

PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

Sylvester Mwandar Yakwal

*Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation Sciences
University of Jos*

&

Peter O.Oyeneye

*Royalmark Consulting (Public Relations Consultants)
Jos, Plateau State.*

Abstract

Public relations, (PR) which is the professional practice that encourages and or promotes the adequate sales of goods and services, has been used over the years in various fields of human endeavour. However, it is not quite clear if this special service has been appropriately used for the enhancement of inclusive education for special needs children and adults, least of all in Nigeria. This paper attempts to examine this area in relation to the concept and philosophy of inclusive education. Furthermore, it examines the public relations process, tools and techniques, its role and its advantages in inclusive education. Constraints of PR practice in inclusive education for special needs children and adults are also identified. Suggestions have been advanced on how best public relations can be utilized to enhance inclusive education for special needs individuals in Nigeria.

Introduction

There is no gainsaying the fact that the education of special needs children and adults in Nigeria and indeed the world over has come a long way. This is especially so when one considers the latest development which centers around inclusive education for these category of persons. The Salamanca statement and framework for action adopted in 1994 and which Nigeria is a signatory to, lay emphasis on integrated education based upon the principles of inclusion, integration and participation to promote equality of access for those with special educational needs. This is believed to be part of a nationwide strategy aimed at achieving education for all.

In Nigeria, the National Policy on Education (1981; 1998) made some provisory statements about education and service delivery for children with special needs presumably in a bid to ensure equal educational opportunities for them. According to the Salamanca statement and framework for action (1994), equality of opportunity for children, youth and adults with disabilities in primary, secondary and tertiary education should be carried out as much as possible in an integrated setting. Article 26 of the statement emphasized that "...an effective public information effort to combat prejudice and create informed and positive attitudes and the provision of necessary support services..." (p21) must be encouraged to facilitate inclusive education for special needs children, youth and adults. In the light of this and as specifically suggested by the Salamanca statement, external support by resource personnel from various agencies, departments and institutions should be coordinated at the local level to enhance inclusive educational arrangements for individuals with special needs. Article 51 (Salamanca, 1994) is emphatic that such arrangements should involve non-educational services.

It is in view of this that this paper attempts to examine the possibility of utilizing public relations as a non-educational service that could ensure the optimal usage of all available expertise and resources for the benefit of inclusive education. Furthermore, as postulated by Abosi and Ozoji (1985), Ajobiewe (1992), Ozoji (2002;2003) and Yakwal, Dala and Milaham (2003) realizing the goal of successful education of special needs children requires the cooperation of families, professionals and the mobilization of the entire community, voluntary organizations as well as the support of the public at large. A positive attitude on the part of all stakeholders in the education of special needs children and adults can only be expected to favour school and social integration. It is the

contention of this paper that this will in turn be enhanced by the provision of necessary information in simple and clear language through the use of public relations tools and techniques.

Public Relations Defined

Many Public Relations practitioners and Institutes of Public Relations across the globe have different definitions of the practice. A good number of such definitions are saying the same thing in different ways. According to the World Assembly of Public Relations Associations public relations practice is the art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organization leaders and implementing planned programme of action which will serve both the organization's and the public interest.

The British Institute of Public Relations in its own definition, posits that public relations practice is the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics. In the light of the above, public relations practice can be seen as a planned and sustained effort. It is goal oriented and tangible because when there is a plan, there is an intention to achieve a goal. Public relations is also a continuous process. It is not what is done today and set aside tomorrow. Establishment and maintenance of goodwill and mutual understanding is one of the very purpose or objective of public relations. The word "maintain" also goes to show once again that continuation of communication effort is a significant concept in public relations practice.

Any organization needs the goodwill of the people in order to succeed. Friendly feelings from the public means a lot and conscious effort must be exerted to build and maintain it. The people likewise need the goodwill and support of the organizations. The term "mutual understanding" denotes that communication effort should be two-ways and will result in a "two-way understanding". In other words, an organization has to send out information and also receive feedback from its "publics".

