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Preschool Environment in Nigeria**

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Teaching and Learning in an Inclusive Preschool Environment in Nigeria

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Abstract

One of the key Importance of the basic education as stated by the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Programme of the Federal Government of Nigeria is regular primary education and literacy education, where attention is focused on special needs education, mostly in the area of basic education for the nomadic groups and the girl-child. Little or no special consideration is given to the education of children with disabilities, especially children in their early years (preschoolers). This study therefore, examined teaching and learning in an inclusive preschool environment in Nigeria, discussing inclusion in preschool/early childhood education, features of inclusion in high quality early childcare services and useful strategies for inclusion in preschool classrooms. The study recommended that early childhood educators should develop positive attitudes towards inclusion in preschools, preschools in Nigeria should adopt inclusion and the government should organize in-service training for preschool teachers on inclusion among other things.

Introduction

In the world today, there are special schools that exist alongside regular ones. These are for learners with one form of impairment or special needs learners such as hearing impairment, visual impairment, learning disability, physical and health impairment, mild mental retardation and nomads. Also included are the gifted and talented. Many of these children worldwide experience different forms of discrimination and exclusion from schooling based on the fundamental factor of their impairment. Several other factors such as gender difference, cultural beliefs, ignorance, and poverty are advanced factors apart from the impairment of the learners. UNESCO (2006) admitted that an estimated 140 million children who are out of school are having majority being girls and children with different levels of impairment. Among them, 90% live in lower middle-income countries with 80% and above are in Africa. There are countless others within the school system not receiving quality education.

However, there is a breach of the provisions of the international treaty, the Convention on the Right of the Child (CRC). The CRC unilaterally declared that education is the right of all children irrespective of gender, socio-economic status, disability, culture, or religion which is a direct reinforcement of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. Thus, the desire to fulfill the provisions of the CRC as well as the Education for All (EFA) goals is the basis for the Inclusive Education Programme.

In recent years, the idea of establishing inclusive schools is been projected worldwide, especially in the wake of the Salamanca Declaration of 1994, which was endorsed by 92 countries in a modern term is referred to as inclusive education. According to the declaration schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other conditions. Which includes disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities and children from other disadvantaged or marginalized areas, groups or environment.

Inclusion Education and The Relevance in Teaching and Learning

The term inclusion describes educating a child with special education needs full-time in a regular classroom (Cole, Waldron, & Majd, 2004; Haager & Klingner, 2005). It implies that a child who has a disability, either; cognitive, social, emotional, or physical disability, is given education in the same teaching environment as his/her counterpart who is without a disability. The inclusion method is a basic model where both disabled and abled students are being educated within the same classroom. Inclusive education, is a type of education where regular (conventional) and special needs learners stay together in the same academic environment and classroom for learning. However, this kind of education (inclusion) comes with several challenges. The school authorities and teachers need to provide learning opportunities/activities and ensure that the environment is conducive for

meaningful and intentional engagement of regular students and those with special needs. Weiner (2003) opined that the teachers' moral obligation to be committed in expecting that all students meet a high standard of achievement and to provide an excellent learning environment is paramount in inclusive schools. Special needs students in regular education classrooms participate in classroom instruction at the same level as the regular students. It is obvious that in inclusive classrooms, students learn in different ways.

Although they are some evidence of positive effects of inclusion on students with disabilities, some opponents report that there is less evidence of the overall benefit of inclusion on the classmates of pupils with disabilities (Fletcher, 2006). The main challenge with inclusion is that mainstreaming had not been complemented by changes in the organization of the ordinary school, its curriculum and teaching, and learning strategies (UNESCO, 2008a). In Nigeria, much emphasis has not been given to special need education, with particular focus on inclusive learning environment. No concrete step has been taken regarding inclusive education in Nigeria. Even at the policy level, integration remains the focus of planning a special education programmes. However, professional associations concerned with the education of people with special need, have been addressing inclusive education in the country. For instance, inclusive education was one of the major issues examined at the 12th Annual National Conference of the National Council for Exceptional Children held at Minna, Niger State, in August 2002. In the keynote address presented at the conference, Obani (2002) argued, "The old special education system with its restrictive practices cannot successfully address these problems (of special needs children). The answer lies in inclusion or inclusive schooling, in changing and recognizing the entire school system to accept all children and cater to their varied 'special' or 'ordinary' learning needs and difficulties".

Furthermore, the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme of the Federal Government has put more emphasis on basic education, specifically regular primary education and literacy education, where attention is focused on special needs education, mostly in the area of basic education for the nomadic groups and the girl-child. Little or no special consideration is being given to the education of children with disabilities, especially children in their early years (preschoolers). The question now is how can inclusion be adopted in preschool classrooms in Nigerian? This study, therefore, discussed inclusion in preschool classrooms and strategies that we can use to achieve success.

