

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Special is Unique, Until You Are in School: An Anecdote of Nigeria's Inclusive Education System

Atinuke Elizabeth Ayowole

Doctoral Student, Department of Political Science,
Southern Illinois University, Carbondale IL, United States

Abstract:

Inclusive education is a process of enhancing the capacity of the education system in any country to reach out to diverse learners. The practice anchors on the notion that every child should be an equally and mutually valued member of the school culture. In other words, children with disabilities benefit from learning in a regular classroom, while their peers without disabilities gain from being exposed to children with diverse characteristics, talents, and temperaments. With Nigeria, much of the debate regarding inclusive education has remained theoretical and speculative, and has not translated into adequate inclusive educational opportunities for persons with disabilities - visible and non-visible. The basis of inclusion is that special needs pupils have a right to the benefits of a full school experience, with needed modifications and supports alongside their peers without disabilities who receive General Education. For the child with a disability to benefit optimally from inclusion, it is imperative to have an accommodating and efficient system, effective collaboration with special educators, as well as with General Education teachers who can teach a wider array of children, including those with varying disabilities.

Keywords: Public policy, education, inclusive education, governance

1. Introduction

The past four decades have been met with many attempts at reforming the Nigerian education sector, particularly to better accommodate inclusive education, but with no significant results (Adepoju, 2007). The importance of this discussion comes from the basis that inclusionary practices are anchored on the principle of fundamental human rights. Fundamental human rights to education here refer to all students irrespective of their abilities or disabilities as having a right to be educated in the same classroom setting where possible (Oladele, 2016). The Nigerian National Policy on Education (NPE) (2004) stipulates that those persons with disabilities should be educated in regular schools along with their non-disabled peers. The policy further stipulates that person with disabilities would receive free education from primary school to higher institution, also known as university ("Nigerian National Policy on Education," 2004). The policy statement shows that Nigeria sees inclusion as an inalienable right of persons with disabilities. It is however worrisome to note that Nigeria is still underdeveloped in its practice of inclusion. This underdevelopment is characterized by tremendous deficiencies in professional competency and classroom provisions, which are caused by structural inhibitions in the national policy framework on education (Stephanie, 2012). Such structural inhibitions as in curricular overloading; lack of funding; deeply rooted cultural beliefs and stereotypes; negative perceptions; insufficient research; paucity of qualified teachers; unaccountability and teacher attitudes, do not only inhibit successful implementation of the policy, but additionally incapacitate success of innovative programs in special education (Stoler, 1992). Against this backdrop, this paper will examine the Nigerian educational system on inclusion, its success or otherwise, challenges and the future perspectives for improving the education of children with exceptional needs.

2. Statement of the Problem

Osokoya citing Michigan (1991) sees inclusive education as the provision of educational services for students with disabilities in schools where non-disabled peers equally attend under the instruction of general education (GE) teachers equipped with appropriate special education support and assistance as determined appropriate through an individualized Educational Planning Committee (IEPC) (Osokoya, 2007).

In a society like Nigeria, the historical educational system was characterized with more inclusion than it obtains at the present; both students with or without disabilities were allowed to be educated in one classroom and use the same curricula of instruction. The idea behind this was that every person within the society must be assisted in whatsoever way to attain their maximum potential and in turn be useful to the society's economic and social stability. Hence, if a learner is identified as being dull in learning and all instructional approach and intervention has been exhausted, such learner is pronounced "non-conformist" or "default" and unable to contribute economically to the society's viability, and hence must be excommunicated. The negative societal perceptions of this culture transferred into the classroom and largely remained until present (Eskay, 2009). To address this, it would then be thought that a national intervention (or policy) would

restore the hope of inclusion for students with special-needs in general education. More complications rather developed (Nwogu, 1988).

The design of the Nigerian national school curriculum creates limited space for Special Needs Education Service education because of other competing priorities. Asagwara in 1997 corroborated this observation when he stated that:

“Those who planned the Universal Primary Education (UPE) scheme in 1976 apparently forgot to consider the importance of the availability of qualified teachers, adequate learning environments, equipment and textbooks, classroom management and supervision, and the content of the curriculum. Thus, the governing policy-body outrightly endorsed an international protocol for special needs education that has not been adequately researched or tested in developing countries. It is bound to fail” (Asagwara, 1997).

