Inclusive education and the role of distance education

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Abstract

The second goal of the UN Millennium Development calls for universal primary education by 2015. Is this goal too ambitious? How much have/are the educational systems doing around the world to achieve this goal? Is the political will there? Is education really inclusive? These questions and many more are critical. Inclusive education that is concerned with all learners, with a focus on those who have traditionally been excluded from educational opportunities such as learners with special needs and disabilities, children from ethnic and linguistic minorities could be one of the many ways of achieving the second UN Millennium Development goal. This paper engages a debate on whether the education system is actually inclusive or not. The paper focuses mainly on the inclusion of children and/or people with disabilities; the challenges children and/or people with disabilities face; and lastly the role that distance education could play towards achieving inclusive education.

Key words:
Inclusive education, disabilities, UN Millennium Development goal, distance education, minorities

Introduction

The concept of inclusion is based on human rights, equal opportunities, social justice and participation. Inclusive education is very complex and multifaceted recognizing that there isn’t just one inclusion but rather, inclusion according to government rhetoric, inclusion as seen by children within schools, inclusion according to disabled activists, inclusion according to the lay person and inclusion contested by various academics. Inclusion involves many stakeholders and it is a process that is difficult to implement. It is also controversial in the sense that it has multiple interpretations; it means different things to different people. Poverty, ethnicity, disability, gender or membership of a minority group may limit access to or marginalize within education. Cultural, social and economic consequences of these factors vary from time to time, country to country and from location to location (UNESCO, 2003). Therefore, inclusive education appreciates every learner’s fundamental right to learn and acknowledges that each child has unique abilities and needs. Seemingly, if given the right opportunities, all children can
develop their potential. Inclusive education considers differences in the learning and physical abilities of children as opportunities for making education system and schools more responsive and dynamic.

Inclusive education enables both teachers and learners to feel comfortable with diversity and to see it as a challenge and enrichment in the learning environment, rather than see it as a problem. Furthermore, inclusive education is concerned with all learners, with focus on learners with special needs and disabilities, children from ethnic and linguistic minorities (UNESCO, 1994).

Proponents of inclusive education argue that inclusive education benefits children with disabilities in the sense that they develop better social skills, better academic achievements, promotes citizenship and builds a sense of strong community. Opponents of inclusive education on the other hand argue that special education is better resourced, has low teacher-pupil rations, has special teachers, great individualized of instruction in a homogeneous classroom, and an increased curriculum emphasis on social and vocational goals (Johnson, 1962, cited in Kavale & Forness, 2000).

Exclusionary practices in education

There are attitudinal and contextual realities associated with the general education classroom that might affect the success or failure of integration (Shanker, 1995). Baker and Zigmond (1990) study indicated that, the general education classroom was a place where undifferentiated, large-group instruction dominated and teachers were more concerned with maintaining routine than with meeting individual differences. They argued that, “teachers cared about children and were conscientious about their jobs-but their mind-set was conformity, not accommodation. In this setting (regular education classes), any student who could not conform would likely be unsuccessful” (p. 519). McIntosh, Vaughn, Schumm, Haager, and Lee (1993) shared the same sentiments whe they found similar scenario for students with disabilities in the general classroom. Even though the students were treated much like other students, students with disabilities did not receive differentiated instruction or adaptations. It would be interesting to investigate if this assertion still holds to date.

In developing countries, the major constraint of the move toward inclusive approaches in education is attributed mainly to serious shortage of resources such as lack of schools or inadequate facilities, lack of teachers and/or shortage of qualified staff, lack of learning materials and absence of support (UNESCO, 2003). Regular teachers are not adequately trained to provide diversified instructional methods or to cope with the needs of diverse learners.

On the contrary, in developing countries, the move toward inclusive approaches in education is often due to the legacy of traditional policies and practices (such as segregated or exclusive education for groups identified as being “difficult” or “different” or based on wealth, religion, etc.).
In the following section, the author discusses some factors that militate against inclusive education. However, it is important to note that the factors discussed below are not exhaustive. These factors include access, policies and structures, funding, curriculum and

**Access**

Some exclusionary practices are related to access. Examples of access barriers include high school fees that can only be afforded by well-off people; schools that are “open” for a specific ethnic or religious group for example. Other factors related to access include poor quality of the teaching, weak school management or curriculum that is irrelevant to people’s needs just to mention a few.

**Policies and structures**

Policies and structures can also contribute to exclusion. In some countries there may exist policies that give a possibility for authorities to declare that some children are “uneducatable” usually children with severe intellectual disability (UNESCO, 2003). In some contexts, the way educational provision is arranged contributes to labeling and discrimination despite good intentions (e.g. The School of the Blind in Botswana). The parallel systems of education have prevailed across the world particularly in the developed countries. This has created a mainstream education system that does not have to cater for children who may challenge its orthodoxy, structure or functioning; and special schools and classes for particular groups of students such as students with disabilities, students from different ethnic groups, students who have challenging behavior etc. The structure is further strengthened by special incentives for teachers working in this ‘specialized’ area, such as better salaries, lower retirement age, smaller classes and so on which impedes efforts in changing the way the system works.

