Dealing With Diversity

Following the American Psychological Association’s Guidelines

Leah Huff

The College of Idaho

The student I decided to do my ethnographic case study on was a very special little boy. When I first started my student observation and teaching this year, it was interesting to see how my teacher set up the room. I saw right away that this student was seated away from the other students, and his desk was in a corner. I saw how easily distracted he seemed to always become, and I began to wonder what he was dealing with, how well he did in school, and why my teacher acted a certain way towards him (being a lot more stern with him than she was with other students). This made me interested to find out more about this student.

My student, I believe, has some elements of diversity. I first saw that my student didn’t seem to interact with the children in the same way that the other children interacted with each other. I saw that this student also liked to do his work his way- first he would be fidgeting around and not be on task, and then a minute later, he would start to do his work, and finish before anyone else. What makes this case even more interesting, is that he finishes this work with high proficiency. I knew that this student was a bit different, and I wondered how I would connect with this child, and if I could.

I talked to my teacher a lot about what kinds of diversity this student faces. We talked a lot about how this student is smart, but isn’t quite there socially, but a genius in his own way. According to Rothstein (2012), he explains in his article that there are many children who have what society would label as a “mental disorder” if they are different form what most consider to be “normal”. Rothstein continues to explain how mental disorders shouldn’t be looked down upon, and in a lot of ways, a mental disorder can become a strength for certain students. Rothstein explains, that instead we should understand that certain students fit into something called “ Neurodiversity” (2012). Rothstein states, “ Proponents of neurodiversity argue that there are positive aspects to having brains that function differently; many therefore, prefer that we see these differences simply as differences rather than disorders” (2012). When reading Rothstein’s article, it reminded me a lot about the kind of diversity that this young boy in my class faced when it came to how he processed things and how conducts himself and his thinking.

Rothstein also wrote another quote that I believe fits with my student very well, “ What one man thinks of as his heightened ability, another thinks of as a disability.” I believe this student might go through his entire life being a bit different, and he might struggle with it, but everyone is different in their own way. I hope he grows to love himself for who he is and how smart he is, even if he thinks differently than other people.

I have high hopes for this student though, for example, when asking the question “ Who is your best friend and why?” this student was anxious to tell me. However, he also knew he was different and said “ I know it’s different, but my friends are younger. One is in second grade and wild and has awesome legos, another is a fourth grader and he has Minecraft on his computer and isn’t as wild.” He then went on explaining to me how they have parties , which means poking each other and doing “annoying stuff” to each other; it’s very physical. I am glad that this student hasn’t shut down socially, even with his differences that he has when it comes to being able to be social with others his own age.

I also know from parent teacher conferences by asking questions to my teacher, how the student struggles in other ways, such as not having enough attention maybe, and his parent’s socio-economic status. My teacher warned me that the student’s mother has a lot of children, and doesn’t seem to get much help at home. The book, *A framework for Understanding Poverty* (1996), explains how poverty can come in many forms. I believe this student will face a lot of diversity because he doesn’t seem to have the financial, and emotional help (p. 7). I also believe this student doesn’t have the proper support systems, and his only role model might be my teacher. I asked this student who his role model is, and who he can go to for help, and he said it was a hard question for him, and I would have to wait to get his answer. I saw him thinking there for about ten minutes, which broke my heart. No child should have to think about if they have anyone they can go to for help. He finally said , “ My dad is really smart with building stuff around the house, I would go to him.” I asked who he can go to if he has a problem at home and he didn’t say anything. I stopped asking, and I told him that my teacher is always available to him.

I know my student might not have the resources at home that some other children do, but I am glad that my teacher makes sure to make an inclusive environment within her classroom. My teacher makes sure that every child is treated with respect, and they must respect each other. One time a student was rude to the student that I am doing my ethnographic case study on, and my teacher immediately said something about the situation and told the other child that it was unacceptable, and the child got a ticket taken away (if you lose enough tickets, you get detention and you are not allowed to go on field trips). The classroom she sets up is filled with respect and care for one another. Even how the students treated me in her classroom was different than when I went to the other fifth grade classrooms; all the students in my teacher’s classroom were very respectful towards me, they knew that was what my teacher expected.

