Enhanced Social Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education: Opportunities for Living and Learning Communities Programmes

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Abstract

This study sought to establish a model for enhancing social integration of student with disabilities by adopting the Learning and Living Communities strategy. The strategy ensures that, not only physical barriers are removed but also, that inherent impediments that are part of students' lived experiences in the learning space are redressed. The objective of the study was to enhance social inclusion by using a multidimensional approach which utilised the Living and Learning Communities strategy. The target of the approach was to focus on the interrelatedness of physical, social and cultural and experiential factors in the education of students with disabilities in Higher Education. The study used key informant in-depth interviews as the main method of data gathering. The participating institutions were fourteen universities, of which six were private and nine were state. The Deans of Students Affairs were the key informants of the study as they had the mandate to take care of students welfare and academic success. Data were analysed using qualitative methods of categorisation of responses and then drawing themes and insights. The findings of the study were that social inclusion practice in higher education in Zimbabwe left a lot of aspects unattended which led to low success rate of students with disabilities. The study also, established that a multidimensional approach would significantly remove the impediments caused by interrelatedness of factors that militate against the social inclusion of students with disabilities. Although institutions, both private and public, had knowledge of Learning and Living Communities, they had not embraced the concept. It was therefore recommended that universities in Zimbabwe adopt the Living and Learning Communities model in order to enhance social inclusion and success of students with disabilities in their learning spaces.

1.0 Introduction

International conventions such as the United Nations Conventions (2007) on the Rights of People with Disabilities(UNCRPD) have driven the policy on inclusive education in Zimbabwe. While the policy appears to be a moral imperative and mere adherence to international trends, in practice there seems to be gaps particularly in pedagogic practice resulting in the unintended exclusion of people with disabilities (Badza & Chakuchichi, 2007). Designing policies for inclusion should not be viewed as a unidirectional strategy but an intersectional process where social aspects, educational aspects, physical and psychological aspects as well as lived experiences of people with disabilities are taken into account. It should be recognised that in intersectional policy formulation for inclusion, people with disabilities themselves have a key role and interest in the outcome. Where a minority group was involved in the processes of policy formulation then self-advocacy was achieved.

The paper utilizes an intersectional perspective to identify specific needs for the design and improvement of policies and other measures to create a more inclusive higher educational system for underrepresented groups particularly students with disabilities. The idea that uni-dimensional policy formulation practices could generate further exclusion and that intersectional approaches to social inequality were needed, was barely understood. In fact, the contribution of informal activities towards learning was not fully accounted for. What is more important was to explore the nature of the out of class learning experiences and seek ways to strengthen those experiences, (Li,2016).

Discourses on 'diversity' and 'social inclusion' have driven policies which are presented as moral imperatives but at the same time they obscure socio-cultural dynamics. Tinto (1995) argues that social-cultural dynamics were responsible for influencing both academic success and failure. Higher Education, particularly universities, were required to embrace social inclusion as a matter of policy but their practices focused on one aspect only which was physical aspects of inclusion. Kuh (1993) points out that, some out of class experiences contribute to student learning and interpersonal development. These experiences were conversations with colleagues after class and collaboration in research projects while living in students' residences

2

or working on or off campus. Some of the activities included participation in institutional governance, involvement in clubs and organizations based on voluntarism, (Kuh 1993). In another study, Willis (2007) found out that,

> Students who are part of a community of learners tend to rise to higher levels of learning and joy, especially when they work cooperatively on in-depth, project-based units of discovery. In these supportive ………….communities, students acknowledge and appreciate one another's skills and talents. (Judy Willis, 2007)

In a more recent study, Sedaghatnia, Lamit, Abdullah and Ghahramanpouri (2015: 96) noted that "legibility, social relation, hostel quality, facilities, extracurricular activities, accessibility, safety, comfort, academic services and transportation, affect student inclusion at university campuses." It was therefore pertinent to assert that social inclusion in a university was a critical factor that influenced success and retention of students.

The problem under investigation was that, 'Does social inclusion adds value to learner support in higher education? If so, how can it be articulated in Living and Learning Communities interventions to enhance the quality of education for people with disabilities?

Living and Learning Communities intervention was anchored on a number of theories (Chickering 1993, Tinto 1995). Tinto (1995) in his theory of student retention and success factors pointed to the need for a student to reach academic integration and social integration in order to remain in college and to succeed. The very essence of integration was to be part of a structure. The student was expected to be part of the academic structure as well as part of the social networks of the university in order to remain on a sustained development course in the university.

