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## Diversity and Inclusive Education

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### Abstract

Interacting with diverse perspectives helps people learn more deeply and broadly. Diversity can include not only race and ethnicity but also language, religion, ideology, physical ability, culture, cognitive ability, socio-economic status, age, gender and sexual orientation. Because much of the education is designed for groups of students with individual strengths and weaknesses, it is difficult to respond to diversity in robust educational ways. This paper introduces important insights from educational psychology on how to use diversity to enhance critical thinking, help students feel at home in their learning environment, encourage students to challenge assumptions, and design education to suit different student needs.

**Keywords:** Diversity, inclusion, inclusive education, students with disabilities.

### Introduction

Inclusion as a philosophy can't be discussed meaningfully unless it is placed in the context of diversity among group members, especially in the framework of inclusive education. Diversity in literary terms means differences. The term diversity, when utilized in discourse associated with people or communities or in social contexts is more specific, indicates that a group of people is composed of individuals who are different from each other in one way or another or means collective differences between people, that is, they are those differences that distinguish one group of people from another. For instance, differences in culture, language, gender, appearance (Eg. skin colour, hair type), lifestyle, social and economic status, family structure, skills (Eg. physical, social, creative and intellectual), beliefs and values (Jingran, 2009) [7].

In the analysis of diversity from the point of view of uniformity, the term diversity is the opposite of uniformity. Uniformity means similarity of some kind that characterizes a group of people. "Uni" refers to one; "Form" refers to common forms. So when there is something in common for all people in focus, we say there is uniformity in that group of people. When students in a school, army, police or navy are wearing the same type of clothing, we say they are in "uniform". Thus, like diversity, uniformity is additionally a collective concept. When a group of people shares a similar characteristic, be it language, religion or any other, it is understood that it represents uniformity with respect to the focused characteristic. But when there are groups of people of different races, religions and cultures, they represent diversity, which clearly denotes that diversity means variety.

The scope of diversity widens as social groups that are identified as marginalized use a variety of strategies to make their issues acknowledged and accepted by society. At the same time, subsumed in the notion of diversity is the understanding that certain differences may bring specific disadvantages to the person in terms of his/her social position and life chances whereas others may not, to the same extent. Finally, diversity is not simply a descriptive term; it implies an ideological position that values and respects cultural pluralism and supports its preservation within society; the concept of diversity encompasses acceptance and respect for members of a group; it is loaded with a political perspective positively inclined to equity and justice in society.

### Diversity

The concept of diversity encompasses acceptance and respect. It means understanding that every individual is exclusive, and recognizing our individual differences. These are often along the size of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, politics, or other ideologies. It is the exploration of those differences during a safe, positive, and nurturing environment.

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It is about understanding one another and moving beyond simple tolerance to embracing and celebrating the rich dimensions of diversity contained within each individual. Diversity is a reality created by individuals or groups from a broad spectrum of demographic and philosophical differences. It is extremely important to support and protect diversity because by valuing non-judgmental individuals and groups and fostering a climate where fairness and mutual respect are intrinsic, we will create a caring, cooperative and success-oriented community that attracts intellectual strength and produces innovation solutions from the synergy of your people.

"Diversity" means more than recognizing and/or tolerating the difference. Diversity is a set of conscious practices involving:

- Understand and appreciate the interdependence between humanity, cultures and the natural environment.
- Practice mutual respect for qualities and experiences different from ours.
- Understand that diversity includes not only ways of being but also ways of knowing;
- Recognizing that personal, cultural and institutionalized discrimination creates and maintains privileges for some while it creates and maintains disadvantages for others;
- Build alliances between differences so that we can work together to eradicate all forms of discrimination.

Therefore, diversity includes knowing the way to relate to those qualities and conditions that are different from ours and extraneous to the groups to which we belong, but which are present in other individuals and groups. It includes but aren't limited to age, ethnicity, class, gender, physical abilities/qualities, race, sexual orientation, also as religious status, gender expression, educational background, geographic location, income, marital status, parental and employment status experiences. Lastly, we recognize that categories of difference aren't always fixed but also can be fluid, we respect individual rights to self-identification and that we recognize that no culture is inherently superior to another.

