

## INCLUDING THE EXCLUDED: A NECESSITY FOR BUILDING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN NIGERIA

<sup>1</sup>Akinbile, O.S. and <sup>2</sup>Kehinde, R.A.

Corresponding author-[oladayosamson99@gmail.com](mailto:oladayosamson99@gmail.com) 08165374895  
[adeolakahinde@gmail.com](mailto:adeolakahinde@gmail.com) 08035858262

<sup>1,2</sup>Department of Education for Learners with Learning Disabilities, Federal College of Education (Special), Oyo

### Abstract

*The truth of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG-4) is centred on inclusion of learners with diverse needs in general education classroom so as to afford them the opportunity of receiving instruction under the same roof with their counterparts without special educational needs. Regrettably, some schools in Nigeria still struggle with the aforementioned veracity by providing instructions for learners with diverse needs in a special or separate classroom setting which is the good gospel of inclusive education. Consequently, it is expedient to include the excluded and have a paradigm shift to embrace an inclusive education learning environment that will erase labeling, segregation and stigmatization of learners with diverse needs in Nigeria. This article is anchored on Contact theory of Gordon Allport which aims at promoting positive attitude and participation of learners with diverse needs. In light of this, this paper discusses the including the excluded: a necessity for building inclusive education learning in Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** Building, Inclusive education and learning environments

### Introduction

Inclusive education is a global movement that emphasizes the importance of providing quality education to all students, particularly those who have historically been marginalized due to disability, language, or socioeconomic factors (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020). It is founded on the belief that every child has the right to learn in a shared environment that respects and accommodates individual differences. According to Adigun (2021), inclusive education has proven to extol the virtues of equal opportunity for all students without any iota of discrimination in relation to their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other conditions, which may ordinarily prevent a challenging circumstance to enabling them to fully participate in learning environments. In the same vein, Adaka et al. (2022) evinced that inclusive education promotes the active and full participation of all students, irrespective of their learning abilities, disabilities, or impairments. Inclusion goes beyond mere physical presence. It encompasses the active involvement, participation, and contribution of every student in all aspects of school life, including academics, social

interactions, and extracurricular activities. Understanding the essence of inclusion is crucial for fostering a culture of acceptance and belonging in educational settings.

More so, Florian & Black-Hawkins (2011) emphasize that inclusion involves more than physical placement of students with disabilities; it requires adaptive pedagogical strategies that support diverse learners. According to Salanmaca statement, no child should be excluded for any reason. Ainscow & Miles (2008) viewed inclusive education as the process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation and reducing exclusion. However, despite widespread policy support and moral imperatives, some children are excluded and quarantined to homes or special centres due to the severity of their condition. Doing this, the goals of inclusive education becomes an illusion and the practice is incomplete.

Thus, this paper evinces the inclusion of the excluded such as students with disabilities, students from marginalized ethnic or racial backgrounds, non-native language speakers, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, gifted and talented, students with behavioural or emotional difficulties and migrant children in inclusive learning environment.

### **Who are the Excluded?**

Exclusion in the context of this paper is not just physical segregation but also refers to limited engagement, low expectations and lack of appropriate support. The excluded are described thus:

#### **(1) Students with Disabilities**

These are the students who have deformity or deviation in the organs of the body and as a result experience difficulties in performing normal duties or responsibilities. Despite being the central focus of many inclusive policies, students with disabilities still face significant barriers. According to Mitiku, Alemu & Mengsitu (2014), insufficient teacher training, inaccessible facilities, and a lack of individualized support limit the effectiveness of inclusion. Furthermore, many schools adopt a "one-size-fits-all" model that fails to accommodate specific learning or physical needs (Sharma, Loreman & Forlin, 2012).

#### **(2) Ethnic and Linguistic Minorities**

Students from minority ethnic backgrounds or those who speak a different home language often experience both academic and social exclusion. Cummins (2000) notes that language barriers and cultural disconnects with the curriculum result in disengagement and underperformance. Racism, implicit bias, and lack of cultural competence among educators further exacerbate these challenges (Gay, 2010).

#### **(3) Students from Low Socio-economic Backgrounds**

These are students whose parents find it difficult to eke out a living let alone of providing for their educational needs. Their parents' poverty significantly affects their access to quality education. Students from low-income families may lack basic resources such as school supplies, internet access, or adequate nutrition. Sirin (2005) found that socio-economic status is a strong

predictor of academic achievement, with disparities in support often going unnoticed under the inclusive framework.

#### **(4) Gifted and Twice-Exceptional Students**

These are students who exhibit high performance or potential ability in any of the general intellectual ability, specific academic aptitude, creative or productive thinking, visual and performing arts and psychomotor ability either singly or in combination. Although they may not face traditional forms of marginalization, they can be excluded due to a lack of differentiated instruction. According to Reis & Renzulli (2009), these students often under-achieve when their learning needs are not sufficiently recognized or met.

#### **(5) Students with Behaviour or Emotional Challenges**

These are students who experience difficulties with regulating their emotions, behaviours and social interactions. They are frequently punished or removed from classrooms instead of being supported. Kauffman & Landrum (2013) argue that behaviour challenges are often misunderstood as defiance rather than expressions of unmet emotional needs or neuro-diversity.

