

All Kinds of Kinds

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Abstract

This paper focuses on my personal experiences with diversity. The experiences described are from my student observations for EDU 390 and from my experiences as a volleyball and basketball coach. Regarding my student observation classroom experiences, I include the demographics of the student body I am speaking about such as age, gender, culture, and so on. I also include some instructional adaptations, both subtle and significant, and environmental adaptations, both subtle and significant as well. To wrap up my student observing experiences, I include lessons learned and takeaway for the future. With regards to my coaching experiences, I share some of my most significant encounters with diversity, how I handled them, what I wish I would have done differently, and what I learned from them. An underlying theme of this paper is the many forms that diversity may present itself, whether it be skin color, home life, or disabilities, to name a few. In addition, students need to be taught and coached different ways, which makes perfect sense because all students are different. Like students, no diversity situation is the same, and this paper points out the importance of reflecting on experiences and how to implement lessons learned with future situations.

Country singer Miranda Lambert said it best in her song “All Kinds of Kinds” when she sang, “Ever since the beginning, to keep the world spinning, it takes all kinds of kinds.” With diversity on the rise, from culture, to skin color, to socioeconomic status, what the world needs is more acceptance and less discrimination. While I do not intend to offer all the solutions to problems associated with diversity, I do provide some of my own experiences with diversity and some of my own thoughts on how to accept all kinds of kinds.

I grew up in a small town of approximately 800 people. My graduating class consisted of 16 students, which was about the average class size in 2014. One year after I graduated, I was offered three coaching positions at my old school. I accepted the coaching positions of Junior High Volleyball Coach, Assistant Volleyball Coach, and High School Girls’ Basketball Assistant Coach. As of spring 2017, I have completed two years as a coach and three years as a college student pursuing Elementary Education and Business Education.

Through my experiences as a coach and a student observer for several classes, I have been a part of some interesting and sometimes challenging experiences. Students are very different, and all students have circumstances that may be either very minor or very significant. I have had many experiences with students through classroom student observations, coaching volleyball, and coaching basketball who have had a wide range of circumstances ranging from cognitive disabilities, unfortunate home situations, and different cultures that have needed instructional and environmental adaptations to better facilitate learning.

Through EDU 390, I got the chance to witness how diverse my small town has become in the few short years since I graduated. I observed the classes of Health and Weights under the instruction of Vicky Bender, Wilton’s Health and Physical Education teacher and the Athletic Director.

The first class I student observed was Ms. Bender's 9th grade Health class. The class consisted of 13 students with 5 boys and 8 girls. The most obvious diversity in Ms. Bender's Health class was the one Native American boy and the two African American boys. The Native American boy was very quiet, but I am not sure if he is a quiet student in general or if he was quiet because he was new to Wilton. From previous readings, I understand that "intense eye contact is avoided, as it may be considered a sign of rudeness. Native Americans may exhibit limited facial expression and may appear guarded, aloof, or cold," and perhaps this explains why he seemed so quiet (Spradlin, 2012, p. 90). The two African American boys both had picks, and they seemed to care about how their hair looked. I was aware of one girl's home background, which was a drug-involved mother and a father who tries hard to be a good parent but must work to support the family. I was also vaguely aware of another girl's home background, which consisted of uninvolved parents and resulted in the girl wearing unwashed and smelly clothing.

Ms. Bender is a good instructor, however, I did not witness any major instructional adaptations. What I did notice, and I think is important, is how comfortable the students seemed with their teacher, and "real learning does not happen until students are brought into relationship with the teacher, with each other, and with the subject" (Spradlin, 2012, p. 61). They all felt comfortable answering and asking questions, and the students and teacher even joked and laughed with each other fairly frequently. Ms. Bender is not someone who got upset with noise and distractions, however she did use the "silent treatment" quite effectively. She would silently wait for the room or certain students to realize they were too loud or distracting before she proceeded with the day's lesson.

In addition to instructional adaptations, no major environmental adaptations were noticeable in the 9th grade Health class either. Students were assigned to certain chairs at tables,

which helps to eliminate too much irrelevant chatter regarding the lesson. However, I did notice the two African American boys seemed to be friends, and they were located at opposite ends of the room from each other. At times, the seating arrangement did allow for too much distraction as the two boys tried to talk to each other from across the room. Overall, students seemed to get along and accept each other relatively well. In fact, the two African American boys seemed to be the class's favorite people as they were funny and easy to get along with.

