

# DEVELOPING COMPETENCIES THROUGH TEACHER-IN-SERVICE PROGRAMME FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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## Abstract

*This paper considered developing competencies through teacher-in-service programme for inclusive education in Nigeria; and discussed salient issues such as concept of inclusive education, learners targeted by inclusive education, having children with special needs in inclusive classrooms, competencies expected of regular teachers to teach in inclusive classrooms, and teacher-in-service programme for teaching in inclusive classrooms. The paper revealed that teacher in-service programme is meant for developing knowledge and skills that are likely to bring about desired improvements and enhance 'competence-on-the-job' of the teacher for whom it has been provided; and that the introduction of inclusive education has posed much responsibility on the regular teachers who were not originally trained to teach children with special needs in inclusive classrooms. Therefore, these teachers need to be retrained on the rudiments of teaching children with special needs in inclusive settings through in-service training programme. In doing this, regular classroom teachers will no doubt become competent inclusive teachers.*

## Introduction

The way teachers teach bears on how much pupils/students learn and on their performance on graduation. Jones in Ekpiwre (2014) posits that no matter what educational systems mandate and/or expectation, in the end, effective teaching is very much dependent on the will and competence of the teacher. Competency means the ability, expertise, skill and attitude that a teacher displays as he/she teaches in the classroom. It is the consistent ability of the teacher to properly perform his or her classroom assignment; and encompasses a combination of the teacher's knowledge (of subject matter and general pedagogy), attitudes and experience that enables him or her achieves desired education goals (Ekpiwre, 2014).

Teacher-in-service programme is part of the teacher education that is usually given to service teachers while they are still in the employment of an institution with the intension of catering for useful knowledge which a teacher may be lacking or has forgotten or not overly utilized in order to enable him/her gain self-confidence and better job performance. The Federal Ministry of Education corroborates that in-service training shall be developed as an integral part of continuing teacher education and shall also take care of all inadequacies (FME, 2009).

In this paper therefore, issues concept of inclusive education, learners targeted by inclusive education, having children with special needs in inclusive classrooms,

competencies expected of regular teachers to teach in inclusive classrooms, and teacher-in-service programme for teaching in inclusive classrooms shall be discussed.

### **Concept of Inclusive Education**

Inclusive education depicts a school placement option in which children with special needs are removed from special schools and are educated along with their peers in the regular schools. It predisposes identification of, and selective placement of children with special needs where the majority of children of comparable age receive their education (Ozaji, 2005); and demands that schools are developed to respond to pupils' diversity given the overall organization, curriculum and classroom practice as well as support for learning and staff development (Ainscow, 1999). The ideology of inclusive education programme is to accommodate children with special needs and those without special needs in the same class. Inclusive education therefore, is a means of welcoming all children without discrimination, into regular or ordinary schools with the aim of creating environments that are responsive to their differing developmental capacities, needs, and potentials (Obani, 2006). It portends the ideology of learning to live and learn together with each other. Central to this ideology is the approach towards learning, which is termed as "inclusive learning". The implication is to move away from labeling the child to creating accommodative classroom environment; concentrating on understanding better how the child learns so that he/she can be better helped to learn.

Salamanca Declaration (1994) describes inclusive education as a developmental approach aimed at meeting the educational needs of all children, youth, and adults, with great emphasis on those who are vulnerable to marginalization and exclusion. This implies that all school children have equal opportunities to reach their maximum potential and achievement irrespective of their origin, abilities or disabilities, physical, intellectual, social, emotional, or linguistic differences. The Declaration holds that every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities, and learning needs; therefore, our educational system should be designed in a way that takes into account the diversity in characteristics and learning needs of children with special needs.

### **Learners targeted by Inclusive Education**

Ideally inclusive education targets all learners, not only those with disabilities. Specifically, three groups are targeted by inclusive education including learners in mainstream schools that are failing to learn due to barriers of whatever nature (e.g. language issues, poverty, inappropriate teaching, gender biases, disabilities, etc). Also, in this group learners who have no disabilities and are learning very well are targeted.

Learners in special school who have been placed in the school on the basis of their disability (i.e. learners with significant disabilities) are the second targeted group of inclusive education. These learners include children with learning disabilities, attention deficit (hyperactivity disorder), emotional and behavior disorders, intellectual retardation, hearing impairment, visual impairment, low incidence disabilities (e.g. traumatic brain

injury, multiple severe disabilities, deaf-blind), autism spectrum disorders, communication disorders (speech and language disorders), special gifts and talents, physical and health impairments and children at risk (Ozoji, 2013).

The third group of target of inclusive education consists of learners of compulsory school-going age who are out of school or who have never been enrolled in school due to barriers of whatever nature (i.e. children with/without disabilities). Having these children in a classroom suggests that individual differences among the pupils will be more pronounced. Hence, teachers should be prepared to cope with the individual differences among pupils in inclusive classroom through teacher in-service programme.

### **Having Children with Special Needs in Inclusive Classrooms**

Children with special needs are beneficiaries of special needs education. Having these children in inclusive classroom is a very critical issue involving many people; something most classroom teachers have not had to experience before. In this regard, team teaching (i.e. where one or more paraprofessionals will be involved) is likely to be implemented as well as more frequent contact with parents. This situation can be overwhelming to a classroom teacher who has always been alone with his/her children. So, interpersonal conflict may be common; and there is likely to be disagreement on the appropriate methods to be used, ranging from discipline to instructional materials.

