



<https://www.tspeducator.com>

Volume 24; Issue 2; October 2025; Page No. 50-54.

## Inclusive Vocational Education Models for Equitable Empowerment for People with Special Needs

\*<sup>1</sup>Sagiru, J.I., & <sup>2</sup>Danlami, A.

<sup>1</sup>Department of Educational Foundations Gombe State University, Gombe

<sup>2</sup>School of Special Needs Education, Federal College of Education (Technical) Bichi, Kano State

\*Corresponding author email: jummaisagir@gmail.com

### Abstract

Inclusive vocational education is very essential in providing people with special needs skills required for self-reliant and societal development. The paper highlights some characteristics of people living with disabilities and examined the idea of vocational education. It outlined and examined the challenges confronting vocational education models in Nigeria. The paper also discussed some effective vocational education models, which will be employed to empower people living with disabilities in the society and the nation at large. The paper concluded and recommended that the government should provide adequate funding to vocational education programmes in Nigeria, also government, development partners, and other relevant stakeholders should collaborate and provide adequate facilities of vocational education programmes in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Inclusive, Vocational Education Models, Equitable, Empowerment, People with Special Needs

### Introduction

One of the core objectives of education in Nigeria is to ensure that it is both compulsory and a fundamental right for every Nigerian, regardless of gender, religion, ethnicity, background color or any individual. Goal number five of education in the 2013 revision of the National Policy on Education reveals that, education aims to develop the necessary competences, as well as mental, physical and social abilities, to empower the individuals to lead meaningful lives and contribute positively to the society. This shows that education is all inclusive and includes people with special needs. Approximately 15% of people living with disabilities out of 15,000 were enrolled at different levels of education in Nigeria is included into the regular school setting (Joint National Association of Persons with Disabilities, 2022). A person living with disability is an individual who has been determined, to require a special care, attention and accommodation which others do not (Kagan, 2024). In another definition, people with special needs refers to children and adults with developmental, intellectual, emotional, sensory, or motor impairments, or significant chronic illness that require special health surveillance or specialized programmes, interventions, technologies, or facilities to take care of these challenges (Kagan, 2024).

Aggarwal (2011) sees the term special or exceptional person as that which refers to a traitor or to an individual possessing the trait, if the extent of deviation from normal possession of that trait is so great because of it, the individual warrants and receives special attention from his fellows and his behavior responses and activities are thereby affected. The child with special need possesses some characteristics of which a teacher handling such should know as described by Aggarwal (2011) in his work, exceptional children, their education and development.

### Characteristics of People with Special Needs

There are many and different characteristics of people living with disabilities, a few among them are as follows according to Danlami (2020):

- People living with disabilities may have different needs or abilities compared to those without disabilities.
- They can be easily recognized because of their deviation from the normal children.

- The deviation of these children may be in terms of their developmental or acquired traits may be behavioral or developmental. These can be emotional, intellectual, physical, social etc.
- Individuals with special needs need a supportive environment to fully develop and nurture their talents.

Teaching individuals with special needs in an inclusive setting requires:

- I. Sharing of the same classroom, facilities, resources and opportunities with normal individuals
- II. Providing services to the individuals with special needs in the same regular school settings
- III. Individual with special needs should follow the same schedule as their counterparts the so called normal children
- IV. Individual living with disabilities should be involved in academic and non-academic activities in schools
- V. Persons with exceptionalities should be allowed to use all facilities and materials in the school as do the so called normal individuals
- VI. Encouraging friendly relationships between individuals with disabilities and the so called normal individuals
- VII. Attending to parents of learners with special needs about their concern on their children
- VIII. Providing an appropriate individualized programme to take care for individuals with special learning needs (Danlami, 2020).

Since every person in Nigeria has right to education, including person with disability and special needs, apart from mainstream education in schools, these people also have options to enroll in a vocational school available in any state in Nigeria where they happen to be.

### Concept of Vocational Education

Numerous scholars have attempted to define vocational education as it relates to individuals with special needs; one of such is that of Abdullah, Yassin and Abdullah (2015), who defined vocational education for people with special needs as something that should remain consistent during the transformation of vocational education under the Education Development Plan (MECC, 2013-2025). This is due to the fact that the skills and hand-on training they acquire during their studies will enable them to adjust effectively to the workplace and also empower them to be able to become productive to themselves and the society at large (Niemi & Mielola, 2017).

A clear example of vocational education for individuals with special needs can be found in Finland, where most pursue post-compulsory education in the vocational sector after completing mainstream schooling. (Niemi & Mietola, 2017). Considerable efforts have been dedicated to making post-secondary education accessible to children with special needs, which remains a core element of the inclusive education policy. In Finland, children with special needs also have the option of enrolling in special groups within vocational institutions and colleges if they require more extensive support than their peers without special needs. This approach is highly effective in ensuring that individuals with special needs can learn in a more supportive and productive environment, while also significantly reducing dropouts rate.

