

What Do Transformative Classroom Interactions Look Like?
A Qualitative Case Study on Advocacy for Diversity, Equity, and
Inclusion among South Carolina Elementary School Teachers

by

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to the memory of my mother, Rosalyn Stalks, whose legacy of intellectual curiosity and commitment to personal excellence continues to guide and inspire my work. My deepest gratitude to my siblings, Yolande, Curtis Jr., and Corey; our bond is unconditional. Also, to my children Stephon, Meg, and Hannah, my forever loves and inspiration. We did it!

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Abstract

The term multiculturalism describes the presence or support of various cultures and ethnicities in our society (Oxford,2023c). The acceptance of multiculturalism has played a significant role in how we function in society. Historically multiculturalism has reshaped the legislation, population, and educational system in South Carolina. South Carolina was the last state in the nation forced to desegregate its public school system, in 1963, almost ten years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (LDHI,2025). Currently South Carolina lawmakers passed bill H.3927, a controversial bill that targets state agencies and schools for any association with diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, training, or practices (Moore,2025).

. This study of ‘What Do Transformative Classroom Interactions Look Like? A Qualitative Case Study on Advocacy for Diversity Equity and Inclusion among South Carolina Elementary School Teachers “explores the characteristics of transformative interactions that focus on teacher advocacy and Diversity, Equity and inclusion in classroom settings.

The purpose of this mixed method research study is to explore how teacher advocacy in diverse classroom settings promotes transformative learning experiences. This research will investigate challenges and barriers to learning in diverse classroom settings. The study seeks to address the critical gap in understanding how teacher advocacy initiatives for DEI create transformative learning in South Carolina elementary schools. This study was inspired by the need to understand how teachers can effectively advocate for DEI in classrooms, creating equitable learning outcomes for South Carolina students.

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Chapter 1-Contextualization

Historical Context

The concept of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) derives from a period in United States of America that greatly needed social justice. The term DEI describes policies and programs that promote the representation and participation of diverse groups of individuals which encompasses people of different ages, races, ethnicities, abilities, disabilities, genders, religions, cultures, and sexual orientations (Barney & Rosencrance, 2024). DEI is a concept that supports the multicultural classroom environments in the United States. The racial and ethnic diversity of United States public school students have significantly increased. Research indicates that by 2024, 54.7% of United States public school students will be non-white (Lindner, 2024).

These demographics support the pedagogy of how diversity and inclusion have transformed the framework of United States classrooms K-12. Students in our classrooms depend on educators to provide them with an equal and quality education. Researching theories that support the integration of DEI in elementary schools can help create strategies for learning and teacher's advocacy.

Although the use of DEI concepts is currently recognized in United States classrooms, historically it has made an impact on the United States education system. DEI is now increasingly being integrated into K-12 curriculum to create inclusive learning environments for all students (EdGate,2019). These strategies to integrate DEI in United States classrooms include adapting inclusive and diverse lesson plans that acknowledge cultural diversity. The efforts to implement DEI in K-12 classrooms are for the long-term academic and social well-being of students.

Quaker schoolteacher and abolitionist Anthony Benezet (1713-1784) is considered one of the leading founders of teacher's advocacy for DEI due to his philosophy and educational practices.

Benezet is noted as a prolific abolitionist of the eighteenth century whose antislavery writings served as foundational texts for activists on both sides of the Atlantic (LSU Press, 2023). Although Benezet did not use the term DEI, his philosophy of student equity and enrichment made a profound mark in early education (Vivian, 2023). His efforts to abolish slavery and educate all children align with the fundamental values of D.E.I.

Benezet's contributions to educational diversity and freedoms were significant. Benezet founded the African Free School in Philadelphia, where future abolitionist leaders Absalom Jones and James Forten studied (The Library of Congress, n.d). His efforts to establish equity in society and education are a profound legacy of philosophical achievement. His fundamental beliefs of anti-slavery and equal education can be perceived as pathway to the integration of DEI in United States education.

As time progressed, the need to desegregate classrooms in the United States was still a harsh reality. The 1964 Civil Rights Movement ended segregation in public places and banned employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin (Johns & Castro, 2016). The implementation of the Civil Rights Act signified the movement toward diversity in the United States. The desegregation of South Carolina public schools starting in 1963 was a major milestone in the long struggle for African Americans to access the ideals of freedom promised during Reconstruction (Lowcountry Digital History Initiative, n.d). Although the Civil Rights acts were established to create equal opportunity for all citizens, the challenges of inequality were a reality in a previously segregated nation.

The momentum of DEI spread with The Civil Rights Movement in the 1960's (Edmonds, Lind 2021) which now encompasses multiculturalism in society, the workplace, and the classroom. Throughout the civil rights movement in the United States, South Carolina still faced challenges with equality and desegregation. South Carolina was the last state in the nation forced to desegregate its public school system even ten years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (L.D.H.I, n.d). On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court decided unanimously in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Kansas* that that racial segregation of children in public schools was unconstitutional (History, 2021).

The terms desegregation and integration have similar connotations to the current terms DEI that invoke changes in classroom environments. The term desegregation means the elimination of laws, customs, or practices under which people from different religions, ancestries, ethnic groups, etc., are restricted to specific or separate public facilities (Dictionary.com, Words, 2021). Integration, the act of combining an integral whole group (Dictionary.com,2021), was a necessary action that prompted changes in the composition of South Carolina classrooms.

When classroom structures become more diversified, support systems are needed to manage the complexities. Teacher advocacy is a necessary tool that can produce positive long-term outcomes in education. Historically, past research indicates teachers have advocated for educational equality in a more subtle manner. In fear of being jailed, teachers would make meals and provide rides for civil rights workers (Jordon, 2023). It was also noted by Professor Tondra Loder- Jackson that during the 1963 Children's March, teachers were obligated to report on student's absence due to this march (Jordon, 2023). Teachers that supported the march did not report absences, keeping students from expulsion (Jordon,

2023). These subtle methods of advocacy helped make an impact on the United States educational system.

Sociocultural Context

The acceptance of multiculturalism has played a significant role in how we function in society. Multiculturalism is an ideology that promotes the institutionalization of communities containing multiple cultures that have been addressed primarily through the school system, with the rise of ethnic studies programs (Libretexts, 2021). The interconnection of DEI and multiculturalism in the United States educational system has had a profound impact on classroom environments. Recent estimates from the United States Census Bureau, by 2060, the white population in this country is projected to fall by more than 20 million people, while the Hispanic population doubles. It is also reported that the African American and Asian populations will continue to increase, projecting that by 2043 the nation is projected to become majority-minority (Chen,2023).

