EMPOWERING DIVERSITY: ENSURING EQUITY, EQUALITY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN AN INCLUSIVE ECOSYSTEM

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Abstract

The present study is centred around the fundamental human right of education and its potential as an empowering tool. It emphasizes the imperative of providing inclusive and equitable quality education, accessible to all individuals regardless of gender, disability, social status, or economic background. The overarching aim of education is seen as fostering the holistic development of an individual's personality and promoting positive human traits, such as friendship and peace. The research contends that education should extend beyond imparting basic skills like reading, writing, and math, and nurtures qualities like curiosity, courage, and resilience in students. Inclusive education is viewed as a right for every child, not a privilege, and the review study highlights the increasing attention on children and childhood, advocating for respecting diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and beliefs within educational settings.

Drawing from existing literature, the research underscores the link between inclusive education and sustainable development for all learners, promoting principles of equity, equality, and sustainability. Two key findings emerge from the review: a) Creating an inclusive school environment necessitates ongoing attention to various educational aspects, including school policies and curriculum; b) Establishing comprehensive spaces that facilitate the full potential of all children is urgently required. Such inclusive practices are deemed essential for achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals in Education. Overall, this empirical study provides valuable insights into the significance of inclusive education and its role in supporting sustainable development. It emphasizes the importance of cultivating an inclusive and diverse educational environment that benefits all students.

Keywords: *Diversity, Ecosystem, Equity, Equality, Inclusive Education, Sustainable Development.*

Introduction

Inclusive Education (IE) represents a new-age and inclusive approach towards educating children with disabilities and learning challenges alongside their neuro-typically developing peers in the same learning environment. By bringing all students together within one classroom and community, regardless of their individual strengths or weaknesses, IE aims to maximize the learning potential and functioning capacity of each student. This approach fosters an environment of inclusivity and tolerance, making it one of the most effective methods to promote a cohesive and accepting society (Boyi, 2013). Creating an inclusive learning environment is essential for promoting equal opportunities, fostering diversity, and ensuring that all students feel valued and supported in their educational journey. An inclusive learning environment is one where every student, regardless of their background, abilities, or identities, feels welcome, respected, and able to fully participate in the learning process. It is critical to foster a culture of respect and empathy among students and teachers. Further, it will open the channels of communication and active listening to understand and appreciate different perspectives and experiences. We need to Embrace and celebrate diversity in all its forms, including race, ethnicity, gender, religion, culture, language, socioeconomic status, and learning abilities. The learning materials and resources represent diverse perspectives and experiences and hence must be made in accordance with the needs and abilities of the learners. The principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) aim at creatinginclusive instructional materials and activities that cater to the diverse needs of learners (Anupriya & Salim, 2014).

The use of multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression to accommodate different learning styles and preferences is viewed as a progressive method of training. The use of inclusive language that is respectful and affirming of all students helps to overcome stereotypes and derogatory terms that may marginalize certain groups. A teacher needs to establish clear classroom norms and rules that promote inclusivity, respect, and positive behaviour. There is a strongly felt need to encourage collaboration and cooperation among students with and without disabilities by providing necessary accommodations and support services. Peer learning and collaboration is encouraged in an inclusive setting as it fosters a sense of belongingness and provides opportunities for students to learn from each other's unique perspectives and experiences. Encouraging the use assistive technologies, and other support services like extra time, can help the learner progress at par with his or her peers. The use of individualized support plans such as Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs) help to support the child by promoting a clear analysis of long term and short-term goals with proposed plans and methods of action, which re further presented in IEP meetings where they are discussed in the presence of the parent and the Child with Disabilities (CWDs) (Rao, et al., 2021).

Adoption and practice of culturally responsive teaching practices that acknowledge and incorporate students' cultural backgrounds into the learning experience further plays a role in enhances students' engagement and academic performance.The use of culturally friendly and student friendly approaches will remove prejudice, lower discrimination, and reduce stereotypes. This will further provide opportunities for students to explore social justice issues and engage in discussions about equity and fairness.Provide ongoing professional development for teachers and staff to enhance their understanding of inclusive practices and to create a supportive school-wide environment.Educators and curriculum planners must be trained to avoid the Inclusive Curriculum Review and update the curriculum to ensure it reflects diverse perspectives and contributions from different cultures and communities. The establishment of safe learning spaces where students can express themselves freely, without fear of judgment or discrimination are essential towards the creation and maintenance of equity and equality among learners.By fostering an inclusive learning environment, educators can create a positive and enriching educational experience for all students, promoting their academic success and personal growth. Hence, an inclusive approach not only benefits individual learners but also contributes to a more harmonious and understanding society.

Purpose

The present study aims to identify and explore the role of inclusive education in addressing equity, equality and diversity through inclusive education thereby empowering sustainable development. The methodology followed is review of relevant literature.

