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Diversity, Dignity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Age of Division, Discord and Disunion: Stereotyping, Sexist, Hegemony in Education

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Abstract

The article addresses diversity issues related to language, gender, and culture. Topics include fundamental areas of research essential to the discussion on language diversity in the context of education with respect to equity, poverty, stereotype threat, Pygmalion Effect, non-sexist language, and Matthews Effect. The discussion on diversity and equity creates a space to think about issues of access, opportunity, voice, and equal participation within society and educational settings. Diversity among humans requires thoughtful considerations, accommodations, and differentiations in educational treatment, yet providing equal opportunities for growth and learning for all.

Keywords: introduction diversity, equity, culture, language, gender

1. Introduction

1.1 Issues Related to Diversity

The concept of diversity has exploded in the last ten years. It has pushed us to reconsider our definition of diversity to include, language, gender, religion, culture, physical and cognitive abilities, social class, ethnicity, sexuality, and socio-economic standing. More recently, it is referred to as equity, inclusion, diversity, and access, or EIDA. Diversity exists in nature and, therefore, is all around us. There is no classroom that has no diversity, just like there is no classroom where all the students wear the same shoe size in the classroom. All classrooms are heterogenous at many levels in terms of students' backgrounds, family history, students' interests, physical abilities, socio-economic background, intellectual diversity and much more. This article focuses on issues related to diversity in the context of education with respect to equity, poverty, and stereotype threat. The article is structured within the framework of the "Six Stages of Diversity in Education" model (Wehmiller & Withers, 2007). First, the article briefly discusses diversity, equity, and poverty. This is followed by discussion on "Stereotype Threat" referring to gender and testing; "Pygmalion Effect" profiling students' backgrounds and teacher expectations; "Non-Sexist language use in academics"; and "Matthew Effect" in literacy learning, followed by Results and Discussion.

1.2 Schools in Multicultural Society

Living in a multicultural, pluralistic society it is important for us to understand the cultural, ethnic backgrounds of our learners specially in the context of education. We must keep in mind that diversity is not a static issue, it is a moving target, ever evolving. It is a part of the fabric of our society and needs to be fully integrated into school structure. In the context of education, engaging in discussion on this topic to overcome polarization becomes more relevant and urgent in this age of division and distrust where most schools are struggling with rise in behavioral issues due to rising political incivility and division. Zimmerman (2019) stated, "Schools reflect society, and society is polarized and embittered. It would be surprising if the students did not bring that into schools. Although the results are depressing, I do not find them surprising" (Education Week, 2019). It is a challenge in many nations at large. There is a tight link between schools and society first outlined by education philosopher John Dewey in the early part of last century. He emphasized inclusivity, cultural diversity, and experiential learning (Richard, K. 1995). Currently, in educational institutes "diversity" has become more about "recruitment" and "visibility for symbolic representation" rather than ideological beliefs about inclusiveness and equitable outcomes. Current literature on diversity uses a range of abbreviations such as D&I (diversity&

inclusion), DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion) or IDEA (Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Access).

1.3 Equity and Poverty in Education

Equity in education is about providing equal access to all so that each child has the opportunity to participate successfully in schooling to become a productive member of the society. The ongoing discussion on diversity and equity creates a space to think about issues of access, opportunity, voice, and equal participation within society and educational settings. It makes one understand how individuals' culture, race, background shape their understanding of educational practices. These are key issues and obstacles to literacy learning, however, the most pervasive obstacle to literacy learning is poverty, low economic status which intersects with other factors.

Poverty in and of itself does not imply that children cannot be successful in school. It is the life conditions and circumstances that do not support the development of abilities of children in poverty. Over time these children become deficient in their ability to manage academic work. As Gordon (2009) states, "We know in the 21st century that the absence of a certain developed ability because of the absence of opportunity to learn should not be interpreted as absence of ability to learn." Diversity among humans requires thoughtful considerations, accommodations, and differentiations in educational treatment yet providing equal opportunities for growth and learning.

2. Method

This conceptual paper focuses on stereotype threat related to gender and assessment, teacher expectations for students from non-dominant cultures and their effect on student learning. The article is framed within the context of the "Six-stages of Diversity" in educational settings (Wehmiller & Withers, 2007) that are described below. This framework leads to the development of an inclusive school setting.

