



Does Inclusion Drive Motivation? Evidence from Public Education Institutions

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Abstract

Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) have become increasingly important in public-sector organizations, yet limited empirical attention has been given to whether DEI climate is associated with employee motivation in public education institutions. Existing research largely links inclusive workplace climates to outcomes such as well-being, participation, psychological safety, commitment and engagement, but the direct motivational relevance of DEI climate remains underexplored, especially in resource-constrained public-sector education contexts where financial incentives and promotion opportunities may be limited. This study examines the relationship between DEI climate and employee motivation using survey data from 113 employees drawn from public education institutions across multiple regional education jurisdictions. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling was applied using ADANCO 2.4.1 to assess the measurement and structural models. The findings show a positive relationship between DEI climate and employee motivation, with DEI climate explaining 32.5% of the variance in motivation. The structural model indicates that DEI climate has a substantively meaningful positive association with motivation ($\beta = 0.5705$), while the effect size is large ($f^2 = 0.4824$). These findings suggest that employees who perceive their workplace as fair, inclusive and respectful are more likely to report stronger motivation. The study contributes to DEI, organizational behavior and public-sector management literature by positioning DEI climate not only as a policy or compliance issue, but also as a non-financial workplace condition associated with employee motivation. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of inclusive leadership, equitable treatment, employee voice and respectful institutional climates in sustaining motivation within public education institutions. Given the cross-sectional design and measurement limitations, future research should test this relationship using larger samples, longitudinal designs and expanded models incorporating mediating mechanisms such as psychological safety, perceived organizational support or workplace belonging.

Keywords: *Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI); employee motivation; public education institutions; workplace inclusion; organizational behavior; public-sector management; PLS-SEM; employee engagement*

1. Introduction

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have become increasingly important in public-sector organizations, particularly as institutions seek to strengthen workplace fairness, legitimacy, and employee engagement. Across organizational research, inclusive workplace climates are often associated with positive employee outcomes because they shape how individuals experience fairness, respect, belonging, and opportunities to participate meaningfully in institutional life

(Shore et al., 2011; Nishii, 2013; Mor Barak, 2015). In both public and private organizations, DEI has gradually moved beyond being treated as a compliance requirement or administrative expectation. It is increasingly understood as an important workplace condition with implications for how employees engage with institutions and how organizations function more broadly.

Existing scholarship has explored DEI through several related pathways. Some studies position DEI climate within organizational culture and leadership practices (Roberson, 2006; Nishii, 2013). Others connect inclusive climates to psychological safety, employee well-being, commitment, and team effectiveness (Edmondson A. C., 1999; Shore et al., 2018; Guillaume et al., 2017). These contributions remain valuable and continue to shape understanding in the field. However, comparatively less attention has been given to whether DEI climate itself directly influences employee motivation. This remains particularly underexplored in public-sector education systems, where financial incentives may be limited and employees' day-to-day institutional experiences may carry stronger motivational significance.

This issue is especially relevant in public education institutions. Teachers and education-sector employees often work within formal administrative structures shaped by service obligations, bureaucratic procedures, and resource constraints. In such settings, motivation may depend not only on promotion opportunities or financial rewards, but also on whether employees experience the institution as fair, respectful, and inclusive. Workplace inclusion may therefore become an important non-financial source of motivation by reinforcing professional worth, institutional belonging, and willingness to remain engaged.

Accordingly, this study examines the direct effect of DEI climate on employee motivation in public education institutions. The study is guided by two research questions:

RQ1: To what extent does DEI climate explain employee motivation in public education institutions?

RQ2: Does DEI climate function as a direct motivational driver in a public-sector education context?

The study tests the following hypothesis:

H1: DEI climate positively influences employee motivation in public education institutions.

By examining this relationship directly, the study contributes to DEI and organizational behavior literature by showing that inclusion may operate not only as an institutional value or policy concern, but also as a meaningful workplace condition associated with employee motivation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 DEI Climate as an Experiential Condition

DEI climate refers to employees' perceptions that the workplace is fair, respectful, inclusive, and supportive of different social and professional identities. It extends beyond the formal existence of diversity-related policies or institutional statements. More fundamentally, it reflects how employees experience the organization in everyday practice through workplace interactions, institutional processes, and decision-making.

