

# **EDUCATING SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN IN THE REGULAR SCHOOL: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR NIGERIA**

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## **Abstract**

*Nigeria and most of the countries of Africa are grappling with the problem of making provisions for children with special needs, even on mainstreaming basis. Therefore, this paper attempts to highlight and examine the concepts of inclusive education, educational inclusion and the prospects it holds, for Special Education practice in Nigeria. In addition, the paper discusses the challenges of inclusion in Nigeria. It also discusses about the goals of inclusive education and concluded that there is need for the Governments to adopt as a matter of law or policy, the principle of inclusive education.*

## **Introduction**

Educating special needs children in regular schools or classrooms means inclusion, mainstreaming, integration or normalization. Inclusive education environment attempts to educate special needs children and adults in the same schools or classroom setting alongside the so- called normal children. The call for inclusive education or mainstreaming came as a result of the excluding nature of the life of people with special needs.

## **Inclusive education**

Inclusive education refers to educating children and adults with special needs with their counterparts in the same learning environment. Okuoyibo (2006) defines inclusion as more than ordinary accommodation of all children in a common environment. It also implies that the regular schools would undergo some simple modifications and adaptations in terms of infrastructures, curriculum, personnel, administrative strategies as well as teaching materials approaches” so as to meet the learning needs of the children with special needs.

Basically, there are two types of inclusion, which include social inclusion and educational inclusion.

## **Educational inclusion**

Mani (2003) maintains that inclusion is not a programme but rather an ideology. It is a concept of effective schools where every child has a place to study. But, McCall (2003) in Ozoji (2006) stressed that in education, inclusion is related to disability and in particular to policies concerned with children with disabilities attending mainstream

schools. Inclusion is a provision of educational opportunity to all children irrespective of their condition, age, status, geographical location and disability.

### **Special needs children**

The general understanding of special needs children by layman is handicapped or gifted children. But to Special educators it is beyond this. Ozoji (2006) conceives special needs children as children like others, they differ from one another in age, ability, learning style etc. They have unique learning needs based on their disabilities. Some have cognitive impairments, learning disability, physical disabilities, chronic health problems etc.

He added that traditionally these children are classified along their impairments or gifts such as blind, gifted etc. Obani (2002) describes this classification as “old school”

UNESCO Salamanca Report of 1994 in Ozoji (2006) introduces a new school classification of these children. As children who are for whatever reasons failing to benefit from school due to the following:

- Experiencing difficulties in School whether temporary or permanent.
- Lacking interest and motivation in learning.
- Only able to complete one or two year of primary education, forced to repeat classes.
- Forced to work (Child labor, hawking).
- Living in severe poverty or suffering from chronic malnutrition.
- Victims of war or armed conflict.
- Suffering from continuing physical, emotional or sexual abuse or
- Simply not attending school whatever may be the reason.

UNESCO (1994) further summarized these children into main categories as follows:

- Those who are currently enrolled in to primary School but for various reasons do not progress adequately.
- Those not currently enrolled into primary schools but who could be enrolled if the schools were more responsive and
- The relatively smaller number of children with more severe physical, mental or multiple impairments who have complex special education needs that are not being met.

To meet the educational needs of special needs children, there must be a proper implementation of inclusive education in our regular schools which will involves adequate preparation and adaptation of a procedure.

Ozoji (2006) states that adequate preparation is needed in these areas

- Government policy and back-up policies favoring inclusive education should be translated into pertinent actions.
- Research to point up to ways forward, problems, solution etc.
- Adequate funding.
- Effective public information, because community support is needful for success.
- Extensive training and re- teaching of staff or support personnel.

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- Provision of continuing of support services.
  - Individualized educational plans – education tailored to specific individual needs.

### **Goals of Inclusive Education**

Special education teachers or those who are responsible for implementing inclusive education should take into consideration the following goals during implementation:

- i. To provide education for children with diverse learning needs within the re-structured school community.
- ii. To make special needs children active members of the school community and then to help them achieve quantity education out comes based on their IEP'S and to achieve social competence.
- iii. Build a supportive school community that is able to identify and minimize barriers to learning and participation.
- iv. To educate more children better.
- v. To ensure successful learning and social experience or competence.
- vi. To empower children who are hitherto excluded or isolated.
- vii. To enable students to participate in mainstream education to the best of their abilities.
- viii. To build inclusive schools that can respond to diverse needs.
- ix. To study the pressures that lead some people in schools to feel excluded and separated.
- x. To attend imaginatively to diverse learning needs in the classroom.
- xi. To ensure improvement of students learning outcomes.
- xii. To develop exemplar units of planning for diversity and understand this diversity.
- xiii. To dismantle barriers to access and participation in the end facilitate achievement in schooling and training.

### **Competencies Required by Various Stakeholders in Inclusive Education.**

There are many and different competencies needed by stakeholders of inclusive education in Nigeria as forwarded by Ozoji (2006) which include the following:

- ❖ Ability to solve problem solve in the classroom is important.
- ❖ Ability to figure out informally what skills a child needs remains a major asset for teachers in inclusive classroom.
- ❖ Ability to take advantage of children's individual interests and use their internal motivation for developing needs.
- ❖ Ability to adopt curriculum or aspects instruction on three areas- curriculum, materials, instruction and classroom organization and behavior management.
- ❖ Teacher acceptance that everyone in the classroom in his/her responsibility rather than assuming someone else will do it.
- ❖ Knowledge of instructional strategies and how to use them effectively. This includes ability to adapt materials and to re-write objectives for each child's needs.