The Concept of Inclusive Education

According to Nwazuo (2003), inclusive education as a concept is a largely unexplored social frontier in education. This, according to him, is because most academic discussions bordering on inclusive education in Nigeria tend towards abstract ideological positions rather than focusing on the practical details of how to operate it given our peculiar circumstances. Mani (2003) posits that inclusive education is indeed an ideology and not a programme. Mani argues that it is a concept of effective schools where every child has a place to study and teachers become facilitators of learning rather than providers of information. Maiwada (2003) on the other hand, is convinced that special education, mainstreaming and inclusive education are concepts which are closely related in the sense that they are used to refer to education of persons with special needs. According to him, it is mainstreaming which has led to inclusive education while mainstreaming itself has been encouraged as a desirable means of integrating exceptional children with their normal peers in regular education. In the light of the above, it is reasonable therefore to look at inclusive education as a goal to be aimed for rather than a fixed state to be achieved. This means that it should be viewed as a process and an ideal towards which members of a community aspire.

Philosophy of Inclusive Education:

Article one of the World Declaration on Education for All which emerged as a result of the World Conference on Education for All held in Jomtien, Thailand in March 1990 states that every person – child, youth, adult – shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs. These needs are required by human beings to be able to among other things, survive, to develop their full capacities, to live and work in dignity, to improve the quality of their lives, to make informed decisions and to continue to learn etc. Since inclusive education denotes that ordinary

educational arrangements should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, emotional, social, linguistic or other conditions (UNESCO,1999), then it is obvious that such an arrangement must have some objectives.

Inclusive education, according to Darlington`s Charter for Inclusion, should:

- Combat discriminatory attitudes, create welcoming communities and build an inclusive society
- Be the norm for all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions;
- Place the individual needs of all children at the centre of the process and fit the learning to the needs of the child rather than the child to the system;
- Celebrate differences and individual abilities and welcome the unique contributions and participation of all and
- Provide equal opportunities for access to quality education at all levels.

In the light of the above, it can be deduced that the philosophy of inclusion hinges on helping students and teachers become better members of a community by creating new visions for communities and schools. Furthermore, it involves all kinds of practices that are ultimately practices of good teaching. This means that as we share knowledge to meet the challenges being faced by special needs individuals, we are improving the quality of education for all those involved in inclusive education.

Special Needs Persons

In recent times, whenever inclusive education is mentioned in ordinary conversation, what quickly registers is the education of special needs persons. This is because, as mentioned elsewhere in this paper, the concept of inclusive education as postulated by various national and international fora specifically identify special needs children as the major direct beneficiaries of such an educational arrangement. This can be accepted as the true position as it exists in the face of various arguments that have been advanced.

According to Ozoji (2002), the World Health Organisation (WHO) has issued an international classification as well as a definition of the three basic terms related to understanding persons with special needs. Called "The International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps (ICIDH)", this classification defines impairment as "any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological or anatomical structure or function". Ozoji noted that the loss or abnormality can be in the make-up of the organ or in the way the organ(s) function(s) or operates causing distraction or problem localized at the level of the organs. Thus Ozoji described impairment as the mother of cases for rehabilitation, special education and any other need the individual may have in these fields. The ICIDH defined disability as a restriction or lack of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being.

Yakwal, Dala and Milaham (2003) identified the third basic term related to understanding persons with special needs as postulated by the ICIDH as the word handicap. According to the classification, handicap can be viewed as a "disadvantage for a given individual, resulting from an impairment or disability (depending on age, sex, social and cultural factors) for that individual". Explaining this position, Ozoji (2002:2) said that it is not a matter of organ (as in disability) but that of the role or status of the individual that is described as a disadvantage. This clearly shows that special needs children and youth are as varied as the various classifications and definitions of the basic terms related to understanding them. In this respect, we can identify special needs individuals that are expected to benefit from inclusive education as:

- the gifted and talented;
- the physically handicapped including the cerebral palsied, the epileptic etc;
- the visually impaired including the blind, the low visioned and the partially sighted;
- the hearing impaired including the deaf and hard of hearing;
- hospital-bound children including those with chronic medical problems;
- children with severe speech defects;

- the mentally retarded;
- the emotionally disturbed;
- the multiple handicapped;
- the learning disabled etc (Andzayi, 2002).

All these categories of special needs individuals need some kind of sustained efforts to communicate their conditions, needs and aspirations to various stakeholders including families, professionals, NGOs, CBOs, philanthropists, local communities, the private sector, the local, state and federal governments in order to obtain the much needed attention for them.

What Can Public Relations Do?

Many people do not really understand what public relations means and what it can do. Some actually take it to mean propaganda, advertising or mere publicity. But from the definitions and the analysis of one of them, we believe those doubts and misconceptions have been corrected. For the sake of emphasis, let us consider what Kogan (1965) says public relations can do.

