Spring 5-1-2018

A Journey Toward Better Understanding Disability in the Classroom

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A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors
Spring 2018

Honors Capstone Project in Inclusive Elementary and Special Education

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Table of Contents

Abstract

  Beginning with the institutionalization movement, where children with intellectual and physical disabilities were put in institutions because they were deemed to be hopeless and uneducable, and continuing today, intellectual and physical disabilities have been a cause for discrimination and inequality in the world of education. In the current education system, students with disabilities still face segregation, but are increasingly being included in classes with their peers who do not have intellectual and physical disabilities.

  Through the passage of legislation such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, students with intellectual or physical disabilities have been guaranteed a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment possible (20 20 USC CHAPTER 33, SUBCHAPTER I: GENERAL PROVISIONS). This has sparked a new understanding of disability as professionals in the world of education have attempted to create environments where individuals with and without intellectual and physical disabilities can achieve academic and social success.

  As a teacher candidate in a college program that emphasizes inclusion, the courses and fieldwork experiences that I have completed have focused on including students to the maximum extent possible through learning and implementing different theories on education and instructional strategies and techniques. This autoethnography details how my understanding of disability has changed starting from before high school with my involvement in Special Olympics and ending with my current understanding of disability having completed the Inclusive Elementary and Special Education program in the School of Education at Syracuse University. This autoethnography will also connect my evolving understanding of disability with my experiences teaching in inclusive classrooms.

Executive Summary

An autoethnography is a piece of writing that combines the author's experiences as a member of a certain community with careful analysis. The author is both the researcher and the writer, collecting data that is comprised of personal experiences in his or her community. In this autoethnography, I write about my experiences as a member of the Inclusive Elementary and Special Education teacher preparation program community. As a Senior, having completed my course of study, this autoethnography serves to detail how my understanding of disability has progressed throughout my time at Syracuse and how it has evolved to include principles such as inclusion that were highly emphasized in my program. The coursework and school placements I completed were framed around an ideology that students with disabilities can and should be included in general education classrooms with their same aged peers.

I decided to write my capstone as an autoethnography so that I could critically reflect on my experiences in the School of Education to see how I have grown as an educator. Reflection was a point of emphasis in my education major, as students were encouraged to think about their lesson plans and pedagogy to note areas of strength and areas where improvement was needed. When introducing herself on the first day of class freshman year, one of my education professors explained that she enjoyed teaching freshmen and senior level courses because it allowed her to see how students change through their four years. Having examined my experiences from each of the four years, I can see just how true that statement is. My understanding of disability, and my ability to interact and teach students with disabilities has drastically improved.

My research for this autoethnography consisted of reviewing old lesson plans, projects, and coursework. I also spent considerable time journaling my experiences in student teaching and retracing my experiences in previous placements. To develop the arc of my paper, I reflected

back on my introduction to the world of disability through my experiences in Special Olympics. I entered Syracuse with an interest in educating students with disabilities that evolved as I became more involved in placements and coursework. My dedication to creating equitable environments for individuals with disabilities has stayed the same, but my knowledge on the subject has increased.

I have structured my autoethnography chronologically, starting in eighth grade when I became involved in Special Olympics. Most of the autoethnography is focused on my time at Syracuse and my experiences in the three blocks (three intensive semesters that combined education courses and substantial time in elementary classrooms prior to student teaching) and one semester spent student teaching. All teacher candidates at Syracuse in the Inclusive Elementary and Special Education program complete these. For context, Block I begins during sophomore year with some time spent in the field. Teacher candidates spend most of their time making observations of classrooms, but also teach a few lessons. After this point, each Block builds on the previous one in terms of the courses that students take and their participation in an elementary classroom. The program culminates with a semester long student teaching experience in a special education placement and a general education placement. In this semester, teacher candidates take larger roles in the classroom, and eventually take over as the lead teacher. Interspersed through the snapshots related to the blocks are experiences from my summer internship at Johns Hopkins University in the Department of Cognitive Neurology, and my summer job as a counselor at Camp Shriver, a summer camp run by Special Olympics for children with intellectual disabilities. These experiences were equally valuable to the progression of my understanding of disability. Finally, my autoethnography ends with an explanation of my current views on education and how they have shaped the beginning of my teaching career.

Introduction

I became interested in pursuing a degree in special education when I joined my local Special Olympics Unified Sports program. Special Olympics International explains that, "In Unified Sports, teams are made up of people of similar age and ability" (specialolympics.org). My program would practice once or twice a week and would participate in competitions on the weekends. The sports that we played would change throughout the year, with soccer and milers (a program similar to track and field) in the Fall, volleyball and basketball in the winter, and baseball, tennis, and golf in the Spring.

When I first joined Special Olympics, I had never worked with individuals with physical and cognitive disabilities before. I did not really know what it meant to have a disability, and was unsure of what to expect from interactions with people with disabilities. The first couple of times that I participated in Special Olympics, my interactions were strange and awkward as I tried to gauge the abilities of the other person to hold a conversation. I was hesitant to interact with the athletes because I did not know how to and I did not know their abilities to hold conversation. However, I kept going to the weekly practices because my friends did. I learned that though my misconceptions about individuals with disabilities were, and still are, common, they are very wrong. I became more involved in Unified Sports and Special Olympics as a volunteer, unified partner, and advocate for inclusive schools, culminating in my senior year when I was a unified partner on a unified soccer team at the Special Olympics National Games.

When I first joined Special Olympics, they had just begun to implement inclusive programs and sports teams where athletes with and without intellectual and physical disabilities would compete together. I became more involved in the inclusive movement by joining the New Jersey State Youth Activation Committee, where we analyzed and implemented inclusive

principles of Special Olympics into schools around the state. Next, I co-founded a Project Unify club at my high school to make my community more inclusive. At the time, students in my school district with intellectual and physical disabilities spent the whole school day being educated in the Skybox, an isolated classroom for students with disabilities. Throughout the day the students would take all of their classes in the Skybox, only leaving for lunch and some specials. They had limited opportunities to interact with the rest of the school. My club helped to include students from the Skybox with the rest of the student body by holding inclusive weekly events after school with students from the rest of the school. The ideology of the club was that even if students in the Skybox could not be included in academic classes with the rest of the school, they could be a part of the school community in other ways. We expanded our club to help educate students in our school about disabilities and the importance of inclusion through events such as Spread the Word to End the Word and disability awareness campaigns[1].

Through my exposure to Special Olympics, I became aware of Syracuse University's Inclusive Elementary and Special Education program. After visiting and learning more about the program, I knew that it would complement the experiences that I had already had with inclusion and individuals with intellectual and physical disabilities. Through the fieldwork experiences and coursework that I have completed at Syracuse, my understanding of disability evolved as I learned to view disability through different lenses.

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[1] Spread the Word to End the Word is a campaign dedicated to ending the use of the word retard in reference to individuals with intellectual disabilities. Disability awareness campaigns are usually organized by Project UNIFY (now called Unified Clubs) to educate members of the school community about the impacts of different intellectual disabilities.

<u>Methods</u>

I decided to write an autoethnography after a discussion with my honors advisor as I was entering my Junior year. Through reading works by authors such as Carolyn Ellis and Sarah Wall, I learned about autoethnography. In their chapter "Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexive" of the book *The Handbook of Qualitative Research* by editors Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner explain that, "Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (2000, p. 739). The authors explain that the process of writing an autoethnography involves first looking outwards on social and cultural aspects of personal experiences. Then it involves looking inward to include interpretations of the experiences. Through constantly looking outwards and inwards, authors can create a piece of work reflective of a certain community. The author places him or herself in the community, and uses his or her experiences combined with insight and interpretation, to create meaning.

Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams and Arthur P. Bochner explain the advantages of writing autoehnographies compared to other types of research in their article "Autoethnography: An Overview" in the journal *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*. The authors describe that the genre of autoethnography revolutionized social science by connecting research topics with the people who were being researched. They explain that, "In particular, they [social scientists] wanted to concentrate on ways of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience, research that would sensitize readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence, and to forms of representation that deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different from us (ELLIS & BOCHNER,200)" (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2010). The genre of autoethnography allows the researcher to combine

personal experiences with factual information. In explaining his or her connection to the work, the author provides context to the reader, but also frames him or herself as an insider to the community that is being written about.

