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Embracing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: A Pathway to Professional Excellence for Direct Support Professionals

By Sarah Gonzalez Noveiri

As the backbone of the disability support system, Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) offer vital care, support, and direction to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) in a variety of contexts. High turnover rates, a lack of workers, and few prospects for career advancement are just a few of the major issues facing the profession in spite of their vital role (Hewitt et al., 2022). Simultaneously, people with IDD still face limited opportunities for self-determined lives, healthcare disparities, and obstacles to full community inclusion (Friedman, 2020).

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A transformative framework is at the core of tackling these issues; diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is a way of thinking and doing things that recognizes and celebrates human differences (diversity), guarantees equitable treatment and access to resources (equity), and establishes spaces where everyone feels appreciated and empowered to fully engage (inclusion). DEI is particularly important to the IDD sector because it tackles the historical marginalization that both people with disabilities, and the workforce that supports them have endured. Adopting DEI principles can help organizations that support the IDD community create support systems that more accurately reflect and address the varied needs, cultural backgrounds, and life experiences of the people they serve. It can also help create more respectful and sustainable work environments for DSPs, many of whom are members of underrepresented groups. The core principles of person-centered support (dignity, respect, and self-determination) are ultimately upheld by DEI approaches in the IDD sector. When considering the potential effects of these principles in a broader context, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives present viable ways to tackle the everyday struggles faced by DSPs and those they support. DEI frameworks create environments where everyone can participate and flourish, acknowledge and value differences, and advocate for equitable treatment and opportunity. The significance of DEI is examined in this article from two interconnected perspectives: (1) for DSPs who offer services and supports, and (2) for people with IDD who receive these services.



Making a world of difference
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Equity in Compensation, Training, and Career Advancement Creates Inclusive Cultures

Low pay, few benefits, and few prospects for career progression are characteristics of the DSP profession. In most communities, the median hourly wage for DSPs in the US is still significantly below the living wage threshold (National Core Indicators, 2022). These circumstances lead to unstable workforces and high turnover rates. By promoting equitable pay, increased benefits, and meaningful career ladders, equity-focused initiatives both inside and outside of organizations can address these systemic problems. According to Houseworth et al. (2020), organizations that use equitable compensation practices see lower employee turnover and higher-quality services. In a similar vein, Hewitt et al. (2019) observe that DSP career pathways and credentialing programs result in higher job satisfaction, lower turnover intention, and better quality of supports. By encouraging more inclusive learning environments that benefit both staff and the people they support, these programs acknowledge the diverse backgrounds, learning preferences, and strengths that DSPs bring to their positions.

DSP recruitment and retention depend on inclusive workplace cultures that go beyond pay and training plans and make all employees feel appreciated, respected, and supported. According to Taylor et al. (2020), DSPs who expressed a sense of belonging and respect at work showed increased levels of engagement, job satisfaction, and loyalty to their organizations. Regular feedback channels, collaborative decision-making procedures, and acknowledging contributions from all organizational levels are examples of inclusive workplace practices. Because many DSPs come from a variety of backgrounds, these practices are especially important. Significant numbers of women, people of color, immigrants, and people from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds make up the direct support workforce (PHI, 2021). It is both morally required and a sensible tactic for bolstering the workforce to establish work environments that honor and value this diversity.

Intersectionality and Complex Identities

Understanding the complex nature of identity is just as vital as comprehending workplace culture. People with IDD have complex identities that go far beyond their disability. They come from a variety of socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, cultural, gender, sexual, and religious backgrounds (Friedman, 2020). The idea of intersectionality is a framework or a method of looking at the world that reveals the connections and influences between various types of inequalities and discrimination. As a result, many identity-based obstacles go unaddressed by standard DEI and/or social advocacy. Understanding the complex lives of people with IDD and/or a diverse workforce requires an understanding of intersectionality.

To properly contextualize this concept, the understanding of how identity-based discrimination takes place was first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins has also identified concepts like intersectionality in early work by Black, Latinx/e, Indigenous and Asian American feminists (some are Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, and Gloria E. Anzaldua). Since the introduction of the concept of intersectionality (1990s) intersectional scholars have explored the impact of social hierarchy and inequality related to race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, age, disability, class, and citizenship among others. Research by Magaña et al. (2016) demonstrates that people with IDD who belong to racial or ethnic minority groups face compounded, or intersectional barriers to accessing services, healthcare, and community opportunities. Similarly, studies by Akobirshoev et al. (2020) document how women with IDD experience higher rates of unmet healthcare needs compared to men with similar disabilities or women without disabilities.

