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Arts 4 All Kids/YMCA: CEL Final Report

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Arts 4 All Kids/YMCA: CEL Final Report

I completed two experiential learning placements with nonprofits in London in the field of childcare. The first was a semester-long volunteer experience with Arts 4 All Kids and the other was a paid position with the YMCA of Southwestern Ontario, a position I have held for two years. Childcare was not something I was seriously considering as a career path initially, and therefore I had no specific goals when starting my first CEL other than exploring the realm of teaching out of personal interest. This would change for my second CEL, as I took a more focused approach in choosing a position that would help me to achieve a career in education and childcare.

For my first CEL, I volunteered as a creative writing instructor at Arts 4 All Kids, a non-profit organization that provides children from low-income families the opportunity to participate in classes of varying arts disciplines. I taught two forty-five-minute classes once a week, each with ten students of ages ranging from 7 to 12.

I had, for quite a while, wanted to try my hand at teaching. I have had many people tell me to go into the field, mainly due to the fact that I can speak French and French teachers are currently in high demand all over the province. While I do not necessarily believe in choosing a career based only on the availability of work, I have worked with children in the past and have always enjoyed it and have been curious about entertaining the prospect. When I heard about the opportunity to work with Arts 4 All Kids, I did not hesitate to respond, not only because it sounded like an incredible organization, but because it felt like the chance I had been waiting for.

To clarify, this is not the story of someone who has a dream which they are suddenly allowed to pursue. I never wanted to be a teacher when I grew up, in fact, I have never been sure about what career I would like to pursue at all. I still cannot even decide on a second major let alone what I will be doing for the rest of my life. I have watched my peers discover their passions, leading them closer to their goals, while my own goals have not even been set. Finding your place is no easy task, but it is made ever more discouraging when all those who surround you seem to have it already figured out.

This is where I think the experiential learning component of the SASAH program has been and will most likely continue to be instrumental in my learning journey. For those in my position, unsure of their future, a trial run in a potential career can be extremely beneficial, as it was for me. I was able to experience, though on a very basic level, the role of teaching. Its joys, its hardships, its challenges, and its triumphs. And most of all I found that I enjoyed all of it.

Karen, the program director warned me at the beginning of my placement that this would not be a perfect simulation of what teaching at a school would be. For one thing, the children chose to be at Arts 4 All Kids and in my classroom, whereas children in school, if the choice were given to them, would often rather be anywhere else. I also did not have to mark anything; all assignments were just for fun.

Even though it was only a volunteer position, I treated my placement as if it were a real work experience. I made an effort to engage the students and find new and exciting assignments that I thought they would enjoy and learn from. I have always thought that the value of any experience relies on the effort put in by those involved. I knew the harder I worked, the more I would learn and the more skills I would develop, and indeed I believe I have learned a lot. Through trial and error, I was able to discover which activities worked best in the classroom and

which did not. Sometimes I would pick assignments that were too hard and left the students discouraged, sometimes they were too easy, leaving them bored. I now have a lot of respect for teachers that are able to engage their students while also making sure they learn something. It is no easy task. I had my victories though. Introducing the tales of Harris Burdick, the mysterious writer and his intriguing illustrations was a stroke of genius on my part, if I do say so myself. During the open house on the last day of class, my students proudly read their Harris Burdick stories aloud to their parents and showed them the pictures that had captivated their imaginations. As frustrating as it is to create engaging course content, I tell you this: the feeling you get when you finally reach a child and get them excited about learning makes it all worthwhile.

I was also able to learn a lot from the volunteers, many of whom were already teachers, including Karen. It was incredible to have them nearby because if I was ever unsure about how to handle a particular situation, I had several helpful mentors who were always happy to lend their support and advice. They were never patronizing, they treated me like a colleague rather than a student which I greatly appreciated. That recognition helped me to feel more confident and authoritative. It made me a better teacher because it made me feel like one. The nerves I had when I began my placement quickly melted away once I started to truly believe that I could fill the role of a teacher. I have my fellow instructors to thank for that, for it was largely due to their support that I felt as comfortable as I did.

