UNIJERPS
Unizik Journal of Educational Research and Policy Studies VOL.15 (1);
https://unijerps.org
2021 Impact Factor: 5.641; 2020 Impact Factor: 5.355.
January-June, 2023
Indexing and Impact Factor URL: http://sjifactor.com/passport.php?id=21363

EMPOWERING SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN WITH LIFE-LONG LEARNING IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SETTING.

Esomonu, Nkechi Patricia-Mary & Ezenwosu, Ngozi Elizabeth
npm.esomonu@unizik,edu.ng 08026422569; ne.ezenwosu@unizik.edu.ng 803388373
Department of Educational Foundations; Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

ABSTRACT
Educational emancipation of children with special needs has been of concern to educational professionals and every good government over the years. This is because children with special needs constitutes about 15 to 20 percent of world population and cannot be neglected. Education is most productive when every learner is considered and impacted on based on their learning abilities. Hence, the learning outcome of Children with Special Needs (CSN) should be of paramount interest to teachers whose primary responsibility is to deliver curriculum content effectively to diverse learners using different skills and teaching approaches. To achieve the aforementioned purpose, teachers are expected to know each learner's academic potentials as well as behaviour in order to help each learner especially the CSN. The study therefore aimed at establishing effective strategies required to engage the CSN for maximum learning outcome.

Keywords: Learning, Special Needs, Children, Inclusive Education

Introduction
Since it is through education that children/learners acquire critical skills, knowledge, values and so on to be functional in the society it becomes more vital to give every child the necessary opportunity and support to get the desired learning especially learners with Special Needs . The primary focus of inclusive education is to integrate children with special needs (CSN) in regular classrooms. Thus inclusive setting (IS) focus on approaches to respecting individual needs and ensuring optimal development of all children in classrooms. Chao, Sze, Chow, Forlin & Ho (2017) lends credence to this perspective since schools are places for enhancing individual potentials by ensuring equal educational opportunities. Westwood (2011) explained that the term special educational need was introduced in the beginning of 21st century with the desire to move away from the use of older terminologies such as handicapped children to find a generic description that would suitably embrace the increasingly diverse group of children with problems in learning. A child has special educational need if he or she has learning difficulties than the majority of children of the same age.

Children Special Education Needs refer to children who find it more difficult to learn or access education than most children of the same age because of a learning difficulty or disability. According to the Children and Families Act (DFE in Fastiggi, 2019) special education needs children could have problems in the following areas.

Communication and interaction needs which include speech difficulties of all kinds. It could be difficulties with producing or responding to expressive language; difficulties uttering speech sound or difficulties understanding spoken and

other communication from others. There may be difficulties with understanding age-related social conventions of interaction such as turn-taking during conversations or appropriate level of physical contact during play.

Cognitive and learning needs which include dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia, and dysgraphia. Dyslexia is a learning disorder that affects the ease with which a person reads, writes and spells. The person is said to have reading and spelling difficulties. Dyscalculia is a disability that manifest in difficulty learning mathematics and calculation. The child will have difficulty in understanding numbers, learning how to manipulate numbers, performing arithmetic and learning facts in mathematics. Dyspraxia is a disorder that affects movement and co-ordination. It will affect tasks requiring balance. It has to do with problem in fine motor skill resulting in difficulties in coordination. Dysgraphia is a learning disability that result in difficulty in writing. This could show itself in difficulties writing in a straight line, holding and controlling writing tool, recalling how letters are formed and letter spacing.

Social, mental and emotional health needs which includes attention deficit disorder (ADD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). These are behaviour disorder characterized by inattention, impulsivity and overly active. Persons with ADD/ADHD are easily distracted, have short attention span, unable to stick to tasks that are tedious, unable to listen to or carry out instruction. Children with ADD/ADHD make a lot of mistakes in school work.

Sensory and/or physical needs which include visual impairment (VI), hearing impairment (HI), multi-sensory impairment (MSI) and physical disability. Visual impairment is the decreased ability of a person to see to a degree. It includes blurred vision, loss of peripheral vision, extreme light sensitivity, generalized haze and more. Hearing impairment is a hearing loss that adversely affects a child's educational performance. It ranges from a mild loss in which a person misses certain high-pitched sound to a total loss of hearing. Multi-sensory impairment is a common term used to describe children with impairments of both sight and hearing which have the potential to impact many areas of the person's learning and development. Physical disability is any limitation on a person's physical functioning, mobility, dexterity or stamina. Common example include handicapped, physically challenged, deformed, incapacitate and injured. A pertinent question in this study is, how can these special needs children be handled in inclusive education?

