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Inclusive Education Policies in Nigeria and its Implementation Challenges: A Historical Overview

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ABSTRACT: The implementation of educational policies in general, and those of inclusive education in particular, have been the Achilles' heel of many a government, past and present. This paper examined inclusive education policies in Nigeria as well as the challenges that pose barriers to its effective implementation. The paper highlighted the various views held by some persons on inclusive education, which tend to show the need to bring together both the physically able and disabled into the mainstream of schooling. Also, the historical evolution of inclusive education from special education in a few countries which ignited the need to globalize this aspect of education into inclusive education through many international conferences, treaties and policies. It was also observed that over the years Nigeria has various editions of her National Policy on Education on inclusive education. The paper therefore identified some of the challenges stalling the implementation of the policy on inclusive education. The paper concluded that unless there is a total change towards policy implementation, Nigeria's good educational dreams should be tottering like a little child standing on a quick sand. It was therefore recommended, among others, that inclusive education should be adequately funded; that sufficient trained manpower be made available to be retrained when the need arises.

KEYWORDS: Inclusive Education, Inclusion, Integration, Persons with Disabilities, Policy, Social Intentionality.

INTRODUCTION

Since the turn of the 21st century, it is apparently clear that greater attention has been given to educational development because of its roles in the emerging socio-economic and political situations in the world, as well as in the scientific and technological advancements. These developments have necessitated serious concerns, which to a great extent border on how to make education generally accessible to everyone irrespective of gender, ethnic, religious, physical and environmental encumbrances. The realisation that there are certain categories of persons who have been excluded from the mainstream of education in their societies made this situation more worrisome - a situation that calls for urgent global attention. This implies that in those climes, children of school age, for some inexplicable circumstances beyond their control, are denied the

right to formal education. In other words, their being excluded from the educational provisions of their countries may have stemmed from inherent disabilities or from diverse defects occasioned by human errors.

Although, the right of every child to education has been enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on Fundamental Human Rights in 1948, but many countries are yet to ensure its full implementation. For example, the education of the girl-child is still under contentions in some countries. However, some countries have taken the bull by the horns to make education accessible to every child a reality. In some advanced countries, like the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, etc., frantic efforts made in this regard have yielded significant success because their education system made provisions for some members of their societies

who have physical disabilities or other forms of impairment. On the contrary, in developing countries like Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, etc., not much has been done to ensure that every child has access to quality education. As a result, there is a sizeable proportion of the population that has been excluded from (and needs inclusion into) the formal school environment. This category of persons often referred to as out-of-school children include; children roaming the streets - the almajiris, the physically disabled, and so on. It is this group of persons that makes inclusive education inevitably necessary so that they can not only have access to education alongside their able-bodied peers, but also appropriate their rights to education. This paper intends to examine inclusive education policies in Nigeria, and the implementation challenges that have made inclusive education inconsequential in the educational scheme of things in Nigeria.

Perceptions on Inclusive Education

Inclusive education can be described as the educational 'baby' of this century because of the greater emphasis and attention given to it by both national and international bodies and organisations aimed at ensuring that the hitherto excluded, neglected or overlooked educational social and emotional needs of some categories of children of school age are taken into consideration and/or provided for within government legal framework. In other words, inclusive education is an approach adopted to provide accessible and equitable educational opportunities for both physically able and disabled children in a formal school setting. For Angwaomaodoko (2023), inclusive education is a contemporary approach whereby students with special needs are grouped or merged with students without disabilities. The notion that inclusive education is coterminous with integration has been debunked because the two terms differ in terms of focus, methodology, learning environment and so on. According to FRN (2023), integration refers to exceptional learners being taught in a main stream classroom, while inclusive education requires all learners to attend and be welcomed by their neighbourhood regular schools in appropriate regular classes, and are supported to learn, contribute and participate in all aspects of the life of the school” (p.14).

