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Reflection on 15 Hours of Independent Learning Opportunity

I had chosen to take on four different learning experiences this semester involving people who have exceptionalities. The experiences that I have had this semester not only stir up new perspectives, they promote opportunities to be creative and effective educators and friends throughout the community.

My first independent learning experience involving an individual's exceptionality was with a five year old boy named Anthony who had been born with down-syndrome. His single parenting mother is also a student at Stout as well as a friend in the neighborhood. Having had early morning classes, I helped watch Anthony until it was time to get him on the Head Start bus.

Most of Anthony's exceptionality is with lack of communication and controllable motor skills. I had found it very frustrating just to get Anthony bundled up to go out on a cold winter day, because unlike other children, he doesn't communicate when his sleeves get caught up in the arm of his coat or when his foot isn't completely pushed into a boot. He had constantly inhaled and exhaled through his mouth because his nose would continuously fill up with mucous, and yet he never expressed any discomfort to me. I couldn't get him to blow when I wiped his nose because he hadn't fully developed the kinesthetic knowledge associated with it. His communication with me had been limited to pointing, accompanied by an "uh" sound from the back of his throat, most times out of excitement of a new discovery.

There were times that it seemed that Anthony was fully capable of exploring new objects, places, and creatures with patterned thinking and excitement, but there were also times that I could only wonder what was actually going on in his brain. Two examples that I believe show contrast of my observation is the difference between him interacting with pets such as fish, turtles, and hermit crabs and him sitting in front of the television watching a logo from the DVD player bounce off the edges of the screen for several minutes at a time. Needless to say, I enjoyed letting him play with the pets more. On

many occasions it was just easier to turn on children's programs such as Sesame Street. My main concern was the lack of exercise involved with the activity.

My second independent learning experience involving exceptional needs was through volunteering at the Special Olympics Basketball competition here at Stout by showing encouragement and team spirit. The competition had seemed to have drawn people from such a broad range of exceptionalities, and sometimes it was very difficult to determine what many of those were. The most influential observation that had struck home with me was that many of the participants had the same traits as classmates of mine who had been excluded so many times before from many peer functions throughout grade school. The children who have never had a chance to be recognized in the spot light were finally getting long awaited and well deserved attention out of people in which they have always respected and idolized.

I carried a video camera along with me that day, and I have to say that it had been a magnet for attention. I had participants approach me looking for just an opportunity to show off their medals in front of the camera. One even wanted to make a formal thank you speech to all the volunteers that came out to help put the competition on. It isn't necessary to go find them, because they will find you.

My third independent learning experience involving exceptional needs was with a student named Cassy who had experienced trauma from brain injury at some point in her high school career by jumping off the back of a flatbed truck, as well as controlling diabetes for close to twenty years. She lacks motor functions in different parts of her body so she has had to train herself to be left handed. Cassy and I have been friends for a couple years, but we decided to take on a couple fun projects together. One project was to get her started on a web page that she could use to express her poetry and let others know what activities she had been taking part in. I had operated the controls while she conveyed what she wanted. My goal was and still is to make it easy enough to understand that she can keep it up on her own. The other project was to go for walks to get some exercise, mainly because I have been out of shape with work and school, and she doesn't get off of her scooter enough.

The walks and talks had been quite enjoyable, and I told her that she was always welcome to come and arrange for one. I had the opportunity to learn quite a bit on these

walks, such as how her injury affected her life. I got to hear some samples of her poetry, and even meet some of her other off campus friends. She liked talking about losing her life nine times on a medivac helicopter. I believe she gets excited pointing this out because not too many people have been there or done that. Her diabetes has also caused her to have several car accidents, and I was able to relate because I have been to the hospital several times with a best friend of mine. One of those times called for me to step on the break while our vehicle was in motion.

As far as both projects of walking and web page developing, I had learned that it takes quite a bit of patience. Tasks have to be taken at a slower pace, a pace that is just not comfortable to someone that has the ability to cruise along at a higher rate.

The forth independent learning experience involves sitting down with the elderly to play go fish at the Potter's House Assisted Living Resort. I was first surprised to find out how many college students work and spend regular time there, but I feel that is great because it makes it a more comfortable atmosphere to step into. It was a fun experience because some of the elderly folks revert to innocent children again, which is a great opportunity to practice roles as a teacher. I found that it was more important to encourage paying attention and try to encourage memory retention than it was to just play for the fun of it. My fun came from catching them in the act of trying to peek at my cards when I turned my head.

To recap the experiences, I would like to point out that sometimes encounters with areas of special need are not easy and failure to correct problems can be very emotional. Other encounters can be quite satisfying when one sees the excitement brought to people who have missed out on the glory of being important and special. Taking the time to relate to people like Anthony, Cassy, Bob, Lucile, Harold, Rose, Janet and the Stevens Point Basket Ball Team give teachers the variety of experiences and faculties necessary to performing well as a teacher. The job requires patience, cheerfulness, attention, encouragement, and any spare time that can be offered. I am looking forward to it.