Ellis, Adams and Bochner explain that autoethnography is a combination of autobiographies and ethnographies. In autobiographies, authors usually write about epiphanies, or important moments in their lives. Ethnographers study a culture's practices, traditions, values, and beliefs by becoming a participant in that culture (2010). When combining them, the author writes about epiphanies that contribute to an overall arc or message while also analyzing these experiences through the lens of social science.

In this autoethnography, I am writing from the perspective of a student having completed the Inclusive Elementary and Special Education major. My autoethnography is structured as a series of snapshots, moments or stories that are then followed by commentary related to how my understanding of disability has changed. Important to understand in my autoethnography is that in my major, students complete three blocks (Block I, II and III) where they participate in field experiences and relevant coursework. My explanations of the different Blocks throughout this piece is intended to give the reader context as to the structure of my program, but is not entirely representative of the current structure of the program. The details of each of the blocks have changed since my completion of them.

When writing my autoethnography, I framed my snapshots and explanations around a simple question: How has my understanding of disability changed through my time in the Inclusive Elementary and Special Education program at Syracuse University? My research was based on answering this question, using experiences from placements and coursework that would help to show my evolution. In explaining the methods she used for her autoethnography titled, "'I

Can See You': An Autoethnography of Teacher-Student Self," Erika França de Souza Vasconcelos explains what she calls as snapshots. She writes that, "I combine memories and language devices to create textual snapshots that together form a sample narrative photo album of my teaching-learning life" (Vasconcelos, 2011, p. 419). In a similar fashion, the experiences that I have chosen are snapshots, or short moments in time, that are representative of larger themes expressed in my commentaries. The snapshots are based on actual events that happened, but the dialogue used is paraphrased. The snapshots are included in boxes, with commentaries not in boxes following them.

My first step in beginning this autoethnography was to decide what it was supposed to chronicle. Given the variety of experiences that I have had working with individuals with intellectual and physical disabilities in many different environments, this seemed like the logical decision. Next, I decided what experiences to use as snapshots by first dividing the autoethnography into chronological sections. My autoethnography follows a timeline to effectively show how I have changed each semester of the program. In each section, I spent time journaling my memories and pivotal events from those periods. Next, I drafted one or two-page representations of those events, paying careful attention to larger themes that are expressed in each one.

For some blocks, especially the ones that I completed in my Sophomore year, I had difficulty thinking of experiences, so I consulted with people knowledgeable about the blocks and my experiences in them, namely other people in my cohort. In addition, I looked back on old lesson plans and assignments to remember what had happened and to see how my understanding of disability has changed. I started the process of deciding what anecdotes to include in the summer before my senior year. I kept a journal throughout student teaching during senior year,

in addition to the journal that I completed about the other blocks. Through these reference

materials, I developed the arc of my autoethnography.

Part I: Before Syracuse

"When we give you a number, find the rest of your teammates and put on a pinny."

Michelle made her way around the line of players giving each one a number. As she pointed at each player, they dispersed, finding the rest of his or her group.

When she pointed at me, I stood up and eagerly twisted around the dimly lit gym, looking to see who else was in my group. Recognizing my friends in each of the other two groups, I became dismayed, realizing that I would be on a team by myself. Focusing now on the rest of the gym, I saw unfamiliar people motioning to me that I was on their team. Walking closer to them, I realized that some of the people looked like they had disabilities, while others looked like they did not. I instantly became more nervous, unsure of how a group of people who were so different were going to be able to play together on a team, especially considering that some of my teammates had disabilities. How should I interact with them? Should I just play as I usually do, or do I need to dumb-it down so that they can play too? Should I bring the ball up the court, or can they? These questions and others raced around my head as I tried to figure out what I was going to do when the game started.

"Red team is going to play the green team. Make sure that everyone has a pinny, and come to the court when you are ready to play."

This announcement came from Michelle, who was standing by the whiteboard in the front of gym writing out the lineup for the different games. Still uncertain of what to expect, I walked onto the court.

I first became involved in Special Olympics as a favor to my friend. He had helped create a unified sports program as a Bar Mitzvah project and asked all of his friends to come to the practices as unified partners. I agreed to go because I knew that he needed my help and because he kept asking me. My knowledge of disabilities at this point was very limited. I knew that there were people in the world who had disabilities, but I had never had any contact with individuals with disabilities and I did not know anything about specific disabilities.

At the first few unified practices that I went to, I mainly kept to myself, or hung out with my other friends who had also reluctantly agreed to be unified partners. I was hesitant to interact with the athletes with disabilities because I did not know how to do it. I did not know how to start conversations, and was unsure of whether I would be able to talk to people with disabilities in the same way that I talked to my friends.

However, as I began to attend more of the practices, I began to break outside of the bubble that I had created. My first interactions with the athletes were during the games that we would play, and mainly consisted of asking for the ball, or passing the ball to someone else. Slowly, I began to talk to the athletes in between the games. As I attended more of the practices, I began to become friends with them.

I realized that interacting with people with disabilities follows the same process as interacting with someone who does not have a disability. You first approach a person, decide what topic to discuss, and then engage in the conversation. When I first joined Special Olympics, I was nervous to interact with individuals with disabilities because of the stigma that follows having a disability. I thought that they would act and talk differently to the point that it would be difficult to have a conversation. I realized that I did not have to change the way that I talked, or even simplify my language or the topics that I was talking about. More than this, I realized that

the athletes at Special Olympics had many of the same interests as me and it was much easier to hold conversations than I thought it would be.

Though it may sound like a simple realization, my involvement in Special Olympics taught me a lot about how to personally be inclusive of individuals with disabilities. Socially and academically, individuals with disabilities in my school were separated from everyone else. They were taught in separate classes, and outside of school they participated in organizations and activities that were catered specifically towards individuals with disabilities. Joining Special Olympics as a unified partner was my first experience working directly with individuals with disabilities in an inclusive environment. My community did not emphasize inclusion, instead keeping students with disabilities separate from everyone else. This can be seen in the way they were taught in school, and in the lack of community involvement in Special Olympics. When I joined the Unified program, it was the first time that I had ever heard of it. Not many people from the community were involved with the program unless they had a family member who had an intellectual disability. Even though the program took place in schools in our school district, and was comprised of students in the school district, it was relatively unknown.

Compounding my lack of knowledge about individuals with disabilities was the way that I saw them being portrayed in the media. When individuals with disabilities were shown in TV shows and movies, it was usually in a negative light, with a focus on how disabled the individual was. Contrary to the perpetuated stereotypes surrounding disability was Becky, a character in the popular TV show *Glee* which was becoming more popular when I first got involved with Special Olympics. The show features Becky, a girl with down syndrome, as one of the supporting characters. This was the first time that I had seen a character with a disability in a TV show not specifically about their disability. I saw Becky interacting with the other characters in the show,

on the cheer team, and as a classmate, and sometimes member of the Glee club, and realized that her character was about more than just her disability. Using my experiences in Special Olympics as well as what I saw in the Skybox and on TV, I formed my first definition of inclusion as a mindset that students with intellectual and cognitive disabilities should be treated as equals in schools. This definition played on the interactions I saw Becky having with other students in the Glee club and on the cheer team. My first definition focused on creating a community where all students are welcomed, but was not specific to including individuals with disabilities in education.

It is important to note that though this was the first time I consciously defined inclusion, it was a term that I had created working definitions of in the past. When I first became involved in Special Olympics, my definition formed around the ways that individuals with disabilities could be included in sports. It expanded as I learned about the different aspects of schooling and life where inclusion was necessary.

"In this club we will be holding after school activities with students in the Skybox. We will go to movies, and tie dye shirts and do other activities like that. Connor will also be holding basketball games during lunch with students from the Skybox for anyone that is interested in participating. The purpose is to have students in the Skybox meet students outside of the Skybox and vice versa."

After a brief introduction to the club, Maggie and I move into the second item on our agenda; a training session on how to interact with the students in the Skybox. We explain general rules like not dumbing down conversations when talking with a student from the Skybox and that it is ok to play to your full abilities in the unified basketball pick-up games during lunch. More than anything, we want the students at this meeting to understand how to interact with students from the Skybox and to dispel some of their misconceptions about what it means to have a disability. Looking out at the students who have come to the first meeting, I recognize a lot of Maggie's friends, but also a couple of people that I have never seen before. Excited, I realize that our advertising efforts have paid off. I was worried about who would come to the meeting, and overall membership. We are a new club, and I expected to have to work hard to find new members.

