IMPACT OF CULTURALLY INCLUSIVE PRACTICES ON PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY OF CULTURALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS.

Abstract:

As the process of globalisation has increased higher education, so has the culturally diverse student populations in many educational institutions across the world. While universities endorse inclusion through diversity policies and culturally inclusive practices, there is some uneven distribution of the psychological safety of culturally diverse students. Psychological safety, defined as the perception that one can express ideas, concerns or identity without fear of negative consequences, has been associated with academic engagement as well as collaboration and overall well-being. However, there has been little empirical research to consider the impact on psychological safety of specific culturally inclusive practices among culturally diverse students. This study examines the relationship between culturally inclusive practices and psychological safety in higher education institutions. Employing quantitative survey design, culturally diverse students from several institutions were included in this study. Correlation and regression analyses were performed with the help of the software package Statistician (SPSS) to establish the strength and the significance of the relationship. Findings suggest that culturally inclusive practices are especially predictive of psychological safety; these are particularly inclusive pedagogy, culturally responsive curriculum and faculty cultural competence. The study is relevant to educational research as it illuminates the processes of how institutional inclusivity operates on student psychological actions and provides recommendations for policy and practice.

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1. Introduction

Globalisation has turned higher education into a culturally complex setting in which students with diverse linguistic, ethnic, religious, and national backgrounds interact in a common academic space (UNESCO, 2021; Strayhorn, 2019). Universities have placed an increasing focus on diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives to ensure representation and participation (Banks, 2016; Kezar & Holcombe, 2018). However, representation alone does not mean belonging (Strayhorn, 2019; Sue et al., 2019). Students may be present in a wide range of institutions but may not feel safe psychologically, and as a result, diversity will not be beneficial in practice (Edmondson, 2018; De Leersnyder et al., 2022).

Psychological safety can be defined as the belief of a student that their involvement in learning can be done freely without the risk of being embarrassed, marginalised or discriminated against (Edmondson, 2018; Niță, 2023). The psychological safety that is fostered in academia encourages discussion, inquiry, taking intellectual risks and collaboration. For culturally diverse students, the perception of safety is highly sensitive to institutional behaviours, communication patterns and recognition of identity. When students feel ignored, stereotyped or misunderstood, they may become deactivated from participation, thus making learning less effective.

This study addresses the effect of culturally inclusive practices on psychological safety in a sample of culturally diverse students to offer an empirical understanding of the processes by which institutional inclusion will be translated into meaningful student experience.

1.1 Research Aim

This study will explore how culturally inclusive practises can influence the psychological safety of culturally diverse students.

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1.2 Research Objectives

- To determine the psychological security of culturally diverse students in culturally inclusive institutions.
- To test which relates to the interconnection between culturally inclusive and psychological safety in educational settings.
- To determine the major aspects of culturally inclusive practises that influence the psychological safety of students.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Psychological Safety Theory

Psychological safety refers to a mutual understanding of a learning environment as being one where it is safe to take interpersonal risks (Edmondson, 2018; Niță, 2023). In educational situations, this means being able to ask questions, disagree, express uncertainty and share cultural perspectives without the fear of ridicule. Feeling safe contributes to such students to dive deep into content, and cooperate with others; the student feels confident about school.

2.2 Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Culturally responsive pedagogy acknowledges that students' cultural backgrounds influence the ways that they value (interpret) knowledge and interact in classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 2017). Teaching practices that allow various perspectives to be integrated enable students to link learning to identity, leading to more engagement and less alienation. The framework assumes learning is enhanced when the experiences of the students are recognised as intellectual resources rather than obstacles.

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2.3 Inclusive Leadership and Institutional Climate

The existing institutional climate is determined by the behavioural attitudes of leadership and daily interactions (Woods et al., 2024; Edmondson, 2018). Inclusive leadership is the use of fairness, openness and active recognition of diversity. In educational settings, faculty behaviour, the way the staff give feedback, and their response to cultural differences influence the perceived emotional safety of the students. The theoretical integration suggests that inclusion must work both structurally and relationally to have an impact on psychological safety.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Culturally Inclusive Practices in Education

The idea of culturally inclusive practice has moved away from previous assimilationist models of education and moved toward more pluralistic and equity-oriented models. Diversity initiatives in the past concentrated on access and representation almost exclusively, but the current academic discussion claims that any representation without structural and pedagogical change is in danger of microaggressiveness or marginalisation in the provision of formal diversity (Banks, 2016; Kezar and Holcombe, 2018). Culturally inclusive practices thus do not only relate to demographic variety but also incorporate institutional practices, curriculum structure, pedagogical strategies, as well as relational practices.