Inclusion in Preschool/Early Childhood Education

An inclusive preschool serves and educates children with disabilities in the same environment as their peers making it possible for all the children to participate in the same activities and routines. Children with different disabilities, which include: blind, and low vision, deaf and hard of hearing, cerebral palsy communication and language disorders, anxiety, autism, developmental delay, physical disability, and taught in the same environment together with their peers without disabilities. It is a child's right to attend a school in an inclusive setting. There is an accessible learning environment in an inclusive preschool. Children access materials in multiple ways, engage with materials, and express themselves. Inclusion is mostly suited to the preschool classroom. This is because, the preschool curriculum is flexible, and the children have the ability to respond to a range of learning styles through play where the teachers observe them. Observation and assessment is an integral part of the learning cycle in early education. Teachers work in teams to reflect together on learning to create a purposeful, and engaging environment. They use their observations to improve learning and create the next steps.

Features of inclusion in Early Childhood Programs

The features of inclusion in high quality early childcare services are; **access, participation, and support** (Division for Early Childhood (DEC) & National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), (2009))

Access means providing the children in early childhood programs with a wide range of learning opportunities, activities and environments that accommodate and respond to individual differences. This can be done by:

1. Ensuring that all items and materials are reachable and accessible to the children and removing barriers
2. Presenting different ways to engage with toys, materials and activities
3. Offering different ways for children to convey what they know
4. Offering adaptable learning opportunities for children who have diverse ways or styles of learning
5. Using strategies and tools, that support a child's play and learning
6. Making individual modifications and/or adaptations to help a child's learning

In participation, we use different teaching approaches that promote children engagement, learning, interaction and a sense of belonging. This can be done by:

1. Planning activities for children based on their interests and abilities
2. Offering opportunities for children to interact and work together
3. Providing support for the children and guiding them as they learn or acquire a new skill
4. Using naturally occurring activities and routines to teach specific skills to a child alongside their peers

Support has to do with the broader early childhood system and services that help parents and providers in promoting the practice of inclusion, including the opportunities accessible for collaborating and for building partnerships. Support may consist:

1. Discovering Professional Development (PD) opportunities for you and/or your staff in order to learn about best practices for supporting children with various abilities
2. Working together with parents or other service professionals who play vital functions in the child's life
3. Looking out for training in order to acquire knowledge that will help you develop the way you work with the children in your program

Creating an Inclusive Preschool Environment

Preschoolers are active learners. They learn about the world around them, explore, and solve problems, using the materials and learning opportunities in their environment. To create learning environments that are responsive to children's differing abilities, interests, and developmental levels, inclusion is the key. Doing so ensures that children are engaging in the learning experiences offered to them. Also, the space has to be welcoming and sensitive to children's cultural and linguistic characteristics to foster an effective learning environment (Laser, 2009). Helping children to have a sense of belonging is essential to inclusion. It is not enough to just share physical space; we have to create meaningful relationships and experiences to fully include infants and toddlers with disabilities. This will help the child, the other children, and the family benefit. Creating a truly inclusive environment also include fostering the social and emotional environment (<https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/infant-toddler-resource-guide/inclusive-environments>. Assessed on 7/12/2020)

Environmental practices encompass the following:

Physical environment: This refers to; space, equipment, and materials.

Social environment includes; interactions with peers, siblings, family members.

Temporal environment refers to sequence and length of routines and activities

Environments also comprise of developmentally appropriate schedules, lesson plans, and experiences. Staff and families can alter environments to make necessary accommodations to support all children, particularly those at risk for or diagnosed with disabilities.

A preschool learning environment takes into consideration the indoor environment, the outdoor play provision and the emotional environment.

The indoor environment

The indoor environment comprises a range of materials and activities to ensure independence for the lowest functioning and challenge for the highest functioning. This involves open ended materials such as clay, paint, blocks or pretend play.

Materials are made accessible to the children; they will know where to go to obtain and return them.

Age-appropriate equipment, materials, supplies, and physical spaces, support effective, engaging, and accessible environments.

The Outdoor Environment

Give all children opportunities to engage in the outdoor environment. Outdoor play should include opportunities for physical activity, sensory play and peace, and relaxation.

The Emotional Environment

The learning environment should support participation, be nurturing, and promote friendship, and respect.

The environment has to be structured to support interaction and accomplish goals.