Education reform in the United States is important because a healthy education system is crucial to economic growth, social mobility, and overall metrics of equity (Smith,2023). Social acceptance along with teacher advocacy for education can help provide fair and equal opportunities for all citizens so that we can live productive and meaningful lives. Social Justice for education creates opportunities for all students to have successful outcomes. It is essential that educators create a systematic framework that helps integrate diverse students into our communities and classrooms effectively. Education should not be considered a privilege but a fundamental right of all citizens.

Due to the emergence of DEI in the United States, teachers must be able to meet the needs of the students in today's classroom. Multiculturalism and DEI have become keystone factors in how we function in today's classroom. Students should be exposed to an environment that is academically productive and socially inclusive. When students can learn and function in a diverse setting, they can potentially achieve positive outcomes in life.

Although multiculturalism has become more apparent in the United States, there are still challenges in the classrooms. Due to the complexities that arise from multiculturalism, it is essential that educators foster an open-minded approach to teaching. Factors such as isolation, cultural bias, and teaching from different perspectives can create barriers for students to have successful outcomes. Teachers must communicate and create lesson plans relating to their classroom composition. It is critical that educators advocate for the continuance of DEI curriculum's, resources, and programs that support the needs of all students.

It is important for teachers to understand the correlation between social justice and education. Social justice has transformed classrooms into diverse learning environments that are accessible to all learners. Social justice concepts should be recognized in school so that they provide equal opportunities and treatment for all students without any favoritism or discrimination whatsoever (Capper & Frattura, 2007, Wang 2015,) The classroom is an ideal setting for educators to gain a firsthand assessment of the needs of their classroom population.

The more educational leaders engage with their students; they can implement a cultural pedagogy that supports equity in the classroom. James A. Banks, the creator of the Social Action approach, discusses how teachers and students can take a proactive approach to social action by securing a positionality about a social issue they feel needs action. According to Banks (1988), Students gather pertinent data, analyze their values and beliefs, synthesize their knowledge and

values, identify alternative courses of actions, and finally decide what actions should be taken. Encouraging social justice in a classroom setting promotes authentic leadership in communities. These experiences create a more inclusive atmosphere that prevents isolation and cultural indifference.

Socio-Political

In recent current events DEI has been a topic of conflict for educators, students, and legislation. The Trump administration has set deadlines that order the cease of DEI practices in schools and colleges across the United States (Binkley, Gecker&Mumphrey,2025). This means that funding, resources, and initiatives will be eliminated from school curriculums. South Carolina has recently experienced efforts to ban DEI from higher education and book k-12 in the last year (Bassett, 2024). The suppression of Critical Race Theory and DEI can negatively impact students and teachers. Critical Race Theory (CRT)I whose core concept is that race is a social construct, and that racism is not merely the product of individual bias or prejudice, but also something embedded in legal systems and policies (Sawchuk,2021).

It is implied that the elimination of DEI will further marginalize the underrepresented students, faculty, and staff (Cliburn,2023). United States District Judge Landya McCafferty partially blocked the Department of Education's attempt to defund DEI initiatives, stating, our nation is deeply committed to safeguarding academic freedom, which is of transcendent value to all of us and not merely to the teachers concerned. These restrictive measures can prevent students from gaining knowledge about other cultures and belief systems that could enhance their overall learning experience. According to the Intercultural Development Research Association, bans on both books and DEI initiatives can limit the availability of information

about minority groups and their history, as well as place limits on what teachers can teach about history in both K-12 and higher education institutions. While DEI faces legislative challenges nationwide, South Carolina teachers need a strong platform for advocacy. Organizations such as The American Federation of Teachers is one of the nation's largest teachers' unions, have acted against the banning of DEI (Binkley, 2025). The American Federation of Teachers Union and the American Sociological Association filed a lawsuit against the Trump administration, stating that these DEI bans violate the First and Fifth Amendment (Binkley,2025). When teachers are unable to provide lesson plans that are supportive of their students' culture, it can create barriers in their learning process.

These barriers can become significant obstacles for students to reach their full potential. Researching the advocacy of DEI among South Carolina teachers can provide insight as to how we can improve the functionality of our educational framework. Exploring teacher advocacy in South Carolina can provide our institutions and legislators with a clearer perspective of the importance of DEI in elementary education.

Chapter 2 - Theoretical Framing

The theoretical framework used to investigate the transformative classroom interactions amongst teachers' advocacy for D.E.I is Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP). CRP focuses on the academic and personal success of students as individuals and as a collective, encouraging students to feel affirmed in their identities and experiences (Escudero,2019). Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, a term coined by education theorist Gloria Ladson-Billings in the mid-1990's and described it as "a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes." (pp.17-18) (Ladson-Billings ,1994) When students engage in learning experiences that can reshape their perspectives, it is a transformational approach to learning.

The goal of this research is to explore the theoretical framework of advocacy for DEI, more specifically regarding South Carolina elementary school teachers. Because CRP addresses the academic, social, and cultural condition of our classroom environments, this theory can identify and substantiate the need for cultural acceptance into their classroom environment. Teachers can create culturally appropriate lesson plans, incorporate diverse literature, and acquire resources by researching students' cultural backgrounds. By exploring the theoretical framework of culturally relevant pedagogy, educators can gain a deeper understanding of how they can promote DEI in their classroom environments.

The correlation of this qualitative case study method with prior empirical case studies that support CRP can give credence to new research findings. For example, the researcher can refer to James A. Banks' transformative steps to multicultural learning and refined methods of integrating teachers' advocacy and D.E.I. James A. Bank is an American educator that is

regarded as the father of multiculturalism (Ford,2024). James A. Banks identified four levels of integration of ethnic content that might prove helpful to the integration of multi-cultural content into the class curriculum (Ford, 2024). The four levels of integration of multicultural content in education are as follows: Level 1-4 are contribution, additive, transformative and social action (Banks, 2010).

