Transformational Learning through Inclusive Pedagogy in Higher Education

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Abstract: Inclusive pedagogy is at the core of student-centered and equity-focused education. Learning environments especially in higher institutions are not responding adequately to calls for inclusion which is foundational to transformational learning, the kind of learning that bring about significant improvement in the student that translates to impactful contribution to the society through action. This paper investigates the need for inclusive pedagogy in higher to achieve transformational learning. Therefore this paper is teleologically-oriented, that is, purpose-oriented. The study also proposes a co-creation of knowledge between institutions, teachers and students through review of their philosophies and curriculum which will bring about purposeful learning that is geared towards making the individual and society better. This paper also makes contribution to the theoretical and practical understanding of inclusion in higher education, to explore how inclusive pedagogy as ongoing process should be constructed continuously to fit with evolving student needs. The theoretical framework of this study is a combination of reflective-learning and transformative learning to investigate the issues raised. The methodology adopted is qualitative and data were collected from secondary sources such as journals, textbooks and internet sources to explore the study. The study concludes that Higher education through inclusive pedagogy should seek to meet students where they are and create a collaborative learning experience with strategic reframing and realignment in philosophy and curriculum to help students to actively participate in the teaching and learning process which will birth transformational learning.

Keywords: Curriculum, co-creation, education, inclusion, pedagogy, philosophy.

1.1 Background to the study

Learning is a continuous enterprise of human beings that liberates the mind through consciousness and a desire for self-determination and freedom. But the kind of learning that liberates the mind cannot be imposed on but must be carried out in an environment that

promotes freedom and inclusion. As such, this paper proposes that the process of transformational learning in higher education is achieved through inclusive pedagogy, in an authentic goal for liberation of the mind to transform the individual and the society, hence, Onanwa, Imu & Ehiemere (2023) opine that education is the eye, the way and the means for the development of any nation and its languages (see Imu, & Amazu 2023).

Dewsbury & Brame (2019) stated as institutions of higher education refocus their efforts on improving educational outcomes for all, we find ourselves in a moment when we need to reflect on what "inclusion" really means. The idea of inclusive education has evolved from being associated with improving access for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) to mainstream education. Inclusive pedagogy operates based on the understanding that differences in culture, background, gender, sexual orientation, race, and ability should not be barriers to learning. Instead, these differences should be celebrated and integrated into the teaching and learning process where the student is the focus.

Inclusive pedagogy involves being as reflective about teaching as students are expected to be about their learning. Inclusive pedagogy is not a style, but a philosophy that forms the basis of teaching and learning that recognizes the whole person of the student. (Dewsbury & Brame, 2019) Inclusive pedagogy is not only beneficial to marginalized students but to all students as it encourages diversity, empathy, and participation, all of which are essential qualities for effective learning and personal growth. Inclusive pedagogy becomes increasingly important in a world that is deeply divided by differences and where inequalities and social injustices exist. By developing an inclusive learning environment, not only will students feel a sense of safety and belonging, but they will learn valuable skills that will give them the leverage to excel in personal and professional life, evident in their show of empathy, critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration skills.

Inclusive pedagogy is possible to implement with commitment, awareness, and the development of a positive attitude towards diversity which must be captured in the philosophy of institutions and their curriculum to bring about transformational learning.

Transformational learning is the type of learning that empowers students to enact meaningful change in their lives and communities. Inclusive pedagogy is a key component of this transformation as it challenges traditional teaching approaches and prioritizes the needs of students. A gap exists within transformational learning theory between theoretical construct and practical application. (DeSapio 2017) this paper will explore how inclusive pedagogy can in practicality facilitate transformational higher education.

2.   Literature review

2.1   Conceptual definitions

This section will explain the concepts of inclusive pedagogy and transformational learning as they are important to investigating the study.

Inclusive pedagogy is an approach to teaching and learning that supports teachers to respond to individual differences between learners but avoids the marginalization that can occur when some students are treated differently. (Florian & Spratt 2013)

Norwich (2013) notes that inclusive pedagogies can be interpreted and described in a variety of ways; often, the term refers to the how of teaching (i.e., instructional strategies and/or learning environment) rather than the what of teaching (i.e., curriculum content), although it can also be used to apply to both.

Hockings, (2010) defines inclusive pedagogy as teaching that engages students in learning which is meaningful, relevant and accessible to all. Inclusive education embraces the view that individual difference is a source of diversity, which can enrich the lives and learning of others.

According to Simsek (2012) transformational learning is the process of deep, constructive, and meaningful learning that goes beyond simple knowledge acquisition and supports critical ways in which learners consciously make meaning of their lives. It is the kind of learning that results in a fundamental change in our worldview as a consequence of shifting from mindless or unquestioning acceptance of available information to reflective and conscious learning experiences that bring about true emancipation.

Slavich & Zimbardo (2012) defined transformational learning as involving creating dynamic relationships between teachers, students, and a shared body of knowledge to promote student learning and personal growth. From this perspective, the actors collaborate with each other with aim to help the student master bodies of information.

