connections.

Work BC provides ten duties of an elementary/kindergarten teacher, all of which revolve around preparing and enacting lesson plans, understanding individual learning needs, and managing behaviours. I have also practiced Universal Design Maps of lesson planning and I understand the importance of heading each lesson with a core and curricular competency. My job as a teacher will be to teach students the knowledge they must possess to graduate. However, my pedagogy revolves around making the time students spend learning worthwhile regardless of the career or life path they may take. I connect deeply to the critical consciousness theory of Paulo Freire, where he encourages the use of the school system to ensure freedom for our future generation by nurturing the creation of critical citizens who can carry on a democratic society (Giroux, 2010, p. 716). He enforces the importance of knowing your students' lives outside of the classroom to teach in a manner they can connect with (Bates, 2019). Teaching with Freire in mind may involve utilizing various environments as every person learns better in different atmospheres (2010, p. 717).

Developing a class full of educated citizens requires the allowance of uniqueness – I will be teaching 24 individuals with one curriculum I must follow. Freire provides insight on an ultimate goal, but I know to be true to my (ever-developing) pedagogy, I must place a large portion of my efforts on the learning environment I create. To build trust with my students, they must know they are safe and seen while learning.

Differentiated instruction comes at the cost of students categorizing themselves based on the assignments, books, and worksheets they receive. My belief is that if every student in the class has a positive relationship with me and I work on positive connections with every student, ideally they will be encouraged to treat each other with that same respect and carry it into other aspects of their life. I have experienced the power of modelling during my time ski racing, where one team had a coach with clear favourites – the only athletes he helped with technique and provided one-on-one lessons - and a coach who embraced every athlete regardless of their ability or personality. The difference in the atmosphere of the teams was palpable. The first team was full of cliques (despite having very few members), and little teambuilding happened outside of practice times. When the other coach did not play favourites, neither did the athletes. We formed a community of support for each other, which extended out from practices and races into helping new members find housing and drives to practice. This is my goal for a classroom. If I model what a positive relationship looks and feels like with each class member, they will emulate my example in other relationships.

Learning Theories Simplified provided theories I connect with for an abundance of teaching scenarios, from lesson planning to assessments. However, I feel it is impractical to plan on enacting these systems without spending more time experientially developing who I will be as a teacher through practicums. For now, I go to theorists such as John Hattie and his theory on visible learning, which relies on teacher reflection (Bates, 2019, section 4.3), both personally and with regards to advice from others. As encouraged by Hattie, having a growth mindset has been drilled into me this semester, and I can understand why. Since I believe in modelling positive behaviours for my students to emulate, I should practice believing in my own growth and pushing my comfort zone.

I hope my pedagogy evolves as I learn more throughout this program. I am in school to learn how to be the best teacher possible, and I know the four semesters to come will lead to growth and change as long as I work to keep an open mind. There is so much I look forward to adding to my pedagogy, but will not allow myself to forget the importance of making each student feel seen, heard, and important. I hope to carry this foundation with me as my dream of teaching turns into a reality of nights full of lesson planning and days of classroom management, learning, failing, and growing. A coaching teacher told me she gives every student the chance to start fresh each time they enter the classroom. She does not hold grudges against them, and each day she aims to make them feel loved. I hope to be a teacher who smiles at students every morning, regardless of my personal life and past troubles in the classroom, so they will know I have their back.

References

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