



CHAPTER 18

DEVELOPING SOCIAL SKILLS IN CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN NIGERIA: THE IMPERATIVE OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Abdullahi Babatunde, Asiru M.Ed

*Department of Special Education
University of Ibadan, Nigeria*

Ololade Olayinka, Nnamani M.Ed

*Department of Special Education
University of Calabar, Nigeria*

Introduction

Skills are central to any human's socio-economic, educational and vocational development as well as relevance in every society. Acquisition of relevant skills has always been emphasized by employers. This is because competence and efficiency are required to implement assigned roles. Securing and surviving on any official job revolves around possession of described skills by any employer. This underscores the fact that critical thinking, problem solving, and collaborative efforts and appropriate professional disposition are skills desired in corporate and academic organizations. It could be concluded that skills and social relationships are intertwined. Skills foster social relationships. Social relationships enhance quality social life, which leads to social competence. Hence, social skills are needed for meaningful co-existence in our society.

Social skills refer to any competence in facilitating interaction and communication with others in places, where social norms and relations are formed, presented and adjusted in verbal and non-verbal manner. These skills are actions exhibited to achieve adeptness in social contexts. The skills at social engagement levels include active listening, emotional intelligence, persuasion, delegation, stewardship to mention but a few. All these are ingredients of social competence. These ingredients are essential to quality social relationships in any environment.

However, deficits in social skills could impair the effective social functioning of children in any environment. Thus, lack of social skills negatively impacts on children's behaviour (Hagopian, Kuhn and Stcother, 2009). Socio-emotional challenges such as social withdrawal, isolation, temper tantrums among others affect children's successful social engagement. Mel Slater and Baker (2002) pointed out that children with deficits in social skills suffer from social awareness such as glossophobia. According to the authors, children with glossophobia feel unprepared, lack confidence and are unlikely to gain social prowess required to pursue their interest or passion. At this juncture, frustration, depression and



psychological distress are resultant effects of social skill deficits among the children.

A social skill deficit could result in psychosocial issues. A person who is socially deficient struggles to get involved in interaction with others. Socially incompetent people misinterpret social cues. Such individuals may develop an acute fear of communicating with new people and being ridiculed in social contexts. In the explanation of Angelico, Crippa and Loureior (2013), social skill deficits are considered to hamper social functioning and the adaptive ability of individuals with several implications for performance and social interactions.

The foregoing points to the fact that social skill deficit is a behavioural anomaly, and children with special needs express these social skill deficits. Children with special needs are categorized as those with disabilities, with measures of disadvantage and gifts as well as talents (Komolafe, 2019). Children with disabilities include those with visual, hearing, physical or health impairments, intellectual or learning disabilities and emotional or communication disorders. The disadvantaged are children of nomadic pastoralists, migrant fishermen, migrant farmers, hunters and so on. The gifted and talented are precocious children with above average or high intelligence, creative tendencies and leadership qualities.

Children with disabilities could be rehabilitated in special schools or classes in Nigeria. Children with visual and hearing impairments as well as those with intellectual disabilities receive instruction together. Asiru (2021) observed that the increasing number of special schools being established in Nigeria suggests that special needs children's education is given attention in a way. However, other children with special needs who do not fall into the category above have not been given equal treatment or access to rehabilitation. Children with learning disabilities and those who are gifted or talented have largely been found in Nigeria's regular schools. Hence, there is the need to have a functional system where all special needs children will be able to learn together for the purpose of social skills development.

Quality change in or restoration of social skills in the children with special needs requires education that provides fair treatment and equal opportunities for all learners. This education is known as inclusive education. Within an inclusive education system, students' diversity and peculiarity are catered for, as inclusive education aims at eliminating exclusion created as a result of negative attitudes and lack of response to diversity. The variety in race, economic status, social class, language, religion, gender, sexual orientation and ability is accommodated in the inclusive process (UNESCO, 2009). According to Hayford (2013), UNESCO further added that inclusive education is central to the achievement of high-quality education for all learners. It is the development of an inclusive society. It is essential to achieving social equity and balance. It has some positive effect on social skills development in children with special needs.

The paper therefore examines social skills deficiency among some children with special needs, inclusive education and social skills development as well as challenges in fostering social skills in these children. Implications of inclusive



education for fostering these social skills are highlighted. Conclusion is drawn, while useful suggestions are made to relevant stakeholders in Nigeria.

Social Skills Deficiency among Children with Special Needs

Each category of children with special needs has a hard time navigating conversation or other socio-emotional issues. Social skills deficiency among children with special needs is worth being explored. For instance, Antia, Jone, Kreimeyer and Reed (2011) remarked that children with hearing impairment are increasingly susceptible to social problems. The children's reactivity to social challenges are as a result of nuances of communication, voice traits and interaction pace. Other causative factors in this regard, are language requirements and/or the environmental conditions of interactions. The hearing issues that characterize the living of these children subject them to the risk of social repudiation by others.

