Article

Inclusion in Education: Ensuring Educational Equity in Relation to Gender, Class, Race and Ethnicity

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Abstract

This paper attempts to articulate the relevance of the principle of inclusion in education in relation to gender, social class, race and ethnicity. It begins with a discussion on the meaning of inclusion vis-à-vis the notion of exclusion. This is important because inclusion can best be explained through its opposite, inasmuch as we can only make sense of inclusion in education if we have understood and analyzed the way in which the minority students have been excluded in schools. The paper then proceeds with a discussion on the relevance of the notion of inclusion in education by highlighting the extent and the way in which gender, social class, race and ethnicity influence educational achievement. Finally, given that a number of students of gender, social class, race and ethnicity have been shut out from the social, economic, political and cultural systems which are viewed as institutional platforms necessary for them to be integrated into their communities, the paper argues that schools must ensure inclusion and equality of opportunity for pupil outcomes along the lines of gender, social class, race and ethnicity.

Keywords   Inclusion in education, educational equity, gender gap

Introduction

Systematic inequality of opportunity along the lines of gender, social class, race and ethnicity has been one of the perennial problems in the history and development of education. In fact, it has continued to attract major attention from educators and social scientists over the years. Most of the time, this inequality of opportunity comes in the form of a limited access to educational resources, such as quality curriculum and skilled teachers. As late as the 1960s in the United States, for example, most minority students had to experience education through segregated schools (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Lemay, 2000). What is striking is that the low levels of achievement on the part of the minority students were viewed as a function of genes, culture, or lack of effort and will than
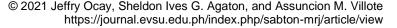
it was a function of their unequal access to educational resources. Thus, the naïve yet dominant view that it is the fault of the students if they do not achieve in school continues to prevail in our educational landscape today. It is precisely in the context of this intellectual naiveté that this paper attempts to articulate the relevance of the principle of inclusion in education in relation to gender, social class, race and ethnicity. It begins with a discussion on the meaning of inclusion vis-à-vis the notion of exclusion. This is important because inclusion can best be explained through its opposite, inasmuch as we can only make sense of inclusion in education if we have understood and analyzed the way in which the minority students have been excluded in schools. The paper then proceeds with a discussion on the relevance of the notion of inclusion in education by highlighting the extent and the way in which gender, social class, race and ethnicity influence educational achievement. Finally, given that a number of students of gender, social class, race and ethnicity have been shut out from the social, economic, political and cultural systems which are viewed as institutional platforms necessary for them to be integrated into their communities, the paper argues that schools must ensure inclusion and equality of opportunity for pupil outcomes along the lines of gender, social class, race and ethnicity.

What is inclusion and why does it matter?

It is important to note that understanding the concept of inclusion is the first step toward creating inclusive schools that cater to the needs of the minority students. Inclusion is loosely defined as the act of making sure that all members of society or groups feel valued, their differences recognized and respected, and their basic needs are met to ensure that they can live in dignity and have a sense of belongingness (Robo, 2014). The notion of inclusion is, therefore, seen to be crucial to our multicultural and highly globalized society as it fosters civic participation and capacity building, which may result in the empowerment of the people, especially the less privileged and marginalized. It can also be seen as one of the best ways to ensure intercultural relations within multi-ethnic societies and across borders, thus ensuring respect for cultural diversity and multiculturalism. More importantly, when socially included, people can take up positive roles in society and therefore make a valued contribution to their communities because they feel a high level of self-esteem. As Axel Honneth (1995) argued, self-esteem brings in us a feeling of being unique and special, which is instrumental to the development of identity. Thus, inclusion is directly linked not only to the promotion of human rights and social justice but also to the development of identity and self-esteem.

But why inclusion? The need for inclusion springs from the social condition wherein individuals are shut out from the social, economic, political and cultural systems which are viewed as institutional platforms necessary for individuals to be integrated into their communities (Cappo, 2002). This shows that inclusion is necessary because there is some degree of social injustice that people experienced, or to speak very simply, some people have been deprived of and excluded from the affairs of the society. This is all the more interesting when we think of how this practice directly impacts on the lives of the Syrian refugees in Germany lately. As is well-known, the German government has welcomed over a million asylum-seekers from Syria (and other countries in Asia and North Africa) during the past few years. However, reports show that many German people have deliberately taken actions, for example, in the form of protest, that prevent the asylum-seekers from integrating themselves into the larger German society (Genova, 2016; Chazan, 2017).

