Service Learning: Bingham Elementary

For my service learning experience, I worked at Bingham Elementary. Bingham is a small, brick two-story elementary building on the eastern side of Lansing. Working at Bingham Elementary was different than what I had been used to seeing since I grew up in a rural agricultural neighborhood. In my area, the majority of people are White and are of a similar cultural background. The Bingham Elementary populace is made up of a variety of cultures and backgrounds.

Before going to service learning at Bingham, my expectations were that Bingham would be a large elementary and that it would have a majority of white students. I was surprised the first time I went to Bingham that it was quite a bit smaller than what I had expected and that the student body was a mixed culture of whites, blacks, and Hispanics.

I found my experience at Bingham Elementary to be very useful as it helped build upon ideas and themes discussed in the TE 250 classroom. I had the chance to deal first hand with a less privileged student named Johnny who was diagnosed with ADHD. Through my experiences working with Johnny at Bingham, I came to the conclusion that oppression is a problem in American school systems as students are being oppressed based on their personal abilities. Teachers and administrators are placing students in categories that may stay with them for the rest of their lives. I also found that leaving students in the regular classroom setting would be better for them.
Oppression is still a problem in American classrooms. Working with Johnny at Bingham Elementary showed me that Johnny is a victim of oppression. He is oppressed by his abilities and what people expect and think of him. It is easy to tell that Johnny is put in a different mold than the other children in his class. His desk is in the front of the room, by the teacher's desk, separated from all of the other children. It is plain to see that people don't expect much out of him. I remember the first day I went to Bingham, and I was standing in the office, the secretary placed a call into Johnny's teacher. Talking to the secretary was another teacher, and she warned me of working with Johnny. She said that he is a troublemaker and just do your best to make him work. The last thing she told me was “good luck”. This showed me that teachers had already passed judgment on Johnny by categorizing him and that they had reduced expectations of him.

As I continued to work with Johnny at Bingham Elementary, it became more and more apparent to me that American teachers and administrators are too quick to place students diagnosed with learning disabilities in the special education classroom. By placing students in special education classrooms, many times, teachers are oppressing these students and placing them in a category that may be difficult to work their way out of.

Instead of placing those students who learn differently directly into special education, it may be better for schools across America to try to deal with these students in the classroom and try to teach them in a supportive environment where they could be taught to their strengths. This is a better option than throwing them in the special education classroom, where many times, they may feel singled out and not challenged enough. As Catherine DuCharme puts it in her writing "Valuing differences: The
Children We Don't Understand", "We need to accept and value differences, listen to children and observe their ways of problem solving, and utilize their strengths and interests." By saying this, DuCharme is basically saying that all children learn differently and that we need to look at the strengths of each child's learning abilities and work towards teaching them to their strengths.

In Johnny's case it will be hard to overcome this oppression. Even though Johnny is not labeled as "special ed", once he was labeled differently than his classmates in a negative way, it automatically became difficult for him. All through school, Johnny will be labeled as different, and the teachers will track him as exactly that.

In conclusion, working at Bingham Elementary was a great learning experience. I learned a lot to help build upon the class discussions in the TE 250 classroom. I learned that oppression is a problem in the United States because children are being tracked and placed into special education classrooms, which may not always be the best place for them to enhance their learning.