

**BRIEF REPORTS**

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**INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY: CHALLENGES  
AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR NIGERIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The readiness for acceptance of inclusion varies across countries and continents of the world. While countries within the advanced economies have gone beyond categorical provisions to full inclusion, Nigeria and most countries of Africa, are still grappling with the problem of making provisions for children with special needs especially those with handicaps, even on mainstreaming basis.*

*This paper attempts to highlight and examine the concept of inclusion and the prospects it holds, for special education practice in Nigeria in the 21st century. In addition, the paper discusses the challenges of inclusion in Nigeria, while reflecting upon the ground reality in the country.*

**INTRODUCTION**

Today, if there is any concept that has gained currency in the world of special needs education, it is inclusion. A run down of major publications in the field, will reveal the volume of intellectual energy that has been (and is being) dissipated in the examination of this emerging concept. Inclusion is generating thoughts and attention world wide as a new approach in the provision of services for learners with special needs. International organisations particularly UNESCO, now see inclusive schooling as an effective approach in the education of this class of learners.

The Salamanca Declaration of 1994, provided the needed international and theoretical frames for inclusive education. In the report, the point made was that "the task of the future is to identify ways in which the school, as part of the social environment can create better learning opportunities for all children and by this means, address the challenge that the most pervasive source of learning difficulties is the school system itself (1).

The report further described inclusion "the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitude, of creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society

and achieving education for all; moreover they provide an effective education for the majority of children" (1).

### **CONCEPTUAL EXPLORATION**

Inclusion refers to the "full-time placement of children with mild, moderate and severe disabilities in regular classrooms" (2). The inclusion movement believes that children with special needs should be placed in the regular school classroom which they would have otherwise attended, if they had been normal children. In other words, each child belongs to the regular classroom and therefore, there should be no condition imposed, to exclude him/her from that environment.

Inclusion is a step further in mainstreaming, as it presents a means "by which a school attempts to respond to all pupils as individuals, by reconsidering and structuring its curricular organisation and provision, and allocating resources to enhance equality of opportunity. Through this process, the school builds its capacity to accept all pupils from the local community who wish to attend, and in doing so, reduces the need to exclude pupils" (3). Thus, the high point of inclusion lies in its emphasis on restructuring of the entire school programmes and practices. Here, the content, the process and the environment of the mainstream programme are restructured "in order to accommodate a much wider range of ability" (4).

For Lons Florain, "inclusion of all pupils in the mainstream schools is part of an international agenda which calls for the full inclusion of all pupils with disabilities, into all aspects of life" (5).

Inclusion is based on the assumption that:

- The original place of the child with special needs is in the regular classroom. Therefore, no condition should be allowed to remove him/her from that environment.
- All children have the right to learn and play together. Inclusion is thus a fundamental human right. For instance, the Nigerian constitution makes a provision for suitable education for all children (6).
- Denying opportunity to children to learn under the same roof with other children, is devaluing and discriminatory.
- Exclusion is inhuman and indefensible.

### **SPECIAL EDUCATION PROVISION IN NIGERIA**

Two eras have been identified in the development of provision for persons with special needs in Nigeria (7). The first is the humanitarian/missionary era (1945-1970) during which, provision

of services was dominated by private voluntary organisations (PVOs) and private individuals. During this era, religious bodies (mostly Christian) were the driving force behind establishing and maintenance of services and programmes for children and adults with handicaps. During this era, the attitude of the Government was somehow lackadaisical, in matters concerning persons with disabilities.

The second was the social service era which saw the development of service. The country witnessed a significant contribution from the government, in terms of commitment as well as inputs and there was a relegation of the PVOs and private individuals to the background. This era which commenced immediately after the civil war that ravaged the country for three years, also saw the commencement of the system of Universal Primary Education (UPE) and the eventual take over of all schools (including special schools) established by PVOs and individuals (8). There was also the commencement of training programmes for special teachers. The following institutions were either established or commenced programmes in special education:

1. University of Ibadan started the Diploma in special education in 1974 and a Bachelor's programme in 1976 (9).
2. University of Jos started the Bachelor's programme in special education in 1977 and Master's in 1978.
3. The Federal Advanced Teachers College, Special (FATC), was established by the federal government in 1977. The college, now known as Federal College of Education, Special remains the only college of special education in the whole of black Africa.

