

AJIL

African Journal of
Inclusive Education

UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN LIBRARY

VOLUME 1 NUMBER 1 JULY 2012

African Journal of Inclusive Education (AJIE)

Vol 1, No 1

July, 2012

UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN LIBRARY

African Journal of Inclusive Education

Vol 1, No 1

First Published July, 2012

by

West and Central African Association of Special and Inclusive Education (WACAASIE)

In collaboration with

Scholarship Publishing and Educatinal Consult Services
Suite 2 Ike-Olu Shopping Complex, Opposite University of Ibadan 2nd Gate, Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria

2012 Conference Secreteriat
Department of Special Education, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

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PREPARING TEACHERS FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

by

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ABSTRACT

The success of inclusive education in any context depends upon many factors. Teachers themselves are critical elements in ensuring the quality of students' inclusion in the school environment. Teachers have direct interaction with students and play a critical role in determining students' experiences in the classroom on a daily basis. Special attention must be paid not only to the classroom teachers who have the skills but also to the support needed to provide quality education to children with diverse learning needs. This requires the collaboration of classroom teachers, special education teachers, school principals, education officers and policy makers. This paper indicates that preparing teachers with essential knowledge and skills for inclusive education requires the commitment of all stakeholders. This paper further stresses that preparing teachers does not simply mean providing prospective teachers with inclusive education skills; it also means providing training and support for existing teachers as well. It is also the position of this paper that building capacity for inclusive education should include awareness raising activities as well as integrated pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes to ensure that teachers are aware, ready and willing to implement inclusive education properly.

Keywords: Collaboration, Teacher, Pre-service, Education, In-service

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has been internationally recognized as a philosophy for attaining equity, justice and quality education for all children, especially those who have been traditionally excluded from mainstream education for reasons of disability, ethnicity, gender or other characteristics. While inclusive education has been implemented successfully in many countries, other countries are still in the process of achieving this goal. The paper focuses more specifically on issues relating to teacher training and human resource development.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

UNESCO (2005) defined inclusive education as a process of addressing and responding to the diverse needs of all learners by increasing participation in learning and reducing exclusion within and from education. This means that all children have the right to quality education that caters largely for their individual needs. Some countries like the United State and Australia have been successful in promoting inclusive education practices and policies that remove barriers and create conditions which enable all children to learn. However, in poorer developing countries,

the process of creating an inclusive system is more difficult. Factors such as lack of adequate funds, administrative and policy level support, and trained personnel pose challenges that slow down progress. As a result of these difficulties, some countries may choose to begin the process by first focusing on one group of children with the long-term goal of eventually including all excluded groups.

In developing countries like Nigeria and Ghana, for example, the inclusive education movement targets children with disabilities, a group that has been traditionally excluded from educational opportunities. This involves mainstreaming children with disabilities into regular classroom settings, allowing them to learn together with their non-disabled peers. Ideally, this practice will lay the ground work for an education of quality for all children, including other excluded groups. However, inclusive education in many developing countries is still a work in progress, and for now, many countries continue to focus on inclusion of children with disabilities.

In Nigeria, as well as in other developing countries, the government has recognized the importance of inclusive education in promoting social justice and equity. One major difficulty that Nigeria and other countries face is ensuring that human resource development can support these important initiatives. This paper provides suggestions and best practices for how to create a work force that can support these objectives.

THREE ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS FOR CAPACITY BUILDING IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

In developing human resources to support an inclusive education system, three areas should be considered: the attitude of teachers and education staff, pre-service training programmes to ensure that future generations of teachers enter the profession with the skills and knowledge to work in an inclusive environment, and in-service training to improve the capacity of teachers already working in the field.

ATTITUDINAL CHANGES AND AWARENESS RAISING

For inclusive education to succeed, it is vitally important that teachers, principals and other education stakeholders maintain a positive attitude towards inclusion (Brantlinger, 1996). They must be firmly convinced of the benefits that inclusive practices bring to all children. Even if inclusive education is mandated by law, it will never succeed without the enthusiastic support of its practitioners. Obtaining such support involves behaviour and attitudinal change which is not a quick or easy process. There are ways to accomplish such changes, and the following are examples of activities and strategies that could be used.

