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## A Literature Review of Multicultural Education Practices to Support Marginalized Communities

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**A Literature Review of Multicultural Education Practices to Support Marginalized  
Communities**

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## **A Literature Review of Multicultural Education Practices to Support Marginalized Communities**

The United States of America is often referred to as a “melting pot,” a well-intentioned but misinformed analogy describing a land characterized by immigration and the coming together of many different nationalities and cultures into one place. By using the term “melting pot,” we imply that individuals from diverse backgrounds must assimilate, or “melt” together in order to become one American culture. To combat this, scholars have proposed a new metaphor, in which we compare the United States to a “salad bowl.” This recognizes that, while people who have immigrated and descended from immigrants from all around the world are together in this country, these differences should be embraced and celebrated, and not melted away. There is no one American culture, but rather, America is an amalgamation of all the cultures that joined each other on this land. (Berray, 2019)

The “salad bowl” metaphor is perhaps most visible in the everyday public-school classroom. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, approximately 48% of students enrolled in public school in the fall of 2017 were white (“Racial/Ethnic Enrollment”, 2021). This means that 52% of enrolled students were Black/African American, Hispanic, Asian American Pacific Islander, Native American/Indigenous, or two or more races (“Racial/Ethnic Enrollment”, 2021). This does not even begin to consider other intersectional factors that affect students, such as socioeconomic status, gender identity, sexual orientation, and religion or spirituality. Today’s classrooms are the most diverse and expansive that they have ever been when we look at the student population, but this is not yet reflected in public school teachers. The overwhelming majority, about 79%, of teachers are white, 76% are female, and most are of middle-class status (“Characteristics of Public School Teachers”, 2021). This creates

what is known as a “diversity gap” between students and teachers, as children are spending their most formative years under the supervision of teachers who are not representative of their own identities.

When teachers are aptly trained to be culturally competent, it leads to better classroom outcomes for teachers, and therefore for their students. Furthermore, when culturally competent teachers and schools make efforts to directly and specifically support culturally diverse students who are members of marginalized communities, the diversity and achievement gaps begin to close. This literature review seeks to provide an overview of multicultural education and its benefits, as well as to make precise recommendations for supporting students from two marginalized communities (students of color and the LGBTQ+ community) based on current research.

## **Overview of Multicultural Education and Cultural Competency**

### **Defining Key Terms**

#### ***Multicultural Education***

Before we can begin to analyze multicultural education and cultural competency and their effects on teachers, students, and schools, we must first define the terms. Multicultural education is a “comprehensive school reform process that aims to provide a basic standard of education for all students and one in which racism and segregation in all its manifestations is rejected and in which the diversity of society members is supported” (Tonbuloglu, 2016, p. 2). In educational institutions that practice and prioritize multicultural education, “students of different genders, races, ethnic and cultural backgrounds” are “afforded the same opportunity of success in education” (Tonbuloglu, 2016, p. 2). The goals of multicultural education can be summarized as “to guarantee equality of opportunity, to solve the problems arising from cultural conflicts, and

to support students in developing empathy so as to recognize their mutual cultures and in doing so, increase their academic success” (Tonbuloglu, 2016, p. 2). Multicultural education is holistic in nature, focusing on students’ identities and academics and their place in the broader world in and outside of school, and therefore allowing “the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and behaviors that will allow students to participate in the democratic society” (Tonbuloglu, 2016, p. 3). This can manifest in the classroom in a variety of ways, so long as teachers are centering the experiences and perspectives of students from diverse populations in their instruction. For example, teachers can recognize a variety of cultural festivals and holidays in their classroom, strategically plan lessons that are inclusive of multiple viewpoints (especially those from marginalized communities), and can reflect diverse historical and contemporary individuals in their classroom design and décor. These practices and principles comprise multicultural education.

### ***Cultural Competency***

One crucial prerequisite for a multicultural classroom is a culturally competent teacher. Cultural competence is “increasingly needed to teach effectively in schools today,” and “the achievement gaps that persist between white and non-white students has called greater attention to the need for schools to provide culturally relevant teaching and learning so that all children succeed” (Gutentag, 2018, p. 437). Cultural competency is defined as “an individual’s worldview” and their “capacity to shift cultural perspective and adapt behavior to cultural commonalities and differences” (Gutentag, 2018, p. 438). Just as multicultural education is holistic in nature, cultural competency is “developmental in nature” in that it recognizes that “one’s worldview can change dynamically over time through experiences and reflective learning,” and that learning can come from “formal education, non-formal learning, and

experiences combined with reflection about cultural perspective and ways of being” (Gutentag, 2018, p. 438). The research makes it abundantly clear that it is more important than ever before that teachers be culturally competent, regardless of how they receive that training.

