

Inclusive Education for People Living with Disabilities in Nigeria

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Abstract: Achieving inclusive education is one of the lofty goals set by the United Nations which was, then, passed down to individual nations around the globe. It is believed that inclusive education has great benefits for individuals and society at large. However, its level in developing nations, Nigeria inclusive, is still very low. The aim of this paper was to assess how inclusive education for people living with disabilities can be achieved in Nigeria. To achieve this aim, a theoretical research method was employed. The methods enabled a systematic literature review to be done in this study. To this end, several published studies were reviewed and explored to draw out significant lessons for inclusive education and identify possible actionable steps the government could take on inclusive education. The study results revealed that the level of inclusive education was still very low and far from the expectations of its advocates. While the Nigerian government supported the idea of inclusive education and enshrined the rights of people living with disabilities in the 1999 constitution, sufficient actionable steps are yet to be taken to achieve inclusive education. Similarly, inclusive education faced severe challenges in the country in the form of low levels of infrastructure and teaching materials and resources. The living conditions of people living with disabilities were poor because cultural beliefs and myths about them enable people to treat them poorly and shabbily. These findings are significant to inclusive education advocates and policymakers in the country because they help them to understand the poor level of inclusive education in the country, and poor governmental efforts towards inclusive education; re-evaluate their existing approaches, and design better approaches for the course of inclusive education.

Keywords: advocacies, disabilities, inclusive education, Nigeria, poor.

Introduction

Achieving inclusive education is a goal advocated for by many international groups and institutions such as UNESCO and UNICEF in which people living with disabilities are set up to have access to education in the same manner as people living without any disability (Richler, 2020; Ydo, 2020). While it was initiated by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), many nations and international bodies are strongly advocating for it (Kusimo et al., 2019). It was perceived that inclusive education is beneficial to individuals and the nations at large (Ajuwon, 2012) and has been established as the universal right of people living with disabilities to education (Egaga et al., 2015). Hence nations across the world are encouraged to sign up to pursue the goal at their respective national levels. Even the data on people living with disabilities is so staggering that attention has to be paid to them. For instance, about 650 million people across the entire globe have one disability or the other and the United Nations (2011) stated that 150 million of the 650 million people are children living with disabilities (United Nations; 2011, UNESCO, 2010). Unsurprisingly, more than 80 percent of the children with disabilities are residents in developing nations and they are thereby prevented from active participation in school (Agunloye et al., 2011).

In this paper, the focus is on how inclusive education can be achieved for people living with disabilities in Nigeria. It aims to answer the question, "How can inclusive education be achieved in Nigeria?" To this end, pertinent concepts or constructs in the study are reviewed to aid the understanding of readers and to help the study achieve its aim. More so, the importance of inclusive education is discussed at length including the challenges encountered in the implementation of inclusive education citing the challenges of different countries, especially the developing ones in the world. It is then wrapped up with measures or efforts that can be taken to achieve inclusive education in Nigeria and, by extension, in the rest of the developing world.

The study is narrowed down to Nigeria, discussing inclusive education extensively as it affects people living with disabilities in the country. This is necessary because, in Nigeria, people living with

disabilities experience different levels of difficulties and challenges (Martinez et al., 2020). They are despised in society, labeled with strange and unpleasant tags, informally denied access to basic facilities and opportunities, have little or no recognized rights in the country, and the government's efforts towards ameliorating their conditions seem at the lowest ebb (Eleweke et al., 2016; Arimoro et al., 2019). As pointed out by Cornelius-Ukpepi et al. (2019), children with disabilities, living in developing and emerging countries such as Nigeria, are hardly in schools. They are confronted with numerous barriers such as non-accessible schools and teaching resources, teachers, and classmates exhibiting discrimination towards them. The experiences of females with disabilities are more harrowing than their male counterparts. All these barriers or challenges lessen their chances of accessing quality education.

It is appalling to state that it is almost impossible to exhaust all the challenges and difficulties of people living with disabilities in Nigeria. In some quarters, there are harmful traditional and cultural beliefs and myths about people living with disabilities in Nigeria. These beliefs include that people living with disabilities are suffering the consequences of the evil acts of their parents and a host of other unfounded myths about them. Unfortunately, there is a relatively high number of Nigerians who uphold these strange and unfair myths and beliefs about people living with disabilities (Etieyibo et al., 2016; Rohwerder 2018). And these harsh and unfriendly traditional and cultural beliefs, which are ingrained into many Nigerians, have worsened their living conditions, preventing them from accessing education in the country.