Statement of the Problem

To explore the related literature and analyse the findings to understand steps taken towards empowering diversity by ensuring equity, equality and sustainable development in an inclusive ecosystem.

Research Question

What are the steps, measures and recommendations seen in relevant literature which indicate the action taken towards ensuring equity, equality and SD in an inclusive ecosystem thereby empowering diversity?

Methodology

A systematic review of literature was carried out for the present study. The studies involved government reports (both national and international), published research papers and articles following PRISMA guidelines.

Review of Literature

Numerous research studies have centred on the role of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a parameter for enhancing educational quality (Vladimirova and Le

Blanc, 2016) and as an effective indicator of social cohesion (Gupta and Vegelin, 2016). Over the past decade, there has been a notable resurgence in the focus on promoting quality education, leading to its recognition as a significant policy objective in numerous countries. As an illustrative example, The Europe 2020 strategy, launched in 2010, aimed to enhance the competitiveness and productivity of the European Union, thus supporting a sustainable social market economy (EU, 2010a, b). The strategy outlined three main pillars: Intelligent growth (emphasizing the development of a knowledge and innovation-based economy); Sustainable growth (advocating for a resource-efficient, greener, and more competitive economy); and inclusive economic growth (striving for an economy with high employment rates that fosters economic, social, and regional cohesion) (Pasimeni & Pasimeni, 2015).

According to the United Nations (2015), Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 is designed to ensure equitable and high-quality education while promoting inclusion and providing long-term learning opportunities for all individuals. SDG4 particularly emphasizes the significance of educating children with special needs, despite the challenges they may face. Pertinently, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) places a societal responsibility by ensuring that children with special needs and physical disabilities have equal access to free inclusive education at both primary and secondary levels, on par with their non-disabled peers (United Nations, 2006).

Based on this foundation, Nigeria's education policy has embraced inclusive education, aiming to ensure equal benefits for all individuals while reducing discrimination against the physically challenged. Garuba (2003) asserts that fostering an accepting environment, where everyone is embraced for their differences, is the most effective approach to combat stigmatization and discrimination. This can be achieved through the promotion of inclusive societies, raising awareness, and educating people about diversity and inclusion. It is essential to recognize that education has the power to significantly influence a child's mindset, regardless of their physical abilities. While physically fit individuals promote acceptance and reduce prejudice in society, the physically challenged may struggle to envision themselves being fully accepted due to societal differences.

Magrab (2003) mentions that inclusion and inclusive education are approaches that acknowledge and embrace the diverse characteristics exhibited by children, enabling their attendance in regular schools despite any obstacles or physical challenges that may impede access to quality education. However, in Nigeria, there exists a prevailing scepticism regarding the education of physically impaired individuals. Prejudice and superstitious beliefs contribute to the belief that such children should receive special education, while others advocate for their education at home or their exclusion from regular schools altogether.

As per the National Policy on Education the training of children with special needs should equip them with the necessary tools to accomplish their long-term objectives. This encompasses providing education to the physically challenged within a supportive and less restrictive environment. Furthermore, education is regarded not only as a crucial catalyst for instigating positive transformations but also as one of the most valuable investments a country can make in developing its human resources and advancing its knowledge economy (Aminu, 1995).Boyi (2013) emphasizes the essential role of education in achieving sustainable national development for a state or society. On the other hand, Fafunwa (1974) argues that a key indicator of high-quality education within a culture is the imparting of knowledge to the younger generation, fostering positive attitudes and admirable traits as they grow. Meanwhile, Amaele (2011, p. 7) perceives education as facilitating a child's overall development through appropriate techniques and methods tailored to their abilities and interests, ensuring they are not left behind and enabling them to thrive and contribute to society's development.

Anupriya and Salim (2014) argued that the main reason for inclusive education is to encourage students with disabilities to be independent and benefit from inclusive educational resources, practices, and activities.

UNESCO and the World Education Forum (2015) have acknowledged the global drive towards achieving accessible and high-quality education for children with special needs. This awareness has been steadily growing and has recently been incorporated as a goal within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework (UN, 2015). The concept of inclusive education, pioneered by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), entails the process of educating all children in regular schools, not solely limited to those with disabilities (UNESCO).In Nigeria, this embrace of inclusive education poses the most significant challenge. Education objectives align with the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable education, promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030 (Demirbağ and Sezgin, 2021; Shiohira, 2021). This underscores the importance of addressing the hurdles associated with inclusive education to realize the educational aspirations and principles enshrined within the Sustainable Development Goals. (Demirbağ and Sezgin, 2021; Shiohira, 2021).

