

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND LEARNING DIFFICULTIES AMONG SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN IN NIGERIA: THE CASE OF THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED

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Abstract

Vision has an essential role in a child's development, and visual deficit is a risk factor not only for altered vision-sensory development, but also for education and overall socioeconomic status throughout life. If there is any group of individuals who need quality education, the visually impaired should be in the fore front. The policy of education for all is therefore a welcome development. Subsequent upon that, this discourse was predicated on the fate of the special needs children and particularly the visually impaired in the Nigerian primary education system. Through extensive review of literature, the researchers discussed the status of inclusive education and x-rayed the numerous challenges to the implementation of inclusive education programmes in Nigeria which included poor funding, poor teacher preparation, lack of school counselors, poor infrastructure, lack of adequate collaboration among regular and specialized personnel and families, unwholesome attitude or stigmatization among others. Using Bruner's theory of instruction, the theoretical bases for non-restrictive learning environment for the visually impaired children were highlighted. Based on that, the researchers posited that if the challenges are not urgently handled, through restructuring of the major processes of inclusion, the learning difficulties already being encountered by the visually impaired children in the regular classrooms will be exacerbated rather than being abated; and that will impact negatively on the child, the family as well as the society at large. Bearing in mind the zero reject principle of the current education policy in Nigeria and elsewhere which emphasizes equal educational opportunities for every child, the researchers made some suggestions on the way forward centering on curriculum content and implementation processes, including capacity building programmes for personnel and collaborative and interdisciplinary approaches.

Introduction

Education is an instrument that makes learners gain access to knowledge, skills and information that will prepare them to contribute to

community and national development. It is often seen as a tool that can be used to reduce poverty, improve the lives of individuals and transform societies (Grubb and Lazerson, 2004). For education to achieve this purpose, it needs to take care of all citizens including those who may be at risk of marginalization on the basis of: ethnicity, linguistic background, gender, physical and intellectual or any other form of impairment as well as the gifted or talented children. These are generally referred to as special needs children. In realization of the place of education in human development, the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004) in her National Policy on Education states that every Nigerian child should have equal educational opportunity to maximize his/her potential irrespective of the child's peculiar characteristics such as giftedness or impairment of any form.

Special Need Children: The Visually Impaired

As earlier stated, special needs children do not necessarily refer to children with impairments or developmental challenge only. It also includes children with special abilities (gifted or talented) who may find normal classroom activities boring, not challenging enough or even discouraging. Special needs children may include the visually impaired, hearing impaired, autistics, physically, emotionally, and psychologically impaired as well as gifted or especially talented children. The present researchers are interested in the visual impairment which is here described as any form of reduced vision that cannot be corrected by spectacles or contact lenses. According to Medicare Vision Rehabilitation Services Act cited in Blaise-Okezie, Ihem-Chijioke and Ewunonu (2015), visual impairment refers to vision loss of a person to such a degree as to qualify as an additional support need through a significant limitation of a visual capacity; resulting from either disease, trauma, congenital or degenerative conditions among others that cannot be corrected by conventional means such as refractive correction or medication. Vision has an essential role in a child's development, and a visual deficit is a risk factor not only for altered vision-sensory development, but also for education and overall socioeconomic status throughout life. Loss of vision in children is a critical issue as it may influence their education, development, employment and social activities.

Among the common causes of visual impairment in children and adults are cataract, glaucoma, onchocerciasis, and vitamin A deficiency, (World Health Organization, 2001). Also according to Bezabih, Abebe, and Fite (2017), visual impairment is caused by cataract, glaucoma, uncorrected refractive errors, age-related macular degeneration and corneal opacity; and also may be associated with the quality of health service and the

socioeconomic status of the people. Osadare (2017) has put the number of children suffering from vision impairment in Nigeria at over five million. This is a reasonable percentage of the Nigeria's total population and should not be ignored.

Visual impairment varies in intensity. It may be high, moderate or low. However, according to Perks (2007), children who are visually impaired no matter the intensity battle with a lifetime of emotional, social and economic difficulties, which also may affect the family and society. Therefore every assistance need to be provided for the visually impaired children to enable them develop their potentials in life so and be able to contribute meaningfully to national development. Unfortunately, the traditional education system in Nigeria and elsewhere is often designed to cater for the normally developing children. That prompted some parents of special needs children especially the visual and hearing impaired to be sending them to special schools where affordable (Blaise-Okezie, Ihem-Chijioke, and Ewunonu, 2015). Most of such special schools such as the school or centre for the deaf and dumb or school for the blind are quite costly therefore many of the special needs children especially those suffering from one form of impairment or the other in developing countries like Nigeria often end up not being educated at all or dropping out of the regular school system. Even where the parents are able to sponsor the child in such special schools, it often reminds the children that they are different from the other normal children thereby triggering some kind of psychological disturbances that do not engender effective growth and development. Thus, the current clarion call for inclusive education worldwide.