Another concrete example of social exclusion in the contemporary society is the case of the indigenous peoples in many parts of the world. It is worthwhile to mention that some of the wider and profound social impacts that we can witness in the history and development of the European colonial expansion and imperialism are the displacement and exclusion of the indigenous peoples. From the time of colonization to the contemporary form of economic globalization, the indigenous peoples around the world have been dispossessed of their lands, stripped off their identities, and deprived of their natural wealth. In fact, P. Calvert and S. Calvert (2001) argued that the indigenous peoples are amongst the most socially excluded peoples in the world today. In Canada, for example, Wynne and Currie (2011) claimed that the Aboriginal peoples who are living in large metropolitan areas have experienced a high level of racial discrimination. They also claimed that the Canadian society, as evidenced by the history of colonialism and health care policies, has deliberately excluded the Aboriginal peoples from the affairs of the State. We may also think of the Penan people in Malaysia and the Manobo people in the Philippines. Both the Penan in the Malaysian part of Borneo and the Manobo indigenous peoples in southern Philippines have been severely disenfranchised through indiscriminate logging and mining activities (Ocay, 2015). They also have suffered massive land grabbing, militarization, and other forms of human rights violations.

Given the above, it is therefore not difficult for us to see how social exclusion has brought about the marginalization of many members of society, especially the minority and the less privileged groups. On a personal level, social exclusion brings in the feeling of being left behind and isolated and a low level of self-esteem. If left to rule unchecked, social exclusion will result in more social pathologies and even social disintegration. To prevent this from happening, there is a need for society to build a culture of inclusion wherein individual differences are recognized and valued, mutual relationships between and among races are sustained, and the basic rights of all individuals are acknowledged. And one of the best ways to do this is to promote inclusive education. Following Robo (2014), we argue that the school has an important role in bringing about an inclusive society, which will eventually lead to a more just and democratic society. Indeed, social inclusion through education is one of the best, if not the only, ways to promote and maintain social cohesion.

Inclusion and equal opportunity in education

In the previous section, we have briefly sketched the nature and meaning of the principle of inclusion and its importance to society. In this section, we will present the relevance of the principle of inclusion in education through an engagement with the way in which schools can ensure inclusion and equality of opportunity for pupil outcomes drawn along the lines of gender, social class, race and ethnicity. We will also present here the definition of gender, social class, race and ethnicity as well as relevant cases of achievement gaps in terms of these categories from the vantage point of the recent developments in British educational system. We particularly chose to highlight the relevance of the British educational system in this paper because of its long history of enrolling international and culturally diverse student population.

Gender gap and educational achievement

Gender is best understood if it is defined in relation to sex because gender is simply the social elaboration of sex. When we say sex, we are referring to the biological characteristics that

categorize someone as either male or female. Gender, on the other hand, refers to the socially constructed ideas and practices that determine what it is to be male or female (Newman, 2016). Thus, a person's sex is a fixed biological given, while gender is something that a person is not born with, but something that he or she does or performs (Butler, 1990). This explains why gender is viewed as the social elaboration of sex as gender builds on sex in the sense that it is a cultural value ascribed to someone's biological sex. For this reason, if someone argues that a man should be 'macho' and must not be effeminate, we are attributing gender to a biological male. The same holds true of a woman if we say she should behave in such a way that her actions conform to the characteristics attributed to a woman, such as being refined, quiet and sweet.

Understanding gender is important because the unfair treatment of women across the world is done on the basis of their gender. For example, when women are denied access to quality education, they are denied such fundamental right not because of their biological sex but of those socially constructed ideas and values ascribed to them. This is precisely because biological differences cannot explain why men have greater access to power or why women have low status in society than men. What this suggests is that gender discrimination is a human creation and therefore can be eliminated. Thus, when women are denied access to power or quality education, it is not proper to say that it is natural and a fact of their biological makeup; rather, the patriarchal society says so.