2.2 Theoretical studies

Reflective-learning theory

This theory was championed by John Dewey, who argued that learning is strongly oriented to action (pragmatism) and the values of experience. He further argued that learning based on personal experience should be preferred and encouraged. This theory pursues inclusion in learning where the approach and process is not divorced from the students. This theory is student-centered and operates in two phases, the critical self-reflection and learning and knowledge sharing. Students are seen key participants in the learning process and are expected to engage positively in the process of critically reflecting on their work and themselves. This should result in realizing the influence that they have on their learning, as well as on the learning that occurs where they live and work.

A typical self-reflection question could be: "How can I improve what I am doing?" (Whitehead 2014). The process of critical self-reflection can be very valuable to plot a constructive way forward and maybe alter direction. This theory encourages that rather than focusing on the negative in an attempt to solve problems, an appreciative "gaze" or insight should be developed to understand the root sources of success and build a better future from a positive present. This process of learning through an appreciative "gaze" enables the learner to build practical wisdom

of achieving to "alter direction" and move towards their set goal. The ability of the student to achieve set goal for him/herself and the society is what define such learning as transformational.

The second component this theory emphasizes collective learning and knowledge sharing, rather than self-learning where the focus is on the individual in isolation. In this phase the attention shifts to interaction. The interaction with the teachers and fellow students, where emphasis moving away from the student's way of knowing and only one-sided perspective on what the truth is to an acceptance of a pluralistic view of ways of knowing and understanding of the human experience and putting the knowing to good use.

Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative learning is an educational theory outlined by Jack Mezirow. It adopts a constructivist learning perspective, the idea that meaning is constructed from experience and internal understanding with the importance of collaboration and reflection. Using these learning approaches, students challenge their "meaning perspectives," which are the unconscious ways we view the world, allowing them to view the world from different perspectives and solve problems without implicit bias or myopia.

Transformative learning theory has received a lot of attention in education but there has not been particular attention to transformative learning in higher education. This study beams light on this area with the focus on inclusion pedagogy. There is a demand that higher education should reflect and respect the diversity among students. The inclusive-based learning style of transformative learning seems tailor-made for helping the students participate the process of learning actively. Transformative learning theory seeks to create a change of heart that will result in a perspective transformation for learners and the society.

2.3 Empirical studies

Goldman & Eiduson (2021) submits that the enactment of the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education should be modeled by both the institution and teachers positive and caring connections, which are then imparted to and owned by learners as well. Creating a truly inclusive class climate should be a deliberate decision by institutions of higher learning through their philosophies and curriculum. An inclusive pedagogy is not only based on academic content, but is also focused on the socio-emotional well-being of the learners and the positive value that is placed on students' identities. We observed that traditional teaching prioritizes content and not the receiver of the content. This approach to teaching isolates the learner and denies the learner of actively participating, poor academic performance and lack of varied perspective to problem-solving in personal and professional lives.

Hulgin & Drake (2011) argue that inclusive education requires a constructivist approach to teaching and learning. This involves a fundamental shift to an explicit critique of assumptions, practices, and structures associated with a positivist approach while considering the students'

backgrounds and interests, acknowledging and respecting the wholeness and particularity of learning as situationally constructed. An inclusive pedagogy must be student-centered; it is non-negotiable if learning will have a profound impact on learners' lives, lead to increased self-awareness, greater empathy, and a deeper understanding of their world. This will ultimately empower students to take action on the knowledge and experiences to create positive change in their own lives and in the world around them.

Freire (1970) noted that the individual and collective development of critical consciousness is paramount to the pursuit of transformational learning. For him, an inclusive pedagogy is a humanizing pedagogy, where the method of instruction ceases to be an instrument by which teachers can manipulate the students, because it expresses the consciousness of the students themselves. Through inclusive pedagogy in higher education, institutions and teachers can re-imagine their philosophies and teaching, to dismantle exclusive practices that have hindered the academic performance of students. This approach to teaching in higher education requires the institutions and teachers to reconsider their philosophy and curriculum through which every student's experiences are validated and seen (Iturbe-LaGrave, Sponsler, Paguyo, & Cramble-Alvarez, 2018).

Inclusive pedagogy in higher education should be an educational approach that aims to create a learning environment where every student feels valued, respected, and included regardless of their differences. It is an approach that should recognize and embrace diversity and promotes equality. The basis for its operation should be that every student has unique skills, talents, and experiences that are valuable to the teaching and learning process.

2.4 Theoretical framework

This study adopts theories of reflective-learning and transformative learning to investigate the issues raised.

This study makes a strong argument for the value of transformational learning as an integral outcome of an inclusive pedagogy in higher education. Its processes include critical reflection, reflective discourse, and action. Action is important in this theory because the power of information and knowledge the student has learned is tested when it is put to action.

Institutions and teachers should focus on the action phase which leads to the co-creation of knowledge. Co-creation of knowledge is a method of student involvement that pushes both students and teachers to stop viewing the curriculum as something to be delivered and start creating it together. Both the faculty and the students have a say and a stake. Working with students and being receptive to their ideas and perspectives fosters the development of shared objectives that teaching and learning are collaborative endeavours. The conventional methods of teaching and learning are put to the test via co-creation, allowing the students to develop a wide range of experiences and responses from diverse and different perspectives to engage problems avoiding implicit biases.

