

**JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS PUPILS WITH DISABILITIES AND THEIR ACCESS TO
QUALITY EDUCATION**

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Abstract

The principal focus of this paper is on children with obvious physical or neurological learning disabilities and how the school leadership affects their quality of education. The study used quantitative (positivist) approach and employed the natural-science inquiry paradigm. The sample comprised of one hundred and sixty two (162) participants selected from in-service student teachers from the University of Nigeria Nsukka, who were taught by the researcher Educational Management courses. Data were collected using quantitative methods mainly questionnaires. The questionnaire was designed by the researcher. From the research findings, it is certain that many participants perceive parents' educational background as having an impact on access and quality education for children with disabilities. In some tribes in Nigerian and disability is strongly linked to superstition. Having a disabled child in the family means a curse or bewitched. Such families tend to hide their children and deprive the children of the assistance that could have been provided by government.

Keywords; Education, physically disability, secondary school students, and families

Introduction

It is mandatory that all students irrespective of capability should have access to quality education. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 26(1) states that everyone has a right for education. The benefits of having quality education are that education is able to adapt to the changing needs of the country as the world around us changes; and spearhead the development of human resource and the country's economy. Research has indicated that quality education has benefited public health, demography, economy, human rights, governance and political stability through increasing people understanding (OECD, 2001).

The Nigerian education system has taken great strides in the welfare of students with disabilities (Dart, 2007). This is evidenced by erecting special schools, reviewing the national curriculum to cater for the disabled and special training for teachers to handle children with abnormality; and the policy of inclusive education is among the top priorities in the provision of education for all. Students who passed a certain criteria to determine the disability are sent to these special schools or centres. Those who are physically or mentally impaired, but do not fall within the set impairment range are left to be integrated in the mainstream education.

These disabled students are exposed to the same conditions, same infrastructure, same curriculum and write the same examination together with the normal students. Under such conditions do we expect the physically and mentally challenged students to acquire the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes for their life-long learning? Can educators and facilitators proudly claim that the physically and mentally disadvantaged students in mainstream schools receive quality education? The focus of this article is to investigate how the school leadership can have impact on improving access and quality education for students with disability in the mainstream.

Statement of the problem

The practice of special education in Nigeria began from an inclusive education premise. The 2008 National Policy on Education (Federal Ministry of Education, 2008) makes inclusive education the norm rather than the exemption. There is no structure in place for early detection and identification of children with disabilities and special needs at the governmental level. The responsibility of bringing children with special needs to schools rests squarely on the shoulders of the parents. The principal focus is on children with obvious physical or neurological learning disabilities. When such children are brought to school, they are assigned to special education teachers in self-contained resource settings for intensive teaching and learning of the necessary socialization and other transition skills needed to move them from the self-contained resource setting to completely inclusive classrooms in as short a time period as possible. These policy advocates for access and quality education for all citizens including those with disability. Despite the Ministry of Education and Skills Development efforts to make education accessible to all including the physically and mentally challenged students, the implementation of the above policies seems to be a nightmare. There is evidence of some students with disability who are not accessing education (Raditloaneng, 2011). If this tendency of poor implementation of government policies persists it will frustrate the ideals of ensuring that all citizens of Nigeria including those with special needs have equality of educational opportunity as envisioned in The 2008 National Policy on Education. It is against this background that a study on the school leadership capability to influence access and quality education for students with disability in ordinary schools was conducted.

The research questions

The following research questions guided the study.

- a) What influence does school leadership have on access and quality education for students with disability?
- b) What are the in-service teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards the integration and inclusion of students with disability in mainstream schools?
- c) What strategies can school leadership implement to enhance access and quality education for students with disability?

Prior to the 1980s, the education of children with disabilities in Nigeria was through humanitarian and voluntary private organizations, who were often Christian missions. These organizations set up residential facilities and provide rudimentary services for the education of children and persons with disabilities (Garuba, 2003). During this period there was no federal or state involvement in the education of children with disabilities. The few available humanitarian and voluntary organization centers were able to accommodate the educational needs of only a handful of children with disabilities. In most cases the parents of children with disabilities kept them at home and are left without any formal education or training in appropriate skills to assure transition to independent living. In Nigeria, the Federal Government holds a major responsibility for public education, at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels; in terms of learning, learning outcomes, and funding. States are only responsible for funding and supporting the universities and tertiary educational institutions they establish. The Federal Government establishes and funds most of the institutions of higher learning. Therefore, policy changes in education are principally driven by the Federal Government.

