

Autism in a Whole New Light

Stephanie Marie Buck

Northampton Community College

For my service learning experience I observed and assisted in an Autistic Support classroom at an elementary school. I joined the class on Fridays for a total of seven visits. I began by getting to know the four students in the class and learning about their disabilities. I also developed an understanding of the three teachers and how they all interacted with one another. Spending time in this type of classroom setting, I came to realize how much effort goes into providing an education for children with special needs.

After seizing this opportunity, I was interested in how teaching children with autism truly happens. The only other experience I had with autism beforehand was being a “buddy” at Special Olympics through my high school. Remembering the challenge of keeping my buddy with autism behaviorally stable throughout the events of the day, I wanted to understand how different the approach is in a controlled professional environment with these children. Going in, I had rather low expectations of communication and progress in educational successes. The effort and the amount of personal and educational success I witnessed is absolutely astounding! After the first few visits, the feeling I once had about autism separating people completely vanished.

It was important for me to understand how these four students were placed or identified to receive services through Autistic Support. For the convenience of the school district, the four students were grouped together. They were taught the same routines, but individually they each had specific techniques tailored to their school work which accommodated their disabilities. I observed and documented, in my daily journal, learning techniques, routines, behavioral patterns, and student progress. As far as learning techniques, children with autism are taught by means of prompts. A prompt is anything that aids the student in giving a correct response. These prompts included physical, gestural, visual, positioning, and modeling. Each one was tailored to the student’s disability in order to help him or her learn the desired material. As an example, gestural prompting was used with a student studying novel pictures: pictures in a book that contained something that was wrong. One such picture had a bike with *square* wheels instead of *round* wheels. The goal was to be able to correctly point out the error in the picture. If a student had a hard time with it and was stumped, the teacher would simply point to the wheels to direct the student’s focus.

Routines were used as a way to help guide the students into each activity for the day. Students with autism need a predictable type of structure. This promotes personal successes among the students and therefore aids in their learning abilities. These students also have limited attention spans with small valuable learning windows, and these routines are set to meet both of these needs throughout the day. Behavioral problems or tantrums occurred at almost every visit. The causes for such incidences varied. Sometimes the student was over-stimulated, sometimes he or she was sick, sometimes it was a routine change, and sometimes the source of the stress was undetectable. The most extreme incident I encountered occurred when a student was informed that he would not be going with his tutor for the afternoon. The student immediately started to pout and cry and showed signs of hyperventilation. He continually apologized to the teachers, believing that he was at fault for the change because of bad behavior. It took him about an hour and a half to calm down and refocus.

Because I was in this classroom for an extended time frame, I was able to detect progress in the students. I observed speech improved, fine motor skills strengthened, listening skills refined, verbal sounds communicated, and matching objectives accomplished. This astounding level of progress was the accomplishment of a student with an intellectual disability. Her speech and verbal communication skills were extremely limited, almost nonexistent. Her goal was to make a certain sound for an object of interest. It was evident by the end of my visits she could clearly say the sound “p” for a pretzel, the student’s favorite snack.

One student was taught to communicate by means of a Picture Exchange Communication System, known as PECS. Out of all the techniques I observed, the use of the PECS book was the most interesting and fascinating to learn about and observe in practice. The PECS system consisted of a book with laminated pictures that had a Velcro backing. The pictures were of food items, a potty, toys, and emotion faces. The pictures had been tailored to the child’s daily routine and lifestyle. One goal of this method is to give the child a means to communicate his wishes, thoughts, and feelings. I witnessed this process used by the student and was impressed by the level of communication achieved. He is speech-impaired and cannot form any audible sound or words. I observed the student using this method to communicate what he wanted to eat, how he felt, and what he wanted to do. Going into the book, he could answer such a question as, “What do you want to eat?” or indicated a need or desire by picking out the corresponding picture and handing it to the teacher. Eventually, the PECS book goal is to lead to the child’s speech production. I discussed this with the teachers who are unsure if this would be possible for this student in the years to come, but they and the parents are hopeful. It is incredible to witness how this child was able to communicate in a nonverbal way. This shows just how truly capable children like him really are.

