

Reflections on the Fear of Participating in Research about DEI in School Settings

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Abstract: This article reflects my journey as a tenure-track faculty member attempting to study diversity and inclusive practices within elementary and secondary schools, focusing on how schoolteachers feel equipped to address the needs of diverse students, particularly in the context of gender and sexuality. Sparked by a conversation with my spouse about the absence of policies supporting students' gender identity, the study explored educators' preparedness for inclusive practices. Data collection was challenged by an increasingly contentious political climate, with LGBTQ+-restrictive laws discouraging school administrators, unions, and districts from participating. Despite setbacks, a small group of educators engaged, offering critical insights. My experience underscores how policy, politics, and controversy shape academic inquiry and limit access to participants. Ultimately, the article calls for creating safe spaces where educators can share experiences and for advancing a deeper institutional commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion in schools.

Keywords: diversity, equity, inclusion, DEI, academia, gender and sexuality

Introduction

It was a warm, summer-like day in September 2021. I had just begun my work as a tenure-track faculty member at a public institution in Ohio. Excited about the new path ahead and nervous about the pressure and expectations that come along with the tenure process, I decided to reach out to my other social work–teaching colleagues.

I already had a few ideas floating around in my head at the time. However, one idea centered around studying cultural humility in practice within elementary and secondary school settings. Specifically, I was curious if school teachers felt equipped with the skills and experience to craft the inclusive spaces they were tasked with providing in the current classroom setting.

After talking with my colleagues for a little while, a study was crafted—one that we felt at the time would be groundbreaking. Little did I know that the process of getting the study going would present a microcosm of how policy and laws impact how academics like myself can conduct their day-to-day work.

Study Overview

Our study aimed to look at the perceptions of diversity and inclusive practices in elementary and secondary school settings. This idea was the brainchild of a conversation I had with my wife in late 2020 during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. I remember sitting in our living room when she asked for my help in talking with one of her students, whose gender identity had changed and who now wished to be referred to by another set of pronouns. I immediately asked what policies her school had in place. To my surprise, the answer was none whatsoever. This

conversation led to a discussion of how this needs to be changed as students continue to show development (physically, mentally, emotionally, and in personal identity) during the late elementary school years.

Excited and disappointed by the lack of policy and guidance available to my wife, I began to look into the literature. Amazingly, I found no literature that focused on diversity and inclusion preparedness from elementary and secondary educators. I did, however, find quite a few studies on high school– and college-based diversity and inclusion efforts. Most of the findings revealed that educators and policymakers tended to focus on fitting diverse students into normative structures rather than pursuing initiatives that presented inclusive practices (Smith & Payne, 2015). Other findings included that educators reported lacking knowledge about the various aspects of gender identity and often relied on parents for support (Neary & Cross, 2018). Additionally, the research showed that approaches in schools varied regarding students using names or pronoun preferences (Dodge & Crutcher, 2015).

As a result of this information, I decided to contact two of my colleagues and ask them if there might be a study worth pursuing. We scheduled a Zoom call the week after my discussion with my wife.

Study Method

What transpired during that meeting was the type of brainstorming you could imagine that happens when you put two social work academics together with an education academic professor, the discovery of something worth pursuing, and multiple article ideas. At the end of our 90-minute meeting—which was only scheduled for an hour—we agreed that this was something we needed to pursue. So we laid out an initial gameplan for how we would design the study. As we left it that day, we decided to look into various studies already created that assess diversity and inclusion practices in schools. We then located a study that adapted a survey provided by the US Department of Education (2022) to school districts on diversity and inclusion efforts. We decided to use an already-created study so that we could avoid being accused of bias or trying to create a specific result. Using an already-created governmental survey would not reinvent the wheel, while also providing us with a broader depth of data that we could look through to establish themes for the study.

To supplement the base study, our adapted version incorporated questions targeting specific areas of practice that reflect many of the established components of a DEI program. Our survey included questions about the terminology and language used with students in school settings, as well as items asking staff to self-report their efforts to advocate on behalf of students. We then looked at the student learning environment, and finally aimed to gather staff feedback on professional development and instruction. All of these questions were aimed at gathering staff perceptions of their preparedness to provide culturally appropriate services to all students within those various categories.

