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Self-Empowerment Through Lifelong Learning and Social Inclusion: Exploring the Impact on Individual Empowerment

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Abstract

This paper assesses lifelong learning and its importance in terms of social inclusion as an educational phenomenon and as the interaction between education practices and social inclusion. The research argues that universal education, accessible to all and focuses mainly on poor and disadvantaged people, is fundamental in the fight against poverty and its promotion and the creation of wealth in the community. It also asserts that lifelong learning is the most critical component in this process. The main purpose of this systematic review is to examine the level of modern trends in lifelong education and its social inclusion role through experimental data, theoretical analysis, and the value judgements of public policy. The research presents a systematic review of articles published in peer-reviewed journals, reports, and policy analyses for 2019–2024. Through thematic analysis, the study identifies the principal topics signifying the social side of lifelong learning. The investigation reveals four main mechanisms, pedagogy and curricula, digital learning and storytelling, social capital, and building community and policy frameworks and strategies that should be used to promote lifelong learning and social inclusion. With these discoveries, it is clear that the inclusive diversity-based educational policies demanded must be implemented, and all teachers must be trained while digital technology is deployed to improve access and engagement. The research indicates that such components can be brought into the education system through collaborative work. This initiative may be used to formalise a lifelong learning paradigm that will be geared towards empowering individuals and creating social harmony.

Key Words: Lifelong learning, Social inclusion, Educational policies, Pedagogy and curricula, Digital technology

INTRODUCTION

Recent notions in nonformal education include finding a proactive lifelong learning paradigm as a process that encompasses accessing new knowledge and skills throughout life (Lambert, 2020). This idea is very relevant when examining social inclusion, particularly

when the learning force becomes operational and people are enlightened to make independent and autonomous decisions that guarantee and safeguard their social status and full-fledged community participation (Tuparevska, Santibáñez and Solabarrieta,

2020). In countries with a developed education system and a greater emphasis on and support of vocational and adult learning, lifelong learning principles are seen as relevant for the eradication of social inequalities and regular opportunities for development for everyone.

Research shows interdependency that has long-term learning implications and social integration based on a give-and-take, which can be either positive or negative (Lambert, 2020). A systematic review by Keating et al. (2020) further points out that lifelong learning to be a crucial factor in resolving educational inequalities and achieving social cohesion. However, Tuparevska, Santibáñez and Solabarrieta (2020) state that marginalised individuals and communities still do not have access to such opportunities. Policy and method discrepancies ensue from different philosophies on the effect of modern educational systems and practices on providing equal access opportunities in the educational realm. Besides that, some general disadvantages are also tied to the continuous practice of research in the sense of tethering the empiric data to the social policy framework and individual empowerment processes (Lambert, 2020).

This review is stimulated by the conviction that education, as the most fundamental aspect of society, not only shapes social structures but also defines individual life trajectories, and this is an issue that ascribes economic strength to itself and experiences social contradictions. The reason for this undertaking is rooted in the fact that it is the know-how of how socio-economic inclusion and individual empowerment can be achieved through lifelong learning. This research has the capacity to give a new voice to issues that are central to educational reform and social policy by providing insights into critical matters that are shaping the identity and values of the education system.

Research Methods

The paper applies a systematic review methodology to studies published from 2019 to 2024 for the identification of recent trends about lifelong learning and its importance to social inclusion in the German context. Materials were chosen as a result of an extensive search of the academic databases - JSTOR, Scopus and Google scholar- when using the keywords "lifelong learning," "social inclusion," "educational opportunities," and "Germany" The use of these search engines was limited to peer-reviewed articles, government reports and policy analyses that are related to the topic. The inclusion criteria encompassed the studies that gave empirical data, theoretical analyses or policy evaluation of the research question, while the exclusion criteria let in only the studies from those contexts but removed any studies outside the stipulated timeline. The data extraction involves the identification of approaches, findings and outputs on lifelong learning, as well as social inclusion. Data analysis that was done revealed thematic synthesis to be applied for classifying findings in coherent themes that came up in the fine-grained comprehension of the topic, as illustrated by Braun and Clarke (2022). It became possible through this approach to identify correlations, juxtaposition and contrasts in the literature that have been concentrated in a reviewed state of the art.

