



## SOCIAL INCLUSION AS A TASK IN THE DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS OF PERSONS WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENT: IMPLICATION FOR SPECIAL NEEDS COUNSELLING

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### **Abstract:**

Social skill is the foundation upon which other skills are built. Without a social presence, visually impaired students may encounter isolation, difficulty with inter personal relationships, difficulty with employment and independent living as adults. Over the past years in which children with visual impairment have been included in public schools and most especially private special schools with increasing numbers, the practicalities and legalities of ensuring access to the curriculum have often taken precedence to, and sometimes obscured the issue of social inclusion. The UK, Scottish Government and Nigeria through adoption recognises that ensuring all children develop good levels of social competency in their school years has the potential to be a very powerful strategy for promoting lifelong social inclusion. Providing equal access to education in an inclusive setting to all individuals with disabilities is the key element of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1992 making it the role of the school in promoting, developing and supporting the social skills of all pupils as documented in the legislation and guidelines. So, bringing the social world at a very early age to a child who is blind is an essential skill or task in the developmental process of a child with visual impairment. This paper therefore is an attempt at discussing social inclusion as a task in the developmental process of persons with visual impairment and its implication to special needs counselling. To this end, this work uses two facets of social inclusion which is education through interacting with society and education through fulfilling social roles. Special Needs Counselling guidelines and management of children with visual impairment for social, academic, physical and spiritual adjustment are also highlighted.

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## 1. Introduction

Persons with disabilities often face barriers of participation in social and physical activities and these might include complex issues including attitudes towards people with disabilities, traditional and religious belief, physical education systems, and access to sporting infrastructure including services, facilities and equipment. Inclusive education is based on the right of all learners to acquire quality education no matter their differences, by cooperatively doing things in unison. This assist learners to meet their basic learning needs that enriches their lives despite their differences. Inclusive education gives rise to social presence as it brings all students together into a classroom and community regardless of their strength and weakness thereby improving the terms on which individuals and groups take part in the society giving rise to improved abilities, opportunities and dignity of those disadvantaged on the basis of their identity. Social inclusion requires that all individuals be able to secure a job, access services, connect with family and friends, deal with personal crises and have their voices heard. However, perception, opinion and attitudes of the society towards this type of education are inhuman, negative and worrisome particularly towards children with disabilities. For persons with disability to acquire knowledge like others, they are mostly rejected, discriminated and frustrated because of their physical, emotional and psychological disadvantages which makes the problem of social inclusion a typical challenge in the lives of persons with disabilities and the world at large (Dommak, 2013).

The World Bank Group (2012) defines social inclusion as the process of improving the terms for individuals and groups to take part in society and the process of improving the ability, opportunity and dignity of those disadvantaged on the basis of their identity to take part in the society. Competences in social skills are therefore needed for successful daily living to enable children to interact successfully with peers, teachers and others; accurately recognize and sensitively respond to emotions expressed by others; or express desires and preferences in socially acceptable ways. So, Social competencies enable students to identify and solve social problem in a socially acceptable manner. For example, disagreement about who can play with a toy or invitations to sneak out of school with a group of peers.

So much of what is learnt is through the visual sense. Almost 80% of what a person acquires is through vision (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). People learn to interact, learn to engage socially through observation. Very young children, babies for example, learn to smile by watching what their mothers do, and engaging with them. And that reciprocity back and forth, that joint attention that's so critical with very young children is encountered through the visual sense, so once there is an impairment in the visual functioning of a person, the person automatically losses a major aspect of social life. Visual impairment is a general term that refers to total blindness, partial sightedness

and low vision. The World Health Organization (2015) defined visual impairment as a physical, psychiatric, intellectual or sensory impairment whether temporary or permanent, provided that it lasts for a significant period of time, that limits the capacity of the individual to perform one or more essential activities of daily life and which can be caused by economic and social environment. Agomoh and Kanu (2015) opined that for blind or visually impaired kids, learning those social skills needs to be taught at a very early age, these social skills need to be modelled, they need to be practiced; so, a child who is going to learn them have to be helped to learn these skills which makes the social development of a child with blindness not really an easy task.

