

Attitude of teachers towards the inclusion of special needs children in general education classroom: the case of teachers in some selected schools in Nigeria

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Abstract

Attitudes about inclusion are extremely complex and vary from teacher to teacher and school to school. This article explores the attitudes of teachers about inclusion of special needs children in their secondary schools in general education. This study adopted a descriptive survey research design, with 60 teachers as participants from selected secondary schools in Oyo State, Nigeria. Four hypotheses were postulated at the significant level of .05. The instrument, a questionnaire with question items on demographic information like gender, marital status, professionalism and teaching experience has a general reliability coefficient alpha of .83. A t-test method of analysis was the main statistical method used to test the 4 generated hypotheses. The findings revealed that the attitude of male teachers is 39.4, while that of female teacher is 43.3, thus, the t-test analysis shows that the calculated t-test is 2.107, which is greater than the critical t ($t=1.960$). This implies that female teachers have more positive attitude towards the inclusion of special needs students than their male counterparts. Furthermore, the results reveal that significant difference exists between married and single teachers in their attitude towards special need students. And that professionally qualified teacher tends to have a more favourable attitude towards the inclusion of special need students than their non-professional qualified teachers. It was recommended that teachers should attend seminars and conferences to improve their knowledge about ways of practicing and accepting inclusion for a better tomorrow for our special needs children in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Inclusion, attitude, special needs children, general education*

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Introduction

Educational programmes for students with disabilities have traditionally been built upon the assumption that a variety of service delivery options needs to be available. Special education law, for example, stipulates that schools place students with disabilities in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). The notion of LRE assumes that there are alternatives along a continuum of restrictiveness, with residential institutions on one end of the continuum and regular classes on the other (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1998).

The Internal Inclusive of Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) act for individuals with disabilities education requires that a continuum of placement options be available to meet the needs of students with disabilities. The law also requires that to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities are educated with children who are not disabled and that special classes, separate schooling, or removal of children with disabilities from the regular environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be attained satisfactorily.

The past three decades have witnessed an international debate, particularly in developing countries such as Nigeria, on inclusive education. That is, the education of students with disabilities and non-disabled students in the same school and same class. The debate emanated from voices supporting and those criticizing inclusive education. The voices of those supporting inclusive education, such as Stainback and Stainback (1991), assert that inclusive education is the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving equal educational opportunities for all. Critics however have argued that inclusive schools will not adequately meet the needs of the disabled. They point out that disabled children will receive more attention and therapy in segregated schools rather than in inclusive schools. The researchers wonder if critics put into consideration the problem of stigmatization on the part of the disabled students, especially in some developing countries like Nigeria where the special needs children are yet to be accepted fully into the society. On this note, the researchers felt concerned about the attitude of teachers towards the inclusion of special needs children in general education. This motivates the conduct of this study at this particular time. It is expected that the outcome of the study will be beneficial to the stakeholders in Nigerian education to make constructive decision as regards segregated and inclusive schools in the country.

Literature review

Inclusion or inclusive education can be interpreted as the philosophy and practice for educating students with disabilities in general education settings (Bryant, Smith, & Bryant, 2008; Lipsky & Gartner, 1997; Rogers, 1993; Salend, 2001). The practice anchors on the notion that every child should be an equally valued member of the school culture. In other words, children with disabilities benefit from learning in a regular classroom, while their peers without disabilities gain from being exposed to children with diverse characteristics, talents and temperaments. According to (Ajuwon, 2008), supporters of inclusion use the term to refer to the commitment to educate each child, to the maximum extent appropriate, in the school and classroom he/she would otherwise attend. It involves bringing the ancillary services to the child, and requires only that the child will benefit from being in the class (rather than having to keep up with the other students). This is a salient aspect of inclusion, and requires a commitment to move essential resources to the child with a disability rather than placing the child in an isolated setting where services are located (Smith, 2007). For the child with a disability to benefit optimally from inclusion, it is imperative for general education teachers to be able to teach a wider array of children, including those with varying disabilities, and to collaborate and plan effectively with special educators.

