



CREATING AN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS FOR CHILDREN WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENT IN NIGERIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

The paper focused on creating inclusive classrooms for children with visual impairment in Nigerian primary schools. Salient issues such as concepts of inclusive education, inclusive classrooms, visual impairment, children with visual impairment, benefits of teaching children with visual impairment in inclusive classrooms, and strategies for creating inclusive classrooms, will be highlighted and discussed. In conclusion the paper posits that primary school teachers need to be flexible and willing to adapt classroom instruction to meet the learning needs of children with and without disabilities. At the same time, special education teachers need to collaborate with the significant stakeholders to ensure that learning takes place. However, regular student teachers must have skills in communication, collaboration, cooperative learning strategies and confidence to use these skills in the classroom where children with visual impairment are included. In this respect, those who have not received such training during their pre-service training should also receive it during their in-service training. The paper suggested among others that given the complex nature of classrooms and the increasing demands on teachers (who often have little or no specialized training in working with children with visual impairment), structures should be set up to provide the necessary help and guidance for them to make changes in their instruction.

Key Words: Inclusive, Classrooms, Visual Impairment.

Introduction

Inclusion is the understanding that all children will have access to the knowledge, skills and values necessary to lead productive lives. Inclusive classroom connotes accommodation of children with diverse learning abilities and needs including

those with and without visual impairment in the same classrooms for instruction. Similarly, inclusive classrooms refer to a programme in which all available resources are collaboratively utilized to meet the educational needs and challenges of children with diverse needs who are in its attendant area (Ozaji, Unachukwu & Kolo, 2016). It can also be described as a classroom arrangement where children with visual impairment and others termed as “normal” are enabled to participate in the learning process together irrespective of their uniqueness (Iroegbu, 2021).

Inclusive education philosophy was adopted at the World Conference on Special Needs Education in 1994. It was restated at the World Education Forum held in Dakar (Dakar Framework for Action, 2000). This was further supported by the United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for persons with special needs, which proclaim active participation and equality of education for all (Haruna, Ogaero & Daniang, 2014). Furthermore, the ‘Salamanca Statement’ sets forth the challenge to provide education for all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, emotional, social, linguistic or other conditions. A section of the statement endorsed by 300 participants representing 92 countries and 25 international organizations in 1994 is notable and that is, education policies at all levels which stipulates that children with disabilities should attend the neighborhood school that is the school that would have been attended if the child did not have a disability (National Teacher Institute, 2012). One of the philosophical perspectives of inclusive education is that children who learn together learn to live together.

Children with visual impairment are not guests in the classroom rather they have the same desks, materials, and storage spaces as others and they are included in class works, field trips, rewards, and consequences. In fact they are “natural” members of the classroom. Through inclusion, they receive instruction at an appropriate level within the general education classroom. However, the critical issue underlying successful inclusion is the acceptance of diversity. Unfortunately, this is not likely to happen easily and without major changes in the way many schools operate. The complexity of the challenge is explained in Smith, Polloway, Patton and Dowdy (2001):

The real challenge is a lot harder and more complicated than we thought. Neither special nor general education alone has either the capacity or the version to challenge and change the deep-rooted assumption that separate and

track children and youths according to presumptuous ability, achievement, and eventual social contribution. Meaningful change will require nothing less than a joint effort to reinvent schools to be more accommodating to all dimensions of human diversity (p.37).

Although, Ferguson's advice is accurate and perhaps overwhelming positive steps toward successful inclusion can be taken on a classroom-by-classroom and school-by-school basis. It is important to remember that one teacher can have a dramatic effect on the lives of children with visual impairment. Creating effective inclusive classrooms therefore, has relevance for children's immediate needs as well as their long-term needs. In the short-term; children need to learn in settings along with their peers (that is inclusive schooling). In the long-term; these children as adults, are expected to live, work and play along with their peers in their home communities (that is inclusive living). In this regard, without the opportunity to grow and learn with non-special needs peers throughout their lives, individuals with special needs will not be able to accomplish these goals. In this paper, salient issues such as concepts of inclusive education, inclusive classrooms, visual impairment, children with visual impairment, benefits of teaching children with visual impairment in inclusive classrooms, and strategies for creating inclusive classrooms, will be highlighted and discussed.

Concept of Inclusive Education

Inclusive classroom connotes accommodation of children with diverse learning abilities and needs including those with and without special needs in the same classrooms for instruction. It can also be described as a classroom arrangement where children with visual impairment and others termed as "normal" are enabled to participate in the learning process together irrespective of their uniqueness (Ozaji, 2005). Inclusive classrooms therefore, is a programme in which all available resources are collaboratively utilized to meet the educational needs and challenges of children with diverse needs who are in its attendant area (Ozaji, Unachukwu & Kolo, 2016). One of the philosophical perspectives of inclusive education is that children who learn together learn to live together.