## **Benefits for Teachers**

### ***Increased Sense of Self-Efficacy***

As previously indicated, it is inevitable that today’s teachers will have a diverse classroom in which many identities different from their own will be represented. This makes them the “primary actors that must negotiate the diversity of the school on a daily basis” (Gutentag, 2018, p. 408). Teachers in Western society are becoming increasingly aware of their role in fostering cultural diversity in the classroom, and they are often evaluated on their ability to do so, be it by their peers, their administration, or even by themselves. This evaluation often becomes part of a teacher’s assessment of their effectiveness in their career, or their self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is generally defined as a “belief in one’s own ability to execute the tasks required by one’s job,” and teacher self-efficacy is more specifically defined as, “the individual’s beliefs in his or her capabilities to perform specific teaching tasks at a specified level of quality in a specified situation” (Gutentag, 2018, p. 410). A teacher’s level of self-efficacy is related to their “classroom behavior, openness to new ideas, attitudes toward teaching, student achievement, and affective growth” (Gutentag, 2018, p. 410). Therefore, the higher a teacher’s self-efficacy, the better their classroom demeanor, the better they feel about their job, and the better their and their students’ achievement will be. However, when a teacher is presented with a learner who is “different - linguistically, socially, and culturally,” their “mainstream teaching practices” may be challenged (Gutentag, 2018, p. 410). If a teacher does a poor job teaching a diverse learner, they may be judged to have a “lack of knowledge, skill, and motivation to cope with



cultural diversity” (Gutentag, 2018, p. 410). This can in turn cause a decrease in self-efficacy, thus a further decrease in teacher and student achievement. Cultural competency training assists teachers in knowing how to relate to and teach students of various backgrounds and identities, which can ultimately give them a higher sense of self-efficacy, therefore leading to a better turnout for all involved.

### ***Less Risk of Burnout***

When issues with a career in education are discussed, burnout is one of the first things that comes to mind. Burnout is defined as “a psychological syndrome arising in response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job,” and it leads to “overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism and detachment from the job, and a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment” (Gutentag, 2018, p. 410). More specifically, teacher burnout is characterized by “feelings of frustration, discouragement from work, and a desire to quit teaching” (Gutentag, 2018, p. 410). It is often a very negative experience, that “can lead to both mental and physical distress and can impair the quality of teachers’ working lives, teaching, and relationship with students” (Gutentag, 2018, p. 410). Burnout is already something that we would like to avoid for teachers for these reasons, and we would especially like to avoid it in places with teacher shortages like the United States. Teachers who are unprepared for today’s classrooms may face a distinct type of burnout known as “diversity-related burnout,” which is defined as “the extent to which the teacher’s personal and professional well-being is negatively affected by daily coping with a culturally heterogeneous student body” (Gutentag, 2018, p. 410). In the circumstances of diversity-related burnout, it is crucial to realize that classroom diversity is not the cause of the burnout, but rather, it is the teacher’s approach to that diversity. One study found that Israeli teachers that held assimilative views towards teaching diverse students, thus taking the “melting

pot” stance, had higher rates of diversity-related burnout than teachers who took on a more pluralistic attitude, much like the “salad bowl” analogy (Gutentag, 2018). The research makes it clear that pre-service and practicing teachers who have developed their cultural competency and are prepared to embrace diversity and foster inclusion in their classrooms are at a significantly lessened risk of diversity-related burnout, and therefore at less risk of burnout altogether. So, in this era where it is almost as important to keep teachers in the classroom as it is to effectively teach the students in those classrooms, cultural competency training and preparations for multicultural education can contribute to higher success rates for teachers and therefore for students.

### **Why Multicultural Education?**

Pre-service and practicing teachers who are culturally competent can successfully incorporate multicultural education and culturally responsive pedagogy into their teaching style, which research clearly shows is beneficial for all students, regardless of majority or minoritized status.

### ***Teachers Lacking Cultural Competency***

When teachers do not receive training in cultural competency, they tend to perceive “values, beliefs, and events in standard terms and with regard (principally) to what they know themselves” (Tonbuloglu, 2016, p. 4). This leads to them misunderstanding “the ethnic, social, racial, or linguistic diversities of their students,” and “knowing or unknowingly [applying] the wrong educational techniques in their classroom” (Tonbuloglu, 2016, p. 4). So, essentially, teachers who are not culturally competent are more likely to utilize teaching strategies that are not inclusive of all their students, which can contribute to the achievement gap we know exists for students from diverse backgrounds both individually and societally. This is a serious

problem, because “few teachers are provided with the skills to become true practitioners of multicultural education, either prior to or during their professional service,” and “the success of formal education is connected to the attitude and professional preparedness of the teacher himself” (Tonbuloglu, 2016, p. 5, 4). Essentially, students’ experiences in school are directly correlated to their teachers’ dispositions and pedagogical knowledge, and the vast majority of teachers are not being taught or prepared for the highly diverse classrooms waiting for them in today’s schools. So, it is crucial that teacher preparation programs along with professional development start to encourage teachers “to employ cultural sensitivity strategies and ensure quality of opportunity so as to ensure the academic success and personal development of all students” (Tonbuloglu, 2016, p. 4). This, as has been previously discussed and will be elaborated on even further in coming sections, leads to better outcomes for all teachers and for all students.