Understanding intersectionality has important practical ramifications. In order to provide person-centered supports and elevate the work and value of DSPs, it is necessary to acknowledge and address these intersecting identities. According to McDonald et al. (2016), workplaces and

supports that are customized to each employee's cultural background and preferences result in better outcomes for people with IDD, higher retention rates, and higher levels of job satisfaction for DSPs. These improvements include a sense of belonging for everyone, increased community involvement, and improved quality of life. Similarly, culturally responsive approaches to sexuality education improved self-advocacy skills among diverse young adults with IDD and allowed DSPs to develop meaningful support practices (Curtiss & Stoffers, 2018).

Inclusion in Community Life

For many people with IDD, full community inclusion is still an elusive goal that extends beyond individual supports to larger social contexts. People with IDD face social isolation, limited social networks, and limited participation in community activities, even in the face of deinstitutionalization initiatives and policy changes toward community living (Amado et al., 2013). Opportunities for an inclusive community acknowledge and appreciate the contributions of people with IDD while taking into account their various needs and preferences. According to Kramer et al. (2018), diversity-embracing community inclusion programs that acknowledged the diverse interests, preferences, and skills of people with IDD outperformed one-size-fits-all strategies. DSPs are better able to recognize and develop opportunities that fit the distinct interests, preferences, and cultural backgrounds of the people they support when they are aware of diversity, equity, and inclusion principles.

The foundation for community inclusion often begins in educational settings. Shogren et al. (2015) documented how inclusive educational experiences resulted in improved social networks, enhanced self-determination skills, and better post-school outcomes for students with IDD. Similarly, Wehmeyer et al. (2018) found that students with IDD who participated in inclusive educational settings demonstrated stronger self-advocacy skills and greater confidence in community settings. Educational support represents another critical area where DSPs can apply DEI principles. DSPs who support students with IDD in inclusive educational settings are more effective when they understand diverse learning styles, cultural influences on education, and varying family expectations. These DSPs are better able to advocate for appropriate accommodations and to facilitate meaningful participation in diverse educational communities.

In addition to education, meaningful employment represents another vital dimension of DEI principles. Despite employment being identified as a priority by people with IDD, their participation in the workforce remains limited. Wehman et al. (2018) found that inclusive employment initiatives, which recognize the diverse strengths, interests, and support needs of workers with IDD, result in better job matches, higher job satisfaction, and longer job retention. In employment settings, culturally competent DSPs improve outcomes for people with IDD seeking competitive, integrated work. Wehman et al. (2018) documented how employment specialists who understand the cultural context of both job seekers with IDD and potential employers are more successful in facilitating job matches that meet individual preferences and result in longer job retention. DSPs who recognize diverse work values, communication styles, and workplace norms can provide more effective on-the-job supports that respect individual and cultural differences.

Cultural Humility as the Integration Mechanism of DEI Principles

The effective application of DEI principles in DSP work requires cultural humility, an ongoing process of self-reflection, learning, and growth. DSPs who practice cultural humility approach their work with awareness of their own cultural backgrounds and biases, openness to learning from the people they support, and commitment to addressing power imbalances in the support relationship. Shogren et al. (2018) found that culturally responsive person-centered planning, which explicitly addresses aspects of identity important to the individual, resulted in more

meaningful goals and improved outcomes. Likewise, Hewitt et al. (2022) documented how DSPs who received training in culturally responsive person-centered approaches reported greater job satisfaction and stronger connections with the people they support.

DSPs who receive training in cultural humility gain greater confidence in supporting people from diverse backgrounds and demonstrate more personalized support approaches. These DSPs are more likely to recognize and respect cultural differences in decision-making, family involvement, and goal setting, leading to support plans that better reflect individual preferences and values. For people with IDD, having support from DSPs who practice cultural humility means receiving services that respect their complete, and full identities. Culturally responsive relationships develop greater trust between DSPs and the people they support, creating space for more authentic self-expression and self-determination. From an organizational perspective, person-centered approaches require organizations to create flexible support systems that can adapt to diverse needs rather than requiring people to fit into existing service models. Bogenschutz et al. (2015) found that organizations committed to DEI principles are more likely to develop innovative, individualized supports that result in better outcomes for people with diverse backgrounds and needs.

