

Cultural Diversity Capstone Experience

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Introduction

Throughout my many learning experiences in this Diversity Practicum course, I have become more aware of the different cultural, socioeconomic, physical limitations, etc. that will be present in my future classroom. As a future educator, it is imperative that I learn how to best teach my students. Students of all different ages, cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, ethnicities, disabilities/struggles, all deserve a competent, well-rounded, well-educated, and dedicated teacher, and I intend to be that for them. In this paper I will describe my experiences in the different settings I observed/aided in and compare the differences and similarities of these experiences. My practicum hours consist of volunteering and observing at the Mid-Winter Pow Wow, visiting Inspiring Minds-center for dyslexia and literacy, and different schools in North Dakota. I will describe what I learned and how these experiences have better prepared me to be an educator.

Demographics

The demographics of the different groups I was able to observe and supervise had a wide range. At the Mid-Winter Pow Wow at the University of Mary the event ranged from girls, boys, men, and women with ages varying from 4 to 60 years old. Saint Bernard Mission School on Standing Rock Reservation's demographics ranged from kindergarten to seventh/eighth graders. The people participating in the Mid-Winter Pow Wow and the students from Saint Bernard Mission School were mainly Indigenous people from the surrounding area. I was then able to visit Lincoln Elementary School, in town. The demographics of this group were boys and girls in the 5th grade, ages ranging from 10-11 years old. The students were a mix of general students to students with different and mild disabilities. I was then able to visit Inspiring Minds, an incredible center for people of all ages that have dyslexia. The group's demographics, that I

observed, were boys from the ages 9 to 11 years old. Because I was able to go to so many different environments I was exposed to and got to interact with many different demographics.

Environmental Adaptations

The environments from each setting were immensely different. At the end of the day, each environment had their own ways of implementing adaptations to ensure successful learning.

Mid-Winter Pow Wow To ensure learning success in this setting, it was an open event for the students of the University of Mary who could be exposed to and educated on Indigenous culture. The biggest cultural element that was displayed was the dancing, music, colors, and sense of community. The University of Mary allowed different vendors to set up tables to sell handcrafted artifacts, clothing, paintings, etc. These were all on display and available for purchase throughout the day. Young boys, girls, men, and women all dressed in beautiful garments, head dresses, some even carrying large drums all partaking in the powwow. There was such an innate sense of community among all the participants. There was familiarity, sharing hugs, greetings, joy, and a sense of pride to be sharing their culture with those around them. Later on, students were called on to come down and join in different games/dances. This opportunity allowed so many people to come together and enjoy the richness of Indigenous culture of North Dakota.

Lincoln Elementary School Lincoln Elementary School really embraced the concept that the classroom environment is the third teacher. This environment not only incorporates all five pillars/elements of a learning environment-(1) creating a sense of belonging, (2) flexible space and open-ended materials, (3) natural materials, (4) wonder, curiosity, and intellectual engagement, and (5) symbolic representations-but also, provided resource rooms, used calming colors throughout the school, and had non-conventional learning areas/techniques. This environment ensured learning success for all students whether general education students or

students receiving special education. Lincoln Elementary School is designed to help every student.

Inspiring Minds Inspiring Minds Center for Dyslexia uses different teaching methods to improve the ability of students with dyslexia. They offer one-on-one instruction in a safe environment that allows students to feel comfortable making mistakes, therefore improving and learning. Inspiring Minds is designed to help students improve throughout their entire education career and even offer services to adults, as well. Their purpose is to help students succeed and they do so everyday through their adaptations to the student's learning environment and curriculum.

Saint Bernard Mission School After being given a tour of the Saint Bernard Mission School



grounds, I saw how greatly Native American culture was incorporated into the church and even the curriculum through displaying artifacts, paintings/artwork, teaching specific history lessons, etc. I was able to experience first hand the Montessori techniques used in the kindergarten and first grade classrooms. I worked one-on-one with a student learning about counting and reading numbers through base ten pieces. By assimilating culture and different learning techniques, students feel a sense of belonging, community, and growth in their personal lives, by learning more about their culture, and growth in how they learn, by involving multiple different learning techniques.

