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TE-846

### Biography of a Literacy Learner

A young girl living in a small community seems very typical to those around her at first glance. Trinity Nelson is a very lively and happy eight year old 3<sup>rd</sup> grader. However, there is much more to her than initial meets the eye. To get a full perspective and understand who Trinity is, one must look at her family background, the community in which she lives in, her school experiences and language abilities, as well as her cultural identity. Furthermore, based on this information and my own similar and different experiences in life, I will suggest classroom modification and a communication action plan to help Trinity be the most successful student possible.

When first observing Trinity's family, it seems very traditional. Trinity was born in the nearby metropolis of Traverse City, the closest hub of business, commerce, and recreation in the Northern Michigan area. She lives with her unwed, biological mother and father and full sister in a small rental duplex. Neither of her parents graduated high school. However, her father did obtain his GED. Her mother is a stay-at-home mom and her father is a tire tech in Traverse City. When Trinity was first born her parents lived with her maternal grandfather just outside of Traverse City. They remained there for only the first few months of her life. They then moved right into the city with her maternal grandmother for approximately two and a half years. During that span of time they lived in three different rental homes with many, often changing family members including friends, paternal grandpa, uncles, aunts, first and second cousins, as well as great-uncles and great-aunts. In the midst of this, at sixteen months old, there was new arrival to

the family-her younger sister, Val. Needless to say, there was constant movement and chaos. Even though it seemed chaotic it was fun. It created a close family unit and connected Trinity to her ancestry. Just under three years of age, Trinity's parents decided it was time to move out on their own. However, it did not stay that way for long. The constant shuffle of family and friends as roommates continued "forever" or so it seemed. At four, Trinity began the Ready Four School Program that she qualified for and was bussed to a neighboring elementary school within the district. About half way through the year, during Christmas break, the family moved again to be on their own to their currently home about a half hour from Traverse City. They have maintained that independence and residence for the last four years.

Their new home is in the small Village of Fife Lake. It is located in southeastern Grand Traverse County. The area is a prime recreation/tourism area within the state with many seasonal residents, especially during the summer months. The main attraction of The Village is the lake itself which is approximately six hundred and twenty acres. The Village population in 2010 was 443 with the Township having a total of 2,791 residents (Village of Fife Lake Planning Commission, 2012). Trinity's lives on the main roadway for travel through this small village, just a few houses from the local ballpark. Just a few blocks down the road she can find the majority of commercial properties such as the ice cream shop, hardware, library, post office, and multiple restaurants. There are three local churches of Catholic, Methodist, and Baptist denomination. The Township Fire Department maintains an eight person, paid on-call staff. There is also an on-call ambulance service. Additionally, the Village is served by a full time year round sheriff's deputy that polices the Village and the two neighboring townships. The median household income for the Village of Fife Lake residents in 2009 was \$41,658 (Village of Fife Lake Planning Commission, 2012). While the Village has seen a significant increase in

median household income since 1990, almost doubling from \$20,781, there is still about 11% of the population at or below poverty level. Children comprise 32.1% of the total population while the largest adult population is that of 35-54 year olds with 29.1% (Village of Fife Lake Planning Commission, 2012). . These school age children are served by the Forest Area Community Schools. The school district serves the communities of both Fife Lake and South Boardman. The district consists of three buildings. The South Boardman Elementary serves pre-k through first graders with 105 students. The Fife lake Elementary (within the Village itself) serves second through fifth graders with 185 students. The Middle School/High School building is centrally located between the two communities and serves sixth through twelfth graders with 354 students. There were 38 instructors district wide during the 2011-2012 school year with a student to teacher ratio of 17 to 1 (Village of Fife Lake Planning Commission, 2012).

The first sign of Trinity's learning struggles began when she was about two years old. It initially materialized as a speech delay which was noticed by her mother due to a progression in gross motor skills with no speaking. Her communication was limited to pointing and grunting. By the time she was three, she was hospitalized for ear tubes which they believed was the cause of her speech delay. She then received speech therapy through the local hospital and after about two months they felt she had reached their goals and was released from the program. Trinity began school in the Ready Four School Program and continued in the Head Start Program after moving to Fife Lake. She then continued in the general education programming for kindergarten and first grade. During her first grade year her teacher recognized a deficit in her reading ability and brought it to her parent's attention. At that point Trinity began to receive additional supports. This primarily took the shape of one on one instruction from the teacher. During this time, she also had her ear tubes surgically removed after having been in place for approximately

