

The Impact of Policy Stances Around Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and Critical Race Theory on the Research Process

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: 📅 October 17, 2024

Published: 📅 October 29, 2024

Citation: Ronald E Davis. The Impact of Policy Stances Around Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and Critical Race Theory on the Research Process. Biomed J Sci & Tech Res 59(2)-2024. BJSTR. MS.ID.009274.

ABSTRACT

This article chronicles the initial journey of a tenure-track faculty member at a public institution in Ohio, who, motivated by a conversation about cultural humility in education, sought to explore educators' perceptions of diversity and inclusion in elementary and secondary school settings. The study emerged from personal experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting a significant gap in policies and practices regarding LGBTQ+ student support. Despite obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and developing a survey based on existing government frameworks, the research faced considerable challenges in recruitment due to a prevailing climate of censorship and anti-LGBTQ+ legislation across several states. Attempts to engage school districts and teacher unions resulted in widespread reluctance to participate, reflecting the contentious nature of the topic and its implications for educators. Ultimately, the study pivoted to directly contact teachers and social workers, emphasizing the necessity of understanding frontline experiences in shaping inclusive practices. This experience underscored the impact of current policies on research participation and the critical need for advocacy in educational settings to foster environments that support diverse student identities. The article highlights the importance of resilience and adaptability in research, particularly in navigating controversial subjects within the field of education. It was a warm summer like day in September 2021. I had just begun my work as a tenure track faculty at a public institution in Ohio.

Excited with the new path ahead and nervous with the pressure and expectations that comes along with the tenure process, I decided to reach out to my other social work teaching colleagues. I had a few ideas floating around in my head at the time. However, one idea that kept floating around in my head centered around the idea of Cultural Humility in practice within a school setting. Specifically, I was curious if school teachers felt equipped with the skills and experience to provide the inclusive environmental practices that they will be tasked with utilizing in the current classroom setting. After talking with my social work professor colleagues for a little while a brilliant study was crafted. One that we felt at the time would be groundbreaking. Little did I know the process the get 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 the elementary and secondary school setting. This idea was the brainchild of a conversation I had with my wife in late 2020 during the height of the COVID pandemic. I remember sitting in our living room and her asking for my help in talking with a student of hers that wished to identify with another gender pronoun. I imme-

diately asked what policies her school had in place. To my surprise, the answer was none whatsoever. Which then lead to a discussion of how this needs to be changed as students continue to show development and questioning behaviors in 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 very little literature that focused on diversity and inclusion preparedness from elementary and secondary educators. Most of the findings show

that educators and policy makers tend to focus on fitting diverse students into normative structures rather than pursuing initiatives that present inclusive practices (Smith, et al. [1]) Other findings that were discovered included that educators reported lacking knowledge about the various aspects of gender identity and often relied on parents for support (Neary, et al. [2]). Additionally, the research showed that approaches in schools varied in regards to students using names or pronoun preferences (Dodge, et al. [3]) I did however find quite a few studies on high school and college-based diversity and inclusion efforts. 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 for 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, that 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 attack the study. As we left it that day we decided to look into various studies already created that assess diversion and inclusion practices in schools. We then located a study then adapted a survey provided by the US department of education 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 end 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. Questions in the study focused on target areas of practice mirroring many established characteristics of a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) program. Our survey asked about terminology and language utilized with students in an academic setting, then our study looked at staff advocacy. Here we aimed to identify staff self-reporting their efforts to advocate on a student's behalf. We then looked at the student learning environment, and finally aimed to gather staff feedback around 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. All together during our meeting we identified 25 school districts to reach out to in order to help distribute the study. This is where the study got interesting.

Current Policy Climate and their Significance to the Study

LGBTQ policies around restricting educational rights and censorship has exploded since 2019. In the year before the pandemic,

2019, there were a total of 3 bills that looked at curriculum censorship geared towards restriction of instruction around gender and sexuality in public schools [4]. As of the writing of this article in 2023, there are presently 62 such bills that have been introduced. Additionally, in 2023 the term "forced outing" has been created and utilized in multiple bills. This term refers to educators being forced to report to parents, without student consent, any changes to a student's name or pronouns being used that could be interpreted as identifying as a trans identity. In 2023 alone, 11 states have passed Anti-LGBTQ legislation restricting LGBTW rights. Those states have included Idaho, Utah, Wyoming, South Dakota, Iowa, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Georgia. Some of the notable bills and policies include Florida's Parental Rights in Education bill, HH 1557. This bill was approved in July 2022 [5]. The legislation put into motion restrictions not allowing instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity that is "not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students in accordance with state standards." (Parental Rights in Education, 2022). This legislation spurred multiple student walk-outs in schools across the state of Florida. Then later in 2023, Florida passed HB 1069. This law prohibits instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity from Pre-K all the way through 8th grade [6].

