

## ASSESSMENT OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN RIVERS STATE

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### **Abstract**

*Although inclusive education is clearly stated as part of the National Policy on Education, its level of implementation is yet to be ascertained in Rivers State. Hence, this study was designed to establish the level of compliance to the inclusive education policy by public secondary schools in Rivers State. Adopting the survey research design, the study made use of a sample of 600 respondents, using simple random sampling technique for the selection. Included in the research sample were some parents and staff in the selected secondary schools. Three research questions and three corresponding hypotheses guided the study. Data used in the study were generated from copies of the questionnaire administered to and retrieved from the respondents. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, while analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to answer the hypotheses. Results obtained confirmed that practically, public or government-owned secondary schools were not fully inclusive, bearing in mind the many social factors which might have posed as obstacles, thus representing exclusion. It is recommended that an inclusive education policy of the government that has been packaged for the benefit of all Nigerian children should be strictly pursued in secondary schools in Rivers State, in order to reap all its benefits.*

### **Introduction**

Current trend in the education sector seems to dwell more on diversity and inclusion in enrolment, school-type and classroom practices, including the learning culture of the classroom. This sounds the clarion call that Africa, particularly Nigeria, must be awake to the responsibilities that accompany a densely populated space that accommodates a wide range of cultures, beliefs and religious affiliations. In this situation therefore, the school undoubtedly becomes the centre-stage for considering the inclusion of all existing range of a variety of both human and environmental characteristics in its establishment and development. In other words, education requires different categories of learners to be brought together for exchange of ideas and continued

knowledge. This calls for proper harnessing of the unique personality of all individuals, while promoting the need to showcase their strength and cooperation towards the creation of an environment which will foster acceptance, involvement and collective participation of all stakeholders in the education sector to ensure greater opportunity for development. The school environment represents a convergence for all categories of people, irrespective of their age, ability, class or level and promotes the process of socialization. Education does not only provide training for self-sufficiency but goes beyond this to expose the learners to new patterns of thought which form the fulcrum of innovation and development.

Many developed societies have prepared themselves to handle the challenges associated with diversity in all spheres, especially in school. This effort has continued to yield high levels of tolerance and acceptance for individual and group differences, thus providing unlimited opportunities to the promotion of team work, solidarity and the forging of strong bonds of friendship among and between individuals and groups. There is no doubt therefore that the challenge of clarifying the benefits of inclusion lies on the education sector, especially since education promotes the training of the mind to produce citizens who will ensure the survival of society.

In the light of the shift towards inclusion in the country's National Policy on Education, Nigeria has accepted in principle its implementation in her educational system to cater for the diverse group of students who come to learn. Garuba, cited by Wenenda and Okeke (2018), asserts that the practice of inclusion presents an avenue for schools to respond and deal individually with students, bearing in mind that these students have rights that have been seen through the lens of equality to every opportunity provided by the government and, where necessary, equity is employed. The challenge however is that the government comes under scrutiny to ascertain how well it is willing to drive the implementation of the policy, or gone to enforce the already stated policy, especially in government/public owned schools.

### **The Concept of Inclusive Education**

Inclusive education is a practice where all learners especially children, despite their individual differences such as socioeconomic background, religion and other peculiarities are allowed to enroll, and welcomed by their community schools in classes that are appropriate to their age groups. The Incheon declaration of 2015 in South Korea (WEF, 2015) highlighted various channels through which inclusion could be achieved in education to include:

- The expansion of access to publicly funded schools, which will in turn result in equitable quality education that would be made compulsory.

- That inclusion and equity in education should be considered as the bedrock of a solid education agenda, which is geared towards the elimination of all hindrances in the education sector for achieving equal participation and better end products.
- The necessity for gender equality in education.
- Commitment to ensuring that the necessary mechanism which will ease the process of measuring progress is put on ground in the bid to ensuring quality education per time.
- Commitment to the continuous promotion of quality in education for life, without imposing restrictions to available learning opportunities.

The report of the meeting highlights the need for every person/child, irrespective of their age and sex to benefit from available educational opportunities. This view, as Kisanji (1999) asserts, points to the fact that inclusion in education is not to be limited to disability, but covers all the factors which represent exclusion such as gender, religion, residential location, educational qualification of parents, social class, among others. In essence, situations which could create special needs may present themselves in the life of a normal student in the course of his/her everyday interaction with fellow classmates and between him and the teacher, the environment he finds himself, the availability of funds to pay for his/her educational needs and the ability or inability to communicate thoughts. Shaddock et al in Loreman, Forlin, Chambers, Sharma and Deppler(2014:9) opine that,

if participation becomes an issue for any student, whether arising from disability, gender, behavior, poverty, culture, refugee status or any other reason, then the desirable approach is not to establish special programs for the newly identified individual or group need, but to expand mainstream thinking, structures and practices so that all students are accommodated.