We then decided for this study we would identify key school districts in the states of Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, Mississippi, and Tennessee. These states were selected due to prior

relationships and knowledge of school administrators in various school districts within those districts. As a group, we thought those established relationships would eliminate potential barriers due to such a controversial issue potentially being apparent within the survey being approved for distribution amongst staff. All together during our meeting, we identified 25 school districts to reach out to help distribute the study. This is where the study got interesting.

A Study Stalled

In November 2021, our study received IRB approval. Surprisingly, the IRB approval was straightforward, requiring no revisions or changes to the survey and/or informed consent information provided to participants. We then created an overview and flyer to help recruit and email administrators to help distribute and participate in our study. This included an extensive discussion within our group on whether or not we should highlight or use any wording associated with LGBTQ+ individuals. We decided that due to various policies potentially in place within school districts at the time of the creation of the study, we would be better served to focus on DEI efforts as a whole. We felt comfortable with this approach because the way the study was set up would still be able to identify themes established for topic areas such as LGBTQ+, gender issues, sexual orientation, physical disabilities, and mental health.

Our group met every week from October 2021 through August 2022. During that time, we reached out to 25 school districts, providing them with information on our study. Communication was done via email notifications utilizing a copy of our informational flyer and a general overview of what we aimed to learn from the study. The initial districts notified were in the State of Ohio and Pennsylvania to school principals and superintendents. We then expanded to the other remaining states via email communications to principals and superintendents. Not one district superintendent or principal agreed to participate in our study. One prominent school district in Ohio stated the study held no value to their staff and students, while another said the study was too controversial. We met as a workgroup and realized that nationally, as well as statewide, policies and laws around LGBTQ rights and the removal of protections in schools for some LGBTQ individuals had begun the process of passing in many states. Then, in June 2022, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* was announced (Liptak, 2022). What came with this overturning were new fears over LGBTQ rights being taken away, with the opinion written by Justice Thomas that brought up the potential need to look at rights and protections for LGBTQ individuals: “For that reason, in future cases, we should reconsider all of those precedents because they are ‘demonstrably erroneous’” (Dobbs, *State Health Officer of The Mississippi Department of Health, et al. v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization et al.*, 2022).

The Pivot

Back to the drawing board. Not one school administrator agreed to participate in our study or distribute our study. We then discussed how we needed to get teachers and staff input on their experiences with diversity and inclusion in the schools within which they had been employed. We then decided the next best approach would be to reach out to teacher unions in the targeted states. We spent the next month researching teacher unions in the states of Ohio, Pennsylvania,

New York, Tennessee, Texas, and Mississippi. At that time the IRB was amended and approved. A month later we sat down with contact information on an Excel spreadsheet with phone numbers, email addresses, and contact information for various teacher unions in those states. We then crafted a message greeting with our recruitment flyer and sent emails to over 20 different teacher unions. Two weeks later we had heard back from over half the unions and not one agreed to participate or distribute our study. One teachers' union, in alerting us that they could not distribute the study as it is too controversial, encouraged us to reach out to local teacher groups and begin creating mailing lists from teacher addresses on public school databases. It was at this point we decided to pivot.

Then, in August 2022, we decided to meet via Zoom to take stock and regroup to decide where to go from where we had just ended. I shared my lack of success with teacher unions in Ohio and Pennsylvania. But then we discussed the true need for our research to be completed for administrators, teachers, and social workers to begin to see the importance of developing more in-depth practices at the elementary and secondary school level regarding inclusion practices and cultural sensitivity to the various needs today's students present. We finally decided to take the challenge and begin gathering email lists of teachers within the various school districts we wanted to target in our study. When all was said and done, over 1,000 teachers' and social workers' names and email addresses were collected. Later the next week emails were sent out to all 1,000 teachers and social workers. From those emails, a total of 29 individuals completed the study over three months.

Current Policy Climate and its Significance to the Study

Anti-LGBTQ policies around restricting educational rights and censorship have exploded since 2019. In the year before the COVID-19 pandemic, there were a total of three bills that looked at curriculum censorship geared towards restriction of instruction around gender and sexuality in public schools; by 2023 there were 62 such bills introduced (Coming, 2023). Additionally, in 2023 the term *forced outing* was used in multiple bills (e.g., Education, 2022): This term refers to educators being forced to report to parents, without student consent, any changes to a student's used name or pronouns that could be interpreted as declaring a trans identity. In 2023 alone, an American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU, n.d.) tracker counted 88 anti-LGBTQ bills passed into US law, of which 35 specifically targeted the rights of teachers and students.

