

**Research paper**

# **Support Services for Inclusive Education of Children with Disabilities in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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**The paper discussed support services in relation to education of children with disabilities in an inclusive education environment. In doing this, the writers streamlined salient issues such as concept of children with disabilities, concept of inclusive education, concept of support services, difference between inclusive education and special education, types of learning styles in inclusive classroom, and importance of support services in facilitating effective educational inclusion for children with disabilities were highlighted and discussed accordingly. However, it is important to note that one of the critical issues underlying successful inclusion is the acceptance of diversity. In addition, an inclusive classroom should provide safe and supportive services in order for all learners in including those with disabilities to participate willingly in the class activities without being ridiculed.**

**Key words:** support services, disability, children with disabilities, inclusive classroom and inclusive education.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Inclusive school communities are educational settings in which children with disabilities have opportunities to participate and receive support in all aspects of school life alongside peers who do not have disabilities. In an inclusive education system special educators, specialized instructional support personnel, general educators and other education personnel work together to address the needs of children with disabilities. By collaborating, these educators better support the learning and participation of all children in the regular schools. This means that the inclusion services provide meaningful access to children with disabilities; hence, inclusive programme aims at providing for every individual with special needs in a given nation. The inclusive education curriculum emphasizes that educators consider children with disabilities before creating the school curriculum so as to allow all children to have equal access to instructions and opportunities to participate in learning activities.

Inclusive education support services entail all forms of educational work that assist children with special needs for some form of education support, encourage their development and advancement and their maximum inclusion and social interaction in schools. Specifically these support services may include but not exhaustively; resource materials for children with special needs education and educators; transportation; speech therapy and counseling for children, parents and educators as well as medical services.

In 2016, it was estimated that about 7 million children were reported to be out of school because of their inability to access primary education due to disability state according to Vanguard news. The design and management of primary and secondary schools in Nigeria are reportedly non-inclusive and inaccessible to children with disabilities. The article reported that 7 million children make up more than 50% of over 10 million children in Nigeria. Education being the basic need and right for every child; supposed to be available to every child regardless of his/her physical or social limitation. More so, the precedent for inclusive education was set in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) clause of Public Law 94- 142, originally passed by Congress in 1975. The most recent version of this law, known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Acts (IDEA), was enacted in 2004. Although many strides have been made in realizing the intent of the law, most schools in developing countries like Nigeria often still treat inclusive education as a new and challenging way of supporting children with disabilities. Too often, separateness and exclusion can define the educational experience, particularly for children with the most significant cognitive disabilities. Despite the slow rate of implementation and the challenges involved, educators, , and families have found many reasons to support inclusive education for children with and without disabilities including (1) support to civil right (2) integration in community life (3) a sense of belonging and acceptance of differences (4) varied learning opportunities (5) use of best practices in instruction (6) an individualized education in a supportive context (7) relationships with peers (8) increased support for all children team building improve schools and (10) parental involvement (Sabia, Thurlow & Kearns, 2022). Therefore the introduction of inclusive learning in the classroom is a necessity and not just a minor additional feature in the policies governing the management of schools in Nigeria.

However, without adequate provision of support services in Nigerian schools just like in every other developing countries of the world, successful educational inclusion for children with disabilities will automatically become a mirage and effort in futility. Therefore, the thesis of this paper would focus on highlighting and discussing the concept of children with disabilities; inclusive education, support services, differences between inclusive education and special education, the importance of support services in facilitating effective educational inclusion for children with disabilities, conclusion and way forward.

### **Concept of Children with Disabilities**

Children with disabilities are a highly diverse group with wide-ranging life experiences. They live in every community and are born with or acquire distinct impairments that in relation to their surroundings; leads to functional difficulties such in seeing, hearing, walking, communicating, caring for ones or making friends. According to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2022), Children with disabilities are those who were born with a genetic condition that affects their physical, mental or social development; those who sustained a serious injury, nutritional deficiency or infection that resulted in long-term functional consequences; or those exposed to environmental toxins that resulted in developmental delays (UNICEF, 2022).

