

EARLY INTERVENTION PROGRAMME FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN AN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Formerly children with special needs were considered as not educable and the few that receive education were made to attend segregated classroom or special schools but one of the recent developments in the field of education is the movement towards educating these children in an inclusive classroom with their fellow children that are not handicapped or disabled. Therefore, this paper examines the meaning of inclusive education. It tries to look at the importance and rationale for early intervention on children with special needs in an inclusive classroom and also, highlights the factors that can enhance the success of early intervention and education for children with special needs

Introduction

One of the recent developments in the field of special education is the movement towards placing all special need children in the same classroom environment with the non - disabled learners which is referred to as inclusive education (Hallahan and Kauffman, 1994). Inclusive education has become one of the more contentious issues in the field of education. Historically, education for the children with special needs was always given in a segregated environment until during the Nigerian third National Development plan between 1975 and 1980 when integrated education for the handicapped was perceived as part of the Universalization process (Mohammed and Anwalu, 2004). In a bid to integrate special need children into the regular classroom, Government specified in Section 8 of the National Policy on Education (2004) that the disabled should be integrated into the society via education and this is to be achieved through mainstreaming and integration of the handicapped and non - handicapped in a regular school setting by a regular teacher who has some training in elements of special education.

In the same vein, research findings in the recent past suggested that providing a separate school for the disabled does not bring about the desired social integration of the disabled into the society in which they belong. As a result, a number of studies have suggested a number of ways by which the disabled person could be properly integrated into the educational system and the society at large and these are mainstreaming, integration or inclusive education. Stainback and Slamback, (1996) and Westwood, (1997) argued that any form of segregation of pupils with special needs is socially unjust, and a denial of their right to be exposed to the same broad range of learning experiences enjoyed by their counterparts.

Mba (1995) quoted by Unaegbu (2004), described integration as a system whereby average and able - bodied children are grouped with disabled child in the same classroom or learning environment. In Nigeria, the National Policy on Education (1977), revised 1981, 1998 has not only recognized integration but also adopted it. A section of the policy states "Government has decided that integration is the most realistic form of special education since handicapped children are eventually expected to live in the same society with their able bodied counterparts." However, the trend has gone beyond mere integration but has moved towards inclusive education. In the National Policy on Education (2004), Section 10 sub section 96c (i) it was stated that "all necessary facilities that would ensure easy access to education shall be provided e.g inclusive education or integration of special classes and units into the ordinary / public schools under the UBE scheme." This is an indication that Nigeria Government has adopted inclusive education as the best method of educating the children with-special needs.

What Is Inclusive Education?

Milner (2000), as quoted by Ademokoya (2008), defined inclusive education as a reform process aiming at ensuring that all learners regardless of their physical or sensory defects have access to the whole range of educational and social opportunities offered by the school. Adeniyi and Egunjobi quoting Staubs and Peck (1995) defined inclusive education as the full time placement of children with

moderate and severe disabilities in a regular classroom. Also, Westwood (1999), viewed inclusive education as the removal of all persons and learners with disabilities from segregated settings (institutions and special schools) into the community living and regular classes where they can live and learn side by side with their non - disabled persons or learners.

Inclusion from the above definitions depicts the idea of accommodating and welcoming the person with disability as a full member of the regular school or the community and valued as inseparable and respected members or citizens. The inclusion model of education is a model that allows children with special need to be educated in a regular education classroom along with his typically-developing peers. Children educated under this model, usually only need minimal support from the special education department and can benefit from school specific academics. Inclusive class is a place where everyone belongs and is accepted, supports and is supported to have his or her educational needs met.

Inclusion is beneficial for individuals with special needs as they spend their day alongside typically-developing peers who can serve as role models for social interaction. In a 1994 study by Baker, Wang and Walberg, it was discovered that "special-needs students educated in regular classes do better academically and socially than comparable students in non-inclusive settings." The rationale for inclusive education in Nigeria according to the National Policy on Education (2004) 4th edition, is to

" give concrete meaning to the idea of equalizing education opportunities for all children, their physical, sensory, mental, psychological or emotional disabilities notwithstanding; provide adequate education for all people with special needs in order that they may fully contribute their own quota to the development of the nation".

Inclusive education is characterized by placement in the neighbourhood schools according to the age and appropriate grade, equal accessibility, cooperative learning practice and support from the special education department in the regular school.