Sitting at a Special Olympics New Jersey State Youth Activation Committee meeting a few weeks ago, our advisor had suggested that one of our projects for this year could be to start a Project UNIFY club in our school. I was caught off guard by this advice, and at first, did not know if it was an achievable objective. I was unsure of how my high school would react to it and knew that it would be a lot of work, especially considering our school's environment. While Maggie and I were very open to inclusion, I did not if others would be. Still, even though it was a suggestion, I knew that our advisor expected us to start the club.

Maggie and I got to work immediately, first talking with the school administrators, then with a teacher who would eventually become our club advisor. There were a lot of details to figure out, and it took some time, but after months of planning, we held our first meeting. The goal of this club was to provide opportunities for students in the Skybox to meet and become friends with students in the rest of the school.

Now, after a week of anxiously advertising the club over morning announcements, and through posters hung around the school, our vision was coming to fruition. While I was still unsure of how popular the club would be, but seeing the openness of the administration at my school, as well as the dedication that Maggie brought to the club, I was optimistic that it would do well.

When I co-founded this club, my high school did not have a very inclusive mindset. The students with intellectual and physical disabilities were educated in a separate classroom in a far corner of one our hallways. Even though the students were in different grades, they took all of their academic classes together and spent the majority of the school day in this room. Being in an isolated classroom affected their abilities to socialize with other students outside of the Skybox and being labeled as a Skybox student meant that they were often teased and made fun of.

When deciding what types of classrooms students with disabilities should be placed in, schools around the country are supposed to apply the Least Restrictive Environment principle, examining which educational environment will be the most appropriate for a student according to the services they need and the resources of the school. There are two main debates regarding inclusive education. One states that all students with intellectual and physical disabilities should be fully integrated into inclusive classrooms while the other states that it is not practical to integrate all students with disabilities into general education classes all the time. Jean B. Crockett and James M. Kauffman explain in their book, *The Least Restrictive Environment: It's Origins and Interpretations in Special Education* that the side that opposes full inclusion argues that a full continuum of alternative placements according to the abilities and needs of students with disabilities is more beneficial because not every student can function in the general education classroom for the whole school day. Full continuum means that some students with disabilities could be served in separate classrooms such as resource rooms, isolated classrooms and special day or residential schools. Crockett and Kauffman write, "In contrast, the assumption underlying a full continuum of alternative placements is that the least restrictive environment (LRE) for learning will vary from student to student and often from time to time for a particular student" (1999, p. 1). In my high school, LRE was applied through the mindset that not every student with

intellectual and physical disabilities could be included in the general education classroom. The Skybox, an isolated classroom, was determined to be the LRE for many students with mild to severe intellectual disabilities. The students took classes focused on teaching life skills such as buying groceries that would help them successfully live independently after high school instead of classes that would enable them to pursue further education after high school.

One result of educating the Skybox students separately from the rest of the school was that students who did not have intellectual or physical disabilities struggled to understand disabilities and interact with individuals who did have disabilities. The Project UNIFY club was founded with the intention of solving this problem. While we recognized that it would be nearly impossible for us to fight the school district's policies regarding academic integration, we also knew that there were many non-academic periods during the school day when these students could socially interact with students outside of the Skybox. The club hosted events during our whole-school lunch, after school, and on weekends such as going to the movies, tie dying shirts, and unified sports that were meant to bring the two populations in the school together. Through creating opportunities for both populations of the school to interact, the club also helped to educate students who did not have intellectual or physical disabilities about disabilities.

The club started from the beginning, conducting trainings with students from around the school on how to interact with students in the Skybox and with individuals with disabilities in general. In the trainings we addressed what to do in medical emergencies, like if someone has a seizure, and we also discussed more practical rules, like how to talk with individuals with disabilities. We explained that it was not always necessary to use simplified language, and that sometimes individuals with disabilities like to hug and show their emotions physically. We explained that just like with a friend, it was ok to say no to a hug, and provided alternative ways

to show friendship, like exchanging high fives. The purpose of the trainings was to highlight how interactions with individuals with disabilities were different than with people who do not have disabilities. At the same time, we wanted to encourage students in the club to interact with and become friends with the students from the Skybox through providing strategies and conversation starters.

On a personal level, leading this training showed me that many people do not know how to interact with individuals with disabilities. I was reminded me of my misconceptions about disabilities when I first joined Special Olympics. I learned that people are usually scared of individuals with disabilities, because of a lack of knowledge and experience. They may underestimate the abilities of individuals with disabilities to interact with other people and think of them differently because of their appearances and slower processing capabilities. While it is easy to scoff at how obvious and common sense the content of the trainings was, it is important to remember that this was the starting point for many dedicated members of the club. They learned quickly the purpose of the club, and how necessary it was, as they became more involved in the world of disabilities and saw how individuals with disabilities were treated.

The club was successful in its first year and in the years after I had graduated, has continued to expand. More students from outside of the Skybox participate in the club and the administration has adopted a more inclusive attitude including the students from the Skybox more in the school community through efforts such as implementing inclusive physical education classes.

20	As the peer partners bring their groups of freshmen into the cafeteria, the quiet disappears. The students nervously talk to one another as they look around, trying to understand the various posters and simulations that are set up around the room. The peer partners help guide students to the centers, as the Disability Awareness Fair begins. Looking at the other stations, I am confident that the Fair is well organized and that we are prepared. I just do not know if people will actually like the activities that we have planned. As the first Project UNIFY initiative, the Fair is intended to help people think about the way they view disability. That will only happen if the activities are engaging and interesting.

At my table, a freshman comes up to me and asks, "What is this station?" Launching into a prepared speech that I had written out the night before, I begin my answer by talking about how this station is supposed to provide students with opportunities to experience what it is like to have Down Syndrome. I explain that at this station, students will put socks on their hands and try to complete tasks such as zipping up a backpack and tying a shoe.

After I am finished with my introduction, I point out the backpack that is lying on the ground and the two fuzzy socks that are placed on a table above it. The student, still a little confused, puts one fuzzy sock on each hand and tries to grab the zipper of the backpack. He has trouble grasping the zipper handle, and it takes him two or three attempts to even hold it. As he tries to move the zipper up and around the top of the backpack, he loses his grip and stops many times to reposition his hand. Throughout the task, the student's look of confusion turns to frustration and then deep concentration as he becomes more and more involved in what he is doing. While he is attempting to zip up the backpack, I watch him, wondering what he is thinking and whether he will be able to connect his frustration to the everyday difficulties of Down Syndrome.

When he is done, I ask him for his thoughts on the station. He explains that it was a lot harder than he thought, and it took more time than he expected it too. Hoping to push him to think more deeply about the activity, I use this answer as a jumping off point to begin discussing the difficulties with coordination and fine motor skills that individuals with Down Syndrome often have. They would have a difficult time zipping up the backpack and tying their shoes. To end the station, I direct the student to the facts and pictures that are on my poster that further describe Down Syndrome. Next I tell him that he should go to the other stations because they have other activities and will teach him about the different types of disabilities.

I watch him walk away, and reflect on how the station went. While he seemed to understand the concept of the activity, I do not know if he understood the whole purpose of the Fair.

The first major Project UNIFY event in my high school was a Disability Awareness Fair that gave participants an opportunity to experience to the greatest extent possible what it was like to have a disability. The purpose of this event was to educate students about disabilities and allow them to experience the differences and difficulties that individuals with disabilities have in their everyday lives. Through providing opportunities to experience different types of disabilities, we hoped that students would be more accepting and understanding of individuals with disabilities.

At one station, we had students wear glasses that were blacked out except for a tiny hole and asked them to try to walk in a straight line from one wall to another to experience a visual disability. At another station, students tried to read a paragraph with misspelled words and with letters backwards and sideways to experience what it was like to have dyslexia. After each of the stations, we would ask students how easy it was to accomplish the task, and about their experiences in the simulation.

The participants in the Disability Awareness Fair the first year were mainly freshmen who came as a part of their Peer Partner groups. Peer Partners were upperclassmen who helped freshmen transition from middle school to high school through talking with them once a week and introducing them to activities and extracurricular opportunities at the high school.