In a similar development, children with intellectual disabilities show evidence of deprivation, inadequacy in social skills, social adjustment and competences (Jahoda, Pert and Trower, 2006). Deficits in social skills noted among the children include defective information processing, defective perception, egocentric communication patterns and difficulties in problem solving (Basquill, Nezu, Nezu and Klein, 2014). This social skills incompetence among the children negatively influences their behaviour and attitude to learning. Greshman and Eliot cited in Adedokun (2018) stressed that such deficits in social skills observed among the children may be addicted to or worsen over the years.

Visual impairment, as one of the disabilities poses some hitches to the social life of children affected by the condition. Apart from reduction of visual capability, visual challenges or limitations contribute to the behavioural patterns of the children. As observed by Abodunrin (2019), a child with visual impairment is dependent on the verbal enquiry in order to follow behaviour of others in a social situation. This resort could be found to be inconvenient or degrading sometimes. According to Agesa (2014), a child with visual impairment, who is unable to determine whether he or she is being observed, feels that he or she must coordinate his movement. He or she wants to control his or her behaviour, which produces a state of tension.

Early developmental impairments or delays characterize the conditions of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs). The early childhood poor intellectual, emotional and social skills possessed by the children have implication on their social life (Ozaji, Nnachukwu and Kolo, 2016). Social interaction challenges emanate as a result of their inability to relate adequately well with mates. They respond to social gestures in a passive manner. The children's inactive interaction in social contexts are noticeable to peers. Adebisi and Oladeji (2012) clarified that social communication defects are observed in the poor way the children recognize personal social interactive postures as in smiles or laughter.

In the same vein, children with emotional and behavioural disorders find it difficult building and/or maintaining acceptable interaction with peers. Pervasive



mood of gloominess or depression could be expressed by some of the children (Anderson, 2012). In this situation, a child with disorders in emotion and behaviour may be disturbed. Solving problems with disengagement, hostility, infringement on others' rights, temper tantrums at the slightest provocation, insensitivity to the feelings of others and deviant behaviours are common among the children.

Children with learning disabilities are sometimes withdrawn and very emotional. They could throw tantrums when they are infuriated. They have attention hyperactivity deficit disorders, because of the challenge in processing sensory stimuli. In comparison, children with physical and health impairments also have restricted social skills use. Complexes of inferiority and aggression in the course of challenges are noted among them. The children's dependency on others is worse than those with visual challenges.

The former requires more assistance in getting simple tasks done than the latter.

Individual children with gifts and talents have their own social issues. Asiru (2021) remarked that some of these learners are found in the regular schools in Nigeria. This has a lot of negative impact on the social life of the students. The learners' inquisitive nature may trigger hostility and strict opposition among other students. As a result of inability to meet the educational needs of these learners, the gifted could consider the school system highly boring and become dropouts. Scholars observed that the learners become easily frustrated because of inability to implement big ideas (Ozaji, Nwachukwu and Kolo, 2016). As submitted in the document by New Zealand Ministry of Education (2008), the learners with twice exceptionality (giftedness and concurrent disabilities) could become disturbed in school by virtue of the teacher's focus on their disabilities rather than observable gifts and talents.

Inclusive Education and Social Skills Development in Children with Special Needs

Inclusive education achieves beyond academic improvement among children with special needs. It has a lot to do in fostering social skills among the children. Inclusion has occupied a centre stage in the discussion of education policy and practice around the globe (Ikujimi, 2006). The concept has equally enjoyed global endorsement by means of policy statement in Salamanca (UNESCO, 1994). In recent times, the debate about inclusive education has gained attention in Nigeria. To this end, Ajuwon (2008) noted that inclusive education, as an official policy of educating children and youth with disabilities along with their counterparts without disabilities in ordinary schools, has been adopted in the country. Based on the clarification above, all learners in the educational and training settings are made provision for. Such provisions are on the account of potential and demonstrated abilities as well as social backgrounds. The foregoing suggests that inclusive education centres on jettisoning stigmatization and labeling.

Inclusive education stands for the least restrictive environment. In such settings for equitable learning, socially related curricular activities are structured



for access and facilitated among the learners (Ozaji, Nnachukwu and Kolo, 2016). Isaiah (2021) remarked that inclusive education involves a process of reform and restructuring of school with a view to ensuring that all learners have access to social opportunities. The principle of inclusive education prioritizes skills acquisition.