For a proper understanding of the issue regarding inclusive education for everyone, some of the key terms are defined and explained. Conceptually, in the simplest form, inclusive education is a combination of two keywords – education and inclusiveness. Education is a means of acquiring values and skills that enables an individual to function optimally in society (Adeyanju 2010; Etuk et al., 2012) i.e. it fosters personal and societal growth and development (Daura et al., 2015). Inclusive education can be said to be the process of teaching all students, with and without disabilities, in a regular school environment, accessing the same resources, academic practices, and activities (Anupriya et al., 2014). Inclusive education is defined as educational settings that allow children with disabilities and children without disabilities to receive education in the same learning environment (Egaga et al., 2015). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child deems inclusive education as a legal, human right of people living with disabilities (Bouillet et al., 2015). Bouillet et al. (2015) posited that inclusive education enables children to learn together, actively engaged in the same learning and teaching process. Cornelius-Ukpepi et al. (2019) stress that inclusive education means that children with disabilities are integrated into the normal educational settings with their counterparts. They went further to state that inclusive education requires conscious efforts to alter educational policies, practices, structures, and systems to accommodate diversity in learning within a given locality. It ensures the active participation of learners not minding their disabilities. To Okwudire et al. (2018), inclusive education is a means to continuously increase the rate of participation of learners from different backgrounds in the learning curriculum, cultures, and collegiality of local schools. In inclusive education, learners are seen as being equal without any discrimination or marginalization. It ensures that all learners have equal learning opportunities to access quality education, educational materials, and resources, pertinent assistance not minding their disabilities, and thereby prepare them for a productive life in the larger society (Ibok 2015). So, with inclusive education, all students with disabilities and without disabilities are offered quality education. However, the degree of inclusiveness in some developing countries, particularly Nigeria, is still low with no sign of improvement soon (Fareo 2015).

In terms of importance, inclusive education does not allow any child of school age to be excluded from their learning thereby promoting national development (Cornelius-Ukpepi et al., 2019). Udo (2012) claimed that inclusive education enhances the improvements of all learners – learners with disabilities and learners without disabilities. The inclusive system of education makes it possible for all learners, with and without disabilities, to attend the same-age classes in their communities with special supports being offered to learners that need them (Bouillet et al., 2015). Inclusive education offers learners similar opportunities to hone and improve their skills and talents as individuals and in conjunction with other learners which helps them to achieve efficiency, relevance, and equality (Bjørnsrud & Nilsen, 2011). It helps to increase the rate of engagement of learners and their

educational success. So, when classrooms are safe and highly cooperative, members of the class develop a sense of belongingness (Jones & Gillies, 2014). It helps to underscore the concept and practical application of a community that consists of diverse people and eliminates the sense of superiority among learners (Cornelius-Ukpepi et al. 2019). In return, learners are able to achieve academic and social development. It eliminates barriers to friendship and collegiality, promoting cooperation and team spirit and work (Striully, 2016).

The issue of inclusive education is already accepted by the Nigerian government and the government has developed guidelines and policies to actualize the program by targeting three categories of people in the society – the disabled, the disadvantaged, and the exceptionally gifted (Federal Ministry of Education 2008). The guidelines and policies accommodate all kinds of people regardless of their disabilities which may be physical, mental, emotional, sensory, and any other forms of disabilities. However, it is bedeviled by challenges that make the implementation difficult. These challenges or barriers are poor attitudes from the government, lack of infrastructure to foster inclusive education, inadequate number of trained teaching personnel, ineffective policies to promote inclusive education, and a host of other barriers as identified in the literature (Ahmad 2012).

There are many extant empirical studies on inclusive education for people living with disabilities. Some of these studies are explored and reviewed to show the results of empirical studies done on achieving inclusive education in Nigeria. The findings of these studies are pointers to the measures that can be taken to achieve inclusive education in Nigeria. For instance, the study of Arimoro (2019) confirmed the nation has been a party to several advocacies for creating a non-discriminatory environment for people living with disabilities but it falls short in the area of implementing policies that actually ensure that people living with disabilities access inclusive education. In other words, the Nigerian government takes a crucial step toward achieving inclusive education, offering supports for it by partnering with international advocacies for inclusive education. However, the government makes no conscious efforts to achieve it within its border.

Eleweke, et al. (2016) conducted a qualitative study on inclusive education pointing out that a lack of access to support services makes inclusive education difficult to attain in Nigeria. The result of the study showed that the achievement of inclusive education is hinged on the provision of support services that enable people living with disabilities to cope with the rigor of accessing education with people without disabilities. So, the provision of support services is essential for the achievement of inclusive education. Egaga, et al. (2015) expounded on the concept of inclusive education but with reference to children with hearing impairment. The study explored a wide range of strategies and support programs that foster the achievement of inclusive education in the country. It ended by suggesting that the goal of inclusive education is only attainable through the enactment and implementation of legislative policies and the provision of required equipment and materials for the implementation of the program. Kusimo et al. (2019) assessed inclusive education with reference to the fourth goal stated within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). They employed the quantitative method which enabled questionnaires to be administered to 200 respondents but only 188 responded to it. The analysis of the survey instrument revealed that the implementation of SDG goal 4 with respect to people living with disabilities was in a terrible state. It was suggested that individual Nigerians needed access to knowledge, skills, and information for the nation to experience meaningful development.