When equipped with DEI knowledge and skills, DSPs become powerful agents for systemic change within disability service organizations. Their daily interactions with people with IDD give them unique insights into barriers to equity and inclusion, while their positions within service systems provide opportunities to advocate for meaningful change. Bogenschutz and Hewitt (2019) found that DSPs who received training in equity and inclusion were more likely to identify systemic barriers affecting people with IDD from diverse backgrounds and DSPs simultaneously. These DSPs initiated conversations about cultural responsiveness, challenged discriminatory practices, and advocated for policy changes that better served the diverse populations of the organization. Their advocacy led to concrete improvements in service delivery, including expanded language access, more flexible support options, greater cultural representation in recreational and community activities, and enhanced working conditions. DSPs also play a crucial role in transforming organizational cultures to become more inclusive. Johnson et al. (2021) documented how DSPs who embraced DEI principles modeled inclusive practices for colleagues, challenged stereotypes and biases, and created more welcoming environments for both staff and people with IDD from diverse backgrounds. Their leadership influenced broader organizational norms and practices, gradually shifting cultures toward greater equity and inclusion.

The insights and experiences of DSPs are invaluable for developing more culturally responsive service systems for people with IDD. DSPs often have the most direct knowledge of how cultural factors influence service utilization, preferences, and outcomes, making their input essential for effective system design. Hewitt et al. (2020) found that organizations that actively sought input from diverse DSPs when developing programs and policies created more responsive service models. These organizations implemented practices such as flexible scheduling to accommodate religious observances, culturally specific programming, and translated materials that better served diverse populations. These organizations were able to overcome obstacles to participation and access that might have gone unnoticed otherwise by integrating DSP viewpoints into system design.

The expertise that DSPs contribute to their work is acknowledged by this cooperative approach to system transformation. Culturally responsive organizations value DSP insights and establish procedures for integrating their viewpoints into decision-making processes, rather than considering DSPs as merely implementing policies created by others. Lewis and Taylor (2019) provided evidence of improvements in service quality, staff retention, and outcomes for people with IDD from diverse backgrounds in organizations that formed DSP advisory committees with diverse representation.

Conclusion

One effective strategy for resolving ongoing issues with supports for people with IDD is the application of diversity, equity, and inclusion principles to DSP work. Within intricate support networks, DSPs who adopt DEI values and practices act as advocates, change agents, and cultural bridge builders. Their efforts have a direct impact on the self-determination, community involvement, and quality of life of people with IDD from a variety of backgrounds.

All parties involved experience real benefits when these principles are applied correctly. When DSPs provide DEI-informed support, people with IDD receive services that acknowledge and value their full identities in addition to their disability status. It entails having advocates who are aware of the additional difficulties that people with disabilities who happen to belong to other marginalized identities face. It entails being able to participate in community activities that suit their cultural values and preferences, as well as receiving communication in easily accessible and culturally relevant formats. Investing in DEI training and support for DSPs has several advantages for service organizations. Establishing truly inclusive environments, addressing health and service inequalities, and serving diverse communities are all made easier for organizations with culturally responsive DSPs. These organizations also benefit from the insights and leadership that a diverse DSP workforce brings to service planning and delivery.

Policy initiatives must address both the working conditions of DSPs and the systemic barriers faced by people with IDD from diverse backgrounds. Living wages, comprehensive benefits, and career advancement opportunities for DSPs are essential for building a stable, diverse workforce. Simultaneously, policies must ensure equitable access to services, supports, and opportunities for people with IDD regardless of their racial, ethnic, cultural, or linguistic backgrounds. Supporting DSPs to provide culturally responsive, person-centered supports, moves the IDD sector closer to realizing a vision of inclusive communities where all people with IDD can live self-determined lives that reflect their unique identities, values, and preferences. The implementation of DEI principles in DSP work is not just an add-on or enhancement, it is an essential component of quality support that recognizes the full humanity and diverse identities of people with IDD.

About the author

Dr. Sarah Gonzalez Noveiri is the DEI Officer at AHRC Nassau, where they have served since 2022. They bring global expertise in evidence-based systems of organizational change, with a focus on building healthier, more inclusive workplace cultures. An award-winning interdisciplinary rhetorician and critical cultural scholar, their work explores how identity, power, and culture intersect—informing practices that promote equity, belonging, and justice.

Their academic background bridges the humanities and organizational strategy, grounding their approach to diversity, equity, and inclusion in both research and real-world application.

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