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Volunteer Reflection Paper

I have always had a special connection with people with disabilities, specifically autism. When I was in eighth grade I started volunteering with a self-contained special education classroom at a publicly-funded elementary school that works primarily with low functioning students with a diagnosis of autism. I volunteered and interned in this particular classroom all four years of high school and I chose to use them as the basis of this assignment. Throughout my time volunteering in this classroom, students have come and gone but the impact they have made on me remains.

Although I have been working with this particular class for a few years now, because of my newfound knowledge of social work values, I was able to observe and understand situations in an entirely new way. When volunteering with them in the past, I had done so with the mindset of a teacher, focusing more on the day to day (or sometimes even minute to minute) rather then the mindset of a social worker, focusing on both the short term and long term potential for success. For this assignment I was able to more objectively observe the strengths and weaknesses that can be found within this classroom and other self-contained special eduction classrooms globally. The most significant problem I encountered while volunteering was seeing the potential for growth in the students’ education when they were included in regular education classes with an aid, rather than being in their self-contained classroom for most of the day with other students whose abilities are similar to their own. The main barrier for inclusion that I observed during my volunteer experience was the lack of assistance available to teachers in the form of teacher’s assistants. Unfortunately, the school cannot afford to support the number of teacher aids needed to promote the inclusion needed for student success. As a result, students who are capable of thriving in a regular education classroom with the help of an aid must remain in a self-contained education environment all day because there are not enough teachers’ aids to accommodate for all of the students’ needs. Children with special needs deserve every opportunity to a safe and inclusive education which includes equal access to an environment that best fits their needs and allows for maximum growth. An increase of required teachers’ aids based on the amount of students with a documented need for special education services would take a significant amount of pressure off special needs teachers and existing teachers aids that are being forced to bounce from classroom to classroom without breaks to accommodate students the best they can. Inclusion allows for an exceptional education experience for all students within the classroom. Promoting inclusion within schools teaches the next generation important skills like compassion, empathy, perspective and humility.

Through this volunteer experience I was able to learn a lot about myself and those around me. The most significant thing I was able to take away from my time working in this classroom was that the smallest, sometimes seemingly insignificant, things can make the largest impacts in the life of the student and their family. Over the course of my time working with this class I have seen many beautiful things. I watched an eight year old say “mama” for the first time, and once watched a student who had not eaten solid food in years eat a cupcake; the most meaningful thing I have experienced happened while volunteering for this assignment. I have been working with a nonverbal student with autism named AJ for two years now. He has always hugged, laughed, and smiled but he never spoke to me. I have always felt like I have been able to make a personal connection with the children and been able to target where their greatest potential for success is. When I went to work with his class in October, I spent a lot of my time working with his speech. At the end of the day, when I was saying goodbye to all the students he came over to give me a hug and said my name very lightly. Hearing him say my name was a reminder to remain hopeful. In many helping professions it can be easy to get discouraged when faced with the difficult realities of the job, but this experience taught me just how great of an impact that I can truly have in the lives of others.

In the end, this volunteer experience has been incredibly life-changing. I learned to be more patient and that each person has the potential for growth. I was able to use my knowledge of social work values and the strengths perspective to assess each students’ potential and abilities. I was also able to observe a potential policy change to increase the amount of teachers’ aids provided for each school district to allow for more inclusion which will greatly impact the education of all students. I am so grateful for the continued opportunity to work with and learn from these students, and to continue to advocate for their success.