

Editorial

Tapestries at work: Diversity and inclusion as the new norm

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In a world replete with glaring inequities, questions of social justice, diversity and inclusion are becoming increasingly significant. Socio-political forces such as immigration, globalization, conflict-based displacement and the discourse around human rights have caused these concepts to gain prominence, leading to several discussions on how we can foster greater acceptance for divergences. The ideas of diversity and inclusion tie in closely with the United Nation's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda), which seeks 'to realize the human rights of all.' This agenda embraces the principles of equality and non-discrimination, alongside a commitment to leaving no one behind and prioritizing the needs of the furthest behind.

Given that diversity and inclusion can have different meanings for different people, it may be beneficial to define both terms at the outset. Diversity has been defined as acknowledging, understanding, accepting, valuing, and celebrating differences among people with respect to age, class, ethnicity, gender, physical and mental ability, race, sexual orientation, spiritual practice, and public assistance status (Esty et al., 1995). Inclusion is understood as a process of responding to the different needs of all persons in order to enable their participation in learning, employment, services, cultures and communities. Authentic inclusion goes far beyond merely adding individuals who are 'different' with respect to race, ethnicity, gender or sexuality in a given setting or organization (Gonzalez & DeNisi, 2009). Rather it incorporates beliefs and perceptions that different individuals can make unique contributions and hence their full participation must be encouraged (Mor Barak, 2015).

The idea of pluralism is central to the acceptance of diversity and inclusion. The term itself has a number of meanings, although running across them are the ideas of variety and heterogeneity. According to the APA dictionary, pluralism in the philosophical sense is the

belief that ultimate reality is composed of more than one substance or fundamental kind of entity. In the social sense, pluralism refers to the existence of people having different religions, ethnic origins and cultural backgrounds. It must be noted that while the idea of diversity has recently come into vogue, plurality has been the natural order of the world for millennia. It is also well-known that the land we now call India, has always been pluralistic. Plurality has characterized this nation not only in terms of ethnicity, religion or language but also in terms of festivals, family systems, daily customs, traditions and spiritual practices. It can thus be assumed that many lessons with regard to diversity can be learned through the history of this land and its people.

Diversity and Inclusion in institutions: Advantages & Challenges

Currently, the two most common contexts for discussing inclusion are educational institutions and work places. An analysis of labor statistics and other data show workforces to have become more heterogeneous, presumably as an outcome of advances in women's and civil rights (Mor Barak & Travis, 2013). Over the last few decades, members of historically underrepresented groups have joined work spaces, earlier denied to them. Further, developments in economic policies, including India's acceptance of the New Economic Policy based on the principles of Liberalization, Privatization, and Globalization in 1991, led to the world's economies becoming more inter-connected. Subsequent technological developments, including the spread of the world wide web further augmented these inter-connections. With the changing paradigm, came the need for organizations to understand differences in cultural norms and ways of being.

Similar trends have occurred in the education sector, where students of varying cultures (Gollnick &

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Chinn, 2002) inhabit modern classrooms. Although there is little official data available on the topic, classrooms in the country now house students who speak different languages, belong to different religions and regions, and represent different class and caste dynamics. This has largely been the result of educational policies and practises (such as the Right to Education Act, Sarva Siksha Abhiyaan, and implementation of the EWS quota) embraced by the Indian state in the last 15 years and changing economic trends such as the growth of the country's middle-class. The Rights of Persons with Disability Act (2016) and the National Education Policy (2020) are also heavily inclined in favour of inclusion.

While the acceptance of inclusion both as a phenomenon and as a practise has been growing, there has also been a great deal of scepticism due to the complexities involved in managing diverse spaces. It is indeed difficult to accomplish genuinely inclusive processes in practice. Diverse workspaces and the desire to make them inclusive, creates at the very least the challenges of ensuring that company leaders understand the meaning of inclusion, training managers holding them accountable to show that inclusivity is a core competency and providing workers with safe spaces to voice their concerns. Creating inclusive classrooms necessitates teachers to employ teaching methods that are not only theoretically sound but also culturally sensitive. Teachers need to be equipped with skills to create learning spaces within which each student feels supported and is provided the best opportunity to learn (Richards, Brown & Forde, 2007). None of this is possible without adequate infrastructure and resources being provided to organizations and schools. In schools for instance, without additional resources, the nudge towards inclusion contains the risk of it being reduced to merely shifting special educational practices into the classroom (McLeskey & Waldron, 2007). Diversity, unless channelized positively also carries the threat of prejudice, discrimination and stereotyping. Without the wide-spread acceptance of diversity, there is always a risk of inter-personal and inter-group conflicts.