Methodology

The question this study aims to answer is “How can inclusive education be achieved in Nigeria?” It is the principal question the study aims to answer through its plethora of reviews of extant studies on the issue of inclusive education in a country like Nigeria, a representative of developing countries. In order to answer this question, the study employs a systematic literature method which is equally deployed to achieve its aims and objectives. This is premised on the strength of the method to keep readers abreast of the recent happenings on the issue of inclusive education, particularly among people living with disabilities in Nigeria (Tawfik et al., 2019). The method helps to narrate the crux of the study in a clear, systematic manner (Snyder 2019). It enables the study to peruse different scholarly works on the subject of inclusive education.

Different resources were explored to source for extant studies on the issue of inclusive education. In total, more than twenty (20) studies between the period of 2011 and 2020, aside from the Nigerian constitution, were reviewed. Out of them, ten (10) were empirical studies published between 2018 and 2020. The selected studies were reviewed in order to glean useful and relevant information from them. In short, these studies discuss the issue of inclusive education using various qualitative and quantitative research designs (Egaga et al., 2015; Kusimo et al., 2019; Arimoro 2019). During the study, the concept of inclusive education was extensively explained and defined and specific barriers to inclusive education in Nigeria were pointed out. Thus, the findings of these studies give an insight into the current study and answer its research question.

Results and Discussions

Overall, this study generates pertinent and reliable findings from the theoretical research conducted through the review of extant studies on the issue of inclusive education in Nigeria. Some of the specific findings of the study are:

First, inclusive education requires those students with disabilities and those without disabilities to access the same education using the same resources, under the same conditions, and taught by the same teacher (Ahmad 2012; Kusimo et al., 2019). Inclusive education eliminates all forms of separation and discrimination that people living with disabilities are experiencing in society.

Secondly, there are harsh and unfriendly beliefs about people living with disabilities in Nigeria (Fareo 2015; Etieyibo et al., 2016). In some quarters, they are perceived as individuals suffering from the consequences of the evils done by their ancestors or the evils committed by them earlier in life. These beliefs are harmful and unhealthy.

Thirdly, the rights of people living with disabilities are already protected by the 1999 Nigerian constitution (Nigeria 1999a; Arimoro et al., 2019; Etieyibo 2020). They have rights to personal liberty to engage in any productive activity; and the right to live. Similarly, the Nigerian government has signed treaties bordering on the rights of people living with disabilities to education. However, the government has not done enough to make them actionable and enforceable.

Fourthly, the study revealed that inclusive education offered learning opportunities to learners with disabilities, accessing quality education with their counterparts without discrimination and prejudice. It is a tool to build a community without discrimination and enable learners to understand the need not to discriminate against anyone at an early age.

Fifthly, it is clear that the Nigerian government has developed guidelines and policies to execute the inclusive education program accommodating people without any discrimination against their disabilities (Federal Ministry of Education 2008). However, the execution is sluggish. The pursuit of inclusive education can only be achieved through the enactment and implementation of legislative policies (Adetoro 2014; Egaga et al., 2015). It is therefore suggested that the government should exercise the political will to ensure that the guidelines for inclusive education are followed closely across the country. The enforcement of pertinent policies on inclusive education guarantees the achievement of inclusive education. Without exercising political will, inclusive education will remain an elusive laudable program not executed.

Lastly, inclusive education requires the availability of essential teaching materials, resources, and infrastructural facilities. It is suggested that the government should make a substantial budget for the provision of materials, resources, and infrastructural facilities to guarantee the success of this programme. Without the provision of these resources and facilities, teachers will underperform and fail at their responsibility to provide quality education to all students regardless of their physical disabilities and lack of it.

While these specific findings are drawn from the theoretical research conducted, it is pertinent to state that future studies on the subject should employ a mixed research method to assess inclusive education in Nigeria. Questionnaires and interviews should be leveraged to elicit information from the people. The findings of this approach are bound to generate more robust findings than the current theoretical research.

Conclusions

Inclusive education is still a pipe dream in Nigeria. While the government pays lip service to it by offering support to advocacies for inclusive education and making provisions for the rights of people with disabilities to be protected; it needs to follow up all these laudable actions with a political will to pursue the achievement of inclusive education in Nigeria. Without any appropriate policies, discrimination in learning will persist. Hence government should formulate and enforce policies to achieve inclusive education.

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