For aspiring teachers, I believe Arts 4 All Kids to be the perfect placement. It is a relaxed environment very well suited to those inexperienced because it gives the feeling that the stakes are not so high. While it is challenging enough, it is not overwhelmingly so. It is an environment where everyone learns together, instructors and students alike. And because there are always two

or more teachers per class, there is always the comfort of discussing and bouncing ideas off of another person which can help to improve ideas and to problem-solve. It was a great way for me to be introduced to the career of elementary school teaching, which I feel more inclined to pursue now that I have experienced it a little.

For my second CEL, I got a job with the YMCA in the before and after school program at St. Sebastian Catholic Elementary school. After Arts 4 All Kids, I was inspired to pursue a career in childcare and the YMCA was the perfect place to continue my learning. I have loved my work at St. Sebastian and have continued my work beyond the scope of my CEL experience. This year will be my third school year at St. Sebastian with the same children.

Looking back on both of my CELs, I can see significant improvement in the ways I have conducted myself in both positions. After rereading my reflections from Arts 4 All Kids, I remember marvelling at the ease with which other volunteers spoke to their classes, the respect they commanded from their students, and how they managed to use a tone that was firm, gentle, and playful all at once. I remember how terrified I was to be standing in front of a room full of kids struggling to find the words to reach them. I remember how excited I was when I finally did reach them. My experience at St. Sebastian Catholic School has undoubtedly built on my experience at Arts 4 All Kids. But in this position, I have graduated from learning how to communicate and teach children in general; I now focus on how to communicate with children with significant barriers and behavioural issues. I am no longer afraid or nervous when I speak to a large group of kids, in fact I feel that I speak with the same ease that I observed in the volunteers at Arts 4 All Kids who I looked up to. I have been lucky to have had such excellent mentors and peers who I could learn from in both of my positions.

At St. Sebastian I have the benefit of learning from not only my fellow YMCA staff members, but also the school staff: the teachers and support staff. St. Sebastian is a difficult school mainly due to its position in one of the least financially stable neighbourhoods in the city, and yet the teachers are some of the best and most dedicated that I have ever known. Their commitment to the well-being of the children at their school is exceptional and in some heartbreaking cases, exceeds that of the students' own parents. It has been their dedication to their work that has inspired me to show the same commitment in the work that I do at the school. I have come to regard my CEL as having less to do with my professional development in terms of my own success, but an improvement on my skills as an educator to better help the children in my care. At the end of the day, everything we do is for them. Those who forget this have a hard time in this job.

In my first reflection I focused on the behaviours I face and my process for implementing and evaluating behaviour management strategies. This is still an on-going and constant process for our school and the area to which I dedicate the majority of my time. It means having a mutual system of support between the school and YMCA staff, then developing behaviour management strategies, implementing them, experiencing failure, and repeating the process until we see improvement. Sometimes it is as easy as using tried and true methods that teachers already use successfully in their classrooms. Sometimes it requires a little more effort. Some of the behaviours we work with are so unique and unpredictable even the teachers are at a loss for how to manage them. This means working together with consistent communication and frequent staff meetings to decide how to proceed. I wish I could say that since my last two reflections, or even since I started this job ten months ago, that I have seen a significant improvement in those with behaviours due to my efforts, but I can't. Some have come leaps and bounds from where they

were last year, or even where they were at the beginning of this year, others have regressed, and some students who had previously displayed exemplary behaviour are now developing disrespectful attitudes and frequently break the rules. I would be lying if I said it wasn't discouraging to see kids you have worked so hard to help fall further and further through the cracks—or even worse, to see them lash out and tell you they hate you after everything you do.

But there is hope. I have seen it. One girl used to react violently towards others whenever she was angry, but after months of discussions with her one-on-one about brainstorming other ways of dispelling anger without hurting herself or others, she is finally thinking about her actions and stopping herself before she hurts someone. Now when she gets angry, she goes outside and screams as loudly as she can, stomps her feet, or kicks inanimate objects. It's not a perfect system, but it's an improvement. We came to the decision that we can't stop her from being angry or get to the root of what makes her angry—she has a therapist for that. All we can do is help her control her reaction. It may not seem like much, but to me it makes a world of difference. After so much time and effort, trial and error, to see her use the strategies that we worked on together, to see her stop and think about her actions and how they will affect others like we talked about so often, it's a visible sign of progress. It's a reminder that my efforts are not in vain, and it's a sign that I have seen in other students and that I hope I will see more often as I continue my work.