The training of faculty cultural competence has come into vogue as a popular intervention to reduce implicit bias and intercultural communication (Pedersen et al., 2022). Whilst such training can raise awareness, there has been criticism of short-term workshops as not usually bringing about limited changes in behaviour unless these are within ongoing professional development structures. The success of cultural competence efforts, therefore, is not just determined by the content but also by institutional accountability and support as well.

Inclusive curriculum design is another of the core pillars of culturally inclusive practice. Scholarship in culturally responsive pedagogy emphasises that the process of knowledge

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production is historical and, in most cases, culturally dominant narratives. Whereas curricula that do not make room for a variety of traditions of learning implicitly create institutions of legitimacy. However, inclusion of diverse materials is not enough for epistemic equity. Critical scholars warn against shallow diversification, or "add-and-stir" kinds of diversification, in which token representation does not contradict theoretical assumptions. True inclusion in curricula must involve questioning of whose views, the principles of theories and whose life, as case studies and examples of the latter.

The most popularly cited mechanisms that enhance inclusion and retention amongst minority students, as per discussion, are mentorship programmes and support networks in existence (Strayhorn, 2019; O'Keeffe, 2016). These interrelational supports provide useful advice, lobbying, and social capital that is often not so readily available in formal venues in a classroom setting. Nevertheless, the issue with mentorship effectiveness has varied according to the level of training for mentors, the cultural match and institutional recognition of the labour of mentoring. Mentorship may otherwise get stuck in becoming an individualised way to solve structural inequity, taking note of the lack of support on a systematic level.

Anti-discrimination policies and formal statements of diversity tend to be used as proof of institutional commitment (Kezar & Holcombe, 2018; UNESCO, 2021). However, there is emergent research being conducted that indicates that symbolic policies may provide an illusion of inclusion without addressing some of the issues of microaggressions and subtle exclusionary norms that occur day-to-day. The fact that the given policy-practice gap leads one to the necessity to investigate the concept of inclusion not at the structural level of policymaking, but in relation to experimental outcomes such as psychological safety.

3.2 Psychological Safety in Academic Settings

Psychological safety, first developed in the world of organisations and their team research, has been increasingly drawn into the education arena. It is defined as the assumption of the ability to take interpersonal risk-taking without the fear of negative social consequences. In relation to

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classrooms, such risk-taking is a process that includes asking questions, deviating from understanding, comprehending and expressing culturally shaped viewpoints.

Empirical research has demonstrated that psychological safety facilitates collaborative learning, novelty and academic perseverance. In line with Edmondson (2018), when students feel safe, they are more willing to participate in discussions and think in more complex, higher-level orders (Huerta et al., 2024). On the other hand, self-censorship and withdrawal could be due to fear of embarrassment, fear of stereotyping, etc. Importantly, psychological safety is situation-specific and relationally developed as opposed to being intrapersonal.

For culturally diverse students, a sense of psychological safety is related to identity validation. Even formally inclusive institutions are exposed to safety wearing off because of stereotype threat, linguistic insecurity or cultural misunderstanding. Hence, psychological safety is not an impartial condition in the classroom that is mediated by the relations of power, cultural hierarchies and communication rules. While a substantial portion of the literature supports the benefit of psychological safety, few research works explore the extent to which it is affected by structures such as institutions, reflecting on how psychological safety is concretely created or hindered, or how it is made effective or frustrated.

3.3 Linking Inclusivity and Psychological Safety

Although both culturally inclusive practices and psychological safety have been studied separately, the integration of the practices has remained theoretically underdeveloped. Existing research tends to make assumptions about a positive relationship between inclusion and belonging, but the ways in which institutional practice relates to student experience need further articulation.

Inclusive leadership research proposes that behaviours characterised by openness, fairness and engaging with diversity create climates of trust. In educational settings, members of a faculty serve as frontline representatives of the institution's values. Students' interpretations of safety are informed by their responsiveness to an expression of their culture, their way of feedback, and

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how they create dialogue. Thus, one possibility is that the experience of relational inclusion may be a mediating mechanism between structural inclusion and psychological safety.

At the same time, the representation of the curriculum gets into the play of epistemic legitimacy, indicating whose knowledge matters in the academic discourse. When students from diverse cultures face psychological safety threats in terms of cultural intellectual erasure, even in sensitive interpersonal climates, psychological safety can be compromised. This means that psychological safety functions at interpersonal and epistemological levels [Sue et al., 2019; Strayhorn, 2019].

