ADMINISTRATION OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN NIGERIAN SCHOOLS: ISSUES AND IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

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Abstract

This article analyzes the issues surrounding inclusive education as it relates to children with disabilities; issues concerning including students with disabilities in ordinary schools. Some important Nigerian historical events that support inclusive education are discussed. The author points out recent issues and challenges of inclusive education andidentifies some important implementation strategies that if properly carried out, will result to dramatic change in the present situation of inclusive education in Nigeria. The article concludes with recommendations to resolve the issues at hand.

Keywords: Administration, Inclusive, education, Nigeria, Schools, Strategies

Introduction

All people have a right to education. Inclusive education is an approach that ensures the presence, participation and achievement of all students in education. This may be in formal schools, or in non-formal places of learning, such as extra-curricular clubs and humanitarian camps. It often involves working to change the structures, systems, policies, practices and cultures in schools and other institutions responsible for education, so that they can respond to the diversity of students in their locality. Inclusion emphasizes opportunities for equal participation, but with options for special assistance and facilities as needed, and for differentiation, within a common learning framework.(Sightsavers, 2011)

The concept of inclusive education includes all learners, but it may be interpreted differently according to the context. For example, while it covers children excluded on the basis of language, gender, ethnicity, disability and other factors, it can focus on children with disabilities only. At the same time, children may be affected by more than one issue. A child with disabilities may also speak the language of a minority ethnic group, or be a refugee, or, if she is a girl, her family and society may not value girls' education. According to LCD (2012), making schools inclusive for boys and girls with

disabilities improves them for all learners, including students facing exclusion because of other challenges, or more than one issue.

According to UNESCO (2005), Inclusion is:

- Recognition of the right to education and its provision in non-discriminatory ways.
- A common vision which covers all people.
- A belief that schools and other places of learning have a responsibility to educate all children (and adults) in line with human rights principles.
- A continuous process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners – regardless of factors such as disability, gender, age, ethnicity, language, HIV status, geographical location and sexuality – recognising that all people can learn.

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 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.

Nigeria, in 1993, made a decree for the provision of inclusive education with clear and comprehensive legal protection and security backing (FRN,1993), 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.

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). Inclusive education was one of the major issues examined at the 12th Annual National Conference of the National Council for Exceptional Children held at Minna, Niger State, in August, 2002. In the keynote address presented at the conference, Tim Obani (one of the pioneers in special education in the country), argued, "The old special education system with its restrictive practices cannot successfully address these problems [of special needs children] (Garuba, 2003).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. An indication is the promulgation of PL(public law) 99-457 which, to a large extent, addresses special education concerns of young children.

Implementation Strategies

It is essential that some strategies which encompass everybody have to be implemented in order to make inclusive education a reality in Nigeria. Some of the strategies identified are discussed below:

Identify children's needs and rights: A project typically begins with a baseline study to identify children with disabilities who do and do not attend school, support services, education and social policies, and barriers to inclusion in an area. Inclusion starts at this point, with the baseline study as a participatory process involving children, parents and families, teachers, community leaders and local organisations.

Projects may use different methods for their surveys, but all should involve the people who know how to find children who do not attend school, and what support they might need to do so. Often it is children who have this information about their peers, so their views should always be taken into consideration. Results then inform the project's activities and can lead to the establishment of an ongoing mechanism to identify children with disabilities and help prepare them to enter the education system.

Early identification helps minimize the impact that impairments may have on children's development and optimizes chances of inclusion both in school and in society. It can also lead to early intervention, which often produces better results for the child and can be more cost effective. To make identification and intervention programmes sustainable, the projects take place through existing local government or institutional systems such as pre-school screening, mother and child clinics, other health clinics, etc.

If such services are not available in an area, a disabled child can still take part in the inclusive education project — the project will just need to adapt its efforts to support the child. The project will also stimulate local service provision through lobbying, advocacy, working with parents and other activities to ensure that they become sustainable over time.

Engage parents and families: Mothers, fathers and other family members are also crucial to the success of an inclusive education project. They are the people who know their children, sisters or brothers with disabilities, and who may have the best understanding of both their problems and abilities. Some families will want to take an active role in their children's education, while others will be happy to work with other people to get the child into school. Either way, an inclusive education project will communicate with and involve them in many ways such as the following:

- Families are often the first point of contact in the project's process of identifying a disabled child. When they know that a project is taking place in their area, they may also come forward to tell the school or community workers about their child.
- Parents or siblings can also learn skills such as simple stimulation techniques, basic physiotherapy or sign language to support the child, as well as how to make and maintain assistive devices using local materials.
- Mothers and fathers can be invaluable as volunteer classroom assistants in schools and as members of school committees, and, once encouraged, often advocate for inclusive policies and practices.
- Projects form parents' groups, which are an essential part of the project. Many will have been involved in the project since the baseline survey, and together they can plan, advocate and provide services for their own and other disabled children.
- Since travelling to and from school is often an important issue for children with disabilities, parents may organize transport and lobby for accessible public transportation or roads. Primary schools are usually in the same village or neighbouring village with no public transport. Appropriate personal mobility devices and support from the existing community could be another viable option.
- When there are social protection programmes or other entitlements that can support children with disabilities, the project can support parents to become aware of and access them.
- As mothers and fathers become disability advocates, they can spread the message of inclusion in their communities.
- Parents sometimes go on to become project and community leaders.
- Once the formal project ends, parents will be in place to keep its activities functioning and reaching out to other children.

