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Beyond Redistribution: Rethinking Educational Equity for Racially Minoritised Learners through Deficit Thinking, Affirmative Action, and Inclusion

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ABSTRACT

Persistent racial inequities in education reveal the limits of redistributive approaches that focus narrowly on access and resources. This paper argues that genuine educational equity requires a plural conception of justice encompassing material, cultural, and political transformation. Drawing on Fraser's (1995) model of redistribution, recognition, and representation, it re-examines three interconnected frameworks—deficit thinking, affirmative action, and inclusion—as distinct but complementary responses to racial inequality. Deficit thinking exposes misrecognition within dominant cultural hierarchies; affirmative action addresses redistributive injustice through structural redress; and inclusion seeks representational reform by transforming belonging and institutional culture. Through a critical synthesis of these perspectives, the paper develops a Plural Equity Framework that reconceptualises educational justice beyond compensatory or tokenistic measures. It concludes that advancing racial equity demands coordinated action across policy, pedagogy, and institutional practice to affirm and empower racially minoritised learners within education systems

Introduction

'Prejudice is a burden that confuses the past, threatens the future, and renders the present inaccessible.' (Angelou, 2008). Despite ongoing international initiatives to advance justice and inclusion in education, racial minority students still experience severe and enduring inequalities. These racial disparities take many different forms in diverse contexts and are not limited to a single nation or educational system. Educational equity, unlike equality, does not imply treating all students the same. Rather than that, it recognises that individual students require different kinds of support, recognition, and opportunity in order to achieve just outcomes (Ainscow, 2020). However, many traditional approaches to eliminate the educational racial inequality focus only on redistributing educational goods such as access to schools or other educational resources without challenging the deeper roots of system issues underpinning in racial inequality (Kolluri and Tichavakunda, 2022). In other words, reforms frequently tackle who gets in rather than how knowledge, value, and belonging are defined once inside.

This paper argues that achieving racial equity in education requires a shift from redistribution alone to a plural conception of justice encompassing material, cultural, and political dimensions. Drawing on Fraser's (1995) tripartite model of redistribution, recognition, and representation, the discussion re-examines three interrelated frameworks:

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The deficit thinking demonstrates how minority students are blamed for their own marginalisation in the educational system. Then comes affirmative action, which provides redistributive policies to address structural disadvantages. Furthermore, inclusion challenges education's dominance as the sole measure of value or success. Finally, compare these three concepts to investigate which is a more effective and transformative approach to reducing racial inequality in the educational system.

Theoretical Background: Reframing Educational Equity

Educational equity has long been a central topic in debates on justice and inclusion. However, its meanings and applications are varied across different contexts. In many education systems, equity is defined primarily based in a redistributive lens. It focused on providing resources or opportunities to historically marginalised groups. While redistribution is essential, it is insufficient for addressing the deeper cultural and institutional process that reproduce inequality. As Fraser argues, justice requires not only the redistribution of material resources but also recognition of cultural difference and representation within decision-making processes. These dimensions reveal how inequity is sustained not just through funding or access gaps within education system. It also sustained through different hierarchies and exclusion from political power.

This article is based on Fraser's tripartite model. It positions the deficit thinking, affirmative action, and inclusion as representing different but interconnected approaches to educational justice. Each approaches corresponds onto one of Fraser's dimensions of justice:

Framework	Justice Dimension	Core Focus	Limitations
Deficit Thinking	Recognition	How minoritised learners are perceived and valued within dominant cultures	Reinforces cultural misrecognition and symbolic violence
Affirmative Action	Redistribution	Expanding access and opportunity through structural redress	Operates within meritocratic systems without redefining success
Inclusion	Representation	Transforming participation, belonging, and institutional culture	Risks superficial diversity without structural reform

Thus, rethinking educational equity requires more than adding compensatory measures. It requires a whole fundamental reconsideration of what counts as knowledge, success, and participation in education. By critically analysing their intersections, this article seeks to develop a more integrated and transformative understanding of educational justice.

Deficit Thinking and Racialised Failure

Deficit thinking refers to a potential theory which explains the educational inequality. This suggests that schools and institutions attribute the failure of the students to their internal characteristics such as lacking of learning ability, motivation, and family support rather than the systematic inequality issue that exists within the educational institutions. This is supported by Valencia (2012), who defined deficit thinking as a harmful ideological model that falsely assumes that minority ethnic learners are inherently less capable than their peers. Since they are 'deficiencies' in the culture, family, and behavior backgrounds and are accountable for their academic struggles in the institutions. This conceptual model is not only utilised for explaining the inequities in education but also misguided policies for the continuation of avoiding the systemic inequality failure for educators (Davis and Museus, 2019).