The literature therefore leads to a multidimensional model of the development of psychological safety based on the interaction of the structural commitments and pedagogical design, and the behaviour of the relations. However, empirical research has very rarely disaggregated these dimensions to assess their relative predictive strength. By quantitatively examining distinct inclusive practices and their association with psychological safety, the present study fills this gap and adds to a more nuanced conceptual understanding of inclusion as an experiential outcome rather than a policy declaration.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was used to assess the perceptions of culturally inclusive practices and psychological safety in accordance with well-established research methods in the area of educational climate research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach enabled the measurement of relationships between variables in a large number of students without necessarily compromising comparability among students.

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4.2 Sample

Participants were culturally diverse students attending institutions of higher education, a population that is often studied in theory on the inclusion and belonging theme (Strayhorn, 2019; Banks, 2016). The cultural diversity was operationalised in terms of nationality, ethnicity, or language background or minority status within the institution. Stratified sampling ensured representation across academic disciplines and year levels in order to attempt to reduce bias with programme-specific experiences.

4.3 Instrumentation

The items given to complete in this survey were Likert-scale-based measures of perceived inclusivity and psychological safety. The items that measured inclusivity were regarding the measure of the presence in the curriculum, sensitivity of faculty to culture, acceptance of peers and access to support through mentorship. The psychological safety items had included items measuring comfort in talking in class, same sex, faculty and peer perceived respect, and fear of judgment. The instrument made it possible for a systematic comparison of institutional practices and psychological outcomes.

4.4 Data Analysis

SPSS was employed to perform the descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression, analytical strategies often used in educational research in social sciences (Field, 2018). Reliability of the scales was assessed with the aid of Cronbach's alpha in order to ensure internal consistency. For this study, statistical analysis identified the strength and predictive power of inclusive practices on psychological safety.

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5. Results

5.1 Descriptive Findings

Students had moderate perceptions of institutional inclusivity overall, which is in line with previous higher education inclusion surveys (De Leersnyder et al. 2022). However, psychological safety differed among groups. International students and linguistic minorities had somewhat lower levels of safety, especially in terms of speaking in class and expressing their opinions. Domestic minority students demonstrated higher levels of safety with the availability of mentorship programmes, indicating that there were relational effects.

5.2 Correlation Analysis

The perceived culturally inclusive practices were found to be strongly positively related to psychological safety, as would be expected in empowering earlier empirical data pertaining to the topics of inclusive climate and engagement (Huerta et al., 2024; Woods et al., 2024). Students who felt that their faculty respected them and that the materials for the course were inclusive and peer-open were consistently more likely to report an ability to participate and self-express with confidence.

5.3 Regression Analysis

Regression analysis showed that faculty cultural competence was the best predictor of psychological safety, meaning that the day-to-day interaction is what is making the biggest difference in the relationship with student confidence. An inclusive curriculum also significantly predicted safety since representation proved to be validative of intellectual belonging and lessened alienation. Mentorship access was a "moderate predictor of safety as they offered interpersonal reassurance and guidance, especially for students unfamiliar with institutional culture" (p. 49). Institutional policies alone had less predictive value if not visibly enacted, and

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thus indicate that symbolic commitment is insufficient if it is not implemented in behavioural terms.

6. Discussion

The results of this research contribute to the current body of literature by empirically demonstrating that culturally inclusive practices serve as more than just a symbolic manifestation of diversity commitment and can serve as active determinants of psychological safety. While past research has shown that through inclusion, belonging improves (De Leersnyder et al., 2022), the current researcher's contribution is to the discussion owing to the reference to defining the distinction between structural (policies and representation) and relational inclusion (daily interpersonal behaviours). The results show that the strongest predictive factor of psychological safety is relational inclusion, especially faculty cultural competence. This implies that it is a living interaction creating psychological safety and not institutional rhetoric.

Critically, the hegemony of faculty behaviour as a predictor points to micro-level mechanisms of the interpretation of institutional climate by students. The policies can indicate the macro level of inclusivity, but the safety will be judged by the students through the interactions in the classroom, the manner of feedback and the attitude towards cultural expression. This is in line with the inclusive theory of leadership, Woods et al. (2024), suggested that the leadership behaviours realise diversity promises. Institutional diversity statements will decrease to be performative and not transformative in the presence or absence of behavioural alignment.

The considerable role that an inclusive curriculum plays further suggests a central role for epistemic representation in psychological safety. Whenever the students complete monocultural or Eurocentric curricula, they may encounter implicit hierarchies of knowledge that marginalise their considered identities. On the other hand, representation that is diverse in nature, in the readings, case studies and examples sends out a message of intellectual legitimacy. This finding is in line with the culturally responsive pedagogy, which sees the recognition of culture as the basis for equitable engagement. However, the findings also suggested that there are limits to the

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effect of curriculum reform alone; there should be complementary facilitation practices that enable the curriculum reform efforts to have a powerful impact on student achievement.

