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Entering the Inclusive Space: An Autoethnography of a Future Educator

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
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Honors Capstone Project in Inclusive Elementary and Special Education

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Abstract

Inclusive Education is the practice of educating all students in one classroom. Students with disabilities or who qualify for special education are members of regular education classrooms, and remain in the classroom for as much of the day as possible. The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) legalized that schools provide free and appropriate education, as well as educate students in the least restrictive environment. The least restrictive environment is in the general education classroom. This legislation helped to increase the prevalence of inclusion in schools.

This research represents my development as a future educator. I entered Syracuse University as in Inclusive Elementary and Special Education major. My focus, however was neither special education nor inclusive education. Throughout my four years at Syracuse University however, I have changed my mindset and beliefs about special education, disability and inclusive practices. I use my own experiences and memories from my four years in college to research how a person's mindset can be transformed. I begin exploring my thoughts during my first two years in the program, highlighting key lectures and placement moments that challenged my thinking. I then look at my experience studying abroad where I had my first experience needing my own modifications. In this second section, I additionally look at my semester post-abroad and how I became more critical of my professors and how they were not doing what they were teaching us. The third section explores how my student teaching is the first time I saw inclusion working for all students, and how my mindset began to change, during planning lessons and on a philosophical level. I finally reflect on all these experiences and where I am at moving forward as an educator.

Executive Summary

An autoethnography is a methodology that studies a group or a culture by focusing on the individual. The researcher becomes the subject being studied, and their experiences are the data. This means the researcher is already a part of a community that is being studied, and their lived experiences are used to discover something about that culture. The experiences being studied can be reflective on past experiences and include moments currently being lived.

I decided to use the method of autoethnography by the suggestion of my adviser and my education major. I began my project by thinking of the broad topic of my development as a teacher. I am in my fourth year in a teacher preparation program, so I am a member of this culture, and have individual memories and experiences that shaped my involvement in this group. I started by going through my transcripts and highlighting any classes which caused a reaction (either positive or negative). From these classes I looked through my old class notes and papers and began to write about specific memories from these courses.

An autoethnography has a distinctive characteristic of having some memories written as anecdotes in the first-person. After the anecdotes, there is an analysis written about the moments and how they relate to the larger group and question being investigated. My research began with only the memory section. Once I wrote these I looked for patterns about what I wrote or about my development as a teacher. The trend that I noticed was many of the memories were related to my original and my changing thoughts about inclusive education. For this project, inclusive education refers to the education model where students with disabilities are integrated into the general education classroom for optimally the whole day.

My project is broken up into three parts, based on my development as an inclusive education teacher. Part I is the beginning of my college career, and focuses on my original

ideology where I not only disagreed with inclusion, but, I had a strong opposition to it. I write about my special education courses and how both disability is defined and how inclusion is discussed. In most of these anecdotes I refer to my own experiences growing up with a school attempting inclusion and the negative impacts this had on me. I also write about the experience of being someone who did not agree with the main ideology of their program. I was surrounded with arguments that inclusion is the best practice, and my teachers and peers repeatedly supporting this claim that I disagreed with. The second part of my paper is the change in my thinking. This revolves around my experiences abroad and the effect of being in Paris for the terrorist attacks. As a result of this experience, I had to get my own accommodations and modifications for classes for the first time and had a first-hand experience of this. Part II also includes the larger impact coming back from abroad and adapting to SU life after this event and what I learned about teaching to the whole student. I experienced disappointment in how my teachers handled the situation both abroad and upon returning to SU. Part III is my experience in student teaching in two integrated co-teaching classrooms (where there is a general education and a special education teacher in the classroom). I describe how my thoughts about inclusion changed and how this was seen in my lesson plans. I saw inclusion being successful and I explore how my thought process around inclusion change. I end the piece with a discussion about my overall experiences and how these relate to the larger context of teacher preparatory programs and how to change someone's mindset.

This is an important project because as an educator I spend my life trying to help shape and develop student's minds. In college, I live in a space as both a student and a teacher. My own teachers are trying to shape me into a specific type of educator, just as I will try to shape my students into productive, loving, passionate members of society. My story is useful since it

demonstrates how ideologies can change, and the many factors that go into this. Creating a world that is more inclusive is a goal of our program, and I am leaving it, believing in inclusion. This project explores this development and the larger question of changing someone's beliefs, and the impact that education can have.

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Introduction

I entered Syracuse University, August of 2013 in the School of Education. I knew from a young age that I was drawn to children and teaching. I have memories playing school with my dolls and making my family take 'tests' that I created and graded. As I got older I was a Sunday School teacher and participated in mentorship programs and tutored students in the town next to mine. In high school, I wavered between majoring in education or social work. I had taken child development courses in high school so I had some idea of what these courses would be like. After a day shadowing a local elementary school social worker, I made the decision to major in Elementary Education. When researching possible education programs, one aspect stood out, some schools offered dual certification in elementary education and special education. My goal was to be an elementary general education teacher, but I knew I had to be competitive in my job market. So, I limited my search to schools that had this dual program. After visiting the schools I was accepted to, I felt I belonged at Syracuse and my family sent in my deposit.

I expected to come out of college as a confident teacher. I anticipated learning the best practices for teaching, theories behind educational methods, and having experiences teaching in the field. I knew Syracuse had the most field experiences of any school I applied to and I knew they had placements in schools in urban and suburban districts, which was one of my criteria for a program since I was already passionate about urban education. My focus upon entering Syracuse was to become an urban educator. Despite knowing I would be certified in special education, I did not expect to leave as a special education teacher. I had a fixed mindset on what I wanted from college and a plan on how I would get it. My focus on urban education seemed practical since we were in the city of Syracuse and the side of School of Education building said 'urban education'. The special education certification seemed like a nice bonus but was not my

passion or interest. This autoethnography will tell the story of how I transitioned into becoming an educator who is passionate about special education, focusing on inclusive education.

Methods

I was first introduced to the ethnographic method in a sociology research class. I learned the researcher becomes a member of a group to study them. The researcher's experiences in that group become their research. I was not aware of autoethnography until I met with my honors advisor and was informed that honors students within the School of Education are encouraged to complete an autoethnography. I began my research with the writings of Carolyn Ellis. She describes autoethnography as, "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)." (Ellis, Adams, 2010, p.273) Autoethnography is different from ethnography since the since group being studied is one the researcher is already a member of, and the focus of the research is their own life events. This research can also be done retrospectively. The researcher will not always know while experiencing an event that it will be an autoethnography, so the researcher reflects on past experiences through memories and journals/writing to aid their research.

The specific form of autoethnography that I chose is a personal narrative. Ellis describes the personal narrative category as "stories about authors who view themselves as the phenomenon and write evocative narratives specifically focused on their academic, research, and personal lives." (Ellis, 2004, p.46) Writing my autoethnography, I focused on stories or anecdotes from my life that contributed towards my larger research of my development as a supporter of inclusive education. I focused on my academic and personal life and wrote from this perspective. One goal of personal narratives is to write about a topic that can impact someone else's life. Your story can be generalized and influence someone else. To do this, it is recommended to include "sensor and emotional experience, and to write from an ethic of care

and concern.” (Ellis, Bochner, 2000, p.46) This ethic of care is how I started writing my autoethnography.

For my autoethnography, I began with the broad theme of my development as a teacher. The School of Education values reflexivity to establish and solidify our philosophies as educators. This reflexivity gives merit to this form of research, particularly in the education field. I have experience reflecting after each lesson I teach, and on my teaching philosophy after each semester. I began my research by highlighting any courses on my college transcript that stood out. I looked for any feelings of excitement about a course, or where I felt strong negative emotions. I went through class notes, my papers, and lesson plans I’d written for these classes and marked examples that elicited an emotional response or showed my beliefs as an educator. My next steps involved writing down my memories. I did not write journals throughout my college career, so I relied on looking at my notes from lectures and writing about these events from memory. I went through my notebooks and put sticky notes on the pages that represented concepts that I disagreed with and those that challenged by preconceived notions as an educator.

The process of recording these memories provided more of a challenge than I expected. I could remember the events and easily wrote about what happened. What challenged me was writing about my personal thoughts and feelings. Writing about certain moments required a vulnerability that I was unfamiliar writing with. My innermost thoughts about events had to resurface and be put into words. At times this felt wrong, I have been conditioned to omit emotions when writing and in this project, my research hinged on this openness. I also found that even writing the factual events about certain memories was challenging. I had to write about painful times and relive those moments to the smallest detail. I had to put myself back in that time and space and remember both what happened and how I felt. I had suppressed these strong

emotions and raw feelings to help me cope with some situations, and this writing required me to re-examine these events and emotions. This resulted in a physical tiredness, which I had also not experienced in other writings. As I wrote these memories I was still in school and experiencing events that shaped me as a teacher during my student teaching. For this semester, I kept journals and immediately wrote down stories of what had happened

Once I finished my initial write up of all my memories, I looked for trends. The first trend I saw was an increase in my confidence and teacher presence, including learning how to incorporate music and movement into each of my placements. I had multiple memories that revolved around my internal struggle to find my voice in the classroom and feeling as though my teachers wanted me to be someone else. The second theme I saw was the development of my thinking and actions about special education and my beliefs about the inclusion model. There was an immediate arc to this development, beginning with memories from classes where I disagreed with how special education was taught. As the memories progressed I noticed the topic of inclusion reoccurred, but I had different reactions. I additionally had personal experiences that made the concepts of special education real to me and, upon reflecting on this, I saw the change in my thinking during student teaching. This development surprised me. I did not have any intention of being a special educator or being a supporter of inclusive education. Going through my notes reminded me how strong my feelings were against inclusion when I began the program and how they had changed. This change intrigued me. I was interested in discovering what caused this shift in mindset. As an educator, I am interested in the impact education has on students and I think that changing someone's mindset about a group of people and practice is the largest way you can impact someone. I wanted to use my life as research to consider how this change occurred and what factors influenced the shift in my philosophy.

Once I decided that this autoethnography would explore the process of becoming a supporter of inclusive elementary practices, I divided my work into three sections of my development. The first section included writings that supported my initial thoughts and feelings against inclusion and being a special educator. The second section included the memories that began my shift in thinking and my personal experiences with disability. The third section described how these changes in philosophy flourished during student teaching into what I believe today. My initial write ups of memories became the beginning of each section. I formatted the work to have the firsthand experience in italics and then an analysis on the importance of that section and why it related to my larger question. I followed this pattern for each section.

But First a Note

My writing takes place in the context of the inclusive elementary program. The structure of the program is chronologically situated. The program is set up in blocks, where each block shifts the focus of what we are teaching and increases the expectations of that teaching. Pre-block refers to the semesters my freshman year where we had an observation day in a pre-school but did not involve teaching. These classes established the base of our program's philosophy and is where my autoethnography begins. Block 1 involves being in a classroom with another education student four times a week for half days in a grade between K and 3rd. I was in a first-grade classroom. We did individual tutoring and taught five community building lessons. Block 2 began full days where there were two sections. We taught one math and one social studies lesson (that included differentiated instruction) in the first section. We then returned to SU education courses for six weeks. The next six weeks were back in placement where we taught a social studies unit and another math lesson. I went abroad after block 2 (fall of my spring semester),

which creates a pause in the education program. Upon returning, I entered block 3 where we taught the same six week on and off pattern. We taught mathematics, ELA, and a science unit. I then completed my student teaching. I student taught in New York City and this is teaching full day for the entire placement. My college career ends with a semester back at Syracuse.