Historically, deficit thinking has served as a clear example of racialised forms. According to Valencia (2012), in the 1920s, Mexican American students in the United States were often allocated into special classes or even inferior schools due to their limited English proficiency. These language barriers for minority ethnic groups served to cover the racist assumption about intellectual inferiority and attempts to exclude the minority systematically from high-quality education. Although the discrimination of minority ethnic groups has become less socially acceptable in the modern educational context, deficit thinking continues to play an implicit role in many educational institutions. According to Cabiles (2024), the research found that many minority students experience deficit thinking in an Australian primary classroom. As a result, they feel ashamed of their mother language and cultures due to past experiences of discrimination and school practices like 'English-only' norms. Educators and administrators may describe the minoritised students as lacking discipline, passive learning and lack of family support. Therefore, it reinforces the idea that the problem lies within the student rather than the design and functioning of educational institutions.

Additionally, the deficit thinking is also rooted within the neoliberal education reform. According to Brathwaite (2016), neoliberal education reform is driven by market-based logic, which includes school choice, institu-

tional accountability, and competition. It seeks to enhance educational quality through approaches like standardised examinations and performance-based sanctions. However, learners are expected to demonstrate excellent outcomes under certain assessments, and those who do not perform well are labelled as 'underachieving' or 'at-risk'. (Sharma, 2016). As a result, minoritised learners will often face systematic barriers in the educational system, including lack of access to high-quality schools, discriminatory disciplinary practices,, and under-represented curricula. Thus, they are considered educational failures without any recognition of systematic issues that limit their academic success.

Institutions and educators attempt to challenge the deficit thinking by advocating the approach for asset-based frameworks that recognise students' cultural wealth, linguistic resources, and community knowledge. Rather than focusing on what students lack such approaches focus on what students bring. However, Wallace (2023) indicates that asset-based models can be co-opted if they are not accompanied by institutional transformation. Recognising students' strengths is important, but it is insufficient if schools continue to reward only dominant forms of knowledge and performance.

Affirmative Action as Structural Remedy

If deficit thinking blames racially minorised learners for their educational underachievement, affirmative thinking is a type of policy that aims to correct the systematic inequality issue of minoritised learner in educational context. According to Holzer and Neumark (2006), affirmative action refers to a set of strategies including the race-conscious admissions or contextual offers to improve the opportunities and outcomes for historically marginalised groups.

Affirmative action directly addresses racial inequality by reforming the allocation of opportunities in educational admission. It responds to the racial disadvantage that minoritised students are experiencing. Institutions value their ability and potential in addition to their academic preparation. This is also supported by Tierney (1997), the racial inequality in higher education is not incidental. It occurred and is embedded structurally in how merit, excellence, and success are defined and rewarded. He also criticises the idea that institutions systematically prioritise white and middle-class norms. From this perspective, affirmative action becomes more than a compensatory policy to minoritise group students and is applied as an approach for institutional transformation.

One of the most important benefits of affirmative action against racial inequality is that it creates more inclusive

models of academic admission and evaluation. Rather than selecting the merit students through standardised examination, affirmative action allows institutions to evaluate students holistically, recognising context, characteristics, and diverse forms of excellence. It facilitates extra opportunity for entry of racially minoritised students into competitive institutions which they have long been excluded from. In addition, Crosby et al. (2003) argue that the diverse learning environment could foster a positive interaction between the groups and also provide an inclusion and fairness signal to minoritised students. Moreover, these contextual and race-conscious approaches challenge institutions to interrogate their biases and expand their academic value so that they resolve the systematic issues of racial inequality.

However, affirmative action has its limitation. One significant critique is that it operates competitive logic within the existing educational system. Rather than rethinking what counts as academic success. It still focuses on enabling more minoritised students to participate in a flawed admission. BOBO (1998) demonstrates that because affirmative action only validates success when minority students are able to "compete" on dominant terms, it tends to promote the very meritocratic values it aims to correct. Additionally, public views of such policies vary widely according to Crosby et al. (2003). It is often influenced by the perceptions of fairness, group membership, and beliefs in meritocracy. As a result, affirmative action can create stigma when it is not supported by open communication or unambiguous standards, leading to the assumption that minority students are less competent or "deserving" of their position.