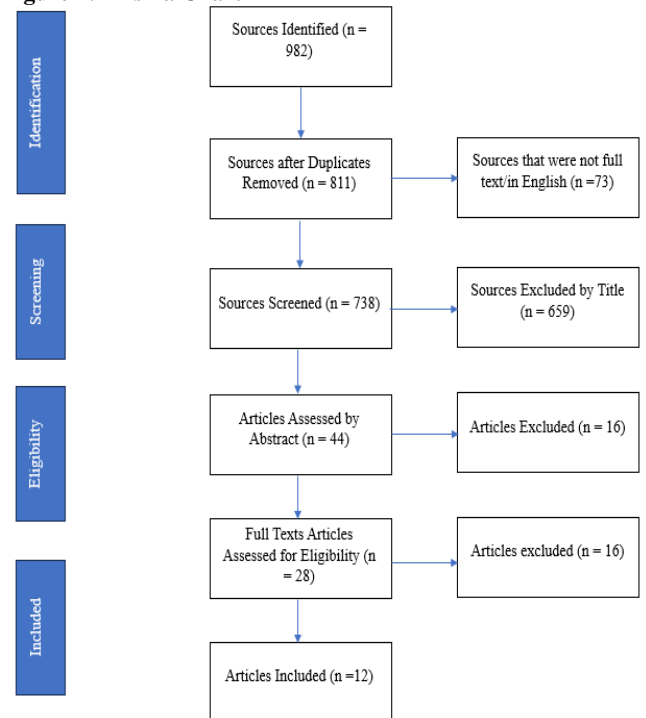
Results

The results section presents a comprehensive analysis of the studies reviewed, focusing on the impact of lifelong learning on social inclusion.

PRISMA Analysis

The PRISMA model during the screening process of study selection and inclusion, provides a clear overview of the search and review methodology employed (Salameh et al., 2020). Figure 1 aids in understanding the scope of research considered and the criteria for study inclusion, ensuring transparency and replicability in the review process.

Figure 1: Prisma Chart



Source: Author, 2023)

CASP Analysis

CASP (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme) analysis of the studies is conducted to assess the quality and relevance of the evidence gathered (Long, French and Brooks, 2020). As illustrated in Figure 2, the analysis scrutinises each study's methodology, results, and conclusions, ensuring that the findings presented are robust and reliable.

CASP Item	Benkova and Mareva (2019)	Collins, Azmat and Rentschler (2019)	Gubjonsdóttir and Oskarsdóttir (2019)	Heyder, Südkamp and Steimmeyer (2020)	Hymel and Kaftan (2019)	Juvonen et al. (2019)	Klang et al. (2020)	Lohbeck (2020)	McDuff et al. (2020)	Svoen, Dobson and Bjerge (2019)	Tobbell et al. (2020)	Vetoniemi and Kämäri (2019)
1. Clear statement of aims	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2. Qualitative methodology appropriate	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3. Appropriate research design	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4. Appropriate recruitment strategy	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5. Data collection addressed the issue	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6. Considered researcher	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

interventions designed for social inclusion. These themes provide a different view of the strategies for social inclusion to be designed and implemented.

