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## Research Article

# How Listening and Advocacy Foster Inclusion

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### Abstract:

Adults must listen attentively to the perspectives of children since some children are quite capable of articulating their opinions and thoughts. There is still an evolving body of research regarding how listening and advocacy can enhance inclusion. At the time this paper was done, there was no concrete evidence to affirm that there is a connection among the three disciplines listening, advocacy, and inclusion. There is a lack of research and a gap, and this study seeks to fill it. This author holds the very firm opinion that both listening and advocacy are two significant elements that facilitate inclusion. It seems to be the rule that when policies are implemented those who are affected the most are seldom consulted. In this regard, educators, policymakers, and all those involved with the lives of children must begin to listen to the opinions of children since they are quite capable of representing their issues. In this way, advocacy becomes more meaningful and can incorporate proper inclusive education. This research analyzed and summarized recently published literature on listening, advocacy, and inclusion and thus it is not comprised of new fieldwork. However, research undoubtedly noted that there is a paucity of information that specifically identifies the correlation of the three elements listening, advocacy, and inclusion.

**Keywords:** *Listening, advocacy, inclusion, diversity, equity, equality*

### 1. Introduction:

The United Nations General Assembly (1989) affirmed the rights of children and stated that their adults must heed their experiences. Brookes (2018) also conjectured that all citizens need to listen properly to children so they can become advocates and lobby more for inclusion. Asamoah *et al.* (2018) opined that inclusive environments should always foster a culture of equity and equality where there is respect for all. They also firmly believed that for inclusion to be truly meaningful, people must appreciate the dignity and worth of all. UNESCO (1994) opined that when inclusion is evident, children frequently benefit, and their overall educational skills are enhanced. They also affirmed that inclusion affirms the unique ability of students of all backgrounds. Very often the perspectives of children are unheeded and there is no advocacy among them. This discipline is also necessary since advocacy allows children to express their concerns. The literature highlighted that there is a dearth of information as it relates to this issue. This paper consisted of a critique of various documents, articles, and books. This research compared current publications associated with this topic. This research highlights the significance of listening and advocacy and demonstrates the connection with inclusion. The methodology is presented, limitations are acknowledged, future suggestions for research are noted and a conclusion and recommendations are provided.

### Listening and Inclusion

Rogers and Boyd (2020) resolutely affirmed that listening to the perspectives of children could have social, political, intellectual, religious, and educational relevance. They further affirmed that children could be a catalyst for change. Jones and Welch (2018) also affirmed that position and added that because the voices of children are dynamic, they could be a source of inspiration and positively impact on society.

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The United Nations General Assembly (1989) opined that children are best suited to formulating their views and sentiments and they have a right to express them.

The United Nations General Assembly (1989) also believed that adults must appreciate and value these views very seriously and try to inculcate them when they make decisions that concern children. Rogers and Boyd (2020) resolutely argued that adults must heed the voices of children since this discipline fosters trust and enhances respect. It also provides autonomy and self-determination to children (Green *et al.* 2018; Stålberg *et al.* 2016; The United Nations General Assembly, 1989; UNICEF 2019). Foster, *et al.* (2022) opined that listening to children and incorporating their opinions in the decision-making process safeguards their rights and empowers them to become advocates. It also offers invaluable insight to stakeholders, policymakers, educators, and the wider community. Sahlberg *et al.* (2020) believed that adequate and sufficient time must be provided to allow children to accurately articulate and express their opinions and perspectives. Cook-Sather (2018) affirmed the noteworthiness of paying attention to the sentiments of children especially the marginalized and further stated that their perspectives and experiences could certainly contribute to the holistic formation of advocacy and inclusion. Listening skills are essential for the overall well-being of students because energizes and motivates them to such a degree that they become more willing to participate in their studies. Mention must be made that when educators listen carefully to students, the latter formulate, internalize, and retain information, actively engage, and contribute to the learning process, and achieve their goals and objectives (Cook-Sather 2018). They also become advocates and affirm inclusion. Although listening is multifarious and manifold, it is quite rewarding and when done properly often fosters advocacy and inclusion. Julien (2021) recommended that educators commence this process with open-ended questions. These typically begin with who, what, where, when, and why. During the questioning process, educators can encourage students by making brief, gentle, and pertinent motions to actively them in the conversation. Gestures like a nod of the head, a smile frequently inspire students, make them comfortable and relaxed, and help to concentrate (Julien 2021). Within that avenue, they are more willing to share their perspectives, goals, and aspirations. Julien (2021) also firmly believed that eye contact enables listeners to engage students in dialogue and they are able to note if the students are uncomfortable or reluctant to speak about a particular subject. Mirroring can also be affirmative and stimulating. Similarly, repeating certain phrases is very prudent since it seeks to further unravel issues. Clarification involves asking relevant questions to resolve and debug complex issues. Koščak *et al.* (2021) opined that listening is more than merely hearing words, phrases, and sentiments. They believed that when educators listen actively to students, they are better able to comprehend value and appreciate them. Listening to students

