

CREATING LEAST RESTRICTIVE ENVIRONMENT IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: THE ROLE OF COMMUNITIES AND STAKEHOLDERS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Frantic effort is being made globally to ensure that children with disability are not totally segregated from their peers without disability when it comes to receiving qualitative education hence the idea and policy of inclusive education being promoted locally and internationally. Inclusive education comprises of several aspect and one of them is the focus of this paper titled creating least restrictive environment in inclusive education: the role of communities and stakeholders in Nigeria. Creating least restrictive environment involves deliberate effort by communities and stakeholders in special needs education to put in place everything that will ensure effective placement of children with disability in an educational continuum where they can maximize opportunities to the fullest. It also calls for removal of barriers and providing necessary supplementary services where such are required Since inclusive education policy demands the child with disability to attend the regular or local school he or she would have attended if that child had not suffered any form of disability. It therefore becomes imperative for communities and stakeholders to play active role in planning, organizing and evaluating outcome of the programme. The paper therefore discusses the concept of least restrictive environment, stakeholders in least restrictive environment, role of communities and stakeholders in least restrictive environment, benefits and challenges of least restrictive environment. The paper concludes with recommendation that the best learning environment should be made available to children with disability in regular school or classroom ensuring that all supplementary services are provided and they should not be problem to other children.

Keywords: Least Restrictive environment, Communities, Stakeholders and inclusive Education.

Introduction

Inclusive education which is an educational system and policy that calls for educating children with disability in the general or regular school, classroom as well as the same environment and atmosphere void of barriers is gaining momentum in Nigeria with wider publication and sensitization carried out by different professional bodies, groups and associations. Earliest form of special education received by children with disability was that which segregated them from other children without disability as introduced by the missionaries in Nigeria and this led to the establishment of separate schools for children with disability and named such after the type of impairment involved. For example, school for the blind, deaf and the like. The policy of inclusive education was adopted at the World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality Salamanca Statement, Spain

1994 and was restated at the World Education Forum 2000 in Dakar Senegal UNESCO, (2000). At the conference, a statement was issued asking government of different countries to give the highest priority to it by making education systems inclusive and adopt the principle as a matter of policy. This was to bring about a shift from the idea of segregating or separating children with disability from the regular schools and classrooms. The idea of inclusion was further supported by the United Nation's Standard Rules on Equalization of Opportunities for children with Disability Proclaiming Participation and equality for all UNESCO, (2009). Inclusive Education is defined as a process of addressing the diverse needs of all learners by reducing barriers within the learning environment Omede, (2016). It requires attending the age appropriate class of the child's local school, with individually tailored support. Inclusive education is a process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to all children either those with disabilities or without UNESCO, (2009). With the idea to reach out to all children and bringing a team of professionals together to handle educational and entrepreneurial activities within an inclusive setting or school, the least restrictive environment which is placing the child in the most beneficial education continuum comes to mind. At the Jometin World Conference held in Thailand in the year 1990, the goals for "Education for All" were set and it was proclaimed that every individual (child, youth and adult) shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities which would meet their basic learning needs.

Inclusion is an educational approach and philosophy that emphasizes and provides all children vital opportunities and access to academic and social achievement Olawale, Ogunwale and Dafwat, (2016). This includes access and ability to participate in the full range of social, recreational, arts, sports, music, day care and afterschool care, extra-curricular, faith and religious driven and all other activities carried out within the school environment or classroom.

Different aspects of inclusive education such as curriculum for children with disability, instructional strategies, labeling, utilization of assistive technology, manpower development, remuneration and incentives, volunteerism, monitoring and evaluation as well as funding have received attention in terms of discourse. However, one vital aspect of inclusive education that is yet to be properly addressed and needed to be attended to by stakeholders, communities and researchers in the field of special needs education is that of creating least restrictive environment to accommodate individualised education needs of different categories of children with special needs, its challenges as well as what is required by the communities and stakeholders in special needs education. Knowing fully well that the regular or general classroom or school environment were not structured or built with the children with disabilities in mind, a deliberate effort is required by the communities and stakeholders in the field of special needs education as well as those in general education to create a favourable learning environment that is less restrictive and barrier free. Environment is defined as the total surroundings or given space where human activities are carried out including teaching and learning Oladejo and Oladejo, (2011). According to these authors, environment is divided into physical and social environment and all human activities including teaching and learning take place within the environment. In order for children with disability to be successful and benefit from the inclusive education programme of the federal government of Nigeria who has adopted the policy of inclusive education as the best option for her citizens with disabilities as spelt out in the national policy on education, (2013), there is the need to ensure that both the physical and social environment for learning does not constitute barrier or inhibition to accessibility and does not restrain utilization of adapted aids for movement, sport, art and craft as well as communication in teaching and learning processes. It is to this end that this paper examines and discusses the concept of least

restrictive environment, the role of community and stakeholders, its benefits and challenges in inclusive education.