Part 1: Inclusive Elementary, Minus the Inclusive

Walking in my first EDU class, I notice the large room. “Wow, there must be over 50 people in this room!” I think as I walk down the aisle. I look around hoping to see a familiar face, but do not see any. I pick a seat near the front of the class, take out my fresh notebook and wait. Professor C walks to the front of the class. She is wearing heels, a dress and a blazer. She stands with upright posture and a commanding voice. Listening to Professor C describe the course I feel excited but overwhelmed and I remind myself, “I am here for this purpose and excited to see what I will learn”.

I came to Syracuse University (SU) for the Inclusive Elementary and Special Education program. My purpose was to become certified in elementary education and special education. I wanted both certifications on my resume to give me a leg up against other teachers who only had one certification. My interest was in becoming a general education teacher; I had no interest in special education. This program was special for its ability to get students (including myself) into the field earlier than any other I looked at. This first semester we were placed in pre-schools specializing in teaching students of different abilities. I was at an inclusive preschool which specialized in teaching students of different abilities. Along with this placement was an introductory course on inclusive special education. This course was the first time I learned about inclusion as a positive educational practice, and about special education.

I Worked Hard for This, Why Are You Diminishing It?

“Social construction” I hear the term said by Professor C and see it projected in large letters on the power point slide. Thinking about this word brings up notions of race and how I’ve heard arguments that race is socially constructed. My first thought is, “how does this relate to special education?” “Social construction is the thoughts and expectations attached to a group of people or idea based on abstract presumptions created in society” Professor C begins to say.

These same words are written on the screen and I hurry to write them down. "Is it real?" I look up from my notes and the room is quiet. The whole class appears to be pondering this question: Is it real? I am perplexed, "Of course it's real. Race is real, it's something you can see and trace back. Disability is real. It is something different on the inside, or outside of someone. This wasn't an inherently bad thing, but it is a thing so it is real" I think as the silence in the room continues. Professor C comments that disability is socially constructed. She begins citing examples to build her argument. She starts with Down Syndrome. I think, "how can this be socially constructed, the very definition of Down Syndrome is the extra chromosome. Is she going to say this is a lie?" I feel myself getting worked up and angry at what I know are the facts. "You can't dispute the scientific proof" I think, as a mix of anger and confusion fills my body. Instead, Professor C acknowledges that "there is an extra chromosome, but it is society that puts the meaning of this difference." This explanation does not win me over, instead I think, "It is a practice in science to look for correlations and causations. If this is instead social construction, then is all science social construction?" Professor C continues her argument by informing us that scientists have changed the IQ number required in labeling an intellectual disability. I pause. I agree that IQ numbers are a social construction of intelligence. I would not want my life to be determined based on a test score. But, how does the social construction of IQ correlate to the social construction of Down Syndrome? Professor C describes how social construct develops expectations. There are low expectations and the belief that everyone with Down Syndrome, "looks the same, is stubborn, is happy." This concept of human perception begins to soften the scowl on my face. Professor C assigns the class activity of writing the social constructions for different categories and disabilities. I fill in the worksheet, but I do not leave believing what I have written.

My overall emotion in this class session was annoyance. My first impressions of the inclusive elementary program was that this woman must be some new aged thinker that doesn't believe in science. I continually thought about disabilities I knew and how all of them were explained by a difference. How did she have the right to come into a classroom and throw that all away? I judged my program from this class that I would not believe what was being taught.

“Ability tracking is when you group students based on their perceived ability.” Professor C defines the word we are going to be discussing. She relates the term to elementary schools having different colored or themed reading groups. She continues her talk, “As students progress through school this tracking develops into honors programs, AP courses, dean’s list, and special education classes.”

These are the notes I look as I begin the week’s homework assignment. The task is to write a short paper on ability tracking, including our personal relationship to it, connections to our readings, and describing its implications. As I look at the blank computer screen, I can hear the expected response being written in my head, “I experienced tracking but it was wrong! The implications for the students who are not in the top track outweigh the positives of having the system.” I know what the expected response is, but I cannot get myself to write it. I have written seven other essays for Professor C regurgitating what authors have said, and shaping my personal experience to sound like this expected response. I am tired of this lying.

In the program, I had begun to feel like an outsider. In class and discussion everyone around me seems to agree with our readings. They nod and argue about the social construction of disability and for the harms of teaching in self-contained classrooms. I learn quickly that I need to hide my true thoughts about inclusion. I think to myself, “get through the next four years and then I can teach however I want when I get out.”

As I read the articles about inclusion, I can feel anger rising inside me. The ideas being written are only focusing on the students in the lower groups. "Of course, they ignore the upper track children" I scoff, "all they care about is the one child with a difference, they forget the other 22 kids!" I am now upset and can feel my face turning red. My experience as a student in the higher track is being lost. Why is my school experience not as important as the students in the lower groups? I am grateful for being tracked. I was challenged and it helped me get to where I am now, sitting here at a major university.

I look at the blank screen and tell myself I need to write something. I slowly move my hands on the keys, typing out these thoughts. I am apprehensive to be honest but I try to offset this by using the correct terminology. I remind myself of the good grades I have gotten up to this point, and the buffer I have, so I can write an essay I believe in. As I get to the end of the paper I do try to reflect and say I recognize how, where I am, is due to inequality from ability tracking. I write about my experiences in High School and remember how I didn't always start in the highest group. My freshman year of high school I was placed in the 'regular' level (there was only honors or regular) for english and after one class I began the process of transferring into the higher level. I needed recommendation letters, written from my middle school teacher, my own written letter and my transcript. I had the family and support to make this change, which impacted the trajectory of my high school English courses, since I ended up taking AP English courses. I concluded my paper that while I had benefited from tracking, I had also felt the struggle to change tracks (into the honors classes). I began to see the author's point that tracking restricts student achievement based on an initial evaluation of intelligence at a younger age. This is summarized in as the last paragraph of the paper.

"I feel that there is a difference in every student and how they learn. Classes should not be weighted the same if one class does drastically more work than the other

and there is a need for separate classes. Through class and the articles we read however my brain is trying to re-grasp the idea of tracking as being negative and that if those students who were seen as lowering the academic level of the courses were given the opportunity to succeed that we would not have had the problem of needing honors courses. So after reflecting on my own experiences being tracked I can see how it can be both a positive and a negative.”

In writing these thoughts, I felt a confusion of emotions. I had believed in the benefits of tracking and attributed my hard work and dedication as reasons for getting into the higher tracks. I believed that the different levels of classes were not the same, and should not be treated as such. In writing this paper however I began to question, not as much these ideas, but the systems in place that created the divisions. I knew it was hard to go from one track to the other but I still believed that for the most part, students were already in the correct track that matched their academic level. I began to think about students who were stuck because of this system. Maybe tracking did not just acknowledge the high thinking of the upper tract but instead was putting students on a predetermined path that they would not be able to get out of. This confusion made my original anger towards tracking dissipate. I did not know what to believe. Do I remain with my own experiences and feelings, or is there actually some merit to what we are reading and being taught? How could the education system that provided so much to me, be structured to give me this success based on the restriction of others?

These events all occurred during my freshman year at Syracuse. I was living in a world just removed from High School. With all the new experiences and people in college, I tried to think back to those happy times any chance I could. While these memories were happy, during this semester, I began to see the institutional biases and procedures that were in place to facilitate the schooling experience I had. One thing I learned, was the importance of “Doing School.” This

means the ability to sit in a class and listen to a teacher, to do the assignments and not to question what is being told. I excelled in this. I grew up loving the structure of school and I fit well into this construction of what a 'good student' was. Entering college, I learned how to 'do college.' I learned my professors and what they wanted to hear in their papers.

The anecdote about the ability tracking paper was influential in my career at Syracuse since it was a time I ignored the acceptable practices I knew would get my A, and instead wrote what I believed. I wrote about the anger and angst from high school resulting from classes being too easy. I attributed the 'dumbing down' of course material to the inclusion of all students into the classes. I had lived in a school that 'taught to the middle.' When students of different abilities were put into the same class, the content was easy for the 'higher level students' and challenging for the perceived 'lower level students.' I brought up this experience in class and the response was "what about *de-tracking* where all abilities are supported and all students have enriched opportunities and ways to utilize their strengths instead of everything being lowered." This response lost all progress I had made toward thinking inclusion was possible. I saw this as the epitome of a teacher who was all theory with no experience. I thought how nice it was to have these grand ideas, without having to be the one living them. I was angry for the experiences where I felt my education suffered because classes were taught to the middle, or when a teacher recognized I was bored and gave me additional work. My A was not the same A that the student sitting next to me got. Why was I doing extra work for the same credit? "It sounds great on paper to have all students challenged at their level but it is not possible!" I thought. I felt the urge to scream this and leave the class. "People like this are who change the structure of education but do not have to deal with the implications. Maybe for the one student who is now in regular classroom it is good, but is it worth sacrificing the potential of all the other students?" My

thoughts came fast and fueled by anger. I realized that not only did I not want to be a special educator I now knew I was against inclusion. I held a grudge against the students with disabilities from my schooling. I saw their inclusion (as opposed to the teacher) as the reason my education suffered. It was impractical to expect teachers to differentiate every lesson, there is not enough time in the day. I then began to enter a stage of panic. I did not know if I would be able to continue in an education program I so strongly disagreed with and who I felt ignored my experiences as a student. However, I had already finished a year and liked the rest of the school so I remained at Syracuse, but snickered my way through every special education class.

I grew up thinking my school was inclusive. I remember having students with disabilities in my classroom in elementary school. Once tracking began in middle school the inclusion dissipated since we had three levels of classes. The students with disabilities were placed in the lowest level. There had been parent push back to get rid of the lowest level since the grading was weighted differently than the upper levels. When I entered high school, they switched the system so there were only had two levels. Looking back, I can see how this was not inclusion. Teachers did not know how to adapt to teaching a wide range of students. In my own life, I did not have any close experiences with disability. The closest experience I had with special education was growing up with the difference of having a GI disease. I would be up many nights with intense stomach pain and GI doctors were unsure of the cause. I eventually was diagnosed with Allergic Colitis and put on a gluten and dairy free diet. Colitis means that a part of my colon is inflamed and there are different triggers which inflame it more. To me, colitis was never something to hold me back. I have a high pain tolerance and could get through hours of school or rehearsals while in pain. I had breathing techniques to use and lived most of my life without people (besides my close friends and family) knowing I had Colitis and was in pain.

When Professor C talked about the social construction of disability I kept thinking back to myself. Was my Colitis socially constructed? But I know my pain is real. There is something different about my body. I react differently to food and feel this. How could I be told that it was not real. I found myself thinking angrily, “Did Professor C have pain? Did she have nights of not sleeping, crying in the bathroom when there was nothing that could be done?” There are differences in bodies that are real and you cannot dismiss this as all being constructed by society. As I continued in the class I took the articles with a grain of salt. I saw the readings as theoretical, but not things that could be used in an actual classroom. Professor C shared different stories of students she had worked with. My response to these stories was always, “what about the other 23 students?” I knew it was important for the teacher to try to include the student with the disability, but should that be done to the detriment to the other students? This began my personal crisis in the program. I was an Inclusive Elementary and Special Education Major who did not believe in inclusion, and disliked special education. Everything around me was inclusion. I had come to Syracuse for its focus on urban education. So far, I had little to no exposure with this in my SU classes. I knew that having the special education background would make me a better teacher, so I took a deep breath and continued to plunge deeper into the world of inclusion.

