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PROMOTING EQUITY AND INCLUSION FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN NIGERIA: THE DECISIVE ROLE OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

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ABSTRACT

Every citizen has the potential to contribute to national development. Inclusive education is important for combating illiteracy and underdevelopment. It involves integrating students with special needs and learning disabilities into regular classrooms. The paper titled "Promoting Equity and Inclusion for Students with Disabilities in Public Secondary Schools in Nigeria: The Decisive Role of School Administrators" argues that school administrators and the government must work together to promote equity and inclusion for students with disabilities. This includes aligning policies with inclusive legislation, prioritizing professional development, and engaging the community. This approach not only creates a fair and inclusive society, but also taps into Nigeria's diverse student population for national development. The paper examines the concept of inclusive education, the current state of inclusive education policy in Nigeria, the role of inclusive education in national development, the challenges facing inclusive education practice in Nigeria, the specific challenges faced by school administrators in promoting equity and inclusion, and the way forward for implementing inclusive education in Nigeria. It also provides recommendations that emphasize the important roles of school administrators and the government in promoting equity and inclusion for students with disabilities in public secondary schools in Nigeria.

Keywords: Equity, Inclusion, Disabilities, Secondary Schools & School Administrators**.**

Introduction

Equity and inclusion are important parts of education that help build a fair and inclusive society. The world conference on special needs education was held in Salamanca-Spain in 1994 with over 300 participants including 92 governments and 25 international organizations in attendance. Among other decisions reached, the conference upheld a new Framework for Action, the guiding principle of which is all special children, irrespective of the nature/form of disability should be accepted in ordinary schools. More so, the framework emphasize that all educational policies should stipulate that

special children attend the neighbourhood school that would be attended if the child did not have any form of disability (UNESCO Report, 1994).

The world conference on special needs education also calls on governments of all nations to among other things:

- Give education highest policy and budget allocation to improve educational services for inclusion of all children, their differences or difficulties notwithstanding.
- Adopt as a matter of law/policy the principles of inclusive education and enroll all children in ordinary schools unless there were compelling reasons for doing otherwise.
- Develop demonstration projects and encourage exchanges with countries operating inclusive schools.
- Ensure associations of persons with disabilities are actively involved in educational planning and decision making.

The idea of inclusive education is further supported by the United Nation's Standard Rules on equalization of opportunities for person with disability proclaiming participation and equality for all (Okeke & Anierobi, 2021).

The concept of equitable and inclusive education

Many researchers and authors have defined inclusive education based on their perspectives. Inclusive education by Arren and Schwartze (2000) means that all students attend and are welcomed by their neighbourhood schools in age appropriate, regular classes and are supported to learn, contribute and participate in all aspects of the life of the school. Boll (2013) explained inclusive education to mean that students with special needs will be placed in the same classroom environment as other students of their age who do not have special needs (normal children). Haug (2017) said inclusive education involves the right to education for all students. Furthermore Singh (2016) noted that inclusive education is a new approach towards educating children with disability and learning difficulties with that of normal ones within the same classroom. Ozoji, Unachukwu and Kolo (2016) explained a child with disability as one who has an impairment which to a great extent affects his/her ability to perform certain tasks as a result of the damaged organ.

Inclusive education can be referred to as an approach within the field of education that aims to provide equitable and quality learning opportunities for all students, regardless of their background, abilities, disabilities, or other differences. It is a philosophy that promotes the idea that every student has the right to access and fully participate in education, regardless of their individual characteristics. Inclusive

education seeks to remove barriers to learning and create an environment where every learner feels valued, supported, and engaged. This is in line with the assertion of Kozleski and Yu (2018) that inclusive education expanded the responsibilities of schools and school systems to increase access, participation and opportunities to learn for marginalized populations of students.

