Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in Museums: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract

This paper is a brief review of the literature surrounding diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility in museums. Ranging from critical race theory to digital access, this review touches on a wide variety of the scholarship on the topic of DEIA and how it benefits museums. Many of the topics discussed in this paper center around diversity and disengaging from racist ideologies. That being said, there is quite a bit of scholarship on the best way to embrace underserved populations, be it through culturally specific museums, social justice education, or the impact of digital technologies on accessibility. Many of these scholars offer multiple perspectives on the topic of DEIA as well as tools to enable museums to address DEIA policies within their programming and outreach.

Introduction

This paper is a review of literature surrounding Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) policies in museums. There is quite a lot of scholarship on DEI policies in museums within the United States, but little in the way of the *accessibility* policies that museums need to operate within to fully represent their museum visitors holistically. It is important to note, however, that all policies that fall under DEIA are worthwhile and worth considering for museums to increase engagement with their audience. Accessibility is no less important than equity and inclusion, and access is not a limited definition of physical able-ness. Accessibility in the context of the museum space refers to access based on physical ability, race, geography, and socioeconomic status. One of the ways in which museums can improve access is through the rise of curatorial activism - "the practice of organizing art exhibitions with the principle aim of ensuring that certain constituencies of artists are no longer ghettoized or excluded from the master narratives of art" - and an increase in inclusivity and a focus on equity (Reilly, 2021 p. 34). The goal of all museums should be to increase access for all visitors, potential or realized.

Literature Review

Underserved Populations

Kraehe and Acuff (2013) explain that underserved populations are largely overlooked when it comes to accessibility within museum institutions. They recommend looking at these communities through four theoretical lenses to get a better understanding of ways that these populations can be served. The first of these four lenses is critical race theory, where we analyze the way whiteness is centered in education, leading to the marginalization of BIPOC communities. The second lens we can look through is intersectionality. This is the complex web of characteristics of individuals and how they intersect (Kraehe and Acuff, 2013). The third

theoretical lens is critical multiculturalism, which is looking at multicultural qualities beyond basic inclusion. Critical multiculturalism looks at the underlying power structures that affect multicultural issues. The fourth and final lens that Kraehe and Acuff (2013) look at underserved populations is social justice education. Social justice education focuses on pedagogy that establish guidelines surrounding marginalized communities. If we look at underserved communities outside of basic demographic information, we have the ability to understand the power structures that established inequity in the first place.

When looking at underserved communities, we have to understand exactly what it is that they are missing from. Olivares and Piatak (2022) explain that "merely 23% of US adults attend an art exhibit every year; 27% of those individuals who participated were white, 17% of individuals were Black, and 16% of individuals were Latinx" (p. 121). Museum admissions do not, at this time, represent the diversity of the demographic population of the United States, which is problematic and deserves closer attention. One of their findings is that Black populations are 32% less likely to attend the museum. However, these populations did reveal that cultural heritage within the museum is a significant factor in their attendance (Olivares and Piatak, 2022). This reveals that in order to increase access for Black communities, museums need to work to improve representation within their programming. They also note that admission cost is not a disparate difference in attendance across racial makeup.

Social Justice and Multiculturalism

Garber (2004) notes that social justice education does not just inlude racial theories. She explains that social justice education also encompasses feminist theory, "multicultural, disability rights, environmental, community based, critical pedagogy, social reconstruction, and visual culture art education" (p. 4). Social justice education is growing more and more thorough in its

focus and ways in which we can increase equity within the realm of art education. "In social justice education, students' interests, voices, and lives are now understood as part of curriculum. Identity takes shape within spaces both within and outside school" (Garber, 2004, p. 6). By expanding the function of art education to include students' voices, we fully embrace social justice and engage in pedagogy that provides greater access to these communities. This type of engagement becomes empowering for students because it allows them to engage with their own power to "border cross" and to think critically about power structures and inequality when they encounter it in and outside of the classroom (Garber, 2004, p. 9).

Delacruz (1995) believes that there are some misconceptions and myths when it comes to multiculturalism in art education. Some of those misconceptions include "the belief that multicultural education is for victimized minorities and the claim that multicultural education is against the West" (Delacruz, 1995, p. 57). She further states that there is a common misconception that multiculturalism will pass eventually. One of the biggest problems with these misconceptions of multicultural education is this belief that "multiculturalism is for the *others*" (Delacruz, 1995, p. 57). This belief is not only incorrect, it is harmful to marginalized communities because it further participates in a dangerous othering of 'us vs. them'. On this matter, Delacruz (1995) makes the following argument for multiculturalism in education: "Multicultural art education is built on the premise that the United States is informed by and made stronger by its diversity of customs, artistic practices, aesthetic design systems, social functions, and beliefs, sacred and secular, that are embodied in the symbolic and artistic expressions of the people who make up the nation" (p. 58). Delacruz (1995) makes further arguments to disprove the misconceptions about multiculturalism, but the above quote

encompasses all that multiculturalism is and does for our society *because* of our diversity and not in spite of it.

