

# INCLUSIVE EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN NIGERIA PROBLEMS AND WAY FORWARD

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## **Abstract**

*This paper provides an introduction and basic clarification on the concept of inclusive education. Besides, the rationale behind inclusive education has also been established. Equally highlighted, are some of the major problems to effective inclusive educational practices. More so, some possible ways forward which the writer deems fit for a more feasible and practicable inclusive education practices have been clearly expressed. Special education practitioners should take it as a challenge in seeing that special needs children are properly educated in an inclusive setting. This would be made possible when the major obstacles are considered and squarely addressed.*

## **Introduction**

One of the major goals of special education is the provision of adequate education for all children and adult in order that they may fully play their roles in the development of the nation (FRN, 2008) This is because all children need an education that will help them develop relationships and prepares them for life in the mainstream of the society. In fact, as rightly posited by Obani (1996), every child and adult whether disabled or not is entitled, and should be exposed to the fullest educational provision, resources and treatment available in the community.

It is behind the above background that several attempts to fully integrate special needs children and adults into the regular schools were made. These range from mainstreaming, integration, normalization and currently inclusion. Inclusion as a relatively newer concept moves to widen and extend the boundaries to include all children who for whatever reason, are failing to benefit from school (UNESCO Salamanca declaration, (1994). Therefore, inclusive education as opined by Charles (2003), has evolved into a concerted move, policies and practices in education as they relate to curriculum, culture and local centres of learning. Besides, inclusion tends to include rather than exclude, to integrate rather than segregate, involve most, if not all the teachers instead of a few specialist ones, to re-organize, adapt and where necessary effect changes in the whole system (Obani, 2002). However, despite the goodies of inclusive educational practices, certain problems are bound to be encountered. This paper therefore, dwelt on such problems and the possible ways forward.

## **The Concept of Inclusive Education**

Heinemann International Students Dictionary defines the word “inclusive” as that which includes everything offered or stated. However, as posited by Agbeke (2000), the term is more than that in the field of education. It entails educating a child with visual impairment or any other disability in the neighbourhood schools rather than sending the child away from home to attend special school. Impliedly therefore, our education system has to be re-structured in such a way that it accommodates all learners as much as possible no matter their difference or disability in the same neighbourhood schools (Obani, 2002). Also it means that the entire school system has to be modified with a view to meeting the divergent needs of all learners. The new emphasis thus, focuses on preparing schools so that they can deliberately reach out to all children (Ainscow, 1995 & Charles, 2003). More so, all students their disabilities notwithstanding should be educated with their peers in the same physical location (Knight, 1999).

However, inclusion as strongly postulated by a myriad of scholars Nsamenang (2008), Nwazuoke (2008), & Abdullahi. (2008), cited in Bello (2011) and a host of others should not be regarded as total absence of selective instruction or special attention to special needs children in an integrated school system, rather, it is in recognition and indeed an expression of the gregarious nature of man and the huge benefits associated with that (Bello, 2011).

## **Rationale behind Inclusive Education**

It is pertinent to note that going by the UNESCO estimate, more than 20% of the school age population in Nigeria requires special educational services to be able to live as functional members of the society. However, for one reason or the other, such children continued to be at a disadvantaged position. The launching of Universal basic education was a step forward in drawing more special needs learners into our regular schools.

This therefore justifies the emergence of inclusive educational practice. Mercer (1971) opines that the world itself is an inclusive community with people of varying race, gender and religious background.

Besides, inclusive education provides an opportunity for the products of the education to have wider socio-political and economic networks than they would otherwise had under a specialized education arrangement (Bello, 2011). This is important given the fact that children who learn together, learn to live together (Nsamenang 2008). In (Bello, 2011).

It should be noted that the inclusion of all pupils in mainstream schools is part of the international human rights agenda that calls for the full inclusion of all people with disabilities into all aspects of life form, [1998] Also, article 1 of the Kampala declaration stipulated that every person has the right to education and participation in intellectual activity” (the Constitution and code of practice of ASUU, 2006) as cited in [Bello, 2011]. Beside, the Federal Government has already emphasized this in its National policy on Education when it states that:

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“Integration (now inclusion) is the most realistic form of special education, since handicapped children are eventually expected to live in the society” (FRN, 1981).

The need for inclusive education was borne out of consideration that children in segregated settings could not achieve academically better than their counterparts in the regular school settings. In fact, as strongly postulated by Abang (2003), special schools and classes provide second-rate education and regular schools and classes provide benefits for all students.

Fundamentally, inclusive education enhances the social interaction of the normal children and their special needs counterparts. It also enhances the educational development of handicapped students (Ezera, 1991). In fact, Ladipo (2002), strongly believed that inclusive education has the tendency of minimizing fear among learners as well as encouraging understanding and respect among all children regardless of their abilities and disabilities. Thus, through inclusion, the frequency of interaction between handicapped and the normal students is enhanced.