Some of the notable bills and policies included Florida's Parental Rights in Education (2022) bill, HH 1557. Approved in July 2022, this legislation put into motion restrictions disallowing instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity that is "not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students in accordance with state standards" (pp. 4–5). This legislation spurred multiple student walkouts in schools across the state of Florida (Villarreal, 2022). Later, in 2023, Florida passed CS/CS/HB 1069: Education (among other anti-LGBTQ bills), which prohibited instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity from pre-K through 8th grade. Beyond this, it defined legal sex as immutable, based on traits present at birth, and proven by legal documents which match that at-birth sex assignment—directly attacking the validity of both the identities and corrected legal documents held by transgender residents of the state.

Tennessee mirrored these definitions in HB 239. Further protections for students were targeted and lost in the passing of HB 1269, which allowed teachers to intentionally misgender and deadname transgender or nonbinary students. I have witnessed as my institution's home state of Ohio has also become a hotbed for legislative anti-trans and anti-DEI bill activity, particularly as it relates to education.

Recent state and federal actions since 2023 have produced a patchwork of laws and policy shifts that directly shape how prepared elementary and secondary educators are to implement DEI practices in K-12 settings. In some states (e.g., Florida, Ohio, and Texas), legislative measures aimed at limiting or defunding DEI offices and restricting curricular content have narrowed the range of professional development, curricular frameworks, and institutional supports available to teachers, producing legal and administrative uncertainty about what equity-centered instruction and training can legally include (ACLU, n.d.). At the same time, other state initiatives and proposals—such as New York bills and guidance that encourage districts to appoint DEI officers and adopt DEI policies (James & Rosa, 2023)—have created expectations and infrastructure for districts to expand culturally responsive pedagogy and targeted personnel diversification efforts. Meanwhile, debates and bills in Ohio since 2023 (and subsequent proposals) have signaled potential restrictions on institutional DEI programming at public higher-education institutions and created spillover effects for K-12 partnerships, teacher preparation pipelines, and district-level collaborations that traditionally supported educator readiness on equity topics (ACLU, n.d.).

The resulting landscape—conflicting mandates, varying enforcement across states, and shifting administrative guidance—reduces consistency in pre-service and in-service training, undermines teacher confidence in using evidence-based culturally responsive practices, and increases the likelihood that DEI implementation will vary widely between districts and states rather than being a reliably supported component of K-12 pedagogy.

Future Considerations Based on Experience of Study

As a result of this experience, I've learned how much policy and current events impact participation in a study—along with how a study may need to be shaped to gain participants. As researchers, we must stay up to date with new laws being debated or even considered within state and federal legislatures. Even if they are not passed into law, they provide a good picture of what potential issues may arise when pursuing a study on the same topic area.

What I was not prepared for is that controversial hot-button topics in our current society can be seen as a non-starter in the world of public education administrators and union officials. In many instances, school districts are held together by a thin thread from school levies, tax dollars, and public perception. I don't blame the school districts—again, it is more a reflection of our society where people may identify there is a problem, but don't want to risk attachment to a topic for fear of being on the wrong side of it in the end. Likewise, I understand and have grown to appreciate where teacher unions stand on these matters. Teacher unions similarly don't want to be on the wrong side of a controversial topic as medical benefits, salaries, and work conditions can be impacted through many teacher contract negotiations.

I've learned in this experience that it requires a little grit and a broad leap of faith that individuals will come forward because your topic moves them and they have decided that it is the right thing for themselves and those they serve. With that said, the current political climate and policy changes reviewed in this article make it that much more necessary for individuals to be provided with a safe environment to voice their experiences, good or bad, to help shape change. Without that, we are censoring diversity of thought, something paramount to living and working within a democratic society. In a way, it is a throwback to the central tenets of social work where advocacy began at the individual level. The impact of this study would be large if enough individuals teaching in school districts would feel safe and supported—without fear of losing a job or being stigmatized—to come forward and give their input on their experiences in the classroom on such a controversial topic.

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