

THE VIABILITY OF PROVIDING ADEQUATE INCLUSIVE EDUCATION TEACHERS USING OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The importance of education to development of individuals, groups and a nation cannot be over emphasized. It is one thing for a government to make education available to its people and it is another thing to make it accessible. One of the important strategies through which education can be made accessible to all kinds of learners is by inclusion. Inclusive education refers to an approach where all learners including the special needs, disadvantaged and vulnerable children receive learning using the general education curriculum in the normal school setting. The idea is that all types of children irrespective of their challenges or needs should be accommodated in the neighborhood local schools. The question however is how adequately prepared are the teachers in such schools to handle inclusiveness appropriately and effectively. To ascertain their level of preparedness a qualitative study was conducted where the curriculum of teacher education was subjected to document review, and 20 teacher educators were purposefully selected and interviewed. To obtain the perspective from the beneficiaries a case study of a person with special need who went through inclusive education was also carried out. The result showed that the curriculum of teacher education does not address inclusiveness; as such most teachers are not adequately equipped to handle inclusive education. The few that have the training are grossly inadequate. It is recommended that the curriculum of teacher education should be reviewed to expose all prospective teachers to the skill of handling all types of learners. Open and distance learning can be used to close skill gap in inclusive education by training and upgrading in-service teachers and educators of pre-service teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Each individual should have equal opportunity for educational progress irrespective of the circumstance, but this has been the challenge worldwide. To address this issue the Sustainable Development Goal 4 on Education and the Education 2030 Framework for Action emphasize inclusion and equity in education for all nations. According to UNESCO (2000), inclusive education is seen as “a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion from education and from within education.” The goal is that the whole education system will facilitate learning environments where teachers and learners embrace and welcome the challenges and benefits of diversity. Within an inclusive education approach, learning environments are fostered where individual needs are met and every learner has an opportunity to succeed. Inclusive education is when all learners, regardless of any challenges, are placed in age-appropriate general education classes that are in their own neighborhood schools to receive high quality instruction, interventions, and supports that enable them to meet success in the core curriculum (Bui, Quirk, Almazan, &Valenti, 2010; Alquraini& Gut, 2012).The Education for All agenda of the 1990 Jomtien World Conference was the platform that gave the first attention to inclusive education. According to the conference report, every person—child, youth and adult should be able to benefit from educational opportunities which would meet their basic learning needs (World Conference for Education for All, 1990). Then came the 1994 Education Report which gave the idea of inclusive education a larger impetus. Equally, the marginalization and exclusion of learners from educational system was seriously addressed at the Dakar World Education forum in April 2000 with the following warning that: The key challenge is to ensure that a broad vision of Education for All as an inclusive concept is reflected in national government and funding agency policies (UNESCO, 2000).

In Nigeria, the principle of inclusion has kicked up with formulation of a National Policy on Inclusive Education and the pronouncement of policy-makers that all school should be inclusive; but some questions that come to mind are: does the National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) minimum standard adequately address inclusive education in its contents? are there adequate qualified inclusive teachers in local neighbourhood schools? what is the experience of the inclusive learner? Are there strategies in place for teacher educators to train their student teachers and in-service teachers to do the job well? These are the answers this study seeks to address.

OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this study is to find out the level of the teachers' preparedness to handle inclusive education adequately and the viability of using ODL to provide adequate inclusive education to teachers, specifically, the objectives are to find out:

1. The teacher educators' level of knowledge and expertise in inclusive education /strategies
2. The adequacy of the teacher training curriculum on inclusive education
3. The programmes that exist for pre-service/in-service educators on inclusive education to update themselves
4. How ODL could be used to provide teachers/teacher educators with adequate inclusive education skills/strategies

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What do the teacher educators know about inclusive education /strategies?
2. How adequate is the teacher training curriculum on inclusive education?
3. What programmes exist for pre-service/in-service educators on inclusive education to update themselves?
4. How can ODL be used to provide teachers/teacher educators with inclusive education skills/strategies?

LITERATURE REVIEW

NCCE 2012 minimum standard/NPE and Inclusive Education

Inclusive education is the major challenge facing educational systems around the world (Ainscow, 2004). In Nigeria, inclusive education is thought as an approach to serving children with disabilities within general education settings. Consequently, the National Policy on Education states that Special Education is created as a formal special educational training given to people (children and adults) with special needs (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2004: p. 47). However, this is contrary to the international practice where inclusive education is seen "as a reform that supports and welcomes diversity amongst all learners" (UNESCO, 2001).

