An Ethnography of a Classroom for Emotionally Disturbed Children ~ Lisa Dubetz

Lisa Dubetz wrote her ethnography for Dr. Hass’ Internship in Sociology (SOC 42092) course. She was to create an ethnography based on her experiences during her internship.

ABSTRACT: This ethnographic research project is an analysis of a local institution and its effectiveness in transitioning children diagnosed with emotional disabilities into society. It looks into the effectiveness and barriers of institutional policies, the advantages and disadvantages of the classroom policies, and the methods of instruction by the teacher and her aide, and the children.

An ethnography is the style of research that “seeks to understand the meanings the people under investigation ascribe to their experiences” (Maso 2001; Brewer 2000). This ethnographic research project is about the effectiveness of a local urban elementary school classroom in transitioning children diagnosed with emotional disturbances (ED) into society. Due to their inability to adapt to a regular classroom setting, they are placed in a separate classroom. Kauffman et al. (2002) found that separate settings often better address these students’ needs. These children are not integrated with the other “typical” children at any time during the school day. They are confined to this classroom for their academic learning, and they are subjected to rules and regulations imposed through a positive behavior plan, under a federally funded program called “No Opportunity Wasted” (NOW). The NOW program is a point based system for good behavior with children receiving awards based on the number of accumulated points (Personal interview, Principal 2006).

While this school utilizes the label “emotionally disturbed”, for purposes of research, I am also incorporating the terms “learning disabled” and “seriously emotionally disturbed.” The term “learning disabled” may be a better diagnosis of these children because a majority of them are on medication for ADHD. The global concept of learning disabilities includes problems in listening, concentrating, speaking, and thinking (Raymond 2004). About three times as many boys as girls are classified as having a learning disability (U.S. Department of Education 1996). This classification may be because of the “referral bias of teachers who are more likely to refer boys because of their disruptive, hyperactive behavior” (Liederman et al. 2005). “Seriously emotionally disturbed” is a classification term used by the school systems to identify children and adolescents with serious behavior and emotional characteristics. These adolescents encounter many difficulties, which compromise their daily functioning. Some of the frequent difficulties displayed include “emotional problems, behavioral deficits, impaired socialization, poor problem-solving skills, and family dysfunction” (Delerme 1995).

Although considerable research has been conducted on “behavioral interventions for children and youth with emotional disturbances” (Clarke et al. 2002; Dunlap and Childs 1996), very little research has specifically examined the “experiences of students who have ED and receive special education services” (Rones and Hoagwood 2000) or how those “experiences change over their school careers” (Wagner et al. 2006). In 2001, President Bush enacted the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. This federal initiative requires that students with disabilities have access to the general curriculum, participate in high-stakes assessment programs, be educated in the least restrictive environment, and for most, reach the rising achievement standards for adequate yearly progress that are held for students as a whole (Wagner et al. 2006). Researchers have found that in order for students with emotional disturbances to succeed in the classroom, the following interventions need to be in place:

• “A structured teaching environment, including the provision of explicit, systematic, and highly interactive direct instruction delivered in learner-friendly, memorable ways” (Boudah et al. 2000);
• “Independent learning strategies” (Deshler et al. 1996);
• “Opportunities for peer-mediated learning, including classwide and reciprocal peer tutoring” (King-Sears and Cummings 1996; Wright et al. 1995), as well as “cooperative learning” (Putnam et al. 1995); and
"Teachers with a strong repertoire of behavior-management skills to decrease inappropriate behaviors and increase prosocial behaviors" (Landrum et al. 2003; Walker et al. 1998).

The Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS) prepared for the Office of Special Education Programs of the U.S. Department of Education by Blackorby et al. (2002) is a national study of the "characteristics, experiences, and achievements of students with disabilities in elementary and middle schools, and takes a broad look at student functioning that goes beyond their disability level, including students’ health, sensory functioning, communication, daily living skills, and social skills, from information gathered from parents and guardians of SEELS students through telephone interviews and a mail survey conducted in 2000-01."

This research project will address each of the concerns noted above, along with the correlation between the findings of the SEELS and this classroom. It will also address whether or not segregating them from the rest of the children is an effective means of providing them with an education and preparing them for transition into society. This research paper will explore these concerns by describing the method used during the research, classroom setting, the teacher and her aide, and the students. The Analysis and Findings section of this paper addresses the effectiveness of the structure and rules of the classroom, the symbols the children attach to their surroundings, the psychological labeling and resistant strategies utilized, and the social disadvantages of this segregated classroom. It will also address the cultural barriers to the effectiveness of the classroom, and the institutional policies imposed upon the classroom. The conclusion of this paper will show that while the teacher’s methods are effective, there are institutional and cultural barriers that need to be addressed.