The second class of Ms. Bender's that I observed was the Weights class. This class consisted of students ranging from grades 9 to 12. There were two groups of weights students who were all boys and seemed to be divided up with the school basketball boys in one group and the non-basketball students in the other group. The reason for the division is because the basketball boys did not lift on game days due to fear of muscle fatigue and sometimes because they were leaving school early and would be missing weights class. The groups typically alternated days and sometimes occasional switch-arounds were done to accommodate for boys' basketball games. One African American boy from the Health class happened to be in the weights class, and he was in the non-basketball group. As for the other students, I am not aware of their home environments, cultures, or circumstances such as learning disabilities. Sometimes, for reasons I am not sure of, all the boys would be in class together.

As mentioned, Ms. Bender is a great instructor, but no significant instructional adaptations were made. Perhaps, in the specific classes I observed, subtle instructional adaptations were only necessary. However, important qualities that Ms. Bender possesses are encouragement and her love for health. I noticed especially with the non-basketball boys, Ms. Bender pushed them and encouraged them to try their hardest, because doing so would make the class more worthwhile. Also, because Ms. Bender is so passionate about health and fitness, she

could eagerly share her knowledge with the class and inspire students to want to be healthy and fit which is so important because “. . . teachers have the power to inspire and ignite as well as squelch and deplete students” (Spradlin, 2012, p. 61).

Similar to instructional adaptations, no major environmental adaptations were needed. The first environmental adaptation was dividing students up based on basketball boys and non-basketball boys. This adaptation helped to keep groups together and lifting weights evenly instead of some basketball boys being missing from both groups and not in attendance to workout with their peers. The division of groups helps for two reasons. The first reason is that athletic boys and non-athletic boys may have different skill levels, and so athletic boys working out with athletic boys and non-athletic boys working out with non-athletic boys may help reduce intimidation and self-esteem issues. The second reason is that the basketball boys all seemed to be good friends and the non-basketball boys seemed to be friends, and so working out with buddies is a great way for students to push each other and keep each other accountable.

As noted, on some days all students were mixed together, and on these days students usually played a team game in the gymnasium. Teams were frequently mixed up throughout the class period, with teams containing a mix of non-athletes and athletes. Mixing up students really helped the athletes to push the non-athletes, and the teams were more competitive.

My time spent observing under the instruction of Ms. Bender was interesting even though I did not witness anything drastic or very obvious towards teaching students with diversity. Perhaps this is a good lesson in that a big deal does not need to be made out of diversity, meaning if a teacher welcomes all students in a safe and friendly environment, that act alone will go a long way. Research shows that “the critical role adults play in the healthy development of children and adolescents cannot be underestimated” (Werner, p. 91). If a teacher demonstrates

acceptance for all, students will usually follow their lead. Of course, students will be a little baffled when they come from a small, rural community, and a student of color attends the school for the first time, a sometimes never before seen sight in such a small school. However part of teaching students how to accept diversity is by demonstration. Diversity is a very neat thing, and educators must help students understand that.

Moving on to my coaching experiences, I have learned about diversity and fostered new ideas on how to coach with it. Like teachers, coaches “begin the instructional decision-making process with goals. They must then select a range of materials and methods to most effectively and efficiently teach those goals” (Bremer, Clapper, Hitchcock, Hall, & Kachgal, 2002, p. 4). Coaching Junior High Volleyball was my first coaching position. As a person who directly influences such young lives, it is first and foremost important to learn about each girl and have a general understanding of their lives. This was a huge learning point in my first year of coaching as I coached and disciplined more on my own assumptions.

In particular, I had one girl who had a drug involved mother and a working father, which I did not know. The young girl received detention by teachers for misbehaviors, and her behavior may have been a result of her poor home life. Like many coaches from my past, I used running as a punishment, but running as punishment is not a fix in a situation such as the young girl’s, who eventually soon quit volleyball. Perhaps if I would have known the girl’s situation, I would have sat her down in private after her detentions and asked her why she received detention and then helped her understand why her behaviors were wrong. I think doing so would have been a better and more effective approach to the situation, and being someone who was offering her guidance instead of discipline for a change would have offered the girl a safe relationship that she so desperately needed.

Another learning experience in my first year of coaching junior high was the competition between sisters. Sister A and Sister B were one year apart, and they often got into fights with each other. Looking back, as their coach I needed to find ways to separate them yet help them understand that they are on the same team. However, at the time I basically told them to stop fighting, which only resulted in an unresolved feud between them, and they both eventually quit volleyball. Especially as a coach, it is inevitable that I will encounter siblings who are on the same team, but sometimes competitive siblings have a hard time understanding how to exert their competitiveness together instead of at each other. Something I learned is that as a coach, I must help each sibling understand their strengths and how to use those strengths together to create a dynamic duo.