Many countries (both developed and developing) have adopted and inculcated the policy of inclusion in their education policies. Nigeria for example, adopts the policy of inclusion in her National Policy on Education (1998). The policy stipulates the integration of special needs students into regular classrooms, and free education for exceptional students at all levels.

In practice however, it is only one state out of over thirty states that has actually started the implementation of the inclusive education at the primary school levels, other states of the federation in Nigeria are just starting up by creating a unit in each of the schools for their inclusive classrooms.

Studies however assert that the inclusive schools lack adequate technology equipment and incentives needed to provide special needs education in Nigeria. Studies on special education and inclusion suggest that the programs face many challenges. They demand special equipment, face inadequate specially trained teachers, lack incentives for available specially trained teachers and lack proper administration and supervision of management. These examples illustrate some of the challenges of the programme in Nigeria, thus, the researchers are interested in investigating the attitude of the teachers in the education of the special needs children in our general education.

Ajuwon (2008) also comments on the obvious benefits of the inclusive education paradigm, i.e. children are more likely to learn social skills in an environment that approximates to normal conditions of growth and

development. Children, during their formative years, develop language more effectively if they are with children who speak normally and appropriately (Mitchell & Brown, 1991). Often, it is gratifying that where school and community environments can be made physically and programmatically accessible, children and youth with physical disabilities can function more effectively than would otherwise be the case. It is also apparent that such modifications to the environment often enable others who do not have disabilities to access their environment even more readily (Ferguson, 1996). In recent years, the principle of universal design (Centre for Universal Design, 1997; Waksler, 1996) has evolved to describe physical, curricular and pedagogical changes that must be put in place to benefit people of all learning styles without adaptation or retrofitting. Failing to accommodate the environmental and accessibility needs of persons with disabilities in the society will inevitably inhibit their participation in educational, social, recreational and economic activities (Harkness & Groom, Jr., 1976; Steinfeld, Duncan, & Cardell, 1977). Therefore, architects, product designers, engineers and environmental design researchers should use their best judgment in early programming and design decisions.

However, UNESCO (1994) citing in Ajuwon (2008) emphasized that for inclusion to achieve its objectives, education practices must be child-centred. This means that teachers must find out where each of their students are academically, socially, and culturally to determine how best to facilitate learning (Gildner, 2001). A logical consequence of this realization is that these teachers will need to acquire skills in curriculum-based assessment, team teaching, mastery learning, assessing learning styles, cooperative learning strategies, facilitating peer tutoring, or social skills training. Given that children have varied learning styles or multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1991); both general and special education teachers must plan and coordinate classroom instruction to capitalize on each child's needs, interests and aptitudes.

The decade 1970–1980 could be rightly described as the golden period for the special needs children in Nigeria because, it was in the latter half of the decade that the Federal Military Government of Nigeria released the National Policy on Education in 1977. (In this document, issues relating to inclusive education and equality were elaborated, especially as it concerns the right to education of both the special needs children and the non-disabled children).

Prior to this period, the attitude of the society, government and citizens on special needs children had been highly negative and degrading, where the disabled were thought to be incapable of contributing anything meaningful to the society. One important aspect of the individual called teacher is “attitude”. His attitude to himself, his work, his or her students and many other things depends on a number of variables which in turn influences his productivity.

“These students need more assistance than I can give them. It isn’t fair to take time away from the other students in my class who can really learn something”.

The above judgment, stated by a teacher who may either be reacting to the new inclusion policy in his school, or dealing with students in his classroom who have identified disabilities, reflects a common stance of modern educators towards this paradigm shift in educational policy. His statement conveys a strong attitude about, first, the ability level of the students with special needs in his class, and second, an attitude about what effort he is willing to make for these students as a teacher. Both of these attitudes can have an enormous impact on teaching style and make the incorporation of traditionally segregated students into general education classroom a failed endeavour from the outset.