You Can See My Hands Shaking

Molly sits on a stool in the front of the class. Her hair is the first thing that stands out. The curls spiraling down, create almost an afro around her face. Her glasses are on a chain around her neck. Her long skirt reminds me of hippies and as she begins talking, this impression grows. Her voice is quiet yet intense, reminding me of the divinations teacher from Harry Potter.

As I sit in my desk, my mind is racing. My first official SPE class. I know my knowledge about SPE is less than those around me and my opinions on inclusive education do not match the program. I am trying to plan how I continue hiding these thoughts and the questions about

difference I am struggling with. As she passes out our syllabus I see that each week is broken up by different disabilities. This brings a smile to my face since it appears to be a true introduction to disability. "Maybe I can catch up to the others in my cohort who seem to know all about the different disabilities already."

*Molly begins by telling us that she has hand tremors. This affects her writing, so she will not write on the board. When she begins talking about disability I am ready to hear about social construction, how we need inclusion and how disabilities do not exist. I feel myself already getting defensive, ready to dismiss whatever comes out of her mouth. Instead she says, "many disabilities do have a physical difference." I stop. Did my special education teacher just agree with me? How does this fit in with this program? She continues, "there is a physical difference in people. This cannot be denied. Look at my hands, they are shaking. You cannot deny this." I feel excitement building inside my chest. I think "see, I am not wrong! I knew I wasn't crazy!" I see a shimmer of hope that my opinions are going to be validated. She continues saying how disability is rooted in a physical difference, but it is the **interpretation** of this difference that creates disability. Tremoring hands are only a disability when the difference is viewed as a negative. Tremors affect her ability to use her hands, (to write, to draw ect.) and our society has decided hands are important, so not having full use of them is a negative. Her description about how her tremors are turned into a disability makes sense. It is clear there is a difference in her hands, and our society's construction of normality has decided her tremor is a deficit and a disability. "Think about someone who feels pain. From an injury or something chronic. That person has real pain. They feel it and have it. It is a disability when it hinders what they are doing."*

When I think about my time in this program, this is the SPE class that made the biggest impact on my understanding of disability. It was the time when I saw disability not as something

that made people inherently different, but something that was constructed to elicit these ideas of difference. Some differences cannot be denied, from a hand tremor, or how a brain may work differently. However, differences on their own are not necessarily a disability until society constructs it to be.

This class also began a self-reflection on my own life. I had never considered myself to have a disability. Her last comment resonated with me however, I had lived with pain. Was she implying my Colitis was a disability? It was something different about me that I dealt with. I had passes from nurses (to get me out of class if I was having a flair up) my entire school career that I never used. I swallowed the pain and pretended that nothing was wrong. I panicked when I was having an episode and knew the usual bathroom time allotted. Why I didn't use my nurses pass to go down and have the time I needed to let the pain pass and recover was beyond me, until I realized, I did not want to be different. To me, I just had a bad stomach and ate different food. But, with this description my difference could be a disability if *society* constructed it to be. I did not want to be different, and had the luxury of hiding my difference. Since society does not construct stomach pain as a disability, I did not associate my pain and difference as a disability. But her words stuck with me. The pain is real. The difference is real. What was socially constructed was the response. Our society shapes disability and creates something out of that physical difference. This class was important in my development believing in inclusive education, since it helped me understand disability. Students with disabilities were no longer people with inherent differences that required separate spaces and doing different work.

These Students are so Retarded

The classes discussed have all occurred in my pre-block stage at SU. This begins my experience in block 1. I was placed in a first-grade classroom in an urban district. One of my friends from my cohort (Rachel) is my partner (we are placed in the same class).

Mrs. L begins to talk to Rachel and I, about her class. She talks about how many of the students come from low socioeconomic backgrounds. "In the morning, you'll see they all eat breakfast. There are bags that come to each room." She informs us how breakfast is messy, smelly and takes up time in her morning. She gives us our first task of helping the students put papers into their binders. Each student has a labeled binder in a filing cabinet in the back of the room. She gives us a class list and says to call them over and get to know them. We begin by doing this, and I feel my heart beating harder and faster. The students enter the room, looking at us, but no one talks to us. Before Mrs. L even introduces us to the class she tells us to start calling kids up. We look at the list and Rachel looks at me. The first few names are not ones I have seen before. I take a deep breath and call out my best pronunciation of the first name. A student looks up and I ask for him to come with me the side table. Once there, I explain who I am and that I will be working in the classroom. As the class fills in it gets harder for the students to hear us. By the time Ms. L calls the class' attention we have not finished our task. When she asks about our progress, I have my first experience of failure. We did not finish meeting all the kids and putting their papers away. I tell myself I will work quicker to avoid the embarrassment of having to tell my teacher I could not accomplish what was requested.

It is the third day of placement, and Rachel asks about that the schedule for the day. Ms. L begins to tell us about the lesson she's planned, "oh, but I am not sure if it will actually get done. These students are so retarded they can't do the simplest things." I stop. Did I hear her correctly? I look at Rachel and see her face change and freeze. Yes, my teacher has called her

students retarded. The most basic rule of education, setting high expectations is shattered. Not only that, but she has used the R-word. With all the movements to ban and stop the use of this word I cannot grasp how my teacher has thrown it into her speech. I am grateful it was not said to a child but the impact of using this word is felt. Mrs. L notices our silence, and responds, "oh, I know it seems mean but you'll see. I'm not being mean, it's true." Her attempt to explain herself makes it worse. There is no remorse for her language and I am baffled. I also question what she is doing teaching, particularly in an urban school. I cannot believe she has disrespected her students in this way and has laughed it off.

In the corner of the room is a stop light system, a chart where each student has their name and three pieces of colored paper (green, yellow, and red). One mid-morning we are having the students find their book for the ELA lesson. One student is responsible for passing out their table's bags. One of the boys realizes he does not have his and goes back to the crate. The teacher begins yelling at him for getting out of his seat, since he was not the one instructed to get the bags. As he tries to explain, she cuts him off and he returns to his seat, without his books. Two minutes into the lesson, she asks the boy where his books are. He responds he doesn't know. The teacher asks if she looks like his mom who will clean up and find everything for him. He responds no. "If you don't find it I'll have to change your card for disrupting the class." The boy's eyes widen and he is quickly out of his seat. He says out loud "it's in none of these." Ms. L responds, "for speaking out turn your card to yellow." The boy walks to the side of the room and changes his card. He returns looking disappointed. As he looks tears begin streaming down his face. It is clear he is upset and Rachel moves to help look in the crate. Ms. L tells her, "stop looking, he's the idiot who lost it, he has to find it or not do the lesson." We both stop, not sure what to do. When the boy cannot find his book, Ms. L tells him to change the card to red since

she must stop teaching to help him. Now the boy is audibly crying and Ms. L tells him to suck it up and go to his seat. My heart goes out to this boy, but I do not dare go against what my teacher says. I am conflicted about what I should be doing. My priority is the children, but Ms. L is grading me and I am a guest in her classroom. How do I stay in this environment when I disagree on many of her techniques?

From this block experience, I learned the importance of passionate teachers. It was evident that my teacher was there to perform a job that she referred to as “vacation money”. This showed me the reality of some schools and teachers. I was already thinking my classes were operating in a space of idealism, and now my placement confirmed this. During this placement, I grew as an educator, since I learned how to go with the flow. I was never sure what would come out of my teachers mouth or what I would have to do that day. This initially terrified me since I could not prepare, but I learned how to calm down and try my best with what I was given. I additionally saw a teacher and practices that I did not intend to use.

One of the largest realizations from this placement was discovering I did not agree with the use of the stop light system. This had been a system I grew up with and had positive associations with. In our SU class, there was a day when we discussed this system and the drawbacks to using it. I heard these arguments and discredited them. I felt that since I had lived with this system and it worked for me, it must be a good system. Why would it be bad to have a visual to students about their behavior? If they don't want to see red, then they shouldn't break the rules. These were my thoughts during this discussion but I did not share them. There was an atmosphere where disagreeing with the system was the ‘correct’ response so I went along with this and just built up my thoughts and frustrations inside. Looking back, I see how I viewed the management system from the perspective of a student who could follow class rules and get what

I needed from the supports already provided. Experiencing the child crying as he tried to follow the class rules gave me the opportunity to view the system from the perspective of a student who does not follow the rules as easily and who needs different supports. I saw the tears shed as cards were changed and the fear that was engrained in students. The constant threats to turn cards created an atmosphere where faults were looked for and paraded in front of the whole class.

This also represented a time when I began to see that some of my assumptions on best teaching practices were not the best. I had written papers about why the stop light system was detrimental to students, but I did not believe what I had written until I saw it in practice. My own experiences were not the experiences of all students, and these are the students who need to be thought about when planning a management system. This realization about this system represents a larger refocusing of my attention and relearning occurring. I was beginning to look at the experiences of all students, and thinking specifically about the 'bad' or 'trouble' kids and their experiences in the classroom.

What am I missing?

During block 2, I was placed in a second-grade classroom with a new, 23-year-old teacher. I had opportunities to try new techniques to teach and incorporate more movement and music in the classroom. After our first six weeks, all students in my cohort at SU give an 8-minute presentation on our social studies lesson. These lessons were additionally being graded for my 'differentiations course' which taught us how to incorporate accommodations and modifications for our lessons so that all students in the class could access the lesson. This is leading us towards creating lessons that support an inclusive classroom where all students are supported.

My knees are shaking as I sit in my seat. I look at the board and recount the number of names until it is my turn to present. I have practiced this presentation more times than I can count and know what I need to do to keep my presentation under 8 minutes. I watch my classmates go before me. I notice how slow their tempos are. When the timer goes off and they are not finished they are forced to sit down, losing the points from the slides they did not get to. I go back through my plan of fitting it all in. When it is my turn I walk to the front of the classroom and start talking. I am a fast talker normally, but am impressed by my own speed. I am terrified of missing some information. I have worked so hard for this grade and do not want to miss any points because I went too slowly. The professors sit in front, their faces stone cold as I talk and I begin to worry I am doing something wrong. I want to impress them with my creative lesson on communities. I am used to being the best and want to continue being a top student in the cohort. I can feel my classmate's eyes on me and I feel more pressure imagining their judgement of my lesson. I begin to worry that I did not have the best lesson, and feel my tempo speeding up more. I finish my last sentence as the timer goes off. I finally take a breath and answer any questions from my classmates. To my surprise, they all smile and one even comments "you are so cute! Please say you want to teach Kindergarten." I am confused by this comment, since I was not trying to be 'cute' but trying to show my understanding of the content. The last question is asked and I sit down. As I watch my classmates present I see great ideas and lessons. "I wish I had thought of that" I think, but also worry that my lesson is not good enough. I had felt so confident going into the presentation, but sitting there I am beginning to see I am not the most creative in my class. I have a longing to have the impressive lessons in front of me and I feel a great disappointment in myself. This is not a feeling I usually feel and am not sure how to handle this emotion.

