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The Future of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in Education Keep, Reform, or Dismantle?

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Abstract

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, also known as EDI, is one of several acronyms that refer to policies and practices of organizations, such as K to 12 school boards and post-secondary institutions, to promote inclusive and equitable environments. While EDI has become a ubiquitous discourse in educational administration, its impact extends into classroom pedagogies, hiring practices, curriculum development, and institutional culture. In this article, we critically examine the extent to which EDI committees and initiatives fulfil their promise of fostering inclusive environments to support equity-denied groups. We address the following research questions: (1) How have EDI frameworks evolved in education? (2) What gaps exist between EDI policies and their implementation for transformative impact? (3) What alternative approaches can create sustainable and impactful change? Overall, the article casts a critical eye on EDI initiatives, exploring opportunities, challenges, and potential futurities considering the polarizing discourse of political correctness and anti-wokeness.



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Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, also known as EDI, is one of several acronyms that refer to policies and practices of organizations such as K to 12 school boards and post-secondary institutions to promote inclusive and equitable environments. While EDI has become a ubiquitous discourse in educational administration, its impact extends into classroom pedagogies, hiring practices, curriculum development, and institutional culture (Eizadirad & Trifonas, 2025). In this article, we critically examine the extent to which EDI committees and initiatives fulfil their promise of fostering inclusive environments to support equity-denied groups. We address the following research questions: (1) How have EDI frameworks evolved in education? (2) What gaps exist between EDI policies and their implementation for transformative impact? (3) What alternative approaches can create sustainable and impactful change? Overall, the article casts a critical eye on EDI initiatives, exploring opportunities, challenges, and potential futurities considering the polarizing discourse of political correctness and anti-wokeness.

This article is a conceptual analysis and policy discussion that critically examines the evolution of EDI in educational settings. The primary goal is to provide new insights that inform future policy and research across K to 12 and higher education. It is important to note that we address EDI in both K to 12 and higher education because systemic inequities persist across these levels, and policy shifts in one often influence the other. By examining both, we provide a holistic view of challenges and opportunities in educational reform. The discussions are intended for scholars, educators, policymakers, school administrators, government representatives, and EDI practitioners who are engaged in shaping and implementing equity initiatives in education.

We begin by defining key concepts and relative theoretical perspectives leading to the current EDI landscape. Next, we examine the current discourse on EDI in education, highlighting both strengths and limitations. For example, we outline to what extent EDI committees and initiatives fulfil their promise of fostering inclusive environments to support equity-denied groups and by contrast, where they are performative by merely being public relations exercises that accomplish very little except positive optics amidst neoliberal influence. Finally, we conclude by discussing what the future holds for EDI and explore alternative approaches and opportunities for meaningful change and sustainable reforms rooted in activism.

Tensions within EDI Discourses

Throughout the article, the term *equity-denied* refers to individuals and/or communities who have been systematically excluded from fair access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making processes due to their social identities or location, associated with factors such as race, gender, and socio-economic status (Ahmed, 2021; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 2003). This term builds upon scholarship in critical race theory and intersectionality which highlight how systemic barriers persist despite equity initiatives (Eizadirad & Trifonas, 2025).

The rise of EDI discourses has been a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by grassroots activism, opposing tensions and resistance, and institutional response to pressures of being more inclusive supporting equity-denied groups (Eizadirad & Ghaffar-Siddiqui, 2025; Hunt et al., 2015; Kendi, 2019; Ramaswamy, 2021; Sider et al., 2022). For instance, public outcry over systemic issues such as unmarked graves discovered at former Canadian residential schools catalyzed educational institutions to examine their colonial histories and practices (Adams & Wisdom, 2021). Another example would be Jordan Peterson, a Canadian clinical psychologist and professor of psychology who is well-known for his critiques of political correctness and identity politics. He gained widespread attention in 2016 for opposing Canada's Bill C-16, which proposed adding

gender identity and expression to the list of prohibited grounds of discrimination. Peterson argued in 2021 that the bill would infringe on free speech rights. His controversial stance on this and other topics have made him a polarizing figure. Those who support him view his stance as a champion of free speech and traditional values, while critics view him as discriminatory and responsible for perpetuating exclusion and even hate speech.