a year and a half. This removal resulted in a small hole in her eardrum and was fixed with a permanent patch that the ear drum would heal over. Unfortunately, as a result Trinity's eardrum would not respond to certain frequencies meaning she had lost some hearing. Once the eardrum healed fully she then retained full hearing. There was a consideration to retrain her in the first grade but was mutually believed that would be detrimental to her overall development. Prior to the start of second grade, Trinity participated in a program through the school called JUMP START. This is a three week half day program right before the start of each school year that focus' on math and reading. Upon entering second grade, her new teacher was brought up to speed on her current reading level. She was initially tested and found to be below grade level and was placed in interventions. These included phonics education, letter sounding and combining, word and letter grouping, and reading. Her level of intervention increased and decreased throughout the year and was in the most intensive intervention group in class with addition intervention time daily by the end of the year. Also, at this time, she was complaining of not being able to hear the teacher. There was also an observation of a decrease in word fluency and overall classroom performance. These issues were mentioned to her ear doctor and she was subsequently tested...and failed. He noticed her hearing had declined and proceeded to have another surgery for ear tubes. Even though she struggled with her reading abilities she was awarded citizen of the year award which is an award to recognize the student who exhibits overall excellence. Even through her reading ability was lacking her determination and focus remained. She always had a positive attitude, a smile on her face, and never complained. Retention was again considered but was progressed to third grade with plans of testing for learning disabilities and possible special education. Through the summer Trinity was on a weekly at home GRASP program through the local community college. This program focused

on math and reading and included activities such as writing letters, multiple choice assessments, story problems, short story analysis, etc. Then, just prior to the beginning of third grade she again participated in the JUMP START Program. Just after the start of the year Trinity was tested and the family was contacted by the ISD to discuss results and action plan. She was still at a first grade level for phonics, decoding, and fluency. As a result of these findings, she was entered into special education as learning disabled and currently has an IEP. Under this IEP, Trinity is to receive 30-60 minutes per day of specialized help in reading, tests read aloud, additional time on assignments and assessments, and an in-class intervention of the highest tier for her level similar to what she experienced at the end of the previous year. Trinity is currently working under this IEP and still has her second set of ear tubes.

Trinity's heritage consists primarily of Norwegian, German, and Irish/Scottish descent. The Norwegian and German background comes from her paternal side while the German and Irish/Scottish are from her mother. The way these cultures are observed in her family are through food, song, dance, and entertainment. During family meals and holidays her family often prepares traditional cuisine such as cyball (which is ground herring and potatoes mashed into cakes and then fried and dipped in butter or vinegar), Irish corned beef and hash with boiled cabbage and potatoes, and Scottish brisket of beef boiled with potatoes and carrots. As for song, the family listens to female Celtic artists. Many of their favorite songs often include the traditional Irish bagpipes. In the spring of each year, the family attends the Highland Festivals in Alma where they watch the saber toss, dance and music competitions, as well as finding their crests and tartans. At the festival, they also enjoy local and traditional cultural foods. Beyond these ancestral elements, the family functions as a traditional American family with a melting pot of cultural influences. They enjoy weekend football, days on the beach, trips to the local ice

cream shop, and playing indoor and outdoor games. Trinity is very involved and participates in summer softball and girl scouts. She has many friends. Like most girls her age, Trinity's closest friends are girls.

When looking at Trinity's life thus far, I can see many similarities and differences between us. We both grew up in the same small town with our biological parents. However, even within these similarities, I can find differences. Trinity lives within walking distance of the hub of activity of our small town while I lived about five miles out in what I would consider a very rural area. In fact, I was raised on a 40-acre sheep farm. This difference in available space extends to our homes and space within them. Trinity's duplex rental home is a very small two bedroom in which she shares her room with her younger sister. My home as a child was a three bedroom home with a full basement. I always had my own room and by the time I was six, I was the only child at home as my sisters had left for college. Trinity often has to fight for the shared attention while I had my parents to myself. Trinity's sister is not as well behaved as Trinity and thus gets more attention. This is one way that Trinity and I are similar; both of us follow directions, do as we are told, and need very little redirection or discipline from our parents. Another very evident difference that I observe of our childhoods is that Trinity is an eldest child and I am a youngest child. It is evident through all of the moving around that was done in Trinity's early years that her parents were still trying to establish themselves and needed the help of their own parents to make that happen. As for me, my parents were older when I was born and already well established. They were living in a home they owned and my father had well established trade skills and career. Our mothers, however, both chose to be stay at home moms. Our fathers, in a way, are similar in that neither of them have any college education and both chose labor trades (my father was a builder). Another difference that is evident is the closeness

of Trinity's family compared to that of my own. Trinity has had the presence of most of extended family in her life; I, on the other hand, did not have much interaction with my extended family beyond my paternal grandmother. Most of my grandparents passed either before I was born or when I was very young. Both of my parents had only one sibling and neither set of aunt and uncle were around much. They were both very involved in their own lives and happenings. While these differences may seem small, they do impact our upbringing and the adults we ultimately become.