Reflecting on my lessons from block 2 for math and social studies I see endless pages of lesson plans filled with concept maps, justifications and the lesson plans. My process for planning social studies involved asking my teacher what to teach and reviewing the materials she gave me. I then found the common core standard related to the topic and began planning my lesson. My initial reaction to receiving the topic of communities was that this was one of the main common core standards for second grade and I felt confident that I would be able to align the lesson to these standards. I tried to think about engaging the class and using multiple intelligences. In my first lesson, I taught communities by having a group discussion where we looked at images of the three classifications of community (urban, rural, suburban) and came up with class definitions of each. The class then did rotations through a book center, a drawing center, and a writing center. I planned the lesson thinking about what most kids would do. I wrote the lesson how I wanted it. Only after this initial lesson was written, did I begin to think about differentiating the lesson. My focus was on the students who I perceived as 'normal' and what they could do. On the lesson plan template, there is one column for the lesson (left) and one column for the differentiation or accommodations being provided (right). I planned entirely in the left column before looking at the right. After I decided what I was doing I tried to put in a few bullet points of how I was differentiating. I put in the minimum differentiation needed to get a good score for that class. I had the teacher read the book aloud, and had a sentence starter strip on the writing table. While these were useful accommodations, they were an afterthought. My primary purpose was to create an engaging lesson for the students who could normally access the information. I only added the 'extras' to fill in my lesson plan template.

This resembled my process for all my lesson plans during block 2. Differentiation was a class I was taking, and I was adding in these accommodations and changes to better my grade.

There was no internal conviction that these accommodations were improving my lesson and helping the students in my class. Instead, I thought more about my grade and pleasing my teachers than what would help my students. At this time in the program, my passion was still urban education. Special education was of no interest to me, besides a way to pass a class. I did not see the importance of these accommodations and modifications for my class. I did not feel I had any students with that severe of a disability, so why was it needed? I also found that some of the accommodations I had written on my lesson plan I did not actually do in my lesson. There were ideas of writing and projecting definitions, and having students in pairs that I had written because I knew they looked good, but I did not think were actually needed. I did not see the impact these accommodations had on the students and was not interested in the time and effort needed to add these into every lesson. I had no interest in special education and was still against having the inclusion model.

PART II: My World Turned Upside Down

I studied abroad in London, England during the fall semester of my junior year. During this semester, I took general requirement courses (ETS, History) and two sociology courses for my double major. I was learning to navigate a semester with no education courses. I traveled many weekends with my friends and went on many of the school sponsored trips to other countries. The next memory occurred in November on my trip to Paris, which ultimately shaped my view on the value of accommodations and special education.

I walk with five friends out of the Louver. I had seen the Mona Lisa and checked off another box of my abroad to see list. We eat dinner at a nearby restaurant, taking the extra time to order Crème Brulee for dessert. Paris was the dream that I had hoped. Versailles was grand, there were cafes on every corner and I loved the atmosphere.

We are returning to our hotel on the metro when the conductor announces they will not stop at the next station (our stop), but to get off at the next station and follow the signs back. Our stop is located in a square known for political rallies and demonstrations. Earlier that morning we had seen people with posters walking there. Emily brings this up, suggesting something happened with that. We get off at the next stop feeling we have solved the mystery. We see a sign pointing to our square and follow it. We continue following the signs until we reach a road that is blocked off. We make a loop around and get back onto the road, to find it blocked as well. We are all calm as we look at street signs and then at our paper map of Paris trying to get back to our hotel. On the next road, we see flashing lights and people walking both towards and away from the commotion. The calmness begins to waver since we are not at the square, but already seeing police. We are sure this is the direction to go in, so we continue. It is eerily quiet, except for the siren from the police car. My heart begins to beat faster since I am unsure what is going

on. "Stop talking" Emily whispers, "if something is going on we don't want people knowing we are American." This increases my worry since we are in a country that did not have a reputation for welcoming Americans. We continue walking in silence. We see Police standing around and a man in a red coat walking on the street yelling in French. Two women walking in front of us turn around and hurry back where we just came. The man in the puffy red coat says, "turn around, you cannot go this way!" We stop, he was speaking English! But this happy feeling quickly shifts to panic knowing this is the only way we know how to get back. He must detect this panic since he asks, "where are you going?" We give him the name of our hotel and address and he orally tells us which streets to take. This does not help since so many of the French names sound the same. He then asks if we have a map and points out the path. We thank him and say we will try to follow his directions. He tells us to hurry. This makes us pause. He asks us, "don't you know what is happening?" We all shake our heads no. "There's been some sort of explosion and they closed the streets." My heart stops. An explosion means danger and all I can think is we need to get home immediately, but no one moves. We are all processing this information and our bodies have not caught up to our brains. He begins speaking faster and offers to walk with us the beginning of the way since he is going in the same direction. This is relieving since there are many turns and streets we need to follow, so the five of us begin to follow him.

We walk towards an intersection where we will break off from the man in the red coat, he says we just need to continue straight. When we reach the intersection, we find more cops, red lights and the road crossed off. I begin to worry there is no way to get home. The man approaches one of the police officers. He comes back, a worried look over his face, his brows are squeezed and his voice is low. "You need to find a restaurant to go into, you need to get off the streets." We nod at his instructions, turn around and start walking. He pauses, to our left

was a restaurant which minutes ago was packed with diners, now is empty with half eaten dinners on every table. The owner is locking the door so he goes and speaks to him in French, he returns to us saying, “okay um... there should be a bar up here that may be open.” We walk and find another deserted space. He stops, takes a deep breath and tells us, “there is a shooting going on and he has been on these streets. The restaurants have been told to shut down and all people to evacuate the streets.” My heart skips a beat. An explosion, now a shooting, I feel my safety slipping away as the panic rises in me. Where can we go? We need to get off the streets, but now restaurants and bars are no longer an option. We can’t take the roads we need because they are closed off. It seems like every option is crushed and I my mind cannot think. He then turns to us and says “come back to my apartment. It is close by and we can walk together.” My internal response is “no, we can’t follow a stranger into his home!”, as he says this I turn to look at my friends. Emily is standing in the front, looks at us and I can see her eyes trying to offer reassurance. There is no time to rationally think about this, so I swallow my fear and agree with the rest of the group to go. Even as I do this I can picture all the times my parents have told me not to talk to or trust strangers, and I am now putting my trust in one. My internal moral compass is spinning out of control and I feel a confusion of emotions. I am terrified about what is going on, but grateful we have found someone to help us. I feel like I am in a dream, looking at the flashing lights, hearing a language I do not understand being yelled around me. There are swift motions on either side of me as people scurry inside but I am not fully aware of any of it. I have entered a survival mode and my only focus is keeping my eyes forward, my feet moving and avoiding breaking into tears. I am counting in my head up and down to ten, making sure I am breathing on every five counts. This is all I can do to prevent my mind from entering a space of

worst case scenarios about the shooting or following this man. My feet continue putting one in front of the other and I feel like a sheep being herded with my friends, away from the streets.

As we walk, he attempts small talk. We learn his name is Salim and he lives part of the year in Paris and part of the year in Barcelona. I am going on autopilot as all my brain can do is count to ten. "Oh, I hope you won't mind my mother" he says. I snap out of my counting with a moment of hope, if he is bringing us to a home he shares with his mother it is more likely to be safe. I finally acknowledge my fear about following him, but feel calmer knowing his mother will be there. He explains that he lives next door to his mom. Since her apartment is larger we will go there. His brother and girlfriend should be there as well. I feel myself calming down thinking about how we are going to a family home. We get to a street and he stops, he punches a code into a gate and pushes it open. The gates offer another chance to breathe, as I associate the physical gate with protection. He walks us to a brick building and we go through a little walkway to the front door. He puts in a key and we walk in.

The apartment is dim with tan walls. There is a small kitchen attached to a living room. There is a large circular table with chairs, and a couch in front of a TV. He immediately turns on the TV. He watches a few minutes of news and picks up the phone. He hangs up without talking, he informs us his brother, his girlfriend and mother must still be out and he is worried. He tells us it's his brother's birthday and they were going to a party. He starts pacing and continues calling. He then says the phones must not be working and asks if we need anything. We say no and he brings over some water. He turns his attention towards the TV. He translates for us, "there has been an attack... there are more attacks happening..." A map flashes on the screen, I recognize the name of the square of our subway station and the area around our hotel. There are red marks representing spots of the attacks. He points out the road we were on and how there is

a red mark. On the top of the screen is a number. It starts off around 50 and as the night progresses it keeps growing. While I do not speak French, I can translate for myself that it is the casualties. We realize we need to get in contact with our program. He gives us his wifi password and we reach out to them. He offers us drinks as we contact our parents. When I facetime my mom, she asks how I am doing and I respond, "I'm safe don't worry", "what?" she says and I realize she does not know what has happened. I did not want to have to tell my mom what is going on so, I tell her to look it up. I cannot talk about it without feeling the tears well in my eyes. But I know I cannot cry. I needed to be strong for me, and for my friends around the table. Crying will not help, so I talk fast and try to play down the severity of the attacks. I tell her to google Paris, I quickly explain there's been attacks but we are safe. My Dad then gets on the phone and I talk to him as well. I see Kelly give her phone to Salim who talks to her mom, I ask for the same thing as I imagine my dad worrying. Salim talks to him, laughing saying he ran into us and now we are here going to have a good time. I am surprised with how Salim is smiling and making jokes (I later learn he was doing all this for us, trying to calm us down). We all finish making our calls and remain seated quietly at the table, unsure of our next move.

His brother, mother, and the girlfriend walk into the house. He rushes over, hugging and kissing them. I long for this family moment. While I know, my family is safe in the U.S. I want that comforting voice and touch. Instead I am in a stranger's apartment on the scariest day of my life. They talk in French and then look at us. He translates that he told them he found us and we could not get back to our hotel so he is letting us stay here until the streets are cleared and we can return. The girlfriend begins talking to us in English, and the brother introduces himself and then sits in front of the TV. The mom makes a pot of tea and gives us cups. The mom speaks limited English but smiles at us. Since none of our five speak French we smile back at her, and

use motions to communicate. "You all play cards!" Salim exclaims and questions, to which we nod yes. Talking seems to take more energy than I have. I am sitting and engaged, but also spending energy pushing down the emotions from the night. The brother sits in front of the TV not moving. One of our friends sits next to him, silently fixated on the screen. I feel myself being drawn to the news and the ever-rising number on the screen. But I also feel the wallowing and unhealthy uncertainty when watching. Emily is looking over as well and whispers, "it doesn't help to watch." I know she is right, there is nothing we can do. This feeling is hard to accept. This entire night has been out of my hands. I prayed to God when on the streets asking for calmness and safety but this was all I could do. As someone who is a control freak this inability to have any control has a physical reaction. My body is shaking which I see when I hold my tea cup. As I sit I begin replaying the events from the night, starting at the metro and how we ended up here, over and over in my mind. I relive the panic and confusion. I still feel like this is all happening to someone else and I am watching. Reliving it is keeping me focused on reality.

Salim takes out a pack of cards and teaches us a card game (similar to Old Maid). After a few rounds we teach him how to play Uno. We continue teaching each other card games from our countries. With each game, I am finding it easier to breath. My pulse is slowing down and I find I am even smiling. Salim is larger than life acting out the game rules and joking with us. The night becomes about showing each other our cultures and traditions. We transition to playing music. To represent the USA, we play hip hop, country, and pop music. Salim and the brother's girlfriend listen intently and then turn on a French pop song which we all bob our heads to, and then Latin music. Salim explains how living in Barcelona part of the year has taught him how to salsa. As the music plays he begins to dance, and soon we are all standing learning to Salsa. There is laughter in the air and smiles on our faces. I am genuinely beginning to enjoy my time

with this family. For a moment, we forget about the tragedies and fear occurring outside of the apartment. I don't think about why we are here, but instead try to enjoy my time with the French family. It was a night filled with accepting one another and sharing parts of ourselves. In a night filled with lockdowns and inhumanity, there is a glimmer of hope and love in this apartment. We pause to grab water and Salim says "this is what you must remember about this night, this is what France is, we are a loving people. We are happy people, remember us this way."