The Disability Awareness Fair is one example of Project UNIFY's attempts to engage the whole school in our mission. We held the Fair in the cafeteria so that we could attract as many students as possible. In addition, we also advertised for the Fair weeks in advance, posting fliers on walls around school and teaming up with the Peer Partners. Even if students were not a part of the club, we wanted them to be involved in our mission.

Looking back on the Disability Awareness Fair years later as I write this, I realize that it was well intended, but problematic. By simulating different disabilities, we reinforced stereotypes about the manifestation of disabilities and minimized their effects on individuals who are diagnosed as having them. At the end of each station, we led a reflection that started by pointing out how inconvenient it was. By doing this, we reduced their full lived experiences and portrayed them in a negative light. However, I also recognize the intended impact of the Fair and how it was a first step in the right direction. Considering the environment of my school and its lack of awareness of inclusion in the beginning, it was necessary to provide experiences that would help individuals walk in the footsteps of someone with a disability. Through providing concrete experiences, we helped make the effect of disabilities more real which we hoped would lead to more widespread acceptance and inclusion.

The purpose of the Fair was achieved as the Project UNIFY club gained more members, and the school became more inclusive. My high school is now a dedicated member of the Unified Champion Schools movement, a re-branded term for Project UNIFY. They attend two to three conferences a year and have a large following at the high school. There are now about thirty students with and without intellectual and physical disabilities in the club and they hold events every week. In our first year as a club, we had ten members, and none of them knew much about inclusion or individuals with intellectual and physical disabilities. Seeing how far my high school has come in its efforts to include every student in the community has proved to me the feasibility of implementing inclusion in schools.

While I did not see students talking about how they loved the Fair, or learned a lot from it, I could see the change in the high school in the coming months. Up until this point, I was skeptical about the Project UNIFY club and my ability to educate others about disability. I was

unsure of how much I even knew about disability. At this point, my decisions regarding the club

and what we did were largely based on what my advisor of the State Youth Activation

Committee told me to do and what I saw other people on the Committee doing in their clubs. My

understanding of disability grew as I began to understand that inclusion was necessary in school.

I did not have any vision of what inclusion looked like in an academic setting, but realized that

inclusion could happen at the very least during non-academic times of the day.

Part II: Beginning at Syracuse

After positioning myself in the front of the classroom, I take a deep breath, look at Alex and then out at the class. I take a moment and collect myself before beginning to speak. This is my first time in front of a class, and I am very nervous. Even though I have spent countless hours in the past week preparing for this lesson, designing an opening that will hook the students in, and measureable objectives with specific assessments, I have no idea how to begin the lesson. Standing in front of the classroom, I am terrified seeing all of my students expectantly looking at me, waiting for the lesson to begin. I momentarily forget what to say as I am paralyzed by the stare of my students.

When I had practiced this lesson last night, it had seemed so easy. My partner and I had scripted everything, anticipating that we would be nervous and have trouble finding the right words. Now, when it was time to deliver the lesson, the words that I had memorized seemed to disappear. Sensing that I was stuck, my partner bails me out by beginning to introduce the lesson. "Today we are going to learn about Christopher Columbus. Does anyone know anything about him?"

After this prompting, I recover, and jump back into the lesson. While I begin to remember my scripted lines and become more involved in the lesson, I still feel uncomfortable standing in front of the class. Having that many people staring at me made me feel like I was on stage about to give a performance. I wanted to deliver a memorable lesson, and by building it up in my head, I put more pressure on myself. I could not wait for the lesson to be over so that I could escape to the background of the class. I would not have to look down on all those staring and smiling faces anymore, and I would not feel like I was performing for the students.

My partner and I taught this lesson in the second week of our first placement in Block I. In this stage of the program, teacher candidates are placed in a classroom three days a week for three hours each day. They plan and lead four separate lessons that differ in content as an introduction to what they will do in the rest of the program. Many teacher candidates in Block I are placed in a classroom and given the role of a teacher for the first time. The lessons that my partner and I taught were basic, and we relied heavily on the host teacher for guidance and to provide ideas for lessons. With so little time in the classroom, it was difficult for me to form relationships with the students and to understand the different learning needs of the class.

When we had to prepare to teach a lesson, my partner and I would spend copious amounts of time writing our lesson plans and scripting everything that we would say. We were so focused on what we were teaching, that we did not pay attention to who we were teaching. Our lessons were not very exciting and mainly consisted of standing in front of the class and lecturing. For example, in the Christopher Columbus lesson, my co-teacher and I began the lesson by reading a text to the students and asking them questions such as, "why did people from Europe want to travel to the Indies in Asia 500 years ago?" and "who remembers why the Europeans couldn't get to Asia by walking and by riding animals?" According to Bloom's Taxonomy, the questions that we were asking were lower level, mainly focusing on recalling information. We did not stretch the students to think on higher levels about the content they were learning because we did not know how to do this.

The focus of Block I was on developing instructional strategies to teach content and writing lesson plans with specific, measureable objectives that were matched to appropriate assessments. This focus can be seen in the format of the lesson plan for this Block and the pre- and post-commentaries that students are required to answer. The lesson plan includes a chart

intended to help students write objectives with a condition, an observable skill and a criteria. It also includes a section where students are asked to write a script for what they will say and do. This chart takes up the majority of the lesson plan template, and helps students think through the format of their whole lesson. The post-commentary asks students questions about how many of the students met the objectives and evidence to support those claims. However, there are no questions about the different abilities or needs of the students in the class. While we talked about how students learned differently, we were not expected to explicitly include these components in our lessons at this stage in the program.

In my Block I lessons I was not as sensitive to the different needs of students as I was in future Blocks. I was so concerned about the responsibilities of a teacher, like how to talk to students and how to structure and write a lesson plan, that I did not have the time or skills necessary to think about differentiating what I was teaching. In a lesson plan for Unity Day at my placement in Stonehedge Elementary School, I included an activity where students were given index cards with a peer's name on it. The students were instructed to write one strength about a peer on a piece of paper. In my post-commentary I reflect that, "Some of the students made statements indicating that they did not like the peer that they were assigned. This contradicted the purpose of the activity and the lesson, which was to teach the students that everybody has a set of skills and talents" (Unity Day Lesson Plan). The statements that some students made in this lesson indicate that not every student was equally included in the classroom community. Even though I correctly made this conclusion in the post-commentary, I did not know how to address it.

In Block I, my perspective on inclusion and how it could be implemented in classes was similar to my perspective before coming to Syracuse. I knew that inclusion was possible, but I

was still confused about how it could be used in a general education classroom. While it was a point of conversation in my classes, I did not have any opportunities to experience it in my placement.

Looking back on Block I, the fact that inclusion in our placements was sort of ignored makes sense. For many of my peers in my cohort, including myself, this was our first experience in a classroom as a teacher. The principles of inclusion are hard to implement when you do not have any basic skills as a teacher. Our experiences in Block I focused on helping us develop requisite skills that we would later use to implement inclusion in our placements.

In my first experience as a teacher, I felt pressured by the students' expectations and from my professors to deliver meaningful lessons. I was so scared to be in front of the class, that I was focused on just making it through the lesson. At the same time, I was concerned with using specific strategies that I learned in my courses that I rushed through the activities and directions, and was stuck in my head for many of the lessons that I taught in Block I. Even in the rest of the program, it took me a long time to become comfortable teaching in front of a class. However, I realized that as I taught more lessons, I began to enjoy the lessons I was teaching. My personality came out more and I was better able to focus on the individual needs of my students. In Block I, I was so concerned with teaching my lesson "correctly" that I had tunnel vision. I realized later that not every lesson goes as planned. One of the most important skills a teacher can have is the ability to improvise to ensure that the students are learning what they are supposed to.

While Unified Sports was successful in my area of New Jersey, it has met varying levels of success in the rest of the country. Unified Sports in the Central Region of Special Olympics of New York, and in the Syracuse area has taken a long time to get started. Sean [the program director in charge of all athletic competitions and training clubs in Syracuse] explained that many of the training clubs in the central region are, "old school" and that, "they like what they do right now" (Coakley 11/13/15). He described that the training clubs were fearful of the change to Unified Sports because it would mean less spots for athletes. Sean explained that for State and National games there are a certain number of spots for each sport that the Central region can fill. The headquarters of Special Olympics of New York gives quotas to each of the regions on how many athletes will be sent to state and national competitions. From there, Sean goes out and asks specific training clubs to be representatives for the region. If Sean chooses to send a unified team instead of a traditional team, that means that fewer athletes will be able to go to the competition. For example, a traditional basketball team is made up of ten athletes. A unified basketball team is made up of five unified partners and five athletes. If the unified basketball team was chosen to go to a State or National competition instead of the traditional basketball team, that means five athletes would not be able to compete at the games. While Unified Sports is great in theory, in practicality, it presents a huge problem for the organization. How can Special Olympics, whose mission statement centers on the desire to include all children with intellectual disabilities, overlook athletes and replace them with unified partners?