People with one disability or another are no less concerned with developing a worthwhile sporting and vocational program for themselves such as leisure time pursuits which are recently becoming more and more important in the lives of people today. Social activities like sport can have a positive impact on the lives of people with disabilities yet many of these persons face challenges in getting involved with sports. Ajobiewe (2014) stated that sports and other social activities can play a key role in the lives and communities of people with disabilities, the same as it can for people without a disability. Integration and inclusion of people with disabilities in mainstream sport is therefore the key focus in recent decades and have created new opportunities for participation and competition on a larger scale, participation in disability sport also contributes to nation building and national identity and can also promote rehabilitation of people with disabilities.

This paper therefore is an attempt at explaining social inclusion as a task in the developmental process of persons with visual impairment as well as its implication to special needs counselling using two facets of social inclusion which is education through interacting with society and fulfilling social roles.

## **2. Social Development of Persons with Visual Impairment**

Vision is considered as an important factor in the development and achievement of goals by any human being. Greater percentage of school work, social interaction and vocational economic achievements largely depends on vision which calls for the need to understand and assist those without proper vision to be able to adjust to the effect of visual impairment. Visual impairment which is one of the categories of disability is a broad term used to describe the complete or partial loss of vision. Visual impairment in essence signifies the fact that the child's vision is none functional to a reasonable degree, it interferes with the child's use of sight to learn and in daily functioning (Eke, 2013). It may also cause severe limitation in the child's visual activity and central vision which makes the child unable to see a wide area. Agomoh and Kanu (2015) stated ways of measuring these aspects of vision to be through: clarity of vision, contrast sensitivity, colour blindness, night blindness, field of vision and dioptré which is the degree of corrective lens.

Social inclusion is equipped with mechanisms which accommodate diversity and facilitate people's active participation in their political, economic and social lives. It is the process by which effort is made to ensure equal opportunities that everyone regardless of their background can achieve their full potential in life despite their abilities or disabilities.

Ekeledirichukwu (2016) noted that like other disability categories, visual impairment has cultural connotations in every society. The stigma of visual impairment is attached to both the individuals and the members of their family. Thus, a child with visual impairment is perceived as a bad omen and is often abandoned by family either in the hospital, orphanage or special school or in extreme cases killed without public knowledge. Ozorji, Unachukwu and Kolo (2016) opined that, in the drive towards inclusive education, the Government and education providers must accept that inclusion is as much about the ethos and social life of schools, colleges and universities as it is about access to the curriculum. The need to closely link knowledge of child development together with socio-emotional development is now increasingly discussed in terms of seeing the child as part of a system of relationships, within the family, within the extended family, within society and within the school (Lewis & Collis in Schwartz, 2010). There is also a growing concern and recognition of the necessity of developing specific skills for those with particular needs especially those who are blind or visually impaired.

As suggested by Lewis and Collis in Schwartz (2010), the focus needs to shift from the individual performance of the blind child to the forming of relationships between the child and the social environment. Schools are therefore encouraged to address these issues for all pupils throughout the curriculum. In primary and secondary schools social competence may be directly addressed through classes on personal and social development or as linked programmes with other subjects (Morris, 2001). Providing equal access to education in an inclusive setting to all individuals with disabilities is the key element of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1992. This act provides that:

- Students with visual impairments have unique educational needs which are most effectively met using a team approach of professionals, parents and students. In order to meet their unique needs, students must have specialized services, books and materials in appropriate media (including braille), as well as specialized equipment and technology to assure equal access to the core and specialized curricula, and to enable them to most effectively compete with their peers in school and ultimately in society.
- There must be a full range of program options and support services so that the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team can select the most appropriate placement in the least restrictive environment for each individual student with a visual impairment.
- There must be adequate personnel preparation programs to train staff to provide specialized services which address the unique academic and non-academic curriculum needs of students with visual impairments. There must also be

ongoing specialized personnel development opportunities for all staff working with these students as well as specialized parent education (Peter, 1998).

