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The Imperative of School Counsellors towards Inclusive and Special Needs Education for National Development

Egbule, E.O.

Department of Guidance and Counselling, Delta State University, Abraka

Corresponding author email: gbuleosita2@gmail.com

Abstract

The study looked at the necessity for school counsellors to support inclusive and special education for the advancement of the country. The study's two main research topics were to determine how sociocultural influences impact special needs schooling and how school counsellors may improve and promote national development via their counselling in the school context. According to the variable of inclusive and special needs education, a review of the literature was conducted. The descriptive survey was used as the study's design. School counsellors at the state's public secondary schools made up the study's population. 172 counsellors were purposefully selected as the study's sample size. The questionnaire served as the data-gathering tool. The research concluded that education counsellors are the brain-box for national development due to their invaluable services to learners. Learners with special needs should be considered when establishing educational institutions, and the placement of counsellors in every school should be a "sine qua non" before schools are established. The data derived were analysed using the mean and standard deviation. The results showed that school counsellors are essential if national development is to be achieved because their role in the schools guarantees that citizens with confidence in themselves are chummed out of school regardless of whether they have disabilities or not.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Special Needs Education, School Counselor, National Development

Introduction

The term "school" refers to an educational setting that is intended to offer learning areas and an atmosphere for children to study under the supervision of a teacher and professional assistance. In this context, a professional is referred to as a counsellor who is responsible for providing students with competencies through a school counselling program (Egbule, 2020; Robinson & Roksa, 2016). It is impossible to overstate the importance of having a counsellor in schools. They are professionals that adjust with regards to the changing trends in a bit to pass across effectively their knowledge to students on how they can effectively adjust and be responsive to changing variables in the society that has immediate and remote bearing on their affairs and that of the nation as a result of their actions and inactions. In the view of Egbule (2023), as roles change, counsellors are adjusting to figure out the best ways to help students, especially those with special needs in the school as a result of inclusion, prosper in their academic field along with how to thrive in another facet of life. This suggests that school counsellors make sure children are prepared to meet social demands and obstacles in a way that can support national growth, both academically and in other ways. The duties of school counsellors extend beyond the standard advice offered to ordinary students on how to raise their academic performance and career options; they also include pupils who are enrolled in the school due to special needs and inclusion.

Counsellors work to close any academic gaps that may occur in the classroom as a result of inclusion and special needs children. When students with special needs spend most or all of their time alongside students without special needs (general education), this is known as inclusion in education. According to Wilkinson and Pickett, as cited in Egbule (2018), it emerges in the context of special education with an individualised education program and is based on the idea that it is more beneficial for students with special needs to have some mixed experience with

students without special needs. This will help them be more successful in social interactions and personal development, which will lead to further success in life for both individual and national development. According to Garuba (2003), inclusion is a strategy used by schools to try to address each student as an individual by reevaluating and organising their curriculum, providing resources to improve equality of opportunity, and so on. This implies that kids in an inclusive school receive equitable treatment, which in turn promotes unity and advances national progress. Regarding this, school counsellors work to ensure that a variety of needs and interests are aligned to accomplish learning goals. In light of this, this essay aims to investigate the necessity for school counsellors to support inclusive and special needs education for the advancement of the country.

Concept of Inclusive Education and National Development

One of the biggest challenges facing education globally is inclusive education (Ainscow, 2004). An approach to assisting students with disabilities in traditional educational settings is reflected in inclusive education in several developing nations, such as Nigeria. Because of this, the Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN) (2013) said in its National Policy on Education that special education is a structured educational program designed for individuals with special needs. The worldwide approach, however, views inclusive education "as a reform that supports and welcomes variety amongst all learners" (UNESCO, 2009), which runs counter to this. This implies that the goal of inclusive education is to maximise the skills of all student groups to promote both immediate and long-term personal and national development.

Bryant et al. (2008) define inclusive education as the perspective and approach to improving (through education) children with disabilities in traditional classroom environments. "Inclusive" means "full-time placement of kids with mild and moderate disabilities in regular classrooms," they added. According to Garuba (2003), inclusion goes beyond mainstreaming because it offers a way for a school to respond to each student as an individual by reevaluating and organising its curriculum and assigning resources to improve equality of opportunity for all students. This implies that if all students are given equal opportunities, they will want to achieve high levels, which will significantly advance societal progress. Counsellors here make sure that children who lack confidence or are naïve are helped to succeed academically both inside and outside of the classroom. According to Smith (2007), "the dedication to train each child to the maximum extent appropriate; in the school and classroom he/she would otherwise attend" is what inclusion in education means. Smith said, "It entails providing the child with ancillary services, and it only requires that the child will benefit from being in the class." This is the key component of inclusion, and it calls for a dedication to bringing the resources and materials needed to the kids with a handicap to them instead of putting them in a separate location where services are offered.