This is the idea I try to remember about this night, the laughing and compassion shown to us. I will never forget Friday November 13th and the implications it had on me. I got to see incredible works of art, but also see how quickly it can be all taken away. My family has called Salim my guardian angel. He found us lost and opened his home to us. The city went on lock down and we had to stay the entire night there. We only slept at the very end and that was barely rest. When playing games and the laughter stopped, it brought me back to reality. I was forced to remember what was going on, and we tried to research what had happened since more information was known. The fear and anxiety began to creep back in. Most of the night I continued thinking about our actions and how those 10 minutes we ate desert gave us the 10 minutes to miss the explosion and shooting. I felt blessed, but with an intense feeling of guilt. In these quiet moments, I finally felt the tears swell in my eyes and silently fall down my face. I accepted the reality that I was in Paris and had just gone through a terrorist attack. Acceptance made the facts real, and the experience I had gone through in context. The more I thought about this the tighter my chest felt and the harder it was to breathe. I tried replaying the happy moments but then felt guilty that I was laughing while others were dying. This made me feel harder on myself and regret my choices to play the games instead of watching the news.

The next morning, we walked back to our hotel. We passed the intersection from the night before and saw sawdust on the road (Sawdust is used to cover and soak up blood.) We passed a restaurant with more sawdust in front and we noticed the bullet holes in the windows. I imagined the night and everything that had gone on, just hours earlier. There was no one else out besides police officers at the street corners. I could feel their eyes watching us which gave me comfort. Later we saw in the news that in the places we walked there were memorials created later in the day. But when we walked the city was quiet and the remnants from the night before felt like time was paused. We were walking in an area stopped by time, the aftermath of a tragedy before the mourning began. In this moment, I could reflect and honor those victims without the rest of the world watching.

We reached our hotel and were greeted by the abroad activity coordinators from SU. When I was in the hotel I felt for the first time that I could let the tension out of my body. I could fully fill my lungs with air and know I was in a safe place with others I knew. These calming emotions let me finally sleep. The rest of our outings were cancelled, and SU said we were not allowed to leave the hotel. When we arrived at the train station the next day I felt a mix of excitement and fear. I was close to entering my 'home' and comfort of London. I wanted to be on that train, heading away from this country and the memories associated with it. At the same time, it was eerie being in the station. There was security at every corner and our passports and tickets were checked for what seemed like double the time. I also looked around and saw all the people in the station. My mind began to think how this would be a prime location for another attack. I tried to push these thoughts from my mind but they resulted in feeling paranoid and counting down the minutes until our train left.

I realized in the train station that I did not have any souvenirs. Every country I had been to, I had gotten some memento to remember it. My first thought was that I did not want anything to remember this trip by. I had the emotional trauma, that was enough. I walked through the gift store and found myself getting angry. Paris was now ruined for me. I would not be able to look at the Eifel Tower without my heart beating faster. I looked at the row of nicnacks and each one brought back this feeling. I bought a macaroon since I had wanted a true French Macaroon. After eating this I realized, there are wonderful things in Paris. I thought how I would not be back here for so long and I might want something. I went back into the store and looked again. I found chocolates that had images from Paris on the wrappers and bought these. It has been over a year since I was in Paris and I have not yet opened the box of chocolates. It remains in my room in the original bag. This box of chocolates has come to signify something larger. These chocolates are the memory of the worst moment of my life. I decided I would take the wrappers and make a collage of all the Paris images. I am waiting until I feel I have been able to move on to do this. The moment when I can look at the bag and not feel tears in my eye or my heart beat faster just looking at it. I do not feel I am at this point. The chocolates remain in the box, and Paris continues to hold this emotional reaction. I am grateful to have something from Paris since I now view it as a symbol of my strength, but do not feel ready to break it open and fully move on. By eating the chocolates, I am showing I have moved on from this experience but I do not want to do this. I want to remember this moment. I want to think about these experiences to remember both the destruction and love of the world. The box of chocolates is so much more, and I am not emotionally ready to open it up and finish this part of my life.

Where Do I Go From Here?

My first class back in London is an ETS course meeting at a local art gallery. I travel there with Emily and Kaitlyn (who were also in Paris). My first test is taking the tube (subway). The announcers voice makes me jump each time an announcement is made, but I keep breathing and we get to our stop without any major concerns. The art gallery is associated with a University, but located in a large warehouse. The exhibit is multimedia focused with different 'rooms' that contain video and music. I walk around the smaller rooms, and end up in the main exhibit. There is a large screen in front of me and speakers surrounding us. The film starts with a desert scene where the moving camera gives the feel of a moving vehicle. There is a loud popping noise and I jump. My immediate thought is that there has been another explosion. My shoulders scrunch to my ears and I look around. Everyone else is sitting quietly. My mind begins to spin. "Calm down Lindsey, it was just a noise." I start taking deep breaths and hold onto the bench I am sitting on to help me regain my physical consciousness. There are more popping sounds and this time I am convinced they are gun sounds. This creates a larger reaction inside me and I feel my breathing faster and shallower. "It's just a movie, you are safe" I repeat to myself. My leg is tapping on the ground, faster and faster. There are more gun shots and I feel I am close to losing it. My body is now shaking and I am holding my breath, trying to avoid crying or screaming. There is an explosion sound to my left and I physically jump from the bench. Now I am panicking and feeling I am stuck in this space. I need to get out. My whole body is shaking and I am replaying the explosion in my mind. This could have been me I think. This is what I missed, I tell myself. I begin to almost torment myself by thinking I should stay in the room and feel what actually could have happened. With more shaking and shallow breathing, I feel disappointed in myself. I did not even see any bomb or shooting, I should not be having a

reaction. I am now getting angry at myself and belittling my own experience. I feel my hands clenching onto the bench and how cold my body is. As the film plays there is another explosion and I know I need to remove myself from the space. I am finding it hard to breathe at all and each step I take feels like I am hiking up the tallest mountain. It takes all my energy to get out of the room. I pause when I leave and look at the black walls surrounding me. I put my head in my hands and crouch to the ground. I try breathing to and from 10 and I feel my body swaying back and forth. This is a calming motion and I find myself doing this and quickening the speed I am rocking. I pause and realize how odd I must look. I stand back up and tell myself to pull myself together. I begin to walk and continue hearing the explosion and gun shots from the main exhibit so I walk until I cannot hear them.

I find a room that is black, has two small children's light aquariums and a film of a major city scene. I sit down here. I curl my legs into a ball and try to get my body as small as I can. I fixate my attention on the moving fishes. I try to only think about these fishes and swimming in the ocean. I try to forget I am in this dark, overly stimulated art museum. I try to push from my mind the video of the desert. I find by staring at the fish I can do this. I can sit with the fish and imagine myself somewhere else.

I walk into the regular school building and feel a sense of comfort and apprehension. I am ready to be in my classes and try to forget what has happened. At the same time, all I want to do is stay inside my protective flat, with the support of my roommates and ignore the world going on around me. As I walk in, things feel oddly normal. My classmates are laughing and passing by on their walk up to their classrooms. I see smiles and how for most of them it is a normal Monday. The building seems muted and this is oddly reassuring. I notice eyes on me and my

friends. Voices go quiet and people hurry past us. I am not sure if this is real or I am imagining it. When I meet up with other friends I receive big hugs and “oh my goodness, are you alright?! What happened!?” I do not want to talk about it. I want to get to my class so that I can get back to my flat.

I pause before I turn the doorknob to the classroom. I am entering the class ‘Islam and the West’. I have disliked this class from the beginning of the semester, since the class is structured to have debates where there is only one correct answer. I try to talk minimally in general, avoiding having to come up with an opinion and defending it, however she cold calls on students. She begins this class as usual, by chronologically teaching the history of Islam. Halfway through class she informs us that we will spend the rest of the class reading different news articles about the recent attacks to see how Islam is represented. As she says this I shake my head. I almost laugh to myself thinking, “of course we are talking about this.” I am finding it almost comedic that I have a second class where I must confront the attacks. All I want to do is forget about the weekend and return to my safe space of school. Instead, every space I enter is relating to it. I cannot escape and this creates a new feeling of being trapped.

Before we read the articles, she wants to talk about the weekend. A few students share their thoughts, but it is mostly quiet. This is when she begins calling on people. My foot starts tapping, my hand is shaking and I am trying to avoid thinking at all. Instead I return to my counting and picture each number in my head. I have successfully tuned out the class and am keeping myself somewhat sane. As I do this I am interrupted, “Lindsey what are your thoughts about this weekend?” I pause. This is the opposite of what I want. I want to hide under the table and pretend I am not in this class. Instead I have been thrown into the middle of it. I try to

formulate words but just feel myself getting angry. "I should not be forced to talk about this!" I scream in my head. The class is still waiting for me, so I slowly come up with the answer, "I don't think I can give an unbiased response at the moment. I was there and experienced the attacks and aftermath." I feel my tone is pissed off as I want her to feel bad about calling on me. I want her to feel her mistake of forcing this discussion without caring about the students in the class. How could she just waltz into the room and think it was alright to discuss this when several of her students had just experienced a life changing experience. I feel my face is hot and know I must be a deep shade of red, I am angry, upset and holding back the tears. When the conversation ends, we are given a ten-minute break. She tells the class that anyone who does not want to do the article assignment may leave and not need to make it up. My first response is, "good! You shouldn't have forced this in the first place!" But when I look at my stuff I do not move. This is my class, I am here to get an education. I do not want to step out of class. If this was any other class I would not leave. I always stay for activities, even if they are optional. I am trying to hold onto this aspect of my identity. I have lost my control and feeling of comfort from the weekend and do not want to lose this aspect of myself. I decide to go to the bathroom and decide what to do. As I wash my hands I start feeling more anger. I am first annoyed with myself. I have always been able to 'do school' well. If I leave I am admitting that I cannot do that anymore. I am a school person and I will not change that. But as I look at myself I see my red, puffy eyes and my shaking hand turning off the faucet. I realize I am not okay. I have not processed this event on my own and am nowhere near ready to process it in front of a class with different experiences. I step out of the bathroom and a girl from class comes over and says how awful it was the teacher randomly called on people and if she were me she would leave. Hearing someone else validate my feelings makes me begin to cry. This is not how I wanted to come back

to school. I had built up school in my mind as my safe haven, and it has been taken away. I do not feel safe to share my ideas in this class. I was trying to stay to prove that I was my normal self. I realized that I was not my normal self. I felt some disappointment in myself since I could not just snap back into school mode, but I also acknowledged how off I was, and how I needed to get help.

In the SU London academic building there is a program office. There are three women who plan outings for the abroad center, to different places in London and trips to other countries. When I leave class, I do not want to go back home. I need to be around people who understand what I am going through but will let me be quiet. I walk to this office, because two of the women were in Paris. When I get there, my friend Kaitlin (who had been in Paris) was already sitting at the center table. Her eyes have a similar red puff as she talks. Seeing these familiar faces help my anger fade. Laura came over to the two of us and offers to make us tea. As we drink the tea she asks us about our day and what brings us to the office. I find that I can openly talk to Laura. My thoughts are validated and she offers a kind smile. This office becomes my safe space in the SU building. I know I can come here and get away from the looking eyes of others and regroup after using up what seems like all my energy in class. My second support system is my flat (apartment). I live with five other girls, who were all in Paris. I can openly talk about what I am feeling and often one of the other girls has similar emotions. We begin to work through this experience together and the effect this has on our lives. It is a space where we can talk and cry, but also be quiet and just know there is someone next to us who understands.

Why Won't My Brain Cooperate?