Instructional Adaptations

With every visit, to the powwow, Lincoln Elementary, Inspiring Minds, and Saint Bernard Mission School, I was accompanied by multiple people. However, in this paper I will mainly focus on my instructional approach and adaptations I used.

Mid-Winter Pow Wow The whole purpose of a powwow is to bring different people together to share in singing and dancing. Not only is it a social gathering that builds community, it is also sacred and spiritual. Boys and girls, men and women of all different ages dressed in beautiful garments dancing in harmony and singing as one. These people have memorized meaningful dances and lyrical music that powerfully express their culture. These dances and songs have been passed down through generations, taught through experience, and shared to all. By being open to share their Indigenous culture, others are able to learn and participate.

Lincoln Elementary School As mentioned briefly before, Lincoln Elementary incorporates many different options for different learners. For example, they offer resource rooms for extra help and scaffolding for students. They also have calm/blue rooms where students may be put to self-soothe, to ensure safety of self and others, and/or do homework. Lincoln Elementary also uses non-conventional teaching techniques for students like project-based learning, incorporating natural materials in everyday learning, open classrooms, etc. Lincoln Elementary School offers instructional adaptations for students with any type of physical or learning disability while still creating community and belonging within their classrooms.

Inspiring Minds At Inspiring Minds they offer 45-60 minute sessions with each client. It is different from a regular classroom in many ways like the time spent, amount of students in the room at once, and the one-on-one instruction provided at all times. Inspiring Minds focuses on reading, spelling, and oral translation rather than hitting every target area. Inspiring Minds uses the Barton Scope and Sequence, based on an Orton Gillingham approach, and teaches students Greek and Latin roots. These different techniques not only help students spell and read with ease but improve grammar, written expression, and study skills. There is so much more to dyslexia than just having difficulty reading. By having these instructions altered especially for them, students with dyslexia are given that chance to succeed.

Saint Bernard Mission School When visiting Saint Bernard Mission School, we put together different physical activities for the older group of students and the younger group. With the older group, we started with a relay race type game. Not only did they pick up quickly on the rules, they also got into it. It was harder to get their attention. There was one student that sat out, I realized that there will always be some students that need an extra push to involve themselves. So, I went over to the student and just began a conversation. I found out that a lot of the students at SBMS have grown up together and many of them are even related. I finally got her to join the group and we all switched to a new game. Students need to be able to trust instructors before jumping all the way. By laying a foundation for a relationship, especially with the older students who have more difficulty trusting, can really improve learning and involvement in the classroom. Once the younger group came down, we adjusted the instructions to better capture the attention of the students and so that they could better understand. After the physical education was over I got to participate in the kindergarten/first grade Montessori room. The teacher assigned me to one of her students. They were working on units, longs, flats, etc., matching them with numbers, and reading the numbers aloud. To better explain this, I'll give an example. I would pick a random number of beads (the beads were singular-units, a string of 10 singular beads-longs, 10 longs strung together-flats, and one giant cube of 10x10 longs or 1,000 singular beads-block). Say, I chose 5 units, 9 longs, and 3 flats. The student would then count these pieces, pick out the number equivalent to each category (I.e. 5 units = 5, 9 longs = 90, 3 flats = 300). Then the student would walk the beads, and the number cards over to a new mat (all the materials on a tray). Once at the new mat, the student would line up the base-10 pieces to the number equivalents and try to say the numbers all together (I.e. three hundred, ninety-five). When the student tried to guess without counting, it was often not accurate (I.e. thirty, ninety-five). So, I would have the student count the beads first, lay them out, and then read it. By doing this, the

result was almost always correct. Having these visual aids, hands on activity, and freedom to do this activity on their own/at their own pace are great ways for the student to better/fully understand this concept, even though there were errors at some points. During this visit, I was more able to participate and interact with the students instead of just observing or being in the background. I not only experienced, but initiated instructional adaptations during physical education and in the Montessori classroom.



Parameters Beyond the Classroom

These diverse experiences not only apply in the classroom but outside the classroom. Some of the activities did not even occur inside a typical classroom. One could even argue that every environment we are in is a classroom.

Mid-Winter Pow Wow This was such a unique experience. This event occurred on the University of Mary campus but was outside of any ordinary classroom. The powwow allowed people from all over to come together to experience song and dance. Many observers were new to being so immersed in this rich Native American culture.