According to Ajuwon (2008), for a child with a disability or impairment to gain the most from inclusion, regular education teachers and school counselors must be able to instruct and mentor a large number of students, including those with a variety of disabilities, as well as collaborate and effectively plan with special education. Adedokun and Olaleye (2014) state that inclusion might be either complete or partial. To achieve full inclusion, all students, including those who need significant behavioural and educational support and resources to succeed in regular courses, must be mixed, and separate special classes must be eliminated. Under full inclusion, special education is viewed as a service rather than a location, and it is delivered to the student rather than to them to fulfil their individual requirements. It is combined with the daily routine, classroom layout, curriculum, and teaching strategies. On the other side, partial inclusion occurs when special education kids are taught in regular classrooms but are removed from the regular classroom to take a particular test as necessary. This suggests that inclusion may be either complete or partial, thus, school counselors work to make sure that children with disabilities maintain their inherent confidence and beliefs and that negative attitudes are no longer present in their minds, no matter what role they play. This will guarantee that the pupils in question maintain their desire for academic success.

According to Salisbury and McGregor (2005), inclusive schools are places where all students are accepted and receive important academic and non-academic instruction that prepares them for life in the community. Salisbury and McGregor imply that inclusive education aids in preparing students to make constructive contributions to the advancement of the country. According to Florian and Rouse (2001), inclusive education is those that which satisfies the dual requirements of improving academic standards for everyone and enrolling a diverse student body. According to Webber (quoted by Adedokun and Olaleye, 2014), five key elements are necessary to successfully include students with special needs: a sense of belonging and social skills, an understanding of student diversity, curricular needs, efficient management and instruction, and staff support and cooperation. Three important components were added by Voltz, Brazil, and Ford (2001) for a successful integration of students with special needs: shared ownership among instructors, a sense of belonging, and active, meaningful involvement in the mainstream.

Administrative assistance was added to the list by Mastropieri and Scruggs (2001). Therefore, there is a far higher

chance of inclusion in the educational environment being effective when the characteristics mentioned by Webber, Voltz et al., and Mastropieri and Scroggs are implemented. Therefore, all learning materials and resources should be tailored to each student's unique needs, the curriculum should be sufficiently flexible to allow all students to participate in all school activities, and an inclusive school should be completely accessible to children with disabilities.

Concept of Special Needs Education and National Development

Every child is different from every other child in a variety of ways. While some children require special teachers, the majority can learn in regular classrooms. Before they can learn in a classroom context, they require special education teachers and programs. Children with unique educational needs are those who need extra pedagogical instruction before they can learn effectively. According to Bryant et al. (2008), children with special educational needs are exceptional or otherwise challenged children who may be below or above average in terms of their physical, intellectual, social, or emotional characteristics. These children require specially planned and carefully monitored programs in the areas of content, school staff, and physical environments.

According to Olukotun (2004), segregation was the first step in the teaching of children with exceptional learning needs; nevertheless, this approach has drawbacks as it ignores the reality that these children are member of the community and society as a whole. This suggests that segregation limits and hinders the social requirements of children and people in their later years. For this reason, school counsellors are essential, since they will be in charge of guiding students and learners and instilling self-belief in them regardless of their position. Giving kids with particular learning difficulties confidence can help them become more creative and let go of the idea that they need help; instead, they see themselves as the ones who can help others. This sense of assurance guarantees that they have the necessary tools to support the advancement of society. The purpose of education is to start processes that will help the child in the learning environment as much as possible. It is necessary to develop non-traditional methods and processes for helping students with specific learning needs since their nature precludes them from accessing learning environments. One such tactic is the employment of professional counsellors and inclusion, which is a learning arrangement that unites typical students and kids with special learning needs in the same classroom setting under the supervision of a qualified counsellor. This will guarantee that every student receives the proper instruction on how to contribute to society.

