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SPOTLIGHTING THE TRENDS IN THE INCLUSIVE EDUCATION RESEARCH IN NIGERIA

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Abstract. This article presents a systematic review of the scholarship in the area of inclusive education in Nigeria, highlighting current trends, challenges, and prospects. The analysis reveals a paucity of scholarly research pertaining to inclusive education within Nigeria as reflected in international academic journals. A specific gap that has been delineated is the predominant focus of existing studies on disability, with scant attention afforded to gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, among other pertinent characteristics of exclusion.

Keywords: inclusive education, children, Nigeria, research, systematic review

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Научная статья

АНАЛИЗ ТЕНДЕНЦИЙ В ОБЛАСТИ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЙ ИНКЛЮЗИВНОГО ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ В НИГЕРИИ

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Аннотация. Показаны текущие тенденции, проблемы и перспективы в области инклюзивного образования в Нигерии на материалах систематического анализа крупнейших периодических изданий. Анализ выявил пробелы в поле научных исследований, касающиеся ряда аспектов инклюзивного образования в Нигерии. В существующих исследованиях в международных журналах основное внимание уделяется инвалидности, при этом авторы обходят стороной вопросы гендера, социально-экономического статуса, этнической принадлежности, а также другие измерения социального исключения.

Ключевые слова: инклюзивное образование, школа, дети, Нигерия, исследование, систематический обзор

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Introduction

Measures attesting to the increasing awareness and understanding of the right of persons with disabilities to education are embodied in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the World Declaration on Education for All (1990), the United Nations Standard Rules on Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (1993), and the Salamanca Declaration and Framework for Action (1994) [1]. The goal of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and its Optional Protocol (OP) is to provide ground-breaking new precedent for disability rights legislation both nationally and globally [2]. The idea that schools should accommodate all students, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other impairments, serves as the foundation for the Salamanca Declaration and the Framework for Action on Special Needs Education [3]. The fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) states that by 2030, all people should have access to inclusive, high-quality education, and lifelong learning should be encouraged [4].

African states enthusiastically supported the movement that resulted in the UN General Assembly adopting the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and its Optional Protocol on December 13, 2006 [5]. However, despite the reduction in enrollment gaps for vulnerable children brought about by universal primary education in many countries, the adoption of inclusive education in Africa since Salamanca (1994) has been sluggish [6].

The National Policy on Education was announced by the Federal Military Government of Nigeria in the latter part of the decade (1977), and the follow up period might be referred to as the beginning of recognition of special needs of students in the Nigerian society. Before then, the scholars point at the prevalence of demeaning public attitudes towards children with special needs and disabilities [7]. Children with disabilities are among the disenfranchised groups in Nigeria, where a “social and cultural fabric” [8. P. 10] is still hostile to people with impairments. The country recently acknowledged that 10.5 million of its students were not attending school.

The aim of this article is to emphasize the main trends in the scholarship on inclusive education in Nigeria, highlighting the thematic angles and points of relevance, while also examining the development of academic knowledge in this field and identifying the issues that have been contested. A brief literature review will precede the description of methodology and presentation of the main findings of systematic analysis of international scholarship on the given topic. The discussion and conclusion will present the gaps and perspectives highlighted in the reviewed articles.

Literature Review

A corpus of research that lists obstacles to the implementation of inclusive education has resulted from the inability of inclusive education to establish a firm foothold in educational systems around the globe [9]. It was further noted that

according to scholars' experience as academics in the field, the obstacles and enablers approach to inclusive education is constrictive since it implies that when more hurdles are found and removed, the objective of inclusive education will advance linearly [9]. Academics engaged in the pursuit of an African perspective on inclusive education assert that a re-emphasis on the fundamental principles of African values, community, and education would enhance the inclusivity of educational practices [10]. Africa must leverage its abundant cultural assets and recognize its unique social and economic contexts to avoid overextending itself in the pursuit of international benchmarks [11]. Hence, contextualized publications on inclusive education in Nigeria would indeed be beneficial.

Systematic reviews are distinguished by their thoroughness, transparency, reproducibility, and methodology. Finding all pertinent published and unpublished work that answers one or more research questions requires a methodical search process. Integrating a research topic into the larger framework of scholarly disciplines is essential in any field of study in order to expand on the body of knowledge in that field and to find gaps in the literature to support a claim. A great way to accomplish this is by carrying out a systematic review [12]. As noted by [13], the first and most evident advantage of systematic reviews is that they allow crucial design research questions to be addressed by utilizing the method's capabilities. The ability to stay up to date with the constantly expanding body of knowledge on a variety of subjects is another important benefit that systematic literature reviews offer. Additionally, the accuracy and reliability of recommendations made can also be improved by systematic reviews [14]. As opposed to conventional or narrative literature reviews, which are criticized for being arbitrary and biased, the goal of a systematic review is to conduct a thorough and open review at every stage of the process, making it repeatable and updateable. They specifically clarify the distinctions between configurative and aggregative synthesis logic, which are crucial for reviews in educational research [12].