Within the past couple of decades, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion initiatives (EDI, sometimes with an additional D for Decolonization or A for Accessibility) have emerged as an institutional response for school boards and post-secondary institutions to outline how they support equity-denied groups (Abrica & Oliver Andrew, 2024; Eizadirad et al., 2023; Shankar, 2020; Sider et al., 2022). Such emergence can be attributed, to a certain extent, to external pressures from community members and the public to hold institutions accountable. Another prominent example that sparked EDI conversations and institutional responses include the murder of George Floyd in 2020 at the hands of four male police officers (Adams & Wisdom, 2021; DiAngelo, 2022).

Many EDI advocates emphasize the importance of EDI initiatives in fostering dialogue, raising awareness, and creating pathways for long-term cultural and organizational transformation. For example, schools and organizations that embrace diversity benefit from higher employee satisfaction, lower turnover rates, and increased innovation (Schwab & Vanham, 2021). Lower turnover reduces hiring and training expenses, enabling schools and organizations to focus on fostering innovation and achieving strategic goals. Companies that institutionalize diversity are 35% more likely to outperform their less diverse counterparts in financial returns (Deloitte, 2018; Hunt et al., 2015). Similarly, schools with strong equity programs report higher levels of student engagement and academic achievement (Ishimaru et al., 2023).

However, the implementation and effectiveness of EDI initiatives have sparked intense debate and even backlash (Abrica & Oliver Andrew, 2024; Ahmed, 2021; Eizadirad & Ghaffar-Siddiqui, 2025). Abrica and Oliver Andrew (2024) argue that while EDI initiatives aim to address systemic inequities, they frequently fall short of achieving transformative change due to performative compliance, lack of data-driven accountability, and insufficient stakeholder engagement. In many cases, EDI efforts focus on surface-level representation rather than addressing deeper structural barriers that perpetuate exclusion and inequities (Kendi, 2019; Sider et al., 2022). Scholar activists such as Sara Ahmed (2021) have highlighted how institutions use complaints as a catalyst for change, underscoring the importance of listening to marginalized voices, yet paradoxically, institutional procedures in place often end up protecting the institution more than the needs of people who lodge the complaints against the institution. One key example involves women who have experienced assaults on campus. In many cases, their complaints are dismissed or dragged through extensive bureaucratic processes that constantly retraumatizes them. Abrica and Oliver-Andrew (2024) refer to this as “The DEI Enterprise,” where they argue that “DEI is fundamentally a neoliberal construct that extends rather than disrupts the logics of Whiteness” (para. 13). To this critique, we would add that it also reinforces patriarchal structures. The ongoing debate emphasizes the complexity of implementing EDI strategies that are impactful and sustainable.

EDI proponents, on the other hand, might refer to Crenshaw's (1991) concept of intersectionality, which has been instrumental in shaping EDI frameworks by emphasizing the interconnected nature of social categorizations and how they create overlapping systems of discrimination (e.g. how race intersects with gender and social class). However, as EDI discourse gained traction, it also encountered significant resistance. Critics such as Ramaswamy (2021) and

Haider (2018) have pointed out how EDI practices can be co-opted by neoliberal agendas, reducing them to mere public relations exercises that prioritize optics over substantive change. The fall of EDI discourse's popularity can be attributed to several factors including the rise of anti-woke sentiments, most recently amplified by Donald Trump executive orders as President of the United States. Such narratives distort the intent of EDI by positioning it about special rights or preferential treatment rather than correcting exclusionary practices with historical roots (Eizadirad & Ghaffar-Siddiqui, 2025). For example, the backlash against Critical Race Theory (CRT) in the United States reflects broader societal debates about the role of race and identity in public life. As Iati (2021) notes, conservative movements have increasingly targeted CRT and EDI initiatives as emblematic of “woke” overreach, framing them as threats to supposed equality, free speech, and traditional values. This opposition has been mirrored in other contexts including schools, higher education, and corporate environments where EDI policies are often viewed with skepticism. The combination of political pushback and neoliberal co-optation suggests that while EDI discourse has made significant strides in raising awareness about inequities, and in some case leading to policy reforms, its future impact hinges on addressing these critiques and moving beyond performative activism towards genuine systemic change (Abrica & Oliver Andrew, 2024; Sider et al., 2022).

