Research Article

Strategies for Creating Inclusive Schools

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This manuscript explores the critical need for creating inclusive educational environments amidst the shifting demographics of the U.S. student population. By 2026, students of color are projected to comprise over half of the school population, presenting a stark contrast to the demographic composition of teachers and principals. This disparity underscores the necessity for schools to be responsive to the educational, cultural, and social needs of an increasingly diverse student body. The manuscript introduces a School Inclusion Model (SIM) developed and implemented to address these challenges. The SIM focuses on leadership, organizational justice, and school outcomes as core elements for fostering inclusivity. Through a multi-phased project involving planning, implementation, and evaluation in a district experiencing significant demographic shifts, the SIM demonstrated positive outcomes in changing teacher and leader perceptions towards inclusivity, enhancing parent engagement, and improving school climate. The findings underscore the importance of intentional, coordinated efforts in cultivating inclusive school environments where students of all backgrounds feel a sense of belonging and equity.

Student Population Challenges

By 2026, students of color will make up 54% of the U.S. school population. It is not clear if the projections for teacher and principal demographics will reflect the similar matching trends. Major shifts in student populations are a forerunner of what is to come for public schools (Cilluffo & Cohn, 2019; Maxwell, 2014). This growth indicates an increase of Latinx population and Asian-Americans (Cilluffo & Cohn, 2019). In the fall of 2019, for the first time, the overall number of Asian, Latinx, and African-American students exceeded the number of White students (Maxwell, 2014). As students of color enter the school door, there is a feeling that teachers and leaders are not equipped to create an inclusive context and possibly not make these students feel they belong.

By the time, students of color come to school; many of them have experienced poverty, domestic abuse and a fear of food insecurity (Cicchetti & Valentino, 2006; Dettlaff, Earner, & Phillips, 2009; Drake & Pandey, 1996). These students face incredible odds as they begin their educational experience. Because of language barriers, students have limited opportunities to finish high school or attend post-secondary schooling. (Berliner, 2009). As students begin their education, schools will bear much of the responsibility in responding to the educational, cultural, and social needs of these students (Holme, Diem & Welton, 2013). The increase of demographically students in our schools, requires us to reflect on how we are serving these students' needs and making them feel they belong in our schools. This article provides iinformation about a School Inclusion model that was implemented to create inclusive schools.

The School Inclusion Model

This School Inclusion Model forcuses on inclusiveness relevant to school contexts. (Ferdman & Deane, 2014). The model borrows from multiple constructs related to cultivating inclusive schools (Roberson 2006; Sabharwal, 2014; Shore, Randel, Chung, Dean, Ehrhart, & Singh, 2011; Thomas & Plaut, 2008). It focuses on underrepresented groups to insure these students feel a reciprocal and generative connection with their teachers and leaders. Thus, schools must be responsive to the needs of all students.

The School Inclusion Model centers on three core elements: leadership, organizational justice, and school outcomes. For this model, leadership was identified as essential in creating inclusive contexts. School administrators are expected to have the capacity to instill a culture of inclusion, and in turn demonstrate a level of adaptability, flexibility, and a value for diversity (Madsen & Mabokela, 2005; Thomas, 2008). Thus, a leader's exposure to others who are different them must build relationships with linguistally and culturally diverse students and parents.

Organizational justice, perceptions of fairness and equity is another indicator for the School Inclusion Model (Torres, Madsen, Luo, Yuong, Luévanos, 2018). Inclusive schools focus on "fairness" in responding to students' needs. In creating inclusive schools there needs to be a strong sense of

justice. Consequently, when schools review their discipline rates, special education placements, and graduation rates they are aware of their biases and prejudices. Leaders and teachers need to identify and confront disparities among students to insure there are equitable opportunities.

School outcomes were embedded in the School Inclusion Model to insure there is a relationship between academic performance and the treatment of students. Consequently, if we do not make students feel they belong, it will impact students' performance. This School Inclusion Model tackled issues of belonging, access, choice, voice, equity, and fairness. This article will provide an overview of how the school inlusion model was implemented along with specific strategies which were used in schools.

