

**Counselling Strategies for Positioning Inclusivity in Nigerian Educational  
System for National Reconstruction**

**BY**

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## **Abstract**

*Inclusive education is a kind that targeted all children in receiving education in the same environment irrespective of any physical or social challenge. The global best practices now advocate for this kind of educational provision in order that nobody feel libeled. This paper discussed on issues that pertain to inclusiveness in education by touching on issues like what is inclusion in education and its possible pseudonyms, the basic elements of inclusive education and how to make it a reality. The paper also dealt with the common effective learning environment for inclusiveness and the possible challenges associated with inclusive education. Strategies for effective inclusion to address bottlenecks to effective challenges to inclusion were also addressed. How counselling could ensure access to appropriate support and interventions to build inclusion in our educational system are also discussed.*

## **Introduction**

Education is supposed to be a right and its provisions and opportunities should be made available and open to all. Consequently, the Education for All (EFA) as an international agreement adopted at the Jomtien World Conference in 1990 and reiterated at Dakar Framework for Action (2000) targeted to achieve education for all by 2015. The EFA movement is a global commitment geared towards enabling all children, young people and adults have the human rights to benefit from an education that will meet their basic learning needs, that which includes learning to know, to do, to live together and to be, thereby developing learners' personalities so that they can improve their lives and transform their societies. Thus, one of the goals EFA set to achieve is in creating safe, healthy, inclusive and equitably resourced educational environments conducive to excellence in learning with clearly defined levels of achievement for all (Umo, 2013). Accordingly, it could be asserted that education should be planned in such a way that everyone can benefit from its provisions.

In this regard and as contained in the National Policy on Education (1998) one of the values which Nigerian education is expected to promote is that of "emotional, physical and psychological health of all children". Thus, Nigerian education has unambiguously pointed that its objective is for enabling numeracy and literacy to all irrespective of culture, religion, physical, or socio-

economic challenges. Somehow, that provision as spelt out in the national policy is not being implemented as it should be because of some political or operational oversights. Thus, many times one will notice that some groups of people are neglected or somehow denied from such benefits, though sometimes it is not like they are neglected or denied but because the educational arrangements or provisions simply doesn't favour them due to their physical, societal, socio-economic, emotional or mental challenge. In fact, the arrangement would be such that could, from the start, somehow vilify or stereotyped them. And that is where the issue of inclusive education came into play. For national reconstruction to happen, Nigerian education system need to be positioned to cater for all and to enable all to benefit maximally.

### **The Concept of Inclusion in Education**

Inclusion in education is based on the belief that every child can learn and realize his/her full potential if provided equal opportunities to participate in school, supported with resources required as per his/her condition and taught in a manner appropriate to his/her needs. Inclusive education is an umbrella term that encompasses considerations and strategies to support the diversity of learners in a given context by minimizing barriers to learning, as this may impact an individual's ability to achieve her/his full potential. Inclusive educational setup refers to equitable and non-discriminatory arrangement where each child is valued, accepted and respected. Every child gets equal opportunity of participation in all those activities that suits his/her capability. Schools conduct curricular/co-curricular activities necessary for developmental needs of all students as per their interest. An Inclusive set up helps in building a community, nurturing and comforting environment where each child can acquire academic and social skills with a positive attitude and values.

The Central Board of Secondary Education (2020) noted that the concept of inclusion first gained recognition in Canada followed by the USA and Great Britain. The Salamanca Statement, UNESCO 1994, for action on special needs education, has been identified as the international breakthrough for inclusion leading to a paradigm shift in education. Ideally, a child must receive education in an environment that is the least restrictive and is most conducive to his/her needs. This means that general education is the placement of first choice for all wherein a child with disabilities is with her/his peers without disabilities to the maximum degree possible.

Kirschner (2015) observed that some educators and theorists also use “inclusion” in a broader sense, to refer to an educational system designed to ensure access for all groups that have been marginalized in society and in schools. Thus, inclusion is sometimes *envisioned as the deliberate and self-conscious structuring of whole-school and classroom environments so that they are accessible and congenial not only to students with impairments, but also to those who can face exclusion or disempowerment due to their ethnicity, social class, gender, culture, religion, immigration history or other attributes*. Because inclusion also has this broader meaning, it is sometimes endorsed as a means of achieving a more comprehensive form of social justice.