Under the law, a child is considered disabled for social security income (SSI) purposes if: he/she has a medically determinable physical or mental impairment (or combination of impairments); the impairment (s) results in marked and severe functional limitations and the impairment (s) has lasted (or is expected to last) for a least one year or to result in death. This means that to meet the statutory definition of disability, a child's impairment(s) must result from anatomical, physiological or psychological abnormalities that are demonstrable by medically acceptable clinical and laboratory diagnostic techniques. In other words, an objective medical evidence such as signs, laboratory findings or both) is required of child to be considered as a disabled child or one with disability. However, for the purpose of this paper; children with disabilities simply connotes those with hearing impairment, learning disabilities, speech and language disorders, visual impairment, intellectual impairment, physical impairment, autistic children, or those with albinism.

### **Concept of Inclusive Education**

Inclusive education aims at educating children with disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers. It promotes equal opportunities and full participation for all age-going school children regardless of their abilities. According to Rao (2021), it is a learning environment that promotes the full personal, academic and professional development of all learners irrespective of race, class, colour, gender disability, sexual preference, learning style and language. Inclusive education describes a programme in which all available resources are collaboratively utilized to meet the educational needs and challenges of children with diverse needs who are in its attendant area (Ozaji, Unachukwu & Kolo, 2016). One of the philosophical perspectives of inclusive education is that children who learn together learn to live together.

The inclusive education philosophy was adopted at the World Conference on Special Needs Education in 1994 and

restated at the World Education Forum held in Dakar (Dakar Framework for Action, 2000). The same philosophy was further supported by the United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for persons with special needs, which proclaim active participation and equality of education for all (Haruna, Ogaero & Daniang, 2014). More so, the 'Salamanca Declaration' discussed how broad and balanced special education services should be provided learners with visual impairment in order to accommodate their needs, abilities and aptitudes in inclusive schools. Though, the immediate focus of the Salamanca conference was on special education, its aim was to develop the inclusive education systems (UNESCO, 2020). A section of the statement endorsed by 300 participants representing 92 countries and 25 international organizations in 1994 is notable and that is, education policies at all levels which stipulates that learners with disabilities should attend the neighbourhood school that is the school that they would have been attended if they did not have disabilities (Iroegbu, 2023).

Inclusive education is powerful concept in the world of teaching. It is all about creating an environment where all children, regardless of their abilities can learn together. The ultimate goal is to ensure that every child gets a fair shot and equal opportunities in his/her education journey (Kapoor, 2023). One of the existing ways schools are achieving this goal is the embracing smart classes. The high-tech classrooms utilize digital technology to take education to a whole new level; by making learning interactive, engaging and super effective.

### **Concept of Support Services**

Supports are services, strategies or situations that may benefit any learner with disabilities in the regular school. When the learner's individualized education plan (IEP) team, which comprise the parents of the child, the child's teacher and school personnel (that may include the psychologist, counselor, and others) meets; most of the discussion will be about the kinds of supports that can help the child's teaching and learning processes. Different children will require different kinds of support to participate fully in school. Some children need physical supports such as help with personal care, changes in seating arrangements, alternate forms of communication (for children with speech problems) and extra help to participate in activities which would not otherwise be possible. Supportive services in the inclusive classroom include special teacher, speech therapist, psychologist, occupation therapist and counselor.

The special education teacher and the regular education teacher engage in co-planning and work together to design lesson plans to fit the learning needs of all children; with the special education teacher focusing on the needs of the child with special needs education (that the child with disability in this context). The special education teacher may sit beside children with disabilities and provide one-on-one help or additional instruction so that the children will feel more included as a part of the class. The special teacher also, recognizes individual differences among children in the classroom and implements learning strategies to develop cooperative culture and collaborative work management as well as organize various activities for all in the class.

The speech therapy plays the roles of identification of problems, assessment and support of speech; develop language skills and ability; identifies communication needs of children; develop social communication, cognitive-communication and provides support and care for children who have difficulties with communication. The physiotherapist plays the roles of checking daily progressive muscular conditions; organizing exercise routines and games; providing health-related guidance and counseling; organizing health camps; evaluating a patient's condition and needs and develops a treatment plan for patients. On the other hand, the occupation therapist sees to the responsibilities of observing patients doing tasks; asking patients questions and review their medical history; laying out the types of activities and specific goals to be accomplished; learning new ways of doing things; regaining skills and developing new ones; using materials or equipment that makes life easier and adapting their environment to work better for them. Finally, the counselor plays the roles of organizing counseling sessions with children with special needs education; encouraging early involvement; consulting with and working with other school staff and collaborating with other school and community professionals (Rao, 2020).