Chickering (1993) developed the seven vector theory of student development. These were:

1. Development of competences
2. Ability to manage emotions
3. Movement through autonomy towards interdependence
4. Development of mature interpersonal relationships
5. Development of identity
6. Developing purpose
7. Developing integrity

According to Chickering (1993), the student came from high school with certain competences and behaviours which were challenged by University demands, particularly in the social space. The student then went through transformation to develop appropriate human values which they would apply in life. At this stage they had a purpose which was driven from lived experiences and discourse within the university space. Student development therefore, was a critical component of university's activities. Student development was such a multi-dimensional aspect which included intellectual development, emotional development, social development and physical development. The University curriculum focused mainly on intellectual development but the more important aspects of personal and interpersonal competencies were left unattended or may be left to take place informally or unintentionally. A closer look at even the intellectual development itself shows that the student learnt a great deal from the social settings than the classroom. In fact, research shows that about 70% of what students learnt takes place outside the classroom. Kajewski and Madsen 2013 in their interpretations confirmed that 70% of learning was done informally while 20% took place through coaching and only 10% through structured learning. The 70: 20:10 model of learning was confirmed by other researchers in the field of education (Rabin 2014: McCall. Lombardo & Eichinger 1980) According to Browness and Gram (2010) Communities of Practice were an excellent way of making students with the same professional goal generate and share information as they engaged in knowledge creation, exchange and dissemination.

The Living and Learning Communities mantra leans heavily on the established fact that 70% of learning takes place outside the classroom and within the students' social space thus making social inclusion an indispensable part of student development. Living and Learning Communities Programmes were initiated in USA by students in residence to enable them partake in academic experiences with their peers and interact with faculty, enjoying the benefits of being part of a diverse community that shared scholarly interests. Living and Learning Communities initiative clearly takes care of all the clinical aspects of social inclusion. The concept of a diverse community of learners increased opportunities for persons with disabilities. It was therefore, the purpose of this study to find out how students with disabilities could benefit from social inclusion through the initiative of Living and Learning Communities at Universities whose aim

4

was to connect students inside- and outside-the-classroom experiences**.** Dugan and Marus (2010) looking at students in Living and Learning communities in relation to their academic performance found out that those students who participated in Living and Learning Communities' programmes developed better critical thinking skills and were more likely to explore service learning or volunteer activities. Mutanga [2017], in another study confirmed the importance of social networks at university as he found out that most students attributed their success to the supportive friends they made during induction. With regard to the attitudes of academic staff, students had mixed reactions: some reported positive attitudes, while others had bad experiences. The importance of social networks and social relations was highlighted by Roux and Burnett (2010). Also, Dugan and Marus [2010] noted that students generally sought an environment that facilitated a multiplicity of interactions which enhanced continued learning outside the classroom. The Living and Learning communities initiative was a socially inclusive strategy that gave opportunities for critical thinking and multifaceted interpersonal relationships which were ideal for students with disabilities.

2.0 Research Strategy

The study was in the qualitative paradigm, utilizing the in depth interview and focus group discussion strategies to generate data. The participants of the study were ten (10) student practitioners selected from each state university in Zimbabwe and sixteen (16) purposefully sampled students with disabilities in state universities. Student with disabilities' participants were made up of 9 students with visual impairment, 6 students with physical impairments and one with hearing impairment. The student participants were those that were readily available to participate in this study and had some disabilities.

A short interview guide was used to generate information about social inclusion within the context of Living and Learning Communities at universities. One focus group discussion was held at one University with visual impaired students regarding their feelings towards inclusion in the university.

3.0 Findings

Data generated by this study and found to relate to students with disabilities' social inclusion in higher education were categorized into the following specific thematic areas:

1. Social integration
2. Pedagogic inclusion
3. Academic integration and
4. Sports inclusion

3.1 Social Integration

Students with disabilities reported that they were generally accepted by other students in the university particularly by those students belonging to the same cohort with them. Participants cited the reason for this social inclusion as familiarity brought about by proximity because of existing in the same study space. Asked whether students with disabilities had any problems of social acceptance? One student with visual impairment gave the following response:

> *Those students in the same programme with me who have no problem communicating and working with me. I guess they know me better so it's easy to socialize with them.*

Others believed that when people with disability show a strength and or excellence in a subject area, then they become the *darling* of the group. Thus social inclusion was enhanced by the mere fact of operating in the same social space and by the minority groups exhibiting excellence in a way that benefited other students. Another student with disability responded as shown below:

> *When I started getting good marks in my assignments many students came to work with me. They believed working together improved the quality of their work. I was glad to know that I was worth something. If you help someone you feel good and you become confident.*

3.2 Pedagogic Inclusion

15 out of 16 student participants (94%), cited pedagogic inclusion as a difficult area. Participants believed that University lecturers had no training in teaching people with disabilities. Actually, students with visual and hearing impairments reported that lecturers taught a subject and not people.