### *Better Experiences for All Students*

Often, when people hear the phrases “multicultural education” or “culturally responsive pedagogy,” they assume that these are teaching strategies designed specifically for students from diverse backgrounds, sometimes even going as far as to assume that students from majority groups are left out when these methods are implemented. Of course, we already know that students from diverse backgrounds do benefit greatly from multicultural education, but the reality is that culturally responsive education is beneficial for all students, regardless of majority or minoritized status. Multicultural education is “a form of education that champions freedom” for all, and from it:

All students from a diversity of cultural and ethnic backgrounds including white, male and middle-class students can gain knowledge, skills, and attitudes that can help them to

contribute to the future of their own nation and the planet in a productive manner.

(Tonbuloglu, 2016, p. 3)

One of the primary goals of K-12 education is to prepare students for prosperous lives outside of school, and multicultural education contributes to this goal in many ways. Students who have multicultural education experiences “acquire positive traits such as the ability to empathize, and the showing of respect and tolerance to others,” and they gain “deeper insights into knowledge and the wider world” (Tonbuloglu, 2016, p. 3). Ultimately, there are no students that proper multicultural education is not advantageous for, and culturally competent teachers are able to provide that multicultural education to propel their students forward in a diverse world.

### **Recommendations for Supporting Students from Two Marginalized Communities**

#### **Justification of Focus**

The phrase “marginalized communities” is all-encompassing and covers any and all communities that are discriminated against for their backgrounds and identities. This includes people of color, members of the LGBTQ+ community, people of marginalized faiths, non-Native English speakers, immigrants, those living in poverty and with low socioeconomic statuses, people with disabilities, and others. This literature review focuses primarily on people of color and the LGBTQ+ community for several reasons. The first are time and resource limitations, as it would take many years and many libraries to address the research for supporting every marginalized community in schools. Some communities also fall into different scopes of the education field, such as students with disabilities in the special education discipline. Legislation regarding people of color and the LGBTQ+ community are also “hot topics” in current society, and there is strong potential for these communities to be immediately physically, mentally, and emotionally harmed if their needs go continually unaddressed. Thus, the following section of this

review concentrates on students of color and students who are members of the LGBTQ+ community.

### **Students of Color**

Merriam-Webster defines a person of color as “a person who is of a race other than white or who is of mixed race” (Merriam-Webster, Person of color. n.d.). The phrase “students of color” refers to students of any race or ethnicity other than white European. This includes Black and African American, Latine/a/o, Native and Indigenous, and Asian American Pacific Islander students, among others. Students of color are subject to many barriers to academic achievement and discriminatory educational practices that white students are not, and schools have a responsibility to take action to provide students of color with equal opportunity and equitable education experiences. Recommendations for teachers and institutions are diminishing disproportionality in discipline and special education referrals, increasing access to advanced academic material, and involving family and affirming culture in the classroom.

#### ***Diminishing Disproportionality in Discipline and Special Education Referrals***

It is a long-recognized and well-studied issue that students of color are disproportionately disciplined in United States schools. As emphasized in the article “Vulnerable Decision Points for Disproportionate Office Discipline Referrals: Comparisons of Discipline for African American and White Elementary School Students,” “racial disparities in rates of exclusionary discipline for students of color have been well documented, with differences most pronounced for African American students” (Smolkowski et. al., 2016, p. 178). Approximately ten years ago, during the 2011-2012 school year, out-of-school suspension was used as a punishment for “8% of African American elementary students and 23% of African American secondary students” in comparison to only “2% of White elementary students and 7% of White secondary students”

(Smolkowski et. al., 2016, p. 178). There are two primary types of infractions that students are disciplined for: those objective and those subjective in nature. Objective violations do not require a decision on the part of the teacher or administration, because there is no ambiguity in their definition. These are behaviors like smoking on school grounds. On the other hand, subjective violations do require the discipliner to make a decision about whether or not the student should be punished and at what level. These include actions such as disrespectful comments and not paying attention during lessons. Research has shown that in the case of these subjective and discretionary behaviors, teachers and school staff are more likely to discipline students of color, and they “may be more likely to overreact to minor behavior by African American students by classifying it as a more severe (major) incident” (Smolkowski et. al., 2016, p. 180). Due to this, African American students have a “31% higher likelihood than white students of being disciplined for discretionary violations” (Smolkowski et. al., 2016, p. 180). It is clear both theoretically and in practice that students of color are unfairly disciplined in comparison to their white peers, and diminishing this disproportionality in discipline can be one of the first steps to better supporting their success and academic achievement.

