

Provision and Maintenance of Quality Education for Learners With Special Needs in Nigerian Inclusive Schools



Education

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ABSTRACT

Learners with special needs are only different from others in that they require special attention which others may not require. Learners with special needs share in common with their other peers the desire for education and self-determination. However, they are limited by the challenges of sustaining attention and focus. Regrettably, quality education within the framework of inclusive education for special needs is gravely undermined by lack of provision of this programme. In the endeavor of finding ways to assist such learners along their individual paths of discovery, it is essential that parents and teachers play their various roles of devising standard means of engaging with special needs. This paper therefore contends that a very important way to achieve quality education for persons with special needs is to inextricably link special educational processes with broader processes of educational reform. More so to integrate them regardless of the type or severity of disability, in their communities so that they experience no physical or attitudinal barriers as they pursue their personal goals in education, housing, employment, and all other activities of daily living. This process is generally known as inclusion. It will help to achieve the education for all objectives by making it possible for learners with special needs to be educated in least restrictive environment, and will help promote quality education for all children especially those with special needs.

Introduction

Throughout history, people with disability have constituted an important segment of the society because they are found in every society across gender, race, ethnicity, religion and geographical boundaries. According to the World Bank, more than one third of children out of school have a disability, and fewer than 5% of children with a disability reach the education for all goals of primary school completion (Richard, R. (2009). Regrettably, many of them have been perceived as object of and subjected to discrimination, violence and misunderstanding. Sometimes they become ostracized and denied basic human rights because they were "different" from others. The long-held belief that all people should interact with the environment in the same or at least a very similar way has been elusive for most persons with disability. For many years the term 'special needs' has been used to describe all people with any sort of physical or mental deviation, but presently, the term is used more accurately to mean problems a person with one form of disability or the other may encounter while interacting with his or her environment. It has only been within recent decades that society has come to recognize that having a disability does not prevent a person from working and living as well as anyone else and that some persons which the society term as "normal" may actually require special needs.

Addressing the crisis of the exclusion of children and youth with disabilities from education can be as daunting as well as complex. Gabriele (2007) posits that persons with disabilities in developing countries were accorded too little attention in major development programmes especially in provision of quality educational opportunities and equality. Okorosaye-Orubite and Abdulrahman (2008) observed that quality education are not provided and maintained for people living with diverse disability and have as a result accused the Nigerian government of insincerity in providing quality education that would not be discriminatory on the part of those who are disabled. Nwagu and Umeifekwem (2014) opined that providing in-school programmes of Health and Physical activity promotion services for students with special educational needs in Nigeria within the framework of inclusive education principles presents a rational step for achieving equality of educational opportunities for all. This paper therefore discusses factors and diverse concepts related to disability and further suggest practical means of providing systematic quality education within the framework of inclusion to cater for the special needs population in schools which can have

the added benefit of improving education for all children.

Changing Attitudes towards persons with special needs

For thousands of years in every culture and society physical and mental differences have been ascribed special meaning. This was usually negative and often persists in stigma, negative attitudes and stereotypes today. People were thought to have special needs because they or their –parents had done something wrong in the past. Hence, they are being visited by deities or gods. Persons with special needs were often subjected to inhuman treatment, being seen as bringing shame on their families. Euthanasia (the act or practice of killing or permitting the death of sick or injured individuals) was widely practiced on babies born with significant impairments. Such children were often abandoned and had to rely on begging to survive.

It was believed that special needs persons brought bad luck because they may have been cursed or had a spell placed on them by the 'gods'. They were often viewed as not fully human or possessed by evil spirits. They were ostracized and labeled negatively. This made it easy to make fun or ridicule them. They became a caption of jokes and symbols for all the ills that may have befalling the world. There are many cultural and literary manifestations of this thinking which are still being reinforced in myths, legend or literature. Even modern films, comics and television programmes draw upon and reinforce these negative stereotypes. Stereotypes are bundles of negative and untrue perceptions which often precondition how people treat and respond to disabled people. These attitudes towards persons with special needs should be changed because several conditions could place anybody on special needs.

