

Inclusive Education for Children in Difficult Circumstances: The Role of the Guidance Counsellor

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Abstract

Inclusion in education is an approach to educating students with special educational requirements. Inclusion discards the use of special schools/training centres or special classrooms to identify students living with disability from those without disability. This aspect of education also ensures that quality education is provided for all, with respect to the variety of needs and abilities, features and learning opportunities of the children and the communities in which they live. However this may not be readily achievable without an accomplishing role of the guidance counsellor. Hence to bridge the gap between these children, the parents and school, the guidance counsellors serves in maximizing the child's achievement and incorporating life skills, to help promote equity and access to education.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Guidance Counselling, Disabilities.

Introduction

In Nigeria, special educators, parents of students with disabilities, policy-makers and other stakeholders continue to debate on the challenges and benefit of education model fashioned by the principle of inclusion, which stresses that ordinary schools should accommodate all children and young people, regardless of their circumstances or personal characteristics, whether abled or disabled. Countries all over the world (developed or developing), such as Sweden, Denmark, Netherlands, Italy, (Rieser (2014) Ghana, (Ankutse (2014), Kenya Kurumei, (2012) and Nigeria (Nedum (2015) and ([Ajuwon](#) (2012) (now advocates the policy of inclusive education, they are now accepting their obligation to education 'for all' and are recognising the need of providing education for their side-lined citizens. The impetus for the inclusive education movement stems from the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO's) declaration that, among other things, "Regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all" (UNESCO, 1994 pg 9).

Supporters of the Article 18 p. 17 of the same declaration noted that: "Educational policies at all levels, from the national to the local, should demand that a child with a disability should attend the neighborhood school (within the vicinity) that they would have attended if the child did not manifest a disability; (UNESCO, 1994). In the Nigeria content's the National Policy on Education (2004), laterally talked about the concept of inclusive education within the spectrum of the Universal Basic Education scheme. Ajuwon (2011) asserted that some advocates now see inclusive education as a favoured approach to responding to the needs of all students in ordinary schools. Thus, as inclusion of students with disabilities into regular classrooms becomes a reality within public schools in Nigeria, it becomes imperative to determine the role of the Guidance Counsellor in the practice. These counsellors are gradually being recognized as key stakeholders in the implementation of the strategic educational

policies plus inclusive education practices in our education system. The importance of education to human beings cannot be over emphasized. Education is a human right that should be given to all human beings specially by reason of being human.

There are a lot of international human rights instruments that provide for education as a fundamental human right. These include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981). The relationship between education and development is well established such that education is a strategic guide of development. It has been recognised that education increases output, health and lessens undesirable features of life such as child labour as well as bringing about empowerment. This is why there has been a lot of emphasis particularly in recent times for all citizens of the world to have access to basic education.

Meaning of Inclusive Education

The prevailing determination of education is to guarantee that all learners including those living with disability gain access to information, knowledge, skills and services that will prepare them to contribute in societies' growth and workplaces. Salami (2013) stated that inclusive education was not the custom in our schools, many years ago; special classes were created for students with special disabilities or special needs. To help these children catch up with school activities Special educators felt that they should just teach the students separately in smaller groups away from the normal students, even when they were joined in the same class. In some cases these children had interpreters. However this method had not succeeded over time as many students in separated special education classes have fallen far behind their counterparts' in the regular learning system. Obani (2006) in Oluka, and Egbo (2014), declared that inclusive education was a better way to help all students succeed; he said it is the most current system of providing education for children with special needs. This involves the recognition of all children without exclusions or discrimination into nearby schools that they should ordinarily attend if they were not having or living with disabilities. This suggests that there has to be some alterations and adjustment in the regular schools system in terms of organizational approaches, prospectus, education materials, infrastructures, workforces, curriculum and methodology in order to accommodate the special learning needs of children with these forms of disabilities and difficulties in learning. All these in Nkwoagba (2013) are directed towards including children, youths and adults with special needs into every plan of societal development starting from the school.