Inclusive – also called inclusion – practice can be defined as attitudes and methods that ensure all learners can access mainstream education. Everyone works to make sure all learners feel welcome and valued, and that they get the right support to help them develop their talents and achieve their goals. When education is truly inclusive it can actually benefit all learners, not only disabled learners. It is an education that includes everyone, with nondisabled and disabled people (except severe cases) (including those with “special educational needs”) learning together in mainstream schools, colleges and universities. This means the system must adapt to include disabled people – they should not have to adapt to the system (see models of disability). The

education system must recognize that it creates barriers for disabled learners, for instance if parts of the school are inaccessible. Disabled pupils and students may require adaptations and support to access the curriculum Hehir & Katzman (2012), Florian (2008), Tomlinson (1999).

In Nigerian context, inclusion should encompass the physically challenged as well as those special target groups who are less considered; the nomadic herders, the migrant fishermen, the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), the street kids, the *almijiri* children, the out-of-school and all such others. So, the contention here is on how to integrate them into the school system where 'normal' children attend. Education that excludes and segregates perpetuates discrimination against traditionally marginalized groups. When education is more inclusive, so are concepts of civic participation, employment, and community life.

### **What inclusion is not**

Literature on inclusive education is replete with what actually is inclusion in education and what it is not. Previous practices in attempting to educate the special target groups mostly engage in what is now seen as segregation. Thus, authors like Hehir & Katzman (2012), Kirschner (2012) Enslin & Hedge (2010), Tomlinson & Imbeau (2010) Minow, Shweder, & Markus (2008) and McLeskey & Waldron (2000) explain the following with respect to inclusive education:

- **Special Education (Segregation).** Special Education is the practice of educating students in an exclusive set up and in a way that addresses their differences and needs through individualised teaching. Ideally, this process involves individually planned and systematically monitored arrangement of teaching procedures, adapted equipment and materials, collaborative teaching, involvement of parents and accessible settings. Also, provision of separate units in mainstream schools and colleges is another form of segregation too.

- **Integrated Education.** Integrated Education means persons with disabilities of all ages and/or those learners, identified with ‘Special Educational Needs’ are being placed in regular education settings with some adaptations and resources. There is, however, the expectation that persons with disabilities and/or ‘special educational needs’ must fit into the pre-existing structures, attitudes and an unaltered environment that already exists in the school. In a nutshell, disabled children and students in mainstream education, but without enough support for them to be truly included. This is called integration.
- **Mainstreaming.** Mainstreaming is the practice of placing students with special education services in a regular classroom during specific periods based on their skills. In summary, disabled learners are in mainstream education, but their needs are not met.

### **Basic Elements of Inclusive Education**

Elements that are considered as important and that could make inclusive education acceptable and appreciable include:

- i. **Use of teaching assistants or specialists:** These staff have the potential to be inclusive or divisive. For instance, a specialist who helps teachers address the needs of all students is working inclusively. A specialist who pulls students out of class to work with them individually on a regular basis is not.
- ii. **Inclusive curriculum:** An inclusive curriculum includes locally relevant themes and contributions by marginalized and minority groups. It avoids binary narratives of good and bad, and allows adapting the curriculum to the learning styles of children with special education needs.
- iii. **Parental involvement:** Most schools strive for some level of parental involvement, but it is often limited to emails home and occasional parent–teacher conferences. In a diverse school

system, inclusion means thinking about multiple ways to reach out to parents on their own terms.

### **Advancing Inclusive Education**

To make inclusive education a reality we need to do the following:

- a. ensure that educators have the training, flexibility, and resources to teach students with diverse needs and learning styles,
- b. ensure that kindergartens and schools receive adequate and sustainable financial support so that all activities and services are fully inclusive,
- c. empower parents to assert their children's right to education in inclusive settings,
- d. enable the entire community—including mainstream and special educators, social workers, parents, and students—to work together and participate in the design, delivery, and monitoring of education, thereby reframing inclusive education as a shared responsibility,
- e. hold governments accountable for implementing antidiscrimination legislation, legal mandates for inclusion, and policies to remove barriers.

### **Effective Common Learning Environment in Inclusiveness**

Inclusive education is carried out in a common learning environment; that is, an educational setting where students from different backgrounds and with different abilities learn together in an inclusive environment. Common learning environments are used for the majority of the students' regular instruction hours and may include classrooms, libraries, gym, performance theatres, music rooms, cafeterias, playgrounds and the local community. A common learning environment is not a place where students with intellectual disabilities or other special needs learn in isolation from their peers.

Thus, [www.inclusiveeducationcanada.org](http://www.inclusiveeducationcanada.org) noted the following effective common learning environments:

- ✓ Enable each student to fully participate in the learning environment that is designed for all students and is shared with peers in the chosen educational setting;
- ✓ Provide a positive climate, promote a sense of belonging and ensure student progress toward appropriate personal, social, emotional and academic goals;
- ✓ Are responsive to individual learning needs by providing sufficient levels of support and applying student-centred teaching practices and principles.
- ✓ Common learning environment: an inclusive environment where instruction is designed to be delivered to students of mixed ability and with their peer group in the community school, while being responsive to their individual needs as a learner, and used for the majority of the students' regular instruction hours.

