



**INCLUSIVE EDUCATION STRATEGIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION FOR
AFRICAN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THE BACKGROUND EXPERIENCE OF
EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY**

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education, from the view point of educational psychologist is a carefully designed system of education for children with special needs so that they can reach their optimum potentials in terms of development. Recent developments in educational system lead to the inquiries such as whether the design is actually implemented accordingly or not. The paper discusses inclusive education strategies in early childhood from the perspective of educational psychology and its impact on the realization of sustainable development in Nigeria and Africa. It explained it as a concept that views children with disabilities as true full time participants and members of their neighborhood schools and communities. That inclusive school is a place where everyone belongs is accepted, supported of having his or her educational needs met. The question of whether inclusive education in Nigeria is practiced the same way and manner to reflect the reality as any other advanced countries or is just a myth has been addressed by the paper. One of the obstacles discovered is the fact that although it is practiced, not every level of education (primary or secondary) does it well. The paper went on to make some recommendations for improvement in order to meet up with the projections of education for all (EFA), as well as that of the millennium development goal which will lead to the realization of the basic objectives of sustainable development. To achieve those, some important recommendations were made. One of such recommendations is that human rights organizations should take a lead to pressurize for the proper implementation, since inclusive education is the right of all children, (normal and exceptional).

INTRODUCTION

As part of the education for all movement that followed the World conference in Jomtien, Thailand, in April 1990, most countries including Nigeria and Mauritius, embarked on programs aimed at meeting children's basic educational needs as set out in the United Nations convention on the rights of the child (CRC, 1989, arts 28 and 29). While some countries may boast of 100 percent school enrolment, many, especially in Africa, have not yet been able to provide quality education to enable young children including the exceptional children to be enjoyable in new sectors of the economy, to have more fulfilling jobs, and also to be competitive at the highest level, (EFA, 2009 in Zubairu, 2010).

In consideration of the love and care for high populated Nigerian children, it should be recognized that every child whether normal or abnormal has the right to education. This right include to grow healthy, to receive care and support, to be protected from exploitation and abuse, to learn to develop to his or her full potential, to be safe, to be informed and to be heard. As Hendrickz (1996) observes, teachers are the child right's duty-bearers, therefore, it is our ardent commitment to strive to the best of our ability for these rights to be fully realized. It is against this background that this paper is written in order to review the aspect of inclusive education based on the Nigerian experience and find the way forward that could lead to the realization of the objectives of inclusive education in early childhood as its relate to the goal of education for all (EFA), which can in turn, fulfill the antics of sustainable development in line with Education For All (EFA) goals. The six Education For All goals according to Zubairu, (2016) include the following: (1) Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children. (2) Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality. (3) Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programs. (4) Achieving a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults. (5) Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality. (6) Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

The Concept of Inclusive Education

The Longman dictionary of contemporary English defines the word "inclusive" as the act of including or state of being included. However, in education, inclusion means enabling pupils or students to participate to the best of their abilities, their

disabilities notwithstanding, in the life and work of institutions that mainstreams. The charter of inclusion states that, inclusion is a term which expresses commitment to educate each child to the maximum extent appropriate in school and classroom he or she would otherwise attend. It involves bringing the support services to the child (rather than moving the child to the services). Similarly, the Centre for studies on inclusive education (C.S.I.E) of the university of Bristol, England as reported by Mohammed (2003) states that inclusive education means disabled and non-disabled children and young people learning together in ordinary pre-school provision, schools, colleges and universities with appropriate networks of support. Inclusive education is also defined as a goal to be aimed for, rather than a fixed state to be achieved once and for all.

Generally and frankly speaking, inclusive education is a concept that views children with disabilities as true full time participants and members of their neighborhood schools and communities. Contributor posits that inclusion should have no range of placement but rather, all persons are educated with their peers in the same physical environment. This is because, when persons with special needs are welcomed (regardless of disabilities, race, class, gender etc.) and educated with their peers, tolerance and acceptance are built in such children. In this regard, inclusive education advocates for total involvement of persons with special needs in all activities of the school, be it social or academic. This according to Lere (2009) implies that regular schools have to be reconstructed or adapted to facilitate inclusion of these persons as to be able to manage them in the same setting with other children. As education is a reflection of the society, inclusive education makes good educational and social sense according to (Ukwudire, et al. 2003).