Inclusive Curriculum and Pedagogy as Foundations for Lifelong Learning

The inclusion of curriculum and pedagogy as bases for lifelong learning across the reviewed papers suggests a consensual agreement on the vital role of educational inclusivity in creating an appropriate environment that supports lifelong learning for all students, including those with special educational needs (SEN) and physical disabilities. Prior studies indicate that systemic changes, effective teacher training, and the use of inclusive educational methods are crucial for the provision of quality education for all (Guðjónsdóttir and Óskarsdóttir 2019; Collins, Azmat, and Rentschler 2019). An often-explored topic relates to the call for educational systems to go beyond individual accommodations to systemic transformations that embed inclusivity in the curriculum and teaching methodology (Collins, Azmat, and Rentschler, 2019). This option is also supported by McDuff et al. (2020), who argue for institutional change through the strategic design of the Inclusive Curriculum Framework (ICF), whose aim is to guarantee equal opportunities for students throughout their journey. Similarly, Vetoniemi and Kärnä (2019) call for adapting learning environments to meet the needs of diverse students and establishing an inclusive culture, which is necessary for lifelong learning.

The research indeed reveals the significant role of teacher attitudes and education in creating a welcoming environment. Guðjónsdóttir and Óskarsdóttir (2019) aim at the empowerment of teachers as co-developers of the curriculum who can apply different teaching methods, taking into account the uniqueness of each student. The role of teacher attitudes is emphasized in the study of Hymel and Katz (2019) as well as Heyder, Südkamp, and Steinmayr (2020), where the implementation of universal learning design was a success factor.

In addition, the essays propose that promoting social belonging and respect in the classroom is crucial. Juvonen et al. (2019) and Klang et al. (2020) emphasise the need to foster understanding of group dynamics and use cooperative learning approaches to promote student social acceptance and integration. This approach is critical for designing an inclusive curriculum that focuses on academic needs and promotes social harmony and inclusion, thus developing students into lifelong learners. Notwithstanding, there are the challenges that have been highlighted in the mentioned studies, which include the slow transition towards inclusive settings and the persistent obstacles that hinder the full involvement of SEN students in mainstream education (Vetoniemi and Kärnä, 2019; Guðjónsdóttir and Óskarsdóttir, 2019). In spite of these obstacles, the results of the articles taken together suggest that inclusive curriculum and pedagogy should be an integral part of educational systems that have a desire to promote lifelong learning and social inclusion for all students. The synthesis of these articles gives a concise appeal to educational stakeholders to emphasise inclusivity in curriculum design and pedagogical strategies. Thus, educational institutions can design a learning environment that does not only accommodate but even embraces diversity, thereby laying the foundation for lifelong learning and the empowerment of all pupils.

Digital Learning and Storytelling for Enhancing Access and Engagement

The topic of digital learning and storytelling for improving accessibility and engagement plays a key role in the debate on inclusive education and lifelong learning. Although the articles may be quite different in their main focus, they all highlight the importance of digital tools and storytelling to create more accessible and involving learning settings for all, including those with special educational needs (SEN) and disabilities. According to Collins, Azmat, and Rentschler (2019), online tools such as recorded lectures and online resources also contribute to the teaching and learning processes for students with disabilities. Therefore, it not only improves access but also engagement, with an added element of participation for the students who may be physically challenged. Also, Svoen, Dobson, and Bjørge (2019) pinpointed that digital stories and online courses improve social inclusion and wellbeing, especially for refugees and migrants. Collectively, these articles emphasise the contribution of digital technologies in creating enabling education environments (Collins, Azmat, and Rentschler, 2019; Svoen, Dobson, and Bjørge, 2019).

On the other hand, studies such as those by Klang et al. (2020) and Lohbeck (2020) do not directly consider digital learning and storytelling. Yet, the focus is on cooperative learning, the psychological and social dimensions, and technology integration. These tools could contribute to collaborative learning experiences and provide personalised learning pathways, all of which are in line with the goal of inclusive education. Guðjónsdóttir and Óskarsdóttir (2019), Heyder, Südkamp, and Steinmayr (2020), and Juvonen et al. (2019) suggest the integration of digital technologies and storytelling by introducing innovative teaching methods and calling for the preparation of educators for group dynamics and diverse teaching techniques. These approaches are, by default, compatible with digital learning methods, which can provide diverse and flexible approaches to content delivery that will fit the different learning needs and preferences of students.