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are thus an integral part of the country's long culture and heritage, and the goals largely represent India's development goals (Kakar et al., 2021; Manby,2021). India had a major influence in shaping the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).Although India's education sector has developed tremendously, it still has a long way to go to achieve the SDG Goal 4 (Rao et al., 2021). Such efforts require sound policies, careful oversight, and adequate funding. These

efforts will significantly improve a prosperous future, good jobs and better living standards through the decadal Education Mission 2030, which aims to promote inclusive, equitable and dignified education.

Findings

The concept of inclusive education, developed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), emphasizes the process of educating all children in regular schools, not just those with disabilities. This aspect presents the most significant challenge to implementing inclusive education in Nigeria. The educational objectives align with the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) 2030 which seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by the year 2030 (Demirbağ and Sezgin, 2021; Shiohira, 2021).

The reports of international forums such as the UNESCO and the World Education Forum's report (2015) acknowledged a global momentum towards achieving accessible and high-quality education for CWSNs. This awareness has witnessed a steady and well-maintained increase leading to its successful integration as a goal within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework (UN, 2015). The present study clearly indicates that Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are viewed as a crucial parameter and indicator of educational quality and social cohesion. When we talk about social cohesion it focuses on social integrity and equality under the broader umbrella of inclusion. The promotion of quality education especially inclusive education has regained importance as a policy mandate in many countries, particularly in the last decade. The legislations and policies such as the NEP 2020, Europe 2020 strategy (2010) specifically focus on improving the nature and quality of education services offered to children with diverse learning needs.

The National Policy on Education (2020) highlights the significance of offering training and education to Children with Special Needs (CWSNs) as a fundamental aspect of enabling them to attain their long-term objectives. This policy emphasizes the importance of creating a supportive and inclusive environment for educating disabled individuals. By providing the necessary tools and skills, we aim at empowering them to overcome challenges and support such students to realize their full potential. Moreover, education is recognized as a driving force behind positive transformations within society (Anupriya and Salim, 2014). Notably, it is also regarded as a valuable investment for any nation, contributing to the development of its human resources and propelling advancements in the knowledge economy. The multifaceted benefits of education, both in terms of individual growth and societal progress, reinforcing the policy's emphasis on fostering inclusive education practices for the betterment of the nation is also clearly felt (Aminu, 1995). The focus on creation of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) is also a result of the same.

The three main pillars suggested by the Europe 2020 strategy namely:a) Intelligent growth - based on knowledge and innovation, b) Sustainable growth - promoting resource efficiency and competitiveness, and c) Inclusive economic growth - emphasizing high employment and economic, social, and regional cohesion can be considered as starting point for developing systems focusing on provision of quality inclusive education across educational ecosystems such as schools and Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs).It is seen that the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4, United Nations 2015), emphasizes on the provision of equitable and quality education, ensuring inclusion and long-term learning opportunities for all individuals. Thereby addressing the educational needs of special children and acknowledging the importance of equal educational opportunities to all despite numerous challenges and diversities. It is imperative to mention here that the present study highlights the critical role played by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). It places responsibility on the society to ensure that Children with diverse abilities have equal access to free and compulsory inclusive education at all levels, on par with their non-disabled peers.

Conclusion

The study clearly mentions that our education policies and legislations must embrace the inclusive education, therefore aiming to benefit all individuals and reduce discrimination faced by Individuals with Disabilities (IwDs). There is a tremendous need to create a global ecosystem which is accepting and embracing everyone irrespective of their unique differences and diversities. This will play a pivotal role to end stigmatization and unmindful labelling Garuba (2003). Education plays an integral role in influencing acceptance and shaping human perspectives. An informed outlook can help reduce prejudice against the disabled. The misconceptions regarding nature and type of disabilities, available schemes, and benefits along with proactive and useful policy formulations for such individuals. We need to understand that inclusion and inclusive education are approaches that acknowledge and accommodate a child's differences, allowing them to attend regular schools despite other challenges with the help of needed and reasonable support services and accommodations.

Providing quality education and need based training to Children with Special Needs (CWSNs) is essential to equip them with the necessary skills for accomplishing their long-term goals. This involves imparting education to physically challenged, sensory impaired and cognitive deficient individuals in a supportive and inclusive environment. Education not only plays a pivotal role in driving positive transformations but also stands as a highly valuable investment for any nation, fostering the development of its human resources and propelling advancements in its knowledge economy (Aminu, 1995).

The present study sheds light on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which hold significant importance in India's culture and heritage, with these goals largely reflecting the country's developmental aspirations (Kakar et al., 2021; Manby, 2021). India played a significant role in shaping the formulation of the SDGs. Despite considerable advancements in the education sector, India still faces considerable challenges in achieving SDG Goal 4 (Rao et al., 2021). In order to make substantial progress, the nation requires well-defined policies, effective oversight, and sufficient funding. These efforts are central to achieving a prosperous future, generating employment opportunities, and enhancing living standards, as envisaged through the Education Mission 2030, a ten-year initiative aimed at promoting inclusive, equitable, and dignified education.

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