While diversity poses the above-mentioned challenges, the benefits that it offers are several and thus worth consideration. Workplace diversity can increase

the attractiveness of organizations to potential business partners, future employees, and society at large (Robinson & Dechant, 2017). Diversity also increases the available talent pool, job satisfaction, organizational commitment and retention rates (Shore et al., 2011), along with decreasing conflict, the intention to leave, stress, job withdrawal, and organizational turnover (Hopkins et al., 2010). "Diversity Matters" (2015), a report by McKinsey & Company dwells at length on how diversity within workplaces places corporations at an advantage. Their research looks at the relationship between the level of diversity (defined as a greater share of women and a more mixed ethnic/racial composition in the leadership of large companies) and company financial performance. The research was based on data collected from hundreds of organizations in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, and Latin America. The analysis revealed a statistically significant connection between diversity and financial performance. The companies in the top quartile for gender diversity and racial/ethnic diversity were 15 percent and 35 percent more likely to have financial returns above their national industry median respectively. To ascertain causation, the researchers consulted additional evidence, and identified the most important factors driving better performance by companies with diverse executive teams and boards. These were found to be advantages in recruiting the best talent, increased employee satisfaction, improved decision making and stronger customer orientation.

Similar advantages have been witnessed, in the educational sector. In an analysis of co-teaching practises at the secondary level, general and special education teachers who co-taught in inclusive classrooms spoke of several benefits. For instance, improving feelings of belonging on campus improved the course grades of historically marginalized students (Walton & Cohen, 2007). In a more recent study (Murrar et al., 2020), students who felt that their peers treated them more inclusively performed better academically and reported an increased sense of belonging. Benefits for students with disabilities include elimination of the stigma of being in special education while students without disabilities receive enhanced individualized help through the collaboration between the special and general

education teachers. Other research has indicated significant improvements in the area of communication for students with disabilities who experience full-time placement in inclusive settings (Carter & Maxwell, 1998).

Preparing organizations and people for diverse settings

Given that fostering inclusion can pose challenges and elicit resistance, psychologists have attempted to understand how to best prepare people for functioning in diverse settings. A strategy that perhaps works is contact with dissimilar others, keeping in mind all the conditions necessary to reduce prejudice: equal status, common goals, cooperation, and institutional support (Allport, 1954). The jigsaw classroom, developed by Aronson in the 1970s is an example of a cooperative learning technique that has successfully reduced racial conflict and increased positive educational outcomes such as improved test performance, reduced absenteeism, and greater liking for school (Aronson, 2002). The use of self-managed teams in corporates, which allow people in different roles and functions to work together on projects as equals, can yield similar results. This may be explained by the optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991), which believes that individuals strive for a balance between feelings of similarity among group members on one hand, and recognition of their unique characteristics as individuals on the other. Inclusion can therefore be fostered by achieving a balance between belonging to a group and being appreciated for idiosyncratic characteristics of individuals. As people feel that they are important members of the organization and that their unique talents are recognized and appreciated, feelings of inclusion increase (Shore et al., 2011). Hiring Diversity and Inclusion managers, too, can boost inclusion by creating social accountability. Their role should not only be to advise leadership and employees on best practices to foster a diverse, welcoming, and inclusive work environment, but also ask questions. In an experiment conducted in Israel (reported by Dobbin & Kalev, 2016), teachers in training graded identical compositions supposedly written by Jewish students with Ashkenazic names (European heritage) or with Sephardic names (African or Asian heritage). The latter typically come from