### **Differences between Inclusive Education and Special Education**

Special education focuses on specific needs, while inclusive education aims at integrating all learners. Special education is a form of instruction that is specially designed to meet the unique needs of children with disabilities; hence, it is aimed at serving children who have differences that significantly impact their learning, response or behaviour. On the contrary, inclusive education is a concept that focuses on the inclusion of all school-age children, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, in general education settings. It seeks to create an environment where all children can learn together and receive appropriate support and accommodations.

Special education traditionally categorizes and identifies children based on individual impairments or disadvantages, whereas inclusive education challenges this approach and aims at breaking away from the idea of labeling children as 'different.' It rather promotes a shift in school cultures and practices that eliminates stigmatization and ensures that all children have equal opportunities for learning and participation.

Traditionally, the vision of special education differs from an inclusive education system, since it relies on segregation or integration, instead of inclusion. However, inclusive practices in special education can be implemented across the curriculum to provide children with disabilities with more opportunities for success. For example, a teacher might use flexible grouping to create small groups of children with similar needs; thus, allowing them to work together on a project (UNESCO, 2020).

### **Types of Learning Styles in inclusive classrooms**

Inclusion is the understanding that all children will have access to the knowledge, skills and values necessary to lead productive lives. Inclusive education takes place in an inclusive classroom where teachers, learners and other paraprofessionals interact to achieve learners' individual educational goals. Hence, it is an active learning environment where every child is participating in the classroom activities (Onwubolu & Edozie, 2011). Inclusive classroom is concerned with the implementation of a system of education which offers every member of the society an equal opportunity to acquire basic education in the regular school. Similarly, it is a place where everyone with or without special needs belonged to, is accepted and supported by peers and other members of the school community in order to have the educational needs of such one met. For inclusion to be successful in the classroom therefore there is need for the teachers to understand the different types of learners that stand to benefit from the inclusive classroom and acquire skills necessary to handle the different categories of children with disabilities. Therefore, the teachers should understand that there are visual learners, auditory learners, reading/writing preference, kinesthetic learners, logical and mathematical learners, social and interpersonal learners as well as solitary and intrapersonal learners (Kapoor, 2023). These types of learners are further discoursed below.

1. **Visual Learners:** These learners include children who grasp information best when it is presented visually using charts, maps, graphs and diagrams. When the teacher shows this category of learners an image they tend understand the concept much better than through written and spoken words. Teachers can cater for visual learners by using graphic organizers or flowcharts to explain complex ideas. For instance, a teacher can use a flowchart to simplify a scientific process to visual learners.
2. **Auditory Learners:** Some children including those with disabilities are auditory learners. This category of learners learns best when information is delivered through listening or speaking lessons, group discussions and talking things through their jam (slogan or using their peer group's language). Most often, the learners prefer sorting out their ideas by speaking first. Therefore, to support auditory learners; teachers can share audio recordings of lessons or incorporate group activities where learners are given opportunities to explain concepts to each other.
3. **Reading/Writing Preference:** These learners when information is presented using words. They are avid readers and excel in written assignments like stories or book reports. In order to help this category of learners to learn; teachers can encourage them to describe diagrams or charts with written statements and later study their notes to reinforce their understanding.
4. **Kinesthetic learners:** These categories of learners are hands-on; they need to get physical and tactile materials to be able to grasp new information. Kinesthetic learners excel in activities that involve application of what they have learnt; they enjoy learning involving concrete personal experiences, practices or simulations. So, teachers can provide working examples or task them with hands-on experiments to illustrate concepts.
5. **Logical and Mathematical Learners:** logical and mathematical learners naturally lean towards careers in programming, accountancy, science and research. Thus, they can excel in pattern recognition; comfortable with numbers and have aptitude for grouping and classifying information.
6. **Social and Interpersonal Learners:** They learners thrive in group setting and love collaborating with others; they might take leadership roles within a group. They are often extraverted, good communicators, sensitive and empathetic. However, it is not all social learners are extraverted; some prefer listening in a group setting to working alone.
7. **Solitary and Intrapersonal Learners:** These categories of learners can be visual, auditory, physical, verbal or logical learners; they value their independence, introspection and privacy. They often incline toward careers that require self-determination and solitary workloads such as researchers, writers, authors, programmers and coders (Kapoor, 2023).

