

## **Embracing Inclusive Education Online in Times of Covid-19**

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### **Abstract**

The concept of diversity and inclusion has continued to gain attention and attraction and is a challenging topic in the times of Covid-19. In this pandemic period, all of our systems are totally disturbed including the educational system and all sectors of life get stressed, including our principles and values. Remote teaching and learning process has become a 'new normal' for all of our educators and learners and it will be continued for an undetermined period of time. This new normal online learning poses adaptive and transformative challenges to the educators and the learners. Inclusive education in this lockdown, quarantine period is a huge challenge. This paper explains about barriers of inclusion, like unconscious bias, and the pedagogical methods to practice for successful inclusive education online in times of Covid-19 and in the future.

***Keywords:*** Inclusive education, online education unconscious bias

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Diversity includes all differences that define each of us as unique individuals in terms of age, religion, education, experience, personality, knowledge, skill sets, and sexual orientation. In general terms and in educational settings, diversity includes all aspects of identity and experience, including nationality, value system, ethnicity, socio-economic context, language, gender, sexuality, family structure, age, ability, educational background, and learning styles. All people must be respected and considered as valuable members of their own communities and in public, regardless of their age, caste, abilities, disabilities and health care needs. This respect is defined by the term inclusion. Diversity and inclusion involve people understanding each other, considering that everyone is unique, practicing simple tolerance of individual differences, and embracing and celebrating the rich dimensions of diversity contained within each individual.

### **Education Privilege**

Poverty is a major barrier for a long time in school education and higher education in the countries like India. Due to poverty, many brilliant students in our society have lost their education, lost their future and they have lost even their precious life. Recent data show that there are now more than 320 million (32 crore) students affected by Covid-19 in India. In the Covid-19 crisis, educators all around the world including India are forced to make a sudden switch from regular classroom teaching to completely online teaching and these 320 million students are in a position to attend their regular classes online. In many of our rural areas, there is a lack of internet connectivity and even electricity. The lockdown period extends endlessly and the poor and middle-class parents who mostly work for daily wages, lost their jobs and are suffering for their one square meal in this pandemic period. It is highly impossible for them to afford computers or smartphones to get their children access to online education. More than 65% of the student population has reduced hours of current electrical supply and the families are not

affording to pay electricity bills. These massive unexpected burdens on families have pushed millions of school students out of education. It is a great exclusion happening due to poverty. The impact of Covid-19 in these two years has affected many sectors especially low, socio-economic groups and disabled students even face greater risk of being excluded. Dutt (2020) asserts that the lack of diversity, which spans race, gender, disability, sexuality and other social categories, contributes directly to the lack of inclusion and equity experienced by people from marginalized groups. Moreover, online teaching is *Victor Ludorum* amidst this chaos; it is no more an option but a necessity (Dhawan, 2020). Online education is the only option and students face many difficulties in their remote learning. In remote learning, students miss their physical classes and peer interaction which leads to a sense of isolation, mental stress and depression and they themselves are excluded from education. It is a great challenge for the educators to make every online classroom welcoming, engaging and inclusive.

### **Unconscious Bias**

Generally human beings are very good in nature. But sometimes, we lack simple tolerance and understanding and exclude people due to unconscious bias. Unconscious bias is an unconscious judgment and an automatic mental shortcut used to process information and make quick intuitive decisions about other people. It is a human attitude and stereotype that people unconsciously attribute to another person or group of people that affect the person or the group. Unconscious bias or implicit bias is often defined as prejudice or unsupported judgments in favor of or against one thing, person or group as compared to another in a way that is usually considered unfair. As a result of unconscious bias, certain people get benefited and many other people are penalized or excluded. Although people are often unaware of their unconscious bias,

it creates barriers that prevent diversity and inclusion in our community, society and workplace, damaging relationships that could foster creative and innovative ideas.