### **Challenges Associated with Inclusive Education**

According to Hehir & Katzman (2012), Florian (2008), Tomlinson (1999), Minow, Shweder, & Markus (2008), McLeskey & Waldron (2000) three types of possible challenges or dilemmas associated with inclusive education that are especially relevant to classroom management are:

- i. **How to create and maintain the order, structure, and safety** that are necessary for a successful learning environment. Classrooms, like all other social situations, involve routinized activities and patterns of interaction. Teachers seek ways to include all their students in the social rituals through which learning and community building take place; they also strive to find creative, constructive ways to handle potential disruptions. Effective management thus is not only about accommodating students' learning needs, but also about helping them regulate their behavior.



- ii. **How to meet the learning, social and developmental needs of all students**, both those who are typically developing and those with special needs and impairments. Here, the goal is to devise and implement academic and social curricula that can reach every child while also maximizing each individual's potential.
- iii. **How to confront the ever-present risk of stigmatizing those who are perceived as “different.”** In other words, there is a need to recognize and to try to lessen the many forms of literal and symbolic exclusion that may emerge, even in a setting that is devised to minimize these problems.

### **Strategies for Effective Inclusion**

Three ways, according to Kirschner (2015), to address bottlenecks to effective challenges to inclusion are a flexible approach to giving students the support they need, an integration of universal design and differentiated instruction, and the “normalization” of the reality of human differences.

1. ***A flexible approach to providing support.*** In an effectively inclusive environment, teachers and staff are open to finding creative ways of helping a child function in the class. The goal is to provide all children with what they need in order to accomplish their best learning and to become members of the classroom community. As teachers get to know their students' individual limitations and sensitivities, they often can anticipate situations that are likely to prove especially difficult or overly stimulating. They can take preemptive steps to minimize a student's discomfort and thereby help to preserve the harmony of the group. In more advanced grades, where academic instruction takes up much of the day, many different kinds of accommodations enable students to overcome limitations that might interfere with their learning or their ability to demonstrate what they know.

2. ***Integration of universal design and differentiated instruction.*** There are many ways to adapt pedagogical techniques, curricula and other aspects of teaching and learning to the varied needs and abilities of students. Universal design and differentiated instruction are two types of strategies that can make schooling accessible to a wide range of learners. The term “universal design” refers to the construction of environments intended to be accessible to everyone. Although often associated with the need to make physical spaces accessible to those with motor or sensory impairments, the principle of universal design is also relevant to other aspects of education. It can be applied to the way material objects are used, as well as to how teachers plan and execute curricula. Universal design can also involve building an individualized approach into the way the curriculum is constructed and lessons are taught. This type of curricular planning and presentation is analogous to designing an elevator so that people can enter it using walkers and wheelchairs as well as by walking unassisted, and so that the floor numbers are perceptible not only visually, but also through touch (braille) and hearing (recorded announcements). While “universal design” denotes techniques that help make academic and social aspects of school accessible to all learners, the concept of “differentiated instruction” highlights the importance of tailoring what is taught, and how it is taught, to individual students’ learning styles and differences. Differentiation can involve teaching the same concepts in several different ways, so that there are multiple points of entry into the same or similar material. But it can also involve teaching substantially different material to different students.
3. ***“Normalizing” the reality of human differences.*** Inclusive educational practices do not deny or disavow the existence of differences, including ability differences. Rather, a key element of effective inclusion is that it makes differentiated needs and supports seem less strange or

disturbing, by teaching children to regard them as a routine fact of life. Thus, inclusive education is not only about improving access and opportunity for those whose impairments might otherwise limit them. It is also about making impairments less central to the way a child is viewed by others, as well as to the way she sees herself. With younger children, one way to make ability differences and needs seem more ordinary is to allow all children in the class to become familiar with the devices and services used by children with special needs. Rather, it is just the beginning of a longer process whereby, over the course of weeks, only those children who really require accommodations “for their best learning” come to use them. There is a strategy related to how children receive services (e.g., occupational, physical and speech therapy). Instead of taking a child out of the classroom, service providers often work with their clients inside the classroom. And, whether they remain in the classroom or not, a child can ask a friend (who is not necessarily receiving services) to accompany him when he works with a service provider. Inclusive education is also facilitated by lessons and activities that encourage students (as well as adults) to reflect on the fact that everyone has strengths, as well as limitations and areas they can try to improve.