Also, the objectives of the NPE are beyond the country’s budgetary allocation for education, not to mention, for special education. Compared to other countries, Nigeria has been found to have slow funding on special education because Nigeria lacks a legal mandate to enforce special education policies. As a result, services for people with disabilities are not delivered appropriately (Obiakor, 1998). The NPE mentions the use of specialists and ‘additional services’ to support students’ needs in primary and secondary schools (“Nigerian National Policy on Education,” 2004). However, operation and coordination services, and the offering of individual support to children requires additional resources money that many schools do not have, particularly in a tight economy (Stephanie, 2012). Undoubtedly, inadequate funding can hinder ongoing-professional development that should keep both specialists and classroom teachers updated on the best practices for inclusion. Lack of legal enforcement of a program in any democratic society can make the program faux. As it stands, there is no legal mandate from the government to enforce the implementation of objectives enumerated in Section 8 of the NPE regarding people with special needs. Among other consequences, this absence of a legal mandate has led to lack of local, state, and federal governments funding for special education programs (Eskay, 2012). As Ajuwon (2008) pointed out, the absence of legal mandates to enforce special education programs perpetuates negative societal perceptions of special-needs learners (Ajuwon, 2008).

The outcome of these root causes has been defined by a malevolent extent of incompetency, separation, and insufficient school and classroom facilities as should be the standard of inclusive schools. The required facilities, assistive tools and learning materials that enhance learning are either lacking or -where they exist, are inadequate and/or obsolete, and professionals in special education are few in Nigeria. General purpose teachers are therefore seen to dominate the field of Special Needs Education. Additionally, the rise in different advocacy organizations for people with different categories of needs has been largely met with underfunding and dual-trained special educators (i.e., educators with certification in special education as well as a subject-matter discipline) not exhaustively specialized to work with the different types of special-needs students (Stephanie, 2012).

3. Enabling Legislation and Policy

In Nigeria, The National Policy on Education (NPE) (2004) and the Universal Basic Education Act (UBE) (2004) are the only authorized and recognized education legislations and policies responsible for national-education curriculum, with the NPE being solely responsible for inclusionary mechanisms for special education students.

In 1999 the Universal Basic Education (UBE) policy was adopted and enacted into law in 2004 as the UBE Act which makes a provision that 2% of its Consolidated Revenue Fund (CRF) would finance the UBE program. Thus, the compulsory free Universal Basic Education Act, 2004, provides a legal framework within which the Federal Government stipulated “to achieve uninterrupted nine-year compulsory Universal Basic Education for all children in primary and junior secondary school levels throughout the country, including free access to this compulsory education for students with special-needs” (“Nigerian National Policy on Education,” 2004). As a national education policy under the UBE Act, the actual provision for funding the education of children with special needs was not put into effect until 2008 (Ajuwon, 2008). This was when the policy of Inclusive Education -National Policy on Education (NPE)- was officially and formally adopted as an integral part of the UBE policy (Omede, 2016).

Although both educational policies are under the control of the Federal Ministry of Education, without a synergy of all teachers, other public and private organizations like Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council, Universal Basic Education Commission, National Universities Commission, breakthrough is still far-fetched. Hence, despite the mandatory authority of the Federal Ministry of Education to solve this policy problem, sectoral Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) with specialty and specialists in both fields of special education and inclusive teaching are good authorities to address this policy problem (Stoler, 1992).

4. Current Challenges

With half of its population under the age of 30 and 65% population under 35, Nigeria currently has the highest number of out-of-school children in the world, approximately 8% of her youth population (BBC, 2017) (Mbachu, 2016). Yet only 6% of its national budget is allocated to the Nigerian educational sector, compared to 26% recommended by The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (Dipo, 2018). In a country with such an educational state-of-emergency, the stakes are low for the special-needs population. People that are unable to afford any type of formal education mostly lack access to a sustainable occupation, consequently resulting in increasing poverty and less likelihood that the country will live up to its vision for a better economy (Mbachu, 2016). Nigeria’s three tiers of government are required to fund programs for people with learning disabilities, with the Federal Ministry of Education coordinating activities between relevant agencies (Shayera, 2018). However, NGOs specialized in special education programs still report severe constraints in obtaining funds, even from the tiers of government. According to a BBC Hausa

editor, the Nigerian education system would certainly be better suited to live up to all its educational promises should government funding become appropriately allocated (BBC, 2017).

