Diversity Practicum Capstone Paper: Knowledge I Gained

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 Growing up in this intimate town known as Bismarck, I have had few opportunities to experience and see the diversity in others; their culture, race, religion, socioeconomic status, etc. I had attended a private catholic school from kindergarten to 8th grade. After that I attended St. Mary’s Central High School, a private catholic school. To further my education, I am attending the University of Mary, a private catholic university. Needless to state, I had not been exposed to much diversity growing up, which is why the diversity practicum has been such an eye-opening experience for me because I had the chance to see diversity in an elementary and early childhood setting. In this paper, I will elaborate on the diversity I had been exposed to growing up, the demographics of the populations I had observed for this practicum, environmental and instructional adaptations used in these classrooms, successful interventions implemented, as well as my observations, thoughts and experiences throughout this practicum that have influenced my thoughts regarding my future classroom.

 While attending Cathedral of the Holy Spirit Grade School, my classmates and I were all the same race. In third grade, an African American student transferred into my class. He was the only racially diverse student I had been around until my sixth-grade year when a Latin American student and a Vietnamese student joined our class. Then when I began high school, I was in classes with a Native American student as well as my previous classmates from grade school. Other than diversity in race, there was only one student with a physical disability that had attended my high school. I think that because I went to a private catholic school for kindergarten through 12th grade, I was somewhat secluded from the diversity that many others were exposed to throughout their early years in school.

 Understanding that I had little exposure to diversity, I was amazed at the diversity and the demographics of Rita Murphy Elementary School. I was immediately aware of the cultural difference between my elementary school and Rita Murphy, and that difference was mainly influenced by religion. Seeing this difference made me reflect on a quote from Pope John Paul II, “the Church respects all cultures and imposes on no one her faith in Jesus Christ, but she invites all people of good will to promote a true civilization of love, founded on the evangelical values of brotherhood, justice, and dignity for all” (Staudt, p.60). This made me realize that cultural diversity should not change a person’s perspective for other’s worth.

Not only was there diversity in the classroom I had been in, but when I would walk down the hallways or stop into other classrooms, I would see immense diversity in ethnicity and physical abilities. In the second-grade class of 7 and 8-year-olds that I had observed and worked with, there were 21 students. The gender distribution was just about equal with 11 boys and 10 girls. There was one Native American student and one African American student. The socioeconomic status varied from high to low in this classroom. The academic level of these students also ranged; there were many academically achieving students, some who were struggling, some on IEPs for cognitive or physical limitations, and one student on a behavioral plan. Both students on IEPs are delayed in their reading levels, however one has a speech delay due to his voice limitations. Student E. on the behavioral plan (I will call her Eve), is on medications, has almost daily meetings with a behavior specialist, and needs consistent redirection for her behaviors.

 The other setting that I had observed was Shiloh Christian Preschool. To my surprise, this class of 15 students who were either 4 or 5 years old had many diversities as well. I was somewhat shocked because in my private catholic school experience, I was exposed to such little diversity. Thus, I found it especially interesting to observe these students. There were two African American girls and one Colombian boy, and the classroom’s gender distribution was about equal with a slight majority of girls. Their socioeconomic background was quite similar amongst majority of the students since it was a private catholic school. However, the Colombian student (I will call him Scott) was adopted from Colombia from a family in poverty at around age 3. Scott has ADD/ADHD, a Sensory Processing Disorder, and is on a behavior plan. Cognitively, he is a very bright student. However, his ADD/ADHD causes him to be very energetic and have a hard time participating in lessons. Scotts’ Sensory Processing Disorder causes him to reject participating some activities, but other than that there are no physical limitations present in the classroom.

 Because of the diversities present in these classrooms, both schools had to provide environmental adaptations for their students. At Rita Murphy, the calm down area was often used for Eve as well as many other students who needed a moment for self-regulation. The teacher taught every lesson with the students seated on the carpet in front of the Smart Board which allowed movement. She also provided flexible seating and working areas for her students including a standing table, exercise balls, a bean bag chair, rocking chairs, yoga mats, a low table with seat cushions, as well as regular desks. At Shiloh Preschool, the teacher also did her whole group lessons with the students seated on the carpet to allow movement. She provided a calm down corner for her students, however I did not get to see this used. Her classroom was set up in learning centers such as science, dramatic play, writing, manipulatives, technology, etc. She even had a reading loft where she allowed two students at a time to sit and read. Both of these environments allowed for choice for their students which promotes a greater sense of diversity within the classroom.

 Not only is the environment important, but the teachers’ instructional adaptations play a large role in the students’ learning and academic success. At Rita Murphy, choice is available for almost everything in the classroom. The teacher highly involves the students in decision making processes so that they feel respected and included in the way their classroom runs. The teacher often prompts her students to make choices by saying, “what is my job right now?” or “you can do this now or at recess, it’s your choice if you’ll owe me time.” This is a great strategy to use within a classroom to promote self-management within each of the students. I observed this technique being used often with Eve, who often chose to not participate in lessons or did not want to complete in-class work. After the teacher would use one of these two phrases, I could see that Eve was processing and deciding which usually led to her doing what she was supposed to do.