### **Problems of Inclusive Educational Practices**

As earlier pointed out, inclusive educational practices in Nigeria may be obstructed by a number of obstacles. One of the major problems that may hamper the smooth progressing of inclusion is the non-existence of statistics of special needs children. The actual figure of those requiring special educational services is not available. Special education practitioners mostly tend to make references to the world data on special needs children. This is a dangerous trend as scholars have emphasized that comprehensive and reliable statistics is essential for any meaningful planning and inclusion of children with special needs (Nkangwung and Adeyemi, 2002 and Komolafe, 2003). Supporting this view Ohanador (2003), strongly asserted that the statistics of exceptional persons in Nigeria are often “guess estimates” this makes it difficult to project the number of teachers that will adequately cater for their needs.

It is imperative to mention that inclusive schools are bound to encounter problems in securing itinerant teachers who will render some assistance to the special needs children. Coupled with this, is the absence of teachers /speech interpreters for the deaf children and Braille specialists who can handle the blind among others. Added to this, is the non-availability of the materials and equipments that will serve as a support to the inclusion practices. Such materials as observed by Adedoja (2003), include wheel chairs, artificial limbs, bookstand, Braille machines, magnifying glass etc.

There is no gain saying the fact that unfavourable attitude is also a major problem that may constitute a nuisance to an effective inclusive educational practices in Nigeria. Eleri(1995), maintained that the attitude to people with disabilities in modern day Nigeria is fraught much more with pessimistic sympathizing than optimistic emphasizing. Corroborating this, Eleweke and Hadadian(2001), postulated in strong

terms that such situations breeds and reinforce the feeling of learned helplessness in such individuals. This is a serious problem since it has been observed that attitude serves as a mediating construct in behavior. They therefore constitute significant implications concerning the provisions, of services for individuals with disabilities (Shindi, 1991). Inclusive education cannot proper in a hostile attitude.

Fundamentally, inaccessibility of regular classrooms to the special needs learners coupled with lack of adequate teacher preparation are also problems worthy of serious consideration. As Nkangwung and Adeyemi (2002), already pointed out that existing infrastructures and facilities in our schools are not designed to meet the needs of children with disabilities. This problem no doubt still persists. Also, effective inclusion of children with special needs may not take root without the presence of an effective teacher. This is because as Okeke (2001), rightly puts it that the teacher imparts knowledge, information, skills, values and attitudes to learners who are assumed to be inexperienced.

Arbitrary use of labels will certainly hinder effective inclusive educational practices particularly for those with obvious and visible handicaps. Labeling of persons serve only to exclude such persons from the society. Adedoja (2003), maintained that labels as a stigma breeds negative reactions. That is why it has been cautioned that labels should not be used arbitrarily (Gbegbin 1991).

### **Way Forward**

Looking at the problems highlighted above, this writer wishes to posit some fundamental points which he deems fit for surmounting such problems and also a possible way forward to the effective inclusive educational practices in special education.

Certainly, the need for changing attitudes toward special needs children cannot be over-emphasized. Both regular and special teachers should embrace and accept such children as people of worth just like their non-special needs counterparts. All forms of segregation should be avoided. In fact, as posited by Abang (2003), the teachers' attitude towards students is one of the three major catalysts that affect integration, interaction and achievement. She therefore emphasized that for inclusion to be a success, positive attitudes are essential.

Fundamentally, adequate teacher Preparation is very pertinent for an effective inclusive educational practice. This is because no education system can rise above the quality of its teachers (FRN, 1981). More special teachers should therefore be trained on the one hand, and on the other hand, regular teachers should be re-trained to keep abreast of inclusion. This is essential as Hodgson (1985), strongly argued that if regular teachers are trained in special education or special teachers are available, they would be able to promote learning within the classroom by appropriate classroom organizations and also by what they teach and how they teach it.

Closely related to the above, is the need for teachers to be well prepared with a view to coping with individual differences that are bound to exist among the learners. This is very essential, as the presence of special needs children for inclusion in our

conventional schools will further make such differences more pronounced. Beside, inclusion being the most current orientation compels schools to restructure their programmes in response to the diversity of their pupils (Ainscow, 1995).

Removing the architectural barriers is also worthy of serious consideration for an effective inclusive educational practice. Thus, there is the need to modify school buildings with a view to suiting the peculiarities of the heterogeneous composition of the students. Specifically, ramps, elevators and other necessary facilities should be provided to facilitate mobility of the special needs children as well as easy access to their classrooms. There is also the need to incorporate and emphasize vocational training in the inclusive educational practices. This is with a view to making the special needs children self reliant. Okafor (2003), observed that, the present situation where the majority of persons with special needs are condemned to a life of total dependence on charity or begging cannot be justified. This is because they can be self-reliant provided they are properly educated.

### **Conclusion:**

No doubt, the trend toward inclusion of special needs children into the regular schools posed serious challenges to special education practitioners. For, they are to see that such children are properly educated from within the mainstream, not from seclusion in segregated settings. However, it does appear to this writer that non-existence of statistics on school aged special needs children, unfavorable attitudes, inaccessibility of regular schools to such children, arbitrary use of labels and lack of adequate teacher preparation among others are problems' that can hamper effective inclusive educational practices. Unless these issues are squarely addressed, the practice of inclusion may not yield the desired out come.

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