

Learners With Disabilities in an Inclusive Education Setting in Nigeria: Implications for Administrators

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Education in an inclusive setting appears to be a concept in this 21st century. This concept is beginning to gain recognition in the field of education. Children with and without disabilities are gradually being educated together in large scale societies. This is because most large scale countries have begun to recognize, appreciate, and accept children with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. In Nigeria, inclusive education has not fully gained recognition due to governmental policies. These policies help in the formulation and implementation of special education programs for learners with disabilities in Nigeria. The authors looked at inclusive education policies in relation to placement, legal mandate, assessment, least restrictive environment, identification and referral, and instructional programming. Finally, in this paper, recommendations and conclusion are provided.

Keywords: special education, administration, inclusive education, curriculum

Introduction

The notion of inclusive education was initially thought to be a concept in Nigerian educational system. However, inclusive education has since then witnessed some tremendous improvements in the last decade despite cultural, social-economic, and political constraints (Eskay, 2009; Abang, 1988; Oluigbo, 1986). These improvements began from the provision of Section 8 of the National Policy on Education since 1977 and have provided support mechanisms for children with disabilities. Because of governmental policies and cultural constraints, inclusive education did not witness series of advocacies, litigations, and legislations, as it was observed in large scale societies like the United States of America, which resulted in the establishment of legal mechanism to meet the needs of children with disabilities in an inclusive setting. A recent indication is the promulgation of PL (public law) 99-457 which, to a large extent, addresses special education concerns of young children.

Inclusive education is, by definition, the full integration of learners with and without special needs into the same classrooms and schools and thereby exposing them to the same learning opportunities. Ahmad (2000) defined inclusive education as the education of all children and young people with and without disabilities or difficulties in learning together in ordinary pre-primary schools, colleges, and universities with appropriate network support. Okwudire and Okechukwu (2008) saw inclusive education as the progressive increase in the participation of students, in reduction of their exclusion from the cultures, curricula, and communities of local schools. Okwudire and Okechukwu (2008) further explained that with inclusive education, all students in a

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school regardless of their strength or weakness in any area become part of the school community. It is a place where children are seen as equal members of the classroom without being marginalized.

The Nigeria government and educational administrators have failed to put forth resources to facilitate the provision of inclusive education in some schools in Nigeria. Furthermore, there are still no indications of efforts to handle these shortcomings. According to Eskay (2009) and Oluigbo (1986), these shortcomings include: legal mandates, placement issues, assessment, least restrictive environment, identification and referral, non-biased assessment, and instructional programming. In the United States, there are laws, such as PL 94-142 and IDEA (Individual with Disabilities Education Act) 2004 that have been used to acknowledge the unique needs of children with disabilities in an inclusive setting. In spite of the Nigerian government being a member of the United Nations education on human rights and child right, yet she does not acknowledge the need for every child to be free, have leisure and play and be protected from harmful practices, violence, injury, and abuse in an inclusive setting.

Nigeria, in 1993, made a decree for the provision of inclusive education with clear and comprehensive legal protection and security backing, yet due to governmental policies and cultural constrains, such decree did not succeed. This is a big problem for most special education and non-special education school administrators in Nigerian.

Shortcomings

Furthermore, the following shortcomings: identification and referral, unbiased assessment, least restrictive environments, funding, IEP (Individualized Education Programming), and legal mandates.

Identification and Referral

In an inclusive education setting, placement of exceptional learners is one of the fundamental aspects of special education. Administrators without knowledge and experience of special education usually encounter difficulty. Without appropriate identification and referral of exceptional learner, it appears difficult to have an appropriate placement. Due to lack of legal mechanism, inclusive education is hard to maintain, talk less of providing appropriate services for children with disabilities.

Further, in an inclusive setting, the referral process does not provide a suitable method for documenting and gathering systematic data for record-keeping and reporting purposes. Although there is a variation of practice among states and districts, the referral process is not seen to be a procedure used throughout this country, because it neither helps parents know their rights nor give them freedom to litigate when their children are inappropriately identified or targeted for inappropriate placements.

Unbiased Assessment

Assessment is an important ingredient in the whole process of inclusive education. Observation, screening, referral, evaluation, identification, and individualized education plans relate to the assessment process. Unfortunately, most administrators have difficulty in assessing and appropriately placing children with disabilities in the inclusive setting. This difficulty is due to their lack of exposure to the knowledge of special education (Eskay, 2009). When these individuals are inadequately placed, they carry with them the negative baggage of labels and categories. Assessment in Nigeria has a different goal. Often, assessment is utilized for placement and detection of what the child knows or does not know. In most cases, they are curriculum based on assessment which is frequent, systematic, and measured learned tasks (Beattie, Anderson, & Antonak, 2010).

