

# INNOVATION, CULTURE AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: AS TOOLS FOR NATIONAL INTEGRATION

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the role of innovation, culture and inclusive learning as it relates to national integration. The paper adopted a conceptual approach by reviewing relevant literatures on the subject matter. Based on the literatures reviewed, it was discovered that much is still needed to be done to meet up with contemporary challenges facing the effective practice of inclusive education. The paper concludes that inclusive education is still very essential in a changing world hence persons with disability should be mobilized to get re-integrated into the regular school setting so as to acquire the necessary education and be useful to themselves and the society as we work towards national integration.

**Keywords:** Inclusive Education, People with Disability, Special Needs Education, Innovation Integration.

Education is a very important means of preserving, protecting and building up our national unity as a country and people. In achieving this, our culture, innovation and inclusion of all members and citizens of the country are imperative. All over the world, inclusive learning as an effective approach for the education of persons with disabilities is gaining momentum. Inclusion comes in the form of right to education, the right to employment opportunities in their social order and the right to hold administrative and political positions. Inclusive learning is defined by Ashi (2010) as a partial location and functional inclusion with all specialized facilities in a regular educational school setting. According to Obi, Mensah and Avoke, (2007), inclusion is a radical departure from the traditional segregation approach of educating children with disabilities which involves the adaptation of regular school practices to suit the needs of children with disabilities. Put differently, it is an education system whereby the disabled and non-disabled children learn together in one classroom with modifications in physical structures, equipment and methods to suit the conditions of diverse special needs learners. Functional inclusive learning is one of the objectives of special education in Nigeria today with the aim to concretize the meaning of equal opportunities in education for all children, their disabilities notwithstanding (National Policy on Education, 2012).

Inclusive learning has generated a lot of debate among scholars and researchers in recent times. A number of recent publications and papers (Udeme, & Olisaemeka, 2016; Omede & Danladi, 2016; Obi & Ashi, 2016) revealed the degree of attention and intellectual discourse that has and is being dissipated in the discussion of inclusive learning for persons with disability in the society. In Nigeria, inclusive education is generating thoughts and attention as a new and better approach in the provision of services for learners with special needs. On the international scene, organizations particularly UNESCO, now see inclusive learning as an effective approach in the education of learners with special education needs. It is in this regard that the Salamanca Declaration of 1994, provided the needed international and theoretical platform for inclusive education. In the report, it was emphasized 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. In the report, inclusive learning was described as the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitude and building an inclusive society. The Salamanca Statement restated education as an entitlement for all rather than a privileged for some.

As a result of this inclusive education lunch by the UNESCO, some developing countries have risen up to the challenge and adopted the inclusive learning practices in their educational policies and programmes. However, Nigeria has not fully braced up to the implementation of the inclusive learning as enshrined in the Salamanca 1994 declaration. This is an indication that Nigeria is seriously lagging behind on issues relating to inclusive education.

### **Innovation and Culture**

Innovation implies new ideas, methods and devices. It is the bringing into being new solutions and approaches towards meeting a particular need or want. It is using more effective ways, productive means and result oriented introduced by the government, designer, or inventor. Innovation is a systematic introduction of new ideas, products or values into an existing one. It involves generating new and concrete methods of solving certain problems in a given situation. Innovation refers to implementation of a new design, process, idea, or learning environment that increases an individual student or group of students' ability to learn, as evidenced by their ability to make meaning and transfer. Innovation involves deliberate application of information, imagination and initiative in deriving greater or different values from resources.

In education, innovation often results when ideas are applied to satisfy the needs and expectation of the students. Innovation helps create new methods for collaboration, interdisciplinary learning, flexible time, and flexible learning environment.

Culture refers to the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concept of the universe and material object and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving. In addition, culture donate historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge and attitude towards life.

Culture is defined as the total way of life of people or society which is expressed through their religious beliefs, modes of worship, and modes of dressing and political organizations Sideso (2014). Culture can also be defined as the sum total of the learned behaviour traits and beliefs characteristics of the members of a particular society. It is a set of ideas, beliefs and ways of behaving by a particular group of people or society. The things that make up the culture of a people include language, religion, dressing, arts and crafts, technology, tradition, custom, food and feeding habits.

Basic concepts in culture are:

1. **Acculturation.** This is the process in which members of one cultural group adopt the beliefs and behaviours of another group. It is the process of adopting the cultural traits or social patterns of another.
2. **Enculturation.** This is the process by which an individual learns the traditional content of a culture and assimilates its practices and values.