Further to the above, Stainback and Stainback (1992) as cited in Azeez, et al (2003) opined that inclusive school is a place where everyone belongs, is accepted, supports and is supported by his or her course of having his or her educational needs met. The definition emphasized that inclusive education should not make any discrimination or a sort of limitation in giving the individual with special needs their education right. Also, inclusive education stands for full time placement, of all with disabilities into regular classroom. The above definitions reveal in obvious sense the need for inclusive education to be the unconditional recognition of the special needs children into the regular educational system regardless of the nature and severity of the disabilities.

Rationale for Inclusive Education

As important as it is, the inclusive system of education in Nigeria just as is the case in Europe and America has become a household name in the area of special education. In fact, many see it as an innovation why some view it as another opportunity for readdressing the concern of special need individuals. In Nigeria, despite public enlightenments and numerous campaigns about the importance and benefits derived from inclusive education, it is apparently clear that the generality of Nigerians, including the educated population have not yet embraced the system, perhaps due to cultural beliefs that seem to dominate the attitudes of the majority. (Zubairu, 2010)

According to Azeez, et al (2003), the need for inclusive education is imperative in order to meet the united nation's declaration on equalizing of opportunities for persons with disabilities of 1993 and the UNESCO Salamanca declaration on special needs education (1994). Since Nigeria is a member of the United Nations and a signatory to the declaration, it is mandatory for the country to comply with the provision and declarations. These and other reasons underline the significance of the rights of the Nigerian exceptional child to all forms of functional education including inclusive education for his potential development. This will lead to the exceptional child to reach his maximum potential in life capable of contributing towards sustainable development.

The Rights of the School Child

As contained in Zubairu (2009), it was stated that in its wisdom, the Nigerian government provided in an act that in addition to health care, access to safe drinking water and sanitation and protection, there should be a condition for every Nigerian child including the exceptional child to be adequately educated to thrive and develop to their fullest potential. In pursuit of these objectives, Nigeria has developed a number of policies which include education policy. The policy provides that every Nigerian child (including the disabled) has the right to education from primary to university level.

Therefore, at it could be observed, that the government's explanation that the concept of equitability in the distribution of facilities, resources and benefits is a major concern. It is on this light that Mohammed (2003) states that, education is a social benefit regarded as the right of every citizens, "as contained" in the constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria. For this reason Mohammed opined that each individual (able and disabled) must be given equal opportunity and access to education. He therefore stress that the school system in the country kept in segregated environments for the purpose of education should be mad to

integrate. Or such schools should as a matter of importance be integrated into regular system of education of education.

In a related development, it was reported that in some highly developed countries, such as U.S.A, Britain, Canada and France etc., the governments have legislated against segregation. Further to this, Henderson (1995) as cited in Mohammed (2003) had argued against single category schools or segregation and recommend integration. This implies that children with special needs should be provided educational opportunities in school within their neighborhood with special needs, they should be provided with special teachers, equipment and facilities and also services of special nature, to suit their conditions and meet their needs.

Brief History and Development of Special Education in Nigeria

Literature or information on the history of special education in the country is very scanty to say at the least. This is because, early schools for the handicapped were usually regional establishments and information about their existence did not go beyond these regions. Therefore, many people outside the particular regions know little or nothing about them.

Development of special education in Nigeria according to Ekeleme (1997) took almost the same pattern as in Europe and other western countries. Education for “normal” persons went on for centuries before individuals began to think and embark on the education of the handicapped or exceptional children. In Europe for instance, it was not until 1760 when Abbe D l’eppee opened a school for the deaf in Paris that people began to realize the importance of educating exceptional children. In 1784, an associate of Abbe D l’eppe, Valentine Huay, started the first residential school for the blind, after witnessing ten blind men being exploited for public entertainment. Prior to this period, the handicapped were used merely as entertainers in the palaces and in court jesters. In fact, it was only after 1800 that institution established primarily by individuals, began to spring up all over Europe and America. Later, these institutions began to receive financial assistance from governments. In other words, education of the handicapped (exceptional persons) began to attract the attention of normal persons had taken firm roots and extended to Nigeria.

The missionaries were the pioneers of education in Nigeria and in fact, for many years, had the monopoly of education in the country. Even when government became involved in education, missionaries were still allowed to operate schools and were given grants in aid to support the schools the same interest in educating the general populace was transferred to the handicapped even though

whimsically (Ekeleme, 1997). Thus, the first schools for the handicapped were established by the missionaries and voluntary agencies. However, as Ekeleme further stated, it is not possible to state categorically the date when special education was started in Nigeria and by whom. But we do not know that the missionaries played a major role in the establishment of special schools and in the growth of special education in the country.