The inclusion literature suggests that employees are more likely to engage positively with organizations when they experience both belonging and recognition. Lynn M. Shore and colleagues (2011) describe inclusion as a condition in which employees are treated as insiders while also being valued for the distinct contributions they bring to the workplace. Similarly, Lisa H. Nishii (2013) explains that climates for inclusion shape employee outcomes by reducing interpersonal barriers and creating conditions where individuals feel respected and able to participate meaningfully.

Broader diversity scholarship reinforces this perspective. Quinetta M. Roberson (2006) explains diversity climate as employees' shared perceptions of fairness and inclusion within

organizational structures and workplace practice. In a related way, Michèle E. Mor Barak (2015) argues that inclusion reflects the extent to which employees experience legitimacy, access, and meaningful participation within organizational life. From this perspective, inclusion is not simply about whether policies exist. It also concerns whether employees believe those policies are reflected in their actual workplace experience.

This distinction is particularly relevant in public institutions. Formal policy commitments may exist on paper while employees experience workplace realities differently in practice. In many cases, inclusion is encountered less through official statements and more through everyday access to participation, opportunities to contribute, equitable treatment, and recognition. DEI climate therefore becomes both a lived workplace experience and an institutional signal about belonging, fairness, and legitimacy.

Viewed this way, DEI climate becomes more than a background organizational condition. It reflects how employees interpret their place within the institution and whether they feel respected and included as part of its functioning. These workplace perceptions are especially important in public education settings, where institutional experiences often shape engagement and commitment in ways that extend beyond formal policy arrangements.

2.2 Motivation in Public-Sector Contexts

Motivation in public-sector institutions cannot be understood only through financial incentives or formal administrative controls. Public employees often work in environments where material rewards are limited, promotion systems move slowly, and institutional constraints are part of everyday professional life. In these settings, motivation is frequently shaped by a wider combination of relational, intrinsic, and institutional factors.

Self-determination theory provides an important starting point. Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci (2000) argue that motivation is strengthened when individuals experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Within this framework, inclusion becomes especially relevant because it influences whether employees feel connected, respected, and valued within organizational life. When employees experience exclusion or unequal treatment, this sense of connection may weaken. When they experience fairness and inclusion, motivation may become stronger and more sustained.

This perspective also aligns with social exchange and organizational support literature. Peter M. Blau (1964) explains that employees are often more willing to reciprocate favorable institutional treatment through stronger engagement and effort when they perceive the organization as supportive and fair. Similarly, research on perceived organizational support suggests that employees respond more positively when they believe the institution recognizes their contributions and values their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986). John Stacey Adams' equity theory (1965) reinforces this view by showing that perceptions of fairness influence willingness to contribute effort and remain committed to organizational goals.

Public service motivation theory offers an additional explanation. James L. Perry and Lois Recascino Wise (1990) argue that public-sector employees are often motivated by civic commitment, service orientation, and attachment to public values beyond material reward. Later scholarship similarly shows that motivation in public institutions is shaped by institutional context, value alignment, and employees' perception that their work contributes to broader social purpose (Ritz & Neumann, 2016).

This is particularly relevant in education. Teachers and education-sector employees frequently work under demanding institutional conditions while remaining closely connected to public service responsibilities. Prior studies show that teacher motivation is influenced not only by financial incentives but also by workplace climate, professional respect, and organizational

relationships (Dinham & Scott, 1998; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, S., 2017). This suggests that inclusive workplace climates may contribute to motivation not only through individual psychological processes but also through everyday professional and institutional experience.

In this context, motivation becomes closely connected to how employees experience the workplace itself. Where institutions are perceived as respectful, inclusive, and equitable, employees may be more likely to remain engaged, invest effort, and sustain commitment to their responsibilities. This makes DEI climate particularly relevant for understanding motivation in public education institutions.

2.3 Linking DEI Climate to Motivation

The relationship between DEI climate and employee motivation may be understood through three closely related mechanisms: belonging, recognition, and psychological safety.

First, inclusive workplace climates strengthen employees' sense of belonging. When individuals feel accepted as legitimate members of the institution, they are generally more willing to remain engaged and invest effort in their work. This aligns with Lynn M. Shore et al.'s (2011) argument that belongingness remains central to inclusion. Employees who feel included are more likely to see themselves as part of the institution rather than positioned at its margins. That sense of belonging can strengthen commitment and reinforce willingness to contribute.