### **3. Social Competency Skills for Those with Visual Impairment**

Social competence is the ability to handle social interactions effectively by getting along with others and being able to form and maintain close relationships and responding in adaptive ways in social settings. Participation in social and physical activities for people with disabilities results in improved functional statuses and quality of life, this implies that it leads to improved level of physical health and wellbeing (Ajobiwe, 2014). This participation also improves physical fitness and general mood in some persons with depressive and anxiety disorder. Additionally, it improves self-confidence, social awareness and self-esteem which can contribute to empowerment of people with disabilities. In 1998 the Scottish Education Office outlined the skills which underlie social competence as:

- The ability to understand another's point of view when different from your own.
- Knowledge of how to interpret other people's emotional state and behaviour.
- Skill in suppressing immediate emotional responses in favour of more carefully considered responses in social situations.
- The ability to adjust one's behaviour to make it acceptable or rewarding to others (SOEID, 1998).

Children with visual impairment provide a distinctive focus for enquiry. These children can have complex needs, which calls for accommodation by the class teacher to ensure that they are afforded their full entitlement to their curriculum. In accessing the curriculum which must meet their social, educational and emotional needs. Children with visual impairments face a variety of challenges. For instance, these children have limited or no access to the curriculum via the visual medium and some might rely more on their hearing and touch senses to learn. This means that, on average, child with visual impairment need more time to assimilate information than fully sighted children (Eke, 2013). The following items have been identified by researchers as strategies needed to develop the social lives of persons with visual impairment exhausting the desires of the persons with visual impairment, the teachers and the parents in collaborative effort based on social inclusion:

- Building on the importance of knowledgeable and supportive teachers and entire staff.
- Building on the importance of friends both for self-esteem and protection from bullying.
- Building on the need for better communication between teachers to promote inclusion in the classroom.
- Building on the importance enlightened staff who are 'up-to-date' about learning aids and techniques that would support persons with visual impairment in school.

- Building on Sensitive staff to provide support that allow children with visual impairment to fully engage with the curriculum, in a way that will not bring stigmatisation.
- Building on Friendships and social inclusion as an important part of school life for practical help and support to children with visual impairment.
- Building on an inclusive ethos (attitude and character) in a school as teachers attempt to fully include pupils in all aspects of school life.
- Building a School development plan, staff development and the role of the senior management in promoting the full implementation of inclusive policies (Marianna et al., 2002).

#### **4. Social Inclusion in the Education Facet for Persons with Visual Impairment**

Many children with visual impairment become visually fatigued when concentrating on school work for sustained periods of time and so often need to rest their eyes regularly. There is a wealth of literature which indicates that reading through braille imposes significant cognitive demands for blind children compared with their sighted age peers who read through print. Furthermore, a child with sever visual impairment is likely to require additional support in developing social life and skill. Another continuing support, around issues of inclusion in school for those with a disability has been centred on special educational needs, but little on the promotion of social inclusion in mainstream schools and of perspectives/experiences of those concerned. Morris (2011) acknowledged that while education policy, both in terms of school-age children and further higher education, is now more motivated by a philosophy of inclusion, there is very little recognition of the steps necessary to enable children with disabilities and young people to genuinely mix with their peer group. When Morris (2011) asked young persons with disabilities in their teens and early twenties to describe what social exclusion meant to them they talked about:

- Not being listened to,
- Having no friends,
- Finding it difficult to do the kinds of things that non-disabled people of their age do,
- Being made to feel they have no contribution to make,
- Feeling unsafe, being harassed and bullied.