Also there should be a collaboration with other professionals. Activities should build on children's interests and extend learning

Teachers should demonstrate flexible thinking

Routines should be predictable. This includes a regular timetable for the day but also predictable routines within routines, for example, keeping the same routine for circle time and within that there might be a predictable routine for calendar. It should be inclusive all day long. All teachers should interact and share interactions and teaching of all students, sharing expertise, and providing instructional generalization.

Teachers should be reflective and work together to discuss strategies to support the learning of individuals and the group. They should also monitoring outcomes and implement them into the programme. Collect data on how the practice is delivered and the effects and meet regularly as a team to review and plan. Always be flexible and ready to change.

There should be a strong partnership with parents, building on the belief of the parent, as the child's first educator.

Play in an Inclusive Preschool Environment

Play is the best way children learn. It is how every child learns about their world. It helps children learn: social skills, fine and gross motor skills, language and communication, cause and effect, pre-literacy and math skills, creativity, etc. The open-ended nature of play, encourages, choice, naturally caters to different learning styles and supports teachable moments as they occur. Inclusion is not a set of practicalities; it is an attitude, a set of values. Every child learns best through play in an inclusive preschool classroom. But some children may need toys or materials to be adapted or modified because of their unique needs and challenges, to fully engage in play opportunities

Adapting Toys and play materials

Adapt a toy or material to meets the need of the child, NOT the disability label.

Adaptation is any change or adjustment in the makeup or function of an item that results in a better fit. For toys, it means making adjustments or modifications to allow children with different abilities to interact and play with the item in a developmentally appropriate and significant way.

There are different ways to adapt toys and materials for inclusive preschool classrooms, these include;

Confining: it has to do with adapting the area around the toy; to keep the toy within reach of a child with a disability. A toy becomes unusable or frustrating for a child with physical disability or a visual impairment if it is out of the child's reach. A tray with a raised edge or lip can be a workable adaptation or item to confine a toy.

Stabilizing or securing: Stabilizing entails making an adaptation or modification to keep a toy in place or stop it from tipping over without restraint. A child with low muscle tone or limited muscle control will be frustrated and lose interest while using a toy that moves or falls over easily. Creating a wide base for a toy is one of the ways of adaptation to confine such toys.

Extending or enlarging: Extending or enlarging means adding something to a toy, to make it less difficult for a child to grasp or use. For example, extending or enlarging pieces or parts of a toy or item for children who have problem in carrying out fine motor tasks, can make such toys easier to grasp, push or turn.

Enhancing or adding: Enhancing implies adding something, for example color or texture, to a toy so that a child can easily see or feel it or making the toy more attractive to the child. Likely adaptations or ways to enhance a toy are: adding strips of sandpaper, or other textures, to tops of cars or trucks, handles, sides of blocks, knobs for puzzles, painting a with bright colors, etc.

Simplifying or reducing: Simplifying has to do with, removing the number of pieces needed to complete a task, reducing the steps, or replacing pieces for a simpler fit. Adaptations to simplify a toy include; reducing the number of pieces accessible to a child. For instance, mask a section of a puzzle and provide the child with just those pieces that are showing.

Whenever one is adapting or modifying a toy for a child, the goal you want the child to achieve during play should be kept in mind. It could be to interact with friends and learn social skills, to practice fine motor skills, or to work on persistence and remaining on task. Any adaptations one makes should ultimately support the result or goal. Make sure your adaptations do not interfere or get in the way of the child's play. Adaptations and modifications are meant to support learning, not to hinder it (<https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/youngstar/pdf/ys-2019-20/adapting-toys.pdf>. Assessed on 2/12/2020f).

Useful strategies for Inclusion in Preschool Classrooms

The following strategies are effective in inclusive preschool classrooms (<https://allplaylearn.org.au/early/educator/inclusive-educator-strategies/>; Head start/Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center, 2017)

Attitude

An educator's attitudes have a great impact on children; this also includes children with disabilities. Educators should always be caring and understanding. They should think of things from the child's perspective.

Language

Language is very essential in preschool classrooms; therefore, an educator should be careful of how he/she speaks with the parents of a child with a disability, and the child as well. Words can fortify negative stereotypes and constraint expectations. Ask each child and family what they prefer and use their language.

Know the child

Learn to know each child as unique person with their own strengths and interests. An understanding of a child's likes and dislikes can provide starting points to engage them in the program. For instance, educators can include a child's favorite colors, characters, or animals in designing experiences. Using a child's interests can inspire and help them learn new things in a known context, and bond them with other children.

Create regular routines to promote daily wellbeing

Use likely routines throughout the day but vary tasks within the structure to sustain interest throughout the day. All the children will benefit when you use visual timetables, stories about social situations, adult-led learning, and guided play and learning, particularly, those who get restless or fearful or need support with unexpected change.