poorer families and perform worse in school. On an average, the teacher trainees gave the Ashkenazic essays Bs and the Sephardic essays Ds. However, when the teachers were told that they would have to discuss their grades with their peers, these differences vanished. The possibility of justifying their grades made the teachers evaluate the essays on its merits. Similarly, simply having a diversity manager who could ask questions from managers would prompt them to step back and consider everyone who is qualified instead of hiring or promoting the first people who come to mind. Forcing people and organizations to reflect on their own perspectives and diversity practices may help them become more aware of available alternatives and uncover unspoken assumptions and biases that guide their practices and theories. And finally, some research is pointing towards the role of empathy. While those with high empathy are sensitive towards the needs of diverse populations and thus internally motivated to respond without prejudice toward them, low empathy individuals may especially require diversity training to promote motivation and ultimately reduce prejudice (Lindsey et al., 2015).

Diversity training programs: Drivers for change

Diversity training (DT), currently a popular concept, may be defined as any program intended to promote positive inter-group contact, reduce prejudice and discrimination, and generally teach people from different backgrounds how to collaborate effectively (Bezrukova et al., 2012). Three common methods used to carry out DT are perspective taking, goal setting, and stereotype discrediting (Lindsey et al., 2015). The perspective taking strategy encourages individuals to imagine what it's like to be a member of a different group as a way of understanding how those experiences may be different from their own. Goal setting implores individuals to set personal goals that aim to improve diversity values and inter-group relations within their organization, for example to use more inclusive language. Finally, stereotype discrediting aims to reduce prejudice by confronting participants with their commonly held stereotypes towards marginalized groups.

According to one estimate (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016), nearly half of midsize companies use DT, as do nearly

all the Fortune 500. We see a similar trend in educational institutions as well. Numerous universities across the globe implement some form of diversity and inclusion programs, such as courses on ethnic studies (Greens, 2000), women studies (Case & Stewart, 2010), human sexuality (e.g., Mansoori-Rostam & Tate, 2017), panel presentations (McDermott et al., 2018), education and contact intervention (Ahuja et al., 2017); role playing (Hillman & Martin 2002), and community events that celebrate diverse cultures (Klak & Martin, 2003). Yet, research supporting the benefits of DT is mixed, at best (e.g., Cox, 2023; Green & Hagiwara, 2020; Paluck et al., 2021). While most trainees do believe that their skills for interacting with diverse populations have improved after training, there is no overwhelming evidence that DT exercises actually improve behaviours toward stigmatized groups (Kulik & Roberson, 2008). Psychology, anyways is replete with examples of attitude-behaviour inconsistency (Ahuja & Dhillon, 2018; LaPierre, 1934). Furthermore, the positive effects of diversity training rarely last beyond a day or two, and a number of studies suggest that it may even be counterproductive (Dobbin & Kaley, 2016; Dover et al., 2020). Unfortunately, programs on DT may often be a knee jerk reaction to highly publicized instances of bias. One such case was that of Starbucks, which closed down stores in 8000 locations to conduct a four-hour antibias training for 175,000 employees after an outrage following the arrest of its two Black customers allegedly loitering while waiting for an associate to arrive (Stewart, 2018).

Interestingly and encouragingly, the benefits of diversity education courses in educational institutions have been reported to be effective (e.g., Ahuja et al., 2019; Rudman et al., 2001), perhaps more so than in workplaces. The question that assumes significance then is what is it that educational institutions are doing where HR is failing? While there is no single best way, an appropriate and effective approach towards inclusion will depend on the degree of pressure for diversity, the type of diversity in question, and attitudes of the leadership. Firms that use DT for more representative recruitment and better grievance handling are designed to preempt lawsuits by policing managers' thoughts and actions, not effecting real change. Often DT courses are compulsory to attend for employees, resulting in annoyance and resistance. On

the other hand, colleges often rely on voluntary training, evoking the opposite response ("I chose to come, so I must be pro-diversity"). Newly introduced value-added courses under the New Education Policy (2020) in India on emotional intelligence may prove to be effective at empathy building. Recent evidence (Cox, 2023) indicates that bias habit-breaking programs are successful in enabling people to act as change agents and reduce bias, foster inclusion, and advance equity, both within themselves and their social contexts. The authors are optimistic and hopeful that these are steps in the right direction for meaningful lasting change.

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