The discrimination of women in education, however, may not be so pronounced in highly developed societies, such as the United Kingdom. Recent studies show that the girl pupils in the UK have greater access to quality education. They are even outperforming the boy pupils. Several studies have shown that in the UK in recent years, there has been a growing gap in achievement between boys and girls. For example, Gillborn and Mirza's (2000) study showed that in 1989, 29.8 percent of boys aged 15 years old and above in all schools in England attained five or higher-grade General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) passes compared to 35.8 percent of girls of the same age. This is equivalent to a gap of 6 percentage points. By 1999, exactly 10 years later, the gap had increased to more than 10 percent, with 42.8 percent of boys compared to 53.4 percent of girls. This clearly showed that indeed boys are lagging behind girls in terms of educational achievement.

The report of the National Curriculum Assessment at Key Stage 2 in England (2016) has corroborated these findings. According to this report, in 2015, 57 percent of girls in the UK have attained the expected standard in all of reading, writing and mathematics, outperforming the boys with only 50 percent. The report also showed that in terms of individual subjects, girls outperformed the boys at the expected standard, with girls attaining 70 percent compared to 60 percent for boys in reading, 70 percent compared to 67 percent in grammar, punctuation, and spelling, and 81 percent compared to 68 percent in writing respectively. This is compounded by Mctague's (2014) claim that boys are lagging behind girls by the time they reached 5 years old, with 40 percent of the boys unable to even write their own names. These reports are indeed alarming. In fact, Robinson (2009) opined that the fact that boys are now the true victims of discrimination constitutes the real gender gap in education in recent years, at least in the UK.

In explaining this alarming phenomenon, scholars and researchers alike have pointed to a variety of factors, including new policies in education and new approaches in the assessment of educational outcomes. Let us present two of the famous factors that influence educational achievement in relation to gender, namely, the feminization of schooling and essential differences between boys and girls.

Feminization of schooling happens when there are a number of female teachers than male teachers, and when, as a consequence, the nature of the curriculum and its delivery, the construction of the workforce and its general structure and organization, and teacher expectations tend to favor girls (Skelton, 2002; Eurydice, 2010). In the UK since the introduction of state education in 1870, there has been a feminization of schools, which resulted in what many scholars perceived today as 'masculinity crisis' in education (Haywood, Popoviciu, & Ghaill, 2005). As Tony Sewell (as cited in Smith, 2006) argued, schools in the UK have failed boys because lessons have become feminized. Sewell further argued that boys fall behind in exams and the job market because teachers do not nurture male traits such as competitiveness and leadership. Although Sewell pushed for the recruitment of more male teachers in primary schools, he did not, however, endorse the idea of boys outperforming girls. What Sewell suggests instead is that schools need to balance the gender gap in educational achievement. As he writes, 'In the 1970s we changed the story of girls. Our attitude was that boys can get on with it. It's a question of balance, and we believe it has gone too far the other way' (as cited in Smith, 2006). Skelton's (2002) study corroborates this claim when she said that the UK's move to recruit more male teachers in primary schools recently is intended primarily to tackle boys' underachievement in schools as a result of the feminization of schools.

The essential differences between boys and girls also significantly influence educational achievement. According to the report of the DfES (2007) in the UK, boys and girls have different learning styles and, thus, they respond differently to materials and task assigned to them. In fact, as the report showed, girls are more likely to have control of their learning than boys. The report also showed that in terms of the level of reading comprehension, boys are significantly affected by the content of what they read, while girls' performance showed little influence only. In terms of motivation, it is found out that girls showed more interest in reading, while boys are more interested in Math. Moreover, the report revealed that boys are more likely to be influenced by their male peer group, which seems to be the reason why boys tend to devalue schoolwork.

Social class and educational achievement

Social class is another important factor that influences educational achievement. For G. Zgourides and C. Zgourides (2000), 'social class refers to a group of people with similar level of wealth, influence and status' (p. 90), which is usually categorized into four types, namely: the lower class, the working class, the middle class, and the upper or rich class. The lower class is characterized by poverty, unemployment and homelessness with only a few of the people that belong in this class finished high school. The working class is composed of minimally educated people and who are engaged in manual labor. The middle class is composed of white-collar workers, which is sometimes referred to as the 'sandwich' class. Lastly, the upper class is composed of exceptionally rich people. As expected, the upper class 'exercise a great deal of influence and power both nationally and globally' (G. Zgourides & C. Zgourides, 2000, p. 92).