Concept of Least Restrictive Environment

In special needs education, the term least restrictive environment is used to describe educational option which emphasize that children with disability should be placed in the regular school and classroom where they can maximize opportunities and develop their potentials without any hindrance or discrimination Akinpelu, Oyewumi, Oyewole and Azanor (2012). Development of potentials and residual ability of children with disability to enable them contribute their quota to nation building forms part of the objectives of special needs education in Nigeria National Policy on Education (2013). Therefore, to promote effective learning process which will lead to harnessing their residual ability, children with disability must learn in an environment that does not hinder or constitute barrier to teaching and learning process, mobility, communication and other supplementary services. The least restrictive environment is any environment that does not prevent or limit abilities of children with disability gaining access to the school, classroom, hostel, lavatory and barriers free for them to succeed as normal as possible in an educational setting Douvanis and Hulsey, (2002). Educating children in the least restrictive environment has been mandated since the 1970's as a provision of the Education for All Handicapped Act. This is a federal document that was agreed to and signed by every party that was at the individualised education plan (IEP) stakeholders meeting. The plan states the educational goals and objectives for the child with disability and the services that will help to realize or meet his or her goals whether it be in the general or special education setting. However, least restrictive environment is a call for strategic placement of the child in the general education classroom ensuring that learning as well as usage of special devices and services are not impeded UNESCO, (2009).

The UN Convention on the Rights of children with Disability, Article 24 clearly recognizes the rights of children with disability to equal educational services as follows:

- a. Children with disabilities are not excluded from the general education systems on the basis of disability and that children with disabilities are not excluded from the free and compulsory primary education or from secondary education on the basis of disability.
- b. Children with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary and secondary education on equal basis with others in the communities in which they live.
- c. Reasonable accommodation of the individual's requirements is provided.
- d. Children with disabilities receive the support required within the general education system to facilitate their effective education.
- e. Effective individualised support measures are provided in environments that maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion UNESCO, (2009).

Least restrictive environment is defined as that educational setting which maximizes the children with disability opportunity to respond and achieve. It permits the regular teacher to interact proportionally with all the children in the classroom and foster acceptable social relations between children with disability and those without disabilities Douvanis and Hulsey, (2002). One of the fundamental values structured in to current special needs education policy and practice is the notion of equity for all children those with disability and those without. reviewing the programme of least restrictive environment, Omede, (2015) said, least restrictive environment is a principle stating that children with disability are to be educated in settings as close to regular classes as appropriate for the child. Although almost all stakeholders concerned with the individualised education plan for children with disability agree with these goals in principle, there is significant and heated debate in the professional community of special needs education about how to achieve these goals.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) demands that states must provide a free appropriate public education to qualified children to the maximum extent possible. This act requires that a child with disability must be educated in the least restrictive environment and such education should be individualised and appropriate to the child's needs. Since the Education for All Handicapped Children Act amended as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004 was passed in 1975 in the United State, States have been required to make available to children with disability a free appropriate public education in the Least Restrictive Environment. It is a standard rule that each school district must establish A procedures to assure that, to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities including those in public or private institutions or other care facilities are educated with children who are without disability and that special classes, separate schooling or removal of children with disabilities from the general educational environment should occur only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily IDEA, (2004).

Least restrictive environment placement or programme differs for each child with disability receiving special education and related services. Basically, a child's least restrictive environment is the environment where the child can receive an appropriate education designed to meet his or her special educational needs while still being educated with peers without disability to the maximum extent appropriate. Depending on the individual needs, the least restrictive environment could be the general classroom, with or without supplementary aids and services; a pull-out programme for part of the day with the remainder of the day being spent in the general classroom or in activities with children who do not have disability; a special education class within the children's neighborhood school; or even a separate school specializing in a certain type of disability IDEA, (2004). Under the legal provisions as demanded by the Individuals with Disability Education Act, schools must offer a continuum of services in a variety of settings. For example, in the United State, children with disabilities are placed in general classroom, resource room, separate classes, separate school facilities, residential facilities and homebound/hospital settings. This continuum popularly referred to as Deno's Cascade in special education is generally done by moving from more restrictive to less restrictive or vice versal in an inclusive setting depending on the severity or improvement of the child's disability or situation. Thus, one child's least restrictive environment where that child can get the education he or she needs while still interacting with peers without disability may be quite different from that of another child Oniyama and Asamaigo, (2018).

Stakeholders in Inclusive Education

According to the National Policy on special needs education, (2015), stakeholders in inclusive education are those that play one role or another towards the success and positive outcome during the process of carrying out teaching and learning as well as other related services in a special needs education setting. They are personnel saddled with the task of planning, organizing, coordinating, designing, implementing assessing, screening, observing and evaluating progress and shortcoming in service delivery in general and special or inclusive education setting and they include:

a. Parents. Parents play critical role in creating least restrictive environment in inclusive education, they work and collaborate with school administrators and service providers to ensure that children with disabilities are not denied access to qualitative education and services. Parents provide information about their children with disabilities so as to ensure that the best placement option is given especially in the general school environment. Parents determine where and which school their children will attend as well as services needed. They also complement effort of teachers after school when the children are back home.