makes worthwhile and humane connections, and students are more excited and even eager to participate in classes. When students know that attention is given to them, they feel they are part of the class; they participate in classroom discussions and are unafraid of confronting challenges (Koščak *et al.* 2021). It can be noted that through this discipline students are more likely to master concepts, pay attention to pertinent information, integrate and assimilate it and thus enhance learning and enhance their overall ability. They experience a great sense of autonomy, which is a necessary component for advocacy and inclusion. Furthermore, it is necessary to pay attention to the experiences of children because it could accentuate cognition and make learning meaningful. During classroom discussions and group activities because they enable students to contribute meaningfully. This discipline is also necessary because it nurtures a growth-promoting environment and embraces inclusion where students have unconditional positive regard. Julien (2022) hypothesized that listening to children ought to be incorporated in every aspect of life. He insisted that listening is more than offering direction and guidance because it involves unconditional positive regard. Although it does not always address problems, it frequently creates and sustains positive relationships, which is the heart of inclusion. Liu *et al.* (2022) postulated that educators must maintain an effective channel of communication with students. Communication must be transparent and incorporate the experiences of children. Birgitte Fyhn and Berntsen (2022) mentioned the need to listen and not judge and condemn. Birgitte Fyhn and Berntsen (2022) posited that through listening adults could appreciate the language of children. They further deduced that listening is strenuous and laborious because it involves paying acute attention to inflection and intonations and simultaneously observing the gesticulations. Yin Cheryl Ng *et al.* (2022) affirmed that educators should cultivate a non-threatening environment so that children can express themselves. They also posited that both adults and educators need to re-evaluate and re-think how they listen. Yin Cheryl Ng *et al.* (2022) believed that listening empowers children with a voice and some of them become independent, bold, and unafraid of expressing their sentiments and this is the foundation of advocacy and inclusion. They further added that listening is necessary to ascertain the experiences, perspectives, and opinions of children. Thus, more attention must be provided to this important discipline. Yin Cheryl Ng *et al.* (2022) lamented that too often listening is depreciated and oversimplified. Boardman (2022) also believed that the voices of children are frequently disregarded. This is a grave source of concern because the opinions of children continue to be absent especially when adults make decisions that concern them. It is undeniable that adults and educators are so concerned with their careers and personal goals that they have little or no time to listen to their children. To further compound this scenario, many adults work very hard, and this could severely obscure and grossly obstruct their ability to listen. Birgitte Fyhn and Berntsen