Furthermore, collaboration of relevant professionals is required at this juncture. Collaborative efforts of school psychologists, psychotherapists, occupational therapists and special needs education specialists such as sign language interpreters, speech therapists, braillists, medical personnel among others are all needed in rendering essential services. Such services are provided to facilitate inclusive education of children with special needs. All these professionals work as a team to ensure a comprehensive programme of inclusive education. Professional contributions are required to enhance the workability of the inclusive education.

Rockson and Akotey (2019) submitted that it is the responsibility of the school to give adequate support in the functionality of inclusive education. The school is to employ qualified and competent staff and engage resource persons to work with all students within the system. The schools is to offer other relevant services to support the students. Therefore, in an inclusive education setting, the school system is expected to be organized in a manner that supports inclusion of all learners. Facilities in the school should be carefully selected to meet the needs of all students.

Buttressing the above, Mugambi (2017) explained that an empowering school, culture and social structure is formed when students experience equality and equal status. The culture and organization of the school cater for different racial, ethnic and gender groups when the students experience treatments without discrimination. The school's environment should support every child's needs, regardless of disabilities or abilities.

Children with special needs benefit from learning and skills acquisition in the context of inclusive education. This is because the practice of inclusive education is anchored on the belief that every child should be cared for based on his or her needs. Komolafe (2019) noted that every child should be an equally valued member of the school culture. From the environment created by the school culture, it is obvious that children with special needs learn in a productive way. The children without special needs also gain from being exposed to children with diverse gifts, talents, temperaments and other features.

Children with special needs, especially those with disabilities, experience some difficulties in the development of social skills. The children often struggle to develop friendships and social interactions (Bossaert, Boer, de Frostad, Pijl and Petry; 2015; Schwab, 2015). Hence, decreased peer acceptance and diminished social participation characterize the children's everyday life. This issue has to be addressed using the right approach. Children with special needs are to be offered educational settings in order to have socially regulated experience. Such an



environment could make learning of necessary interaction skills possible among the children.

Inclusive education as a social process engages the children in such a way that social relationships are developed. In the context of functional inclusive education, every learner is a valued member of the system. Regardless of disabilities, social classification, gender, religious affiliations, inclusive education aims at ensuring that every child is able to learn and acquire relevant skills for life. From the foregoing, it could be observed that inclusive education works towards enhancing social connection among all categories of children with or without disabilities.

In full inclusion, special education offers services that are integrated into daily routines (Komolafe, 2019). Such routine activities foster social interactions among the children. This is because such tasks are brought to the children instead of removing them to meet their needs. Inclusive education helps the children in engaging more in social activities without a feeling of inferiority complex. The interactions between children with disabilities and those without such conditions translate to the latter's feeling of satisfaction and social efficacy within the school system.

According to Rockson and Akotey (2019), children with special needs develop a positive understanding of themselves in an inclusive system. They have adequate knowledge about their situations. This knowledge helps them in the development of their self-esteem within the school. The children also learn to understand and appreciate heterogeneity that characterizes inclusive settings. As other children without special needs relate with children with special needs, mutual respect is earned, and such respect improves when children of diverse capabilities and cultural backgrounds engage in learning activities together.

An inclusive education setting takes differences in its learning into account. It recognizes that children with different attitudes experience skills that bring novel ideas. Tenas cited in Abbu-Sadat (2019) emphasized that a diverse inclusive system inspires and garners these differences to allow for social proficiency and cater for behavioural/emotional metamorphoses among the children. As a result of the conducive environment created for diversity management through inclusion, social improvement is thereby facilitated among children with special needs. Conversely, inclusive education gives an opportunity for the development of positive attitudes of children without special needs towards mates with disabilities or impairments.

Inclusive education promotes friendships. Research has indicated that children with special needs in inclusive classrooms are more likely to engage in friendships compared to counterparts in segregated settings (Kwon, Elicker and Kontos, 2011). The friendliness achieved through the atmosphere created in an all-encompassing environment reduces social isolation and provides an avenue for social skills acquisition among the children. Okoli, Nwazuoke, Ezeanoche and Oduwole (2019) observed that friendships among the children make room for role



modeling and a platform for social growth. By this virtue of the spirit of cooperation and teamwork is imbibed among children with or without special needs.

Ogunsola (2018) averred that inclusion is considered as the potent instrument of warding off discriminatory attitudes towards children with special needs. In the environment created through an inclusive approach to special education, every child with special needs has the opportunity to flourish socially. The inclusive social space enhances every child's self worth. Mag, Sinfield and Burns (2017) confirmed that individual differences are learnt and accepted in an inclusive system and this attitude relegates any form of harassment and bullying to the background.