Ajuwon (2008) seems to endorse the above position as he argues that including students with disabilities in the general education can provide them with the opportunity to learn in natural stimulating settings, which also may lead to increased acceptance and appreciation of differences. In a similar vein, Bryant, Smith and Bryant (2008) maintain that inclusive education can be interpreted as the philosophy and practice of educating students with disabilities in general education. The practice, according to them, is anchored on the notion that every child should be an equally valued member of the school culture. Additionally, Mamman (2023) asserts that inclusive education is not just an educational philosophy; it is a fundamental human right. For him, it embodies the spirit of diversity, embracing the richness that emanates from accepting and respecting the power and needs of every learner. In this regard, inclusive education can be seen as active form of participation within a common learning framework (Felder, 2018). It can therefore be argued that inclusion would be much more connected with the idea of social learning, belonging and shared experiences in the common social life. The implication therefore is that inclusive education should among other values foster social and interpersonal relationships among the physically able and the disabled students within the same learning environment.

The idea of inclusivity in education could be further seen from a broader spectrum - from the policy formulation and implementation standpoint, which is predicated on social intentionality and social action in which all participants pursue a single shared goal, not goals which are different or parallel (Schmidt, 2009). Policies are products borne out of considered intentions of members of the society aimed at proffering solutions to social problems. This requires collective social actions from the formulation to implementation stages.

To Warnock in Vorhaus (2006), inclusive education has received renewed attention with reference to special education, and has become a serious educational policy issue in many countries desirous of giving a class of human beings not excluded by their conduct, but whose status as persons with profound and multiple difficulties has equal access to educational opportunity

(Vornhaus, 2006). In this regard, the success of an inclusive education policy, by and large, depends on the degree of its social intentionality and the effectiveness and efficiency of its social actions. This implies that an educational policy should ensure that facilities and environments should be such that can accommodate all children regardless of their physical, emotional, linguistic or other circumstances (Ajuwon, 2008).

Inclusive education, according to UNESCO (2005), is defined as a process of addressing and responding to the diverse needs of all learners by increasing and reducing exclusion within and from education, i.e., all learners have the right to a quality education that take into consideration their individual peculiar needs. FRN (2023) further adds that inclusive education is "Education for All" because its sole aim is to dismantle barriers to learning, and thereby involve all learners who have been excluded through marginalisation and segregation. In effect, inclusive education would be a laudable educational if its objectives and implementation strategies could be vigorously pursued and achieved.

Historical Evolution of Inclusive Education

Many intervention measures and legislations have been put in place to respond to challenges responsible for educational backwardness observed among certain segment or sub-set of the world's population generally. The measures taken are expected to assuage educational problems in most countries of the world, especially in the third world countries.

What we know today as inclusive education did not just evolve in a straight forward manner; its evolution took different shapes and forms before becoming a reality. The journey to inclusive education began by the mid-1970s. It is on record that in 1975, the United States Congress enacted the Education for All Handicapped Act, which requires public schools funded by the federal government to, among other things, ensure that handicapped children have access to special education. It also provides for a free and appropriate education in the least restricted environment for children between the ages of 5 and 21 years old. This Act was later renamed Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). After a short while the US Congress came up with the Education Consolidation and

Improvement Act of 1981, which among other provisions aimed to cut spending, and streamline aids to disadvantaged students. The Act, however, did not dismantle special education (<https://www.congress.gov>).

In the same year, the United Kingdom Education Act, 1981 came into being. It was an Act that revolutionised education in the UK by introducing Special Needs Education, thereby establishing formal assessment procedures, and promoting integration of children with disabilities into the mainstream schools. Apart from giving parents more rights in terms assessments and choice of schools, the Act also engendered a paradigm shift from strict medical categorisation to a more holistic view of learning difficulties (<https://www.legis.uk>). It is therefore apparent that the above legislations in the US and UK created global awareness to the impending educational problems, which called for response in terms of educational policy; the failure to do so will likely engender two major consequences. According to UNESCO (2005), the envisioned consequences are:

There will be exclusion of millions of children and future adults from social and economic benefits linked to the achievement of lasting literacy. *In addition*, there will be perpetuation of poverty trap in Africa because of their failure to reach critical threshold of schooling that enables other investments to bear fruits (p.164, words in italics mine).

To avert the above consequences, in Jomtien, Thailand at World Conference on Education for All, in 1990, history was made. This conference which was attended by 155 countries and 150 organisations, sounded the alert that the process of schooling in developing countries was running out of steam. The conference established a global commitment to ensure universal access to basic education for all children, youths and adults by the year 2000. One of the core objectives of the Conference was to prioritise primary education in order to reduce illiteracy, especially for girls and underserved population (<https://hylibrary.unm.edu>).