Inclusive education (IE) means different and diverse children learning side by side with their peers in the same classrooms. They engage in every activity together even including after-school activities. Inclusive education targets those children traditionally excluded from general education for reasons of disability, gender, geographical remoteness, ethnicity and poverty. The driving principle is to make all students feel welcomed, appropriately challenged and supported in their efforts (Esomonu, 2018). Inclusive education gives every student opportunity to participate in student government and equally attend the same sports events. Nwaodo & Akpokiniovo (2020) posits that IE portends a panacea for getting schools and communities to provide learning that will guarantee equalization of educational opportunities for all children irrespective of

their ability/disability status. Inclusive education values diversity and the unique contributions each learner brings to the classroom. In a truly inclusive setting, every child feels safe and has a sense of belonging.

Looking at inclusive education from government perspective, it is stated in the National Policy on Education (2013) that the federal government is committed to providing equal educational opportunities for all in the inclusive setting. The Education and Training (ET) 2020 Working Group on promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education clearly indicated that education should go beyond equal opportunities and ensure the inclusion of the diverse range of learners. Learners and their parents participate in setting learning goals and take part in decisions that affect their welfare. School community especially teachers have the training, skills, support, flexibility, and resources to nurture, encourage, and respond to the needs of all learners as well as help them become lifelong learners.

Lifelong learning refers to the education individuals experience throughout their lives which may be formal, informal and or non-formal. It is a fact that human beings keep learning and training themselves throughout their lives whether consciously or unconsciously to gain more control over their environment. Lifelong learning is the ongoing voluntary and self-motivated pursuit of knowledge for either personal or professional reasons. This is important for an individual competitiveness and employability. Lifelong learning is good for one's health particularly for children with special needs because learning something new keeps your brain developing even as you age. Learning something new can reduce stress (Healthchecker, nd) Empowering CSN to become lifelong learners can be best done in regular classrooms in the midst of their peers. The paper continues by discussing the Nigeria scenario on special needs children, justification for inclusive education, essential needs of inclusive setting, ensuring effective inclusive education for life-long learning.

Nigeria Scenario on Special Needs Children

Observably, teachers, parents and society at large recognized easily and care for children with sensory needs, physical needs, and speech difficulties. However, children with dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia, dysgraphia, attention deficit disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism are in most classrooms, but they are not identified and recognized.

For the visual, hearing and multi-sensory impairment, and physical disabilities, Nigeria is a signatory to and in some cases has ratified various charters and conventions on fundamental human rights of these special needs children. Some of these conventions include:

International Convention on Civil and Political and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
- Convention on Rights of persons with Disabilities (CRPD)
- Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

Council of European Convention for Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, open for signature in 1950.

The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization's Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960).

Report of the UN Special Reporters on the Right to Education (UN, 2007).

Again, child's rights to education including the physically challenged is no longer a matter of debate in Nigeria. Education is considered as a right of every Nigerian citizen seen in:

-Compulsory, free Universal Basic Education Act 2004 – section 2

-The African Charter on Human and People's Rights (Ratification and Enforcement) Act, CAP A9, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004 – Article 17(1).

-The National Policy on Education 2013

-1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria

In Nigeria, persons with disabilities have also organized themselves into groups. The national association is called Joint National Association for Persons with Disabilities (JNAPWD). This association has branches in the states and local government areas. Their objectives include equal opportunities, political positions, employment, skill acquisition and so on. Clusters to JNAPWD include Nigerian Association for the Blind (NAB), Nigerian Association for the Deaf (NAD) and Nigerian Association for the Physically Challenged.

There are some efforts to provide for inclusion by some examination bodies. For instance West African Examination Council makes provisions for candidate with disabilities. But generally schools for persons with disabilities are still being operated at different locations.. Inclusive education has not taken root in the country. Physically challenged persons cannot assess many buildings in institutions. Schools do not have knowledgeable persons in inclusion. Libraries do not have Braille translated books and audio-converted books.

