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Teaching Strategies for the Visually Impaired in Visual Arts

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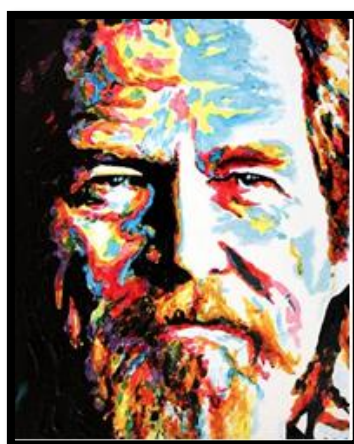
Abstract:

A 2018 study by the Eye Unit of the Ghana Health Service revealed that about 270,200 Ghanaians are blind, representing 0.74% of the Ghanaian population. Records indicate that the education and training of blind people in Ghana date back to the early 1940s. The study of Creative Arts involves experimentation and interaction with the natural environment as a problem-solving tool for national development. Creative Arts encompass Art forms like painting, sculpture, graphic designing, and ceramics. However, in the study of Arts in Ghana, certain challenges have become barriers for the visually impaired who pursue art. This is a conceptual study conducted at the University Practice School – South Campus – Ghana. It delves into the challenges that visually impaired learners are exposed to in the study of Arts and establishes if it is the end of the road for a mainstream student who becomes visually impaired along the path in pursuing the dream as an artist. The study identified that visually impaired learners can express themselves artistically once the teaching and learning process is facilitated with tailor-made teaching and learning strategies in art which directly focuses on potential art learners who are visually impaired. The study gathered that mainstream education in Ghana should be restructured to enable harnessing the potential of visually impaired learners.

Keywords: Art education, visual impairment, inclusivity in education

1. Introduction

From John Bramblitt, a blind painter of American origin, to Stevie Wonder, a performing artist, the art industry has success stories of visually impaired artists who earned their prominence and popularity as a result of their excellent artworks and performances. Other famous blind artists include the likes of Keith Samon, Esref Armagan, and Sargy Mann, to name a few. Amid their physical challenge, these visually impaired artists have broken barriers and fought through numerous challenges to bring themselves into the limelight, winning the hearts of many and becoming a motivation to others.



*Figure 1: Painting by John Bramblitt
Source: Sleep Club*



Figure 2: Painting by John Bramblitt
Source: Sleep Club

According to Dogbe (2020), the education and training of the blind in Ghana were instituted and founded by the following Scottish missionaries, namely: the Harker and the Benzie's, respectively, in 1942 and 1945. Part of the objectives of the education and training of the blind was to enable the blind to become economically and socially independent and contribute to society. Ghanaian local artists, the likes of Sammy Betil, a colour-blind painter, who is prestigious, and Andrew Sowah, a performing artist, have equally earned local and international recognition with their artworks. Another example is former Ghanaian minister of State: Henry Siedu Daanaa, who was the first visually impaired minister of State in Ghana.

It is argued that people without disabilities may well appreciate the challenges that people living with disabilities are bedevilled with, but; many have little knowledge of the depths of difficulties that such individuals with severe visual impairment have to deal with in their daily life activities.

"By engaging in visual arts, people with sight impairments show that the creative artistic process can be altered. They prove art is not reserved for sighted people only. Having their art exhibited, the artists with sight disabilities could demonstrate that they are active agents behind the cultural shift. Interestingly, visual arts take on a different shape in the hands of people with limited vision. They create artworks resembling rather oeuvres of professional contemporary artists than of sighted amateurs." (Szubielska, 2018, p3).

In the educational system in Ghana, there is the practice of inclusivity in teaching and learning. However, the majority of visually impaired learners who could study in the mainstream find themselves in special schools for the blind. Juxtaposed with the educational provision and curriculum structures, the employment opportunities for the visually impaired are generally not the best and fair practices.

Some visually impaired persons guide their walk with a white cane, while others rely on persons with sight and other means to move about. Access to education by the visually impaired is difficult in most parts of Ghana.