Inclusive education is a process of strengthening the capacity of the educational system to reach out to all learners (Okeke & Anierobi, 2021). Equitable and inclusive education aims to create a learning environment that provides all students with the necessary resources, support, and opportunities to learn and succeed. It recognizes the uniqueness of each student and seeks to eliminate obstacles while embracing diversity and fostering collaboration. By combining equity and inclusion, education systems can strive to offer a fair and enriching learning experience for every student. Equitable education focuses on addressing systemic disparities and ensuring that all students receive the resources, opportunities, and support they need to thrive. It acknowledges that different students may require varying levels of assistance to overcome challenges and reach their full potential. Key aspects of equitable education include:

i. **Fair Distribution:** Allocating educational resources, such as funding, teachers, technology, and learning materials, based on the needs of each student and school, rather than perpetuating existing inequalities.
ii. **Customized Support:** Providing targeted support and interventions to students who require additional assistance, such as students with disabilities, English language learners, or those from disadvantaged backgrounds.
iii. **Access to Quality Education:** Guaranteeing that every student has access to a high-quality education, regardless of their location, socio-economic status, or other factors.
iv. **Elimination of Barriers:** Identifying and removing barriers that might hinder certain groups of students from fully participating in educational opportunities, such as discriminatory policies, inadequate facilities, or lack of transportation.

Inclusive education also encompasses mainstreaming as well as full inclusion. Mainstreaming implies allowing children with disabilities to learn together with normal children in the same classroom and under the same teacher after they show the ability to keep up with the rest of their peers. Full inclusion is the integration of all students, even those that require substantial educational behavioral support and services to be successful in regular classes and the

elimination of segregated special classes (Olufunke & Oluremi, 2014). Inclusive education can provide a range of academic and social benefits for students with disabilities, such as high achievement in language and mathematics, improved rate of high school graduation, and more positive relationship with non-disabled individuals (Isuwa & Lengnen, 2014).

Overview of the current state of inclusive education policy in Nigeria

In other to adopt the approach of inclusive schooling and to support the development of special needs education, the Federal Government of Nigeria (2013) in her National Policy on Education emphasized that persons with special needs shall be provided with inclusive education services in schools with normal children attend, in age appropriate general education classes and the aims of special needs education are to:

a. Provide access to education for all persons in an inclusive setting.
b. Equalize educational opportunities for all persons, irrespective of their genetic composition, social, physical, sensory, mental, psychological and emotional disabilities.
c. Provide adequate education for all persons with special needs in order for them to contribute their quota to national development.
d. Provide opportunities for gifted and talented persons to develop their talents in the interest of national development and finally
e. Design a diversified and appropriate curriculum for different target groups.

The effective implementation of inclusive education policies in the context of Nigeria's public secondary schools, hinges significantly on the commitment and competence of school administrators. The role of school administrators in promoting equity and inclusion encompasses various dimensions. They bridge the gap between policy and practice, translate the principles of inclusivity into meaningful actions that resonate with the unique challenges of the students as well as shape the educational experiences of students with disabilities. However, formulating policies is easy but implementation is often the problem.

The full implantation of inclusive education policies in Nigeria is more in theory and less in practice. Supporting this assertion, Okeke and Anierobi (2021) stated that inclusive education in Nigeria is still faced with the challenge of policy implementation. Many implementation strategies were proffered by government and scholars in Nigeria for its success. Folanke (2009) in Lawal and Isah (2022)maintained that, Nigeria is known to have some of the best laws on inclusive education in Africa but the implementation

has remained the main problem due to different hindrances. Okeke and Anierobi (2021) opined that even the National Policy on Education with all its recommendations is yet to adopt practical steps towards the realization of inclusive education in the country.

The role of inclusive education in fostering national development

Inclusive education plays a crucial role in promoting national development by fostering social cohesion, economic growth, and individual well-being. It ensures that everyone, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds, has equal opportunities to access high-quality education and actively participate in society. Additionally, Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach and Richardson (2005) as cited in Eskay, Ugwonna and Ogbueghu (2020) reports that special education is a very important investment for human and national development and is influenced by the environment where it subsists. The following highlight the significance of inclusive education in fostering national development:

- **Reducing Inequality:** Inclusive education helps reduce educational and socioeconomic inequalities by providing equitable access to quality education. This contributes to a fairer distribution of opportunities and resources in society.
- **Economic Benefits:** European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2017) reports that inclusive education can result in long-term economic benefits. It enhances the employability of individuals with disabilities and promotes a workforce that is more diverse and adaptable
- **Promoting Social Cohesion:** Inclusive education promotes social cohesion by bringing together students from different backgrounds, including those with disabilities (UNESCO, 2019). This helps to dismantle stereotypes and prejudices, and fosters a society that is more inclusive and tolerant.
- **Enhancing Human Capital:** Inclusive education ensures that all individuals have the opportunity to develop their skills and talents, contributing to a more skilled and capable workforce. This, in turn, can boost a nation's economic development (World Bank, 2018).
- **Global Competitiveness:** Nations with inclusive education systems are better positioned to compete globally, as they harness the full potential of their human resources and promote innovation and creativity (UNESCO, 2019).

