

Student Well-being: A Collective Responsibility

Stephanie Fearon

Jason's Story

STEPHANIE FEARON: Right now I work in eight inner city schools in Toronto. And in one particular school, I'm working with a teacher who has this little student, his name is Jason. And Jason is in grade four. He self-identifies as a black child, born in Canada. He's proud of his Caribbean roots. He speaks Jamaican Creole, Patois. He loves reggae, he loves dancehall. He also has trouble reading. You know, he has trouble remembering what letters come after G when he's reciting the alphabet. And after a while, we've been working with the teacher, he's starting to learn how to read. He's reading now his first picture book.

A few weeks ago, something happened to Jason. He was excited that he's reading his first picture book. He is -- it's a book, it has pages, it has pictures. And he decides that right before school, at 8:00 a.m., he's going to go to the convenience store. The convenience store is right beside the school. When he goes in to buy one of those gummy candies for 25 cents, the shopkeeper yells at him, and tells him, "Get out!" Tells him that, "You blacks are all the same. You all are thieves. Get out! You stole from me last week." Jason didn't steal from him. He runs out. He's upset. Floods of emotions; he's angry, he's sad. He didn't do anything. He enters into the school, and now we're there. We're pointing at him to read this book, this picture book, and we're angry, we're frustrated as educators because he's not reading this picture book. And you see the tears falling.

And the thing is, Jason's, like, "I don't even see the words. I can't even remember what comes after G." But we're, like, "You know how to read this picture book. We've been practicing, and as educators, we're just frustrated." And Jason is, like, "I don't remember what the letters are after G. But I remember the smell of coffee and the gap between the bottom teeth of the shopkeeper that yelled at me."

I tell this story because when I work with educators, we can't divorce what is happening out in the community around racism, around discrimination regarding social economic status. That has a real impact on the cognitive, on the social, on the emotional needs and development of Jason. And if we are truly about well-being, about supporting Jason and living his full potential, as an educator and working as a learning coach working with many educators, my job is to really bridge that. Say to the educator, we have to look at all the parts of who Jason is. We have to acknowledge that systemic, institutionalized discrimination impacts learners within and outside of the school. And only then will we be able to support the well-being, the achievement and create equitable learning conditions for children like Jason. It might be based upon Jason's race, for example, in this place, his social economic

status. But the same holds true for children whose worlds are shaken, who are meant to feel less than because of their gender identity, because of their ability, because of sexism that exists. So that is, in a nutshell, my role as a learning coach, is really to discuss the ways that I can work with educators to acknowledge, to honour all the different parts of who make children like Jason in order to support their achievement.