The foregoing calls for the expansion of education services to make allowance for the diverse issues that could come up, not necessarily the construction of special schools nor the drawing up of special curriculum for special categories of people. Sayed (2009:34) argues that “failing to understand the specificity of the problem at hand can create perverse unintended outcomes”. Reiterating the place of participation as a key component of inclusion could spell doom, if the wrong mechanism which is not a true representation of inclusion is developed. On this ground, this article

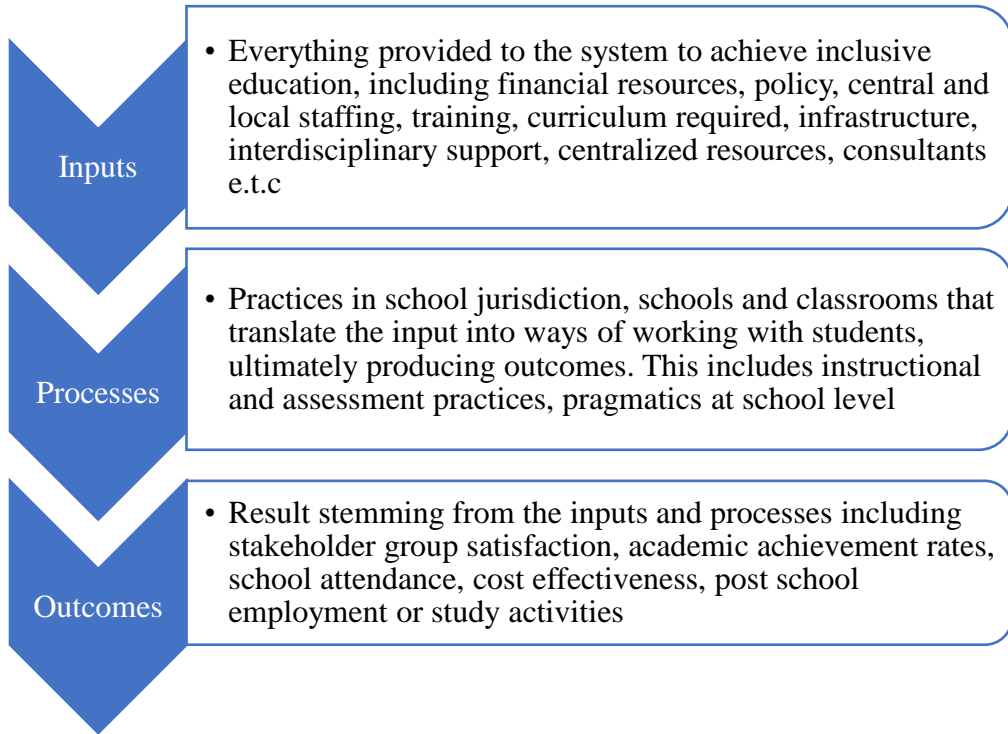
would be limited to gender inclusion in public secondary schools in Rivers State.

Assessing inclusive educational practice will involve a whole school approach to establish how well child-friendly schools have fared in ensuring that practical changes are being implemented for all children, irrespective of their socioeconomic background, physical ability or gender succeed in school. Inclusive education could be measured on the micro level, using the inputs-process-outcomes model which addresses individual persons and classrooms. The key points in the inputs are the policies on ground in support of inclusive education, which are supposed to be implemented in various schools, their level of implementation in these schools and efforts made at ensuring these policies are adhered to, with emphasis placed on equality of educational opportunities.

The process highlights the climate in which policies are enforced, and whether the school environment is conducive for all students. The school is meant to be a place where every student is treated equally, irrespective of their individual differences and completely erase labeling and bullying in the classroom from fellow students or teachers. This means that assessment would be based on the equality of treatment accorded every child from his/her enrollment to classroom experience. This calls for the right school practices which will foster co-operation, friendship, unity, mutual love and respect among pupils of different religions, gender, and socioeconomic status. The overall impact of the process column translates into a classroom where each child strives to do better because he/she is not coerced or forced but encouraged to do better by the show of love and understanding received from peers and staff, promoting self-development on the part of the students as they are basically encouraged to believe in themselves.

