



Inclusive Education Implementation in Two Universities in the West African Sub Region

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Abstract

This study investigated the implementation of inclusive education in two universities in the West African sub-region. Three research questions and three hypotheses guided the study. The population 75 special needs students in the two universities. There was no sampling as this population was manageable. Data were collected by the use of semi-structured interview. Data analyzed based on thematic literature reviewed. Results revealed availability of legal documents, facilities neither provided nor adapted for inclusive education and one university had teacher assistants. Recommended that management should urgently address some of the issues for a fulfilling experience while in school.

Keywords: *Implementation, inclusive education, universities, West Africa and sub-region.*

I. Introduction

Education is the acquisition of skills and values that enables the individual to function in the society. These skills are usually passed on in schools to help the overall development of the students. Education is a fundamental human right, therefore every individual irrespective of physical or mental capabilities is expected to be given an opportunity to access it. Government has the obligation to fulfil this right as part of its philosophy and goals of education states that education is compulsory and a right to every citizen irrespective of gender, social status, religion, ethnic background and any peculiar individual challenges.

Individuals with different types of challenges are said to have "special needs". In the school setting, they are referred to as special needs students. Special needs education is captured in

Nigeria's National Policy on Education (2013) as well as Sierra Leone's Persons with Disabilities Act (2011) and National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools (2021). However, research at global, continental and regional levels and by human rights groups have given rise to new concepts which led to the formulation of a separate policy solely for special needs education, "National Policy on Special Needs Education (2016)", in Nigeria. In these documents, challenges as categorized include: visual impairment, hearing impairment, speech impairment, physical and health impairment, mental retardation, learning disabilities, multiple impairment, autism and albinism.

People with these challenges are less likely to be in education therefore this research is anchored on the social justice theory by John Rawls in 1985. It is based on the view that everyone deserves equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities. Education benefits all especially as it promotes economic, social and political development. Education is critical to breaking down stigma around disability and reducing the cycle of poverty. Teaches learners how to live together thus improving tolerance of diversity, hence the need for inclusive education. Inclusive education is also a gateway to higher education. The practical state of inclusive education in many countries differs widely, between and even within schools. Allan (2008) stated that it appears to be deep uncertainty about how to create inclusive environments within schools and how to teach inclusively. However, there is every need for inclusion in many schools as children with disabilities have no hope of acquiring education elsewhere except in such institutions.

Inclusive education is an arrangement where challenged students and normal students all study in one classroom environment. Inclusive



education was originally developed for younger children (Morina (2017), but as more of them complete their early schooling, the need to move inclusive policies within higher education increased. This rise in the demand for inclusion in higher education comes with challenges as stated by **Morina, (2017), Qumbisa, Awuzie & Emuze (2023)** and Dewi, Basti & Asmiati (2024). From the reconstruction of classrooms, incorporation of modern technologies for the teaching-learning process to the adjustment of other facilities to accommodate the now more diverse student population. In the same vein, Riswari et al. in Muhlis, Sopyanti & Ishaqy (2024) posit the implementation of inclusive education in higher education encounters issues pertaining to staff, management, and curriculum. Notwithstanding equity and social justice demands that education should be made available to who want to access it.

The increase in the number of students with special needs and response to the Salamanca statement prompted the Federal Ministry of Education to enact separate policies to emphasize special needs and inclusive education in separate policy papers. (The National Policy on Special Needs Education (2015 and The Policy on Inclusive Education (2016) respectively. In these documents, the government enumerated the differences between integration and inclusion, did a situation analysis as well as rationale for inclusion.

Inclusion has been described as a program that helps school to adapt to the diversity of children. It advocates that children should be placed, received or allowed to participate in a regular school setting and the school as much as possible should realize the whole set of objectives for all groups of students (Rapps & Corral – Granados, 2021). According to Soli in (Rapps & Corral – Granados, 2021), inclusion has been defined as a student belonging to a professional social and cultural community. It also concerns participation quality, democratization and dividends in education.