In Nigerian environment, it is common, to see local educational authorities take responsibility to organize services for children with disabilities. They may provide a variety of settings, from special classrooms, to mainstreaming, to inclusion, and assign teachers and administrators, and students to the system that seems most likely to help the student achieve his or her individual educational goals. Students with mild or moderate disabilities, as well as disabilities that do not affect academic achievement, such as using power wheelchair, scooter or other mobility device, are most likely to be fully included. Indeed, children with polio or with leg injuries have grown to be leaders in different government sectors, and teachers in schools and universities; Many of them are self-advocates. However, have all students with all types of disabilities from all the different disability categories been successfully included in general education classes? Are they working and achieving their individual educational goals in regular school environments? Are they participating in all the activities? How are they taught whether mainstreamed or in inclusive classroom? Do teachers use strategies that will make them acquire lifelong education? These questions and more have not been fully addressed in Nigeria.

Justification for inclusive education

It has been observed that there are higher achievement and improved skills in inclusive classroom for both students with and without disabilities Many studies over the past three decades have made these observations and showed that inclusive education enhances attitudinal change,

fosters integration, improves social skill and friendship (Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Esomonu, 2018)

Around the world, children, especially those with special needs are excluded from schools in their community because of disability, race, language, religion, gender and poverty. So inclusive education provides a better quality opportunity for all children and is instrumental in changing discriminatory attitudes. As already stated, the Nigerian government is a signatory to several international accords that supports Inclusive Education (IE). Schools provide the context for a child's first relationship with the world outside their families, enabling the development of social relationships and interactions. Respect and understanding grow when learners of diverse abilities and backgrounds work, play, socialize, and learn together. The corner stone for inclusive setting is that every child has the right to be supported by parents, community and the school to grow, learn, develop and become functional members of the community contributing towards its development.

Education that excludes and segregates perpetuates discrimination against traditionally marginalized groups such as children with special educational needs instead of empowering them to reach their potential. When education is more inclusive, so are concepts of civic participation, employment, and community life.

Most children with special needs are usually categorized as having disabilities and are present in every race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, and religion. According to World Health Organization (WHO) more than a billion people, or 15 percent of the world's population, have some category of disability. Of these, an estimated 150 million children have a disability, and 80 percent of these children live in the developing world. These children often face conditions of extreme poverty, exclusion, and discrimination and are denied the basic services offered to their peers without disabilities. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimates that 90 percent of children with disabilities in low-income countries have never received any form of education (UNICEF, 2014). Also, once enrolled, students with disabilities are more likely to drop out of school than students without disabilities. This seems to be the norm in many developing countries Nigeria inclusive. Once a country has committed to the concept of inclusion in education, it becomes important to adapt national policies and laws. The education of children with disabilities and the importance of inclusive education are best integrated into the country's overall education strategic plan, with implementation strategies reflected in the national education strategic implementation plan. In this way, the commitment to inclusive education is clearly reflected in national policy and strategic planning in general, included in the education budget, and recognized in bilateral and multi-lateral partnerships with funding agencies. According to UNESCO's Policy Guidelines for Inclusion in Education, national legal frameworks should, at a minimum, achieve the following (UNESCO, 2009):

- Recognize inclusive education as a right.
- Identify minimum standards in relation to the right to education, including physical access, communication access, social access, economic access, early

identification, adaption of curriculum, and individualized student supports;
- Identify minimum standards regarding the right to education and ensuring that families and communities are active participants in inclusive education;
- Ensure a transition plan for students with disabilities;
- Identify stakeholders and their responsibilities;
- Provide resources for students with disabilities; and
- Establish monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for ensuring that education is truly inclusive.

Peters (2003) estimated that only 5 percent of all students with a disability complete primary school. It is observed that when and where CSN learners attend school, a curriculum that has not been adapted to their needs may mean they do not have the same access to education as their peers do. Moreover, teachers may not know how to accommodate the needs of learners with special educational needs. In many situation books may not be available in Braille for learners who are blind, and teachers may not be knowledgeable in sign language for students who are deaf.