As the glowing fire from the Jomtien Conference was still burning and bristling, as a follow up, another conference was held in the Spanish city of Salamanca. The outcome of the conference is the

Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action 1994, which was a declaration call for the inclusion of all children and youth in the mainstream schools, and end to segregated learning particularly with regards to students with disabilities (<https://www.european-agency.org>).

In order to ensure the sustained stream of consciousness from the two conferences mentioned above, the World Education Forum (2000) held at Dakar, Senegal reaffirmed the vision of the World Declaration on Education for All through six Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Goals 1 and 2 emphasised improved and comprehensive education, especially for the most vulnerable, disadvantaged, and children in difficult circumstances (Site internet de l'UNESCO www.unesco.org/education/efa/fr).

Moreover, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) of 2006 was a landmark treaty adopted by the United Nations General Assembly to promote, protect, and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights by persons with disabilities. The implication of this cut across all spheres of human life - economic, social, political, and indeed education the springboard of developments. Finally, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by all members of the United Nations came up with 17 goals. Among them is goal 4 which aims to ensure inclusive, equitable and quality education, while promoting lifelong learning for all by 2020. Sustainable Development Goal 4 not only corroborates earlier affirmative actions of the world body, but also strengthens and adds teeth to them. In all, UNESCO has done so much by relentlessly organising international conferences, and by sensitising every country on the need for inclusive education in their educational policies.

It could be said that inclusive education metamorphosed from special education, and that the emphasis on inclusive education is borne out the ethical principle that abhors any form of segregation, prejudice marginalisation, and discrimination. Hence, it is imperative to include such persons in the mainstream of the school system - especially at the basic education and secondary school levels as provided in National Policy on Inclusive Education.

National Policy on Education and Inclusive Education

A foray into the various international policies and treaties that gave birth to inclusive education show that Nigeria was a late comer in the formulation of policies on inclusive education. The focus of the National Policy on Education editions of 1977, 1981, 1989 and 2004 was specifically on Special Education, the main objective of which, among others, was to give concrete meaning to the idea of equalising educational opportunities for all children with one form of disability or the other. The key word in inclusive education is 'access' to education for all children whether normal or disabled, and not 'equalising' educational opportunities for all children. However, the 2013 edition of the National Policy on Education came closer to the issue and asserted that:

Persons with special needs shall be provided with inclusive education services in schools which normal persons attend, in age-appropriate general education classes directly supervised by general teachers (p.65).

A critical examination of the foregoing glaringly shows that there are inconsistencies and contradictions in the intentions encapsulated in the various editions of the policy. Admittedly, FRN (2023) affirms that "the policies do not present a clear explanation of inclusive education, and also do not tackle the confusion between special education and inclusive education" (p.6). It could further be argued that Nigeria did not give special education the "concrete meaning" it deserves because of lack of 'concrete' actions or measures. Furthermore, it is no gainsaying that Nigeria between 1977 and 2023 did not flow with the global current on inclusive education because of her inability to implement to the letter most of the international policies and treaties to which she is a signatory. Hence, it could be adduced that the policies Nigeria enunciated over the years for special-cum-inclusive education were at best statements of intentions frustrated by systemic challenges.

Challenges in Implementing of Inclusive Education in Nigeria

Myriads of challenges have bedevilled the effective implementation of inclusive education and its precursor - special education - since 1977. Some of them are briefly highlighted in this paper. One of the challenges is the pervasive cultural beliefs which have had and is still having

disincentive effects on the policies and programmes of inclusive education, hence the erroneous impressions about persons with disabilities. Core traditionalists, in particular hold the view that disability in some persons is as result of a curse or punishment inflicted on them by the gods, which cannot be obviated through ablution or sacrifice to appease the gods. Another related barrier to effective implementation of inclusive education is negative societal attitudes towards disabled persons. Some people think that such persons cannot be useful to themselves much more to contribute to economic, social and political development of their societies. For that reason, it would amount to efforts in futility spending money on their education. We can contend that both societal negative attitudes and obnoxious cultural beliefs among Nigerians have impeded the inclusion of persons with disabilities into the mainstream of schooling. These attitudes and beliefs are more pronounced in the rural areas, where we have more of the disabled persons.