Additionally, the physical and sociocultural environment and current academic curriculum for general education are not designed or built to accommodate inclusionary practices (Oladele, 2016). Many students (both disabled and nondisabled) are put together in the same classroom and poorly prepared teachers find it difficult to identify their individual needs (Eskay, 2012). A study conducted by three specialists on special education in 100 schools in the South-West in 2016 revealed that schools are not architecturally designed to accommodate persons with disabilities (Oladele, 2016). As discovered from this study, overcrowded classrooms where large populations of 'normal pupils' overwhelm regular teachers and where buildings are not conducive for academic learning does not show that Nigeria is ready to practice inclusion (Akinpelu, 2012) (Oladele, 2016). Also, General-Education teachers are not often properly deployed to receive and practice inclusive education. Findings from a study reveal that most teachers' attitudes toward inclusion are largely negative and thus present a drawback on achieving inclusive education in the country anytime soon. In the study, most teachers claimed that teaching persons with a disability could result in having children with disabilities, half of the respondents opined that person with disabilities should be educated in special schools, and about 45% averred that they felt uncomfortable interacting with persons with disabilities (UNESCO, 1994).

In Boyle, Scriven, Durling and Downes (2011), the authors affirmed that knowledge of inclusion and attitudinal factors play an invaluable role in the integration of special-needs children within the regular education setting. These cultural behaviors, superstitions, and taboos have caused, poor identification, poor evaluation, bad placement, and lack of adequate instructions for learners with disabilities in Nigeria (Onwuegbu, 1977). Unfortunately, the slow adoption of educating people with disabilities is reflective of the disparate view of policy makers on the subject. Because of the political and cultural issues mitigating against the institutionalization of special education, the journey to praxis seems far-fetched despite the enactment of provisions to support special education in the NPE over three decades ago (Muuya, 2002).

5. Future Perspectives, Implications, and Conclusion

The failure to accommodate the environmental and accessibility needs of persons with disabilities in the society inevitably inhibits their participation in educational, social, recreational, and economic activities (Ajuwon, 2008). As affirmed in Section 8 of the NPE, like Public Law 94-142 in the United States, it is suggested that future policy modifications must serve the purpose of the legislative provision for all children:

- To give concrete meaning to the idea of equalizing educational opportunities for all children's physical and emotional needs.
- To provide adequate education for all learners with disabilities, so that they may fully play their roles in the development of the nation.
- To provide opportunities for exceptionally gifted students (who are also considered disabled within the Nigerian society) to develop at their own pace in the interest of the nation's economic and technological development. ("Nigerian National Policy on Education," 2004) (pp. 33-34).

Also, the implementation of an architecturally conducive building for educational institutions would promote accommodation for the environmental and accessibility needs of persons with disabilities in the society. Unfortunately, a likely effect of this modification may lead to establishments of separate schools to allow more teacher-student attention for special-needs learners as occurred in the past, thereby inhibiting their mixed participation in educational, social, recreational, and economic activities (Steinfeld, 1977), 9-16. Since it is reported that children are more likely to learn social skills in an environment that approximates to normal conditions of growth and development, children also, during their formative years, develop language more effectively if they are with children who speak normally and appropriately (Ajuwon, 2008). Investing in a national inclusive education has been proven to also bring better social, academic, health and economic outcomes than children with disabilities attending segregated schools (Baboo, 2017).

Although modifying the current educational policies in Nigeria would establish physical and assistive structures towards an inclusive system, enforce a legal mandate of the NPE to sanction non-compliance of the policy, and allow for people with special needs a right to academic accommodation, the way people think about others with disabilities may not be changed if the government does not educate the citizens about the newly institutionalized information and resources. Hence, for inclusion to be successfully practiced, it is suggested that necessary modifications must be in place. Examples of these modifications include school support staff, physically conducive structures (disability friendly environment, appropriate equipment and tools for early identification and teaching learning process), changes in the curriculum to accommodate inclusion, awareness of what inclusion is all about, and accurate census of persons with disabilities.

The policy on Inclusive Education which began as an excellent path for providing equal education to all Nigerian citizens has found itself struggling with how to make it better for learners with special needs. It is unsurprising that for decades, such a struggle has not produced any measurable progress in the education and service delivery for these learners (Eskay, 2012). Without a doubt, Nigeria needs to commence a paradigm shift appropriate to the 21st century era by expunging all anachronistic beliefs and policies if it desires to join other progressive countries in recognizing, protecting, and maintaining the rights of learners with special needs. The sooner lawmakers address the problems inhibiting inclusive education, the better for the country's economy. If other countries like the United States have successfully established policies that bolster special education, there is no reason why the Nigerian system and institutions cannot implement the same.