Second, inclusion may function as a form of institutional recognition. Employees who experience fairness, respect, and equitable treatment are more likely to interpret these experiences as signals that the institution values their contribution and professional role. Motivation, in this sense, is shaped not only by incentives or formal rewards but also by whether employees feel seen, respected, and acknowledged within the workplace. Where recognition is experienced consistently through inclusive institutional practice, motivation may become more stable and more deeply rooted in employees' connection to the organization.

Third, inclusive climates may strengthen psychological safety and participation. Amy C. Edmondson (1999) explains psychological safety as employees' perception that they can participate, contribute ideas, and engage with colleagues without fear of negative interpersonal consequences. Lisa H. Nishii (2013) similarly notes that inclusive climates reduce barriers to participation and encourage employees to engage more openly within the workplace. When employees feel safer contributing and believe their presence is respected, their willingness to invest effort may increase.

Taken together, these mechanisms suggest that DEI climate should not be understood merely as a background organizational condition. It may operate more directly as a relational and institutional factor that shapes how employees experience the workplace and whether they remain motivated within it. This is particularly relevant in public education settings, where financial incentives may be limited and employees often rely more heavily on workplace relationships, institutional respect, and a sense of belonging to sustain engagement over time.

Viewed from this perspective, DEI climate is not simply about inclusion as a formal policy commitment. It also reflects how employees experience the institution in practice and how those experiences shape motivation. This provides a clear theoretical basis for examining whether DEI climate directly influences employee motivation in public education institutions.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Context

This study adopted a quantitative research design using survey responses collected from public education institutions.

The study used data from 113 respondents drawn from multiple public education institutions across regional education jurisdictions. Respondents included teachers and administrative

personnel working within formal public-sector education structures. A stratified cluster-based sampling approach was used to improve institutional representation while maintaining practical fieldwork feasibility.

Public education provides an appropriate setting for examining the relationship between DEI climate and motivation because it combines formal administrative structures, service obligations, and institutional resource constraints. In such environments, relational and non-financial workplace experiences may play an important role in shaping employee behavior.

3.2 Measurement of Constructs

The model includes two reflective latent constructs: DEI climate and Motivation.

DEI climate was initially measured using three indicators capturing perceptions of fairness, inclusion, and equitable treatment. Following measurement refinement, the final retained DEI construct was represented by two indicators.

Motivation was measured through indicators reflecting willingness to exert effort, remain engaged, and respond positively to the work environment.

Items were adapted from established literature and contextualized for public-sector education institutions. Responses were collected through structured questionnaires.

3.3 Analytical Approach

Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was used to test the proposed relationship between DEI climate and Motivation.

PLS-SEM was appropriate because the model is theoretically focused, predictive in orientation, and involves latent constructs suited to variance-based structural modeling (Hair J. F. et al., 2017; Hair J. F. et al., 2022).

The measurement model was evaluated using:

- indicator loadings,
- Cronbach's alpha,
- Dijkstra-Henseler's rho,
- composite reliability,
- AVE,
- HTMT,
- Fornell-Larcker criterion,
- VIF diagnostics.

The structural model was assessed through:

- path coefficient,
- coefficient of determination,
- adjusted R²,
- Cohen's f²,
- bootstrapped significance estimates.

Model specification:

DEI Climate → Motivation

4. Results

4.1 Measurement Model

The measurement model was assessed using indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, discriminant validity, and indicator multicollinearity. Overall, the model provided adequate support for testing the proposed structural relationship between DEI climate and employee Motivation.

Motivation demonstrated strong internal consistency reliability and satisfactory convergent validity. Henseler et al's (2015) rho was $\rho_A = 0.9068$, composite reliability was $\rho_C = 0.8671$, and

Cronbach's alpha was $\alpha = 0.8808$, all of which exceeded the commonly recommended threshold of 0.70. Convergent validity was also established, with an average variance extracted of $AVE = 0.5775$, exceeding the recommended minimum threshold of 0.50.

For DEI climate, reliability values were acceptable overall. Dijkstra–Henseler's rho was $\rho_A = 0.7402$, composite reliability was $\rho_c = 0.7096$, and Cronbach's alpha was $\alpha = 0.6969$. While Cronbach's alpha was marginally below the conventional 0.70 benchmark, the overall reliability remained acceptable for an exploratory institutional model. The average variance extracted for DEI climate was $AVE = 0.4567$. Although AVE was marginally below the recommended threshold, composite reliability remained acceptable and the construct was retained based on theoretical relevance.