The literature makes several suggestions for reducing the amount of unfair and unjust discipline that students of color are subject to. The first is to improve clarity of the definitions of subjective infractions. By providing definitions of behaviors like “defiance” and “disrespect” that “reduce ambiguity as much as possible,” administration could “attenuate the influence of implicit bias on discipline decisions” (Smolkowski et. al., 2016, p. 192). Alongside this, educators should be given specific guidelines as to what behaviors necessitate a minor office discipline referral versus a major office discipline referral, or no office discipline referral at all (Smolkowski et. al., 2016). By putting discrete expectations and restrictions on what teachers can discipline students

for and what level they can do so, students of all identities will receive more proportionate discipline. Teachers also need to be trained to recognize their Vulnerable Decisions Points (VDPs). VDPs are defined as “the conditions under which racial bias is most likely to influence decisions in the discipline context” (Smolkowski et. al., 2016, p. 178-179). Teachers who know when their VDPs are can “identify specific decisions that are vulnerable to bias and use alternative responses” that do not “perpetuate disproportionality” (Smolkowski et. al., 2016, p. 192). Those alternative responses should be “more instructional than exclusionary, such as teaching or reteaching expectations or visibly modeling cooldown strategies for students” (Smolkowski et. al., 2016, p. 192). Furthermore, administrators should “be encouraged to use more instructional or restorative alternatives to suspension,” and they should provide teachers with professional development to help them “identify and counteract their own VDPs” (Smolkowski et. al., 2016, p. 192). After disciplinary procedures have been established in a way that promotes equity, schools should ultimately start taking preventive measures, like “proactively teaching classroom routines, using acknowledgement systems equitably, and enhancing the level of student engagement in classroom instruction” to lessen the amount of discipline that must occur in the first place (Smolkowski et. al., 2016, p. 192).

In addition to disproportionality in discipline and office referrals, students of color are also overrepresented in special education referrals and programs. Research demonstrates that “many African American students are inappropriately referred for and placed into special education programs,” and that “school districts typically provide no explanation for placing large numbers of such students into special education classrooms” (Craft & Howley, 2018, p. 3). This is a problem that is getting progressively worse, as “over the last 20 years, the percentage of African American students identified as having disabilities and subsequently placed into special

education programs has increased steadily” (Craft & Howley, 2018, p. 3). African American students being overrepresented in the special education classroom might not be so large of an issue if these classrooms were actually benefitting student achievement levels and providing students with the services they need, but, in reality, special education programs often limit student opportunity and lead to stigmatization. Because African American students are being improperly placed in special education programs, and those programs are providing the students with a subpar educational experience, it has become yet another “insidious form of segregation,” and another way that schools “contribute directly and indirectly to institutional racism” (Craft & Howley, 2018, p. 4-5).

There are many causes that lead to students of color being referred to special education programs. One such cause is culturally mismatched classrooms, “where African American students receive their education primarily from White teachers,” who “often make assumptions about the motivation and academic ability of African American and other diverse students” (Craft & Howley, 2018, p. 7). These assumptions may automatically lead to a special education referral, or they may cause teachers to provide students of color with less thorough instruction and classroom support. Then, when teachers see those students underperforming, “they may incorrectly assume that the below-level performance results from some type of inherent learning disability rather than from inadequate prior instruction” (Craft & Howley, 2018, p. 6). So, students of color end up in a cycle where their teachers immediately determine that they are incapable of succeeding in the general classroom environment, give those students a subpar experience in the classroom, and then refer them to special education where it is once again assumed that they cannot succeed in the classroom and the process starts all over again. What is perhaps most important to note, though, is that analyses of special education referrals for



students of color have shown that many students who are given those referrals have recently been through a significant traumatic event in their life. Educators either did not know about or ignored the students' life events, and "concluded that students had learning disabilities," when in reality they were observing "students' tumultuous reactions to the traumatic events in their lives" (Craft & Howley, 2018, p. 23). Later in students' education careers, these events that led to their special education placement had no "bearing on placement decisions, education plans for students, or eventual decisions regarding whether the student should be retained in a special education program or returned to the general education mainstream" (Craft & Howley, 2018, p. 18). Teachers who are referring students of color to special education are not doing so for the sake of student success, nor are they empathizing with or even considering the impact of a student's outside life on their life inside the classroom. This inattentiveness and unjustified segregation have significant implications for pedagogical reform.