My teacher also loves to point out what any child does well, and looks at the small things to help students succeed and embrace themselves. For instance, when they were doing reports on countries, she made sure that each person got a country that they were from. This made them able to celebrate their differences and tell the group all about their diversity an where they each came from. I believe paying attention to such small things can also help with engaging a student in the curriculum, and shows them why what they are learning is important and how it can relate to them. My teacher also will call student’s parents if the student forgets something in class to help the student out, I know she has done that a few times with my student that I am doing this ethnographic case study on. This adds extra support not only for the children, but the parents too who might need the extra support and help also.

I believe it is obvious how lucky my student is to have his teacher. All my teacher wants to see is her students succeed in life. She knows my student is different and tries to help him in every way to make him comfortable, even if it’s something as small as setting his desk apart from others so he can have his own space, and not bother anyone else. I am glad my teacher tries to engage her students because I asked my student what he does outside of school all he could say was “Minecraft, the computer game”. I asked the student what else he does after school, and he also said that since the teacher knows he is interested in rocks she is very happy when she hears that he will go home and learn more about them. I feel it’s great that she encourages him like that. It seems the only time my student gets attention is when he is in the classroom. Other than that, he says he is always playing video games at home and told me that his mom is always busy with his six other siblings. I worry that he doesn’t feel connected at home either. When I asked him about people in his family he said he thinks two are his half siblings and one might be adopted. I hope, as he gets older, he feels more connected with them.

When talking to my teacher about any help that the school might give my student, she shook her said “ the counselors don’t really help out here because he is in the accelerated learning program. He needs the help, but he doesn’t have the supportive parents to make the school care .” I believe my student would have benefited from seeing a school counselor, it might help him socially and I wish the school was more aware.

Before I started talking to this student, I got worried about how I could relate to a student who seemed so different. I was anxious, and didn’t think I’d be able to handle a child like that in my classroom , along with 20 other children. However, after awhile, I saw that once I took the time to see the world through his eyes, he would listen to me, and trusted me. I understood him and accepted him, which made it easy on both of us to get along with each other, and for me to teach him.

The student took this interview very seriously, and I believe wanted to help me with my assignment. After we talked some, he felt comfortable to come up to me a few times after and ask for help even with certain assignments. I don’t think I had any perception issues when it came to my teacher’s classroom, I think it’s great how my teacher can have so many different children in her classroom, and they all respect each other. I had enough time in the classroom to see how my teacher sets up the right kind of environment, and how she helps my student in certain ways, and I feel lucky that I have such a fantastic mentor.

I believe I changed a lot through this experience- if anything I’ve gained more faith in myself. I saw that I connect with students who might be a bit different if I take the time to get to know them. I know from my CASA cases that my kind of education, and background is something that not every child gets the privilege of having. I know this, so I will try my hardest to pay attention to the certain needs my children might have within my classroom. I know what a child needs to succeed because of my own background and having amazing parents. I also know how fragile childhood is by moving on from my mother’s death when I was a child. I was lucky I had my father to support me after, some children aren’t so lucky and the only support they might get might be from a teacher.

I know there is only so much I will be able to do in my own classroom for my students, but I will try my best to help in any way, even if it means just giving them emotional support. I know from this experience to pay attention to the little details, and be like my teacher and understand each child’s home life so I can help give them the support they need within in my classroom. I know I can connect with all students or try my best, and hopefully that will create enough trust and respect that any child can learn in my classroom. I hope I can be a teacher who will make a difference in a child’s life; someone that child can always come back to, even after years of moving on from my classroom.

References

Payne, R. K. (1996). *A framework for understanding poverty* (4th rev. ed.). Highlands, Tex

Rothstein , A. (2012). The New Atlantis » Mental Disorder or Neurodiversity? . *The New Atlantis - A Journal of Technology & Society* . Retrieved March 7, 2013, from http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/mental-disorder-or-neurodiversity