Concept of 'Special Needs Persons'

Special needs persons are those who have been observed to require special attention and specific necessities that other children do not. The state decides upon this status and offers benefits that follow a person with special needs because it is believed that the person will not be adopted if assistance is not provided. Special needs education assumes that human differences are normal and that learning must accordingly be adapted to the needs of the person rather than the person fitted to pre-ordained assumptions regarding the pace and nature of the learning process.

The Salamanca Statement, Inclusion, Inclusive education: An overview

The Salamanca Statement

The United Nations and its agency, UNESCO, have played a significant role in promoting inclusive education in the present review. The most significant event took place in June 1994 when representatives of 92 governments and 25 international organizations met in Salamanca, Spain (UNESCO, 1994). The resulting agreement, known as the Salamanca statement, demonstrated an international commitment to inclusive education. It included the following agreements:

i. Those with special education needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child-centered pedagogy? capable of meeting these needs, and regular schools with this inclusive orientations are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving an education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system.

ii. The Statement also called upon all governments 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'.

The statement re-affirms the right to education of every individual, as enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and renews the pledge made by the world community at the 1990 world conference on education for all to ensure that right for all, regardless of individual differences. The statement also mentions the 1993 UN Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities which states that the education of disabled children should be an integral part of the education system.

Inclusion

Inclusion is no longer a new concept in the field of special education and disability. During the 19th century, pioneers of special education argued for and helped develop provision for persons who were excluded from education (Reynolds and Anis-Cow, 1994). The education of these persons with special educational needs and disabilities is now an established key policy objective in many countries (Lindsay, 2007). According to Nwagu and Umeifekwem (2014), inclusion as an organizational model for educating students with disabilities in regular educational setting along with non-disabled peers, provides a practical and sustainable platform within which quality education can be provided as instructional resource and support to serve special educational and health needs of students with disability.

According to Susie (2000) from Enabling Education Network (EENET), the definition of inclusion is clearly broader than just special needs or disability, as the Framework spells out the many categories of persons who may be excluded from education. The guiding principle that informs this Framework is that: Schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social and emotional, linguistic or other disabling conditions. This should persons who are disabled and gifted, street children and those who go to school, those from remote and nomadic populations, linguistic, ethnic or religious minorities and children from other disadvantaged or marginalized areas or groups.

Inclusive education

There is no universally agreed understanding of inclusive education. UNESCO (2001) defines inclusive education as a developmental approach in education that "seeks to address the learning needs of all children, youth and adults with specific focus

on those who are vulnerable to marginalization and exclusion". An alternative interpretations, such as that offered by Ainscow (1999), suggest that inclusive education should be concerned with 'overcoming barriers to participation that may be experienced by any person'. He defines it as a 'process of increasing the participation of pupils in, and reducing their exclusion from, the cultures, curricula and communities of their local schools'. This notion of inclusion, he argues, 'lays the foundations for an approach that could lead to the transformation of the system itself. Dyson (2003) supports this notion, arguing that 'many children who currently experience difficulty in our schools share important characteristics and are educated in settings that themselves have similarities'. This, he continues, makes it more likely that 'systematic rather than individual interventions' will come to be seen as appropriate to practitioners and policy-makers. In other words, the learning environment should change, rather than the individual.

Porter (2013) found that inclusive education can:

- Be less expensive to implement and operate than special education services
- Have a broader reach than traditional special education in terms of positive education and social impacts on children;
- Contribute significantly to the ongoing professional development and job satisfaction of educators; and
- Produce better moral and team effort in the school environment.

Factors that Influence effective implementation of inclusion

Many successful examples of inclusion of persons with special needs into regular education have relied on additional funds for their success. However, inclusive education is said to be positively influenced when families are in an active partnership with educators; Principals, teachers and school boards demonstrate commitment to support the programme ; Teacher education provides teachers with the skills to cater to the diverse needs of all students; Specialists work in partnership with teachers; Accommodations are made to support individuals to learn; Schools are resourced to teach all children well; All children are given opportunities to have a say in their learning. Of all these factors, the teacher's attitude towards the programme of inclusion determines to a great extent the success of its implementation. According to O' Brien (2000), the key resource for a successful inclusive education programme lies inside the teacher's head. Some mainstream teachers have considerable reservations about the feasibility of inclusion in reality. Teachers must be both competent and confident in their teaching ability. Brownell and Pajars (1999) emphasize that teachers' beliefs are important determinants and predictors of teaching practices. Many teachers concern center on issues as appropriate curriculum, in-class support, ongoing training, their ability to teach diverse groups of children, planning time, how high to set expectations and how to assess the students. Putnam (1998) acknowledges that it is not always easy to teach persons of different abilities in the same class. The movement towards inclusive education continues on the assumption that teachers are willing to admit students within the regular classes and be responsible for meeting their needs.

