

Interview with Dr. Ayesha Khan: Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Education

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BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Ayesha Khan is an associate professor with a cross-appointment at the School of Interdisciplinary Science and the Department of Psychology, Neuroscience & Behaviour at McMaster University. She has taught in the Life Sciences program since 2013. Over this time, she has received McMaster's Student Union Award for her work in community-engaged education and McMaster President's Award for Outstanding Contributions to Teaching and Learning.

Dr. Khan believes in incorporating equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) principles into her course content. By applying a critical lens to the material she delivers, she thinks about how her course content relates to broader social issues. Dr. Khan cultivates her teaching philosophy by facilitating student empowerment. One way she allows students to showcase this skill is through the delivery of community-engaged education projects. In LIFESCI 4OX3, The Biopsychology of Sex, students mobilize their knowledge into an end-of-term project aimed at informing students in LIFESCI 3E03, Reproductive Endocrinology, about topics surrounding reproductive issues and EDI. She believes that integrating these EDI principles is essential in empowering students to honour their voices and experiences. In her seminar and tutorial-style classes, students are exposed to several perspectives through the facilitation of peer conversations. Dr. Khan values the conversations she has with students about EDI. She uses these discussions as a learning tool to further her knowledge about the subject. By encouraging this dialogue, she strives to create an environment where students can openly express themselves.



Dr. Ayesha Khan, PhD

ABSTRACT

Equity, diversity and inclusion, (EDI) is emerging as a central topic in science today. EDI refers to an approach where individuals are encouraged to participate and given opportunities to succeed (1). In this approach, barriers and advantages are recognized and further, dissimilarities between individuals are respected and celebrated (1).

In this interview, Dr. Ayesha Khan shares what EDI means to her as a professor at McMaster University. She speaks about her relationship with EDI as an ongoing learning process that she is navigating with the help and guidance of students as well as academic resources. Her experience with EDI indicated to her that she should actively create a learning environment that is inclusive by allowing her students to have open conversations with one another. By indicating the value of EDI in an academic context, students are encouraged to be considerate of the effects of inequality in society. In this interview, Dr. Khan explains how consideration of EDI principles has made her an advocate for student empowerment and critical thinking.

Keywords: Equity, diversity, inclusion, academia

Equity, diversity and inclusion have been at the forefront of many discussions concerning the workplace, media, and education. What does EDI mean to you as an educator?

Equity, diversity, and inclusion is relevant to all of us. Right now, I would say that I'm working towards understanding the different ways in which people define this rather complex issue. The definitions of EDI might vary. Additionally, I spend a lot of time thinking about how to discuss EDI issues with students and what the best ways of presenting them are. In no way do I consider myself as an expert in such matters, so I co-share my learning with my students to better understand the definition and the lived experiences of everyone. To do that, I have to be very vulnerable to my students and let them know I don't have all the answers, and in particular, I am a student just like them when it comes to this topic. The importance of including EDI in education allows me to partner with my students in a more authentic way so that we can co-learn together and explore how we can put EDI principles into practice.

Was there a moment where you decided to include EDI principles in your classroom?

One basic principle around my teaching philosophy is student empowerment. I'm constantly looking for ways to empower my students to voice their thoughts and question the content they are learning in their courses. The purpose of university education is to gain a lot of discipline knowledge around a particular topic. But ultimately, students are citizens of a community. They should be people who think deeply about issues relevant to themselves and those around them. They should consider EDI issues to consider varied perspectives better. Further, connecting EDI to their academics can empower them to have a well-rounded perspective. Relating my empowerment philosophy to EDI made complete sense because many global issues are happening right now, especially within the context of reproductive endocrinology and reproductive health.

“Hopefully, our students are empowered enough to provide a meaningful perspective where it counts.”

One of the seminars you lead, LIFESCI 4X03: the Biopsychology of Sex, has a high demographic of people who identify as women over any other gender identity. Do you think this poses a challenge of representing different perspectives?

I hope to get students engaged and excited about the content they are learning in the classroom. One consequence of cultivating their passion is that they are keen to openly and respectfully discuss their unique lived experiences with others.

“As a result, the message spreads even if the classroom has a particular demographic because students feel like these issues are worth talking about with others.”

There are other courses where subjects of sex and gender are not a part of the course content. Do you feel that efforts should be made in these other classes to include EDI principles?

It is possible. For instance, recently, the Nobel Peace Prize recipients were announced. Instructors could discuss the number of women in a particular field versus the number of Nobel Peace prizes awarded to women.

That's not to say that those professors who are not talking about EDI issues in their classrooms are not interested in such matters. If you are going to include EDI as a topic of conversation, you need to have enough time to address student questions and provide many opportunities for ongoing discussions. There also needs to be enough time to share resources to gain varied perspectives so that there is time to go beyond superficial analysis. There are logistical constraints for why that can't happen in all courses.

Another challenge is that most of us in the Faculty of Science are experts in subject matters outside of EDI as an academic discipline. Including material that you are passionate about while still learning about it can pose a challenge because you don't want to present

information in a way that could be misinterpreted or deliver inaccurate information. When you're trying to help your students learn something that you are also learning with them, there are many risks.

What is your personal goal with EDI in the classroom?

If there is awareness around EDI issues, then as students transition into the next phase of their academic and professional journeys, we've planted a seed that EDI is a significant part of our lives. Equity, diversity and inclusion is about empowerment, to see things differently.

“I also feel that there is strength in numbers. Just one student alone can go on and bring awareness to many others.”

Co-learning EDI with my students and sharing this information makes me feel like I have done something noteworthy with my platform.

REFERENCES

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