### ***Halo Effect***

Halo Effect, also called Halo Error, is a well-known cognitive bias. It is a tendency of a person to create positive impressions of another person or a group, a product, a brand or a company in one area that positively influences his opinions and feelings in other areas. Cognitive bias is a mental deviation of a person from normal judgment. The deviated judgment that occurs due to cognitive bias prevents someone from accepting a person, a product or a brand based on the idea of an unfounded belief of what is good or bad. Many times, unconsciously we judge someone, something or some place as likeable and being positive based on a single positive aspect. Seeing the outward appearance of a boy to a girl or vice versa leads them to a marriage settlement. By merely seeing the outward appearance, they make major decisions and finally at the time when they realize it, everything including a peaceful life has gone from them. This is Halo Effect. They make constant errors in judgment and it is the reflection of their individual preferences. Some people go with their whims and fancies, they go with their choices and wishes, no matter how unreasonable it may seem. There are 'n' numbers of such cases that come every day. Facebook and Instagram attractions are good examples. In the classroom, teachers are prone to the halo effect error when evaluating their students, for example, a teacher might assume that a well-behaved student is also bright and motivated before they have objectively evaluated the student's capacity in these areas (Preta, 2021). It is the responsibility of the teachers to educate their learners about value education and decision making skills.

### ***The Horn Effect***

The Horn Effect is another cognitive bias. The horn effect asserts that physical appearance is a major criterion for our inclusion and exclusion. Rubin (1982) uses the term 'horn effect' to refer simply to the tendency to limit the overall assessment of an individual to a single negative attribute. For example, two men are attending an interview. One is average in merits and the other one is very smart. The manager selects the candidate with physical appearance not giving importance to merits. Physical appearance is a major criterion for our inclusion and exclusion. When you judge a person, attributing negative qualities to him based on one known quality, then you have used the horn effect on him. For example, physically unattractive people are perceived to be less trustworthy even though there is no connection between knowledge, talents, morality and physical appearance. Horn effect has a major part in the hiring process, due to the fact that recruiters exclude talented candidates in favor of those with a better appearance.

### ***Affinity Bias ('Like Me' tendency)***

Affinity Bias is otherwise called Similarity Bias or Like Me tendency. It is an unconscious tendency of people to connect with others and easily socialize and spend time with those who share similar interests, experiences and backgrounds. It is easy to socialize and spend time with others who are like us. Affinity Bias or Like Me tendency leads us to favor people who are more like us in character, appearance, sound and behavior. With similarity bias, people ignore finding faults in people who are more like them and find faults in people who are not similar or less like them. We exclude people in this way too. Unconsciously people gel with people who are more like them as like the idiom "Birds of a feather flock together," and exclude people who are dissimilar to them.

### ***Confirmation Bias***

Confirmation Bias is the tendency to look for information that supports, rather than rejects, one's preconceptions, typically by interpreting evidence to confirm existing beliefs while rejecting or ignoring any conflicting data (American Psychological Association, 2018). Imagine a situation that you try to reach a friend with whom you generally have a good relationship by Whatsapp. Recently, you received no calls from him in return. After some time, you come to the conclusion that your friend avoids you. Your mind easily confirms that your friend is avoiding you and you start believing that your friend is definitely avoiding you. From that time onwards, you start believing that your friend definitely avoids you and you keep this belief unchecked. Your mind tries to search for reasons to give weight to your belief that your friend avoids you. With that belief, you start excluding your friend. This is Confirmation Bias. People display these biases unconsciously by giving more weight to evidence that confirms their beliefs upon someone or something, and ignore or undervalue evidence that could disprove it. They gather selective information and interpret it in a biased way. Using this selective information they make predictions about a specific outcome including existing beliefs and their expectations. Especially people are likely to process information to support their own beliefs when the issue is highly important or self-relevant. For example, during the election season, people tend to seek positive information that paints their favored candidates in a good light. They seek and find negative information about the candidate they oppose.

