


Chapter 8

Inclusive Education Through the Lens of Open Distance Learning

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ABSTRACT

In the pursuit of social justice, modern society has recognized education as an indispensable tool for upholding the rights of individuals with disabilities. Inclusive education, therefore, serves as a pragmatic front for achieving these goals within the educational system, particularly in higher education. Today, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) remains a key approach to achieving educational rights and opportunities for all. However, ODL continues to face significant challenges as an alternative educational system, requiring careful consideration and rational thought through theoretical lenses. Using critical theory and the community of inquiry to diagnose the processes that limit the objectives of inclusive education within the ODL system, the study concludes that the ODL system can be strengthened towards the cause of rights and educational opportunity of students with disabilities.

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INTRODUCTION

A disability is a construct that is characterised by limitations in physical or mental capabilities that prevent individuals from performing some activities and achieving certain tasks. The construct of disability has long been part of the human experience. Historically, people with disabilities have faced and are still currently experiencing biased assumptions, harmful stereotypes, and irrational fears, which spring from the negative attitudes of non-disabled members of the society. Extant literature has documented that persons with disabilities were viewed as tragic, pitiful individuals unfit for societal contribution who are always discriminated against, marginalised, relegated, and ridiculed (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007; Ngubane & Adigun, 2024). These struggles and efforts to change conditions characterised the period from Dorothea Dix's notable advocacy for disability rights in 1843 to the recognition and integration of people with disabilities that emerged in the wake of post-World War I and so on.

Interestingly, the past three decades have brought a glimpse of hope to the communities of persons with disabilities based on the declaration of Salamanca and the statements of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, among other statements, acts or declarations that enforce epistemic equity and social justice for persons with disabilities. Quality education is not just a means to ensure equity and justice; it inherently leads to progression and human development (UNESCO, 2013). This ultimate goal can only be achieved through the involvement of everyone, regardless of his or her behavioural, cognitive, physical, or mental capacities. As a result, various existing legal instruments that provide equal opportunities not only encourage the development of positive attitudes towards persons with disabilities but also enforce the provision of suitable forms of education for all learners. Adaka et al. (2022) argue that the efforts of stakeholders, both nationally and internationally, have led to a significant shift in educational provisions that could benefit persons with disabilities. According to Charema (2010), educational provisions for persons with disabilities have undergone different phases, from segregation and integration to mainstream education. However, common themes for this change in nomenclature or trajectory lie in the way by which humanity seeks to understand disability and respect their right as equal members of one community. There are two important concepts associated with the perspectives of disability when considered in terms of education, care services and rights. These concepts are diversity and equity (Ainscow, 2016). It is therefore important that we examine each of these concepts and their impact on the current state of educational practices that undergird attempts at improving the condition of the disabled educationally.

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