The Challenges and Opportunities of Inclusive Education in Nigeria

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Abstract. UNESCO and many other international organisations have emphasised the role of inclusive education towards providing equal opportunity for the thriving of abled and disabled children. This study investigates the challenges and opportunities of inclusive education in Nigeria. The study adopts critical disability theory as its theoretical framework, with the social model of disability forming the framework's foundation. Teachers across 40 mainstream primary schools in Abeokuta, Ogun State, duly filled and submitted one hundred forty-seven questionnaires. At the same time, 18 parents of children with disabilities were also invited for interview. The study revealed that inclusive education in Nigeria is still in its early stages and is faced with several challenges, including a lack of understanding and awareness, inadequate resources and infrastructure, and a shortage of qualified teachers. Despite the challenges, there are several opportunities for developing inclusive education in Nigeria. The Nigerian Government has committed to promoting inclusive education by adopting policies that would favour inclusive education.

Keywords: inclusive education; disability; special needs children; Nigeria; challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Education is seen as a powerful tool for the development of every nation as it represents both the present and the future which is of no surprise that the UN, UNESCO, and UNICEF, among many other international organisations, have advocated that every child should have access to quality education, as such, children with disabilities are not excluded from these group. This has prompted much emphasis to be laid on inclusive education to ensure the provision of an ideal environment for the thriving of both abled and disabled children. To this end, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has played a significant role in advocating integrating students with special needs into our mainstream education, the origin of the term inclusive education [1].

The inclusive educational approach is beginning to gain global acceptability as an approach to education that ensures quality education for all learners, respective of whether these children have a disability or not, most notably within the last decades with the signing of the Rights for Person with Disabilities among 177 countries of the world [2, 3]. It represents a contemporary educational approach where students with special educational needs are grouped or merged with students without disabilities, thus, promoting equal educational opportunities for all students [4]. Some scholars noted that this approach of education is aimed at removing diverse embargo or barriers to learning by ensuring that mainstream schools provide varieties of educational services that meet the demand of all students and further enable them to learn based on their abilities, thus, ensuring full participation of every child in class [5]. According to [6], inclusive education aims to build a sense of acceptability, unity and belonging within schools and the community, bolsters this education approach's significance.

Inclusive education gained recognition in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom within the last two decades. This education approach is currently engaged by other developing countries such as Nigeria. Nigeria has over 200 million individuals, yet there is limited data on disabled children. But with the significant increment in the incidence of political and religious violence in the country, the number of children with disabilities is increasing with a limited number of special needs schools to accommodate the growing number of children with disability in the country.

The success of inclusive education in any society is hinged on certain factors associated with the

availability of modern educational facilities that would directly impact the usage of diverse approaches in teaching. Some of these factors include qualified teachers capable of connecting with various categories of students and possessing the ability to use modern educational facilities, behavioural modification of mainstream students to be more accommodative and the presence of modern facilities. Other challenges that some other authors have highlighted include inadequate knowledge or information on creating an ideal classroom setting that is inclusive, the continued segregation and division that exist in the educational institution and the different opinion that is shared among both teachers and parents on the idealness and necessity of inclusive education [1, 7, 8]. Despite the challenges in establishing inclusive education, this approach still possesses benefits that, when properly channelled, would foster a sense of unity and further aid in integrating special needs children into society.

The Nigerian Educational setting is still far behind other developed countries. As such, the practicability of inclusive education is still examined by all stakeholders in the educational sector [9–12]. Challenging this education practice bears in mind that the country was one of the signatories of several international treaties seeking inclusive education. Authors [12] highlighted some of these treaties, which are: the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education [1], the Dakar Framework for Action [13], and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [14]. In line with being a signatory of international treaties on inclusive education, the country had also initiated four significant policies such as the National policy on education in the year 2014, the national policy on special needs education in 2015, the national policy on inclusive education in Nigeria in 2017 and finally, the discrimination against persons with disabilities (prohibition) act in 2019. The international and local policies aim to protect the interest of children with special needs. However, the extent to which these policies are implemented in Nigeria remains a nagging question.

