

ACHIEVING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS AT THE PRIMARY SCHOOL LEVEL IN NIGERIA

S. M. Yakwal, M. N. Oriade and B. G. Dala

Abstract

The paper attempts to examine the possibility of achieving inclusive education for special needs children at the primary school level in Nigeria. It casts a search light on the concept, rationale and philosophy of inclusive education as well as identifies the beneficiaries of this kind of arrangement in the Nigerian context. The paper further examines the areas that adequate attention must be paid for the achievement of successful inclusion in educational arrangements for special needs children at the primary school level. Finally, it mentions some of the benefits of achieving inclusive education for special needs children and concludes that achieving inclusive education for special needs children at the primary school level in Nigeria is attainable and must be vigorously pursued for the growth and development of the country

Introduction

According to the Blue-print on the education of the handicapped in Nigeria (undated), all children have a right to education, the physical make-up, economic status of the parents, sex, religion and place of origin notwithstanding. This implies that equalization of opportunities must be encouraged in the Nigerian educational set up. Ozoji (2003) stated that equalization of opportunity is a philosophical phrase which refers to attempts made by government to ensure that available opportunities are made accessible to every citizen of the country irrespective of tribe, colour, creed or physique. According to him, this attempt becomes necessary because there are citizens who, on account of their present circumstances, cannot easily gain access to the available opportunities as bona fide citizens of the country.

In admission in tertiary institutions across the country, consideration is given to educationally disadvantaged states in order to equalize their educational opportunities. The provision of special education is, no doubt, aimed at equalizing educational opportunities for all handicapped children just as nomadic education makes the same provision for nomadic fulanis or their riverine counterparts (Ozoji, 2003 p. 17).

It must be noted that education in all its forms, is essential to sustainable development. In many respects, primary education makes a positive contribution to combating the problems of poverty, the degradation of the environment and the improvement of nutrition. Indeed, it is generally accepted that education is the most effective means that society possess for confronting the challenges of the future. In this respect, one may tend to agree with the Blue-print on the education of the handicapped in Nigeria that education aims at preventing a disability from constituting a handicap. In other words, if a visually impaired person is taught to read in Braille or low vision materials successfully, the disability of blindness will no longer constitute a handicap as he/she is now able to read about the world around him/her.

In discussing the very important and indeed relevant issue of equalization of opportunity, Ozoji (2003) is emphatic that this is another way of saying what belongs to us all

must be shared by all on equal footing. Thus, no one should be left behind because he/she cannot cope.

In the light of the above, one can deduce that it is imperative that achieving inclusive education for children with special needs in Nigeria especially at the primary school level is made a reality. This is especially so in view of the importance attached to the primary level of education not only in Nigeria but throughout the world. This, among others, forms the fundamental basis for this paper.

Inclusive Education: Conceptual Framework, Rationale and Philosophy

The education of children with special needs in Nigeria and indeed the world over seem to have come a long way in recent times. This is because of the latest development in special education which centres around what has come to be known as inclusive education. The Salamanca statement and framework for action adopted in 1994 and which Nigeria is a signatory to, lays emphasis on integrated education based on the principles of inclusion, integration and participation to promote equality of access for those with special educational needs (Nwazuoke, 2003; Ozoji, 2003; UNESCO, 1999).

The National Policy on Education (1981; 1998) made some statements about education and service delivery for children with special needs presumably in a bid to ensure equal educational opportunities for them. In the same vein, for the Salamanca statement and framework for action (1994), equality of opportunity for children, youth and adults with disabilities in primary, secondary and tertiary education should be carried out as much as possible in an integrated setting.

The basic reason why we need inclusion according to Darlington's Charter for Inclusion (2003), is because whatever their disability or learning difficulty, children have a part to play in society during and after school. Therefore, according to the Charter, an early start in mainstream playgroups or nursery schools, followed by education in ordinary schools and colleges form the best preparation for life.