It was also during the social service era that in 1977, the National Policy on Education (NPE) was released. The release of this policy was a significant turning point in Nigeria's special education programme.

**The aims of special education as stated in the policy are as follows:**

- (a) to give a concrete meaning to the idea of equalising educational opportunities for all children; their physical, mental and emotional disabilities notwithstanding;
- (b) to provide adequate education for all handicapped children and adults, in order that they may play their roles fully in contributing to the development of the nation;
- (c) to provide opportunities for exceptionally gifted children to develop their skills at their own pace, in the interest of the nation's economic and technological development (10).

In addition, the policy also contains the following provisions that are beneficial to persons with special needs.

- integration of children with handicap into the mainstream of regular schools;
- provision of special education for children;
- setting up of a committee to coordinate special education activities, conducted by the Federal Ministry of Education (FME) in collaboration with the Ministries of Health, Social Welfare and Labour;
- provision of special education services for the gifted and talented children;
- conduct of census of persons with handicap (7).

The social service era also marked the emergence of legislation that are meant to address the problems of children and adults with handicap. It was the Plateau state government that first enacted a law called 'Plateau state handicapped law' which was introduced in 1981. Among other provisions, the law stipulates that the education of children with handicap is compulsory and provides for the rehabilitation needs of adults with handicaps. The law was however, restricted to Plateau State which was just one among the then nineteen states in the country (Nigeria has thirty six states). It was in 1993, that the Federal Government enacted the first and only legislation on the handicapped. The 'Nigerians with Disability Decree' was enacted to " provide a clear and comprehensive legal protection and security for Nigerians with disability, as well as establish a standard for enhancement of the rights and privileges, guaranteed under this decree and other laws applicable to the disabled in the Federal Republic of Nigeria" (11).

### **IMPLEMENTATION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION PROVISIONS**

At the level of policy provisions, it can be said that special education has fared better. It is however a different ball game when it comes to the implementation of the policy declarations. Very little success has been seen in the actualisation of the programmes that are part of the nation's education policy. This is even acknowledged in the National Blueprint on education of the Handicapped published by the FME. According to the blueprint " success made so far in the delivery of special education in Nigeria, although minimal in terms of anticipated impact, largely due to inadequate funds" (12).

As stated in the NPE and the blueprint, a census of the handicapped was taken in 1991. However, though the census was not really targeted at the persons with handicap, since it was only during the general census that two columns were focused on this category of people, it was still a movement in the right direction. The other strategy mapped out in the implementation blueprint, stating that the Federal and State ministries of education should conduct a census of the handicapped, is yet to be done.

In addition to the significant progress made in the implementation of policy provisions, especially those dealing with training of personnel in special education, the federal government established an academy for the gifted and talented children. Although it is pointed out, that in practice, some of the children who are admitted in the academy are not necessarily there because they meet the screening criteria, but through the influence of higher ups in society (7); the fact still remains that the establishment of the academy is in keeping with the provision of the education policy and an attempt at touching the lives of children with special needs.

Apart from these provisions, other aspects of the policy particularly those dealing with administration, integration, provision and management of facilities and identification of children with special needs, for the purpose of enrolment for services, exists mostly on paper.

This situation has led to low enrolment of children with special needs in schools and other service outlets. For instance, enrolment of school age children with handicaps, stands at 0.42% (13), while that of their normal school going counterparts is around 67.05% (14).

### **INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN NIGERIA**

It is a matter of fact, that no concrete step has been taken with regard to inclusive education in Nigeria. Even at policy level, integration remains the focus of planning special education programmes. However, professional associations 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 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]. The answer lies in inclusion or inclusive schooling, in changing and recognising the entire school system to accept all children and cater to their varied 'special' or 'ordinary' learning needs and difficulties" (15).