- » Organize training workshops for educators and key community members on general inclusive education techniques, especially those which highlight how such techniques can benefit all children by improving overall quality of teaching.
- » Integrate awareness about inclusive education into schools' regular professional development activities.
- » Integrate knowledge about the benefits of inclusive education into initial training programmes for student teachers in colleges and universities.

PRE-SERVICE TRAINING PROGRAMMES

In order to build human resources in the field of education, training must be done both at the pre-service and in-service levels. According to Blaton (1992), pre-service training of student teachers refers to training individuals before they become teachers. This includes training at the levels of teacher training colleges and universities.

Ideally, inclusive education should be a compulsory subject for all teacher candidates and an integral part of teacher training curriculum (Brantlinger, 1996). Fundamental knowledge and skills of inclusive education, such as understanding needs and abilities of children with special needs and pedagogic skills such

as instructional accommodation and activity differentiation, should be provided widely to teacher candidates. Countries with strong track records of implementing inclusive education, such as the United States and Australia, have adopted the aforementioned skills for a long-time. As a long term goal, countries should work towards promoting inclusive education as a compulsory subject in pre-service training programmes.

In countries where such courses are not yet compulsory, developing a teaching module or unit in inclusive education in lieu of changing the entire curriculum can be an effective first step.

In-Service Training Programmes

In-service training programme includes professional development for teachers who are already working in the classroom. In addition to developing the skills of professionals before entering the workforce, it is essential that teachers already teaching be provided skills and techniques for inclusive education. Teachers in many countries are required to upgrade their professional skills on an annual or regular basis to enhance their teaching performance. In-service training programmes offer a particularly effective strategy to improve the quality of an entire educational system for all children regardless of their needs. Inclusive education methods are child-centered, employing active and participative learning techniques that improve teachers' capacity to teach children both with and without disabilities. Collaborative and participative techniques not only enhance learning outcomes, but also reduce prejudice and discrimination among children.

Regardless of whether countries have adopted inclusive education as a national mandate or are still in the pilot stages, this type of training will have a positive impact on all teachers and children in participating schools.

PRE-SERVICE APPROACHES: FOCUSING ON THE PRESCHOOL AND PRIMARY SCHOOL LEVELS

Pre-service teacher training in inclusive education should be made available for all levels of education like preschool, primary and secondary. However, in developing countries where this is not possible, it is important to prioritize preschool and primary school levels.

The earlier in life that children with special needs receive educational support, the more successful their schooling will be in later years, and the higher their quality of life as adults (Elweke, 2002). Early intervention for children, including linkages to early childhood health programmes and preschool inclusive education programmes, should be a priority in any country context. In reality, however, in many countries these programmes are under funded and poorly staffed, especially where compulsory education in state schools generally begins at the primary level. If possible, inclusive strategies should begin at the preschool level (age 3 to 6) in order to assist children earlier in life. In countries where intervention at the preschool level is not possible, primary schools may offer a more accessible alternative for systematic change towards inclusion.

In addition to the clear benefits of early intervention, preschool and primary school are logical starting points due to feasibility of application and implementation in the field. Usually, preschool and primary school teachers receive general training in the key subjects of language, mathematics, natural and social sciences, while training for secondary teachers requires more in-depth specialized knowledge of a variety of specific academic disciplines. Preschool and primary school children are usually taught by a single teacher or a small group of teachers and teaching assistants. Students therefore spend more time with their teacher and have a greater number of interactions with that one instructor. Children at junior and senior secondary levels receive instruction from a much greater variety of teachers. Therefore, in order to have a wider reach, pre-service teacher training programmes

for inclusive education should target preschool and primary school teachers first before expanding to higher educational levels.

