

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS IN POST COVID-19 ERA: AN EVIDENCE BASED PRACTICE



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ABSTRACT

The post Covid-19 era will be a challenging period for special needs students and their teachers/caregivers. In as much as the training of these students need to be inclusive, the educational disruptions caused by the pandemic will require policy makers and teachers to be more resourceful and innovative in the creation of suitable learning environments as well as new methods of teaching and training for their learners. This article focuses on the use of evidence based practice and how practitioners can combine Special Education and Inclusive Education to cater for the unique needs of their students. With the right provisions and adjustments made through pedagogical, organizational and content modification, it is hoped that students with special needs will be able to manage well despite post Covid-19 challenges.

Keywords: *Inclusive Education, Post Covid-19, Evidence based practice, Special needs provisions.*

Introduction

By the beginning of the year 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had started forcing the closures of schools in almost all the countries of the world. The rapidity and scale of educational disruptions was unimaginable prior to the pandemic (UNICEF, 2020). Students with special needs who majorly rely on support from school staff, and use of equipment and gadgets that were only provided for in the four walls of their classrooms were left hanging. The pandemic compounded the challenges already faced by these persons pre-pandemic. Majority of these students receive specialized care, and attention in schools either in form of special education or the more commonly adopted system of education now, inclusive education. The purpose of inclusive education is to provide quality education for all persons without any form of discrimination based on age, sex, class, race and ability. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has helped to bring to the forefront the flaws in this system of education, especially as relating to persons with severe cases of special educational needs. Examining the issues associated with education of persons with special needs in the

post COVID-19 era, the presenter advocates the use of evidence based practice in the education of these persons and seeks for practitioners to embrace a coalition of special education and inclusive education as an alternative to the sole practice of both systems.

Till date many Nigerians are yet to benefit from special education programmes as outlined by the section 8 of the National Policy on Education and this is as a result of poor funding, cultural beliefs, poorly trained teachers and the absence of legal mandate to compel enforcement (Eskay, Eskay and Uma, 2012). In many parts of the country, persons with special needs are still viewed in a negative light, coupled with negative societal perceptions, lack of care of learners, ignorance and superstition have made education of these persons difficult. World Health Organisation [WHO] (2011) estimates that there are over one billion people experiencing one form of disability or the other. Of this population, it is said that 93 to 150 million are children and as at 2006, the population census of Nigeria put the population of persons with disability in the country at over 3 million. These figures calls for urgent attention of policy makers. In some cases, persons with special needs are isolated from their community and left alone in institutions which are likely to be in a segregated setting. Practices such as these are inhumane and discriminatory.

Achieving the right to education for persons with disabilities is a challenging task, however, it is the key to achieving the sustainable development goals. Although the National Policy on Education advocates inclusive and free education for persons with special needs, the government is yet to deliver (Dark, 2018). The National Policy on Education outlines that Nigeria's three tiers of government are required to fund education for persons with special needs, however, this is not the case. Lack of accessibility, discrimination and prejudice, exclusion or segregation from mainstream school and inferior quality of education are among the barriers faced by persons with special needs.

Fast forward to the present day, COVID-19 has added to the numerous challenges faced in the education of persons with special needs. The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered many changes to the special education system. While a significant number of students had their routine interrupted, those most affected are learners with special needs (Nelson, 2020). In the words of Leandra Elion as cited by Nelson (2020) "generally speaking, in special education, one of the strategies that works the best is a structured routine - and that is gone". How do I assist my students with special needs? How do I teach parents of students with special needs how best to assist their child? These and more are questions on the lips of parents, caregivers, and teachers during the COVID-19 period.

By Monday 23rd March 2020, the Federal Ministry of Education approved school closures as a safety protocol for curbing the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. This declaration means there would be no waiver for special needs students. Therefore, schools and institutions catering for persons with special needs had to opt for remote learning. This translates to the need for teachers of special needs students

to modify the individual education plan for their students. The new development was a nightmare for these institutions as majority of them did not provide these services even in person. Education of persons with special needs in Nigeria is inadequately funded which made it difficult for their teachers to embrace remote learning or even adapt their IEPs to remote learning (Nelson, 2020). Schools are overwhelmed as they adapt to virtual learning and enhance safety measures inside school buildings to comply with COVID-19 guidelines. However, this is no excuse to deny a child's right to free and appropriate education. It is important to build a more resilient teacher workforce in times of crises, teachers need to be equipped with digital and pedagogical skills to teach remotely, online and through hybrid learning.

