Challenges students experience with inclusive education: Significance of listening and advocacy

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Abstract: Some experts, believe that the concept of inclusive education is still imprecise and nebulous and there is a nascent research and literature about this subject. When this non-empirical research was embarked upon there was no noticeable evidence to explicitly highlight that there is a meaningful understanding of the various challenges and obstacles that children face in inclusive education. Similarly, no evidence made the connection between inclusive education, listening, and advocacy. There is a gap due to the paucity of information and this research seeks to fill it. This author firmly believes that listening and advocacy are two major elements that enable and foster inclusion. Too often when policies are implemented those who are affected are not consulted. Educators and policymakers must pay more attention to the perspectives of children because they are quite capable of presenting their issues. In this way, inclusive education will be meaningful and cater to those who need it. This research analyzed and summarized recent published literature on the inclusion of children and the fieldwork is not novel. It is interesting to state, however, that research undoubtedly noted that there is a dearth of information that focuses on the various challenges that children encounter in inclusive education. It is crucial that everyone, especially professionals and policymakers, pay particular attention to the importance of inclusion. They also need to be cognizant of the experiences of these children and the role that advocacy plays, especially when they implement policies that relate to their growth and development.

Keywords: *Advocacy, Diversity, Equality, Equity, Inclusive education, Listening, Students, Technology.*

1. Introduction

Asamoah, Ofori-Dua, Cudjoe, Abdullah, and Nyarko (2018) opined that inclusive environments should always foster a culture of equity and equality where there is respect for all. They also firmly believed that for inclusion to be truly meaningful people must appreciate the dignity and be cognizant of the value and importance worth of all. UNESCO (1994) opined that when inclusion is evident children frequently benefit and their overall educational skills are enhanced. They also affirmed that inclusion affirms the uniqueness of students of all backgrounds. Very often the perspectives of children are unheeded and forgotten. This study emphasizes the significance of listening to children. Brookes (2018) affirmed that all citizens need to listen carefully and attentively to children so that inclusion can be enhanced. Listening to children accentuates and brings to the forefront their needs, feelings, goals, and aspirations, and thus, accentuates advocacy. This discipline is also necessary since advocacy allows children to express their concerns. According to the literature, there is a dearth of information. Thus, this non-empirical research consisted of a review of various research documents, journal articles, and books. A critical research method compared current publications associated with this topic. This research explains inclusion and accentuates some of the challenges. It also recognizes the significance of listening to children and the need for advocacy among them. The methodology is presented, limitations

are acknowledged, future direction for research is noted and a conclusion and recommendations are provided.

1.1. Inclusion

Zacharias and Brett (2019) posited that education ought to be holistic and incorporate all students. They further argued that education is fundamental and meaningful only when equity is evident. Amor et al. (2018) opined that for the past thirty years, several educators have endorsed the fact that education ought to be inclusive. Globally this is an important issue especially as it is strongly promoted by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, (United Nations, 2006). However, this is an extremely slow process since educators must try to overcome the challenges that students experience with inclusion. Inclusive education incorporates all students regardless of their disabilities. Schwab, Resch, and Alnahdi (2021) also affirmed this position and noted that inclusion is all-encompassing and must not be limited to only students with disabilities. UNESCO (1994) also shared this stance and insisted on the urgency and necessity that all students ought to be educated in the regular education system. They further proclaimed that because inclusion is a fundamental right all students must be allowed to be educated in mainstream schools. UNESCO (1994) argued that education systems should be adequately designed, and relevant educational programs implemented to incorporate and embrace diversity and equity. According to UNESCO (1994) mentioned that the teaching and learning process must be child-centred and thus meet the needs of all. They continued to argue that educational institutions must make every effort to ensure that all students especially those with disabilities receive the extra support so that learning could be salutary. In that way, they can optimize their potential. Mention must be made that inclusion also fosters solidarity and camaraderie among students and minimizes prejudice, (UNESCO, 1994). Based on research UNESCO (1994) firmly believed that inclusive institutions that educate students from the community are most successful in eliciting support and affirmation from the wider community.