Method, Setting, and Sample

Method

The ethnography consisted of participant and non-participant observation and informal interviews with the teacher and her aide. The interviews with the teacher did not follow any type of format, but rather as questions came to mind, they were asked and answered. The questions ranged from the children’s backgrounds, their actions that led them to being diagnosed, and their behavior in the classroom during the times when I was not present. The teacher’s background, the school’s policies, the children’s service policies, her programs, her reactions to the way she is providing an education, her responses to the emotional needs of the children, and what she feels would improve her classroom were also asked. For the non-participant observation of this ethnography I sat in the classroom and observed the children. I also participated in activities with the children, such as gym time, reading time, and activity time.

Setting

The setting of this ethnography is an elementary classroom in an urban local public school specifically for children diagnosed as ED. The elementary school is a typical school with classrooms for children in grades K through 5. While the other classrooms within this school are grade level appropriate, this classroom houses kindergarten through third grade. Further, according to the guidelines established by the school system, this classroom should only have eight children, but there are ten children of different ages and grade levels for which she must provide the same educational opportunity.

Classroom

The classroom consists of a teacher’s desk and teacher’s aide desk aligned against the back wall of the classroom. In front of the teacher’s desk are two eight-foot tables side by side. These tables are used mainly for breakfast and lunch. Ten individual desks make up the center of the room. Each desk has approximately three feet around it. This area is considered each child’s space. Behind the desks are individual lockers without doors where the kids can place their coats and bookbags. There is also a TV for lunchtime viewing. Against one wall are three computers for computer work, and the wall has two blackboards with posters showing the points awarded for different behavior programs. On the opposite wall are two blackboards for schoolwork. The letters of the alphabet are displayed across the tops of the blackboards with big, colorful letters and pictures. Above the wall with the lockers are posters showing word endings and possible words in big, colorful letters.
There are two tri-fold walls to be used if a child needs to be shielded from the other children.

Sample
Teacher and her Aide
The teacher is in her thirties and has been teaching various special needs classrooms within this school system for a number of years. She is married and has two children, plus two stepchildren from her husband’s first marriage. She is Caucasian from a middle class family, and she is living a middle class lifestyle in a suburb of Akron.

The teacher’s aide is a middle aged African-American woman with grown children who live outside her home. She resides in the same city as the location of this classroom, attends church regularly, and is learning about exercise and healthy nutritional eating habits. Her attitude towards the children is often negative. Her best description of the children is that “there are options today, the mothers don’t need to have these children.”

Students
The children in this classroom have similar backgrounds, live in similar neighborhoods, and the parents implore similar parenting skills. They range in age from five to nine, covering kindergarten through the third grade. The children have all been tested and diagnosed by the school psychologist as ED. These children are unable to either participate in the normal classroom setting or obtain an appropriate age level cognitive ability to be at grade level. There are nine boys and one girl in the classroom. Of these 10 children, one is Hispanic, three are Caucasian, and six are African-American. There is one child who is five years old and in kindergarten. He is developmentally around three years of age. He can neither write, read, use scissors, nor open his lunch.

Two children are in the 1st grade. One of those children has since the start of my research been integrated into a first grade classroom setting during the mornings. This was accomplished by having him integrated into the “normal” classroom setting for one-half day, one day a week. The other first grade child is on medicine. His attitude is slow and he works very slowly. He is generally well behaved; he just needs motivation.

Three children are in the 2nd grade. One of these children displays signs of dyslexia however, he has not received any further testing to confirm this theory. One is on medicine, and he has learned tricks to hide the fact from his mother that he actually did not swallow his pill. When he arrives at school on these days, he is constantly talking and disrupting the class, with the end result that he loses points on the reward system and loses activity time because he is on “red.” This child is an antagonist and knows how to push the other children’s buttons. He is constantly trying to start trouble. He has a crush on the only girl in the class.

She, like the other children, has been diagnosed as emotionally disabled. She, however, displays behavior patterns seen in schizophrenia. It may be questionable as to whether or not she belongs in this classroom setting. It was determined not to pursue any further testing by her grandparent because her outbreaks of schizophrenic behaviors are few and far between.

