Prize Winner from Curriculum and Instruction, Undergraduate Childhood Education.

Assignment:

For the *Critical Experiences in Becoming a Teacher* assignment, students in CED 394, Childhood Methods of Instruction, were asked to recall, document, and offer interpretations of three critical experiences that influenced their thinking about teaching, learning, and/or learners. Two of these were experiences that occurred prior to the start of the course and one was from the course-related practicum. The purpose of this assignment was to promote pre-service teachers’ deep reflection on the ways in which their perspectives on teaching, learning, and learners—and, ultimately, their classroom behaviors—are influenced by interpretations of personal experience.

Professor: Joanne O’Toole Ph.D.

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**Critical Experiences in Becoming a Teacher**

By Rachael Huver

**Part One**

*The Teacher Who Understands*

_Sometime in your life, you have had that teacher that had positively impacted you in such a way that encouraged you to choose this career path. Write about that experience._

The students began writing as if it was something that required little thought. I must have been the only one that viewed the task as one of the most poorly crafted assignments in history. It became one of the most heartbreaking things I had ever been asked to complete. I had suddenly realized I had made it to college without ever having that teacher I was being asked to write about. I can remember leaving class that day feeling like I had been cheated out of this life-altering experience that the rest of the class recalled with such ease.

I have carried the label of having ADHD most of my life, and school work has always been a struggle for me. Embarrassed to ask teachers for extra help, I simply found it easier to hide in the back of the classroom where I could be made invisible, though I desperately wanted those teachers to help me or even _understand_ me. I realized this would probably never happen, and that this was the way teachers were supposed to be. I was silly for thinking they were there to help and understand their students. College professors seemed to make this stereotype more of a fact…until my junior year.

After weeks of late assignments and instructions that never seemed to be taken into consideration, I was certain this teacher was becoming one more to add to the list of people who viewed me as a disappointment. She approached me after class one day and said something that has forever changed me as a person: “I understand where you’re coming from. I know you’ll make a great teacher some day because you’ll be able to understand students just like yourself.”

It didn’t matter if another teacher never understood that the reasons behind the incomplete or late assignments did not stem from laziness, or absent-mindedness. All that mattered was that _she_ understood. She has given me the ability to recognize the impact teachers can have on their
students. In understanding me, she allowed me to understand that students are not all the same and that they must be viewed as an individual in order to ensure their future success. I no longer have trouble writing about that impactful teacher. She has become one of the most inspirational people I have ever encountered. Above all else, she has unknowingly become the encouragement I needed to work toward becoming the teacher who understands.

Reading between the Lines

I was sixteen years old when my brother came home from his first day of high school in tears. Two weeks later, he was a high school dropout. I may have been too young to understand a lot of things, but I was certainly old enough to recognize the negative impact this teacher had on my younger brother. To him, school was no longer a safe environment, and a ten minute experience with an earth science teacher was a good enough excuse to run from his problem.

My brother has stuttered his entire life, and up until high school, it was never an issue with the other students. For me, the ninth grade meant being in a new school, with new teachers, and a lot more people to befriend. For my brother, the ninth grade meant having a stuttering problem in a new environment, with teachers that wouldn’t know, and students who would now be given a reason to laugh at him.

Mr. Freeman had drawn my brother’s name out of a hat and asked him to read. Knowing the response he would get from his classmates discovering his secret, my brother refused. Mr. Freeman simply explained to him that this was the way his classroom was run, and if he refused to read he would be sent to the principal’s office. My brother sarcastically apologized to the unforgiving teacher and began gathering his things. This became the situation for the next two weeks.

One day, (after much frustration I would assume), Mr. Freeman asked my brother why he would not read for the class. My brother stuttered, “I can’t read out loud because I have a stuttering problem.” The class erupted with laughter, and he left high school that day with an experience that would wound the person he could have become.

That day, I saw how much a single teacher could make or break a student without ever knowing it. I saw how important it is to look beyond a student’s disobedient behavior and to search for the true reason that is likely to be responsible for that negative behavior. I saw how important it is for students to feel safe inside the classroom and to view teachers as role models, rather than their enemies.

Mr. Freeman may have driven my brother toward his decision to leave high school that day and never return; but he has also driven me to become the teacher to take all things into consideration and to make that classroom an inviting, safe place for all students who enter it.

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1 A pseudonym
Part Two

Building a Bridge of her Own

My attention had instantly been redirected to the opposite side of the classroom as I watched the teacher’s assistant walk away from her desk. Erin², with her head in her hands, stared at the essay that rest so innocently on top of her desk. While the other students were filling their papers with words, Erin was filling hers with tears. As each teardrop fell from her cheek, emotions splattered across her blank paper. I stared helplessly from across the room, watching in silence.

Coldly, the teacher’s assistant sat in the front of the classroom watching Erin drown her essay in discouragement.

"Two more minutes!" the teacher warned. Like a herd of elephants, the students raced to turn in their masterpieces. Erin watched them fall one-by-one into the hands of the enemy. Each paper was jammed full of words- full of answers. It was as if she was praying for one of those overloaded papers to explode and spill the answers onto her blank paper. I too, wished that was possible.

Erin wiped her tears and quickly began writing- probably to avoid the embarrassment of handing in a paper full of emotions that seemed to go unnoticed by everyone but me. The teacher collected her essay and placed it on top of the pile. She watched as if she were protecting hers from the dangerous army that lay beneath her vulnerable essay. I walked over to the stack of papers, ready to defend and protect. Her essay was in safe hands, away from the others screaming the words she’d wished she had. I began reading her response, my heart beating faster with each word. Her answer was correct.

Later that day, I discovered that the teacher’s assistant was not ignoring a student’s cry for help. She was actually helping her.

A few weeks later, I received an e-mail (chainmail) from a close friend. It ended with some of the most powerful words I’ve ever read:

“Ideal teachers are those who use themselves as bridges over which they invite their students to cross, then having facilitated their crossing, joyfully collapse, encouraging them to create bridges of their own.” Nikos Kazantzakis

Erin had built a bridge of her own.

Instinctually, we race to assist those claiming to need help. Subconsciously, we are allowing them to become dependent on others. I have learned that students lose sight of their confidence in academics when there is always someone to turn to for the answer. Teachers need to teach

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² A pseudonym
students to not only have confidence, but to become independent. It can be surprising to realize the things a student is capable of doing once the bridge has collapsed.