Students of color referred to special education programs have adverse experiences in those programs. The special education classroom requires students "to tolerate instruction that is slow-paced and often oriented toward memorization rather than accelerated and oriented toward problem solving and critical thinking" (Craft & Howley, 2018, p. 6). African American students in special education programs experience "teachers' inattentiveness and willingness to abandon efforts to instruct them as unfair and discriminatory forms of treatment," and they see their "teachers' judgements about their academic capabilities as inaccurate" (Craft & Howley, 2018, p. 19). Therefore, students are left feeling rejected and unconfident in their own capacity for learning because of the actions of school personnel. They believe that they are "restricted, resegregated, and denied an appropriate education," and report asking, "either their parents or their teachers to help them get out of the special education program and go back to the general

education classroom,” but in more cases than not, “the adults were unwilling or unable to help them” (Craft & Howley, 2018, p. 20). Students’ perceptions about their unfair educational experiences in special education programs are proven correct by research, and that unfair outcome is more likely to happen to students of color than it is to white students. To combat this, teachers need to be made aware of their biases against these students and the results of those biases. Teachers also need to be trained in trauma-invested education and know how to be “sufficiently attentive to students’ circumstances to differentiate between trauma-related adjustment difficulties and persistent emotional disturbances” (Craft & Howley, 2018, p. 28). Any staff member that interacts with children in schools needs to be “sufficiently well integrated into the network of community service agencies to be able to make referrals for appropriate psychological services” (Craft & Howley, 2018, p. 28). By decreasing the amount of inapposite disciplinary actions and special education placements that students of color are subjected to, schools can work towards becoming places that genuinely offer equal opportunity and equitable education to all.

### ***Increasing Access to Advanced Academic Material***

Ceasing to inappropriately place students of color into special education programs is only the first step to closing the gap between their educational experiences and those of their white peers. Marginalized students also need better access to advanced academic material. Enrollment data from public schools demonstrates that “Latino and African American students are underrepresented in AP [Advanced Placement] courses nationwide, and those who enrolled in AP courses and completed the AP examinations scored significantly lower than Caucasian students” (Ohrt et. al., 2009, p. 59). This comes as no surprise, as the “discrepancies support the well-documented academic achievement gap between African American students and their

Caucasian peers,” as well as “reaffirm the evidence of barriers preventing equity in access to higher education for Latino and African American students” (Ohrt et. al., 2009, p. 59). Schools need to be working “to identify barriers affecting access to higher-level courses,” and designing “interventions to address these barriers” (Ohrt et. al., 2009, p. 59). One such intervention is for institutions to “develop a program to identify, track, prepare, and support qualified Latino and African American students for the AP course curriculum” (Ohrt et. al., 2009, 60). Once the program is in place, school staff can address the frequent “lack of a positive role model with experience in higher education” that occurs for students of color by providing them with mentors to “promote the career and self-efficacy of Latino and African American students” (Ohrt et. al., 2009, p. 61). A program that boosts students of color’s access to higher-level academic material, that is supported by “administration, faculty, and support staff,” can transform “the system from one that overlooked the underrepresented groups to one that encourages and supports these students in aspiring for the most rigorous curriculum” (Ohrt et. al., 2009, p. 62-63). Then, with success in Advanced Placement and other academically challenging courses, students of color can advance towards higher goals for their future education, in high school, college, and beyond.

### ***Involving Family and Affirming Culture in the Classroom***

Studies have shown that teachers hold various negative stereotypes about families and parents of color and their involvement, or perceived lack thereof, in the academic activities of students of color. As Jahnelle A. Cunningham states, it is not actually a lack of involvement that teachers are perceiving, but rather, they are overlooking or even ignoring the involvement of parents of color because it is “not directly tied to school activities” (2021, p. 28). The involvement of parents of color is often focused not only on “children’s academic and future career prospects,” but also on “children’s safety; beyond the typical parental worries of their

child's well-being" (Cunningham, 2021, p. 37). This is because they "must also teach their children about racism and discrimination" (Cunningham, 2021, p. 37). Cunningham's study on African American involvement in students' mathematics education gives us valuable insight into how to support students of color in all classrooms across all subjects. Cunningham chose to do this study because "students' mathematical identities do not develop in isolation but rather are co-constructed in the context of other salient identities, such as race, gender, and social class," and thus, "messages students receive about mathematics, and other social constructs such as race, carry implications for how they perceive their mathematical abilities relative to others" (2021, p. 25-26). The concept of mathematical and academic identity formation has been well-known in the literature for a long time, but many students of color are still being taught "with little attention paid to their identify formation," and in classrooms "void of context and cultural relevance" for them (Cunningham, 2021, p. 26). Subsequently, their academic identity development and achievement are stifled, and they "lose the opportunity to draw mathematical connections to their everyday lives, including understanding how to use mathematics to critique and challenge social inequalities" (Cunningham, 2021, p. 26). This means that teachers need to teach mathematics and all other subjects with "curriculum and pedagogy" that center "the history and culture of Black children" and students of color, and they must do so in a way that does not present students' backgrounds and culture in a negative or monolithic light" (Cunningham, 2021, p. 26). One way that educators can do this is to seek the guidance of students of color's parents. Cunningham tells us that:

Black parents possess a wealth of experiential knowledge—including knowledge of what it means to be a Black student in a mathematics classroom as well as what it means to be Black in America broadly— that makes them uniquely positioned to foster their

children’s mathematical identities,” and similar can be said for parents of other identities. (2021, p. 26)

Thus, “teachers can, and should, use Black parents as a guide to model meaningful mathematics curriculum and pedagogical practices that support Black children’s mathematical identities,” and should do the same across other academic subjects (Cunningham, 2021, p. 26). Once teachers have built rapport with parents “by showing that they too are interested in their community-based knowledge,” they can teach “with attention to social justice, student culture, and community-based/informal [mathematical] knowledge” (Cunningham, 2021, p. 26, 38). Students of color need and deserve to be taught in a way that is affirming to their culture and background, and educators can involve students’ parents in order to do so.

### **LGBTQ+ Students**

“LGBTQ” is an acronym or abbreviation for “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning” (Merriam-Webster, LGBTQ. n.d.). In this text, the acronym will be used along with a “+” to denote all students and individuals who identify as a part of the LGBTQ+ community, regardless of if they fit into those five specific categories in the original definition. Like students of color, LGBTQ+ students of all races and ethnicities are victims of various obstacles to academic and social achievement that their heterosexual, cisgender peers do not face, and schools have a similar responsibility to work towards diminishing these obstacles and yielding an environment that is safe for students of all sexual orientations and gender identities. Suggestions, based on research, for educators who wish to support LGBTQ+ students are to address the disproportionate bullying they experience, take a social justice approach, and focus on students’ physical, mental, and social health.

### *Address Bullying of LGBTQ+ Students*

Most educators and school staff know that “bullying of youth is a serious public health problem and a major risk factor for poor physical, mental, and social health” (Reisner et. al., 2020, p. 408). In fact, “approximately 30% of US youth are involved in bullying as a bully, target, or both” (Reisner et. al., 2020, p. 408). What many educators may not know, however, is that “LGBTQ youth disproportionately experience bullying relative to their non-LGBTQ peers, including verbal, physical, and cyber bullying, leading to physical injury, psychological distress, and even suicide” (Reisner et. al., 2020, p. 408). Bullying can be defined as “aggressive behavior or intentional harm-doing by peers that is carried out repeatedly and involves an imbalance of power, either actual or perceived, between the victim and the bully” (Reisner et. al., 2020, p. 408). This is a major problem in schools for all students, and it is affecting LGBTQ+ children in even stronger and more dangerous ways than it is their heterosexual, cisgender peers. This is partly because LGBTQ+ youth are simply experiencing more bullying than their peers, and it is also due to the fact that “the bullying LGBTQ youth endure is accompanied by limited and/or restricted access to culturally competent health services inside and outside of schools” (Reisner et. al., 2020, p. 409). So, LGBTQ+ students are being bullied in school, and they do not have resources in their schools to help with the bullying they are experiencing. This is an issue that is beginning to be recognized in research, as “the prevalence and consequences of LGBTQ-related bullying are increasingly well-understood,” but, “successful efforts to intervene on these disparities are lagging” (Reisner et. al., 2020, p. 409). In response to this, “the US National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) and the American Public Health Association (APHA) have called for the development of innovative strategies to address LGBTQ bullying,” and it is time that schools take action to do so (Reisner et. al., 2020, p. 409). Before

actually implementing any strategies to combat LGBTQ+ bullying, teachers and institutions must understand the various levels at which the bullying must be addressed from. The first is societal stigma, as homophobia and transphobia extend far beyond the school environment and affect LGBTQ+ individuals in all places and spaces where they live life (Reisner et. al., 2020). The next levels are the organizational cultures and interpersonal systems that exist in schools and how those cultures and systems work to oppress the LGBTQ+ community (Reisner et. al., 2020). Finally, the individual-level characteristics of all parties involved in bullying incidents must be considered. This includes personal knowledge about and attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community, as well as intersectional backgrounds and identities (Reisner et. al., 2020). Once all these factors have been recognized, educators can begin the practical work. The first step is for teachers and school staff to “educate themselves or attend formal trainings” in order to “increase knowledge, improve skills, and change attitudes toward LGBTQ topics” (Reisner et. al., 2020, p. 411, 418). They should listen to and learn from the stories and experiences of LGBTQ+ students when students are willing to share, but they should not rely on those students for all the information on how to support them (Reisner et. al., 2020). The next step is for “more representation of these identities in school staff” (Reisner et. al., 2020, p. 418). Decreasing the bullying that students from marginalized communities face requires schools to “invest in staff that is diverse in race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity,” so that students feel represented in their school environment and have somebody to go to who can empathize with the dynamic of the bullying they are experiencing (Reisner et. al., 2020, p. 419). After changes at the teacher and staff level have been made, administrative professionals must implement “clear and consistent reporting protocols and policies for bullying incidents,” and other structural interventions that give school staff direct instructions for what to do when LGBTQ+ bullying

occurs, as well as LGBTQ+ students a clear idea of what will happen when they do tell their teachers about the bullying (Reisner et. al., 2020, p. 419). By addressing the disproportionate bullying that LGBTQ+ students experience at the student, staff, and administrative level, schools can “demonstrate that LGBTQ students are a priority and take a firm stance against bullying” (Reisner et. al., 2020, p. 419).

