

Inclusive Education in Nigeria: Access and Equity

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Abstract:

Inclusive education involves bringing together persons with disabilities and the non-disabled to study in the same classroom with adaptable facilities and equipment. With this arrangement in place the assistive technology becomes an unconditional requirement for children with special needs. It involves public and private programmes and laws. And it involves a number of other things including people who work in the "helping" professions. This paper examines some of the basic requirement for the inclusive programme to be feasible in any environment. The attitudes of people towards those with disabilities globally, the challenges of people's attitudes towards disability in Africa, in Nigeria and the challenges of people with disabilities themselves with a view to encourage the non-disabled to develop positive attitudes towards the disabled for social change. Recommendations are made for a way forward.

Introduction

Globally, three forms of inclusion for persons with disabilities exist for example, the right to education, the right to employment opportunities in their social order, and the right to politics/administrative positions. According to Obi, Mensah and Avoke, (2007) inclusion is a radical departure from the traditional segregation approach of educating children with disabilities which involves the adaptation of regular school practices to suit the needs children with disabilities. Inclusive education is a system whereby the disabled and non-disabled children are educated together in one classroom with modifications in physical structures, equipment and methods to suit the conditions of diverse special needs learners (Ashi, 2010). Inclusive education could be partial or locational (proximity to resource facilities) and functional inclusion with all specialized facilities in a regular education school setting. Functional inclusion is one of the goals of special education in Nigeria today with the aim to concretize the meaning of equal opportunities in education for all children, their disabilities notwithstanding (National Policy on Education, 2004, Revised).

In retrospect, inclusive education practices over the years in African countries like Ghana, Uganda, Kenya and Liberia to mention but a few have been ongoing while some countries are presently at the level of reviews and follow up services in inclusive societies. The phase one of the global projects of Education for All (EFA, 1994) was the collaborative work of internationally accepted paradigm. The Salamanca Statement reaffirmed education as an entitlement for all rather than a privilege for some (Report on Inclusive Schools & Community Support, 1998-2001p.12-13). This lunch for action was the project: Inclusive schools and Community Support Programmes. As a result of this inclusive education lunch some African countries took the lead and embarked on inclusive education practices in their nations. With the development of the Ministry of Education's strategic plan 2001-2015, and the piloting of inclusive education in ten districts, Ghana is said to be well position in the implementation of inclusive education practices (Obi, Mensah, and Avoke, 2007 p.33). This is an indication that Nigeria is seriously lagging behind on issues related to inclusive education for special needs children. Apart from human right movements in Europe and America that served to promote the Individual with Disability Education Act (IDEA), many African countries have legal backing at all levels of their inclusion services for persons with disabilities. Obi, Mensah, and Avoke, (2007) noted that the international laws proactive development of education in other countries opened the way for Ghana Education Services (GES) to develop a strategic plan for 2003-2015. The University of Education, Winneba in Ghana for example has a dual role of human resource capacity for the visually impaired individuals who pursue programmes leading to Bachelor and Masters Degrees (Hayford and Majisi, 2011). These qualifications enable them to work in middle and top management levels in competitive employment. Ghana currently has model schools for inclusive education in the ten regions of the country as already mentioned. Kenya's philosophy is for the country to make sure every child has a chance to excel, hence the child's success is enhanced through the implementation of inclusive education services (Were, 2011). Uganda has developed some structures such as development of standardized training curriculum for technicians in the schools and the people believe this approach could be models for other countries. The Nigerian situation is an up hill task in the realization of the country's responsibility towards the special needs population in our society. The present absence of a law for the right of persons with disabilities in Nigeria forms a major part of the challenging issues of inclusion.

Issues of Inclusion

With government consideration, special attention should be given to:

- Preparation of teachers on the information about negative attitudes towards disabilities by the uninformed members of society such as parents and some employment Agencies.
- Fear of persons with disabilities themselves and their parents who have the fear of rejection or fear of not being accepted in inclusive education.
- Inaccessibility of regular schools to special needs individuals at all levels of education and public places in the state is a serious issue.
- Lack of special equipment, noting the huge cost of equipment per special need child in inclusive education is equivalent to educating five non-disabled children.
- Funding of special schools/inclusive education settings must include all type of disability, incentives and programme allocation.
- The Federal government order of grant in aid of 1972 for example does not fit into the inclusive education system.

Rationale for Inclusion

According to Obi, (2008) inclusive education is viewed as right issues where persons with disabilities are not discriminated based on religion, race, ethnicity, tribe or disability. Obi noted that the Dakar World Education forum recognized rights of all children, the disabled, at-risk and vulnerable to have access to qualitative education by 2015 through:

- Expansion of educational opportunities for all children especially the disabled, vulnerable and disadvantaged.
- Promotion of innovative programmers that encourage those with special needs and disabilities to help them enroll, attend and successfully complete their programmes in inclusive settings.
- Ensuring accessibility in inclusive settings for children with special learning needs and children with various forms of disabilities (Unisef, 2004).

Trends of Special Needs Education in Cross River State

Educationally, Cross River State has provided special education services in three Senatorial districts mostly by missionary bodies and philanthropist. The cross river state government effort through supportive staffing and payment of the salaries of special education teachers in special schools, payment of subventions to special schools and donations to special needs individuals in cash and kind is commendable. Nevertheless, there is still a lot to be done by the government through working with adults and children who have all forms of disabilities to maximize their potentials and help them to be self-reliant and also fairly independent. We can succeed with inclusive plans if there is attitude change from negative to positive attitudes towards disabilities.