This study will examine the challenges and opportunities of inclusive education as it will provide information on the current status of inclusive education in Nigeria, considering the challenge that special needs children face. This will further aid in militating against the high school dropout rate among children with disabilities.

Literature Review

The goal of inclusive education is to ensure that the needs of all learners are met as such, according to UNESCO [15]; inclusive education is an approach to education that seeks to make a change to educational structure and environment in such a way that meets the diverse needs of learners. More so, it advocates for equal opportunity for all learners with respective disabilities (which could be physical, emotional and social).

Thomas Skrtic bolsters the significance of student diversity by emphasising the need for the deconstruction and further reconstruction of public education and the particular need for education [16]. The author [17] argued that student diversity is not a problem in learning institutions but an asset. As such, it must become a foundation for innovation and progress in terms of knowledge. He added that education's primary objective is to prepare students for successful contributions to their communities and improve their living conditions. The curriculum, instructional facilities, educational, and organisational structure must evolve to meet the student's desired future and build unity and a robust democratic system [17].

The author [9] looked into the challenges faced by children with disabilities in Nigerian educational settings. She noted that despite the challenge of marginalisation that disabled children face in mainstream education, inclusive education is still significant in meeting students' needs as against adapting to the inflexible and unaccommodating classroom environment. Her assertion agrees with [17] opinion on the reconstruction of a flexible educational system possessing an evolving curriculum that satisfies the needs of individuals and the community.

Despite the benefits associated with inclusive education as a tool for securing the future and right of children with disabilities, there still exist challenges that militate against the establishment of educational institution that is genuinely inclusive, with the majority of these challenges associated with developing countries like Nigeria. Authors [18] highlighted challenges, including inadequately trained personnel and lacking facilities and educational materials. Therefore, the overall success of inclusive education should be hinged on overcoming the obstacles set to limit the implementation of this education approach in a country like Nigeria.

The study adopts critical disability theory as its theoretical framework, with the social model of disability forming its foundation, considering its overall objective to ascertain the challenges and opportunities of inclusive education in Nigeria. The social model of disability opines that the concept of disability is a social construct where societal belief, ideas and attitudes serve to become an obstacle, oppress and further limit the opportunities of people with disability or particular need individual [19]. The author noted that individuals might be limited by impairment, but their participation ability depends on the political and socially sanctioned environment. Thus, the challenge of disability resides in the response of society to it [20].

The social model provides a foundation to explain the social process that excludes students with disabilities from active participation in society. The author [19] noted that "students with disabilities are marginalised in school contexts, thereby guiding as to what environmental or social conditions must be adjusted or reformed to increase participation". The consequence is that an education system whose social, political and environmental construct limits the active participation of children with disabilities runs a risk of representing an oppressive education system.

The social model of disability aligns with the inclusive education system in terms of philosophy, practices and structure as it provides a means for explaining the benefits of active participation of both people with disabilities and abled under the same educational facility while bearing in mind that disability could be seen as another form of student diversity [21, 22]. The exact position was held by [17] as students with a disability could be seen from the lens of any other social category such as age, race, gender, class and ethnicity, thus, eliminating any barrier that may arise from the traditional formulation of abled versus disabled. Consequently, training or educating students would not fall on any specialised teachers but becomes a collective duty of all staff within the school.

METHODS

The study was conducted in the city of Abeokuta, the capital of Ogun State, Nigeria. The study area borders another famous western town of Nigeria: Lagos, Oyo, Osun and Ondo. The research area is moderately populated and was chosen due to its popularity, yet, there are extremely few special needs schools within the city. As such, most disabled individuals would likely attend the mainstream educational setting due to proximity to school and other factors.