The degree of inclusion has been made, hence, Haug (2017) identified four elements that have been described as the degree of inclusion: increasing the community, increasing participation, increasing democratization and increasing dividends. Inclusion however, is a radical departure from the traditional segregation approach of educating children with disabilities which involves the adaptation of regular school practices to suit the needs of children without disabilities (Obi, Mensah & Avoke, 2007). Inclusive education is a system whereby the disabled and non-disabled children are

educated together in one classroom with modifications in physical structures, equipment and methods to suit the conditions of diverse special needs of learners (Ashi, 2010).

Inclusive education could be partial or locational (proximity to resources facilities) and functional inclusion with all specialized facilities at a regular educational school setting. Functional inclusion is one of the goals of special education in Nigeria with the aim to concretize the meaning of equal opportunities in education for all children, their disabilities notwithstanding (National Policy in Education in Obi & Ashi, 2016). According to Omede (2016), inclusive education simply means schools should accommodate all children regardless of their intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic and other conditions. This should include disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic population, children linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities and children from other disadvantaged or marginalized areas of groups.

Inclusive education however involves transforming the whole education system – legislation and policy, systems for financing, administration, designs, delivery and monitoring of education, and the way schools are organized. Inclusive education creates a level playing field for everyone. It shows that students with disability can be accommodated in the same classroom with normal children. (UNICEF, 2023) Continuing, UNICEF (2023) sees inclusive education as allowing students of all backgrounds to learn and grow side by side to the benefit of all. It means having all children in the same classroom and in the same school. It also means real learning opportunities for groups who have traditionally been excluded- not only children with disabilities, but speakers of minority languages too. Children with disabilities can however fully benefit from this type of educational setting just as normal children. For UNESCO (2012), inclusive education is based on the right of all learners to a quality education that meets basic needs or learning needs and enriches life.

Educational practice directed to include children with disabilities in basic education have become increasingly demanded in contemporary context. It occurs because after years of struggle of disabled people's social movements, the right to education under the same conditions as people without disabilities is regulated from a legal point of view (Gesser & Martins, 2019). Legislations are worthwhile and in order, but what actually obtains is more important as Mitter (2015) in Mendoza and



Heymann (2022) opine that despite these policies, the implementation of these goals has proven much more difficult in practice. Haug (2017) opined that inclusive education is a means to secure equal educational rights for all persons. Equal educational rights can only be achieved when these students are provided facilities that facilitate their learning experiences as United Nations Educational and Scientific Organization (2011) states that inclusion in education is an all-embracing concept where learners of all abilities, ethnicities and background, especially those whose voices have historically been excluded, are educated together within one system. Due to the fact that these students are usually in the minority, their needs tend to be ignored or not accorded the attention it demands.

Since inclusion is based on the assumption that all children have the right to be in the same educational space, they should be properly integrated interactively and socially. In support of this, Banda and Mbewe (2018) revealed that disabled students benefit from the system by not only involved in academic activities but also in the discussion of real life and family issues through sharing their life experiences. In order to achieve social interaction and integration of students with disabilities with fellow students, Scheulka (2018), summarized the components of successful inclusive education implementation to include;

1. Inclusive policies that promote high outcomes for all students;
2. Flexible and accommodative curriculum;
3. Strong and supportive school leadership;
4. Equitable distribution of resources; and
5. Teachers who are trained in inclusive pedagogy and view it as their role to teach all learners in a diverse classroom. (p.4)

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG4) precisely calls for ensuring inclusive and quality education for all and promoting lifelong learning. For quality, availability of trained personnel to support inclusive education is necessary. Teachers who are trained in special needs education delivery are needed but unfortunately, Chitiyo (2021) reported that teachers lack specialized training appropriate in teaching students with disability.

Education as a fundamental human right of all individuals brings the rationale for inclusion. This right is supported by a wide range of international conventions and declarations among which are the:

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights;
- Convention on the Rights of the Child;

- Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action;
- International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women
- Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities
- Education for All
- Millenium Development Goals
- Sustainable Development Goals.

