REFLECTION

Transforming Our School Settings

Educator John Strong reflects on his journey with equity, diversity and inclusion

My formal experience with equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) goes back more than 10 years, but my personal connection to it spans a lifetime.

When I was in third grade, I moved into a new neighborhood. I went from a friend circle that included light and dark children, kids who spoke English as a second language, and a boy with cerebral palsy, to a new group that clearly reflected the neighborhood’s homogeneity. At first, I had a hard time “breaking in.”

Uncertain of myself, I was prone to getting into fights. But over time I started feeling more at ease on the playing fields. Tag, baseball, football, basketball, it didn’t matter. That was where I felt comfortable and included.

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EDI AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Equity refers to the practice of providing personalized supports to individuals as they require them to be successful. (This differs from equality, which gives everyone the same thing regardless of whether they need it or not.)

Diversity refers to heterogeneity — differences in social dimensions such as ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, etc. rather than a great deal of sameness.

And inclusiveness is the straightforward practice of including others rather than excluding them and making them the “other.”

Physical education provides a unique forum for formalizing EDI practices, primarily because students compete in almost every class. If educators can consistently frame these competitive episodes as opportunities to collaborate effectively, more students will realize how situations can be enhanced by seeking to bring people together rather than splitting them apart.

Physical education class is also a good setting to model the practice of gaining consensus from a group. When something doesn’t go as expected, students can learn how to work together to gain consensus for change, then enact the change and proceed with the newly improved idea.

INCORPORATING A MINDFULNESS LENS

According to Jon Kabat-Zin, founder of the Center for Mindfulness, “Mindfulness represents a new way of being in a relationship with yourself, one that’s catalytic of a new way of ongoing learning and healing.

The transformation comes with the understanding that you are not your thoughts about yourself. You are far, far bigger, more nuanced and multidimensional than who you think you are, the story of you.”

John Strong is the chair of SHAPE America’s Equity, Diversity & Inclusion task force and an associate professor at Niagara County Community College. He has been teaching in the Health, Physical Education and Recreation Department for 13 years. In addition, he explores inclusiveness in presentations related to K-14 physical education at local, state and national levels.

John believes physical education can lead the broader educational community toward large-scale normalizing of inclusiveness practices that will facilitate improved performances and outcomes for everyone. He can be reached at jstrong@niagaracc.suny.edu.

I see great possibility in that statement and believe that mindfulness can be transformative in our school settings if applied correctly. If our shared future is one where we believe it’s possible to embrace our educational, professional and local communities with an equitable and inclusive lens, the widespread utility of mindfulness will be a key.

Viewing EDI with a mindfulness lens is like multiplying six-digit numbers with a calculator. You can do it without a calculator, but it takes longer, and you may not even be confident in your final answer.

The empathetic state you’ll find yourself in as a result of mindfulness will make prejudice and exclusion seem like ridiculous choices!