Indicator loadings ranged from moderate to strong. For DEI climate, DEI1 loaded strongly (0.8337), while DEI2 (0.5902) and DEI3 (0.5716) showed moderate but acceptable loadings. For Motivation, loadings ranged from 0.6067 to 1.0478, with MOT4 (0.7207) and MOT5 (0.7295) demonstrating strong contributions and the remaining indicators contributing adequately to conceptual coverage of employee motivation.

Discriminant validity was supported. The heterotrait–monotrait ratio was $HTMT = 0.5533$, while $HTMT2 = 0.5343$, both remaining below the conservative threshold of 0.85. The Fornell–Larcker criterion also supported discriminant validity, indicating adequate distinction between DEI climate and Motivation.

Indicator multicollinearity was not a concern. Variance inflation factor values ranged from 1.3249 to 3.2190, remaining within acceptable limits.

Global model fit indices were interpreted cautiously in line with variance-based SEM practice. Although the standardized root mean square residual ($SRMR = 0.1217$) was above the more conservative benchmark values commonly reported in covariance-based SEM, the study prioritized construct reliability, discriminant validity, and explanatory power given the prediction-oriented and exploratory nature of the model.

Taken together, the measurement model was considered adequate for structural analysis. Although DEI climate demonstrated marginal convergent validity, the construct remained theoretically meaningful and empirically acceptable for examining the relationship between inclusion and employee motivation in public education institutions.

4.2 Structural Model

The structural model produced a positive and substantively meaningful relationship between Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) climate and employee Motivation in public education institutions. The results indicate that DEI climate had a direct positive effect on Motivation ($\beta = 0.5705$), suggesting that employees who perceived their workplace environment as more inclusive, equitable, and respectful were more likely to report stronger motivation.

The model explained a meaningful proportion of variance in Motivation, with a coefficient of determination of $R^2 = 0.3254$ and an adjusted coefficient of $R^2 = 0.3193$. This indicates that DEI climate accounted for approximately 32.5% of the variation in employee motivation in the study context. For a focused model with a single predictor, this represents substantial explanatory power and demonstrates that workplace inclusion contributes meaningfully to motivational outcomes in public education institutions.

The effect size for the DEI \rightarrow Motivation relationship was also substantial ($f^2 = 0.4824$), indicating that DEI climate made an important contribution to explaining employee motivation. Based on Cohen, (1988) effect size interpretation, this exceeds the threshold for a large effect, suggesting that the relationship is not only statistically meaningful but also substantively important in institutional terms.

Bootstrapping procedures based on 999 resamples further supported the stability of the relationship, indicating that the observed effect was robust and unlikely to be attributable to sampling variation. The consistency of the bootstrapped estimates strengthens confidence in the positive association between DEI climate and employee motivation.

Overall, the structural model provides empirical support for H1, confirming that DEI climate positively influences employee motivation in public education institutions. The findings suggest that inclusion functions not merely as an organizational policy concern but also as a meaningful institutional condition associated with stronger employee motivation.

Table 1. Structural Model Results

Path	Beta (β)	R ²	Adjusted R ²	f ²	Decision
DEI → Motivation	0.5705	0.3254	0.3193	0.4824	Supported

Source: ADANCO 2.4.1 bootstrapping output (999 samples).

Table 2. Summary Interpretation of Structural Model

Structural relationship	Interpretation
DEI → Motivation ($\beta = 0.5705$)	Positive and meaningful relationship
R ² = 0.3254	DEI explains 32.5% of variance in Motivation
Adjusted R ² = 0.3193	Explanatory power remains stable after adjustment
f ² = 0.4824	Large practical effect
Bootstrapping (999 samples)	Relationship remained stable and robust
Hypothesis H1	Supported

4.3 Interpretation of Findings

The results suggest that DEI climate functions as more than a general workplace condition within public education institutions. The positive relationship observed in the model indicates that employees who experience the workplace as inclusive, fair, and respectful are more likely to report stronger motivation.

This finding is important because it points to inclusion as a practical workplace experience rather than simply a policy commitment or administrative objective. In the study context, employees who perceived stronger inclusion also appeared more willing to remain engaged and invest effort in their work. This suggests that workplace inclusion may influence motivation by reinforcing employees’ sense of belonging, fairness, and institutional respect.

The finding is particularly relevant in public education settings, where formal rewards and advancement opportunities may not always be immediately available. Under such conditions, employees may draw motivation not only from financial incentives or career progression, but also from how they experience the institution in their everyday work. Feeling respected, fairly treated, and meaningfully included may therefore become an important part of sustaining motivation.