Another problem in the Syracuse area is that there are no existing unified training clubs. To create a unified training club, would either mean that a traditional training club would have to split up to allow for the addition of unified partners, or that they would have to attempt to start a new unified training club. This means that the Central region would need to recruit new athletes, with which it already has a problem, and that it would need a new coach, with which is already has a problem with. However, when asked about the future of Unified Sports, Sean stated that Unified Sports would become more popular, but that it was about finding the right time and place to do it. Unified

Sports have already been integrated into the other regions of New York, and now it is waiting to be

integrated in the Central region. Sean pointed out that the best time to start a Unified program would

be when a new generation of athletes starts becoming involved in Special Olympics.

*All interviews cited in these paragraphs were conducted as a part of an assignment for one of my

classes in 2015. The people interviewed are all involved in Special Olympics in the Central New York

region as employees, volunteers, or participants.

When I came to Syracuse, I was interested in continuing my involvement in Special Olympics. I hoped to continue to play Unified Sports, and knew that in New Jersey there were great unified college programs that played in competitive leagues against one another. I thought that there might be a similar intercollegiate program in Central New York. I joined the Syracuse Special Olympics club in the beginning of the first semester of my Freshman year. However, I realized after one meeting that this club was not what I had expected. Instead of having unified sports teams and ways to participate in Special Olympics, the club's role was more to support the local Special Olympics through fundraising efforts.

Disappointed by the lack of opportunities that the Syracuse University club offered, I realized that my experiences in New Jersey with unified sports and inclusion were very different from the opportunities for inclusion in other parts of the country. I wanted to learn more about Special Olympics in Central New York so that I could understand their views on inclusion and how they were working to implement inclusion. At about this time I was also assigned a paper in my GEO 219 (American Diversity and Unity) class to learn more about a specific aspect of the Syracuse community. I wrote my paper on how inclusion was being implemented into Special Olympics in Syracuse.

This course paper helped me see that the key problems to implementing inclusion in Central New York were time, resources and attitudes. It was difficult to implement unified sports in Syracuse because of the time and resources necessary to start unified teams. To start a new team, there would have to be new coaches and participants, and there are also many details that had to be worked out. More important than either of these obstacles, it was difficult to implement Unified Sports in Central New York because people did not fully believe in it and were not personally dedicated to its success. Despite problems with resources and time, if people were

dedicated to unified sports, they would find a way to make it work. Through my interviews, I noticed that the people that did not believe in Unified Sports, or its feasibility in Syracuse, thought this way because they were scared that the opportunities for inclusion would inadvertently exclude athletes. While their intentions are understandable, their stubbornness and inability to make changes to the existing program is frustrating.

Through my placements in the School of Education, I realized that schools in the Syracuse area have the same problems when they try to implement inclusion. It is very difficult to find the resources and time necessary to create inclusive classrooms, and find teachers who know and are willing to teach with an inclusion model. In addition, some teachers do not want there to be inclusion. They are worried about the opportunities for academic rigor in inclusive classrooms and taking away from the educational experience of students who do not have intellectual and physical disabilities.

At this point in my studies, I believed that inclusion was widely accepted in communities and schools around the country. My professors had taught me that inclusion was always possible in any educational environment. They had used theories and anecdotes from their own experiences in the classroom to support this argument. However, through writing this paper, I learned that some people do not believe in the feasibility of inclusion or the positive benefits that it brings to individuals with and without intellectual and physical disabilities. I learned that my views on education were different than other peoples' views on inclusion. While I had seen the benefits of unified sports, and the successful creation of unified sports programs, some people in Special Olympics of Central New York had not. I experienced the same wavering dedication to inclusion in schools that I was placed in. While the reasons that the various schools and Special Olympics provided were legitimate, I also got the sense that they did not care that much about

inclusion. If they really had cared, and wanted to exist, then they would have found a way to make it happen. In my high school, it was difficult to break through the mindsets that perpetuated environments like the Skybox, but because of the dedication of the Project UNIFY club and Special Olympics of New Jersey, we found a way to make it happen. Our efforts were small at first, finding times through the day that could be adapted to be more inclusive, and but eventually we succeeded in changing the mindset of the school.

Writing this paper reaffirmed my professors' points about the endless possibilities of inclusion by showing me the limited attitudes of some individuals who refused to see the benefits of inclusion, and were unwilling to try it. This was my first experience with people who did not believe in inclusion, and it shocked me that people could be so stubborn and set in their ways. It was not the last time I have interacted with this type of people, and each time, I am amazed at their blatant refusal and ignorance.

"Connor can you come in here for a minute? I want to have a conversation with you about something."

As I enter Dr. Smith's office, I see that he has written a bunch of 1s and 0s in an array on the whiteboard hanging on his wall. He begins the conversation saying, "Are you familiar with binary?"

Confused, I shake my head. While I have heard of binary before, I do not know what it is or how to use it.

He explains, "Binary is a code made up of 1s and 0s. Among many things, it is the code that is used in computers. I want to have a conversation with you about Autism and how to think about it. This will help you with your work this summer. The brain is sort of like a computer that controls the rest of the body. People who do not have Autism have brains that run on codes made of the numbers 1 and 0. The brain of someone with Autism runs on a code like binary, but instead of only being limited to 1s and 0s, their codes may have numbers between 1 and 0. No one knows what specific numbers make up their code or the pattern of numbers. That is why there are some people who are lower functioning and other people who are more high functioning. When you are looking at AI and the way that he acts and thinks, keep in mind what I just told you about binary. A brain without Autism and a brain with Autism, though they run on the same binary use very different numbers."

Even more confused than when I walked into his office, and still processing what he had told me, I walk out of his office and go back to my desk.

That summer I worked at the Department of Cognitive Neurology at Johns Hopkins University where I was using physiological monitoring techniques to learn about correlations between measures like heart rate and sweat production and instances of self-injurious behavior.

At that point in the program, I had not had any placements in schools, and my knowledge of disability was shaped by the courses that I had taken so far at Syracuse and my experiences in Special Olympics. I had never worked to critically examine disability, nor did I know much about self-injurious behavior. This was a profound experience for me because it was my first opportunity to experience individuals who had more severe disabilities than the individuals at Special Olympics I had worked with. Through the videos that I watched of the individual as a part of the study (He was referred to as AI) I learned more about his day to day life and his education. He was in his mid-twenties, but was still learning to read. In math, he was learning simple multiplication. I was shocked to learn that he was still working on simple skills that many peers his age had learned years before.

Through this internship, I realized that there are multiple ways to view disability. The explanation that Dr. Smith gave me about the function of the brain through the metaphor of binary was helpful because it explained how the brain of an individual with Autism functions from a scientific perspective. However, it greatly differed from my own definition of Autism, which was shaped by my previous experiences, and the definition of Autism that I had learned in my courses. The medical definition that had been explained to me focused on differences in brain production and as a result, the abilities of the individual to function. The definition of Autism that I would learn in my classes was taught through an educational lens that focused on learning difficulties individuals with this disability face and accommodations and modifications to help them succeed in the classroom. It also included a social factor, explaining that the way that

society is organized affects the way that disability is perceived. The large difference between the medical and social/educational lens of autism, and disability overall, is that the medical lens tries to fix the disability. In the research I was doing at Johns Hopkins University, I was focused on trying to fix AI's self-injurious behavior. It was seen as a negative consequence of his Autism, and something that needed to be changed. Examining AI's self-injurious behavior through the social lens would focus on why he was harming himself and what accommodations and modifications could be made to help him.

My current definition of disability is shaped by my work at Johns Hopkins University and my time at Syracuse as I see it through the social lens used most often in education and through the medical lens, which focuses fixing the disability. I recognize that as a future teacher, the way that I support individuals with disabilities through my instructional decisions is important, while also acknowledging that there are benefits to viewing disability through scientific facts. For example, learning the typical patterns of behavior for an individual with a specific disability like Autism, is important in identifying the ways to include that individual in the classroom.

