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L Kathleen Sheriff

Associate Professor of Special Education, Department of Education Studies Stephen F. Austin State University
P.O. Box 13017, SFA Station
Nacogdoches, TX 75965, Texas, USA

Summer Koltonski

Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Special Education, Department of Education Studies Stephen F. Austin State University, P.O. Box 13017, SFA Station
Nacogdoches, TX 75965, Texas, USA

Nicole Letchworth

Assistant Professor of Special Education, Department of Education Studies Stephen F. Austin State University, P.O. Box 13017, SFA Station
Nacogdoches, TX 75965, Texas, USA

Corresponding Author:

L Kathleen Sheriff

Associate Professor of Special Education, Department of Education Studies Stephen F. Austin State University
P.O. Box 13017, SFA Station
Nacogdoches, TX 75965, Texas, USA

Disability socialization perspectives: Views from the Seats of electric grocery carts

L Kathleen Sheriff, Summer Koltonski and Nicole Letchworth

Abstract

A special education professor suffering from severe nerve damage and post-surgery rehabilitation shares her authentic mindful conversations through the sociological theory of *Looking Glass Self* while riding through multiple big box stores on electric grocery carts. Having taught many children with severe disabilities in her career, her self-reflection and disability identity struggles reveal reflective observations regarding barriers school children with orthopedic disabilities endure while utilizing electronic mobility devices. She questions her own disability identity concerns while realizing empathy not understood prior to her socialization experiences that occurred while shopping from the seats of electric grocery carts. Discussion establishes pre-service special education initial teaching standards appropriately identified as means for empathy and advocacy training in her undergraduate curriculum coursework as a result of her mind-engaging conversational notes in this autoethnography study.

Keywords: Disability, electric grocery carts, *Looking Glass Self Theory*, orthopedic impairment, pre-service teachers, special education

Introduction

Special education professors teach and train undergraduate pre-service special education candidates to not only use strategies and interventions to help student learners access academic curriculum, but also teach and train their undergrad candidates how to utilize assistive devices and technology. Much time and effort will be spent by special education candidates in field experiences and clinical teaching opportunities in learning how to support public school children by using, maintaining, and cleaning technology devices such as wheelchairs. Pre-service candidates could benefit from experiences of riding in assistive technology devices to experience what their students with disabilities experience on campus in electric chairs and off campus in community type devices such as electric grocery carts. It is common on many campuses to train special education pre-service candidates in the use of white canes, walkers, augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices, software apps, iPad and computer technology programs, and communication devices such as frequency modulation (FM) systems. School students with electric wheelchairs and electric mobility devices are using those items themselves while pre-service special education university students are on campuses training for their certifications. It would be rare and quite possibly inappropriate for a candidate in field experiences to ask a student to allow him/her to ride in the equipment a student owns.

Pre-service special education candidates may not ever personally experience individual electronic mobility devices unless deliberate planning for these experiences is included in their university curriculum. University professors might consider some simulation experiences in community big box stores by simply planning for pre-service special education candidates to shop and socialize in stores while riding on electric carts. While impossible for pre-service special education candidates to understand the full life experiences their students with orthopedic impairments go through daily as they maneuver school and community environments, it could especially benefit their future students with disabilities if they experienced some electronic mobility device training. Experiencing both the actual mechanical workings of electronic mobility devices and the emotional and socialization experiences students have could lead to empathy leading to better lesson supports in the areas of authentic and appropriate advocacy and socialization opportunities for students with disabilities.

Theoretical Framework

Charles H. Cooley's theory of Looking Glass Self ([1902] 1983) describes self-meaning as a component of how one defines himself/herself through societal feedback. Cooley believed that "the mind lives in perpetual conversation" (p. 54) and "each to each a looking glass reflects the other that doth pass" (p. 151). Sociologist Alison Carey explains (2022) that *Looking Glass Self Theory* includes how a person imagines himself/herself to appear to another person, imagines the societal judgement that another person may attribute to himself/herself, and how he/she evaluates himself/herself based from the reactions of others. Carey (2022, p. 116) states that according to *Looking Glass Self Theory*, "disability shapes identity to the extent that it influences the feedback we receive from others."

Background

The researcher author experienced severe nerve damage prior to emergency surgery leading to self-questions regarding whether she became a person with an orthopedic disability as a result of nerve damage discovered in her spine. After months of rehabilitation with occupational therapists and physical therapists, the researcher determined that she would need to use wheelchairs, canes, walkers, electronic shopping carts, and personal support persons to navigate certain environments due to walking ability loss. Autoethnographic narrative stories reflect some of the author's shopping experiences post-surgery and rehabilitation therapy as she began experiencing how she would shop within her community. She concluded, "After all my years and all my experiences of serving students in special education programming, I found myself learning how little I knew about the sociological imagination mindsets of my students with orthopedic disabilities."

