

CHAPTER 9

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR VISUALLY IMPAIRED CHILDREN

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Introduction

Before the establishment of School for the Blind Children (SBC) in Gindiri, Plateau State in 1953 and other subsequent schools, the educational needs of children with visual impairments in Nigeria could not be met because the general education system was not sensitized to their needs. Nevertheless, these children lived in communities along with the sighted population. This invariably informed the type of inclusion that existed for the visually impaired persons in areas other than education in the Nigerian society. The search for new directions in educational provisions for special needs children has made special education to pursue with vigour the inclusive philosophy. Because of the unsatisfactory pace with which their full integration had been taken by society, this philosophy advocates that children be educated and provided for within the mainstream of the polity.

Following the Salamanca Conference in 1994, the quest for the new directions increased and climaxed to the introduction of a

new philosophy to the concept of integration called inclusive education. Inclusive education was introduced as a programme and a philosophy to guide service provision for special needs children in the society. The inclusive philosophy which has received global attention may be defined as a policy that all children and young people with or without disabilities or difficulties learn together in ordinary pre-schools, primary schools, colleges, and universities with appropriate network of supports. This cuts across all educational initiatives from early childhood education to primary, vocational, adult, teacher education, curriculum development, and higher institutions. It is part of the universal right to education, which is extended to all children, youth and adults with disabilities. The Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education (2002) intimated that:

The ultimate goal of inclusive education is 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 (p.7).

The Visually Impaired

The World Health Organization recognizes three levels of visual capacity as normal vision, low vision and blindness. Low vision and blindness (as impaired vision) may result from three medical conditions including reduced visual acuity, restricted field of vision and imperfect colour vision. With the exception of colour vision cases, most of the visually impaired cases have been observed to emanate mainly from visual acuity and less from field of vision problems. This means that visual acuity-related problems, which range from normal vision to blindness

determines who is visually impaired (Ozaji, 2006a).

However, the visually impaired is one whose sense of vision is defective and this could range from ability to see partially to total blindness. For education purposes, Ozaji intimates that a child is visually impaired if his preferred mode of reading is braille or other means that do not involve sight. Uzo (2001) observed that visual impairment (defective vision) affects four major functional areas of an affected individual including orientation/mobility, communication, activities of daily life and sustained near vision task. In this respect, the visually impaired individual is therefore, one who has functional limitation in orientation and mobility skills; daily living activities and visual tasks resulting from his defective visual condition.

Educational Programmes for the Visually Impaired

Generally, the educational environment for educating visually impaired children is either the special or regular school. While special school is exclusive, regular school is inclusive. In the recent times, special education has made passionate advances towards educating persons with disabilities (including the visually impaired) in the regular school even with more vigour than ever. Nevertheless, the quest to educate these persons in the regular school started some decades ago and has been given different nomenclatures such as open education, integration, mainstreaming and normalization in different countries of the world.

Sequel to the Salamanca declaration (1994), inclusive education has been advocated and adopted worldwide for educational provision of persons with disabilities (including the visually impaired). The contemporary issue in educating the visually impaired in particular and persons with disabilities in general is inclusive rather than segregative (exclusive) education. Because the world is talking and doing inclusive education for these categories of persons; and research findings confirm

its practicability and desirability (Okeke, 2003). Similarly, the National Policy on Education (2004) recognizes inclusive education under the UBE scheme. The visually impaired child has important roles to play in the society, so an early start in regular school is the best way to prepare him for these roles.

Apart from the issue of educational programming, there is the concern for transition planning for the visually impaired. According to the Council for Exceptional Children (1994), transition planning aims at helping the student (visually impaired) choose a living situation; ensuring that the student graduates with community living skills and can access post-secondary education. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments (1997) defined transition planning as coordinated set of activities for a student with disability that is designed within an outcome-oriented process; which promotes movement from school to post-school activities. These activities may include post-secondary education, vocational training, integrated employment, continuing and adult education, adult services, and independent living or community participation.

Conversely, in special schools visually impaired children acquaint themselves only with fellows with visual impairments hence they have limited exposure to the seeing world. Besides, abstract subjects such as mathematics and science are usually neglected with the presumption that the visually impaired students would find them difficult. These situations, no doubt, heighten their exclusion from the general schools. Mani (1999) argues that focusing on 'difference' between the blind (visually impaired) and sighted children made special education apart from general education.