Ozaji (2005) also viewed inclusive education as an opportunity that is cautiously planned to educate learner's special needs within the re-structured mainstream or school communities. This means that all students in a school regardless of their strength, weakness, or disability in any area become part of the school community. In simple terms inclusive education also means placing children living with some form of disability (physical emotional or behavioural disorder) with those without any form of disability in the learning environments where they are taught to learn and play together, communicate and participate in curricular and extra-curricular activities without any form of discrimination and without any form of labelling. By this the students start very early in life to regard each other as friends, they learn to understand, appreciate each other's strength, tolerate one another's weaknesses and individual differences, and also appreciate the peculiar challenges children with special need go through in the learning process. Okuoyibo (2001) sees inclusive education as a means

whereby students with disabilities regardless of the nature or severity of their disabilities are put into all planning activities at general education such as school, classroom and surrounding communities. Inclusive implies that a child should be unconditionally mainstreamed into the regular educational system without regard or reference to the nature and severity of the disability s/he has. It is also inferred that inclusive education represents a process of addressing and responding to the variety of needs of all learners regardless of physical, psychological inclinations through increasing participation in learning, social, cultures and societal expectations and ways of reducing exclusion within educational activities. It is also geared in increasing the hope of getting education, securing a job, creating a family and raising their children, socializing or even exercising their civic rights during elections.

In recognition of the importance of inclusive education the international community and governments all over the world have made assurances for all her citizens to have access to education. EFA Global Monitoring Report (2002) documented that across the globe, there are inequalities in educational access and achievement as well as high levels of absolute educational deprivation of both children and adults living in challenging terrains. In order to confront this challenge, the rights based approach, which emphasizes the participation of citizens, was advocated.

Goals of Inclusive Education

Ozaji (2005) identified the goals of inclusive education to include the followings:

1. provide education for children with diverse learning needs within their structured school community.
2. make special needs children active members of the school community and then to help them achieve quality educational outcomes and to achieve social competence
3. build a supportive school community that is able to identify and minimize barriers to learning and participation
4. educate more children better
5. ensure successful learning and social experience competence
6. empower children who are hitherto excluded or isolated
7. enable students to participate in mainstream education to the best of their abilities.
8. build inclusive schools that can respond to diverse needs
9. study the pressures that lead some people in schools to feel excluded and separated.
10. attend imaginatively to diverse learning needs in the classroom
11. ensure improvement of student learning outcomes develop exemplary units of planning for diversity and to understand this diversity.
12. dismantle barriers to access, participation and facilitate achievement in schooling and training. It should be note that for one to say that inclusive education is successful, the above goals must be achieved.

Mechanisms of Inclusive Education

The mechanisms of inclusive education are those modules when put in place will ensure a workable implementation of inclusive education. Oluka & Egbo, (2014) opined that to ensure a sustainable and successful implementation of inclusive education in Nigeria, the following components are very paramount and necessary to be on ground:

- i. Heterogeneous grouping: all students including those with special needs are educated together in groups with those without disabilities.
- ii. A sense of belonging to a group: all students are considered active members of the class. In such an environment, students who have disabilities feel welcomed as those without disabilities.
- iii. Shared activities with individualized outcomes: they share educational experiences (lessons, laboratories, fieldwork and group learning at the same time). The learning objectives for the students are individualized to meet each student's learning needs.
- iv. Use of environment frequented by individuals without disabilities: The learning experiences take place in general education classrooms and community work sites.
- v. A balanced educational experience: it seeks an individualized balance between the academic functional and social or personal aspects of schooling (Lere, 2007).

The challenges of Inclusive Education

Although many schools are moving towards special needs inclusive classrooms, there are a number of issues or challenges that need to be addressed. Preparing and training a teacher is the first step in making special needs inclusive classrooms a success.