(2022) admitted that although listening is complex when adults listen tactfully, a child-centered ambiance is created. Skovsmose (2020) posited that listening is dynamic and interesting and adults make quality time to do so. Skovsmose (2020) further added that listening invigorates and stimulates children and makes them independent so that they can speak spontaneously, and this gives rise to advocacy and inclusion. Mithani *et al.* (2021) emphasized that it is important that all children, especially those with disabilities, be afforded a safe place to share their emotions. Brookes (2018) resolutely recommended that adults should be unafraid to initiate conversations with children. Because children can express their needs and achieve them when they are persuaded and encouraged. This approach gives children a deep sense of satisfaction and frequently spurs them on to become advocates. Walker and Misca (2019) firmly opined that the sentiments of children must be an integral element concerning inclusion because they empower children and provide them with a great sense of independence. They become more responsible and take ownership of their lives. Thus, the experiences and aspirations must be brought to the forefront (Kaneva & Corcoran 2021). When listening to children one must create unconditional positive regard and embrace inclusion (Ferguson, 2017). Adler & Rodman (2010) and Gerrig & Zimbard (2008) forcibly affirmed that adults must be positive and object when they listen. DeVito (2006) mentioned that listening is intricate and sensitive and offered five stages. They are accepting, comprehending, recalling, appraising, and responding. Delpit (1993) firmly opined the necessity to listen with undivided attention to the tone of children and also observe their gesticulations because these sentiments help resolve their goals and aspirations. DeVito (2006) also added that listening without casting aspersions benefits both adults and children. Listening with unconditional positive regard is not superficial and it is more than being attentive and discreet. It extends beyond the boundaries of understanding children's jargon. Fine and Glassner (1979) remarked that listening involves more than being sympathetic. Bovee (2008) opined that through listening ambiguities are minimized. According to DeVito (2006) listening with empathy augments a relationship and hence, he suggested that adults should be empathetic and understanding and permit children to vent and become independent. Fine and Glassner (1979) cautioned that obstacles and hindrances could surface because some adults may not be able to fully comprehend the vocabulary of some children. Moreover, listening must be meaningful and timely. If it is not genuine it could be unproductive. Bovee (2008) and Adler & Rodman (2010) believed that the following could assist and support listening. Adults can make notes, maintain eye contact, respond appropriately, exhibit non-verbal cues, and stay focused. Shevlin and Rose (2022) opined that adults need to habitually revisit the way they listen. Listening to children frequently challenges the stereotypical views of how adults listen. Shevlin and Rose (2022) further added that listening to the voices of children can initiate

change and provide opportunities so that others can learn from their experiences. Moreover, it can lay the foundation for inclusion. Emm-Collison *et al.* (2020) affirmed that children usually have a general idea of their goals and objectives. By focusing on the perspectives of the children, adults can often help them to fulfill their dreams, obtain these ideals, become independent, and embrace inclusion. Kaneva and Corcoran (2021) opined that listening is a prerequisite in trying to unravel the emotions of children and it should be brought to the forefront. Kaneva and Corcoran (2021) also observed that when some children speak nervously, it is indicative that they are uncomfortable. In this way, educators should try to be sensitive and supportive in the relationship because some children will trust adults if they are sincere. Therefore, it is important to value the experiences the voices of children.

### **Advocacy and Inclusion**

Dowse *et al.* (2018) propounded that there is a dearth of information about advocacy among children and further believed that this suggests that their voices are not given due consideration and prominence. Code (2006) described advocacy as manumission and liberation because it involves providing a voice to the marginalized. Ridley (2015) opined that advocacy takes several different forms, but it is principally concerned with achieving true justice at all levels of society. Since many people do not consider the importance of self-advocacy there is a struggle for independence and recognition by minorities. Advocates for inclusion affirm that children, especially those with disabilities, should express their concerns because they can offer personal experiences pertaining to their goals and aspirations. Advocacy also entails apposing trends of thought of thinking so that inclusion could be possible. Advocacy, as it relates to inclusion, indicates that the perspectives of students could revolutionize the existing structures of society. The heart of advocacy includes manumission children from the conventional and authoritative attitude that members of society may hold toward them. The United Nations (2017) affirmed self-advocacy and further indicated that children are quite competent in their views. Thus, they must be afforded a voice. Having a voice is the only way they would achieve inclusion. On the other hand, when this voice is denied, they habitually become disillusioned and disenchanting. They are more inclined to become more withdrawn and this further complicates inclusion. The United Nations (2017) clearly outlined a policy and legal guidance for governments to protect children especially those with disabilities. They cited that children have the right to associate and interact freely in all public spaces without harassment and intimidation and this is the heart of inclusion. Thomas De Benitez (2017) decisively supported the idea presented by The United Nations (2017) and further mentioned that advocacy is a necessary tool that embraces inclusion. (Meir & Fletcher 2020; Richardson & Fletcher 2020) further added that advocacy is a form of education and