The outcomes' column addresses the actual participation of each school in the furtherance of inclusive education policy. Considering the major question on the minds of all, one wonders whether access is truly equal or whether there are biases of a kind which will affect the access of female students into the schools. The academic achievement of the students is addressed in the outcomes. How students in inclusive school settings fare at the end of their learning is another point of assessment, compared to their counterparts in non-inclusive settings.

Figure 1.0 The input-process-outcomes model for measuring inclusive education.



The input-processes-outcomes model by Kyriazopoulou and Weber. Adapted from Conceptualizing and Measuring inclusive education by Loreman et al (2014:11).

**Theoretical Framework**

***Cognitive Democratic Theory of Education (CDTE)***

The CDTE proposed by Knight (1999) merges inclusive education and social inclusion. Knight (1999: Para 4) postulates that “a classroom is democratic and socially inclusive to the extent to which it welcomes all students as equally valued members of the school community”. This theory exposes and brings to the fore issues of separation and exclusion which are everyday occurrences in local communities and cities to be addressed. Perceived differences should not be celebrated or else it could become a barrier and hinder effective communication. Knight opines that the process of preparing subjects for citizenship in a multicultural and diverse society demands that learning be suited to the individual needs of the subjects and the education these individuals receive adequately reflect that society; hence every democratic culture should welcome diversity and a feeling of positive

attachment by all. All students should have equal rights which should be allowed, to avoid oppression. As emphasized (Knight, 1999: Para 12), these rights, among others include:

- The right of every students to be equally prepared to exercise their rights;
- The creation of an enabling environment which will encourage risk taking by students through the removal of high stake testing which he asserts are fraudulently defined as standards.

He therefore emphasizes that competence should be developed by nudging students not only to believe in themselves but also in their ability to achieve much more, if they apply themselves to study. From the foregoing, Knight supports that schools should welcome as full-fledged members all students irrespective of their individual differences and accommodate them in school, such that each student is made to understand that he/she is useful, and given reasons why he/she should be hopeful of the future and what it holds, to dream big while keeping existing options open. Creativity is therefore a must to effectively create an interesting and lively atmosphere in the classroom and students positioned to learn without the need to impress anyone. Consequently, all students would have to be treated equally with appreciation for their uniqueness. This goes without saying that, inclusiveness is an integral aspect of democracy and should be the hallmark of every school whether located in rural or urban areas.

The cognitive democratic theory of education also addresses the key issues of inclusion as it relates to equal opportunity to educational provisions, access, and inequality. Educational programmes should be executed in settings which allow the freedom of expression to the intent that all students are initiated in a discourse to advance their self-image. Students and teachers alike can thus be encouraged to think analytically in a bid to enhance holistic teaching and learning outcomes. Knight (1999) argues that separation and exclusion in their different presentations need to be addressed, using democratic education. Exclusiveness, he asserts, could be seen in the hierarchical education which is individualistic in nature and displayed in the classroom in the form of tracking, ability grouping and special attention given to the students in class by the teachers. This differential in treatment in the classroom raises questions which challenge the notion of inclusion, while at the same time exposing instances of exclusion and inequality which form the normal routine of everyday schooling for millions of people around the world.

In addition, a democratic classroom depends on the ability of the teacher to expose and challenge the false belief that certain groups, people, or

students are incapable of achieving success in academics as held by the proponents of deficit thinking. This perspective argues that as at present, while the need for absolute equality and fairness in educational practice appears to be beyond reach, progress can be made towards such a goal as it is not only realistic but could be operated as equal encouragement for all. Knight (1999) insists that when students are equally encouraged, much of the differences by class, ethnicity, gender and religion among others disappear. This stand is supported by Nind (2014) who asserts that inclusive education can provide new connections to democracy and social justice in education drawn from the basis that it is concerned with socially just ways of organizing teaching and learning.

### **The Practice of Inclusive Education in Nigeria**

Nedum (2015: Para 9) asserts that the National Policy on Education has since inception leaned towards inclusion and this is evident in the birth of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) in 1998. The Rivers State Universal Basic Education Board (RSUBEB) is one of many Boards created to facilitate the enforcement of inclusion in education. It is worthy of note that the nations' strategies for inclusive education, address broad exclusion issues like gender, ethnicity and marginalized groups to improve learning outcomes for all children (ESSPIN, 2013:3). However, Sambo and Gambo (2016) argue that inclusion in Nigeria continues to stay as theory and this is very different from the actual implementation of the said policy. Nonetheless, progress in the right direction has been achieved albeit at a slow pace. Omede (2016) asserts that many have continued to speak up for the right supports which would make provisions for, and include different categories of people positively in educational settings, thus ensuring the smooth implementation of inclusive education programme.