Vocational education refers to skill-oriented programs aims at equipping learners with practical abilities, typically introduced at the lower levels of education. It centered on preparing individuals for specific occupations and entry into clearly defined career paths (Reko & Maxwell, 2016). The Nigerian government in her efforts to empower all her citizens introduces 15 trades in the new basic education curriculum which is aimed at developing the skills and employability of graduates from primary and junior secondary schools (Mamman, 2024). This development is expected to be ready and implemented in September of 2025. This also will be beneficial to both the so-called normal children and individuals with special needs in an inclusive setting.

Vocational education in Nigeria has its roots in the earliest stages of human society. It existed in traditional forms, where individuals engaged in work as a means of survival. It was hand-on and primarily taught within the family unit, following indigenous or traditional vocational systems, the Nigerian people acquired diverse skills through traditional crafts and trades such as weaving, sculpturing, blacksmithing, carving, farming, fishing, cattle rearing, hair plaiting, dress making, bead weaving, leatherwork, pottery, brick making, basket weaving, raffia works, mat weaving among others. However, it gained wider recognition and well prominence with the introduction of the National Policy on Education (NPE, 1970) by the Nigerian government. The revised version of the National Policy on Education (NPE, 2013) affirms that technical and vocational education are broad terms encompassing areas of the educational process that, alongside general education, involving the study of technologies and related sciences and the acquisition of practical skills, attitudes, understanding and knowledge relating to occupations in various sectors of economic and social life (NPE, 2013). The objectives of the technical and vocational education, as outlined in the National Policy on Education, are to:

- a) Develop skilled manpower in the applied sciences, technology and business, especially at the craft and technical levels
- b) provide individuals with the technical expertise and vocational skills essential for agricultural, commercial and economic growth.
- c) train individuals and provide them with the skills essential for self-reliance and economic development (NPE, 2013).

These goals can be achieved through technical colleges which the government has established in an inclusive setting in almost all states of the federation where all learners be it, the so called normal or those with special needs.

In a paper presented in a conference by Muhammad, Muchamad & Purba (2020), it asserted that people with special needs have great potential if they can be developed based on the skills they like. Therefore, secondary school education should be able to provide facilities that can develop the skills of individuals with special needs. The provision of vocational services is usually provided according to the interests and talents of learners with special needs. The vocational service programmes in secondary schools for individuals with special needs can be in the form of culinary art; fashion; cosmetic; massage; computer and informatics engineering; simple automotive; art; plantation fisheries; and entrepreneurship. Schools can develop their own independence options according to regional points, students' characteristics, interests, and talents of students with special needs.

### **Problems Faced by Vocational Education Models in Nigeria**

Vocational education models in Nigeria face numerous challenges. Some of the key issues according to Okoye and Onyenwe (2016) include:

- i. **Inadequate funding of vocational education:** Insufficient funding for vocational education institutions has led to the production of underprepared graduates, as there are inadequate resources to construct and maintain workshops, laboratories, or acquire modern equipment. Vocational education is often understaffed due to insufficient funding, which results in the inability to employ experienced and skilled teachers. Those who are employed often leave the teaching profession prematurely due to poor remuneration, opting instead to more lucrative careers.
- ii. **Inadequate facilities:** The current facilities for vocational education programs as are insufficient both in quantitatively and qualitatively, and many are outdated. In summary, this situation is partly responsible for the difficulty in effectively conducting practical experiments for individuals with special needs. This challenge also hinders effective teaching and research in science and technology, resulting in the production of insufficient and poorly prepared vocational education graduates, thereby weakening their contribution to vocational and socio-economic development in Nigeria.
- iii. **Brain Drain:** Is the movement of vocational education teachers and lecturers from Universities to other professions in Nigeria. These professionals are increasingly leaving the vocational education sector in search of better conditions of service such as improved remuneration, job security, and career development opportunities (Okoye and Onyenwe, 2016).
- iv. **Staff training and retention:** The ongoing training of academic staff is essential to continuously enhance the quality of their output. The training may be obtained either within the country or abroad. Local training is typically more affordable than training abroad, but it tends to be more challenging due to limited facilities, insufficient learning materials and distractions caused by the pressure to fulfill various responsibilities. Oversees training demands significant foreign exchange, but it offers a conducive environment that supports achieving succeed in a shorter period. However, over the time, it has consistently been challenging to ensure that trainees return to their home countries after completing their studies.
- v. **Curriculum of vocational education:** The curriculum for subjects with practical contents is typically structured with approximately 67% allocated to theoretical instruction and 33% to hands-on workshop session. one of the key challenges in designing an effective curriculum for vocational education is equipping children with special needs to transition from traditional methods to the modern paradigm of information and communication technology in technical practice.
- vi. **Apathy of Political holders' /law makers:** Education in general including vocational education programs, has been severely neglected in Nigeria. one of the biggest challenges facing vocational education is convincing lawmakers of the importance of prioritizing the program in resource allocation. Various strategies have been proposed to achieve positive outcomes, including lobbying, involving vocational educators in governance, and persuasive engagement. However, the government continues to exhibit a biased and unbalanced approach toward the proper development of vocational education in Nigeria (Okoye and Onyenwe, 2016).
- vii. **Nigerian Value system:** In Nigeria today, there is an excessive emphasis on university qualifications, often without considering whether the degree holder actually possess the necessary knowledge and skill. In contrast, in advanced societies, individuals with vocational education qualification are highly respected and valued for their practical skills and expertise. In fact, the value system in those countries is based on an individual's skills and knowledge, rather than the number of academic degrees they hold. In the public service, graduates of vocational education often face discrimination, limited career advancement opportunities compared to their counterparts from traditional academic background. As a result, secondary school leavers and their parents tend to prefer university education over vocational