The Federal Government of Nigeria began paying tacit attention to the issue of persons with disabilities following the aftermath of the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1969) which left the country with a critical number of persons with disabilities. With increasing crude-oil revenue, the government also began the taking over of missionary and religious schools with the intent to move towards universal basic education for all children, including children with special needs. Starting from the 1970s, some of the federal government tertiary institutions, like University of Ibadan, University of Jos, and Federal Advanced Teachers College, Special Education (FATC) began offering diploma and degree programs in Special Education (Garuba, 2003). In 1977, the federal government released a National Policy on Education which contained some provisions for special education including the idea of equalizing education for all children irrespective of their physical, mental, and emotional state (Garuba, 2003). One of the first states in Nigeria to move forward with the dictates for the education of children with special needs in the 1977 National Policy on Education was Plateau

State; by enacting the Plateau State Handicapped Law in 1981 which makes the education of children with disabilities compulsory with a provision for the rehabilitation of adults with disabilities.

Like in most developing countries, serious governmental policies in Nigeria are driven by international trends, treaties, agreements, manifestos, and directives. In the arena of education, national policies are driven by international organization manifestos especially those from the United Nations International Children and Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nation Educational Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declarations. From the late 1980s UNICEF began to take on the issue of education for children as a central goal. In pursuance of this goal, the organization produced a binding international instrument known as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989. The Convention sets out 54 articles and two Optional Protocols. Part I, Article 2, Section 1 of the Convention states.

“State Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status” (Office of the United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights, <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>).

Also of significant importance are the UNESCO Declaration on Education for All (EFA) in 1990, the Salamanca Statement Framework for Action 1994, and the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, in 2000. All of these form the coherent force that influenced the adoption of national policies on the education of children with disabilities in Nigeria. As result of political instability, Nigeria was unable to formulate a coherent national policy on education, especially the education of children with special needs until 1999 when a democratic system of government began to take root again; following three decades of military dictatorship. In 1999 the Universal Basic Education (UBE) policy was adopted and enacted into law in 2004 as the UBE Act. The UBE Act provides for free basic education for all children from ages 5-16. However the actual provision for funding of the education of children with special needs, as a national education policy under the UBE Act, was not put into effect until 2008. This was when the policy of Inclusive Education was officially and formally adopted as an integral part of the UBE policy.

Methodology

The study used quantitative (positivist) approach and employed the natural-science inquiry paradigm. The paradigm portrays that there is a reality out there which is tangible, stable and apprehensible; and can be investigated on a large number of participants resulting in the finding that can be analysed statistically and pruned for the purpose of generalisation. This ideology corroborate the idea that we inhabit a relatively stable, uniform, and coherent world that can measured, understood and generalized about (Gay & Airasian, 2000). This suggests that in order to understand the reasons for a small number of students with disabilities in schools; the existing information can be sourced basing on the feelings and opinions of the researched.

Participants

The sample comprised of one hundred and sixty two (162) participants selected from in-service student teachers from the University of Nigeria Nsuka, who were taught by the researcher Educational Management courses. Consent was required from the participants and they agreed to be involved in the study. The informants represented all cadres of all teaching fraternity. Out of one hundred and sixty two participants, fourteen were the School Heads, eight were Deputy School Heads, six were Heads of Departments, fifty-seven were Senior Teachers and seventy-seven were teachers. One hundred and twelve were females and fifty were males. The respondents' age ranged between twenty-six and fifty- four years. As regard qualification all participants had a diploma in education. Convenience sampling was used to select the respondents. Creswell (2005) describes convenience sampling as a procedure where “the researcher selects the participants because they are willing and available to be studied”. As such convenience sampling was favoured because the participants were the researcher's students and readily available.

