

## Building Inclusive School Communities: Can Conformity be Equitable?

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### Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of educational research on the topic of social inclusion and equitable school communities. Although school practices that require students to conform and change their beliefs and behaviours to fit in with a particular group may be seen as exclusionary, I argue conformity can still play a role in building inclusive school environments. Indeed, I argue that the absence of conformity in schools may exacerbate social exclusion and social competition. The problem with conformity is not the word itself, I argue, but rather the way it has been operationalized in schools. This paper presents a new approach that I call “Equitable Conformity,” which promotes inclusivity and tolerance. Moreover, this paper describes the use of restorative practices as an effective method for achieving equitable conformity within schools. This article will be of particular interest to educational practitioners such as teachers and school administrators who are attempting to build inclusive and peaceful school communities.

### Introduction

Child and adolescent social exclusion in schools is a growing problem and student relationships are often based on popularity and social status (Aronson, 2000; Newman, Fox, Harding, Mehta, & Roth, 2004). Unfortunately, students deemed by their peers to be unpopular, frequently fall victim to isolation and even bullying within their school’s social atmosphere (Rigby, 2004). Thus, there is a growing debate regarding the approach educators should take when attempting to create a socially inclusive and equitable school community (Gibbs, 2006; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009).

One method for building social inclusive school communities is to create an educational environment based on conformity. Some pedagogical practices that promote conformity aim to create an equitable and highly functioning school environment, cohesion, and a peaceful commitment to the community (Apple & Franklin, 2004). Conformity can be seen as an act of adopting beliefs, and behaviors of dominant group. Some communities with low levels of violence are often occupied with citizens that share a strong belief in cohesion and conformity (Ross, 1993). However, some scholars have criticized conformity and claimed that it is a narrow-minded approach that lacks an appreciation for individuals who do not fit a certain social profile (Apple & Franklin, 2004; Kumashiro, 2000). Some postmodernist theorists believe that conformity in communities such as schools can cause discrimination against minority students and should be replaced by an approach that promotes individualism. My position is that both conformity (changing one’s beliefs and behaviours to fit in with a particular group) and individualism (opportunities for members of the school community to develop and freely express their unique characteristics without fear of exclusion or bullying) can be used in positive ways (Apple & Franklin, 2004; Furman, 2002; Osborne, 1999). Later in this paper, I will discuss how merging elements of conformity and individualism can create an approach that may build peaceful school communities.

Because school practices that are organized to achieve either conformity or individualism may seem drastically different, many educators who seek to build an inclusive and equitable school community may feel they must make a choice between practices, thereby excluding the other approach. This paper presents an analysis and synthesis of existing research that describes a different way of thinking about inclusive and equitable school communities. I argue that inclusive schools cannot exist without conformity. The absence of conformity in schools is likely to exacerbate social exclusion and social competition. Although the term *conformity* has a negative connotation (Apple & Franklin, 2004; Kumashiro, 2000), the concept can still play a role in building inclusive school environments. The problem with conformity lies in the way it has been operationalized in schools. Conformity must be redefined and practiced in a way that suits the multilayered diversity of modern classrooms (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009). This paper presents a new definition of conformity that includes inclusivity and tolerance (aspects associated with individualism) and describes the use of restorative practices as an effective method for achieving this type of conformity within schools.

### Background

Historically, assimilation and conformity were presented as ways for people such as politicians and educators to bolster inclusion within multicultural environments. However, in practice, they were often used to resist cultural diversity and protect the existing dominant culture (Apple & Franklin, 2004). In North America, sociocultural conformity was used as a defensive measure against the influx of Eastern European immigrants in order to protect Anglo-Saxon cultural norms. North Americans in positions of sociopolitical power were concerned that their cultural identity might be compromised by the influx of newcomers (Apple & Franklin, 2004). Educational policymakers and schools initiated philosophies and promoted curricula that indoctrinated students into a set of Anglo-Saxon beliefs and values. Thus, between the late-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries—the modernist time period—conformity was used in schools as a method of social control.