As signatories to these, Nigeria and Sierra Leone have developed some Special Needs Policy (2015) and Policy on Inclusive Education (2016) and the Policy on Radical Inclusion (2021) respectively to accommodate all persons in the education system. Emanating from these, is the inclusive approach to education which is believed is most effective method of eliminating discriminatory practices and creating a flourishing environment for learning. The philosophy is that education is compulsory and a right of every child irrespective of gender, social status, religion, ethnic background and any peculiar individual challenges.

Inclusive education has received international endorsement because it is seen as ensuring education in least restrictive environment for persons with disabilities. Inclusionary practices are anchored on the principle of fundamental human rights. Fundamental human right of all students, irrespective of their abilities or disabilities have a right to be educated in the same classroom setting where possible (Oladele, Ogunwale & Dafwat 2016). Inclusion means more funds, additional experience to deal with new challenges, extra work, being abreast of recent information willingness to work in collaboration with other professionals and many more (Adetoun 2003).

Inclusion for Omebe (2016), differs from previously held notions of integration and mainstreaming which tended to be concerned principally with disability and special education needs and implied learners changing or becoming ready for or deserving of accommodation by the mainstream. By contrast, inclusion is about the child's right to participate and the school's duty to accept the child. Inclusion rejects the use of special schools or classrooms to separate students with disabilities. The author further reiterates that inclusion gives students with disabilities skills they can use in and out of the classroom. Fully inclusive schools which are rare no longer distinguish between "general education" and "special education" programmes. Instead, the school is restructured so all learn together.



Learning together brings certain requirements like the provision of teacher assistants as most teachers are not trained (Dake, Opoku-Asare&Obosu 2018) for special education delivery. Personnel hired by schools to assist classroom teachers in the delivery of content in an inclusive classroom in an effort to educate students are known by a variety of names (Giangreco& Doyle, 2007; Sharma &Salend, 2016). Such names include teaching assistants, learning support assistants (LSA), teacher aide, paraprofessional, paraeducator and special needs assistant (SNA). By whichever name, the duty they perform is more important as Thompson (2023) suggest that they bridge the gap between special needs students and mainstream education, promote inclusivity and enhance overall teaching quality.

Deployment of teaching assistants has become necessary as inclusive education implementation is on the rise especially in tertiary education where many lecturers may not have been exposed to any training in inclusive education delivery. They assist the teachers as well as provide support for the students to operate more effectively and probably have a better impact on the students, there is need for their involvement in planning the lesson and supporting learning throughout the learning period. (Viktorin 2018) Aside this, they also act to encourage the students to believe they can do it by assisting them emotionally to overcome obstacles and achieve in their educational endeavours.

The current practice at the Enugu State University of Science and Technology, Enugu is for the teacher assistant to come in to assist students in an inclusive classroom while the lecture is going on. In spite of this role of providing improved educational opportunities and supporting a richer learning experience, they arrive classes late, creating a frustrating situation for the student. At some other periods, they are not available leaving the students stranded, looking like a fish out of the water. Sadly too, they are not involved in any other educational activities, such as library use by the students.

This mismatch between their role and what they practice was averred by Breyer, Lederer and Gasteiger-Klicpera, (2020) when the stated that learning support assistants legally defined roles and responsibilities often do not correspond to their activities performed in practice. This could be attributed to inadequacies in their training. Google, Walker, Ottey, Allan & Irwin (2022) in Orchard (2023) reported that educational assistants only have brief training for the complex role they play.

In responding to diversity in the needs of all children, youths and adults, regular schools with inclusive orientation need to provide appropriate facilities to close the gap between formulations and realizations of inclusive education (Haug, 2017). This is in line with the turn-around strategy for special needs education (Federal Republic of Nigeria 2013) of adequately equipping schools with trained personnel and relevant equipment.

Regretably, both the Enugu State University of Science and Technology in Nigeria as well as the University of Sierra Leone in Sierra Leone do not have any observable nor have adapted existing facilities to cater for students with special needs. Emeahara (2015) states that educational information service provision in the various types of libraries in Nigeria appear to have primarily catered for the educational needs of regular students. This further affirms has created a wide gap in the provision of vital and timely educational information to persons with special needs for their educational advancement.