It is contained in the NCCE minimum standards, as "Special Education" was designed to cater for three categories of individuals thus:

- 1) The Special Needs which include people with physical, visual, hearing, mental, emotional, social, speech, learning and multiple impairments.
- 2) The Disadvantaged involving the children of nomadic pastorals, migrant fisher folks, migrant farmers, hunters etc.
- 3) The Gifted and Talented involving people (Children and Adults) who have high intelligent quotient and endowed with special traits in arts, creativity, music, leadership, intellectual precocity etc and therefore find themselves insufficiently challenged by the regular schools (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2004: pp. 47-48).

Furthermore, by the provision of the policy, education of children with special needs shall be free at all levels and all necessary facilities that would ensure easy access to education shall be provided to include:

- a) Inclusive education or integration of special classes and units into ordinary/public schools under the Universal Basic Education (UBE) scheme;
- b) Regular census and monitoring of people with special needs to ensure adequate educational planning and welfare programme;
- c) Special education equipment and materials like Perkins brailler, white/mobility care, brailed textbooks, abacus, talking watch, audiometers, speech trainers, hearing aids, ear moulding machines, educational toys, calipers, crutches, wheel chairs, artificial limbs, audio-visual equipment and internet facilities;
- d) Special education training on braille reading and writing, typewriter use, speech signs, daily living skills;
- e) Special training and re-training of the personnel on capacity building to keep them abreast of latest teaching techniques on various categories of disabilities, the gifted and talented; and

f) A teacher-pupil ratio of 1:10 in special schools (pp. 49-50).

However, a cursory look at the policy itself shows some contradiction and gaps. For examples, the creation of “special schools” negates the principle of inclusive education which is to provide equal access opportunities to education regardless of any barrier. In a situation where regular classes in the cities are overcrowded to the tune of 1:80 teacher-pupil ratio, the vision on ratio 1:10 for inclusive classes may remain a dream. The special schools are limitedly scattered all over the country and sometimes named after a particular disability to further stigmatize whoever attends such schools. Worse still, the stereotype cultural belief of illiterate parents that the handicapped children are “children from idols” made adoption of inclusive education in Nigeria a myth rather than a reality. This situation poses a serious question on the readiness factor and perhaps the desirability of inclusive education in Nigeria.

Capacity Building of Inclusive Teachers

Since the aim of inclusive education is to accommodate all learners as much as possible within the same environment and taught by the same teachers, it is expected that these teachers will include the general teachers and in some cases special education teachers but the majority will be the general teachers. In order to practice inclusive education successfully, the teacher needs to be capable of accepting, understanding and attending to learner’s differences and diversity, which could be physical, cognitive, academic, social, and emotional even if the pupils need to spend some time out of regular classes to receive specific attention like speech therapy or other special attention.

Ajuwon (2012), in a study on inclusive education in Nigeria, found that most participants (141 special needs educators) stated that they were tolerant of the diverse behaviors of their students within the inclusive setting, they were less confident in their abilities to manage the behaviors of students with special needs. This lack of confidence in their professional competency may indicate limited training and/or exposure to inclusive practices'. Specifically, the study found that 'In terms of educational qualification, both a greater tolerance of potentially negative behaviors and a greater understanding of the needs of students with sensory disabilities were associated with higher formal training. The motivation of participants who have acquired advanced professional training may have led them to embrace new conceptualizations in the emerging field of inclusive education. This is a positive finding which revealed the necessity to provide ongoing professional development and training to special needs educators.

In order to ensure that no child is left behind in education, there is the need for massive retraining of the teachers of regular schools in inclusive education pedagogies and skills. They are also to be trained in evaluative services for disability (Agunloye, Pollingue, Davou, & Osagie, 2011). As well remarked by Ajuwon (2008), there is the need to conduct comprehensive and methodologically—sound researches into specific needs and interests of each categories of the children with special needs to determine how best to integrate them into the regular class and society. This should equally help in designing cost-effective-universal school buildings that would accommodate everybody (whether disabled or not) with abundant resources to provide education for all in the same setting. Structures and resources are key to inclusive education but what about the curriculum of teacher education and how adequate are the teachers prepared to handle inclusiveness appropriately and effectively?