3. **Cultural influence.** This implies historical, geographical and familiar factors that affect cultural assessment and intervention.
4. **Cultural consciousness.** It implies the awareness of one's culture, while still being able to understand other people's culture.
5. **Cultural universals.** This implies a common practice or belief found in every culture (Sideso 2014).

### **Concept of Inclusive Learning**

Inclusive education implies responding to diverse needs of all learners by increasing participation in learning and reducing exclusion within the education system. This means that all children have equal right to quality education that caters for their individual needs and national development. According to Obi and Ashi (2016), inclusive education entails a situation where all students are welcome by schools in their neighborhood irrespective of their physical status or disability. Inclusive education makes it possible that persons with disability and non-disabled have regular classes and are supported to learn together, contribute and participate in all aspects of life in the school. Christopher and Elizabeth (2012) state that inclusive education is internationally recognized as a philosophy for attaining equity, justice and equality in education for all children, especially those who have been excluded from education for the reason of disabilities. In this regard, inclusive education is globally applauded as an option and best practice in education of children and adult with special needs, and that special educators, parents and other stakeholders have not relented efforts in debating on the benefits and challenges of this education standard. Ajunwo (2008) stresses further that the debates on inclusive education have been shaped largely by the principle of inclusion, which explains that ordinary schools should cater for all children and young people, regardless of their circumstances or personal characteristics. On the global stage, the Salamanca 1994 declaration on inclusive education urged national governments to provide a more inclusive education system that is buttressed by an ideological position based on recognition that all pupils should have fundamental right and equal opportunity to experience education in mainstream schools. Chika (2011) clarify further that inclusion refers to the full-time placement of children with mild, moderate and severe disabilities in regular classrooms setting to receive lessons with other children without disabilities. Advocates of inclusion posit that children with special needs should be placed in the regular school classroom which they would have otherwise attended if they had not suffered any form of disability. Put differently, each child belongs to the regular classroom and therefore, there should be no condition imposed, to exclude him/ her from that environment.

Christopher and Elizabeth (2012) maintain that inclusive learning system 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.

It is therefore evident from the foregoing that the high point of inclusive education lies in its emphasis on reorganization of the entire school programmes and practices. In view of this, the content, the process and the environment of the mainstream programme are reorganized so as to be able to accommodate a much wider range of ability (Ashi, 2010).

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. The inclusive learning framework is hinged on a number of assumptions. The centre for Studies on Inclusive Education enumerated the assumptions to include:

- 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.
- Denying children opportunity to learn under the same roof with other children is devaluing and discriminatory.
- Exclusion is inhuman and indefensible (Burden 2006).

Burden (2006) argues that the aim of inclusive education is not to erase differences in children but to enable all children to belong to the same educational community at the same time eliminating social exclusion arising from attitudes and responses to diversity in race, culture, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender and ability. Inclusion in special education means that schools, classes and activities are scheduled for students with disabilities so that opportunities for their participation are maximized. UNESCO (2009), perceives it as a process of transforming schools and other centers of learning to accommodate all learners including boys and girls, learners from ethnic and linguistic minorities, rural populations, those infected and affected by HIV and AIDS, those with disabilities and difficulties in learning and as well provide learning opportunities for all. Accommodating such learners will in some ways help in developing self-esteem needed to overcome obstacle that the disability would have posed to them.

### **Effective Practice of Inclusive Learning in Nigeria**

The Nigerian education system supports the inclusive learning programme as enshrined in the National Policy on Education (2012). It also aimed at promoting national integration and preserving our cultural heritage. Successive administrations have also attempted to fine-tune the policy on education in a bid to accommodate the changing trends in providing education as a means of promoting national integration without excluding the less privileged and the special needs children in the society. In spite of the concerted efforts however, it can be observed that much needs to be done to meet up with contemporary challenges facing the effective practice of inclusive learning in Nigeria. In order to achieve an optimum inclusive learning outcome, a number of rationales for effective implementation of inclusive education practices and follow up services is considered under the following strategies:

A methodical and conscious effort has to be made to train teachers to have attitude change towards admission of special needs children into regular education schools. This approach is based on the views of people who believe that blindness, deafness and physical disability is contagious. This idea further explains why some people would not want to associate with those who have deformities so that they will not give birth to children who are deformed (Ashi, 2010).

There has to be a political will of government at all levels backed by enacted law for the right of persons with disabilities and the implementation cost of special education services. This should be

backed up with updated legislation that supports the education of persons with disabilities in the society.

