

### School District and School Demographic

Godson Elementary is a medium-sized, inner-city school located in Abbotsford, BC. With a total student population of nearly 20,000 students in its K-12 programs, the Abbotsford School District ranks as the 5<sup>th</sup> largest school district in British Columbia. Of these students, approximately 2200, or nearly 11%, are recognized by the B.C. Ministry of Education as having “diverse needs.”

More specifically, Godson Elementary has a population of around 400 students, with nearly 50 students considered to have “diverse needs.” Within this smaller sample community, resided the two students which I chose to conduct my research with. Having worked nearly 10 years at Godson, all of which in either Grade 4 or 5, I have had the opportunity to work with a group of amazing students and families.

### Student Background

Two of these students were *M* and *D*, two siblings from the same biological family, both who have Ministry of Education Autism designations, as well as Abbotsford School District *Individual Education Plans*. As I taught both in successive years, I became very aware of the challenges, and successes, that they had both experienced in their past school years. First, I had *M* join my class partway through the 2021/22 school year. She arrived from another nearby school district and had previously received two separate BC ministry designations, ‘G’ for *autism spectrum disorder* and ‘H’ for *Serious Mental Health* interventions required.

I quickly realized, however, that *M* was a child who simply needed the option of choice in their day, and their education, and needed to feel fully supported by the adults at the school. As she was already meeting expectations, regarding most grade level academic areas, *Social Emotional* learning needed to be the primary focus for her. As such, our Learning Services team completely refocused her IEP goals, as well as installed a team to help her in the way that she was showing us that she needed. This, paired with an increasingly positive dialogue with her parents allowed for us to get more insight into what she really needed and how school fit into the bigger picture for her overall.

By the end of the school year, *M* was fully integrated into her classroom, with both her classroom teacher, as well as a class EA and school-employed Youth Care Worker. As this environment, where she was included but not forced to integrate, was a new idea for her, she was initially reluctant. But through dedicated SEL instruction in a variety of programs, she began to flourish and was able to enjoy a very high level of success by the end of the year.

The following year, *D*, *M*’s younger brother, joined my Grade 5 class. While he did not have the “H” designation for “Serious Mental Health” intervention required, he displayed many of the physical and verbal aggression traits that many students with that IEP often display. It was agreed upon at the start of the year, that due to pre-existing requests from the family, that *D* would be joining me in my class. As a result, we (the Godson community) were able to further strengthen the pre-existing relationship that we already had.

*D*'s Grade Five experience did not go as smoothly as *M*'s, however. Throughout the course of the year, *D* struggled with their social emotional state and would often resort to the same learned violent behaviors that they were already familiar with. Whereas Youth care Worker and EA support had proved valuable with his sister *M*, these same interventions were not nearly as successful with *D*. As a result, the decision was made for *D* (with consultation with both him, and his parents) to create “sanctuary spaces” in both the Principal and Vice-Principal offices. No matter the situation, or what had happened previously, *D* had permission to use these spaces. By eliminating uncertainty in the moments after physical and verbal complaints (of which there were many), it eliminated the “what now?” moments and gave a safe place for *D* after these issues arise, sometimes even multiple times a day.

Despite these challenges, Grade 5 was a year of many firsts for *D*. He participated for the first time ever in a school Christmas concert and went on a school field trip for the very first time. Additionally, *D* attended a number of year-end ceremonies which he had not ever previously. These included him receiving a completion certificate for the end of elementary school. While he did not participate in all year-end activities, due to a few different reasons, it was the first time that invitations to participate were ever formally extended to him and his family.

### **Informal Interview Process**

For the purposes of this assignment, I reached out to *M* and *D*'s parents and invited them to participate in an informal interview with myself (with their mother present), to speak about their experiences in elementary school. These included, but were not limited to, their Grade 5 school year(s). Both students, and their mother, were ecstatic to share both their highlights and challenges of their individual K-5 time.

As I wanted to conduct the interview in an environment that they would be comfortable with, the interview was conducted in-person in the classroom at Godson that I taught them both in. The following is the list of questions that I used to provide a framework for our discussion:

- Can you tell me about your morning routine at home before school starts?
- Please tell me a short list (1 or 2) of your favourite experiences during elementary school?
- Is there a time/experience where you didn't want to be at school? What happened that led to this? Do you feel that you were being heard about why you didn't want to be there?
- What is your favourite subject/activity to do at school? Outside of school?
- What environment in school (or outside of school) do you feel the calmest? What environment do you feel the most dysregulated?
- What can a teacher/school staff do to help? What has helped you in the past? What do you not like about how teachers have interacted with you?
- What would you like to tell your teacher? What should they really know about you?
- Are there any other things that you would like to share?

While these questions provided a script for our discussions, the underlying theme that permeated throughout our talks was both *M* and *D*'s desire to “be heard and truly listened to.”

As we progressed through our conversation, several things became very apparent to me: these two were/are kids who are just trying to cope, and sometimes thrive, in their daily lives despite many thinking they know what is “best” for them. Beginning their day at home, the “K” household with two

children with neuro-diversities must adhere to a regular routine with minimal variation. While typically mundane, ie. Cereal for breakfast, pre-teens fighting over bathroom time., both *M* and *D* described to me in detail every facet of their schedule before school. In this context at least, expectations and routine were/are paramount.

Oppositely, the siblings' favourite subjects at school were a surprise to me, as they both got extremely excited around Music and Drama. Due to the creative and often improvisational requirements of the two subjects, I was initially perplexed by their obvious desire to tell me all about their experiences in these subjects. Upon hearing their explanations however, the reason for their enjoyment became clear: they didn't have to adhere to singular interpretations of classwork, which they had felt they need to previously. More specifically, they were free to interpret the content and display their understanding in the way that felt most comfortable to them, not necessarily in the way that their teacher(s) wanted them to.

While their passion seemed to both move towards the arts, both had completely different ways in enjoying their own personal time. *M* told me that they get the most enjoyment from being inside, in their own bedroom with the ability to watch tv, and more specifically anime and manga. *D* was the complete opposite; he wanted to spend as much time as possible outside and needed to always expend energy participating in solitary athletic activities. This is particularly of note for *D*, as he very clearly recognized when he was/is the most dysregulated: during gym class and unstructured/loosely structured team sports. He used the language that it was "overwhelming" and that he would "lose control completely." My own experiences with him corroborated this, as it was often the time when his previously mentioned aggressive behaviors would occur. Oppositely, his sister loved/loves P.E., but struggle dramatically with Math, and the general concept of there being a "right and wrong answer."

Finally, the largest thing that was communicated through our conversation was the siblings' desire to be "understood." We, including myself, all agreed that most teachers and educators had honest, well-meaning intentions, but could still do a better job of listening to the needs of students, including those with a wide array of neuro-diversities. As they both were able to explain eloquently, "they knew/know what they need to grow, but sometimes can't communicate these needs in ways that others, including teachers, can always understand." The most valuable things we all agreed upon in these instances were 'time and space,' however, it may not necessarily always look the same in each individual moment.

## **Conclusion**

I came into this interview process thinking that I knew a great deal of information about *M* and *D*, but quickly learned a lot more by simply asking questions that never came up in our time together. Through our experiences, both successful and trying, I believed that there was a connection and relationship that had been formed, but I didn't fully realize just how important it was to both *M* and *D*. By simply listening with no motivation, which they clearly highlighted to me was very important, they recognized that they were being heard and said they ultimately felt more successful as a result.