Once I had completed my observations, I had the unique opportunity to learn how to interact with the students in their various activities. For instance, one student had the goal to work on fine motor skills. By creating a “crumple heart” the student was able to work on this skill. The task was to crumple up pieces of paper and glue them on a heart cut out. I worked with the student to demonstrate and motivate him to crumple pieces and place them on the heart. This was a valuable experience for both of us because it was fun and productive. I also aided a student who had a speech impairment and therefore struggled with reading comprehension and pronunciation. Together we sat down and read a book. I would read part of a sentence, and he would finish it. When he struggled, I guided him through pronouncing a challenging word and asked questions frequently throughout the story to make sure he was improving his comprehension.

Another student was working on associations. The teacher showed the student a picture of a cup and then when shown three items and prompted by asking for the cup, the student would give her the cup. After watching many attempts by the teacher, I asked to work with the student. My approach was to show the student the picture of the cup and then hand the cup to the student. I noticed that the student’s timing ability to then hand me the cup when placed among the two other items improved! This technique astonished both the teacher and me! At this moment I realized, by taking a leap of faith, I could help this child. In doing this, I learned just how eager and capable these students are if given the chance and time. I felt privileged to be able to work with these students and have the chance to learn from one other.

I benefitted from working with the Autistic Support class by discovering sources which contribute to the tension and frustration these classes and teachers experience. One such source was the elementary school itself. These particular classes are in the same buildings housing the

general education students, but are not socially accepted or treated equally by fellow staff and students alike. I personally can attest to this. I walked down a hallway with the other special education teachers and students with special needs. The general education teachers and students would not even look at us. I noticed a sense of wariness. Since students with autism are unpredictable, both general education teachers and students are unsure how to interact with these students with special needs. I could now empathize with the teachers when they told me about not feeling wanted or accepted as a part of the school. It broke my heart to witness and understand how children and others with autism are stigmatized in our society.

Stigmatizing people who have autism distorts the way in which we see them. Stigmatizing makes you see the *disability* of the person, when you should be seeing the *person* with the disability. The difference is being able to take into account that he or she, too, is a person and nothing less. This is the common ground between you and a person with autism. As a step forward, recognizing that a person with autism shares the same emotions but just expresses them in a different manner helps to communicate and bring the two of you together. I experienced the great reward at learning how to do this. There was a student who would shake a tight fist back and forth to display her happiness or a sign of agreement. I would then mimic this motion to ask if she was happy or to even communicate that I, too, was happy. It was amazing to see her repeat it when it was appropriate. I felt included, and no longer an outsider to her world.

Another source which adds to the stigmatization, at least in the school, is that the autistic classes have to be “integrated” in the public schools. This basically means the classrooms themselves only have to be in the same building as regular education schools, but the students themselves do not need to interact with the general population of students. This is infuriating once you think about the chain reaction it creates. By separating the special education children, it starts as a physical communication that these children are different and needed to be separated from the others. Even to the students who do not understand autism and other learning disabilities, they understand that those students’ classrooms are “over there” and theirs are “here”. It sets the stage for the feelings that could develop later in life. Stressing the point that there is nothing wrong with having the two student populations interacting to some degree can be done by students, parents, and community members alike. Discussing and presenting the subject to a school board is a possibility that could change this or at the very least have the idea surfaced. If this were accomplished, it would introduce children without autism to the autistic world. The result would be better educated adults and better treatment of people with autism, due to the fact that they grew up associating with students with autism throughout their years in public schools. Hopefully this will lead to integrating students with other disabilities as well.

The Autistic Support organization was a third source of stigmatizing. The teachers of the Autistic Support classes are employed by the Autistic Support organization and therefore are not employees of the school districts in which their classes are located. Naturally, this creates conflicts in policies among the teachers and administrators involved. This frustrates the special education teachers and creates unnecessary job stress. It is difficult for someone without the right kind of power, such as me, to have a respected say in the lines that have been crossed and where new ones should be drawn. There is enough knowledge and common sense nevertheless to know that, “a [school] that is divided can not stand.”

Participating in the service learning had many positive impacts. First and foremost, it affected me in ways I never realized were possible. I learned so much about autism and the ways in which education can and is being used to help students prepare for the future.

In addition, I got to work with some amazing teachers who have dedicated themselves to these children and do an amazing job at it. They do not baby their students because of their disabilities nor do they bend to their every whim. Their goal is to try to prepare them for “the real world” in the individual ways that each student can adapt, in order for them to more successfully mainstreamed into society.

