

**INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN NIGERIA:  
BENEFITS, CHALLENGES AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

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*This article analyzes the philosophical, sociological, and legal imperatives of including students with disabilities in ordinary schools. Some important global events that support inclusive education are discussed. The author reflects on Nigeria's newly revised National Policy on Education with its emphasis on inclusive education (2008), and the Universal Basic Education policy (1999). The article concludes with recommendations to improve the status quo.*

*Introduction*

In recent years, the debate about inclusive education has moved from high-income countries like the United States and Canada to a low-income country like Nigeria, where an official policy of educating children and youth with disabilities alongside their peers without disabilities in ordinary schools has been adopted (National Policy on Education, 2008). There is a growing recognition that including students with disabilities in general education can provide them with the opportunity to learn in natural, stimulating settings, which may also lead to increased acceptance and appreciation of differences. Thus, the debate continues among educators, local, state and federal policy makers, parents, and even people with disabilities in Nigeria regarding the efficacy of inclusion and the inevitable restructuring of general education that will need to occur to make learning meaningful in an inclusive environment. The perception has been that the debate has resulted in pressure greater than ever before for most students with disabilities to access the general curriculum and attain the same standards as typical students. It is against this background that the author has decided to elucidate on the dimensions and implications of the practice of inclusive education.

*Defining the parameters of inclusive education*

As currently implemented in the industrialized world, inclusion or inclusive education can be interpreted as the philosophy and practice for educating students with disabilities in general education settings (Bryant, Smith, & Bryant, 2008; Lipsky & Gartner, 1997; Rogers, 1993; Salend, 2001). The practice anchors on the notion that every child should be an equally valued member of the school culture. In other words, children with disabilities benefit from learning in a regular classroom, while their peers without disabilities gain from being exposed to children with diverse characteristics, talents and temperaments.

Supporters of inclusion use the term to refer to the commitment to educate each child, to the maximum extent appropriate, in the school and classroom he/she would otherwise attend. It involves bringing the ancillary services to the child, and requires only that the child will benefit from being in the class (rather than having to keep up with the other students). This is a salient aspect of inclusion, and requires a commitment to move essential resources to the child with a disability rather than placing the child in an isolated setting where services are located (Smith, 2007). For the child with a disability to benefit optimally from inclusion, it is imperative for general education teachers to be able to teach a wider array of children, including those with varying disabilities, and to collaborate and plan effectively with special educators.

There are obvious benefits to the inclusive education paradigm, i.e. children are more likely to learn social skills in an environment that approximates to normal conditions of growth and development. Children during their formative years develop language more effectively if they are with children who speak normally and appropriately (Mitchell & Brown, 1991). Often, it is gratifying that where school and community environments can be made physically and programmatically accessible, children and youth with physical disabilities can function more effectively than would otherwise be the case. It is also apparent that such modifications to the environment often enable others who do not have disabilities to access their environment even more readily (Ferguson, 1996). In recent years, the principle of universal design (Center for Universal Design, 1997; Waksler, 1996), has evolved to

describe physical, curricular and pedagogical changes that must be put in place to benefit people of all learning styles without adaptation or retrofitting. Failing to accommodate the environmental and accessibility needs of persons with disabilities in the society will inevitably inhibit their participation in educational, social, recreational and economic activities (Harkness & Groom, Jr., 1976; Steinfeld, Duncan, & Cardell, 1977). Therefore, architects, product designers, engineers and environmental design researchers should use their best judgment in early programming and design decisions.

However, for inclusion to achieve its objectives, education practices must be child-centered (UNESCO, 1994). This means that teachers must find out where each of their students are academically, socially, and culturally to determine how best to facilitate learning (Gildner, 2001). A logical consequence of this realization is that these teachers will need to acquire skills in curriculum-based assessment, team teaching, mastery learning, assessing learning styles, cooperative learning strategies, facilitating peer tutoring, or social skills training. Given that children have varied learning styles or *multiple intelligences* (Gardner, 1991), both general and special education teachers must plan and coordinate classroom instruction to capitalize on each child's needs, interests and aptitudes.

