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# THE PERCEPTIONS OF REGULAR ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

*There is a growing body of evidence that inclusive education may be quite beneficial to the social, moral and ethical development of young people. It is in the realization of this that the National Policy on Education adopted inclusive education stating that all categories of children should be catered for irrespective of their disabilities and they should be integrated with the normal children in ordinary classrooms. In spite of copious examples and data that unequivocally support this model, some assumptions still persist in professional and lay circles that necessitate a probe into the perspectives of regular teachers who play host to these "visitors". This paper therefore assesses the perceptions of regular English Language teachers to find out the extent to which they make the students feel a sense of belonging, contribution of the community and school, as well as the adaption of the curriculum to students' individual needs. These are a must for the total development of the child.*

## INTRODUCTION

"Inclusive education", "full inclusion", "heterogeneous school", "integration" or "support education" – these are all labels given to the practice of assigning children with disabilities to ordinary schools to receive formal education like their normal peers.

The need for inclusive education for the physically handicapped children is clearly stated in the National Policy on education in Nigeria. (1998) section 8 states that all categories of children should be catered for irrespective of their disabilities and they should be integrated with the normal children in ordinary classrooms. The prevalent assumption is that handicapped school leavers will continue to live in the community amongst non-handicapped people, yet the sense of social isolation they feel on leaving their special schools many indicate their stress, disappointment and frustration if adequate measures are not taken to assist them (Aramide 2002). Integration therefore is seen a way of helping disabled children overcome the stress and isolation in the transition from school to community.

Gregory and Bishop (1989) citing the case of the deaf, opined that keeping deaf children in a special school is like separating them from their hearing peers and thus inhibiting their integration into the society. They stressed that advocates of integration know the importance of deaf children learning within a normal language environment, taught by adults using language.

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## **INSTRUMENTATION**

A scheduled Perceptions Assessment (PA) conversational interview designed to measure specifically teachers' perception of Inclusive education was used in this study.

The instrument was developed because of the non-availability of a directly applicable instrument at the time the study was conducted.

The Perceptions Assessment conversational interview was prepared based on extensive research and practice findings which have repeatedly demonstrated the efficiency of integrating students with disabilities into regular classes especially in the areas of achievement of individualized educational plan (IEP) objectives (Brinker and Thorpe 1984); interaction social skills development and communication skills development (Cole, Meyer, Vandercook and Mc Quarter 1986).

The interview is made up of three sections. The first section probes the general knowledge of English teachers of inclusive education (10 questions) the second section elicits information about their training and disposition towards the disabled students (10 questions) and the final section focuses on general factors related to the adaptation of the curriculum to individual needs of the students (10 questions). The interview is designed to initiate an informal, conversational exchange between the researcher and the teacher. According to Burgess (1980) conversational interviews are social events that can provide greater depth of understanding than more rigid interview techniques. The primary purpose of the conversational interview is to generate information that will provide authentic insights into teachers' perceptions. The instrument is considered relevant in the context because participating in a conversational interview allows individuals to use their unique ways of describing their fears, dilemma and experiences and to raise ideas and issues related to their perceptions and interests that may not be reflected in the scripted interview items (Denzin 1970).

## **DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

The conversational interview was designed to elicit information that will allow the researcher gain insights into regular teachers perceptions of Inclusive education, their disposition towards the children and the extent of adaption of curriculum to students' individual needs. The entire interview took approximately 5-20 minutes with the researcher asking probing questions which teachers answer on individual basis. Teachers were encouraged to elaborate upon their responses by assuring them that the exercise is to give them an option and a choice of students to teach and to help them achieve their objectives. Probing of brief responses in this way revealed important questions and fears which give rise to myths that need to be addressed.

Follow-up questions based on teachers' comments also provided significant information for the curriculum planners' use in planning reading programmes for the disabled.

Validity checks were carried out using language education experts and reading specialists. Internal consistency reliability of 0.82 was found for the teachers' Perceptions Assessment conversational interview with a five-day gap between administration on a pilot sample.

It is an established fact that the development of all children is enhanced by the extent to which they feel a sense of belonging, caring and community in school (Staub and Peck 1995). This, inter alia is the responsibility of the teacher. The pertinent question that comes to mind is – how prepared are the regular teachers for inclusive education? It is important to assess the extent of their readiness to play host to these “visitors”. Failure to enlist their interest will no doubt result into ‘dumping’ of the pupils, and their success in school is jeopardized.