Lincoln Elementary School This visit was in an ordinary classroom environment. However, the information I learned about how to incorporate non-traditional classroom objects, like garage doors, plants, animals, etc. into the classroom added a very distinctive aspect to learning and the learning environment. They also include parents greatly in the student's education which is so important in building family involvement and community.

Inspiring Minds Inspiring Minds is more like a tutoring center rather than a classroom. This center has different sized rooms, like classrooms, throughout the building. However, they also have a “backyard” that is utilized frequently for when students need a quick break, are early or late for their sessions, or during good weather they can move the lesson to outside. By having flexible learning spaces and providing outdoor options as a learning environment allows students to recognize learning in different environments and refocus on content. There is also a strong community of parents who have children with dyslexia and seek out Inspiring Minds to help their child succeed and be surrounded by uplifting and encouraging people.

Saint Bernard Mission School At SBMS there is such a strong sense of community. By incorporating Native American culture into learning it allows students to better understand the culture around them while also teaching them about history. There are events like the Mid-Winter Pow Wow that allows students to be more involved in the Indigenous culture and experience song, dance, and community first hand.

Connecting Information

Throughout these diverse opportunities I had during my practicum experience, I made many connections to the Council for Exceptional Children Standards ¹. Because I was able to visit so many different places, my experiences met numerous standards. However, two of these standards were so prominent in my diversity opportunities. The first standard, ICSI.1.K5, states, “Cultural perspectives influencing the relationships among families, schools, and communities as related to instruction.” This can be seen in many aspects throughout each visit. During the Mid-Winter Pow Wow, students from the University of Mary are able to witness new cultural perspectives and those participating in the dancing and singing are given the opportunity to share their insight and traditions with others. At Saint Bernard Mission School students are immersed

in their culture. Artifacts, artwork, stories, monuments, etc. line walls and fill the classroom. These were perfect places to see cultural perspectives and how culture is incorporated into peoples' lives. The ICSI.2.S1 standard, states, "Create a safe, equitable, positive, and supportive learning environment in which diversities are valued." This was one standard that I can, with 100 percent certainty, say applied to every place I visited. At the Mid-Winter Pow Wow, all the participants were engaged, dancing, singing, joining in, and lifting each other up. I had never been a part of an event that had so many different people in one room but so eager to learn and be involved. At Lincoln Elementary School, there are so many resources the school provides to ensure student success. Classroom environment, resource rooms, teaching techniques, etc. are all ways to guarantee that students are being supported, are able to grow, and learn in a healthy and positive setting. At Inspiring Minds, students are really embraced. Students with dyslexia, along with many other disabilities, often get discouraged or lose confidence in the classroom. Inspiring Minds gives that confidence back to students by creating a safe learning environment where students are comfortable making mistakes and are constantly supported by educators, parents, and the community there. At Saint Bernard Mission School, students are encouraged to learn about their differences, they are taught not only excellent content but are taught in a way that ensures their growth. Educators are encouraging, provide positive feedback, and create a safe environment for students.

Conclusion

Overall, the experiences I was able to witness and be a part of were so rewarding and I am so grateful to have been given the opportunity to do so. There was so much that I was able to take away from these experiences and will be able to use as a future educator. I have learned that

¹ All Council for Exceptional Children standard references come from the EDU 390 Syllabus

culture can enrich a person's education. Incorporating culture in learning allows students to create personal connections to content. And by allowing students to learn about their history, their culture, and their traditions they can become better versions of themselves and better those around them by bringing new awareness and knowledge. I have learned that every student is so different. Whether they are a general education student who has difficulties in specific subjects, struggles to stay focused, or has a disability, especially dyslexia, I am far better equipped with how to support these students and guide them to success. This can be done by being patient, by being willing to hear what the student has to say, implementing new teaching techniques in the classroom, by using games in the classroom to refocus or to use as motivation, etc. I also realized the importance of classroom environments and how imperative it is to incorporate natural materials, calming colors, have open space, flexible materials, use images, graphs, songs, and more to improve memorization, etc. There is so much information that I gathered and will use in my future classroom as an educator. This experience is one that will stay in my mind forever and have a big impact on how I lead my own classroom one day.

References

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