Additionally in Tennessee, a law, HB 239, was passed by state legislatures defining sex with an anti LGBTQ definition as a person's immutable biological sex as determined by anatomy and genetics existing at the time of birth and evidence of a person's biological sex (An Act to amend Tennessee Code Annotated, Title 1, Chapter 3 and Title 49, Chapter 2, Part 8, [7]) relative to statutory definitions. Tennessee additionally adopted HB 1269 which allowed for teachers to intentionally misgender and deadnaming of transgender or binary students. In the state of Ohio, HB 6 prohibited transgendered students from participating in school sports. Additionally, Senate Bill 83 was passed and it restricted diversity, equity, and inclusion programs or trainings in all Ohio businesses. According to Coming (2023), there would be an elimination of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training in public institutions [4]. This senate bill also adds that the ban includes any related training that can be interpreted as teaching that is reactive to demonstrating, systemic and prevalent issues in universities, colleges, or higher education institutions. Students and faculty members of Ohio universities and colleges have attempted to advocate for this issue. They brought their concerns to the Ohio Statehouse in April of 2023 to express their thoughts against the higher education bill and how these changes will affect university and college campuses (Henry, et al. [8]). More than 500 people submitted opponent testimony during the Senate Workforce and Higher Education committee meeting to Senate Bill 83 about the potential changes on required American history courses, evaluations based on if the professor showed bias or taught with bias, and also concerns on prohibiting staff and faculty members from striking, but only 100 got to testify.

In all of the bills proposed, the target population impacted would be those who have different cultural backgrounds such as Hispanic,

Native American, Alaskan, African American, LGBTQIA+ and others. Additionally, the passing of many of these policies and bills potentially lead to the elimination of acknowledgement of community organizations such as; African American Voices Gospel Choir, American Muslim Student Association, Armenian Students Association, Association of Latino Professionals for America [4]. This will also trigger certain populations of individuals who have faced oppression, discrimination, and biases.

A Study Stalls

In November of 2021 our study received IRB approval. 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 Diversity, Inclusion and Equity (DEI) efforts as a whole. We felt comfortable with this approach because the way the study was set up would still be able to see themes established for topic areas such as: LGBTQ+, Gender Issues, Sexual Orientation, Physical Disabilities and Mental Health. Our group met on a weekly basis from October 2021 through August 2022. During that time, we reached out to 25 school districts providing them with information on our study. 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 to be on. 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 of 2022 the overturning of *Roe v Wade* was announced. What came with it was 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. Which included: "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. vs Jackson Women's Health Organization [9]).

A Study Shifts

Back to the drawing board. Not one school administrator agreed to participate in our study or distribute our study. We then discussed the need was to get teachers and staff input on their experiences with diversity and inclusion in the schools they've been a part of. We then decided the next best approach would be to reach out to teacher unions in the states we had aimed to focus on for our study. We then spent the next month researching teacher unions in the states of Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, Tennessee, Texas, and Mississippi. A month later we sat down and had contact information aligned 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 all the teacher unions, totaling 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 teacher union was encouraging however in alerting us that they could not distribute the study as it is too controversial, but that they 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.

A Study Pivots

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 of our research to be completed in order 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 in regards to inclusion practices and cultural sensitivity in regards to the various needs today's student presents. We finally decided to take the hard way and begin gathering email lists for teachers within the various school districts we wanted to target in our study. When all was said and done over 1,000 teacher 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.

A Study Teaches

As a result of this experience, I've learned how much policy and current events impacts participation in a study along with how a study may need to be shaped in order to gain participants. As researchers it is imperative that we 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 give a good picture into what potential issues may arise if a study on the same topic area is being considered. 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 broad leap of faith that individuals will come forward because they're moved by

your topic and have decided that the right thing to do is the right thing to do for themselves and those they serve. In a way it is a throwback to the central themes of social work where advocacy began at the individual level. The impact of this study could be large, if enough individuals teaching in school districts would come forward and give their input on their experiences in the classroom. In hindsight maybe it is where I should have started, because without individual teachers, we don't have administrators or teacher unions to support our schools.

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ISSN: 2574-1241

DOI: 10.26717/BJSTR.2024.59.009274

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