

e-Learning as a Panacea for Inclusive Education in Nigeria

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Abstract

For a long time, children with disabilities were educated in separate classes or in separate schools. People got used to the idea that special education meant separate education. But research findings abound that indicate that when children are educated together, positive academic and social outcomes occur for all the children involved. It is also a well-known fact that simply placing children with and without disabilities together does not produce positive outcomes. Many countries, including Nigeria have adopted Inclusive education (IE) as a strategy to provide educational opportunities for all citizens irrespective of disparity in age, gender, language, physical challenges, abilities and disabilities. Inclusive education occurs when there is continuous and sustained advocacy, planning, support and commitment. e-learning, when compared with the conventional inclusive education system, has been found to be cheaper, more accessible, more flexible and easier to adapt to any group. In addition, it provides equal opportunity to every learner and it is mobile. This paper examines the challenges of e-learning administration while at the same time exposing its merits and recommending it as a veritable tool for effective and efficient inclusive educational system in Nigeria.

Keywords: Inclusive, education, open, e-learning, physically-challenged, disability

Introduction

Inclusive Education (IE) in a narrow sense is the practice of teaching students with special needs along those without disabilities in regular classes, instead of separating them. It is an educational approach and philosophy that avails every child with the prospect of attaining education and be involved in every school activities. Ahmmed, Sharma and Deppeler (2012) viewed IE as a worldwide reform strategy intended to include students of different abilities in mainstream regular schools. IE is a global trend that involves the idea of making education accessible to all children (Bryant, Smith & Bryant, 2008), irrespective of physical, cognitive and social status. In a broader sense however, IE is an educational philosophy that promotes the idea of quality education adopted to the needs of those who learn irrespective of their age, gender, ethnicity, language, class, and disability (Mirjana & Biljana, 2010).

The concept of IE is based on the principle that all children should be catered for regardless of ability, circumstances or personality, as all children have the basic right to be educated alongside their peers in their local schools (UNESCO, 1994). UNESCO (1994) stressed, among other things, that regular schools with inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all. The blueprint also advocated that educational policies at all levels, from national to local should stipulate that a child with disability should attend neighbourhood schools. The Dakar Framework for Action (2000) reaffirmed the UNESCO (1994) Salamanca statement that affirmed the right to education for every individual and urged governments and international community to adopt IE. Mitchell (1999) opined that IE policies enable everyone to be accorded equal status regardless of the level of functioning or other personal characteristics that are associated with humans, such as disabilities, highly gifted or talented. The aim of IE is to remove social prejudice and segregation that have constituted as stumbling blocks to the education of those predisposed to marginalization and the physically challenged.

IE is neither mainstream nor special education. The difference between mainstream schools and inclusive education lies on the level of support and expectations that students encounter. Students who are mainstreamed have little or no additional classroom support besides the general assistant given by the teachers, while students in IE enjoy individualized teaching and group support (Adeniji, 2015). Special education, on the other hand, focuses on specific disabilities and has trained professionals with expertise in teaching students with special learning impairments. Students in special schools attend classes with colleagues that manifest similar disabilities. For instance, schools for the blinds provide instructions in Braille and life skills, while those with hearing impairment have classes in sign languages and speech therapy (Wagar, 2016).

The principle of IE was implied in Nigerian National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN), 2004) which tangentially referenced the concept of education for all within the broader Universal Basic Education Scheme. This Policy produced the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme which called for access to all special needs children with their varying disabilities to education in a conducive and less restrictive environment. The UBE programme mandates every state government to provide free, compulsory and universal education for every child of primary and junior secondary school age. Children with disabilities are inalienable part of the UBE scheme.

The theoretical framework

The theory of Multiple Intelligence, developed by Howard Garden in 1983 (Garden, 2006) and subsequently refined, forms the basis for argument in favour of inclusive education. The theory identified nine intelligent ways through which people understand and perceive the world around them. According to Garden, human beings possess

intelligence in varying amount and teachers can improve education by addressing these multiple intelligence of learners. He stipulated that humans have intelligence in nine areas but are stronger in some of them than the others. The interactions of this varying intelligence are what make humans unique. The categories of intelligence, according to Garden are verbal/linguistic, logical/mathematical, intrapersonal, visual/spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal and naturalistic intelligence.

