Inclusive Education in the Face of a Global Pandemic: Providing Support

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Article Info	Abstract
	Inclusivity in education has been perceived to be used in accommodating mostly students with disabilities as well integrating students with different learning abilities / needs. For which scholars have researched and proposed diverse models that can be used for efficient and effective implementation in and out of the classroom situation. These models / solutions as much as possible may not have captured instances of inclusive education (IE) in the era of a global pandemic such as the Covid-19 pandemic which is being experienced across the globe. The Covid-19 pandemic brought with it novel challenges that has affected every sphere of life, inclusive of education. It therefore requires novel, adaptive and transformative ways in responding to the problems that it brought about. As such the idea of this paper is to highlight possible practical issues as it pertains to inclusive education during the Covid-19 pandemic using review method. Hence, relevant literatures are reviewed. The submission following the reviews is adopted for conclusion and recommendations which indicates that institutions of learning are to look beyond the norm of inclusivity in education as it pertains to disabilities, but focus on exploring the adoption of digital devices for teaching and learning purposes.

Introduction

Inclusive education is usually targeted at ensuring access to equal educational rights for different categories of people regardless of their challenges (Parmigiani, Benigno, Giusto, Silvaggio & Sperandio, 2020). According to Parmigiani et al. (2020), the practices however adopted in achieving such vary in schools and communities, yet the reason for inclusive education remains to support all students to be successfully integrated in their schools. This accounts for one of the reasons why the students are placed in regular classes, provided with various support systems during teaching and learning exercises, and made to participate in all activities which promote educational success (Hardy & Woodcock, 2015; and Haug, 2016). Additionally, inclusive education is considered pivot for all children and expected to be treated as such for students with learning needs that have been historically and / or contemporarily marginalized (Waitoller, 2020; and Kozleski, 2020). Review of the work of Uleanya, Gamede and Kutame (2020) suggests that in the South African context, marginalization in education could be traceable to the form of education provided to students in rural communities. Uleanya and Rugbeer (2020) hold the view that many rural institutions of learning in South Africa are marginalized following the experience of participatory access. In this regard, participatory access is used to mean giving students the opportunity to enrol for different courses of studies without ensuring the quality of education provided. Conversely, Akoojee and Nkomo (2008) describe the reverse as access with success. This implies where students are enrolled for different courses of study and are given due access to quality education through the availability of certain necessary support systems and infrastructures. Suffice to state that inclusive education entails making available possible learning supportive environment for all children regardless of the challenges that they may be faced with in order to enhance their learning abilities and ensure good academic performances for them. However, Akoojee and Nkomo (2008) as well as Uleanya, Gamede and Kutame (2020) hold the view that different challenges tend to militate against efforts made to ensure the provision of quality education which is envisaged to transcend to access with success. In other words, participatory access is usually experienced due to several challenges. These challenges include students, institutions of learning, and government related (Uleanya, Gamede & Kutame, 2020).

Additionally, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has caused various forms of challenges for different sectors in virtually all walks of life (Olaniran & Uleanya, 2021a). The challenges posed by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic have affected institutions of learning as well as students in different ways (Page, Charteris, Anderson & Boyle, 2021). For instance, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has led many institutions of learning across various nations and regions of the world to explore the online option of teaching and learning though they are underprepared for such. This practice has led to some students being left-out. Suffice to state

that some students have been marginalized due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, yet the idea of inclusive education which is the desired norm and practice in a nation like South Africa remains the same. Hence, the reason for this study which attempts to explore the various challenges hampering inclusivity in education during the Covid-19 pandemic. In order to achieve the focus of this present study, attempt is made to proffer answer to the research question guiding the study. The identified research question is: what are the factors hindering inclusivity in education in South Africa during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic?

Methodology

This present study adopted literature review method to generate data. Thus, relevant literatures were reviewed and applied to this study. According to Snyder (2019) in support of the adoption of literature review as a research method, states that there are different types of review method. These include: narrative otherwise called integrative, systematic reviews, and meta-analysis. The narrative or integrative method of literature reviews according to Snyder (2019) is supported by Baumeister and Leary (1997); Torraco (2005), while the systematic reviews, and meta-analysis methods of literature reviews are supported by Wong, Greenhalgh, Westhorp, Buckingham and Pawson (2013); Davis, Mengersen, Bennett and Mazerolle (2014); as well as Liberati et al. (2009). The literature review method especially as it concerns research in the social sciences provides opportunity for critical evaluation of the opinions of various scholars on a specific subject which is of interest to the researcher at that moment. In the case of this study, the works of different scholars on inclusivity in education with regards to schools during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic was explored and adapted to the South African situation. Table 1 below shows succinctly the different subject areas where relevant literatures were reviewed following the extant works of some identified scholars.