This tension between genuine efforts to address the root causes of systemic inequities and the performative aspects of EDI initiatives creates a complex landscape that requires careful analysis. In the last few years, EDI discourse has increasingly become under intense fire and scrutiny. As a result, long-standing affirmative action laws in the United States that account for equity have been clawed back. At school boards, post-secondary institutions, and private corporations, EDI budgets and initiatives are on the chopping block. And yet, EDI remains a dominant force with transformational potential to make institutions more inclusive, raising the question: are EDI committees and policies treated as a panacea for addressing societal disparities or are they performative window dressing to give the appearance of institutions respecting diversity while maintaining inequitable systemic practices? In the upcoming subsections, we further examine the complexities of EDI committees and initiatives, in education and other sectors, to reflect on whether they should be kept, reformed, or dismantled.

Institutions Wanting to Do Better: Admitting There Is a Problem and Naming It

Identifying problems and naming them are first steps in initiating change and improvements within any school, community, or institution. A way to begin is to consider the communities one belongs to and assess their reputation as a “good” neighbourhood or “sketchy”. This logic can also be applied to how schools are labelled and how they are funded (Garcia Mathewson, 2020). These perceptions and reputations inform how people think about others, or specific schools or communities, despite such ideologies in many cases being rooted in stereotypes and assumptions about, for instance, social class (Eizadirad, 2019; hooks, 2024; MET Anti-Racism Speaker Series, 2024). Beyond location, the societal problems EDI aims to address are multifaceted: systemic racism, gender inequality, discrimination based on sexual orientation, and ableism, to name a few others.

On a positive note, EDI committees have significantly contributed to advancements in both K to 12 and higher education by amplifying the needs of equity-denied faculty, staff, and students (Barton, 2024; Eizadirad & Trifonas, 2025; Jones, E., 2022; Kendi, 2019). For example, in K to 12 schools, EDI committees have contributed to the implementation of culturally sustaining

curriculum content and pedagogies that reflect diverse histories and perspectives, fostering a sense of belonging among students from marginalized communities (Paris & Alim, 2017). Yet, in seeking to approve and implement systemic reforms within schools, school board leaders and equity directors- many of whom come from equity-denied groups- often face ‘battle fatigue’ and significant political backlash. Ishimaru et al. (2023) describe this paradox as “organizational double jeopardy,” where equity directors endure increased scrutiny but leverage their positions to advance equity agendas. Their work highlights the dual realities of advocating for equity: confronting resistance while also fostering progress. This duality reflects the broader landscape of EDI work.

Individual and institutional apathy coupled with pressures of “cancel culture” - itself fraught with knee jerk polarized viewpoints - pose significant barriers to building cultures of equity (Gosine, 2019; Sossi, 2021; Walton, 2019). Institutions, always aware of optics, in many cases seem to engage in performative rather than substantive change, undermining the purpose of EDI in the first place (Ahmed, 2021; Au, 2017; Sider et al., 2022). Under the spectre of political correctness, EDI discourse has become contentious and often enacted using a neoliberal checklist approach rather than through authentic relations with marginalized identities and communities (Karimi, 2022). Typically, the conversations stay at the criticism level or complaining without advancing to what can be done as a collective to mitigate the root causes of the systemic barriers. As noted by Darder (2024) in her analysis of Freire’s concept of critical consciousness, systemic and institutional practices that have been engrained for decades or more are difficult to see and challenge. To create lasting change, EDI efforts must transition from tokenistic measures to authentic engagements with marginalized communities for transformative impact (Ahmed, 2021; Sider et al., 2022).

The Nuances and Complexities in How EDI Initiatives are Implemented

EDI discourse, particularly in the context of cancel culture and anti-wokeness, brings both advantages and disadvantages. As Ramaswamy (2021) notes in the context of business, it can descend to the superficial, giving rise to cynicism and apathy or it can be viewed as a facet of what has for many decades been referred to as stakeholder capitalism as opposed to shareholder capitalism (Schwab & Vanham, 2021). Stakeholder capitalism refers to an economic system in which corporations prioritize the interests of all stakeholders—including employees, customers, communities, and the environment—rather than solely maximizing shareholder profits. This approach aims to balance financial success with social responsibility. A case in point is comedian Dave Chappelle in the entertainment context. His controversial stand-up routines criticize the practices of institutions, yet they are also saturated with anti-trans and ableist rhetoric, garnering both criticism and praise from viewers and listeners (Chappelle, 2021). The polarization of responses highlights the divisiveness and tensions within EDI discourse and the extent to which comedy can or should operate as social critique on one hand, yet also potentially causing harm to marginalized communities (Abramovitch, 2019). Critics argue that cancel and anti-woke culture stifles free speech, while others insist that it holds individuals accountable for harmful rhetoric and makes room for marginalized identities and histories (Alfonseca, 2024). Is there a middle space in between these opposing stances where constructive dialogue can take place? Perhaps there is a space for cultivating care, empathy, and understanding, and moving towards finding practical solutions in ways that somehow benefit all. We recognize that *benefits all* is problematic given the