enlightenment because it provides various opportunities for children to freely express themselves. According to Kaneva and Corcoran (2021), advocacy creates pertinent avenues for children to interact with each other cordially and respectfully. This interaction develops new skills accentuates education and embraces inclusion (Njoroge 2017). Moreover, this dynamic process equips children with pride, boosts their ego, and empowers them to optimize their ability and potential (Black *et al.* 2021; Dowse & Fletcher, 2018; Malcolm & Fletcher, 2017). When children engage in discussions, dialogues, and debates their talents are brought to the forefront and this creates an awareness for everyone (Corcoran *et al.* 2020). Salla *et al.* (2023) decisively opined that because advocacy empowers people and adds meaning and value to their experiences, it has the power to facilitate true democracy. They further believed that advocacy is a critical component since it fosters inclusion. Moreover, Salla *et al.* (2023) outlined three major ingredients that are essential for advocacy. They are knowledge, sensitivities, and skills. According to Salla *et al.* (2023) knowledge deals principally with the cognitive domain and is aimed at acquiring accurate knowledge and information. For example, advocates can develop an appreciation for inclusion. Salla *et al.* (2023) further outlined that this knowledge base is not limited and static but inexhaustible and limitless. Thus, it can expand and deepen cognition to incorporate a comprehensive and well-informed notion of advocacy. Frawley *et al.* (2020) also believed that this knowledge could incorporate how historical impinges on the present. It could also investigate the personal, power, and cultural struggles that currently exist. Salla *et al.* (2023) argued that an informed and deeper understanding of the social, intellectual, and educational components is necessary to arrive at advocacy. Salla *et al.* (2023) opined that sensitivity addressed the affective aspects of the role of advocates. They further insisted that the acquisition of knowledge is insufficient and resolutely affirmed that advocates must have the correct perspectives. Hence, advocates need to have the proper attitude and genuine desire to ensure that inclusion is achieved, (Salla *et al.* 2023). According to Salla *et al.* (2023), true sensitivity allows advocates to appreciate and value diversity, equity, and equality. Sensitivity demands regular and consistent self-reflection. For advocacy to be meaningful society must be willing to change. To empower and affirm children is more than merely allowing them to express themselves. It involves total transformation and even forces society to value and appreciate the perspectives of children. It is important to note that advocacy among children with disabilities is not easy to attain. In several instances, these children are unaware of the existence of those who make policies regarding their lives. Therefore, policymakers must be alerted. They must pay attention to the sentiments of these children and their difficulties, and challenges. If their voices go unheard, then their lives could be disregarded completely, and interests will not be effectively engaged, and inclusion will be further minimized. Advocacy among children should create an

awareness of how they live, and it is inadequate to merely express an interest in them. Commitment involves a diligent effort in the pursuit of inclusion. However, this has its measure of difficulty. It involves social, political, and educational action and critical analysis challenging the misinformed, ignorant prejudicial statements and ideas that are often prevalent within society.

### **Inclusion**

Zacharias and Brett (2018) decisively posited that education ought to be holistic and incorporate all students. They further argued that education is fundamental only when equity is evident. Amor *et al.* (2018) opined that for the past thirty years several educators have endorsed the fact that education ought to be inclusive. This is also consistent with, (The United Nations 2006). However, this is an extremely slow process since educators must try to overcome the challenges with inclusion. Inclusive education incorporates all students regardless of their disabilities. Schwab and Alnahdi (2021) also affirmed this position and noted that inclusion is all encompassing and must not be limited to only students with disabilities. UNESCO (1994) also shared this stance and insisted the urgency and necessity that all students ought to be educated in the regular education system. They further proclaimed that because inclusion is a fundamental right, all students must be afforded the opportunity to be educated in mainstream schools. UNESCO (1994) argued that education systems should be the needs of all, and programmes implemented to incorporate and embrace diversity and equity. According to UNESCO (1994), it is imperative that the teaching and learning process must be child-centred and thus meet the needs of all. They continued to argue that educational institutions must be inclusive. In that way, they can optimize their potential. Mention must be made that inclusion also fosters solidarity and camaraderie among students and minimizes prejudice (UNESCO 1994). Based on research (UNESCO 1994) firmly believed that inclusive institutions which educate students from the community are most successful in eliciting support and affirmation from the wider community. According to the literature, it is explicitly clear that true inclusion diminishes obstacles and barriers and tries to overcome prejudices and thus, embrace diversity, equity, and equality. According to Ristić *et al.* (2021), it is a strategy oriented towards integrating all students. Similarly, Glavinić and Ristić (2023) mentioned that this strategy is fundamentally holistic, and it is focused on the overall development of students. Hence, the teaching and learning is always student-centered. (Radovanović & Kovačević 2020; Ristić & Kovačević, 2022) stated that when inclusion is delivered properly it fosters positive attitudes, heightens communications, and nurtures a profound sense of belonging among students. In addition, Firat and Koyuncu (2022) decisively opined that cognition is stimulated and the esteem of students is boosted. El Ahmad and Mohammad (2023) hold the firm view that inclusion is a dynamic and all-embracing approach to education and ought to eradicate challenges that students