In addition, funding education in Nigeria is one of the Achilles' heels in the implementation of inclusive education. It is evident that Nigeria has never complied with UNESCO's recommendation that countries should set aside 26 percent of their annual budgets for education. The education sector generally has been in trouble because of the neglect and laissez-faire attitude of the Nigerian government to finance and "oil the engine room" in which its manpower is baked and bred; inclusive education should be seen as a component part of this all-important engine room. Unfortunately, the ready excuse for poor implementation of good policies on the part of government is lack of funds (Uvowi, 2015), whereas, some government officials deliberately under-utilised budgetary allocations meant for education for personal interests.

A major handicap crippling implementation efforts and strategies of inclusive education is the lack of accurate statistics of the beneficiaries of the programme. To obtain a reliable census figure of persons with disabilities, especially in the rural areas, poses some problems because relatives of such persons are usually suspicious of the real motives of anyone who wants useful information from them. The frustration, as a result, leads to insufficient statistics that would not enable

effective planning and implementation of inclusive education. However, even when there are accurate and reliable data, there has been always been the lack of political will on the part of government to translate policies into action. Government's lackadaisical attitude has always constituted bottlenecks to the execution of well-intended educational policies, such as inclusive education. As a corollary, inadequate provision of infrastructural facilities has equally undermined the implementation of inclusive education. In most cases, important and other necessary equipment that would facilitate teaching and learning are grossly lacking. This includes adaptive learning materials, assistive devices and basic technology; all these constitute obstacles to effective implementation of inclusive education in Nigeria. Moreover, inclusive education at the present suffers manpower deficit. For this reason, FRN (2023) emphatically stressed the dearth of specialists and training available to teachers and educators. This implies that teachers in inclusive education schools may not understand or support their children's learning needs. This problem is further compounded by non-curriculum adaptation, which makes teaching and learning difficult among regular students and their disabled counterparts (Ajuwon, 2008). Curriculum adaption would be easier if technocrats would allow specialists to design and interpret the curriculum content for the various levels of inclusive education.

Conclusion

From the discourse so far, it is certain that Nigerian government has joined the comity of nations to demonstrate her commitment to full implementation of inclusive education policy to ensure that no child of school-going age no matter his/her physical condition, gender, religion, tribe, and so on is denied access to quality and equitable education. The implementation of inclusive education will not only be profitable to its beneficiaries alone but will also reinforce the child's inviolable right to education. The possibility of these depends, to a large extent, on amelioration of the impediments to policy implementation without which Nigeria's aspiration to make inclusive education a worthwhile venture would be a mirage.

Recommendations

From the foregoing, the following recommendations are made;

For effective implementation of inclusive education in Nigeria, there should be comprehensive public awareness programmes to ensure that negative attitudes and cultural beliefs have very minimal effects on inclusive education. In addition, government should, as a matter of necessity, collaborate or partner with some international donor agencies to ensure adequate funding of implementation of inclusive education. While this is being done, government should strive to implement the UNESCO's recommendation on funding education in Nigeria.

Again, government should make it a point of duty to ensure that accurate and reliable statistics are gathered through its appropriate agencies, which would be the basis of an effective planning of inclusive education.

Also, governments at all levels should demonstrate sufficient commitment to the implementation of the objectives and strategies of policies and programmes of inclusive education in line with international standards.

The success of inclusive education, among other things, depends to a large extent on trained specialists and educators, hence it is imperative for government to train and retrain teachers specifically for inclusive education to enable the disabled not only to be useful to himself but to society as well. In this regard, government and all critical stakeholders should see the provision of adequate facilities and necessary equipment as major priorities in the implementation of inclusive education.

On the whole, the curriculum of inclusive education should be designed and adapted by experts so that it can take into consideration all learners irrespective of their ability and modes of learning, including means of assessment for all learners. It is therefore imperative that government should in practical terms implement to the spirit and letter of its policy on access to free and compulsory education for all children, especially for persons with disabilities.

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