Standing off to the side, I watch the campers from my group begin to dribble their soccer balls around the square of cones. Out of the corner of my eye I see Mary abandon her soccer ball and walk to a nearby bench. Hurrying to catch her before she sits down, I meet her at the bench and ask, "Why aren't you dribbling your soccer ball?"

She responds, "I don't like soccer, and I'm not feeling well."

I don't buy this excuse because I know that Mary does not like to participate at stations that do not interest her or that require her to exert effort. One of the biggest challenges as a counselor that I deal with daily is trying to get her off the bench and back to the station. Once she sat down, it was impossible to motivate her to continue participating.

I tried a variety of strategies that night to get Mary to rejoin the station. From calmly explaining that participation was mandatory, to getting frustrated and making empty threats of phone calls to her mother. Nothing worked.

Hopelessly, I realized that there was nothing more I could do. I walk off to help another camper. Suddenly, turning my head, I see one of the other counselors from my group talking to Mary trying to get her to participate. I turn around, confident that he will fail just as I did. After a little bit, I glance around and see that Mary is standing up. She reclaims her soccer ball, and joins the rest of the group. Incredulously, I approach the other counselor and ask, "How did you do that? I was trying to get her to go back to the station for like ten minutes!"

He calmly explains, "I know her from last summer and we are pretty good friends. I just told her that not everyone likes every station and that sometimes you have to do some things that you do not like. Then I asked her to give the station a second chance and told her that it would be over soon."

Hearing the counselor explain what he did makes me feel worthless. He didn't do anything special, he just talked to her. That should have been the first thing I tried instead of panicking and trying to bribe her.

Working at Camp Shriver for that summer gave me the opportunity to work with children in a different way than I usually do. Instead of being a teacher, I was a camp counselor. With the different position, my attitude also changed. Being a camp counselor, I felt like I had less authority. Instead of being in charge of teaching a class of 20 students and making sure they learned what they were supposed to, I was more of a friend to the campers.

Even though I thought it would be easier to form relationships with my campers, this was an area that I struggled with. Instead of being able to connect with the campers over what book they were reading, or what they were learning in math, like in school, I had to find other ways to learn about their interests and hobbies. I had to initiate conversations with the campers to get the information that I wanted to know. This was an important step for me because I learned that even though it is important to learn about my students as learners, I also need to get to know them as people.

Going into my next placement, I spent more time getting to know the students not only as learners but also as people. It was difficult at first, and I felt awkward starting short, sometimes only minute-long conversations. However, I immediately saw a change in the way the students talked with me. They saw that I was interested in getting to know them as people, and were excited to share information with me. Over time, I began to observe how my host teachers formed and maintained relationships with students. I noticed that these relationships were reinforced through conversations throughout the day and school year. It could be as simple as complimenting a student on a new haircut or shirt, or as complicated as asking about a family that was going through difficult times. My host teachers were talking with each of the students every day, asking how they were or what they were doing after school.

The relationships that my host teachers were forming contributed to an overall classroom community that was welcoming and where students felt comfortable enough to learn and participate. The students may not have always liked what the teacher said during the school day, but they trusted him or her and were respectful because of the positive relationship they had.

This summer helped me see the correlation between understanding disability and inclusion and forming strong relationships with students. In order to include students in the classroom, teachers have to know them as people and as students. This becomes even more important when students have disabilities and may have specific behavior characteristics or strong likes and dislikes that may affect their education. Though it is a lot of effort, and may feel awkward, forming relationships with students informs instructional decisions and is crucial in creating inclusive environments.

<u>Part III: Block II</u>

Julie turns off the music that had been playing on her computer and switches to her PowerPoint, signaling the beginning of class. Students shift their attention towards her and stop talking.

"As you know, yesterday we held our mid-semester conferences. We wanted to let you know that it does not matter how well you did because everyone will continue to grow throughout the semester. We realize that you are still just beginning to learn how to write and plan lessons. Some of you may not have done as well as you hoped you would. Take this opportunity to think about your lessons and how you need to improve. If you want to talk to me, you can always send me an email or come to my office hours."

Even though she continued speaking, I couldn't focus on anything else that she said. I was stuck on the memory of my conference yesterday. I had sat there as my math professor explained to me that they didn't feel I was applying what I had learned in my classes to the lessons that I was teaching. The professor had gone on to explain that I had used too many worksheets and that I had not made my lesson accessible to everyone. My immediate disbelief had turned to disappointment. I had thought my lesson was perfect. The students had learned about elections and even got to participate in one. They had loved the lesson and had seemed engaged in what I was teaching the whole time. While I knew that there was room for improvement, overall, I thought the lesson had gone really well.

One of the most important skills that I learned from Block II was how to adapt my lessons to accommodate the diverse learning needs of my students. The focus of the semester was on designing inclusive lessons that would allow every student to participate in a meaningful way. In addition to applying educational theories such as Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences, which states that there are many different types of intelligences that translate into different learning styles, and Bloom's Taxonomy, which presents a hierarchy to tasks from lower, more concrete thinking, to higher, more abstract thinking, we were pushed to understand and accommodate our students diverse learning needs and styles. Emphasis on this skill can be seen in the lesson plan template which required teacher candidates to examine two focus learners, noting communication strengths, likes and dislikes inside and outside of the classroom, and student specific objectives for the lesson.

In Block II teacher candidates design and teach two major lesson plans. In the middle of the semester there is a mid-semester conference where candidates meet with one of their professors to discuss their progress and to identify strengths and weaknesses. This mid-semester conference is usually difficult for teacher candidates because they often do not do well on the first lesson plan. This is the first semester where teacher candidates are asked to design and teach lessons independently while also applying the knowledge they have learned from their time in the School of Education. The jump from Block I to Block II is difficult, and initially many teacher candidates struggle.

While it was difficult to hear that I was not doing well in Block II at the mid-semester conference, it was necessary, and helped me think about specific areas in my teaching and lesson plan writing that I needed to change. While the activities that I used were engaging and interesting, they did not always focus on teaching the right content or appeal to the diverse needs

of my students. For example, while the idea to have the students participate in a mock election helped them understand the process of voting, it did not teach them the more important concept of the significance of an election. I realized that I needed to balance creating engaging lessons with teaching the appropriate and necessary content.

Having this negative mid-semester conference experience also taught me the importance of reflection. I was so caught up in what I had thought I had done well in my lesson that I never stopped to think about what I had not done well. For example, in my lesson I noticed that the students were having trouble understanding the directions of how to vote. I initially blamed this on their young age, but on reflection, I understand that the students' confusion was not related to their age, but the way that I had explained the activity. The structure of the activity, and the way that I delivered it did not meet the needs of my students. One of the themes from my mid-semester conference was the need to include more supports for students with disabilities. My lesson did not resonate with the whole class, and may not have been understood by some of the students. In addition to the simulations, I should have presented the content in different ways and in different levels of complexity to appeal to the different students in the class.

I learned a lot from that conference, and realized how difficult it is to plan effective and appropriate lessons that take into account the different needs and learning styles of the students in the class. This was a turning point for me as I learned that when designing lessons, it is not enough to focus on the activities, but also on the needs of the students in relation to the planned activities. This was a difficult skill for me because it required a higher level of consciousness. I had to predict how the students would react to the lesson and then plan accommodations and modifications to support them.

Part IV: Block III

"We are going to start ELA class. I know that you are all really excited for the gameshow, but we aren't going to start until I see that everyone is quiet and looking up at me."

I glance up from my book to see if the class is following my directions. Many students have ignored me and are still talking. I look to the substitute teacher and he clears his voice before loudly asking students to pay attention. Before school that morning he had told me that he has a reputation for being loud and that he was not afraid to use his loud voice. The students look up momentarily, surprised by the substitute teacher's loud voice, then begin to talk to one another again.

The game show that the students are about to start is designed to teach them about different famous inventors and how their inventions have affected their lives. The students are excited about the game show because the other day my host teacher told the students that in this unit they will get to work in teams to create some of their own inventions.

I begin reading even though I know that many of the students are still talking. We are already very far behind, and need to make some progress. If I waited until they were quiet, we would fall even further behind. I hope that the students who are talking will hear me begin the lesson and will quiet down, but they don't.