Engage the community

Children, parents, families, teachers and education officials all live in communities. Inclusive education works best when all sectors of society are involved. Key stakeholders within inclusive education programmes include local civil society leaders, community leaders, religious leaders, local government representatives and other relevant contacts.

Local organizations – including non-governmental organisations, implementing partner organizations and disabled people's organizations – also participate. Each can play an important role in facilitating the project's implementation and development.

As a result of partnerships with local communities, more parents and children would come forward to be included in the programme.

In an inclusive education project, community members will often:

- take part in consultations and project meetings before the project starts, including identifying children with disabilities in their area
- join, participate in and manage local project committees

- run regular awareness meetings for other sin their community
- take part in school management committees
- participate in assessing school accessibility and the need for adjustments to make schools more accessible
- help identify children with disabilities in the area

Through these activities, inclusive education projects work towards building an inclusive society in which every person, with or without disabilities, is accepted and can thrive.

Engage national, regional, state and local governments

The ministry of education and local education authorities play a pivotal role in influencing the education system and making it more flexible, o it is vital to engage them in the project. Lobbying can focus on curriculum change, teacher training and financial support to make schools inclusive, for example.

At the start of an inclusive education project, it is important toanalyse current government policy and isolate exactly how it needs to change to become inclusive for children with disabilities. Depending on the circumstances, there might be need to make some changes such as:

- advocate for a flexible curriculum and inclusive assessment system
- lobby national authorities to produce books and other learning materials in a range of formats that can be used by children with different impairments
- work with the government and universities to change the teacher training curriculum so that teachers learn how to teach girls and boys with a wide range of impairments and improve their skills as child-centred teachers for all their pupils
- lobby for funding to make schools physically accessible, for instance building ramps, rails and accessible toilets

Change on paper can be easy; in practice it is often more complicated. An inclusive education project monitors policy implementation and creates structures to do this after the project formally ends. These can include community advocacy groups and stakeholder groups within universities, government ministries, etc

Making schools welcoming and accessible

Children with disabilities, like all children, are individuals and have their own needs and abilities. While boys and girls with mobility impairments may have trouble entering inaccessible school buildings, children with sensory impairments may primarily face communication issues. However it is important that those running a project do not assume that they know what the barriers will be. For instance, a blind child may have trouble getting around a classroom even though she does not have a specific mobility impairment.

The project will build ramps and accessible toilets; adjustments to support children with visual impairments will include enlarging classroom windows or installing clear plastic sheeting to let light in through roofs. Changes to the physical environment, such as

painting the edge of steps in bright colours, edging paths, painting doors different colours to walls, etc., will improve school safety and accessibility for all children.

No two schools will necessarily need the same adaptations, just as no two children will have exactly the same disabilities and abilities. The project, though, should ensure that all children's access needs are met and that they are welcomed into the school community. This extends to making broader, systemic changes in the way the school is organised, including altering buildings and grounds that will enable disabled children to attend in the future, even if there are no children who need those alterations in a certain year's school intake.

Challenges of Inclusive Education in Nigerian schools

There are numbers of challenges that have been treating the implementation of inclusive education in Nigeria. Some of which, according to (Eskay& Angie,2013) are:

(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.

Other challenges include:

Inadequate 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 norco-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.

Negative attitudes of Teachers: Negative attitudes among teachers may translate into negative teaching methods and frustration at the pace at which some children work. In

some cases this leads to labelling children as 'slow learners' and offering no encouragement to learn at their own pace. At worst it may lead to teachers physically punishing children for what is perceived to be 'poor performance'. Such attitudes can lead to further marginalization of children with disabilities at school.

Wider accessibility issues: Many children walk long distances to attend school, and a combination of a lack of adequate transportation, difficult terrain, poor quality roads and the associated cost to families make many schools inaccessible to girls and boys with disabilities. Girls in particular may be at more risk of exclusion if their parents keep them at home because of fears for their safety and security when travelling to and from school.

Mothers or fathers, or older sisters or brothers, may carry smaller children but this can eventually become too difficult. Building ramps and creating physically accessible schools is important, but so too is creating sustainable community transport solutions between home and school.

Lack of access to toilets in school can also be a major barrier for children with disabilities. Ifa child cannot use the toilet all day while at school, he or she is much less likely to attend. Even if toilets have been adapted to make them accessible, they must be maintained. In cases where schools do not have adapted toilets, they may use this as an excuse to keep boys and girls with disabilities out of the school, saying that there are no staff helpers who can take children to the washroom.

Ignorance of community health personnel by the children: The lack of educational psychologists or even the regular use of simple assessment tools means that many teachers are unaware of the potential or needs of the young people in their classrooms. This gap also makes it hard to understand what progress a programme might or should achieve, and how to measure whether the education service is providing quality and having the best possible impact.

This can be a particularly difficult issue for children with multiple disabilities and sensory impairments. Prevailing attitudes in some places are that these children belong in special schools or are not capable of learning. This may result from a lack of understanding of the ethos of inclusive education; for example, some people advocate home-based education or the use of resource teachers who visit the mainstream school once a month only to track if the child attends school.

While there may be a role for home education and resource teachers for some children within our projects, our focus will always be on changing school cultures towards inclusion. Used by themselves, such approaches do not lead to inclusion or fundamental change of education systems or societies.

Conclusion

Presently in Nigeria, inclusion still remains in the realm of theory and far from practice. Special needs education in Nigeria is still grappling with problems of policy implementation, an environment that is not conducive for practice and a lackadaisical

attitude of the people and government. Implementing inclusion in such an environment may be unrealistic and counter productive.

Recommendations 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) 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;

(4) 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;

(5) 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 programme.

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