Children with special needs are able to develop a sense of belonging in inclusive settings. They develop self-confidence. They utilize a self-concept of not just being receivers of assistance but donors of such inclusive education enables the children with special needs to learn problem solving strategies and critical thinking from their contemporaries without special needs. Resultantly, the children learn to be independent and acquire developmentally advanced skills. Such exposure helps them develop a more positive self-image.

At this juncture, the importance of teachers in the successful implementation of inclusive education should be noted. The teacher plays a crucial role in the provision of inclusive education for all children. This foregrounds the relevance of teacher training and re-training in the workability of inclusive education. Fakolade, Adeniyi and Tella (2009) established that successful inclusion for children with special needs in regular classrooms is dependent on the expression of positive attitude of the teacher. The teacher with training about these children is believed to display favourable attitudes towards them. On this note, workshops, review, research on inclusion and collaboration play a significant function in the development of successful inclusion among the teachers.

Children with special needs often exhibit expressions and behaviours which are different to interpret. The teacher who is sensitive to the children's non-verbal cues is more likely to have a successful interaction with the children. The teacher's styles in interacting with the learners are conveniently reproduced among the children. Sensitive, responsive and supportive styles are critical skills needed by the teacher to foster social skills in the children in inclusive classrooms. However, inclusive education is not without certain challenges confronting it in Nigeria.

Challenges in Fostering Social Skills in Children with Special Needs

The challenges for the practice of inclusive education in fostering social skills in children with special needs can be met. To commence with, if inclusive education will be functionally practicable in fostering social skills in children with special needs, the broken school system must be fixed. Ozoji, Nnachukwu and Kolo (2016) reiterated that in-class provisions and physical environment assistive structures are impossible to be put in regular as well as integrated school settings with



ramshackle classes and environments. If the school system is fixed, effective learning and quality social relationships among the children will be achieved.

For inclusive education to be practically implementable in regular and special schools, relevant and modern technologies are to be put in place. Technological tools such as laptops, desktops, tablets, and installation of Internet facilities should be made available to enhance electronic learning among the children with special needs. This could have a implication on social skills development in the children. For instance, with correct use of social media platforms, the children will be able to foster social relationships within and outside the schools.

Okoli, Nwazuke, Ezeanochie and Oduwole (2019) noted that paucity of good teachers for students with special needs negatively affects the level at which the practice of inclusive education achieves results. A dearth of qualified and competent teachers is a setback of inclusive education in fostering social skills in these children. Ajuwon (2008) is of the opinion that the training of general education teachers remains key to the development of relevant social skills in children with special needs.

In terms of Inclusive Education Policy for the education system at large, adaptation for effective practice is yet to be considered. In effect, the domestication of Inclusive Education Policy must be one that combines regular teaching-learning process and special needs practices. This could positively impact social skills development in children with special needs.

Implications of Inclusive Education for Social Skills Development in Children with Special Needs

1. The children with special needs are able to develop social adroitness for better functioning in Nigerian society. Social competence among the children has direct correlation with socioeconomic advancement of the nation.
2. Inclusive education fosters social interactions that lead to social adaptability among the children. The children then could make use of socially adaptable skills and behaviour to better their social life. The quality social life of the children helps them in expressing their individuality.
3. The social space provided contributes immensely to the children's mental health wellness.

Conclusion

Based on the significance of inclusive education for social skills development in children with special needs in Nigeria, the following conclusions are drawn:

1. Regular and special education teachers' positive attitude to inclusion is a key factor. The teachers' sensitivity, responsiveness and other behavioural traits are germane to the successful implementation of an inclusive system.
 2. Challenges related to comprehensive adoption of inclusive education in Nigeria are a bane of the practice.
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3. Social skills are critical for overall development of children with special needs.

Suggestions

The following suggestions are made to relevant stakeholders:

1. Pre-service and in-service training of regular and special education teachers should take utmost priority of the Federal and State Ministries of Education in Nigeria. Such training and retraining are believed to enhance the teachers' knowledge of inclusive education, and for them to have more positive attitudes towards children with special needs.
2. The challenges of the broken school system/structures, regular and inadequate or non-availability of specialized equipment as well as inclusive education policy guidelines should be looked into by those involved in education quality control and assurance as well as education policy makers. This will enable the practice of inclusion in Nigeria to be well accepted globally.
3. The regular and special education teachers operating in the inclusive system should pay equal attention to learning and social needs of children with special needs. This sensitivity by the teachers will allow the instrument of inclusive education to foster social skills in the children.
4. Susceptibility and reactivity of children with special needs to social challenges should be investigated and addressed by school guidance counsellors. This will help psychosocial adjustment and/or development of the children.
5. Social participation should be given more attention within an inclusive system. Such is believed to play a significant role in developing social skills in the children.

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