Besides, everyone is a bit nervous in unfamiliar situations. Teaching students in an inclusive programme for the first time is no different. For example the English Language teacher is expected to teach communication skills of listening, speaking, reading and to all pupils in his/her class with an appreciable measure of success. No doubt many questions, fears and assumptions will run through his/her mind. Can I learn how to teach all these skills to all students with different types of disabilities? I feel able to teach writing skills but I wonder if I am really capable of teaching reading or oral skills to a deaf child for instance. What about other emotional and psychological challenges? What additional supports and resources will be provided for these students? Will those supports be available to all students in my class? Will I be cheating the students with disabilities? Will I be cheating other students academically or socially by concentrating more on the disabled? Is my classroom a place for all students?

These and other questions and concern will likely permeate the minds of regular teachers in inclusive classrooms. These questions exemplify the personal dilemma that teachers face as they embrace the philosophy but struggle with implementation. In this paper English Teacher Perceptions of Inclusive education are addressed. This will help in determining their commitment, interest, professional training, the availability of inservice education and their preparedness to counteract the notion of “otherness” or the perception by the students with disabilities that they are visitors to the school community (Schnorr 1990). In spite of copious examples and data that unequivocally support inclusive education, some assumptions still persist in professional and lay circles that necessitate a probe into the perspectives of regular teachers and the appropriate adaptation of the curriculum to address individual student’s needs. This is the focus of this paper.

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This study assesses the perceptions of the English Language teachers of inclusive education. This will elucidate their preparedness, and the extent to which they can give the students a sense of belonging and caring on which their total development hinge. It will also reveal the extent of adaption of the curriculum to address individual student’s needs which is a sine qua non to educational achievement.

### **SAMPLE**

Twenty English language teachers randomly selected from four schools where disabled students are enrolled took part in the study. The schools are located in three Local Government areas in Lagos State.

also note that the past 15 years of research on segregated education has demonstrated a deleterious effect on academic performance and social adjustment.

However, 95% of the teachers express the view that when students with disabilities are included in regular classrooms, the educational outcomes for typical students are not negatively affected. This agrees with research findings that children with disabilities are part of "all children". For example Hurt, Staub, Alwell and Goetz (1994) in their study of cooperative groups found no significant differences in pre and post- test math scores when group members either did or did not include a student with disabilities.

All (100%) of the regular English teachers posit that their schools and classrooms lack appropriate support for the disabled. This they attributed to the lack of commitment on the part of government resulting in the unavailability of equipment, and resources needed for this reform, which is still the exception rather than the rule. According to the teachers, if placing students with disabilities in an inclusive classroom environment is to evolve into being perceived as an option rather than a ridiculous notion, these reforming schools must be provided with academic and administrative supports and structures.

The teachers (100%) do not doubt the fact that children who are fully included could experience tremendous success, they however express their need of new tools, strategies and resources to support students put under their care. They all do not see themselves as being up to the task in the circumstances.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To make for a proper integration of the disabled into the regular classroom, the following recommendations are hereby proffered:

- (1) Students with disabilities should attend schools geographically close to their homes.
- (2) The school curriculum should be adapted to address individual students' needs within the regular class and surrounding school.
- (3) Tools and resources needed to support students placed in general education should be supplied.
- (4) Placing students in these classrooms and assigning para-professionals to them does not comprehensively address their needs. There is need to provide ample inservice special education for the regular classroom teachers.
- (5) Teachers should adopt instructional strategies that are effective for all students such as cooperative learning structures, activity and experienced-based instruction and integrated language arts curriculum. The needs of students with disabilities are best served through these innovative and interactive formats.
- (6) Developing flexible grouping patterns. This involves randomly grouping students into manageable groups to encourage social and academic expansion.
- (7) Creating individualized assessments. This will allow for an individualized measurement of each student's personal performance, growth and development.
- (8) Involving parents and families. Parents should be invited to share their

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of the conversational interview is to elicit information about regular English teachers' perception of inclusive education and the extent to which the students are made to have a sense of belonging, caring and community in school. Therefore the interview questions focus on teachers' general knowledge of the scheme, their training, interest and the use and adaption of the curriculum to students' individual needs. The study revealed that majority of the teachers show adequate knowledge of inclusive education. They all claimed to have been well briefed about students' enrolment in the school and so the whole concept is not strange to them. About 20 disabled students are enrolled in the four schools under study, 50% of the respondents have attended training programmes in the education of the disabled on general issues such as the psychological and social aspects of coping with children with disabilities. None of them has received specialist training on pedagogical issues.

