

The Social Phenomenology of Alfred Schutz and the Development of Special Education in Society

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Abstract. *The aims of the study to investigate the social phenomenology of alfred schutz and the development of special education in society. Teaching profession is considered to be a social action that is set in the life-world, where intersubjective relations are demonstrated and must be valued by the teacher in any circumstance in which it acts. In an attempt to equalize educational opportunity for all learners, a deep insight into education of exceptional students is emphatically given due consideration. This study drew attention to the main idea of social phenomenology of Alfred Schutz and how it could be of assistance in providing a full integration of exceptional students in society. It presented the needs of implementing social action to different kinds of exceptionalities in special educational system from the perspective of social phenomenology of Alfred Schutz. By incorporating Schutz's conceptional theory of social action into special education, this paper recommended that the special education teachers should be more concerned on mutual understanding and accepting the subjects' psychological state of mind and other problems they encounter academically. They should value and apply the aspects accentuated by this theory within the educational framework.*

Keywords: *Special Education, Intersubjectivity, Alfred Schutz, Social Phenomenology, Society, Exceptionality, Attitude*

Received: December 26, 2022

Revised: January 20, 2023

Accepted: February 14, 2023

INTRODUCTION

In every classroom door lies a world of abilities and disabilities. Some students learn quite easily, while others require much assistance before, they learn. Some are well behaved while others are mischievous. Some friendly, while others are ill at ease with their pairs. In addition, students perform differently at different times in different circumstances and such variations contribute to the wonder of individuality. This implies that students are individuals with different personalities, tastes, skills, learning needs, learning abilities which also implies that they present different challenges to the teacher. Extending this means that all students especially those with special learning needs (exceptional individuals) deserve special care and special teaching. The only discipline that offers these special care and teaching is special education. Special education is specially designed to meet the individual needs of exceptional students (Zigmond, 2001; Zigmond & Kloo, 2017). Such is the task of this paper. Hence, a dimensional approach in this study is featured from the angle of phenomenology.

Phenomenology is of great importance when it comes to life-world experiences. "It is the philosophical study of the structures of experience and consciousness; descriptive of the givens of immediate experience (Eberle, 2010; Giorgi, 2014; Barua & Das, 2014). By extension, it is an attempt to capture the individual's understanding, experience and conception (Agama, 2020)" of the life-world. It is acknowledged that the role being played by phenomenology in terms of

understanding human behaviour helps a lot in fishing out the true meaning associated with personal activities within social context. Phenomenology has been of keen interest in understanding the experiential world on daily life along with social reality (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005). It recognizes social reality as part of human activity, whereas social reality relies most effectively on intersubjectivity. This aspect of social context in phenomenology is an alternative research that contributes towards an extensive approach on experiences related to exceptionalities (like the visually impaired, the hearing impaired, the mentally retarded, the learning disabled etc) in society, especially those experienced in different institution of special education. It is considered proper that as a field of knowledge and professional practice, special education should operate specifically to meet the educationally need of exceptional students in society.

In view of this, this study deemed it necessary to present a deep insight into the social phenomenology of Alfred Schutz who championed on understanding the action of individuals in the world (Schutz, 1962). By virtue of originality, Edmund Husserl was the one that developed the concept of phenomenology as he tried to find out the fundamental or essence of reality in human consciousness. But Schutz uses Husserl's phenomenological philosophy in studying the social world. For Schutz, what actually gives meaning to the objective social world is the meaning derived from the intersubjective relationship. He affirmed that what made social interaction possible was nothing but the language and the "the stock of knowledge" in them. Every social interaction demands that individuals should take themselves as one and similar entity, and with the help of their experiences, such task becomes actualized.

The overall aim in social phenomenology is to expatiate "the reciprocal interactions that take place during human action, situational structuring, and reality construction" (Crossman, 2018). It is the concern of the phenomenologists to make meaning out of the relationships between action, situation and reality that happen in a society.