Use each child's unique strengths and abilities

Every child has unique strengths and abilities. Provide opportunities for the child to use his/her strength/abilities, resulting in the child achieving experience confidence and success in their development and learning. For instance, a child might be very good at construction but will not be interested in drawing. Permit the child to construct a 'zoo' or any other thing they like, then help them draw the 'animals' that go in it. Telling a child to teach a skill to his/her fellow children can also strengthen their abilities and improve their self-esteem.

Take a child's learning style into consideration

Try to know how each child learns best. Monitor if a child is mostly involved during visual, verbal, musical, hands on / kinesthetic, social, solitary, active, or problem-solving/logical experiences. Creating experiences in line with children's learning style can help engage and inspire them learn.

Have the equivalent expectations

Have high and similar anticipations for all children. Adjust the program to every child's developmental challenges, strengths and abilities. The program should be challenging, yet, they able to complete the activity.

Encourage children's participation in the program

Help children to fully participate in the program. For example, if each person is expected to pack up at the close of the day, a child with a disability should also assist. There may be need to give them more time or a task that equals their abilities and strengths.

Employ evidence-based strategies

When making modifications to adopt the inclusion of a child in an early childhood education and care setting, apply evidence-based strategies. Evidence-based strategies have been tried in early childhood education and care settings or other significant settings. They are confirmed to lead to valuable improvements for children with disabilities or developmental challenges.

Modify experiences to be as inclusive as possible

Modifying experiences can help children to concentrate and learn. Give frequent breaks also. Provide a safe space (physically and emotionally)

Try giving positive feedback and correcting children immediately, when they are learning a task or behavior. Gradually reduce the corrections as the children become more competent.

Give lots of practice opportunities

To help children learn to use the skill they have acquired in other situations and places, give them time to practice such skills in different settings and with different materials.

Promote child interaction

Children get to know, appreciate one another and build friendships through playing and working together. Children can also learn by watching others. Think of ways in which you can assist a child to interact with others in a group.

Support social, emotional, and problem-solving skill development

Encourage children to develop social behaviors by asking another child to play, sharing a toy, or waiting their turn.

Collaborate with others

Connect with parents regularly about their child's distinctive strengths, preferences, and abilities. Speak to them about the support they feel their child needs and the best methods of communication.

Benefits of inclusive preschool programs

Research reveals that all children benefit from inclusion. By using modifications and specialized instruction, children can be successfully included in programs. Inclusion is not more expensive and children do not need to be "ready" for it. Families of all children largely have positive notions about inclusion. Right from the Start (2019) and [Division for Early Childhood \(DEC\) & National Association for the Education of Young Children \(NAEYC\) Joint Position Statement \(2009\)](#), reported that inclusive programs support children development and learning in the following areas;

Social and emotional learning

- Children with disabilities get more opportunities to build friendships in inclusive preschools. These friendships help to maximize engagement as they children explore and learn new things.
- Promotes children's academic achievement, independent living, and adult mental health
- Gives children a sense of belonging and value for their abilities and potential
- Inclusion encourages acceptance and support from normally developing peers. It gives children opportunities to learn skills, values, and attitudes related to human differences (Farrell, 2000)
- Increases self-esteem, confidence, autonomy and leadership skills of normally developing children(Fuchs, Fuchs, & Burish, 2000).

Language, communication and learning

- Inclusion improves language skills in children with severe disabilities (Rafferty, Piscitelli and Boethcher , 2003)
- In an inclusive preschool, children with disabilities get encouragement from other children and learn directly from others.

1. Children without disabilities also make similar developmental gains in regular and inclusive preschools (Odom, DeKlyen, & Jenkins, 1984, Strain & Bovey, 2011)

Conclusion

Inclusion is very crucial in preschool since early childhood education lays the foundation for lifelong learning. Every child should be allowed to be educated in an inclusive setting. It is their right. Inclusion promotes children's development. No studies comparing the social impact of segregation and inclusive environments have shown segregation to be superior. Early childhood educators' attitudes towards inclusion have a great impact on its success. They have to develop positive attitudes. There are many strategies that are effective in inclusive classrooms. Also, we need to make adequate collaborations to achieve impressive results in inclusive preschool classrooms.

Recommendations

The study recommends the following:

1. Early childhood educators should develop positive attitudes towards inclusion in preschools.
2. Preschools in Nigeria should adopt inclusion; do not leave any child out.
3. The government should organize in-service training for preschool teachers on inclusion in preschools.
4. The government should carry out proper supervision and monitoring to ensure that preschools accommodate and make appropriate provisions for children with disabilities.

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