James A. Banks theory provides a framework of support for teachers functioning in multicultural environments. These steps to integrating multicultural learning in educational curriculums' Transformative approaches encourage learners to broaden their capacity to learn without bias. The impact of eliminating bias in our classrooms can be beneficial to personal growth and development. It is necessary to obtain data that reflects the outcomes of multicultural learning. Observing how students function in diverse environments gives educators' insight as to how to prevent learning gaps and other societal barriers. This empirical framework can serve as an analytical guide to design a focal point of action for this research study.

The researcher can also refer to the Culturally Relevant Pedagogy theory to maintain critical consciousness. Critical consciousness involves the ability of taking learning outside the classroom using school knowledge and skills to identify, analyze, and solve real-world problems (Amoako, Kayser & Starks, 2021). This socially conscious pedagogy describes an aspect of learning based upon social interactions that help us learn from another. These learning interactions are based on critical thinking and social acceptance that supports DEI initiatives.

The theoretical framing of DEI from an educational and social perspective is critical to the advancement of society. When educators implement DEI in their classrooms, strategies of critical thinking, social acceptance and academic excellence are fostered into society. The framework of DEI centers around fairness, which empowers Individuals to feel secure. It is essential that educators have a platform to function and promote DEI curricula.

Integrating DEI in our classrooms can create a more cohesive and productive society. Investigating the advocacy of DEI amongst South Carolina elementary school teachers can promote increased instructional skills for teachers, increase academic achievement for marginalized or diverse students, and create stronger community relationships. Researching theories that encompass the application of DEI can bridge gaps in society, producing positive attributes for South Carolina's educational system.

Another approach to DEI learning environments is multicultural education. Multicultural education was a reform movement based on developing ideas and processes (Banks, 1992) and aimed to create equal educational opportunities for all students, regardless of a student's racial, ethnic, or social class group (Banks & Banks, 2010). The need for education reform created new perspectives as to how to outreach and educate diverse classroom populations. The goal of reformation is to improve the curriculum and social interactions in society. These multicultural interactions contribute to the advancement of equality and positive social interactions in society.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Building on the work of Ladson-Billings, Geneva Gay developed a framework with a stronger focus on teachers' strategies and practices called Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT (newamerica.org)). CRT is described as an education reform that strives to increase the

engagement and motivation of students of color who historically have been both unsuccessful academically and socially alienated from their public schools (Vavrus,2008). This method of teaching involves acknowledging the cultural identity of students and integrating them into classroom interactions. Educators that embrace CRT help advocate for cultural awareness by building relationships and being supportive of cultural diversity within classrooms.

This teaching pedagogy is similar to culturally relevant pedagogy in the respect that teachers must uphold cultural competence in their classroom to become more relatable to all their students. Culturally responsive teaching practices can produce a more equitable learning environment for students. The author Gorski describes this approach to school equity as equity literacy. This equity literacy approach is a comprehensive framework for preparing teachers and students to see the world through an equity lens (Gorski,2016). This can be achieved by educators understanding the challenges and biases faced by their students. Teachers must assume the preparedness of inclusive action to help eliminate these biases.

The Diversity Pedagogy

The Diversity Pedagogy Theory is a set of principles that point out the natural and inseparable connection between culture and cognition (Sheets,2009). This theory created by Rosa Hernandez Sheets gives the researcher insights into the interconnectivity of culture and education. This theory explains the connection between cultural behavior and how teachers use this information to instruct students. This pedagogy supports diversity and inclusion as a mechanism that promotes learning. Educators should strongly consider being more socially conscious so that they can develop a strong learning relationship with students. The Diversity Pedagogy or DPT is based on principles that support positive and insightful interaction amongst teachers and students in the classroom. The ideology of diversity begins with the willingness to

accept new cultures. The exchange of interaction between students and teachers during classroom activities is described as Pedagogical Behavior (Sheets,2009). Sheets describe these interactions as Diversity Pedagogical Dimensions that define teacher and student interaction. Pedagogical behavior between students and teachers is supported by other theorists that support diversity and inclusion.

John Dewey, an American psychologist and education reformer, believes curriculums should be relevant to the students' lives (Lorina,2012). John Dewey's theory of pragmatic diversity and inclusion intersects with Sheets theory of culture and cognition. Both theories promote the application of the teacher to familiarize themselves with students' backgrounds so they can learn together. These theories suggest that if teachers engage students with the willingness to recognize their cultural and social background, it can strengthen their learning potential. The theoretical connection between Sheets and Dewey implies that acknowledging cultural and social backgrounds in a learning environment benefits students' learning outcome. Students are more likely to function more effectively in society due to their multicultural and inclusive atmosphere experienced in the classroom.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory or CRT is an academic and legal framework that denotes that systemic racism is part of American society from education and housing to employment and healthcare ((*Critical Race Theory*, n.d.). The suppression of Critical Race Theory and DEI can have a negative impact on students and teachers. Educators should have the ability to instruct students in a manner that is academically sound and culturally responsive. It is implied that elimination DEI will further marginalize the underrepresented students, faculty, and staff (Cliburn,2023). These restrictive measures can prevent students from gaining knowledge about

other cultures and belief systems that could enhance their overall learning experience (Cliburn, 2023).

CRT and DEI are both educational frameworks that involve navigating through the inequities in classroom environments. These theories acknowledge that racial inequalities must be addressed and eliminated for the overall success of student learning outcomes. DEI, while touching on topics about race, does not seek to analyze the history of legalized racism in society (Diversity,2024). CRT and DEI are theories that empower teachers to seek the necessary tools to promote a more equitable environment for their students. Teachers can reduce inequality gaps by understanding what is at stake when students are deprived of literature, resources, and learning opportunities due to legal suppression or unskilled educators. The realization that CRT and DEI are theories that coincide with law and education can help teacher advocates improve their approach to teaching in diverse settings.

Critical Multicultural Theory

Critical Multicultural Education Theory aims to create a stronger society that fulfills the needs and interests of all groups by drawing attention to the oppression and inequality found within the social structure of society (Sleeter & Grant, 1987). Critical multicultural education theory supports education and social interactions in a learning environment.

The interaction between students and teachers helps diminish stereotypes that can cause obstacles to learning. Multicultural teachers' educators should have a cultural awareness that promotes transformative learning experiences for their students. The Critical Multicultural Competency Model suggests that teachers should have cultural competencies such as skills, awareness, transformative leadership and socio-cultural perspectives (Acar-Ciftci,2016). When

teachers can reach out to their students on this level, there can be significant opportunities for transformative learning experiences.