In relation to education, the DfES (2007) reported that social class achievement gap is three times wider than gender achievement gap. As a matter of fact, some minority students in England achieved significantly below the national average and whose underachievement is much greater than the gap between boys and girls. This is because social class background directly impacts the students' level of educational achievement. In most cases, the higher the child's status in life, the greater is his or her achievement on average. As Gillborn and Mirza (2000) wrote, 'in 1997

children from the most advantaged background…were more than three times as likely to attain five or more higher GCSEs than their peers at the other end of the spectrum (in the 'unskilled manual' group)' (p. 18). It is therefore inevitable that those students who lack the material resources that schooling demands will normally achieve poorly and even experience failure in education. As Bernstein (1971) argued, schools were mostly middle-class institutions that cater to the needs of middle-class children.

Children of socially disadvantaged class in the UK also suffered from stereotypes that significantly affect their educational achievement. For example, working-class students are labeled as being troublesome, rubbish, crap, and shit (Reay, 2004). For this reason, they have no choice but to move to inner city schools with relatively low-quality historical results coupled with bigger class size. Moreover, working-class parents were often blamed for their children's underachievement because they are viewed as unsupportive and indifferent to their children's education. There is also this widely held view that working-class children are more fit for vocational education than tertiary education; thus, we see working-class students sought job right after graduating high school (Webb, Bathmaker, Gale, Hodge, Parker, & Rawolle, 2017). These are indeed some of the reasons for the prevalence of educational underachievement among working-class students and the way in which social class influences educational achievement.

Race/Ethnicity and educational achievement

Race and ethnicity are complex terms that can be used interchangeably. However, ethnicity can be loosely differentiated from race. When we say ethnicity, we are referring to that sense of cultural and historical identity based on membership in a distinctive cultural group, such as Irish or Latino (Bhavnani, Mirza, & Meetoo, 2006). Thus, ethnicity denotes groups that share common ancestry, language, and culture. According to Cornell and Hartmann (2007), ethnicity is often based on custom, beliefs, and religions. Race, on the other hand, is a socially constructed concept which 'refers to the differential concentrations of gene frequencies for certain traits that…are confined to physical manifestation such as skin color, hair texture, and facial features' (Lemay, 2000, p. 7). Race, therefore, is associated with the biological makeup of a particular cultural group and is usually the subject of stereotyping; thus, we normally speak of racial discrimination.

Recent studies in education showed that racial inequality remains the major impediment to educational achievement. In fact, Lewis and Diamond (2015) argued that racism is the major cause of academic underperformance on the part of the minority students. This is due to several important reasons. For one, it is interesting to note that many schools today even in highly developed countries, such as the UK and the US, are not totally committed to equality and diversity. For example, some white teachers in the US do not consciously assess the students whether or not they are good, but they instantly judge them on the basis of their race (Hyland, 2005). Students of color were also usually perceived as older and likely to be intentionally defiant, while white students were perceived as playful and appropriately goofy. Moreover, white students are expected to be in the honor class, while students of color were reminded of the crazy things that they did (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Worse still, Richardson's (2000) study found out that 'members of the white racist in Britain have the belief that to be British is to be white' (p. 24).

Now, it must be noted that this process of categorizing is not neutral, although it is done at the subconscious level. It carries with it all types of categorizing, including cultural beliefs, that influence the way one thinks whether or not the student is good or is bound to college or he or she is more threatening or not. Indeed, racism tremendously affects the performance of the minority

students. In some cases, this form of discrimination, albeit done unconsciously, resulted in self-loathing and inferiority complex.

Inclusion and the possibility of equal opportunity in education

As mentioned in the early part of this paper, equality of opportunity in education is absolutely reasonable and that it can best be attained through an inclusive education. According to Suleymanov (2015), inclusive education is a process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to include all children in the learning process and at the same time celebrate differences and respond to individual needs. Thus, education needs to accommodate everyone regardless of gender, social class, race and ethnicity, as well as provide them with the necessary opportunities and ensure that they are accessible to all students (Suleymanov, 2015). In this way, schools become a place where all children can participate freely because no one is excluded or left behind. A 'one size fits all' approach to learning, therefore, has to be abandoned once and for all as it only put a strain on education and barred students from achieving (Knowles, 2011). Now, how can schools ensure this?

