

Educational Change and Improved Diversity

Jalen M. Jackson

Loyola University Maryland

ED*625 Montessori Capstone: Professional Learning Plan

Dr. Victoria Elasic

August 7, 2022

Abstract

This paper analyzes some of the causes of low diversity in school settings and the benefits of working to create more diverse and inclusive environments. The goal is to offer all children an equal opportunity for educational experiences. Included is an analysis of the challenges schools are faced with when it comes to building diverse school systems. Teachers also offer their experiences and perspectives on the outcomes of inclusivity in their classrooms. Through research, there has been a determination that all children and adults in the diverse school systems reap the benefits of inclusivity. There has been ample research concluded on inclusivity, but there are still some limitations which are discussed. Despite those limitations, there is much value in the research already done and it should be applied within school systems and more directly in the classroom. Diversity and inclusivity should work in a synchronous fashion benefiting society.

Educational Change and Improved Diversity

As the world progresses, diversity has become more of a looming topic. Today, there is a focus on making everyone feel included despite their race, how they choose to identify, or socioeconomic status. Society is on a growing path of acceptance, creating a better environment for all. This is especially a discussion more people are having in and about the school setting when considering educational change. The push for more diverse and inclusive environments is one that has been around since slavery. Activists have rallied for more than 70 years for inclusivity and comfort surrounding diversity in everyday life. The notion that not all people are accepting of creating a more inclusive environment is still around today. Segregation was a part of the social norm until, the civil rights law act of 1964 prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. The civil rights act was the birth of the idea diversity. Public buildings and facilities began to allow people of different races into the same building. This is when the topic also became more prominent in schools. Researchers slowly began to conduct studies to look at classes that were diverse versus those that were not. Diversity in the school settings will be reviewed closely and how educational change can move forward to progress inclusivity within the learning environment. Despite the push for more diversity, it has always proven to be a challenge.

Inclusivity Challenges Schools are Faced With

A challenge schools face when it comes to creating diversity is financial opportunity. Families who typically have money to pay for their child's education can send their children to independent schools. Given that tuition for these schools can range anywhere from \$5,000-\$25,000, this creates an uneven opportunity for diversity. "Measured in 2015 dollars, the average

full tuition in nonsectarian private elementary schools rose from \$4,120 in 1979 to \$22,611 in 2011". (Snyder & Dillow, 2015, Table 205.50). These schools often consist of children who have parents as doctors, lawyers, and other professions of higher stature that can afford college-like tuition rates for their elementary aged children. Public schools are often limited in diversity because of strict districting parameters. Children often go to school based on their location within the country or city. This comes at a disadvantage to low socioeconomic status communities and their schools and a high advantage for those in higher status communities. Wealthy families are grouped into the same school systems while those of less fortune are all grouped into a different school. "Since most children attend a public school close to their home, this has resulted in increased segregation of public schools by income" (Owens, et al., 2016). According to Mira Debs (2019, p. 28), public schools are often rewarded financially based on students' performance meaning higher socioeconomic schools are adept to more financial gain for better resources and opportunity, ultimately limiting opportunity for students who attending low socioeconomic schools. Another factor contributing to low diversity in school settings is the lack of trained teachers.

About 79% of teachers nationally identify as white Americans as opposed to less than 7% African Americans, 9% Hispanic, and 2% Asian American. The findings show that benefits exist for congruence in student–teacher ethnicity; students who share the ethnicity of their teachers have more positive perceptions of their teacher and schoolwork compared with students with a mismatch. (Nishina et al., 2019, p. 312)

This makes it important to create a diverse teacher pool to benefit children of all ethnicities, not only those of Caucasian descent. This is not a change that will happen overnight.

It will also be important to train the available teachers on diversity and inclusivity as well. “Teachers can set the tone for the climate within the classroom both through their own interactions with students and through modeling adaptive prosocial behaviors” (Nishina et al., 2019, p. 312). Communication can also serve as another negative factor when it comes to education opportunity. There are instances where people think they could not possibly afford to send their child to a school where tuition is \$15,000 a year and little they know, there was an available scholarship to cover \$10,000 or more of the tuition. People in low socioeconomic communities are sometimes limited in technology access and may have less opportunities to research opportunities for their family on the internet. As the push toward more diverse school environments continue, so must the understanding and cultural awareness grow of the human. Diversity will improve when people begin to understand that everyone has something to contribute to the betterment of society. Pride and ego are often contributing factors to why someone may exclude others.

Why is Inclusion Necessary?

It is necessary to take a further look into this topic to help answer several questions. a) How do we improve the diversity in school settings, b) How/why diverse school environments benefit the child, c) How/why diverse school environments benefit the adult, d) How/why to be inclusive in a diverse environment with children and adults? Answering these questions will help bring awareness to why school settings should be diverse and inclusive. Not only is diversity beneficial for the child, but it also benefits the adults and creates an environment where everyone is comfortable.

What Has Been Concluded on Inclusion in School Settings?

