

Blended Learning Advocacy: Roles of Librarians and Technology in Inclusive and Equitable Education

Josephine K. Oloyede

*Department of School Library and Media Technology, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.
josephineoloyede@gmail.com*

Abstract

Advancement in technology has given a rise to development in virtually all aspect of life. New methods of teaching and learning keep springing up so as to improve learning outcomes and to make sure that there is inclusive and equitable education for all. Blended learning has been seen as one of the methods of instruction that gives learners increased opportunity to learn at their own pace and in different settings. This paper highlights the role of librarians and technology in providing inclusive and equitable education by using blended learning in classrooms and libraries. It also highlights the importance of blended learning in achieving inclusive and equitable education.

Keywords: *Blended Learning, Librarians, Technology, Inclusive and Equitable Education*

Introduction

In many years of human existence, education has been seen as an important factor in supporting changes and ensuring sustainability of human well-being. Without education, there can be no improvement in the lives of humans. Education is the only tool that can bring about desired development to any nation because educated citizens have sense of purpose and confidence to their careers that add stability to their nation. This is why developed countries take education seriously by employing experienced people to improve the sector. Education is the process of facilitating learning or the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, morals, beliefs and habits. Education makes it possible for people to use the available resources in their respective countries sustainably by decreasing harmful practices; it promotes sustainable development economically, socially, culturally and politically and makes people participate fully in promoting human rights, gender equality, peace and non-violence society as well as appreciating global citizenship and cultural diversity (Alam, 2008).

Education is a social process; it is growth; it is not preparation for life but life itself. This implies that education gives life rich meaning and it starts from cradle to grave. According to "Education for all" of UNESCO, quality education encompasses improving all aspects of the quality education and ensuring excellence so that recognised and measureable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills. Quality is the heart of education and what takes place in classrooms and other learning environment is fundamentally important to the future well-being of children, young people and adults. Quality education is one, which satisfies basic learning needs and enriches the lives of learners and their overall experiences of living (Samantaray, 2017). Thus, when we speak of education it should be one of quality which brings out excellence in its recipients and is accessible to all irrespective of their gender, social status or economic status.

It has been observed that promoting inclusive learning is a process of increasing the presence, participation and achievement of all learners in their educational settings (Hick, Turner-Cmucha and Aitken, 2016). Inclusive education as an on-going process is aimed at quality education for all while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities, characteristics and learning expectations of the students and communities, eliminating all forms of discrimination (UNESCO, 2008). Developing inclusive education indicators is important, and recognising that technology

often overlaps in this area, with a strong focus on meeting the needs of young people with special needs in Nigeria as in many other countries. Using Information Communication Technology to involve young people with special educational needs is generally accepted as common practice for those young people who are identified as such, as well as other youth with extra needs (European Organisation for Advancement of Special Needs Education, 2020).

Persons with disabilities include those with long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which may impede their full and effective participation in society on an equal footing with others in interaction with various barriers (UN, 2006). This definition of inclusive education goes beyond people living with physical disabilities or challenges. It covers those with mental, intellectual and sensory impairments. There are some students that are slow learners and cannot understand what is being taught in the class at the same pace with other students. These types of students should be able to learn with others and at the same time get quality education.

An inclusive education setting is understood to be where a learner with a disability or special educational need follows education in a mainstream class with their peers for the largest part of the school day. The conception of special needs has been redefined over time not only to cover disabilities and cognitive functioning *per se*, but has been expanded to include gender, health and nutrition status, language, geographic location, culture, religion, economic status – variables often associated to as barriers to achievement of Education for All (EFA) movement. Some girls are left out of getting education because their society belief that it is wasteful to educate a girl child. Other children are left out because of their geographical location while some parents can simply not afford to send their children to school because of financial setbacks. Effort to broaden the scope of inclusion to covering all barriers to attainment of EFA was regarded by many as transformational phase of education and learning environment. It is certainly by welcoming and genuinely responding to differences and diversity associated to learning that will collectively contribute towards the achievement of Education for All mission.