 The teacher also showed instructional adaptations by using small group focused learning in reading, math and phonics. This allowed her to work with students in similar subject leveled groups, thus promoting achievement in their different zones of proximal development. She would also use variety in her whole group lectures by using the Smart Board or easel, as well as turn-and-talks or whole group discussions. This would change day by day to keep the students engaged. For example, Eve left the carpet and walked out of the classroom during a lesson, so instead of leading a whole group instruction as the teacher had planned, she quickly prompted the students to turn-and-talk so that she could convince Eve to join the group. Other times, the teacher would switch from a whole group discussion to having the students write on the Smart Board which would usually draw Eve back to the lesson as well. During these whole group lessons, she would sometimes say “give me 5” or sound sometimes for a breathing exercise to regain students’ focus and attention which enhanced the likelihood of student success.

 During rotations, the teacher gave the students the choice to do anything related to reading, writing or math. There were poster boards with guidelines for them to reference if they were unable to make the choice without prompting which was beneficial for some students. Many students would begin to work right away because they were able to choose to do something that interested them. For the students who struggled with writing, reading or math, they had small notes of information on their desks like sounds or example problems to adapt their learning. If the student needed further assistance from the teacher but she was busy with a small group or another student, they could post a sticky note with their request on her board. This board enhanced the chance of student success because the student is able to communicate their needs to the teacher without being told something like “just a minute, I am busy”, thus allowing them to take control in their learning.

 Some instructional adaptations used for Eve included: a behavior chart which allowed her a point every time she did what she was supposed to do each day, a pass to the calm down area for a set amount of time so that she could regroup herself, as well as additional one-on-one interactions from the teacher to provide encouragement. These three strategies were especially useful to encourage Eve’s success.

 The teacher at Shiloh also provided instructional adaptations for her students. They did many brain breaks or active movements to get their wiggles out and they had a well-established routine. She also used objects like animal puppets, stuffed animals and pictures to enhance the whole group lessons. She used songs to teach her students and used questioning strategies during any of her read aloud. For Scott’s instructional adaptations, she would allow him to use a weighted lap pillow to rest on his legs to help suppress his fidgets and energy. He would also get to use a weighted vest as well as a sensory brush. He seemed to calm down very quickly after a teacher brushed his arms, legs, or back with the sensory brush. Those three objects were great adaptations used for Scott to improve his likelihood of success.

 Both schools also provided interventions beyond the parameters of the classroom. At Rita Murphy, students would be pulled out of the classroom during their rotations to see specialists. They offered Speech, OT, PT, behavior specialists as well Math or Reading focused groups. The teacher hardly sent homework home with the students, but would provide multiple opportunities for parents to gain more information about being involved in their student’s academic success at home. Shiloh also offered services outside of the classroom, especially for Scott. He would meet with PT, OT, Therapists, and the in-school specialist to help with his needs in order to promote academic success. The teacher had also said the parents are actively involved at home with Scott to help with his Sensory Processing Disorder.

 Throughout my experiences and observations at both schools, I found many strategies and ideas that I would like to carry to my future classrooms. From Rita Murphy, I really liked the teacher’s emphasis on choice in all aspects of learning as well as during rotations. I plan to use her phrases “what’s my job right now?” and “you can do this now or later during recess, it’s your choice if you’ll owe me time.” Both phrases are great for holding students accountable in their learning. I also plan to use her attention getters such as the breathing chimes, or “3, 2,1, talking is done” during whole group instruction. One final idea that I would use in my future classroom that I saw at Rita Murphy was their morning meeting with show and share. This is a great strategy to begin the day because it welcomes each student into the classroom, creating a sense of community and belonging, while allowing the chance for students to share anything they desire before the day begins. I think this is a great way to enhance the students’ academic success because it encourages them to be present in the classroom and interact with their peers.

 I also noticed strategies from observing at Shiloh Preschool that I would like to use in the future. The most important was blaming the clock; when it was time to stop centers for play, instead of saying “it’s time to clean up, we have to begin our lesson. I said we need to clean up, friends” the teacher says “uh-oh, the clock is telling me that it’s time to clean up. I’m sorry we can’t play longer, but the clock says we are done now.” This is a great way to deflect the negative feelings associated with transitioning from a fun activity to a more structured activity from being directed at the teacher to the clock. The other strategies I would use were the jingles she would say such as “uh-oh spaghetti-o” or “mac-n-cheese, everybody freeze!” Finally, I would also like to use transition songs and chants to help my students smoothly switch from one activity to the next.

 After observing and interacting in both of these classrooms, I pondered the type of strategy I find a preference towards. My thoughts kept coming back to the Universal Design strategy, which “seeks to offer flexible curriculum and learning environments that allow students with widely varying abilities the opportunity to access the general curriculum and achieve the academic content standards that have been established for all students in the school, district, or state” (Staudt, p.1). This is because I want my classroom to be inclusive in a way that is useable to all learners, regardless of their abilities or diversity.

Overall, the diversity practicum has been a great experience for me because I am more aware of the diversities in classrooms. The diversity I was exposed to has helped me as a future teacher to recognize the diverse needs of students. The diversity practicum has been such an eye-opening experience for me because I had the chance to see diversity in both an elementary and early childhood setting. While observing the demographics of the populations, environmental and instructional adaptations used, and successful interventions implemented at Rita Murphy Elementary and Shiloh Christian Preschool, I was able to form a more knowledgeable understanding of the different diversities within a classroom based on the experiences throughout this practicum. This will influence the way I run my future classroom because I now understand that each student is diverse in his or her own way. This experience has made me reflect on the ways that I will provide adaptations and my own service to the unique individuals within my classroom.

References

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