6. References

- i. Adepoju, A., & Fabiyi, A. (2007). Universal basic education in Nigeria: Challenges and prospects. *Union for African Population Studies; Fifth African Population Conference*, 1, 9-13.
- ii. Ajuwon, P. (2008). Inclusive Education for Students with Disabilities in Nigeria: Benefits, Challenges, and Policy Implications. *International Journal of Special Education*, 23(3), 11-16.
- iii. Akinpelu, E., Oyewumi, A., Oyewole, M., & Azanor, F. (2012). Implications of Architectural Design and Banking System on Students with Disabilities at the Federal College of Education (Special). *International interdisciplinary conferences of Catholic University of Eastern Africa*, 1, 27-31.
- iv. Asagwara, K. (1997). A Perspective on Free Education at All Levels in Nigeria. *The Urban Review*, 29(3), 189-203.
- v. Baboo, N. (2017). *The Economic Case for Inclusive Education*. Available: <https://www.light-for-the-world.org/economic-case-inclusive-education>. [December 2, 2019].
- vi. BBC. (2017). *Nigeria has the 'largest number of children out-of-school' in the world*. [BBC]. Available: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-40715305>. [November 15, 2019].
- vii. Dipo, L. (2018). *Funding of Education in Nigeria below UNESCO Recommended Benchmark, Says Ministry*. [This Day.] Available: <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2018/04/09/funding-of-education-in-nigeria-below-unesco-recommended-benchmark-says-ministry/>. [September 4, 2018].
- viii. Eskay, M. (2009). *Cultural perceptions of special education administrators in Nigeria*. Mauritius: Lambert Academic Publishing.
- ix. Eskay, M., Eskay, O., & Uma, E. (2012). Educating People with Special Needs in Nigeria: Present and Future Perspectives. *US-China Education Review* 10, 898-906.
- x. Mbachu, D., & Alake, T. (2016). *Nigeria Population at 182 Million, with Widening Youth Bulge*. [Bloomberg]. Available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-11-08/nigerian-population-hits-182-million-with-widening-youth-bulge>. [December 2, 2019].
- xi. Muuya, J. (2002). Aim of Special Education. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 17(3), 229-239.
- xii. Nigerian National Policy on Education, Federal Ministry of Information 48-49 § Fourth Edition (2004).
- xiii. Nwogu, P. O. (1988). *The Provision of The National Policy on Special Education in Nigeria* Ibadan. Ibadan, Nigeria: Fountain Books Ltd.
- xiv. Obiakor, F., & Bragg, W. (1998). Exceptional learners in Nigeria and the USA: The Placement Issue. *The Journal of International Special Needs Education*, 1, 31-35.
- xv. Oladele, A., Ogunwale, O., and Dafwat, S. (2016). Inclusive Education for Persons with Disabilities in Nigeria: How Far? *International Journal of Advanced Academic Research*, 2(5), 1-8.
- xvi. Omede, A. (2016). Policy Framework for Inclusive Education in Nigeria: Issues and Challenges. *Public Policy and Administrative Research*, 6(5), 34-35.
- xvii. Onwuegbu, O. (1977). *The Nigerian Culture: Its Perceptions and Treatment of Learners with Disabilities*. Unpublished Doctoral dissertation, Federal Advanced Teachers College for Special Education, Oyo, Nigeria.
- xviii. Osokoya, I. O. (2007). Educating Children and Youth with Special Needs within the Context of Universal Basic Education in Nigeria. *Sophia: An African Journal of Philosophy*, 10(1).
- xix. Shayera, D. (2018). *For Children with Disabilities in Nigeria, Educational Opportunities Remain Scant*. [Devex]. Available: <https://www.devex.com/news/for-children-with-disabilities-in-nigeria-educational-opportunities-remain-scant-93819>. [December 1, 2019].
- xx. Steinfeld, E., Duncan, J., & Cardell, P. (1977). *Towards a responsive environment: The psychosocial effects of inaccessibility*. Pennsylvania: Dowden, Hutchinson & Ross.
- xxi. Stephanie, T. (2012). *Barriers to Inclusion in Education*. [UNESCO]. Available: www.unescobkk.org/education/appeal/programme-themes/inclusive-education/themeatic-issues/barriersto-inclusive-education. [November 29, 2019].
- xxii. Stoler, R. (1992). Perceptions of Regular Education Teachers Toward Inclusion of All Handicapped Students in Their Classrooms. *Clearing House*, 66(1), 60-63.
- xxiii. UNESCO. (1994). *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education Adopted by the World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality*. [UNESCO]. Available: <https://www.ijaar.org/articles/volume2-number5/Arts-Humanities-Education/ijaar-ahe-v2n5-may16-p3.pdf>. [November 29, 2019].