The study aims at obtaining information on the challenges and opportunities that are associated with inclusive education in Nigeria, as such the survey would require obtaining information from education stakeholders and for this particular study, the teachers, school administrators and parents of children with disabilities would form the participants of the study. The study targeted 250 teachers across 40 primary schools (10 public and 30 private institutions), while 50 parents of children with disability were targeted. However, at the end of the study, data were only received from 147 teachers and 18 parents of children with disability, bringing the total sample size to 165 individuals.

Data was obtained from teachers and school administration by issuing questions as the data collection instrument. At the same time, parents of children with disability were interviewed to get their experience and that of their children in an inclusive setting, considering their children were still in primary school. They might not correctly express themselves [23].

A letter of introduction was issued to the head of the institution to obtain formal consent from the schools to survey staff and parents of the institution. In addition, an invitation letter was sent to parents of children with disabilities. A total of 250 questionnaires were issued to teachers. However, only 147 teachers had submitted their questions, representing 58.8% of the targeted 250 teachers. The first section of the question comprises the respondent's demographic information, while the second section comprises the challenges and opportunities of inclusive education in Nigeria.

Eighteen parents of students with disabilities were contacted and interviewed. The interview was conducted within the school environment. The data was analysed to represent the data on charts and percentages.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1 indicates that 74% of teachers involved in the survey have never heard of the term inclusive education before our survey, which shows the low level of awareness regarding this education approach.

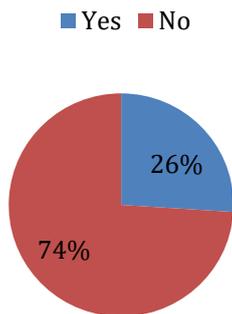## Have you heard of inclusive education before

Figure 1 – Awareness of Inclusive Education

Figure 2 indicates that despite the majority of the teachers involved in the survey not knowing the term inclusive education, 68% claimed to have taught children with disabilities in the past, which means they will have an understanding of

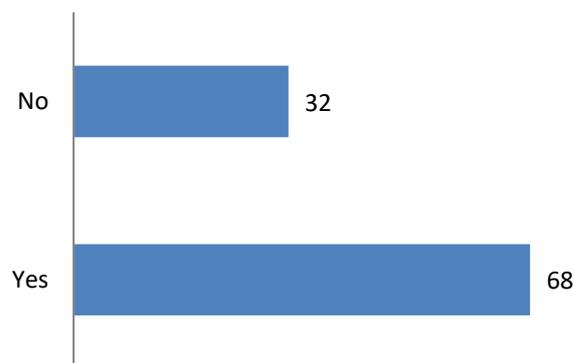the challenges associated with inclusive education in Nigeria.

Figure 2 – Have you taught any children with disabilities? (%)