The Salamanca statement and framework for action (1994) argues that regular schools with an inclusive orientation are:

the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system... (UNESCO, 1994:ix).

In the light of the above, the rationale and philosophy of inclusive education as propounded by Ozoji (2003) include considerations as follows:-

- Every child has a basic right to education
- Every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs.
- Education services should take into account these diverse characteristics and needs
- Those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools.
- Regular schools with an inclusive ethos are the most effective way to combat discriminatory attitudes, create welcoming and inclusive communities and achieve education for all.

- Such schools provide effective education to the majority of children, improve efficiency and cost-effectiveness.

The Salamanca Statement, asks governments to:

- Give the highest priority to making education systems inclusive to adopt the principle of inclusive education as a matter of law or policy to develop demonstration projects.
- Encourage exchanges with countries which have experience of inclusion.
- Set up ways to plan, monitor and evaluate educational provision for children and adults.
- Encourage and make easy the participation of parents and organizations of disabled people.
- Invest in early identification and intervention strategies.
- Invest in the vocational aspects of inclusive education.
- Make sure there are adequate teacher education programs.

It is note worthy that the statement and framework for action also outlined new thinking on the education of children with special needs and provided guidelines for action at the national, regional and international levels. The guidelines for action at the national level, which is what we should be paying more attention to in Nigeria, are in the areas of

- # Policy and organization.
- # School factors.
- # Recruitment and training of educational personnel.
- # External support services.
- # Priority areas.
- # Community perspectives and
- # Resource requirements.

According to article one of the World Declaration on Education for All which emerged as a result of the World Conference on Education for All held in Jomtien, Thailand (1990), every person child, youth, adult shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs. Such needs are required by everyone to be able to, among others, survive, develop their full capacities, live and work in dignity, improve the quality of their lives, make informed decisions and continue to learn. Because inclusive education emphasizes that ordinary educational arrangements accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, emotional, social, linguistic or other conditions (UNESCO, 1999), it is obvious that such arrangements must be backed by some kind of philosophy.

Darlington's Charter for Inclusion categorically stated that inclusive education should:-

- Combat discriminatory attitudes, create welcoming communities and build an inclusive society;
- Be the norm for all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions;
- Place the individual needs of all children at the centre of the process and fit the learning to the needs of the child rather than the child to the system;
- Celebrate difference and individual abilities and welcome the unique contributions and participation of all and

Provide equal opportunities for access to quality education at all levels.

In view of the above, one can rightly deduce that the philosophy of inclusion hinges on helping pupils and teachers to become better members of a society by creating new and challenging visions for them. In addition, it involves all kinds of practices that are known and accepted as practices of good teaching. This invariably means that as we share knowledge to ensure that we successfully meet the challenges being faced by children with special needs, we are indeed improving the quality of services provided in an inclusive educational setting at the primary school level.

Achieving Inclusive Education at the Primary Level

Based on the explanation offered by Ozoji (2002:2) and Andzayi (2002) we can identify special needs children that are expected to benefit from inclusive education as:-

- The gifted and talented;
- The physically handicapped including the cerebral palsied, the epileptic and so on;
- The visually impaired including the blind, the low visioned and the partially sighted;
- The hearing impaired including the deaf and hard of hearing;
- Hospital-bound children including those with chronic medical problems;
- Children with severe speech defects;
- The mentally retarded;
- The emotionally disturbed;
- The multiple handicapped;
- The learning disabled and so on.

All these categories of special needs children need some kind of assistance to remediate their conditions, needs and aspirations and this can best be done in an inclusive educational setting.

Other beneficiaries of inclusive education identified by Yakwal, Dala and Milaham (2003) include the families of children with disabilities, the communities in which they exist, the local, state and federal governments, and service providers for this category of children. According to them, non-governmental organizations who serve as advocates, medical and allied professionals as well as the private sector are also beneficiaries for various reasons. The reasons range from self-actualization for the children with special needs with its advantage of creating an independent and self-sustaining individual, conservation of the much needed resources for other developmental projects to satisfaction that a useful purpose have been served by children with special needs being made competent enough to become assets rather than liabilities to the communities in which they exist (Ajobiewe, 1992).