TARGETING LOCAL NEEDS

When creating teacher training programmes or developing curriculum adaptations, it is very important to find out about existing national educational guidelines. This allows for the creation of inclusive education modules that complement and integrate into the pre-service curriculum. This can be done by understanding the local context and considering the following questions:

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER WHEN CREATING AN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION CURRICULUM

- » What is the current staff structure of your country's education system?
- » Are there built-in supports for teachers integrating children with diverse needs in the classroom?
- » Do classroom teachers in your country have the skills and training to teach children with special needs in regular classes?
- » Is there a cadre of teachers who are experts in special needs education?
- » Who regulates the job requirements of teachers?
- » Are teachers required to teach all children regardless of their special needs?
- » Do the regular pre-service teacher training curricula provide essential knowledge and skills for student teachers to teach children with diverse needs?
- » Are training institutions willing and able to integrate inclusive education into their education programmes regardless of government requirements?
- » What are the current policies in your country to support both education staff and children with disabilities?

With this information, development practitioners, educators and policy makers can work together to decide on appropriate ways to prepare teachers to teach children with special needs. Different steps can be taken based on the local context and the situation of the national educational legislation.

IN-SERVICE APPROACHES: SCHOOL-BASED TEACHING TRAINING DEVELOPING A NETWORK OF KEY TEACHERS

Students with disabilities need strong support from their teachers in order to fully participate in class activities with non-disabled peers (Kilgore and Griffin, 1998). Inclusive education requires that teachers have additional skills to be able to design inclusive lessons with a variety of activities that cater to diverse student needs. In some countries, classroom teachers are supported by a network of inclusive education coordinators, or specialist teachers, whose only job is to provide special support to both classroom teachers and students with disabilities. They collaborate with regular school staff to provide technical counselling in lesson planning and provide direct support to students and teachers as well.

However, in many developing countries, this support model is not in place due to lack of funding and appropriately trained personnel. Therefore, it is necessary to explore local adaptations and devise more feasible ways of providing support to classroom teachers and students with disabilities.

WHO ARE KEY TEACHERS?

According to Peters (2004) the term "key teachers" is used to refer to groups of educators, usually school vice-principals or district education officers, who are selected based on their overall competence and interest in inclusive education. In some developing countries, key teachers are selected by district and provincial education authorities. Although they maintain their regular position, key teachers gain additional training to provide strong

technical support to classroom teachers regarding inclusive education issues. They provide this support in addition to their regular duties. In a few cases exceptional classroom teachers have become key teachers as well.

At this juncture, the question that may readily come to one's mind is why key teachers? The development of a network of key teachers is cost-effective because they are already part of the educational system and not a new set of specialists requiring additional funding. Praisner, (2003) is of the opinion that key teachers are mostly school-based and often part of the local community, making this system more sustainable.

CRITERIA FOR SELECTION OF KEY TEACHERS

Criteria for selection can vary depending on the expected role and tasks of the key teachers. However, prospective key teachers must:

- » Have positive attitude towards children with disabilities.
- » Hold good qualifications and pedagogical performance records.
- » Be confirmed as long-term resources for schools and districts by local education authorities.
- » Demonstrate good collaborative and communication skills.
- » Have good skills as a trainer and facilitator.
- » Have a sound professional reputation.
- » Possess good counselling skills.

DUTIES OF KEY TEACHERS

Key teachers are the core human resource for inclusive education implementation in the field. Once trained, key teachers are usually assigned to a group of three to five neighbouring schools, which they visit on a rotational basis. Their visits usually coincide with the school's regularly scheduled meetings. These meetings take place in the school once a week, usually for one or two hours. According to Blanton (1992), duties of key teachers may

vary according to country context and local needs, but fall into the following general categories:

PLANNING

- » Assist in development of annual plans for inclusive education implementation at school, district and provincial levels.
- » Provide guidance to teachers and school leaders on the implementation of inclusive education plans, especially Individual Education Plans.

MONITORING AND REPORTING

- » Conduct field visits to monitor the implementation of inclusive education at the school level, including tracking the progress of students with disabilities, observing lessons and providing feedback to teachers.
- » Write reports summarizing the results of field visits, which are then sent to the project office as well as to district and provincial offices of education.
- » Make prompt recommendations to improve the learning results of children with disabilities.

CAPACITY BUILDING

- » Replicate training received from external experts on inclusive education knowledge and skills for the benefit of classroom teachers.
- » Organize thematic workshops for classroom teachers on teaching children with specific disabilities.
- » Create opportunities for teachers to share their experiences in teaching inclusive classes.
- » Coach classroom teachers on an individual or group basis when needed on specific topics or skills.

