MAINSTREAMING LEARNERS WITH COGNITIVE DISABILITIES AND NON-ACADEMIC INCLINATIONS: OVERLOOKED DIMENSIONS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract
Inclusion of students with special needs is prevalent in many countries. One of many goals of inclusive education is to give students with disabilities the opportunity to participate in the least restrictive environment so that they receive as much education as possible with non-disabled students. Disability here covers both physical and cognitive domains but one finds that inclusive education in most countries - Nigeria inclusive - focus on mainstreaming learners with physical challenges, especially the hearing impaired learners, visually impaired learners, and physically impaired learners into regular classrooms with all the attendant supports required, while the learners with cognitive challenges and non-academic inclinations are overlooked. These groups of learners are rarely identified in the inclusive classrooms with the implication that little or no provisions and supports are made for them. This paper x-rayed the overlooked component of inclusive education with specific reference to slow learners, learners with learning disabilities (dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia), and learners with non-academic inclination. The paper recommends that cognitive component of inclusive education be recognized and catered for by concerned authorities. Special education component of teacher education should also cover special cognitive needs of learners so challenged. It is important to provide educators with necessary orientations and training on special cognitive needs of some learners in inclusive classrooms. Adequate resources and support should also be provided to meet the needs of these learners.

Introduction

The formation of contemporary educational programmes such as inclusive education requires that all children and young people (with or without disabilities) learn together in a classroom. This learning process

occurs from the pre-school level through primary and secondary school levels to higher institutions. Essentially, the growth of inclusive education practices stems from increased recognition that students with disabilities thrive when they are, to the greatest extent possible, provided the same educational and social opportunities as non-disabled students. This conveys continuity in the process of breaking down barriers to learning and participation for all categories of learners in the educational system. Nevertheless, many parents and teachers have concerns that the inclusion of students with disabilities might come at the expense of their non-disabled classmates. They may worry that the modifications or accommodations that students with disabilities require in inclusive classrooms will impede the learning of non-disabled students. Despite these concerns, research has demonstrated that, for the most part, including students with disabilities in regular education classes does not harm non-disabled students and may even confer some academic and social benefits (Thomas, 2016). Inclusive education, therefore, is placed upon full participation in a school for all by children with or without disabilities. In this perspective, schools are expected to become capable to welcome any child.

Inclusive education succinctly implies:

1) To give equal value both to pupils and teachers;
2) To increase pupils' participation – and to decrease their exclusion – as for cultures, curricula, and communities in the territory;
3) To promote change in the cultures, in the educational policies and in the school practices to fit pupils' diversities;
4) To reduce obstacles to learning and to participation of all pupils, with or without special educational needs; \
5) To consider pupils' differences as resources to learning rather than problems to be fixed;
6) To promote the reciprocal support between school and community;
7) To recognize that school inclusion is part of a more general social inclusion (Directorate General for Development Cooperation, 2015).

Inclusive practice can be seen as a multi-component strategy used for raising achievement. It is also important to note that reducing school failure in an inclusive classroom has a positive impact both on individuals and on the society (Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation, OECD, 2012). However, there are still concerns about the problems facing schools under the dual pressure of becoming more inclusive and, at the same time, responding to demands to raise learners' achievements and combat school

failure (Muijs, Ainscow, Chapman & West, 2011). Various studies have considered the impact of inclusion on academic achievement across a whole range of curriculum areas in different education levels. They have shown the positive impact of inclusive placements for learners with disabilities (European Agency, 2012b). Moreover, the recent meta-analysis by Dyssegaard and Larsen (2013) showed that the academic and social development of learners without disabilities does not suffer when learners with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are included in the mainstream classroom.

Recent research evidence also suggests that learners with SEN make better progress when they are educated in mainstream settings (Wild, Schwinger, Lutje-Klose…, Kurnitzki, 2015). For example, a nationwide empirical study in Germany compared the learning outcomes of learners with SEN in mainstream schools with the results of such learners in special schools. The project revealed that learners with SEN in mainstream schools were six months ahead in mathematics and reading and up to twelve months ahead in their listening skills. These results indicate that learners with SEN in inclusive settings can learn more than their peers in special schools (Institute for Educational Quality Improvement, 2014).