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Concept of Visual impairment

Visual impairment refers to any deviation from normal which results in defective functioning, structure or development of the visual organ. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (2013) defined it as vision loss, which adversely affects a person's educational performance. Hence, loss of vision makes it difficult for a person to complete daily tasks without specialized adaptations. So, a child with visual impairment is one with problems in the structure and or functioning of the eye (Lere, Ozegya, & Iroegbu, 2014). These problems range from ability to see a little to inability to see at all. Thus, a child with visual impairment experiences limitations in performing certain actions, functions or educational activities that involve the use of sight (vision). One of the most important requirements for students with visual impairment to excel in the school system is access to technology. Technology has become an essential part of the everyday educational setting. Thus, the use of assistive technology has proven to facilitate learning and communication for many persons with or without special needs (Uwoye, 2019). This is true with those with visual impairment as use of assistive technology holds potential for them to successfully participate and excel in education.

Concept of Inclusive Classrooms

Invariably, a typical classroom in which inclusive education is practiced should be one in which (1) all children receive instruction from the same teachers irrespective of their diversified learning needs (2) placements are age and grade appropriate and (3) special education supports exist within the general education class (Werts, Culatta and Tompkins, 2007). However, Smith, Polloway,

Patton and Dowdy cited in Ozoji (2009) posit that for inclusion to be successfully practiced five critical issues are pertinent; first, learners with special needs (e.g. the hearing impaired, visually impaired and those with learning disabilities to mention but a few in this context) must be valued, active and full members of the class and/or school community. In fact, they can truly be included in the classroom only when their teachers (regular or special) appreciate them; and their peers accept them socially.

Second, the various types of diversity such as racial, ethnic, gender, religion, physical, learning, behavior and differences are recognized and celebrated. In an inclusive classroom where children with visual impairment are included opportunities are usually created for them to learn tolerance; and develop the ability to accept differences in each other.

Third, attention must be paid to the curricula needs of these children. In fact if the special learning needs of children with visual impairment are not properly addressed even before embarking on their inclusion in the regular class or school environment success could be elusive. The teacher must therefore be able to identify and assess too, the feasibility of meeting the curricula and learning needs of these children in order to accommodate them in his/her classroom.

Fourth, many of the included children may be able to deal effectively with their curricula activities while others need modifications. Therefore, the teacher must be able to vary the curricula activities to meet the needs of all children included in his/her class. Fifth, it is important that the teacher is knowledgeable about the curriculum 'plus' and 'minus' paradigm in handling the diverse learning needs of children in his/her class besides his/her knowledge about the general curriculum.

Children with Visual Impairment

Children with visual impairment are those whose sense of vision is defective. These children have visual disabilities because they cannot perform visual tasks such as reading print. They are visually handicapped because of the difficulties that prevent them from total integration in the society that demands the use of sight for effective functioning. Abang (2005) described them as those whose visual defect interferes with their optimal learning and achievement. Hence, the children need modification in the method used to present learning experiences, materials and in the learning environment. Also, children with visual impairment have defective vision with corresponding functional limitations in orientation

and mobility, daily living skills and visual tasks which result to poor integration in the society. Educationally, a child has visual impairment if he/she cannot read printed symbols, but can only read through braille. Thus, the major characteristic trait of children with visual impairment is inability to see physically or clearly. So, they do not have opportunity to benefit from visual information to be able to carry out experiments, observations, measurements and other activities in the teaching and learning processes. This situation informs why these categories of children with disability need assistive technology in order to access and excel in academics.

The children therefore, need to be trained to use and rely on other senses (auditory, tactile, olfactory and kinesthetic) in order to excel maximally in school. Hence, accommodating children with visual impairment in classrooms would involve adaptation and modification of teaching methods, materials and instructional strategies without altering the standard of learning and their expected requirements. Also, appropriate assistive technologies need to be procured and applied in order to enable them to complete tasks, assignments and or examinations like their sighted counterparts.

Benefits of Teaching Children with Visual Impairment in Inclusive Classrooms

Nevertheless, while the merits of inclusion have been debated, the reality is that the movement has taken hold. A comparison of the national placement figures from the 1987 – 1988 and 1995 – 1996 school years shows an increase from 28.88% to 45.95% in the number of children with visual impairment educated in general education classrooms, at least part of the day (Nwankwo, 2011). This represents a 60% increase in the number of children with visual impairment served in these settings (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2000).