Toni-Marie, (2018) identified some top challenges teachers face in a special needs inclusive classroom :

- i. **Lack of experience in an inclusion setting.** Educators need to coordinate efforts and understand the needs of the classroom in terms of developing skills and lesson plans for inclusion. However some teachers have not been exposed to special needs classrooms training.
- ii. **Educating students with less severe disabilities.** When there are children of all abilities in the classroom, both physical and academic, children in the middle can easily fall between the cracks. These children can have learning disabilities, hearing impairments, ADD or language delays to name a few. Providing the right amount of attention and adaptation can be challenging, especially if there is a higher teacher to student ratio.
- iii. **Lack of experience dealing with severe and profound disabilities.** Pupils with severe disabilities require more variations and attention than the average students. Teachers must be skilled in handling severe disabilities and understand when to make referral.
- iv. **Including all students in all activities.** This is quite challenging as teachers need to address how the classroom will communicate with each other and encourage participation of every member.
- v. **Individualized lesson plans.** Teacher should create lesson plans based on individual abilities and adhere to the fact that there varying abilities in the classroom, teachers can be challenged to address individual academic needs based on ability.
- vi. **Teaching compassion to students.** Teachers must not tolerate insensitiveness and stigmatization, should ensure all students are to be treated with respect, regardless of ability.
- vii. **Attending therapy sessions.** A special needs inclusion classroom should be organized to allow for students to attend therapy sessions. However, this becomes a challenge in planning day to day activities and keeping all students engaged and learning.

Cortiella (2009) asserted that policy makers who do not understand the concept of inclusive education can be barriers to implementation of this wonderful aspect of education. They sometimes play nonchalant attitudes to promote inclusive education. However there are other challenges about negative attitudes and behaviour on the part of educators and parents, in relation to the abilities of children with disabilities. Most of the time their will to learn is under questioning. These challenges can be conquered by raising consciousness of human rights in communities and publicising positive examples of disabled children succeeding in inclusive education and in life after school. Other possible methods include supporting disabled children to express their aspirations and participate in planning processes, as well as promoting action research and critical pedagogy amongst teachers (Croft, 2010).

Effectiveness of Inclusive Special Education Programmes

Many positive signs have been observed with both special education and regular students. Some proponents of inclusive education programmes argue that segregated special education programmes are more detrimental to students and fail to meet their educational goals. Kurumei (2012) asserted that the effectiveness of inclusive education included

i. Increase in number of enrolment:

Inclusion has increased the number of children accessing education; this has increased the literacy rate in the community. Inclusion has created positive perception towards disability in the community and has enabled learners to appreciate each other's strength and weaknesses. Finally, inadequate resources, inadequate teachers, and negative attitudes and perceptions laden with cultural beliefs were the general challenges affecting effective implementation of inclusive education.

ii All Children can Benefit

Those who favour inclusion see some positive evidence that all students can benefit from these inclusive programmes when the proper support services are enacted and some changes take place in the traditional classroom.

iii Professional training for Special Education Teachers

Professional development classes for both special and general education teachers produce a better understanding of the concept of inclusive education. When provided with the proper tools, special needs students have the opportunity to succeed along with their non-disabled peers.

Benefits of Inclusive Education

The philosophy of inclusive education is aimed at helping all children learn at their own pace and style within a nurturing learning environment. The New Brunswick Association for Community Living NBACL have stated findings about the benefits of inclusion for children and families to include:

- develop individual strengths and gifts, with high and appropriate expectations for each child.
- help to reduce weaknesses found in children with disabilities.
- provide opportunities to learn about and accept individual differences that are bound to occur, thereby reducing the impact of harassment and bullying
- It helps the individual work on their personal goals while participating in classroom activities with other students their own age.
- It promotes a culture of respect and belonging for the child in the school system.

- Inclusive education also helps to develop acquaintances with a greater number of other children, each with their own distinct needs and abilities.
- It gives opportunities for parents to be involved in the activities of their local schools.
- It positively affects both the school and community to appreciate diversity and inclusion on a wider level.

The Roles of Guidance Counsellors

Guidance counsellors are professionally trained to work with clients, whether as individuals and in groups, to whom they render professional services concerning educational, vocational and personal/social development. Guidance counsellors value the dignity, integrity and welfare of their clients, work in ways which promote clients' control over their own lives, and respect clients' ability to make decisions and engage in personal change in the light of clients' own beliefs and values. To protect clients' interests, Guidance counsellors are required to comply with this Code of Ethics, which makes explicit the values underlying their practice (Lere, 2007). However, the roles of guidance counsellors in ensuring effective and sustainable inclusive education cannot be overemphasised.