The Purpose of Inclusive Education

Inclusive education is concerned with minimizing and removing barriers to access, participation and learning for all children, but especially for those who have been socially discriminated because of poverty, disability, gender, religion, ethnicity or any inequalities (UNESCO, 2006). Accordingly, Giorcelli cited in Udeme and Angela (2016) listed the following as principles of a properly planned and fully implemented inclusive education: appropriate age and grade placements; no special classes or schools; cooperative learning practised; special education support given to regular education; and collaborative efforts needed to provide service to all who need them. Giorcelli further identified common features of schools where inclusive education is reported to be thriving. These features are: collaborative teamwork; a shared framework; family involvement; general educator ownership; clear role relationships among professionals; effective use of support staff; meaningful Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and procedures for evaluating effectiveness.

Ozoji cited in Oluka and Egbo (2014) identified the purpose of inclusive education as follows:

1. To provide education for children with diverse learning needs within their structured school community;

2. To make special needs children active members of the school community and then to help them achieve quality educational outcomes and to achieve social competence;
3. To build a supportive school community that is able to identify and minimize barriers to learning and participation;
4. To educate more children better;
5. To ensure successful learning and social experience competence;
6. To empower children who are hitherto excluded or isolated;
7. To enable students to participate in mainstream education to the best of their abilities.

It should be noted that for inclusive education to be successful, the above purpose must have been achieved. In a similar vein, the aim of inclusive education however is not to erase differences in children but to enable all children to belong to the same educational community while at the same time eliminating social exclusion arising from attitudes and responses to diversity in race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender and ability (Vitello & Mithaug, in Udeme & Angela, 2016). One may then want to know how an inclusive classroom should be.

In the view of Jorum (2015), an inclusive classroom is placed with full participation of the children with or without disabilities generally aimed at preparing a child that will participate as a full and contributing member of the society and specifically aimed at reducing barriers of educating children with disabilities and learning difficulties. A real inclusive classroom should act to guarantee the right to equality and to diversity, that is, to guarantee to each child equal possibilities to develop her/his own abilities towards the complete, personal and social, self-realization (Directorate General for Development Cooperation, 2015). In order to achieve this, the inclusive classroom teachers have to remove all barriers to learning related to learners' diversities through pedagogical and teaching models aimed at individualization, respecting learning styles and conditions characterizing every person. It is important to note that inclusion of all children within the classroom has brought about a new challenge for teachers. A typical inclusive class may consist of learners with physical disabilities, gifted children, slow learners, learners with different learning disabilities, high/low efficacious learners, mentally retarded children, hyperactive children, emotionally challenged children, learners with different academic orientations and low socioeconomic status children. With such a diverse combination, classroom management, along with focusing on delivering a differentiated instruction that targets each student individually in the classroom has made a regular education teacher's job beyond difficult.

Sequel to this challenge, inclusive education teachers pay little or no attention as regard to some learners' different cognitive abilities/disabilities and orientations in an inclusive classroom. Rather emphasis is put on the physical ability/disability dimension of inclusiveness as if that is the only aspect of learners' differences.

The popular target groups in inclusive education, especially in Nigeria, are learners with different physical challenges like the hearing impaired learners, visually impaired learners, physically impaired learners. The government, different ministries of education, and school authorities strive to ensure that these groups of learners are properly mainstreamed in the general classroom with their peers. As focus is placed on these groups, other groups of learners who are experiencing learning challenges due to disabilities that are not physical but cognitive and affective in nature are often overlooked. Recognizing these groups and giving them needed opportunities to develop their potentials is the focus of this paper.