Four children are in the 3rd grade. One child in particular of this age group is the role model or leader of the children as a group. These role model or leadership tendencies are forced because he is big for his age compared to the other children, and he is a tough child. The other children fear him more than respect him. Children at a young age can learn behavior patterns by watching family members (Skinner 1938). While this child may have this leadership in the social control of the group of children, his educational level leaves much to be desired. He cannot read nor do basic math problems. He is reading at the first grade level. He cannot recognize sight words or read a complete sentence. Also, in class while reading aloud he seems to have a stuttering problem. One day while watching a movie, the word “rock” appeared on the screen. He immediately blurted out “rock” and he was so proud of himself. He smiled ear to ear and looked at the other children and said, “rock.” However, when the suffix “-et” was added he did not know the word “rocket.”

The second biggest child of the third graders appears to be well behaved as long as no one enters his desk space. I asked the teacher why he is not integrated because, on an emotional level, there does not appear to be any concern. I was informed that
he is on medicine, but the parents do not regulate his dosage. If they give him too much he will pluck out his eyebrows or eyelashes or bite his nails down to the core. Also, he is very computer literate, but opts to use this skill in a negative, destructive manner. A couple of times this year he has managed to erase the computer reading programs the children are required to complete. The program is set up so that you have to pass one section before moving on. When he deletes the program, it has to be reinstalled and the children have to start over again with the reading program.

The third child is an emotionally troubled child. He is an angry child with hidden emotional problems that could escalate into something out of control. For example, last year on four separate occasions he physically attacked other teachers and staff in the school. The police had to be called in to contain and control him. Whenever he feels compelled, he will get up and leave the classroom, leave the school, and walk the neighborhood. Several times the principal left the building and drove around in her car searching for him. He is a very mean, physically aggressive child with a nasty tongue.

The fourth third grader is emotionally disabled, but not like the other kids. His behavior is, at best, odd. He is probably autistic or has Asperger’s Syndrome, and, therefore, does not belong in the classroom. However, his father, like the parents of the other children in the classroom, refuses to believe that there is anything wrong, and will not authorize further testing. Many, many times he has the tri fold wall around him so he does not disturb the other children. This child is, however, reading at above grade level. If this child could be tested and diagnosed with autism, he could be better served in a population that would meet this need.

Analysis and Findings

The Effectiveness of the Structure and Rules of the Classroom

The effectiveness of this classroom is in the strict regimented control imposed by the teacher, which is necessary in order to maintain a peaceful social setting due to the children’s behavior patterns. This could be seen as a disadvantage because the children do not have control over any aspect of their educational or social learning. The only rights these children have are their desks and immediate surroundings, and even those rights have limitations. Because these children are segregated, they have no control, privileges, or social interaction as compared to the “normal” children in this school. The “normal” children have an opportunity for classroom discussion, playing outside with classmates, eating their breakfast and lunch in the cafeteria with other children, and attending rallies in the gym.

The rules and structure of the classroom that every child must comply with are as follows:

• Upon entering the school, the ED children go straight to their classroom for breakfast, whereas the “typical” children eat breakfast in the cafeteria. The ED children must also complete a reading assignment before they can eat breakfast. The ED children have an allotted amount of time to complete the assignment and eat breakfast.

• After breakfast, the children have eleven educational learning projects each day that must be completed before lunch. When their assignments are completed, the children raise their hands and are acknowledged by the teacher. She then instructs the children to bring their work up front and then return to their seats and quietly wait for lunch.

• In order to maintain continuity in the classroom and a quiet lunch period, the children are not allowed to raise their hand to ask a question or vocalize a need.

• During lunchtime the children may watch a movie. If there is any conversation, fussing, or jittering the movie is turned off. When lunchtime is over, the teacher instructs the children one at a time by calling out their name to throw their lunch tray away, then to pick up their reading baskets and then to sit back down in their seats.

• After this is completed, the children take turns going to the bathroom.

• Following lunch and the bathroom break is a mandatory 20-minute silent reading time. When reading time is over, the teacher follows the same routine
and announces one at a time that the children can get up and put their reading baskets back and return to their seats.

- On Mondays, the children do not have any “special” outside classroom activities and work on a classroom project. On Tuesdays, the children have Learning Resource Center time, on Wednesdays, the children have gym, on Thursdays, the children have art, and on Fridays, the children have music.

To be sure the above routine is completed in a timely manner, and in accordance with school policy, the classroom has several ongoing award programs in place. The children earn points for good behavior. After a certain number of points have been accumulated the children earn treats or prizes. If a child is causing a continual disturbance, there are tri-fold walls that are placed around that child so his disruptive behavior does not “catch on” to the other children. One of the issues with these children is that if they think they can get away with something, it catches on, and in a very short amount of time you can have chaos.