Giving an extensive treatment to the exceptionalities presume the consideration of playing the field of special education as one of the interactions among subjects, identifying it as a complex environment and an area of human activities that demands understanding of social action of the individuals they contain. Emphasis is given on the challenges of the exceptionalities especially from the perspective of intellectual development through the knowledge generated from the main theoretical conceptions of social phenomenology of Alfred Schutz. Special education teachers are expected to potentialize the social dimension inscribed in meeting up with the needs of the exceptional students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Philosophy and Attitudes Towards the Exceptionalities in Society

The conceptional meaning of exceptionality portrays two different things at the same time. It can be used to describe a bright person or a person with an unusual high talent. It can also be used to describe a person who has one form of disability or the other (Onu, 2008). Exceptionality according to Kirk et al. (1993) connotes that the individual deviates from expectations, different from normal which might be noticed in the mental characteristics, sensory abilities, communication abilities, behaviour and emotional development or physical characteristics. These differences occur to the extent that the person requires modifications of school activities or special educational services to assist him in the development of potentialities.

The term exceptionality is a general term used to describe individuals who are extremely bright mentally (the gifted) and the handicapped such as visually impaired, the mentally retarded, the learning disabled, the hearing impaired, the socially and emotionally disturbed. It is a deviation from the norm or laid down standard. Educationally, students are termed exceptional because they have learning problems of distinct natures and therefore require special education services to reach their potentials (Wormald et al., 2015; Forness et al., 2012). In other words, students may be considered exceptional educationally when educational programs have to be

altered or adjusted in order to accommodate or provide for the students in the classroom (Yell & Katsiyannis, 2004; Drasgow et al., 2001). Exceptionality could be positive (gifted and talented) or negative (the handicapped). So, any student who deviates from the norm in the classroom or out of classroom activities could be regarded as exceptional.

However, the concernment of this paper is mainly on the negative (the handicapped). They are less privileged and the overall objective behind their education is placing them towards self-realization, understanding, human relations, individual and national efficiency together with social, cultural, economic and scientific progress. The philosophy behind the special education that takes care of the exceptionalities is to examine and employ the best intellectual approach for the development of the school system. Discrimination in one way or the other towards the victims should be avoided (Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al., 2017). Hence, attitudes associated with the intersubjective relationships among the exceptionalities determine their development academically.

Meanwhile, attitude is a combination of feelings and beliefs which result in a predisposition to respond favourably or unfavourably towards persons, groups, ideas or objects (Abosi & Ozoji, 1985). While for Johnson (1975), attitude is a combination of concepts, information and emotions that result in a predisposition to respond favourably or unfavourably towards particular people, groups, ideas, events or objects (Johnson & Matros, 1975). Attitude could be appropriate or inappropriate. Appropriate attitude promotes effective behaviour and feelings of fulfilment, joy and enjoyment with examples as honesty, love, diligences, co-operation among others. Inappropriate attitudes promote self-defeating behaviour and feelings of depression, anger, guilt and shame with examples as cheating, laziness, dishonesty, envy, hatred, selfishness among others.

The philosophy or beliefs uphold by the public about the exceptionality contribute the set back of special education (Kauffman & Farkas, 2022). Oftentimes, how the public generalize the disability gradually effects an individual's personality with the unfortunate association of uselessness. In other words, the loss of a valuable aspect of the body is misunderstood as a loss of the whole personality. For instance, to some, loss of sight is taken to mean helplessness, dependency, worthlessness, unproductiveness and deprivation. The loss of sight is thought to mean the loss of all senses and victim is viewed as depersonalized being. This philosophy in all intent and purposes are misguided.

Occasionally, the public assumed that the best way to assist the disabled in their condition is to flood them with devaluating pity and unwanted sympathy. In some instances, such sympathy gives him unlimited liberty to do anything he likes since nobody would be so heartless as to confront him because of his condition.

There are those who think that the disabled have problems of such a magnitude that only carefully designed provision can best address them. Ugwu (2014) described this attitude as protective attitude. Many believe and want the disabled to be protected in institutions for their education and rehabilitation (Gill et al., 2016). Alms to the disabled are freely encouraged to protect them from want. At homes, parents protect their children to a fault. This attitude may satisfy the short-term needs of the disabled, but may delay full independent for and total acceptance of the disabled unto the mainstream of the society.

Another is the manifestation of feelings and exhibition of behaviours which directly or indirectly mistreat, deny, or discriminate against the disabled. Examples are public maltreatment of the disabled through cheating, disregard, unmindful acts, rejection, neglect, knocking them down, devaluation, impatience with their limitations, unmindful criticism, legislative provisions which ignore the interest of the disabled. These hostile attitudes confine the life space of the disabled as they do not offer them the opportunity to live their life as expected because these attitudes are expressed to the disabled negatively.