Previous research has shown that, in addition to providing a broad overview of the empirical research on inclusion that has been published within a period of time, a systematic literature review can also be used to identify empirical support for practices and policies that contribute to the growth of inclusive education [15].

The aim of this paper is to investigate the current scope of research on inclusive education in Nigeria in the international journals in order to have better conceptual clarity and to systematize the range of social issues, research problems, methodologies and themes in the best studies of Nigerian researchers that were presented at the academic platform of high international impact.

Method and sample

This study employs a systematic review of literature methodology as also adopted by other studies of inclusive education within and outside Africa [14, 15]. The principal considerations that contributed to the desirability of a systematic literature review as the appropriate methodology for this work are clarity, validity, and auditability, which are features of a systematic literature review [16].

The selection process started initially with a manual search of relevant articles in several research databases including JSTOR, ScienceDirect, Taylor and Frances online, and International Institute of Science Technology and Education. Subsequently, articles on inclusive education in Nigeria were found in seven

journals, namely, the International Journal of Disability Development and Education (IJDDE), the International Journal of Inclusive Education (IJIE), Cogent Arts & Humanities, Cogent Education, Universal Journal of Educational Research (UJER). These journals were chosen to ensure a thorough and impartial systematic review because of their specialized emphasis, multidisciplinary reach, and relevance to educational research themes. In addition, the selected journals have international scope; therefore, the study that includes Nigeria are exposed to the worldwide audience, thus adding value to the international recognition of the national issues.

All selected journals are highly acclaimed periodicals in the fields of disability studies and educational development. With an intense focus on peer-reviewed interdisciplinary research, they highlight the challenges and potential for creating inclusive educational settings and meeting the needs of diverse learners. Their breadth and thorough peer-review process guarantee the dissemination of high-quality research with practical applications. All journals in our selection are widely cited and provide a forum for addressing major challenges in the creation of inclusive educational settings, making it a great resource for synthesizing findings.

To ensure a comprehensive coverage and to avoid omission of relevant articles, the following search options were used: “Inclusive education in Nigeria”, “Inclusive education AND Nigeria”, “Impairment AND Education AND Nigeria”, “Mainstream Education AND Nigeria”, “Special education needs AND Nigeria”, “Inclusion AND Education AND Nigeria”, “Integration AND Education AND Nigeria”, and “Special Education and Nigeria”.

This initial step returned 115 possible articles that were found in the search results. Following the removal of 64 duplicates from the 115 items returned by the literature search, 51 articles were examined and their relevance was evaluated.

The next step in choosing the articles was to review the title, abstracts and full texts for significance. The inclusion criteria were as follows: the articles should be about Nigeria and have at least one of the following terms in the abstract and among the key words: inclusive education, inclusive schools, special education needs. This left us with nineteen eligible articles, which were then retrieved for the full-text review in our analysis: eight from IJDDE, eight from IJIE, one from Cogent Arts and Humanities, one from Cogent Education, one from UJER. In the following sections, we present the findings of the study.

Results

Trends in the studies of inclusive education in Nigeria

The first article about Inclusive Education in Nigeria among the selected publications appeared in 2004 in IJIE [17]. However, we included into the analysis two articles on education of children with SEND that appeared in JDDE in the 1990s [18, 19], for they raised the issues of accessibility of schooling and mention possibility for children with disabilities to study together with their peers [18]. There is a notable increase in frequency of publications through the last decades: two articles in 1990s, two in 2000s, six in 2010s and ten in the 2020s.

In the next sections, we systematize and analyze the articles in our selection according to the theoretical framework and methodology, social and research problems highlighted and ways to solve the issues.

Social issues and research problems in the studies of inclusive education

Education of children or youth with disabilities was seen to be the focus of 20 articles from our sample. In addition, three articles from the collections emphasized the need to include other groups, namely, adults with disabilities, female learners and students with sickle cell disease. Furthermore, amongst the articles that focused on students with disabilities, five articles focused specifically on the issues faced by the students with hearing impairments, visual impairments, intellectual disabilities, autistic spectrum disorders. Other articles addressed the issues of inclusive education of children with disabilities without particular focus on the type of impairment.