> *Lecturers focus on the subject without regard to the information acquisition needs of students with disabilities.*

A deaf student said that lectures speak while looking at the window or sometimes looking down on their notes.

> *They do not position themselves so that us deaf can get information from their lip movements. This is not good. It is important to look at us so that we can see the information from their lips and on their face! This is good for us deaf.*

This statement show that university lecturers should be given training in teaching people with disabilities. Sometimes not much was required other than just a change in attitude.

Visually impaired participants had similar issues but which relate to sight problems. They said that:

> *Often the teacher (Lecturer) does not seem to appreciate my presence. They teach as if I am not there. Sometimes they say look at the diagram on the board! But they forget I cannot see it as others do. This is where they leave us behind and then we appear as if we are not working as hard as other students. Actually we work harder to understand the same material as sighted students.*

This scenario showed that lecturers need training to be aware of differently abled learners and utilise methods that appeal to the information acquisition and information dissemination strategies of students with visual impairment.

Other participants said that lecturers did not address them directly.

> *They speak to the board and not to us. So we do not hear what they say, the sound is directed to the board and not to my ears. Other lecturers do not know that we benefit most from the sense of hearing and the sense of touch.*

> *Some teachers speak to our colleagues and helpers instead of us. They must know that we are their students and our colleagues cannot represent us when we are there. It will be good if our teachers can speak to us directly – then we can feel wanted, liked and regarded.*

> *Lessons can be meaningful to us if the lecturer can liaise with our Resource Room teacher so that what he is going to show on the chart can be prepared for us so that we can have the tactile appreciation of same diagrams.*

These transcribed extracts show the evidence of physical inclusion existing concurrently with pedagogical exclusion. While the student with visual impairment were physically present, they were not considered specifically during lecture delivery hence they missed on information and concepts.

The participants however mentioned appreciation of the considerations made in adapting examinations and making specific conditions to accommodate them. Participants mentioned that they were given extra time and use of assistive devices during examinations. Others mentioned that their examination question papers were presented in Braille and enlarged print.

> *When I saw my exam paper in enlarged print I am happy because I know that someone has thought of me. These adaptations showed that the university knows our rights and recognizes that we were also important.*

3.4 Academic Integration

Academic integration was both a vertical and a horizontal process. Students were expected to relate to both their seniors and those at the same level with them but in different areas of study. In vertical integration, students should know how to relate to staff particularly their lecturers, professors, chairpersons of departments and faculty deans. They should also be able to exercise personal and interpersonal skills in learning spaces such as lecture theatres, seminar rooms, libraries, laboratories and field visits. Through academic integration, the student was expected to feel that they were part of the learning community. According to Tinto (1993) if they felt un-integrated then chances of dropping out increased. Student with visual impairment were asked whether they were able to get to all amenities of the university? They responded as follows:

> *Of course, after orientation I can go from hostels to the important places in the university*

> *After orientation I move with my friends to all parts of the university. It is our*
environment.

Students with disabilities were asked 'how much they interacted with their academic staff?' Their responses were as follows:

In our lectures we speak out so that our ideas are considered.

You have to communicate with staff in order to tape their wisdom. Data! thats what we need from professors.

Lecturers are so good, they appreciate our participation. I get confident when the lecturer shows interest in my participation. But, sometimes they forget we are present!

The library does not have Braille books. We need technology to identify books we need. The resource Room helps us with transcription of books.

The study found out that academic integration was a critical success factor for social inclusion of students with disabilities, however, the university academic terrain was inundated with various forms of technical exclusion. This observation was consistent with the findings of Emong and Erin (2016), in their study at Makerere University, Uganda who found out that:

There are discrimination and exclusion tendencies in matters related to admissions, access to lectures, assessment and examinations, access to library services, (Emong and Erin 2016)

3.5 Sports inclusion

100% participants were aware that university sports had tremendous benefit to all students in terms of promoting healthy living, enhancing personal and interpersonal skills, character moulding and development of identities. All participants were aware of constraints in competing with able bodied students. Students with hearing impairment had no problems in participating in sports with other students provided that instructions were given in modalities they understood. Students with physical impairment and students with visual impairments, because of the nature of their impairments found it difficult to compete with able bodied students. However, they were happy participating at the *paralympics* level. What was important for them was that they had a platform to be included in sport. Excerpts from the interviews show that students with disabilities appreciated sports for the same benefits as other students;

I like to feel healthy that's why I do sports. A game makes you feel part of a team and the feeling of winning and victory is universal, I believe. You really feel good. Also, when we

> *lose we learn to appreciated that there are other people stronger than ourselves. You*
> *also learn to be humble. It is all character building.*

The study found out that sport promoted social inclusion, character building and development of the individual person. The study also established that most students with disabilities did not think about sports.