Some people would not just want to be bothered with the problem of disability. They contribute neither morally nor materially to the cause of the disabled. Ozoji (1991) described this attitude of “I don’t care” as being bad as hostile attitude to the disabled because in moments of great need, when their contributions would count most, such persons develop thick skin and allow the disabled to be submerged by their problem. Neutrality in attitudes may infer that the individual has bits of positive and negative attitudes that are not fully blown to give a mark to the person’s attitude direction.

In all reflections, the exceptionalities are least cared for educationally simply because of the negative philosophy and attitudes of the society. The perspective of social phenomenology of Alfred Schutz has to be incorporated to suit the nature and severity of the disabled condition. The needs, interests, values and orientation of every disabled persons have to be recognized. It is through the utilization of social context in phenomenology that the realization of these phenomenon will facilitate an intensive special education in the society.

The Conceptual Analysis of the Social Phenomenology of Alfred Schutz

The architect of social phenomenology, Alfred Schutz (1899-1959) was indeed concerned on how the problem of order in society and the attitude of the members of society could be handled in order to achieve social life. He was influenced by two great philosophers (Max Weber and Edmund Husserl) who made him to publish his first book called: *The Phenomenology of the Social World*. Max Weber inspired him to make an illustrious interpretation of social reality based on the given meaning of the act from the perspective of the person who practices it. Schutz made this contribution deductively from the Weber’s concept of “ideal types” in order to create more deeper meaning of human actions in the social world. He acknowledged the importance and necessity of understanding social phenomena directly from the source (i.e., as upheld by the subject to the action), advocating Husserl’s ideology of intentionality and intersubjectivity. But while Husserl’s intersubjectivity was transcendental, looking forward to having an ultimate foundation for knowledge and not on social ground, Schutz’s intersubjectivity was mainly to create social relationships in everyday life.

Schutz opened up with the structure of reality and maintained that it is through social relationships that one’s action can interpretatively accord the true meaning in the life-world. Because of this, he felt that the most essential thing in the life-world is a matter of understanding what is happening to human life on daily basis. Any science that will have to interpret the human action must first of all begin with the impression of describing the basic reality that manifests itself as it is to humanity. According to him, this reality is the everyday world (Schutz & Luckmann, (1973) which is penetrated by a kind of structure that reveals the social construction of individuals and the connection of their relationships.

Schutz tried to explain human nature through a detailed analysis of the cognizing subject’s intentional experience. Giving the analysis of the experiential world becomes an important project for Schutz. For him, the everyday world is the master plan that structured man even before his birth. This is the basic thing that made man to act naturally, in anything that appears to him as social reality. Meanwhile, man has the capacity to interfere with his natural world, to influence and to be influenced, to transform himself at all time as well as changing the social structures. According to Schutz, this is how the subject (man) puts himself in the life-world and its social structure into what he refereed as natural attitude (Schutz, 1967).

Schutz discarded the social context of Husserl’s phenomenological method in studying the social world and went ahead to study human being in the world within the natural attitude. His main interest is focused on the ordinary social life. He is of the opinion that the meaning structure and meaning constitution about which the phenomenologists speak, are to be studied empirically, and clarification of the notion of the meaning is very much related to understanding (Jesus et al., 2013).

As long as human beings interact and live together, doing things in common both in mind and body, having a related kind of consciousness; the world of everyday life is more of a cultural and inter-subjective world (Agama, 2020). It is intersubjective because the subject is bound up in different social relationships, understanding and being understood through them. It is cultural because from the beginning this world is a universe of meaning which must be interpreted to guide and lead the human being (Schutz, 1962). Agama (2020) would sum it up thus: "In this process of this mutual constitution, self and other intertwine. Within this intertwining both parties learn the specific cultural patterns, bodily habits and common language required to continue for interaction" (Ugwu, 2014).

Naturally, in the whole life of humanity, individuals have different ways of seeing the world. It appears that one sees the world from the aspect of his interests, desires, motives, ideological and religious commitments. Sense experience is generally and humanly considered to give through knowledge, but how it is conveyed on each person's life depends on what Schutz called the biographical situation (Rogers, 1957). The biographical situation of a person forms the matrix of all social actions and the totality of experience the person has encountered in his life-world.