- b. Teachers. Teachers be it special or general are the actual engineer saddled with the responsibility of managing the child with disability at the classroom level. They are the ones to position the child in the right environment where learning and other supplementary services can best be effectively delivered. Teachers are responsible for executing the special aspects of the curriculum particularly when it comes to adapting and improvising materials to suit the needs of children with disabilities. They also evaluate outcome so as to make necessary adjustment where possible.
- c. Therapists. These are specialist with knowledge of managing and fine tuning certain conditions or characteristics of children with disability and this include behaviour, speech, language to mention but a few.
- d. Assistive technologists. They are specialist who train children with disability the art and science of assistive technology, they also repair and fix assistive devices and above all, offer supplementary services to other professionals on issues relating to assistive technology because this is a vital aspect of special needs education as no meaningful achievement can be recorded without the deployment of assistive technology.
- e. Sign language interpreters. These are personnel who work with the teacher in an inclusive setting particularly the general teacher who has limited knowledge of the education of children with hearing impairment. The sign language interpreter help to facilitate effective learning by interpreting information from the teacher to the children and from the children to the teacher.
- f. Mobility instructors. They are professionals trained and saddled with the task of instructing children with visual impairment on mobility skills as well as technique and equipment.
- g. Volunteers. These are people who willingly offer one service or the other to promote wellbeing of children with disability. For example, different associations and nongovernmental organizations carry out advocacy programmes and services to help in ensuring that children with disability have access to qualitative education, health care, counseling and other essential services.
- h. Counselors. Counselors help by providing services such as guidance to parents of children with disability on the choice of education as well as school that their children can attend. Work with teachers to ensure that children with disability are properly placed in the classroom or career programme Oniyama and Asamaigo, (2018).

Role of Communities and Stakeholders

The communities which are people within the immediate environment where inclusive education is carried out has important role to play especially towards creating least restrictive environment and among such role include:

Planning. This is the act of selecting and designing curriculum content for children with disability. The members of the community and stakeholders where special needs education is to be carried out should be part of the planning so as to ensure that the idea of creating least restrictive environment is not left out.

Organising. It is not enough to plan or arrange learning tasks and supplementary services, rather it is essential to discharge the planned educational tasks for the benefit of children with disability. Therefore, communities and stakeholders must organise the educational tasks in sequence and order of achievement so that they will fit in to the least restrictive environment or educational continuum programme.

Evaluating. Communities and stakeholders must evaluate educational tasks as well as performance of children with disabilities to ascertain their level of progress or otherwise. This enables stakeholders to determine the next line of action as far as strengthening and adapting or adjusting where necessary.

Benefits of Least Restrictive Environment

Creating least restrictive environment in inclusive education has numerous benefits for children with disability, according to the National Policy on special Needs Education (2015), when children with disability are educated in least restrictive environment they stand to gain among other things:

1. Positive educational development. Least restrictive environment promote positive educational development and growth of children with disability since all factors that can bring about limitation are well taken care of by stakeholders in special needs education.
2. Self actualisation. Creating and educating children with disability in least restrictive environment enable them to fulfil their educational dreams as they can now take up choice profession and career.
3. Learn at their own pace. Creating and placing children with disability in least restrictive environment help them to learn at their own pace especially those with intellectual and learning disability because the special teacher and other stakeholders are able to deploy necessary therapies as well as supplementary services.
4. Maximise opportunity. Children with disability are able to maximize opportunities when educated in least restrictive environment thereby bringing out the potentials and genius in them.
5. Promote social relationship. Children with disability attending the general school and learning in the same environment with other peers without disability foster social relationship leading to positive behaviour and friendship.
6. Reduce discrimination and stigmatization. Since all children learn together, there is the chance of better understanding of each other which in turn reduce discrimination and stigmatization of children with disability by those without disability.

Challenges of Least Restrictive Environment

In spite of the benefits of list restrictive environment in an inclusive setting, it is not void of challenges. Some of the challenges of creating least restrictive environment include:

- a. Expensive. Creating least restrictive environment in inclusive education to take care of children with disability require a lot of funds especially to provide special equipment and instructional materials, train teachers, and engage experts to ensure success of the programme.
- b. Time consuming. Creating least restrictive environment calls for discharging the individualised education programme suitable to each child with disability and in doing this, a lot of time is spent so as to achieve the desired result and outcome.

Conclusion

Creating least restrictive environment in inclusive education have come to kick against segregating children with disability from other children without disability, promote equal treatment for all and ensure that nothing inhibit or limit opportunity to learn. Therefore, if a meaningful progress is to be made in this direction, the role of community and stakeholders as highlighted in this paper is very important and this is time for all to rise to the task to ensure the success of inclusive education in Nigeria.

Recommendation

1. Placement decisions must be made on an individual basis by the IEP team.
2. Each school should have alternative placement available in order to ensure that each child with disability receives an education that is appropriate to his or her individual needs.
3. The school must ensure that each child's placement is in where the unique needs of that child can be best met.

4. When a child with disability is so disruptive in a general classroom that the education of other children is significantly impaired, the needs of the child with disability cannot be met in that environment. Therefore, regular placement would not be appropriate to his or her needs.
5. When placing a child with disability in an alternate setting, one factor to be considered is the need to place the child as close to home as possible in the neighborhood school.

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