

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: CHALLENGES AND OPTIONS

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Abstract

Inclusive education stands for improvement of schools in all dimensions to address the educational needs of all children (those with special needs inclusive). Recommendations to send children with special needs to mainstream schools were proffered. Despite this, the change has been slow with segregation in special schools dominating the scene. The article reviews the issues about inclusive education and outlines several options about inclusion. Needless to say the fact that teacher education remains a very weak link with respect to equipping teachers to be prepared for an inclusive classroom for management. The teacher education diploma and degrees offer “introduction to special education as compulsory course in order to prepare teachers to identify and diagnose disability. Thus it gives them holistic perspective with respect to deal with diversity or challenge negative attitudes. Hence, the article reviews the nature of inclusive education, challenges and options in Nigeria.

Introduction

There are an estimated 10.5 million children out of school in Nigeria (UNICEF 2010), many of whom are marginalized by factors such as poverty, gender, disability, caste, religion, social class etc. Thus, the idea of inclusive education is very relevant to our current situation, where differences in religion, gender, faith, ethnicity and ability are often seen as a threat rather than a source of richness and diversity. Inclusive education stands for improvement of schools in all dimensions to address the educational needs of all children. The major support for inclusive education came from the 1994 world conference on special needs education in Salamanca, Spain which emphasized that schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional linguistic or other conditions. The urgency to address the needs of learners who are vulnerable to exclusion through responsive educational opportunities was also highlighted at the Dakar (Senegal) World Education forum in April 2000 where it emphasized “The key challenge is to ensure that the broad vision of education for all as an inclusive concept reflected in national government and funding agency policies. Education for All must take account of the needs of the poor and the most disadvantaged, including working children, street children, remote rural dwellers and nomads, ethnic and linguistic minorities, children, young people and adults affected by conflict, HIV/AIDS, hunger and poor health and those with special learning needs.

Mainstreaming vs. Inclusion

Inclusive education is a relatively controversial topic for many parents and educators. The idea behind inclusive Education is that students with special needs will be placed in the same classroom environment as other students their age who do not have special needs. Within inclusive education there are two main branches of thinking: mainstreaming and full inclusion.

Integration or mainstreaming is a process that allows children with special needs and normal children to interact with each other and hence develop realistic understanding and appreciate of their problems. It equally ensures a realistic assessment of the children with special needs to be made as there exists opportunity to compare his/her performance with the normal learner. While inclusion is a step further in mainstreaming full inclusion puts students with special needs in standard classroom environments without testing or demonstration of skills. Individual that support full inclusion believe that all children belong in the same classroom environment no matter what. Full inclusion calls for the non-existence of special schools and other forms of segregated placement. Hence, the difference between inclusion and mainstreaming. Supporters of mainstreaming advocates the placement of children with special needs in regular environment to the extent his condition permits on the other hand the inclusionists believe that the entire population of students with special needs belongs in regular education classroom (Donna, 1996: 472). While feelings about inclusive education are still somewhat mixed, many studies show that children with special needs thrive in standard classroom environments for a variety of reasons.

On an interpersonal level, inclusive education allows children to develop friendships with their peers and feel less social tension about their disabilities. Some people believe that children who are placed in standard classroom environments generally have higher self –esteem than children who are isolated to different classrooms simply because they have special needs. Other studies show that children with special needs actually learn more in regular classroom environments, provided they get the help and support they need in and out of the environment when it comes to academic subjects.

Groups that oppose inclusive education often maintain the position that children with special needs will be forced to learn at a slower pace, but in practice this is easily avoided by qualified teachers

Nature of Inclusive Education in Nigeria

The principle of inclusive education was adopted at the world conference on special needs education. Access and quality (Salamanca) in 1994 and restated in 2000 at the world education forum in Dakar. Hence, Nigeria like other countries adopted and inculcated the principle of inclusion in her national policy on education, which means all pupils irrespective of their varying abilities have equal opportunities to learn.

Although Nigerian's national policy on education considers inclusion as the most realistic form of educational provision for children with special needs. Experts

have suggested that an inclusive education should be encouraged by governments by way of providing infrastructure, personnel and other facilities that enhance learning, socialization and the overall development of children with special needs. Unfortunately, inclusive education in Nigeria still remains at policy level despite the tremendous efforts.