Institutions, schools, universities of higher education have been working toward integrating diversity into their culture. Most schools make institutional goals and mission statements regarding diversity and equity, however, there is often a significant distance between the indicated goals and reality. Primary reason for the gap is that it is hard work and ever changing. There are ways to align the goals with corresponding actions with respect to diversity in all its dimensions. These include, self-assessment, readiness for change, identifying the work, awareness raising, capacity building and accountability presented in a six-stage framework (Wehmiller & Withers, 2007):

The Six Stages of Diversity in a school setting (Wehmiller & Withers, 2007)

Stage 1: Exclusive

Schools develop a specific and exclusive mission statement. The dominant perspective of the society has an undeniable influence on the school's mission, structure, and decision-making process.

Stage 2: Passive

Although the school no longer promotes itself as an exclusive institution, little to nothing has been done to alter its structure or mission. Practically speaking, nothing has changed at the school. The mission statement remains at the 'rhetoric' level.

Stage 3: Symbolic Change

When referring to diversity in schools, the term is generally used in a narrow sense that only encompasses race and ethnicity, the most evident forms of diversity. The school makes great attempts to highlight its efforts to diversify by admitting a small number of students and faculty members of color. To succeed at the institution, these selected students and instructors must 'adjust' or 'fit' into the existing structure. The structures of the school must be accepted as they are.

Stage 4: Analytic Change

School starts to evaluate if its organizational structures are meeting the needs of all of its stakeholders. These questions are frequently raised because the population changes dramatically. There is a risk that the school will become mired in unending debate and pose queries without being prepared to offer specific solutions.

Stage 5: Structural Change

School makes an earnest effort to answer the questions posed in analytic change stage. School does so by committing resources – personnel, money, time - to diversity initiatives.

Stage 6: The school's mission, organizational framework, and decision-making process all completely incorporate inclusive diversity, equality, multiculturalism, and justice activities. Diversity is not a static issue, so

it is crucial to understand that this stage is fluid.

2.1 Stereotype Threat

A “stereotype danger” is a situation in which people are or feel they are at risk of conforming to preconceived assumptions about their social group. Long-standing racial and gender inequalities in academic achievement are thought to be caused by it. For instance, negative stereotypes of women as being less capable at mathematics or that one would be judged or perceived by their cultural or social ethnicity or nationality rather than actual performance can influence one’s productivity and put unnecessary stress or psychological pressure on the individual. Group stereotypes can threaten how students evaluate and view themselves and this can affect their academic performance.

In a study conducted by Spencer, Steele, and Quinn (1999), they discovered that women performed better on tests simply by being informed that there are no gender differences in math ability. In their study, they informed half of the women that the math exam had revealed gender differences and then told the other half that it had not, the researchers administered math tests to both men and women. Women did as well on tests as men when test supervisors told them there were no gender disparities. Women who were told that there were gender disparities performed noticeably poorer than males. The study indicates that women who were informed about gender bias, under-performed probably due to apprehension, and anxiety. The study highlights how stereotype threat related to gender can affect performance on a test. This applies to literacy and reading skills as well. Therefore, it is critical that assessments are tested for bias review for inclusivity, multiculturalism, equity in order to be effective.

2.2 Pygmalion Effect

The above-mentioned concept of stereotype threat is intertwined with the notion of Pygmalion Effect (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). The Pygmalion Effect implies that people do better when more is expected of them, i.e., there are higher expectations of them. It refers to situations where teacher expectancies of student performance become self-fulfilling prophecies which can be defined as “a false sense of the situation evoking a behavior which makes the originally false conception come true” (Merton, 1968, p. 477). They can also be referred to as ‘feedback loops.’ Students perform better or worse than other students based on the way their teacher expects them to perform or they themselves give in to the others’ expectations of themselves. In other words, a misrepresentation of reality can trigger behaviors that would end up turning the myth into a reality. In a famous psychological experiment, researchers (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968) presented the power of high expectations. In this study, teachers were falsely told at the start of the year that the randomly selected students they were going to teach were ‘academic bloomers’ who were going to flourish over the course of the year. In other words, the low achieving students were falsely labeled as ‘high achievers.’ When the researchers went back at the end of the year, they found that these students had indeed made more progress. These findings were attributed to the high expectations that the teachers had demonstrated for their students, which resulted in students being asked more challenging questions and being supported accordingly. The conclusions demonstrated by the study illustrate the Pygmalion effect or as it is also called, Rosenthal effect (expectancy effect), which is the phenomenon that explains better performances by learners when greater expectations are put on them. The teachers in the study mentioned above may have unnoticeably delivered the academic achievers more personalized interactions, extensive feedback, more approval, and positive gestures, such as nods and smiles (Spiegel, 2012). On the other hand, teachers would pay less attention to low achieving students, seat them farther away from teachers in the classroom and provide lower-level reading materials.