The essence of this teacher’s views of his class is embodied in his classification of the students in the class into two groups, those who “can really learn something”, and, implicitly, “those who cannot”. This particular judgment is not original, but has been regularly iterated during the past and even present century by Nigerian teachers and administrators as a reason for denying education opportunities to the “in educable”, due perhaps to their negative attitude towards the exceptional children.

In another similar judgment, a student was denied access to a school because he was classified as “mentally retarded” and thus unable to be taught. The Nigerian teachers of that period deemed providing schooling for this particular group of people a complete waste of time, simply because the disability made it impossible for the special needs children to fit into the standard system and learn with only the methods and supports offered to the “normal” children. Thus, many similar judgments by teachers have negatively influenced the education of the special needs students; thus creating a problem in their academics.

In a study carried out by Mba (1991) on the attitude of teachers towards the inclusion of hard-of-hearing students in general education classroom, it was revealed that the attitude of teachers indicated hesitancy of the teachers to accept the hard-of-hearing unless the communication barrier was obviated. Similarly, Ogbue, (1995) reported an interview conducted in Lagos State on the issue of inclusion of special need children in general education classroom. Her findings were that of the 200 regular primary school teachers interviewed, 60% of them rejected inclusion, while 35% of them would want inclusion provided they were adequately trained. The remaining 5% were undecided on the issue. Thus, many of all these negative attitudes will have an adverse effect on the education of the special needs children in Nigeria.

Malinen and Savolainen (2008), in a sample of 523 Chinese university students, administered a questionnaire to examine their attitudes towards the inclusion of children with disabilities into regular classrooms. Factor analysis, analysis of variance, t-test and correlations were used to assess the

respondents' general attitude towards inclusion, the factor structure of the attitudes, the relationship between demographic variables and the attitudes and the ratings of best educational environments for students with different kinds of disabilities. The analysis revealed that (a) the participants' average attitude towards inclusion was slightly negative; (b) four factors, named as social justice, meeting the special needs of the pupils with severe disabilities, quality of education and teachers' competence, were extracted (c) the most important background variable that explained the attitudes was the participants' major subject in the university; and (d) the ratings for the best educational environment for a student with a disability varied according to different types and levels of disability.

Elliot (2008) examined the relationship between teachers' attitudes toward the inclusion of children with mild to moderate mental disabilities in physical education settings and the amount of practice attempts performed and the levels of success attained by these students compared to their peers without disabilities. The findings suggested a relationship between teacher attitude toward inclusion and teacher effectiveness. Teachers with a positive attitude toward inclusion provided all of their students with significantly more practice attempts, at a higher level of success.

Researchers have attempted to discover the factors associated with the successful inclusion of students with disabilities. The role of teachers' attitudes has been studied. The majority of these studies in physical education have assumed that a positive attitude towards inclusion was necessary for the successful inclusion of children with disabilities into physical education (Rizzo & Vispoel, 1992; Tripp & Sherrill, 1991). These studies have examined the relationship between different types of attitudes and variables such as teacher age (Rizzo, 1985; Rizzo & Wright, 1988), gender (Patrick, 1987), teaching experience (Marston & Leslie, 1983), educational preparation (Rizzo & Vispoel, 1992), perceived teaching competence (Rizzo & Wright, 1988), and type and severity of student disability (Rizzo & Vispoel, 1991).

Several student and teacher related variables have been significantly and consistently linked with specific teacher attitudes toward inclusion (Rizzo & Vispoel, 1992). Student grade level and severity of disability have been found to influence teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. Specifically, students with disabilities were viewed more favourably in lower grade levels than in higher grade levels (Minner & Knutson, 1982; Rizzo, 1984), and children with less severe disabilities were viewed more favourably than those with more severe disabilities (Rizzo, 1984; Rizzo & Vispoel, 1991; Rizzo & Wright, 1987; Tripp, 1988).

