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Advancing Inclusive Education in Nigeria: The Transformative Impact of 21st-Century Training of Special Needs Teachers

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Abstract

In Nigeria, as in many countries worldwide, the pursuit of inclusive education remains a challenge, particularly in catering to the needs of students with disabilities. This paper explores the transformative potential of 21st-Century training programs for Special needs teachers as a solution to enhance inclusive education practices in Nigeria. Depiction upon contemporary pedagogical approaches, technological advancements, cultural sensitivity, collaborative learning environments, professional development, and supportive policy frameworks, this paper elucidates how comprehensive training initiatives can serve as a panacea for fostering better inclusive education outcomes. By examining the current state of Special needs training in Nigeria and envisioning future directions, this paper offers insights and recommendations for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders invested in promoting inclusive education.

Keywords: Inclusive education, 21st Century, Special needs, Special needs teachers

Introduction

Inclusive education, a global movement aimed at ensuring that all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, have access to quality education within the general education system, is gaining momentum in Nigeria. As the country strives to meet international standards and fulfill its commitments under the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the focus on transforming Special needs is becoming increasingly critical. In this context, the training of Special needs teachers emerges as a pivotal element. The 21st Century brings unique opportunities and challenges, necessitating a reimagined approach to teacher training that embraces technological advancements, innovative teaching practices, and a deep understanding of cultural and socio-economic diversity. This paper explores the transformative impact of 21st-Century training for Special needs teachers in Nigeria.

Background of Inclusive Education in Nigeria

The concept of inclusive education represents a fundamental shift in the approach to educating children with disabilities and special needs. Historically, the education system in Nigeria operated on a segregated model, where students with disabilities were often excluded from mainstream schools and educated separately in special institutions (Okoro, 2018). This approach, while well-intentioned, perpetuated social stigma, marginalization, and limited opportunities for children with disabilities. The movement towards inclusive education gained momentum in Nigeria in alignment with global initiatives such as the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education in (1994) which advocated for inclusive education as the preferred approach for providing quality education to all children, regardless of their abilities or disabilities (UNESCO, 1994). The adoption of inclusive education in Nigeria was further reinforced by legislative frameworks such as the National Policy on Education (NPE) and the Education for All (EFA) agenda, which underscored the government's commitment to ensuring equitable access to education for every child (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). However, despite policy pronouncements and international commitments, the implementation of inclusive

education in Nigeria has faced numerous challenges. Limited infrastructure, inadequate funding, a shortage of trained personnel, and deep-rooted cultural beliefs and attitudes towards disability have all posed significant barriers to progress (Adeyemo, 2019).

In response to these challenges, various stakeholders, including government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society groups, and international development partners, have embarked on initiatives aimed at promoting inclusive education in Nigeria. One notable initiative is the establishment of inclusive resource centers and Special needs units within mainstream schools, where students with disabilities can receive specialized support and accommodations while learning alongside their peers (Salami & Adebisi, 2017). Additionally, efforts have been made to enhance the capacity of teachers through specialized training programs in inclusive education pedagogy, curriculum adaptation, assistive technology, and positive behavior support strategies (Iduma & Mbazor, 2020). These training programs were designed to equip educators with the knowledge and skills necessary to create inclusive learning environments that cater to the diverse needs of all students. Furthermore, advocacy campaigns and community engagement activities have been instrumental in raising awareness, challenging stereotypes, and fostering a culture of acceptance and inclusion within Nigerian society (Udoh, 2016). While significant strides have been made, much work remains to be done to fully realize the vision of inclusive education in Nigeria. Addressing systemic barriers, increasing investment in education infrastructure and teacher training, strengthening policy frameworks, and fostering collaboration among stakeholders are critical steps towards building a more inclusive and equitable education system that ensures every child has the opportunity to learn and thrive, regardless of their background or abilities.