This implementation however, meets with challenges which could likely make nonsense of the laudable goals of inclusive education policy in Nigeria, if not addressed immediately, some of which include gender inclusion and the bias faced by women of diverse religious beliefs in the school environment. Some argue that successful inclusion in education is difficult to implement, but if done right, could benefit all categories of students (Internet A, 2016). Simply put, when the right channel or process is followed within an enabling environment like the school, there would likely be more compliance and better execution in the implementation process.

### ***Gender and Cultural bias***

Connell, cited by Wight (2010), asserts that children get to learn that the world is gendered at a very young age by the process of socialization which makes them believe that what is acceptable for one is not acceptable for the other. Wight (2010:33) argues as follows:

Each image of gender depicts a different way of thinking gender, whether it is stereotypical or non-stereotypical, for example; a woman, a care giver, mother, wife, daughter or sister. A man on the other hand may be represented as masculine, powerful or downtrodden, a father, son or brother

Wight's observation implies that the way a boy or a girl is treated is dependent on the prevailing situation of the individual and to a large extent, on the culture and value placed on each sex by the parents, community, religion and the school. Different societies have shown differences in the way the males and females are treated. WHO (n.d) argues that inequalities exist between men and women. When certain individuals or groups of people do not fit established gender norms imposed by society for them, stigmatization, discrimination or social exclusion occurs (Lynch, 2016). These can negatively impact on education. Different regions in Nigeria ascribe different importance to the education of boys and girls. Some regions offer boys limited educational opportunities, while others do same to the girl-child (Moja, 2000). They are implored to work rather than waste precious time attending school. However, the girl-child most often is the major victim of gender discrimination in the pursuit of education (UNICEF, n.d). In educational settings, gender plays an important role in the achievement of an inclusive education. Gender inequality comes to play as cultural bias and socio-economic status plays key part in the way particular roles are assigned, the type of responsibilities and opportunities in education and society at large that are open for both boys and girls. Crossman (2018) asserts that popular culture plays an important role in the way each gender is treated. In addition, the categorization or grouping of one's sex reflects in the structure of society, especially in the actions and language towards women which in turn affect the way males and females are treated. Mundi (2013) argues that gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men and by extension boys and girls are considered, recognizing the diversity of different groups of women and men.

### ***Religious Bias in Gender Inclusion***

Nigeria is a religious nation, with freedom to religious practices. However, with religious intolerance being experienced in some parts of the country, religion becomes a challenge to true inclusion in educational practice because when people do not conform to the popular belief of the majority in an area, they become open to torments, isolation, or are sometimes portrayed to look dangerous. In the school environment, many students, especially female students of religious extractions who do not conform to the majority are treated in ways which tend to make them feel inferior from the others. Sometimes, teachers treat students from religious affiliations that are different from the norm like Islam, pagan worship and other religious sects differently, thereby making them shy and refrain from participating in educational opportunities.

The interest of government, in ensuring the success of inclusive educational programme motivated the formation of the Almajiri Integrated Model School (AIMS) launched in April 2012 in Sokoto. This, among other things, was to ensure that formal primary school curriculum was integrated with Islamic education and give children access to education. This practice however, draws a clear line of exclusion. As Ivowi (2015:8) asserts, “as long as there is separation of the schools for two distinct classes of children, there is discrimination”. Newlin (2018) however, asserts that the right side of history informs one to be accepting of all, and be inclusive, diverse and tolerant. This however does not require that one religion or belief be altered to match that of the other.

The study aimed at establishing the level of implementing the National Policy on inclusion in educational practices in public secondary schools in Rivers State. Consequently, the objectives of the study included the determination of the following:

- i. The extent to which the public secondary schools in Rivers State are inclusive, based on the religion of female students;
- ii. The infrastructural provisions on ground to facilitate the education of males and females;
- iii. The extent to which freedom in the classroom is encouraged for the female student.

Three research questions and hypotheses directed the entire course of this study as follows:

- (i) What is the extent to which the public secondary schools in Rivers State are inclusive for females, based on religion?

- (ii) What is the differential level in classroom treatment among female students in public secondary school in Rivers State?
- (iii) To what extent are female students encouraged to express themselves freely in the classroom?
- (1) There is no significant difference in the extent to which public secondary schools in Rivers State are inclusive for females, based on religion.
- (2) There is no significant difference between the way male and female students are treated in the classroom in public secondary schools in Rivers State.
- (3) There is no significant difference in the way males and females are allowed to freely express themselves in the classroom in Rivers State.