Overlooked Component of Inclusive Classroom

Children with different cognitive abilities

One of the overlooked components in an inclusive classroom is a child's cognitive ability. Cognitive ability refers to an individual's ability to carry out a given task from the simplest to the most difficult. This task is carried out with various mental abilities on how to learn, remember, solve and pay attention. In a mainstreamed class, teachers usually classify children on two extreme cognitive abilities; "mentally retarded" and "gifted children". Another group of learners with cognitive challenges placed in between these extreme groups are: the "slow learners"; the "non-academically inclined learners" but not mentally retarded; and learners with learning disabilities. These groups of learners need equal recognition and attention in our classrooms as those that are physically challenged.

Slow/Gifted Learners in an Inclusive Classroom

Diversity of learners is an issue worth addressing in education practices across countries if inclusive societies are to be developed, promoted and sustained. Towards realizing inclusive societies, employing inclusive best practices in education systems would be an important foremost step. In order to do that, teachers must consider slow learners as well as fast learners in an inclusive classroom. According to Kirk as cited in Vasudevan (2017) the rate of learning is the basis of identifying a child as slow learner, average or gifted. For Kirk, the slow-learning child is not considered mentally retarded because he is capable of achieving a moderate degree of academic success even though at a slower rate than the average child. He is educated in the regular classes

without special provisions except an adaptation of the regular class programme to fit his slower learning ability. The child we call a slow learner is one who is not necessarily retarded or in need of special education but is likely to need some extra time and help in a regular classroom. He is capable of learning just about anything that the average child is capable of; it just takes him longer. In other words, a slow learner is one who learns or is learning at a slower than average rate. Mainstream teachers should identify slow learners because they may easily drop out if their needs are not met. Learners who are fast learners/gifted are learners that have the potential to demonstrate, exceptionally high capabilities with respect to an exceptional ability to learn, create or perform well above average cognitive ability globally or within a specific domain (Handbook for Teachers: Gifted and Talented Students, 2013). These two dichotomous set of learners have seemed to be given little or no attention in our inclusive classrooms. Teachers generally concentrate on the average learners while the gifted/fast and slow learners are basically overlooked.

Children with Learning Disabilities/Challenges

Children with learning disabilities are often unidentified or overlooked in our inclusive classrooms. Most times they are labeled by their teachers and peers with various disparaging terms that make many of them develop internalizing disorders such as anxiety withdrawal and low self-esteem (Lyon, as cited in Tilly & Aniko, 2015). The common learning disabilities experienced by some school children but mostly overlooked by the government, curriculum planners, school authorities and classroom teachers are dyslexia, dyscalculia and dysgraphia.

Learners with dyslexia. Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit to the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge (National Institute of Child Health and Development and International Dyslexia Association, 2002). The ability to read and write is recognized as being one of the most fundamental of the core skills contributing to academic achievement, lifelong learning and sustainable development (Trudell, Dowd, Piper & Bloch, 2012). However, learners with dyslexia find it difficult to achieve or obtain

this goal as every subject requires some reading and writing. Specifically, the Regents of the University of Michigan (2016), in their recent research, are of the view that dyslexia makes it difficult for learners to master the following skills which are crucial to the learning process: access to written texts, reading fluency, spelling, organizing information, following written directions and sequencing information. They further point out that as a consequence of their reading difficulties, learners with dyslexia are forced to compensate for their weaknesses by following their peers, verbally processing information, relying on rote memorization and using hands-on or experiential learning contexts. Children that are dyslexic in nature find it difficult to thrive in the mainstream class in the face of challenges including inappropriate support, inadequate specialized teachers and bullying.

Research carried out by Agu and Nwasor (2013) on assessment of Nigerian lecturers' awareness status about dyslexia among higher education students revealed that many lecturers in faculties of education do not even know what the term dyslexia means much more make provisions for learners so challenged in their teaching practices. The research also observed that no support was provided for students with such learning challenges in the mainstreamed classes.