Research has shown, that no concrete measure has been taken with Challenges of Inclusive Education the country. Even at policy level, integration remains the pivot of planning special needs education programmes. Although, professional advocates concerned with the education of special needs people, have been addressing the issues raised at the 12th annual national conference of the national council for exceptional children held at Minna, Niger state. In a keynote address at the conference, Tim OBANI argued, “the old special needs education system with its restrictive practices cannot successfully address the problems of special needs children. The best option is inclusion, in changing and recognizing the entire school system to accept all children and cater for their varied “special” or ordinary learning need and difficulties (OBANI,2007).

Although, education of people with special needs has received wide attention at policy level, though at the level of implementation. (Christopher, 2013). Identified the following problems associated with special needs education in Nigeria.

- ❖ Inadequate plans for the identification of special needs children
- ❖ Lack of adequate guidance services for the parents and the nature and extent of special needs education facilities available for children with special urban centers.
- ❖ Begging which is fast assuming the status of an occupation among adult persons with special needs as well as parents of the special needs children.

Challenges of Inclusive Education

If inclusion should be the viable option to ensure full inclusion of people with special needs, it is inevitable that one come across some problems. Specifically, Nigeria and other developing countries will need to address the following:

- Issues of material and equipment: Materials and equipment to support inclusion must be provided. Unfortunately, materials and equipment that are vital in educating people special needs are not available in regular settings. These include wheel chairs, braces, artificial limbs, Braille machines, Jaws, open book software, thermo form and typewriters, talking calculators, tele-touch, hearing aids for the deaf etc.
- Problem of securing the services of itinerant teachers, sign language interpreters and note takers for the hearing impaired, braillists for the visually impaired etc are yet to be resolved. The regular teachers in our schools know very little or next to nothing in special education, hence cannot possibly provide proper instruction and assistance needed by people with special needs.

Teacher education Programme

Special education though still being regarded as a recent innovation in Nigeria, still experiences a general shortage of qualified manpower to run the programme. It is a well known fact that teacher education remains a very weak link with respect to equipping teachers to be prepared for an inclusive classroom environment. Hence, distrust in both the special and mainstream education systems leads some parents to keep children with special needs condition at home for fear of their abuse or neglect in the classroom (Julka, 2005); which may then be interpreted by teachers as a lack of community interest in education for their children. There is evidence to suggest that many teachers do not feel equipped to teacher children with special needs and complain that they need more time to instruct these students (Mukhopadhyay, 2003). The poor quality educational provision in many schools is reflected in the fact that many government job reservations for adults with special needs remain unfilled.

Prospects of Inclusive Education

Inclusive education is developmental approach seeking to address the learning needs of all children, youth and adults with a specific focus on those who are vulnerable to marginalization and exclusion. An increasing number of publications, policy papers, workshops etc. have supported the ideology of inclusion. Some organizations and people, however, doubt whether the ordinary classroom can provide quality education for special needs children. This debate has been on, ever since people began to voice their reservation against old segregated institutions and in turn raised their concern for equality of disabled children. These concerns must be taken seriously and dispelled by showing examples of positive experiences, which clearly demonstrate that inclusive education most definitely addresses quality issues in education.

Many countries have developed programmes which promotes equality of opportunity by allocating specific funds to areas of social and economic need. If inclusion is to be successful, the following parameters need to be taken care of:

- Encouragement provided by the community for including children with disabilities in schools.
- Readiness of the general education system to accept responsibility for education of children with special needs
- Willingness of parents of children with disabilities to send their wards to local schools.
- General classroom teachers to be equipped to manage the education of children with special needs
- Enrolment rate of children with disabilities at least on par with that of non- disabled children.
- Retention of children with disabilities in schools.
- Availability of support from peer group to children with special needs and vice-versa in teaching learning processes.

- Availability of specialist teacher support, if possible to the regular classroom teachers.

Thus, we as teachers, parents, teacher-educators etc have to facilitate the implementation of inclusive education not only as a program but also as an ideology- an ideology based on the principles of human rights approach wherein stress is laid on giving importance to the individual and respecting his/her potentiality in the teaching- learning process.

Conclusion

The existing diversity of students in schools nowadays is very great. International agencies /organization, NGO's Nations and even individual now see to the extension of education facilities to all manner of people irrespective of the existence of factors or conditions which ordinarily would have posed as hindrance to participation.

In the first instance. However, the issue appears no longer that of extension of participation but that uniformity in the environment and mode of participation. The skills of teachers to handle this situation effectively require more specialized training for the realization of the aims and objectives of inclusive education, a through knowledge and understanding of special education is needed by the teachers.

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