To date inclusion is conceptualised as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity in the needs of all children, youth, and adults through increasing participation in learning, cultures, and communities, and reducing and eliminating exclusion within and from education. It involves changes and modifications in terms of content, approaches, structures, and strategies, with a common vision that covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children (UNESCO, 2009). Inclusive education requires designing schools and training institutions, classrooms, programmes and activities so that all students can learn together. The benefits of inclusive education are numerous and technologies can support inclusive education. But despite the exponential growth of technology in the digital era, there exist economic, educational and social gap between those who have easy and unregulated access to the internet and those who do not.

The Sustainable Development Goals are a collection of seventeen interlinked global goals designed to be a blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. These goals were set up in 2015 by the United Nations General assembly and are intended to be achieved by the year 2030. This new agenda is building on the principle of “leaving no one behind”. It emphasises a holistic approach to achieving sustainable development for all. The Goal 4: Ensure Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education and Promote long-life learning opportunities for all is pertinent to achieving all other goals. This is because for the actualisation of the other goals, people must be well informed about the role they need to play and this is what education does for the citizens of a country. Education equips learners of all ages with the skills and values needed to be responsible global citizens, such as respect for human rights, gender

equality and environmental sustainability. Investing in and strengthening a country's education sector is key to the development of any country and its people. Some progress has been made in access to education, specifically at the primary school level, for both boys and girls. However, access does not always mean quality of education, or completion of primary school. Currently, 103 million youth worldwide still lack basic literacy skills and more than 60% of those are women. Target 1 of Goal 4 is to ensure that by 2030 all boys and girls and complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education. (Wikipedia-Sustainable Development Goals.)

Without investment in quality education, progress on all other development indicators will stagnate. The Global Partnership for Education works to ensure that all children irrespective of where they live get a quality education, prioritising the most vulnerable. Alokun (1998) reports that various researchers have shown that a strong library campaign can lead to higher student's achievement. Therefore, to achieve qualitative education at all levels without the support of libraries and librarians would be very difficult. This therefore saddles librarians at all level with a weighty responsibility; that of providing access to information for their patrons thus giving them the tools for self-development and actualisation of dreams.

Role of librarians and technology in achieving inclusive and equitable education

Achieving quality education, means having all required educational infrastructures. Among the key infrastructure for supporting quality education is the provision of effective library services. Libraries are gateways to knowledge and have a great role in supporting sustainable development. Education can be acquired from libraries to help people become literate, be able to numerate, become problem solvers and achieve self-actualisation, economic sufficiency, civic responsibility and satisfactory human relationships. Using libraries, people get opportunities to learn and educate themselves in various aspects related to their daily life as well as building knowledge and understanding of the World, making informed decisions and consequently work productively in solving problems (Makotsi, 1999).

A good school library will function as the knowledge hub of a school where students and teachers can access resources that can develop their critical thinking skills. It is very important to ensure that a nation should have effective library services at all levels, especially school libraries since, school libraries promote literacy, numeracy and reading culture among young generation (World Bank, 2008). It should also be noted that when a school have well equipped school library but do not have the right personnel to be in charge, the library may not be able to realise its purpose to the fullest extent possible. A good school librarian can harness all the resources in the library and put it to good use for the realisation of its goals.

School library services in pre- primary, primary and secondary schools have a great role to play in developing early literacy, promote reading culture and life-long learning among the young people in society and they have direct impact on students' academic achievements and learning in general. Many students today prefer reading online on their devices. The needs of such students can be catered for by providing good books to develop literacy and promote reading culture. The librarian can upload such good books online on the school website for students to read. Audio books can also be included in the library's collection. Students can listen to such books while doing household chores at home. Visually impaired students can also benefit maximally from the library audio books collection. School libraries provide resources in a wider and deeper understanding to students in various subjects in the school; promotes reading habits among young generation; initiating career development among youth and ensure feeding philosophical and social values into the community (Makotsi, 1999). The combination of physical

resources and online resources will help realise the goal of no child is left behind in inclusive and equitable education.