Data collection techniques

Data were collected using quantitative methods mainly questionnaires. The questionnaire was designed by the researcher. The questionnaire was favoured because it tends to be more reliable than an interview because it avoids face to face interaction, thus reducing bias (Cohen, Manion, & Morris, 2007) and less

costly in terms of money and time. The questions were both open-ended and closed-ended. The questions were piloted using teachers, senior teachers, a deputy School Head, a Head of Department and a School Head from a neighbouring junior secondary school. Piloting was tried out for purposes of improving the questions' ability to do the job for which they are needed. After the corrections were made the questionnaire was ready to be used in the main research. The researcher administered the questionnaires.

Data analysis

Data analysis adopted a computer package form of data analysis normally used for quantitative research. The package is known as the Statistical Package for Social science version 19. The Likert scale analysis followed Oppenheim's (1996) methods of working with the frequencies and percentages of the levels of agreement and disagreement of the respondents. The data collected were represented in the form of frequency, tables and percentages. As for open – ended questions code frame was used to interpret the findings.

Results

The findings of the study are shown in the table below

Statement	Participants Responses									
	S/D	%	D	%	A	%	S/A	%	N	%
Parent support										
1. Parents hide their children from the public.	0	0	5	3	45	28	112	69	162	100
2. Parents have negative attitudes towards disability.	0	0	17	11	57	35	88	54	162	100
3. Lack of parents' education contributes to children inability to access to quality education.	0	0	3	2	10	6	149	92	162	100
4. Parents are encouraged by the school leaders to send their children with disabilities to school.	0	0	0	0	8	5	154	95	162	100
Teachers attitudes										
5. Teachers must teach students with disabilities	122	75	2	1	9	6	29	18	162	100
6. Teachers must not be forced to teach students with disabilities	0	0	0	0	2	1	160	99	162	100
7. Teacher are not trained to teach students with disabilities	2	1	0	0	8	5	152	94	162	100
8. School leadership discourages teachers and peer abuse on students with abilities to increase access.	0	0	0	0	16	10	146	90	162	100
Infrastructure										
9. Inadequate resources disadvantages students with disabilities	6	4	2	1	95	59	59	36	162	100
10. School leaders have a say in the design of infrastructure.	96	59	64	40	2	1	0	0	162	100
11. School leaders can modify structures that exist in schools.	5	3	0	0	155	96	2	1	162	100
12. School leaders are allowed to erect buildings suitable for students with disabilities.	0	0	2	1	2	1	158	98	162	100
Curriculum										
13. The curriculum is not relevant to the disabled students.	23	14	38	24	36	22	65	40	162	100
14. The curriculum is the same as that of normal students.	0	0	0	0	0	0	162	100	162	100

15. The school leaders are mandated to modify the curriculum to meet the needs of students with disabilities.	162	100	0	0	0	0	0	0	162	100
16. The school leaders assist to design a curriculum that meets the needs of students with disabilities.	0	0	2	1	160	99	0	0	162	100
School leadership										
17. Prohibition of segregation and stigma of students with disability increases students' access to quality education.	0	0	0	0	75	46	87	54	162	100
18. Requesting sufficient funds to cater for special education needs enhances quality education.	1	0	0	0	16	10	145	90	162	100
19. Heads of schools are allowed to recruit special education staff.	1	0	0	0	19	12	142	88	162	100
20. School leaders understand the policies regarding special education.	67	41	47	29	38	24	10	6	162	100
21. School leaders are able to identify the special education needs timely.	121	75	34	21	5	3	2	1	162	100
22. Community involvement in child's education increases access and quality education.	0	0	2	1	24	15	136	84	162	100

As illustrated in the table above, one hundred and fifty-seven (97%) participants believe that parents hide their disabled children, while five (3%) disagree. One hundred and forty-five (89%) felt that some parents have negative attitudes towards disability and seventeen (11%) did not agree with the statement. One hundred and fifty-nine (98%) were in agreement with the statement that lack of parents' education contributes to children inability to access to quality education, while three (2%) were not. The findings regarding teachers' attitude show that one hundred and twenty-four (76%) participants felt that teachers must not teach students with disabilities, while thirty-eight (24%) were of the view that teachers must teach students with disabilities. All informants agreed that teachers must not be forced to teach students with disabilities. It has been indicated by one hundred and sixty (99%) participants that teacher are not trained to teach students with disabilities and only two (1%) showed that teachers has been trained.