- PR can influence the attitudes and actions of the management which employs it. This is possible through feedback techniques like suggestion boxes and opinion polls;
- It can help management express opinions and articulate views;
- It can secure public attention through competence in communication;
- It can counter the arguments of opposing views;
- By furnishing information and viewpoints, PR can encourage an uncommitted segment of the public to take a favourable position on specific issues;
- After an unfortunate situation has been corrected, PR can help rebuild an organization's image by communicating the changes that have been effected.

However, public relations cannot be a whitewash for a black condition; it must be "truth well told". There is no way PR can be used to persuade a public that it is acting in that public's interest when in fact it is not.

Public Relations Process

As must have been observed from the different definitions, public relations involves the creation and maintenance of mutual understanding and cordial relationships. This is the cardinal objective of public relations and if it must be achieved, there is a basic process which must be followed logically.

According to Ajala (2001), public relations in its mature form is a scientific management function seen by practitioners and others as part of an organisation's problem solving process. Ajala also quoted Center and Walsh (1981) as saying that problem solving is a continuous process and that the process of responding to a public relations problem is just like any other decision making process by professionally trained managers. Public relations practice lays a lot of emphasis on planning instead of haphazard handling of issues. The public relations process is also known as public relations programme or public relations campaign.

The steps to be taken in a public relations process as suggested by Black (1989) are made up of research, action, communication and evaluation. This process is referred to as "RACE":

Research – This deals with the research conducted to determine the causes of a problem

Action - This involves the process of drawing up the action plan and the costing of the plan

Communication – Under this step, the practitioner determines who he is communicating with, the message and the media of passing the message to the public;

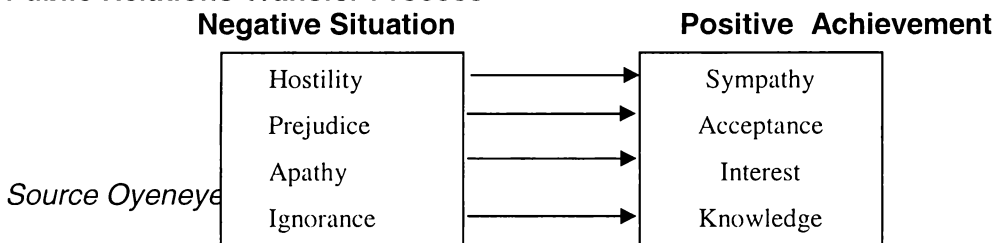
Evaluation - As the programme is being implemented, the practitioner monitors the process of implementation, the result, the need for possible modification in implementation and final assessment of the effect of the public relations programme.

The Role of Public Relations In Inclusive Education

The role of Public Relations in inclusive education cannot be over stressed given the fact that inclusive education advocates an educational arrangement whereby all categories of children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions are brought together under one school system instead of any kind of segregational arrangement.

Public Relations can be used to achieve this purpose because of its concept of cordial relationship and friendliness. Given this concept, operators and managers of our schools, parents and children can be made to embrace inclusive education. Public Relations encourages interaction and free flow of information. For instance, the use of the Public Relations transfer process model propounded by Jenkins (1985) will help greatly in “selling” the concept of inclusive education. According to Nwosu (1996), the model explains how Public Relations can be used or applied to change hostility to sympathy, prejudice to acceptance, apathy to interest and ignorance to knowledge.

Public Relations Transfer Process



Specific Roles of Public Relations in Inclusive Education

Public Relations can be applied to inclusive education in very specific ways. Let us consider some of these specific roles:

1. Creating awareness for Inclusive Education

Public Relations has awareness creation as one of its basic functions. We can therefore use it to create awareness about inclusive education. Many parents and children are in the dark about the meaning and benefits of inclusive education. So we must move them from the level of ignorance to the level of knowledge.

2. Promoting the advantages of Inclusive Education

People tend to resist change most especially because they do not know where it will lead them and the benefits. Public Relations can handle this problem. As experts in the use of the media, we can employ television and radio jingles, documentary films, staged drama, seminars and workshops, news, analysis on radio stations, television drama, talk shows, etc.