The overall ethos of the school for the visually impaired should therefore be a valuable support from many teachers and attempts to fully include these children in all aspects of school life. School development plans, staff development and the role of the head teacher are important in nurturing and promoting an atmosphere where social inclusion is seen as important enough to be discussed in formal as well as informal arenas. These children perception of their immediate environment, and their perceptions of interactions with peers' means that they can miss out on what is going on around them (Demmak, 2013). The social development of a child can be viewed as essential for the

ongoing development of his or her participation and learning in school. Hence, learning presupposes a specific social nature and the process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them.

Indeed, a belief in socially constructed knowledge makes it difficult to separate the idea of a child social inclusion in the learning process from their development. This is due to the fact that a great majority of early learning comes through vision; children who are blind or visually impaired will be slower to learn many skills than their sighted peers. The teacher-pupil relationship is an important one and thought should be given to how that might be nurtured and developed when most of the contact with the pupil in class may be mediated through a support teacher (Lewis & Collis 1997). Schools in Scotland are encouraged to address these issues for all persons throughout the curriculum. In primary and secondary schools, social competence is directly addressed through classes on personal and social development or as linked programmes with other subjects (Scottish Executive 2000). It is recognised that for a whole variety of reasons some pupils may have 'special needs' in this area and need enhanced support to achieve levels of competence. To this end, Eke (2013) noted that if the social and environmental barriers were eliminated, people with disabilities would have a more realistic opportunity of living equally alongside persons without disabilities.

## **5. Social Inclusion, Interaction with the Society and Fulfilling Social Roles**

Persons with visual impairment often receive inappropriate behaviours from members of their environment. They also encounter many unpleasant personal challenges in their effort to cope with vicissitudes of life. In addition, they have fewer social experiences compared to their peers (Ekeledirichukwu, 2016). In the same vein, Lerner (2012) asserted that visual impairment is a devastating physical condition with deep emotional and economic implication whose consequences affect not only the individual but also the family and the community.

The loss of vision after illness or trauma causes major changes in lifestyle which may result in problems of physiological or social adjustment of the victim leading to feeling of isolation, difference and shame occurring in everyday life, conflict and lack of acceptance by sighted people. Furthermore, a person who loses his or her sight undergoes extensive behavioural, motivational, cognitive and emotional adjustment which creates or aggravates many social and psychological challenges. For example, lack of access to education, unemployment, street begging and attendance poor quality standard of life afflict many people with visual impairment in Nigeria (Agomoh & Kanu, 2015). The need to closely link knowledge of child development together with socio-emotional development is now being increasingly discussed in terms of seeing the child as part of a system of relationships, within the family, within the extended family, within society and within the school (Sacks, 1992). As suggested by Lewis and Collis in Schwartz (2010), the focus needs to shift from the individual performance of the blind child to the forming of relationships between the child and the social environment. Atteng and Ekom-Idorenyin

(2019) also added that attitudinal barriers faced by children with special needs have become part of societal climate and have served to drastically limit the maximization of the potentials of this group of people. For those who may be blind or visually impaired different social skills would be encouraged ranging from understanding the personality and self-advocacy of the visually impaired, such as:

- introducing oneself; meet and make friends with other visually impaired children
- listening; discuss visual impairment issues
- asking questions, starting a conversation; work on life skills from an equal baseline and develop these skills
- asking for help / refusing help
- being criticized / criticising; being confident and able within their own inclusive settings
- how to deal with feelings; raise their self-esteem. (Sacks et al., 1992).

## **6. Barriers to Social Inclusion and Special Needs Guidelines for Practitioners**

The social model of disability locates the external problems faced by persons with disabilities in the way that organizations and social needs have to do with needs for belongings, love and affection and their mental assessment of self in relation with their interactions with the environment which reflects in their behavioural problems, communication issues, self-esteem and self-image problems. But accepting and accommodating society will significantly reduce the barriers and effect of the disability (Atteng & Ekom-Idorenyin, 2019). Social inclusion is multifaceted: it encompasses social Political, cultural, and economic dimensions, and operates at various social levels. The most relevant aspects can be clustered under three interrelated domains: markets, services and spaces (figures) the three domains represent both barriers to and opportunities for inclusion as such, it is also rational since it impacts on people in various ways and to differing degrees over time and critically depends on and influence people's ability, opportunity and dignity which are unequally distributed among social groups The (World Bank Group, 2012). The ability of a child to socially adapt depends on the individual, some children lack social skills and some face the bias that is still present against people who are different in some way.