Some scholars argued that school practices during the modernist time period were culturally oppressive because they attempted to assimilate students into a prescribed vision of Anglo-Saxon society and disallowed individuals from developing and expressing their individuality (Osbourne, 1999). Some of these same scholars hold that in order to establish social inclusion and harmony, individuals must conform to a unified set of values, beliefs, and culture and to a singular way of doing things (Apple & Franklin, 2004; Furman, 2002; Osbourne, 1999). In schools, such actions may lead to some cultures obtaining more privilege and may bolster the inclusion of select populations thereby alienating particular students who do not share similar beliefs and values (Furman, 2002). Building school communities by enforcing cultural conformity and forcing students to abandon their own cultural views for the purpose of indoctrinating them into a dominant system of beliefs is an act of systematic violence, oppression, and social exclusion (Galtung, 1990). Since classrooms today are occupied by multiple student identities, building inclusive schools requires policy makers and educators address the needs and issues of individual citizens, rather than providing a uniform political vision of society (Osbourne, 1999). Thus, the modernist view of community should be abandoned (Furman, 2002). However, while a conformity-based approach for social inclusion in schools can be culturally discriminatory, such outcomes may not be an inevitable result. Whether conformity is an inherently oppressive practice or, instead, can yield inclusive outcomes if implemented in a more equitable manner is the focus of this paper.

### Rethinking Conformity

Gibbs (2006) argued that conformity should not be dismissed entirely. With student populations diversifying, greater emphasis is being placed on independence. She posited that pride in independence has led some people to become socially competitive. Habits of care and unity created through the coming together of people, regardless of their culture, race, or gender, have been lost in the push for individualism. A shift away from the collective has also resulted in a reduction in happiness associated with inclusion in a variety of social networks (Putnam, 2000). Instead, conforming to a desire to build social networks and engage in peaceful relationships may help increase empathy so that students school wide, especially those who are often seen as unpopular, can develop strong social connections and peer-support networks.

Social competition and hierarchies exist among students because many schools expect culturally diverse students to get along after simply throwing them together at school (Aronson, 2000). As a result, students engage in social tournaments, and those who belong to the most dominant culture usually win (Newman et al., 2004). Drawing on 30 years of research, Aronson (2000) asserted that social exclusion is often reduced when students collectively follow the belief that each individual succeeds when students agree to work cooperatively, as opposed to individually. Thus, conforming to a collective belief of inclusion and equality may help schools support peaceful atmospheres.

#### A New Definition: Equitable Conformity

As discussed previously, there are many negative connotations associated with conformity due to its historical background. However, social exclusion is not always caused by a lack of opportunities to express individuality. In many cases, it is caused by a lack of cultural tolerance, cooperative behaviours, and social networks among culturally diverse individuals (Aronson, 2000). In other words, conformity is not the problem; rather, the problem lies in what people are being asked to conform to. Just as a hammer can be used as a weapon to harm or a tool to build something positive, conformity can be an effective tool for building inclusion in school communities if redefined and used appropriately (i.e., to promote equity rather than strip it away).

By integrating elements of individualism into a new definition of conformity, the strengths of conformity and individuality can be juxtaposed into a singular approach for constructing an inclusive and equitable school community. Setting aside attachment to conformity or individualism is necessary to objectively examine both approaches in terms of their strengths and weaknesses. Conformity is unavoidable. Once students are required to attend school, they have already been asked to conform to the social paradigm of schooling. Similarly, for individualism to elicit peaceful behavior among students, everyone in a school must conform in terms of their belief in inclusion and equity. Because bullying and social exclusion are significant problems for schools (Aronson, 2000; Newman et al., 2004), the discourse must involve finding the best solution rather than reinforcing a preferred theoretical position.

Given the above, I propose a shift in how we view conformity. I suggest the creation of an approach called *equitable conformity*, which I define as an approach used to create an inclusive community through the practice, behaviour, and belief that every individual has the right to feel included, appreciated, and respected for their different abilities, culture, gender, and interests by all social actors within the school. With this new definition of conformity, the following questions can be addressed: Why should educators and administrators urgently push for the implementation of equitable conformity? What would happen if school communities had no conformity?

#### Equitable Conformity: Why Is It Needed & What Happens Without It

The school community is constantly changing. Classrooms have been transformed into spaces occupied by students with different languages, cultures, and exceptionalities (Banks, 2006; Osborne, 1999). To create an educational space that promotes an equitable academic and social atmosphere that is free of exclusion, negative conflict, and degradation, all members of the school community may benefit from viewing one another as social and cultural equals. Therefore, the initial step in building an inclusive and culturally tolerant school is finding a way to implement school-based policies and practices that seek to reduce social competition and elicit conformity to culturally tolerant and inclusive norms of behaviour.