Method

Autoethnography might be called "insider ethnography" (Thomas, 2023, p. 170). This type of methodology used in the field of special education is one wherein the data writing within social contexts is collected via researcher immersion into a situation in order to support critical reflections of an area of interest to the researcher (Vincent & Benstead, 2023). This form of research is employed in this study based on the unique individual autobiographical notes reflecting experiences while shopping and interacting with others in twenty (20) trips to eight (8) different big box stores in two (2) Texas counties over a seven (7) month period-of-time. Authentic narrative thoughts were recorded and written down for memory retrieval. Connections to thoughts gleaned from experiences in the big box store shopping scenarios via *Looking Glass Self Theory* began to influence the researcher in how to support pre-service candidates seeking special education certification in supporting their future students with orthopedic disabilities. Connections to empathy that those with disabilities deserve from teachers and stakeholders making advocacy suggestions for them were noted. Reflective thoughts regarding lack of training provided in higher education for pre-service candidates in electronic mobility device usage became overtly aware to the researcher. Further connections of ideas regarding Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) initial service standards were tied to the idea that experiencing community interactions via electric grocery carts could lead to more authentic robust advocacy, lessons and strategies for

candidates' future students regarding self-determination and emotional supports tied to assistive mobility device usage.

Autobiographical Storytelling Notes

Individual autobiographical notes were kept by researcher author on socialization experiences for data documentation. The following storytelling notes express thoughts and self-talks the professor researcher detailed of her experiences based on others' responses and behaviors while she shopped riding on electric grocery carts.

Touchy Feely Vegetable Thoughts

"I'm waiting and waiting to drive past you in these veggies. I see you cutting your eyes toward me. Oh, no, you don't! Stop squeezing the avocados and pretending you don't see me. There you go again. You looked at me with your side eye. Who do you think I am? A disabled mindless person? All you have to do is move a few steps and I can get by you. Rude or maybe you just don't think I'm worth consideration. You just think I'm a voiceless disabled vegetable type person. There you go again. Squeezing more avocados. I'll just play with these flowers and act like I don't see your side eye glances. I'm not some vegetable without a mind. I'm just broken, not disabled....oh, no! Or maybe I am! Lord help me be patient and not be hurt by this person."

Beery Cluttered Aisles of Thoughts

"Why on earth are these beer boxes everywhere? How embarrassing....I just knocked over all that beer with this cart. Everyone is staring at you Kathy! Who do they see? They see a person without control, without legs, without ability. Stop! Is this your ego? Why do you imagine they are thinking about you so much? Well, you did just knock over cases of beer and they are staring. Odd. They just walk past the beer boxes....to get away from you? Maybe? Stop! Please, Lord, help me understand who I am now. I have supported those with disabilities my whole career, how dare I think I am better than they. Get this cart rolling again and get out of this beery cluttered aisle and STOP! Take your thoughts captive, Kathy! Shame....Stop!"

Green Salsa Dancing Thoughts

"Wow! I can't reach the salsa verde. How will I achieve this purchase? People just keep walking by. How sweet of you to offer. Wait! I can't hold all these salsas at once. Oh, I get it now, you are salsa dancing over me to be able to get your items. I'm in the way and I'm too slow. Okay. I get it now. I can't reach up and put these back....I guess I'll buy them all."

Leggo My Eggos Thoughts

"Just a little closer, closer, closer. Reach for those waffles. Oh, no! What's that going on? Uh, oh! Cart is banging between these two refrigerator doors. What if the glass breaks? Let me think...I better do what Kellogg's says and *Leggo my Eggos!* And work on how to get out of this glass door trap. So glad no one is watching me right now! Well, I'm probably on the cameras."

Razzing Thoughts in the Raspberries

"Oh no! This cart just died right here in the raspberries. What shall I do? Reach for phone. Uh, oh! I left my phone in the car. There's a worker. Please look my way. I'm

waving even and you glance but keep going by. Really? Lady, next to me. You just keep looking and picking up raspberry packages and don't even talk to me. My head is right next to your left shoulder. You don't even look my way. Worker walking by again...hey, you don't even respond to my call to you. You think you are so cute in your little worker bee vest. Hmmm!"

"Ah, here's a gentleman. What? You say to plop up and down on the seat to get a connection between the steering column and the movement? Geez, okay. Plop, plop, plop! Still no go. Twenty minutes has passed now. I'll pray...because my thoughts are not good. I'm abandoned by all. I am disabled, surely, because I cannot help myself. I can't walk. I'll pray. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me...and here's my goodness and mercy arriving...my

husband worrying about me and the time I've been alone in the store. Let us escape this place and all the negatives I have felt today."