3.1 Transformational Learning through inclusion in higher education

Famous educational philosopher, Paolo Freire argued that teachers should build pedagogy around the voices and lives of their students (Freire, 1970). This underlines the thrust of this paper that the major objective of the educational system is to serve as a social integration institution, and inclusive education is frequently considered as the path to achieving this objective. Higher education pedagogy drive for inclusion should be student-centered, only through this approach can the output be beneficial to the individual and the society. Higher institutions help to transform lives of students. The type of education and approach used determine if the learning will be life changing for individuals, and the skills that students gain from their higher education experience if they can leave an indelible positive impression and impact on the society.

Answering the *How*

The ultimate question that must be answered is how higher institutions can and teachers drive the process of inclusive pedagogy? This study focuses on refining the philosophy of higher institutions and realigning the curriculum to be student-centered.

Some philosophers have argued that the purpose of education is to develop the intellect. Other philosophers have argued that the purpose of education is to develop moral character. The philosophies of different higher institutions stop at the developing the intellect and moral character without factoring the receiver of this philosophy.

Whatever philosophy that any higher institution frames, should be about the students and one that is inclusive not just in theory but in practice. Inclusive-based philosophy will achieve beyond the development of intellect and moral character to helping students to think critically, solve problems, and understand the world around them based on how they are actively part of the teaching and learning process. Diversity should be integrated and embraced in every aspect of running higher education

The curriculum and style of teaching should drive inclusion by realigning practicable curriculum and teaching approach that can promote an inclusive environment where students feel valued because of their differences, and feel comfortable participating in the teaching and learning process. The curriculum should represent diverse types of students and perspectives through course content and materials, including readings, lecture examples, images used in presentations, and case studies. Doing so helps all students to imagine themselves within various learning scenarios. Rethinking and restructuring the curriculum becomes important teaching meet various teaching requirements, and students needs regardless of their differences.

Inclusion is about school change to improve the educational system for all students. It involves changes in the curriculum, changes in how educators teach and how learners learn, and changes in how learners communicate and connect to each other with and without special needs. Inclusive pedagogy should reflect the evolving culture of contemporary students needs with emphasis on active learning, genuine evaluation methods, applied curriculum, multi-level

educational methods, and enhanced attention to varied requirements and individualization of students. The argument here is that higher education and educational systems must change so that they become caring, nurturing, and supportive educational communities where the needs of all students are truly met.

3.2   Benefits of Inclusive Pedagogy in Higher Education

Inclusive education is proactive rather than reactive; it enables institutions and teachers to anticipate plan for and mitigate challenges to teaching and learning with the student as the focus, which in turn addresses exclusion. Teaching and learning that is inclusive improves the learning experience for all students and provide effective strategies for breaking down the barrier to transformational learning.

Inclusive pedagogy also enables all learners to fulfill their potential even beyond the class and this guides them in their professional lives. The approach shifts the focus away from focusing on areas of weakness to enhancing learners' strengths and using this to offset any challenges to learning (Masataka, 2017). This is an asset-based approach which prioritizes what a learner can do rather than what the learner cannot do.

Developing and implementing inclusive pedagogy in higher education can also be used as an opportunity for collaborative planning and co-teaching, otherwise known as co-creation of knowledge. Co-creation encourages students to use higher order thinking abilities and to become more deeply involved in the meaning and application of what they learn. Students' active participation in the teaching and learning process results in new viewpoints and ideas. This gives them well-rounded education and enabling learning space where they can explore a variety of perspectives as opposed to just few. Inclusive teaching and learning acknowledges and supports diversity, which promotes innovation, problem solving and new ways of thinking.

3.3   Emmanuel Lucas Nwachukwu Inclusive Pedagogy Model (2023)

This model shows the essential elements that captures the essence of inclusive pedagogy in education. These elements of redefined philosophy, a student-centered curriculum and a co-creation of knowledge that involves the students, teachers and the institution can make a significant difference to student outcomes around inclusive practice. Thomas & May (2010) observed that inclusive pedagogy is a challenging issue for institutions, as there can be confusion as to what constitutes inclusive teaching and learning; concern about how to develop inclusive learning and teaching policies and practices in specific contexts and disciplines; and some resistance to change. This model therefore makes it easy define and what factors that are required to not only deliver inclusive pedagogy but also transformational learning in the end.

4.1   Conclusion

Higher education provides a significant opportunity for societal advancement and should be given the attention it requires for impactful learning. Transformational learning through inclusive pedagogy is a shift towards education that prioritizes the needs of students inside the classroom and outside. It challenges traditional teaching approaches and empowers students to take an active role in their learning experience. This approach requires institutions and teachers to create an environment that is free of any form of exclusion, and that actively promotes equity. Higher education through inclusive pedagogy should seek to meet students where they are and create a collaborative learning experience with strategic reframing and realignment in philosophy and curriculum to help students actively participate in the teaching and learning process which can birth transformational learning.

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