### ***Social Comparison Bias***

Social Comparison Bias is having feelings of dislike and competitiveness with someone that is seen as physically, or mentally better than yourself. Misunderstandings, dislikes, groupism and ego clashes in the working places are mainly due to this social comparison bias. In the

Covid-19 pandemic, many people lost their jobs and working visas throughout the world and they compare themselves with others who are still working. As a result, they start developing low self-esteem that causes them to have a feeling that they are worthless. But reality might be different and their feelings wrong. We exclude many people in our working place and community with the mentality of Social Comparison Bias. There are two kinds of social comparisons prevailing among people. One is Upward Social Comparison. In this comparison, we compare our personality and achievements with those who we believe are smarter than us. This comparison works as a motivating factor to improve ourselves or the level of ability. The other one is Downward Social Comparison where we compare ourselves with someone who is lesser in achievement than us and feel comfortable with our achievements and quality. The recent research says that we exclude people in both these kinds of social comparison.

### ***Gender Bias***

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is a human rights violation, a universal issue, with great impact on victims/survivors, their families, and communities (Economic and Social Council, 2002). A new United Nations report has found almost 90% of men and women hold some sort of bias against females. Stein (1999) explains:

Sexual harassment in schools is unwanted and unwelcome behavior of a sexual nature that interferes with the right to receive an equal educational opportunity. Over 78% of students reported experiencing at least one incident of sexual harassment since starting high school, including 92% of the females and 57% of the males. Female students reported, on average, a higher number of incidents of unwanted behavior (since they started high school) than male students.

Women have the right to walk freely on the streets without sexual harassment and catcalling. Gender stereotypes exist at school and work where thinking may be that girls should stay at home and help with housework and childcare, and boys should have education.

### ***Glass Ceiling***

The Glass ceiling is a metaphor for the evident but intangible hierarchical impediment that prevents minorities and women from achieving elevated professional success. For instance, female physicians and surgeons earn 38% less than their male counterparts and female lawyers earn 30% less than male lawyers (Sadker, Sadker and Zittleman, 2009). Gender bias is a barrier for women and minorities to get promotions and leadership or reaching any upper-level roles. Often, hiring managers are unconsciously gender biased. Mentoring opportunities are minimized due to gender bias. Professional development is extremely affected by gender bias.

### ***Objectification and Poor Representation***

Objectification means treating persons as commodity or objects without regard to their personality or dignity. Recent evidence shows that the learned automatic response to objectify women has become culturally ingrained to such a great extent that choosing not to objectify women depletes self-regulatory resources and decreases performance in cognitive tasks (Tyler, Calogero & Adams, 2017). In the media, women are photo-shopped and airbrushed leading to much more emphasis and value being put on their external appearance above other capacities. Girls are represented poorly in entertainment and the media in ways that reinforce damaging gender stereotypes and traditional roles. Girls are shown in a reductive and unfair way. Performance reward bias occurs when employers or managers evaluate an employee's merit in a biased way, and allow their conscious or unconscious prejudice to affect the evaluation

of that particular employee. Increments, promotions, and merit-based rewards are included in the performance reward bias.

### ***Bias Towards Transgender Individuals***

Strousma (2020) states, “Transgender and gender diverse individuals often face discrimination in health-care settings, and are unable to find competent, knowledgeable and culturally appropriate health care. Lack of provider knowledge is a significant barrier, but our findings suggest that simply increasing training may not be the solution. Transgender and gender diverse individuals are often facing discrimination. School, peers and sometimes teachers are the major cause of their problems in their teen ages and, of course family and siblings, are also included. Often, transgender individuals are not completely accepted. Let us examine ourselves. How are we treating transgender persons? When we meet them while crossing a toll gate, do we say a good word with a smile or do we mock them? It should come from our heart and mind. It is every human being’s responsibility.

### ***Contrast Bias***

It is the human tendency to mentally upgrade or downgrade an object when comparing it to a contrasting object. In a selection people often get confused whether it be either selecting a dress or selecting a life partner in marriage. Due to this bias, many times people make the wrong choice and definitely exclude the best unknowingly.