COUNSELLING

- » Provide technical advice to school principals for inclusive education implementation.
- » Provide counselling and advice to teachers on the progress of children with disabilities in their classes.
- » Provide counselling and advice to parents of children with disabilities.

CAPACITY BUILDING FOR KEY TEACHERS

In order to build capacity, all key teachers receive training in three areas: awareness raising, thematic issues, and the coaching process. Each type of training is described below:

AWARENESS RAISING

For awareness raising training, key teachers are provided background information and general knowledge about inclusive education and disability issues. Expected outcomes include:

Knowledge

- i Different approaches for educating children with disabilities, such as inclusive education and special education, to highlight the needs of children with disabilities and the benefits of inclusion.
- ii Rights, abilities and potential of children with disabilities.
- iii Theories, rationales and current trends of inclusive education.
- iv Disability related issues such as: the definition and identification of major disability types, the general impact of disabilities on physical and intellectual development of a child, disability laws and rights of people with disabilities (including the right to education).
- v Necessary support for the inclusion of children with disabilities at schools and in communities.

Skills

- i Advocacy skills to promote the inclusion of children with disabilities.
- ii Communication skills to mobilize out-of-school children to attend school.
- iii Assessment skills to monitor children's performance and progress.

THEMATIC ISSUES

Thematic training on specific types of disabilities should be provided to key teachers after the general awareness raising training. Ideally, key teachers should learn about all major types of disabilities so that they can assist teachers in schools where there are children with a variety of disabilities. In reality, however, it can be difficult to mobilize all key teachers to attend all thematic trainings due to budgetary constraints and busy work schedules. A practical solution is that key teachers choose one particular disability so that they become the resource person for their chosen area of focus (Lesar, S.A., Benner, S.M., Peter, J.O. and Samson, R.T. 1997).

For thematic training, expected outcomes include:

Knowledge

- Needs and abilities of students with specific disabilities.
- Different teaching methods to support students with specific disabilities.
- How to plan a lesson to include children with disabilities
- How to create individual education plans
- Strategies to assess progress of children with disabilities.

Skills

- Assess abilities and identify needs of children with disabilities.
- Develop lesson plans with specific objectives for children with disabilities.
- Choose and deliver appropriate teaching methods to help children with disabilities achieve learning objectives.
- Write individual education plans.

THE COACHING PROCESS

The third and final aspect of training is the coaching process. This component of the training was provided in response to an expressed need by key teachers themselves. Key teachers receive training as coaches in order to successfully support and mentor classroom teachers. Lombardi and Hunka (2001) are of the opinion that to be an effective mentor, a key teacher must possess good counselling and interpersonal skills. For these types of skills, learning is best imparted through practical hands – on sessions. According to Lombardi and Hunka (2001), the coaching process for key teachers can be described in several steps:

Step 1: Key teacher and inclusive education expert observe lessons by classroom teachers

In this initial step, the key teacher and an inclusive education expert observe an inclusive lesson taught by a classroom teacher. These experts are hired by the project to provide training for key teachers. Experts are usually from national universities or colleges of education.

Step 2: Key teacher observes the coaching process demonstrated by the expert

After the lesson, the expert coaches the classroom teacher, discussing the lesson plan and appropriateness of the teaching methods used. In addition, the expert helps the classroom teacher to evaluate the students with disabilities using the individual education plan. The key teacher observes the entire process: the lesson and the interaction between the expert and the classroom teacher.

Step 3: Key teacher observes classroom teacher and practices coaching skills

Applying what was learned from observing the expert in step 2, the key teacher observes the lesson delivered by a classroom teacher. The key teacher then offers similar coaching and advice based on the model provided by the expert. The key teacher continues this process of observation and coaching over a period of one or two months, allowing the key teacher to conduct several

working sessions with the same classroom teachers and students. This way, both key and classroom teachers can assess students' progress together and evaluate the effectiveness of teaching methods used or adjustments made. The expert observes the key teacher's coaching and provides feedback, pointing out strengths and areas for improvement.