In my second year of junior high volleyball, I encountered a whole new wave of diversity. My young team consisted of several girls who had divorced parents, one girl who was also in gymnastics, and another girl who had a very busy home life. While all the girls needed my support, some situations called for a little extra organization on my part and the girls' parts. Concerning the girls who had divorced parents, Fridays often meant traveling to visit the other parent, which in my girls' situations, were at least three hour drives. I had a strict missing practice rule, but because having divorced parents is already a tough situation, I did not penalize the girls as long as I was informed about when they were going to be missing practice. I think it is so important for teachers and coaches to be aware of such situations so as not to make a difficult situation even more unfortunate.

Sometimes athletes are dual sport athletes, which requires much commitment on the athlete's end. It is also important that each coach communicates with each other and with the athlete and that some kind of agreement or understanding is arranged. I unfortunately learned

this the hard way when one of my junior high girls was a dual sport athlete in volleyball and gymnastics. What we should have done is arranged some kind of agreement or understanding because she was missing one practice for another practice. Because I have a strict missing practice rule, I often penalized the girl with less volleyball playing time, which really was not fair on my part. Having better understood the situation and each other's intentions, some drama and the girl quitting volleyball may have been avoided.

A similar situation arose when one of my athletes was missing practice because her parents were working and she had to watch her four younger siblings after school. I did not know why she was missing practice because the girl did not inform me when she was going to be gone, and I did not know about her home life. Had I known about her home life, I would have made better arrangements with her so that her already difficult situation did not have to be even more challenging.

In addition to Junior High Volleyball, I have also experienced diversity through my position as the High School Volleyball Assistant Coach. I have learned that the role of a significant mentor in young girls' lives is no easy task, and there are so many small details and large details that go into working with students and fostering good relationships and safe environments. Small details add up, whether it be braiding girls' hair for games, listening to the problems one girl is frustrated about, giving girls rides home, or waiting at the school with a girl after a game until a parent arrives to pick her up. Small acts can build great trust between coach and athlete.

Perhaps my most significant encounter with diversity as the Assistant High School Volleyball Coach is when the team welcomed a young girl who unfortunately suffered from Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. The mother of the girl explained that the girl loves to be around people, and she

wanted to play volleyball. The mother further explained that the girl did not want to play in any volleyball games, she just wanted to go along and sit on the bench to cheer on the team.

Although we still made a point to hold high expectations for the girl, “equitable treatment does not mean approaching and working with all students in the same way” (Spradlin, 2012, p. 7)

We made modifications for the girl, and we did so with a lighter workload, which would allow the girl to be successful. For example, we allowed the girl to practice serving from a line that was closer to the net so that she would be able to serve the ball over the net. We also designated the girl the spot of “defensive specialist” so that she knew where to go when the team broke up into positional work. Education books stress the point of creating opportunities for students to achieve, and that is what we sought out to do to make the girl’s volleyball experience as positive as possible. While “school curricula are still largely designed for students without disabilities,” athletics can be a great step to better understanding and implementing universal design (Bremer, Clapper, Hitchcock, Hall, & Kachgal, 2002, p. 1).

Fortunately for us coaches, welcoming the girl and making her feel like a part of the team was easy for the rest of the team. The girl was surrounded by such a positive environment and people. The girl was often the last person to finish drills, but her teammates cheered her on until she finished. This was the first experience I ever had with inclusion, and I highly support the practice because I have seen the benefits inclusion can have. Inclusion is “integrating students with disabilities in regular classrooms and whenever possible *with* the supports necessary for them to succeed” (Spradlin, 2012, p. 249). Including the young girl who had a cognitive disability on the sports team, with proper adaptations, was not only beneficial to the girl, but also to the rest of the team who was consistently inspired by the young lady.

Moving on to basketball season, my biggest learning experiences were with a young lady with an unfortunate home life and a young lady who has struggled with eating disorders. Both experiences called for emotional stability from the coaches, as stability is really what both girls needed. In addition, I also had the change to watch the Junior High Boys Basketball team play after our practice one evening. One young boy suffered from cerebral palsy, but his efforts were so inspiring to me.