Inclusive Education

Inclusion is a philosophy and practice that supports the rights of all children, regardless of their abilities or dispositions to participate actively in everyday activities within their communities. The principle of inclusion according to UNICEF, (2013) emphasizes active participation of children within the natural environment of their community. In relation to education therefore, inclusion specifically focuses on including or accommodating all children in normal or regular education programmes. Okuoyibo (2001) sees inclusive education as a means whereby children with special needs regardless of their unique nature are put into the mainstream with planned activities of general education. Ozoji (2005) also sees inclusive education as a programme carefully designed to educate learners with diverse needs within a re-structured mainstream or schools. Inclusive education is further defined by Ozoji, Unachukwu and Kolo (2016) as educational practices which make

provisions for functional and effective learning and training for all learners within all settings most readily available to them.

The philosophy behind inclusive education is that every child is important and can contribute meaningfully to the development of the society if properly equipped. It is therefore a form of capacity building process with defined principles. The principles of inclusive education according to Ozoji, Unachukwu & Kolo were that: every child and family is equally valued and deserves the same opportunities; all children learn in different ways; and education is a child's right and not a privilege. Providing an inclusive education to all is necessary because it is linked to human, economic, and social development. This is in response to the advocacy of Dakar Framework on Education for All (UNESCO, 2000). Failure of any education system to provide an education for all children may not only lead to an educational underclass, but also a social and economic underclass which has serious consequences for societal growth, development and sustenance. The growth of inclusive educational practices in Nigeria stems from increased recognition that children with disabilities and or special needs thrive well when they are provided the same educational and social opportunities as normally developing children. There is also evidence such as Bossaert, Boer, Frostad, Pijl, and Petry, (2015), that participating in inclusive settings can yield social and emotional benefits for children with special needs. Specifically, Bossaert et al identified such social and emotional benefits to include struggling to develop and maintain positive peer relationships, which have important implications for a child's learning and psychological development. Including children with impairment can support improvements in teaching practice that benefit all children. However to effectively include such a child with impairment require teachers and school administrators to develop capacities to support the individual strength and needs of every child, not just those with impairments.

In most cases being educated alongside a visually impaired child for instance does not lead to adverse effects for normally developing children. In short, normally developing children who are educated in a regular classroom alongside other impaired children often do not hold any prejudicial view and often are more accepting of those who are different from themselves even outside school environment. Therefore, the key aspects of including every child in regular school programme are the values, beliefs, and institutional practices that work best for each child. Hence, inclusive education focuses on the transformation of school cultures and pedagogy to increase access for all children, enhance the acceptance of all children, maximize children's participation in various activities, and increase the achievement and

development of all children. In other words the process of education must be meaningful and relevant to the learner.

Theoretical bases for effective Inclusive Education

Theoretically, rich and quality learning environment and human interactions have been identified as part of the key elements of the learning process. Theorists like J. Brunner, Albert Bandura and others propounded theories in favour of quality learning environment and healthy human interactions (Brunner, 1960; Bandura, 1977). Specifically, Brunner postulated that for instruction to be effective and worthwhile, it must consider the following: the nature of the learner; the nature of the knowledge; and the nature of the learning process. To Brunner, man lives within a culture and is hopelessly ineffective without the culture. Therefore it is the very nature of man that should inform the provision of appropriate guide and pedagogy. Brunner also identified five key components of any learning theory: the optimal experience to predispose learners to learn; a structuring of knowledge for optimal comprehension; specification of optimal sequence of presentation of materials to be learned; the role of success and failure; and the nature of reward and punishment and procedures for stimulating thoughts in a school setting.

Drawing from Brunner's theory as presented above, one may be tempted to assert that the visually impaired children are in a fix in the present day Nigeria's type of inclusive education. This is in line with the array of challenges to effective implementation of inclusive education in Nigeria (Stephanie, 2012; Obanya (2013). Visual impairment already places the child into a peculiar culture which must be critically observed while providing learning experiences for them. Including children with visual impairment in the mainstream education require restructuring of some major components such as: planned activities of general education; re-structured mainstream education; provision for functional and effective learning and training for all learners; capacity building process with defined principle; and transformation of school culture and pedagogy to increase access for all children. The visually impaired children especially require rich and organized learning environment with emphasis on quality interaction with teachers and peers; availability of special learning facilities; opportunity for individualized learning where necessary; suitable evaluation techniques among others. This demands active public and private partnership as well as sound and reliable policy statement and implementation.