widespread misperception that equity is synonymous with special rights. Yet, perhaps useful steps can be taken to de-escalate this polarized rhetoric.

EDI discourse offers opportunities and challenges to address such questions through actions, particularly within educational settings. While critics often highlight the shortcomings of EDI initiatives, they tend to overlook their successes in fostering awareness and driving policy reforms in recent decades (Barton, 2024). For example, restorative justice practices in schools have reduced suspension rates and improved school climate, directly aligning with the goals of making schools safer and more inclusive (Yuhas, 2018). Similarly, mentorship programs for underrepresented students in K to 12 schools and post-secondary institutions have led to higher retention rates, more graduates, and greater engagement amongst students (Ramaswamy, 2022). Furthermore, initiatives such as equity-focused professional development for K to 12 teachers have improved educators' ability to be more intentional and confident in addressing systemic biases in their classrooms. Moreover, policies promoting diversity in faculty recruitment and hiring have led to more representative academic environments, which research has shown to enhance learning outcomes for students (Barton, 2024; Ishimaru et al., 2023). As a collective, such EDI initiatives have led to more resources being secured to support equity-denied students resulting in the mitigation and reduction in opportunity gaps across different social groups and communities (Eizadirad, 2019; Paris & Alim, 2017). These advancements demonstrate the potential of EDI committees to enact meaningful change when their work is rooted in genuine commitment to equity.

Nonetheless, the discourse surrounding EDI remains fraught. School boards and post-secondary institutions often use EDI initiatives as public relations tools rather than genuine mechanisms for change. They leverage EDI initiatives to construct inclusive schools or campuses, yet their motives seem akin to stakeholder capitalism, with public relations used as a platform to generate profits through the image created and maintained (Shankar, 2020). For example, the “show” of EDI attracts more students of diverse backgrounds, particularly international students who are charged inflated tuition to offset decades of corroded public funding. However, services that support their success such as adequate housing and reasonable work hours are typically insufficient. Simply put, the promises of EDI have swiftly become *de rigeur* on most campuses, yet the degree to which they have lived up to their promise particularly for international students, to name one such equity-denied group, is entirely in doubt or ineffective (Coen Sanchez, 2023). Balancing these critiques with evidence of progress highlights the need for ongoing critical engagement with EDI practices and initiatives to ensure they fulfill their transformative potential.

Evaluating EDI Impact: What Key Performance Indicators Measure Efficacy

Dominant socio-political and cultural discourses perpetuate binary thinking and divisive rhetoric (Giroux & Pollock, 2010; MET Anti-Racism Speaker Series, 2024). These include the myths of meritocracy that anyone can succeed with enough hard work (Au, 2017; Rauscher et al., 2024) and neoliberal ideologies that anything and everything should be on the open marketplace, including all forms of education (Au, 2017; De Lissovoy et al., 2024). These frameworks fail to account for the complex systemic disadvantages that differ by identity, class, geography, and other factors, notwithstanding implicit and covert prejudice that equity-denied groups routinely face. As Abrica and Oliver Andrew (2024) emphasize, “DEI can support equity causes to an extent, but

DEI as an enterprise of the neoliberal university, like any other functional or revenue-generating unit, largely serves White interests” (para. 8).

K to 12 and higher education leaders can foster a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of EDI efforts by challenging deficit-thinking discourses. This needs to go one step further by tracking efficacy through data-driven measures to move beyond performative politics. To measure the impact of EDI initiatives, K to 12 school boards and post-secondary institutions should outline their key performance indicators (KPIs) to measure the progress of their commitments over time and its impact. These could include collecting and reporting on data such as the demographics of students, faculty, and staff; overall number and identities of students accepted into programs; the criteria used for acceptance into programs and making intentional changes to mitigate barriers for under-represented groups; graduation rates among minoritized students and comparing it to those who had access to mentorship and other culturally-responsive support services; improving the diversity and mental health of faculty and staff while maintaining excellence for merit and experience; and enhancing the effectiveness and cultural responsiveness of support services for all stakeholders including students, teachers, and administrators.

