Coaching Diverse Athletes

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For my diversity practicum experience I coached gymnastics at Bismarck Gymnastics Academy. While I have been coaching gymnastics for many years now, I have never had to think critically about how the diversity of my students affected my coaching. In my classes I have students of varying ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, different ages, and with a variety of different disabilities. I also have had the opportunity to work with students who are ELL. The overall percentage of these students is low, however I have at least one student with a diverse background in almost every class I coach. Gender distribution is heavily weighted towards girls, although I do have nine boys in my classes out of 105 total students. In addition to the above demographics, my athletes also range in age from 5-18 years old, which can provide a challenge in some of the classes where there is a wide age gap.

Because of the diversity of my students I had to employ a plethora of adaptations. For example, in classes where there is a larger age gap I have to set up the class in a way that allows each student to stay active. I typically do this by setting up multiple stations for students then group them with other students of similar skill level. I can send a younger, less experienced group to do an easier activity while I help the older group with a difficult skill or vice versa. I also adjust the way that I coach based on age and cognitive development. With older students I will often use more verbal cues whereas with younger students, students with cognitive disabilities, or students who are ELL I will demonstrate and walk them through the skill. One specific example was when I worked with a student that had cerebral palsy I had extra visual cues for him, additional mats in the area in case he fell, and I made sure that I stayed close while he were performing the skill in case they needed assistance.

One of the successful interventions I had occurred about four weeks into the session. One of my students was having difficulty focusing in class and was becoming a distraction to other students. After class I had a discussion with her mother who shared strategies that she has in the home to help with focus, as well as talking to her daughter about how she could behave better in class. The biggest takeaway I have had from this practicum experience is that enlisting family help is essential to student success. This being said, I have also had experiences where parents were not helpful, but rather put the blame on me. These situations are difficult to handle because in my experience it eroded the coach-athlete relationship of mutual respect. Despite this I have typically been able to rebuild a relationship by showing the student that I have their best interest in mind. I do this by getting excited when they succeed, even if it is a small success such as listening during instruction, getting a new skill, or making progress towards a goal they have.

Naturally my classroom experiences will be a little different than coaching, however the main thing I will carry with me into teaching is what I have learned about building connections with students and parents. I have had multiple experiences where I have had to talk to parents about behavioral issues, but what I have found is that they receive it well more often than not. I think this is because I make it a point to tell parents something good that their child has done each week. Especially for students with physical or cognitive disabilities something as simple as acknowledging that you enjoy having their student in class each week is enough to make any conversation about issues much easier and more positive.

In conclusion, I have enjoyed viewing my coaching from a different perspective. I think that this experience has helped me to realize that there is more to my students than I know about initially. I think that this experience will help me be a better coach and educator, and will help me to spot and address similar challenges in my classroom in the future.