Though employing the use of technology will simplify the educational process for the visually impaired, in Ghana, funding such technological devices has become a challenge because such learners come from poor homes. This has driven the concern and needs for tailor-made solutions to cater to the needs of visually impaired learners in Creative Arts to help sustain their interest in the study and also build the capacity of the named group in the study of Arts to help them become independent as a means to an end. The probability of life has demonstrated that anyone can find him or herself in any circumstance at any given time, with or without warning; hence the need to be proactive and create structures that will serve and meet the growing needs of members of society.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

The call for this study followed an evaluation of visually impaired learners at the University Practice Basic School – South Campus on how they performed compared to that of sighted-learners of the same school. It appeared that sighted-learners performed better than their visually impaired colleagues.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

This conceptual study explores the needs of visually impaired learners in Creative Arts. It seeks to address the challenges that visually impaired learners face in the study of Visual Arts by discussing teaching strategies that can be employed in providing tailor-made instructional methods to such learners for expected teaching and learning outcomes.

2. Literature Review/Conceptual Framework

The following are relevant theories that focus on the themes that govern this study. This section reviews discussions on the themes that follow:

- Art education,
- Visual impairment, and
- Inclusivity in education and teaching pedagogies

2.1. Art Education

According to Wright (2011), Art is the discovery and development of elementary principles of nature into beautiful forms suitable for human use. This points out that Art is a form of expressing one's self through one medium or the other. It enables communication with each other. This goes further to indicate that Art is a manifestation of the human heart and mind on a creation that is dedicated by the artist's resources. Art plays an important role in the aspect of cultural education in human life. Art involves a creative process of flexible thinking in the sense that it should be a platform for expressing one's inner thoughts of creativity other than having restrictions and limitations. From cave art to urban graffiti, humans have expressed themselves through imagery. As a means of communicating ideas, feelings, and solutions, Art can be verbal or written. Art is a diverse range of human activities in creating visual, auditory, or performing artefacts. Art is not simply a visual material; it has historically acted as a powerful outlet for a country's social history, cultural tradition, political views, and changing civilization. Spelt as a three-lettered word, art defies definition. Some schools of thought explain art as something that you can create on your own and is a form of creativity. Art is a human's creative skill. Art is the imagination of someone's mind. It tests your imagination and creativity. Art brings out the best in you; it is a way to let creativity out of you. Art isn't just the ability to draw. It's the ability to think.

The year 1927 saw the introduction of Art education into the curricula of Education in Ghana at Achimota College. College of Technology, now KNUST (Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology), took over the specialization of teacher education programme from Achimota in 1952 as a result of upgrading to a university in 1957 (Duku, 2012). This denotes that art education in Ghana has at least been in our school curricula for 93 years. After some 93 years of Art education in the Ghanaian curricula, Ghana cannot boast much of how far its Art education has come. Art can be used to educate persons who cannot read or write by communicating through images to disseminate information to the public. From the above, one can conclude that we should study art at school to be creative or do art to demonstrate our creative skills. Inside, we all have the ability and skill to produce Art. One just needs to let it out. Art as a subject meets the needs of all six domains of knowledge. Art education promotes creativity, which is an opportunity to progress in life. Art education enables learners to build and maintain mental and physical health and well-being, document human activities, understand humans, communicate and improve comprehensive thinking and creativity. It develops both cognitive and psychomotor domains. The study of arts builds confidence and perseverance. Art is life, and through that, society learns to accept diversity, address issues, and show their emotions in an acceptable manner. According to Jolley (2016), as cited by Punzalan (2018), arts education promotes some benefits in various ways. Some of the advantages of arts education are:

- Developing the students' imagination and creativity,
- Allowing them to understand and express their feelings and ideas, Aiding them to understand and visualize other core subjects,
- Helping them to observe the world around them,
- Supporting them in decision-making, problem-solving, and developing values such as concentration and persistence

Punzalan (2018) further cites that Ochshorn (2016) agrees that Arts Education is important because it improves performance. Ochshorn opines that it improved learning skills, school attendance, critical thinking skills, and creativity. A good arts education is built on and reflects recognition of the specific and unique way that the arts shape people's thinking and their lives.

2.2. Visual Impairment

"Visual impairment has been considered one of the most threatening disabilities, typically awakening emotional reactions of extreme loss of confidence and independence in individuals confronted with this disability" (Reina et al. 2011, 244).

