Learning from Exceptional Children

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At Marquette University, service to others is an integral part of the campus environment. As a Jesuit institution, service to those most in need in our community is one of the core principles Marquette was built upon. In order to reach out to those in need, the service learning program at Marquette enables students to connect to the community by learning from experience the concepts being taught in the classroom.

In my senior year at Marquette, I was given the opportunity to do service learning through a psychology course entitled, "Working with Exceptional Children." In this course we learned about the differences between children who are considered "typically developing" and those that are "exceptional" and what factors impact the lives of children with exceptionalities. By integrating service learning into the curriculum, we were able to see firsthand the various ways that children are unique, different, and exceptional, to how familial, societal, educational, and multicultural issues impact the lives of children with exceptionalities.

To fulfill the requirements of the course, we worked with elementary school children in inclusive classrooms at Spring Creek Elementary School. Inclusive classrooms serve both typically-developing children and those with exceptionalities such as learning impairments or physical disabilities or those who are considered gifted and talented. This is typical in elementary schools around the nation as districts try to meet the needs of each student. Inclusion is part of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which outlines provisions for districts to follow to allow children with exceptionalities to receive the best educational experience "with non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate" (Hardman et al. 2011, 28). This is often referred to as the least restrictive environment (31). This piece of legislation was groundbreaking for education because it meant that almost all children would participate in educational activities in classrooms with their peers to whatever extent they were capable. By working to place students in their least restrictive learning environment, every child has the opportunity to grow and work with peers, which is a fundamental aspect of development that children might have missed out on in a segregated classroom.

Spring Creek has embraced inclusion and continues to work to place each student into a least restricted environment. While in the classroom, children with exceptionalities can sometimes need a little extra help or direction, so schools often employ aides to assist teachers in the classrooms. I became one of these aides and was scheduled to help for four hours each week in the third and fourth grade classrooms. During the times I was in the classrooms, students were usually working on reading, writing, and math, so I often worked with specific children on an individual basis during the student's work time. This allowed the teacher to provide additional instruction or assistance to students that needed help understanding new and challenging concepts. By assisting the teachers and support staff directly in the classrooms, I had the opportunity to experience firsthand some of the challenges and successes inclusive education provides students at the elementary school level.

As a component of my course, we discussed The Ecological Systems Theory as an innovative way to reflect upon our service learning experiences and how they correlate with class material. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory is commonly used to describe the development of individuals and has been especially useful as a way to analyze the lives of

children with exceptionalities (Butera 2005; Bronfenbrenner 1979). Bronfenbrenner's theory emphasizes that a person's biological characteristics cannot fully explain the development of that person. It is also important to consider how an individual interacts with one's environment to completely explain his/her development and characteristics. This theory was developed as a way to understand human development by categorizing each aspect of a person's life into four distinct systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and finally macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner 1979).The micorosystem, or individual, includes a person's biological characteristics, personality, family, neighborhood, school, or peers. In contrast, the mesosystem includes interactions between microsystems, such as the interaction between family experiences and church experiences and between church experiences and peer experiences. The exosystem consists of the components of the larger social system with which the individual does not usually have direct contact (e.g., like family friends, social services, or government agencies). Finally, the macrosystem represents the society and culture of an individual. This would consist of things like values, belief systems, lifestyle choices, customs, and resources that accompany a person's particular societal or cultural upbringing (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Johnson 2008). In order to fully understand and appreciate the complexities of individuals, Bronfenbrenner believed one must look at each of these systems and, in turn, and how the systems were interconnected as a person grew and developed (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Throughout the course, we considered our experience though the lens of this theory. The levels I felt were the most important to the experience of children with exceptionalities at my site were the exosystem, or community and the macrosystem, the society and culture.

Community Influences

The community that a child is brought up in is one important component of Bronfenbrenner's theory because it often has a profound effect on the development of children with exceptionalities. At Spring Creek Elementary, community interactions involve not only the children interacting with the teachers and support staff at the school but also with their peers. Before I began working in the classrooms, I had a lot of ideas about how the classroom environment would function and what hurdles I might expect to find that would affect learning within this community. By reflecting on these thoughts and seeing firsthand how successfully the learning community at Spring Creek functions, I was able to see how important establishing a strong, supportive community can be for children with exceptionalities.

Peer interactions can be an important source of support within the educational community for children with disabilities. One of the most interesting things that I witnessed during my time at Spring Creek was the interactions between children with and without exceptionalities. When I started this class and my service learning, I was interested to see how children who were "typically developing" would treat those who had some difficulties in the classroom setting. Before this experience, I had thought that there would be significant differences between the styles of interactions between these children with predominantly negative interactions being the most common. I worried "typically developing" children would easily be able to identify which children were different and possibly pick on them or exclude them from activities. After spending time in the classroom, I am happy to report that I actually observed the opposite behavior. It seems as though they take on the role of caretaker and naturally try and help them to succeed. For instance, one day when I was in the classroom, the students listened to a book and afterward needed to choose something they liked best about the book to write a summary. In this

particular classroom, there is one student that is an extreme perfectionist and this often causes him to have a very hard time writing about his own ideas because he is afraid of not doing things correctly. In order to help him think of ideas, I decided to take him over to the book so that he could look at it to brainstorm with his goal in mind. There were a few other children also looking at the book, so when we arrived, there was not a space where he could sneak in to get a peek. I could see that he was quickly getting very distressed over the fact that he couldn't see the book since they only had a short time to write. I was about to step in when, to my surprise, one of the little girls noticed him and immediately gave up her spot for him, even though she herself didn't have the summary done. Then she proceeded to work with him to come up with ideas to write about as a team. Working together, they both completed their summaries with ease. He didn't even need any encouragement like he normally does to write down his ideas. It was almost as if she too picked up on him struggling and wanted to help him even though she, also, had her own work to do. By both students working together towards a common goal, they each were able to complete the task without difficulty. Unlike my previous fear, it seems that instead of exploiting the exceptional children's weakness, peers seem to want to help them succeed. This highlights some of the greatest strengths of inclusion for students like the child in my example because, just by inviting him to work with her, this little girl allowed him to feel like a valuable part of the classroom community (Hardman et al. 2011). This interaction clearly proved to me how important peer support is in the learning process for children with disabilities and how important peers can be in the learning community.