Psychological Effect of Labeling the Children

All of the children in this classroom were consistently behaving in a deviant manner that was disruptive to the other classmates. These children could not conform to the norms of society as posed in a classroom setting. Consequently, they were diagnosed by the school psychologist and labeled as ED. Thio (2006) says that once people are labeled deviant, “they tend to see themselves as deviant, which in turn leads them to continue the so-called deviant behavior.” We can apply Thio’s (2006) statement to these children, and premise that once children are labeled ED, they tend to see themselves as ED, which in turn leads them to continue the so-called ED behavior. Thio (2006) further went to say that once labeled a deviant [ED], “the individual tends to suffer a negative consequence by continuing to engage in deviant [ED] activities.” . . . It is not readily apparent when observing these children if they are “acting out” against the regimen of the classroom by exerting their individuality through their labeling as ED. If these children do not want to do their work that day, they use their labeling as ED and act out in odd ways, without severe consequences. The teacher reacts by ignoring the child, and by placing the aforementioned tri-fold wall around that child. I believe the child see this as a reaction opportunity. The child is receiving one-on-one special attention during the couple of minutes the teacher needs to put the wall around the child.

Psychological Effect when Resistant Strategies are Used

In other institutions where social control has been evident, individuals have found ways to defy the
rules. These are resistance strategies (Foucault 1991). McCollgan (2005), in her ethnography, “A Place to Sit,” examined people in a nursing home with dementia, and found that these people had important issues about identity and place. She also found that residents did not generally appear to identify with the nursing home and constantly tried to dissociate, distance, and escape from it through various resistance strategies. Resistant strategies are used in this classroom setting. In my observation, this was accomplished through resistance to do assigned homework, displaying outbursts of emotional aggressiveness, and blatantly ignoring the teacher’s requests. One particular day during my non-participant observation time, I witnessed the following resistance action:

A child came to school angry and did not want to do any schoolwork. He completely missed breakfast and slept most of day. He woke up when I walked into the classroom. When the teacher confronted him and said there was only a few minutes left before lunchtime was over, and he would not be able to go to gym until all his work was caught up, he replied, “you can’t tell me what to do.” He then proceeded to stand up to leave the classroom, but the teacher interrupted him and suggested that he sit down.

Social Disadvantages to a Segregated Classroom

Everyday life is a matter for negotiation and is concerned with strategy and image management (Goffman 1970, 1990). It can also be cooperative, “a kind of social bargain” (Lofland 1978, 44), particularly in public situations; to fail to work collectively “is to threaten the meaning system which supports us” (Lofland 1978, 45). Restricted to the confines of this classroom, there is little opportunity to integrate with typical children in a social setting, and this, in part, determines the structure of a school day for these children. For example, while other children are playing on the playground, these children are in the classroom. This classroom has its own specified gym time, and these children play by themselves on the playground. These children do not get an opportunity to play with children their own age. Further, they do not get the opportunity to see how social structure within their age is appropriately accomplished. These children do not eat lunch with the other children. Again, this is another social growth opportunity that is not achieved.

Barriers Imposed by Institutional Policies

This classroom promotes a routine structured around the teacher’s regimented control of the activities of these children and their ability to obtain an education and be integrated into society. However, the teacher, herself, is restricted to the school’s policies that are to be enforced within the classroom. Because of these policies, the teacher is limited to the amount of individual attention she can give these children. The teacher is also limited to the amount of control she can exert over the emotional outbursts by these children. For example, it is a school wide policy that there will be a 20-minute silent reading time after lunch when children read books. However, a majority of these children cannot read or read two or three grades below their level. This 20-minute silent reading time is not effective for these children. The teacher recognizes this, but must follow the school’s policy. The teacher acknowledges that this time would be better spent tutoring the children one-on-one.

On an institutional level, the children’s services division for the public school system as a whole has adopted a new reward system. The teacher is expected to change over to this award system during the middle of the school year. What is ironic with this request is that a major part of the teacher’s control over the classroom is the strict adherence to routine. Research has shown children with disabilities function better in a routine setting (Ogonosky 1995). However, the division of the public school system that is in charge of the education of all children with disabilities is making this request. The teacher acknowledges that this transition will create chaos in the classroom.

Another example of an institutional barrier imposed upon the teacher in providing the best environment for the children is that she regularly has to attend teacher education workshops. These workshops usually take the whole day, and they cover all sorts of disabilities. There may be times when only 20 minutes of the workshop teaching program relates to ED children. Again, the division of the public school system that is in charge of the education of all children with disabili-
ties organizes and enforces mandatory participation at these workshops. The teacher recognizes that while these workshops are necessary in order to keep her up-to-date on the most recent developments, she stated that breaking the routine in the classroom causes chaos, which may take days to recover from.