Nevertheless, the role of special school cannot be underrated either now or in future because it has clearly important role to play for even visually impaired children in inclusive settings. Teachers of the

visually impaired 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 subject management team with the 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 education is however, a human right issue and every child should be entitled to it. This is the new direction in promoting special education and social integration of persons with visual impairment in the society. Therefore, the place of inclusive philosophy in educating the visually impaired child ought not to be a debate any longer. 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 of the visually impaired children with others.

Rationale for Inclusive Education

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 visually impaired children are served by few special schools. The present scenario is that:

- (1) A visually impaired child has to travel to far off places, whereas his sighted siblings from the same family can attend the local school. This accessibility to local school is not made available to children with visual impairment.
- (2) In most villages of the country, 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 in each category 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 children with visual impairment, even the mild and moderate cases are not attending schools. This calls for the involvement of general education so that children 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 visually impaired children'. If EFA in the case of the visually impaired children is to become a reality, inclusive education needs to be nurtured. Besides the accessibility factor, the nature of distribution of visually impaired children too demands inclusive education.

Existing Inclusion in General Education

Inclusive education in special education may be a recent concept, but it is an accepted approach in general education. In a general classroom 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. General education teachers apply this method of teaching without labelling 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 impaired and hearing impaired children) is 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, these children can also compete with those without disabilities.

The Conditionalties for Inclusive Education for Visually Impaired Children:

Conditionalties in this context entail wide spectrum of necessary considerations that must be put in place in order to realize effective inclusive education for the visually impaired children in Nigeria. These may include curriculum considerations, nature of training needed by general classroom teachers, volunteerism in educating the visually impaired, facilities and equipment, technological development, the role of government and implementative strategies.

Curriculum Considerations

Curriculum entails activities that formally or informally go on between the school and the children. Doing inclusive education requires that what is taught visually impaired children is comprehensive enough to make them fit into the society after schooling. Educating children with visual impairment involves two broad curriculum issues including unique and regular curricula.

Unique curriculum comprised subjects such as orientation and mobility, braille, sensory training and daily living skills while subjects normally offered in schools such as Mathematics, English, Social Studies, etc. constitute the regular curriculum. Apart from these curriculum differentiations, information and communication technology, vocational counselling, transition training, life skill training, and career education are newer contents necessary for the visually impaired to live successful in the contemporary world. This implicates that life after school is a challenging one; and only those with additional skills may secure a sustainable means of livelihood (Ozaji, 2006b). How then does the visually impaired child acquire these additional skills for survival? A new direction to achieving these survival skills in the visually impaired child is through the inclusive education philosophy.

Nature of Training needed by General Classroom Teachers

For effective implementation of inclusive education, general classroom teachers need to be trained in understanding the special needs of children with visual impairment. It is ideal to include a separate paper on 'special needs children' 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 will be in a position to take care of the educational needs of visually impaired children too in general classrooms, provided materials such as braille books, assistive devices, etc. are made available. The work of the general classroom teachers may be occasionally assisted by specialist teachers. Existing teachers who have no exposure to the education of children with special needs could be given in-service training in the following areas:

1. Definition of visual impairment - 1hr.

2. Psychological implications of visual impairment - 2hrs.
3. Learning behaviours of visually impaired children - 2hrs.
4. Braille -10hrs.
5. Assisting devices – abacus, talking calculators, etc. -10hrs.
6. Preparation of teaching aids (learning materials) - 6hrs.
7. Use of low-vision devices - 4hrs.
8. Teaching methods -10hrs.
9. 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 persons with visual impairment in the mainstream of the society.

Volunteerism in Educating the Visually Impaired

Educating the visually impaired children involves a lot of work or case loads that regular and special teachers as well as support staff cannot cope with. This makes it invariably impossible for them to provide all the needed school services of these children. If inclusive education is to be made feasible for these children, volunteer services must be readily available to supplement those service areas that are seemingly left out. Volunteer services such as print reading for the visually impaired, braille transcription, provision of recreational services and advocacy have been essentially important and are still needed even more, in the education of the visually impaired children in the inclusive setting.