According to the literature, it is explicitly clear that true inclusion diminishes obstacles and barriers and tries to overcome prejudices and thus, embrace diversity, equity, and equality. According to Ristić, Popović, and Milovanović (2021) it is a strategy oriented towards integrating all students. Similarly, Glavinić and Ristić (2023) mentioned that this strategy is fundamentally holistic and is focused on the overall development of students. Hence, teaching and learning are always student-centered. Radovanović and Kovačević (2020) and Ristić and Kovačević (2022) stated that when inclusion is delivered properly it fosters positive attitudes, heightens communications, and nurtures a profound sense of belonging among students. In addition, Firat and Koyuncu (2022) opined that cognition is stimulated and the esteem of students is boosted. El Ahmad (2023) opined that inclusion is a dynamic and all-embracing approach to education and ought to eradicate challenges that students experience with all types of inequities. Some of them are imposed by exclusionary education policies, systems, and practices. El Ahmad (2023) believed that proper and effective communication, commitment, and collaboration among all stakeholders are necessary elements to support inclusion. Thus, it can be stated that inclusion involves transforming education policies, processes, and procedures so that students can access schools. Inclusion is evident when the needs of students are met, cognition is apparent, and their potential is optimized.

Schwab et al. (2021) presented six major ideas that enhance inclusive education. They are inclusion of students with disabilities, inclusion of students with behavioral challenges, inclusion of the vulnerable, inclusion without segregation, inclusion that encompasses all, and inclusion that affirms equity and equality. El Ahmad (2023) posited that inclusion is an all-embracing approach that addresses all aspects of education. It can be argued that its principal objective is to improve the overall well-being of all students. These include the rights to social, emotional, intellectual, and religious education and according to the United Nations (2006) these rights ought to be respected.

Sharma (2017) postulated that inclusion seeks to create one educational system which values and honors the dignity and innate worth of all students and simultaneously respects diversity. Thus,

inclusion is contrary to segregation and encompasses all students regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, disability, community, background, sexuality, and ethnic background. Sharma (2017) further believed that inclusion is the process that enables all students to learn and interact with the mainstream school systems. In this way, they are motivated and encouraged to participate fully in all aspects of school (Dollinger & Hanna, 2023).

It must be borne in mind that inclusion is developmental and involves continuous changes and adjustment. Because it is dynamic and continuous there is a need to periodically examine and evaluate the policy of inclusive education. It ought to be noted that Watkins (2017) cautioned that such examination and investigation should not only concentrate on current practice. It should also include current global trends in education. Thy type of evaluation empowers and motivates educators to further improve teaching and learning. It is not uncommon that although some institutions may have limited resources the educators are often more imaginative and innovative in their delivery of the syllabus. Watkins (2017) described inclusive education as a methodical approach to education that embraces all students. Inclusion fosters diversity and equality, creates camaraderie, and diminishes prejudices and biases.

1.2. Challenges to Inclusive Education

Although inclusive education is considered a viable approach to educating students with special needs there are some challenges, (Lindner, Schwab, Emara, & Avramidis, 2023). They believed that some educators still do not grasp the full concept of inclusion and frequently think that inclusive education is concerned only with students with disabilities. With this limited and narrow-minded notion, it is convoluted for these educators to fully appreciate and value equity and equality. Hence, Lindner et al. (2023) postulated that the improper attitude of educators and their unwillingness to accommodate students present a significant obstacle in the implementation of inclusive education. Yada, Leskinen, Savolainen, and Schwab (2022) also presented a similar view and further added that the self-efficacy of educators is essential for the successful implementation of a sound inclusive educational system. El Ahmad (2023) conjectured that children with disability rely on the use of assisted technology (AT). Due to low income and poverty, many educational institutions are not only unable to provide AT, but they also lack adequate resources, and educational materials to enhance teaching and learning. Sharma (2017) opined that the challenges to inclusion are both internal and external. Some of the internal challenges include unhealthy attitudes by educators, untrained and inexperienced educators, irrelevant curricula, and poor organization of the entire education system. The inaccessibility of schools, many issues with enrolment, constant social stigmatization, and economic situations are some external factors. Implementing and sustaining inclusion is difficult, complex, and multifarious but it is not impossible to achieve. It is a fact that there is a great hindrance to adequately addressing and catering to the needs of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. This is chiefly because inclusion is not fixed but continuous and developmental. Moreover, educators must be aware that each child is unique and special and can certainly make a positive difference in society, (McCabe & Ruppar, 2023). It can be concluded that the challenge of inclusive education is to address the needs of all students. and assist them in optimizing their potential. As noted before, this process is convoluted and demanding and requires dedication and commitment.