After considering all of this information, we need to consider Trinity as a whole package and focus in on how all of these external environments and influences have shaped the young girl she is today. Trinity is a kind, giving student who takes difficulties in stride. Her perpetual optimism and ability to overcome obstacles is rare in students her age. According to her mother, "she never gives up;" she takes every challenge in stride and with determination battles on. With that said, these continued weaknesses in hearing and reading, I'm afraid, could challenge this great sense of optimism and determination.

When looking specifically at Trinity's disabilities, I see two main areas of concern. The first would be her ear and hearing issues. These may have ultimately resulted in some of her delayed reading abilities. We know that oral language influences a student's ability to acquire the necessary sight-word vocabulary (Lori A. Helman and Matthew K. Burns, 2008). So as I consider a plan for Trinity, I consider the idea of "How can I provide challenging instruction to help...catch up without overwhelming?" (Lori A. Helman and Matthew K. Burns, 2008). In response, I realize that I must come up with a strategy that is not "one size fits all." We see through research that there is a significant correlation between students' acquisition rates and

their language proficiency scores which measure speaking and listening skills, including vocabulary, listening comprehension, and verbal proficiency. Thus, it's determined that a significant relationship did exist between English proficiency and acquisition rates of English sight words (Lori A. Helman and Matthew K. Burns, 2008). Based on this information, the first thing we need to target is Trinity's hearing issues and delay in language proficiency. The determination must be made if she is still below level in language proficiency and then boost those particular skills. The hope is that with this new set of tubes, her hearing is improving and this is happening naturally but an assessment must be done to be sure. Should the assessment affirm the belief of improved hearing, her ability to acquire the English language in the form of written text should be improved. However, even with this optimistic outlook her ability is behind and she will need interventions to get up to grade level. The first intervention I believe to be essential is differentiated instruction in reading activities. Trinity's teacher needs to use a variety of grouping strategies in her literacy instruction in the classroom, both whole group and small groups to provide individual attention. New words should be introduced in groups of five to seven words at a time. When working with these new words, the following methods would be appropriate (Lori A. Helman and Matthew K. Burns, 2008):

- Provide visual support for new words through pictures, objects, or actions.
- Give student opportunities to hear new words in context and ask questions about what they mean .
- Connect the oral and written forms of new reading words.
- Have students use new words in their own sentences.

- Encourage students to self-monitor for understanding of word meaning, such as sorting words they can read into "I know what it means" and "I don't know what it means" categories
- Check frequently for understanding of student comprehension .

Language development activities must be embedded within skill instruction must also be included. One way I would recommend doing this would be by using picture sorts of words that compare beginning or ending sounds supports vocabulary learning, phonemic awareness, and phonics. Alphabet materials that use high-utility words for reference are another way to support both the skills and language development for Trinity. Lastly, she must receive multiple opportunities in her school day to read high-frequency words in connected text. Some examples of these would be:

- Create Personal Readers for students.
- Provide time every day for students to read materials at their instructional and independent levels.
- Create opportunities for students to reread familiar texts by (a) phonetically regular and high-frequency words, (b) words of high interest to students' personal lives, (c) words that represent familiar concepts and images, (d) high word repetition rates, and (e) a low ratio of unfamiliar words (Hiebert, Brown, Taitague, Fisher, & Adler, 2004).

After implementing these interventions and teaching strategies, the last key to success will be to evaluate Trinity's progress and communicate strides and concerns with her parents. I would recommend that the parents and teachers communicate weekly on Trinity's progress to re-evaluate the plan and if adjustments should be made. This communication could take many

forms. I would personally recommend an electronic form of communication such as email. This would also give a record of this communication and flexibility of review and response.

As a young girl living in a small community I've discovered that while Trinity may seem very typical at first glance, she is an eight year old 3rd grader with some struggles and reading difficulties. However, there is much more to her than merely these struggles. To get a full perspective and understand who Trinity is, I've lookd at her family background, the community in which she lives in, her school experiences and language abilities, as well as her cultural identity. Furthermore, based on this information and my own similar and different experiences in life, I have suggested some possible classroom modifications and a communication action plan to help her be the most successful student possible.

## Bibliography

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