This CEL has been an incredible experience. As I said of my previous CEL, I place great value on experiential learning, and I think it is a very important component of the SASAH program. I would never have had this job if it weren't for experiential learning. It was my placement at Arts 4 All Kids that gave me the interest and the experience that allowed me to pursue my current position. I am a living success story—my current career path was a direct

result of the SASAH experiential learning program. Not only has this process given me a passion for teaching, working at St. Sebastian has refined that passion into a focus on underprivileged children or children with learning disabilities or barriers. I want to do more than just teach, I want to be an advocate for the kids who aren't getting the support they need, either due to financial or familial reasons. I want to be the one to believe in a child when no one else does.

I do not believe that any particular knowledge from the SASAH program has helped me in my work for the YMCA. I don't think that SASAH has groomed me to be a good teacher, however I do believe being a SASAH student has had a positive effect on my work. SASAH has taught me above all else to be resourceful, to think critically, and to look at a problem from all possible angles. These are skills I use every day. I am constantly re-evaluating and repurposing resources at my disposal to better serve the children in my care. While no SASAH class has directly related to my line of work, being a SASAH student has changed the way I engage with problems and how I go about finding solutions. I think that unlike other programs that have a very clear-cut, linear pathway that leads to a degree, SASAH is what you make of it. I don't think that any of the classes or projects are useless no matter how far the subject matter may be from our preferred area of study. It is ultimately up to us what we choose to take from our own learning, and this is what SASAH students need to realize in order to make the most out of this program. The CEL component of SASAH has taught me that in terms of career opportunities, with a SASAH education, the sky is the limit. I know now that education doesn't have to be linear. It isn't necessarily about what you know, but how you use that knowledge for a given task. SASAH may not have taught me about childcare, but it has given me skills I can use in just about any career I choose to pursue, including (as I have demonstrated) childcare.

I presented my CEL experiences along with my fellow students on November 27, 2020. I Other than challenges associated with virtual format for the event, I found the most difficult part of creating a presentation about my CEL experiences was condensing two and a half years of work into seven minutes. While many of my peers had done semester-long experiences or summer internships, I had been working at the YMCA for nearly two years, and my work was still on-going. It was hard to summarize a job that had consumed so much of my time and effort, and had become such a huge part of my life. How do you communicate the meaning and magnitude of those experiences in only a few minutes? How do you make an audience understand how much these experiences mean to you? I was able to summarize the major points about what I do and to what end, but I don't know if that summary is an accurate reflection of what it's like to work where I work.

I was pleased during the question period after my presentation, when Dr. Patrick Mahon asked about the language I use to discuss sensitive topics related to students who struggle either financially or behaviorally. Working with children from struggling families is something I am extremely passionate about and makes up a large part of my work, but only spoke briefly about it during my presentation, being sensitive to time. I was glad that Dr. Mahon gave me an opportunity to speak more about it.

Dr. Mahon if the language I used was something that came naturally to me or if it was a learned way of communicating. At first, the question intrigued me; This kind of language does not come naturally to me at all, in fact I feel as though I am constantly reassessing my language and trying to find the words to describe exactly what I do for work. But the more I think about it, the more I realize that this is actually a very tangible representation of my learning journey in this field. As I go back and read my CEL reflections, I have noticed an evolution in the way I

communicate about the unique learners I work with. As I learn new ways of working with these kinds of students and become more comfortable in these environments, the ease with which I describe my work is also greatly improved. Even now I find myself reevaluating my words, but I definitely feel more confident talking about my work now than I did a year ago. This question helped me to reflect a little bit deeper on my experience as an educator in general.