What then is Early Intervention Programme in an Inclusive Classroom?

Early intervention programme can be described as all activities designed to discover and assist children that are prone to disability as they pass through the spectrum of predictable stages of development. According to Gaji (2004) quoting Heward & Orlansky (1984), early intervention refers to the practice of screening, assessment and diagnosis as well as pre- requisite training in basic skills during the critical years from birth to school age. The implication of early screening is to detect any impairment or disability while the child is still young and the necessary step can be taken if applicable towards prevention. According to Thorburn and Mario (1990) quoted by Anwalu (2004), early intervention is defined as early detection of impairment and all measures designed to preserve the normal developmental process of infancy and childhood.

In a wider perspective, early intervention also embraces services offered to parents and their children so as to avoid or restructure disability conditions which could be detected before it takes its toll on the growing child (Gaji, 2004). Early intervention can take effect from the prenatal, peri natal and post natal stages. During the pre natal or peri natal stage, some scientific and technological devices are used to discover or detect some presumed metabolic disorders in the developing fetus prior birth or during delivery to prevent the occurrences where possible. At the post natal stage, if discovered, some therapy are utilized and this will even include the parents and family members by teaching them on the ways to handle the special child and his or her needs. Early intervention for special need children is designed to provide proper support services for these children and their parents in order to arrest the development of disability or to prevent the development of secondary disabilities. Adedoja (1999) quoted by Anwalu (2004) pointed out that comprehensive early intervention programme should include

- ❖ Early identification of children with disability (through screening)
- ❖ Diagnosis
- ❖ Assessment
- ❖ Treatment
- ❖ Psychological and educational evaluation
- ❖ Early childhood education
- ❖ Parent guidance

❖ Individualized instruction

The following services should be considered paramount to qualitative and effective early intervention that bring out results. The age span for these interventions is considered by scholars to be 0 - 6 or 8 years. It should be given in early childhood centres, nursery schools or for home preparation before entering the formal education settings

Therefore, early intervention in an inclusive classroom can be seen as enrolling children with special needs in nursery schools that is meant for normal children without any discrimination or prejudice. That is allowing special needs children to attend schools which they would have attended if they did not have any disability. Such a classroom accommodates each child with his / her strength and weakness and the classroom environment is always conducive, facilitating, and interactive and the pupils are actively involved. Each individual is accorded equal respect and members are developed to respect others and appreciate individual weaknesses and strengths.

Research evidences have established the efficacy of early intervention at the pre school years, when the rate of growth and development is most rapid especially when the presumed or established disabling conditions which could inhibit learning at the later life are noticeable. It is believed that failure to take the advantage of the early years which is characterized by curiosity and learning readiness, might lead to difficulty in acquisition of some basic pre-requisite skills in later life.

Rationale for Early Intervention for Children with Special Needs

Pre school education is essential for children with special needs because of its several benefits. For instance, the pre school stage is a stage when identification of some disabilities is easy and some mild disabilities can be cured. Discovery at this stage can minimize the effect of risk and lead to fewer manifestation of disability in later years. Therefore, the rationales for early intervention are as follows

- Early education for children with special needs can generate and maintain more normal rates of development (Singh, 2004)
- Pre school education for special children reduces the need for placement in the special education class in primary schools
- It helps to reduce drop outs, wastage and stagnation in primary schools (Singh, 2004)
- Several researches such as Kaltsounis, (1970) and Farrant (1962) have established that children with special needs are more creative than their normal children. This suggests that special children should be exposed to appropriate teaching and learning strategies that will foster creativity at the early stage of life.
- Pre school can reduce difficulties of handicapped children by providing special training programmes
- School may be the first experience for a pre school child with special needs in a normal give-and- take peer relationship. The pre school education may be helpful to develop social skills needed for their adjustment
- Enrolling children with special needs in Pre School is very important because it widens their experiences which can complement and reinforce home training. Here, some habit and skills can be learned which might help for future adjustment

The Status of Pre School Children with Special Needs in Nigeria

Traditionally, special needs children were considered as special creatures that are to be kept home away from the normal children or placed in an institution run by charitable trusts after six or seven years of age. Parents and families of children with special needs are always very timid to be identified with them and the society always sees them as people that have been visited with the wrath of God. Disability is considered a punishment of the past sins and that nobody should interfere in the justice meted out to disabled person by God. The society believes that children with special needs, are liabilities. These children are considered not educable and so were neglected and expenditure for their education was considered wasteful. Therefore, people do not want to relate with them or have any respect for them and do not want to identify with them. The society believes they should be pitied and the only means of living for them should be begging. Some families always misuse them and engage

them in begging as a means of livelihood for the family. These views about children with one disability or the other segregated them from other children and they are alienated from the general public.