However, Schutz discussed three domains of influence in the experience of social environment as contemporaries, predecessors and successors, each person at the center (Agwulonu, 2001). He distinguished the experience of the life-world as a process of typification. The typification refers to a conceptual framework that unites the conscious experiences of a person or a group in the social world. It is an invariant representation of the action or the person/group that makes it homogeneous, refraining individual characteristics. Typification plays a significant role in social life. With typification, the contemporaries, predecessors and successors experiencing objects, living creatures, actions, situations etc, are made possible.

Schutz's analysis of the world of contemporaries, predecessors and successors led him to the concept of intersubjectivity. The notion of intersubjectivity is the reality that places individuals to experience and have access to one another, at which the constitution of society plays a significant role. The method at which human beings act, interact, experience and feel for one another, making meaning of things out of their own as well as forming subjective lives, is the main object of the social context in Alfred Schutz's phenomenology. He recognized sociality as intersubjectivity in accordance with individual subjects. Therefore, to understand the social world phenomenologically is relied mostly on the subjective experiences of people irrespective of what might happen in the world.

Social Context in Alfred Schutz's Phenomenology and Special Education

Special education has qualities of social phenomenology, involving social actions, attitudes, intersubjectivity, social reality, understanding etc towards the exceptionalities. The acts unfold based on the situations and the type of relationship established in them.

The dimension of teaching and learning in special education might initially be an attempt to equalize educational opportunity for everyone and it may vary from one institution to another. Individual experiences in the course of learning may also vary from one person to another. Learning is an action experienced subjectively, but involved deeply in the world of social life. It occurs as a result of interpersonal relations, mostly dependent on the type of relationship established with the other.

Identification and approaches to educating exceptional ones transcends the normal professional performances of ordinary tutors. Efficient teaching of these group of people constitute interest and passion for them. In order to meet up with the demands of the disabled in the race of life, special attention should be paid to them to facilitate their learning.

A phenomenological understanding of the relationship between individual consciousness and social life is fundamentally tackled by Alfred Schutz. He aspired to find out the relationship between human awareness and social action – the relationship between subjective meanings and objective social world. It is recognized that how people relate to each other constitutes knowing

the true conditions of subjective lives. In respect of this, empathic understanding is highly required from the side of the special education teacher. Empathy is a “psychological concept which refers to one’s ability to perceive other people’s problems from peoples own point of view thereby offering the needed assistance” (Agwulonu, 2001). Emphatic understanding drives the special education teacher to understand an exceptional child’s problems by way of perceiving it on the perspective of why he thinks, feels and behaves the way he does. With this understanding, he communicates to him that much value is placed on him as an individual, that there is ability in disability, and that he is not a disabled invalid as stereotyped by the society. With these understanding and feelings, the disabled person can easily or gradually explore his abilities for proper growth and development.

Social action as a subjectively meaningful attitude oriented towards the attitude of others is central to Schutz. His interest on the attitude of members is because it helps in dealing with the problem of order in society, thereby making sense of social life. Thus, high degree of intimacy and rapport are required from special education teacher. His positive attitude of acceptance and love is a step towards changing the attitudes and practices that lead to unequal and unjust treatment of students with disabilities. A warm positive attitude expressed toward an exceptional person goes a million miles away in changing his negative attitude of what he feels he is thereby improving himself worth irrespective of the nature and degree of his disability. Rogers (1957) regarded this element of social action as positive and un-conditionality of regard. Viewed in the perspective of social phenomenology, a special education teacher is expected to accept his students with disabilities without any reservation in order to achieve the fundamental truth of the study.

The social phenomenology of Alfred Schutz is also based on the conception of intersubjectivity. Knowing other minds, mutual understanding and communication, reciprocity of perspectives is possible only through intersubjectivity. Intersubjective world is a common world in which the subjectivity of the other ego is grasped in the living stream of consciousness. Schutz was very much interested in grasping each other’s consciousness, relating to one another intersubjectively. In alliance with Schutz, limitless tolerance, understanding and acceptance of individual emotion or psychological state of mind is an essential quality which a special education teacher must possess. It is obvious that the teacher’s method of teaching determines so much the efficiency of the students. Some students are branded slow learners because of their inability to follow the teacher in his method of teaching (Kirschner et al., 2013). This happens that the student fails his test and dislikes both the teacher and the subject. Some teachers work down the psychological strength of their pupils by their unpleasant method of teaching. The attention span of this pupil is limited, as he battles with his difficulties. So, a special education teacher should bear in mind that he deals with different students with varied disabilities and limitations, he should be patient enough in interacting with them. In this respect, some mannerisms exhibited by exceptional students must have to be ignored, otherwise they will be discouraged and unchallenged.