Chapter 3- Literature Review

Introduction

The first major section is a topical review of literature related to the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. Culturally responsive education is an integral asset to a multicultural learning environment. Based on Gloria Ladson-Billings, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy framework, culturally responsive teaching refers to an approach to teaching and learning that facilitates the achievement of all students by recognizing that culture is a powerful force in shaping how we see ourselves and the world around us (National Equity Project, n.d-b).

This review of literature is important because it defines the role that culture plays in education. It enlightens educators to understand that students need to see themselves in their learning environment. In Gloria Ladson-Billings study of Cultural Pedagogy she describes for decades anthropologies have examined ways that teaching can better match home and community culture of students of color who in the past did not have academic success in schools (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The ideology of CRP is that students can have better learning outcomes if they are culturally secure in their learning environment. Along with considering CRP as a method to foster multiculturalism in classrooms, Ladson-Billings (1994, p 210) considers culturally responsive education one of the most effective means of meeting the learning needs of culturally diverse students.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

This review describes the fundamental origin of culturally relevant pedagogy. CRP was created by educational theorist Gloria Ladson Billings in the early nineties that rest on the fundamental pillars of academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical

consciousness (Escudero, 2019). Billings focused on these three components of a culturally based pedagogy to bring a necessary awareness to diverse education. The historical beginnings of CRP were developed by Gloria Ladson -Billings in response to multiracial classrooms involving students of low socioeconomic class (Richardson,2021). This literature discusses the author's initial approach to defining the purpose of this theory. This theory was based upon connecting students with academics and culture in a learning environment. This theory supports both positive cultural and academic experiences in classroom environments.

Multicultural Education Theory

This portion of literature review recognizes the importance of self-reflection and observation. Teachers can benefit from learning how to teach in multicultural classrooms if they are presented with the proper teaching resources. Teachers need to find ways to incorporate students' use of their own cultures as an asset for their learning and self-reflect on their own deficit-based thinking about students of diverse cultures (Howard,2003). The author expresses the need for educators to identify their own beliefs and how they relate to the varying cultural differences as they relate to their students.

Teachers that reflect on the realities of multiculturalism can promote a level of social acceptance that is beneficial to learners. It is essential in diverse settings that teachers acknowledge the cultural identities that populate classrooms in the United States while identifying their own.

The Writers of UoPeople, Education Leadership describes the synergy of cultural interaction as a powerful, potentially enriching encounter: differences are explored, reflections

on self and other extended, biases unearthed (UoPeople, 2024). The more educators reflect upon their own feelings toward cultural diversity; environments of unbiased learning are created.

This aspect of literature discusses the correlation between multiculturalism and teacher advocacy. It is essential to research literature that supports the efforts of teacher's advocacy in diverse settings. Multiculturalism is considered a comprehensive educational approach that reforms classroom structure, curriculum design and instructional practices (Parker,2019). These approaches can be considered transformative due to how teachers choose to instruct and interact with their students.

The author Jill Bradley-Levine (2018) uses theories of critical pedagogy, collaborative leadership, and ethical leadership to frame teacher advocacy on behalf of students who are traditionally marginalized. CRP along with other theories can provide supportive constructs for educators. Teachers can use these theories as a platform for DEI advocacy. The empirical studies of teacher advocacy regarding DEI suggest that teachers transform into activist or strong education leaders. Picower (2012) defines “teacher activists” as “educators who work for social justice both inside and outside of their classrooms” (p. 562).

Another important aspect of advocacy is ethical leadership which involves adhering to moral guidelines while empowering your colleagues and direct reports to follow your example (North Central College, 2023). Teachers should display sound ethical behavior while functioning as educators and citizens in the community.

Practicing ethical leadership should involve adhering to a personal code based on their “principles, beliefs, assumptions, and values” (Starratt, 2004, p. 5). These ethics codes are often the basis of why teachers seek advocacy for their students and themselves. It is through the lens of desiring inclusion and equality for all students that a teacher displays exemplary character of citizenship and leadership skills.

Education Reform

Researchers of American multiculturalism can have a positive impact on education reform. Researchers such as Carl Grant, Christine Sleeter, Geneva Gay and Sonia Nieto help provided scholarship in multicultural education helped develop deeper frameworks for education opportunities and social change (Gorski,1999). The correlation between the presence of multiculturalism in education and a more highly functional society has generated a more socially aware mindset. Researching education reforms can assist teachers in creating more culturally inclusive learning environments. Reforming U.S. public education systems so they are inclusive and equitable will take many changes (Together,2024).

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Challenges

Due to recent legislation prompted in the Trump administration challenges to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, including book bans and restrictions on classroom curriculum, can create significant obstacles to transformative teacher-student interactions. According to the Intercultural Development Research Association, bans on both books and DEI initiatives can limit the availability of information about minority groups and their history, as well as place limits on what teachers can teach about history in both K-12 and higher education institutes.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in education focuses on acceptance for all students. The term DEI encompasses a theory that supports the need for a more humanitarian approach to learning. The evolution of DEI reflects broader societal changes and the recognition of education as a fundamental right all (Diversio - DEI Platform, 2023).

The term DEI can be defined as the following: Diversity is the perceived differences between individuals with respect to demographic and socio-cultural differences such as sex, religion, race, ethnicity, age, physical or mental abilities, sexual orientation, thought, or economic background. Equity is mainly concerned with fairness and impartiality in both opportunities and outcomes. Finally, inclusion refers to the presence, belongingness, and incorporation of diverse groups particularly in spaces that were traditionally underrepresented or marginalized (Rynarzewska et al., 2024). It creates opportunities for all students to learn in an equitable environment. Enhancing DEI can help us get closer to education's overarching goal: improve student learning and outcomes (Admin, 2023).

Chapter 4- Statement of Problem Practice

In education, Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) has become evident for educators and students. Teachers and students are now facing more obstacles in classroom interactions due to cultural differences, isolation, and lack of resources. South Carolina's Educational system is no stranger to marginalized students. It is reported that South Carolina issues of poverty, racism, and inequity in both the lives of children and citizens as well as in our schools are still being ignored (Plthomasedd, 2023).