Inclusion: Addressing Racial Educational inequality

Inclusion is best understood as a multi-dimensional concept that encompasses the social, epistemological and structural dimension of education. According to Ocay, Agaton and Villote (2021), inclusion should be rooted in social justice. It requires not only the integration of the students from diverse racial and socio-economic backgrounds, but also a shift in the foundational values, practices, and power in relation of educational institutions. Inclusion should not be a superficial approach to reduce racial inequality, it needs to take away symbolic diversity and dismantle of systemic racism and exclusion (Stentiford and Koutsouris, 2022).

Inclusion is not only about curricular representation. It is also about transforming education institutions' cultures and practices. The gap between formal inclusion and the actual sense of belonging from institutions. This is sup-

ported by Seamster and Charron-Chénier (2017), they introduce the concept of 'predatory inclusion' to describe how access to education may appear progressive and fair. However, it actually sustains racial inequality through approaches such as student debt and assimilationist expectations. Their analysis of the wealth gap highlights how inclusion becomes a form of exploitation when the structural support or institutional reform. For instance, Black students are more likely to enrol in for-profit colleges. It usually takes on more expensive private loans, both of which contribute to increased debt burdens. Therefore, many racially disadvantaged people, especially Black students, have better access to higher education. Nevertheless, the conditions of that access are often unfair and make racial inequality worse instead of better.

Inclusivity as a transformative approach in education has its clear benefits. Initially, it could enhance minoritised student belonging and engagement. When racially minoritised students encounter materials, teaching styles and institutional values that affirm their identities, they are more likely to participate, succeed, and feel connected to the institutions (Gray, Hope and Matthews, 2018). Also, an inclusive environment could allow students greater autonomy in how and when they engage referring to Hayvon (2025). This setting provides a flexibility space for minoritised students to express themselves without being defined by stereotypes or assimilation into main cultural norms.

Additionally, inclusive education could also be applied as an approach to structural and systematic exclusion in the education system. According to Gale, Molla and Parker (2017), they found out inclusive education exposes that an individual's ability and achievement could be influenced by the educational context for minoritised students. This reframing enables a deeper understanding of how educational inequality is produced not by students' deficit thinking but by systemic barriers such as inaccessible curriculum, inflexible pedagogy, or cultural discrimination. It is essential for minoritised students with academic struggles, as this shift can be transformative. According to Chanicka and Logan (2021), it breaks the assumption that underachievement by minoritised students reflects cultural or personal failure and replaces equity as a matter of institutional responsibility and systematic design.

Despite its benefits in solving racial inequality in education, inclusivity still faces persistent implementation challenges that affect its effectiveness for racially minoritised learners. A major challenge is that deficit-orientated mindset for teacher's education on inclusion. According to Siuty (2019), many teacher preparation programmes still rely on the traditional frameworks that perceive inclusion as a policy for addressing the student problems instead of considering the systemic barriers for minoritised students. It reinforces the belief that racially minoritised students must be 'fixed' or assimilate in order to become a part of mainstream settings. As a result, educators and instructors may unconsciously consider inclusion as an act of accommodation instead of realising the systemic change of perception on students (Tiwari, Das and Sharma, 2015).

Conclusion

This essay has examine how deficit thinking, affirmative action, and inclusion offer distinct but interconnected approaches to address te racial inequality in education. Deficit thinking reveal how racially minoritised students often found struggle with cultural failure, which covering the systematic racial inequality issue in educational institutions. Even though it highlights how racism is normalised in educational context, it does not itself offer solutions.

Affirmative action responds through redistribution and providing a greater opportunities of accessing for minoritised students. However, it still operates within meritocratic frameworks without reforming systematically.

Inclusion offers the most diverse approach by seeking the systematic and cultural transformation. It redefines educational success through recognition, belonging and curricular relevance. However, its impact is limited when it only stays on superficial diversity initiatives.

In conclusion, these concepts together demonstrate that educational equity cannot be achieved through single policy. Instead of this, it requires multiple policies apply together to address the racial inequality issues. Thus, the minoritised students could be not only included, but also affirmed and empowered within education system.

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