Schutz being against a successful theory of intersubjectivity involving an account of the transcendental ego affirmed that as long as social reality is concerned, it is not proper to link the notion of intersubjectivity with the notion of transcendental ego. He rejected the notion of transcendental ego and understood the human object as a typified being sharing social relation with other typified human subjects. He used the idea of types and the value of the idea of types for information science in his essay “The well-informed citizen”. (Although Schutz adopted this process of typification from Weber’s concept of ‘ideal types’ which Husserl recognized as an important process in sense making about the world). But then, Schutz’s notion of types is against the notion of radical intersubjectivity. Meanwhile, what is important for Schutz is that the process of typification, scientific typification of social types helps to identify, classify and compare modes of social actions and interactions. Thus, he is of the opinion that habits and typifications are necessary for any organization. In accordance with this approach, however, special education is also concerned with the processes of human action and reality construction. An institution of

special education is an area of human awareness and action constituted by consciousness through typification. The teachers get the exceptionalities known and handle them well through typification. The typification of the exceptionalities are placed on their different mental characteristics, sensory abilities, communication abilities, behaviour and emotional development, physical characteristics among others. By implication, the types of exceptionalities are learning disabilities, mental retardation, visual impairment, hearing impairment, behaviour and emotional problem, the gifted and talented ones among other categories of exceptionality. But in all these classifications, it is obvious that typified action and interactions give an order to the social reality. According to Agwulonu (2001): "It is by familiarizing oneself with a thing that the object becomes well known. On how well these things are known and understood depends more on the communication of the object and the disposition of the subject". Yet, in this case, the special education teacher has greater role to play as that makes him different from those of regular teachers (Recchia & Puig, 2011; Kilgore et al., 2003). This greater role mostly revolves round the objectivity and sensitivity of the teacher. This implies that no matter the nature of disability and type of information about the exceptional student, special education teacher should display a positive regard and accept the exceptional student as a person of worth. Sometimes exceptional students exhibit some attitudes which throw the regular teachers off-balance and into confusion. Faced with this challenge, it is only an objective and a sensitive teacher that can communicate his understanding of their problems to them. Moreso, a sensitive and an objective teacher should not be easily influenced by personal feelings or opinions, but an established reality, thus being tactful and sensitive in dealing with exceptional students.

Both from the area of scientific research and from the footing of special education, having a common knowledge of social phenomenology has as a guiding light the capacity of handling the problems associated with the exceptional students. This dialogical relation is important and should be able to open up into new aspects of philosophizing and teaching of the disabled ones

CONCLUSION

Social phenomenology has common relationship with special education. The notion of special education as a profession of its kind involves the concept of intersubjectivity. The distinctive nature of special education and characteristics of special education teachers gives a complete attention on intersubjectivity and life-world in creating its own version of social theory, a theory of social action. Everyday life as presupposed is employed by them. Accordingly, from the perspective of social phenomenology of Alfred Schutz, special education can be considered as a social action that is set in the life-world, in which interpersonal relations are established that should be valued by teachers in different sections of the institution. His social phenomenology is a plausibility of philosophizing, motivating and developing the action to explore and educate in the field of special education. It should be noted as well, in the same basic phenomenological conclusion that the world is experienced and made meaningful from a particular perspective that is shaped by its relations with others. This type of establishment values the intersubjective dimension of teaching and explicates as the most authentic relationships between the teachers and the exceptional students. It is hoped that this study, by incorporating the conceptual theory of social action proffered by Alfred Schutz to special education, will make the special education teachers to make with ease the academic difficulties of the exceptional students. This, however, can be actualized through a mutual understanding and accepting the subject's psychological state of mind. They should value and apply the aspects accentuated by this theory within the educational framework

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