Roles of School Counselor and Students with Special Needs

According to Thomas and Woods (2003), "disability" is a catch-all phrase that gives teachers and school counsellors a common vocabulary. The learners with knowledge disabilities, poignant and behavioural disabilities, academic disabilities, visually impaired students, difficulty hearing, autism, traumatic brain injury, and other health impairments or mixtures of these are among the 13 disability categories listed in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004. According to the American School Counselor Association (2012), school counselors are in charge of meeting the needs of every student by providing an all-inclusive school counseling program that aims to support and enhance each student's academic, professional, and personal/social development while also helping each student maximize their personal growth for the benefit of society. Through counselling activities such as career planning, college planning and application, academic counselling, course selection scheduling, decision-making skill development, counselling for personal/social issues, etc., school counsellors support and advocate for the students on their caseload. Regardless of their own social or cultural background, school counsellors support all students and provide equal access and success opportunities by acting as specialists, associates, and change agents to improve the school as a whole and its students (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Pelsma & Krieschok, 2003).

Social and Cultural Factors Influencing Inclusive Education

Significant changes have been made to the concept of disability all around the world. According to Payne and Thomas, cited by Egbule (2020), there have been five historical eras where the way disabled people are treated has evolved. The annihilation age was the first. During this period, the Greeks and Romans executed infants who had severe forms of mental impairment and physical deformities. In the second period, those with disabilities were made fun of. To entertain the upper class, people with intellectual and physical disabilities were transformed into court clowns. The emergence of social consciousness occurred during the Middle Ages. The church decided to place the disabled in asylums and treat them humanely and compassionately instead of making fun of them. These were the final periods of sufficient education and practical training. Since then, people have held the belief that education, job training, liberty, and other social norms may benefit those with disabilities.

A family's cultural heritage affects how they perceive and react to a handicap. Families with diverse cultural

backgrounds may have varied perspectives on exceptionality since disability is a socially and culturally constructed state (Linan-Thompson & Jean, cited by Egbule, 2018). Attempts to establish cooperative relationships, life goals, educational planning, and evaluation procedures may all be adversely affected by these conflicting points of view (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). The cultural context of a handicap must always be considered. Every culture has its norms regarding what conduct is considered acceptable and deviant. Research indicates that families from different cultural backgrounds often suggest that a child's disability is determined by their fate.

In the same way that society shapes the idea of disability, a family's cultural references influence the genesis of a handicap. Cultural perspectives on the causes of disability vary. In the United States, most individuals believe that the cause of a handicap can be identified and addressed by scientific methods. Culturally varied families could say that they think the child's disability is due to intergenerational revenge, breaching social taboos, fate, or spiritual causes (Egbule, 2023). To avoid stereotyping, some Hispanic American families would claim that a child's disability is "God's will." Asian American families may see a child's disability as a kind of retribution or vengeance for past wrongdoing, especially if the child is male. The traditional African approach to mainstreaming children with exceptional needs is influenced by African perspectives, traditions, and beliefs. Some studies suggest that the belief that disability is a kind of divine retribution is one of the factors contributing to the pervasive neglect and indifference towards disadvantaged children in poor African countries. People with disabilities are viewed as persistent tragedies in Africa. Many people think that being disabled diminishes their social standing. Most of the time, families hide their disabled children. Because people with disabilities cannot be left alone, this shame-based thinking leads to overprotection. Overprotection may result from the shame of others seeing a family member with a disability. Because many people see disability as a sign of deficiency, they are reluctant to send their children to special schools or even to be in a classroom with other disabled students. Often, the tragic aspect of this existence is also seen to engender sorrow. In other cases, the handicapped person is not allowed to leave the house when guests are present.

The treatment of individuals with disabilities in Africa and other underdeveloped countries is not well documented. However, the largest barriers to free universal education for students with disabilities in Nigeria are prejudice and a negative mindset. Some Nigerians still think that illnesses are caused by curses from God (Agbenyega, Deppler & Harvey, 2005). For example, many in Northern Nigeria believe that a birth with a handicap is not a human being. Since the child is a fairy, a spirit, and a snake, they will find a way to get rid of it. Some decide not to kill the child but to hide it because they don't want anybody to know, and they think it's God's way of punishing them for their sin. This is consistent with the findings of Avoke (2002), who notes that negative attitudes and a widespread lack of respect for students with disabilities pose a major barrier to their social and academic involvement in Delta State, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

For a variety of reasons, including a lack of suitable classrooms, special needs teachers, and well-equipped classrooms that can accommodate all student categories during the teaching and learning process, schools are finding it challenging to integrate special needs students with non-special needs students. This leads to discrimination against students as each category is sent to the school that best meets their needs. This essay promotes an inclusive educational environment in which all students, regardless of their unique characteristics, are enrolled in schools and counselors are hired to help each student reach their full potential and develop their skills for both individual and societal advancement. The study also examined how special needs pupils struggle to receive an efficient education and how, in the absence of appropriate professional supervision and direction, this might impede both individual and national growth. In light of this, the study looked at the necessity for school counselors to promote inclusion and special education for the advancement of the country.