Sequel to the foregoing discourse; it is crucial that teachers understand these different types of learners among the school children including those with disabilities in order to be able to create effective inclusive classrooms where every child has the opportunity to excel irrespective of whatever teaching and learning approaches adopted; hence, the goal remains the empowerment of all learners on their unique learning needs.

### **Importance of Support Services in facilitating Effective Educational Inclusion for Children with Disabilities**

The importance of creating an inclusive environment for children with disabilities is to ensure that the children have equal opportunities to participate in every aspect of life to the best of their abilities and desires. By giving equal opportunities and the corresponding respect; children with disabilities tend to develop sense of confidence and at the same time cultivate the sense of belonging. This invariably, makes for positive growth attitudes irrespective of the children's disabling conditions and thus, would want to pursue and work on their goals to contribute meaningfully to the society.

In relation to the foregoing discourse, support services may be helpful in facilitating effective educational inclusion for children with disabilities as it aims at showing them a positive behaviour; giving them clear instructions so that they understand what is expected of them and provide reward and praise. For example, picture cards or stories about social situations may teach children including those with disabilities; social skills. With the application of some innovative instructional approaches such as use of sensory activities may be an effective way for children with additional needs to feel a sense of relaxation; allowing them to be creative and use their imaginations while engaging their senses. For instance sensory bags or boxes could include any objects that the child wishes to put inside (Barnardos, 2023).

Inclusive classrooms are not just about supporting academic instructions for children with disabilities; rather, everyone enjoys the benefits of inclusion in the classroom, including the teachers, children, parents or guardians. All children benefit from interacting and developing friendships within diverse groups of peers and teachers benefit from getting to know their children in deeper and more meaningful ways. Within the inclusive school cultures, teachers and administrators deal with fewer absence and disciplinary issues, because children who feel valued and included tend to be more invested in their own positive participation in the learning community. For parents and guardians, inclusive classrooms mean that their child is learning and spending much of their young lives in a safe and nurturing environment. Therefore, provision of support services is inevitable in order to record deep success in educational inclusion of children with disabilities in relation to understanding each child as an individual; creating an interactive learning environment that considers the needs of all children including those with disabilities and building collaborations with all stakeholders in the children's educational lives.

### **CONCLUSION**

In the world of education, it is crucial for teachers to understand the different types of learners; by recognizing and catering for their diverse learning styles. Teachers can create effective inclusive classrooms where every child has the opportunity to thrive. However, whether through smart classes or traditional teaching methods, the ultimate goal remains the same; to empower all children with disabilities and those without disabilities on their unique educational drive.

However, the critical issue underlying successful inclusion is the acceptance of diversity. Unfortunately, this is not likely to happen easily and without major changes in the way many schools operate. Neither special nor general education alone has either the capacity or the version to challenge and change the deep-rooted assumption that separate and track children according to the presumptuous ability, achievement, and eventual social contribution. Meaningful change will require nothing less than a joint effort to reinvent schools to be more accommodating to all dimensions of human diversity.

Sequel to the foregoing, it is important to note that an inclusive classroom should provide a safe and supportive environment in which all learners are willing to participate in class activities without feeling ridiculed. When the atmosphere is not as supportive as it should be, there is no doubt that it may impede learning. However, the teacher has the responsibility of creating and maintaining a classroom atmosphere which nurtures the personal, cognitive and social development of all learners (Mpya, 2007).

### **Way forward**

1. Building an authentic relationship with each child is the foundation for a truly inclusive classroom. Therefore, the

teachers should continually work to understand their children's unique backgrounds and perspectives as well as provide opportunities for the children to safely share their life stories and perspectives with their peers.

2. When teachers invest the time to know/understand each child in the classroom and honour each diverse origins, it creates a safe space for learning; a deeper sense of belonging and richer cultural competences for the teachers and the children alike.
3. Teachers should gear efforts towards getting to know what motivates children to learn and the learning styles that work best for them to foster inclusivity in the classroom. For instance, at the start of the school year, teachers might consider handing out a questionnaire or having conversation sessions about what excites children about learning; what they see as their strengths and weaknesses; what goals they have for the year and then incorporate these findings into their lesson plans and classroom materials.
4. Implementing diverse activities around a single lesson can offer children multiple ways to learn and improve overall retention. For instance, the ability of a teacher to plan an independent reading activity, interactive discussion with peers, creative art project, or hands-on experiment around a single topic cannot only reinforce knowledge for the children but would facilitate learning across a range of learning styles.

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