I sit with a blank computer screen in front of me. I am in finals and struggling to complete my assignments. My hands are already shaking and I almost in tears. I will not be able

to finish this paper. "Why is my brain not working? What is wrong with me?" I do not know what to do. I try to rest, but struggle getting back up. I constantly feel exhausted since I am not able to sleep. My energy is drained by the smallest tasks such as showering or cooking meals and I consider it a success each day I make it to school. It is hard enough to get out of bed knowing I must go to class but now I am filled with disappointment and anxiety knowing I will not be able to complete all the work. I try to do what I can but end up feeling worse. I have never had this experience. I've always been able to sit down and do what I need to get done. If I need to read, I read. If I need to write I write. Now, my brain will not cooperate. All I can think is that Paris is ruining my semester. I have had all A's and now I don't know if I will be able to pass these classes. I begin to think I will need to retake all the classes, and be at SU an extra semester. This seems like the worst outcome. I have planned my life to the T, and now this is all in jeopardy. I return to this feeling of losing control and it makes it worse. I panic about getting all the papers I need to, done for my finals.

I had known the academic coordinator of the program prior to Paris. Upon returning from Paris, Kaitlyn and I meet with him (Mike) to talk about our academic concerns. Mike informs us that the professors have been given lists of all the students who were in Paris. It is up to them how to handle the situation. As my anxiety about finishing my finals rises I meet with Mike again and he suggests altering some of the assignments. I bring in my work for each class and we sit down and discuss, what is due, if I think I can do any part of it, and other ways to show what I've learned. Mike emails each professor asking their abilities to alter the assignments, but he tells me the decision is ultimately up to him, as academic head. The final decision is to take my Islam test in a separate setting where I can take the breaks I need to avoid my physical breakdown and shaking, one class debate, one full paper, two reduced papers, and I

am exempt from two papers. As I am working on these we also come up with plans on how I will work. I learn to set a timer for 15 minutes to work and then take a break. I find by doing this I avoid the shaking and can get more done. We set goals for when things will get done and I have someone to check in on not only my work, but on how I am functioning (eating, sleeping, getting to class).

Agreeing to meet with Mike was an internal decision to admit that I needed help. All I wanted was to return to school and progress as if nothing had happened. I did not realize how badly I wanted this normalcy until I did not have it. My parents questioned why I did not go to Mike for help right away. It was a matter of pride. I did not want to admit that I was different after Paris. If I could write all my papers before Paris, I wanted to write all of them after. By asking for help I was letting my guard down and admitting I could not do the rest of the semester on my own. The first time I met with Mike I felt uncomfortable. I had never asked for modified assignments and did not want him to think I was using the system or taking advantage of the situation to get less work. The more I met with Mike, the more I realized it was not a bad thing to get help. He did not think less of me, but instead saw I was working and doing the most I could do at that moment in my life.

The weeks following Paris were the first times I dreaded going to school. I experienced feelings of constant panic and worry about my classes. I went from someone who loved education and school to just wanting the semester to end. The first two class periods (the museum and Islam and the West) represented my time returning to school. I felt like an outsider. I was the same physical body walking to class but inside I was different. It felt as though everything pointed to Paris. I also did not agree with how my professors handled the attacks. While they might not have known they had students there, it was a scary time for everyone.

When I had enough and talked to my teachers about it, they suddenly became overly nice and reassuring. I found ways to adjust to school. I learned new coping techniques and forced myself to go to class, but that was about it.

For the first time, I received my own accommodations and modifications. I realized that the pride in my ability to usually do work inhibited me from getting what I needed. When I first thought about asking for help I associated it with weakness. I resisted this and instead was making myself sick and hurting from pushing myself to places it could not go. I internally yelled at my body and my mind for feeling it was letting me down. This made me feel helpless. I watched Kaitlyn talk to Mike and advocate for what she needed. I realized I did not think she was exploiting the system or weak. I envied her confidence to say exactly what she needed, and to stay with it until she got it. I could see the benefit of accommodations for someone else, but I struggled to justify it in my own life.

As I was debating if I would take the modifications I had many conversations with my parents. One that stood out was when my mom asked, “would you give accommodations to your students if they had something happen?” “Of course!” I responded, how could I not try to help them, “if it’s what they needed I would give it to them.” I realized I was differentiating between help and modifications. In my mind ‘help’ was a negative, something I easily gave but struggled to receive. I realized I was holding myself to not just high but impossible standards. I needed something to be successful but I was not giving it to myself. What I needed were modifications, something that all students should be given. I needed a different way to present my learning. Getting these modifications allowed me to succeed. I really thought about what I could do and what my body could handle. I began to gain a deeper understanding of modifications as something that was a ‘bad’ thing that showed weakness into a way to reach success. I was

ultimately successful in finishing that semester and while they were my lowest grades on a whole, I learned more than any other semester. I felt for the first time what it was like to have my brain not be able to do what I wanted it to. I could not complete the tasks I knew I could do and that I saw others doing.

As a future educator, this experience gave me firsthand knowledge about accommodations that I had the privilege to not need previously in my life. I am a better educator learning to ask for help. I had an internal opposition to modifications based on my own conceptions of associating strength and worth to independent success. Having to ask for my own modifications taught me that they are instead, a needed change for students to succeed. As I progressed through the program this was a major change in my core understanding about special education and how inclusion can work, where all students are given what they need. It is not that the student with the disability is 'getting it easier' but that they are doing what they can do so show their learning. This change was a silver lining I have found from the tragedy that occurred in Paris in my own life

Do As I Say, Not As I Do

I dread returning to Syracuse. I want to remain in my safe home with my family, but I need to leave that. I am scared about returning. What if I have trouble sleep again? What if the shaking returns? What if I can't do it? I have immense doubt in my mind and a fear of leaving the comfort and safety that I had built up in my home.

Block 3 feels different. My cohort has been apart for the summer and fall semester. Many of us have lived in different countries with looser schedules and must return to a block schedule. As classes begin, there is a definite shift in our cohort's dynamic. A professor says this shift always happens when students go abroad and we need to shape up and adjust back to real classes. She says we are not adjusting fast enough and it feels as though our cohort is failing.

This comment stings, I am trying my best to stay afloat back at SU, and now a professor is saying this is not enough. I have to drag myself to class, knowing we will ultimately do something else wrong or to disappoint the teachers. With each class I notice how our cohort's behavior is changing and this confuses me. Our classes are filled with arguments and my peers acting disrespectfully to our professors and each other. I want to just sit them all down and scream! What is happening! We used to be so strong and now we are acting like spoiled teenagers who have not gotten their way. While I am not happy with all of my classes there is still a respect that should be given to professors. This respect is missing in our cohort. Whenever abroad is mentioned or we are told something about our cohort is off/wrong I think back to Paris. I can complete more work than when I was abroad and use my coping mechanism of breathing by counting to ten. I fill in all my available times with activities, this way I do not have time to think about what I am feeling and this made me tired enough to sleep at night. While this is not my healthiest semester, I am surviving.

I enter the small office of Professor N to discuss a lesson plan for my placement. I see the familiar table and set up from when I was here for previous conferences. She starts by asking how I am doing. "Under the circumstances, I guess I'm doing alright" I respond. She asks what I mean and I elaborate, "well I'm not completely back to normal after Paris and am trying to keep up with everything." She says, "oh yes, it must have been hard to be in Europe during that time." I looked at her face and realize she does not know. I took a deep breath and begin, "yes, but it is harder since I was in Paris." A look of surprise crosses her face. "What!?" she exclaims. I proceeded to tell the story about what happened. She asks if anyone else she knows was there, I began to list off names of other School of Education students. When I finish, I have

named seven names and Professor N is quiet. She explains how she can't believe she didn't know so many of my cohort had been in Paris. I am surprised she does not know this. I assumed that since the School of Education is so small the knowledge would have gone through the professors. I say that Professor L knows about Paris since at least another student and I have had meetings with her about our concerns of adjusting and brought up Paris. Professor N thinks aloud if this could be a reason why our cohort is acting differently. I am thinking, "well yeah... generally a life changing experience will affect people", I am both glad she is thinking about this but annoyed it has taken this long. We are not just adapting to being back to the U.S and in block, but transitioning from a traumatic experience. She mentions how it never came up at any staff meetings when our cohort behavior was discussed. Which surprises me more. How could it be that something so large in many of our lives was not mentioned.

My return to Syracuse showed me how challenging it is to adjust back to something in which I had comfort and familiarity. I was relearning how to live as an education student. This semester filled me with annoyance towards my cohort's behavior. There were times I wanted us to shake out of it and go back to being our energetic, passionate cohort. Instead we argued or barely talked in class. I was additionally disappointed in my professors. While I have not always loved everything in previous classes and blocks, I could accept the faults and focus on what they did well. For the first time, I felt they were letting us down. There was a need for many of their students which was being ignored. When I think about what I have learned about teaching one core concept is teaching to the whole child. Related to this is knowing what is going on in students' lives and keeping this in mind with how it impacts them as learners. I felt that this important consideration was skipped this semester. Teachers did not try to see how we were doing, we were just told to pick ourselves up and hurry up with our adjusting. I felt a lack of

compassion and caring for us as human beings. Instead I felt like another name on a list that was being deemed 'ineffective'. They did not try to get to the root of the problem, but blamed the surface level blame on the students. This tough love was not what I needed this semester. My meeting with Professor N was the first time it felt like someone was listening to me. I felt I could open up about what was going on in my life. This meant the most to me this semester. She gave me an example of a caring professor who was trying to get to know us and help us. This is the memory I think about when I think who has been my most influential professor. After our talk, she opened her next class by saying she was here for anyone who needed to talk. This helped open a space of mutual understanding of what was occurring and knowing we had support from her. Professor N's realization did not perfectly fix our cohort, but it began an understanding about the cohort as human beings and how this shared experience shaped our behavior.

Philosophy Check-Point

When I finished block 2, I approached accommodations as an afterthought. I did not see the value of these modifications, except to improve my grade. During my abroad experience, I learned more about differentiation than in any of my SU classes. Having firsthand experience of different needs shaped my perspective on special education. I saw how it was not weakness but instead what the individual needs. My internal belief around accommodations changed. My previous mindset had reflected my own schooling where I got angry when I saw others get accommodations. I questioned why they got things easier. I believed in things being 'fair' and thought that inclusion broke this principle. I learned from Paris the distinction between fairness and equity. Students do not need to be given the same things, instead it is important that students are given what they individually need to reach the same goal.

This new way of thinking influenced how I interacted in the classroom during block 3. There was one student with an IEP in the class who was pulled out for most of the day. I was

able to work with her during social studies and I helped create additional planning pages for her research paper as well as scribed some of her handwritten notes. Before Paris I would have done these if my teacher asked, but I would have questioned if they were really needed. The other students were handwriting their papers, and this student could type hers, plus she needed less information in the paper. After Paris, I looked at these modification as a way for the student to reach the same goal of completing a research paper on a person from the Revolutionary War. I actively wanted to figure out how to help the student. I also appreciated having talks with my host teacher about learning when to step back and have the student try on their own. I felt I was beginning to learn a balance of challenging students while adapting to their needs. I still did not think of this in all of my lessons, but when I did try to add modifications I did not have the internal disagreement that I previously had.

The implication of being disappointed with my SU teachers taught me the importance of knowing what is going on in your student's lives. There was something impacting our cohort and our work, and I wanted my teachers to explore this. Instead, I saw student blaming and an example of my professors ignoring their own teachings. I also learned from this to be more critical of what I was taught. I always thought the program was too progressive and theory based, but in this moment, I really felt the disconnect between professors as researchers and as teachers. They were successful in sharing information, but not in being the teachers they instructed us to be.