Current moves and Policies for Inclusive Education

Government, non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders in childhood education have been making effort towards including children with special needs in normal classroom environment in Nigeria. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004 for instance states that disability is a natural part of human experience and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to participate in or contribute to the development of the society. Improving educational results for children with special needs therefore should be an essential element of every national policy aimed at ensuring equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency. Almost 30 years of research and experience has demonstrated that the education of children with special needs can be made more effective by having high expectations for such children and ensuring their access to the general education curriculum in the regular classroom, to the maximum extent possible.

The World Declaration on Education for All at Jomtien in 1990 renewed its commitment to ensuring the rights of all people to education and knowledge. In 1994, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO,) World Conference on Special Needs Education issued a consensus report on the education of children with special needs. This resulted to Salamanca Statement that “those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools.” The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) binds its 161 signatory states to ensure that “persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live.” Article 24 of the convention requires States to ensure an inclusive education system at all levels for people with disabilities as well as opportunities for life-long learning. Article 24 also stipulates that children with disabilities must not be excluded from general education; that reasonable accommodations and individualized supports must be provided for them; and that people with disabilities should have access to tertiary education, vocational training, and adult education on an equal basis with non-disabled children.

Many countries have developed national policies to support inclusion. Moves to fashion an inclusive education policy in Nigeria started with introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1976 and Universal Basic Education (UBE) in 1999. In 1977, the first National Policy on Education was formulated. This document contained some provisions for special education including the idea of equalizing education for all children irrespective of their physical, mental, and emotional state (Garuba, 2003). In

education, national policies are driven by international organization manifestoes especially those from the United Nations International Children and Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nation Educational Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declarations. From the late 1980s UNICEF began to take on the issue of education for children as a central goal. In pursuance of this goal, the organization produced a binding international instrument known as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989. Nigeria has also enacted its own Child's Rights Act Laws of the Federation in 2004. The UNESCO's Declaration on Education for All (EFA) in 1990, the Framework for Action 1994, and the World Education Forum in Dakar, in 2000, formed the coherent force that influenced the adoption of national policies on the education of children with special needs in Nigeria.

Generally, inclusive education involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a common vision which covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children. According to Salami (2013), inclusive education was not the rule in Nigerian schools. Many years ago, special classes were created for children with special needs. Obani (2006) opined that inclusive education is the most current system of providing education for children with special needs. This entails the acceptance of all children without exception or discrimination into the school that they should ordinarily attend. It also implies that there has to be some adoptions and modifications in the regular schools in terms of administrative strategies, curriculum, learning materials, infrastructure, personnel and methods of approach in order to accommodate the special learning needs of children notwithstanding their forms of disabilities and difficulties in learning. All these according to Nkwoagba (2013) are geared towards including children, youths and adults with special needs into their homes and the general society starting from the school.

Nigeria adopted a formal special education policy in 1988, and has since created additional legislation requiring that schools provide inclusive education services to children with disabilities (Ajuwon, 2008; Tesemma, 2011).

Status of Inclusive Education in Nigerian Primary Schools

Despite the worthwhile objectives of inclusive education as articulated by UNESCO in, Ozoji, Unachukwu, and Kolo, (2016), the inclusiveness of education in Nigeria is still being appraised with mixed feelings. It was observed that, while some parents applaud the system, others see it as a threat to their children's social integration and future prospects. There is a perception

that certain disabilities are more acceptable to inclusive education within the country's inclusive learning settings than others, based on a cultural logic that places different bodily impairments on a hierarchy. This is against the zero reject principle of inclusive education which emphasizes equal educational opportunities for every child. Studies also reveal that teachers themselves show signs of discomfort in inclusive education classrooms as a result of inadequate provision of specialized training and resources to equip teachers in handling children with special education needs in regular classrooms (Mandyate, 2002). In support of the questionable success of inclusive education in Nigeria, Obanya (2013) identified some barriers to effective inclusion of children with special needs in regular classroom to include: economic (eg poverty), physical (eg geographical barriers), sociological (eg exclusion from formal education for generations), and psychological (eg language of the school different from that of the community). In addition, some barriers also may be linked to attitudes, ignorance, poor value orientation and low self worth. In the same vein, while upholding the need for inclusive education in Nigeria, Stephanie, (2012) outlined several challenges to inclusive education which should be urgently addressed. Such challenges include: poor funding, poor teacher preparation, negative attitude and stereotype, lack of cooperation, poor equipment, and accessibility problems. In the light of the above, the special needs children especially the visually impaired may be at more risk under the current inclusive education system in Nigeria.