### **Barriers or Inclusion Challenges in Building Inclusive Education Classrooms**

Inclusive education is founded on the belief that every child has the right to learn in a shared environment that respects and accommodates individual differences. Creating an inclusive classroom environment where every student regardless of ability, background, or circumstance has equal access to learning opportunities is a central goal of modern education systems. However, implementing this vision is not without substantial challenges. Numerous barriers impede the inclusion of marginalized groups in education. If not addressed proactively, the barriers may perpetuate exclusion. Few among the barriers are:

#### **(1) Resource Limitation**

Resource constraints are frequently cited as a major barrier to inclusion. Schools often lack necessary tools such as assistive technologies, accessible materials, and adequate staffing (Forlin, 2010; Mitchell, 2015). These limitations disproportionately affect underfunded schools and low-income communities.

#### **(2) Teacher preparedness and Training**

This refers to the knowledge, skills and competencies that teachers acquire to effectively teach and support students. The majority of general education teachers believe that teaching or inclusion of student with special needs in their classroom is a herculean task. Avramidis & Norwich (2002) found that teachers' attitudes toward inclusion are closely tied to their training and preparedness. According to their report, many general education teachers are not prepared to accommodate students with special educational needs.

### (3) **Cultural and Attitudinal barriers**

Attitudinal resistance can come from teachers, parents, and even students. According to de Boer et al. (2011), negative perceptions regarding the efficacy of inclusion can lead to reduced expectations and exclusionary practices.

### (4) **Curriculum and Assessment**

Curriculum is a structured plan outlining what students should learn while assessment is the process of evaluating students' learning. In accommodating students with special needs in inclusive educational classroom, the curriculum and assessment process are needed to be watered down so as to consider the students' strength and weakness but reverse is the case in most of the self-acclaimed inclusive schools in Nigeria. Slee (2011) critiques the rigid nature of curricula and standardized assessments, which often ignore the diverse ways in which students learn and demonstrate knowledge. The lack of flexibility in many education systems makes adaptation difficult.

### (5) **Collaboration and Communication**

Friend and Cook (2010) argue that successful inclusion requires collaboration between teachers, specialists, families, and administrators. However, real-world implementation often lacks the time, structure, or training to support effective teamwork.

## **Theoretical Framework for the study: Contact Theory of Gordon Allport**

In 1954, Gordon Allport proposed the Contact Theory, which suggests that under certain conditions, direct contact between members of different groups can reduce prejudice, improve attitudes, and promote social harmony. Allport initially formulated this theory in the context of race relations in the United States, but over time, it has been applied to various forms of intergroup dynamics, including the interactions between individuals with disabilities and those without. The major submission of Contact Theory is that prejudice stems from a lack of understanding and familiarity between groups. When individuals from different groups interact, they have the opportunity to break down stereotypes, build empathy, and recognise commonalities, which can lead to more positive attitudes and behaviours. However, Allport identified four conditions under which contact between groups is most likely to result in positive outcomes:

- **Equal Status:** Participants in the interaction should have equal status, which means that no group should be in a dominant position over the other.
- **Common Goals:** There should be a shared objective that requires cooperation between groups, fostering a sense of interdependence.
- **Intergroup Cooperation:** There must be cooperation between members of different groups rather than competition.
- **Support from Authorities:** Support from institutional or societal authorities, such as teachers or leaders, is necessary to legitimize and encourage the interaction.

Allport argued that when these conditions are met, intergroup contact can promote positive change, reducing prejudice and enhancing intergroup relations.

### **Relevance of Contact Theory to inclusive education**

Inclusive education aims to integrate children with special needs into general education classrooms, promoting a more diverse, equitable, and supportive learning environment. Children with disabilities often face social and academic challenges that can lead to isolation and stigma. Contact Theory provides a framework for understanding how intergroup interactions can foster better relationships and reduce negative attitudes, ultimately leading to greater inclusion. The below are the further relevance of inclusive education

#### **(1) Equal status and the role of teacher**

The principle of equal status is a central tenet of Allport's theory. In the classroom, children with special needs often experience a disparity in status compared to their typically developing peers, which can exacerbate feelings of isolation and exclusion. Teachers play a critical role in creating an environment where children with special needs are treated as equals. This may involve modifying teaching strategies, promoting inclusive activities, and fostering an atmosphere of mutual respect.

#### **(2) Common goals and cooperative learning**

In an inclusive classroom, children with special needs and their typically developing peers can engage in collaborative learning experiences where the focus is on achieving shared objectives. This promotes cooperation rather than competition and helps to reduce feelings of difference or alienation. Johnson and Johnson (1989) conducted research on cooperative learning and found that it promoted positive social relationships among students, including those with disabilities. By working together to achieve a common goal, students learn to appreciate each other's strengths and abilities which foster inclusion and reduce negative attitudes.