Culturally Specific Museums

While museums, cultural institutions, and teachers fight to prevent students and visitors from participating in 'othering', Loukaitou-Sideris and Grodach (2004) take a different approach. The authors dissect and analyze the mission and scope of 'ethnic' museums in Los Angeles, CA to determine how their function is different from and similar to traditional art museums. Loukaitou-Sideris and Grodach (2004) note that because museums are becoming more popular and commonplace, they have subsequently been thrust into the middle of "culture and history wars" (p. 50). Because of this, museums are faced with a decision: do they continue on the path of being unattainable conservationists, or do they break down barriers for the public good? Fortunately, most museums are taking the approach of critical thinking and embracing the multiple contexts their audiences visit under. Loukaitou-Sideris and Grodach (2004) explain that while museum audiences globally are diverse, there is a high concentration of ethnic diversity in Los Angeles, which has developed into a phenomena of the opening of many different ethnic museums. The authors go on to note that "according to a research report published by the American Association of Museums, 26 percent of the new museums scheduled to open between 1998 and 2000 were museums on specialized topics such as ethnic or cultural themes" (Loukaitou-Sideris and Grodach, 2004, p. 54). This reflects that there is a growing interest in the type of museums that break down social barriers and embrace multicultural issues.

Three museum professionals in California, Brown et al. (2017) find that there are museum practices that can be beneficial in utilizing at culturally specific museums. In this article, Brown visits The Museum of the African Diaspora (MoAD), Gutierrez visits The Asian

Art Museum and Chong-Moon Lee Center for Asian Art and Culture, and Okmin visits The Contemporary Jewish Museum (CJM) to engage in three autoethnographic case studies of how culturally specific museums function over traditional art museums. On the subject, Brown et al . (2017) cite Luby (2011) who reveals "culturally specific museums developed because the point of view reflected by traditional museums was perceived as excluding the experiences of certain cultural and ethnic groups. What is discovered during these studies is that these museums are culturally specific because they offer an inside perspective into some very rich histories, not to sanitize their history to the general public.

Mainstream museums were also perceived as places where objects associated with the histories of these groups were not being collected, and where the broad or specific stories of these groups were not being told through exhibits" (p. 121). Brown et al. (2017) also shares that there are challenges in establishing culturally specific museums. They explain that because a particular ethnicity is being represented, the push to 'represent it more' becomes apparent. This challenge can be uncomfortable, but it also forces the museum to move beyond just presenting visual culture and encourages visitors to have the tough conversations that come about when working in a culturally specific museum.

Racism in Museums

Dewhurst and Hendrick (2017) share many tools for dismantling and disengaging with racism in museums. They explain that one of the first steps to disengaging with racist ideologies is by developing a shared vocabulary. Dewhurst and Hendrick (2017) go on to say "We realize that language changes with the needs and interests of the people who use it, however, a shared vocabulary allows us to develop common ground for communicating our ideas and listening to others" (p. 104). By developing a shared understanding of the words people are using in

discussing race and racism, we are able to meet each other in a common ground. One of the interesting tools that Dewhurst and Hendrick discuss is the matter of "brave spaces" - that is, a space where we might feel fear or discomfort in speaking, but because we are in a safe space, we can be brave (p. 104). One of the best ways to break down barriers put up by racism or racist ideaologies is by identifying them fully, understanding that "to redesign social systems we need first to acknowledge their colossal unseen dimensions." (Dewhurst and Hendrick, 2017, p. 105).

Improving Accessibility

Brown (2009) begins his article with the claim that there is an inherent duty in museums to establish programming that is available and accessible to as many populations as possible. One of the ways museums can and have started doing that is by embracing technology. As connectivity grows, museums are learning to engage with visitors in establishing an online presence as well as a physical institution. Brown (2009) cites the UK Museums Libraries and Archives Council (MLA, 2001) in noting "museums are being reinvented as physical and virtual spaces in which people engage and learn, interacting with objects, and discovering their stories. Interweaving the real and the virtual creates a powerful brand, enabling museums to occupy centre stage in cultural cyberspace" (p. 224) Because American and UK laws are so clear about disability services and not denying service to someone because they have a disability that it becomes quite clear as to how museums should respond. That being said, Brown (2009) explains that museums still have quote long way to go to be truly accessible. He notes a recent survey that explains "125 museum Web sites revealed that the level of accessibility of such sites is not high. Only 30% of English museum sites and 20% of those from other countries passed a basic technical test of access" (Brown, 2009, p.225)

Conclusion

When we look at diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility in the museum space, it becomes clear that there are steps museums should be taking to improve access for all. This literature is only a small percentage of all of the scholarship on the topic of DEIA in museum institutions. This tells us that this topic is important, not just to scholars on the subject, but museums leaning towards curatorial activism and visitors who align with underserved populations. Through this activism and through adopting programming and policies that positively impact these communities, museums seek to engage with critical thinking and offering a more enriching experience for all. Additionally, by adapting programming to suit all visitors, museums have the potential to increase their visitor numbers exponentially.

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