Multiple Intelligence theory purports that various areas of the brain are responsible for different functions, hence if one area of the brain is damaged, certain abilities are affected. This assumption is true to some extent in physically challenged children in IE in Nigeria. The implication is that teachers and professionals need to provide multiple opportunities for students to learn so as to touch on several aspect of their intelligence. If physically impaired student is deficient in one or two aspects of intelligence, he can be assisted to excel in the other aspects by instructors. Also, stronger intelligence can nurture the weaker ones. These multiple opportunities for learning can be actualized through an effective IE. Promising as it may be, however, IE is constrained by a host of challenges.

Challenges of Inclusive Education

Achieving the educational objectives of IE is becoming very challenging in Nigeria. Schools are accommodating students with increased physical and mental disabilities, and this is coupled with the inadequate number of trained personnel to man the schools. Ajuwon (2011) in his investigation on the sentiments, attitudes and concerns of special education trainees in Nigeria, documented the problems associated with overcrowding, under-resourced classrooms and limited number of professionals with expertise in IE. This could be the basis upon which some have asserted that on paper, IE is best in Africa. Adegunle and Oluwatoyin (2016) opined that integrating the physically challenged children into normal schools is a lofty idea but that experts and those groomed in the system are saying that more need to be done for the system to be optimally utilized. Furthermore, Bryant, Smith and Bryant (2008) in their research identified lack of enabling legislature, sustainable funding, facilities, support services, classroom materials, and staff training as challenges to the implementation of an inclusive education in Nigeria. Other notable limitations have resulted in strong arguments against inclusiveness in education. For example, Baglieri and Shapiro (2012) are of the view that not all children can be appropriately placed in inclusive classroom; they maintained that there are limits to inclusion practice. They argued also that pedagogical practice may not be universally effective for all children and that exclusion of some children is required for the benefit of the class. They explained further that teachers may demonstrate negative attitudes depending on pupil's behavioural or functional challenges. A cited instance is the case of children with mental retardation;

a hidden handicap characterized by social incompetence and significantly reduced ability to learn. These may need to be excluded.

A mentally retarded child, even though educable, exhibit signs of immaturity, inability to reason, failure, inability to compete and to express themselves, and a marked inability to develop and utilize social skills to the point that some people may think he/she is mad. Yet mental retardation is not the same as madness. A mentally retarded child may behave so clownishly that he/she may become a source of social entertainment by the rest of the children (Adeniji, 2015).

A research conducted by Kawser, Ahmed and Mostak (2016) also identified several common challenges to inclusive education ranging from lack of social acceptance; lack of trained teachers; high student-to-teacher ratio; rejection of special need children by schools; unfriendly infrastructure in many schools; accessibility; inflexible curriculum with rigid syllabus; unwelcoming environment; lack of special needs learning materials such as speech and language development, social and emotional skills, motor skills, sensory awareness, tactile awareness, visual discrimination, core skills and professional resources; poor policy formulation and implementation due to lack of knowledge of inclusive education by policy makers; and limited resources due to lack of team work and professional networking (Kawser et al., 2016). Wasim (2012) on the other hand preferred to categorize these barriers into five, namely:

1. Barriers related to time and skills, such as lack of or poor training in teaching children with special needs. It involves teachers' knowledge of IE, and identifying teaching competences for integration of disabled children. The exclusion of people with disabilities from teacher training institutions also limits the number of qualified teachers with disabilities who would have served as role models for students with disabilities.

2. Physical barriers such as accessibility to the built environment or information. For example access to ramps, toilet, stairs, playground, paved pathways, lifts, door handles, class room space, steps and narrow doorways, physical location of schools, public transport, hospitals and clinics, media and public information system, places of worship, housing, shops and marketplaces, offices and factories, social stigmatization etc.