Several articles in the IJDE pose the sharp issues of lack of resources to improve the well-being of people with disabilities, in particular, to make education accessible [18], to train teachers and develop inclusive schools [20]. The results of the study on the facilities available in mainstreamed public secondary schools in southwest Nigeria show that key amenities and resources, such as handrails, hearing aids, instructional materials, Braille, and lower restrooms, were not available, and the few that were (textbooks, resource rooms, typewriters) were in poor shape. This result demonstrated that inadequate resources and facilities hampered successful learning. The studies also highlight the gap between the policy rhetoric and its implementation [21].

As the CRPD was ratified in Nigeria in 2010, it was supported by the strategic documents at the national level, but its implementation is hindered and is challenging due to the lack of resources, especially in relation to inclusive education. In particular, as underlined by one of the authors, despite the Disability Rights Law (HB 37 & 46) being passed by Nigeria in 2004, it is not currently being actively enforced or implemented, which has an impact on inclusion and accessibility [20].

Since the early 1990s, scholars have expressed critical vision of the restraints created by policy definitions of special education and disabilities as a matter of deficiencies, a lack of a legal framework to implement policies to address the issues of welfare and education of people with disabilities, and pointed out that the policies are trapped in the definition of education for People with disabilities for being “blatantly personalistic and stereotyped” [18. P. 171] and prioritizing the deficits (learning difficulty because of handicaps) over potential solutions. Such a viewpoint, according to the author, has a clear impact on the range and quality of services offered to individuals with disabilities. He stresses the acute need for policies aimed to improve social and functional prospects for people with disabilities, especially in a society where opportunities for employment are becoming more scarce. The limitations of medicalized definitions of disability that impact the state of research, as well as the quality and quantity of data about children with disabilities was recognized [22]. Besides, the constrained definitions impact the low level of enrollment of children with disabilities in classes. The authors claim that the learning environment should be improved based on the recommendations informed by the relevant research [22].

The studies of the cultural context of inclusion are published in both journals. The research demonstrates how children and youth with disabilities continue to

face a lack of instructional support and discriminatory views among teachers [23] and other students. Such treatment reinforces the subordinate status of such learners. Perceptions and attitudes around disability and the inclusion of people with impairments in regular schools have been significantly impacted by cultural viewpoints, particularly in Africa [24].

Female students and younger staff seem to have a more positive attitude towards students with disabilities [25]. Another study indicated that special instructors demonstrated more positive attitudes towards kids with special needs than regular teachers. In addition to the negative attitudes, there are the issues of inadequate school supplies and ineffective teaching strategies [21]. Due to these, students with hearing impairments now find themselves in a position where they do poorly, feel alone in the classroom, stop participating in class discussions, and become dissatisfied with their education before graduating [26]. Using the Parents' Attitudes towards Inclusive Education scale, two articles explored parental attitudes, knowledge and perceived social norms that influence the implementation of inclusive education [27, 28]. The scholars identified positive attitudes among parents in general but a lack of knowledge about inclusive education. Cultural ideas influence the treatment of people with disabilities as unequal members of the society.

The cultural context of inclusion is a peculiar emphasis of the articles published in the IJIE. The authors identify traditional beliefs that attribute impairments to supersensible powers; such beliefs influence people's views towards those with disabilities and result in the public ignorance about disability issues. The conventional ways of thinking affect children's chances of inclusion in education [17]. The reliance on such beliefs is called by [29] as non-materialist culture. This term should not be misconceived as a part of a conceptual framework of post-materialism [30]. Here, "materialist" is a term from the Soviet type of Marxist thinking that defines the material world as objective reality that is perceived by the senses but is independent of mind or spirit (cf [31]). The authors explore how stigma underpinned by a "non-materialistic" culture affects the choices that parents in developing countries make on behalf of their children. Here, the mothers are identified as "key stakeholders" in the overall education of the child [29. P. 8].

By examining the everyday experiences of parents of children with disabilities, it was concluded that while some parents applaud the system, others see it as a threat to their children's social integration and future prospects [8]. The findings also point at the differential inclusion – there is a perception that certain disabilities are more "includable" within the country's inclusive learning settings than others, based on a cultural logic that places different bodily impairments on a hierarchy. Such symbolic categorization is coupled with social economic hierarchy indicating "a need for greater support and resources for children with intellectual, developmental or other supposedly severe disabilities that require more specialised care" [8. P. 12]. Indirectly, the study also mentions gender dimensions of exclusion. Although the authors do not elaborate that issue through the lens of the critical gender theories, they bring the evidence that because women are considered as responsible when a child is born with a disability in a society, they typically bear the burden of meeting the health and education needs of such a child [8]. By focusing on everyday experiences of parents more light was into complexities that

arise when poor countries with severe resource pressures and weak political will experiment with inclusive education policy, while underestimating sociocultural barriers that can hinder implementation [8].