### **Definitions of Diversity**

"Diversity involves to all the ways in which people differ, including primary characteristics such as age, race, gender, ethnicity, mental and physical abilities and sexual orientation; and secondary characteristics, such as nationality, education, income, religion, work experience, language skills, geographic location, family status, communication style, military experience, learning style, economic background and work style".

### **From: Williams, D. A. (2013)**

"Diversity is each of us and all of us, individually and collectively. Diversity is all that makes each of us different and those things that all resemble us".

### **The University of Kansas Medical Centre**

"Diversity is a commitment to recognizing and appreciating the variety of characteristics that make people unique in an environment that promotes and celebrates individual and collective achievements".

## **The University of Tennessee Libraries Diversity Committee**

### **Types of Diversity**

Let us see some of the different dimensions of diversity seen in our social groups around.

### **Linguistic Diversity**

Like many other countries in the world, India is multilingual. The canvas of language in India is like a mosaic with an overwhelming variety of linguistic patterns woven into an organic whole. It is generally difficult to associate language tags with various speech patterns in different places. There is rarely a consensus on the dilemma of delineating between languages and dialects with a reasoned argument for taking a stand. An accounting part of the population is multilingual. There are many languages used in social communication, which are often hybrids of other languages; there are constant changes from one language to another; there are several layered patterns of language use in many communities, for example the use of the home or regional language by parents with their children, while their ancestral language is used with their elders.

### **Socio-Cultural Diversity**

Cultural diversity for a sociologist refers to the variety of human societies or cultures in the world; to the variety of composition or to the different cultures of a group, organization or region. It is also called multiculturalism. It encompasses the various social structures, belief systems, rituals, ways of life and strategies that cultures adhere to to adapt to life situations in various parts of the world. The phrase "cultural diversity" is also sometimes used to refer to the variety of human societies or cultures in a specific region or in the world. For thousands of years, geographical, historical and religious influences have woven the colorful fabric of Indian culture, one of the oldest known to mankind. The complex demographic profile left in our society by different-looking Aryans, Asians and Dravids was the precursor to our sociocultural diversity in many ways. Religion, in many ways, is the foundation of our cultural context. This is intertwined with all aspects of life and culture in India and is a primary factor contributing to our diversity. In fact, each region within a state of India has its own identity due to the rich cultural heritage that is very different from the neighbouring region and of course the other states in the country. The types of holidays, the ways in which they are celebrated, although some are the same in all states, and religious rites contribute to the unique identity of each of the regions. It is this richness and uniqueness of the cultural heritage of the different regions of each state that contributes to our cultural diversity.

### **Economic Diversity**

The varied levels of social classes and the gap between these have been increasingly contributing to diversity in our society. From the time, the caste system got rooted in our society and education got monopolized by the upper caste people who knew Sanskrit, the seeds of class differences also got sown in our soil. Thus, the money power related to caste and class gave rise to economic differences and added yet another dimension to our diversity.

### Gender Diversity

Gender is a social construct whereas the sex of a person is a biological status. Gender diversity refers to the difference in the societal outlook to people around *viz* a sex. Right from ancient times, a female has been considered as the weaker of the two. A female, as a child, is to be protected by her father, as a wife, by her husband and as an old mother, by her son. Her role is to bear children and look after everyone in the family. A male is looked upon as the breadwinner, protector and savior of the family. From this socially discriminatory position of males and females, the life experiences of a girl and boy have been very different simply because of their sex. This difference immensely contributes to diversity in our society to varying degrees across regions.

### Ability, Disability and Diversity

Diversity in any social group has another dimension of disability and capacity. Disability is a classification of diversity that transcends all other indices such as class, caste, race, religion and language. It represents the only minority group of which anyone can become a member, at any time in life (Slorach, 2011). "The principle of diversity provides the basis for accepting disability as part of human variation. However, it is a sad reality that in practice our treatment of difference has been rather poor, especially in the context of disability" (Ability Junction, 2011). Disability is a widely used and misunderstood concept, as illustrated by the World Health Organization (WHO) definition: disability is an umbrella term that includes disability, activity limitations and participation restrictions. Impairment is a problem in the function or structure of the body; an activity restriction is a difficulty encountered by an individual while performing an activity or action; while a restriction on participation is a problem that an individual experiences when engaging in life situations. Therefore, disability is a complex phenomenon that reflects an interaction between the characteristics of a person's body and the characteristics of the society in which he lives. These definitions reflect the progress made since persons with disabilities were referred to officially as spastics, imbeciles and cripples. However, they also obscure the vital distinction established by the disability movement between individual impairment and disability as social discrimination.