Special needs Teacher Training

Training for Special needs teachers is comprehensive and designed to prepare educators to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities. It combines rigorous academic coursework, practical experience, and in service professional development programs to ensure teachers are equipped to provide high-quality, inclusive education. This equips educators with the skills, knowledge, and competencies necessary to support students with diverse learning needs. The key components typically involved the following:

1. Educational Requirements
 - NCE, Bachelor's Degree, Master's Degree and PhD. Many Special needs teachers pursue a higher degrees to gain deeper knowledge and expertise.
2. Certification and Licensure
3. Core Training Components
 - Understanding Disabilities: Training includes in-depth knowledge of various disabilities, including learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, emotional and behavioral disorders, intellectual disabilities, and physical disabilities.
 - Instructional Strategies: Teachers learn specialized instructional techniques tailored to meet the needs of students with disabilities. This includes differentiated instruction, individualized education programs (IEPs), and inclusive practices.
 - Behavior Management: Effective strategies for managing classroom behavior and creating a positive learning environment are crucial. This includes training in behavioral intervention plans (BIPs) and positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS).
4. Practical Experience
 - Student Teaching: Practical experience through student teaching is a critical component. This supervised teaching practice allows prospective Special needs teachers to apply their learning in real classroom settings under the mentorship of experienced teachers.
 - Internships and Fieldwork: Some programs include internships or fieldwork in diverse educational settings, providing broader experience with various student populations and educational contexts.
5. Specialized Areas
 - Assistive Technology: Training includes the use of assistive technology to support learning and communication for students with disabilities.
 - Legal and Ethical Issues: Understanding the legal and ethical aspects of Special needs.
 - Collaboration and Advocacy: Special needs teachers are trained to work collaboratively with general education teachers, families, and other professionals. Advocacy skills are also emphasized to support the rights and needs of students with disabilities.

Importance of Special needs Teacher Training

Inclusive education, aiming to accommodate the diverse needs of all students, including those with disabilities, has become a cornerstone of modern educational systems. Central to the success of inclusive education are Special needs teachers, who play a pivotal role in ensuring that every student receives tailored support to thrive

academically and socially. Consequently, the significance of comprehensive and effective training for Special needs teachers cannot be overstated and some are as follows:

Understanding Diverse Needs

Students with disabilities encompass a wide spectrum of needs, ranging from mild learning difficulties to severe cognitive impairments. Moreover, each disability presents unique challenges that require specialized teaching strategies and interventions. Without adequate training, Special needs teachers may struggle to identify and address these diverse needs effectively, leading to suboptimal learning outcomes for students (Griffin & Shevin, 2016). Hence, specialized training equips teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to recognize individual differences and implement appropriate instructional practices tailored to each student's abilities and challenges.

Promoting Evidence-Based Practices

Effective Special needs teacher training programs emphasize evidence-based practices grounded in research and empirical evidence. By familiarizing teachers with validated intervention strategies and instructional techniques, such training enables them to make informed decisions about curriculum design, lesson planning, and classroom management (Sailor et al., 2017). Additionally, ongoing professional development opportunities allow teachers to stay abreast of emerging research findings and innovative approaches, ensuring continuous improvement in their instructional practices.

Facilitating Collaboration and Teamwork

Inclusive education often involves collaboration among teachers, support staff, parents, and community stakeholders to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities. Special needs teacher training programs emphasize the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration and teamwork, providing educators with the skills to work effectively within multidisciplinary teams (Turnbull et al., 2015). By nurturing partnerships and communication among stakeholders, trained Special needs teachers can create cohesive support networks that enhance the overall learning environment for students with disabilities.

Addressing Legal and Ethical Considerations

Special needs is governed by a complex framework of legal mandates and ethical standards designed to safeguard the rights and interests of students with disabilities. Special needs teacher training programs familiarize educators with relevant laws and acts ensuring compliance with legal requirements and ethical principles (Turnbull et al., 2020). By understanding their rights and responsibilities under the law, trained Special needs teachers can advocate effectively for the needs of their students and uphold ethical standards of practice.

Evolution of Special needs Teacher Training

The evolution of Special needs teacher training reflects the dynamic interaction between societal attitudes, legislative mandates, pedagogical advancements, and the changing needs of students with disabilities. Over the years, teacher preparation programs have adapted to address emerging challenges and incorporate best practices in inclusive education.

Historical Context: Historically, individuals with disabilities were often marginalized or excluded from educational opportunities, reflecting prevailing societal attitudes of paternalism and segregation. The emergence of the disability rights movement in the mid-20th Century challenged these norms, leading to landmark legislation such as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975, which mandated free and appropriate public education for children with disabilities. Consequently, the demand for qualified Special needs teachers surged, prompting the development of specialized teacher training programs (Smith, 2013).