The Need for Inclusive Education as an Alternative to Special Education in Nigeria

Ugbong (2001) reported that knight (1991) posits that inclusion is a concept which views children with disabilities as true full time participants and members of their neighborhood schools and communities. Therefore are of the opinion that inclusion should have no range of placement but rather all persons with special needs are welcomed (regardless of disabilities, race, class, gender, etc.) will build acceptance and tolerance in them (Philips and Mbugua, 1999 as cited in Okwudire, 2003).

It is further reported that inclusive education advocates for a total involvement of persons with special needs in all activities of the school, be it social or academic. This implies that regular schools have to be reconstructed or adapted to facilitate inclusion of these persons to be able to manage them in the same setting with other children. Education is a reflection of the society, while inclusive education makes good educational and social sense (Alhassan, 2000). This underlines the importance of inclusive education as an alternative to segregation system in special education in Nigeria.

Furthermore, advocates of inclusive education system of education believe that it is the best form of education service delivery to every individual with special education needs. Specialists in both psychology and special education believe that segregation system seems to violate the fundamental human rights of the exceptional children throughout the Nigerian societies were it is being practiced. Nigeria is a signatory to the United Nation charter which provides that there should be equal opportunities to all children in health, protection and education etc. regardless of their condition. It is against this background that experts opines that inclusive education is a better solution to all situations and conditions. This sums up the needs for inclusive education as an alternative to segregation system in special education capable of meeting the EFA goal (Zubairu, 2009).

Myths or Reality

Providing integrated or inclusive education and equal educational opportunities to all children (regardless of their condition) in Nigeria is rather more

controversial than some aspects of development (Zubairu 2009). This could lead to questions of whether the rights of the child in the provision of opportunities in inclusive education are met or not, where and how, myths or reality. To answer these questions, we consider the following reports. For instance Ndu (1998) as cited in Mohammed (2003), states that the general public adopts the attitude of pity for the disabled and believes that they can only live on charity. This to him leads to a situation whereby a lot of disable children (the blind, crippled and mentally retarded are found roaming the streets begging for alms and generally living a wretched life.

Further to the above, it is reported that sufficient efforts have not been made in Nigeria towards the issue of educating the disabled, let alone providing for an inclusive setting. Again, Runsewe (2003) observed that presently at primary level, the number of children with special needs who are opportune to attend regular school is too small and even those who do, are not receiving inclusive education in the real sense of it. While at the secondary school level, Runsewe believes that visually and physically impaired students are placed in the same classrooms as other students but are not actually receiving adequate support. To buttress this point, it could be seen that hearing-impaired students at this level are still being placed in special schools. It is only at the tertiary level that the different categories of exceptional students study together in the same lecture rooms, but are also not actually getting enough support (Chung & Chung 2006). These and other factors imply that inclusive education in Nigeria is not as complete, detailed and executed as expected.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is apparently clear that the aspect of inclusive education in Nigeria is not a new phenomenon. However, despite various efforts by different agencies and governments to implement the program at different levels of our educational institutions, much has not been achieved. For instance, it was reported that a lot of exceptional children do not seem to receive the required support and be included in the program. Where few exist, no proper arrangement is made for effective implementation in the areas of funding, supervision and leadership. Since as observed, there are some obstacles on the way inhibiting the proper implementation of inclusive education system in Nigeria, there is the need to clear those obstacles so that the society can benefit and exceptional children are properly educated in order to become positive contributors to national development.

Recommendations

The study hereby makes the following recommendations

- Parents and guardians should as a matter of importance, cooperate fully for proper implementation of inclusive education for its success to be recorded in line with the goal of Education for All (EFA).
- There should be a proper enlightenment campaign from local government level through state level up to federal government level on the benefits of inclusive education in early childhood and its merits on both academic and national development
- Since it is discussed as a right of the child, inclusive education should be made compulsory throughout the country and should be regulated in the educational provisions at early childhood level.
- Human right activists should take a lead while other non-governmental organizations follow to ensure that every individual child receives equal opportunity as provided by the inclusive system of education regardless of his condition.
- Measures (as sanctions) should be taken in order to control the possible violators and saboteurs of inclusive education in general and at the level of early childhood regardless of their position in the society.
- Graduates of the inclusive early childhood program should be encouraged by giving them automatic employment in accordance with their performance abilities, so also the physically challenge as in the case of the able people.

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