Learners with dyscalculia. Another cognitive ability overlooked in the inclusive classroom is children with dyscalculia. Children with dyscalculia have difficulties learning the most basic aspect of arithmetic skills. The difficulty lies in the reception, comprehension, or production of quantitative and spatial information (the physical location of objects and the metric relationships between objects). Children with dyscalculia may therefore have difficulty in understanding simple number concepts, lack an intuitive grasp of numbers and have problems learning number facts and procedures. Dyscalculia is in some ways like "dyslexia for numbers." The difficulties experienced by dyscalculic learners include: subsidizing, estimating, recalling number facts, counting backwards, understanding and applying the concept of time, understanding money, sequencing, direction (left/right), noticing number patterns and understanding and applying mathematics language (Bird, 2009). Very little is known about the prevalence of dyscalculia, causes or treatment. Most children with dyscalculia have cognitive and language abilities that are well within what is considered the "normal" range. They may excel in non-mathematical subjects (The University of Warnick, n.d).

Leaners with dygraphia. Dysgraphia is a learning disability resulting from the difficulty in expressing thoughts in writing and graphing. It generally

refers to extremely poor handwriting. Dysgraphia is a neurological disorder characterized by writing disabilities. Specifically, the disorder causes a person's writing to be distorted or incorrect. In children, the disorder generally emerges when they are first introduced to writing. They make inappropriately sized and spaced letters, or write wrong or misspelled words, despite thorough instruction. Marentette (2011) viewed dysgraphia as a deficiency in the ability to write, primarily in terms of handwriting but also in terms of coherence. It occurs regardless of the ability to read and is not due to intellectual impairment. Further, he explains that dysgraphia is a transcription disability, meaning that it is a writing disorder associated with impaired handwriting, orthography in the storing process of written words and processing the letters in those words and finger sequencing (the movement of muscles required to write).

Children with dysgraphia may have other learning disabilities, however, they usually have no social or other academic problems. Cases of dysgraphia in adults generally occur after some trauma. In addition to poor handwriting, dysgraphia is characterized by wrong or odd spelling, and production of words that are not correct (i.e., using "boy" for "child"). The cause of the disorder is unknown (Dyslexichelp.co.uk, n.d).

Learners with Non-academic Inclinations

The resultant effect of inclusive education is much greater diversity in the student population in the classrooms especially in the ability, academic inclinations and commitment of students. Maintaining standards when the academic inclinations and range of ability of students are so varied presents an interesting teaching challenge which Biggs and Tang (2011) called the 'Robert and Susan problem' but in this paper we will call it the "Emeka and Nkechi problem'. On one end are the academically inclined learners and on the other end are the non-academically inclined learners. We will use Biggs and Tang's (p. 30) description of two groups of students in a classroom to bring out the academic inclination diversities in our inclusive class settings. Let us look at two students attending a lecture. Nkechi is academically committed, bright, interested in her studies and wants to do well. She learns in an 'academic' way and comes to lecture with sound, relevant background knowledge. Students like Nkechi virtually teach themselves and do not need much help from their teachers. Teachers like the Nkechis tend to assume that she represents how most students learn, and they teach accordingly.

Let's look at Emeka. He is at university not out of a driving curiosity about a particular subject, or a burning ambition to excel in a particular profession, but to obtain a qualification for a decent job or to satisfy the

parents' desire for their son to be a graduate or because it is what everyone does. He is less committed than Nkechi, and no-academically inclined. He wants only to put in sufficient effort to pass and obtain meal ticket. Students like Emeka are in higher proportions in our today's inclusive classes. They need help if they are to reach acceptable levels of achievement. The challenge we face as teachers is to teach so that Emeka learns more in the manner of Nkechi.

Nkechi represents the academic learners while Emeka represents the non-academic learners. The gap between these two groups of learners cannot be narrowed if we continue to overlook the existence of their diversity in our mainstreamed classrooms.

Conclusion

Although researches have shown how inclusive education benefits all learners (learners with and without disabilities), the benefits go beyond catering for some targeted group of learners – the physically challenged (the visually impaired, hearing impaired and physically impaired learners). For inclusion to be successful, however, it is paramount to put into consideration all learners' diversities which cover the physical, cognitive and affective dimensions. For this to be effectively achieved, it is important to provide educators with training and adequate resources to meet the needs of diverse groups of students.

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