

Loving Those with Exceptional Needs

Is my heart big enough to love? This is the question that keeps coming to I go further into my educational career in pursuing a Math Education degree. I continue to see more and more diverse students and I never see a child that is unlovable, but I question my abilities to love them. Seeing different students with exceptional needs relates to most of the students that I see myself questioning. Over the course of the semester, I have realized the question is not that I am not capable, but am I willing. Am I willing to teach those who have many challenges that take extra time, extra work, and creativity, in order not only teach them, but to love them? I have decided that I do want to take on this challenge.

Learning about children with exceptional needs has been very fascinating. I grew up in some knowledge of disabilities through cousins. In my extended family, I have a cousin with autism, two cousins (who are brothers) with down syndrome, and a cousin who is mentally and physically handicap which is believed to be a chromosomal disability but it has never been officially diagnosed. In all of them, I see their great ability to love and how fun they are to be around! They did not give me a negative stigma around exceptional needs but that they are unique and smart in many different ways than I am.

During my high school days, I had one classmate with autism. To be quite honest, seeing how the special education department treated him gave me a very bad stigma on special education. I saw how he worked the system and even heard him laughing with other students about what he has to do in order to get extra help. He would even tell them to watch him do it the next time and they did react the way he predicted would. When we were in about 6th grade, he would have “outbursts” during the school day in the classroom, and to deal with it, they would send the rest of the class out of the room and we would go into an empty room or the hallway for

long periods of time. This made us frustrated with our teachers, the Special education teachers, and the student himself. Instead of bridging the gap between himself and the rest of us, they seemed to continue to make it grow further and further apart even unto graduation.

While taking this class, I have learned a lot. I learned about these disabilities and little bit of how the brain works within these different disabilities. I especially loved learning about autism. This helped me greater understand my cousin and classmate. My cousin, I see how fast he catches on to things and how smart he is when he can communicate and verbalize his thoughts. In both my cousins and classmate, I saw their obsessions with certain objects or activities. I loved watching Temple Grandin. I felt that she gave me an insight on their brain with pictures I also was able to see some strategies that I saw my aunt do with my cousin regarding to pictures. For example, a game disk broke for my cousin's Wii. My cousin kept trying to play the game and did not understand that it was broke. To help him understand, my aunt brought out a piece of paper and drew what a good disk looks like and explained this is what yours should look like. Then she drew another one and put a big, red "x" through it and said this is yours. He finally understood. I now see why she did this. She was using very intentional pictures to help him understand because he thinks in pictures.

During the course of the semester, I felt like I was getting a better glimpse into how certain children with exceptional needs think. We covered many different disabilities. I knew of a lot of them by name and the general idea of what they were before, but I felt like I learned more of what they actually are. I found that knowing the signs of what to watch out for with a disability was so interesting. There were many things we learned about in how we can accommodate our students with exceptional needs. An example is the T area of the classroom and placing students with visual or hearing impairments and ADHD students.

The most memorable part of my semester was my observation. I was not extremely excited do the observation. I thought that it wouldn't make a difference because 'I know' everything that goes on in a classroom because I experienced it in high school. Well, I was very wrong. Going into Mandan High specifically showed me just the prevalence of special needs in public high school. Visiting with Mr Johs, he expressed how over half of one of his classes had an IEP. I was so surprised! We talked about the changing of behavioral disabilities and how they are so much more common now then even five years ago. This was also what he thought was the most difficult to work with. He talked about the huge influx of Spanish speaking students in just the last year. In my idea of this small world, that does not happen in North Dakota. How wrong was I? What stood out to me the most in this specific observation was his love for the kids he worked with. He knew that his subject (Math) was useful, but definitely not the most important thing he need his kids to learn. He wanted to teach them love and in loving them, how to ask questions. He showed so much care and would visit with them about there personal lives. I know Mr. Johs outside of school, and I have visited with some of his students who have become my friends, and they all truly love him.

Overall this semester, I have learned that there are going to be a lot of difficulties in working with children with exceptional needs, but I have also learned that a lot of beauty can come from them. I no longer have a distaste for the special education program and I can see the importance they have in schools. I hope that I can be an advocate of change in changing the stigma of the term "disability" or whatever word comes next. I can do this by continuing to share my knowledge in and out of the classroom. I have already shared a lot of what I have been learning with my roommates and family. Just being aware is so important. I have learned that I have a heart that does long to love those who may not receive the same love from their peers or

even their own family, but I hope I can be one of an example of learning how to love the child and helping them reach their greatest potential.