

AN OVERVIEW OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN IN NIGERIA

Umunna Victor Iroegbu

Special Education and Rehabilitation Sciences Department,
University of Jos, Jos.

Abstract

This paper examined issues bothering on inclusive education for special/rehabilitative needs persons. In so doing, the paper highlighted issues such as the inclusive philosophy, inclusive or exclusive education?, existing inclusion in general education, nature of training by general classroom teachers, what needs to be done, and implementative strategies.

Introduction

Education is an instrument for national development. The formation of ideas (i.e. contemporary educational programmes) such as the inclusive philosophy; integration of such ideas and the interaction of persons and ideas are aspects of education geared towards national development. In this respect, every Nigerian citizen must have a right to equal educational opportunity irrespective of creed, religion or any real or imagined disabilities according to his/her ability. Section 5 of the National Policy on Education (2004) categorically spells out the basis of Nigeria's philosophy of education including:

- (a) development of the individual into a sound and effective citizen;
- (b) full integration of the individual into the community; and
- (c) provision of equal access to educational opportunities for all citizens of the country at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels (both inside and outside the formal school system).

Therefore, the acquisition of appropriate skills, development of mental, physical and social abilities and competences as equipment for the individual to live and contribute to the development of the Nigerian society appears to be a major national educational goal. What educational system perspective do we need to keep pace with the changing global society?

The Inclusive Philosophy

Inclusive education is a policy that all children and young people (with or without disabilities or difficulties) learn together in ordinary pre-schools, schools, colleges, polytechnics and universities with appropriate network of supports (Ozoji, 2006). Essentially, educational inclusion entails enabling all categories of learners to fully participate in the life and work of mainstream settings irrespective of their learning needs. This conveys continuity in the process of breaking down barriers to learning and participation for all citizens in Nigeria's educational system. The implication, therefore, is that every Nigerian

child and/or youth must have a right to belong to the mainstream or a joint undertaking to work toward equal educational opportunities.

Obani (2006) considers inclusive education as admission and instruction of all children (with or without disabilities and/or other special educational needs) in the same neighbourhood schools. In the writer's viewpoint, it is a concept, which views all categories of learners as true full-time participants and members of their neighbourhood schools and communities. Similarly, inclusionists corroborate that inclusive schools are based on the belief that the world is an inclusive community with people who vary not only in terms of disabilities but in race, gender and religious background (Mercer, 1997).

The reverse of the inclusive philosophy is exclusive education, which places barriers to education for all learners. In other words, exclusive education segregates learners (special needs against ordinary) from one another in different learning environments. This accounts for divergent educational system perspectives that have sprouted special/rehabilitative, nomadic and adult education in Nigeria.

Exclusive education can be effected in settings such as residential institutions and special schools or classes. In any case, this educational system perspective removes learners from the home and neighbourhood (emphasizing on the individual learner's disability) and provides fewer opportunities for social experiences in the larger community (Dada, 2002). Nevertheless, exclusive education has certain advantages as it serves special needs children more because they enjoy individualized educational programme. Also, the role of special school cannot be underrated either now or in future because it has clearly important role to play for even children with special learning needs in inclusive settings. Teachers of the visually impaired for instance, could be posted to designated schools to teach and provide other supportive services; as the schools must have resource rooms. In this respect, it is the discretion of the school management team with special teacher or individualized education plan (IEP) team to decide whether a child will be in resource room or regular class or special class.

Inclusive or Exclusive Education?

The general education classroom or environment where children interact fully with their peers and are jointly taught by the regular and special teachers is indeed the option that truly equalizes educational opportunity for all learners. Unsatisfied with the pace with which full integration of special needs persons had been taken by society, the world international bodies have pursued with vigor the inclusive philosophy. This philosophy advocates that children be educated and provided for within the mainstream of their polity. Following the Salamanca Conference (1994), the quest for inclusive philosophy heightened. Thus, it was resolved in the conference that:

No child should be denied inclusion in mainstream education provision and that this provision should offer full range of support or specialist

services necessary to give all children their full entitlement to a broad and balanced education (Ozaji, 2003 p. 26).

Therefore, it is part of the universal right to education being extended to all children, youth and adults with or without disabilities and/or learning difficulties. This right has been enshrined in the Rights of the Child (1989); addressed in International Declarations like Education for All (1990), Equalization of opportunities for persons with Disability (1993), the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (1994) and the Dakar Framework for Action (2000).

In order to achieve education for all, inclusive education chose the placement of special needs persons together with other persons. Brohier (1999) argues that, the fundamental principle of inclusive school is that all children should learn together where possible regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have. Similarly, the Salamanca Declaration states that schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, emotional, social, linguistic or other conditions. By this development, inclusive educational system perspective was introduced as a programme as well as a philosophy to guide service provision for special needs persons in the society (Obani, 2006).

The Universal Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2001) argues that inclusion in mainstream education is important as a means of promoting social integration and avoiding a sense of separateness or inferiority. In Nigeria, special school services are more than a century old. At present, the majority of persons needing special/rehabilitative education are served by few schools. The present scenario is that:

- (1) The special needs child has to travel to far off places, whereas his other siblings from the same family can attend the local school. This informs that not all children have the accessibility to local schools.
- (2) In most villages of the Nigerian polity, children with disabilities of different conditions are present. As far as the standard models are concerned, one specialist teacher serves 8 – 10 children with disabilities of the same category. But the scattered villages in the country do not have an adequate number of the same category to justify the appointment of a full-time resource teacher. Therefore, the need for multi-category personnel becomes inevitable.
- (3) The extent of disability or difficulty in each category of learners with special needs ranges from mild to severe and profound cases. The mild and moderate cases are more in number than the severe and profound cases (Mani, 1999). Due to lack of sensitivity of general education to the needs of persons with disabilities or learning difficulties, even the mild and moderate cases are not attending schools. This calls for the involvement of the general education so that individuals who are currently left out can be served.