#### **(3) Support from authorities and institutional commitment**

This includes school administrators, policymakers and teachers. They are important for creating an environment conducive to intergroup contact. The commitment of schools to inclusive education can significantly impact the quality of interactions between students with special needs and their peers. When school policies explicitly support the integration of children with disabilities, it sends a strong message about the value of inclusion and diversity. Browder et al. (2009) suggests that when teachers and school staff receive training in inclusive practices and are given the resources to implement these practices, students with special needs are more likely to have positive experiences in integrated settings. The support of authorities and institutional structures provides the necessary foundation for successful intergroup contact, aligning with Allport's emphasis on societal endorsement.

#### (4) Reducing prejudice and stereotyping

Children with special needs are often subject to prejudice and stereotyping, which can hinder their full participation in school life. These stereotypes may include assumptions about their intellectual abilities, social competence, or potential for success. Allport's theory suggests that contact with children without disabilities can help reduce these negative stereotypes, as both groups gain a better understanding of each other's strengths and challenges. Pettigrew & Tropp (2006) reported that positive intergroup contact can reduce prejudice, as individuals come to recognise the individuality of others rather than judging them based on group membership. In the same vein, Carter (2007) found that inclusive classrooms where students with disabilities interacted with their peers showed a significant decrease in negative stereotypes and increased empathy among typically developing children. In an inclusive classroom, when children with special needs and their peers engage in cooperative activities, both groups are more likely to view each other in a more positive light, reducing prejudices based on ignorance and misunderstanding. Stereotype reduction is particularly important in creating an environment where all students feel valued, fostering mutual respect and positive relationships.

#### (5) Promoting Social Integration and Building Friendships

A central component of Allport's theory is the creation of opportunities for positive social interactions. In an inclusive educational setting, children with special needs often face social isolation due to barriers like communication difficulties, behavioral differences, or social stigma. Contact Theory suggests that facilitating interactions between children with and without disabilities can lead to more meaningful friendships and social connections. Odom et al. (2003) showed that children with disabilities who participated in inclusive classrooms were more likely to form friendships with typically developing children compared to those in segregated settings. These friendships help children with special needs develop better social skills, which in turn enhances their social integration and participation in school activities. Similarly, typical peers gain a deeper understanding of diversity and develop more empathetic attitudes toward others, improving the overall classroom environment.

#### (6) Facilitating Empathy and Perspective-Taking

One of the most important outcomes of positive intergroup contact is the development of empathy. Empathy refers to the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person, and it plays a crucial role in reducing prejudice and fostering inclusive attitudes. According to Allport, contact between different groups can lead to increased empathy, as individuals are exposed to the lived experiences of others, which can challenge preconceived notions and lead to more compassionate attitudes. In inclusive classrooms, typically developing children who engage with peers with special needs are more likely to develop perspective-taking skills (Batson & Ahmad, 2009). This increased empathy can lead to a greater willingness to support classmates with disabilities, not only in academic settings but also in social and extracurricular activities. For children with special needs, this means a greater sense of acceptance and belonging, which is essential for their emotional and social well-being.

## **Building Inclusive Education Learning Environment via Including the Excluded**

To build classrooms where all students feel respected and supported (inclusive educational classroom), the role of teachers and administrators become sine qua non. The teachers and administrators need to promote diversity, equity, and empathy. They are also to do the following:

### **(1) Curriculum Adaptations and Differentiation**

The teachers and administrators should adapt the curriculum to cater to diverse learning styles, abilities, and interests. They should employ differentiation strategies, such as flexible grouping, personalized learning, and multi-modal instruction, that can help accommodate the varied needs of students and promote equitable access to education.

### **(2) Collaboration and Partnership**

The teachers and administrators should build inclusive learning environments via collaboration and partnership among various stakeholders, including educators, parents, community members, and policymakers. By working together, these stakeholders can leverage their collective expertise and resources to create supportive networks that promote the inclusion of all learners.

### **(3) Creating Safe and Supportive Spaces**

The teachers and administrators should ensure that educational environments are safe, welcoming, and supportive. This should not only address the physical safety but also emotional and psychological well-being of every student in the inclusive classroom. They should Implement anti-bullying policies, promote restorative practices, and offer counseling and support services that can help or create a nurturing atmosphere where every student feels valued and respected.

### **(4) Empowering Student Voice and Agency**

The teachers and administrators should empower students to actively participate in decision-making processes regarding their education. Doing this, it will promote a sense of ownership and belonging among students. In addition, it allows all the students to advocate for their needs, express their identities, and contribute to shaping inclusive school cultures.

## **Conclusion**

True inclusion goes beyond mere physical integration. It demands systemic transformation, culturally responsive teaching, differentiated instruction and recognition of intersectionality. Without these, students from marginalised groups (such as those with disabilities, cultural and linguistic differences, low-income backgrounds, or diverse gender identities) remain excluded. Addressing their needs must be central to any genuine attempt at inclusive education.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the position of this paper, the researchers therefore recommend the following:

1. The philosophy behind the formulation of inclusive education policy should be practiced to the fullest at all levels of education in Nigeria.
2. Government should provide adequate facilities for the inclusion of the excluded in inclusive classrooms at all levels of education
3. Government should set up monitoring team to ensure the inclusion of the excluded in inclusive classroom

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