Providing leadership in technology integration across discipline areas requires school librarians to apply their knowledge of the specific needs of the school population to ensure effective implementation of new technologies. This has given rise to the name school library media specialists. Librarians are now developing skills in new technologies that can be used in teaching and learning. The implementation of new technology aids inclusive and equitable education. School librarians should be at the fore front in providing training for teachers in the effective use of technology. This training brings about collaboration in the educational sector. This new technology can be used to further the teaching done in class to carry along slow learners. The use of technology in teaching was displayed in full during the lockdown brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Classes can be delivered online using applications such as google meet, zoom conferencing and jitsi. Tests and assignments can be posted on Google classroom for students to take the tests at a particular time. Technology can also be used when teachers provide online resources for students who find it challenging to catch up with their mates. Instead of separating the slow learners in a physical class, the additional online resources can deepen their understanding putting them on the same page with fellow learners at the next physical class.

In the role of information specialist, "the school librarian uses technology tools to supplement school resources, assist in the creation of engaging learning tasks, connect the school with the global learning community, communicate with students and classroom teachers at any time, and provide (continuous) access to school library services. The school librarian introduces and models emerging technologies, as well as strategies for finding, assessing, and using information. He or she is a leader in software and hardware evaluation, establishing the processes for such evaluation to take place. . . (The) school librarian must be versed in the theoretical grounding and practical application of (copyright and fair use) laws in order to teach the ethical use of information to the learning community (AASL 2018). When the librarian provides access to online resources on the school website, students and teachers can visit the library in the comfort of their homes. A student that is indisposed and has assignments to turn in can visit the online library resources for needed materials. Such assignments can also be turned in online if the provisions have been put in place by the librarian and the subject teachers.

Improving equitable access to learning with technology positively impacts student achievement. Lance and Schwarz (2012) found that school libraries which offer a modern technological infrastructure that is accessible to all students positively impact student achievement based on evidence of higher test scores specifically for minority and disadvantaged students. Thus, having technological tools and designating the school library as the schools' primary hub for technology use are important to student learning, but ensuring that available technology is equitably accessible is what will allow these resources to have a positive effect on student achievement. Students visit the library in search of materials for a school project or an assignment. The librarian should make provision for internet connection in the library where students can be taught how to search for information and check for credible resources. This is important because there are so many internet sites that misinform users. When the school librarians teach students how they can perform credible search for assignments, they can sharpen their research skills in preparation for life after secondary school. There are students that do not have their personal computer at home, they can visit the library and carry out their search. In this way no child is left behind, even the ones from less privileged homes.

Providing students with resources to build their skills around online news helps them become better consumers of information. An informal study (Will, 2016) aimed to identify how school librarians were adapting in their instructional role to meet different areas of 21st century learning for students concerning digital literacy, media, and information consumption. The librarians interviewed in the study primarily discussed their role in teaching students “how to navigate and consume information online . . . and helping teachers implant those skills into their curriculum” (Will, 2016). Activities for these instructional and collaborative roles are prompted by librarians’ recognition of misinformation in the media affecting the research process and students’ difficulty navigating truth. Students may lack the ability to differentiate facts, such as a research study, from opinion, given that both are made readily accessible through the same channels of open-access internet and can appear comparable in purpose and authority in the eyes of the undiscerning young reader.

As programme administrator, the school librarian ensures that all members of the learning community have access to resources that meet a variety of needs and interests. The implementation of a successful school library programme requires the collaborative development of the programme mission, strategic plan, and policies, as well as the effective management of staff, the programme budget, and the physical and virtual spaces. To augment information resources available to the learning community, the school librarian works actively to form partnerships with stakeholders and sister organisations at local and global levels. The school librarian also addresses broader educational issues with other teachers in the building, at the district level, and at the professional association level” (AASL 2018, 15). Ensuring equitable access to the school library, collection, and resources can raise student achievement and are reinforced by the presence of a school librarian.

