

NEW KNOWLEDGE

Creating Inclusive Learning Environments

# Creating Inclusive Learning Environments

## THE BIG PICTURE

Educators have recently paid more attention to aspects of students' identities that contribute to their sense of belonging. [A survey of more than 500 educators across the country conducted by the Education Week Research Center](#) found that most teachers believe that a sense of belonging is important to students' academic achievement. Researchers explain that students who sense that their school environment is designed for someone from a different cultural background may become disengaged or not realize their own potential. That feeling can be reinforced by factors such as a lack of teachers or learning materials that match the diversity of the students.

Educators have begun addressing student identity by working to foster inclusive learning environments for students of all races. However, they have yet to focus as much on fostering inclusiveness through a broader social justice lens and explicitly addressing gender identity and sexuality, aspects of students' identities that have caused many students to feel marginalized in school. As a [2015 survey by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network \(GLSEN\)](#) found, 75.8 percent of transgender students across the nation feel unsafe at school because of their gender identity. Transgender students were also more likely than cisgender gay, lesbian, and bisexual students to be targeted for bullying.

Some states have passed legislation that aims to foster greater inclusiveness in terms of gender identity and sexuality. The state of California, for example, passed the California Healthy Youth Act in 2016. The Act requires all California public schools to teach students about gender expression and gender stereotypes. Additionally, [California Governor Jerry Brown recently signed Bill SB179](#), which will allow state residents who do not identify as male or female to indicate a third "non-binary" gender option on their driver's licenses and birth certificates.

While legislation such as this contributes to students' sense of belonging and confidence in their identities, students' feelings of belonging in the classroom ultimately stem from their daily interactions with teachers. However, many teachers across the nation have found it difficult to foster students' sense of belonging, whether the belonging pertains to race, gender identity, sexuality or any other aspects of students' identities. More than 4 in 10 teachers surveyed in the *Education Week* survey noted above said that it is challenging to address "concerns of students who feel that they might be judged negatively based on their identity," and nearly half of teachers reported that "finding strategies to help students who are concerned about fitting in" is challenging.

## NEW UEI KNOWLEDGE

Issues of race, class, and culture have always been central to the [University of Chicago's Urban Teacher Education Program](#) (UChicago UTEP). However, this year, UChicago UTEP has incorporated gender identity and sexuality into its curriculum to prepare teacher candidates to better support LGBTQ students and their family members. The curriculum has been designed to raise the consciousness of all of UTEP's teacher candidates, especially those who do not identify as LGBTQ. UTEP has its students and graduates engage in inquiry groups, workshops, and coursework to consider the ways in which they can create classrooms that are inclusive and challenge norms related to the marginalization of members of the LGBTQ community.

In designing this curriculum, UTEP partnered with LGBTQ educational organizations, such as Illinois Safe Space and the University of Chicago's LGBTQ Student Life office, to learn more about terminology, respectful norms, and barriers LGBTQ students have experienced. UTEP has done this to recognize and welcome the experiences of LGBTQ youth and families, better understand how traditional classroom communities can be improved and, ultimately, challenge the exclusion and intolerance of those who identify as LGBTQ.

UTEP staff members have also engaged in their own inquiry in this area by partnering with experts from the University of Chicago and other organizations.

UTEP's focus on LGBTQ identities reflects its historic focus on fostering inclusiveness through a deep understanding of and appreciation for diverse identities and community contexts. Over the years, many teacher candidates have come into the UTEP program with the presumption that low-income communities are 'broken,' the schools in those communities are 'failing,' and that the students need 'saving.' UTEP's curriculum, therefore, focuses on helping teacher candidates unlearn some of these deficit perspectives and come to view their students, families, and communities from an asset-based perspective.

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UTEP builds this curriculum by considering how to listen to, learn with, and stand up for members of the low-income school communities in which UTEP graduates go on to teach. To do this, UTEP collaborates with external community organizations and inquiry groups, as referenced above, to craft the curriculum from the standpoint of members of those communities. This focus on identity work matters for creating classroom communities where students feel seen, included, known, cared for, and respected.

## NEW DEVELOPMENTS

More teacher preparation and development programs across the country are adopting a social justice focus. The Rutgers University Graduate School of Education recently launched its [Urban Social Justice Teacher Preparation Program](#), aiming to better prepare candidates to engage with students from diverse backgrounds. In a similar vein, the Teachers College at Columbia University held an institute devoted to fostering dialogue among educators on how to build culturally relevant pedagogy, particularly through abolishing preconceptions of different cultures. These programs have focused more on training educators to foster inclusive, equitable learning environments. As stated above though, training regarding gender identity and sexuality, in particular, has just begun to emerge.

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