**Funding**

Funding has always come up in Education For All (EFA) assessment reports as a constraint for inclusive education. The inadequacy of resources to meet basic needs in education is always a pervasive theme. There are some indications from countries where a parallel system of education (mainstream-special) is in place that providing services to children who are perceived as having special needs is about 2 to 4 times higher than the cost of education who do not need these services (UNESCO, 2003). The higher costs apply to education in separate settings such as in special schools, whereas the lower costs are usually applicable in more inclusive settings.

**Curriculum**

The design and development of learning and teaching materials often do not take into account the special needs, aspirations and uniqueness of the learners. Language could also be a challenge to the learners. “In many countries the language of instruction is different than the language the
Overcoming exclusion through inclusive approaches in education

Some countries have engaged different approaches in education to overcome exclusion. This section explores some examples of inclusion and these are not exhaustive. Some examples include curriculum, assessment and evaluation to promote inclusion etc.

Curriculum

The curriculum has always been one of the major obstacles or tools in the education system to facilitate the development of more inclusive system. Often times “in many contexts, the curriculum is extensive and demanding or centrally designed and rigid, leaving little flexibility for local adaptations or for teachers to experiment and try out new approaches. The content might be distant to the reality in which the students live, and therefore inaccessible and unmotivating. The curriculum might also be gender biased and degrading (UNESCO, 2003). Therefore, the design and development of specific learning and teaching materials and teaching arrangements should take cognizance the needs, interest, aspirations and uniqueness of the learners.

One example of inclusive curriculum was done in Uganda. In this case, flexible curriculum was designed to reach out to semi-nomadic cattle keepers living in a fragile ecological environment in North Eastern Uganda. The revised curriculum has been designed to suit the learning and skills requirements of these children with in-built provision for indigenous knowledge and skills, basic life skills relevant to pastoral life such as animal husbandry, water and rangeland management, environmental protection early warning systems and positive cultural practices.

Assessment and evaluation to promote inclusion

An inclusive curriculum demands flexible, success-oriented means of assessment, examination and evaluation. In this case, the assessment of children is increasingly related to the aims of the curriculum, the culture and experience biography of the child and the ways in which the curriculum is designed and delivered. Supovitz & Brennan (1997) as cited by UNESCO, 2003 argued that , “while knowledge-based examinations are recognized to have their limitations in terms of both validity and reliability, formal standardized tests may also have adverse effects, such decontextualized facts and skills; ranking and sorting schools and children; narrowing the curriculum as teachers concentrate their teaching on the information, forms and formats required in the tests; and reinforcing bias in terms of gender, race/ethnicity and social class.” Some proponents of inclusive education argue that assessment (outcomes-based curriculum) should be on learners’ progress that is measured against the broad results expected at the end of teaching and learning process, such as skills, abilities and values.
Assessment could also be ongoing to get feedback from children’s learning and teachers’ success in selecting appropriate teaching methods and the needs to adjust the pace or style of teaching. As a consequence, all learners can be evaluated against their own achievements as opposed to being compared to other learners. Portfolio assessment can also be used. This would include learners’ own products such as final ‘best’ work, various works in progress, samples of tests completed, certificates earned, goals met, daily work samples, self-evaluation of the progress of learning and teachers’ observations (UNESCO, 2003).

The social situation in an inclusive classroom

While factors such as access, funding, curriculum, policies and structures pose a challenge to the success of inclusive education; social outcomes associated with general education placement have also been investigated as a constraint. Some positive social outcomes have been found primarily in the form of increased tolerance and or social support from students without disabilities (Banerji & Dailey, 1995). However, there seems to be continuing negative consequences that include limited self-confidence, poor self-perceptions, and inadequate social skills among student with disabilities (Kavale & Forness, 2000). In a larger scale study, Vaughn, Elbaum, and Schamm (1996) assessed the effects on inclusive placements on social functioning and found that students with disabilities were less accepted by their peers, and the degree to which they were and liked declined over time. To sum it up students with disabilities were often less accepted and often rejected (Sale & Carey, 1995). With respect to self-perceptions among students with disabilities in integrated settings, Bear, Clever & Proctor (1991) found low levels of global self-worth, academic competence, and behavior conduct. Students without disabilities on the other hand do not have favorable attitudes and improved acceptance towards students with disabilities.

Distance Education and Inclusive Education

Distance education is seen as a flexible and appropriately inclusive to deliver inclusive education. Technology could be used to support inclusion. The advent of technology and open and distance learning could go a long way in widening accessibility to education for the majority of children and or people with disabilities, flexibly so that the learning process can go on. These groups may be able to access materials from home, which is seen as the safest, least expensive environment. This could be incorporated with occasional attendance at local study centers and a form of blended learning that incorporates Open Education Resources (OERs) such as OpenLearn (Khokhar, 2007).