In many schools, regardless of grade, issues related to bullying, popularity and cliques are common (Wiseman, 2002); many students naturally organize into cliques and social hierarchies (Newman et al., 2004; Wiseman, 2002). Often, assimilation and clique formation are influenced by social factors, such as religion, gender, race, and the existing dominant culture. Hierarchies based on popularity often form within each clique, but this also occurs among different cliques. When a popularity ranking system is created among cliques and each clique represents different social factors, the social factors end up building cultural value thus, creating inequities based on things like race, gender and religion.

All human beings have a deep need for group acceptance and social bonds with others (Thompson, O'Neill-Grace, and Cohen, 2002). These cravings for attachment can cause some students to engage in destructive and harmful behaviour, such as bullying among students in the school community. The desire for social acceptance often forces students to conform to behaviours or images that may not be true representations of their identities or beliefs. One common example is gang formation in the school context. Some students desire friendship to the point where they join a social group regardless of what the group represents. Even if a group exercises discrimination against certain races, genders, or cultures, some students may conform to that set of social beliefs in order to fulfill their desire to have friends. For social justice to emerge in schools, teaching and administrative practices, need to focus on eliminating the negative outcomes caused by students' cravings for acceptance (Thompson, O'Neill-Grace, & Cohen, 2002). To achieve such a goal, a theoretical approach such as equitable conformity may help channel the adolescent desire for socialization and social belonging in a direction that is inclusive and does not force students to compromise their social identities because of their need for acceptance. Equitable conformity may help create a space where students adopt socialization behaviours that are grounded on mutual respect opposed to competition for social status.

To tackle the problem of cliques, social hierarchies and exclusion, erasing the notion of conformity in schools in favour of promoting individualism may not provide a solution. Students have a natural desire to socialize with others (Aronson, 2007) and allowing students to express their individuality does not necessarily result in other students reacting to those expressions inclusively. Because students are naturally driven to socialize, educators and administrators should employ methods that guide the socialization process toward inclusivity, rather than work against these natural tendencies. To illustrate this concept, I draw on an analogy using the flow of a river to represent the strong natural tendency for students to form cliques or conform: It is much easier to redirect the flow of a river than to stop its flow altogether. Similarly, it is easier to teach students about conforming to a set of equitable standards than to attempt to stop a natural social behaviour altogether.

When students naturally organize themselves into cliques (Newman et al. 2004) they may often form social groupings based on popular but undesirable cultural factors out of fear of being demoted within the social hierarchy by their peers. Such patterns of behaviour become normalized and may often indoctrinate students with implicit learning that teaches them to construct social knowledge of themselves and their peers based on fixed social factors. Social factors are not accurate reflections of lifestyle and do not reflect one's identity. Identity is not necessarily consistent with race, gender, or economic class; each individual is different and desires different things. Self-expression is inhibited when students fear that their peers may not socially accept them. This fear drives students to abandon their identities and to form groups based on social symbols. A failure by educators and administrators to promote equitable conformity may therefore unintentionally exacerbate any existing social inequalities. Thus, unity and harmony must be established among members of the student body by allowing individuals to express and create their own identification symbols rather than basing their identity on social symbols such as race or gender.

Over the past 10 years, Canadian high schools have opened their doors to many newcomers. Schools are continually registering many culturally diverse children who have immigrated to Canada (Feuerverger & Richards, 2007). With this increase in immigrant students, the question as to how these individuals will fit into the school system arises. Immigrant students arrive with a rich set of experiences and culture. However, immigrant students may often lack feelings of inclusion and in turn feel like outsiders because of their cultural differences (Feuerverger and Richards, 2007). Fearing social exclusion, immigrant students may feel an urge to conform to a school's dominant culture. One major struggle immigrant students face is a feeling that they need to restructure their existing cultural identities to one that will closely align with what is dominant in their school: they want to fit in. Because of this problem, the urgency is high for schools to actively find ways to formulate inclusive methods that will help make classrooms spaces that are welcoming, safe and respectful of diversity. This is one particular problem where the equitable conformity would be a perfect fit. If schools promote sameness through the shared belief that all students are members of an equitable school space and student body, then new students (including those who are immigrants) might be able to achieve a sense of belonging while feeling safe to express and maintain their existing identities.

Overall, Equitable conformity allows students to fulfill their natural tendencies to become part of cliques. However, instead of clique formation based on social competition, students develop a sense of belonging and attachment to their school community at-large. Realistically, students are still likely to form smaller social circles within the larger

school community. However, equitable conformity will mitigate social competition among these smaller social groupings and create more horizontal opposed to vertical (thus being inequitable) social structures. In an educational community that practices mutual respect for differences, there is no value placed on the various student groupings; therefore, each group is likely to include a large amount of social diversity. Having argued for the implementation of equitable conformity in schools, this paper will now discuss how schools can operationalize this theory.