Challenges of inclusive education practice in Nigeria

Implementation of inclusive education in Nigerian educational system has faced many hindrances and obstacles which consequently led to the

dysfunctioning of the system of education in the country (Lawal & Isah, 2022. Eskay and Angie (2013) identify the following as challenges hindering the successful implementation of inclusive education in Nigeria.

- **Insufficient plans for identifying children with special learning disabilities:** Nigeria lacks specialists and experts who can effectively screen individuals with learning disabilities.
- **Unequal distribution of specialist schools:** Most specialist schools are located in urban areas, neglecting rural areas where they are needed.
- **Lack of information and guidance for parents:** Many parents in rural areas are unaware of the existence of specialist education centers in Nigeria, as these centers are primarily found in state capitals.
- **Low living standards of parents:** Parents struggle to meet the needs of typical students, making it even more challenging to support individuals with special needs or learning disabilities.
- **Absence of a comprehensive strategy to locate and identify out-of-school children:** There is no data available on the number of children with learning disabilities attending or not attending school.
- Inadequate funding and community ignorance about the impact of learning disabilities on children.

Promoting equity and inclusion: specific challenges confronting school administrators

i. **Lack of Infrastructure and Resources:** Many public schools in Nigeria, particularly in rural areas, struggle with limited infrastructure and resources. Consequently, accommodating students with disabilities and providing the necessary support for inclusive education becomes challenging.

ii. **Teacher Training:** Often, teachers lack proper training and awareness to effectively educate students with diverse learning needs. This can impede the implementation of inclusive practices in classrooms.

iii. **Negative Attitudes and Stigma:** Societal attitudes towards disabilities can act as barriers to inclusive education. Stigma and misconceptions may result in the exclusion and discrimination of students with disabilities.

iv. **Policy Implementation:** Although Nigeria has made efforts to promote inclusive education through policies and legislation, difficulties persist in translating these policies into effective practices at the school level.

Advancing inclusive education in Nigeria: the way forward

Isuwa and Lengman (2014) pointed out that, the way forward for the implementation of inclusive education in Nigeria involves;

- Building sound system for data collection

- Providing pre-service and in-service training for teachers
- Promote inclusive opportunities in schools
- Providing support to parents and involving them in school activities

Boyi (2014) in Lawal and Isah (2022) submitted that, allocation of enough funds, adequate supervision, improving the condition of school plant and motivation of teachers will greatly help in removing barriers for the implementation of inclusive education.

Suggestions

The recommendations below highlight the crucial roles of school administrators and the government in promoting equity and inclusion for students with disabilities in public secondary schools in Nigeria. School administrators' should:

- Promote and facilitate ongoing professional development opportunities for staff, encourage teachers to attend relevant training sessions and workshops, and allocate resources for this purpose.
- Establish mentorship programs where experienced educators can guide their peers in implementing inclusive practices.
- Engage with parents, caregivers, and local communities to build support networks for students with disabilities and actively advocate for the needs of students with disabilities.
- The government must enforce comprehensive legislation that explicitly promotes inclusive education for students with disabilities. This should include provisions for accessible infrastructure, curriculum adaptations, and reasonable accommodations.
- They should provide professional development school administrators to equip them with the skills and knowledge needed to effectively support students with disabilities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, promoting equity and inclusion for students with disabilities in Nigerian public secondary schools requires collaboration between school administrators and government action. This can be achieved by aligning policies with inclusive legislation, prioritizing professional development, and engaging the community. By doing so, we can create a transformative educational environment where every student, regardless of their abilities, can access quality education and fully participate in learning. This will contribute to a more equitable and inclusive society and unleash the untapped potential of our diverse student population.

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