Concerning infrastructure one hundred and fifty-four (95%) respondents strongly believed that inadequate resources disadvantages students with disabilities, while eight (5%) disagreed. One hundred and one (62%) showed that the curriculum is not relevant to the disabled students and sixty-one (38%) felt is relevant. All respondents indicated that the curriculum is the same for all students. Regarding the school leadership influence the respondents were unanimous that the school leadership has an influence over the access and quality education for students with disabilities.

All informants illustrated that parents are encouraged by the school leaders to send their children with disabilities to school and the school leaders discourage teachers and peer abuse on students with abilities to increase access. Although one hundred and sixty (99%) participants showed that the school leadership does not have a say in the design of infrastructure, but the school leaders can modify structures that exist in schools as indicated by one hundred and fifty-seven (97%) respondents. Also one hundred and sixty (99%) participants showed that the school leaders are allowed to erect buildings suitable for students with disabilities. The school leadership influence is also shown in the design of the curriculum (99%), prohibition of segregation and stigma of students with disability, acquisition of funds and recruitment of special education staff.

Another revelation was that one hundred and fourteen (70%) participants illustrated that school leaders do not understand the policies regarding special education, while forty-eight (30%) disagreed. One hundred and fifty-five (96%) respondents showed that school leaders are not able to identify the special education needs timely, while seven (4%) indicated that school leaders are able to identify the special education needs timely. Finally under the school leadership influence one hundred and sixty (99%) participants showed that community involvement in child's education increases access and quality education. Only two (1%) disagreed.

Discussion

From the research findings above, it is certain that many participants perceive parents' educational background as having an impact on access and quality education for children with disabilities. In some tribes in Nigeria, disability is strongly linked to superstition. Having a disabled child in the family means a curse or bewitched. Such families tend to hide their children and deprive the children of the assistance that could have been provided by government. This is affirmed by a spokesperson for disability organisation quoted in Dart (2007) when she said "the fact that the beliefs about disability is still linked to superstition and revenge forces the disabled hide and shy away from seeking help even when it is available".

Another revelation is that teachers have a negative attitude towards teaching students with disabilities. Other studies have indicated that many teachers have a negative attitude towards teaching students with disability in the mainstream (Lambe & Bones, 2006). In most cases the reasons forwarded include having not been trained to teach students with disabilities; teaching students with special needs is demanding and resources are inadequate to teach the disabled students. Lack of knowledge, skills and experience to teach students with disabilities can affect teachers' attitudes towards including the disabled in their classes (Carlin, 2003). Attitudes and segregation towards disability are some of the factors that make it difficult for students with disabilities to attend school.

The study also revealed that school leaders as agents of change have an influence in access and quality education for students with disabilities. It has been revealed that heads of schools have the ability to influence parents to send their children to school, they have the power to stop harassment of students with disabilities by teachers and peers, the heads have a say in the design of the curriculum, can modify the infrastructure, accorded the opportunity to recruit special education teachers and source funds to cater for students with disabilities.

This is an indication that strong leadership is critical in the provision of high quality education for all students. Klingner, Arguelles, Hughes and Vaughn (2001) have demonstrated that school leaders who focus on instructional issues, demonstrate administrative support for special education, and provide high quality professional development for teachers produce enhanced outcome for students with disabilities. The study revealed that many school leaders are not conversant with policies governing special education. It is important for school leaders to understand the policies pertaining to special education. DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2003) suggest that although principals do not need to be disability experts, they must have fundamental knowledge and skills that will enable them to perform essential special education leadership tasks. Clear policies concerning how to deal with disabled students should be availed to the school leaders in Modern Comprehensive Secondary School, Nsukka

Students with disabilities in Nigerian secondary schools should be offered special education focused towards the inclusive approach. The Nigerian inclusive policy must be implemented as it is concerned with quality and relevance. The knowledge and skills that the students with disabilities that will be acquired through the inclusive curriculum can expose their talent. Using their talents, the disabled can become breadwinners, and in such people there is ability in disability.