A thorough review of literature revealed that limited studies have directly investigated the teachers' attitude towards inclusion of the special needs children in the general education particularly in the Nigerian context. Attitude research in education and physical education has grown

increasingly popular over the past twenty years (Folsom-Meek & Rizzo, 2002). This increase has been driven by the belief that the attitude of the teacher can have a direct influence on the successful inclusion of children with disabilities into regular classes (Rizzo & Vispoel, 1992). This investigation was a response to the need for empirical evidence regarding the teacher attitudes toward inclusion of special needs children in General education in Nigeria where there is limited or no data available on the subject matter. Basically therefore, we intend to investigate the attitude of teachers towards the inclusion of special needs students in general education classrooms, and the effects of variables such as gender, marital status, professionalism and teaching experience on their attitudes. The present study had the form of a pilot study which was the first stage of a large scale project with similar aims that addressed representative sample across Nigeria.

Method

The study adopts a pure descriptive approach. The sample was composed of 600 teachers who worked in general education school (regular schools) in Ibadan, Nigeria. Data on the demographic information of the study sample indicate that 73.8% were married, and 26.2% were single. The data further reveal that 74.8% of the participants were professional teachers, while 25.2% of them were not professionals. Considering teaching experience, participants with 1–9 years and 10 years and above were 50% respectively. The breakdown of the sample can be found in table 1 below:

Table 1 Demographic Data (N = 600)

| Variable | N | % |
|----------------------------------|-----|------|
| Gender | | |
| <i>Male</i> | 224 | 37.3 |
| <i>Female</i> | 376 | 62.7 |
| Marital Status | | |
| <i>Married</i> | 443 | 73.8 |
| <i>Single</i> | 157 | 26.2 |
| Professionalism | | |
| <i>Professional Teachers</i> | 449 | 74.8 |
| <i>Non-Professional Teachers</i> | 151 | 25.2 |
| Teaching Experience | | |
| <i>1 – 9 years</i> | 300 | 50 |
| <i>10 years and above</i> | 300 | 50 |

Hypotheses

Four hypotheses were postulated at the significant level of .05; they are:

H01: There is no significant difference between male and female teachers in their attitude towards the inclusion of special needs students in general education classrooms

H02: There is no significant difference between married and single teachers in their attitude towards the inclusion of special needs students in general education classrooms.

H03: There is no significant difference between professional qualified and non-professional qualified teachers in their attitude towards the inclusion of special needs and children in general education classrooms.

H04: There is no significant difference between teacher with less than 10 years of teaching experience and their counterparts with more than 10 years of teaching in their attitude towards the inclusion of special needs students in general education classrooms.

Instrument

Pilot interviews were carried out among a small group of Nigerian teachers, to generate items for the scale in assessing the attitudes of teachers towards the inclusion of special needs children in general education classrooms. The final scale consisted of 20 items which were accompanied by four-point Likert-type self-report rating scales ranging from “positive attitude” to “negative attitude” (1 to 4).

Predictor Variables

Personal and job demographics: Teachers were asked to fill in a detailed biographical questionnaire with information on gender, marital status, professionalism and teaching experience, all relating to their attitudes towards inclusion of the special needs children in the general education classrooms.

Procedure of Data Administration

The researcher administered the instrument in each of the selected schools after obtaining their mission to do so from the school authorities. In each of the schools, respondents were gathered in a class and were administered the questionnaire. The instructions were read to the respondents as regard the filling of the questionnaire. The items in the questionnaire were properly filled and returned after the exercise. There was no case of any loss of items as return rate was 89%.

Results

Hypothesis One

Hypothesis 1 states that, there is no significant difference between male and female teachers in their attitudes towards the inclusion of special need students in general education classrooms. The result of the hypothesis is presented on table 2 below:

Table 2 t-test Comparison of Male and Female Teachers on their Attitude towards the Inclusion of Special Need Students in General Education Classrooms

| Groups | N | Mean | SD | df | Cal-t | T-value |
|--------|-----|------|------|-----|-------|---------|
| Male | 224 | 39.4 | 5.62 | 598 | 7.09 | 1.98* |
| Female | 376 | 43.3 | 7.71 | | | |

* Significant at .05 level

The result on table 2 illustrates that the attitude of male teachers is 39.4, while that of female teachers is 43.3, the t-test analysis shows that the calculated t-test is 7.09, which is greater than the critical t ($t=1.98$) at .05 significant level.