Likewise, according to Hymel and Katz (2019) and Vetoniemi and Kärnä (2019), digital learning and storytelling can be used as fundamental components for an inclusive curriculum. These articles, through their advocacy for universal design for learning and the adjustment of learning settings to accommodate the diverse needs of SEN pupils, suggest a context where digital tools could greatly improve engagement and access, thus promoting a more inclusive educational system. So, we notice that digital learning and storytelling have a high potential for improving access and engagement in inclusive education settings. This discourse reflects a common view on the inclusion of digital learning resources and storytelling in the curricula and pedagogy as foundational components for lifelong learning and social inclusion.

Social Capital and Community Building Through Lifelong Learning

Scholarly articles of this research investigate various aspects of lifelong learning as a tool for social capital and community building and thus suggest a holistic approach to educational inclusion. Benkova and Mareva (2019) emphasise the contribution of non-formal education in developing inclusive social and community values among young people and that it creates social capital. Likewise, Collins, Azmat, and Rentschler (2019) recognise the crucial function of creating a supportive and cooperative educational environment for students with disabilities, which is based on the idea that such inclusive practices play a great role in the creation of communities and social capital among all students.

Moreover, Guðjónsdóttir and Óskarsdóttir (2019) present teacher education as a crucial component for the preparation of teachers to create inclusive environments that promote social cohesion, citizenship, and equitable societal participation. This finding is similarly consented to by Heyder, Südkamp, and Steinmayr (2020), who examine the role of teachers' attitudes in the social integration and well-being of students and argue that positive school experiences promote the development of a sense of community and belonging.

Hymel and Katz (2019) call for educational settings that enhance social cohesion and citizenship by arguing that schools are critical contexts for students to engage with diverse peers and thus build social capital. Juvonen et al. (2019) argue that extracurricular activities and inclusion-oriented clubs play a crucial role in social inclusion beyond the classroom in the development of social capital because they offer students chances to connect with diverse groups. Klang et al. (2020), in which they focus on cooperative learning in the classroom, also allude to the greater theme of social capital by trying to heighten social acceptance and friendship among the students. Lohbeck (2020) considers students' self-conceptions of social integration within inclusive and mainstream educational settings, arguing that inclusive educational approaches facilitate a sense of belonging and community.

McDuff et al. (2020) and Svoen, Dobson, and Bjørge (2019) emphasise the importance of diversity and digital storytelling in the creation of social inclusion and well-being, which proves that these approaches can be quite reliable instruments for social capital formation among marginalised communities. McDuff et al. (2020), Svoen Tobbell et al. (2020), and Vetoniemi and Kärnä (2019) reinforce the role of relationships and the effectiveness of social participation in creating a feeling of inclusion and self-esteem, which are critical for the accrual of social capital and the building of community through lifelong learning. When fostering inclusive environments, stimulating diverse interactions, and prioritising the creation of supportive relationships in educational contexts, lifelong learning can highly promote the creation of cohesive communities and the strengthening of social capital.

Policy and Strategic Frameworks to Support Lifelong Learning for Social Inclusion

The research on policy and strategic frameworks for lifelong learning to promote social inclusion demonstrated the need for a flexible policy that brings together all the different branches of education. Benkova and Mareva (2019), Collins, Azmat, and Rentschler (2019), and Guðjónsdóttir and Óskarsdóttir (2019) emphasise the role of inclusive policies and practices in enabling social inclusion through education. Benkova and Mareva (2019) argue for countermeasures in the context of non-formal educational settings, while Collins, Azmat, and Rentschler (2019) champion systemic changes within the higher education system to realise the ultimate ideal of inclusion. These points of view indicate a wider consensus on the necessity of multi-level strategic frameworks to foster inclusivity and encourage lifelong learning. Moreover, Heyder, Südkamp, and Steinmayr (2020) and Juvonen et al. (2019) also emphasise the need for a positive teacher approach to inclusion, suggesting that policy and strategic frameworks should be adopted regarding teacher professional development and training as critical components in promoting social inclusion (Heyder, Südkamp, and Steinmayr, 2020; Juvonen et al., 2019).