Carroll, Pattison, Muller, and Sutton (2020) hypothesized that even at tertiary education the number of students with disability is increasing. However, they believed that the rate of performance of these students is low and can be attributed to the social and academic stigma that still exists in many educational systems. Garza and Fullerton (2018); Guiffrida (2006); National Research Council (2004) and Tierney (1992) further offered that such inequalities work in disfavor of students with disabilities and nurture segregation. Adams and Proctor (2010); Fuller (2009) and Olney and Brockelman (2003) suggested that some educators and institutions even categorize disabilities, and this also creates isolation and division. Some of these categories are students who have apparent and non-apparent disabilities and those with cognitive and non-cognitive competencies.

Collins, Azmat, and Rentschler (2019) also offered some major hindrances to inclusion. They believed that many educators do not engage actively students in classroom activities and empower them to become independent. Some of them are not even trained properly. Moreover, they lack the proper skills to impart lessons and they do not know how to teach students properly. They lack both the theoretical and practical foundation for designing inclusive lessons. It is not uncommon to note that students with visible disability are frequently denied places in educational institutions, many educators are reluctant and unenthusiastic to promote and support the holistic aspect of inclusion beyond education and employment. They do not value it as a way of life. Nonetheless, Collins et al. (2019) strongly emphasized that it is the duty of all to embrace inclusion not only in the classrooms but in every fabric of life.

1.3. Listening

Cook-Sather (2018) resolutely affirmed the seriousness paying proper attention to the experiences of the marginalized and stated that their perspectives and experiences can certainly contribute to the holistic formation of inclusion. Listening skills are essential for the overall well-being of students. This process of listening often energizes and motivates students to such a degree that become more willing to participate in the learning process. It is also interesting to note when educators listen carefully to students the latter comprehend and retain information, actively participate in class discussions, and achieve their goals and objectives, (Cook-Sather, 2018).

Listening is art and a skill. It is complex but quite rewarding. Julien (2022) recommended that educators can commence with open-ended questions. They typically begin with who, what, where, when, and why. During the process educators can encourage students by making brief, gentle and pertinent motions to actively them in the conversation. A nod of the head, a smile frequently inspires students and makes them feel comfortable and relaxed and helps to focus, (Julien, 2022). Within that avenue they are more willing to share their perspectives. Julien (2022) firmly believed that eye contact enables listeners to engage students in the dialogue and they are also able to note if the students are uncomfortable or reluctant to speak about a particular subject. Mirroring can also be affirmative and stimulating and repeating is very prudent since it seeks to further unravel issues. Clarification involves asking questions to resolve and debug complex issues.

Koščak et al. (2023) opined that listening is more than merely hearing words, phrases, and sentiments. When educators listen actively to students, they are better able to comprehend, value, and appreciate them. The art of listening to students makes meaningful and humane connections, and students are more excited and even willing to participate in classes. Through this art of listening students are inspired and because they feel they are part of the class they sometimes participate in classroom discussions and are unafraid of accepting challenges, (Koščak et al., 2023). It can be noted that through this discipline students are more likely to appreciate concepts, identify important ideas, and integrate information proficiently and competently. Furthermore, listening skills should accompany teaching and learning. They frequently stimulate classroom discussions and foster group activities because they enable students to contribute significantly to conversations and collaborate effectively. This discipline is necessary because it fosters a positive learning environment and embraces inclusion where students feel valued and respected.