This learning experience had a positive effect on the college as well. Being there, I represented Northampton Community College. I would talk about my courses relating to this assignment, such as sociology and psychology. I mentioned the theories involved in the courses and key information. They would ask how this assignment related to those courses, and I would explain while they listened with heightened interest. Once hearing about these courses, they wanted to know about the rest of my courses. It was a genuine experience to be able to enlighten them with my first year college experience and knowledge. I thoroughly enjoyed this learning option. As a college student, I was able to be in a professional setting and use what I am being taught in college to take my education to the next level, while enjoying the social atmosphere. It is not every day that I can dress professionally and be in a school district work environment surrounded by successful people, relating college experiences, academic degrees, and career choices.

I would highly recommend the Service Learning option to other college students in any type of course. It is a worthwhile educational experience and can also be a lot of fun! Having this opportunity gave me my first real look at the inside structure of a work environment. I got to go “behind the curtain” and really take it all in. I met specialized teachers, tutors, parents, and students with autism. Most importantly, I was able to discover how all the cogs worked in a school, more or less, to make the bigger picture in society. Service learning brought me one more unforgettable step further into the real world.

As a future social worker and someone pursuing an MSW degree, I am anticipating one day working in the foster care and adoption field, where I will be able to use this extraordinary experience in practice. I have learned how to better acquaint myself with adults and how to bring something new to their work and social environment. I have adapted their work ethics, in that if I keep pursuing my goals I can reach my desired career with high success. I learned how to work with children of special needs and realized their strong perseverance. With this knowledge I will be able to approach other unfamiliar circumstances with children with an open mind. I communicated with parents associated with this program and was informed of parental situations. Some of the parents had a strong desire to create a secure alliance with the special education teachers and the Autistic Support Organization in order to have the greatest care and support for their child. Other parents unfortunately did not share this goal and often were the ones causing frustration due to their lack of cooperation and or not correctly following instructions and paper work. I learned that not all parents work with the school and the teachers in the same way.

When I was confronted with the realization of the variety of responses to this complicated situation, it made me reflect on my future career. As a Social Worker there are bound to be quite similar situations, since I will likewise be working with parents, children, and government regulations. Each situation must be handled with professional attention, but as I clearly saw this can be challenging and keeping composure can be the most difficult. Further, what this allowed me to see is that no matter the emotional responses, people need to be brought together to some degree for a greater common purpose. As for me, I will encounter this in a situation like that of an adoption. Many people are needed to fulfill this goal, and I will be the one responsible for

piecing it all together. This was a time for me to take personal mental notes on what works and what does not. Being a part of a working system and work environment is exactly the type of hands on experience which will prepare me for my career, and service learning has done just that and so much more.

In April of 2012, there was a public announcement estimating that Autism now effects one in eighty eight children, and one in every fifty four boys. These numbers show a seventy eight percent increase since 2002. With these numbers increasing, autism is clearly becoming more and more common within our society. This is a pressing issue that cannot be ignored; it will not simply just go away. I would strongly encourage becoming involved in some way or another with people who have autism. These are not people in another country; they are people in your community, people in your own backyard. There is a world of possibilities of great experiences and people you could meet. A wonderful option would be to get involved with Special Olympics, as I mentioned I did earlier. This is a day of events set up for children with intellectual disabilities and a typical location is that of a local school. Special Olympics, in its own way, unites people from all over for a day of true companionship and support for these kids and the chance to join them is unforgettable. You can find out when these events are and more information on how to participate at their website www.specialolympics.com.

If nothing else you can begin by creating an open mind about Autism and just taking a look at what other people are already doing to help, it can be truly inspirational. I encourage to you visit the website www.autistimspeaks.org. This website contains information and answers about Autism, blogs, donation options, and other organizations associated with Autism in many ways and locations. The key to understanding Autism is Knowledge. By having the common knowledge to be able to be around these children, it helps to appreciate them for who they really are, as individuals, and not by their disability alone. There is always room for fear in the areas that are not understood. Autism does not have to be one of these areas, and it can start with you.

I extend my deepest gratitude to Dr. Jennifer Bradley from Northampton Community College. Her limitless energy, time, and advice has made this publishing opportunity a reality.