However, in the recent years, there is a global consensus that children with special needs can be made useful and fulfilled if they are educated like their non - disabled peers. Education is discovered as the passport to greater opportunities in life. For the child with special needs, the prognosis of his adult life is believed to be highly dependent on the quality of education in his preschool and ensuing school years. It has been established by scholars that early identification and intervention are pivotal to the prognosis of the child with special needs. Many professionals believe that the first seven years of a child's life are critical windows for his development intellectually, socially and emotionally. Findings (UNESCO, 1999; Westwood, 1997) support the commonly-held view that early services to young children with special needs will enhance their abilities to develop to their maximum potential, reduce later education costs to society, and improve their chances of both economic and living independence. Similarly, the quality of education during the child's formal school years (beyond age 6) and the ensuing transition planning are believed to have a direct impact on whether he achieves maximal economic and living independence or not. Students with special needs are at much higher risk to be significantly unemployed and underemployed upon leaving school compared to their peers who do not have disabilities.

Also, many conferences, workshops and declarations have played a vital role in promoting the education of the children with special needs. Such as the UNESCO conference (1988), the World Conference on Education for All held in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990, the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights which includes Right to Education, and the Conference held in Salamanca, Spain which had a notable impact and serve as a strong force instrumental to the unanimous decision adopted, where it was agreed that inclusive education be floated to cater for all children with disabilities, regardless of age, physical, social, cultural, intellectual, linguistics and other conditions. (UNESCO, 1999)

Despite the global agreement that the world should be an inclusive world with diversities not only in disabilities, it is not surprising that in most cases persons with disabilities are marginalized and made to receive education in a segregated environment and the early intervention is made difficult in normal schools considering the scarceness of the facilities crucial to their education. Facilities needed for the education of children with special needs are very costly globally, and the issue has been aggravated by the pervading poverty level in Nigeria and most of the developing countries which made it difficult to procure most of these facilities. Again, the unpopularity of inclusiveness among the general populace coupled with the non- challant attitude of the critical stakeholders in the field of education and the government, made it extremely difficult for the smooth implementation of inclusive early intervention programmes in Nigeria. The cultural beliefs and attitude to special needs children is' also an impediment to the full implementation of inclusive education in Nigeria.

Factors That Can Enhance Success in Early Intervention and Education of Children with Special Needs

Several critical success factors are important to achieving excellence in the early intervention and education of children with special needs:

- **Timely and Appropriate Placement for Child** - There is the needs for early identification, coupled with proper assessment and placement so that the child can have access to learning early enough
- **Quality Curriculum and Pedagogy ('what' and 'how' to teach)** - A successful education programme requires a sound evidence-based curriculum and pedagogy.
- **Trained Professionals** - Professionals who are systematically trained and coached are integral to success especially in an industry dependent primarily on human resources.
- **Funding of Enabling Services** - Programmes need adequate resources to run successfully.
- **Active Family Caregiver Involvement** - The learning received by the child with special needs in schools must be reinforced and continued at home.
- **Transition Planning/Community Acceptance** - Planned transition from one school year to another; from one school setting to another and from school to employment; is critical. Planned Integration must start early.
- **Strategic Leadership with Strong Execution Discipline** - As with all initiatives, there must be strong strategic and accountable leadership at all levels in order for programmes to be

executed successfully.

Conclusion

This paper has extensively examined the issue of early intervention in an inclusive education system and has pinpointed the factors that can enhance success in an early intervention programme. However, greater diversity in the student population is not without its challenges. Therefore, to achieve success, preschools and other early childhood settings have to establish more flexible organizational structures to promote collaboration and responsiveness. At the individual preschool level, educators need to make changes in their teaching methods and room organization. It is not enough for educators to gather factual information about their theme for the week; they must be able to work flexibly with that material, modifying the learning environments to respond effectively to student differences. Differentiation or using different content, products, learning processes, and teaching processes for different children are one way of accommodating or helping children with diverse learning needs. These are recognized as the building blocks of an inclusive setting.

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