#### *International scope of the debate*

Ideas and strategies about the best way to educate children, especially those with disabilities in developing countries, are generally influenced by external rather than internal circumstances. This is largely due to the historical ties between the developed and developing countries, the open door policy that characterizes the educational system of developing countries, and the impact international development agencies continue to exert on recipients of funds and services. It is this type of relationship that has shaped Nigeria's policy on education over the years, and is clearly reflected in the newly-revised National Policy on Education with its focus on inclusive education of children and youth with special needs in ordinary schools (National Policy on Education, 2008). The National Education Policy document, among other things, calls for access of special needs children, with their varying abilities to education in conducive and less restrictive environments, as well as the education of such children to enable them to achieve self-fulfillment. Thus, the inclusive education paradigm in Nigeria (like that of other countries) has evolved out of the realization that all children have the right to receive the kind of education that does not discriminate on the grounds of disability, ethnicity, religion, language, gender, or capabilities.

Low-income countries like Nigeria are now becoming cognizant of the gross inequalities in educational opportunities for their special needs populations. This is understandable given that less than 10% of these children currently have access to any type of formal or non-formal education. Yet, Nigeria as well as other countries of Africa, Latin America and Asia have, in principle, adopted several international protocols that seek to promote equal access to appropriate quality education as enunciated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the World Declaration on Education for All (1990), the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disability (1993), the UNESCO Salamanca Statement for Framework for Action (1994), and the World Education Forum in Dakar (2000)

Of particular importance is the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (1994) which, *inter alia*, asserts that:

*Regular schools with inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discrimination, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all* (Salamanca Statement, Art. 2).

A closer examination of the above statement reveals the urgency for a fundamental policy shift to facilitate successful implementation of an inclusive education program that will adequately meet the learning needs of all children, youth and adults, especially those who are vulnerable to marginalization and exclusion. According to this framework, schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other circumstances. Indeed, the policy is a clear recognition of the need to work towards *schools for all*. In a sense then, the ideals enunciated in the Salamanca Agreement can be seen as being in consonance with the goals of Nigeria's Universal Primary Education (UPE) scheme of 1976, and the Universal Basic Education (UBE) scheme of 1999.

#### *Nigeria's National Policy on Education*

Since the launching of the first National Policy on Education (1977), there has been a plethora of activities aimed at improving special education services for children, including: the establishment of

additional residential primary schools for children with disabilities in most states of the federation, the increased attendance of students with disabilities in secondary and higher institutions, and the preparation of special education teachers in select tertiary institutions in the country. There has also been a rise in the number of advocacy organizations of and for people with disabilities. These initiatives have however been met with mixed outcomes, with dually-trained special educators (i.e. those holding certification in an area of special education and a subject-matter discipline) not properly deployed to work with students with disabilities. Other persistent problems over the years include: lack of up-to-date teaching devices, and organizational and leadership crises that have militated against reform of the special education sector.

Interestingly enough, Section 7 of the revised National Policy on Education (2008) explicitly recognizes that children and youth with special needs shall be provided with inclusive education services. The commitment is made to equalize educational opportunities for all children, irrespective of their physical, sensory, mental, psychological or emotional disabilities. Undoubtedly, these are lofty goals intended to improve the quality of special education services, but much more is needed to translate the goals into concrete action.

#### *Universal Basic Education Scheme*

In response to the needed reform in the education sector, Nigeria launched the Universal Basic Education (UBE) scheme in 1999. In 2004, the Federal Government enacted the Universal Basic Education Law in which it makes a provision of 2% of its Consolidated Revenue Fund (CRF) to finance the UBE program. Thus, the compulsory free Universal Basic Education Act, 2004, provides a legal framework within which the Federal Government supports states towards achieving uninterrupted nine-year compulsory Universal Basic Education for all children in primary and junior secondary school levels throughout the country (<http://www.fme.gov.ng/pages/cati.asp>).