Open and Distance Learning and Inclusive Education

Distance education has become an important strategy for training teachers to keep pace with a rapidly expanding demand for competent, qualified and professional teachers has continued to increase. This demand cannot be met by the “brick and mortar” approach alone. Open and distance education is usually contrasted with conventional education. ‘It has become a viable and cost-effective alternative to the conventional face-to-face instruction. Various definitions have been given and the concept changes as technology evolves. Guri-Rosenblit 1999: 90 defines distance education as the physical separation of students from the designers and developers of the course content and the possibility of interaction through technology and face-to-face contacts. While UNESCO (2002A:22), see it as an educational process; where there is separation in time and space and communication is done through an artificial medium which may be electronic or print. Nigeria’s National Policy on Education (2004), conceives open and distance education as “life-long learning, life-wide education, adult education, media-based education, self-learning”. Kontagora (2014) saw ODL as a cost-effective strategy for improving teacher quality and teacher supply. With technological advancement distance learning is being equated with e-learning. It is seen as fully online distance learning.

In its over one century of existence, Open and Distance Learning has successfully helped to:

- broaden access to education;
- take education to the doorsteps of learners
- address existing and future shortfalls in teacher supply,
- improve the quality of education
- cut down the cost of education
- surmount various barriers and bridged various gaps – whether geographical, social, economic, cultural, security, educational, linguistic, etc.
- meet the CPD needs of diverse groups who due to exigencies of their fulltime job cannot enroll in full time studies in formal conventional face to face institution.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative study was conducted where the curriculum of teacher education was subjected to document review, and 20 teacher educators were randomly selected from two teacher training institutions (one conventional and one open and distance learning institution). Ten educators from each institution were engaged in in-depth interview (IDI). The data collected were synthesized and summarized. To obtain the perspective from the beneficiaries a case study of a person with special need (an Albino) who went through inclusive education was also carried out. He was purposefully selected because he had experience of inclusive education at basic education, secondary and tertiary level and could give account of his experience.

RESULTS

Teacher Training Curriculum on inclusive educators

The 2012 National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) Minimum Standards which is the curriculum for training basic education teachers in Nigeria has only 2 courses out of the 23 courses under general education courses that address some aspects of inclusion, the courses are; Education of Special Target Groups (1 Credit Elective) and Introduction to Special Education (1 Credit Compulsory) only.

Programmes for inclusive Pre-Service and In-Service Educators

The programmes for capacity building of both pre-service and in-service on inclusive education are only the SDGs annual train the trainer of few special needs and moral and HIV/AIDS on zonal basis for five days only. The number of teachers that were trained from inception to 2017 were 13,937. Some of the teachers and teacher educators have upgraded their knowledge through open and distance learning but not on inclusive education.

Use of ODL to provide teachers/teacher educators for inclusive education

The open and distance learning is available for especially in-service teachers and teacher educators to upgrade their knowledge on strategies/skills needed for inclusive education, the challenges however are absence of practical contact sessions, lack of equipment/materials, accessible learning environment, skill manpower and curriculum of inclusive education.

Case study of an Inclusive Learner

Mr. Isah is an Albino and is visually impaired (short sighted) as is common among people with Albinism. He considers himself lucky, because he attended the neighbourhood school and made many friends. His classmates and teachers always provided a seat for him at the front row. He recalled when he first got admitted into primary school, he knew no one but a number of them offered him a seat and he found it hard to decide who to sit with, “everyone in that class was my friend.”

Isah, said some physically challenged people are being stigmatized by even members of their own family. “There are some who see you as a laughing stock or useless to the society.” He believes that there is potential in every human being. “In most cases, all we need is a little push and support to actualize our dreams.”

His challenge with schooling started when he entered upper primary, he found it difficult to complete class exercises and examinations because the white paper blurred his sight. “I use to find it hard to read and copy notes from the board.” He felt shy to ask for extra time and only one or two teachers gave him extra time to finish copying the notes, others were not patient as enough or accuse him for being too slow. They did not realize that he was struggling. Eventually his grades started dropping; from the top three to the top ten, then to an average student at the completion of secondary school.