### ***Ageism***

Age discrimination based on candidates’ chronological age is particularly prevalent in organizations characterized by rapid change. That is, organizations that have grown and expect to grow rapidly highlight the incongruence of stereotypes about older candidates and job requirements (Diekmann & Hirnisey, 2007). People are less likely to hire older-looking than

younger-looking job candidates. More specifically, older-looking candidates were less likely to be hired than younger-looking ones, presumably because older age appearance triggered impressions of lower health and fitness (Kaufmann et al., 2016).

Ageism refers to the stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination towards others or oneself based on age (World Health Organization, 2010). This may be casual or systematic. On many occasions, aged people are treated unfairly. Ageism has great impacts on confidence, job prospects, financial situation and quality of life. The organization's attitude towards older people is very severe in this pandemic. Aged people are targeted for terminations. In the Covid-19 crisis, many offices and shops are closed. In one instance, a middle-aged man who was the breadwinner of the family was terminated without prior notice. He couldn't bear the shock and he didn't want to face his family who completely depend on his salary. He chose to jump out from a four-story building and was found dead.

### ***Unconscious Name Bias***

This discrimination is rarely spoken. It happens all the time and its negative impact is enormous. People are discriminated against based on the meaning of a name, its pronunciation, its uniqueness, its gender affiliation, and its racial affiliation people. Someone hears a name and if that name doesn't register or it is uncomfortable for them, they may treat the person differently without even realizing what they are doing. If a name sounds African, Indian or anywhere non-western, people may make assumptions about that person or rule them out of opportunities (Morris, 2019). In general, people assume that someone with a double-barreled surname is privileged or 'posh' but it is the racial element that makes this kind of bias so damaging.

### ***Bias in Treating Physically Challenged***

Due to cognitive, developmental, intellectual, mental, physical, and/or sensory differences, disabled people are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society (Russell & Ravi, 2019). Most of us are very confident that we treat others equally and we believe that we are fair and equitable, and evaluate others based on objective facts. However, even the most egalitarian persons have unconscious biases. They are triggered automatically, in a fraction of second, without their conscious awareness or intention, and cause attitudes about and preferences for people based on characteristics such as age, gender, disability, and religion. Nowadays, physically challenged people are in our midst in the classrooms. Do we have sufficient infra structures for their convenience? Do we have a session or at least a collection of Braille books in our libraries for visually challenged people? Do we have ramp facilities for the physically challenged students to get access to our buildings easily with their wheelchairs? We are witnessing the struggles they face in our educational institutions. We do not purposely avoid them or not help them. However, people unthinkingly create undesirable actions or attitude, regardless of the goodness of conscious intentions.

### ***Human Blind Spots or Mind-bugs***

Apart from being biased in the matters discussed above, we have so many blind spots. Blind spot is actually a metaphor for a certain type of human behavior. Blind spots or mind bugs refer to the unconscious triggers and associations made by our brains about some persons, activities or phenomena. They are often hidden to our conscious because they are embedded preferences, not reflective ones. The blind spots often bother us because they are at direct odds with our chosen beliefs. The brain contains an unconscious warehouse full of associations between certain people and particular characteristics that often cause us to mis-identify our

fellow humans (Mahzarin & Greenwald, 2016). Social mind-bugs are a very dangerous matter of diversity and inclusion.

Once I had to fly from one place to another for very urgent work. I got a seat near the pilots' cabin. To my surprise, two lady pilots entered. Seeing the lady pilots, immediately, I felt like jumping out of the flight. I strongly believed, only male pilots could handle aircraft. In another incident, a father and his son were in a car accident and the father died on the spot. The son, badly injured, is rushed to the hospital. Seeing the boy in the operating room, the doctor refuses to do a surgery and says, "I can't operate on this boy. He is my son." How could this possibly happen? How could the surgeon be the boy's father when the story stated that the father died in the same car and the boy to the hospital? What are we missing here? In case you are stumped as I was, the solution is very simple: the doctor is the boy's mother (Banaji & Greenwald 2013).

