

INCLUSION: THE CHALLENGE OF BELIEF EXPRESSION AND PRACTICE IN THE NIGERIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

By

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Abstract

The principle of inclusive education which was adopted in Salamanca, Spain about fifteen years ago and re-stated in the World Education forum in Dakar, Senegal in 2000 seems to be a belief system which does not match the realities on the ground. In this paper, the author focuses on what inclusive education is, an attitude towards people with disabilities in an inclusive classroom, the United States model of inclusive education; barriers to and benefits of, inclusion in Nigeria and recommended measures to make inclusive education a reality in Nigerian schools.

Since the adoption of the principle of inclusive education at the World Conference on special education: Access and Quality at Salamanca, Spain, 1994 which was re-stated at the World Education Forum at Dakar, Senegal, 2000 (Okobah, 2007), many studies (Agamoh, 2009) have shown the gains which could be derived from practising inclusive education in Nigeria, but most of these findings are not always given practical attention by the government, in solving the problems of the relevant sector and this may create a discouragement factor in the affected organisations. One of the reasons for this lack of seriousness in adopting research findings could be the law of compulsive innovation (Nachmias, 1980), which newly installed administrators have a strong desire to reject the policy their predecessors had started, and to emphasize the programs they create themselves so that they could claim credit for whatever success results. President Ebele Jonathan of the Federal Republic of Nigeria sees this lack of uniformity in educational practices as creating “confusion” (Daily Sun, 2011) in the system.

Also, frequent changes in policy as Ajayi (2008) observed, and reported by Ajoa (2009) could be traceable to frequent changes in government, that within the eight years (1991 – 1999) as Provost of Federal College of Education (FCE), Osiele, Ogun State, Nigeria, he had passed through five different regimes, Babangida, till 1993; Shonekan, for less than four months in 1993; Abacha, 1993 – 1998; Abubakar, 1998 – 1999 and Obasanjo, 1999 – 2007.

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Within that period, eight Ministers of Education were appointed and the same thing happened at the State level. Each of the Presidents, Ministers, Governors and Commissioners had their own different conceptions and policies on education which they tried to implement during their tenure.

While the practitioners in education involve themselves in teaching, research and extension services, the government has not made any concrete efforts to put in perspectives the necessary facilities which could encourage the practice of partial or full inclusive education in Nigeria. There is a possibility that inclusive education may be only discussed at conferences and workshops while not much is done to bring this concept to reality in the interest of the people with disabilities, the regular classroom teachers, the pupils and the entire nation. There is also a possibility that this innovation, just like others in the past, would be pushed to the background or rejected if it does not yield the expected results. Obani (2006) sees this as a challenge to educational planners, especially those who prepare the budget for the UBE schools.

In this paper, the author believes that for inclusion to be achieved in Nigerian schools, there must be need to consider how inclusion is practised in other countries and specific consideration should be given to the adoption of the America model since Nigeria still needs a lot to achieve in the area of materials and personal resources.

Inclusion: What it is

Haladu (2007) sees the concept as a movement in attitudes towards people with disabilities, from private institution, special school, to integration and now gradually to inclusive education. Boyles and Contadino (1998), and Dada (2007) believe that inclusion is a commitment made by a school system to educate all students, whatever their needs, in their neighbourhood schools with peers of the same age and grade as themselves. This means that instead of taking the child to services, the services are brought to the child. Okobah (2007) writes that Ozoji (2004) sees inclusive education as enabling all pupils to participate fully in the life, and work of mainstream setting, whatever their needs or physical/mental capacities, that it is all about removing barriers to learning. Some educators believe that the inclusion of the highly gifted may be more like exclusion because the students' needs are not being met and appropriate services are not provided for them in the regular classroom. Obani (2006) records that every author has recognized that the era of special school was fading and that, in an integrated and holistic manner, the Nigerian school system should be structured to meet the needs of each individual learner, without discrimination whatever the child's development level and that the UBE programme has to reach every individual in an equitable manner, specially – challenged individuals in Nigeria, particularly of primary school age.

Inclusion and Attitudes toward Persons with Disabilities in Nigeria

Smith (2007) observes that one measure of every community is how it treats and includes each of its members. He maintains that some of the factors to consider when thinking about human rights of children are:

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If you do not see children with disabilities, a human right problem is being hidden; if you see children or adults with disabilities homeless or begging on the streets, a human rights problem is not being addressed and if children and adults with disabilities are served only in separate facilities, programs or schools, their segregation signals discrimination, lack of inclusion in society, stereotyping and bias.

Some of these Issues are Yet to be Properly Addressed in Nigeria

Haladu (2007) wrote about the deep seated belief within the Nigerian culture and religion which even more highly educated individuals, hospital physicians have been known to ignore patients who have disabilities but giving preference to able-bodied patients. Whether rejected or less worthy because of the disabilities or because they may be less able to pay for the services, deeply communicates disrespect and devaluation of persons with disabilities. Obani (2006) confirms that the Nigerian culture is still hostile to, discriminatory of person with special needs. In his research on the attitudes of classroom teachers towards the inclusion of persons with special needs in regular classroom, Dada (2007) studied fifty regular classroom teachers in five related schools in Ibadan Metropolis consisting of five local Governments in Oyo State, Nigeria. The result showed that the attitudes of the classroom teachers had been negative. He recommended that in order to improve and facilitate positive attitudes towards the inclusion of persons with special needs in regular classrooms there was need for more enlightenment on the concept of inclusion to these teachers. There was also need for re-orientation and in-service for these teachers so that they could have better insight about persons with disabilities in Nigeria.