### ***Take a Social Justice Approach and Focus on LGBTQ+ Student Health***

Taking a social justice approach to the classroom and school environment can be beneficial for all students, and particularly those who are members of marginalized communities. It is especially advantageous for students who are LGBTQ+, because “there is scant research related to supporting LGBTQ students in preK–12 schools,” but, “there are likely very few, if any, goals shared by social justice researchers that do not overlap with the goals of researchers who focus specifically on LGBTQ youth” (Shriberg & Baker, 2019, p. 90). Furthermore, the research that is already out there shows “evidence that children in minoritized groups, in this case students who are LGBTQ, can be disproportionately harmed by educational practice” (Shriberg & Baker, 2019, p. 91). This is because “power differentials will always exist, and there is a danger that those in privileged positions—for example, heterosexual adults—will use their power, either intentionally or unintentionally, to harm others,” but by taking a social justice approach, we can “address these injustices” through “interpersonal, educational, and/or advocacy efforts” (Shriberg & Baker, 2019, p. 90).

There are a variety of definitions of social justice, but a categorical perspective is often taken when applying the concepts to education. The two most prominent categories are distributive and procedural justice (Shriberg & Baker, 2019, p. 89). Distributive justice “relates to how resources are allocated,” and in the context of education, it focuses specifically on



“resource allocation related to primary, secondary, and higher education students” (Shriberg & Baker, 2019, p. 89). On the other hand, procedural justice is “closely tied to equity,” and “relates to how decisions are made, who makes these decisions, and how people and groups of people treat one another” (Shriberg & Baker, 2019, p. 89). In the context of education, procedural justice and injustice are tied “directly to elements of cultural diversity, power, and privilege” (Shriberg & Baker, 2019, p. 89). The marginalization of and discrimination against LGBTQ+ students in schools falls into both of these categories. By “neglecting to address homophobic bullying” procedural justice is violated, and not properly allocating resources that allow “formal policies toward schools being safe spaces for students who are LGBTQ” to be enacted is a violation of distributive justice (Shriberg & Baker, 2019, p. 89). In practice, supporting LGBTQ+ students through a social justice approach can be done through addressing the requirements listed in the United Nations “Rights of the Child,” which are as follows:

Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child speaks to every child’s right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health, Article 28 provides a right to an education, Article 17 requires that children have access to information and materials from a diversity of national and international sources (particularly sources aimed at the promotion of one’s social, spiritual, and moral well-being and physical and mental health), and Article 14 provides children the right of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion (The United Nations, 1989). While not widely discussed in the United States, a child rights perspective can be a framework that binds social justice research and research specifically related to LGBTQ youth. (Shriberg & Baker, 2019, p. 91)

These articles lend themselves to a strong focus on student health. Research has shown that “exposure to sex education was associated with poorer outcomes (more sexual partners,

increased pregnancy rates) for sexual minority women, but not for their heterosexual peers,” which means that there is a need for procedures to be updated and resources to be allocated to design sex education that reflects “the full scope of knowledge available and for such comprehensive programs to be provided at a younger age than is typically done” (Shriberg & Baker, 2019, p. 91). Next, studies have also shown that “LGBTQ students, particularly males, are less likely to engage in physical activities or join athletic teams due to their unsafe environments where harassment is prevalent and unchallenged by peers and educators” (Shriberg & Baker, 2019, p. 92). So, it is necessary for school mental health professionals, classroom teachers, and physical education teachers to “reduce stigma and enhance a positive climate for LGBTQ students in physical education spaces,” and to foster “a safe, inclusive space that is void of heteronormative practices and allows LGBTQ students to equitably reap the benefits of physical education” (Shriberg & Baker, 2019, p. 92). Using social justice practices to provide LGBTQ+ students with comprehensive sex education and equal opportunities for physical education serves to directly improve their physical and mental health, which are rights that the United Nations deem every child to have. Finally, we must address the social health of LGBTQ+ students. This can be done through several recommendations from the Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network (GLSEN), including “comprehensive antibullying policies, supportive educators, LGBT inclusive curricula, and a Gay–Straight Alliance (GSA) support group” (Sanchez, 2015, p. 33). However, what is perhaps most important is to facilitate “supportive relationships with adults,” and to pair LGBTQ+ students with adults who understand “the struggle of identifying as a minority group that faces constant discrimination and scrutiny for their sexual orientation or gender diversity” (Sanchez, 2015, p. 33). This intervention can be done through LGBTQ+ educators, a community mentoring program, or a partnership with a local

university, but regardless of how this social support is given, it is imperative that LGBTQ+ students get it. Teachers who seek to support students who are members of the LGBTQ+ community can do so by taking a social justice approach that centers upon distributive and procedural justice, and by advocating for and participating in practices that uphold LGBTQ+ individuals' physical, mental, and social health.