The foregoing informs “new thinking in special needs education.” Supporters of inclusive education maintain that it is the commitment to educate each child to the maximum extent appropriate in the classroom or school he/she would otherwise attend if he/she does not have disability. In this respect, to create an inclusive classroom entails bringing ancillary services to the child; and requires that the child benefits from being included in the class rather than having to keep up with the other children. This is a salient aspect of inclusion; and it requires a commitment on the part of teachers and other stakeholders to move essential

resources to the child with a disability rather than placing the child in an isolated setting where services are located (Smith, 2007).

Invariably, for the child with visual impairment to benefit optimally from inclusion, it is imperative that regular education teachers are trained to become competent to teach a wider array of children; and to collaborate and plan effectively with special educators and other stakeholders in the education of children with special needs. However, education practices must be child-centered (UNESCO, 1994). This means that classroom teachers must find out where each of their pupils are academically, socially, and culturally to determine how best to facilitate learning (Gildner, 2001). The implication therefore is that these teachers will need to acquire skills in curriculum-based assessment, team teaching, mastery learning, assessing learning styles, cooperative learning strategies, facilitating peer tutoring, or social skills training. Given that children have varied learning styles or different intelligence (Gardner, 1999), teachers need to plan and coordinate classroom instruction based on each child's needs, interests and aptitudes.

Teaching Strategies in Inclusive Classroom

A good indicator of a functional inclusive education is the extent to which classroom instructional strategies are competently managed to bring about learning outcomes in all the learners in the class. Including children with and without special needs in the class for teaching purposes without having a laid down teaching strategies to follow in discharging the teaching business will amount to effort in futility. In this regard, the following teaching strategies are to be considered in an inclusive classroom:

1. **Assessment:** This involves a systematic collection of information about children's learning in order to inform discussion about their learning outcomes. Teaching and learning must be assessed to take informed decisions about what to teach, how to teach it, how to know if progress is being made or not, and the necessary steps to take to ensure that desired learning outcomes are attained. According to Dala (2013), assessment is an inevitable action in a teaching process. Be that as it may, assessment in inclusive class must be diverse, authentic, appropriate, relevant and sufficiently frequent to ensure precise teaching.
2. **Accommodation:** This involves the adjustments that make learners with special needs competent and proficient to participate in the regular

classroom settings. In other words, it refers to changes in classroom practices; for examples, course content, teaching strategies, environmental structuring, pupil's response, etc. that process access for children with visual impairment to participate in class activities that do not fundamentally alter or lower the standards or expectations of the subject, standard or text (Dala, 2013). Besides, accommodation entails changing conditions to meet a child's unique learning needs rather than requiring him/her to fit in the needs of the system. In this regard, it can be individually provided base on needs assessment or through universal responses to meet every child's needs in the classroom. Accommodation can be made in the areas of assessment (such as focusing on formative rather than summative assessment), instructional/teaching strategies (for instance, focusing on flexible child-centred approaches rather than rigid regular methods), curriculum (focusing on adaptation and modification rather than rigid regular curriculum/teacher-centred approaches all the time), test presentation (focusing on alternate test procedures such as audio presentation, advance test items, verbal response, additional timing to tests, presenting participants and materials in alternate formats, etc), provision of supports to access all aspects of school activities, and provision of additional resources to the ones available and environmental structuring to aid mobility of learners (Dala, 2013). Therefore, without clear-cut accommodation policy and practices, inclusive education for children with visual impairment will amount to effort in futility.

3. **Identification:** This involves the detection of cases of impairment and learning challenges among children in the classroom with the aim of evolving intervention plans/special education for children identified. Identification, especially early identification of children with visual impairment in the class is very important because of the need to assess and help these children overcome the challenges of their disabling conditions. According to Dala (2013), inclusive education targets learners with impairment (medical), learners with poor learning outcomes (learning) and learners from disadvantages backgrounds (sex/gender, religion, backward background). This implies that children with visual impairment can be identified in the class either through medical symptoms, prolonged poor performance in classroom tasks and socio-cultural identity. Identification of children with visual impairment appears easier to achieve when teachers know and relate with

the children closely and monitor their learning styles and classroom behaviours.