Since the calculated t (2.107) is greater than the critical t (1.960) it means that the mean difference between male and female teachers is significant. And since the mean score of female teachers is higher than that of their male counterparts, it follows that the female teachers have more positive attitude towards the inclusion of special need students than their male counterparts.

It also follows that the difference in mean score is not by chance, but statistically significant. Hypothesis one is therefore rejected. Hence, there is a significant difference between male and female teachers in their attitude towards the inclusion of special need students in general education.

Hypothesis Two

Hypothesis 2 states that, “there is no significant difference between married and single teacher in their attitude towards the inclusion of special need students in general education classroom”.

The result of hypothesis two is presented on table 3 below:

Table 3 t-test comparisons of married and single teachers in their attitude towards the inclusion of special need students in general education classrooms

| Groups | N | Mean | SD | df | Cal-t | T-value |
|---------|-----|-------|------|-----|-------|---------|
| Married | 443 | 40.30 | 6.52 | 598 | 2.46 | 1.98* |
| Single | 157 | 45.11 | 7.58 | | | |

* Significant at .05 level

The result of table 3 shows the t-test analysis of the effect of marital status of teachers on their attitude towards the inclusion of need students in general education classrooms. The result indicates that the calculated t is 2.46; which when compared with the critical t (1.98) at .05 level; it was observed that, the calculated t is greater than the critical. This result implies that the calculated t is statistically significant at .05, thus, there is a significant difference between married and single teachers in their attitude towards special need students.

A further look at the table indicates that the mean score of the single (45.11) is higher than that of the married (40.30) suggesting that teachers

who are married have significantly more favourable attitude towards the inclusion of special need students when compared to the participants that are single. On the basis of this result, hypothesis two is rejected.

Hypothesis Three

Hypothesis three states that, “there is no significant difference between professional qualified and non-professional qualified teachers in their attitude towards the inclusion of special need students in general education classroom.

The result of hypothesis three is presented below.

Table 4 t-test comparisons of professional and non-professional teachers in their attitude towards the inclusion of special need students in general education classroom

| Groups | N | Mean | SD | df | Cal-t | T-value |
|------------------|-----|-------|------|-----|-------|---------|
| Professional | 449 | 42.57 | 7.11 | 598 | 1.03 | 1.98* |
| Non-Professional | 151 | 43.3 | 7.71 | | | |

* Not significant at .05 level

Table 4 shows that the mean attitude score of professional qualified teachers is 41.57, while that of the non-professional teachers is 42.09. This means that the professionally qualified teachers tend to have a more favourable attitude towards the inclusion of special need students than their non-professional qualified teachers.

The t-test analysis shows that the difference between them is not significant at .05 level, since the calculated t (1.03) is less than the critical t (1.98). The difference in the mean score therefore occurred by chance. Based on this, hypothesis three is accepted. Hence, there is no significant difference between professionally trained and non-professionally trained teachers on their attitude towards the inclusion of special need students in general education classrooms.

Hypothesis Four

Hypothesis four states that, “there is no significant difference between teachers with less than 10 years of teaching experience and their counterparts with more than 10 years of teaching experience in their attitudes towards the inclusion of special needs students in general education classrooms.

The result of hypothesis four is presented on table 5 below.