### **Discussion and Suggestions for Future Research**

The present research points to many recommendations for instruction at all levels, for pre-service and practicing teachers as well as for students. It is logical to start with pre-service teachers. Individuals in teacher preparation programs need to receive training that makes them aware of their biases towards and against various communities throughout the entire course of their program, and they also must be made aware of how to respond to and lessen the effects of these biases. Teachers need to be made culturally competent before even becoming teachers, and that cultural competence should be developed further as they enter the career. Early and often, teachers should be given trainings that assist them in cultivating authentic and intentional multicultural classrooms, and those trainings should also emphasize the benefits that multicultural education and cultural competency have for teachers and for their students. Once in the classroom, teachers should invite families and adults who are reflective of students and their backgrounds in regularly, and they should prioritize open, developmentally appropriate conversations about diversity and marginalization with students. Teachers must be open to learning from students who have identities different than their own and adapting their classroom culture and curriculum based on what they learn.

Classrooms and schools are going to continue to get more diverse, whether teachers and administration do or not. So, the body of research upon which this literature review is based must

continue to be built and expanded upon in order to properly support teachers, students, and school staff. In terms of general multicultural education, future research may focus on other benefits that teachers can reap from being culturally competent or compare the positive academic and social impacts of schools that prioritize multicultural education over those that do not. Scholars should also focus on the current cultural competency training that pre-service teachers are receiving in their preparation programs, as well as current teacher professional development to determine the efficacy and efficiency of these trainings. In response to the increased demands placed upon teachers and the intensified focus on standardized testing, teacher preparation programs are typically packed with academic and pedagogical methods courses, so it is crucial for teacher and student success that research is done to determine the best way to incorporate cultural competency training and expose teacher candidates to multicultural education practices during their undergraduate and graduate degrees. The research very clearly shows that multicultural education is advantageous for all involved, so future research should overall focus on how to enhance those advantages.

In addition to focusing on multicultural education and school cultural diversity as a whole, future research needs to be done that prioritizes students from marginalized communities and improving their school and societal experiences. For students of color, more direct study of the interactions between teachers and students of color could lead to a better understanding of the mechanisms that underlie disproportionate discipline and special education referrals, which could lead to a better ability to determine if simple awareness can mitigate the problem or if teachers need more complex anti-bias training. Qualitative research could focus on how the experiences that students of color have in advanced-level classes differ from those of white students to hopefully reveal why white students have higher performance levels in those courses,

or scholars could further consider the impact of community involvement for marginalized students enrolled in high-level classes by designing more extensive mentoring programs for students. Future research focused on LGBTQ+ students could also concentrate on designing mentoring programs for K-12 students who identify with the community and best practices for doing so – particularly in places such as the American South where LGBTQ+ individuals are not as well accepted and tolerated. In the same realm of designing and coordinating student programs, studies could create “health centers” for LGBTQ+ students that provide comprehensive services not only for physical health, but also for mental, social, and emotional wellness. Then, finally, research needs to be done that addresses and identifies how to stop other students from bullying LGBTQ+ students, rather than just how to support students after they are bullied. Ultimately, future research should begin to emphasize proactivity over reactivity.

## **Conclusion**

While the United States is often referred to as a “melting pot,” a better metaphor is to call the country a “salad bowl,” where individuals and communities of all different identities, cultures, and backgrounds come together to form a diverse country where everybody keeps their unique characteristics rather than assimilating together. As the population grows, it also continues to get more diverse, and the average public-school classroom is representative of more cultures than ever before. However, teachers are still primarily middle-class white women or otherwise members of the majority, which means that today’s educators need to be culturally competent and have extensive knowledge on multicultural education. Research shows that teachers who are culturally competent have higher senses of self-efficacy and lower risk of burnout, and outcomes are thus better for teachers and students regardless of their cultural backgrounds. Teachers today must also know how to specifically support students who are

members of marginalized communities. The literature shows that teachers can better support students of color by working to lessen the disproportionality in discipline and special education referrals that students of color experience, increasing access to high-level academic material for students of color, and bringing family and cultural diversity into the everyday classroom and curriculum. For students who are members of the LGBTQ+ community, teachers can work towards addressing homophobic and transphobic bullying, they can take a social justice approach to their job, and they can focus on students' physical, mental, and social health to improve their school experiences. At their core, multicultural education and cultural competency seek to provide marginalized students with equal opportunity and equitable academic experiences to their non-marginalized peers, and future research can and should prioritize doing so as successfully as possible.

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