4. **Assistive Technology:** Assistive technology is an umbrella term for any device or system that allows children with visual impairment to perform tasks they would otherwise be unable to do or to increase the ease and safety with which tasks can be performed (WHO, 2004). It is anything that leads to compensate for lack of certain abilities ranging from low-tech devices (such as crutches or special grip for a pen); to more advanced devices (such as hearing aids and glasses); to high tech devices such as brailers and computers with the necessary software. Dala (2013) refers to assistive technology as any device that helps a person with disability to complete an everyday task. Good examples of such device includes a remote control for a television for somebody with broken limbs or typing telephone for persons with hearing impairment or motorized wheelchair for persons with physical impairment. However, to use assistive technology effectively in the classroom, the inclusive teacher should be able to evaluate the children in his class in order to determine the types of assistive technology they need and recommend such for their use. In this respect, the teacher also needs to evaluate the physical environment of the in- and out-classes in order to know the aspects that will pose movement and/or learning challenges for the child or children who will use the environment. With assistive technology, children with visual impairment will no doubt be enabled to access every aspect of the inclusive school community as well as enjoy any service that will directly assist them in selecting, acquiring and/or using suitable learning materials. Therefore, the teacher's ingenuity in recommending assistive technology is very important in an inclusive classroom; hence without assistive technology children with visual impairment may not easily access the school curriculum (Dala, 2013).
5. **Pedagogy:** This involves instructional methods/implications for children with visual impairment. Lowenfeld (1973) propounded the following fundamental principles for teachers to apply when teaching children with visual impairment:
 - i. **Individualization of Instruction:** This principle is saying that the needs of the child should determine the nature and type of educational programme. So, the teacher should structure the lesson plan with the individual child's learning needs in mind and with the aim of carrying

every child along in order to ensure that each child learns at his/her own pace.

- ii. **Concreteness:** Knowledge about concrete objects should be obtained through hearing and feeling. This principle implies the use of tangible teaching aids that will allow the child to touch, feel, smell and explore them in order to enable him/her to understand the concept of what the teacher is trying to convey to him/her. In this respect, this principle affords the child the opportunity to touch and manipulate concrete objects (Ozaji & Mugu, 1999). This helps the child to learn about shapes, size, texture, weight, surface, temperature and so on. The principle of concreteness actually makes the learning and teaching process meaningful as the child is enabled to understand his or her world better.
- iii. **Unified Instruction:** This principle is emphasizing the need to relate all areas of instruction in such a way that learning becomes integrated for the child. The implication therefore, is that learning activities are broken down into manageable sizes to enhance understanding of the whole learning concept. Also, instruction could be taken step by step from the known to the unknown or from the simplest to complex so that the child masters a step before another is introduced to him or her.
- iv. **Additional Stimulation:** This principle is saying that learning should be extended beyond the classroom into experiences that should sensitize other senses of the child. Therefore, the teacher needs to utilize avenues that will stimulate the child to want to learn. Two possible ways of doing this could be either by taking the child to the source of the stimulation for instance, through excursion or field trip; and/or by bringing the source of the stimulation to the child in the classroom by inviting a motivational speaker to have a session with pupils in the class.
- v. **Self-activity:** Everything should not be done for the child because of his/her visual problems. The child should be allowed to do things by him/herself in order to be exposed to useful experiences. In this regard, the teacher should encourage the child to try out things on his or her own.

However, there are two types of pedagogies; the regular pedagogy which is used in the regular school for all learners including children with visual impairment and the inclusive pedagogy, which is about teaching diverse individuals or groups of pupils. In this regard, there appears to be a sort of mutual partnership between

the regular (sole teaching) and inclusive (co-teaching) pedagogies i.e. they exist side by side (Dala, 2013). According to the author, inclusive pedagogy comprises the following:

- i. One-teach-one support method: Here children sit in rows in front of the chalkboard and teacher. The supporting teacher stations himself in the class to provide extra help and support as needed.
- ii. Station teaching: This involves the creation of various learning stations and the co-teachers provide individual support at each different station.
- iii. Parallel teaching: Here teachers teach same or similar content in different classroom groupings.
- iv. Alternative teaching: The practice here is that one teacher takes a smaller group of children to a different location for a limited period of time for specialized instruction.
- v. Team/Interactive teaching: In this method, both co-teachers share responsibilities equally and are equally involved in leading instructional activities.
- vi. Cooperative/collaborative teaching: This method combines the expertise and resources of classroom teacher with the special talents of the special education teacher (p.22).