Teachers often make judgments about their pupils’ future performance based on social prejudices. A growing body of research shows that some educators have low expectations for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and people of color (Jussim & Harber, 2005). “Teachers have far lower expectations for students who may most require high expectations and support. For instance, some secondary teachers believe that students of color and students from high-poverty backgrounds are far less likely to complete college (Boser et al., 2014).” Stereotypes are often part of self-fulfilling prophecies. According to Steele’s (1997) research on the “stereotype threat,” students who worry that their own subpar academic performance might unintentionally support a negative stereotype about their social group do so by underperforming in school.

These results also have broad repercussions. They may have both favorable and unfavorable effects on people outside of the classroom. According to the Pygmalion effect, children are more likely to adopt these attitudes and behave accordingly if parents choose to treat them as bright, gifted, independent human beings. On the other hand, if a parent believes that their child is unable, stupid, or weak, that person will probably conform to those expectations.

Stereotype threat can also permeate assessments, tests, and exams with respect to ethnicity or gender variable. We need to re-examine tests and high-stake exams for unfairness or bias in them. By doing so, one would ensure that assessments do not contain offensive (racist or sexist language), controversial, politically volatile, or inflammatory opinions. A common example of stereotypical case would be representation of females as homemakers and males as earning members or breadwinners. Another situation of stereotyping would be where a nurse is represented as a female, or the reference used for the role as 'she' which will be a case of sexist language.

2.3 Nonsexist Language

Effective communication treats people equally, despite their race, gender, age, socio-economic standing, disability, ethnicity, and nationalities. Breaking away from sexist language respects individual's self-worth, dignity, and integrity. We can be mindful of language use, particularly within a classroom, or in our research publications, textbooks workshops and still represent people fairly in a non-judgmental manner. Balanced language rules can guide us to choose balanced visual images, rather than showing typical stereotyped view of 'mother doing the dishes and father reading the paper or working at a computer'. Routinely using male nouns and pronouns to refer to all people excludes more than half the population. For instance, referring to teachers as she/her or doctors as he/him or engineers as he/him can unfairly link one gender over another with the profession. This will also avoid reinforcing assumptions or stereotypical roles. To avoid inaccurately identifying and stereotyping people or giving false images of people, it is suggested that one uses nonsexist language. Below are a few examples of biasfree terminology in communication.

Table 1. Sample of language stereotypes

Replace Language Stereotyping Genders or Roles or Expressions		
1	Cameraman	Photographer or Camera Operator
2	Fireman	Firefighter
3	Headmaster	Principal
4	Policeman	Police Officer
5	Salesman	Salesperson, Sales Agent, Sales Representative
6	Workman	Worker
7	Waitress	Waiter
8	Maid	Housekeeper or houseworker or domestic help
9	Founding Fathers	Founders or Pioneers or forebears
10	She did well for a woman	She did well, she performed competently

Gender-neutral language is recommended, instead of "he" or "she" related to occupational roles such as, firemen, nurses, flight-attendants. One needs to be mindful of offensive language that may include elitism (one subgroup projected a superior to another), the subtle undercurrent of the tone in the language that could be patronizing or inflammatory. These sexist or stereotype elements can be present in tests, assessments which can affect students' performance and outcomes. Test preparation companies make extra effort to develop bias free test items to prevent differential performance for two individuals of the same ability but different race, ethnicity, sex, cultural/religious background.

An example of sexist material would be a test question that asked pupils to compare the weights of various items, including a baseball. Since girls are less likely to have handled a baseball, they might find the item more difficult than boys, even though they have mastered the concept of measurement that the item intends to test. This would be an instant of a gender bias item. An item may be considered language biased against blacks in which students are asked to identify similar sounds at the end of a word, [when] [win] and [wind]. While the correct answer is [when and win] many may select [win and wind] because they sound the same as [win] in the spoken dialect for many folks. The black students have mastered the concept but are likely to select the wrong item because of language variation making the test item invalid.