Informal measures, tests, class work, homework, and assignment projects are equally used with modifications for people with special needs. The flexible and individualized nature of these assessment strategies encourages higher motivation for all learners and increases their development of confidence. Furthermore, it eradicates the discriminatory nature of fixed tests that are used in labeling and that may be culturally insensitive to address the day-to-day reality of persons within some given culture.

Assessment which is an integral part of Nigerian education and has a high degree of diversity is rare. Instructional programs are arranged to allow for assessment that will monitor student's programs while other assessments are referred to specialist at various centers. The problem, however, according to Ahmad (2000), is the paucity and lack of standardized tests, hence, children are placed in schools at the discretion of their parents and are planned and taught by administrators and teachers who may not have been previously trained to handle diverse learners with special needs.

Least Restrictive Environments

One goal of special education programs in today's world is to place learners with exceptionality in least restrictive environments that would allow them to maximize their academic and social potentials. Children with varying disabilities have a right to education in a non-threatening environment. In the National Policy on Education (1998), Section 8 clearly stated that all children, in spite of their physical, mental, and emotional disabilities, must be provided with equal educational opportunities. Adequate education must be ensured for all children, so they can fully play their roles in the development of the nation. The schools administrators, according to the National Policy on Education, are supposed to provide for students with disabilities in order that they may contribute towards nation building. Unfortunately, the objectives have not yet been achieved in many Nigerian inclusive classrooms. The lack of legal mechanism to enforce the necessary stipulations, such as placement decisions by law, is not made through an M-team (multi-disciplinary team). This team includes a psychologist, educational diagnostician, teacher, administrator of special education, physician (if requested), parent(s), student (where appropriate), and other specialists who work with the students (Rivera & Smith, 1997).

The truth is that these theoretical objectives are yet to be fully realized in schools. The practices of policies in the National Policy on Education are yet to be implemented and the objectives are not yet functional. Yet, it is of great importance that equal educational opportunities be made available for all children, since everyone has to have the same chance of getting a job or doing well (Ajuwon, 2008).

In reality, the idea of quality, as far as special children are concerned, refers to the provision of equal educational treatment to the end that the individual gets an opportunity to develop to the best of his ability. Therefore, it entails the provision of a free education and deliberately planned programs to suit the child's ability at no cost to him and his parents.

Funding

The Federal Government of Nigeria's inability to fund general education has led to the total abandonment of any request for setting up suitable structures for inclusive education and for those children with disabilities. The lack of adequate funding has created problems for school administrators to effectively carry their administrative duties well. The policy document is neither classified any criteria for personnel training nor co-ordination of its special education unit. This situation has led to the stagnation of inclusive education in Nigeria (Eskay, 2009). Conversely, the government has not come up with an accurate number of those in need of special education funding. Further, the lack of professional training in the field of special education has led

to some school administrators in poor planning, and thus, perceives children with disabilities negatively (Eskay, 2009). In fact, lack of training facilities, human and material resources, and the unfavorable attitude of the society towards children with disabilities have added to the funding constraint.

IEP

Instructional programs are consistently designed to respond to categorical placement options of exceptional learners. Nigeria has no federal mandates to ensure placements of exceptional learners in least restrictive environments. This federal enforcement mandates an individualized education plan for every student served in special education programs. The IEP must contain the current functioning level of the student, as well as annual goals, short-term objectives, and services to be provided to the student (Rivera & Smith, 1997). In addition to the identification of services provided, the IEP must include projected dates for initiation and duration of services, as well as appropriate objective criteria and evaluation procedures and schedules for determining, on at least an annual basis, whether short-term instructional objectives are being achieved (Rivera & Smith, 1997). Because of lack of the federal mandates, the concern still remains that many students with disabilities are inappropriately placed. This, in turn, affects the instructional programming by the school administrators in school activities.

The school administrators and teachers who on the other hand should have planned and provided quality instruction to many diverse learners with disabilities are said to give low-quality teaching because of lack of competition with other schools without disabilities.

Legal Mandates

Laws guiding special education are used to meet the unique needs of children with disabilities (Smith, 1998). For example, in 1986, an amendment of PL 94-142 was instituted as PL 99-457 to address the special education concerns of children from birth and provide IFSP (Individualized Family Service Plans) for each child. In 1990, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (PL 101-476) was instituted to respond to the incessant needs of exceptional individuals. With this law, the term “handicap” is out of fashion, and there is a real understanding that individuals can have disabilities or impairments and not be “handicapped”. Additionally, traditional categories of exceptionality are solidified and two new additional categories (Autism and Traumatic Brain Injury) are created. Concepts that are critical to special education today include: (1) referral and identification; (2) non-discriminatory assessment; (3) parental consent; (4) procedural safeguards; (5) placement in the least restrictive environment; and (6) IEP. These concepts have impacted not only special education placements, but all aspects of professional preparation and related services (Rivera & Smith, 1997).