Majority of the teachers (90%) are indifferent to having the disabled in their classrooms on sympathetic grounds and would not regard their presence as pernicious to the well-being of other students. On whether they would want them retained in their classes or taken to special school all (100%) are of the view that they should be enrolled in special schools where they would be given the kind of training needed for optimal life.

The regular English language teachers found the teaching of communication skills of listening, speaking and reading an impossible task especially for the deaf and dumb in their classrooms. They are of the opinion that putting this group of children in regular classrooms is tantamount to "dumping". They however have little or no problems teaching the mentally retarded.

The teachers reported the rapport between the disabled and their peers as fascinating. This perspective of the normal students of their disabled counterparts illustrates the belief that full-time regular class membership eradicates the notion of "otherness" or the perception by the students with disabilities that they are visitors to the school community (Staub and Peck 1995).

85% of the regular teachers would prefer that students with disabilities attend schools geographically close to their homes. In other words, they should attend the school they would attend if they were not disabled and special education teachers who have gained experience and appreciation for expanding interaction among these students should be saddled with the responsibility of teaching them. Majority of these teachers fail to see inclusive education as a natural component of reforms in educational circles but as an addendum to their agenda.

89% of the teachers interviewed express the view that students with disabilities do not benefit optimally from general education classes as there is no specialized curriculum for them. Research on inclusive education and the outcomes for students with disabilities have not been supportive of this myth. In fact Baker, Wang and Walberg (1995) conclude that "a small-to-moderate beneficial effect of inclusive education on the academic and social outcomes of special-needs children can be demonstrated". They

- knowledge and world experiences in a variety of settings such as discussions, informal meetings and seminars. Involving parents can maximize learning time, build students' self-esteem and focus resources for individualized instruction.
- (9) Integrating support services-schools should be provided with staff with specialized training such as special educators, reading and language specialists, speech specialists as well as physical and occupational therapists who should work with the regular teachers.
  - (10) Seminars and workshops should be organized for teachers as supplemental training to increase their efficiency.
  - (11) Regular teachers should explore books for adults that focus on the meaningful participation of people with disabilities in the community.
  - (12) Schools should enlist the support of parents as partners to help make decisions about classroom supports and services.
  - (13) Government should establish a special ministry for the disabled who should be responsible for the training of educators, support services, resource specialists and other related service professionals. They should also provide valuable materials and additional contacts for information on successful integration strategies.
  - (14) Government should encourage disabled adults to form recognized National bodies or associations to cater for the needs of the disabled students. Every local government should have local chapters of these associations which should target specific disabilities.

## CONCLUSION

The development of all children is enhanced by the extent to which they feel a sense of belonging, caring and community in school (Staub and Peck 1995). Children with disabilities are part of "all children" and deserve to be provided and catered for. There is a growing body of evidence that integration may be quite beneficial to the social, moral and ethical development of young people. It is in the realization of this that the National policy on Education in Nigeria (1981 section 8) adopted the integration model stating that all categories of children should be catered for irrespective of their disabilities and they should be integrated with all children in ordinary classrooms. Unfortunately many students with disabilities are placed in general education classes without support. Lack of commitment and resources will lead to a poor situation for the students, their parents administrators and the community. This "dumping" is not integration. It is an example of failure to implement policy requirements, which call for the appropriate use of supplementary aids and services.

The Federal Government must satisfy two criteria (identified by Fuchs and Fuchs 1995) in developing plans for students with disabilities. First "it must provide students with disabilities with an education appropriate to their unique learning needs". And second, "it must do so in as close proximity as possible to normally developing age – appropriate peers." (P. 23).



The bad example of a good idea – that is, placing students without support should not be a reflection on the student with disabilities or the philosophy of integration. When the government and the schools maximize their resources, positive learning outcomes can become a reality for all students. Everybody is the better for it.

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