According to Phoenix (2004), one way of addressing gender achievement gap through the principle of inclusion is to tackle squarely the issue of stereotypical constructions of masculinity and femininity. This means schools need to address cultural gender norms that tend to promote discrimination. For example, in the case of the feminization of schooling in the UK, schools need to come up with clear-cut policies that value diversity, one that acknowledges the fact that boys and girls have different learning styles and abilities. For this reason, as Phoenix (2004; Cutillas, 2021) argues, teachers must be critically conscious of their role in promoting equality of opportunity in terms of gender. Thus, according to Phoenix, it is about time that teachers have to do away with their preconceptions that, for example, boys are lazy and girls are industrious. Hence, teachers must have expectations of high achievement for both boys and girls. In relative parlance, Osler (2004) says that another way of addressing gender achievement gaps is for schools to provide support and training for teachers in terms of gender so that they have the skills to identify learners of both genders who are experiencing difficulties in schools. Thus, if teachers provide lessons that allow students to reflect on those norms that stereotyped gender roles, then gender discrimination in schools would be reduced to the minimum, if not eradicated completely.

In terms of social class, Gaynor (2012) claims that it is imperative that children from all socio-economic background must be afforded entitlement to effective learning opportunities. As Gaynor (2012) writes, the school should be viewed 'as a provider of opportunities for students, especially for those whose lives to that point have been poorly endowed with such opportunities' (p. 32). This suggests that teachers must provide every student the opportunity to experience success and achievement. This is primarily because, as already mentioned, there is a strong parallelism between social class and educational achievement. In relation to this, Skelton and Francis (2003) recommend that education should not be viewed as a business venture. This is because when education prioritizes profit, tendency is that the quality of education is diminished because students are now considered as 'clients' and parents 'consumers' (Skelton & Francis, 2003; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014). Thus, if we can reverse this counterproductive trend in education, then much of the education funds will be used to finance high-quality curriculum and highly qualified teachers. We believe that this is one of the effective ways of ensuring that the less
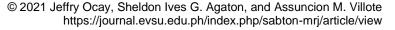
privileged and economically disadvantaged students are integrated into the school and thereby allowing them to have greater access to educational opportunities.

Lastly, in terms of race and ethnicity, Gaynor (2012; Agaton, 2015) argues that all stakeholders in education must take a clear stand on racism. Thus, schools should eliminate discrimination and foster good relations between and among students of color. One way of doing this, according to Gaynor, is to radically alter the norms and values of the schools from being discriminating and exclusive to being accommodating and inclusive. For sure, for inclusive education to be attained, some structural transformations are needed in order to remove barriers that tend to discriminate students of color. Of course, this is easier said than done as existing and predominant cultures that tend to discriminate are difficult to eliminate. This is where policy and education intersect. For example, in the UK, because discrimination of any form, but most particularly racial discrimination, is considered unlawful and therefore is punishable, then policy implementers should see to it that everybody applies and follows the law (Machin & Vignoles, 2006; Agaton, 2017). Strong inspirational leadership is also another important way to promote inclusion in education in terms of race. According to Parker and Villalpando (2007), strong inspirational leadership is crucial to the promotion of social justice and racial equity. Indeed, if only education leaders painstakingly promote anti-racist practices in schools, then cultural achievement gap in education would have been addressed meaningfully.

Conclusion

The paper argues that the principle of inclusion is crucial to our multicultural and highly globalized society as it fosters civic participation and capacity building, which may result in the empowerment of the people, especially the less privileged and marginalized. The paper also argued that there is a need for social inclusion because there is some degree of social injustice that people experienced, that is, some people have been deprived of and excluded from the affairs of the society, particularly in education.
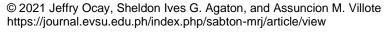
The discussion on the meaning of gender, social class, race and ethnicity vis-à-vis the relevant cases of achievement gaps in terms of these categories clearly showed that indeed children's gender, class standing, and cultural background do really make a difference in the way they experience school. In fact, it is found out that these social categories have greatly influenced the students' educational achievement. As is seen, boy pupils in the UK nowadays have been lagging behind girls in almost all subjects. Minority students have also experienced discrimination, while students who are economically challenged showed poor performance in school. Given that a number of students of gender, social class, and race and ethnicity have been shut out from the social, economic, political and cultural systems which are viewed as institutional platforms necessary for them to be integrated into their communities, this paper subscribes to the idea of universal equality in education. Thus, schools must ensure inclusion and equality of opportunity for pupil outcomes along the lines of gender, social class, race and ethnicity.
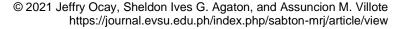
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