Hurley (2001) suggests that, “best practice suggests that guidance and support should be matched to the needs of the student population and be sufficient for that population (p. 22). This describes very well the challenge for institutions to implement distance learning into excluded communities in an effort to allow them to participate in a supported environment.
Distance education experience needs to be inclusive and relevant to the needs of the learners with disabilities. Furthermore, distance education should widen and create access to learning and training opportunities that are tailored to meet the needs of the individual (Walken, 2000, p.60).

Distance education should have local provision that is available within a local area through drop-in Learning Centers, Community-based Learning Centers, workplace Learning Centers or at home. This kind of platform would allow distance learning to take place for excluded groups as the technical element of learning is localized thus, making attendance for tutorial or technical guidance during a programme less of a barrier. Hurley asserted that, “If community access develops as predicted, then some guidance functions will need to be located at the community of Learning Centers. It would be difficult to avoid personal contact upon which mutual confidence is built (Hurley, 2001; p.66)

The value of localized interventions and the sensitivity with which teachers/tutors have to implement and maintain social interaction would promote the process of inclusion. “With course materials on the Internet, the role of the learner changes from one of primarily being a recipient to one of being a participant...Just as the teacher will have to learn new tools, the learners will also have to use new tools if they are to fully capitalize on using course materials and related sources of information on the Internet (Forayth, 1998). Additionally, issues of preparedness of the learners need to be addressed to allow them to be able to engage successfully and not drop out because of technological and social limitations.

There are many learners who are excluded from engaging in schools because of cultural, familial, and economic circumstances and the concept of distance learning does not resonate with them or their communities (Khokhar, 2007). Distance education materials should address the need for pedagogy of recognition (Slee, 1999) where diverse learners can recognize their own experiences and identities in the curriculum. Sheehy, Rix, Nind & Simmons (2004) support this position, “We want students with minority cultures, languages and sexuality to find themselves visible in the materials” (p.140). Students should be valued as active meaning-makers with the potential power to transform their own and others’ educational experiences.

A process of change

A process of change in inclusive education means achieving the goals set; adopting more inclusive ways of thinking and working. Inclusion should be linked to the missions of the education system at larger and not to a specific group such as disability or a certain ethnic group (Fine, 2000 cited by UNESCO 2003). According to Fine, if inclusion is not connected to the mission of the education system, the stakeholders might not be willing to devote their time to the process that does not seem to make any contribution to the development in general. What this means is that, there should be “buy-in” of inclusion by all the stakeholders.
Political will is pertinent to the change process. Strong support demonstrated by leaders and governments would translate into devotion (time and resources necessary for the process) on the part of teachers, other staff and the community.

Physical access and learning environment might pose some barriers to learning and participation if not adequately addressed. Factors such as long distances or dangerous roads, hostile political atmosphere might pose a barrier to accessing Learning Centers/schools particularly for learners who have difficulties in mobility. Learning Centers and/or schools should have simple ramps and internal classroom arrangement that can easily be accessible to learners with disabilities. The physical environment of the Learning Centers/schools such as the design of the building, the availability of water, electricity and toilet/sewage facilities should allow all students to participate in a range of learning activities in and out of classroom.

The support of teachers is critical for any educational undertaking in general and for inclusive education in particular because teachers are agents of change. Teachers need support for their lessons and update their own knowledge. Making better use of resources forms the cornerstone of inclusion; therefore making use of available resources to support learning is very critical. Examples include “developing ways of working that make better use of human energy through greater cooperation between teachers, support staff, carers and the learners themselves.” Better use of child-to-child co-operation can also help to contribute to the development of a more inclusive education in ways that would improve conditions from all learners. Children and/or people without disabilities should appreciate those with disabilities and recognize that they are potential human beings.

Locally made materials play a significant role in enhancing the quality of the learning/teaching process. Local materials also provide satisfaction of the work done for learners and their teachers (UNESCO, 2003).

Conclusion

In their study, Vaughn, Schumm, Jallad, Slusher & Saumell (1996) suggested that in general education teachers believed that they did not possess the necessary preparation to teach students with disabilities, lacked opportunities to collaborate with special education teachers, and made infrequent and unsystematic use of adaptations, even though students with disabilities preferred teachers who did make such instructional adaptations. In response to one of the questions the author asked at the beginning of the paper, Schumm & Vaughn provided a generally negative response. Mamlin (1999) as cited by Kavale & Forness (2000) argued that inclusion effort failed. The failure was attributed to a continuing culture of segregation in the school and a leadership style that demanded too much control. Mamlin concluded that, “not all schools are ready to make decisions on restructuring for inclusion” (p.47).

The preceding debate warrants inclusion policy. Inclusion does not just happen; but requires careful thought and preparation. For appropriate inclusion to occur in general education, it
should be implemented with proper attitudes, accommodations, and adaptations in place (King-Sears, 1997). Literature suggests that generalization about inclusion remains tentative, and more still needs to be done in order to carry it more effective.
References


*Focus on Exceptional Children*, 29, 1-22.