The foregoing implies that special schools and integrated education models have not been able to provide access to all. The Education for All (EFA)

campaign should not become 'education for all minus a category of persons'. If EFA is to become a reality, inclusive education needs to be nurtured. Besides the accessibility factor, the nature of distribution of the different categories of learners in the Nigerian polity too demands inclusive education.

Existing Inclusion in General Education

Inclusive education in special/rehabilitative education may be a recent concept, but it is an accepted approach in general education. In a general classroom situation in Nigeria, children of different intelligence quotient (IQ) levels study together. A classroom teacher usually targets the average learner in his teaching, but is also exposed to situations of handling slow learners as well as academically advanced learners. Therefore, inclusive education on the basis of cognitive abilities is already in vogue in general education (Iroegbu, 2006). General education teachers apply this method of teaching without labeling it as 'inclusive education'. Only children at the two extremes of cognitive abilities are classified as 'mentally retarded' and 'gifted children'. Groups of 'slow learners' but not mentally retarded, and 'academically advanced learners' but not gifted children are certainly different from 'average learners' and they are taught by general classroom teachers only.

Nevertheless, the main similarity between normal children and those with disabilities (such as visually and hearing impaired or learning disabled children) lies in their cognitive abilities. This similarity is a very supportive factor for these children to study along with those without disabilities in integrated education. With the learning of 'plus curriculum' to cope with particular disability or difficulty, these children can also compete with those without disabilities or learning difficulties.

Nature of Training needed by General Classroom Teachers

For effective implementation of inclusive education, general classroom teachers need to be trained in understanding persons with special learning needs. It is ideal to include a separate paper on 'persons with special learning needs' in the pre-service teacher preparation course itself. The curriculum framework of the National Council for Teacher Education (1998) indicates that the pre-service teacher preparation courses should include content on special needs children. Teachers thus trained should be in a position to take care of the educational needs of all learners even in the general classrooms, provided necessary instructional materials are made available. The work of the general classroom teachers may be occasionally assisted by specialist teachers. Those who have no exposure to the education of children with special needs could be given in-service training in the following areas:

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| 1) Definition of exceptionality | -1hr. |
| 2) Psychological implication of exceptionality | -2hrs. |
| 3) Learning behaviours of children with special learning needs | -2hrs. |
| 4) Assistive devices for teaching children with special needs | -10hrs. |

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| 5) Preparation of teaching aids (learning materials) | -6hrs. |
| 6) Teaching methods | -10hrs. |
| 7) Evaluation procedures | -3hrs. |

The in-service courses may be offered to at least one teacher to begin with from each school and need to cover all general classroom teachers in a region. The initial investment on capacity building of teachers would serve a great deal in terms of resources, construction of resource rooms, etc. This should be one of the new directions in special education to ensure the inclusion of special needs persons in the mainstream of the society.

What Needs To Be Done?

All tiers of government should legislate and direct efforts towards educational provision in their various areas of jurisdiction. The National Policy on Education (2004) intimates that, federal, state and local governments shall fund educational programmes within their areas of jurisdiction. There should therefore, be federal, state and local government special education/rehabilitative programmes. Besides, government (in general) should expand its service scope to cover:

1. Pre-school counseling.
2. Parent education.
3. Grants in aid to special schools. Currently, only 2% of approved UBE funds go to Special Needs Education.
4. Budget for special needs children, which should be per capita and channeled to wherever these children are being educated. Fortunately, a workshop on implementation of Inclusive Education at the Federal level has recently been concluded.
5. The employment of special teachers in the regular schools to collaborate with regular teachers.
6. Legislations that facilitate education of the children in the regular school.
7. Adequate funding for their education.
8. Attitude change towards policy formulation and implementation. The greatest threat to inclusive education is not always fund but attitude. Government needs to change its attitude towards members of its polity and their education.

Implementative Strategies

Implementation of inclusive education requires adequate preparation and adoption of procedures.

- (a) Adequate preparation needed may include:
- ✓ Government policy and back up i.e. policies favouring inclusive education should be backed up with actions for effective implementation.
 - ✓ Research to highlight problems and to point up ways forward.
 - ✓ Adequate funding.

- ✓ Effective public information (because community support is needful for success).
- ✓ Extensive training and re-training of staff/support personnel.
- ✓ Provision of continuing support services.
- ✓ Individualized education plans i.e. education tailored to specific individual needs.

(b) Procedures for establishing inclusive schools:

Step 1: Carry out a feasibility study of what is and should be if inclusive school is to be provided.

Step 2: Develop training manuals for the major stakeholders in inclusive education.

Step 3: Establish pilot schools for pilot testing.

Step 4: Create disability awareness.

Step 5: Develop awareness of the new policy, for instance, putting in place an administrative machinery to coordinate the programme (e.g. State Universal Basic Education Board).

Step 6: Implementation (Ozaji, 2006:18-19).

Conclusion

Inclusive philosophy is a globally accepted educational system perspective. It is not an option in Nigeria but a compulsion to reach out to a cross-section of learners and create a demand for multi-sensory teaching in the general classrooms. Therefore, by having special/rehabilitative educational needs and provisions in the regular schools, general teachers will certainly become better teachers. The inclusion concept acknowledges diversity among learners in general classrooms, and admits the fact that every child is unique. The teacher in the setting would become a facilitator of knowledge while promoting peer-group interaction amongst learners. In general, educational inclusion for special/rehabilitative needs persons poses a major challenge and in addressing it, schools would become effective schools and teachers become effective teachers. National and international efforts should, therefore, be geared toward augmenting inclusive education programmes.

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