education, viewing it as a more promising path for career growth and social recognition (Okoye and Onyenwe, 2016).

### **Inclusive Vocational Education Models**

There are various inclusive vocational education models for teaching trade skills to individual with special needs. Here are some of the most effective models and approaches for inclusive vocational education for people with special needs according to Oliveira (2024):

- a) **Dual system:** One of the most widely recognized and successful inclusive vocational education models is its double model, which combines classroom learning with on-the-job training. The model covers a range of trade skills from carpentry to nursing. People with special needs in dual system spent part of their week in a vocational school, where they learn the theoretical and practical aspects of their chosen trade, and part of their skills under the supervision of a mentor. The dual system ensures that children with special needs acquired both the vocational and the social competencies needed for their profession, and that they are exposed to the latest vocations and standards of their workplace.
- b) **Competency-based model:** Another effective inclusive vocational education model is the competency-based model, which focuses on the outcomes and performance of the learners rather than the inputs and processes of the curriculum. The competency-based model is based on the notion that learners should be able to demonstrate what they can do with their skills, rather than how much they know about them. The competency-based model is more flexible and adaptable to the needs and preferences of the learners, as well as the demands and problems of the labour market. Children with special needs in competency-based model can progress at their own pace, choose their own learning methods, and receive feedback and recognition for their achievements.
- c) **School-based Model:** This is another effective inclusive vocational education model, it is a school-based, which integrates vocational and academic education within a single institution. The school-based model is common, countries like Finland, Norway, and Australia, where vocational education is seen as pathway to higher education and lifelong learning. Children with special needs in the school-based model follow a curriculum that combines general and vocational subjects, and that allows them to pursue further studies or qualifications if they wish. The school-based model fosters a culture of learning innovation, and prepares children with special needs for a variety of careers and roles in the society.
- d) **Project-based models:** the next inclusive vocational education model is the project-based model, which engages learners in authentic and meaningful tasks that simulate real-world scenarios and problems. The project-based model is based on the principles of constructivism and experiential learning, which emphasize the active and collaborative construction of knowledge and skills. Children with special needs in project-based model work in teams to plan, execute, and evaluate projects that address a specific challenge or need in their trade or community. The project-based model develops learners' creativity, critical thinking, communication, and team-work skills, as well as their vocational skills.
- e) **Online model:** Online inclusive vocational education model is the online model, which leverages the power and potential of digital technologies to deliver vocational education anytime, anywhere, and to anyone. The online model is especially relevant and convenient for children with special needs who have limited access to traditional vocational education institutions, or who prefer to learn at their own time and place. Children with special needs in online model can access a variety of online courses, resources, and platforms that cover a range of trade, skills, from web development to graphic design. The online model also enables children with special needs to connect and interact with instructors, mentors, and peers from different locations and backgrounds, and to benefit from their feedback and support (Oliveira, 2024).

### **Conclusion**

There are many and different ways of empowering children with special needs in Nigeria. The most effective one is inclusive vocational education models. The models equipped children with special needs with vocational training and skills that will help them become self-reliant. They include dual system model, competence-based model, school-based model, project-based model, and online model. By acquiring vocational training through these models, individuals with special needs can contribute their quota for the development of their society as well as the nation at large.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the challenges faced by vocational education models identified by the paper, it proffered the following recommendations:

1. Government should provide adequate funding to vocational education programme in Nigeria.
2. Government, development partners, and other relevant stakeholders should collaborate to supply adequate facilities and materials for career and technical education programmes in the country.
3. The government ought to supply more training to vocational educators in Nigeria.

4. Government should provide more appropriate curriculum on skills-based training in the country.
5. The government ought to pay more attention to vocational education programmes in terms of resources allocation.

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