The goal of empowering children with special needs is to support them in reaching their full potential and leading productive lives as active members of their communities. They often require specialized services and support to master the content being taught. Before the various policies on inclusive education, specialized education services take the form of segregating children with disabilities in separate classrooms or schools, with no opportunities for them engaging with peers who do not have disabilities. Shifting away from segregation toward including all students in general education classrooms and schools means providing all learners in these classrooms with the unique supports and services that they need—such as access to assistive devices, teacher assistants, and an adapted curriculum—to participate effectively in the classroom activities.

Essential Needs for Inclusive Setting

Every inclusive education setting should consider teacher factor, inclusive curriculum, parental involvement, funding and policies.

Teacher Factor: Teachers have been found to be the central in every classroom activity. They have the capacity to be inclusive or divisive. . They are faced with the task of how to cater for learners with special needs educationally so that learners can maximally learn during classroom activities and even beyond. Teachers therefore should have the right training, flexible enough to teach students with diverse needs and learning styles.

Inclusive Curriculum: An inclusive curriculum includes locally relevant themes and contributions by marginalized and minority groups. It avoids binary narratives of good and bad, and allows adapting the curriculum to the learning styles of children with special education needs. Research has also shown that learners do not learn in the same way due to diversify in their abilities, needs learning styles and so on hence the reason for inclusive curriculum. In developing the curriculum, the team spirit should be displayed. The entire community—school workers, parents, and students—to work together and participate in the design, delivery, and monitoring of education, thereby reframing inclusive education as a shared responsibility. Team Spirit should be displayed.

Parental Involvement: Most schools strive for some level of parental

involvement, but it is often limited to writing reports and occasional parent–teacher meeting. In a diverse school system, inclusion means thinking about multiple ways to reach out to parents on their own terms. Parents should be empowered to assert their children's right to education in inclusive settings.

Funding*:* To truly provide for inclusive setting is expensive. Schools should receive adequate and sustainable financial support so that all or most activities and services for inclusion are supported.

Policies: Governments accountable for implementing anti-discrimination legislation, legal mandates for inclusion and policies to remove barriers. Then there should be serious monitoring to get inclusion to be a reality.

Ensuring Effective Inclusive Education Setting for Life-long Learning

To ensure effective inclusive education setting learner-centred teaching strategies should be adopted in our inclusive classrooms. Learner-centred strategies have been appraised for its significant enhancement of successful learning.

With this strategy it has been observed that a wider range of learners can be accommodated better in daily class activities. This implies that it is applicable to all types of learners. Learners can become independent and in control of their learning and can as well develop the ability to meet their specific learning needs. According to Abiodun-Ekus (2017) although literally, it seems to focus on the learner, it is an approach that fosters active participation and involvement between learners and instructors thereby promoting in-depth learning. Cheang (2009) asserted that it is also applicable in all learning settings either formal or informal in that for formal settings, standardized learning contents are employed howbeit in varied individualized needs. However, Mokobane (2011) remarked that although this approach has a long-standing position with learning/instruction, consistency in its use, adequate preparation for its use and limited awareness of current skills have played a major hindrance to the success of this strategy.

For teachers to use the strategy, to empower special needs children/learners they might have to consider the following steps:

Teaching Skills: Children learn in different ways. It is, therefore, important for teachers to develop the skills to teach in different ways. For example, some students learn best when introduced to information visually, while others learn best through hearing information. The teaching skills of repetition, reading aloud, creativity, diversified illustration with visual teaching materials have been identified as essential for teachers working with children with special needs.

Some ways to bring variety in teaching in teaching in inclusive classroom as stated in Esomonu (2018) are

- Think of three different ways to teach a lesson. You could teach a new concept or definition by:
  (1) having students create a web map on newsprint to represent a concept or a definition (visual),
  (2) giving a brief lecture about the concept or definition (auditory), or
  (3) having students act out the concept or definition using various clues (kinesthetic).

- Ask other teachers how they have taught or would teach a lesson. Try out new approaches,
  even if you may not have used that approach before.
- Share with your colleagues a lesson that you created and ask if they see evidence of the three learning styles being addressed or have any other ideas or suggestions. We must be prepared to learn from each other!
- Listen carefully to student's questions and comments.
- Expect student's backgrounds and abilities to be different.

For different groups of children with special educational needs some specific activities need to be done by the teacher to take care of them in inclusive classrooms. Some are as stated here.