3. Attitudinal barriers especially those of administrators, parents, teachers and the students/pupils. Attitude to disability are major constraints to disabled individuals' full participation in the society. It ranges from pity, repulsion, awkwardness, prejudice, discrimination, stigma and fear to low expectations about the contributions of the disabled and to stereotypical and negative perceptions in form of low intelligence, perceived inferiority, in need of a 'cure', dependent. Inadequate training of teachers and para educators has further fomented negative attitude.

4. Curricular barriers: The present curriculum according to Wasim (2012), is too exclusive and do not cater for the complex and controversial nature of inclusion, which basically requires modification of the physical environment in such a way as to remove physical barriers, involvement of specialists to make modifications and accommodations in both teaching methodology and pedagogy as well as classroom and homework assignments.

5. Communication barriers: Lack of communication among administrators, teachers, specialists, staff, parents and special education staff have constituted barriers to IE. Also included is lack of outreach networks and adequate transportation, amongst others. Adequate collaboration among all stakeholders must also exist (Wasim, 2012). Lack of accessible communications can be disabling for those with sensory impairments. For example, absence of sign language for the deaf; for the visually impaired, if things are not properly labeled (Erevelles, 2011).

e-learning for inclusive education

Many researchers agree that students of today are digital learners. In the twenty-first century, the dependence on television, computer games and communications, predominantly audio-visual, meant that the students are eminently "digital learners". Interestingly, the findings of a recent research conducted in six countries of Denmark, Japan, Malaysia, Slovakia, South Korea and Thailand revealed that children spent more than 10,000 hours playing "videogames"; over 10,000 hours talking on cell phones; approximately 20,000 hours watching TV; children and adolescents spend more than 2.75 hours/week on Personal Computers (PCs); in 70% of countries almost all children from 4 to 6 years have used PCs; everyday, 68% of children over 2 years spend more than 2 hours a day with digital games (Lars, et al., 2010). There are indications that this phenomenon is globalizing.

Irrespective of category, learners of today seem to prefer relevant, mobile, self-paced, and personalized educational content. The online mode of learning, e-learning, promises to fulfill this need. e-learning, known as electronic learning is a method of education used for web-based distance education, wherein there is no face-to-face interaction, as obtainable in the National Open University of Nigeria. Here, students can learn at their own comfort and requirement in a synchronous (online studies through chats, messaging and videoconferencing in real-time) or asynchronous environment (even while offline; delivering coursework via web, CD-ROM, PDF materials, email and message boards using the internet merely as a support tool for postings on online forums) (Mindflash, 2018). e-Learning is generally seen as the use of ICT and the internet for learning. It is flexible and appropriate to inclusive education delivery. In 2012, e-learning had grown at 14 times the rate of traditional learning. Open education is fast growing to become the dominant form of education, for many reasons such as its efficiency and results compared to traditional methods. It is a mode of delivering education and instruction, often on an individual basis to students who are not physically present in a traditional setting such as a classroom. It provides "access to learning when the source of information and the learners are separated by time and distance, or both" (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012).

When used in inclusive education, e-learning offers a lot of benefits as most barriers are checked. For example, cost of education has been an issue throughout history and a

major political issue in most countries today, Nigeria inclusive. However Open Education is generally significantly cheaper than traditional campus based learning; a lot of training time is reduced with respect to trainers, travel, course materials, and accommodation (Sunil, 2017). It has been called the biggest change in the way we learn since the printing press. Concerning other advantages of e-learning in inclusive education, Rusagara (2018) observed that

e-learning offers equal opportunity to learners and they get credit from their thoughts, not from their group; e-learning is mobile (accessible anywhere, anytime, by anyone); easy to adapt to any group of people (accessible learning); assessment is done online and marks cannot be negotiated, hence quality; very cheap and flexible; there is no discrimination, hence the best option for people with disability; it is available to large audience, making it best for inclusion. Students can learn independently in any time and place; e-Learning is self-paced and the learning sessions are available all the time, giving supporting environment to all individuals for learning methods, such that even the physically challenged are less marginalized; e-learning provides improved organization for regular studies like meeting assignment deadlines, homework e. t. c.