Step 4: Key teachers and classroom teachers discuss learning

After key teachers and classroom teachers have worked together on several occasions, a workshop is organized for all participants (key and classroom teachers) within a specific district to share their experiences, identify common problems, and brainstorm potential solutions. This is a forum for key teachers to reflect on what they have learned and to modify approaches if necessary. The coaching process allows key teachers and classroom teachers to be active learners and to have a voice in the type of training they receive.

Monitoring Teachers' Learning and Progress

One of the main responsibilities of key teachers is monitoring the implementation of inclusive education by classroom teachers. Key teachers must pay special attention to the following:

Tailoring content and teaching methods to suit students with special needs: Teachers in inclusive classes must be adept at adjusting lessons so that children with special needs can participate (Van Lanrhoven, 2007). The teacher must set out specific objectives for each child according to his/her abilities and needs. This is a delicate process, since adjusting a learning objective too high or too low can hinder learning, and hence inclusion into the class. Key teachers assess this mostly through classroom observation.

Ensuring the Quality of Individual Education Plans: Classroom teachers are responsible for developing and keeping education plans of children with disabilities in their classes up to date. Key teachers check the individual education plans to see if

appropriate objectives have been entered and to check the progress of the children. In addition, key teachers speak with and observe individual children to verify that the contents of the plans are appropriate and accurate (Peter, 2004).

Though on-site observations are the primary means of monitoring and mentoring classroom teachers, assessments can also be done through thematic workshops. Facilitated by key teachers, these workshops provide classroom teachers in a specific locale a forum for sharing challenges and finding solutions related to a specific disability. Peter went further to say that this kind of sharing also allows key teachers to assess the major challenges faced by classroom teachers and how to strategically plan for further mentoring.

Inclusive Education as Systemic Change

Inclusive education is a child-focused approach to education that takes into account children's abilities, potential and diverse needs. This approach to education calls for teachers to develop creative strategies that cater for the needs of their students. Because it is a holistic approach to teaching and learning, inclusion requires reforms and innovations at different levels of the education system (Stayton and McCollum, 2002). From planning lessons and objectives to differentiating activities that cater for diverse needs, inclusive education supports children in their school environment. It involves accurate assessments of children and the creation of friendly and collaborative environments for all children. As mentioned previously, inclusive education not only improves learning opportunities for children with disabilities, it also contributes to the facilitation of educational reform for better quality teaching, learning and management. Collaborative learning and task differentiation are two important aspects of inclusive education that should be considered as key tools for achieving educational quality for all children. However, in order for inclusion to be both successful and sustainable, it must be addressed at all levels of the system, from education ministries to local teachers.

Praisner (2003) is of the opinion that the success of inclusive education will be limited if investment is only in classroom teachers. It is important to involve school leadership from the beginning so that they understand the basic concepts of inclusive education and give its implementation their full support. School principals and other management staff should be trained in inclusive education principles and techniques so that they are qualified to develop inclusive education strategies at their schools, and lend support to teachers. School principals have the authority to call regular meetings on the topic and to encourage learning among the teaching staff. However, if they have no background in inclusive techniques and philosophy they could prevent rather than promote successful inclusion.

CONCLUSION

The role ministries play in curriculum development and policy change cannot be overemphasized. According to Van Laarhoven (2007), for any country where policies on inclusive education are new, or have not yet been fully developed, it is very important to involve educational authorities at the highest level. In most countries this would mean the national Ministry of Education. There are a number of ways to involve these officials in inclusive education. Some developing countries have had success with the following strategies:

- Providing key policy makers and staff exposure to successful programmes and involving them in dialogue with both international and national professionals and experts on inclusive education.
- Involving key Ministry of Education staff in direct activities such as curriculum development and teacher training.
- Increasing the role of policy makers in piloted programmes by development agencies. This enhances the ownership of the ministry in facilitating the implementation of inclusive programmes and strategies in the long run.

- Exposing officials to inclusive programmes in other countries through study tours to observe successful inclusive teacher training models and to promote interaction with international peers.

Many developing countries have found that part of their success in inclusive education is due to strong collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Training. Policies on human resource development for inclusive education as well as curriculum development should be facilitated by the Ministry.

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