The rest of the day is just as chaotic as the ELA lesson. The students have a hard time focusing and seem to take advantage of my host teacher being absent to do whatever they want. The substitute teacher begins to get frustrated at the students, and responds with his own system of behavior management, singling students out and moving their desks to different places in the room to isolate them from the rest of the class.

His anger explodes at one moment in study hall when he drags a student and his desk into the hallway and commands him to stay there. The student, understandably, reacts negatively to his isolation, crying, screaming, cursing, and knocking on the door, begging to be let back in.

The substitute teacher's behavior management system contradicts everything that I have learned at Syracuse about including students in the classroom. I seriously consider bringing the student back into the classroom, but decide against it because I do not want to undermine the substitute teacher's credibility with the students. At the same time, I know that if I side with the substitute, and let the student wait outside, I will be going against what I believe is morally right. After thinking about what to do for another moment, I realize that my decision is correct. Though it does not sit well with me, I continue circulating around the class to help students with the math activity. Even still, periodically I glance out of the class to check on the student. Each time I walk past the door, I hope that he has stopped crying, or that he is calmly sitting in his chair so that I can feel better. As time goes on, his tirade is replaced by quiet crying at his desk. Knowing that he is so emotional makes me feel even worse. I feel guilty ignoring him, and want to do something, but don't know what to do. In an effort to make myself feel better about the situation, I mentally file this moment away for later, when Ms. Sherman is back.

Leaving school that day, I conclude that the students were not going to listen to me no matter what I did. They knew that I was not a "real" teacher, and thought that they had free reign until Ms. Sherman came back. Even more concerning for me was the substitute teacher's confidence in his decision to remove the student from the classroom. How could he think it was ok to single a student out and make him leave the classroom? How could he not see the negative effects that his actions

had? I knew that there were some people who did not believe in the necessity of inclusion as much as the

professors and staff at the School of Education at Syracuse, but I did not think that there were people

who so fully believed in exclusion.

In Block I when some of my classmates complained about how they had had a bad day, one of my professors explained that every teacher has an awful day where they feel like everything goes horribly. She continued by saying that these days are important because they help you learn from your mistakes. For me, this day certainly fell into that category.

Leaving school, I did not see how it could get any worse. However, remembering my professor's words, I took some time to reflect on the day. One of the most important lessons that I learned was the importance of forming relationships with my students. While teachers have a good deal of authority in the classroom, their real power is based on the relationships that they form with their students. This was a lesson that I continuously learned through my field experiences at Syracuse. The students in my classes knew that I was not a full teacher, and many of them knew that I was still in college. They did not consider me to be a teacher, and did not treat me as one. As a result, instead of coming into my placements assuming that I would be respected, I focused on forming positive relationships with the students to earn their respect.

On the drive home from school that day, images of the student sitting in the hallway crying and knocking on the door stayed with me. Even though the student was misbehaving, and was not listening to me or the substitute teacher, I firmly believe that it was wrong to send him out of the classroom. This incident confirmed for me my belief in inclusion and showed me firsthand the negative social and academic impact that removing students from the classroom can have.

Thinking back on that day, I realize that even though it was one of my worst days in a placement at Syracuse, it was also one of the most valuable. Up to that point, I had heard about the importance of inclusion from my professors and read about it in textbooks, but had never experienced a defining moment that really showed me its importance. Partly because of the

environment that I was being educated in, and partly because of my inexperience in the classroom, I also thought that inclusion was widely accepted by educators around the world. Seeing the substitute teacher act the way that he did opened my eyes to the opposing mindsets that still exist in the world of education.

I disagreed totally with the substitute teacher's tactics, and knew that if I was in charge, I would do almost everything differently. While he was just trying to gain control of the class by isolating the student that he saw as the biggest problem, he created more trouble. In my Block III placement, exclusion was a common practice used by teachers to discipline their students. One teacher whose class I observed frequently used to move students to different corners of the room and refused to allow them to talk or move. The students reacted negatively to their isolation, and often acted out even more than before.

Seeing the way the student reacted to being excluded from the classroom was meaningful to me. I saw the student's reaction when he was not included in the classroom and how upset he was. This moment taught me the importance of inclusion through experiencing what happens when students are not included. It is not always easy to include students, whether because of behavioral problems, or because of profound disabilities that are challenging to accommodate. However, after seeing what happens when students are excluded socially and academically, I realize that the extra work and time are necessary.

Part V: Student Teaching

"The interesting thing about our class is that there are students who are really high and are breezing through the content, and at the other end, there are students who need a ton of extra support to understand the content. This is going to totally change how I teach math this year. Usually, I like to lecture for the first part of the class with a PowerPoint, and then do some practice in the second half with a worksheet or class activity. I am going to have to do more independent and small group work now. With you (pointing at Ms. Hayes) and the TA in the class. Maybe we can divide into groups and each take one?"

Ms. Hayes responds saying, "Yeah, I think that will work. But remember, the TA can only reteach material, she can't teach new skills."

"Hmmm. I'm going to think about this more. I already have all the lessons planned, but you (Ms. Hayes) and I are going to have to plan together to come up with some different activities to support the students who are going to struggle and to extend the learning of the ones who finish early and master the content quickly. It's a good thing that we have the same planning time!"

Sitting in Ms. Joy's class during prep period, my host teacher and I are talking with the math teacher about their observations of the students so far. Ms. Joy started the conversation by describing the results of the most recent math quiz. While most of the students had done well, four had failed the assessment and five had gotten perfect scores. This supported other observations that she made, including the fact that there is a group of students who always raise their hand, and if they are not chosen, will call their answers out, or will stop paying attention. As a result, these students are disrupting the lessons and make it challenging for other students to learn. At the end of this meeting, my host teacher, Ms. Joy, and I agreed to begin to implement small groups into more lessons starting with a review for the math test that was going to take place the next day.

Ms. Joy and Ms. Hayes would have many similar conversations to this one throughout my placement all focused on how they could best support the varying needs of the students in math class. Seeing how Ms. Joy and Ms. Hayes adapted the structure of the math class impressed upon me the importance of collaboration and differentiation. Instead of structuring her lessons around a lecture and then having students practice independently like she usually did, Ms. Joy implemented more heterogeneously grouped activities where students could learn from one another. In addition, Ms. Joy began to include more supports and extensions in her lessons to make sure that every student was engaging with the content.

This focus on differentiation became most apparent to me when I was planning a lesson to teach in Ms. Joy's science class. The students I would be teaching in science were the same ones that had prompted Ms. Joy and Ms. Hayes's efforts to adapt their instructional strategies. When planning my lesson, she explained that it was not enough for me to just plan activities, but that I should think ahead about situations where students finished their work early, or conversely, needed extra support to finish their work. This emphasis on planning ahead and being proactive was challenging for me because it required me to think not only about students who were going to struggle, but also students who would most likely master the content quickly. I had to think of ways to accommodate two populations that had very different needs.

Differentiating for students who needed more challenging content changed my mindset about providing supports and accommodations to students. It is not just students who struggle with the content who need extra support and more individualized attention, but also students who are intelligent and need to be challenged to stay engaged.

After this experience, I learned the importance of collaboration in differentiation. Through both Ms. Joy and Ms. Hayes' observations in the class they were able to create

successful accommodations for the students. In my various placements, I realized that the best

teachers were the ones who collaborated with the other teachers in their grade, and with the other

staff members in the school. This snapshot is one of the clearest and most effective examples of

collaboration, but there were many other experiences where the power of working together was

exemplified. Collaboration is especially important when working with students with disabilities

because it allows teachers to combine their areas of expertise. Ms. Hayes, as a special education

teacher, had more knowledge of the different accommodations that could be used in the

classroom to support the students with disabilities. Ms. Joy was more knowledgeable about the

math curriculum that was being taught and the different activities that could be used. Together

the two teachers combined their knowledge to create engaging lessons that met the needs of each

student in the class.

"Jasmine what does this question say?"

"What continent do we live in?"

"And what is your answer?"

"North America."

Suspicious, I look at her paper and see that she not only misread the question, but she also put the wrong answer. Scanning through the rest of her paper, I can see that she has no idea what any of the questions are asking. I crouch next to her desk and begin reading the first question to her. When I am done, she verbally responds with the correct answer. Now I understand what the problem is. Jasmine knows all the answers, but the main obstacle to her success in this activity is her ability to read.