As alluded to 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 handicapped children,
- Lack of adequate guidance services for the parents and the nature and extent of special education facilities available for their children,
- Most special schools are located in urban centres,

- 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 (7).

There is also the usual problem of attitude towards persons with handicap, which in most cases is far from being favourable. For instance, the writer was a witness to an ugly incident where parents threatened to (and some actually did) withdraw their children from school, because of the presence of a child with epilepsy. The local culture is a great influence on perception of disability and the resulting attitude towards it. Parents and other family members may be ashamed of exposing their children with disabilities, as these children might 'tarnish their image', especially in African societies where the common way of explaining phenomena 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.

Beyond this, the all-pervading problem of illiteracy and its management is more important and therefore, which is more often than not, it takes priority over special needs education. For instance, most intervention programmes carried out by International Agencies and International non Governmental Organisations 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. Where attention is focused on special needs education, it is mostly in the area of basic education for the nomadic groups and the girl-child. Little or no special consideration is given to the education of children with disabilities.

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

Given the nature of the environment of special education in the country, one will have to exercise caution in the attempt to implement inclusion, especially full inclusion. Even in the United States, from where the concept originates, many special educators like Kaufman and Hallan (16) and Zigmond (17), are still sceptical about its practicability.

One has reservations on whether the general educational system designed and implemented in its present form, has the adequate ability to cater for the special learning needs of exceptional children in Nigeria today.

### **PROMOTING INCLUSION IN NIGERIA**

Inclusion as a strategy meant to include the excluded or marginalised groups in educational programmes including schooling, holds a lot of prospects for Nigeria.

1. Inclusion enhances the attainment of the objectives of EFA. Education cannot be for all until it is received by all (7). A system that excludes some people, cannot be for all and

should therefore give way to one that is accommodating of all. It has been argued, "A system that serves only a minority of children while denying attention to a majority of others that equally need special assistance ... need not prosper in the 21st century (15).

2. Inclusion promotes a sense of cooperation and the feeling of togetherness in the learner.
3. It promotes favourable competition among school children of different abilities, endowments and backgrounds.
4. In addition to its direct benefit on learners with special needs, 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 utilisation of the resources of all the members of the community.
5. Inclusive education provides a means of building a cooperative school community, where all are accommodated and able to participate.
6. 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.

The following points can facilitate inclusion in the Nigerian setting.

1. Adequate planning which must be proactive (4) and realistic and take into consideration the peculiar and undeveloped nature of special education in Nigeria.
2. Campaigns to enlighten all the stakeholders in the education of children with special needs. This should be done in addition to aggressive awareness campaigns to reach out to parents of normal children who need to be receptive of special needs children.
3. More exposure of regular teachers to the nature and demands of special needs. Although the education policy provides for a compulsory component of Elements of Special Education for all teacher education students, there are still some teacher education institutions (especially in the universities) which are yet to implement this important policy provision. In addition to getting these institutions to implement the projects, more course units on special education should be made compulsory for all teachers-to-be, especially those going to teach at primary and secondary school levels.
4. Adults with disabilities living on the streets, need to be rehabilitated and gainfully engaged.
5. The Government needs to mobilise people to form more NGOs, to pursue the cause of people with special needs.

6. Professionals and other stakeholders should work towards getting the National Assembly to legislate the creation of a special fund for the education of children with special needs.
7. Though the education policy makes provision for a special education commission, this is still to be implemented. The Government should step up action towards this end.
8. Lastly, there is the 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 and a lackadaisical attitude of the people and government. Implementing inclusion in such an environment may be unrealistic and counterproductive.

In addition, the complexity and diversity of the country requires more intensive mobilisation of resources and information dissemination before inclusion can be institutionalised. With a nation still given to unscientific modes of explaining natural phenomena and human conditions, where illiteracy still exists in significant proportion, adoption of the inclusive school system, may end up not in the best interests of the concerned individuals.

Inclusion should not and must not be considered in the absolute. The Salamanca report said as much in the following statement, “we 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” (1). As far as Nigeria is concerned, presently there are enough compelling reasons to treat implementation of inclusive education with caution. 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 infrastructure and then get on to the final phase which is the actual implementation.

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