Society and Cultural Influences

One component of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory that I found most interesting examines the society and culture that a child is brought up in to see how it affects one's development. People are essentially a product of their culture and the society in which they are raised (Hardman et al. 2011). The society, culture, and those around an individual ultimately shape that individual and how they are able to relate to others. As one progresses though life, those they meet such as their peers, family, and even their friends indirectly shape their opinions, feelings, thoughts, and values they come to believe in. After working at my service learning site for a few months, it was interesting to see how society and the constant push to have traits society values have affected both myself and other individuals at my site.

Regarding the influence of culture and society, I found it very interesting to consider whether or not "typical" societal values are supported or challenged at my service learning site. Many of the ideas that we have about people with disabilities come not only from our own interactions with these individuals but also from what society says about individuals with disabilities. These values are often so ingrained in our minds that they are hard to avoid. One of the most interesting insights regarding this concept relates to the idea of the disability hierarchy. In class we were introduced to the idea of the disability hierarchy as the perception some individuals have that it is better or worse to have one type of disability versus another (Snow 2005). In some respects, the disability hierarchy can help perpetuate discrimination against those that have particular disabilities, such that one person may be considered and even treated as if he/she is more likely to succeed based on qualities that one thinks have more value than someone who is perceived as having a less impairing disability. Kathie Snow, in her essay *The Disability Hierarchy*, suggests that this often results in individuals developing a stratification of pity, or a "level of pity [that] is equivalent to where a particular disability sits on the hierarchy" and interacting with these individuals according to their allotted pity (2005, 2).

Surprisingly, this is the exact type of thinking that I witnessed in a classroom at Spring Creek. While the class was working on a group project with the teacher, I was discussing the abilities and futures of a few students with the teacher's assistant assigned to the classroom. As fourth graders, next year they would be moving to the middle school where they would not have a teacher's assistant in their classroom. The assistant was expressing her concern for some of the students that she believed were "worse off than others" based on the type of disabilities they had. Ultimately, it seemed like she was suggesting that one disability was better or worse than another. She seemed to think that because one child had a physical impairment, he/she would be more likely to succeed intellectually in future educational settings as opposed to another child with what she deemed as a "worse" disability. This is a clear example of the disability hierarchy. She had developed an internal scale of disabilities where she ranked particular disabilities as better or worse than others based on traits or skills she, herself or society valued. As we talked she continued to express more pity or concern for those that she deemed to be "more disabled" because they wouldn't get the help she believed they needed to succeed. It was almost as if, internally, she had placed limits on the children that she believed they couldn't pass unless they had individual help to reach those goals. Admittedly, when I heard this I was very surprised. When I initially heard about the disability hierarchy, I imagined that it existed, but didn't expect it to be expressed so out in the open. With how much progress the educational system has been making to allow all students to learn and succeed, I feel as though this thought might be a great hindrance to progress. As stated by Snow, "the greatest barrier facing individuals with disabilities is not the disability itself, but attitudes about disabilities and the resulting… treatment of people with disabilities" (2005, 1). By placing kids on an internal scale, the teaching assistant was placing limits on the children she was working with that easily could prevent her from seeing the success of some children. Also, she might not offer help to those that she perceives as unworthy of more assistance. After all, these children are very aware of what others think about them and their abilities and if we always convey, even indirectly, that we don't think they will ever understand something, that negative thought itself might be the only thing standing in the way of their success. With this value scale being reinforced even in the minds of some educators, it proves that we have a long way to go in establishing a level playing field even in the lives of those with disabilities.

The service learning organization at Marquette University offered me an invaluable opportunity to learn by giving back to the local community. Overall, during my time at Spring Creek, I have seen how a child's personal characteristics, community, society, and culture can have a serious effect on the life of a child with exceptionalities. By utilizing Bronfenbrenner's theory to examine the lives of children with exceptionalities, it was easy to break down all the components into easily manageable pieces. Looking back on this semester, the hardest and most interesting thing to reflect on was how these various influences affect children with exceptionalities. Knowing how negative and often judgmental society can be of people with disabilities, I was afraid I would realize that society's perceptions have also been held in the elementary school setting. Now, after my experience, I can safely say that this was not always the case. Although I did witness some concerning thoughts regarding the Disability Hierarchy within some of the support staff, I also witnessed some positive peer interactions which lead to increased confidence and the ability to push past some of the stigma surrounding disabilities. Seeing this development over time helped to put the issue into perspective and allowed me to see how we as a community can help these children to succeed, even if it means taking little steps to eventually reach a larger goal. Through these situations, I was able to truly see how much of an

asset a supportive and united community and an encouraging society can be for a child with exceptionalities. My experience has shown me that although it can be slow at times, progress is being made toward successful total inclusion of children with exceptionalities in the general education setting. I am forever grateful to Marquette and service learning for recognizing how important this program is for students and for providing me with the experience that many students don't receive until they graduate. As a Jesuit university, Marquette takes pride in the service their students do for the community, and I am happy to have had an opportunity to participate in this program.

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