Julien (2022) hypothesized that listening to children must be an integral part of life. He further explained that listening is not merely giving suggestions and recommendations. Neither does not mean upbraiding and admonishing children. Although listening does not always address problems it frequently creates and sustains positive relationships which is the heart of inclusion. Liu, Chung, Li, Robinson, and Gonzalez (2022) opined that it is important that educators maintain an effective channel of communication with students. This process must be clear and incorporate students. Fyhn and Berntsen (2023) also accented the purpose of listening. They opined that some educators need to have a new orientation that involves being non-judgmental. Fyhn and Berntsen (2023) predicted that the process of listening makes adults and educators aware of certain similes, metaphors, and idioms that

students use. This awareness can and propel them to appreciate and value the experiences of children. They further deduced that listening is extremely complex and convoluted. It is imperative that educators listen accurately, carefully and thoughtfully to students since these fosters and enhances inclusion.

Yin, Bloom, Corcoran, Fletcher, and Sibley (2022) resolutely suggested that educators must provide a safe environment where children can freely express themselves. They also posited that both adults and educators need to learn how to listen prudently. Yin et al. (2022) believed that listening empowers children with a voice and some of them become independent, bold, and unafraid of expressing their sentiments. They further added that listening is absolutely necessary because educators can value and appreciate the perspectives, and opinions of children. Hence, more emphasis must be afforded to this process. Yin et al. (2022) lamented that listening is underemphasized, underestimated, and trivialized. In this modern society, many adults and educators are so engrossed and committed with their career and personal interests that they have little or no time to listen to their children. To further compound this scenario, many adults work for long hours, and this could severely impede and grossly hinder their ability and zeal for listening. Fyhn and Berntsen (2023) believed that although listening is intricate when adults listen cautiously a child-centered ambience is nurtured. To competently participate in this process, Skovsmose (2020) advocated that educators should always put students first and seek what is best for them. In doing so, the listening process becomes fascinating and captivating. It invigorates and stimulates children and makes them independent that they can speak spontaneously. Mithani, Cooper, and Boyd (2021) opined that it is vital that all children especially those with disabilities are provided with a convenient and comfortable space where they can express themselves.

Brookes (2018) stated that adults must not be unwilling to initiate conversations with children. In doing so they show that they are interested in the lives of students. She suggested that children can express their needs and achieve them especially when they are persuaded to do so. This approach is effective because it makes children feel appreciated and valued and hence, they are unshakable of engaging in the dialogue. Brookes (2018) further described that when children actively participate in conversation, they express themselves without inhibition and personal growth and development are obvious. Walker and Misca (2019) firmly advocated that the various experiences of children is a necessary component of the decision-making process in inclusion. When this is accomplished properly the results are evident. It inspires and makes children independent. They are unafraid of embracing relationships between actions, decisions, and their consequences. They become more responsible and autonomous. As noted throughout the paper it is multifarious but attainable. Thus, children must be given the privilege to express their views and aspirations, (Kaneva & Corcoran, 2021). Therefore, listening to children involves building rapport and forming an amicable environment of inclusion, (Ferguson, 2017).