PART III: Maybe This Can Work

I completed my student teaching in two Elementary schools in New York City. 14 members of my cohort student taught in NYC. I began with my special education placement in a second-grade classroom. The classroom was an integrated co-teaching model (ICT), where there was both a general education and special education teacher in each classroom. I was anxious about my special education student teaching. I had begun to see the benefits of modifications but still did not believe in practicality of full inclusion, or have any interest in being a special education teacher. I was no longer against special education, but did not see myself teaching it. I went into this placement feeling little self-confidence and worrying I would not know what to do if I had students with more severe disabilities.

Putting on my Special Education Hat

My supervisor enters the classroom to observe my math lesson. My host teacher begins an introduction lesson on the 100's chart. I am anticipating this to last five minutes, but she teaches for 20 minutes. I keep looking at my watch and grow anxious with each minute she is teaching. By the end of the 'lesson' the students are restless on the carpet. Multiple students are laying on the ground and starting to talk to one another. I see these behaviors and hope they will not affect my lesson. When we transition, I am left with 12 minutes for my lesson (I anticipated 25). I am frustrated that on the day I am getting observed my teacher has not kept to our schedule. This was a common occurrence in the classroom but today was different. My grade was attached to this, and now I have 12 minutes.

I instruct my small group to sit in a circle. Four of the students follow this direction, while one boy (Isiah) sits in the teacher chair. I am already sitting on the ground (as my host teacher does) and show him where there is space next to me. He grunts but moves himself over. I introduce my lesson on coins, and ask how we can sort them? The group comes up with "size,

color, and shape.” I give each pair a container of coins to sort using these characteristics. As I pass out the coins, Isiah has found a basket that has miniature people (that we use on the board to show groupings). I try to switch this basket with the coin container. He yells no and continues to play. I feel the pressure of my supervisor watching me. I know I should have all students engaged but Isiah will not participate. I imagine what my supervisor is writing on his form as I feel my control slipping. I thought the lesson would be engaging since students are using real money and are the ones sorting it. When they finish sorting I ask the students to put their coins back in the basket. One student (Nathan) does not want to put the coins away and talks loudly about avoiding this task. I feel the frustration rising in me. Now I have two students who will not cooperate. This cannot be a good impression for my supervisor. Finally, the coins are back and the students have a penny (for the next part of the lesson). I have less than five minutes to create the observation list. I decide to orally create the list instead of writing it on the board. As we create the list, Isiah is playing with the paper people and beginning to talk louder, attracting the attention of the rest of the group. Nathan walks over to Isiah, and tries to take the paper person out of Isiah’s hand. Isiah turns around and hits Nathan. Before I can intervene Nathan hits Isiah back. Both boys start yelling and flinging their arms at each other. I try to separate them and call my teacher for help, panicked. I can feel my face is red and I have lost all control of my lesson. I feel I have failed this lesson and observation. In the last three blocks, I have never had a lesson turn into a fist fight, but it has happened. This is supposed to be my student teaching, showing I am ready to enter the world of teaching and I cannot handle a 20-minute math small group. I leave this less questioning my ability to teach.

As the students begin independent reading I tell Isiah he is going to be reading with me. I am using this time to complete my edTPA lessons (a teacher certification exam requirement). I am teaching him how to blend beginning letter sounds together using a mixing bowl. As we sit down Isiah immediately picks up the bowl and spoon and starts to mix the air. I smile, knowing I have his attention. I ask him to put the bowl down but that we will use it in a few minutes. He puts it down and looks at me. He is listening which is another good sign and I feel more confident about my lesson. I tell him how before we read our book we are going to spend some time learning reading strategies. I ask him if he has ever learned about blending letters. He replies no. I ask if he has ever blended anything else and he responds he had mixed cakes. I smile and say that must be how you knew to use the mixing bowl! I say how in some words there are letters next to each other that we need to blend the sounds together. I take out cards that have consonants written on them. I ask him to tell me the sound that each letter makes. We begin with s, he replies /s/ and the next card is t /t/. I tell him to put both the letters into the bowl. I give him the spoon and ask him to mix them around. As he mixes I take out new cards that have the blends written on them and an example word with a picture. He stops mixing and I ask him what the blend would be. I show him the 'st' card and Isiah replies /st/. "Great job! Now we are going to do this with some other letters!" As we continue this process Isiah begins picking the cards and putting them in the mixing bowl. When he only says the first sound, I remind him to look at what we were blending and he corrects himself.

The two memories represent two experiences in my special education student teaching. With this class I learned the challenges of engaging both small groups and individual students. I worked with students who had what I viewed as challenging behaviors (throwing pencil jars, rolling around the classroom, running away from the class when outside), and I had the

opportunity to see how my teachers handled the behaviors, which made me reflect on my own practices. I learned the importance of teaching student's rules from younger grades. Not rules for rules sake, so every child is sitting silently but rules for safety sake (not being able to find students when they ran the opposite directions, or students getting hit by materials when students threw them).

This placement made me question my ability as both a special educator and a general education teacher. Reflecting on my first observation that ended in a fist fight, I saw it not just as two students hitting each other, but two students who were not engaged. After this lesson, I felt defeated. During the debrief with my supervisor, all these emotions came out as tears. I imagined myself failing student teaching because of the fight. I felt frazzled and insecure. During the debrief however, my supervisor had me look at the entire context of the student's behavior. Were there things that day that signaled the student was having a hard time? I thought back and remembered during recess he had gotten in trouble for hitting a student and when we came into the classroom during quiet time he had thrown multiple color pencil trays. The behaviors did not begin with my lesson. What my supervisor said was that he was impressed I did not ask my host teacher to switch Isiah into a different group. This suggestion surprised me. Isiah was in my group, I could not ask him to leave. It is my responsibility to teach him, even if he did not fully complete the activity he was going to be there to hear it. I realized that I had not only resilience but the belief that any student belonged in my group. If I was the only teacher I could not just remove a student, and I wanted to include him. This was a moment when I realized I was supporting inclusion. I did not think twice about having a student with an IEP in my group and did not think removing him was an option. I did not see the differences in behavior and think he

needed to be removed. Instead, my first thought was what I could have done to include him in the lesson. I believed he belonged in the group, and that it was possible to keep him there.

This reflects my larger development as an inclusive educator. I had begun the program thinking it was best to have students in more self-contained classrooms where they could get the one-on-one attention they needed. I did not see the importance of including all students in the general education classroom. This experience demonstrated my shift in philosophy. I believed that the student could be successful in the general education classroom and in a lesson (I thought) that was engaging and universally designed. I did not plan the lesson around the student, but I believed he should be in the group, and remain in the group. These are ideas about inclusion that I began to have. Maybe it was possible to have students all together in the classroom. I was still unsure how feasible it was to provide all services inside the classroom and had some hesitations about eliminating all pull-outs. I wanted students to get their needs in whatever space best supported them.

One requirement during student teaching was completing the edTPA (a teacher certification test). This test involved teaching three to five lessons, where a focus learner is chosen and the lesson is designed to fit their needs (interest, strengths, needs, accommodations ect). Isiah was my focus learner and the second anecdote was my first lesson with him. While I had to plan the lesson for the exam, I found that I was creating my lesson with his needs first. I did not think about a general lesson on blends and then tack on a few accommodations. I began with his needs and what would be the most successful lesson for both of us. This led to my decision to use a mixing bowl. I knew Isiah had an interest in cooking, and succeeded in activities he could use his hands. Seeing the lesson unfold gave me confidence about my decision. He loved the mixing bowl. He was engaged and involved with the lesson for the entire

time. He also improved on the objective of reading the blends. By the end of the lesson he correctly identified the blends I had him read. There were no behavior issues and he showed an improvement in the objective. Teaching these individual lessons showed my ability to plan for an individual student's needs. During whole group lessons, I still gravitated toward planning the lesson and then tacking on some modifications. I was not sure how to balance thinking about every student's needs. This was something that I improved on during my next placement.

Inclusion in Practice

My second student teaching placement was in a combined fourth and fifth grade class. This classroom was also integrated co-teaching, but my host teacher was the general education teacher. The first lessons I taught were writing. My first lesson was on writing hooks. The special education teacher (Asami) had sent me her lesson plan from the previous year. I had kept the lesson close to what she gave me. I did not want to change too much and felt comfortable using her base.

I look at the chart on the board of the different type of hooks. I have finished going over each type and give the next directions, "When I call your part of the rug, return to your seat and write three different hooks. You are going to take your seed idea and try writing a hook using each strategy." I call the different sections of the rug and begin circulating the room. My host teacher asks if they should write one hook? I reply they are trying each strategy so they should write three hooks. She suggests reiterating this. I make a mental note that I need to improve my directions. I continue walking around and see the confusion. Students are writing one hook. I make the announcement and then continue reminding students individually. I also notice some students not writing hooks based on the strategies taught. I sit down with one student and try to have them use the first strategy: setting. "What would the reader see, smell or hear?" I probe. The student begins to describe it to me orally, "exactly! That is what you can write down." When

I reflect on the lesson with my teacher she comments on the students who struggled with the hooks. She asks what I can do during my next lesson to help support them. I pause. In previous lessons Asami had taken care of the accommodations separately so I hadn't even thought of making something different for students. I realize this is part of my lesson planning and that I need to spend time thinking about all the students.

I am planning my fourth writing lesson. Students will begin writing their personal narrative drafts. I have sent my initial plan to Sharron (my host teacher), but I am filled with uncertainty about all students being able to follow the structure and story mountain they learned. I bring up my concern to Asami. "Why don't you make a graphic organizer?" she suggests. "How would that be different than the planning page?" I ask. "Well, it could have sections for them to write each part of the story. So, have boxes that says introduction, and another box for the beginning of the problem and so on." I think about this and like the idea. "How do I give the students this organizer though?" Asami suggests offering the whole class the option to use either the organizer or lined paper. "What if the students who need it don't take it though?" I ask, she responded that we can encourage them.

I begin my lesson on writing the drafts. I use an online copy of the graphic organizer to type as I model using my planning sheet. When I finish modeling, I give the directions to begin writing their drafts during the remainder of writing. I then inform the class that they have two options for writing. They can use lined paper or a printed version of the organizer that I had used. I expected almost everyone to use the lined paper, however as I watch them pick their materials $\frac{3}{4}$ of the class pick the graphic organizer. I had only made 15 copies and realize we will be short. My teacher runs to the office to make more copies.

During my general education student teaching I sent every lesson to my host teachers for feedback before teaching it. I always received comments and things to consider. At first these responses frightened me. Every time I opened the document I dreaded reading all the things I had forgotten. I thought, "I am close to being my own teacher and I cannot write one lesson where everything is thought about." I was frustrated with myself and scared that all the things I still needed to learn meant I wasn't ready to be a real teacher. From reading their comments, I learned that the questions they asked me are ones that teachers are always asking themselves. Comments revolved around three main points 1) *the physical flow* of the lesson: where were, students sitting, how would I transition them? Which timer would I use? These comments helped me to visualize my lesson and remember the importance of considering the bodies of my students. 2) connecting the lesson to the *real world*: Sharron suggested changing my examples to more complex issues and topics. I learned how much the students know. Connecting lessons to the real world helped them understand the topics and gave them importance. When I taught a lesson on prejudice and discrimination I was anxious about using real examples but when I did they got excited about talking about their lives and experiences. It opened the door to a discussion that would not have come if I use more 'school-washed' examples. 3) making sure *all students* could access the lesson: what would I do for students with different disabilities? What modifications or adaptations would I use in the lesson, could these be universally designed? With each lesson I wrote, I began to not only think about the content and creative ways to teach this (involving movement, and different activities) but also these main concerns. I would think about exactly how many students were in each group, and if I was assigning the tables. I incorporated the book we were reading as a class into my lesson as an example since it was something all

students had experience with. And I began to think about how to make sure all students could access the lesson.