Mentorship was a moderate yet significant predictor, which noted the value of anchoring relationships in different, unfamiliar academic contexts. For international and minority students, mentorship is an academic guide with socio-emotional comfort. More importantly, it suggests that psychological safety is rather spread out; students who are part of the supportive network can have a protective experience even in the imperfect institutional climate. Thus, safety operates as both a person's individual perception and as a social reinforcement for a condition.

Notably, with the lower predictive power of the institutional policy, it is possible that symbolic inclusion does not necessarily end in experiential safety. This raises critical questions as to the implementation gap between diversity policy and student reality. Initiatives by institutions to provide policy documentation may not be invested in cultural change processes to the same extent. The findings therefore challenge the leadership of the built environment higher education leaders to reconceptualise inclusion as an ongoing behavioural practice and not a compliance requirement.

7. Implications for Policy and Practice

7.1 Institutional Recommendations

From the policy perspective, the results imply that institutions will need to focus more on behavioural and pedagogical transformation than on declarative commitments to diversity (Kezar & Holcombe, 2018; UNESCO, 2021). A mandatory cultural competence training of the faculty must change from awareness programs into a prolonged, dedicated professional growth, including reflective practice, awareness of bias and inclusive facilitation skills. Such training needs to be iterative in nature and measured for the impact on behaviour and not on completion of attendance.

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Curriculum audits need to go beyond the descriptive representation-metrics on the surface of reading and to critically examine the epistemological framing. Institutions ought to ask questions regarding the voices of those whose knowledge is favoured, voices of whom may not be heard, as well as how they might be disadvantageous to some cultural forms of communication. Embedding a culturally diverse scholarship into core curricular content as opposed to modules ensures that the inclusion is mainstreamed, as opposed to marginalised.

Mentorship programmes require hardening into institutional systems and not to be placed in areas of voluntary or peripheral. Formalised mentorship frameworks with accountability measures can support culturally diverse students to access equality. Furthermore, transparent and psychologically safe reporting mechanisms against discrimination or microaggressions need to be put in place. Such mechanisms should focus on emphasising restorative practices over punitive responses only, and focusing on systemic learning instead.

7.2 Educational Practice

At the classroom level, tools to which educators can resort are the dialogic pedagogies that can decentralise and promote a multiplicity of epistemic perspectives (Ladson-Billings, 2017). Rather than making knowledge singular and fixed, instructors can frame learning as co-constructed, by which hierarchical pressure can be reduced that will inhibit participation. Culturally diverse examples and explicit norm-setting in terms of respectful discussion in the workplace, along with inclusive language practices, can have a combined effect in strengthening psychological safety.

Critically, it is important to understand that silence does not mean disengagement as an educator. In some cultural contexts, reflective listening or deference may be the normative communication style. Therefore, inclusive practice calls for a complex interpretation of participation over the uniform expectations of behaviour. Assessment methods should also cater for a variety of preferred methods of communication, such as written reflection, group dialogue, or multimedia communication.

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8. Limitations

While there are lessons to be learnt from the research provided, it comes with some limitations that allow for critical reflection in light of methodological critique in educational research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The cross-sectional design rules out causal inference, so no firm conclusions can be reached on the temporal directionality between inclusivity and psychological safety. Longitudinal designs would be better able to capture the change in safety perceptions over time in response to institutional interventions.

Self-reported measures are open to social desirability bias or perceptual distortion. Students' understandings of inclusivity can be shaped by their previous experiences outside of the institution, experiences that were beyond the scope of this study. Furthermore, operationalising cultural diversity using demographic markers may make it even more difficult to capture the complexity of the intersection of identities (e.g. socioeconomic status, gender identity, or migration history). The intersectional approaches should be applicable to future research in order to represent these stratified experiences.

Finally, the study's quantitative design, although it allows for statistical generalisation, does not capture the depth of the lived experience. Qualitative or mixed methods may yield greater insight into the student narrating the themes of safety and exclusion, thereby improving on interpretive validity.

9. Conclusion

This research adds to the growing body of literature beyond the UN Decade on ESD that shows that being included in higher education has to be recognised as a phenomenon of sameness in experience and relationality rather than one of mere demographic outcomes and policy tendency. The presence of significant faculty cultural competence, inclusive curriculum design, and access to mentorship clearly predict psychologically safe students, as expressed by students through this

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study developmental study continues to provide conceptual clarity about how institutional practices are translated to student perceptions. The results may be integrated in the modern discussions of equality in higher education systems in the globalised world and lead to the fact that successful inclusion of sustainability involves structural adherence, epistemological reorganisation and continuous interpersonal implementation. Psychological safety should therefore become ingrained as a quantifiable measure of the success of institutional diversity and inclusion efforts.

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