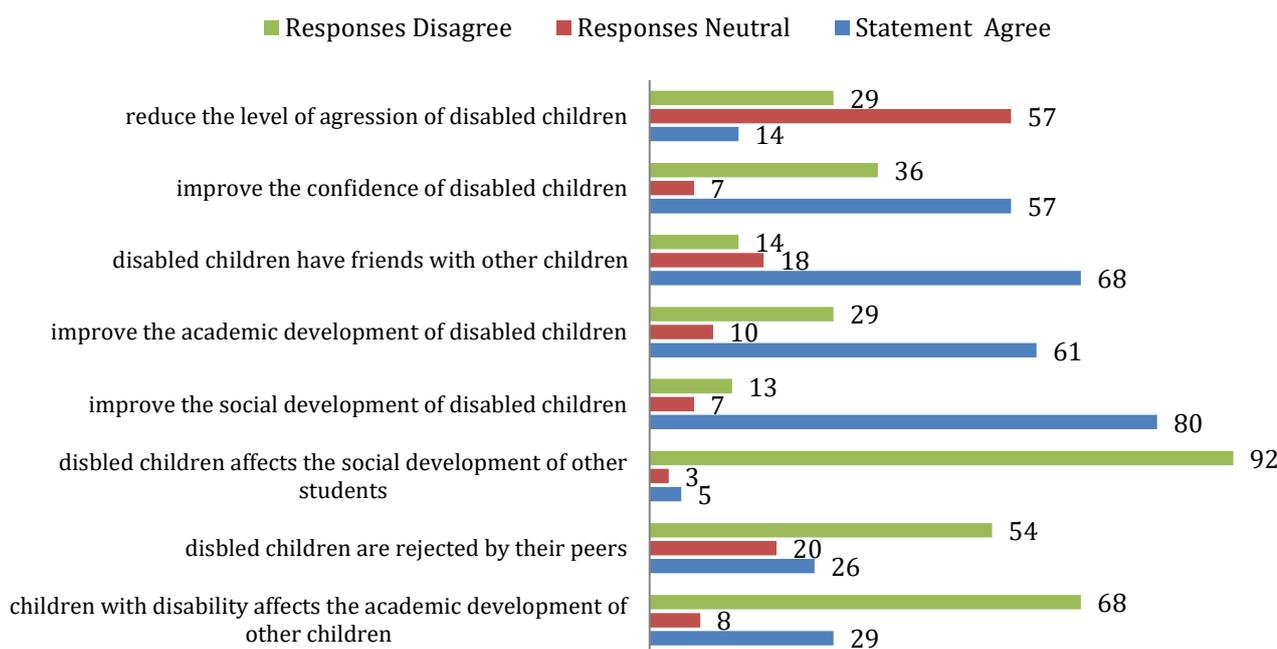Figure 3 indicates inclusive education's impacts on abled and disabled children.

Figure 3 – Impacts of Inclusive Education? %

The result showcases that 57% of teachers agree that inclusive education improves the confidence of disabled students, with this confidence being observed in their academic performance and social interaction in regular school. 68% of teachers believe that disabled children can make friends with able children, thus, improving their social skills, as reflected by the study with 80% of teachers of the opinion that the social skills of

disabled children improve while in an inclusive school. 68% of teachers indicate that the academic performance of children with disabilities improved in an inclusive educational sysem. The result further shows that the inclusion of disabled children in mainstream education does not have impacts the academic performance of able children, which indicates that the presence of disabled children does not negatively impact the

abled children, nor does it negatively impact the social skills of the abled children. At the same time, 57% of teachers remain undecided or neutral to the statement that the level of aggression of disabled children reduces in mainstream education.

Figure 4 shows the impact of inclusive education on teachers. 70% do not agree with the statement that they enjoy having disabled children in their class.
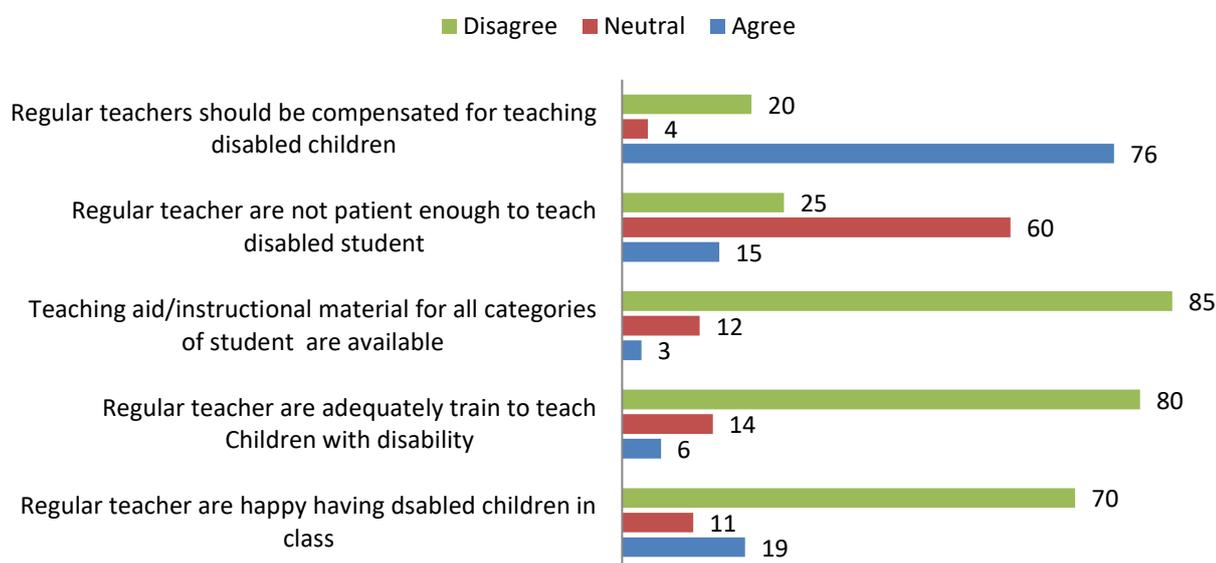