Communication and Interaction Needs. Teachers can support children with communication and interaction needs by playing around with sounds and rhymes in words through songs, poems, chants and games. This will help the children to develop speech, language and literacy. Use rich and varied vocabulary with words and sounds that make learning fun. Validate what a child say and extend on it using new words and phrases to expand upon their ideas, pitching your language just ahead of where the child is at. Allow the children to initiate topics of conversation.

Cognitive and Learning Needs. The examples of these include dyslexia, dyscalculia and dysgraphia

Dyslexia – Reading and Spelling Difficulties. Teachers should use bullet points, provide a word bank with a list of keywords and their meaning to facilitate reading. Teachers should also encourage them to use computers and other assistive technologies and peripherals like pocket spell checker, line reader coloured keyboards.

Dyscalculia – Difficulties in Mathematics and Calculation. Teachers should write out or draw the problems which will enable them to see the relationships among elements. Teachers should break down tasks into subsets and use physical objects wherever possible.

Dysgraphia – Difficulty in Writing. Teachers should instruct them that before they write, they should shake their hands out, rotate their wrists, wiggle their fingers and or squeeze a stress ball. This helps to get the blood flow and prepare the muscles. Thicker pens or pencils with rubber grip can help.

Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). There should be post class rule for students, establish class routine, reduce potential distractions, give appropriate supervision and use positive peer model. Establish a positive relationship with students, provide positive feedback and ask questions rather than reprimand, Teachers should encourage hand-on learning.

Visual Impairment (VI). In handling class with visual impairment children, the teacher should explain all visual materials and replace all visual cues with audio cues. Teacher should incorporate as many tactile learning experience as possible. Physical things to touch should be used in teaching and write with dark colour on whiteboard. For blind students, assistive technologies are used such as Dictaphones/smartphone apps and braille textbooks.

Hearing Impairment (HI). Children with hearing impairment should seat towards the front of the class. The teacher should minimise the background noise and provide written materials to supplement all lessons. The teacher should repeat clearly any questions or answers stated by other students before proceeding and should not speak while facing away from students. Flexible delivery of teaching and with electronic media is recommended.

Building Relationships

Children/learners with special needs deal with lots of challenges and so are influenced by various factors such as cultures, health and so on there is therefore a need for the teachers to keep abreast of the cultures and needs of their learners in order to model collaborative learning. Teachers should be flexible in their communication mode. There should be a combination of sign language, gestures, indigenous language and formal language used in classroom instructions. Researches has shown that learners become more engaged if allowed to express their ideas through any convenient mode while the teacher gently draws attention to the approved mode of communication. This way CSN are empowered to become lifelong learners such that cooperation is modelled, independent thinking encouraged and social relationship are built. Children with special needs should not be rushed to complete any learning activities with punishment attached thereby frustrating their efforts. Feedback must be given to them to enhance their abilities.

Physical or Learning environment

The layout of the classroom matters a lot to achieving positive learning especially for CSN. Teachers and learners should make good use of classroom walls or bulletin boards to regularly display various things such as activity guidelines, learner's work and other information. Pasting can be of varied forms and patterns. This not only beautifies the classroom environment but also their minds thus making them lifelong learners. Furniture in the class such as tables, lockers, chairs, seats should be movable to allow for varied learning activities and teachers should try to be within the eye level of learners.

Finally, **Motivation** is very important to empower CSN towards becoming lifelong learners with the possibility of living successful life in an inclusive society.

Conclusion

Teachers are very vital resource for successful training of CSN in IS therefore they are expected to teach diverse learners. They are equally expected to know each learner's academic learning abilities/disabilities as well as their character. Therefore, teachers are faced with the challenges of how to effectively help such learners as lots of collaboration, specialized and general efforts are needed. Deliberate and consistent engagement of the strategies outlined will go a long way in empowering CSN to learning amongst their peers thereby reducing avoidable learning challenges.

Suggestions

Based on the foregoing, it is recommended that:

1. Teacher preparatory programmes need to adjust their curriculum to include appropriate skills, knowledge and attitude to

handle classes that have children with special needs.

2. In-service training should be organized for teachers on a more regular basis particularly when there are innovations in the curriculum.
3. Teachers should be provided with opportunities to attend conferences and other forums on Educational Inclusiveness.
4. Government at all levels should develop dynamic education policy and curriculum and implement strategies to champion inclusive learning.

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