The school librarian can also help to overcome the problem of gender differences in reading acquisition by maintaining collections of materials that appeal to males and females. In this way it settles the issue of gender inequality in education. Many language classes at school focus on fiction texts, which tend to be less appealing to boys and young men. However, by providing interesting reading material in the areas of sports, science, politics or Do-It-Yourself manuals, the library can neutralise the problem that a large percentage of males are perceived to be slow or non-readers. Providing what interests both male and female readers bring about inclusive and equitable education.

Importance of blended learning in inclusive and equitable education

The world is changing constantly and the various domains are also influenced by the change. There is no exemption even in the education domain. The evolution of the digital learning platforms has a huge impact in educational institutions and has eventually put the traditional methods in the back seat. However, there are demands for both technology and traditional learning methods. As a result of this, the art of combining digital learning tools with more traditional classroom face to face teaching gave birth to the term “Blended Learning”. Blended learning is a teaching and learning approach that combines face to-face classroom methods with computer mediated activities to deliver instruction. This pedagogical approach means a mixture of face-to-face and online activities and the integration of synchronous and asynchronous learning tools, thus providing an optimal possibility for the arrangement of effective learning processes. Blended learning is the term given to the educational practice of combining digital learning tools with more traditional classroom face to face teaching.

Russell and Charles (2003) described blended-learning combines face-to-face with distance delivery systems. ...the internet is involved, but it's more than showing a page from a website on the classroom screen. And it all comes back to teaching methodologies- pedagogies that

change according to the unique needs of learners. Those who use blended learning environments are trying to maximize the benefits of both face to-face and online methods—using the web for what it does best, and using class time for what it does best. In some cases, most interactions between students and the teacher, as well as the direct delivery of instruction, take place in person in the classroom, while materials and possibly some additional activities are delivered online. In other cases, most of the class activities occur online, with infrequent meetings in person to solve problems and support community building. In some blended arrangements, students may choose which activities to complete online and which to complete in a classroom. Ideally, blends are personalised so individual students have the blend that best fits their age, life circumstances and learning needs.

Blended learning environments that integrate physical and virtual components are seen as precarious strategies. This trend has increased since the publication of a meta-analysis of 50 studies that found that while online students performed a little better than face-to-face students, students in courses that blended online and face-to-face components did much better than a straight online course (Means et al., 2010). The case for the effectiveness of blended learning derives from the observation that such courses give students a greater range of affordances that enhance the learning experience beyond that of either online or face-to-face modes alone. Support is presented by Ramsden, (2003) who argued that blended environments increase student choice and this can lead to enhanced learning. Oliver and Trigwell (2005) also suggest that a blended environment may offer experiences that are not available in non-blended environments and that the nature of these different experiences promote learning. Technology has increased the breadth and depth of access to education. This is significant because it has been a hallmark of western education that the co-location in time and space of teachers, students, and resources is the prerequisite of education. Changing from a classroom-only context to include a major online component requires adjustment for teachers and students (Swenson and Redmond, 2009). This adjustment when made will make room for slow learners, students with some form of disabilities or hindrances to get quality education which the SDG goal 4 wants to achieve. Technology is a power tool in bringing all this to realisation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Inclusive and equitable education is essential in a country that wants development. This is because education is the bedrock of a developed country. School librarians and technology can improve the quality of education and make it accessible to all irrespective of their age, gender, social or educational status. Blended learning is one salient way of providing inclusive and equitable education for all. A blended learning environment provides special needs students with a two-fold benefit, a physical, face-to-face teacher of whom to ask questions and seek guidance, in addition to the assets of virtual resources. Students are given opportunity to work independently and at their own pace online, but still have access to the personal attention of a teacher and all the assistance, knowledge, and resources such an educator provides. At the same time, teachers can structure courses and deliver instruction more flexibly or creatively than in a traditional classroom setting. COVID-19 has made us see the usefulness of technology in education. So when school librarians continue the advocacy for blended learning, teachers and other educational stakeholders can come to see the numerous benefits. There is still time before the year 2030 that the UN wants to realise inclusive and sustainable education. Together, we can all achieve more if we work towards it. Collaboration between teachers and librarians, school administrators, government and all other stakeholders will make blended learning work.

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