Historically South Carolina's law supported legislation that upheld segregation in schools. Six years after *Brown vs. The Board of Education*, law makers passed a bill to prevent the integration of African American students into public schools (Madeo. (n.d.). South Carolinas notable history of segregation and inequality is now masked with issues of DEI in classrooms.

The road to equitable education is still challenging, leaving teachers to face daily adversity in the classroom.

Background and Contextualization of the Issue

South Carolina Classrooms face challenges with the continuation of implementing DEI in their class curriculums. Legislation tried to pass bills banning DEI from higher education and K-12 schools. South Carolina House of Representatives passed Bill H.4289 on March 27, which seeks to ban diversity training programs for public university faculty and staff, as well as prohibit diversity statements from being used in university admissions and employment decisions. (Bassett,2024).

Bans on both books and DEI initiatives can limit the availability of information about minority groups and their history, as well as place limits on what teachers can teach about history in both K-12 and higher education institutes, according to the Intercultural Development

Research Association (Basset,2024). The loss of DEI in our school systems would be detrimental to the progress of a state that already suffered from segregation in schools.

Cultural Relevance

South Carolina still faces challenges that could marginalize student populations in the low country of Charleston S.C. The fate of DEI is at risk due to legislation that could ban the promotion of DEI discussions, training, and programs (Ashbaugh,2024). It is essential that teachers and law makers work together to ensure that classrooms have lesson plans and resources that are designed to be culturally relevant. Due to the Anti-DEI movement teachers are concerned about the loss of resources and support in their classrooms.

According to Special needs and disability rights advocates, growing efforts to limit diversity, equity and inclusion programs in elementary and secondary schools may negatively impact special education activities meant to expand inclusive opportunities for students with disabilities (Arundel, 2024). Teachers are faced with concerns about how their students will be affected by new DEI legislation that could potentially create learning barriers for students with disabilities.

Disability rights advocates, special educators, researchers, and the U.S. Department of Education have pointed to short-term and long-term benefits of inclusion for students both with and without disabilities, including high expectations for academic progress (Linscott,2022). The need for teacher advocacy for South Carolina elementary schools begins with understanding which populations of students are most marginalized in our school systems. All students in South Carolina deserve to be in a classroom environment that embraces their culture, learning abilities and beliefs so that they can feel secure enough to become thriving citizens.

Advocacy

Disability rights advocates, special educators, researchers, and the U.S. Department of Education have pointed to short-term and long-term benefits of inclusion for students both with and without disabilities, including lofty expectations for academic progress (Linscott,2022). The need for teacher advocacy for South Carolina elementary begins with understanding which populations of students are most marginalized in our school systems. The role of teacher advocate can be rewarding yet complicated times.

The intentions of educators should be to work toward improving students' learning environments, giving them opportunities for substantive growth and development. When teachers choose to advocate whether at work or on personal times, there are certain parameters to be considered. Teachers should protect themselves as well as their institutions and students while advocating for DEI. It is important for educators to know their rights and privileges as advocates. The National Education Association has created a guide for educational advocacy. This guide provides educators with an overview of their rights at school and outside of school to advocate to meet the needs of students and educators and to stand up for public education (NEA,2023).

This guide provides protection along with insights into teachers' rights, reporting misconduct, teaching, and organizing (NEA,2023). Teacher's advocates need to understand their guidelines so that they are effective for their cause. Teachers should feel safe and confident when they feel advocacy is necessary. The more teachers are faced with legislation that bans DEI, teachers advocate need to understand their rights and freedoms as well. Teachers that welcome the implementation of DEI are faced with the challenge of transforming their classroom into an equitable and inclusive learning environment.

South Carolina minority public school demographics report that 52% of South Carolina students are minorities. South Carolina Department of Education reports that 100,000 students with disabilities are enrolled in South Carolina public schools (Jeffries,2022.)

These demographics support the pedagogy of how diversity and inclusion have transformed the framework of United States classrooms K-12. Teacher preparedness is essential in making classrooms equitable and inclusive for students with diverse backgrounds. Prior research of preparing teachers for advocacy reveals teachers need knowledge of culture in education, a commitment to learn about students' culture and communities, and ways to use culture as a basis for learning (Ladson- Billings, 2001). The research of *Learning to Advocate for Educational Equity in a Teacher Credential Program* (Athanases&Martin,2006) reveals that classrooms benefit from guided cultural immersion in non- school based -cultural experiences (Irvine, 2003).

Research of a “*Qualitative Case Study on Advocacy for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Among South Carolina Elementary Schools*” will focus on ways to support teacher advocacy, teacher development and strategies to maintain DEI in classroom environments. This study's purpose is to improve our curriculum, academic achievement, and social connectivity amongst students and teachers in South Carolina elementary schools. This research is based on creating a platform for teacher advocacy that fosters positive long-term effects for all students in South Carolina.

Teachers should use their skills and expertise to create learning environments that support Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. Teachers now more than ever must advocate for the continual support of DEI their students. Although legislation largely targets higher education, banning DEI education challenges our academic freedoms and the future of elementary students in South

Carolina. When we lose our voice for equality in education, it puts our global citizenship in jeopardy for the empowerment of humankind.

Research Questions

These research questions were formulated from the research purpose and theoretical framework.

1. The research questions are as follows: What innovative strategies and approaches do South Carolina elementary school teachers use to advocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion?
2. How do elementary school teachers in South Carolina describe their experiences in advocating for diversity, equity, and inclusion within their schools?
3. What types of professional development, resources, or collaborative opportunities are available to teachers to enhance their advocacy skills and knowledge?
4. What challenges and barriers do teachers face in their efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion?

These questions were designed by the researcher to explore specific methods teachers use to support DEI in their classrooms. The researcher's goal was to explore innovative strategies teachers implement in their lesson plans. These questions will reveal their personal experiences advocating for DEI and the availability of professional development. The researcher employs quantitative and qualitative analysis which focuses on surveys and interviews. The researcher will collect and analyze data, creating rich descriptive in efforts to understand the complexities of DEI advocacy in South Carolina elementary schools.

Chapter 5-Methodology

This chapter addresses the research methodology used for this study. The researcher chose a qualitative research method to get the opinions of South Carolina Elementary school teachers working in diverse classrooms. Qualitative research involves collection and analysis of qualitative data using an array of approaches and methods to explore in detail an event, concept, or phenomena (Saldaña, 2011). Qualitative data includes interviews, observations, artifacts, photographs, and recordings, among others (Saldaña, 2011). Advocacy for DEI among South Carolina elementary school teachers is a social phenomenon that would generate open-ended questions suitable for qualitative analysis.