To this assertion, it is important to understand the emotional and physical implications of being visually impaired. This vision condition can influence the self-esteem and confidence of people living with the challenge. In this regard, it is important to consider embarking on the application of strategies geared towards harnessing the potential of such persons to stimulate their confidence in society. According to Hong, Kwon, and Jeon (2014), as cited by Szubielska (2018), studies involving typically developing preschool children showed that they [preschool learners] were less likely to make inclusion decisions with respect to a child with visual impairment than with a peer with a mobility disability – most probably due to limited knowledge about the activities available to blind children. Szubielska (2018) goes on to cite (Ostrowska, 1994) that those people [visually impaired learners] are often perceived as strange and different. They are considered unsuccessful, unfulfilled, and not equal partners for people without disabilities. It is believed that less should be required of them due to their limited abilities. In Ghana, there is minimal presence of persons living with visually impaired persons in public life; this segregation due to shyness, stigma, and the fear of being a burden to others leaves a negative attitude towards 'such persons' because society is not used to 'their socialization.' This is caused by poor public sensitization on the theme "there is ability in disability." According to Abang (2005), as cited by Ampofo (2019), the visually impaired are those with some amount of visual problems which could be remedied either by surgical operation or by optical corrections. This includes those who are partially sighted, have low vision, and are blind, as the case may be. Visual impairment means having difficulties with one's vision. The difficulties can be defined according to the severity of the impairment.

2.3. Inclusivity

History has it that, once upon a time, physically challenged persons were killed and subjected to use as objects of entertainment. They were considered a threat to society. The emergence of widespread civilization and societal reforms, among other factors, has driven the change in the narrative. Over the years, persons living with physical challenges have

been shown fair, humane empathy and are allowed to enjoy human rights. In Ghana, the educational system gradually embraced having learners with special needs and learners without special needs in mainstream education to practice inclusivity. This initiative brought a change in the classroom environment by harnessing the significance of tolerance and fairness in the educational system. Inclusive education in Ghana began with 1951's Accelerated Educational Plan and the 1961 Educational Act for free education, which resulted in increases in basic enrolment (Gadagbui, 2008).

Though inclusivity has received some level of criticism, the outcomes of inclusive teaching and learning have lived up to expectations that outweigh the fears of critics. Ampofo (2019) cites Darko (2015) that the Education Strategic Plan (2010-2020) stipulates that the Ministry of Education shall provide education for those with physical and mental impairments, orphans, and those who are slow or fast learners, by including them, wherever possible, within the mainstream formal system or, only when considered necessary, within special units or schools. The objective of Act 778 of the Education Act (2008) is to establish an educational system intended to produce well-balanced individuals with the requisite knowledge, skills, values, aptitudes, and attitudes (Education Act, 2008). This is evidence of the role that the Ministry of Education is playing in promoting inclusivity. Ampofo (2019) again cites that according to Quinn and Ryba (2000), an inclusive curriculum is a recognition that under the principle of social justice, participation in education should not involve discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnicity, indigenous group, socio-economic status, and ability or disability. An inclusive curriculum recognizes the need for schools to be organised, with the individual differences of students in mind, and allows for scope and flexibility to enable all students to achieve their goals. An accessible and flexible curriculum, therefore, is key to creating schools that meet the needs of all students. An inclusive approach seeks to discourage teaching that is based on a criterion of averages. This means that some students will inevitably lag behind, while others will find work too easy. An inclusive curriculum must consider all students' different abilities and needs. It must also be capable of being adapted to meet diverse needs. Strategies such as flexible time frames for work completion, task analysis, differentiation of tasks, time for additional support, and emphasis on vocational and academic goals can be useful in adapting the curriculum (UNESCO, 2005).

2.4. Teaching Pedagogies

"Teaching pedagogies are the instructional techniques and strategies that allow learning to take place. It refers to the interactive process between teacher/practitioner and learner, and it is also applied to include the provision of some aspects of the learning environment (including the concrete learning environment and the actions of the family and community)" (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden & Bell, 2002, p.10). "Pedagogy in teacher education is the knowledge of teaching about teaching and a knowledge of learning about teaching and how the two influence one another in the pedagogic episodes that teacher educators create to offer students of teaching experiences that might inform their developing views of practice" Loughran (2008, p. 1180). In essence, teaching pedagogies encompasses the strategies, approach, and techniques employed by teachers during the teaching and learning process.