The new direction in special education should be pointing toward bolstering inclusive education for special needs children with

reference to the visually impaired. This requires creating awareness that professionals outside special and general education can participate in the educational provisions for this category of children. The characteristic nature of volunteers is that they freely give their time, talents and treasures in assisting others without expecting material rewards. This is what obtains in developed countries where the philosophy of volunteerism has been generally accepted as a culture. Nigeria as a developing country should borrow a leaf from the developed countries.

Facilities and Equipment

Educational environment for the visually impaired child including the existing special schools should have good facilities to enhance free and easy accessibility by the child. The buildings should pose minimal hazards to the child; while architectural adaptation of the existing structures must have been taken care of. In specific terms, the learning environment of the visually impaired child in an inclusive education system should be customized to promote access to all significant facilities and equipment.

No area of special education is a equipment intensive as the education of the visually impaired. These equipment include braille machine, low-vision aids, slate and stylus, thermoforming machine, braille embosser (Computer brailing machine), typewriter, talking calculator, and so forth. Irrespective of the fact that these equipment are usually expensive and normally imported, they are indispensable factors in the educational inclusion for visually impaired children. Extra funding sources for instance, Education Trust Fund (ETF) and World Bank may be explored to provide these equipment. Because the resource room of inclusive school or the special schools should house these indispensable equipment to meet the learning needs of these children.

Technological Development

It is no gainsaying that technology has become the culture of the average man today. Developments in technology have opened up many opportunities that were hitherto closed to visually impaired fellows. Nworgu (1999) intimates that technology in special education aims at helping the overachievers and underachievers and those with physical problems attain an optimal level of functioning. Ozoji (2003) added that technology should free the child to be what he wants to be, to go where he wants to go and to actualize his potentials. Therefore, doing inclusive education for the visually impaired requires that assistive and adaptive technologies are extensively employed in special education to enable this category of the special needs children equalize their educational aspirations in the society.

The Role of Government

All tiers of government should legislate and direct efforts towards educational provision in their various areas of jurisdiction. The Nation 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 special education programmes, state special education programmes and local government special education programmes. Besides, government (in general) should expand its service scope to cover:

1. Pre-school counselling
2. Parent education
3. Grants in aid to special schools
4. Budget for special needs children should be per capita and channelled to wherever these children are being educated.
5. Review the employment of special teachers in the regular schools to collaborate with regular teachers.

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6. Legislations that facilitate education of the children in the regular school.
7. Provide adequate funding for their education.
8. Attitude change towards policy formulation and implementation. The greatest threat to inclusive education is not always funds but attitudes. Government needs to change its attitude towards the visually impaired children 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 point up to ways forward, problems, solutions, etc.
- 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:

- Steps 1: Carry out a feasibility study of what is and should be if inclusive school is to be provided.
- Step 2: Develop training manual for the major stakeholders in inclusive education.

- Step 3: Establish pilot schools for pilot-testing
- Step 4: Creates disability awareness.
- Step 5: Develop awareness of the new policy, through for instance, putting in place an administrative machinery to coordinate the programme (e.g. State Universal Basic Education Board).
- Step 6: Implementation (Ozaji, 2006a: 18 -19)

Conclusion

The inclusion of visually impaired children is possible and the need of the hour to facilitate its expansion. Inclusion is not an option in Nigeria but a compulsion to reach out to these children and create a demand for multi-sensory teaching in the general classrooms. Therefore, by having visually impaired children, general teachers will certainly become better teachers. The inclusion concept acknowledges diversity among children in the general classrooms, and addresses the fact that every child is unique. The teacher in the setting becomes a facilitator of knowledge and promotes peer-group interaction. In general, the inclusion of visually impaired children and other children with disabilities in the general classroom represents a major challenge and, in addressing it, schools become effective schools and teachers become effective teachers. National and international efforts should, therefore, be directed toward augmenting inclusive education programmes. A German organization, Christofel Blinden Mission (CBM) International, has added inclusive education as one of its services for children with visual impairment in Nigeria. Other NGOs could tow the same line in ensuring that inclusive education for the visually impaired becomes a reality.

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