Figure 4 – Impact of Inclusive Education on Teachers

This could be due to the extra work and patience that it takes to teach a disabled child, coupled with the fact that their response indicates that they should also get more compensation for this service, with 76% of them showing their agreement to that statement. Of most teachers, 80% think that regular teachers should be trained to teach all categories of students, and 85% indicate that teaching aid/instructional material for teaching students is not usually available in school.

Findings from interviews with parents of children with disabilities

One of the parents with disabilities complained about the mainstream school teachers not being patient enough to teach her child. She attributed it to the number of children these teachers have to teach in a class. As such, teachers are not interested in their child's specific needs. Mrs Ige noted that:

I am considering pulling my child out of mainstream school into special needs school because the teachers in the regular school my child attends are not qualified enough to meet the specific demand of my child. I'm aware that there are also

benefits in my child attending mainstream school, as he can make friends, but I also want an all-around improvement.

One of the parents complained that her son's teacher was a bully to her child, calling him names that have had a detrimental impact on her child's confidence. Mrs Adedoyin remark that:

I acknowledge my child's progress in mainstream school, but my major challenge is with my son's teacher. He usually calls my child 'Olodo', which means dullard. It got to the point that my son was scared and intimated by his teacher. When I discovered I wanted to withdraw my child from school but changed my mind and decided to confront her about the name-calling.

Some of the parents complained that the mainstream school lack the facilities and their teachers are not adequately trained to meet the psychological needs of their children. Mrs Nurat remarks:

My child is deaf, the school does not have the facility to teach the child adequately, and the teachers are not trained for the specific need of the child. My child would have to copy notes and read independently to pass. The only reason that my child attends mainstream school is due to the distance

between home and school. In addition, the family cannot afford the high transportation cost.

Some of the parents express their satisfaction with their children attending mainstream school due to the significant improvement in their children academically. Mrs Folashade noted that:

My child had a convulsion as a child, which affected her mentally. She was unable to work till she was three years old, I placed her in particular need school, but her condition did not improve. When I withdrew her to a mainstream school, she improved academically as she can read now. The progress made by the child comes from the fact that when she sees other normal children, it encourages her to want to improve as she wants to be like kids of her age group.

While some parents acknowledge that their children could make friends with children that were not disabled, thus improving their social skills. More so, some parents felt that their children mingling with their peers better prepare them for their future, where they will not only have to relate with people with disability but with the general public. As such, being with their peers challenges them to interact socially.

The study looks into the challenges and opportunities of inclusive education in Nigeria, considering that this education approach's potential is massive. It is pretty evident that despite Nigeria being a signatory to some international treaty on the support of individuals with disability and the encouragement of inclusive education in Nigeria, in practice, these policies are pretty far behind in their level of implementation due to significant challenges that are hinged on the teachers, school administrators, parents' perception, facilities and good follow up on Government policy on inclusive education.

One of the first challenges observed in the course of the investigation is the issue of ignorance. 74% of the teachers investigated had never come across the term inclusive education before they participated in the research despite having taught a few numbers of disabled children. Similarly, parents of children with disabilities are only aware of mainstream education and particular need school. Still, none of the parents has heard of an inclusive educational approach for children with disabilities and every other child. Therefore, ignorance is a significant challenge towards achieving inclusive education in the country.