Assessing physical facilities for students with special needs, Madlela (2022) reported that buildings, surroundings sports fields and learning materials did not cater for learners with special needs. Earlier, Morino (2015) had revealed that all students in a study indicated that many university spaces, including some classrooms were obsolete and difficult to access and the furniture inadequate.

Statement of the Problem

Responding to the Salamanca statement and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) many countries initiated inclusive education in the provision of education for special needs students as this will promote social interaction and integration of students with disabilities with fellow, normal students. This provided the opportunity for more special needs children to be enrolled and also graduate from both primary and secondary education. This group of students is now seeking admission into the tertiary education institutions. Researches have shown that not many universities in the West African sub- regions have provisions for inclusive education. This leads to situations where these children with disabilities only end up with O' Level certificates thereby denying them of their aspirations in life. Hence, many of them will not be gainfully employed or will not be able to engage themselves in any meaningful jobs. This will increase the rate of street children if the situation is not addressed with immediate effect.

Stakeholders attributed the inability of many children with disabilities gaining admissions



into tertiary institutions in the two West African sub-regions to many factors. Prominent among these is poor funding of education leading to poor provision of facilities for inclusive education to be adequately implemented. In order to understand the motive behind the absence of or poor inclusion, there is the need to assess inclusive education implementation in these two universities. There are no empirical evidences to support this claim in the two West African sub-regions neither is there any study to the best knowledge of the researchers, that has tried to assess inclusive education implementation in the tertiary institutions of the two West African sub-regions. It is against this background that the researchers carried out this study. The problem of this study therefore is to assess inclusive education implementation in the two universities.

Purpose of the Study

This study ascertained the implementation of inclusive education in two universities in the West African Sub-Region. Specifically, it sought to find out if;

1. there are legal frameworks for the implementation of inclusive education in both universities
2. there are available facilities for inclusive education implementation in both universities.
3. there are qualified teacher assistants who assist the disabled students in both universities.

Research Questions

1. Are there legal frameworks for inclusive education implementation in both universities?
2. Are there available facilities for inclusive education implementation in both universities?
3. Are there qualified teacher assistants who assist students in the both universities?

II. Research Method

The study was carried out in two public universities, one in Nigeria and the other in Sierra Leone. The population for the study was all the 75 special needs students in both universities (10 from Enugu State University of Science and Technology and 65 from University of Sierra Leone). They formed the sample as their number was manageable. This qualitative research obtained first-hand information from the participants as their experiences bring focus on the description of research participants' experiences. Semi structured interviews were used as data collection tool. Three identified thematic areas were used to guide the data collection procedure, with relevant questions.

III. Results

Thematic framework was adopted to analyze the data. Common threads were identified from the provided by the respondents, which helped the researchers to make sense of the of the data set.

Distribution of Teacher Assistants and Special Needs Students in the Two Universities.

Institution	No. of special Needs Students	No. of Teacher Assistants
Enugu State University of Science and Technology	10	4
University of Sierra Leone	65	-
Total	75	4

Distribution of Special Needs Students according to Departments in the Two Universities

S/N	Department	University	
		ESUT	USL
1	Business Administration	-	1
2	Information Technology	-	1
3	Accounting	-	1
4	Procurement & Supply Chain	-	1
5	Project Management	-	1
6	Pharmacy Technician	-	1
7	Lab Science	-	1
8	Med Lab	-	1
9	Pharmacy	-	2
10	Law	-	10
11	Social Work	-	6



12	Gender & Development Studies	-	10
13	Engineering	-	6
14	Architecture	1	1
15	Peace & Conflict Resolution	-	1
16	Education	7	3
17	Economics	-	2
18	Commerce	-	1
19	Pol. Science	-	1
20	Mass Comm.	-	2
21	Pop. & Development Studies	-	2
22	Computer Sci.	2	-
23	Community Development Studies	-	1
24	Maths. & Stats.	-	2
25	Language Studies	-	1
26	Accounting & Finance	-	1
27	Sociology	-	1
28	Physics	-	2
29	Geology	-	1
Total		10	65

