

Inclusion is Not Assimilation: Understanding the Importance of Identity in Educational Settings

By Dr. Shelley Moore

The concept of inclusion has evolved significantly in education, moving beyond mere physical presence in classrooms to encompass a deeper understanding of belonging and recognition of identity. Dr. Shelley Moore, in her recent episode of "Five Moore Minutes," emphasizes that inclusion is not about forcing individuals to conform to a dominant group, but rather about fostering environments where diverse identities can coexist and thrive. This perspective aligns with research that underscores the importance of recognizing and valuing the multifaceted identities of students to promote their academic and social well-being (Civitillo et al., 2021; Preusche & Göbel, 2021; Verhoeven et al., 2018).

An example of this concept is provided in Moore's video, through the story of a young refugee student who, upon arriving in Canada, felt overwhelmed by his new environment. His sense of belonging was ignited when he encountered another student who shared his language and cultural background. This moment exemplifies the critical role that communities of identity play in fostering belonging among students. Research indicates that students who can connect with peers who share similar backgrounds, experience enhanced social support and resilience, which are vital for their adaptation and success in school settings (Najjar et al., 2019). The ability to communicate in one's home language, as highlighted in Dr. Moore's narrative, is not merely a matter of preference; it is a fundamental aspect of identity that can significantly impact a student's sense of belonging and emotional well-being (Khalili, 2023).

Moore also argues that inclusion should not require individuals to suppress their identities or conform to dominant norms. This assertion is supported by studies that show when students are pressured to assimilate, it can lead to feelings of alienation and exhaustion, ultimately hindering their academic performance and mental health (Cicero & Wesp, 2017; Russell et al., 2010). For instance, LGBTQ2+ students often face significant challenges in environments that do not affirm their identities, leading to negative outcomes such as increased anxiety and lower academic achievement (Laiti et al., 2020). Therefore, fostering an inclusive environment means creating spaces where all students can express their identities freely without fear of judgment or exclusion, including Disabled identities.



Disability as an identity is also a critical aspect of this conversation. The understanding of Disability has shifted from a purely medical model to a social model that recognizes the importance of identity and community among individuals with Disabilities. Nario-Redmond et al. highlight the necessity of redefining Disability in a way that allows for appreciation across Disabled and non-disabled divides, which is essential for fostering a sense of belonging among students with Disabilities (Nario-Redmond et al., 2013). This aligns with Dirth and Branscombe's assertion that a social identity approach to disability can bridge the gap between disability studies and psychological science, emphasizing the importance of social relationships and reducing isolation for people with disabilities (Dirth & Branscombe, 2018).

Furthermore, the development of a positive Disability identity is crucial for students with disabilities. Mueller discusses how the lack of positive Disabled identity representation and resources in early development can hinder the formation of a Disability identity, which is often only recognized in adulthood (Mueller, 2021). This highlights the need for educational systems to provide resources and support for students with disabilities to explore and affirm their identities from a young age. Pugach et al. further emphasize that Disability should be included in the social justice landscape, advocating for its recognition and advocacy alongside other social identity markers (Pugach et al., 2020). This intersectionality is vital for creating inclusive educational environments that respect and celebrate all identities.

As we strive to create inclusive educational environments, it is imperative to recognize that true inclusion is about celebrating diversity and fostering communities of identity in all its forms. This involves not only supporting students in declaring and embracing their identities but also ensuring that all members of the school community—including Disabled students—feel safe and valued. By shifting our focus from assimilation to inclusion, we can cultivate educational spaces that empower every individual to thrive, thereby enriching the learning experience for all (Khalili, 2023). Inclusion is not about forcing individuals to conform but rather about creating spaces where all students can express their authentic selves. This is particularly important for students with Disabilities, who often navigate complex social landscapes that can impact their sense of belonging. By fostering communities of identity and promoting positive Disability identities, educators can create environments where all students feel valued, respected, and empowered to learn from one another.

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