Learning Difficulties among the Visually Impaired Children in Inclusive Classroom

It may be argued that educating the visually impaired children in special schools such as the school for the blind may create in them a sense of being abnormal thereby making them have sense of low self worth. However Eleweke and Rhoda (2000) observed that the visually impaired children in inclusive schools are often socially isolated as they often sit in the classroom and rarely participate in other activities outside the confines of the classroom. This may be the reason why some researchers recommended partial inclusion rather than full inclusion (Suleiman, 2006; Anon, 2012). According to Anon, most specialized services or instructions may require special equipment and attention which may distract the rest of the class members. In Nigeria, where many of the classrooms are overcrowded, such services and demands may be overwhelming to the teachers and the pupils may end up being frustrated. In such circumstance the learning difficulty already being encountered by the visually impaired children may become exacerbated rather than being abated.

The visually impaired children may also face increased learning difficulties under the current inclusive education. This might be so as the present Nigerian education system seems to lack the essential elements which must be in place in order to provide appropriate education in the least restrictive environment for the visually impaired children. Such essential elements according to Suleiman cited by Blaise-Okezie, Ihem-Chijioke and Ewunonu (2015, p. 281) are:

- (i) Visually impaired children have unique educational needs which are most effectively met using a team approach of professionals, parents, and children. Therefore to meet their unique needs, children ought to have specialized services, books, and materials in appropriate media including Braille as well as specialized equipment and technology to ensure equal access to the core and specialized curriculum to enable them to compete effectively with their peers in school and ultimately in the society.
- (ii) There must be a full range of programme options and support services so that the individualized education programme (IEP) team can select the most appropriate in the least restrictive environment for each individual child with visual impairment.
- (iii) There must be adequate personnel preparation programmes to train staff to provide specialized services which address the unique academic and non-academic curriculum needs of children with visual impairment. And there must also be ongoing specialized personnel development opportunities for all staff working with these children as well as specialized parent education.

With the wide array of challenges to effective implementation of inclusive education in Nigeria, such as poor funding, poor teacher preparation, lack of school counselors, poor infrastructure, unwholesome attitude or stigmatization among others, the visually impaired children may suffer double jeopardy. The classroom environment may not be conducive for them as the facilities and the attention needed from both teachers and peers may not be readily available. Above all, without non-restrictive learning environment, quality teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil relationships, every effort to educating children with special needs may end up being effort in futility.

Conclusion

It has been established that inclusive education emphasizes the principle of zero reject in terms of eligibility status. In other words, no impairment or special characteristics of any child will prevent him/her from receiving general education like every other child. The Nigeria's education policies also emphasize education for all, and education as a child's right and not a privilege. However, evidence from research suggest that the present system of education in Nigeria lack the essential elements which must be in place in order to provide appropriate education in the least restrictive environment for the visually impaired children. By implication, keeping the visually impaired children in the so called inclusive education especially at the primary level of education, without proper restructuring of the system, in terms of the curriculum content and implementation processes may end up having their early years wasted with little or no skill at all for adult life. If this is allowed to continue, the impact of the impairment will be compounded for the impaired individual, the family and the society at large.

Recommendations

For 'education for all' to be achieved, total inclusive education that requires all the basic and more specialized services for both learners with and without special needs must be provided within the regular school setting on a comprehensive basis. This implies that the regular schools should have full arrangements for special equipments (Braille, audio player, list recorder and talking books), services and personnel in addition to a functional linkage to homes of the learners. More importantly, it must be recognized that the task of including the needs of children with disabilities especially the visually impaired and those of their families in any National Policy on Education is important and carries life-long implication. The government should intensify effort towards literacy programmes aimed at eliminating prejudices associated with impairments and stereotype behavior of people towards the visually impaired people. This invariably will boost the children's belief and trust in the teachers, peers, and in their selves.

The researchers therefore make the following suggestions for enhanced implementation of inclusive education as regards the visually impaired children:

- 1) Adequate fund should be provided for procuring the special facilities and services needed by the visually impaired children.
- 2) There should be reorientation programmes for teachers and pupils at a given intervals to help eradicate prejudices

associated with visual impairments and stereotype behavior of people towards the visually impaired children. This is necessary as the visually impaired children need quality interaction with peers, teachers and other significant persons to develop and learn.

- 3) Home and school collaboration should be encouraged. This may help in early identification of vision problems among children.
- 4) Counseling services should be provided for the visually impaired children to boost their belief and trust in the training and services provided in the inclusive education environment.
- 5) Specialized equipment such as Braille, audio player, list recorder and talking books among others should be provided for the visually impaired children. This will enable them participate actively in the learning activities in school.
- 6) e-Learning Platforms and ICT facilities and applications such as the one for enlarged print for low vision learners; obstacle sound signal relay devices for blind learners; tactile simulations for blind readers; talking books for blind learners; among others should be adopted in schools.
- 7) Capacity building programmes for both regular and specialized personnel should be institutionalized. Such programmes should focus on both the specialty competence and complimentary abilities of all staff in making inclusive education practice functional. This will keep the teachers, administrators and other personnel abreast with the best practices of teaching and learning in an inclusive education classroom especially in handling the visually impaired children.

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