Transition to Inclusive Education: The shift towards inclusive education, grounded in principles of equity, diversity, and access, has profoundly influenced Special needs teacher training. Inclusive practices emphasize the integration of students with disabilities into general education settings, necessitating a collaborative and interdisciplinary approach to teacher preparation (Forlin et al., 2018). Teacher training programs have responded by incorporating coursework on universal design for learning, differentiated instruction, and co-teaching models to equip educators with the skills to support diverse learners effectively.

Integration of Evidence-Based Practices: Advancements in educational research have contributed to the integration of evidence-based practices into Special needs teacher training. Empirical studies have identified effective instructional strategies, behavior management techniques, and assessment tools tailored to the needs of students with disabilities (Cook & Friend, 2016). Teacher preparation programs now prioritize the dissemination of research findings and the application of evidence-based practices in classroom settings, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and innovation.

Embracing Technology and Digital Learning: The proliferation of technology has revolutionized Special needs teacher training, offering new avenues for professional development, collaboration, and resource sharing. Online learning platforms, virtual simulations, and interactive multimedia resources provide flexible and accessible training opportunities for educators, regardless of geographic location or scheduling constraints (Bouck et al., 2016). Furthermore, assistive technologies and digital tools empower teachers to individualize instruction, accommodate diverse learning styles, and facilitate communication with students and families.

Future Directions: Looking ahead, the future of Special needs teacher training lies in technology integration, embracing diversity, promoting cultural competence, and addressing intersectional identities among students with

disabilities. Additionally, ongoing efforts are needed to strengthen partnerships between teacher preparation programs and partners, ensuring seamless transitions from theory to practice (West et al., 2019). By fostering collaboration, innovation, and inclusivity, Special needs teacher training will continue to evolve to meet the evolving needs of students with disabilities in the 21st Century.

Components of 21st-Century Training for Special needs Teachers

As education evolves to meet the needs of diverse learners in the 21st Century, Special needs teacher training must adapt to prepare educators for the complex challenges of inclusive classrooms. Effective training programs should encompass a comprehensive range of components that equip teachers with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to support students with disabilities effectively.

1. **Understanding Diversity and Equity:** Inclusive education demands an appreciation for diversity and a commitment to equity. Special needs teacher training programs should incorporate coursework and experiences that deepen educators' understanding of cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity among students with disabilities (Artiles et al., 2017). By fostering cultural competence and awareness of social justice issues, training programs prepare teachers to create inclusive learning environments that celebrate diversity and promote equity for all learners.
2. **Evidence-Based Practices:** Central to effective Special needs teacher training is the integration of evidence-based practices grounded in research and empirical evidence. Teachers should be equipped with a repertoire of instructional strategies, behavior management techniques, and assistive technologies proven to enhance learning outcomes for students with disabilities (Iduma & Mbazor, 2020). Training programs should emphasize the importance of data-driven decision-making, ongoing assessment, and collaboration with colleagues to implement evidence-based practices effectively.
3. **Collaborative Partnerships:** Inclusive education requires collaboration among educators, support staff, families, and community stakeholders to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities. Special needs teacher training should emphasize the development of strong interpersonal and teamwork skills, as well as strategies for building partnerships with families and community agencies (Turnbull et al., 2016). By fostering collaborative relationships, training programs empower teachers to leverage collective expertise and resources to support student success.
4. **Universal Design for Learning (UDL):** Universal Design for Learning (UDL) offers a framework for designing instruction that accommodates diverse learning styles, preferences, and abilities. Special needs teacher training programs should incorporate principles of UDL into curriculum development, lesson planning, and instructional delivery (Okoro, 2018). By providing teachers with the tools to design flexible, inclusive learning experiences, UDL promotes access and engagement for all students, regardless of their individual needs or challenges.
5. **Technology Integration:** Incorporating technology into Special needs teacher training enhances educators' capacity to individualize instruction, facilitate communication, and accommodate diverse learning needs. Training programs should provide teachers with opportunities to explore assistive technologies, digital tools, and online resources that support inclusive practices (Cook & Friend, 2020). By leveraging technology effectively, teachers can enhance accessibility, foster independence, and empower students with disabilities to succeed in the 21st-Century classroom.