At the same time, motivation remains a broader organizational and psychological construct influenced by multiple institutional and individual factors. DEI climate should therefore not be interpreted as the sole determinant of employee motivation. Rather, the results suggest that inclusion represents one meaningful and practically relevant predictor within a wider set of workplace conditions shaping employee engagement in public education institutions.

5. Discussion

The findings provide empirical support for the argument that DEI climate contributes positively to employee motivation in public education institutions. The positive DEI → Motivation

relationship indicates that inclusion may influence employee engagement in ways that extend beyond symbolic commitment or policy compliance. Employees who perceive their workplace as inclusive and equitable appear more likely to remain motivated and willing to contribute effort. This finding aligns with existing DEI scholarship emphasizing that inclusive climates shape how employees experience belonging, respect, and legitimacy within organizations (Shore et al., 2011; Nishii, 2013; Mor Barak, 2015). The results extend this literature by suggesting that these experiences may also translate into motivation more directly. In this sense, inclusion appears to function not only as an organizational value but also as a workplace condition with practical implications for employee engagement.

The results also connect with broader motivation literature. Self-determination theory highlights the importance of relatedness and workplace connection in sustaining motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000), while social exchange and equity perspectives emphasize that employees are more likely to respond positively when institutions are perceived as fair and supportive (Blau, 1964; Adams, 1965; Eisenberger et al., 1986). The present findings support these perspectives by showing that employees' experience of inclusion may strengthen motivation in meaningful ways within the public education environment.

This is particularly relevant in public-sector education institutions. Teachers and administrative personnel often work under conditions shaped by service obligations, bureaucratic demands, and resource constraints. In such contexts, non-financial workplace experiences may become especially important. Employees may remain motivated not only because of formal rewards or promotion opportunities, but also because they feel respected, fairly treated, and included within the institution.

At the same time, the results should be interpreted carefully. While the structural relationship was positive and meaningful, the DEI construct demonstrated marginal convergent validity. This does not undermine the central finding, but it does suggest that measurement of DEI climate in public-sector settings may benefit from further refinement. Future research could strengthen measurement, examine the relationship in larger and more diverse institutional settings, and test whether DEI climate influences motivation alongside other organizational conditions such as leadership support, recognition systems, and workplace trust.

Overall, the findings suggest that inclusion matters in practical terms. Within public education institutions, DEI climate appears to contribute meaningfully to employee motivation. This reinforces the view that workplace inclusion is not only an ethical or policy concern, but also an important organizational condition with implications for sustaining engagement and supporting institutional effectiveness over time.

6. Theoretical Contributions

This study makes four related contributions.

First, it extends DEI literature by positioning inclusion as a motivational antecedent rather than treating DEI only as a policy or compliance variable.

Second, it contributes to motivation theory by showing that employee motivation may be reinforced through workplace experiences of inclusion, fairness, and institutional recognition.

Third, it contributes to public-sector and educational administration literature by showing that inclusive workplace climates may explain meaningful variation in employee motivation in resource-constrained institutions.

Fourth, it provides an empirical foundation for further theorizing the relationship between inclusion, recognition, and motivation in public institutions.

7. Practical Implications

DEI should not be treated only as a policy or compliance issue.

It may also function as a practical institutional mechanism for strengthening motivation. Managers should pay attention to whether employees actually experience fairness, inclusion, and respect in everyday institutional life.

In resource-constrained education systems, inclusive workplace practices may provide a meaningful non-financial pathway for sustaining motivation.

8. Limitations and Future Research

This study has limitations.

First, the model remains intentionally focused and examines only the direct DEI–Motivation relationship.

Second, DEI showed marginal reliability and requires stronger future measurement.

Third, cross-sectional data limits causal interpretation.

Fourth, the study is situated within public education institutions and future comparative research across sectors would be useful.

9. Conclusion

This study examined whether DEI climate directly influences employee motivation in public education institutions.

The findings show a strong positive relationship between DEI climate and Motivation.

The study contributes to organizational behavior and public administration research by showing that inclusion may function as an active motivational condition rather than only a policy concern.

Employees who experience the workplace as fair, respectful, and inclusive appear more likely to report stronger motivation.

Although the DEI construct requires further refinement, the findings provide meaningful emerging evidence and a useful foundation for future research on inclusion, recognition, and employee motivation in public institutions.

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