Enumerating further he mentioned that students can deal with teachers who are highly qualified, whom otherwise would have been out of reach because of distance barriers. Those qualified teachers can give their inputs and help students in their research. Interactions with students become more appropriate when students are sharing their problems with teachers; since it is not face to face interaction, they fear less and can share their problems freely (Rusagara, 2018). Teaching is more interactive online. Most barriers to interactivity are removed, and teachers can prepare a single document for different categories of learners once without the need for repetition of such preparations. e-learning provides experiences that contain elements of the three distinct learning styles—visual, kinesthetic and auditory.

The most important benefits of e-learning, according to Sunil (2017), are that it accommodates everyone's needs, instruction can be taken any number of times, and it offers access to updated contents. He adds that e-learning enables educators to get a higher degree of coverage to communicate the learning content in a consistent way for their large audience. He went further to observe that e-learning is cost effective since learning in this mode happens easily and quickly, being very effective in learners grasping and digesting content. He explained further that e-learning makes the whole learning process more entertaining. One can communicate with people in chats and forums, one can share one's progress on social media which can be refreshing and fun-filled. The findings of Draves (2002) in Mirjana and Biljana (2010) on the advantages of e-learning are an added impetus to the drive for the subject of discussion. He revealed

that with e-learning, learners are able to learn at a peak time of the day, learn at their own speed, have access to much information, can track personal progress and test personal learning efforts. He further posits that cognitive learning online is much better than in-personal learning. Mirjana and Biljana (2010) believe that e-learning offers flexibility in time, place and in the learning rhythm. Candy (2004), in Mirjana and Biljana (2010), in his contribution revealed that e-learning has a liberating value in that it offers continuous access to information and actually transcends geographical boundaries or interventions. Mirjana and Biljana (2010) asserted that recent research findings indicated very high comparative advantage between e-learning and face-to-face learning in various areas such as discussion board and chat rooms, evaluation of online instruction and assessing the value of online courses in specific fields of study. They revealed also that online courses, in addition to empowering students to learn on their own, are usually far more writing-intensive than traditional mainstream classes have been, the reasons being that in online courses, general discussions, requests for elaboration or assistance, feedback to direct questions, group projects, most assignments, tests and quizzes are all carried out in writing.

There is no doubt that the world today has been globalized through information and telecommunications technology, and e-learning as an approach is the only way to key into the global trend for inclusive national development. Administering education and training through the use of modern technology such as videoconferencing, shared chat, digital course materials and the social media makes it possible for entire classes to be held in the cloud rather than in a physical classroom or lecture hall with all its attendant challenges. Hence e-learning is the best way to achieve the objectives of inclusive education.

Conclusion

Although Inclusion is generally associated with the elementary and secondary education, it is also applicable in post-secondary education. In fact UNESCO has made it clear that inclusion is increasingly understood more broadly today. It is a reform that supports and welcomes diversity amongst all learners. However, attainment of its objectives has been constrained by a host of factors as uncovered in this article. The challenges mitigating inclusive education can be minimized, if not totally eliminated by presenting learning materials via the web. The benefits of e-learning have also been revealed hoping that the information provided will help to ensure true inclusiveness in our educational system.

Recommendations

1. The Federal Government should ensure adequate training of personnel manning inclusive systems via the web and to ensure that curricular barriers are removed by making them less exclusive to cater for inclusion.
2. Government at all levels should ensure all schools have adequate provision of Information and Communications Technology facilities which are basic requirements in e-learning.

3. Adequate orientation and awareness creation is required to motivate learners who might be constrained by age, economy, gender, marriage, religion, disability, location, distance, humiliation, or stigma to embrace e-learning for inclusive development.

4. Government can intervene to make computers, laptops and mobile ICT compliant devices available and affordable, and provide facilities for their use in all parts of the country.

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