Achieving inclusive education for children with special needs in Nigeria will no doubt demand that certain conditions are adequately met. One of such conditions relates to the modification of existing facilities to enable special needs individuals to move about safely, successfully and independently. Due to the nature and magnitude of their disabilities, some special needs persons find it extremely difficult to circumnavigate the environment safely and successfully.

White (1980) posits that mobility is a vital key to personal independence and vocational success. While White insists that the ability to travel safely, comfortably and independently is a factor of primary importance to any individual, Hallahan and Kauffman (1978) are of the view that how well any particular individual copes with his or her disability depends on how well such a person is able to circumnavigate his or her surroundings. In view of the fact that the situation especially in Nigeria leaves a lot to be desired, how can we achieve inclusive education for special school level? This is more so when we consider the bitter fact that apart from the physically tangible barriers that militate against the successful inclusion of special needs persons, there is yet a more devastating barrier that stands in their way known as attitude barriers which Onota (2003) said is unfavourable.

In spite of these seeming impediments, Moven, Yakwal and Milaham (2004) are optimistic that there is change in the offing in respect of positive attitudes towards environmental modification to enhance successful mobility at least for the visually impaired. According to them, this is evident by the fact that many public institutions and organisations are beginning to make environmental alterations to favour the disabled. These are perhaps the only ways that we can enhance inclusive education for special needs children especially at the primary school level. This means that from our homes, to the environment and structural considerations, we must take into account the existence of special needs persons while we plan our educational facilities.

As much as one may agree that inclusive education for children with special needs can be achieved at the primary school level in Nigeria, it remains a fact that there are many constraints that may militate against this desirable goal.

Constraints to Achieving Inclusive Education

Inadequacy of funding is perhaps the most urgent constraint to the provision of inclusive education for special needs children just as has been observed in respect of similar innovations in the Nigerian educational setting. Okuoyibo (2003) is convinced that lots of evidence abound to prove that existing rehabilitation programmes in Nigeria are not properly funded. Mba (1995) states:

... There is no doubt that the present system of funding special needs provision in Nigeria leaves much to be desired. Inadequate funding arrangements have led to haphazard and somewhat half-hearted implementation of programmes on special needs provision... (pp 73-74).

Lack of funds no doubt lead to poor provision of needed infrastructure and equipment as well as the procurement of adequately trained personnel.

Another constraint to achieving inclusive education in Nigeria is poor staffing or where such is available, the quality is nothing to write home about. According to Okeke (1998) who investigated two centers in Enugu, personnel at the centers are mostly not qualified for the job. In the same vein, Okuoyibo (1996) reported that the best-qualified staff at four centers visited across the whole country hold the NCE certificate while some un-certificated craftsmen are in charge of crafts and other skill areas.

Negative attitudes often shown towards special needs persons is another area of constraint to the achievement of inclusive education for children with special needs in Nigeria. As Okuoyibo (2003) and Ozoji (2003) noted, social workers, special education graduates and other related personnel do not show adequate interest in working with disabled individuals more so that special needs children and adults require the use of modern equipment which are often not available. Where equipment and machinery are available, it is either they have broken down or they are obsolete. Shown (1991) reports that lack of facilities poses a major hindrance to effective special needs provision.

For inclusive education to be successfully realized at the primary school level, legislation should be seen as a key to strategy that can be used. Eleweke (1999) argues that legislation is required to give full backing to all activities and policies made towards improving the lot of children with special needs in Nigeria. Legislation that would make mandatory provision for easy accessibility to public buildings and institutions where ramps and other mobility assistance in the environment need to be formulated without further delay (Moven, Yakwal & Milaham, 2004).