However, Abrica and Oliver Andrew (2024) argue that DEI efforts in higher education often serve neoliberal interests, prioritizing institutional optics over substantive equity work. To counter neoliberal influence, institutions can ensure that evaluations and KPIs go beyond surface-level metrics to assess the real-world impact on marginalized communities and the larger benefits to the institution through return on investments benefitting non-marginalized stakeholders (e.g. retention or profits). To demonstrate accountability and transparency, institutional commitments and goals should be publicly shared, such as via websites, and a progress report provided annually as part of a shared responsibility paradigm to collectively improve systems and create conditions for thriving communities that benefit all (Marion, 2024). Furthermore, iterative processes of reflection and adaptation, grounded in the lived experiences of students, educators, and administrators, can be useful.

Moving Beyond Performative EDI: Judging Efficacy by Impact Rather Than Intentions

While EDI as policies and practices needs continued interrogation, activism itself must transcend mere critique to enact real change through data-driven accountability and measurement of impact over time (Eizadirad et al., 2023). Beyond the well-documented successes, EDI committees have also contributed to addressing intersectional inequities (Barton, 2024), such as those experienced by students with disabilities and LGBTQ2S+ people. In K to 12 schools, initiatives like universal design for learning (UDL) have gained traction, ensuring that teaching pedagogies and materials are accessible to all learners regardless of their abilities (Sider et al., 2022). Higher education institutions, on the other hand, have increasingly adopted gender-inclusive washrooms and housing policies, creating more supportive environments for equity-denied students. These measures demonstrate how EDI work continues to evolve, tackling multifaceted barriers while promoting equity and inclusion across diverse populations.

Yet, Traversa et al. (2023) note that in some cases, cancel culture expressed through vocal condemnation has paradoxically silenced constructive critique and dialogue. Advancing EDI's authentic goals for improvements relies on such critique, but more importantly the extent to which the criticism can facilitate meaningful, constructive dialogue with opposing viewpoints. Its focus on self-interest mirrors tactics used by the extreme right, such as invoking freedom of speech

rhetoric to further their agendas and silence critique. Both extremes have led to a societal stalemate. The question is, how can we work with opposing viewpoints, sometimes extreme, and with their associated tensions and feelings of uncomfortableness to move from critique and silencing to action? And how can action grapple with the nuances and complexities of EDI when, as noted by Fairbank (2024), anti-EDI initiatives seem to be trending?

A good starting point is reflecting on one's own life experiences as a timeline from birth to the present with respect to advantages and barriers experienced. It means understanding a broader history that underlies one's life, recognizing that the word "privilege" can be triggering to many people, depending on one's philosophy about EDI and its purpose (Kendi, 2019). It can provoke guilt, anger, and rolling of eyes (DiAngelo, 2022). Furthermore, invoking privilege can be interpreted as affront to the ideals of merit and hard work (Au, 2017; Johnson, 2015), often misinterpreted as an accusation of having an easy life (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). This can contribute to defensiveness and resistance to acknowledging one's systemic advantages throughout life, such as when applying for jobs, experience going through an airport, or applying for mortgage preapprovals.

The purpose of unpacking systemic advantages is not about whether one's life is easy or not or how hard one works. It is about recognizing prejudice and systemic barriers that exist for certain identities, social groups, and communities at the social and institutional levels, and moving from reaction to intentional, targeted actions to rupture longstanding inequitable policies and practices. It is a systemic analysis, using one's life experiences as a baseline to examine the trajectory of access to opportunities and power. Such exploration and introspection involves recognizing one's advantages and using that knowledge to support marginalized communities to mitigate the opportunity gap. One of the challenges of naming systemic advantages is its invisibility to those who have it. By "have it," we mean in varying measures compounded by simultaneously experiencing oppression in other ways. Gay white men, for example, would tend to experience the world somewhat differently than gay men of colour.