The young lady with an unfortunate home life has a mother who is involved with drugs and who often runs off for a time and then returns. The young lady's father tries to be a good parent, but he is often working to support the family. The coaches and older basketball players understood right away that the young lady is in a good place by being involved with a team. If a team poll was taken, the young lady would by far be the team's favorite girl as she is quirky, hilarious, and an all-around very nice girl. The young lady, however, does drive everybody completely crazy from time to time as she is a little loud and not very athletic, but fortunately all coaches and players are very good sports as everyone loves the young lady and knows she must remain a part of a good organization.

The young lady who struggles with eating disorders was an eye-opening experience as she was hospitalized for attempted suicide due to some medications she was on. This young lady had very high expectations for herself and could become easily frustrated to very extreme levels. This young lady, too, was very liked by the team, and it was a rocking experience for every team member. Fortunately, all team members were in full support of whatever was necessary to help the girl recover, and no judgements were made against the girl. This young lady required a strong support system of family members and other adults who she trusted, whether it be coaches or doctors. According to Brenda Werner, PhD, "The most important thing children need to thrive is

to live in an environment of relationships that begins in their family, and also extends out to include adults at childcare centers and in other programs” (p. 95). Werner also explains, “What children need is for the entire environment of relationships to be invested in their healthy development” (p. 95). The young lady’s support system needed to make sure they were working together for the young lady’s recovery.

Regarding both situations, the unfortunate home life and the eating disorders, both girls needed stability in their lives. They needed a constant support system and place where they could be busy, welcomed, and away from their struggles for a while. Both girls are examples of how important instructional adaptations and environmental adaptations can be as these particular girls needed to feel successful, and we, coaches, needed to create opportunities for the girls to succeed.

Another situation that I encountered in my time as a basketball coach was after a high school girls’ basketball practice one evening. I noticed one boy who had cerebral palsy, and his right half of his body was effected. The boy could run, although he had a limp, but he could not use his hand and arm as they were constantly in a stiff position. However, the boy did not let his physical limitations stop him as Spradlin points out, “Many persons with disabilities have coped with oppression by calling attention to their *abilities* and making themselves visible as people who exist beyond their *disabilities*” (Spradlin, 2012, p. 253). The young boy did just that by choosing to go out for basketball because he was capable of running, jumping, and dribbling, just in modified ways.

While watching the game, I noticed that the boy had an unorthodox way of shooting a ball; it was not so much a shot but an underhand throw. I could not help but wonder if the boy’s coach taught him how to shoot properly, and then modified the technique for the boy as needed.

It appeared not, and it was frustrating to think how much considering Universal Design concepts and helping the boy modify his shot could do for him. The potential of Universal Design is such that

In terms of learning, Universal Design means the design of instructional materials and activities that allows the learning goals to be achievable by individuals with wide differences in their abilities to see, hear, speak, move, read, write, understand English, attend, organize, engage, and remember. Universal Design for Learning is achieved by means of flexible curricular materials and activities that provide alternatives for students with disparities in abilities and backgrounds (Bremer, Clapper, Hitchcock, Hall, & Kachgal, 2002, p. 2).

Educators must find ways to adapt to students' needs and help them achieve. In the case of the young junior high boy, he was capable, but he just needed help modifying a technique.

Reflecting on my past experiences truly helps me to prepare for the future. In just a short time as a coach, I have encountered so much diversity and situations that I will know how to react to in the future as well as how to approach and deal with similar situations. There are situations from the past that I wish I could have gone about differently, but because those situations cannot be changed, I carry my lessons with me towards the future in hopes of resolving situations more effectively. If there is one lesson I have learned from student observing and coaching, it is that all students need to be taught and coached differently, and that all varies from instruction, to what is considered achieving, to instructor-student relationship. The concept of Universal Design means that "environments and products should be designed, from the start, for maximum usability . . . and offer flexible curriculum and learning environments that allow students with widely varying abilities the opportunity to access the general curriculum and

achieve the academic standards, and Universal Design can be applied to the classroom and athletic settings (Bremer, Clapper, Hitchcock, Hall, & Kachgal, 2002, p. 1). Diversity is a beautiful thing, which makes every single person beautiful in their own way.

Throughout my student observing and coaching hours, I have experienced all kinds of kinds, and I have learned how to, and how not to, go about some situations. Diversity arises from all the different students and all the different situations those students carry with them. Diversity is anything ranging from disabilities, unfortunate home situations, disorders, culture, and much, much more circumstances that call for instructional and environmental adaptations to better facilitate learning.

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