In spite of the fact that Nigeria is a member of the United Nations Edict on Human Rights and Child Right, yet the child has no right to be free, enjoy leisure and play, and be protected from harmful practices, violence, injury, and abuse. Nigerian legal protection and security for children with disabilities are only in theory instead of being put in practice. This means that these children with disabilities are not guaranteed equal treatments, integration, education, and their eventual mainstreaming in any inclusive setting in Nigerian society.

Lots of school administrators and teachers do not have the professional skills to work effectively with the various disabilities in an inclusive setting. Because of this lack of professional skills, educational policies and programs do not reflect the need of individual differences or disabilities. The educational set-up is mainly structured and not accommodating to children with disabilities in an inclusive setting.

Challenges Militating Against the Implementation of Inclusive Education in Nigeria

There are numbers of challenges that have been treating the implementation of inclusive education in Nigeria. They include the following:

- (1) Inadequate plans for the identifications of children with special learning disabilities;
- (2) Most special needs schools are located in urban centers;
- (3) Parents lack adequate information and guidance on available special education services;
- (4) Begging for aims seems to be a lucrative business among adults with disabilities and children with special needs as they even run away from rehabilitation centers;
- (5) Lack of adequate provision for the maintenance and education centers;
- (6) Parents are not even able to provide for the education of normal children even under the universal basic education in Nigeria;
- (7) Government has no definite strategy to search for and identify children not attending school whether normal or disabled.

On the other hand, the implementation of inclusive education strategies in an environment weighed down by these challenges is no doubt a daunting task, therefore, a successful adoption of the following strategies will address the needs of different categories of learners with disabilities and also make the program a worthwhile venture.

Implications for Administrators and Teacher Educators

The paper suggests strongly that teacher educators and the mainstreaming program for learners with special needs should be accepted and respected. Teacher educators for students with disabilities in most of the Nigerian schools should be aware of special needs of these diverse learners and their potential negative effects on learning. More attention should be given to social and emotional education in the implementation of children with special needs.

The teacher educator should make it clear to the learners with special needs that even if they were educated separately, they would still interact with children without disabilities outside the school environment. Both students with and without disabilities should be made to understand the essence of living with each other in the school. The school authority should see to the proper integration of learners with special needs.

Recommendation and strategies to facilitate inclusive education in Nigeria include the following:

- (1) The inclusive education program should begin with the primary schools education as the formation level for formal behavioral development;
- (2) A special directorate of inclusive education should be created in federal, state ministries of education charged with the responsibilities of planning, strategizing, implementation, and monitoring of inclusive education activities in Nigerian schools;
- (3) Adequate plans should be put in place to take a special census (house to house and school to school) to identify and document children with categories of disabilities. This will make it easier to plan the proportion of different kinds of learners with special needs to be assigned or place in schools set aside initially for inclusive education;
- (4) Initial training and retraining of general and special education teachers to partake in the principles and practices of inclusive education must be put in place prior to their utilization;
- (5) Special task force to be set up by federal government made up of educational technocrat to design and streamline the goals and objectives to be attained by inclusive education in the short medium and long run;

(6) Special committee special committee at community to be set up by state, in collaboration with local governments to brainstorm ideas to establishing priorities, assigning responsibilities for action, and reviewing progress towards defined goals;

(7) There should be a national campaign spear-headed by orientation agency for the identification of children with special needs for purposes of enrolment in inclusive education programmer;

(8) State and local governments with the Federal Ministry of Education, Information and Women Affairs to mandatory earmark substantial funds in their annual budget for inclusive education program campaign, development, and implementation;

(9) Inclusive education should be specially provided for and funded in terms of planning and implementation designing instructional environments, such as accommodation, adaption modifications to materials strategies, equipment, and others facilities.

Conclusion

Inclusive education by its conceptions portends a panacea for getting schools and communities to provide learning in an inclusive setting that will guarantee equalization or educational opportunities for all children with and without disabilities irrespective of their learning ability and disability status. This means that children are able to benefit from each other through interaction, stable work, and life skills for achieving desirable behavior for successful life in an inclusive setting in our society. To achieve this, the authors suggest both the Nigerian government and school administrators sit to deliberate on the implementation of the following major issues in relation to the following shortcomings: identification and referral, unbiased assessment, least restrictive environments, funding, IEP, and legal mandates.

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