Privilege, or as we refer to as it as systemic advantage, can be a powerful tool for social change when used intentionally to support those without it to create inclusive environments and institutions that benefit all (Ahmed, 2021; Eizadirad et al., 2023). For instance, white people can address their white privilege without guilt or shame (although it is also ok if folks do work through the emotions and feelings of uncomfortableness) to advocate for racial equity; straight people can support queer equity; and men can work towards gender equity. In other words, those with relative advantage (meaning, not having to face ongoing and daily oppression based on race, gender, sexuality, or other dimensions of social difference) are key players in advancing meaningful and authentic equity work.

Specifically in education and within schools, teachers can leverage their authority over the curriculum to include diverse voices, pedagogies, and perspectives, particularly from historically marginalized groups to challenge dominant, deficit-thinking, biased narratives (Giroux & Pollock, 2010; hooks, 2003; Kendi, 2019). For example, an English teacher might choose books by authors who are Indigenous or Black to promote critical discussions about equity and social justice. Teachers can also use their position to advocate for additional funding for under-resourced schools, ensuring students from low-income families have access to the same opportunities as their peers to achieve to their full potential (Eizadirad, 2019). Principals and district leaders can advocate for policy reforms that address systemic barriers, such as adopting restorative justice practices, to reduce the disproportionate disciplining of racialized students (Yuhás, 2018). Administrators can

also prioritize hiring diverse staff to reflect the communities they serve, which can help create a more inclusive school environment with greater student engagement by providing students with role models who share their backgrounds and lived experiences (Sider et al., 2022). Policymakers can establish robust systems with relevant KPIs for tracking and addressing disparities in academic outcomes and disciplinary actions across demographic groups. As a collective, such advocacy and activism efforts highlight how educational leaders and stakeholders can use their power to mitigate systemic barriers, creating schools and communities that are inclusive. Such actions not only benefit equity-denied students or groups, but the return on investments reaps benefits for all stakeholders within the school-community ecosystem (e.g. greater engagement, safer schools with reduced incidents of violence, greater collaboration, promotion of critical thinking through diverse perspectives, etc.).

Intentional Activism, Calculated Risk-Taking, and Systemic Change

Activism is the intentional effort to bring about social, political, or environmental change through advocacy, awareness, education, or direct action (Abawi et al., 2025; Eizadirad et al., 2023). Activism typically arises from personal experiences of marginalization. Accordingly, most members of advantaged groups stay on the sidelines due to a combination of not recognizing or seeing systemic barriers, fear of reprisals for speaking up, and/or considering it someone else's problem. Yet, some people with various advantages use their power with intentionality to advance social justice. These are known as allies. Being an ally sounds nice. But even allies, as they appoint themselves, might unwittingly contribute to the marginalization of the very people they claim to support, even with good intentions. Black Lives Matter scholars and activists Bettina Love (cited in Dankowski, 2020), Alicia Garza (cited in Dorsey, 2022), and Feminista Jones (2019), differentiate between being an ally and a co-conspirator emphasizing that allyship is self-titled and rooted in performativity with a tendency to lead rather than collaborate, while on the other hand, co-conspiratorship actively collaborates to share the hard work of social activism and its associated risks to advance equity. In short, being a co-conspirator means taking measures of risk. This distinction is crucial for genuine EDI efforts. Allyship is often self-appointed and performative, while co-conspiratorship involves bearing some of the consequences and engaging in intentional, calculated risk-taking to support equity-denied communities with the objective of making institutions better (Ahmed, 2021; hooks, 2003; Kendi, 2019). This shift is particularly relevant in the current state of affairs in Canada and globally. Countering the excesses of performative allyship, activism goes beyond individual actions to target systemic change and reforms (Barton, 2024; Eizadirad et al., 2023).

Systemic change involves addressing these intersections, by shifting access to power as a form of currency, to create more inclusive structures leading to better outcomes for all within the school-community ecosystem (Ahmed, 2021; Barton, 2024; Eizadirad & Ghaffar-Siddiqui, 2025). For instance, many school boards, post-secondary institutions, and companies have implemented anonymized recruitment processes where identifying information such as names or gender are removed from applications. Such change has contributed to reducing bias and significant increases in the diversity of hires based on merit, qualifications, and skills (Ramaswamy, 2022). Another example is the implementation of mentorship programs that specifically support under-represented groups. Schools and post-secondary institutions that have successfully established mentorship programs for equity-denied groups have benefited from greater retention and a more inclusive culture. Furthermore, schools that have adopted restorative justice practices, rather than punitive zero-tolerance disciplinary measures, have seen a reduction

in suspension rates and violent incidents and subsequently an improvement in overall school safety climate (Yuhas, 2018). These examples illustrate how intentional activism can lead to tangible improvements through authentic EDI initiatives, ultimately benefiting everyone involved.