Obah (2008) in her speech to the Conference of Reading Association (RAN) observed that she would love to see RAN offer leadership in the provision of academic support to students with disabilities, visible and invisible because the needs of this group had been traditionally overlooked in colleges and university classrooms, and called for the consideration of the learning styles of the students with disabilities. This confirms many research results in Nigeria, which have recorded that attitude towards persons with disabilities are negative.

Inclusion and the National Policy on Education (NPE)

The National Policy on Education (NPE, 2004), is based on the development of the individual into a sound and effective citizen. It guarantees full integration of the individual into community, the provision of equal access to educational opportunities for all citizens of the country at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels both inside and outside the formal system. The NPE also clearly states that education of children with special needs shall be free at all levels; all necessary facilities that would ensure access to education will be provided, for example, inclusive education or integration of special classes and units into public schools under UBE scheme. The policy also listed special education equipments and materials for children with special needs. But looking at the realities on ground, Ajao (2008) writes that for thirty years the nation has not been able to successfully implement the National Policy in Education because of “politics”.

Inclusive Education – The American Model

The law which changed the treatment of the persons with disabilities was passed by the United States Congress as EDUCATION for ALL HANDICAPPED CHILDREN ACT in 1975. It was passed by the 94th Congress as the 142nd law of the Congress (PL. 94 – 142). In 2004, the Congress changed the rules again when it passed the INDIVIDUALS with the DISABILITIES EDUCATION ACT (IDEA) which made important modifications to the law and it became effective in July 1, 2005. In August, 2006, the United States Department of Education issued regulations for IDEA. These regulations clarified, explained and provided details about the rules and procedures in IDEA. Many of the new regulations were identical to the old ones, however, these were important changes:

1. how disabilities were determined;
2. rules about public schools;
3. how goals were measured;
4. who could attend INDIVIDUAL EDUCATION PLAN (IEP) meeting; among others.

Commenting on IDEA, Smith (2007) writes:

The US Department of Education, in its 2005 regulation implementing IDEA '04 explained the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) in this way:

“Children with disabilities including children in public and private institutions or other care facilities are educated with children who are non-disabled, and special class, separate schooling or other removal of children with disabilities from regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of disability was such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services could not be achieved satisfactorily” (US Dept. of Education, 2005a, p. 356).

An expert in IDEA, an attorney Siegel (2007) commenting on IDEA stated that IDEA did not tell the parents or the school what specific programme or class the child should be in, that was the decision for IEP team. IDEA did require school districts to place children with disabilities in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) that meets the individual needs. A child's LRE would depend on that child's ability and disabilities. Siegel emphasizes that although congress expressed a strong preference for inclusion, it used the term LRE to determine each individual placement and that children who really needed a more restrictive placement such as special school would be there.

Also, experts in special education had pointed out that the developing consensus was that for most such students, inclusion in general education, with required modifications, accommodations, or assistive technology was not appropriate.

The key feature of special education, according to practitioners in the field was that students with disabilities received their education in the least restrictive environment. In other words, special education services were not automatically offered in any particular place and should offer as much access as possible to the general education curriculum and the general education classroom.

According to Siegel (2007), Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) and Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE) could be confusing. Today, LRE is often misinterpreted as being equal to general education class placement. However, IDEA '04 does not mandate that students with disabilities receive all their education in the general education setting.

Barriers to Inclusion

Inclusion meets with antagonism too. Some special education teachers and administrators are not keen on it. They fear that their gains made on behalf of children with disabilities would be wiped out, and they may not be happy about the drastic changes their accustomed profession would undergo. Regular class teachers may work under pressure and not happy in many ways because they had never taught a child with disabilities and may become concerned about their ability to cope with problems which could arise in the classroom. These create challenges for special education.

Benefits of Inclusion

Inclusion is designed to expand, rather than narrow the scope of opportunities. Rather than making children with disabilities appear more different and isolated, inclusion allows everyone to become more accepting and tolerant, Boyles & Contadino (1998). Differences are accepted rather than feared. Individuals are valued for who they are not what they are. Inclusion gives opportunity to interact with peers in a safe, supportive environment. It brings changes in the roles of everyone responsible for the students once the model is adopted as a policy. When the specialists' and teachers' roles become more of those facilitators and coach, the classroom becomes more child centered. In inclusive setting, the children work with other peers at their own paces and developmental skills levels. Techniques such as peer tutoring, cooperative learning, heterogeneous grouping and small groups for remediation help meet the diverse range of learning styles. The emphasis becomes improved instruction and how to make learning meaningful for each student, rather than rushing to cover the curriculum. Exposure of children with disabilities will help the non-disability children understand individual differences in people; it will also help to diminish the stereotyping of the people with disabilities.

Conclusion

Inclusion appears to be an ideal way to avoid labeling and become more accepting with learning differences. While inclusive programme may offer many advantages to all children, many educators are cautious and concerned that it works better on paper than in practice. The practice of inclusion is in its infancy. To date, there is no legislation in Nigeria that would mandate this method. So adopting inclusive policy is still an issue. Educators in Nigeria have a long road ahead of them before all the flaws are addressed and inclusion becomes accepted practice in schools.

Recommendations

1. Initial teacher preparation and continuous training are mandatory before inclusion can work effectively.
2. Identification of the children with disabilities must be made by the educational authorities so that every child may not be dumped into an inclusive classroom.
3. Scheduling time with other support professionals in an inclusion classroom must be given adequate attention so that every person knows the role to play.
4. Parents should understand that they are the best advocates for their children, therefore must stand up for the educational rights of their children in an inclusive classroom.
5. The government and non-governmental organisations should make support services available so that the needs of the children with disabilities could be effectively met in an inclusive classroom.

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