A qualitative case study about this topic could generate in-depth responses whose credibility is confirmed by rigorous examination. When researchers use qualitative methods, respondents can freely disclose their experiences, thoughts, and feelings without constraints (onepoll.us/). The use of the convergent mixed method will allow me to analyze both quantitative and qualitative findings. Convergent Mixed Method design is where both quantitative and qualitative data are collected and analyzed, then compare the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data to see if the data confirms or disconfirms each other (Creswell.,2018). The triangulation of my research findings will create a descriptive analysis that gives insights on teacher advocacy regarding DEI.

The data sources for the study will be introduced along with the instrumentation and research protocols. Ethical and risk management are considered for the protection of the participants. The researcher will obtain IRB approval along with considering any special consideration for vulnerable populations. The researcher will obtain informed consent, explain participants rights, maintain risk management assessments and maintain secure data collection

methods. The group chosen for the participants are South Carolina elementary school teachers, administrators and teacher assistants. The researcher will perform interviews and observations of educational interactions in diverse settings. The researcher also created surveys and questionnaires that will support my research studies.

Site Selection

The site selected for the study was based on the research recruitment acceptance to the school district that the researcher is employed. The research study was rejected due to the current political climate regarding DEI and teacher availability. Therefore, the researcher used social media platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Research and Gmail to recruit participants. Since the research was rejected, the researcher spoke with teachers directly about the research study. The researcher emailed teachers and requested that any response or participation would be through their personal email. The researcher's goal was to be transparent with the research goals, participants rights and accessibility to survey material.

Participant Sampling Methods and Selection

The study research design sample is an important part of the research framework. Sampling is the process of choosing the group that you ultimately use to obtain your research data (Survey Monkey,2025). The researcher used a purposive sampling method. The use of this sampling method allows researchers to use their expertise to choose a sample that they believe will be most useful in reaching their research objectives ("Types of Sampling Deign,"1999-2025). The study utilized a sample size of 14 participants (n=14). While this limits the validity of the findings and statistical power, the researcher was able to collect trustworthy data that provided valuable insights for my study,

Analysis

The researcher will use NVivo and Qualtrics to analyze and summarize findings. NVivo is a software program used for qualitative and mixed-methods research, specifically used for the analysis of unstructured text, audio, video, and image data, including interviews, focus groups, surveys, social media, and journal articles (NVIVO,2024). The researcher also used Microsoft Co-Pilot to clean and interpret findings for qualitative analysis. The application of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in this research gives teachers the opportunity to have a platform to express their perspectives and ideologies.

Chapter 6 – Discussion of Findings

This section of the study presents the research results of this study. It details both quantitative and qualitative findings, organized by data source and thematic analysis. The results are presented according to a convergent mixed methods design with a visual summary of combined data. A visual summary combines the data. The study's focus on transformative learning and DEI yielded a sample size of 14 participants. This smaller-than-anticipated sample size may limit the generalizability of findings which resulted in limited findings. The researcher has not made any alterations regarding quality assurance as they have a solid blueprint for this study.

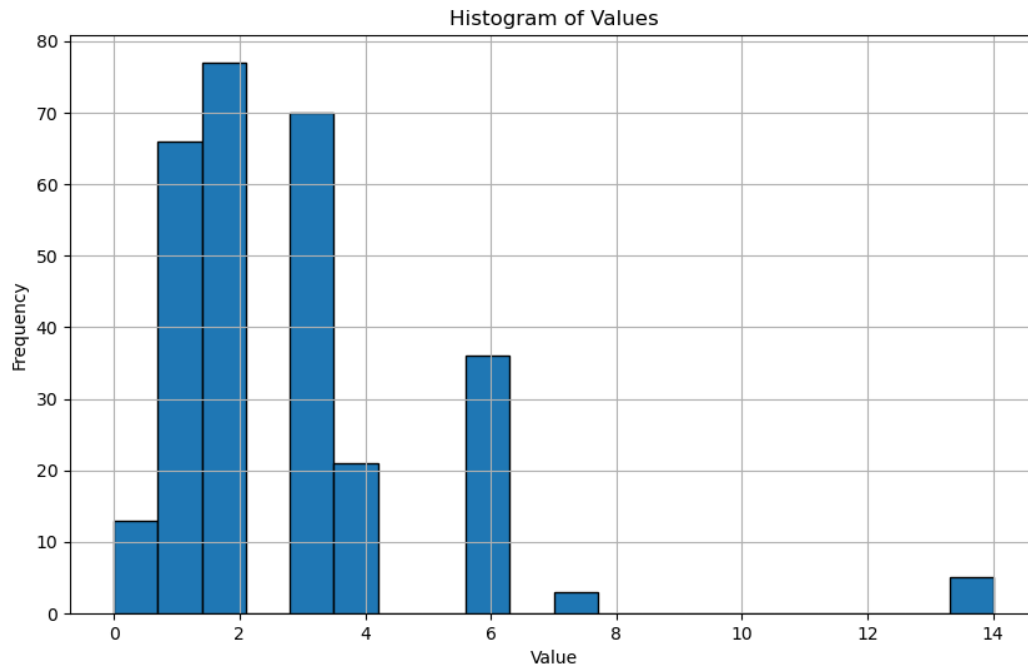
The researcher will ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of data by recruiting from a purposive focus group. Despite these limitations, trustworthy and concise data emerged from the participants. This study maintains rigorous quality assurance procedures which are outlined in the methodology chapter, ensuring data credibility and trustworthiness.