experience with all types of inequities.. El Ahmad and Mohammad (2023) believed that proper and effective communication, commitment, and collaboration among all stakeholders are necessary elements to support inclusion. Thus, it can be stated that inclusion involves transforming education policies, processes, and procedures so that students can access schools. Inclusion is evident when the needs of students are met, cognition is apparent, and their potential is optimized. Schwab (2021) presented six major ideas, which enhance inclusive education. They are inclusion of disabled students, inclusion of students with behavioural challenges, inclusion of the vulnerable, inclusion without segregation, inclusion that encompasses all, and inclusion that affirms equity and equality. El Ahmad (2023) posited that inclusion is an all-embracing approach that addresses all aspects of education. It can be argued that its principal objective is to improve the overall well-being of all students. These include the rights to social, emotional, intellectual, and religious education and according to The United Nations (2006), these rights ought to be respected. Sharma (2017) postulated that inclusion seeks to create one educational system, which values and honours the dignity and innate worth of all students and simultaneously respects diversity. Thus, inclusion is contrary to segregation and encompasses all. Sharma (2017) further believed that inclusion is the process, which enables all students to learn and interact in the same classroom. In this way, they are motivated and encouraged to participate fully in all aspects of school, (Dollinger & Hanna 2023). It ought to be noted that inclusion is continuous and involves constant change and adjustment. Because it is dynamic, there is a need to periodically examine and evaluate the policy of inclusive education. It ought to be noted that Watkins (2017) cautioned that such examination and investigation should not only concentrate on current practice. It should also include current global trends in education. This type of evaluation empowers and motivates educators to further improve their teaching skills and techniques. It is not uncommon that although some institutions may have limited resources, the educators are often more imaginative and innovative in their delivery of the syllabus. Watkins (2017) described inclusion as a systemic approach to education which embraces all students. Inclusion fosters diversity and equality, creates camaraderie, and diminishes prejudices and biases.

### **Inclusive Education**

Although inclusion is an integral component to educating students with special needs, there are some challenges, (Lindner *et al.* 2023). They asserted that some educators still do not grasp the true concept of inclusion and frequently think that inclusion is concerned only with students with disabilities. With this limited and narrow-minded notion, it is convoluted for these educators to fully appreciate and value equity and equality. Hence, Lindner *et al.* (2023) postulated that an improper attitude of educators and their unwillingness to accommodate students present a significant