Research Questions

1. To what extent would a school counsellor harmonise students in an inclusive and special needs school for national development?
2. What impact do sociocultural elements have on instructors' and students' inclusive education in integrated learning programmes?

Methodology

The design of the study is a descriptive survey. The population of the study comprised 475 public secondary school counsellors in Delta State. The sample size for the investigation is 172 counselors, which was purposively chosen across the three senatorial districts of the state. The questionnaire was the instrument for data collection, and it is titled Imperative of School Counsellors towards Inclusive and Special Needs Education for National Development (ISCTISNEND). Data generated were analyzed using the mean and standard deviation on a mean

benchmark of $\bar{x} \leq 2.50$ as region of rejection and $\bar{x} \geq 2.50$ as region of acceptance of the calculated mean on a 4 point Likert Moderated scale of Strongly Agree (SA) =4, Agree (A) =3, Disagree (D) =2 and Strongly Disagree (SD) =1

Results

Research Question One: To what extent would school counselor harmonized students in an inclusive and special needs school for national development?

Table 1: Mean (\bar{x}) and Standard Deviation (SD) Analysis of Schools Counselors and Harmonization of Students in an Inclusive setting for National Development

s/n	Statement	N	SA	A	D	SD	\bar{x}	St.D	Decision
1	Due to the advantages they offer kids and the advancement of the country, school counsellors are essential in an inclusive environment.	172	300	96	55	56	2.94	1.71	Accepted
2	As part of the holistic school counselling program, school counsellors work to help all students, including those with disabilities, realize their full abilities.	172	270	204	18	10	2.90	1.70	Accepted
3	By supporting learners with their workload, school counselors help students reduce cognitive overload and perform better.	172	220	240	16	9	2.81	1.67	Accepted
4	Counsellors who support kids with special needs in the community and at school help them feel like they belong.	172	300	156	20	30	2.94	1.71	Accepted
5	In order to comprehend a student's unique requirements and the adjustments and modifications required to support them, school counselors discuss and work with staff and family.	172	155	260	45	55	2.99	1.72	Accepted
6	While taking into account the strengths and difficulties brought on by impairments and other special needs, school counsellors are dedicated to assisting all children in realising their potential and meeting or surpassing academic requirements.	172	201	179	45	50	2.76	1.66	Accepted
Grand Mean							2.89	1.70	

According to Table 1, respondents agreed with the statement that aimed to assess the value of school counsellors in inclusive and special needs education for the advancement of the country. Their mean answer is higher than the 2.50 threshold for response acceptance, which reflects this. This leads to the conclusion that school counsellors are essential to achieving national development because of their position in schools, which guarantees that confident people leave school, whether or not they have impairments. This conclusion accords with the studies of Robinson and Roksa (2016) and Egbule (2020). According to them, school counsellors help children with special needs succeed academically and learn how to flourish in other areas of life. It is implied here that children with special needs have a beneficial impact on their surroundings when they thrive in other areas of life. Additionally, according to the ASCA (2012), school counselors are in charge of attending to the needs of every student by providing an all-inclusive school counseling program that aims to support and enhance each student's academic, professional, and social/personal development as well as help each student maximize their personal growth for the benefit of society.

Research Question Two: What impact do sociocultural elements have on instructors' and students' inclusive education in integrated learning programmes?

Table 2a: Social-cultural factors as per teachers' views

Statements	SA (%)	A (%)	D (%)	SD (%)
I treat all the students in my classroom equally	42.9	28.6	14.3	14.3
Inclusive education for students with special needs is a good notion	85.7	14.3	0	0
Students who are not visually impaired do not choose bad behaviour from their visually impaired peers.	14.3	14.3	42.9	28.6
Pupils who are not visually impaired have good attitudes regarding becoming friends with their peers who are.	42.9	42.9	0	14.3
There is no stereotyping in my class.	28.6	28.6	0	42.9
I enjoy teaching learners with visual impairment in my class.	57.2	14.3	14.3	14.3
The fact that their children are in the same class as vision-impaired students is causing some parents distress.	14.3	14.3	57.1	14.3
The majority of parents don't give a damn about the school's integrated curriculum.	28.6	14.3	42.9	14.3
Residential schools for the blind, in my opinion, would be more beneficial to visually impaired students.	14.3	28.6	14.3	42.9
When they are not chosen to respond to questions in class, students with visual impairments act out.	0	28.6	42.9	28.6
The majority of visually challenged students in the classroom exhibit some signs of disengagement.	28.6	57.1	14.3	0

According to the results in Table 2a, all of the sampled teachers believed that inclusive education was a good idea, and six out of seven agreed that learners without Virtually Impairment (VI) have a positive disposition toward friendship with their VI classmates, and another six out of seven agreed that most VI students show some kind of withdrawal in the classroom.