Quantitative Analysis

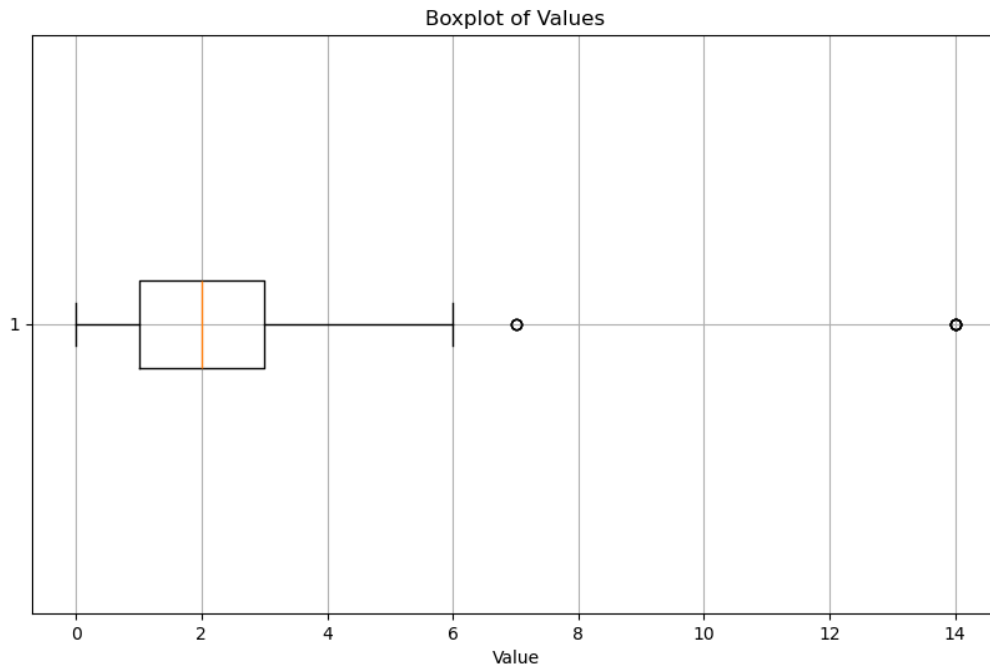
This study involved the collection of two types of data which are quantitative and qualitative. The triangulation of data involved the researcher integrating and interpreting data after reviewing the data analysis. The participant preliminary demographics are as follows for this study. A total of fourteen respondents responded to the survey. Of these 57% (n=8) were certified teachers and 43% (n=6) were assistant teachers. This diverse group of educators provided valuable insight on transformative learning and advocacy for DEI among South Carolina elementary school teachers. The mix of teachers and teachers provides a wider view of how DEI practices are perceived in different school roles.

The data analyzed in this study began with the use of Qualtrics to create and distribute research surveys. These surveys were posted on social media along with the researcher's website for reference. Statistical analysis was performed to create themes, patterns and demographics that correspond to the research questions. Once the researcher gathered all triangulated data sources the results were uploaded to Qualtrics. Due to transcription issues the researcher used Microsoft Co-Pilot to clean and analyze and files. The researcher was able to obtain descriptive data.

The assumptions of normality of distribution and equality of variance for the sample data were determined by an analysis of histograms and boxplots. Histograms help analysts understand data distribution, shape, and central tendency by displaying data points in intervals or bins. Their benefits include detecting irregularities, identifying skewness and kurtosis, evaluating the quality of the data, and allowing easy dataset comparisons (Pyne,2025). This analysis is provided by Excel Co-pilot descriptive statistics that display the data's range and potential outliers.



This histogram displays data concentration presenting around lower values with a median of 2.0. The data reflects that most respondents provided lower numerical values. The data analyzed appears to be right-skewed, meaning they have lower numerical values and fewer higher numerical values.



Both demographics confirm that data is concentrated around lower values with a median 2.0. The boxplot central line represents the mean value (2.0) which aligns with the histograms peak. The Whiskers extended to a minimum (0) and the maximum (14) values displaying the full data range. The presence of Outliers indicates the variability of the responses. Outliers are extreme values that stand out greatly from the overall pattern of values in a dataset or graph (Lemonaki,2021&2024). Further analysis of the outliers can bring insights into specific issues or areas that need to be re-examined. Overall research findings indicate respondents display a high percentage (77.78%) of positive responses regarding research surveys.

Qualitative Thematic Analysis

This chapter outlines the data analysis process employed in a qualitative study. The researcher utilized Qualtrics and an Excel spreadsheet to systematically organize and analyze the emerging categories, themes, and patterns derived from the highlighted transcripts. Based on the responses from fourteen participants, five significant thematic challenges pertaining to student advocacy were identified. Thematic analysis, a qualitative research method prevalent in the social sciences, is utilized to identify and present recurring patterns or themes within the data. This process entails meticulous reading and interpretation of the material to extract meaning and comprehend various subjects and interpretations (Energy Research & Social Science, 2023). The identified themes are as follows: Lack of Institutional Platforms, Inclusion and Misplacement of Special Education Students, Communication Barriers, Systematic Denial and Underestimation of Issues, and Lack of Inclusion in Activities.

Based upon data responses from fourteen participants, a thematic pattern response indicates that teachers face challenges in their classroom. Defining thematic analysis based on the visible responses to the question "What challenges have you encountered with student advocacy?" A qualitative thematic summary of the data is as follows:

Figure 1

Chart Thematic Results

Thematic Chart		
Theme	Description	Supporting Evidence / Participant Insights
Lack of Institutional Support	Students lack formal structures to express needs	“No platform to help students.”
Misplacement & Exclusion in Special Education	Students in special education are miscategorized or excluded.	Placed in general education without adequate resources.
Communication Barriers	Students struggle to effectively articulate concerns.	Difficulty “to find the right words.”
Systemic Denial of Issues	Staff minimize or disregard student concerns.	Staff often minimize or ignore problems, reducing chances for resolution.
Lack of Inclusion in Activities	Students are excluded from school activities	Linked to broader issues of marginalization and inequity.

Defining thematic analysis based on the visible responses to the question "What challenges have you encountered with student advocacy?", A qualitative thematic summary of the data is generated from data responses of fourteen participants. A thematic pattern response indicates teachers face challenges in their classroom. This study indicates that teachers face various challenges in their efforts to promote Diversity, Equity and Inclusion within classroom settings. The data collected from participants reflects interpersonal and structural challenges faced by students. These themes are comparable to Diversity Pedagogy Theory (DPT) as described by Sheets (2005) which integrates cognitive development, cultural identity and social interactions in the classroom environment. Further analysis indicates that there are significant barriers that begin with lack of support within the educational institution and structured platforms for student advocacy. This leaves students and teachers without resources that can promote transformative learning experiences in classrooms.

The researcher analyzed themes generated from research question four (RQ4), What challenges and barriers do teachers face in their efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion? The thematic analysis indicates teachers face several barriers and challenges in promoting DEI in the classroom. Researchers noted similarities in findings for questions regarding student's advocacy barriers and teachers promoting DEI. These findings indicate there is a need for teachers' advocacy and how these barriers can hinder transformative learning experiences.