Higher institution was more challenging because of the set-up of the lecture theatre; the seats were too far away from the board thus he could barely make out the writing. He benefitted more from dictation but not all the lecturers do that. Could it be that his teachers did not understand his struggle or is it that they did not know what to do? Eventually, he dropped out because he could not cope and enrolled in a distant learning programme, with that he was studying at his pace and thus, was able to obtain a diploma.

DISCUSSION

The result indicated that the curriculum of teacher education in Nigeria does not adequately address inclusive education. Similarly, the respondents reported, among other things, the need for capacity building, personnel resources, as well as adequate curriculum, materials and other classroom equipment to meet the needs of children with exceptionalities. The less-than-optimistic reactions of participants in this study suggest that inclusive education in ordinary schools in Nigeria requires substantial increases in resources for inclusionary practices to succeed. Ajuwon (2012) also documented the problems associated with over-crowded, but under-resourced classrooms and a limited number of professionals with expertise in inclusion.

The result showed a very low percentage of inclusive teachers were exposed to CPDs like the one organized under SDGs. de Boer, et al (2011) reported literature findings showing that only special education teachers receive the training; most teachers have either neutral or negative attitude about inclusive education and it was discovered that their attitude was as a result of insufficient knowledge, competence or confidence on how to handle pupils with special needs using inclusive education. It goes without saying that the teachers need technical know-how, experience and support to develop a positive attitude and skill to handle inclusive education effectively. It is neither practical nor possible for all the teachers to return to school to get trained, thus one of the options available to train these teacher educators is through Continuing Professional Development (CPD) or/and ODL. In Nigeria CPD is hard to come by and mostly organized and funded by government, the resources are scarce to train all teachers. Thus, teachers are nominated from a pool of teachers and sometimes only 0.93%. From 2011 to 2018 the Federal Government under the SDGs funded training of trainers’ workshop which was implemented by NTL. Only 13,937 number of inclusive teachers (Faith-based HIV/AIDS and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) were involved out of 1.5 million of basic education teachers. To maximize the benefit, the cascade approach was used where the 500 trained at the zonal level will cascade to other teachers.

At this rate it will take like forever to get all the teachers trained and the learners with special need cannot wait; their schooling has to continue therefore, measures need to be taken to help the situation. ODL has been found to provide opportunity for adults, career persons including teachers to acquire additional qualification and update their knowledge and skills while working.

Most of the participants recommended the use of ODL for mass training of inclusive education teachers because of its flexible nature as described by Yaya (2015):

The growing patronage it enjoys is linked to its capacity of subduing challenges arising from geographical separation and physical distances between learners; democratizing and liberalising education; addressing timing and scheduling challenges; providing life-long education; creating opportunities for those who could not participate in conventional education; complementing conventional education; and offering flexibility and freedom that enable learners to choose what, where, how, and when to learn.

Open and distance learning has been used for a wide range of purposes including teacher education – pre-service teacher education, upgrading of academic qualifications, and in-service continuing professional development in

particular subjects, content areas and instructional methods as well as teacher educators. ODL can fill the deficit from the conventional institution e.g. there are 36 federal universities, 37 state universities, and 45 private universities accredited by the National Universities Commission (NUC) in Nigeria (US Embassy 2012). With their combined carrying capacity, they can only admit 500,000 out of 1.7 million applicants seeking higher education in Nigeria in 2013 leaving more than 1million applicants to wait for another year to apply with no guarantee.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Federal ministry of education, NCCE and other relevant stakeholders should take steps towards reviewing the NCE minimum standards to make it inclusive. This is urgently needed because all other trainings will depend on what the curriculum contains.

A robust Professional capacity building on inclusive education for teachers and teacher educators should be embarked upon. More inclusive education themes should be included in the SDGs training and the number of teachers should be increased and spread to all categories not just the special needs teachers. UBEC/SUBEBS should embark on massive training and retraining of teachers on inclusive education. Development partners can also complement government effort.

More importantly, Open and Distance Learning could be used to train inclusive education teachers to fill the skill gap and to maintain the teacher in the school. A Special Inclusive Education Teacher Training Programme can be used to intensively and massively train basic education teachers in the country. The content of the inclusive education curriculum can be compressed and delivered within one or one and half year. Course books can be developed and other technologies can be used for training. During the training the teachers are expected to undergo internship and mentoring while still on their job. This innovative training concept qualifies teachers as holistic as it equips them with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively address the needs of the diverse classroom.

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