Research has shown that all students benefit from contact with people who are different in various ways. Diverse school settings can be especially beneficial to students who have disabilities, who are bilingual, and even those who are academically gifted. Regardless of academic identification it is important to remember the following,

Bringing different groups together in the same environment is not enough. It is also necessary to foster equal status among groups, establish common goals, facilitate intergroup cooperation, and provide support from authorities. Although there are parallels between Allport's perspectives about reducing bias in society and efforts to include learners with diverse needs in the classroom, it is noteworthy that children may not have the same societal biases or view individual differences and the classroom ecology in the same way as adults. Although adults may understand differences among groups of students, students may not be aware that there are different groups that fit labels such as general education, disability, academically gifted, and emergent bilingual. Moreover, it is important to remember that students create their own society and peer culture and may have their own collectively constructed way of defining different groups. (Farmer et al., 2019, p. 5)

Inclusive school contexts can also promote psychological and social adjustment and enhance learning among students. Research shows "that a school's ethnic composition can lead to a more inclusive environment where children feel accepted and comfortable" (Nishina et al., 2019, p. 317). If children are surrounded by only people who look like them, they will be limited in social exploration and learning of other cultures. In a diverse setting it is important that adults

help children create a positive ethnic identity for themselves. Children should be guided to see the uniqueness of everyone and come to an understanding that everyone can contribute positively if given the opportunity. Children also gain social competence and practice prosocial behaviors when they are in diverse environments.

Assisting students to be ready and able to form friendships with peers from ethnically diverse backgrounds provides them with valuable experience and skills that they can carry forward to new educational, community, and workplace settings. (Nishina et al., 2019, p. 306)

Researchers have also found academic and social gains for all students attending racially and economically diverse schools. “Creating and sustaining racially diverse schools involves strategies for access, outreach, cultural diversity and student support, and advocacy” (Debs, 2019, p. 34). Some of the strategies to improve access for all include providing full-day programs and transportation for families who must work. There are also several ways to improve outreach in the community including printing brochures in several languages and holding information sessions within the community at local libraries and public housing facilities. To increase cultural diversity and students support schools can:

Hire diverse staff and create school-based pathways for training and hiring from within the local community, use curriculum materials that accurately represent economically and racially diverse students and families, and include a parent-outreach coordinator on staff who recruits a diverse population of students and supports a diverse population of families. (Debs, 2019, p. 34)

Limitations of the Research

Although there are many benefits of diverse school settings for child development there are also some limitations of the research already done. Often researchers are limited on the outcome of active participants. Researchers are often faced with the challenge of getting people to participate in surveys and to share their experiences. It is important to remember that experiences differ from person to person and not all people will benefit the same from practices such as a diverse environment. Research is often limited in the ability to obtain personal student responses. Often parents will choose to not allow their child to share their personal education experience through interviews leaving researchers with the only option of collecting data through naturalistic and structured observations. Speaking with children directly would be a more accurate depiction of their experiences. There are also environmental factors that limit research. Considering the duration of the teaching in relation to the child's experience is also important. Children may have different experiences based on how many years their teacher has been the lead in the classroom settings. A child who has a teacher that has taught longer could potentially have a better experience as their teachers have more experience and training on how to manage a diverse environment to reap the benefits of inclusivity. Another question researchers might consider is what number of ethnic groups in the environment is required to consider it diverse. Some researchers may consider 2-3 ethnic groups diverse in comparison to other researchers who would say 3-5 ethnic groups in a classroom is considered diverse. Lastly, the question arises of whether researchers should include the experiences of special education when considering diversity and inclusion. To be inclusive is to factor in whether special education students felt the diversity and inclusivity goals of the schools were met.

What To Do with This Information?

With the research available, we can gather that teachers should welcome diverse and inclusive environments for all students. It is the job of schools and teachers to gather an “understanding of students’ interests and relationships, fostering their development and growth, and creating a community to help them learn to love learning and to feel connected to society” (Nishina et al., 2019, p. 307). Schools should also take into consideration advocating opportunities that add to the diversity of the environment such as scholarships and community gatherings. Often, these opportunities are held tight knit and the public is not made aware of them. Other considerations include the practice of inclusivity. To be inclusive, one must learn to be empathetic and to accept others for themselves. This takes the ability to self-reflect and make improvements of oneself on a regular basis. With doing so, you can then lead by example creating a comforting environment for those surrounding you.

The Future of Inclusion in Schools

Diversity and inclusion in school settings should work synchronously. The topic remains on how to mass improve diversity in schools and really make a change in education. We realize that diversity benefits both the adults and the children who are in those environments. Research has concluded it is important for each child to feel they are in an inclusive environment for proper psychological and social development. As more research is done on the topic of diversity there should be a focus on some of the many limitations of the research conducted. To make improvements such as sample sizes and participants involved will give a more precise overview of the work still to be done to create more diverse and inclusive environments. The community, as a whole, should all play a role in diversity and realize the impact that everyone’s life

experiences can offer. Diversity is a world-wide topic and with the help of new-born programs and funding being allocated directly for improvement, progress is being made. The importance of diversity and inclusion is growing rapidly as the benefits are universal to both adults and students.

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