Adler and Rodman (2010) and Gerrig and Zimbard (2008) affirmed that listening involves a positive attitude. DeVito (2006) mentioned that listening is intricate and sensitive and offered five stages. They are receiving, understanding, remembering, evaluating, and responding. Delpit (1993) opined. Delpit (1993) affirmed that listening is intrinsic because students are more likely to express themselves with those who are willing to listen. Delpit (1993) also opined that it is crucial to listen punctiliously children and also pay particular attention to their mannerisms. This is because emotions and behaviors are valuable in ascertaining the perspectives of children. Delpit (1993) emphasized listening includes finesse and discretion which incorporates all the senses. Listening with heart and mind means being totally engaged and dedicated to the relationship. It means being attentive and observant. According to Delpit (1993) for listening to be beneficial and productive adults may have to even suspend their beliefs. DeVito (2006) also added that listening objectively is growth promoting. Listening with heart and mind is not superficial and it is more than being attentive and discreet. It is more than being acquainted with the parlance of children. It means being truthful and straightforward. Fine and Glassner (1979) offered the perspective that listening to children is more than demonstrating sympathy and empathy. Bovee (2008)

opined that through listening pertinent issues surface and adults can seek clarification, but they must always try to separate opinions from facts.

As documented above, listening can expose adults to the vocabulary of children and further lead them to appreciate the experiences of students. Even when adults think they are fully equipped and can appreciate the jargon of children. Fine and Glassner (1979) believed listening must be done professionally. Bovee (2008) and Adler and Rodman (2010) offered some suggestions that could facilitate this discipline and make it more productive. During the process adults can take notes, make look at the children, respond with appropriate gestures, utilize non-verbal cues and maintain the focus.

Kaneva and Corcoran (2021) opined that listening is important in trying to ascertain the experiences of children. Hence, it should be given more emphasis. Kaneva and Corcoran (2021) noted that children speak in a somewhat incomprehensible tone which frequently denotes nervousness or anxiety and educators ought to be cognizant and appreciate the difficulty experienced by children experience when they try to discuss sensitive issues. Therefore, the need to clearly comprehend the voices of children must be paramount.

1.4. Advocacy

It is important to note that there are many people who do not consider self-advocacy as important. Advocates for inclusion strongly affirm that children, especially those with disabilities, should voice their cases on their own behalf. They are the ones who can best explain what they are experiencing and what they need. Advocacy may also entail challenging the current way of thinking so that inclusion could be possible. This may necessitate the need to re-organize social, political, religious, and educational trends of thought. Advocacy, as it relates to inclusion, indicates that the perspectives of students could revolutionize the existing structures and the images that society has about them. The heart of advocacy includes liberating children from the conventional and authoritative attitude that certain members of mainstream society may hold towards them.

United Nations (2017) resolutely supported and affirmed self-advocacy and further believed that some children are competent to make their own representation. Thus, children must be afforded a voice. Having a voice is the only way they would achieve inclusion. On the other hand, when this voice is denied, they frequently become disillusioned and disenchanted. They are more inclined to become more withdrawn from society, resentful and aggressive and this further complicates inclusion. It is interesting to note that some of them even harbor this disenchantment and the resulting pain, fear, confusion, negative self-esteem, and this low expectation further compound their daily active lives and does not foster inclusion, (United Nations, 2017).

United Nations (2017) addressing the Convention to the Rights of the Child outlined a policy and legal guidance for governments to protect children especially those with disabilities. This document cited that children have the right to associate and interact freely in all public spaces without harassment and intimidation and this is the heart of inclusion. Thomas De Benitez (2017) supported this idea and further noted that advocacy is a necessary tool which embraces inclusion. Meir and Fletcher (2020) and Richardson and Fletcher (2020) further added that advocacy is a form of education and enlightenment because it provides various opportunities for children to freely express themselves. According to Kaneva and Corcoran (2021) advocacy creates avenues for children to interact with each other cordially and respectfully. This interaction develops new skills and accentuates education. Moreover, this dynamic process equips children with tremendous sense of pride and satisfaction thereby giving their fragile ego a boost and empowering them to optimize their ability and potential, (Black, Fletcher, & Lake, 2020; Dowse & Fletcher, 2018). When children participate in discussions, dialogues, and debates their talent are brought to the forefront and this creates an awareness for everyone, (Corcoran, Oldfield, & Bloom, 2020). Dowse and Fletcher (2018) suggested that there is a paucity of literature about advocacy and children and further believed that this dearth of information clearly suggests that the voices of children are not given due consideration and prominence. Consequently, it does not embrace inclusion.