In [24] paper on the right to inclusive education in Nigeria, she highlighted some criteria in Government's policies for providing quality and adequate education for children with disabilities contained in the 2004 National Education Policy on Education. This policy spells out that the teacher-to-student ratio in special needs schools should not exceed one teacher to ten students, which is a significant challenge that teachers in the mainstream setting are faced with. It is also apparent from the finding of our study that the majority of teachers in mainstream education are not usually happy to have a student with a disability which should not be a surprise considering the vast work effort it takes to train children with disabilities, coupled with the fact that the ratio of teacher to students in these schools far exceeds one to ten. Thus, teachers may not be patient enough to meet the needs of each student. There is a need for regular teacher training to meet the psychological and academic needs of all categories of students, with more emphasis to be placed on children with disabilities. This would help elate the challenge of teachers bullying children with special needs due to an inability to comprehend at the pace of the able children and enable them to be more patient with all of their students.

Furthermore, the 2004 policy contained that the architectural facility for special needs students should be warm and friendly to eliminate the barrier to these facilities. For instance, ramps should replace steps. The doors should be wider to accommodate the passage of wheelchairs, and the toilet facility should be lower to enable easy access by children with disability [24]. However, the facilities in many regular schools fall short of this standard, just as the finding of this research indicates, thus, making it difficult for the majority of schools in the country to be converted to an inclusive educational system. Notably, the study also shows the lack of instructional materials for the teaching of students with disabilities, thus, making it difficult for teachers to meet the demands of education in an inclusive setting.

More so, as noted by [25], inclusive education requires the effort of teachers and the adjustment of the environment to enable the thriving of both the abled and disabled children considering that the coexistence of these two categories has been observed to have a considerable impact on the development of disabled children, enabling them to not see themselves as different but like every other child within the walls of the school.

Therefore, teachers are expected to be trained to meet the demand of all categories of students. Thus, the curriculum of teacher's education should be modified to be more flexible yet, suited to meet the current changes in the approach to education.

Despite the previously mentioned challenges, there are several opportunities for developing inclusive education in Nigeria. The Nigerian Government has made commitments to promoting inclusive education, including the adoption of the Education for All (EFA) policy in 2000, the national inclusive Education Policy in 2017 and the discrimination against persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act in 2019, which further indicates that Nigeria is making strive in the development of inclusive education. Additionally, several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international organisations are working to promote inclusive education in Nigeria. Though the pace at which this awareness is being made is slower, many schools are beginning to recognise the importance and opportunities available with inclusive education; as such, the implementation of inclusive education practices is increasing.

CONCLUSIONS

Inclusive education is an important concept that aims to provide equal educational opportunities for all children, including those with disabilities or special needs. As highlighted in the study, the benefits of inclusive education are immense considering the improvement observed with children with disabilities socially, academically and in fostering unity within and outside the school environment. Although inclusive education is still in its early stages and faces several challenges, much can still be done to militate against some of these issues that impact the progress of this approach in education. Therefore, the study makes the following recommendation to aid in improving this approach in education in Nigeria:

1. Awareness should be made to educate all stakeholders in the Nigerian educational system, which would include school administrators, teachers, and parents, among many others, on the importance of inclusive education in Nigeria as means of fostering unity in diversity, enhancing tolerance among students and improvement of education for all categories of students.

2. The continuous training of teachers should be considered a priority for developing special needs education within mainstream educational settings. The necessary equipment, teaching aid/instructional material should be available within regular schools to accommodate special needs students.

3. The Government should ensure proper follow-up on its policy regarding inclusive education in Nigeria. The follow-up should include monitoring facilities to ensure that it meets the criteria necessary for the thriving of disabled and non-disabled students. More so, support funds should be available for institutions actively providing inclusive education.

4. Teachers training institution curricula should be amended to meet continuous changes in education, and in particular, the curriculum should be designed to meet the needs of students with different physical and mental inabilities.

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