Table 1: Different subject areas and relevant reviewed literatures

Area covered	Search Item(s)	Study
Inclusive Education	Meaning	Parmigiani, et al. (2020); Hardy & Woodcock, (2015); Haug, (2016); Waitoller, (2020); Kozleski, (2020).
	Marginalization of Students in Rural Institutions of Learning	Uleanya, Gamede and Kutame (2020); Uleanya and Rugbeer (2020); Akoojee and Nkomo (2008).
	Covid-19 and Challenges in Education	Olaniran and Uleanya, (2021a); Page et al. (2021).
Factors Hampering Online Inclusivity in Education in the Face of the Global Pandemic	Accessing Learning Tools and Materials	Page et al. (2021); Parmigiani, et al. (2020); as well as Uleanya, Gamede and Kutame (2020)
	Use of Technological Tools for Online Education	Aristovnik et al. (2020); Akintolu & Uleanya (2021) as well as Page et al. (2021)
	Discrepancies in and Students Attitude Towards Online and Onsite Methods of Learning	Aristovnik et al. (2020); Owusu-Fordjour, Koomson and Hanson (2020); Kapasia, et al. (2020); Ali (2020); Page et al. (2021); as well as Sahu (2020).
	Poverty / Socio-Economic Background	Ali (2020); Aristovnik, et al. (2020); Armstrong and Spandagou (2009); Dalton, Mckenzie and Kahonde (2012); Donohue and Bornman (2014); Kapasia, et al (2020); Meltz, Herman and Pillay (2014); Murungi (2015); Owusu-Fordjour, Koomson and Hanson (2020); Parmigiani et al. (2020); as well as Van Lancker and Parolin (2020).
	Digital Divide / Computer Illiteracy	Lupač (2018); Guitton (2020); Beaunoyer, Dupéré and Guitton

		(2020)
	Internet Connectivity Issues	Anifowoshe et al. (2020); Kapasia et al. (2020); Owusu-Fordjour et al. (2020); Olaniran and Uleanya (2021b); Parmigiani, et al. (2020); Uleanya and Gamede (2019) as well as Uleanya, Gamede and Kutame (2020)
	Electric Power Supply	Aristovnik, et al. (2020); Ogbomo (2011); Uleanya and Gamede (2019); United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) (2014); Usman (2016); as well as Welland (2017)
	Isolation Issues	Aristovnik et al., 2020; as well as Elmer, Mepham & Stadtfeld, 2020).
Methodology	Review method Narrative or Integrative Method of Literature Review. Systematic Reviews, and Meta-analysis Methods of Literature Reviews	Snyder (2019) Baumeister and Leary (1997); Torraco (2005). Wong, Greenhalgh, Westhorp, Buckingham and Pawson (2013); Davis, Mengersen, Bennett and Mazerolle (2014); as well as Liberati et al. (2009)

Source: Authors' Study

Findings and Discussion

The findings following the reviewed literatures are presented based on the identified research question guiding the study. Hence, the various identified themes are highlighted and explained following the heading and sub-headings below.

Factors Hampering Online Inclusivity in Education in the Face of the Global Pandemic

According to Page et al. (2021), during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, students experienced different challenges which hampered their access to online education. Amongst these challenges are: accessing learning tools, use of technological tools for online education, discrepancies in and students' attitudes towards online and face to face mode of learning, and issues revolving around isolation. Each of the challenges are briefly explained below.

Accessing Learning Tools and Materials

The result of the analysed data presented by Page et al. (2021) showed that students experienced more difficulties in attempting to access learning tools and materials from home compared to when they are in school. This suggests that due to the Covid-19 pandemic some students were marginalized following their difficulty or non-access to learning tools and materials. The difficulty or non-access to learning tools and materials can be caused due to various factors such as location of students, power supply, internet connectivity, access to fund / data, amongst others. According to Uleanya, Gamede and Kutame (2020), low internet connectivity as well as family socio-economic background are contributory factors affecting students access to quality education. In corroboration to this finding, Parmigiani, et al. (2020) following the outcome of the conducted study during the Covid-19 pandemic state that students' access to quality education during the pandemic was hampered due to different factors. Amongst these factors are socio-economic background, digital divide / computer illiteracy, connectivity issues, and electric power supply. Hence, the need to briefly consider the effects of the identified factors on students' learning abilities, consequently, academic performances especially with regards to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Poverty / Socio-Economic Background

Part of the important issues that must be explored in discussing inclusion and inclusivity in education especially as it concerns South Africa following the context of this study is poverty and socio-economic background of students (Armstrong & Spandagou, 2009; Dalton, Mckenzie & Kahonde, 2012; Donohue & Bornman, 2014;