### Inclusion as Philosophy

Inclusion is a philosophy, a mindset, a conviction that every person has the right to enjoy equal opportunities and live with equal dignity, irrespective of how different they are from the others in any group they belong to. The philosophy of inclusion goes beyond physical inclusion and incorporates a system of basic values and beliefs that promotes the participation and sense of belonging of every member in any group. Hence, you can make inclusive education a reality in your class only when you have the conviction and belief in inclusive educational practice.

### Inclusive Practices in Education

Inclusive education allows all students to study in neighbourhood schools in regular age-appropriate classes. In this situation, they are helped to learn, contribute and participate in all aspects of school life. By students, we mean all children regardless of their abilities, disabilities,

socio-economic background and gender, religious and regional affiliation. Inclusive education is about how we develop and design our schools, classrooms and activities so that all students learn and participate together.

Let us see what inclusion in education is more closely:

- It is a process that brings together all students in a classroom and school, regardless of their strengths or weaknesses in any area, and seeks to maximize the potential of all students.
- It is a process where diversity is valued in a group in any respect and where everyone is recognized and respected for their worth.
- It is an effort to ensure that different learners (those with disabilities, different languages and cultures, different homes and family lives, different interests and ways of learning) are taught using teaching and learning strategies tailored to individual learning needs
- It is a process that allows each individual to feel accepted, appreciated and safe. An inclusive community consciously evolves to meet the changing needs of its members. Through recognition and support, an inclusive community provides meaningful participation and equal access to the benefits of citizenship.
- It is a means of improving the well-being of all members of the community.

### Diversity and Inclusive Education

The classroom is a representative sample of society which reflects the diversity that exists among the people of the community. The growing number of students from different backgrounds admitted to primary classes has reinforced the importance of making schools more inclusive. With relatively much greater variation in student talents and social, cultural, economic and political backgrounds, a teacher is expected to transfer understanding and stance on diversity to classroom processes, identify and recognize the threads of diversity among students in order to address the corresponding issues and challenges regarding curriculum design, teaching-learning practices and processes and learning materials, so that the different learning needs of children are subsequently met. Specifically, the primary class in India faces the immense challenge of constructively weaving diversity into class processes to democratize these processes and practices, all geared towards the broader goal of social justice.

Inclusion is an unrelenting process of augmenting learning and participation for all students irrespective of their differences. It is an ideal to which schools can aspire but which is seldom fully reached. But as soon as the process of increasing participation of all diverse learners starts the school is on the path of moving towards inclusion. Participation means actively engaging in learning with others while sharing learning experiences and engaging in collaborative learning. Inclusion starts when exclusionary pressures are removed, the differences between students are respected and each one in the class group feels recognized, accepted and valued for what he or she is.

In the context of diversity, the importance of the agenda of "inclusive education" is further reinforced by the enactment of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009 and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016.

## Conclusion

Inclusion as a philosophy or practice cannot be meaningfully discussed unless it is placed in the context of diversity among group members, especially in the framework of inclusive education. It is the diversity that brings with it the defense of equity and justice for each of the different people in a group, regardless of their abilities, disabilities, social status, religion, class, caste, etc. It is the diversity and exclusion of some who are not like the majority in their group that has led to inclusion as a meaningful discourse in today's academy. Due to the process of social exclusion, affected individuals or communities are prevented from fully participating in the economic, social and political life of the society in which they live. Alienation or deprivation of the right to vote to result from social exclusion affects people with disabilities, people belonging to minority groups, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, drug addicts, HIV positive patients, sex workers, orphans, the elderly, etc. People with disabilities are among the most vulnerable groups at risk of social exclusion.

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