There should be public enlightenment and sensitization on the need for families with children who are disabled to brace up to the challenges of getting those with disabilities to attend regular schools instead of dumping them on the street to beg and constitute nuisance to the society.

Public and private schools, urban or rural, have to imbibe the culture of admitting all classes of pupils in their fold irrespective of their disability status. Modalities have to be put in place to ensure that no child with disabilities is discriminated against.

Those with severe handicapping conditions should however still be placed in segregated special education centres. For example, children with severe developmental disabilities/severe to profound intellectual disabilities could be placed in centres or hospital bound schools. This approach is based on the premise that not all children with special needs can be educated through inclusive education.

Special education teachers should be posted to serve as supportive teachers in all the inclusive education schools. The relevant school authorities should provide basic equipment and materials for each of the categories of disabilities in each school. This is one area that is experiencing seemingly insurmountable challenge as the regular schools lack the basic infrastructures to cater for the non-disabled children not to talk of the persons with disabilities that require specialized seating and learning aids. There is urgent need to dismantle most accessibility barriers in regular schools and put ramps along stair cases and designated areas for cars or wheelchairs in public places. All inclusive education model schools and even higher institutions in the country must be hazard free for all categories of students with disabilities (Ashi, 2010).

### **Significance of Inclusive Education**

There are many stakeholders to the effective practice of inclusive education programme. These stakeholders include government institutions, school authorities, parents, children and adults with disabilities and the society at large. The following among others are the benefits of inclusive education to persons with special needs:

- Parents and families with persons with disabilities who have visions of a normal life for their children can come true. It is the joy of parents to see their children to be accepted by their peers, have friends and live normal lives in the society. Inclusive learning environment can make this vision a reality for many children with disabilities.
- All children learn by being together because the philosophy of inclusive education is aimed at helping all children learn, everyone in the class benefits. Children learn at their own pace and style within a monitoring learning environment.
- Children develop a positive understanding of themselves and others. When children attend classes that reflect the similarities and differences of people in the real world, they learn to appreciate diversity. Respect and understanding glow when children of different abilities and cultures play and learn together.
- Children learn important academic skills. In inclusive classrooms, children with and those without disabilities are expected to learn to read, write, and do math. With higher expectations and good instruction children with disabilities learn academic skills which can increase innovation, cultural growth and national integration.

- Friendships develop. Schools are important places for children to develop friendships and learn social skills, children with and without disabilities learn with and from each other in inclusive classes.
- Discrimination breeds discord. The society will be better off with an environment where everyone is accepted and encouraged to live and learn with others.
- Getting persons with disabilities educated also prepares them to be self-reliant instead of becoming liability to the society. Acquiring regular education can get them employed and lead regular lives as against becoming beggars on the street.

### **Conclusion**

Inclusive education which involves getting people with disability into regular classroom to learn with persons without disability has become a concept that is being promoted across the developed and developing world. Regrettably, in spite of policy and legal backing it has received in Nigeria, its implementation is always elusive. Presently in Nigeria, inclusive education still remains at the realm of theory and far from being practiced. It is also noted that adoption of the inclusive school system would be in the best interest of stake holders since it will be a level playing field for all. It is also discovered that a number of challenges still plague the implementation of the inclusive learning practice especially in terms of basic equipment and materials for each of the categories of exceptional children in each school. It is to this end that promoting innovation in education is very, very essential because innovation will help to invent, produce equipments for learning, redesign the school structures and infrastructures to accommodate everybody.

### **Recommendation**

Innovation, culture and inclusive education are veritable driving forces towards national integration and global unity taking into cognizance our cultural diversity, individual differences, insight and knowledge. The following are therefore recommended in order to realize the dream and strengthen the bond of national unity:

1. The government should rise up to implementing the blue print provided by UNESCO on scientific and cultural development globally.
2. Pragmatic approach should be adopted to execute and utilize various research and discovery at our different levels of education.
3. Funds budgeted for innovative research should be released and expended promptly.
4. Schools should promote the culture of the land and this is by allowing students to have and celebrate their cultural day whereby they can showcase cultural gift, talent and things valued in their communities instead of promoting foreign culture.
5. Teachers must be retrained to gain new innovative and cultural knowledge.

Therefore, inclusive education is still very essential in a changing world hence, stakeholders must brace up to get everybody integrated into the regular school setting so as to acquire the necessary education and be useful to themselves as well as in the interest of national development.

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