3. Methodology

This is an empirical, conceptual study that focuses on observing and interpreting the classroom teaching and learning situation of visually impaired Visual Arts learners at the University Practice Inclusive School – South Campus. The study gathered data through observation and interpretation of learners' classroom environment, teaching and learning activities, and students' artworks. Interviews were conducted with art teachers of visually-impaired learners at the University Practice Inclusive School – South Campus. The study also gathered and interpreted secondary data from scholarly writings and artworks of visually impaired artists in the form of related literature that pertained to the research.

4. Results and Discussion/Findings

In inclusive education, some factors have been identified as challenges that visually impaired learners face in the study of arts. These challenges include but are not limited to inadequate knowledge and skills and the adoption of inappropriate teaching methodologies in managing learners with visual impairment. Data gathered from authors like Szubielska (2018) suggests that by engaging in visual arts, people with sight impairments show that the creative artistic process can be altered. They prove Art is not reserved for sighted people only. Having their Art exhibited, the artists with sight disabilities could demonstrate that they are active agents behind the cultural shift. Szubielska further states that, interestingly, visual arts take on a different shape in the hands of people with limited vision. They create artworks resembling rather oeuvres of professional contemporary artists than of sighted amateurs.

Authors like Russell-Fox (1997) agree that lessons for visually impaired learners should specifically be altered. This suggests the need to design specific approaches in teaching Visual Arts to visually impaired learners in Ghana.

The specific variable that underpins this study in its scope is identified as: Teaching strategies for teaching visual art to visually impaired learners. This specific variable is the focus of discussions in this study.

4.1. Teaching Strategies for Teaching Visual Art to Visually Impaired Learners

The following strategies can be adopted for effective teaching and learning outcomes for learners living with visual impairment.