Some observers see the UBE scheme as a mechanism to revitalize the failed Universal Primary Education project of 1976, and to bring Nigeria into conformity with a number of international protocols that seek to enhance quality educational and social services for its citizens. In the views of Adepaju and Fabiyi (2007), there have been many attempts to revamp the education sector in the past four decades with no appreciable results.

(<http://uaps2007.princeton.edu/download.aspx?submissionId=70830>).

Adepaju and Fabiyi alluded to the goals of the UBE program as specified in the implementation guideline by government in 1999 thus:

- Developing in the entire citizenry, a strong conscientiousness for education and a strong commitment to its vigorous promotion
  - Provision of free Universal Basic Education for every Nigerian child of school-going age
  - Reducing drastically the incidence of dropout from the formal school system
  - Catering for young persons, their schooling as well as other out-of-school children or adolescents through appropriate form of complementary approaches to the provision of UBE
  - Ensuring the acquisition of appropriate levels of literacy, numeracy, manipulative, communicative and life skills as well as the ethical, moral and civic values needed for laying a solid foundation for lifelong living
- (<http://uaps2007.princeton.edu/download.aspx?submissionId=70830>).

The goals just outlined indicate that children and youth in general have every right to an education that will inculcate in them the requisite knowledge and survival skills in society. Some will argue that although the UBE scheme does not specifically reference children and youth with disabilities, such youngsters are invariably subsumed under the law, since they constitute part and parcel of society and have every right to basic education and other essentials of life. If we accept this premise, then, the various stakeholders must begin to provide adequate financial and human resources to actualize what it truly means to bring children and youth with special needs within the education fold. As a starting point, teacher and administrator understanding and commitment must be fostered, followed by parent and community involvement and support. More fundamentally, it must be recognized that the task of including the needs of students with disabilities, and those of their families, in any national policy on education is important and carries life-long implications.

However, we might want to pause for a moment to consider a basic question, i.e. What direction should a low-income country like Nigeria follow in its quest to provide quality inclusive education for special

needs learners? This is no doubt a complex question to answer, given past initiatives that have been plagued with multiple problems including, but not limited to: extreme politicization of education, disagreement over the role of religion in public education, inadequate funding, low and irregular teacher salaries, and limited involvement of the private sector and philanthropic citizens. It is crucial that all stakeholders understand that education is a social process that is concerned with more than the traditional academic domains, and everyone should recognize that education deals with developing in children an increasing sense of independence, personal responsibility and belonging to their diverse community.

*Recommendations for future action and research*

With the current focus to include children and youth with special needs in ordinary schools in Nigeria, there are key lessons to be learned from the experiences of industrialized countries, and from the administrative and programmatic pitfalls that have worked against the successful implementation of past educational policies.

1. *Develop positive attitudes toward disability:* As a first important step, there is need to change the attitudes that prevent any sort of interaction with children, youth and adults who have disabilities (Ajuwon & Sykes, 1988). Public enlightenment work in schools must begin the process of educating the school and the general community in order to eradicate superstitions about causation of disabilities, and to modify the fears and myths about children with disabilities that create misunderstanding and inhibit normal interaction. In the process of changing attitudes, it is recommended that successful and well-placed persons with disabilities in the society be used as agents of attitudinal change.
2. *Identify the scope of children and youth with challenges:* Before inclusion is adopted as a blanket policy, there is need to document the number, characteristics and specific geographic location of students required to be in inclusive programs, the number of specialists who will support their instruction, the necessary amount of in-class and out-of-class collaboration between special and general education teachers, and the optimal type and extent of support from ancillary staff.
3. *Conduct comprehensive, methodologically-sound research into effects of inclusion:* Researchers must determine empirically the educational and social-emotional impacts of inclusion on students with differing characteristics. The Special Needs Section of the National Policy on Education identifies students with all types of disabilities, and the degree of their disabilities ranges from mild through profound. The exceptional population also includes students in nomadic and other special programs, as well as students identified as gifted. We need to carry out quantitative and qualitative studies on the specific needs and interests of each group.
4. *Determine the efficacy of inclusion on general education students and their teachers:* There is need to undertake rigorous research into the needs of the large number of general education students, and to assess how inclusionary practices will impact the general classroom atmosphere. Such studies must also investigate the attitudes, knowledge and skills of pre-service and in-service teachers, and the required knowledge and skills to make inclusion meaningful.
5. *Apply the principle of universal design to school building, curriculum and pedagogy:* As new buildings are constructed under the UBE scheme throughout the 774 local government areas, designers should anticipate needs so that changes after construction are unnecessary, thereby creating maximum accessibility for all students, not only those with special needs. It is cost-effective when at the initial stage planners are guided by the seven principles that make designs universally usable – equitable use, flexibility in use, simple and intuitive use, perceptible information, tolerance for error, low physical effort, and size and space for approach and use (Center for Universal Design, 1997).
6. *Creating a culturally-responsive school environment:* As more and more students with differences enroll in ordinary classrooms, the need for pedagogical approaches that are culturally responsive cannot be overemphasized. Teachers must create a classroom culture where all students regardless of their cultural or linguistic background or ability are welcomed and supported, and provided with optimum opportunity to learn.