A study presented by the authors in [32] is informed by post-colonial gender critical thinking (e.g., [33]). It analyzes patriarchal prejudice that hinders girls' access to education. The authors contend that gender inequality and discrimination against women generally as a result of patriarchal systems of social organization and other socio-cultural practices of early marriage, child slavery, child fostering, or child trafficking, poverty, and multiple household responsibilities, as well as a lack of economic and social opportunities, are the primary causes of the low school retention rate of girls relative to boys in the developing countries where gender parity in education is still a long way off. In particular, in Nigeria, education is hampered by the practices of early marriage [32. P. 366].

Particular areas of inquiry are novel for the African scholarship and need more scholarly attention, e.g., emotional wellbeing and quality of life of individuals with sickle cell disease [34] and services for children with autism [20]. A rare topic for the scholarship into inclusive education is the issue of illiteracy of adults with disabilities. The result of the literature review conducted revealed that, despite the limited funding and instructors who knew little about disability, the majority of adults with disabilities enrolled in the literacy program passed a qualifying exam, enabling most of them to find civil service jobs, continue their education into post-literacy programs [35]. Thus, there was a remarkable potential provided even by the basic literacy effort. However, because of lack of funding, it was discontinued [35. P. 1158].

Thus, the studies highlight the key barriers that hinder inclusive processes: lack of resources and comprehensive policies, public ignorance and widespread prejudices that not only are common among the general population but also affect the attitudes of the main stakeholders of education. The researchers embrace different structural levels of inclusion, paying attention to the policy, culture and practice.

To tackle some of the issues highlighted, the authors have given a number of recommendations that range from the statements addressing the level of governance and public attitudes to the concrete practical solutions at the institutional level.

A special funding allocation is claimed by the authors for the improvement of facilities and for the recruitment of more personnel with superior training to assist kids with impairments in the classroom [23]. To challenge the attitudes that lead to discrimination and bullying against parents and children, the authors propose educating the public about inclusion [17] through awareness campaigns [27], improving the attitude of students and academics. Lastly, the scholars underline the need to improve teacher training, advance curriculum, revise methods of teaching offering small- and individual-sized education in addition to large-group instruction.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to investigate the current scope of research on inclusive education in Nigeria in international journals in order to have better conceptual clarity and to systematize the range of social issues, research problems,

methodologies and themes in the best studies of Nigerian researchers that were presented at the academic platform of high international impact. Systematic reviews that summarize the available information on a topic are an important part of proliferation of research that has an impact on policy planning; hence, a systematic review of literature was carried out. Our analysis shows that the scholarship in the area of education for persons with disabilities in Nigeria acquired the attention of international readership since the early 1990s, when an idea that children with disabilities can study together with their peers was brought to light. There has ever since been a notable increase in the frequency of internationally wide publications about inclusive education in Nigeria, especially in the 2020s, along with the steady growth of legal framework concerning the ratification of international documents supported by the adoption of national laws.

The articles have identified issues facing inclusive education in Nigeria as majorly a lack of both human and capital resources, a low implementation of policy, gender inequality, negative attitudes towards people with disabilities and low knowledge in certain areas of inquiry in the field of inclusive education.

The concepts of Omoluabi and Ubuntu/Botho embedded in African societies and specifically in the education curricula was mentioned [24. P. 13]. These concepts “encourage citizens to love, support, value, and care for persons with disabilities and are geared towards inclusion”. This shows the necessity to take into account cultural assumptions that may nurture the attitudes of the professionals. This implies an epistemic turn towards such methodology that would be informed by cultural anthropology, to identify and discuss the role and place of African indigenous knowledge systems in the analyses of inclusive education (e.g., [36]).

In order to better recognize and resolve these complex issues that hinder inclusive education, the studies identify the main actors whose involvement can facilitate the processes of positive changes. Among them there are parents of kids with and without disabilities, institutions such as governmental departments, schools, and churches, cultural mediators such as priests, teachers, civil society organizations that support people with disabilities, and academia. However, several gaps in the scholarly literature were highlighted in this analysis. There is limited research on inclusive education in Nigeria across international journals. Another gap identified is that studies have paid particular attention to disability, with very little attention paid to gender, socio-economic class, ethnicity amongst other characteristics. Only a few authors recognize that in order to make inclusion effective, the mutual understanding and communication between the stakeholders is crucial. This article seeks to augment the journals’ existing body of knowledge, providing innovative insights and perspectives at the intersection of sociology and pedagogy.

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