- ❖ Ability to foster a cooperative learning environment (Community) and promote socialization for ambiguity.
  - ❖ Ability to work as a team with special teachers, regular teachers and other specialists in whatever the skills and provide the best teaching approach.
  - ❖ Ability to develop lesson plans which reflect evidence of collaboration, curriculum, modification and accommodation.
  - ❖ Ability to implement a variety of instructional arrangements (e.g. Team teaching, cross-graded grouping, peer tutoring, class assistance team, e.t.c.)
- Acquiring the above competencies by special education teachers became necessary for educating special needs children in regular classroom or school, and for proper implementation of inclusive education in Nigeria.

### **Inclusive Education in Nigeria.**

It is a matter of fact that no concrete step has been taken with regard to inclusive education in Nigeria. Integration remains the focus of planning special education programme. However, professional association concerned with the education of people with special needs, have been addressing the issue of inclusive education in the country. For instance, inclusive education was one of the major issues examined at the 12<sup>th</sup> 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, argued. “The old special education system with its restrictive practices cannot successfully address these problems (of special needs children). The answer lies in inclusion or inclusive schooling, in changing and recognizing the entire school system to accept all children and cater for their varied “special” or “ordinary” learning needs and difficulties”. As mentioned earlier, the education of people with special needs has received wide attention at policy level, even though it is otherwise, at the level of implementation. The following problems have been identified with special education in Nigeria:

- ❖ Inadequate plans for the identification of children with special needs.
- ❖ Lack of adequate guidance service for the parents and the nature and extent of special education facilities available for their children.
- ❖ Most special schools are located in urban centers. Begging which is fast assuming the status of an occupation among adult persons with disabilities, as well as other adults who have children with disabilities.

There is also the usual problem of attitude towards persons with disabilities as mentioned by Ozoji (2005), which in most cases is far from being favourable. For instance some parents maltreat, withdrawn and reject their disable children. The local culture is a great influence on perception of disability and the resulting attitude toward it. Some parents and family members are ashamed of exposing their children with disabilities, as these children might tarnish their image especially in Africa societies where the common way of explaining phenomena

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are unscientific. In addition, there is a poor awareness about special education and about the fact that some children with disability can also have an education.

Moreover, most of the intervention programmes carried out by international agencies and development partners are in the area of literacy and non formal education. Even the recently launched universal basic education (UBE) programme of the Federal Government, laid more emphasis on basic education, especially regular primary education and literacy education. Little or no special consideration is given to the education of children with special needs.

The question now, is that how realistic is the adoption of inclusion as strategy, in an environment where special education has to contend with the earlier highlighted problems and several others that have not been highlighted here.

Considering the nature of the environment of special education in Nigeria, Special education teachers have to exercise cautions with attempt to implement inclusion, especially full inclusion. Even in the United States, from where the concept originates, many special educators like Kaufman and Hallan and Zigmond, are still skeptical about its practicability. One has reservation of whether the general educational system designed and implemented in its present form, has the adequate ability to cater for the special learning needs of special needs children in Nigeria today.

### **Promoting Inclusion in Nigeria**

Bakare (2010) opined that, the following are some prospects of inclusion to Nigerian.

- i. Conclusion enhances the attainment of objects of EFA. Education cannot be for all until it receive by all. A system that excludes some people cannot be for all and shall therefore give way to one that is accommodating of all.
- ii. Inclusion promotes a sense of cooperation and the felling of togetherness in the learners.
- iii. It promotes favourable competition among school children of different abilities, endowments and backgrounds.
- iv. Inclusive education provides a means of building a cooperative school community, where all are accommodated and able to participate.
- v. Inclusive schooling is cost effective, as all the learners are accommodated in the same environment using virtually the same facilities. Unnecessary duplications of cost that are associated with segregated arrangements are avoided in inclusion.
- vi. Inclusion allows for the resources of special education teachers to be tapped to the fullest, since they could be used as regular school teachers. It should be noted here, that special education teachers have the unique ability to teach in both the special and regular schools. Inclusion thus presents an avenue for full utilization of the resources of all the members of the community.

**The following points can facilitate inclusion in the Nigerian setting:**

- Adequate planning which must be productive and realistic and take into consideration the peculiar and undeveloped nature of special education in Nigeria.
- Adults with disabilities living on the streets need to be rehabilitated and gainfully engaged.
- Campaigns to enlighten all the stakeholders in the education of children with special needs.
- More exposure of regular teachers to the nature and demands of special needs.
- The Government needs to mobilize people to form more NGOS, to pursue the cause of people with special needs.
- Though the education policy makes provision for a special education commission, the Government should set up action toward this end.
- Lastly, there is need to get the machinery going towards the process of monitoring, in order to ensure effective implementation of inclusive schooling for children with special needs.

**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. Implementing inclusion in such an environment may be unrealistic and counterproductive.

In addition, The Salamanca report said as much in the following statement “we can call upon governments and urge them to adopt as a matter of law or policy, the principle of inclusive education, enrolling all children in regular schools, unless there are compelling reasons for doing otherwise”. There have to be restraints, lest one ends up assisting the special needs children and they finally learn nothing. Instead, it is suggested that there be a phased implementation of inclusion. This will mean gradual implementation, commencing with the first phase which is to identify and remove all the potential and actual obstacles to the implementation of inclusive schooling. The next phase would be to establish the required and then get on to the final phase which is the actual implementation.

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