3. Raising fund for Inclusive Education

As a new concept in the Nigerian educational sector, the full implementation of inclusive education will no doubt require enormous amount. Given the fact that fund raising is a special area of PR function, the practice can help the education sector raise funds for the successful introduction of the concept.

According to Oyeneye (1999), many Africans can be very sympathetic and cheerful in giving if they are convinced that the money raised will be judiciously expended. As long as schools need money for special projects and activities which could not be met by their subventions and fees, there will always be a need for an appeal fund. Oyeneye also lists the following as kinds of fund raising appeals: musical jamboree, donation slips, donation tickets, special dinners or luncheons, rag days, appeal letters, tea parties, etc.

4. Changing wrong notions and countering opposing views about inclusive education

It is possible that some people within and outside the school already have wrong notions and opposing views about inclusive education. It is the function of PR to change these wrong notions and opposing views if the concept of inclusive education must work. Some of the wrong views may border on infections, pace of learning, cost of

implementation and so on. People can be moved from this level of prejudice to acceptance.

5. **Getting legislative backing for Inclusive Education**

PR can also employ its parliamentary liaison function to get legislative backing and appropriate funding for the programme. The training received by PR practitioners in the areas of government relations, parliamentary liaison and lobbying can be very useful in this matter. All that will be needed by the law makers is a facts sheet giving all necessary information on the workings, importance and advantages of the concept.

6. **Researching to determine the necessary modifications in the implementation of the concept.**

PR can also be used to monitor and evaluate as the implementation goes on. This will help determine necessary modifications and adjustments. Opinion surveys, observation, and personal contact can be employed in this area.

Advantages of Employing PR in Inclusive Education

There are many advantages which operators of inclusive education can derive from employing public relations. We have explained some of them elsewhere but for the purpose of emphasis and direct application, let's consider them again.

1. PR practice is the professional handling of communication, enlightenment and information management, so no other tool will create understanding and knowledge about inclusive education like PR.
2. The adept management of the mass media and other PR media by PR practitioners can help saturate the air waves with the news of inclusive education. This will no doubt prevent wrong notions and take care of excuses by mischief makers.
3. Another advantage is that PR preaches the creation and maintenance of cordial relationship and rapport. This is what inclusive education intends to achieve by bringing all the children under the same roof.
4. PR has as one of its key functions the encouragement of an uncommitted group to take a favourable position through information and persuasion. There is no doubt that there are many of such groups in relation to the concept. PR will therefore adequately deal with the situation.
5. PR can also help the operators of the concept not to see things from their own perspective alone through the use of its feedback techniques.

Constraints of Public Relations Practice in Inclusive Education

In spite of the immense contributions PR can make in making inclusive education a huge success, there are constraints to which our attention must be drawn. This will help us to begin to plan towards how to address them. Chief amongst such constraints are:

Funding There is a popular saying in PR practice which goes thus: "*Spend a kobo on PR and you get a kobo result, spend a million and you get a million result*". Oyeneye (1997)

Already, there is the cry of financial problem in the education sector. If PR must be employed adequately and effectively, we must be ready to spend money. For instance, appearance on national television network, affective advertising campaign, public opinion polls, workshops etc are PR tools which cost a lot of money to use.

Adequate supply of PR practitioners There is also the problem of insufficient number of professionally qualified PR practitioners, that is registered members of the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR). Given the fact that the commercial organizations offer a better package will further compound the problem. An attempt to employ any non-professional who says he can do the job may lead to a serious reputation problem for the employers.

Acceptance problem Some experts in the education sector may not be too impressed about employing professional PR practitioners. This is because some people believe PR is a function that can be carried out by any one. But when you compare the services of Sheraton Hotels and Towers to those of some small time hotels, you will know the difference between a professional and a non-professional.

Teething problem When we consider the fact that inclusive education itself is a new concept in our education sector, PR practitioners may equally encounter some application problems. This will stem from limited or no past experiences, past projects and activities to serve as guidelines.

However, it is believed that every new concept or project is bound to face some problems, but with determination and focus, the problems will be surmounted gradually.

Suggestions/Recommendations

In view of issues raised in this paper, we would like to suggest that serious thought be given on the need to use public relations in order to enhance inclusive education in Nigeria. Once this line of thinking is reinforced, there is no doubt that any problems identified can be solved for the benefit of inclusive education not only in Nigeria but the world over.