Decades Pre-COVID-19, inclusive education has been continuously advocated as a replacement for the separatist educational system of special education. Inclusive education and special education are based on different philosophies as they provide alternative views of education for children with special needs (Hornby, 2015). Inclusive education first appeared in literature in the late 1980s. The inclusive education system particularly embraces children of all race, religion, gender, and ability. This system of education has been continuously embraced across the globe, however the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted this system of education and students with special needs have been particularly affected.

Educating children with special needs

Ignorance, taboos and superstitions are some of the major limiting factors to the education of special needs persons in Nigeria. In pre-colonial Nigeria, persons with disabilities were casted away from the society, they were ridiculed and humiliated and some cultures permitted the murder of persons with special needs at birth. The colonial era showed not much difference, Eskay (2012) noted that the colonial education primarily focused on the production of clerks, messengers and partially educated people. Special needs education was not catered for under the colonial government. Post-colonial Nigeria was not any much different and it was not until the late 1970's that the country's policy on education formally recognized the need to educate persons with special needs.

Over the years however, Nigeria has begun to make tremendous efforts in education of special needs persons. Although, as stated earlier, there are still no legal mandate to enforce the provision of special needs education.

History of Inclusive Education

By June 1994, representatives of 92 countries and 25 international organizations formed the World Conference on Special Needs Education, held in Salamanca, Spain and they agreed on a new dynamic statement on education of persons with disabilities, which called for inclusion to be the norm (Centre for studies on Inclusive Education, 2021). They recognized the urgency to provide education for

all children, young people and adults within the regular school system. The framework for action states that all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions must be accommodated in regular schools. The framework drawn during this conference maps out the procedure for adopting inclusive education and the reasons as to why special needs education need to be part of every discussion dealing with education for all.

Before this, the League of Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of human rights, part of which proclaims the right to education as a right of every citizen regardless of gender, race, colour and religion. However, majority of the countries that were signatory to this declaration still did not fulfil their promises of providing education to their citizens. Persons with disabilities were considered a social threat, they were killed and used as objects of entertainment. It was not until the end of the 20th century that even developed countries started educating its special needs citizens.

In the United States, professional advocacy groups started calling for the merging of special schools and regular schools in order to cater for special needs students. UNESCO carried out a survey on teacher education in 14 countries in the early 1980s and they found that regular classroom teachers were willing to take on responsibility for special needs children, but they were not confident whether they had the skills to carry out these tasks.

In theory, Nigeria through its National Policy on Education practices inclusion (Fareo, 2015). The policy stipulates the teaching of special needs students in regular classrooms. However, a cursory look at the policy itself shows some contradictions and gaps. For instance, the policy also allows for the creation of special schools which negates the principles of inclusion. The schools are discriminatory in nature, for example, there are schools named “Schools for the blind”, “Schools for the Deaf and Dumb”, “Schools for the handicapped” owned by Federal government and State government (Adetoro, 2014). There is an urgent need to show commitment to inclusive education in Nigeria, and this will involve abolishing the concept of special schools in the country’s national policy to allow for full integration of persons with disabilities in regular schools and the society at large.

Inclusive education during COVID 19

Inclusive education refers to different and diverse students learning side by side in the same classroom (Open society foundations, 2019). Inclusive education not only values diversity but allows for the unique contributions of students. The students and parents are expected to participate in setting learning goals and take full part in decisions that affect them. Inclusive education systems seeks to provide a better quality education for all children and are instrumental in changing discriminatory attitudes. Providing separate education for these students does not guarantee success. Inclusive education on the other hand, provides supportive, context-appropriate conditions for learning.

The pandemic however has increased the educational divide for many students with special needs. For students with disability and additional learning needs, the move to remote learning has presented additional challenges. Students with special needs lack self-regulation and communication skills to focus on receiving instructions through a computer or tablet. Inclusive education means that every child is valued and receives a high-quality and equitable education (Sharma and May, 2020), adopting remote learning for the children with severe disabilities with little to no assistance defeats the purpose of this educational system.

