

Unlearning Prejudice: Lessons from an Internship Journey

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While pursuing a Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education, my internship provided a collage of both positive and challenging experiences that significantly impacted my journey towards becoming a teacher. These experiences served as powerful motivators, guiding me towards a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in education.

One of the most valuable lessons I learned during my internship was the importance of unlearning pre-existing notions and beliefs that permeate our society. As educators, we focus on acquiring new knowledge and improving the teaching-learning experience for our students, but we often neglect the need to challenge and unlearn the prejudices ingrained within us.

Reflecting on a particular instance during my third-year internship, I recall the school being filled with a

joyous atmosphere as Diwali, the festival of lights, approached. The excitement was palpable and the entire school was eagerly preparing to clean and decorate the premises. Each day, a designated period was set aside a week before Diwali for students to engage in activities, such as creating classroom decorations, making rangoli at classroom doorways, and participating in cleaning.

I was assigned to the second grade during this internship. I ensured that basic materials like coloured paper, plastic scissors, glue, rulers, pencils, and erasers were readily available for the students. These materials were essential for their daily classroom activities and I saw an opportunity to repurpose them for the decoration process.

To involve the students actively, I divided them into different groups, each assigned a specific decorative

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item. One group was tasked with making a paper ring chain, which involved creating paper strips, assembling them into rings, and linking them together. Other groups crafted class banners for Diwali, utilising cut-outs in various shapes to create unique patterns. A few students assisted me in cleaning the classroom and arranging the prepared decorative items.

Throughout the process, there was an atmosphere of coordination and collaboration. The students enjoyed taking ownership of transforming their classroom into a vibrant, festive space. They eagerly shared stories of their family traditions, some recounting the delicious sweets their mothers made like gulab jamun, jalebi, and laddoo. Others excitedly anticipated the bursting of firecrackers when they returned home. Each student had a unique story, and despite the apparent chaos to an outsider, I witnessed effortless learning occurring among my students.

Suddenly, the class teacher, a senior staff member of the school, entered the room, causing a disruption. Annoyed by the perceived 'noise', he called me aside near the classroom door and demanded an explanation for the commotion. Before I could respond, he began berating the students, labelling them as 'brats'. He loudly exclaimed, "Ma'am, why are you putting in so much effort by providing them with all these materials at your own cost? They are the children of thieves and

are destined to become thieves." He declared, "There is no point in trying to make them better; they will not learn anything." With those harsh words, he left the classroom, leaving me stunned and struggling to process the situation.

As I looked back at the classroom, a heavy silence had replaced the earlier enthusiasm. The students' faces, once brimming with excitement, now showed confusion and sadness. The enthusiasm and zeal to celebrate Diwali had vanished, replaced by an obligation rather than genuine excitement.

Determined to restore the students' spirits, I grasped the class banner and encouraged them to resume their work. However, I sensed that their engagement now stemmed more from obligation than excitement.

In the aftermath of this disheartening incident, I was overwhelmed with emotions and unanswered questions. What could I have done differently to uplift my students and recapture the joy that had filled the classroom just moments before? As an aspiring educator, I recognised that our role extends beyond acquiring knowledge and developing pedagogical skills. We must also have the curiosity and courage to challenge and unlearn pre-existing prejudices, stereotypes, and negative attitudes towards certain sections of society. These deeply ingrained biases not only hinder our ability to be compassionate

educators but also impede our growth as individuals.

In conclusion, my internship experiences as a student of a Bachelor's in Elementary Education have imparted invaluable lessons that continue to shape my journey as an aspiring teacher. The Diwali preparation incident highlighted the necessity of unlearning societal biases and prejudices, underscoring the importance of fostering a compassionate and inclusive learning environment. It also emphasises the careful consideration educators must give to their language and behaviour,

as these profoundly impact students' mindsets and self-images.

As I strive to become an effective educator, I recognise the significance of continually questioning and re-evaluating my beliefs and attitudes. It is crucial to create an environment where every student feels valued, respected, and empowered. By actively challenging social evils and fostering a mindset of inclusivity, we can make a meaningful difference in our students' lives, equipping them with the knowledge and tools necessary to thrive in an interconnected and diverse world.