The ultimate goal of these pedagogies is to ensure participatory learning and learning for all children. However, teachers require additional training to be able to use inclusive pedagogy in inclusive classroom. The general principles of inclusive pedagogy require that the teacher should be able to establish prior knowledge during teaching; pre-plan lessons with structured objectives as well as allowing for inter/post planning; proceed from simple to complex by using discrete task analysis (which breaks up the learning into manageable parts); and use a step-by-step approach teaching in small bites with much practice and repetition. Also, the teacher should reinforce abstract concepts with concrete examples; use models for teaching aids; vary types of instruction and assessment with multiple or cooperative inventions and establish a classroom environment that encourages pupils to ask questions and become actively involved in the learning process (Dala, 2013). The implication therefore, is that the inclusive teacher should be very familiar with the regular and inclusive pedagogies and general principles in order to achieve effective learning for all children in the class.

6. **Ethical Principles and Practice Standards:** The ethics and standards of inclusive education are to respect the diverse characteristics and needs of children with visual impairment in the inclusive classroom. The enabling document of the Council for Exceptional Children (2009) spells out ethical principles and standards for professional practice; some of which include (1) expect children with visual impairment to develop the highest learning outcomes and quality of life potential (2) maintain a high level of professional competence and integrity exercising professional judgment to benefit these children (3) promoting meaningful and inclusive participation of children with visual impairment in their schools and communities and (4) never engage in tolerating any practice that harms children with visual impairment. Inclusive personnel are therefore, bound by these ethical principles and standards.
7. **Inclusive Curriculum:** Curriculum is the basis of education. It entails all the learning that is planned and guided by the school; thus it is concerned with what is taught and learned (content); how it is delivered (teaching-learning methods); how it is assessed (for instance, tests/examinations) and the resources used (such as books). Inclusive curriculum in this regard, is a means to social inclusion. It has features such as ensuring equity and quantity (that is responding to learners); 'glo-local', flexible, balanced and relevant to each context and individual (and therefore should address and incorporate national, local and learner's diversities); no "one size fits all" model (however, the same curriculum can be taught to mix-ability learners); and competency-based and evidence-based approaches (such as to direct what works in the class). Therefore, inclusive curriculum should incorporate the following:
 - i. **Regular/core curriculum** as developed by NERDC for schools in Nigeria to be used to meet national goals of education for every child. This is the basis for all other modifications to meet individual needs.
 - ii. **Curriculum plus** - additions to the regular curriculum to address high flyer interests in the class in order to meet their needs. This is often done in the education of gifted children in the form of curriculum compacting (where pupils are made to skip less introductory and review materials); curriculum telescoping (where pupils move through a particular curriculum at an advanced stage); and curriculum enrichment (where pupils move through a particular curriculum at an advanced stage).

- iii. **Curriculum minus** - removal of aspects considered above the learning capacity of certain learners to avoid frustration.
- iv. **Curriculum adaptation** - use of instructional resources to bring the regular curriculum to the appreciation level of certain learners with special needs (for example, Braille content to teach visual/print context to a child with visual impairment in the class). Sequel to the foregoing, both regular and special teachers ought to co-plan to determine inclusive curriculum that will meet all needs and that will enable all learners to learn to their maximum potentials. This informs the basis of teacher collaboration and teamwork in inclusive classrooms.

Conclusion

Preparing quality teachers for inclusive education is a challenging task in both developed and less developed countries. This calls for a change in the national teacher preparation programme most especially for the pre-service teachers. Hence, teachers need to be flexible and willing to adapt classroom instruction to meet the learning needs of children with and without disabilities. At the same time, special education teachers need to collaborate with the significant stakeholders to ensure that learning takes place. Therefore, regular student teachers must have skills in communication, collaboration, cooperative learning strategies and confidence to use these skills in the classroom where children with visual impairment are included. In this respect, those who have not received such training during their pre-service training should also receive it during their in-service training.

Suggestions

1. To provide effective inclusive education for all children, teachers would need to develop a different set of skills and knowledge than traditionally required by the teaching profession.
2. As an increasing number of children with visual impairment are being served in regular classrooms, which are dramatically changing the way special education services are being provided in schools so there is need to reflect this trend in pre-service teacher education programmes so that the next generation of educators will be better prepared to work more efficiently and effectively.
3. Given the complex nature of classrooms and the increasing demands on teachers (who often have little or no specialized training in working with

children with visual impairment), structures should be set up to provide the necessary help and guidance for them to make changes in their instruction.

4. With the increasing diversity among children in today's classrooms, teacher preparation programmes are increasingly needed to train teachers who are able to respond competently to the challenges of inclusive classrooms. A major part of responding to the diversity in the classroom is through effective and efficient teacher preparation.
5. The 'new normal' in teacher-training model should focus on affording trainee teachers ample opportunities to practice as much as possible throughout the programme

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