Limitations of the study

The limitations are outlined in view of the fact that the approaches used are reliable and valid; but they also have their shortcomings which were beyond the researcher's control. Due to time and financial constraints it was not possible to cover all teachers in the field. The study was confined to 1.5% (162) of informants currently involved in enhancing pupils with disability access to quality education out of a population of approximately eleven thousand junior secondary school teachers. Although the sample is relatively small, it is a representative of teachers and school leaders in the 206 junior secondary schools because the respondents were sampled from the ten administration regions which have different settings. This brings the issue of generalisation which is vital in determining the validity and reliability of the research design.

The data collected were mainly the respondents' perceptions about the school leadership influence on access and quality education for students with disabilities in Nigerian junior secondary schools as well as their interpretation of the questions asked in the questionnaire. Being at the mercy of the respondents' good will, might produce findings that favoured them and affect the quality of data collected. It is the researcher's opinion that sometimes data collected based on people's opinion can be tainted by personal bias. This was taken into account during the data analysis. The other limitation was failure to investigate staff from Special Education Division views about the pupils with disabilities illegibility to access and quality education. This

would act as a proof for or against allegations that the school leaders have influence on access and quality education for students with disabilities in Nigerian secondary schools.

Future research

The study provides a foundation for future research on the provision of access and quality education for students with disabilities. The findings of the study have implications for school leaders, teachers, education officers, parents and students. The study suggests that in order for the disabled students to successfully acquire quality education in the mainstream schools, cooperation and understanding of disability amongst all stakeholders in the education of the child are priorities. Evidence from this study is meant to trigger interest for further research on the subject as very little research was carried out on access and quality education for the disabled students in secondary schools in Nigeria. Future research could involve education officers, family welfare officers, parents and disabled students to get their views on access to quality education by the students who are handicapped. Another research could be finding out the transition rate of students with disabilities from junior secondary schools to senior secondary schools. This could challenge for the practitioners to reflect on their practice.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Education is the foundation where the development of a nation is based on. Onwuka (2013) maintains that a society is said to be developed when it has adequately provided for the entire citizenry, irrespective of exceptionalities and gender. This can be achieved if all people including those with disabilities have been accorded the opportunity for quality education. In many developing countries, there are certain traditional beliefs associated with curse of disability, such as curses and contagion which results in the disabled children being shunned and isolated (Mukhopadhyay, Nenty, & Abosi, 2012). Access to high quality education and other social services normally affect children with disabilities. For people with disabilities to access quality education requires strong school leadership. Effective school leadership is critical in the support of parents and teachers when executing classroom practices that help students with disabilities learn to higher standards. Benz, Lindstrom and Yovanoff (2000) believe that school leaders are the agents of change and are in position to change the teachers and parents attitudes towards students with disabilities. The study has revealed that teachers have negative attitudes towards inclusive education. Although inclusive education is a government policy majority feel that the policy is not clear, hence poor implementation. The major challenge that junior secondary schools faced is lack of qualified special education teachers. Many teachers indicated that they are not trained to teach students with disability and are not confident when dealing with handicapped students. These teachers need school leaders who should ensure that diverse needs of students and their families are addressed. The unfortunate part is that even the leaders are not conversant with issues related to special education. Although the school leaders are not expected to special education specialists, they must have fundamental knowledge as well as change their attitudes, beliefs and values. DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2003) posit that school leaders “need a thorough understanding of the laws that protect the educational rights of students with disabilities” (p.11). The study also showed that the school leadership have influence on access to education, curriculum, funds and infrastructure.

With such influence on the above facilities it would be easy for school leadership to improve access and quality education for students with disability. It is envisaged in an action plan for Nigeria inclusive education that schools will be supportive and humane establishments which embrace and support all their learners and value their achievements, so that children will attend school regularly and work hard at their studies. Basing on the research findings the study recommends that:

- School leaders and teachers should work tirelessly to enhance access and quality education for students with disability.
- School leaders should be given power to develop the school curriculum.
- Clear policy on dealing with students with disabilities should be dispersed to schools.
- Both policy makers and implementers must strengthen the idea of inclusive education.
- Parents and school leadership should be in partnership when addressing the issue of access and quality for students with disabilities.
- All teacher training institutions (including Non-Governmental Organisations) should offer special education programmes.

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