### Implementing Equitable Conformity Using Restorative Practices

Restorative justice is a method practiced in various indigenous cultures worldwide that aims to eliminate power hierarchies and build social inclusion and tolerance. Restorative justice is implemented by repairing broken relationships and building cooperative social networks based on equality and cultural tolerance (Zehr, 2002). Restorative practices define a class of methods adapted from restorative justice (Pranis, 2005). In addition to their use in indigenous cultures, restorative practices have gained popularity in North American and European educational systems as a way to reduce social competition and violence. Many one-size-fits-all models for building inclusion in schools are not effective because every school differs in terms of population, culture, and socioeconomic factors (Zehr, 2002). Restorative practices offer schools an opportunity to resolve conflicts in a manner that is inclusive and based on a culture of tolerance.

One popular implementation of restorative practices is restorative circles. Restorative circles are “about building communities of care around individuals... while not condoning harmful behavior” (Morrison, 2001, p. 1). In all contexts, restorative circles involve sharing power in an attempt to fill the needs of those involved in the circle. For this reason, restorative circles may serve as a pedagogical strategy to reduce competition for social power among students and increase social networks among individuals from various social cliques.

Many educators who use restorative circles in schools employ them within the classroom (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2010). Restorative circles require participants (e.g., students, school staff, school administrators) to sit together in a circle and engage in a shared dialogue. The structure of the circle is intended to be inclusive of all members and to ensure that participants are facing each other at all times to increase the sense of inclusion. Topics such as the academic curriculum, conflict dialogue, bullying, and violence are often discussed in restorative circles. The circle often requires that participants conform to a set of guidelines that require them to practice mutual respect and cultural tolerance and that provide everyone with equal opportunities for participation. For example, a talking piece is passed around that grants the holder the right to speak without interruption. These guidelines mirror equitable conformity because they require students to follow a set of guidelines for participation but, unlike modernist conformity, these guidelines elicit opportunities for students to express themselves freely and to build inclusive relationships at the same time.

Why should educators use restorative circles? First, the structure of the circle supports many values of democratic education, as described by Costello et al. (2010): “equality - everyone has seating; safety and trust - one can see everyone, so nothing is hidden; responsibility - everyone has a chance to play a role in the outcome of the circle; and connections - these are built because everyone listens to everyone else’s responses” (p. 22). Second, a circle provides students with the opportunity to tell stories. Storytelling allows students to offer commentary about what is occurring beneath the surface of their lives. Implementing equitable conformity through the use of restorative practices can create a platform through which students feel safe to express their inner thoughts. Finally, dialogue creates opportunities for students to build empathy by offering support to their peers through feedback in the circle.

One major goal of restorative circles is to provide every individual with the opportunity to participate and have his or her perspective heard in an inclusive and respectful way. Storytelling is fundamental for healthy social relationships (Morrison, 2001). For students to feel respected and connected to each other, they need to tell their stories and have their peers respectfully listen. Having students respectfully listen to each other’s story is a way of empowering them and validating their intrinsic worth as human beings (Pranis, as cited in Morrison, 2005).

### Conclusion

In this paper, I argue that educators should not be afraid of pedagogical frameworks that include conformity (requiring individuals to adopt beliefs and behaviours or a dominant group). Conformity is unavoidable and can be an effective tool for strengthening many aspects of the educational system, if used properly. While the term conformity has previously been misused, I suggest a more progressive way to approach conformity is by considering the theory of equitable conformity presented in this paper. Restorative practices such as circles (see previous section), can be used to operationalize equitable conformity in a format that encourages cooperation, opposes social competition, and bolsters social networks and inclusion.

Because we live in a society that is continuously growing in diversity, the promotion of individualism is at the forefront. As presented in this paper, individualism cannot be effectively developed as a stand-alone methodology in schools. Giving students opportunities to practice their cultural identities is a step forward, but it does not guarantee they will be tolerated by other students. The ideas and approaches related to conformity and individualism should be merged to create a new social theory that meets the needs of classrooms today. What I term “Equitable conformity,” can be incorporated within schools for individuals to have a space in which they feel safe to express their diversity. If inclusive and equitable behaviours are ingrained in students, these traits may follow them beyond the communal walls of schools and into local communities thereby helping to potentially build a more peaceful society.

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