In our brain we make some unconscious associations. That is why my mind associated pilots with adult males and doctors with adult males. We know well that females are doctors too and female pilots are everywhere. But we instinctively react and this is what psychologists call 'disassociation. It has undesirable consequences, regardless of the goodness of our conscious intentions. With these blind spots or mind bugs, we exclude many people around us. For no reason we avoid some street vendors, some efficient doctors, some schools, some teachers and some students.

### **Inclusive Pedagogy in Diverse Learning Environments**

Inclusion is not a set of strategies. Inclusion is not a placement issue. Inclusion is about belonging to a community or a group of friends, a school community or a neighborhood. If your students feel strange and doesn't get a feeling of belonging in your classroom, they won't feel

included. A teacher's instruction can help the learner in this situation. Instruction is not just teaching content. Instruction is intentional interaction. Instruction makes the learner more comfortable in the classroom and more successful. Success is not only meritorious accomplishment of content but the all-around personality development of a learner. Inclusion is something that should happen in the mind of a teacher. Good instruction leads to good outcomes. A good instructional strategy is required for a good inclusive education.

### ***Effective Strategies for Inclusive Education Online***

In the synchronous online classes, teachers should create a sense of community and a welcoming space. Teachers should create camera on/off rules and to have privacy to instruct learners and encourage virtual backgrounds especially to those who share small houses with the siblings. Virtual backgrounds should not be changed often or distracted. Early log-in and intro-chats are essential to include everyone in the learning mood. Teachers should instruct the learners to have updated profiles to display their names and they should turn to speaker view in the zoom screen. In the small classes, teachers should give opportunity to everyone to speak and participate in the interactive tasks. In the larger classrooms, teachers should plan for the best breakout room activities with groups having a note taker, reporter and a timekeeper.

1. Anecdotal records. Teachers who teach outside their cultural experience and do not have familiarities with the learners and their learning styles should learn about the identities and backgrounds in their classroom. Anecdotal Records can be used for every individual student to note down their prior education system, and perceived learning preferences. They help the teacher to acknowledge diversity in her class, and to do follow-up activities and improvement tasks with the individual students to make sure their needs are being met.

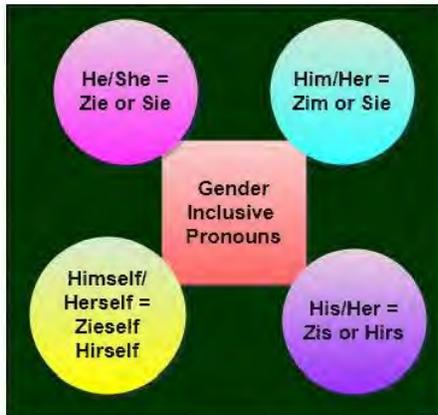
2. Online group office hours. Teachers should consider mandatory office hours appointments for students, and offer longer one-on-one appointments to understand their students' personalities. Teachers should ask about their prior educational experiences, interests, hobbies, how to pronounce their names etc., and meet them frequently on a one-on-one basis.
3. Examine your own biases and consider where they may have originated. This includes:
  - a. Use a third person's point of view
  - b. Don't make comparisons but do choose words carefully if comparisons are required.
  - c. Use specific pronouns when writing about people: The same is true when describing people's cultures and ethnicities.
  - d. Use inclusive words in the classroom.
  - e. Use inclusive activities in the lesson plans.
4. Use gender inclusive pronouns

Normally we use personal pronouns such as He, She, Him and Her to mention male and female. Currently there is a change in using these pronouns. Now people have started using gender neutral or gender inclusive pronouns. A gender neutral or gender inclusive pronoun is a pronoun that does not specify whether the subject is a male or female.

Inclusive pronouns do not associate a gender with the individual who is being addressed or discussed. Rather than using pronouns she or he, her or him, teachers should consider using they and themselves.