School Inclusion Implementation and Evaluation

The School Inclusion Project was a process to provide schools with strategies to create inclusive schools. These efforts included pointed professional development opportunities with teachers and school leadership and instilling a sense of belonging for parents and students. The model also included a consistent time and place where parents, students, teachers, and leaders would implement strategies for parent engagement and college and career readiness. Professional development and coaching techniques were provided for leaders to reflect on their interactions with students, their ability to create a responsive environment in responding to students' of color needs and engage families to the schools.

This project involved three main phases: planning, implementation, and evaluation. Interventions were based on survey data, district consultations, and alignment with ESSA components. School data related to equity and school outcomes was shared with the district so they would have the opportunity for input. Implementation included yearly professional development, based on school data, focused on parent engagement, college and career readiness and culturally competent strategies. As a way to insure sustainability, schools were required to include school inclusion goals into their school improvement plans.

We selected a district which had experienced a major shift in their student demographics. There were 16 schools in this district. We worked with the district leadership to determine which eight schools would be in the treatment group and the others in the non-treatment schools. There were five elementary schools, two middle schools and one high school in our experimental group. At the end of the project, the School Inclusion Model was evaluated using both a summative and formative evaluation. For the summative evaluation a survey (SIS) was given to teachers, parents and leaders each year of the project. Along with the formative, we also conducted qualitative interviews and observations at each school. Qualitative interviews were based on School Inclusion Model and were conducted with teachers, leaders, parents and students.

This model focused on leaders who may have limited understanding about cultural and linguistic differences in working with their demographically diverse school participants. This model worked with leaders to identify inequities in their schools, then established a process to monitor to insure inequites were addressed (Madsen & Mabokela, 2005). Professional development along with coaching techniques required leaders to reflect on their interactions with students and parents. Leaders were supported in how they could be more responsive in working with students of color and engaging families.

The School Inclusion Project indicated positive outcomes that the project was effective in changing both teachers' and leaders' perceptions about their ability to create inclusive schools. A total of 665 teachers provided valid responses to the teacher survey (44.8% in treatment schools and 55.2% in non-treatment schools). Statistical examination using Hierarchical Linear Modeling showed that treatment school teachers perceived greater workplace satisfaction and more positive relationships among groups in 2018 compared to the baseline year (i.e., 2017) while teachers in non-treatment schools did not report any changes in those areas. In addition, teachers in treatment schools perceived that their schools improved in providing inclusive schools in both 2018 and 2020 compared to the baseline while teachers did not perceive any changes in non-treatment schools.

Strategies Used to Create Inclusive Schools

For this article we included what we believed were the most effective strategies in creating inclusive schools. Below are some of the strategies that we used.

Empathy Mapping

School inclusion necessitates empathy. Empathy is vital in both social and organizational contexts, allowing employees to share experiences, needs, and desires as it serves as an emotional bridge and encourages positive and generative social behavior. A process known as Empathy Mapping was a straightforward method provided in Spanish and English to encourage parents to provide feedback to schools. By employing Empathy Mapping alongside interviews with parents, researchers gathered valuable and actionable feedback. The results primarily centered on themes related to safety and security, a sense of caring and belonging, and access to resources. Empathy Mapping exercises played a vital role in refining the campus improvement plan and introducing new project goals as school principals utilized Empathy Mapping data to revise their school improvement plans.

Parent Engagement

Parents and students were also involved with the implementation of the model. When visiting schools, parents were interviewed. They provides insights on how their schools could be more responsive to their needs. Parents were also asked to attend professional development activities along with teachers and leaders. Parent engagement was the pillar through which college and career readiness strategies were included. School leaders and

teachers developed plans for how to increase parent engagement and to be mindful about cultural, social, language, and background differences for working parents.

A total of 612 parents participated in the project to gain their perceptions about how responsive were these schools in meeting their needs. Parents from limited and non-English speaking communities were also included in our meetings with schools. The qualitative analysis of parents' empathy mapping revealed they felt their voices were diminished when expressing concerns about safety, security, and a sense of care and belonging for students and families from diverse backgrounds. These notions revealed a need to repair damaged trust, rejection, and diminished voice.