Table 5 t-test comparison of teacher with less than 10 years of teaching experience and their counterparts with more than 10 years of teaching experience in their attitude towards the inclusion of special need students in general education classrooms

| Groups | N | Mean | SD | df | Cal-t | t-value |
|--------------------|-----|-------|------|-----|-------|---------|
| 1 – 9 years | 300 | 42.76 | 6.61 | 598 | .92 | 1.98* |
| 10 years and above | 300 | 43.3 | 7.71 | | | |

* Not significant at .05 level

Table 5 shows that the attitude of teachers with less than 10 years teaching experience is 42.76 while that of their counterparts with 10 years and above is 40.56. The t-test analysis shows that the t. calculated is (.92) which is less than the critical t (1.98) at .05 significant level. Since the calculated t is less than the critical t, it means that the mean difference between the teachers in terms of teaching experience is not statistically significant. It follows that the mean difference occurred by chance. Therefore, hypothesis 4 is accepted; indicating that, there is no significant difference between teachers with less than 10 years teaching experience and their counterparts with 10 years teaching experience and above, in their attitude towards the inclusion of special need students in general education classrooms.

Discussion

This study examined the attitude of teachers towards the inclusion of children with special needs in the general education in Nigeria. The results of the various analyses on the study have revealed that female teachers have more positive attitude towards the inclusion of special needs students than their male counterparts. Furthermore, the results reveal that significant difference exists between married and single teachers in their attitude towards special need students. Professionally qualified teacher tends to have a more favourable attitude towards the inclusion of special need students than their non-professional qualified teachers. Moreover, teachers demonstrate similar attitude towards the inclusion of special needs children in general education irrespective of their years of experience.

In agreement with the findings in this study, adequate literature search has indicated negative attitude of teachers and much of this negativity results from lack of knowledge (Siegel, 1992; Houck, 1992; Philips, Allred, Brulle & Shank, 1990). There is considerable research that suggests that classroom teachers feel inadequate when children with special needs are included in a regular classroom (Monaham, Miller & Cronic, 1997). The positive attitude of female teachers towards the inclusion of special needs children demonstrated in this study may be due to the fact that females naturally have good tolerance compared to male. They are more calm and receptive than males. The reasons for the negative attitude of the male may be attributed to lack of training in special education. Generally, the findings by previous researchers that teacher' attitudes are more likely to be favourable if they have: (a) higher perceived teaching competence, (b) greater educational preparation, and (c) more experience in teaching students with disabilities (Rizzo & Vispoel, 1991; Rizzo & Wright, 1988; Rizzo, 1985; Marston & Leslie, 1983; Rizzo & Vispoel, 1991) lend credence to the findings on this study. However, the gender difference reveal in this study contradicts earlier findings by researchers such as (Patrick, 1987; Rizzo & Vispoel, 1991; Rizzo & Wright, 1988). This contradiction may be due to the timing i.e. the interval between those studies and this present one. During the time interval, lots of changes have taking place which might account for the differences. Part of these changes is the ongoing struggle to

eradicate gender in-equality which is one of the major themes of globalization that the whole world is targeting.

The significance of special education of future teachers continues to grow along with teaching requirements beyond the traditional classroom. Thus, teachers are expected to integrate many programmes into the lives of the children they teach in order to accommodate the special needs children within the general education classrooms.

In addition, in a study carried out by Ivey (2002) general education teachers showed a significant increase in their belief that there is resistance toward inclusion. This is in agreement with the finding in this study. Also, there have been some studies (e.g. Wikzenshi, 1994; Jamieson, 1984; Berryman & Berryman, 1981) which indicated the negative attitudes of general education teachers towards inclusion based on issues of experience on the job. This is also in line with the findings of this particular study.

Moreover, literature has stressed the importance of individual variables (especially as it affects teachers of the special need children). Thus, personality traits, demographic characteristics, the ability to establish and maintain supportive social networks, and the ability to cope have all been recognized as key mediators of the stressor's impact on the individual (a good example of teachers and the special needs children).

Conclusions

Inclusion agendas should be concerned with identifying all forms of exclusion and barriers to learning within national policies, cultures, educational institution and communities with a view to remove them. Also, it has implications for redirecting teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of special needs students in regular educational programmes positively. Thus, successful inclusion for special needs children in regular classrooms entails the positive attitudes of teachers through a systematic programming within the classroom.

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Biographic statements

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