Eke (2013) noted some barriers to the participation and learning of children with visual impairment to be; assistive technology, orientation and mobility services, inadequate additional curriculum, lack of inclusion in the main teaching and learning processes taking place in the regular classroom, lack of communication and adequate planning by the class teacher. As such, the following are recommended guidelines for the practising counsellor, teachers and special needs educator:

- There should be specific social skills training for pupils with visual impairment including analysis and discussion of social situations and use of role-play.
- There should be opportunities for awareness raising and discussion of social inclusion issues for sighted peers.

- There should be regular training and updates for class and subject teachers.
- There should be opportunities to develop mobility and independent living skills in and around the school.
- It is important to ensure that pupils with a visual impairment get the opportunity to meet with others who have a visual impairment (e.g. clubs and the internet).
- It is important to encourage the inclusion of pupils with a visual impairment in playground games and activities.
- It is important to help create 'circles of friends' for particular pupils to provide support for attending school parties and dances etc. (Sacks, et al., 1992)

## **7. Special Needs Counselling Implications**

The number of students in general education classes is increasing while the number of resource rooms is decreasing hence the growing responsibility for the disability teacher and for general education teacher as well as special needs counselling practitioner is the need for collaborative effort in the following:

### **7.1 Counselling for Parent and Child – The First Social Interaction**

Families are the first teachers to a child with visual impairment, and they are probably the most important teachers. Family counselling involving father, mother, siblings, relatives and friends is the first point of call for the counselling practitioner. Engaging the child with blindness as the centre in the family setting and counselling against isolation of the child and full acceptance of the child in family activities (American Psychiatric Association 2013). The other element that is really critical in family counselling is for families and professionals to have realistic expectations for their students who are blind or visually impaired. Making sure the expectations are not way too low or way too high by striking that happy balance. The summary of the first step skills of Parent & Child: The First Interactions are;

- Providing opportunities for the child to engage in interactive play.
- Set realistic expectations.
- Provide opportunities for exploring objects (Sacks, 2001).

### **7.2 Counselling for Widening the Social Circle**

Counselling will be for accepting peoples' cultural differences, accepting who they are, and then infusing the area of socialization on social skills and other programs like teaching them about those kind of things that can only happen in private i.e. teaching the difference between public and private activities. Summary points regarding: Widening Social Circles are as follows;

- Teaching social skills beginning at home,
- Engaging in playgroups when possible,
- Teaching the difference between appropriate public and private behaviours (Sacks, 2001).

### **7.3 Counselling for Learning Social Skills in the Classroom**

A well-structured environment is encouraged in a way the child knows where everything is kept, and physical obstacles are removed from the environment. So counselling practitioners emphasize affective or character education within the classroom where the child who is blind or visually impaired can play a significant role engaging with the peers in the classroom environment or in that small group activity (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The summary points regarding: Learning Social Skills in the Classroom are as follows:

- Provide opportunity to be part of small group activities,
- Emphasize character education within the classroom,
- Provide cooperative learning activities where the child can play a significant role (Sacks, 2001).

### **7.4 Counselling for Developing an Appropriate Self-Awareness**

Adolescence is a rough time for individuals. But it is even rougher for students who have disabilities and those who have visual impairments. These young people are trying to establish their own identities, and figuring out who they are as individuals and developing individual levels of competence in academics and maybe other talents with greater fear or risk of making friends and who to engage in. It is believed that there is a correlation between social isolation, and a sense of well-being, self-concept and self-esteem (Morris, 2001). It follows that students who are able to engage with others and feel good about engaging with others, would feel more socially competent to a level of developing a better self-esteem or better self-concept about themselves. Summary points regarding the counselling for developing an Appropriate Self-Awareness.