The COVID-19 pandemic have particularly increased the strong connections with and between students and their families. For schools which have been able to adopt remote learning during the COVID-19, students have described how much they valued their teachers' effort to create learning experiences that were fun and allowed them connect with both teachers and other students. Education support staff described that they make contact with students by telephone prior to online lessons to talk through the goals of the lessons (Sharma, et. al., 2020).

The inclusive education system however require the effort of the parent to assist their special needs students in remote learning. Parents are expected to assist their child in taking part in their lessons. However, majority of Nigerian parents with special needs children are unable to take part in the education of their children during the pandemic, meaning these children are left to fend for themselves.

In the public school setting of the country, the education of special needs children came to an altering stop during the pandemic lockdown. It is important however, to examine the basic elements of inclusive education and scrutinize if these factors are present in the Nigerian educational system especially during the pandemic.

1. Use of inclusive curriculum: an inclusive curriculum allows for the addition of the relevant themes and contributions of marginalized and minority groups including the special needs persons. The curriculum is expected to take into consideration the needs of the learners, which means during the COVID-19, an inclusive education is expected to take the pandemic into consideration. However, majority of the schools asides ensuring the health safety protocols against the pandemic be strictly followed, these schools have not made adjustment to the learners learning experience, the students are still being educated the same way before COVID-19.
2. Use of teaching assistants or specialists: At the height of the pandemic when remote learning had to be adopted to ensure the continuous education of persons with special needs, parents of children with special needs had to stand in as teaching assistants to aid the tutoring of their wards. However, these parents were ill-equipped with the knowledge and information to help carry out their new tasks. Post-lockdown, these children are now being educated in their regular classroom, yet they face the same challenges of remote learning but in a different

- scenario. Majority of the schools adopting inclusive education rarely employ teaching assistants to help meet the individual needs of these learners.
3. Involvement of parents: It is important that the parents be carried along in the education of their wards, they should be active contributors. This is however not the case in pre-COVID-19 Nigeria and not at the moment.
 4. Take into consideration the individual learners need: Asides the modification of the curriculum to reflect the learners needs, it is important that structural adjustment be made to make sure the learning experience of the learner is stress-free.
 5. Use of additional educational interventions: It is expected that in order to accommodate children with special needs in the regular classrooms, provisions have to be made to make use of additional interventions as it is not likely that persons with special needs will be able to understand what is being taught in the general classroom. Student specific interventions have to be identified and used appropriately by the teacher and his assistants as they deem fit and appropriate.
 6. Adjustment of the terms of admission: All students in an inclusive school system are not to be admitted using the same criteria. It is important to understand the uniqueness of all students, the criteria should be adjusted and readjusted to fit the applicants' special needs.
 7. The use of alternative forms of communication: In a situation where the student cannot benefit from the traditional means of communication, teachers should ensure that provisions are made to use alternative means of communication which the student finds comfortable.
 8. Modifications of conditions of assessment: In an inclusive education setting, especially in the post-pandemic era, teachers must be creative, they should seek out alternative ways of assessing the students especially those with special needs. It is not a must to follow the paper and pen mode of examination.

Examining the above elements of inclusive education, it cannot be said that majority of schools have fully adopted inclusive education. Practicing inclusive education in the current terrain of the country seems difficult, but not impossible. Special needs persons are particularly more vulnerable to the COVID-19 as majority are known to have comorbid conditions which makes them more susceptible to the virus. Hence, it is important that teachers of children with special needs should not only ensure that educational needs are met without any hindrance but should ensure that the COVID-19 safety protocols are followed to the latter. Provisions and adjustments to be made for special needs persons are huge, the educational supports are to be ensured for the students who need them. The support covers a number of pedagogical, organizational, and content modifications.

Inclusive Education Post Covid-19

A programme delivery can unintentionally present a range of barriers to learning or assessment, so much so that some students can be unfairly disadvantaged. The purpose of inclusive education is to reduce or totally eliminate these barriers whilst ensuring that academic standards are not compromised (Sheffield Hallam University, 2021). Authors such as Hornby (2015) have suggested that full inclusion is impossible and this is because it is considered that there will always be some children with special needs who cannot be successfully included in mainstream classrooms. Since the vision of full inclusion is impossible and special education is likely to breed discriminatory tendencies, it is proposed that developing a theory of inclusive special education which aligns the philosophies, policies and practices of both special education and inclusive education be adopted. In the interest of ensuring that all students with special needs benefit from quality education in the post COVID-19 era, Hornby (2015) examines the evidence based practice in the education of these persons and they are stated below as follows:

1. Continuous placement of children with special needs from mainstream classes to special schools: Although a good number of children with special needs are likely to benefit from mainstream classes, it is important to make sure that the minority who are not likely to benefit should transit between resource rooms, special classes, and special schools. In the event of a pandemic, those who are able to benefit independently from remote learning should be allowed to partake, and those who are in need of special assistance should be provided for. Schools, teachers and parents should make extra effort to ensure that those who are dependent of others should be cared for through extra classes and they should be taught individually with assistance from their caregivers.
2. Providing education in the most appropriate setting through the education lifespan of the student: It is important that these children be able to move between their placement options. It is of utmost importance that there should be flexibility to transfer within the school system unhindered.
3. Ensuring optimum organization for all children with special needs: First, inclusive special education has to be backed up with legislation at all levels. This legal backup makes it impossible for these children to be denied education at any level. This policy must be clear and consistent at all levels and be devoid of ambiguity.
4. There should be focus on including majority of the students in mainstream schools: Only on rare cases should a child have to be placed in special settings. It is important that majority of the students be placed in mainstream classes. Where there is need for remote learning as seen in the case of the COVID 19 pandemic, provisions must be made for the gadgets, tools and equipment which are likely to aid the education of these persons.

5. Collaboration between mainstream and special schools and classes: Hornby (2012) identifies that there are two functions of schools in inclusive special education. The first is to provide special education for children with severe levels of special needs and the second is to assist mainstream schools to effectively educate children with moderate levels of special needs.

UNICEF (2020) gave a detailed checklist on things to be done in order to safely open up schools for inclusive education in East Asia and Pacific region, however, since COVID-19 is a global pandemic, these suggestions can be adopted in Nigeria as well. This checklist outlines in detail a whole systems approach to the safe reopening of schools and after school reopens. One of the major point of this checklist is equipping teachers to deal with learning recovery and mental health and psychosocial needs of children with disabilities. Also, plans needs to be put in place to support teachers to undertake formative assessments to evaluate the children's learning loss. Majority of Nigerian schools have reopened fully, and it cannot be said majority of the conditions listed above were followed. The body also suggest that regular check-ins with the parents be done for the students in transition phase, and schools should ensure assessments is accessible and appropriate.

Asides all these, it is important to ensure that the curriculum of students with special needs be broken down to reflect their needs. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed a number of wrongs in the Nigerian educational system. Majority of the parents of children are not active participants in the education of their children, therefore it is of utmost importance these parents be carried along. This would serve as a counter measure and would prepare them for a future pandemic. The parent understanding the child's needs will also assist the teacher as they are able to tell the teachers the types of supports and strategies that their child needs. The teachers should adapt Individual Education Plans (IEP) to ensure that the impact of the pandemic is considered and addressed.

Children with special needs are more likely to be distracted by the physical setup of their work area, it is important to find a quiet spot. Closing or totally eliminating technology based distraction and covering distracting parts of the screen for remote learning might be the way to go. They might also find it difficult to stay motivated for asynchronous activities, hence task analysis is important. Their activities should be broken down into simpler tasks to ensure that they stay motivated.

Changes from familiar routines might take a huge toil on the students, it is important that the teacher prepares the student for the new normal and this can be done by making use of visual schedules, social stories, story boards among others. This should assist in easing the students into following infection control routines, and use of masks. Education in the post COVID-19 era must critically look into the three areas of curriculum and pedagogy, assessment and learning materials, if normalcy is to be

achieved once again (UNICEF, 2020). Adaptation must be made in these three areas for persons with special needs to be educated.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that inclusive education if practiced to the latter will help prepare learners with special needs for general society. Educating these persons in special schools and classrooms does little to prepare them for life after school which has made education scholars to advocate for the replacement of special education with inclusive education. However, there are a number of ills with the inclusive education system as well, as not all children can be educated in an inclusive education system. Hence, it is only important that the two systems of education, that is inclusive education and special education must be readjusted to adopt the positives of both sides in order to ensure that students with special needs enjoy quality education. As recently witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic, inclusive education is almost impossible for persons with severe disabilities, embracing inclusive special education is the way to go.

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