Communication barriers also cause hinderance due to some students' inability to express their needs. When students are unable to express their concerns, effective advocacy becomes problematic. Teachers also express their concerns for Special Education students due to misidentification and misplacement in general education without support systems. These factors

can lead to exclusion and marginalization which are negative obstacles in student learning. Limited inclusion in school activities draws attention to more extensive concerns regarding social and academic marginalization. Another theme indicated that there are systemic issues such as staff disregarding or minimizing students' concerns. Addressing these barriers begins with teacher advocacy for structural reform and cultural enlightenment within schools to foster genuinely inclusive environments.

Interviews

Interviews provide unique insights into phenomena from the perspective of individuals, offering in-depth information that other methods for collecting primary data may not capture (Hecker & Kalpokas,2025). The researcher was able to obtain one interview that explores transformative learning DEI and teacher advocacy. The researcher used Zoom as a method to collect and analyze data. The respondent was able to elaborate on their feelings and ideas in response to the Zoom questions. The respondent was transparent about-facing challenges but also expressed positive experiences with student outcomes. The question, “*Do you incorporate DEI principles into your teaching practices?*” allowed the researcher to gain insight into teacher development strategies and classroom culture. These strategies are similar to Cultural Relevant Pedagogy, a theory created by Gloria Ladson Billings. A body of research has affirmed Ladson-Billings' conclusions—that the practices of culturally relevant teaching can lead to students, and especially students of color, having more academic success, increased engagement in the content, better attendance, and a stronger perception of themselves as capable learners (Will,2022).

Impact of Study

This research is designed for educators to understand the importance of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in the elementary school system in South Carolina. This research proposal will help uphold our rights as educators to pursue what is in our students' best interests. Educators should use their skills and expertise to create learning environments that support Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Creating an inclusive learning environment that models a diverse and creative curriculum develops transformative learning experiences. Transformative learning involves going beyond common knowledge and learning innovative techniques that reshape our lives. Researching how diversity and inclusiveness can improve our classroom environment is transformational. These experiences can maximize both teachers cultural and instructional experience's Students K-12 in the United States can benefit from these transformative learning experiences as a foundation for achieving successful outcomes in life.

The integration of Multicultural Education (MCE) has become a bridge to transformative learning experiences for both students and teachers. The assumption that all teachers are easily adaptable to cultural diversity is a misrepresentation of the real-life classroom environment. Teachers now more than ever must modify their lesson plans to accommodate a multicultural classroom. When there's a lack of proficient communication within the classroom the ability to form a bond of security and trust is lessened. Students must feel confident in their teacher's ability to communicate and interact so they can feel comfortable in their learning environment.

Multiculturalism is considered a comprehensive educational approach that reforms classroom structure, curriculum design and instructional practices (Parker,2019). Students in the United States K-12 benefit from curriculum reforms that focus on ensuring that all students

receive an equal and inclusive education. It is important to recognize the rapidly changing classroom environments in which our students function daily. The integration of multiculturalism gives students the freedom to learn in a diverse setting. The implementation of D.E.I in South Carolina promotes critical thinking, creating an onset of transformative teaching approaches.

This study allows teachers to provide their experiences with DEI so we can improve the quality of our educational system in South Carolina Elementary schools. Exploring the advocacy of DEI among elementary school teachers in S.C. encourages cultural awareness and transformative learning experiences for both teachers and students.

This study will prompt educators to examine and foster new techniques of teaching in diverse classrooms. “To be an agent of change, you must understand the process of change and provide both the catalyst and the support necessary for transformative learning” (Mezirow,1997). Exploring the advocacy of DEI among elementary teachers will challenge educators to critically reflect on their feelings, experiences, and teaching practices in diverse class settings. It is with transformative learning experiences educators can advocate with absolute confidence because they are becoming more highly skilled in the field of education.

While South Carolina legislation is challenging the implementation of DEI in our curriculums, educators will gain a deeper understanding of the needs of their class population. The experience of learning how to communicate and relate to diverse learners helps create a more cohesive society. Teachers can use this research as an opportunity to challenge personal biases that can cause barriers in their teaching methods. It is crucial that educators use this research as a transformative learning experience that can change curriculums, student development and enhance their teaching career.

Community Impact

According to research, the racial and ethnic diversity of U.S. public school students is projected to increase to 55 percent by 2027 (Zipdo,2023). These demographics support the pedagogy of how diversity and inclusion have transformed the framework of United States classrooms K-12. The researcher explored, “What Do Transformative Classroom Interactions Look Like? A Qualitative Case Study on Advocacy for Diversity Equity and Inclusion among South Carolina Elementary School Teachers” as a means to bring awareness to the condition of South Carolina classroom environments. Students depend on educators to provide them with an equal and quality education. It is important for all students to be able to learn in an inclusive environment that makes them feel secure and valued.

. Factors such as isolation, cultural bias, and teaching from an unfamiliar perspective can create barriers for students to have successful outcomes. The experience of learning how to communicate and relate to diverse learners helps create a more cohesive society. Acknowledging the need for teacher advocacy can potentially bridge the gaps between learning and culture. Transformative learning experiences such as these create a more cohesive and unbiased mindset amongst community members, encouraging support for marginalized citizens.

Conclusion

It is important to recognize the needs of our communities and in many cases, it starts with the children. Our educational system should continue to advocate for the educational and cultural needs of students. The study will hopefully generate an awareness of what tools are needed inside and out of the classroom for the long-term benefits of our society. DEI programs can have a huge positive impact on communities across the board. Research from this study indicates teachers need more support systems and resources to meet the needs of all students. Research has shown that diversity in our communities improves quality of life for the individual as well as for the overall population, for people of all races and income levels, both in the short term and far into the future (Squires,2023).

When teachers are supported by their administrations for their efforts to promote advanced cultural learning and equality, communities are strengthened economically and socially. This study was performed to bring awareness to the need for teacher advocacy platforms in South Carolina elementary schools. Communities can bridge gaps that diminish bias and social injustice which can ultimately advance South Carolina's positionality in the global community. This study was driven by the researcher's dedication to exploring how educators can create transformative learning experiences that positively impact students and society.

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