The research team held the conviction that fostering parent engagement should be the foremost priority. Enhancing parent engagement not only promoted sustainability but also cultivated collaborative relationships within the school community. Specifically, schools collaborated with parents to provide guidance about the transition from elementary to middle school and from middle to high school. Emphasizing literacy was equally crucial, involving parents in reading to their children and educating them about college and career readiness. Notably, substantial adjustments were made to the literacy curriculum based on interactions with district-level administrators.

Enhanced Leadership Committment

A similar statistical analysis of leader survey data revealed that leaders in treatement schools perceived greater workplace satisfaction in both 2018 and 2020 compared to the baseline year (2017) while leaders in non-treatment schools did not perceive any changes in workplace satisfaction. In 2018, leaders in treatment schools believed they were more competent in addressing racial diversity and inclusion. In 2020, leaders in treatment schools perceived that their schools were more adaptive in responding to their students' of color needs. while leaders in non-treatment indicated there was no change.

Leaders operating within an outcome-driven dimension need to be more attentive to how policies, customs, and decisions might influence demographic groups differently (Luevanos, n.d.) Consequently, with this project, leaders in treatment schools made efforts to examine their school data to insure a sense of well being and providing more equitable outcomes. The leaders examined their placement of students in honors or remedial programs, employee turnover, and climate. Both teachers and leaders examined their discipline data and interacted with parents to insure their children were treated fairly.

Increased Teacher Satisfaction and Participation

A total of 665 teachers provided valid responses to the teacher survey (44.8% in treatment schools and 55.2% in non-treatment schools). Statistical examination using hierarchical linear modeling showed that treatment school teachers perceived greater workplace satisfaction and felt positive in their interactions with parents in 2018 compared

to the baseline year (i.e., 2017) while teachers in non-treatment schools did not report any changes in those areas. In addition, teachers in treatment schools perceived that their schools were better in creating an inclusive environment in both 2018 and 2020 while teachers in non-treatment schools did not change their perceptions regarding school inclusion.

At the beginning, teachers were critical to the implementation of this work. Professional development along with self-assessments about their ability to work with demographically diverse students were analyzed. Cultural differences between teachers and students were apparent in both student and school survey results. Teachers inability to work with their cultural and linguistically students was evident in their school outcomes (low graduation rates and lesser numbers of students of color in advanced math, science and gifted courses). The feedback from the SIS survey was used to develop strategies to insure teachers reexamined their school data and implemented strategies to work with their linguistically and cultural diverse students.

After year one and at the end of the project an analysis of teachers' perceptions on inclusion revealed that those in the treatment schools reported higher job satisfaction compared to their counterparts. Additionally, teachers in the treatment group believed that their schools were more responsive to the changing demographics of their students than teachers in the control group. This difference suggests the inclusion survey provided valuable insights into how teachers envisioned their school to being more responsive to their demographically diverse students.

Another indicator to determine if teachers perceptions changed was to examine teacher absenses. Teachers' chronic absenteeism is defined as missing more than 10 days (5.5%) in a typical 180-day school year. There was a 2.06% drop in the rate of chronic absenteeism in the control condition and a 4.19% drop in the treatment condition. Teachers who supported the school inclusion model were less likely to miss work. Additionally, teachers in the inclusion schools reported increased job satisfaction due to engagement with parents and students.

Emergence of Student Engagement and their Perceptions

The inclusion model not only wanted to hear from teachers, leaders and parents, but students as well. We conducted focus groups interviews in both Spanish and English with linguistically and non-linguistically diverse students. Most of the high school students selected for the focus groups were identified as having discipline issues and high absenteim rates. During the student interviews these students indicated they had never participated in focus groups and were hesitant to participate. However, once the focus groups began, students responded to the questions and seemed to enjoy the exchange with then interviewers. Questions focused on their perceptions about how responsive were their schools in meeting their needs (Luevanos, Luevanos, & Madsen, 2022). Many of them stated

that the people who conducted the interviews were nonjudgmental, unbiased, and it was a freeing opportunity.