Rolling, Rolling, Rolling Onion Thoughts, Yee Haw

"I see that perfect onion at the top. I'll stretch...nope, can't reach it. Worker, you just keep looking at what you are stocking and don't even glance my way as I stretch and reach. I'm going for it! Uh, Oh! Onions are rolling, rolling, rolling, Yee Ha! All over the floor....Geeez! Worker, you just pretend you didn't see me make this onion mess. Surely, you heard the onions tumbling to the floor. Surely.... Fine! You can pick them ALL up!"

Tweeting Sounds and Thoughts

"Why is this cart tweeting? Yes, like a bird. People are turning to check out the tweeting. Ah, here comes a kind worker lady. What? It is about to die! You want me to get off so that you may take it back and plug it in? Really? How will I get back to my car? I can't walk from here to there. Another *tweeter* is heading my way. Oh, good, the kind worker lady is helping her get off her cart. I'll tweet myself around to another aisle while she's distracted taking that lady's cart. I better hurry and get those items and get to the car before I die...well, I mean this tweeting cart dies, right?"

Limitations

Autoethnography allows for researcher immersion into a situation, but may not be able to be generalized to a larger population or other situations. This particular study took place in seven months in only 20 trips to big box stores by one Texan special education professor. Much of this experienced immersion may be interpreted as emotional for the researcher and therefore not representative of others who may ride on electric grocery carts to shop. With these concerns, there can be a point made about how America as a society appears to be very interested in narrative stories. Just think about the television and radio shows, pod cast programs, and social media internet presentations where individuals share their personal stories incessantly within American culture(s). The listening audience numbers and "likes" on social media presentations make narrative storytelling appear to be readily accepted by the American public. One still might argue that just because someone shares a narrative story, that story may not be true.

Discussion

Results of this author professor's experiences in big box

stores riding electric grocery carts led to deep thoughts regarding how her undergraduate special education pre-service candidates could truly experience empathy and understanding for their future students with orthopedic disabilities. How could her undergrad students advocate more professionally for their future students without immersion into the usage of typical school, home, and community assistive technology services and mobility devices unless they train specifically using mobility equipment their future students will be using? How could her special education pre-service candidates understand the social imaginations of their future students as they experience life among others via their mobility devices?

Based on electric grocery cart experiences in tandem with reflective thoughts through the lens of *Looking Glass Self Theory*, the researcher determined to add mobility experiences and assignments into the curriculum of several of her special education courses. Some examples of assignments might include requirements to ride in electric shopping carts and wheelchairs and then write reflective journal notes on their experiences to discuss among themselves about their thoughts regarding future students with orthopedic disabilities. Several Council for Exceptional Children (2020) standards were reviewed and found to be appropriate standards to embed in mobility training curriculum additions to coursework supporting pre-service candidates majoring in special education. These curriculum additions were determined appropriate to better serve, advocate and understand empathetically the socialization needs their future students with mobility issues deserve from professional special educators. Those CEC standards found by the author researcher to appropriately justify mobility device curriculum additions are the following:

1. "Candidates practice within ethical and legal guidelines; advocate for improved outcomes for individuals with exceptionalities and their families while considering their social, cultural, and linguistic diversity; and engage in ongoing self-reflection to design and implement professional learning activities."
2. "Candidates use their understanding of human growth and development, the multiple influences on development, individual differences, diversity, including exceptionalities, and families and communities to plan and implement inclusive learning environments and experiences that provide individuals with exceptionalities high quality learning experiences reflective of each individual's strengths and needs."
3. "Candidates collaborate, communicate, and coordinate with professionals and agencies within the community to identify and access services, resources, and supports to meet the identified needs of individuals with exceptionalities and their families."

Conclusion

Checking Out at the Register of Final Thoughts

Final thoughts from the author researcher can be summed up by these narrative notes reflecting final thoughts registered (pun intended): "My experiences as measured by authentic immersion via feedback from experiences viewed through the lens of *Looking Glass Self Theory*.... I am one with an orthopedic disability. I am now a *placard person*. (For the purposes of this paper, a *placard person* is a person who has a medical diagnosis and state issued placard card to prove disability mobility status). Perhaps in keeping with people

first language, I should say I am a *person with a placard*.”
“I am working on taking my thoughts captive when they run into the negative of others’ feedback to me. I am working on not thinking *less of me* but thinking *less about me*. I no longer ask myself, why me?” “I ask myself, why not me? I shall move (literally - if even via carts) forward in life and find yet another opportunity to advocate for those students my pre-service teacher candidates will serve..... Those precious beautiful ones with disabilities which I love and have spent my career serving. I shall continue passing the torch to the next generation(s) of professional special educators. And they, as undergraduate pre-service candidates, SHALL experience riding on electric carts, in wheelchairs, using walkers and canes just like their future students will be using.”

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