Meltz, Herman & Pillay, 2014 as well as Murungi, 2015). Poverty perceived as a social construct has been defined as a measure based on the global poverty line (GPL). It is therefore said that a person is considered to be poor if their income or consumption level falls below the minimum level deemed to be necessary to meet basic needs. The students from low socio-economic backgrounds and / or low-income households live in conditions that make home schooling / access to education difficult as such may not have suitable space to school activities or even access to internet (Iwaloye, Gamede & Uleanya, 2019; Uleanya, Iwaloye, & Gamede, 2020, as well as Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020) and may not even have resources to purchase data, or even a smartphone or computer. This corroborates the submission of Parmigiani, et al. (2020) who opines that the socio-economic background of students impacted their learning abilities, consequently academic performances during the period of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. According to Donohue and Bornman (2014), in the South African context, poverty is one of the major factors which hinders the realization of education goals. Similarly, Owusu-Fordjour, Koomson and Hanson (2020); Kapasia, et al (2020), as well as Ali (2020) hold the view that poverty makes students to put up negative attitude students towards the shift from onset to online method of teaching and learning. This implies that the socio-economic background / poor state of students affects their acceptance of online teaching and learning. This is attributed to the expenses students are likely to incur while undertaking online teaching and learning exercise, compared to the onsite experience where facilities are provided at their disposal. Meanwhile, Aristovnik, et al. (2020) conducted a study from a global perspective on the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the life of higher education students. The study comprised 30,383 students from six continents and 62 nations of the world. The results of the analysed data showed that the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic had impact on the socio-economic lives of students. However, following the support measures from the government, banking institutions as well as institutions of higher learning, many students from different nations of the world were able to cope (Aristovnik, et al. 2020). This implies that whilst the socio-economic background of students of higher education have impacts on them, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic tends to have aggravated such impact, however, with support measures, students are able to overcome challenges posed by socio-economic factors. For instance, following findings from the works of Iwaloye, Gamede and Uleanya (2019) and Uleanya, Gamede and Uleanya (2019), some students travel long distances in order to have access to certain facilities, thus, being unable to cater for their transportation may hinder them from improving their learning abilities. Hence, part of the support measures provided by governments during the Covid-19 pandemic was free transportation (Aristovnik, et al. 2020). This implies that being financially unstable can be a hindrance to most students exercising their right to education.

Digital Divide / Computer Illiteracy
Digital divide following the review of the works of Lupač (2018) as well as Akintolu and Uleanya (2021) is used to imply inequalities in the experiences and abilities of various individuals such as students based on their access to information communication technology (ICT) and technological gadgets. From a technological viewpoint, the Covid-19 pandemic has caused tremendous change in the adoption and use of digital technologies (Guitton, 2020) which was not the case prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. In recent times, the status quo is that digital spaces no longer constitute an amenity but a necessity, since it is almost the only way of accessing information and services (Beaunoyer, Dupéré, & Guitton, 2020). However, inequities in subjects revolving around access to networks and connected devices, as well as the level of computer literacy significantly affect students' abilities to benefit from formal schooling in general and especially in this time of remote education as a norm where the use of technology is a must. Meanwhile, these Digital inequalities were in existence prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 but is now obvious. Suffice to state that online learning seems to be exposing the existing digital divide / computer illiteracy that exists amongst students.

Internet Connectivity Issues
Olaniran and Uleanya (2021b), conducted a study on the reasons why international students choose to leave their home country to study in a nation like South Africa at a postgraduate level. One of the factors identified by international students why they choose to study in like South Africa is access to high speed internet services. This implies that internet connectivity plays a pivot role in the teaching and learning activities of students. However, communities in given regions have unequal conditions of economic development, and social services, as well as significant rural-urban divides (Uleanya, Gamede & Kutame, 2020). Moreover, individuals residing in low-resourced areas – including rural areas and informal urban settlements – often are faced with network / internet connectivity issues. Meanwhile, online learning environments usually require computers and a reliable internet connection (Uleanya & Gamede, 2019). This challenge tends to affect the learning abilities of students, consequently their academic performances. For instance, following different studies conducted by Anifowoshe et al. (2020); Kapasia et al. (2020) as well as Owusu-Fordjour et al. (2020) during the outbreak of the Covid-19, many students had limited access to internet connectivity. This suggests that the learning abilities and consequently academic performances of students during the Covid-19 pandemic would have been affected negatively based on limited internet connectivity.