Ellins & Porter (2005) asserted that many teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education are not particularly positive. Florian and Rouse (2001) in Oluka & Egbo, (2014) noted that many teachers reported in their study that they do not think they could teach children with disabilities. These challenges can be averted with the assistance of the guidance counsellors. Many teachers will then be able to develop confidence and their catalogue of teaching strategies and methodology will improve over time. Since majority of teachers are not professionally trained special educators, the guidance counsellors in schools would assist them gain confidence and help them make informed choices to take professional specialist courses on teaching strategies on disability and special needs of children with emphasis on how and what pupils need to learn, classroom organization and management to suit physically challenged children and identifying, assessing and monitoring difficulties during learning. Differences are bound to occur in the classroom set up, the guidance counsellor should therefore ensure s/he helps to counsell teachers on negative attitudes towards pupils with special needs; they should help build up their capacity to enhance social relations, on their views and willingness to deal with those differences effectively. The Guidance Counsellor assist students with disabilities to demonstrate a sense of belonging to diverse human family, provide stimulating environment for them to grow and learn and enable development of friendships. They create opportunities for students without disabilities to accept differences, make variety of friendships, encourage cooperation and as well help students to become resourceful in class activities. Help the students with disabilities to be educated with same age peers and enhance self-respect. The guidance counsellors are also expected to protect the feelings of the children with special needs since sometimes they are often called all sorts of names; sometimes, teachers and principals hardly accept these children with disability like other children without disability.

Recommendations

The implementation of inclusion in Nigeria will inevitably create new and increased demands on special educators, as well as other stakeholders. With the growing number of inclusive schools, special educators are expected to make adaptations and accommodations to

the curriculum, their instructional techniques and evaluation procedures, as well as their classroom behaviour management styles.

In this study the following recommendations are made:

1. Special education teachers should be trained and government should provide sufficient instructional resources for inclusive schools, and encouraged them integrate all learners.
2. The UNESCO, (2009), declaration that Education should be seen and provided for by the government and stakeholders as a basic human right and the foundation for a more just and equal society should be enforced by all arms of government, Nations who fail to comply should be sanctioned.
3. There should be adequate funding by both Federal and State government to meet the target goals and objectives for equalizing learning for all pupils, including those with disabilities in public schools.
4. There is need for the proper deployment of professional and special education teachers by the Ministry of Education to reach every school especially those schools in the rural areas.
5. There should be an on-going evaluation of professional and special education teacher's attitudes and concerns especially in remote areas.
6. There should be laws to protect children living with disability from any form of molestations.
7. All children with disabilities should be educated in the least restraining environment and that their exceptional needs are met.

Conclusion

The objective of education for all (EFA) is to achieve equal educational opportunities for all children in the 21st century, despite their peculiarities. Hence, the concept of inclusive education is a welcome development. This aspect of education has been seen as the latest acceptable educational alternatives for special needs persons all over the world; it facilitates bringing together the students with special needs with their normal counterpart into one educational environment without discrimination. Inclusion is about providing a disabled student with the support he or she needs depending on the impairment. This may range from making sure the school is physically accessible, providing educational resources in alternative forms and supporting the student with a Learning Support Assistant – as well as providing adequate professional involvement if required. Inclusive education is planning an education that responds to the child's needs through the development of an Individual Education Plan (IEP) which also involves the child.

Indeed, real inclusion requires that we rethink our approach to education and go beyond the old idea that education is simply a way to prepare children for the world of work. Preparing our children to contribute to our society through work remains an important function of education, what we gain from the educational process is much greater than that we learn to make friends, learn about new people, solve problems and form relationships.

The guidance counsellors are the key role players in ensuring that the goals of inclusive education are actualized in Nigeria and in other developing nations, they should guide pupils with special needs to develop skills, tools, capacities, and attitudes to become increasingly independent as learners.

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