Distribution of Special Needs according to Disability

S/ N	Institution	Type of Disability									
		Polio	Albinism	Visual Impairment	Ampu tee	Epilepsy	Speech Impairment	Hearing Impairment	Wheelchair User	Kyphosis	Leprosy
1.	ESUT	-	-	-	-	-	-	10	-	-	-
2.	USL	31	3	14	5	4	1	2	1	3	1

This study examined the implementation of special needs education in two universities in the West African subregion. The increase in the number of special needs students in higher education makes it imperative that since government has policies guiding inclusive education, adequate provisions should be made for its proper implementation. The study has three main themes on special needs education implementation.

Theme 1: Legal Frame for Inclusive Education Implementation

The legal framework for the implementation of inclusive education is based on the government policies on inclusive education in both countries. In Nigeria, there is both the National Policy on Education (2013), where it stipulates that peoples with special needs shall be provided with inclusive education services in schools which normal persons attend. Furthermore, the government in 2016 went further and promulgated a separate and elaborate policy on Inclusive education and its implementation which was revised in 2023. In

Sierra Leone, “The Persons with Disabilities Act 2011 affirms the right of people with disabilities and commits the government to adapting educational institutions, providing learning facilities, and formulating suitable curriculum. These policies are grounded in the rights and entitlements of all children as enshrined in the Constitution and laws of both countries which mandate the government to direct its policies towards ensuring that there are equal rights and adequate educational opportunities for all citizens.

Theme 2: Availability of Facilities for Inclusive Education Implementation

Responses from the special needs students in both universities reveal that the facilities are not adapted particularly to accommodate them and their peculiar needs. The classrooms are the usual classrooms used by normal persons; no special equipment provided. The special needs students noted that other facilities like the library, sports ground and the toilets are also not adapted nor any new ones constructed for our use. This seems to be in line



with the works of Morino (2015), Emeahara (2015) and Madlela (2022). The non provision of adequate facilities may have impact on the negative experiences of these students and could even affect their academic performances.

Theme: Availability of Teacher Assistants

There are no teacher assistants in the University of Sierra Leone, for the Enugu State University of Science and Technology there are four, three female and one male. They are all qualified special education trained graduates, but not sufficient for the number of students as some students are left without an assistant most times. Some of the respondents complained that some members of faculty are not favorably disposed to the presence of a teacher assistant in their classroom.

IV. Discussion

Inclusive education concept has been recognized as a means of not leaving any student behind in the education sector especially as education is believed to be a right of every citizen. In pursuance of this, the governments of Nigeria and Sierra Leone came up with policies to address inclusion. These policies are in recognition that every child should be treated equally and also to achieve the goal of "Education for All". The enactment of policies in most instances does not guarantee its implementation.

Governments most often have laudable policies, but fail to follow through with its implementation as has been revealed in this study. Responses from the students confirm that no new facilities have been provided for special needs students nor existing facilities adapted to take care of this group of students. This corroborates studies of Morino (2015), Emeahara, (2015) and Madlela (2022). This is particularly worrisome as more and more students with special needs are seeking higher education. Great effort should be made to increase opportunity for all students, not withstanding their abilities.

The need for teacher assistants cannot be overemphasized as their role in lecture delivery is very essential (Viktorin 2018)s. Most if not all of the current lecturers are not trained in special needs education delivery, thereby necessitating the use of these category of staff as a stop gap for now. Only one of the universities employed the services of teacher assistants, though grossly inadequate. This may have effect on the number of such students seeking admission into higher education subsequently. Their self esteem can also be affected

as lecturers may not know how best to interact with them.

V. Conclusion

Inclusive education in higher education has come to stay, therefore universities need to acknowledge this fact and work to provide the best school experiences for this group of students. More attention is needed to provide disability support services.

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