Next Steps and Further Areas for Exploration

To further advance inquiry into the effectiveness and futurities of EDI policies, practices, and initiatives we propose the following research question as a guide: what can people in equity-holding groups (the opposite of equity-denied groups) do to create better institutions, particularly to enhance teaching and learning environments and school-community ecosystems? This question emphasizes the importance of shared responsibilities, intentional use of power, and commitment to action to holistically support EDI efforts as a collective. This does not mean that identities in power-holding positions should be the only ones engaging in EDI work but how they do it with equity-denied groups in ways that are effective and reciprocal is significant.

Schools and post-secondary institutions, as centers of knowledge production, have the potential to transform current ineffective EDI efforts that are corrupted by performativity and optics. The "how" of implementation is critical to authentically meet the needs of equity-denied group and communities. By incorporating diverse perspectives into curricula and fostering environments that encourage critical dialogue and shared decision-making, educational institutions can empower individuals and communities to challenge injustices and advocate for positive outcomes that benefit all in the community. Part of doing so requires listening and amplifying counter-narratives from people- students, faculty, and staff- with lived experiences impacted by the issue under examination.

In states where EDI committees and/or CRT have been outlawed or banned, educational institutions face unique challenges in continuing equity work. Covert strategies, such as embedding equity principles within broader institutional goals or alternative discourses such as thriving communities or spaces that facilitate belonging and well-being, may provide a pathway forward. For example, educators can integrate culturally sustaining pedagogies into their curricula without explicitly labeling them as EDI initiatives. The emphasis can be on how to support the needs of all students so they achieve to their full potential, in alignment with school improvement plans and school board strategic plans. Additionally, fostering community partnerships with external agencies and non-profits can help circumvent legal restrictions while advancing equity objectives.

Despite these compelling possibilities, additional areas warrant exploration. Future research could examine how different dimensions of diversity (e.g., gender, race, disability, and intersectionality) uniquely contribute to school and organizational innovation and productivity through data-driven measurements. Longitudinal studies could assess the long-term impact of inclusive practices on school and organizational culture as well as on teacher, staff, and student well-being and performance of schools on standardized tests. Moreover, there is a need to explore how small and medium schools in under-resourced communities, which may have fewer resources and less funding, can effectively implement and benefit from diversity and inclusion initiatives. Finally, understanding the role of leadership styles in fostering inclusion and their impact on students, staff, and teacher engagement could provide actionable insights for schools aiming to build more thriving workplaces.

Conclusion

Complex societal issues do not have simple answers. They require multiple solutions led by different groups and communities impacted by the issue. Addressing these issues requires moving beyond divisive rhetoric and engaging in constructive dialogue from multiple perspectives to mitigate exclusionary practices. This translates into willing to sit with negative emotions such as discomfort and anger, showing respect for opinions and lived experiences that are unique and at times oppose one another, being brave despite hesitations or the fear to have difficult conversations, and speaking up against normalized policies and practices that are ineffective. Systemic change begins with the power of unpopular ideas and extends to work with individuals and collective groups and communities to have a larger impact leading to policy reform and macro institutional changes.

When EDI initiatives are implemented within brave spaces that allow for the exploration of multiple opposing perspectives and expression of a range of emotions, the potential emerges to create more inclusive and equitable environments that benefit everyone, especially those who face ongoing and covert barriers. EDI is not about giving up power. Rather, it is about using power and advantages strategically, as a collective with co-conspirators, to engage in calculated risks to create conditions for thriving that benefits all. Overall, building increased inclusivity within schools, universities, corporations or the larger community leads to safer, thriving communities where people experience greater belonging and a sense of safety and satisfaction. Although not a panacea, such work requires a commitment to community engagement, empowerment, reciprocity, reconciliation, learning from mistakes, and above all a willingness to take risks for the greater good. The questions we leave you with as part of planting a seed and a point of departure is: How will you be a co-conspirator to support a thriving community and what calculated risks will you engage in to benefit those without your particular advantages? Just as importantly, how will you measure the impact of your actions over time through a data-driven approach that takes the conversation beyond good intentions?

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