Conclusion

This paper discussed a number of issues relating to the achievement of inclusive education for children with special needs in Nigeria. In line with what has been discussed, suggestions and recommendations were offered as a way of achieving inclusive education for children with special needs at the primary school level in Nigeria. The paper concludes that with adequate planning, provision of relevant materials, availability of adequately trained personnel, funding, legislation in favour of provision of special education, eradication of negative attitudes and so on, the achievement of inclusive education for children with special needs at the primary school level in Nigeria can be a reality.

References

- Ajobiwe, T.A. (1992). Closing the Gap Between Needs and Available Resources: Community-Based Rehabilitation as a Viable Option. *The Journal of Special Education and Rehabilitation* 3(1), 134-141
- Andzayi, C.A. (2002). *Introduction to Programmes and Services for Children with Special Needs in Nigeria*. Jos: Deka Publications
- Darlington's Charter for Inclusion (2003). Internet Materials, 18 July.
- Eleweke, C.J. (1999). The Need for Mandatory Legislations to Enhance Services to People with Disabilities in Nigeria. *Disability and Society* 14(2), 227-237.
- Federal Ministry of Education (Undated). *Blue-Print on the Education of the Handicapped in Nigeria*. Lagos: Government Printer.
- Federal Ministry of Education (1981; 1998). *National Policy on Education*. Lagos: NERDC.
- Hallahan, D.P. & Kauffman, J.M. (1978). *Exceptional Children: Introduction to Special Education*. London: Prentice Hall Inc
- Mba, P.O. (1995). *Special Education and Vocational Rehabilitation*. Ibadan: Codat.

- oven, R. J. ; Yakwal, S. M. & Milaham, N. (2004). *Social Inclusion: Easy Accessibility for Successful Mobility for the Visually Impaired Through Environmental Modification*. Paper Presented at the 3rd IDP Africa Forum of the World Blind Union Held at the Eskom Convention Centre, Midrand, Gauteng, South Africa from 23-27 May.
- vazuoke, I. A. (2003). *Challenges of Inclusive Education Practices in Nigeria*. Lead Paper Presented at the 13th Annual National Conference of the National Council for Exceptional Children Held at the Kano State College of Education, Kumbotso 11th-15th August.
- keke, B.A. (1998). The Status of Disability Rehabilitation Centres in Enugu State: An Appraisal. *African Journal of Special Needs Education* 3(2) 109-124.
- kuoyibo, J. M. (1996). *Report on the Study of Some Rehabilitation Centres in the Ccunt y*. Unpublished.
- kuoyibo, J.M. (2003). *Rehabilitation of Persons with Special Needs. The Case of Nigeria*. Being a Lead Paper Presented at the 5th National Conference on Special Education Organized by Federal College of Education (Special) Oyo 6th-9th October.
- nota, D. (2003). Employment and Disability Related Barriers: *The Journal of Advocacy and Rehabilitation in Special Education (JARSE)* 1 (1), 133 135.
- bozi, E. D. (2002). *Elements of Rehabilitation*. Jos: Deka Publications.
- bozi, E.D. (2003). *Special Education for Beginner Professionals* (2nd ed). Jos: Deka Publications.
- JNESCO (1994). *World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality: Salamanca Statement*. Paris: Ref: Ed-94/WS/18.
- JNESCO (1999). *A review of UNESCO Activities in the Light of the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education*. Paris: Author.
- White, M.. (1980). Mobility and the Partially Sighted. In D: J. Harvey (ed) *Children Who are partially Sighted: Some Aspects of Their Education*. Birmingham: *Association for the Education & Welfare of the Visually Handicapped*.
- World Conference on Education for All (1990). *Education for All*. Jomtien, Thailand.
- Yakwal, S.M; Dala, B.G. & Milaham, N. (2003). *The Place of Community-Based Rehabilitation Services in Inclusive Education for Children with Special Needs in Nigeria*. Paper Presented at the 15th NASET Annual National Conference Held at Abeokuta, Ogun State 27th-31st October.