Under inclusive education model the special education teacher is a member of the team, who may co-teach with the regular class teacher, assuming responsibility for training, support, and supervision to paraprofessionals. Defining the roles of regular and special education teachers is very critical in determining how inclusion will function in a school/class. Having children with special needs in inclusive classrooms would therefore, demand definition of roles and responsibilities in order to avoid conflict and confusion among professionals.

### **Competencies Expected of Regular Teachers to Teach in Inclusive Classrooms**

Inclusive class does not ask how a child with special needs has to change in order to be a member of the class; but rather “how does the teacher change the classroom in order to offer full membership to a child with disability?” Regular teachers need to be competent in solving problems and informal assessment of the skills a child needs rather than rely solely on standardized curriculum. With this, the teacher takes advantage of the child’s interests; and uses the child’s internal motivation before developing the needed skills in such a child and thus be enabled to set high but alternate goals that are suitable for the child.

Ability to develop alternative assessment batteries is another competency that regular teachers ought to have in order to set appropriate goals that are suitable for the child’s capabilities; determine how to modify assignments and design classroom activities to accommodate all children including those with special needs. This competency can apply at the primary, secondary and college levels bringing about more

activity-based teaching rather than seat-based teaching; and affords the teacher the opportunity to learn how to value all kinds of skills that children bring to class. Again, teachers ought to see and utilize a variety of instructional strategies for effectiveness in inclusive classrooms including the ability to adapt materials and rewrite objectives for a child's unique learning needs (Yakubu, 2009). The implication therefore, is that teachers have to be flexible and must maintain high tolerance for ambiguity in the class through teamwork with important stakeholders in the education of children with special needs.

### **Teacher-in-Service Programme for Teaching in Inclusive Classroom**

All children have the right to an appropriate education that is guided by knowledgeable teachers who work collaboratively with other stakeholders that decide their education matters. However, it is important to acknowledge the difficulty in teaching and learning conditions experienced by regular teachers in teaching children including those with special needs in inclusive classroom. Regular teachers who had no prior training or experience in teaching children with special needs will need in-service training regarding the psychology of having disability or impairment and its effects on development and of learning of the affected. Development of knowledge and skills needed to provide appropriate educational services for these children requires intensive preparation through teacher in-service training programme. Most often, these programmes are offered at colleges and universities, either at the undergraduate or graduate level. Experience has shown that at least one school year of preparation is necessary in order to possess entry level skills for teaching children with special needs in inclusive classroom.

Teaching children with special needs calls for extra care, patience, diligence, commitment, emotional balance and understanding on the part of the teacher (Garuba, 2003). Also, the teacher must be able to absorb shock and emotional crisis associated with teaching this category of children. It is therefore worthwhile to prepare teachers (regular) in order to effectively shoulder the task of inclusion. Inclusion demands that teachers in the regular schools should be made to undertake in-service training in special education particularly as these teachers are mostly ignorant of the element of special education; and cannot possibly provide proper instruction or assistance needed by children with special needs. Since, teacher education is the producer of manpower that sustains all other systems from pre-primary, primary, post-primary as well as post-secondary levels of education in Nigeria (NTI, 2012); it is imperative that preparation of teachers that will cater for children with special needs be emphasized in our teacher producing institutions.

Teacher-in-service programme is a component of teacher education that is given to teachers who have acquired the minimum academic education for skill improvement and career development while on the teaching profession (NTI, 2012). It enables service teachers to gain self-confidence and better job performance. The Federal Ministry of Education corroborates that in-service training shall be developed as an integral part of

continuing teacher education to take care of all inadequacies (FME, 2009). In this respect, it is expected that through teacher-in-service programme regular teachers will become skillful enough to know what do if children with special needs are included their classes.

It is not an overstatement therefore, to say that inclusive education is about continuing to take the next step towards greater participation of all children in learning. Regular teachers need to be equipped (through in-service training programme) with the concept of inclusive education in order to understand the differences between children and their unique learning needs for effective implementation of inclusive education in Nigeria.

Unfortunately, programmes that prepare teachers to teach children with special needs contain a curriculum that is not found in general teacher preparation or generic programmes in special education. This paper therefore posits that teacher-in-service preparation programme could be functional in developing basic competencies in the service teachers for teaching children with special needs included in their class in certain specific areas. These areas may include development patterns in children with special needs; comprehensive assessments of children with special needs in all areas related to the disability; and ability to design and modify core and specialized curricula for a child with special needs. Knowledge of specialized technology; special instructional strategies; special books, materials and equipment used by the child with special needs is fundamental to regular teachers becoming competent inclusive teachers. According to Fafunwa (1996) no significant change in education can take place in any country unless its teaching staff is well trained and retrained. Therefore, in order to run successful inclusive education programme in Nigeria adequate attention, monitoring and proper training should be given to the regular teachers who are the most “active agents” of its implementation.

## **Conclusion**

Teacher in-service programme aims at developing knowledge and skills that are likely to bring about desired improvements and enhance ‘competence-on-the-job’ of the teacher for whom it has been provided. Training of teachers is an investment in which the National Teacher Institute, Colleges, Institutes of Education and Universities must undertake for sustainable purposes. Ihebereme and Maduwesi (2008) acknowledge that quality teacher education is an anti-dote for achieving overall arms of development in a nation. Without good teachers there cannot be good engineers, no good medical doctors, no lawyers, and so on.

The introduction of inclusive education has posed much responsibility on the regular teachers who were not originally trained to teach children with special needs. Therefore, these teachers need to be retrained on the rudiments of teaching children with special needs in inclusive settings through in-service training programme. In doing this, productivity and quality of work of these teachers will no doubt be increased.

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