

## Goodbyes are the Hardest Part: Falling in Love with Teaching

My name is Jay Gardner, and I am a fourth-year student enrolled in the Honours Specialization in Creative Writing and English Literature program. I was always told by relatives and teachers growing up that I would make a wonderful teacher, but I never truly considered teaching as a viable option because of the horror stories I heard about teaching. I was told that students are often difficult, the pay is awful, and the only upside is having summers and holidays off. Last year, I decided to ignore every bad thing I was told about teaching because every job has its pros and cons, and teaching would be no different. I was adamant about applying to teachers' college but was hoping for an opportunity to gain in-class experience to help me solidify my decision. When I received an email that the Arts & Humanities program was offering opportunities to intern as a Teaching Assistant through the Thames Valley District School Board, I knew it was my chance to gain the experience I was looking for.

I originally wanted a placement in a high school classroom, but was instead placed in Chippewa Public School. After finalizing the terms of my internship, I was placed in the Developmental Education, or DE, classroom. DE classrooms consist of no more than 10 students, typically ranging from grades 4-8. I was nervous at first even though I had prior experience working with children in this age range as a Child and Youth Worker, mainly due to the individualized teaching methods and lesson plans each student had. I was scared that I would not be able to connect with them and that I would not be able to effectively help. My worries quickly dissipated after meeting the teacher I was assigned to work under, Mrs. McGuire. She took the time to give me all of the necessary information that would help me work with each student in a way that worked for them, allowing me to not only interact with the students but also

connect with them. Not only did I learn how to work better with students who have different academic needs, but I also had wonderful and insightful conversations with several of the students about things ranging from emotions to personal interests. This made me realize how much I enjoy working in DE, and I hope to move forward as a DE teacher.

Lesson plans are a bit different in DE classrooms, so my role was not to help plan those as they had to be specialized for each student and their individual academic skills and needs. My main role was to help the students and explain concepts that they had difficulties understanding. Every morning I would arrive 15 minutes before the bell, ensuring I had time to receive any updates on the students before they came into the classroom, such as who was sick, who was displaying behavioural problems to look out for, and who may need a bit of extra help with their work that day. Once the students arrived, I would find a seat somewhere close to the students who needed extra help. Typically, I would sit at one of the tables, Mrs. McGuire would sit at another, and the other two student tables were overseen by the Educational Assistants, Mrs. Dang and Mrs. Yule. I would walk the students through the instructions for their daily language booklets in the mornings, and their daily math booklets in the afternoon, often employing some tricks I learned myself in elementary school to help explain the instructions, such as clapping along as you speak to figure out how many syllables are in a word.

Occasionally, I would also do tasks such as organizing shelves, sorting papers, and stapling the students' work to the walls (Fig. 1-2). The classroom was always bright and inviting, Mrs. McGuire always proudly displayed her students' work on the boards and praised them, while not being afraid to offer constructive criticism to her students. Her classroom is fully equipped to support every student, including a cozy corner favoured by one particular student

that has a padded mat for lying down, with bright art and encouraging quotes across the walls (Fig. 3).

I look back on my time in Mrs. McGuire's class fondly, and I will always remember how much of a connection I had with the students. I actually had several common interests with the students, being no more than ten years older than the youngest of them, which was a bit odd but it made connecting with them a lot easier, making my first time in the classroom go a lot smoother despite my inexperience and nervousness. During my last days in her classroom, I told Mrs. McGuire that even though I was not their official teacher, these students were like my students. She made me realize that I began to see the students how most teachers see their students. To me, they were not just the kids. They were *my kids*, as odd as it may sound. I was told that it was normal to grow an attachment to the students, and Mrs. McGuire said that sometimes it will be hard letting them go when my time teaching them is through as she told me how much she would miss her students next year, with five of her students leaving Chippewa to start high school next year. To anyone considering this internship, I will warn you to be prepared to grow attached to the students and for the goodbye to be more difficult than you might expect. Regardless, I would not change my experience for anything, and I hope those who go on to do this internship gain the same learning experience and enjoyment from it that I did.

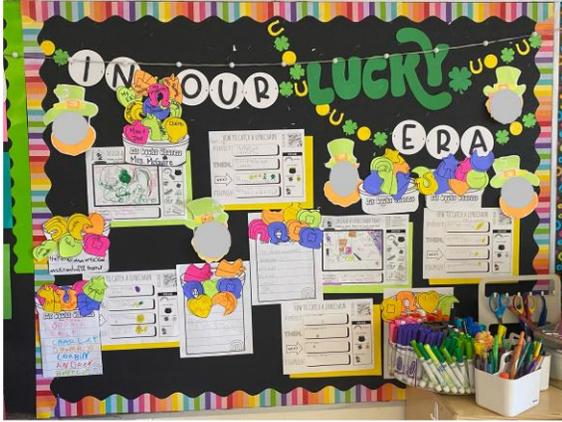


Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3