### Method

The estimated study population includes all parents who have children enrolled in the Universal Basic Education section of government owned schools in Rivers State. A developmental survey design was adopted because the researchers sought to establish the progress made in the implementation of inclusive programme over time, with the random sampling technique used to select two Local Government Areas (LGAs) from each of the three Senatorial Districts in Rivers State, making a total of 6 LGA's. Yamane's model was used to obtain a sample size of 600 respondents. Face and content validity of the instrument made by the researchers for data collection, was ensured by submitting it to experts for evaluation. Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient ( $r$ ) calculated to be 0.72 established the reliability of the instrument. Mean, Standard Deviation and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were also used to analyze the data obtained from the distributed copies of the instrument. 582 copies of returned instruments were valid, hence were used for this analysis.

### Results

**Table 1.0: Summary of mean and Standard Deviation**

Description	N	Mean	Criterion Mean	SD	Remark
Religion	582	3.40	2.5	0.53	Positive
Infrastructure	582	2.76	2.5	0.45	Positive
Freedom of expression for females	582	2.61	2.5	0.43	Positive (High Extent)

**Table 2.0 Test of Between-Subjects Effects**

Description	Type III sum of squares	Df	Mean square	Significance	F ratio	F tables	Remarks
Religion	280.169	3	93.390	0.000	18.011	2.605	Reject
Gender bias in classroom	69.007	3	23.002	0.000	6.748	2.605	Reject
Freedom of expression for females	55.749	3	18.583	0.013	3.649	2.605	Reject

### Discussion

From the findings in Tables 1.0 and 2.0, the mean values were higher than the criterion mean of 2.5 which indicated that to a limited extent, positive steps have been taken to ensure smooth implementation of inclusive education, based on female students' religious differentials, infrastructural provisions and classroom freedom of expression in Rivers State public secondary schools. However, the hypotheses testing indicated that the F-ratio calculated values were higher than the F-table values, with regard to the three variables under consideration, hence a rejection of the three null hypotheses. The researchers therefore concluded that while Rivers State has made concerted efforts in the bid to achieve inclusive education at the secondary education levels, more still needs to be done, particularly with regard to students' religion, infrastructural provision and female students' freedom of expression in the classroom. The achievement of this will help to build on existing policy and ensure that females are treated as equals to their male counterpart in the class. This is basically drawn from the fact that, there is a significant difference in the extent to which public secondary schools in Rivers State are inclusive, based on religious bias for females. Equally, there is a significant difference in the way female students are treated in the classroom in public secondary schools, including the way they are allowed to freely express themselves in the classroom in Rivers State.

The foregoing findings reported for the female students in Rivers State corroborate the earlier related studies documented by Moja (2000), UNICEF (n.d) and Ivowi (2013), among others. In different magnitudes, these scholars pointed out the treatment differentials given to females in favour of the males due to some prevailing societal religious and socio-cultural conditions, all of which continue to constitute a cog in-the-wheel of achieving inclusiveness of the female population, in spite of the policy formulation that supports it. For

instance, while UNICEF (n.d) noted the continued negative influence of some socio-cultural factors towards achieving female inclusion, Ivowi (2013) exhaustively discussed and held unto religious factor as the main cause of the delayed successful inclusiveness in the Nigerian environment.

### **Conclusion**

From the findings, the researchers conclude that while Rivers State has made concerted efforts in the bid to achieve inclusive education at the secondary education levels, there is still much more that could be done. This conclusion is reached after assessing the level of inclusion in government owned secondary schools on a holistic level and comparing practical efforts of the government at ensuring that education is inclusive and accessible to all, especially the females and the elimination of all differential treatment in the classroom. Inclusive educational practices demand that everyone, irrespective of distinctive characteristics, is appreciated and allowed to participate in available educational opportunities. The school is a microcosm of society and the inclusiveness of a society where true appreciation is practiced can only be tested and fine-tuned in the school. As an educationist, one should constantly evaluate performance. Hence, assessing inclusive educational practice should take into account the input of the government in terms of policy legislation, adaptation in structure and curriculum and practical implementation in the classroom, if significant improvement is expected.

### **Recommendations**

In the course of this study, the researchers discovered that inclusive educational programme and practices are still in the input stage and needs to develop, using the inputs-process-outcomes model. However, with the opening of privately owned inclusive schools, the researchers suggest that more research be carried out to ascertain the outcomes of such private attempts at inclusive educational practices and assess how inclusive these schools really are on the basis of access, participation, academic achievement, cost of tuition and study activities.

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