At first I did not want to step on Asami's role as the special educator. What I learned was she was just as much my mentor and teacher as Sharron. When I began to plan my lessons, I considered all my students. I thought about the needs when planning the activity and picked one the most students could do, and what modifications would be needed. It was incorporated into my planning instead of being an afterthought. I also learned how modifications are presented impacts students. By giving the graphic organizer as a tool for everyone, this extra help does not get stigmatized as being inferior or that the students who need it are less intelligent or capable. Instead, it turns students into advocates for their own learning and deciding what is best for them. I could see students thinking about their learning and making the best choice for themselves.

During student teaching, I began to see how an inclusive classroom can work. I saw my teachers working together to modify lessons so all students could access the content. I could see how these modifications benefited students. Each lesson was thought through and every student was challenged. This was what made inclusion seem like a positive classroom model. Students succeeded no matter their perceived level. Students who were higher level thinkers in a subject area were then pushed to learn new strategies for writing, or complete extension activities. Since there were multiple teachers in the room this was often done with groups. I also liked how the groups changed for each subject area and for each unit. This meant it was not always the students with disabilities in one group and the students without disabilities in the other. Instead, it was fluid grouping where students who needed extra support could go, and then students who needed more of a challenge could also be supported. One thought that continually entered my mind was how could this type of successful inclusion work if there was only one teacher in the classroom?

There were many times when small groups and individual help could be given due to the dual teachers (and my presence as a student teacher). I saw inclusion working, but in a model that had additional adult support. I was still critical that inclusion could work in every classroom, because of the dangers that inclusion done wrong can have (teaching to the middle, ignoring students' needs). However, I saw how inclusion could be done right and benefit the students. The theories I had heard and criticized was in action in this classroom. I still did not believe it was possible everywhere and had my own concerns about the school. I was not the full inclusion cheerleader my professors were, but I was moving from my complete opposition side.

Conclusion: Looking Back and Moving Forward

When I entered Syracuse University I envisioned myself as an urban educator. I viewed the additional “inclusive special education” as something to put on my resume and help make me more marketable, but not something I had interest in pursuing. I was against the main belief of our program- inclusion, and used my personal experiences to justify my opinions. When classes began, I was critical of everything being taught. All I could reference were my personal negative experiences. Experiences that made me bitter towards inclusion. I remembered courses in highschool made easier to accommodate all students, and special education teachers only willing to help ‘their’ students. This was what I knew as special education.

Beginning in my pre-block classes I felt the pressure to believe in the inclusive practice. I listened to lecture after lecture about students who benefited from inclusion and the overall justifications for inclusion. Inside, these lectures filled me with anger. I saw my professors as adults separated from the real world of teaching. They did not grow up with inclusion and were living in ‘theoretical worlds’. As my classmates agreed with my professors, I learned I was in the minority with my beliefs and how to hide these feelings. I continued to have my critical thoughts and anger but I kept it inside. I learned how to ‘play’ the special education teacher to the point of getting A’s. One large realization from pre-block was learning that disability is a social construction. I could connect to my own health concerns and see how difference on its own does not inherently make a disability. I wear glasses (a difference in my eyes) yet I would not be thought of as less competent. From pre-block classes I learned that difference becomes a disability when society determines it is.

When I began Block 1, I viewed myself as a general education teacher. During my Block 1 placement, I realized some of my assumptions about best practice and teaching had been

shaped by my own life, and my privilege as a student who succeeds in the traditional school structure. I could listen intently to a teacher, I did not break rules, I sat in my seat quietly etc... I had thought that this was the ideal student. During this placement, I began to see that while these behaviors do make teaching easier, students who have difficulties with these behaviors are not deviant or bad. School values a specific type of learner and many students need something different than what is being given to them. I saw in practice methods that were discussed in class. I began to think about the whole class of students and how these methods impacted students who did not succeed in the structure of school.

The pinnacle moment of my development as an inclusive educator came from the Paris attacks. I had my first experience of my body and brain not being able to do what I, and my teachers wanted it to do. I was battling a form of trauma and trying to keep afloat academically. I saw firsthand the importance of support from adults and my teachers. They had a commitment to helping us all finish the semester abroad and to pass our classes. I was grateful I had worked hard and had good grades up to the attacks, since it made getting accommodations from my professors easier. At first I resisted asking for help. I wanted to show that I was 'ok' and did not need accommodations. I learned that my conceptions of help (weakness and less intelligence) were not true. Modifications are giving a student what they need to succeed. There is no weakness or looking down on needing these. It is not making the work 'unfair' but instead helping to level the playing field so every student can show their learning.

Paris will not be easily forgotten. This was something in my life I will always have. Even today, when I hear about attacks or hear about Paris my heart beats faster. I have learned coping mechanisms and am no longer paralyzed by these emotions. I learned how important accommodations are. Students are not being lazy or trying to play the system. For those who

need them, accommodations are giving students what they need to access the same information and show their learning. I had to put down my pride to learn this, but once I did I saw the benefits in my own life of asking for help and advocating for myself.

Returning to Syracuse offered more challenges and a disappointment in how my professors handled my cohort's change in behavior/attitude. This failure to think about our lives and experiences taught me both what and what not to do. I was disappointed in my professors for ignoring this event and change in us. I began to question my professors. Did they know that so many of us were in Paris? Once they did know (from talking to us) why was this not shared with the rest of the teaching group or impact how they handled our changing cohort? I also questioned the University. I believe that the professors should have been told that students would be coming back with some trauma. I also realized there are always things occurring in students lives and the University cannot be responsible for informing every professor. Seeing the reaction of the school and my professors raised more questions. I also learned how important it was to have a teacher who wanted to talk and listen to my story. When I interact with my future students, this is the type of teacher I want to be. The type of teacher who has conversations even if they are hard. Someone who notices when something is wrong and tries to figure out why, instead of putting the blame on the student. I felt a lightness in my heart and breath when I walked into Professor N's classes because I knew I could talk to her and admit if I was struggling with a lesson plan because I was back having nightmares and not sleeping, or when another attack in Brussels occurred and I could not leave my bed. I had a lifeline in her and it inspires me to be the same for my students.

My experiences in and post Paris did not magically transform me into a special education teacher. I did not walk into student teaching feeling like a confident teacher who thought about

all students and their needs first. I still felt like a general education teacher ‘playing’ special education teacher. But from my semester abroad I learned how to be an educator who valued individual needs and saw the purpose for including accommodations in the classroom. I now valued this individual basis for success, but this did not translate into wanting to be a special educator. From my first placement, I realized the power of one-on-one work. I had the ability to connect with my focus learner and get him to do work and improve his reading. I saw how interest and the belief of success alleviated some disruptive behaviors. I felt more confident in creating lessons on a student’s needs and interests.

My second placement allowed me to use what I learned about individual student interests and needs in a full group setting. I am grateful that my host teachers pushed me to think about all students and how my teachers guided me on incorporating modifications into every lesson. By the end of my time in my second placement, I was creating lessons with universal design, so all students could access it, or in ways which their needs were a part of my original plan. I left this placement the most confident in my ability to accommodate students in the classroom. This placement also gave me the best example of what a successful inclusive classroom can look like. I saw how it could function and be a positive learning environment for all students.

I did not enter Syracuse with the intention of becoming a special education teacher. I fought this role and its principles/ideologies from the beginning. However, with each semester my mindset began to shift and I became more interested and more convinced about the benefits of inclusion and that I could be a teacher who supported inclusion. I place the climax of my change when I was abroad. I know that very few people will (or should) experience a terrorist attack (or another traumatic event) and need modifications. This was an extreme situation which shaped all areas of my life, including my teaching practices. While I am not glad I experienced

these attacks, I have found a silver lining out of the experience, in that it taught me the importance of modifications. I gained new insight into student's needs and how this relates to inclusive education. This insight created the foundational mindset change that was built upon during my student teaching. The attacks in Paris and the trauma occurring post-attacks represented the time when I had a personal connection to what I was learning in class. Modifications were no longer words and theories in a textbook but part of my life. This real-life application of the material is what made the difference. In elementary education, we value hands-on learning and explorative lessons. In my own way, abroad was my hands-on learning about modifications. I learned their importance and impact by needing them in my own life, and having my mind-set adapt with my changing needs.

As I look forward I can see how my development as an inclusive education supporter is genuine and shaping my future. I am looking at teaching jobs and while my interest is still general education, one of the first questions I ask schools is their beliefs on special education. I do not want to be in a school where they use self-contained classrooms and set low expectations for their students. I value the collaboration of students, and finding ways to challenge each student. After student teaching in two ICT classrooms, this form of co-teaching is the type of classroom I want to teach in. I know an ICT model is not as common in schools however. I still feel confident in my ability to make accommodations and modifications for students. I want to meet with the special education teacher and see how we can meet the student's goals inside the classroom. I have seen the benefits of inclusion and am entering the profession of education, wanting to continue the inclusive practices. I still see the importance of pulling students out if they have specific needs that are best met in a separate space, but that this is minimal. I want students to get what they need, with flexibility of where they can receive these services.

This autoethnography fits into the larger scheme of education as it portrays how one person's mindset can transform. I see education helping to create a better world. I believe that inclusive classrooms, where students learn how to interact and value others who are different from themselves is one way to create this world. My experiences led to my personal shift, which will influence my future classroom. Even as a general education teacher, I will have students with disabilities and I am now confident I can accommodate and modify my lessons to meet their needs. I had an internal shift in my view about both people with disabilities and in providing modifications. I learned from my professors and classes, my experiences abroad, and my experiences in different classrooms.

Every student teacher will have a different set of host teachers. I had four teachers during student teaching who each taught me something about inclusive education. Part of what I took from my education program, was learning how to see these lessons during my placements. It was easy to focus on the negative things a teacher did. But I learned how to find the positives in each classroom and learn from what I perceived as the negatives. Even when I did not agree with all my teacher's practices (host teachers and my own professors) I learned from these strong feelings and reflected on what I would do differently. As cliché as it sounds, I took out of each placement as much as I put into it, as well as the mindset I had. Each class and teacher helped shape me on my journey to be an educator, some just took more reflecting to see what I took from them.

As I prepare to leave Syracuse the process of writing an autoethnography has given me the chance to reflect on not only my experiences throughout college but what my core values and beliefs as a teacher are. I began to see direct connections between past experiences and my beliefs that I would not have made without this project. I also found this project and the process

of reflecting helpful as I prepare for job interviews. In one interview, I was asked to describe two behavior management methods I saw in a placement that I would want in my classroom and one I would not want to use. I had already spent time reflecting on everything I had seen in my placements and I used the example of the stop light system. Since I had already reflected on this I could easily justify my answer and share the story about why I no longer want to use it as a behavior management method. As an educator, I believe it is important to be reflexive about my own practices and what I am teaching my students. Creating this autoethnography has been another experience to improve my reflecting skills and to think about everything that has shaped me as an educator. I end this work by stating that I am leaving Syracuse University as a supporter of inclusive education and will bring the belief that every student can succeed into every classroom I teach.

Works Cited

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