Conclusion

This paper is of the view that public relations practice can have a far reaching effect on the enhancement of inclusive education for special needs individuals in Nigeria. As suggested by Yakwal, Dala and Milaham (2003), pressure groups acting for and on behalf of special needs individuals should take advantage of public relations and the mass media as effective tools for the improvement of attitudes towards the provision of services for such individuals.

REFERENCES

- Abosi, C. O. & Ozoji, E. D. (1985) *Educating the Blind*. Ibadan, Spectrum Books.
- Ajala, O. (2001) *Public Relations in Search of Professional Excellence*. Ibadan: Afrika Link Books
- Ajobiwe, T. A. (1992) Closing the Gap Between Needs and Available Resources: Community-Based Rehabilitation as a Viable Option. *The Journal of Special Education and Rehabilitation* 3(1) 134-141.
- Amwe, D. O. (1992) The Integration Debate. *The Journal of Special Education and Rehabilitation*. 3(1) 106-116.
- Andzayi, C. A. (2002). *Introduction to programmes and services for children with Special Needs in Nigeria*. Jos: Deka publications.
- Bila, G. J. (1992). The Right to Vocational Rehabilitation for the Disabled. *The Journal of Special Education and Rehabilitation* 3(1) 26-33
- Black, (1989) *Introduction to Public Relations*. London: The Medino Press Ltd.
- Dafilok, A. D. (1992) Vocational Training for the Visually Handicapped in Nigeria. *The Journal of Special Education and Rehabilitation* 3(1) 34-40.
- Dala, B. G; Yakwal, S. M. & Milaham, N. (2003) Special needs children in Inclusive Education: Implications for Teacher Preparation. Paper Presented at the 13th Annual Conference of the National Council for Exceptional Children Held at Kano 11th – 15th August.
- Darlington's charter for Inclusion (2003): Internet material.
- Eleweke, C. J. (1999) The need for mandatory Legislations to Enhance Services to People With Disabilities in Nigeria. *Disability & society* 14(2) 227-237.
- FRN (1981) *National Policy on Education*: Federal Ministry of Education.
- Ityavyar, D. (1992) Mobilizing the Disabled for Self-reliance. *The Journal of Special Education and Rehabilitation* 3(1) 72-81.

- Kalu, W. J. (1992) Developing Laws on Disabled Children in Nigeria. *The Journal of Special Education and Rehabilitation* 3(1) 18-25.
- Kogan, (1965) *Modern Business: Public Relations*. New York: Alexander Hamilton Institute Inc.
- Maiwada, D. A. (2003) Inclusive Education: Global trend and the Nigerian experience. Keynote address at the annual conference of the National Council for Exceptional Children held at Kano 11-15 August.
- Mani, M. N. G. (2003) Inclusive education in India: Policies and Practices. *The Educator XVI(1)*, 44-49.
- Nwazuoke, O. A. (2003) Challenges of Inclusive Educational Practices in Nigeria. Lead paper presented at the 13th annual national conference of the National Council for Exceptional Children held at Kano 11-15 August.
- Nwosu, E. (1996) *Public Relations Management*. Aba: Dominican Publishers.
- Oyeneeye, (1997) *Concepts and Principles of Public Relations*. Lagos: MediaGate Ltd.
- Oyeneeye, (1999) *Managing the Image and Reputation of Secondary Schools*. Lagos: MediaGate Ltd.
- Ozaji, E. D. (1992) Blindness Awareness Programme in Special Education: Some Curriculum Considerations. *The Journal of Special Education and Rehabilitation* 3(1) 63-71.
- Ozaji, E. D. (2002) *Elements of Rehabilitation*. Jos: Deka publications.
- Ozaji, E. D. (2003) Early Intervention Programme for Inclusive education in Nigeria. Paper presented at the 13th annual national conference of the National Council for Exceptional Children held at Kano 11-15 August.
- UNESCO (1994) World Conference on Special Needs Education Access and Quality: Salamanca Statement Paris.
- World Conference on Education for All (1990) *Education For All Jomtien, Thailand*.
- UNESCO (1999) *A Review of UNESCO Activities in the Light of the Salamanca statement and framework for action on special needs education*. Paris: Author.
- Yakwal, S. M; Dala, B. G. & Milaham, N. (2003) The Place of Community Based Rehabilitation Services in Inclusive Education for Children With Special Needs in Nigeria. Paper presented at the 15th NASET annual national conference held at Abeokuta, Ogun State 27-31st October.