Challenges in Implementing 21st-Century Training Programs for Special needs Teachers

In the 21st Century, the state of education, especially in the field of Special needs, has undergone significant transformations. Technological advancements, evolving understandings of diverse learning needs, and the increasing demand for inclusive education have necessitated adaptations in teacher training programs. While these changes hold promise for enhancing the quality of education for students with special needs, they also present various challenges in the implementation of training programs for Special needs teachers.

1. **Incorporating Technology Integration**
 - Special needs teachers need to be proficient in utilizing assistive technologies and digital resources to cater to diverse learning needs. However, integrating technology effectively into training programs requires substantial resources and specialized expertise (Udoh, 2016).
 - The challenge lies in ensuring equitable access to technology-based training resources and providing adequate support for teachers to develop digital literacy skills (National Education Association, 2020).
2. **Addressing Diversity and Inclusion**
 - The growing diversity among students with special needs necessitates a nuanced understanding of cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic factors. Training programs must equip teachers with culturally responsive pedagogical practices and strategies for fostering inclusive learning environments (Artiles et al., 2017).

- However, implementing comprehensive diversity training requires ongoing commitment from educational institutions and may encounter resistance due to entrenched beliefs and biases (Ford & Kea, 2020).
- 3. **Meeting Individualized Learning Needs**
 - Special needs encompass a wide spectrum of disabilities, each requiring personalized approaches to instruction and support. Training programs must provide teachers with the skills to differentiate instruction and implement individualized education plans effectively (Cook & Friend, 2016).
 - However, the challenge lies in balancing the need for specialized training with the constraints of time and resources within teacher preparation programs (Cook & Schirmer, 2013).
- 4. **Collaboration with Multidisciplinary Teams**
 - Effective Special needs practice often involves collaboration with various stakeholders, including general education teachers, therapists, and families. Training programs should emphasize collaborative skills and inter-professional communication strategies (Cook & Friend, 2020).
 - However, fostering meaningful collaboration requires overcoming institutional barriers, such as time constraints and conflicting priorities among team members (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2014).

Recommendations for Policy and Practice in 21st Century Special Needs Teacher Training

Special needs teacher training is a critical area of focus to ensure that educators are well-equipped to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities. In the 21st Century, this training must adapt to new educational paradigms, technological advancements, and evolving societal needs. Effective policy and practice in this area are essential to prepare Special needs teachers for the challenges and opportunities they will face.

- **Integrating Technology into Teacher Training**
Mandate the integration of assistive and instructional technologies in Special needs teacher training programs. Teacher training programs should include comprehensive modules on the use of technology to support students with disabilities. This includes both high-tech solutions like speech-to-text software and low-tech tools such as visual schedules.
- **Emphasizing Inclusive Education Practices**
Require all Special needs teacher training programs to include a strong focus on practices. Courses should cover strategies for co-teaching, differentiation, and collaboration with general education teachers. Field experiences should include placements in inclusive classrooms.
- **Cultural Competency and Diversity Training**
Ensure that teacher training programs incorporate cultural competency and diversity training to address the needs of diverse student populations. Curricula should include training on cultural responsiveness, understanding the impact of socio-economic status, and strategies for working with students from diverse backgrounds.
- **Professional Development**
Establish continuous professional development requirements for Special needs teachers to keep abreast of current research and best practices. Create a framework for regular professional development opportunities, including workshops, conferences, and online courses. Encourage collaboration and learning communities among Special needs professionals.
- **Collaboration with Stakeholders**
Promote collaboration between teacher training programs, schools, families, and community organizations. Develop partnerships with local schools and community organizations to provide real-world training experiences. Engage families in the training process to better understand their perspectives and needs.

Conclusion

The training of Special needs teachers in the 21st Century must evolve to address the dynamic and diverse needs of students with disabilities. By mandating the integration of technology, emphasizing inclusive education practices, incorporating cultural competency and diversity training, ensuring ongoing professional development, and fostering collaboration with stakeholders, we can significantly enhance the quality of Special needs. These recommendations are rooted in the understanding that effective teacher preparation is critical to improving educational outcomes for all students. As educational policies and practices continue to adapt, it is essential that they remain flexible and responsive to new challenges and opportunities in the field of Special needs. By doing so, we can ensure that Special needs teachers are well-equipped to provide high-quality, inclusive, and equitable education for every student.

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