At the secondary school level special needs children especially persons with visual impairments/blindness and those with physical disabilities have been integrated over the years in some regular education schools namely: Boys Secondary School, Obudu, Girls Secondary School, Obudu, Girls Secondary School, Mount Carmel Ogoja, Mary Knoll Secondary School, Okuku and St. Brendan Secondary School, Bulbar with provision of equipment and materials from the St. Joseph Centre for the Visually Impaired, Obudu.

These individuals with disabilities have struggled to excel over the years with a few of them who gained employment in higher institutions of learning, some gained employment in government primary schools as craft instructors after vocational rehabilitation, some had sheltered workshops or became self-employed after Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) programme in Obudu, some had no employment opportunities while some resorted back to total dependency on handouts from people around petrol stations, motor parks, market places and street corners in the state. The Good Shepherd Special Education Centre, Ogoja and the Government Special Education Centre, Calabar provides education up to the secondary school level. Based on all these facts special needs individuals have succeeded even by attending regular schools. With government legal backing for the rights of persons with disabilities as done in other African countries, special needs children will perform even better in inclusive education practices if given a chance and the necessary support.

Trends of Inclusive Education in Nigeria

In retrospect of the education of special needs children in Nigeria the practice has evolved around a reverse kind of special needs education in few special schools that were established as segregated schools in their own rights. The St. Joseph's Centre for the Visually Impaired Obudu, which was initially opened by the Medical Missionaries of Mary in 1972 as a rehabilitation centre for blind children and in 1990 a full reverse integration, was established by Sr. Mary M. Ashi, H.H.C.J. then Administrator of the centre. The Good Shepherd Special Education Centre, Ogoja also opened an integrated programme for secondary school children with hearing

impairment. These two schools and a few others opened up in other parts of Nigeria as reverse integrated schools. The programmes these schools should in the near future become inclusive education schools given all consideration for the establishment of inclusive education in Nigeria as in other African countries where resources are provided.

Strategies for implementation of Inclusive Education

The rationale for effective implementation of inclusive education practices and follow up services is considered under the following strategies:

- There has to be a political will of the state government backed by enacted law for the right of persons with disabilities and the implementation cost of special education services as discussed earlier.
- Assessment centres have to be established in three locations in the state for assessments by specialists trained as school psychologists/educational psychologists to assess those who are eligible for placement in inclusive education. This approach is based on the premise that not all children with special needs can be educated through inclusive education. Those with severe handicapping conditions will still be placed in segregated special education centres for example, children with severe developmental disabilities/severe to profound mental retardation are placed in centres or hospital bound schools.
- A systematic and conscious effort has to be made to train teachers to have attitude change towards admission of special needs children into regular education schools. This approach is based on the views of people who believe that blindness, deafness and physical disability is contagious. This idea further explains why some people would not want to associate with those who have deformities incase they give birth to children who are deformed (Ashi, 2010).
- Media education through CRBC, Odupkani and Ikom radio booster stations will enhance a widespread sensitization campaign on inclusive education in the state.
- The government needs to dismantle most accessibility barriers in regular schools and put ramps along stair cases and designated areas for cars or wheelchairs in public places. All inclusive education model schools and even higher institutions in the state must be hazard free for all categories of students with disabilities. Ghana for example has hazard free inclusive schools in all the regions as already mentioned.
- Government has to buy basic equipment and materials for each of the categories of disabilities in each school.
- Special education teachers should be posted to serve as supportive teachers in all the inclusive education schools (e.g.2 teachers per class, 1 special and 1 regular teacher).
- A well equipped resource room manned by a specialist in each of the model school is inevitable. A specialist teacher provides special education services for example a raised tactile map of Nigeria for blind students in a geography class.

Recommendations.

- There should be a continuity of inclusive education policy once it is started. There can be a breakdown when one government authority starts and the next one fails to continue ending in huge wastage of human, financial and material resources. Other countries that started had strategies for sustainability and continuity of inclusive education practices and Cross River State should bear this in mind...
- The state government should lease with the Ministry of social welfare, the Ministry of Education, the Department of Special Education at the University of Calabar and the Heads of Special Education Centres/schools in the state as consulting bodies for the head count of all persons with disabilities in the three Senatorial Districts of Cross River State.

Conclusion

Finally, being disabled could be very devastating for those who experience inadequate social and cultural emancipation in their life conditions. The major factors which influence their impact include: the age of onset, degree of severity, attitudes of parents, siblings, community and the larger society. What the special needs persons need is not pity, giving out handouts to them in the streets (e.g. giving them N10, N50 notes etc makes you the Lord of 'lady poverty'). There is an adage of ancient India which states thus:

*If you give a fish to a beggar
You feed him/her for one day
But if you teach him/her to fish
you feed him/her forever.*

It should be noted that certain almsgiving to persons with disabilities can only encourage laziness (Ashi, 2010). Based on the above views, it is more encouraging to give financial or material support to persons with

disabilities who are ready to receive adequate education or skill acquisition training to enable them work and earn a living. This approach will indicate empowerment and dignity of labour. As a society, we have to work towards the functional inclusion of persons with disabilities, fitting them into the mainstream of society. We have to plan programmes that could empower them through education, rehabilitation, health-care delivery (e.g. Hiv/Aids services) and employment opportunities. With all these plans in place, all members of the family, the community and the society at large are encouraged to serve as agents of change who are supportive and inclusive.

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