--THE NEXT DAY--

"Mr. Bradley come take a look at the ANET test for today."

Mrs. Fox has been reading the test to see how hard it will be for the students. By the tone in her voice, I can sense that she is angry. After looking at the test, I can see why. 3 reading passages, 30 multiple choice questions and 3 open ended questions! I try to hide my astonishment from the rest of the class. I know that all of the students are going to struggle with this assessment, not just because of the content, but also because of the length.

Mrs. Fox walk past me and whispers, "There are going to be some tears today." My first thought is of Jasmine, who I know will struggle to read the test. While she may know all the content, her reading skills consistently let her down. I knew that she would try her best on the test, but also that

she would struggle a lot. Thinking of how frustrated she would become angered me. This test was not made for her or other students in the class, who also have difficulty reading, to succeed. The most heartbreaking part of seeing the test was that I knew that no matter how hard she tried, Jasmine would not pass. The test only measured whether the answer was right or wrong. It did not capture all the time she would spend meticulously decoding unknown words, or how she would read and reread questions, scanning through the passage to try to find an answer to a question that she did not even understand. By only looking at one standard of excellence, the test ignored all the other strengths that Jasmine did have.

While helping Jasmine finish her geography quiz, I was simultaneously struck by her high level of knowledge of the content that was being tested and by her remarkably low reading skills. She was able to answer every question I asked her correctly, but then she would write the wrong words, or misspell the words beyond the point of comprehension. It was obvious that she knew the content, but if I had not helped her, she would have failed. In the beginning of my second placement of student teaching, Jasmine had been pointed out as one of the students who had been diagnosed as having a learning disability. I was told that she especially struggled to read and that she was many grade levels behind the rest of the class.

The ANET test contained multiple page reading passages with complex worded questions that were unnecessarily confusing. While proctoring the test that day my main job was to be a cheerleader, imploring students to keep working on the test, and motivating them to do their best, even if they did not think they were doing well. Despite my best efforts, many students became frustrated at the difficulty of the test and simply gave up.

I had thought that to the students, this was just another meaningless test they had to take. However, after seeing their reactions, I realized the students were emotional because they knew that they had done poorly. While my host teacher and I tried to downplay the importance of the tests, it was obvious who had done well and who had not. While the results of the test were not important, the test itself had exposed the individual weaknesses of the students. It was another reminder that they were not smart.

By the end of the test, there were students with their heads on their desks, visibly upset. There was a palpable feeling of hopelessness in the classroom that lingered for the rest of the day. Many of the students felt defeated by the test, and this in turn worried my Mrs. Fox and me. As teachers, we spent significant amounts of time during the school day encouraging students,

and telling them that they were smart and talented. All of our hard work was destroyed by that one test.

Through all the confusion and difficulty, Jasmine kept working on the test. By the end of the allotted time she had read two of the passages and had guessed on all of the questions. In a conversation with Mrs. Fox during lunch, I learned that Jasmine had used the decoding skills that she had been taught, breaking each word of both passages into smaller parts to read them, but had just run out of time. Despite her hard work and determination, Jasmine failed the test.

This snapshot is symbolic of some of my experiences in the Inclusive program working with struggling students who had been diagnosed as having intellectual disabilities. Just like Jasmine, the students that I worked with were all determined, and worked extremely hard to achieve academic success, but still fell behind their peers who did not have the same obstacles as them. These experiences showed me the impact of a disability on a student's life and their abilities to succeed in school. While accommodations and modifications are important, they will never totally remove the negative impacts of the disability.

Watching Jasmine persevere through the test, even when she was presented with tedious passages and confusing words left me feeling dismayed, yet inspired. Jasmine deserved to succeed, but because of something that was not her fault, she did not. At the same time, seeing her work that hard and try her best on the test was encouraging because it showed me how determined she was to do well. Even though according to the test, she had failed, I was proud of her ability to keep working even when others around her gave up.

She was not the only student who struggled to read in my class, and there were many other students who had difficulty on the ANET. This experience helped me realize that for students with disabilities, standardized tests frequently do not accurately measure their

intelligence. If Jasmine had been given the test verbally, I am sure she would have done much better. However, because of her learning disability, she failed. While I knew she was smart, and my host teacher knew she was smart, her score on the test did not reflect that.

Through my journey in the Inclusive program, I had never seen a student work as hard as Jasmine did to overcome her disability. She showed me the potential that students have to be great. I know that with her work ethic and her dedication, she will succeed in the future. She inspired me to continue to support students so that they can do their best and taught me that even though it can be difficult to be a Special Education teacher at times, it is worth it.

<u>After the Program: Getting Ready for my First Classroom</u>

Through my time in the Inclusive Elementary and Special Education program my understanding and perspective on disabilities have changed. Coming into the program, I had very little factual knowledge of disabilities, but I had many experiences playing sports, and interacting with individuals with disabilities through Special Olympics. I was interested in the program because of its dedication to inclusion, but at the same time, I was unclear about what inclusion would look like in a classroom. The inclusion I was familiar with meant giving everyone an equal opportunity to participate on a sports team, but did not explain how to include students in an educational setting.

As I progressed in the program, my definition of disability changed as my experiences evolved. Before coming Syracuse, my definition of disability was based on the values of the community that I lived in. Since the school that I attended isolated students with disabilities to separate classrooms, inclusion was a concept that I was largely unfamiliar with. However, through becoming involved in Special Olympics, I was introduced to the idea of inclusion as it pertained to sports. Even still my definition of disability was limited. It was based on the experiences I had in Special Olympics as well as the way that disabilities were perceived in the media through popular TV shows such as Glee. In Block I, my understanding of disability was centered on the theories I was learning about in my courses. I was so concerned with my individual growth as a teacher as I became more comfortable in that authority role, that I did not focus as much on the individual needs of the students in my class. In Block II, I learned about the importance of supporting students through the accommodations and modifications that are built into my lessons. My understanding of disability became more realistic, as it focused on the different strategies that could be used to support students with disabilities in the classroom. Over

that summer, my understanding of disability continued to change, as I learned about the different lenses that disability was viewed through. Combining elements of Dr. Smith's medical model of disability with the social model of disability that I had learned at Syracuse, I changed my definition to recognize some of the lived challenges that individuals with disabilities have. In addition, working at Camp Shriver taught me the importance of building genuine relationships with students and using knowledge of those relationships to make the classroom a more inclusive community. In Block III, my belief in inclusion was reaffirmed as I experienced the negative consequences of excluding students from the classroom. In student teaching, I learned about the realities of the impacts of disability on a class through my experiences with collaboration among teachers to change the way students were supported.

Now at the end of my Senior year, I realize just how much I have learned about teaching students with disabilities. I have learned through many different lenses how to provide supports, accommodations and modifications for students and have seen how successful students can be when they are given the services they need. My vision of inclusion has evolved from my involvement with Special Olympics. I now know that there are many ways to implement inclusion in classrooms and have experienced it in a variety of environments through my placements. My firm belief in the necessity of inclusion has persisted through the program, and if anything has become even stronger because of my experiences where students have been excluded from a classroom or group.

Emotionally, I have learned that being a teacher is a tough job. Sometimes you have good days, where everything goes right, and sometimes you have bad days, where you feel that you will never be able to recover. Through the program, and the emphasis on reflecting on your

strengths and weaknesses, I have learned that every experience is a learning experience and that there is always room to do better.

Next year I will be teaching at Valor Collegiate, a charter school in Nashville, as a part of Teach for America. While it may seem contradictory to be participating in this program because I have studied education for the last four years, I am excited to serve in an urban, underserved community where I know my skills can be put to a good use. I was inspired to join Teach For America because of my experiences working with inspiring teachers in urban schools in Syracuse. Seeing their dedication to providing rich educational opportunities, as well as the impact that they have on their students lives, has encouraged me to also do the same. Teach For America offers me opportunities to teach in a new part of the country, and will support me as I transition into my own classroom.

Valor Collegiate emphasizes social-emotional learning through ways such as daily circle time, where students work on relationship building, expressing their emotions and coming together as a community, and phase work, where they work on growing as individuals. With the skills and knowledge that I have learned through Syracuse, I am excited to continue to grow as an educator teaching middle school special education next year.

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