Problems Facing Implementation of Inclusive Education Programme

Article 24 of the (United Nations Conventions on the rights of persons with Disabilities) UNCRPD (2006) confirms that persons with disabilities should have access to quality education, yet it is noted that the following problems still exist in most countries around the globe:

- Shortage of trained staff and resource teachers at primary, secondary and tertiary levels;
- Lack of awareness and adoption of upcoming accessible technologies which can help us have equal access to education materials and information;
- No clear guidelines on inclusive education or concrete commitments in terms of budget allocation in our countries;
- Lack of awareness and education facilities for people with disabilities in rural areas;
- Inaccessible schools and local transport;
- Lack of access to scholarships by persons with disabilities.

The major challenge of inclusive education is to satisfy the needs of heterogeneous group of learners in the classroom. Therefore, it is mandatory for all concerned stakeholders to seek solution for misconceptions, wrong beliefs and social barriers which are encountered with current special needs education practice in inclusive setting (Tirusew, 2005).

Quality education for persons with special needs

Education is not only a fundamental right but also a basic necessity to be able to participate and flourish in one's community. It is the stage where children and adults learn to integrate into and become an active member of society. According to Richler (2005), concurrent with move to promote education for all, there has been the acceptance of inclusive education as an internationally recognized policy goal. However, there is still a debate about the definition of inclusion, and about the characteristics that ensure its quality. Much of what happens in the name inclusion is really an attempt to provide a special education program in a regular classroom setting. This model is prevalent in some places where persons with special needs have been placed into regular classes but where the regular system has not changed in order to include the student with special education needs. Governments and others who invest in education are increasingly turning away from segregated models. They are concerned about getting the most for limited resources, and in many jurisdictions that is the reason for wanting to reform special education and eliminate special programs. Where the number of children out of school is high, even substantial increases in special education budgets would not nearly address the need. Finally, where the number of students attending special schools is high, there is a failure of mainstream schools to meet diverse needs.

Key strategies for provision and maintenance of quality education for learners with special needs in Nigerian inclusive schools

1. Inclusive education programme should be reviewed regularly to ensure that it continues to meet the needs of the learners

with special educational needs and all who are not.

2. Diverse and specialized professional development options must be produced that allow for teachers to gain experience which can meet their needs appropriately.
3. The education of learners with barriers especially those with behavior problems require working together with other experts. Collaboration benefits the individual teacher, learners, and the school as a whole for it leads ultimately to the improvements of the delivery of appropriate education.
4. In-service training should be ongoing and promote lifelong professional development of teachers in inclusive education. It is believed that teachers will benefit profoundly from comprehensive in-service training so as to facilitate individual learning.
5. Urgent considerations should be given to addressing the apparent poor social images of learners with barriers who are included in regular classrooms.
6. Collaboration has the potential to promote greater confidence, competence, and professional relationship and communication as well as enhance the planning and delivery of inclusive education. When all these are achieved, inclusion of persons with special needs will not just be seen as a necessity but a priority.

Recommendations

Governments and other duty-bearers should endeavor to recall the commitments made in the UNCRPD and urge them to address the problems as follows:

- Recruit sufficient resource teachers;
- Adopt upcoming accessible technologies and make them easily available;
- Issue clear guidelines on inclusive education and streamline needs-based education;
- Put in sufficient resource (budget allocations) to enable an education of equal importance and quality to be provided to all children with disabilities, including accessible buildings and school transport, teacher training and the provision of additional support for those who require specialist support;
- Develop appropriate solutions to provide education to people with severe disabilities, including home-based education;
- Raise awareness, especially in rural areas, of education facilities and the rights of children with disabilities to education;
- Introduce and expand scholarship opportunities for people with disabilities of all ages.

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