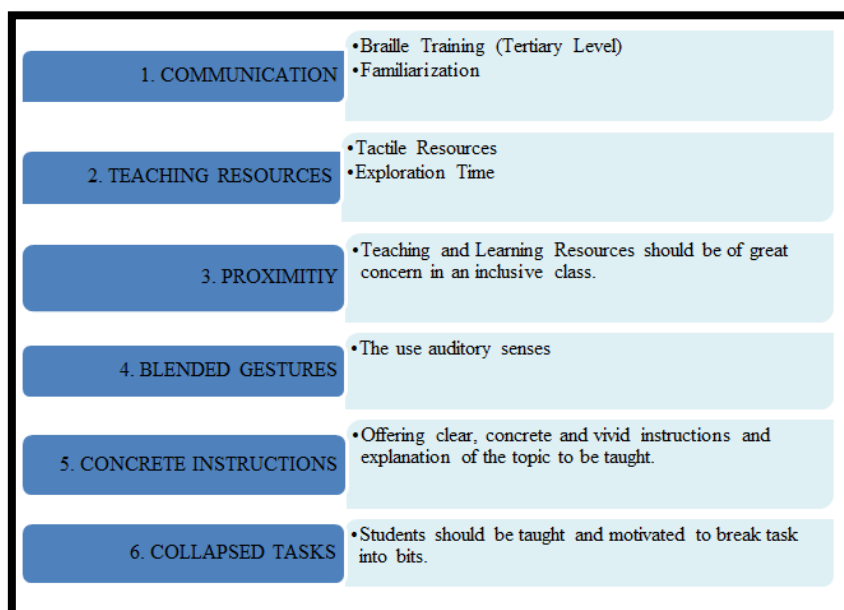


Figure 3: Conceptual-Driven Strategies

- Art teachers should strongly consider learning how to communicate with visually impaired learners. This can be achieved at the training level, where student-teachers may be offered training to help them appreciate the condition of visually impaired learners. As a great means to achieving this success, curriculum reforms at the tertiary level should be considered to focus on training not only students but also teachers in this regard. In the situation of in-service teachers, professional development training can be effectively used in training in-service teachers on how to communicate with visually impaired learners. Teachers who receive such training would be able to communicate with sighted learners and educate them on the need to embrace their visually impaired mates without stigmatisation. This would create a conducive and fair teaching and learning environment to cater to the needs of all learners. Teachers who receive such training will become well-versed in special areas like the use of braille; this knowledge will help teachers identify teaching strategies suitable for art lessons in an inclusive creative art class. The use of braille can efficiently be used in communicating artistic ideas to visually impaired learners. When put in place, this structure will positively influence lesson planning for an inclusive class, making the planning process tailor-made. Art teachers can employ using tactile teaching and learning resources or objects. These materials are tangible and can be felt since they provide a surface feeling to learners as they study them. This can be balanced with teaching and learning resources designed for learners with sight in the same class. In addition to tactile drawing for those who are blind, bold prints may be used for learners with low vision. This will enable them to bring out their imaginative drawing skills and memory composition for the blind and low-vision learners, respectively. Learners should be given the opportunity to interact with the tools and materials for creative arts activities. This will enable fair distribution of teaching and learning resource that benefits the entire class rather than a section of the class. Learners who are visually impaired should be encouraged and allowed enough time to manipulate teaching and learning resources or objects. This will enable them to explore object(s) and discover a better understanding of the object(s) before executing an art project. Visually impaired learners should be led and guided to explore their environment to offer them an experience of what surrounds them.
- Proximity to instructional material should be adequately addressed in class before the commencement of lessons. Instructional materials to be used by learners should be within reach of learners. This will save time, where visually impaired learners will not have to deal with struggling to reach objects.
- Besides focusing on gestures meant to be seen during instructional periods, teachers can effectively blend gestures by using means that can reach the other senses of visually impaired learners. These include using audible or speech cues and sound waves. Means such as audible cues will reach the ears of visually impaired learners. The same applies to soundwaves since the human ears are capable of picking up vibrating signals. Soundwaves are received by the eardrum in the form of vibrations. These vibrations may be achieved by gentle taps and knocking on the desks of visually impaired learners. The entire class should be actively involved in the teaching and learning process. Teachers should grab and maintain the attention of learners (especially visually impaired learners) by using a lot of fairly distributed oral questioning/evaluation methods and calling out the names of learners during lessons. In support of this, Gadagbui (2013) opines that constantly mentioning learners' names during instructional activities helps prevent them from dozing off. Gadagbui goes on to acknowledge the need to praise learners where necessary.
- Art instructors should consider using Concrete Instructions. In a Creative Art class, teachers should offer clear, concrete, and vivid instructions and explanations of the topic to be taught. For example, if a teacher is teaching colours to learners with low vision, one needs to use more bright colours to enhance the contrast of the colours. Visual art involves vision. However, students who are visually impaired are auditory learners. In this regard, an in-depth content knowledge of the information is necessary. Teachers, on the other hand, can use a strategy that the students are familiar with. For example, in teaching different colours, a strategy like the following may be used:

- Colour red; a teacher may clap once to communicate 'r-e- d.'
- Colour yellow; a teacher may clap once to communicate 'y- e- l- l-o-w.'
- Colour green; a teacher may clap once to communicate 'g-r-e-e n.'

Again, the statutory position of colours of paint and other materials should be established in class and made known to the students. For example, colour red is always kept on the right side of the table, yellow is always kept on the left side of the table, and colour green is always kept in the middle of the table. These strategies may vary from one place to the other and from one school to the other.

- Students should be taught and motivated to break tasks into bits. Giving visually impaired students too many tasks to perform at a time is likely to negatively affect the overall teaching and learning outcomes. After completing a work of art, visually impaired learners should be able to describe in detail the project they just completed. This suggests that ample time and some additional level of patience will be needed to achieve this.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Studies indicate that despite the condition of visual impairment, these physically challenged learners still demonstrate the desire to do arts in school and express the desire to be nurtured to make their intellectual ability useful. Every child has the right to education. The opportunity to enjoy this right is not a bias of health, physical condition, or other. Mainstream education in Ghana should be given another look to restructure teaching guides or a teaching curriculum that offers creative art learners, who are visually impaired, a fair and friendly teaching and learning environment for effective teaching and learning outcomes. When practiced, the conceptual-driven strategies will significantly improve the teaching of Visual Arts to visually impaired learners.

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