Finding a Connection: Working with Children with Special Needs

When I first met Tiny—a 7-year old girl with autism and my mentee since freshman year—she glanced at me for a second through large, distant eyes and quickly looked away, jumping to her toy bus in the corner of the room. She began to jump around me with her toy bus and slamming into me. She was unlike any child I had ever worked with, and I wasn’t sure how to start. I couldn’t keep her attention, and especially during the beginning, I felt utterly helpless in trying to communicate with her. With each two hours I spent each Thursday evening at her house, I learned more about how to interact with Tiny, and I grew in patience and sensitivity toward dealing with children and adults with special needs. During my first year with Tiny, I learned that pushing buttons with her on a toy made her aware that I was in the room, sudden noises was the perfect way to make her laugh, and jumping up and down meant she was really excited about the next activity. I learned that she really like to feel strange substances like silly putty and play dough and that an activity lasting longer than 15 minutes was no good. I began to understand that she knew what was going on around her but could not always communicate what she wanted. The time I continue to spend with Tiny always brings more insight into how to connect with her, but of course, there are times when I do not know how to handle a situation concerning Tiny. During one session of an afterschool program at her elementary school, Tiny had lain down on the ground in the hallway, and kicked everyone around with her feet, refusing to go upstairs. I was unable to communicate with her and had to have help from the school’s special education faculty
and the principal. Although there are some unpleasant interactions such as this one, I continue to learn more about Tiny, and in the process, I continue to strengthen my patience, understanding, and imagination in interacting and connecting with children with disabilities.

Learning that I enjoy working with children and adults with special needs was a life changing event and an event that changed my entire career path. Instead of a major in biology and a concentration on laboratory research, I am currently studying Health: Science, Society, and Policy (HSSP) and plan for a medical based career in developmental pediatrics, where I will be able to do more in-depth work with those with special needs. Additionally, for the past two summers I have worked at the Children’s Association for Maximum Potential, a traditional summer camp for children and adults with special needs. By showing children and adults with special needs that they are not defined solely by their disorder and that they have talents and value, we can empower them to have greater self-confidence in themselves and encourage them to have more social interactions with others and participate in activities they may not usually participate in. Through such empowerment, children and adults with special needs can gradually integrate themselves into society, rather than remain isolated in settings such as school or work. Additionally, parents of children with special needs can be inspired by what their children have the ability to accomplish rather than feel very scared and nervous about raising and communicating with a child with special needs. While I have not taken any classes concerning disability due to my only recent switch in academic paths, I hope to add academic knowledge to my experience with children who have special needs by taking classes such as Sociology of Disability during my last two years
at Brandeis. Next semester, I plan to take Life Span Development: Early and Middle Adulthood as academic preparation for my summer project. An important aspect of communicating with children and adults with special needs is to understand the way they develop, and how their mentality and cognitive processes evolve with age.

In addition to increasing my academic knowledge concerning children and adults with special needs, as I approach my senior year, I would like to broaden my experiences in two ways: learn about cultural differences in treatment of children and adults with special needs and learn more new approaches to communicate with those with special needs as well as ways to promote more social interaction among children with special needs. To learn more about cultural differences in the way children and adults are viewed, I would like to go to Egypt in summer 2011, through Coptic Orphans, an organization that works to stop poverty and injustice in Egypt through education, literacy, advocacy, and necessities such as food, water, shelter, and basic health care. Through Coptic Orphans, I would like to conduct an International Volunteer Project, where I would be placed in El Beheira, a coastal governorate, about 130 miles away from Cairo. There, I will be working at an orphanage with primarily children who have special needs. On a day to day basis, I will be interacting with such children through recreational activities such as soccer, outdoor games, singing, and arts and crafts. Additionally, I will bond with the children and help promote social interaction through educational activities such as reading and writing practice. I am mainly interested in Egypt to learn more about my Egyptian background—a background I have not been exposed to very much. While I go to a Coptic Orthodox Church, which consists of mainly Egyptian-American members, I would like a firsthand experience to sense the struggles and hopes of people living in
Egypt—particularly children with special needs. Additionally, I would like to share my knowledge and experiences with the children with special needs in Egypt and contribute creative and imaginative activities that I have learned from past experiences to the orphanage.

Another goal as an undergraduate is to learn new ways to communicate with those who have special needs and promote more social interaction among children with special needs. Water Planet is an organization that researches new therapies such as dolphin encounters, expressive artistic and musical therapies, massage therapies, and cranio-sacral therapies for children with special needs and those with terminal illnesses. One program (Harmony) caters to those who have disorders that are emotionally distressing and who have difficulties with social adaptation. Through this aspect of the program, I would have the opportunity to encounter children with a wide spectrum of emotionally distressing disorders and diseases, from autism and hyperactivity to leukemia and cystic fibrosis. Each day, I'll be able to learn more about how different methods affect a child’s ability to communicate. In one session, I can work on expressive art with a child who has autism, and on another day, I may have the opportunity to work with a trained specialist to provide cranio-sacral therapy for a child who has leukemia. The other program (Serenity) mainly deals with children who have developmental delays and physical and motor disabilities. Children with such disabilities are taken on trips for dolphin encounters, in which aquatic bodyworks is used as a therapy. In addition to dolphin encounters, expressive art and cranio-sacral therapy as well as musical therapies are used to entertain children and promote more social interaction with the other children. Through working with children with various disabilities and learning new and creative
methods for communication to apply to future interactions with children with special needs, I hope to increase my understanding and knowledge concerning the area and experience my own adventure in empowering even one child with special needs.

The Sorensen will not only offer me a chance to begin an academic experience concerning children and adults with disabilities but allow me to apply my academic knowledge through a learning experience consisting of a full immersion with a population that I plan to work with throughout my future. To add to my experience, the Sorensen will provide me with the opportunity to reflect with other Sorensen Fellows after the fact. Understanding my experience and reflecting on the good and bad parts can help me focus my passion even further and learn how I can continue to improve myself for future interactions with children and adults with special needs.