This is consistent with what was suggested by the European Agency Teacher Education for Inclusion project, as reported by Hymel and Katz (2019), who point out the need for in-depth research into effective teaching strategies and well-organised teacher education to support lifelong learning and poverty reduction. The works of Klang et al. (2020) and Lohbeck (2020), though not specifically meant to address policy frameworks, still give insights into educational methods that can help decision-makers in the area of lifelong learning and social inclusion policies. Klang et al. (2020) emphasise the cooperative learning (CL) approach as a pedagogical approach to support social inclusion within the classroom, and Lohbeck's discovery on the favourable influence of inclusive education on academic self-concepts and social integration revises the positive effect of inclusive policies for all students (Klang et al., 2020; Lohbeck, 2020). McDuff et al. (2020) examined the strategic deployment of the Inclusive Curriculum Framework (ICF) in England as an illustration of policy frameworks in place for lifelong learning and social inclusion. This is reinforced by Svoen et al.'s (2019) proposal of novel indicators to measure the success of online learning resources in promoting social inclusion with strategic approaches to identifying how to use digital learning for social inclusion.

Alternatively, the work of Tobbell et al. (2020) and Vetoniemi and Kärnä (2019) focuses on the complexity and sluggish transfer to fully inclusive environments, bringing better attention to collaborative learning and student-centred pedagogies. This emphasises the use of policy and strategic programmes that will not only support the integration of students with special educational needs into the mainstream but also their lifelong learning as tools for social inclusion (Tobbell et al., 2020; Vetoniemi and Kärnä, 2019). This cumulative knowledge recommends the collaborative efforts of policy and strategic framework development, which underscores the need for inclusive education, the provision of teacher training, and systemic change in structures to make sure that lifelong learning opportunities are accessible and friendly for everyone.

Conclusion

Social inclusion issues related to lifelong education as a powerful tool have been decisively discussed, and the outlined themes, including the multi-varied functions of inclusive curriculum and teaching, digital learning, social capital, and policy frameworks, have illuminated the processes through which people acquire education and become active in social affairs. Some in-depth studies focus on the power of curriculum design and teaching to support inclusion, urging education systems to go beyond the boundaries by providing individualised learning considerations. Linking these technologies to storytelling to improve engagement and accessibility, this inclusivity is fostered, catering for the needs of learners dealing with disabilities and those from marginalised communities.

The current state of scholarly study proves a very desperate need to overhaul the current educational policies and strategies. Critics emphasise that the progress of inclusion in actual practice is very slow and that there are various obstacles that prevent active participation by all students, especially those who receive special education. Additionally, the discourse indicates a lapse in the most effective integration of digital tools into the educational philosophy, resulting in the isolation of these tools from the reach and participation in meaningful learning. These criticisms

underline the importance of implementing integration policies through active strategies that provide equal opportunities to everyone, not only through words but also through action within the educational environment.

The focus on these issues by the researchers demonstrates the shared life-long learning and social integration that hold a very strong bond between them, showing education as the backbone of an equitable society. As we explore the diverse aspects of education policymaking, educational innovation, and community development, it becomes apparent that there is a need for coordinated action to overthrow the structural barriers to education. Through the processes of promoting accessibility initiatives, facilitating the accessing of technology, and cultivating community spirit through education, we let an educated society where learning to enjoy lifelong learning be considered as the basic values emerge. Beyond benefiting individuals, the overall objective of this mission is to bolster social ties, translating education from a justifiable tool to a critical instrument for the rebuilding and inclusion of society.

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