**Figure 1**

*Gender Inclusive Pronouns*



5. Validate the experiences and feelings of learners; not the color and caste.
6. Avoid jokes or statements related to community, caste and color. By making a joke related to any particular community, we exclude some persons. By doing this, we sow poison in the minds of youngsters. Additionally, to say nothing when this occurs implies that you agree. Remove negative expectations and set the right expectations. Get feedback and give feedback often.
7. Training for Inclusion: Diversity training asks teachers to understand their students' backgrounds. Teachers need training to handle challenged students in the classroom. Many students with disabilities spend most of their days in general education classrooms. Lack of training to meet these issues is a major problem. Teachers should be trained in a host of non-academic issues—from suicide prevention to food allergies to sexual assault, identifying trans-genders etc.
8. Solution Tree Partners in the Department or Staff Room should be encouraged. Solution tree partners with the brightest minds in education have to join with every teacher to develop the services and prepare suitable teaching tools to use in the inclusive classrooms. In the online

classes, tree partners can be invited to do some discovery learning tasks related to the subject. Seeing different faces on the screen may be a motivating factor.

9. Intergroup Contact: Meet and engage with individual members or groups of other schools.

Faculty from neighboring schools can be invited to share their experiences in the online classes.

10. Individualization: Consider the attributes of the individual apart from his or her group. Focus on his or her individual characteristics, traits, interests, and preferences rather than stereotypes about persons. Online homeschooling is self-paced and students move at their own time in learning. Individualization can be encouraged by giving individual projects and assignments.

11. Form peer groups in the class itself to support the individuals with disabilities in any form. Make inner-circle evaluation to check for affinity bias in the online groups.

12. Perspective Taking: Try to understand from students' perspectives what they encounter and what adaptive techniques they might use to function successfully.

13. Self-Monitoring Appraisals: Continuously self-monitor your perceptions, judgments, behavior, decisions, and actions to check for the influence of implicit biases. Write all of your behaviors in the appraisal and cancel whichever is not right and correct yourself. Write all of your negatives and bias in a paper, strike it out, crush the paper and throw it away. This activity is a psychological practice of deleting negatives in your subconscious mind. Of course, it is a kind of blind spot which helps you to believe that all your negatives have gone out.

14. Avoid Microaggressions: Microaggression is a form of implicit bias.

Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership ... These hidden messages may invalidate the group identity or experiential reality of target persons,

demean them on a personal or group level, communicate they are lesser human beings, suggest they do not belong with the majority group, threaten and intimidate, or relegate them to inferior status and treatment ... microaggressions are active manifestations ... of our worldviews of inclusion/exclusion, superiority/inferiority, normality/abnormality, and desirability/undesirability (Sue, Capodilupo, et.al 2007). Microaggressions are a great insult to the students.

Microaggressions including religion, physical ability, gender, or appearance are not life-threatening by nature, but are still harmful

15. Avoid Gripe Sessions: Do not participate in gripe sessions about students. Faculty members who gripe about students are establishing a culture of failure for their students, their department and their own teaching (Rhem, 1999).

16. Use Inclusive Lesson Plans: Inclusive lesson plans consist of the range of approaches and activities to teaching that consider the diverse needs and backgrounds of all students to create a learning environment where all students have equal access to learn and all students feel valued. While preparing a lesson plan, think about different activities which should be suitable to everyone in the class. Make your lessons into small portions and introduce interactive activities.

### **Conclusion**

Diverse classrooms contribute to students' emotional intelligence, improving empathy and perspective-taking in ways that prepare them to thrive personally and professionally.

Learning among diverse peers and professors inculcates critical thinking abilities, prompting students to challenge their own received wisdom and culturally-bounded assumptions (Sanger & Gleason, 2020). Best practices of diversity in the classroom prepare students for a global economy. Properly cultivated diversity in the classroom promotes empathy and reduces prejudice and also expands students' interactive capacity. Diversity creates a culturally responsive and

inclusive learning environment. It brings a negative behavior policy and contributes to professional growth and satisfaction.

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