

Exploring Teacher-Student Relationships in Special Education

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Special education is a complicated field, and the forces that shape its existence and practices frequently go undiscussed. As someone considering teaching special education, I became curious about the social forces that affect teachers who work in the field. I decided to explore these dynamics by observing and interviewing special education teachers to learn more about how they relate to their students and what, if anything, impacts those relationships. Through this research, I am seeking to investigate how social forces affect special education teachers in their relationships with students and how power, privilege, and identity influence student-teacher relationships in special education. The goal of this research is to contribute to the body of literature that helps teachers to situate themselves within power relationships and serves to inform their teaching so they can better serve all students.

For this research, I used a mixture of ethnographic and interview data. I spent 20 hours per week in a classroom setting at the summer program of a private, self-contained school, located in a large city, for students with a variety of developmental disabilities, including autism. During my time at the school, I acted as a participant-observer, taking field notes on interactions that I observed between teachers and their students, as well as working directly with the students as a volunteer. The summer program splits the students into lowerclassmen (rising 9th and 10th graders) and upperclassmen (rising 11th and 12th graders). They also divide the students into three cohorts within their class level. Cohort placement is based on the level of student independence. The students take classes in a variety of subjects during the summer program. The classroom where I was placed taught “Theme,” which was a course similar to social studies, centering around a different theme during each of the two sessions. In the first session, the theme was “Diversity,” and in the second session, the theme was “Makers and Doers.” In addition to spending time in the classroom, every Friday we went on trips to various places in the community. These trips gave students a chance to explore the city they lived in and make connections to the theme, as well as emphasized travel training and safety in the community.

In addition to my participant-observer ethnographic data, I also conducted interviews with teachers. I interviewed five teachers who were working as head teachers in their classrooms during the summer, all of whom also work at the school as head teachers during the regular school year. Collectively, they taught a variety of subjects to upperclassmen and lowerclassmen of all cohorts. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 40 minutes and an hour. I asked them questions about their background, their pathway into teaching special education, and their experience as a special education teacher, with a particular focus on their relationships with students.

While I have yet to conduct a full analysis of my data, the preliminary findings are very interesting. There are two main themes that have emerged that relate to power in the classroom. The first has to do with who has power or control in the classroom; in interviews, teachers made a point of mentioning that they try to be student-centric and allow students to make their own decisions. My observations can speak to how frequently this holds true in the classroom setting. The second theme involves special education teachers teaching “beyond” subject matter by educating students about their social and behavioral roles. Some questions that emerge from this may explore how teachers decide what social behaviors are legitimate and which are to be avoided, and how these decisions allow them to act as gatekeepers when it comes to students’ integration into the social world.

Faculty Mentor: Ingrid Nelson

Funded by the Riley Research Award