As I explained when answering Dr. Mahon's question, language is important because it can greatly affect a person's perception of an individual. At St. Sebastian, we have a reputation for having all the "bad kids". Supply staff frequently list our school as a site they are unwilling to go to, either because of a past negative experience at our school or because of its reputation as a "bad school". This label changes the perception of our school and by extension, the students who attend it. I do not in any way deny the fact that this school is a difficult and stressful place to work—in fact, I'd be the first to admit it. I do not, however, agree that it is a "bad school" or that my students are "bad kids". This is an oversimplified label for a very complicated problem and effectively writes these kids off as "lost causes", undermining their ability to grow and change and make positive progress. It bothers me that a person who works in education could think about a child in this way. The children I work with are not "bad kids", they are kids that often come from bad situations through no fault of their own. To lose sight of this would be to fail as an educator. My job is to help and guide my students in a positive direction no matter who they are, where they come from, or what kind of barriers they may have. Every child has the potential to succeed and it's up to the educator to believe in that potential and cultivate it. The way I use language isn't just about being politically correct or respectful, it's a reminder to myself and those around me that the work I do is important and the way I think about it is important. Sometimes the simple act of believing in someone can make all the difference.

More recently, a few weeks after I gave my presentation, I learned a new lesson that I have struggled to accept, but I feel is important to discuss.

During my presentation, I mentioned my work with children with special learning needs. I talked about how proud I am to do this work, especially because I have no training in this field. Frankly speaking, I am completely unqualified to work with the students who I work with, these are students who require professional assistance, but due to lack of funding to our program, this is a role I have had to take on. As daunting a task as it may seem, I have really enjoyed this work. It can be challenging, and sometimes terrifying, but I feel as though I have managed quite well.

The student I work with most often is a 6-year-old boy who exhibits episodes of manic behaviour, in which he becomes violent and destructive. He is not naturally aggressive; in fact he is one of the kindest children I have ever known. He knows the name of nearly every student, teacher, and custodian in the school and treats them all as friends, he makes others feel better when they are hurt or sad and is generally a very warm and friendly presence in the school. Unfortunately, on bad days, he seems to lose control of his actions and he behaves in a way that is unlike him, almost as if he isn't there anymore. On these days, he's dangerous. This child has professional support during school hours, but I am his support during Y program, though, as I have stated, I have no training in working with kids with special needs. This hasn't stopped me from finding ways of managing this child's behaviour. Early on, I discovered that we had a mutual interest in superheroes. With this in mind, I brought in my comic books to read to him for quiet time, we decorated superhero masks and drew pictures of our favourite superheroes. I also found that if I saw that he was becoming agitated, I could distract him by playing a make-believe superhero game. I had seen the Joker in the hallway or the Green Goblin sneaking around

outside, and the two of us needed to investigate right away. I would keep him interested by imagining all sorts of exciting adventures; one day the hallway was flooded and we needed to take a submarine to get across, another time the classroom was covered in laser beams that we needed to crawl through to escape. These strategies allowed me to build a strong bond with the child and we have become great friends. The superhero game was so much fun, that it has become not only a tool for de-escalation but, but a constant and on-going activity. I am now permanently known as “Wonder Woman”. The strategy was successful in limiting negative behaviour, but unfortunately, did not eliminate it.

This year, his violent behaviour has reached a point where the safety of the other children and staff are in jeopardy. Just before the Christmas break, after attacking another student quite viciously, my superiors made the decision to suspend him from our program indefinitely. It may sound like an easy decision, but it was heartbreaking to me. I have loved working with this child, and while many see him as a lost cause, I know he can do better. I said before, he’s one of the kindest children I have ever known, and if he could just get the right help to work through whatever is causing this violence, I know he could be successful. I fear that he may never get the help he needs, that this suspension may be the first step in a downward spiral.

I feel as though I have failed him. It was my job to take care of him and I couldn’t do it. The hours and hours I spent working with him were in vain. As hard as it has been, it has forced me to accept the fact that no matter how hard I try, I won’t be able to help everyone. I wish it weren’t true, but I know that if I want to work in this field, it’s something I need to be aware of. Some children will be beyond my skill to assist, and no matter what I do, they will fall through the cracks. It won’t stop me from trying though.

It's interesting, I feel as though I have come full circle. The doubt and uncertainty I felt the first time I stood in front of my Arts 4 All Kids class is plaguing me again. Am I right for this job? Am I good at it? Am I making a terrible mistake? It's a hard pill to swallow but it's important. I think in terms of experiential learning, I've had a very complete experience, with brilliant successes and crushing failures that have allowed me to understand the ins and outs of my chosen career in ways I never dreamed of. The beauty of it is that it doesn't end here. Come January, I get to dive back in and try again. I get to learn from my experiences, even the ones I wished had never happened, and improve my skills as an educator and support those children that need my help.