This study found the Learning and Living communities programme to be strategic in fostering social and academic inclusion for people with disabilities in universities. The programme would ideally work well when supported by a Disability Resource Centre in the university.

4. Discussion

A consideration of the four areas important for social inclusion indicate that inclusion was not meant to be an accidental happening but a planned intervention which could not be left to chance. Universities were therefore expected to plan for inclusion to take place in order to promote both academic and social integration of students with disabilities in line with the social inclusion thrust. Living and Learning Communities programme lent itself as the ideal vehicle for planned social inclusion. Living and Learning Communities programme makes it easy to have planned intervention to take into account the seven vectors of student development, (Chickering, 1993).

While students with disabilities were physically included in universities because of by-laws that govern infrastructural development, they found themselves excluded because of practices in the lectures. For instance, a technical mismatch between the lecturer's mode of delivery and the students' information acquisition modality reflected a definite exclusion which amounts to denial of students' access to the curriculum. Such exclusion was cited in another study by Badza and Chakuchichi (2007), who found evidence of pedagogical exclusion as shown by the extract below;

> *For example, in a university lecture if the professor says look at the graph on the board*
> *to a class where there was one or more students with visual disability and without having*
> *made any tactile aids for them, then they inadvertently denied these students access to*

10

the curriculum. This is typical exclusion. It is the same as saying the class will be held in the third floor seminar room when in the same class there was a student with physical disability who could not get to that room (Badza and Chakuchichi 2007).

Academic inclusion was of critical importance as it was found to be closely connected to student success and retention. Both horizontal and vertical academic integration were a major factor in inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education. For instance, when students with disabilities interacted with the entire academic community, then they felt a sense of belonging which made them behave like integral members of that community.

The discourse on positive outcomes of inclusion requires Higher Education institutions to develop sustainable ways of inclusion in their students' living and learning spaces. It was therefore imperative that Living and Learning Communities programme in universities take cognisance of the need to plan for academic integration of students with disabilities in university campuses spaces. This idea was consistent with Emong and Erin (2016) who in their study at Makerere University, Uganda, made a profound recommendation for sustainable inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education as follows:

As a sustainable strategy for disability inclusion in higher education, universities and other institutions of higher learning should establish a Disability Support Centre. A Disability Support Centre is a critical and an important infrastructure of the institutions in bringing about disability equality in the institution. The Disability Support Centre will be a disability think tank for the institutions regarding disability inclusion and advising on disability mainstreaming (Emong and Erin 2016)

A Disability Resouce Centre was a key amenity at any university as it provided the technical support required by students with disabilities for pedagocical and academic inclusion. The facility provided a vital link between the students with disabilities and the lecture. The Disability Resource Centre and the Living and Learning Communities Programme were viewed as a sustainable model for promoting social and academic inclusion in universities.

5. Conclusion

Social inclusion was found to include critical aspects of social integration, pedagogical inclusion, academic integration and sports inclusion. Sustainable social inclusion was linked to the theory of social integration and academic integration by both Tinto's Academic and Social Integration theory and Chickering's Seven Vectors' theory of student development. Another important intervention was the use of the Living and Learning Communities programmes which would readily carry social inclusion right from the design stage. The most important aspect of the Living and Learning Communities intervention was that it was a planned programme where the participants even planned activities that enhance their inclusion. The aspect of pedagogic inclusion was viewed as critical to the success of student with disabilities hence the need to have for all universities the support structure of a Disability Resource Centre

6. Recommendations

The study supported by Tinto's social and academic integration theory and Chickering's Seven Vector Student Development theory places greater emphasis on a sustainable social inclusion strategy. The study therefore recommends the following two interventions:

    i.   That students affairs practitioners in every university implement Living and Learning Communities Programme in order to make use of opportunities embedded in its design and programming to promote social inclusion in a sustainable way for the benefit of students with disabilities in the university space

    ii.   That Student Affairs Practitioners lobby for a Disability Resource Centre to be made a part of every university in order to support pedagogical inclusion of students with disabilities.

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