Electric Power Supply

Supply of electricity is a contributory factor which affects students' access to quality education (Ogbomo, 2011; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2014; Usman, 2016; as well as Welland, 2017). The issue of electricity becomes even more crucial in the shift from onsite to online teaching and learning, as electric power supply is need for online activities. Following the closure of educational institutions across the globe due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, most schools, colleges and universities have shifted to online classes in order to continue their teaching and learning exercises (Aristovnik, et al. 2020). This shift tends to have had effect on the power systems. On the other hand, according to Uleanya and Gamede (2019), erratic power supply can be a major challenge to access to educational resources as electricity may seldom be available during the day or at night depending on the time of load shedding. In some areas, they may have electricity outages that runs into months due to poor service delivery. Thus, making students who are expected to attend virtual classes and study unable to keep up with their academic workloads due to the inconsistency in electricity supply. This may be a common trend especially in rural areas. Yet all students regardless of their locations are expected to be included in the provided quality education. Such experience of poor electric power supply impacts the learning abilities and academic performances of students negatively.

Use of Technological Tools for Online Education

This is another challenge experienced by students during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic as identified by Page et al. (2021). Following the issue of digital divide / computer illiteracy, many students and in other instances lecturers find it difficult to use technological tools even when they are made available and they are able to access them (Akintolu & Uleanya, 2021). Meanwhile, in the practice of online learning, the use of technological tools is pivot. Review of the work of Aristovnik et al. (2020) shows that knowledge and skills of technological tools influenced the learning abilities of students during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings of the work of Aristovnik et al. (2020) suggest that the issue of the use of technological tools affects both lecturers and students. Suffice to state that poor knowledge of technological tools either from the lecturers or students influences the quality of access to education that would be experienced by the students. This is regardless of the availability of the different necessitating factors.

Discrepancies in and Students Attitude Towards Online and Onsite Methods of Learning

Page et al. (2021) in their study show that the differences in online and face to face modes of learning have effect on the learning abilities of students. Meanwhile, due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the world moved to online mode of learning (Sahu 2020; and Ali, 2020). This was in attempt to reduce or possibly stop the spread of the Coronavirus. According to Aristovnik et al. (2020), the shift from onsite to online lectures following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic affected students in different capacities, especially undergraduates, applied sciences students and those from less developed parts of the world like Africa and Asia. This implies that owing to the differences in the experiences of face to face teaching and learning compared to online, students tend to be affected negatively especially in instances where they have not been exposed previously to online teaching and learning exercises. According to the findings of the works of Owusu-Fordjour, Koomson and Hanson (2020); Kapasia, et al. (2020), as well as Ali (2020), the attitude of students on the shift from onsite teaching and learning to online during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic also affects their learning abilities.

Issue of Isolation

Isolation affects students' mental health in different ways (Aristovnik et al., 2020; as well as Elmer, Mepham & Stadtfeld, 2020). During the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the mental health of different students across the globe were threatened in different ways (Aristovnik et al., 2020, and Elmer, Mepham & Stadtfeld, 2020). For instance, according to Elmer, Mepham and Stadtfeld (2020), some students were at a very high risk of experiencing challenges of mental health disorder, especially those who for various reasons lived or were made to live in isolation during the Covid-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, the mental health of students is paramount in facilitating their learning abilities and improving their academic performances.

Conclusion

The study explored the issue of inclusivity in education especially as it concerns the experiences following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Review method was adopted; hence relevant literatures were reviewed. The findings of the study showed that whilst inclusive education most times is targeted at students with one learning disability or the other, it is expedient that same be considered in the adoption of online teaching following the transition from onsite to online during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the study showed that following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, students experienced various challenges such as accessing

learning tools, use of technological tools for online education, discrepancies in and students' attitudes towards online and face to face mode of learning, and issues revolving around isolation, all of which hindered their access to quality online education. Meanwhile, factors like poor electricity supply, internet connectivity, knowledge of technological devices, amongst others are also contributing factors hampering students' online learning abilities, and consequently academic performances.

Recommendations

Sequel to the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

• Provision of the needed technological tools, as well as making available the needed facilities such as internet connectivity, electric power supply, amongst others for online teaching and learning activities. This will aid the promotion of online teaching especially following the common trend in education in recent time.

• Training of lecturers and students in the use of technological tools for teaching and learning exercises. These can be done through a continuous periodic workshop. In this regard, lecturers would be trained and exposed to the recent technological gadgets needed for facilitating online teaching and learning exercises.

• Motivating students to accept and acclimatize to the new normal, in order to embrace online teaching and learning. This can be done by experts through organisation of periodic orientation programmes by the Student Affairs division of different institutions of learning. In this regard, students would learn to see beyond their challenges or those of the present moment and make attempts to embrace the shift from onsite to online teaching and learning activities following the recent trend in the global world, especially the education sector.

In addition, the study was limited to literature review, hence, it is suggested that a similar study be conducted using empirical data. Such can be done through the adoption of quantitative, or mixed methods. This would aid the collection of large data, in-depth information in order to enhance generalization of results.

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