The goal is to ensure that products, services, educational curriculum, and instructional approaches are designed and developed in ways that treat people equally, regardless of differences in personal characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, and disability, which are irrelevant to the construct being measured. To ensure that one is mindful of language and images that show respect for people in different groups by avoiding language that is condescending, belittling, derogatory or insulting. Avoiding statements with implications that one group is

superior to other groups or reflecting elitism. One needs to avoid assuming that all learners are members of the majority group or are native speakers of English language.

2.4 Matthew Effect in Literacy Learning—Rich Get Richer and Poor Get Poorer

Many schools continue to provide richer vocabulary/literacy experiences to advanced students and continue to provide diluted curriculum with lower expectations for our low performing students. This has been called the “Matthew Effect” (Stanovich, 1986) which refers to the idea that, in reading, the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer (Bast & Reitsma, 1998, p. 1373). In other words, the students who already read better get increasingly better instruction due to high teacher expectations and they receive better quality books to read, which are highly engaging, while poor readers tend to receive poor instruction due to lower teacher expectations and less demanding, watered-down books, such as decodable texts. Children in environments that support the quick acquisition of reading skills—the reading rich environment—generally start to like reading at an early age and engage in it more regularly. Regular reading practice then encourages the development of new skills (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Guthrie, Schafer, & Huang, 2001). These students tend to advance as more capable and enthusiastic readers. Thus, the “wealthy” get “wealthier” (reference to Matthew in the Bible). On the other hand, children in environments who read poorly, those who consistently struggle to learn to read, because of their reading challenges, they generally have a much more negative attitude toward reading and practice it much less (Lepola, Salonen, & Vauras, 2000; Anderson et al., 1988; Scarborough & Parker, 2003). By avoiding reading, poor readers get poorer over time (Cunningham & Stanovich 1997; Stanovich, 1986). This effect becomes more common in children with learning impairments and exhibit progressively more pervasive cognitive, motivational, and behavioral problems (Scarborough & Parker, 2003).

Children who struggle with early reading and writing develop a dislike for reading compared to their more proficient reading classmates, they read less. As a result, in schools, the focus is more on teaching struggling readers restricted vocabulary and simplified, low motivational, uninteresting books or there is more focus on drill in isolated skills, which further lowers their motivation for reading. It becomes a downward spiral. Doing skills in isolation is quite unchallenging and disengaging. It further puts off reading. Research findings (Morgan, et al 2008) show that socio-demographic subgroups most at risk for lagging in becoming proficient readers, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are affected in school, showing that Matthews Effect has direct implications for students.

To break the cycle, we need to provide students with highly motivating, authentic literature that captures their interest. We need to give them highly motivating, authentic literature that captures their interest in order to break the pattern. When we give low-vocabulary, highly motivating books to struggling readers, it works because it makes it easier for them to build on their success and their reading abilities advance quickly. Reading begets reading. They want to read more once they start enjoying literature. When I taught young elementary school students (grades K–5), who primarily consisted of struggling readers, as a Title I Reading Specialist (Title I is a federally funded program for struggling readers in the USA), I made sure to provide them with rich and varied literacy experiences where they could succeed. I provided students with a range of books, fiction, non-fiction, poetry, comics, sports, songs, mystery, historical, adventure, action, fantasy and so on at their reading levels. It is also essential to match a book to a student’s reading level so they do not become discouraged because the book is too difficult (Rog & Burton 2001). The secret to student success in reading is to make it enjoyable and engaging for them in a welcoming, nonthreatening setting (Gupta, 1999; Gupta, 1998/99).

3. Discussion

Communities and schools within these communities face multiple challenges in achieving equity, such as funding, resources, and policies that negatively impact a high number of learners, children in poverty, children with diverse family structures, or children with other aspects of diversity. This mindfulness will help educators become more effective advocates for their students and the students’ needs.

Children with varied cultural heritages, develop rich linguistic backgrounds in their homes and communities that teachers can use to build both learning and literacy (Moll et al., 2001; Cummings, 2007). Specially with respect to immigrant children, many teachers ignore these potentially important experiential backgrounds of minority students. Immigrant students come to USA with literacy skills and academic background from their own countries. However, depending on the schools’ culture about how they value different cultures, it affects students’ academic performance. If the teachers and administrators deem the language as a barrier, then it can have cascading effect on students’ learning and literacy development. Sometimes, this results in students who hide their ability to read and write in Spanish owing to fear of ridicule by fellow students (Moll et al. 2001). They argue that negative teacher and peer responses to linguistic diversity reflect broad societal attitudes that

contribute to impediments in learning and literacy development.