Table 2b: Socio-cultural factors as per views from pupils without VI

Statements	SA (%)	A (%)	D (%)	SD (%)
I have peers who are also visually impaired.	87.5	7.5	0	5.0
I play with students with visual impairment	72.5	20.0	2.5	5.0
Learners who are visually impaired disturb us in class.	5.0	10.0	7.5	77.5
I detest learners with visual impairment.	0	0	5.0	95.0
My parents permit me to play with kids with disabilities at home.	80.0	10.0	2.5	7.5
I like engaging in group activities with visually impaired students.	77.5	17.5	0	5.0
I like learning with kids with visual impairment in my classroom.	85.0	12.5	0	2.5
Students with visual impairment disrupt teachers in the classroom.	5.0	12.5	10.0	72.5
Students who are visually impaired should have their school.	2.5	10.0	5.0	82.5
Learners who are visually impaired throw outbursts over small matter in the classroom and even during play time.	2.5	2.5	37.5	57.5

Children in general education made healthier bonds with their peers who struggled, according to the California Research Institute (1992). A contradictory image is now presented by studies by Thomas and Woods (2003) and Egbule and Egbule (2008). Five of them (71.5%) stated that they treat each student fairly, demonstrating the instructors' passion for instructing VI children. The majority of parents don't worry about this arrangement, according to three (42.9%). The findings support the findings of UNESCO (2009) that parents or guardians were only a little involved in the education of their impaired children. This indicates that the majority of parents share the instructors' concerns about inclusive education.

Table 2c: Socio-cultural factors as per views from pupils with Virtually Impaired (VI)

Statements	SA (%)	A (%)	D (%)	SD (%)
Students in my classroom are friendly.	100.0	0	0	0
I abhor learners in my classroom.	50.0	0	33.3	16.7
Learners in my classroom are helpful.	50.0	50.0	0	0
I fancy working unaided in the classroom.	91.7	8.3	0	0
Learners in my classroom do not like supporting visually impaired (VI) learners.	50.0	25.0	16.7	8.3
My parents permit me to play with my peers who are sighted.	100	0	0	0
My neighbours do not let their children play with me.	25.0	16.7		58.3
I detest my neighbours at home.	16.7	0	0	83.3
My parents do not permit me to eat in front of guests at home.	16.7	0	0	83.3
My parents are satisfied with my school.	100.0	0	0	0
My parents assist me with my homework at home.	83.3	0	0	16.7
My parents ensure that I come to school early.	100.0	0	0	0

Visually impaired learners (VI) also received statements related to the socio-cultural components. These statistics are summarised in Table 2c. The following assertions were agreed upon by all visually impaired students: their parents are happy with their school, their classmates are kind, and their parents allow them to play with their sighted peers. Furthermore, all visually impaired students admitted that they preferred working alone in the classroom, and 75% of them stated that other students did not enjoy assisting individuals with visual impairment. This shows that although VI students appreciated their peers' kindness, they did not receive the support they needed in the classroom, which drove them to prefer working alone. The findings of Thomas and Woods (2003), who proposed that the personal accounts of learners with disabilities give a mixed picture of their experiences in regular education settings, are in line with our results. Others saw their placement in general education as the pivotal moment in their lives for connections, intellectual difficulties, self-worth, and professional success, while others claimed that the trademarks of mainstream life were fear, frustration, humiliation, and solitude.

Conclusion

The importance of school counsellors in promoting inclusive and special needs education for the advancement of the country was examined in the study. The study question that served as the paper's compass was to determine how the function of school counsellors contributes to national development. By inclusive and special needs education, reviews were conducted. A descriptive survey of 172 counsellors from secondary schools around the state was the design used. Based on the inquiry, the paper states that school counsellors are the brain-box for national development due to their invaluable services to students. Students with virtual impairments prefer working alone because they felt that other students in the class were nice, but they were not getting enough help. Students with virtual impairments preferred female teachers over male ones.

Recommendations

1. Accordingly, special needs learners should be considered while establishing educational institutions, and placement counsellors should be required in all schools before they are built. This will guarantee that the students who graduate from these kinds of schools have the proper values and are constructively oriented, enabling them to drive the advancement of society.
2. Additionally, community and educational awareness campaigns should be carried out to eliminate negative views on inclusion.

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