These students noted concerns about not feeling safe and secure at their schools. Along with safety issues, it was believed the schools were not focused on their concerns. Many students noted that school administrators were not present in school areas where most of the bullying took place. They also felt their teachers did not know how to interact with them, nor were they interested in why they were absent. Some students believed their teachers had a a sense of superiority towards them and demonstrated a fake attempt to make connections. When students responded in classes students did not acknowledge their responses and felt their teachers were glad when they did not come to class. Many students agreed a quality of care was missing (Luevanos, Luevanos, & Madsen, 2022).

Upon completion of these focus groups, we met with district administrators and shared with them these students'responses. Administrators appeared uneasy with students' responses; it was apparent this distict needed to hear from all of their students. Consquently, these administrators decided that these unheard voices were important for everyone to hear. Thus, the district team decided to establish student advisory board who would be composed of linguistically and non-linguistically diverse students who would meet monthly with the superintendent.

The School Inclusion Model revealed that student voice was instrumental in addressing achievement disparities and the treatment of diverse racial, linguistic, and socioeconomic groups. Student interviews was able to capture students' perceptions of fairness and their schools responsiveness their needs. This approach aligns with prior research indicating that a sense of belonging is integral to building a community (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Many high schools much like these two high schools possibly struggled with creating inclusive environments for all students. One of the key components of creating inclusive schools is to include student voice in the overall school success and teacher effectiveness (Ferguson, 2012)

Conclusion

Efforts to become an inclusive school organization must be planned, coordinated, and communicated effectively. Administrators and teachers need goals and training that prioritize inclusive practices to insure students feel a sense of belonging. Visible and audible changes in school environments should reflect a steadfast commitment to diversity and inclusion. Furthermore, incentivizing equity for those actively working to make schools inclusive is crucial. This school inclusion model was based on a wide array of strategies that focused on engaging demographically diverse parents, providing culturally competent training for school leaders and implementing post-secondary strategies at elementary and middle schools. Thus, the implementation of school inclusion should consider many of the strategies as noted below.

Innovative Inclusion Strategies: This model employs a multifaceted strategy to create holistic inclusivity, engaging diverse parents, providing cultural training for leaders, and implementing targeted school strategies. These approaches increased job satisfaction, student sense of belonging, and parent enagement.

Broadened Concept of Inclusion: Over three years, interventions based on leadership skills and outcomes broaden inclusion beyond race and ethnicity, showing positive findings and promising potential for addressing all students' needs. These broadened concept embraced differences and created strategic reform for heightended engagement.

Impact on Teachers and Leaders: The study reveals significant positive impacts on teachers' and leaders' perceptions in addressing biases and emphasizing the practical effectiveness of fostering positive professional attitudes. Findings suggest that the school inclusion model increased job satisfaction, diminished of bias, and encouraged teachers to rethink their instructional practices. Leaders became more efficient in examining student outcomes to create inclusive school practices.

Student Outcomes and Involvement: Despite positive impacts on educators, the study acknowledges mixed effects on student academic outcomes due to various factors. Confounding variables make it challenging to draw clear conclusions. The study emphasizes the integral role of students in driving positive change for inclusivity and increased engagement. What was most effective was the opportunity for students to share their perceptions about how they were treated and solutions schools could provide.

Practical Implementation and Tools: The study developed a reliable survey tool measuring organizational dimensions, demonstrating its efficacy in schools to address diversity and equity, increasing parent and student engagement, and generating unity in the school community. The improvement model emerges as a practical solution for schools adapting to shifting demographics.

Equity Incentives: In conclusion, the School Inclusion Model highlights the need to incentivize equity for those actively contributing to inclusive practices. Administrators and teachers should be encouraged and rewarded for prioritizing diverse student needs and creating tangible motivation for fostering a truly inclusive school environment.

Appendix 1. School Inclusion Model (SIM)

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Declarations