- Social competence leads to better self-esteem and self-awareness,
- Finding groups or shared interests that the student can engage with,
- Foster understanding of the importance of social interactions (Sacks, 2001).

### **7.5 Counselling for Self-Advocacy as a Social Skill**

Self-advocacy begins early on, where the children are making choices and decisions for themselves, they are advocating for themselves for what they need and what they like. So, giving students choices and encouraging them to make decisions is the key to self-advocacy. Self-advocacy demands self-reliance by letting people know about visual impairment and being bold to make explanations about the disability where necessary. These opportunities give students a better understanding of who they are, and it helps them to be better self-advocates for themselves, and gives them greater opportunity to be successful and to feel better about themselves because they are taking control of their lives. The summary points regarding counselling for Self-Advocacy as Social Skill areas are as follows;

- Self-advocacy begins early on.
- Allowing the student or child to make choices on their own.
- Encouraging the child to articulate their specific needs (Sacks, 2001).

## 7.6 Counselling for Social Skills and Satisfaction

Social skills are really the foundation upon which other skill areas are built and without good social skills, students and young adults with visual impairment are at greater risk of social isolation later in life. Summary points regarding: counselling Social Skills and Satisfaction are thus:

- Social skills are the foundation upon which other skills are built.
- Students who are less socially capable have a more difficult time finding employment.
- Good social skills lead to peer acceptance and inclusion, and greater personal satisfaction (Sacks, 2001).

## 8. Conclusion

Social inclusion is a “must” task for the developmental process of persons with visual impairment. The need to improve the counselling for self-advocacy, self-adjustment and social skill satisfaction for persons with visual impairment therefore becomes imperative and this depends on parents, family, relative, teachers, friends, community and institutional support in collaborative effort.

It has further become necessary in view of the numerous challenges encountered by persons with visual impairment to invest in training and retraining of counselling practitioners and special needs educators. It is recommended that the families, school and community should reverse negative attitudes and change to caring and supportive attitudes towards persons with visual impairment. Social inclusion therefore provides the need for an educational system that meets the individual social needs of ALL students, fosters independence, and is measured by the success of each individual in the school and community using the two facets of social inclusion being education and interacting with society in line with fulfilling social roles and responsibilities. "The best things about schools and society with social inclusion orientation are the fact that it has nice people, and therefore it is not surprising that the attitudes, empathy, knowledge and understanding of peers, teachers and citizens are the vital ingredients to feeling happy, safe, and socially included in the school and community.

## 9. Recommendations

In the course of this work, four basic recommendations have been made;

- 1) Special needs educators and Guidance counsellors as a matter of urgency must develop a social etiquette on interaction with people who are visually impaired or blind e.g use people who are blind instead of the blind people, calling a person who is visually impaired by name and gently touching of arm or shoulder, allowing the person with visual impairment to hold the sighted hand instead of holding her arm or hand.

- 2) The Government on the other hand must provide opportunities for the persons with blindness to express themselves in a social inclusive setting and also build a working curriculum to embrace the social needs of the child with visual impairment.
- 3) Most visually impaired persons come from economically disadvantaged background, therefore an effort should be made by the Government to ensure such people are accessed and sponsored in school to the highest level their potentials should take them.
- 4) Special Education should be made compulsory to all teachers trainee. This will ensure that children with visual impairment are helped at the nearest school which makes it cheaper and more meaningfully integrative.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors whose names are listed below hereby disclose that they have no conflict of interest to declare and other potentially affiliation with or involvement in any organization or entity, including specific or non-financial interest, relationships and affiliations in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscripts that could interfere with the publication of the article "Social inclusion as a task in the developmental process of persons with visual impairment; implication for special needs counselling" submitted and published under European Journal of Public Health Studies.

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