### **Counselling Roles in Strategizing Inclusive Education for Nigeria**

Counselling should ensure access to appropriate support and interventions to build inclusion in our educational system by raising awareness in teachers, staff and parents about the needs of inclusive education and the strategies required to deal with them. This should not only involve academic growth, but should also ensure total wellbeing in terms of social, emotional and behavioural areas. In this regard, counselling should strategically:

- i. ***Sensitize Teachers:*** counsellors should collaboratively work with other teachers to instill better understanding of the needs of inclusive education by putting forth the child’s point of

view and needs, and helping teachers develop more effective support services for the child. Thus, counsellors should act like a bridge in providing effective communication lines between inclusivity and teachers or their parents. It is also helpful to offer formal and informal lessons that promote empathy and perspective-taking. These dimensions of inclusive education are important because effectively managing an inclusive classroom has as much to do with influencing all students' sense of self and relationships, as it does with developing teaching techniques that are accessible to, and maximize the potential of, all students.

- ii. ***Work with families:*** counsellors should work with families and peers to build positive relationships and enhance optimism. They should help families understand school policies and procedures by providing information about concessions, facilities, programmes and vocational opportunities. They should work with families to improve its ability to meet child's needs at home; this should involve offering parents insight into strategies for behaviour modification to improve child's performance. It may also involve referring families to outside resources, such as child counsellors, vocational training experts or other specialists.
- iii. ***Mount a Holistic Mental and Physical Wellness Programme:*** counsellors should aim at holistic wellbeing of students through a structured programme for prevention, intervention and management of students' health issues. Here, the role of students' unions and young student leaders as peer educators should be encouraged as they can be effective role models for the juniors by promoting health enhancing changes. Interactive sessions should be organized to address all kinds of issues related to holistic wellbeing and equipping students with 21st century skills.

- iv. ***Collaborating with Special Educators:*** The Special Educator's role in building positive culture and plan with teachers the referral, assessment and evaluation of students through provision of appropriate information to teachers in advance to assist them in effective lesson planning, execution and assessment, conducting sessions with teachers, peers and parents to equip them with knowledge regarding disabilities and strategies, and making recommendation for inclusive education considering the individual needs of the students.
- v. ***Work towards Attitudinal Restructuring.*** It has been observed that practical difficulties faced by schools have more to do with attitudinal change. Counselling should strategize to provide a platform upon which policy makers, teachers, parents and community should be educated to possess a positive attitude towards inclusive practices. Furthermore, counsellors should sensitize the community to understand that inclusive education is the best plan for all types of learners and for the development of an inclusive, peaceful and fair society.
- vi. ***Engage in Sensitization Campaigns and PTA Meetings.*** Through sensitization campaigns and the Parent Teachers Associations (PTAs), counselling should educate the schools and teachers on how they could provide equitable learning opportunities to all students by adopting co-operative learning, positive interdependence, empathy, teamwork and involving children in the process. They should be aware of the goals of inclusive education and the importance of their role in building a positive environment. This is because parents of children with special needs are often protective and apprehensive about the adjustment and emotional security of their children. Similarly, parents of a normal child also have some predispositions and prejudices. When they meet at the same platform, they realize that inclusive setup can improve social and emotional learning and lead to better adjustment in society for all children, with/without disabilities.

- vii. ***Ensure Parent as Partners.*** Parent should take an active role in facilitating a learning environment at home and maintain a constant communication with teachers in order to gain insight into their learning growth. In doing so, counselling should educate parents on how they should shed all their apprehensions about school as their role as student advocate is paramount and they should display trust in the institution and work together to draw out the best in the child.
- viii. ***Seek Insights to the School:*** counselling should work earnestly to encourage parents to offer insight and suggestions for improvement on instructional strategies school offer to help child learn (even when not specifically asked). In this regard, parents can provide critical information about their children on the child's strengths and weaknesses at home, background information on the child's history and development, and information on any family factors that may affect the child's learning.

## **Conclusion**

Education is the surest way for the development of any society or nation and for Nigeria to make meaningful strides in that direction its educational system needs to imbibe global best practices. So, any effort aimed at reconstructing the country's development should focus on strategizing education and because of our inherent goals of education and the new global requirements, the reconstruction should target education for all irrespective of personal-social challenges. In this regard, our institutions of learning should restructure to encompass these groups of children who are challenged in any way; our curriculum need to be tailored to take care of them, the teachers need to be given special training to take on the new task, and the planning, construction and organization of the whole schools need to take care of those who are non-challenged and also those with physical or other challenges. Through the employing of counselling strategies in bringing awareness and educating the school, the teachers, parents and society would come to understand what inclusivity is and also what measures each needs to take to ensure that the process is well understood and embraced.

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