These societal attitudes toward language are defined by Ruiz (1984) as ‘language as a problem’ or ‘language as a resource.’ The language-as-a-problem oriented approach claims that speaking, reading, or writing in any language other than the dominant language in the culture is a barrier to children’s development and a threat to the social fabric. The language-as-a-resource approach, on the other hand, asserts that one’s language is intimately linked to one’s identity and provides a launching pad for learning in another language. Collin and Apple (2007) argue that non-dominant literacies and languages are subject to power relations and contribute to reshaping social structures, including stereotypes. “A resource orientation to diversity is supported by educational, linguistic, and psychological research, and is essential to effective teaching for non-mainstream children, but widespread adoption of that orientation is difficult to achieve in educational institutions designed with a diversity-as-problem orientation” (Morrow et al., 2009).

Our beliefs, thoughts, shape the experiences we have in our environment. By considering the diverse needs of our student body, we can design curriculum that benefits all rather than one group over another. We can build curriculum that benefits everyone rather than just one majority group by taking into account the different demands of our student body. Academic experiences are found to be less relevant than diversity experiences in building critical thinking abilities in studies. “Negative diversity experiences exhibited an inverse but statistically significant link with critical thinking skills, affecting largely African American and Hispanic students since they were disproportionately exposed to negative diversity experiences.” In other words, while unpleasant diversity experiences can harm any student, they are more common among African American and Hispanic students.” (Barnett, 2020, p. 25)

We need to create a user-friendly space as a learning environment for students in which they become more confident and competent to take risks. The goal for each student needs to challenge them further from where they currently are in their learning towards their optimal growth. The school culture needs to make students, parents and teachers comfortable in the school setting for easy communication and accessibility.

Children differ greatly in their backgrounds, needs, and interests. Best instructional programs are those that provide a range of effective techniques and plenty of worthwhile reading material. Quality public schooling for minority students or at-risk students continues to be a challenge because of the physical location of schools, which are mainly in low-income neighborhoods, so these schools are underfunded, below standards and are visibly segregated since majority of the children are from lower economic backgrounds who tend to be minorities. These schools generally tend to get teachers who are not highly qualified and experienced because other qualified or experienced teachers get absorbed by quality schools. These schools are understaffed with teachers who are inadequately prepared, resulting in Mathew Effect, which summarizes as “the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer” based on the parables of the Bible. The term “Matthew effect” was coined by psychologist Keith Stanovich in the field of education to describe a phenomenon on how new readers gain reading skills: Early reading success usually leads to later reading success as the learner grows older, whereas failure to learn to read before the third or fourth year of schooling may indicate lifelong difficulties learning new abilities. Because children who are behind in reading will read less, the gap between them and their peers widens. When kids are required to “read to learn” (rather than learning to read), their reading difficulties cause problems in most other disciplines and subject areas.

The schools, curriculum and teachers need to provide space for students to share their concerns, issues. Teachers need to be able to question and talk openly without any fear of retaliation by parents or school administration. No student or group should be made to feel oppressed or marginalized for their beliefs or dilemmas. By creating open spaces for discussion of diverse thoughts and beliefs and practices, one creates a culture of acceptance and inclusiveness. Teachers can create guiding questions for additional conversation about the factors involving student learning by engaging in a group discussion. The local contexts in which teaching, and learning take place (school, classroom) are part of a larger context of communities embedded in a nation. Such spaces must make an effort to bridge the equity-related gap between research, teaching, and learning. These spaces provide opportunities for the new generation of scholars whose work intersects with issues of equity, diversity, & privilege. This model of diversity and equity will work best and is most effective when it meets the school in its existing environment and builds further from there.

We must reconsider how we handle diversity in the workplace, in classrooms, and in our communities. Policies, processes, and practices related to diversity may be necessary, but they should not substitute for reality. To critically examine the current polarization at all levels, including in schools, the workplace, and our communities, we need to undergo an ideological transition in our own thinking. The purpose of research on

diversity is to assist in creating a learning environment where diversity is woven into the fabric of schools and other organizations.

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