obstacle to inclusion. Yada *et al.* (2022) also presented a similar view and further added that the self-efficacy of educators is an essential component for inclusion. El Ahmad and Mohammad (2023) conjectured that children with disability rely on the use of assisted technology (AT). Due to low income and poverty, many educational institutions are not only unable to provide AT, but they also lack adequate resources, educational materials to enhance the teaching and learning. Sharma (2017) opined that the challenges to inclusion are both internal and external. Some of the internal challenges include an unhealthy attitude by educators, untrained and inexperienced educators, irrelevant curriculum, and poor organization of the entire education system. The inaccessibility of schools, many issues with enrolment, constant social stigmatization, and economic situations are some external factors. Implementing and sustaining inclusion is difficult, complex, and multifarious but it is not impossible to achieve. It is a fact that there is a great hindrance to adequately address the needs of students with disabilities. This is chiefly because inclusion is not fixed but continuous and developmental. Moreover, educators must be aware that each child is unique and special and can certainly make a positive difference in society, (McCabe & Ruppert 2023). It can be concluded that to meet the needs of all students still remains a great challenge. As noted before, this process is convoluted and demanding and requires dedication and commitment. Carroll *et al.* (2020) hypothesized that even in tertiary education the number of students with disability is increasing. However, they believed that the rate of performance of these students is low and can be attributed to the social and academic stigma that still exists in many educational systems. (Garza & Fullerton 2017; Guiffrida 2006; National Research Council 2004; Tierney 1992) further offered that such inequalities work in disfavour of students with disabilities and nurture segregation. (Adams & Proctor 2010; Fuller *et al.* 2009; Olney & Brockelman 2003) suggested that some educators and institutions even categorize disabilities, and this also creates isolation and division. These include students who have disabilities that visible and those that are not and those with cognitive and non-cognitive competencies. Collins *et al.* (2019) also offered what they believed to be some major hindrances to inclusion. They believed that many educators do not engage actively students in classroom activities and empower them to become independent. Some of them are not even trained properly and are ill equipped. They lack the foundation for creating lessons. It is not uncommon to note that students with visible disability are frequently denied places in educational institutions; many educators are reluctant and unenthusiastic to promote and support the holistic aspect of inclusion beyond education and employment. They do not value it as a way of life. Nonetheless, Collins *et al.* (2019) strongly emphasized that it is the duty of all to embrace inclusion not only in the classrooms but also in every fabric of life.

### Methodology

This non-empirical research obtained apposite and germane information using various and current studies, methodical review, and meta-analysis. Mention ought to be made that secondary sources were also taken from the internet from September 2023 to January 2024. Some of these included EBSCO, APA PsycArticles, APA and PsycInfo. In addition, a structured and well-organized selection of journals was conducted. To properly maintain the focus and objective of this research and simultaneously find current and apposite literature, the following terms and words were used: learning, advocacy, inclusion, inclusive education, special education, equity, diversity, and equality.

### Limitations and future research

While this non-empirical study contributed to the understanding of how listening and advocacy foster inclusion, there were some limitations. The methods highlighted only personal observations, integrative literature, reflection on current events, and the authority and experience of various authors but it was not grounded on practical observation and first-hand experimentation. Because the arguments presented were not supported by empirical data, they are more susceptible to criticism. In addition, this research may have excluded some relevant studies because it was impossible to capture all the information that was available in online databases. This non-empirical research did not include fieldwork and the actual voices, experiences, thoughts, and opinions of those involved in the study of inclusion. In this regard, further studies could incorporate both non-empirical and empirical methods. These methods could embrace both the field of science and the research outcome being analysed.

### Conclusion

This non-empirical research can certainly impel and incite the public to be acutely cognizant of the great significance of inclusion, which can be accomplished through active listening to children. Listening habitually embraces advocacy, which is a necessary component for inclusion. It carefully explored the significance of heeding the experiences of children and animating them to become advocates. Inclusion does not only consist in being attentive to the experiences of children. It involves giving children the utmost attention and treating them with unconditional positive regard. Too often programmes geared for inclusion are designed without even consulting children. Therefore, government institutions, non-governmental organizations, stakeholders, policymakers, and all those interested in inclusion should have a meaningful dialogue with children.

### Recommendations

From all that has been stated the following recommendations are offered for educators, stakeholders, non-governmental organizations, and policymakers.

1. Teaching and learning should incorporate strategies that enhance listening.
2. Teaching and learning should be child-centered.
3. Educators must promote and encourage advocacy among students.
4. Educators must encourage active participation and reflection among students.
5. Educators and policymakers should inculcate cultural diversity and cultural literacy in the curriculum.
6. Policymakers should make classrooms inclusive of special needs.
7. Provide educators with continuous professional development on inclusion.
8. Provide educators with an overview of inclusive teaching practices.
9. Create safe spaces.
10. The wider community and policymakers must promote an awareness of inclusion.
11. Ensure there is no conflict of interest.

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