7. *Respect dissenting views*: In a pluralistic and democratic society, the views of those individuals who have reservations about inclusive education practices should not be ignored. Even in the United States and other advanced economies, some parents fear that their children will be teased or that they will learn inappropriate behaviors in general education settings. They express the concern that the needs of their children with disabilities cannot be met adequately in a general education classroom. Further, some professionals question whether the general education setting truly can be the least restrictive environment for some pupils, especially when general education teachers also must meet the needs of thirty or even more other students in the class, and the availability of a special educator is limited or nonexistent.

Adepoju and Fabiyi (2007), citing three demographic studies, highlighted serious shortcomings of past educational policies in the primary education sector in Nigeria which revealed, among other things, that 12 percent of primary school pupils sit on the floor, 87 percent of classrooms are overcrowded, while 77 percent of pupils lack textbooks. They also noted problems associated with poorly motivated teachers as well as lack of community interests and participation in management of schools. Similarly, Asagwara (1997), observed that those who planned the UPE scheme in 1976 apparently forgot to consider the importance of the availability of qualified teachers, adequate learning environments, equipment and textbooks, classroom management and supervision, and the content of the curriculum. Even with increased budgetary allocations to the Universal Basic Education scheme, it is doubtful that the quality of education will substantially improve to a meaningful level needed to achieve the goals enunciated in the UBE plan.

8. *Extend inclusion to the community*: There are compelling reasons to embark on such a measure. Children with disabilities may be *isolated* within the milieu of general education, given that the very structure of the classroom may not lend itself to interaction. The most common method of instruction in Nigeria is the teacher-directed, whole-class arrangement, which usually restricts the amount of interactions among children. We often hear teachers cautioning children not to talk with each other and to respond directly to the teacher instead. Therefore, after-school programs and community-based activities may permit typically developing children opportunities to interact with those with disabilities in ways that often do not occur during the school day.

### Summary

It is clear that the Nigerian education system is in the midst of a major reform, with the policy to include students with special needs in regular classrooms. As an important first step toward ensuring long-lasting success, there is need to eradicate all forms of superstitious beliefs about disabilities that have for so long inhibited involvement with people with disabilities in education and the community. In this regard, the need for proper documentation of children and youth with disabilities for effective programming cannot be overemphasized. Also, the proper deployment of available trained special educators at primary and secondary school levels must be a priority for all school management officials. For ethical reasons, these school officials and law-makers must resist political pressures to make insufficiently informed decisions about special education or even general education services. It is not sufficient for government officials to merely endorse international protocols of special needs education that have not been adequately researched or tested in developing countries. In the debates and discussions that will occur, teachers, administrators, other school personnel, law-makers, students with and without disabilities, and their parents must be cognizant of the responsibility of educating all students so they can reach their full potential. The bottom line for students with disabilities should be equitable access to opportunities that will guarantee successful outcomes in education, employment and community integration.

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