To simply empower children and give them a voice is more than merely permitting them to express themselves and provide their own comments and suggestions. It is a complete reorientation that forces society to value and appreciate their proposals and contributions to the wider society. It is important to note that advocacy among children with disabilities is not easy to attain. In several instances, these children are unaware of the existence of those who make policies regarding their lives. Therefore, policy makers must be alerted. They must listen to the perspectives of these children. They must be aware of their concerns, difficulties, and challenges. If their voices go unheard, then their lives could be disregarded completely, and interests will not be effectively engaged, and inclusion will be further minimized. Advocacy among children should foster an awareness of how they live. To simply express an interest in advocacy is insufficient. People cannot identify with them when they are not willing to confront issues and systems that do not contribute to inclusion. Commitment without confrontation tends to fade quickly into fruitless sentimental commiseration. Commitment involves a diligent effort in the pursuit of inclusion. However, this has its own measure of difficulty. It involves social, political, and educational action and critical analysis challenging the misinformed, ignorant prejudicial statements and ideas that are often prevalent within society.

2. Methodology

This non-empirical research obtained apposite and germane information using various and current studies, methodical review, and meta-analysis. Mention ought to be made that secondary sources were also taken from the internet from September 2023 to January 2024. Some of these included EBSCO, American Psychological Association APA PsycArticles, APA PsycInfo, MEDLINE, SCOPUS, and Web of Science. In addition, a structured and well-organized hand screening of selected journals was conducted. Some of them are the International Journal of Inclusive Education, European Journal of Special Needs Education, British Journal of Special Education, Exceptional Children, British Journal of Educational Psychology, International Journal of Disability, Development and Education, International Journal of Special Education, Teaching and Teacher Education, and Journal of Research on Special Needs Education. To properly maintain the focus and objective of this research and simultaneously find current and apposite literature, the following terms and words were used: teaching, learning, inclusive education, special education, listening, advocacy. Thus, this non-empirical research involved a careful and thorough investigation of appropriate and apropos research techniques such as text criticism, critical examination of biographical studies, and narrative analysis.

3. Limitations and Future Research

While this non-empirical study contributed to the understanding of the challenges students experience with inclusive there were some limitations. The methods highlighted personal observations, integrative literature, reflection on current events, and the authority and experience of the various authors but it was not grounded on observation and experimentation. Because the arguments presented were not supported by empirical data, they are more susceptible to criticism. This research may have excluded some relevant studies because it was impossible to capture all the information that was available in online databases. This non-empirical research did not include fieldwork and the actual voices, experiences, thoughts, and opinions of those involved in inclusion. In this regard, further studies could incorporate both non-empirical and empirical methods. These methods could embrace both the field of science and the research outcome being analyzed.

4. Conclusion

This non-empirical research can certainly impel and incite the public to be acutely cognizant of the significance of inclusion. These challenges and barriers can be minimized through active listening and appreciating the perspectives of children. Moreover, listening often fosters advocacy which is a necessary ingredient for inclusion. This paper examined some tenets of inclusion, listening and advocacy. Inclusion is more than being empathetic and demonstrating sympathy and upholding

advocacy. It is getting seriously and wholeheartedly involved in the lives of children. Although this is demanding, convoluting and time-consuming, government institutions, non-governmental organizations, and all those interested in inclusion should have a meaningful dialogue with them. Moreover, children can be instrumental in creating proper inclusion, a better society, a nation, and indeed a better world.

5. Recommendations

From all that has been stated the following recommendations are offered.
1. Teaching and learning should incorporate strategies that enhance listening.
2. Teaching and learning should be child-centered.
3. Educators must promote and encourage advocacy among students.
4. Educators must encourage active participation and reflection among students.
5. The wider community and policymakers must promote an awareness of inclusion.

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