Cultural/Family Barriers

From my research in this classroom setting, there appears to not be an issue with the cultural backgrounds of the teacher versus the children, and her ability to effectively teach the classroom. However, I did make an observation that on one day when there was a substitute while the teacher was on vacation, and the students reacted favorably towards her. She was an African-American “grandmother” woman with a big heart and presented tough love lessons learned from her parents and grandmother. The children reacted by behaving favorably and by giving her hugs.

A noticeable cultural boundary, however, was from the parents’ reaction to this classroom. From interviews with the teacher, the parents do not support the program and do not want their children in this classroom. Most of the parents do not recognize that their child has ED. My observations included:

- One of the children turned five and his mom refuses to believe that he is ED. On Mondays he is in a regular classroom during the mornings and returns to this classroom for lunch. If he does not behave, he gets kicked out. If this should happen the mother is notified. The mother then comes to the school and picks up the child, and will not let him finish out the day. It is odd that the very next day, this child is absent from school.

- The six-year-old has emotional outburst issues, and his parents refuse to believe there is anything wrong with him. He was on medicine last year and during that time the teacher did not have any problems with him. During the summer the parents decided to take him off of the medicine and this year there are more bad days than good.

- One of the third grader’s behavior is different compared to the ED children. He should receive testing for possibly autism or Ausberger’s syndrome.

However, the father refuses to believe that there is anything wrong with his child.

- Each day the teacher completes a work assessment form and briefly describes the child’s day. The parent is supposed to read the form, sign it, and return it the next day. More than half of the parents do not.

- Most of these children are on prescription medicine for ADHD. However, the parents either do not regulate the dosage or do not give the child his medicine in the morning.

- One parent, upon receiving a letter about her son’s disruptive behavior, threatened the teacher with bodily harm. The next day, this parent along with another adult bounded together and covered themselves with a big overcoat and entered the school. Upon passing the cameras, it appeared to be one person. Upon entering the school, one adult went to the office and the parent entered the classroom and physically tried to assault the teacher. That mother’s child witnessed her behavior.

- A mother and stepfather of a child are constantly yelling and “punishing” him for his negative behavior. The mother takes her son to the store and demands that he go into the store to steal toys, presents, food or whatever else the mother wants. As a reward, she lets him stay up all night and play video games.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research project provided some valuable insight into the educational system’s policies for providing an education to children with ED. My research project was to research this educational institution to find out if they are effective in transitioning children with emotional disabilities into society. That question can be answered in two parts. The teacher’s method of instruction, the routine established, and her control in the classroom provides an environment from which the children can adapt and learn. The drawback is since these children are labeled ED and placed in this segregated classroom, they are shielded from the other children, and are not
afforded the opportunity to partake in social interaction. If one of the goals of this classroom is to be able to integrate these children into society, how is that going to be achieved when the children are not around “typical” children in a social setting?

Further, these children receive either peer-mediated learning nor reciprocal peer tutoring, which was found to be necessary for the effectiveness of integrating these children into society and providing them with a means to an education (King-Sears and Cummings 1996; Wright et al. 1995).

Because of bureaucracy within the school and the educational system, there are limitations placed upon the teacher, such as the 20-minute silent reading time. It would also seem plausible that if the school psychologist labeled these children as ED, then these children need counseling, which they do not receive. Counseling could provide a means to show these children strategies to cope emotionally. One child of concern is the child with the anger management issues. He needs someone to talk with about his problems and how to cope with them. From the background information I received, he needs love and attention and someone to bond with because he does not receive this at home. It would be interesting to follow up on this child in five or 10 years to see how his anger management issues are handled. When a child at an early age does not bond with his parents or with other children, deviant behavior patterns develop to cope with the negative feelings associated with his loneliness. An angry child matures into an angry adolescent and finally into an angry adult.

Another example of the school’s policy inhibiting growth surrounds the placement in this classroom of the five-year-old child. Because he turned five after the previous school year was complete, the federally funded preschool program will not allow him to remain in the program for another year, even though developmentally he is at a three-year-old level. He must go to kindergarten. The concern is whether or not this child is going to get pushed through each grade and would not have a chance to fully develop an appropriate cognitive level before being moved on.

Further research and observation needs to be done to understand whether or not these children can be better served by placing more decisions into the hands of the teacher of the classroom, and not into the hands of the “deciders” who are not in the classroom on a day-to-day basis.

References


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