

Investigation of Principals' Attitude towards Inclusion of Special Needs Students in Public and Private Secondary Schools in Rivers State, Nigeria

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Abstract The study examined principals' attitude and factors that influence their attitudes towards implementation of inclusive education in secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis, Rivers State, Nigeria. A survey design was used and samples of 116 principals through stratified random sampling were selected. Data on principals' attitude towards inclusion regarding their knowledge of special education, type of school, gender and years of service in general education setting were collected using an adapted instrument titled: Scale of Teachers' Attitude Towards Inclusive Classroom (STATIC) developed by Cochran (1997). The instrument has a reliability coefficient of 89. Data were analyzed with descriptive and inferential statistics. Result indicates that high percentage of school heads had positive attitude towards inclusion. Principals with knowledge of special education showed high positive attitude towards inclusion than those without prior knowledge. Gender, years of service, and the type of school they head (public/private) did not produce significant difference. Every Principal should have fair knowledge of inclusive education for proper implementation of inclusive education because the principals' role cannot be overemphasized. This study will spur more research on the role of principals' attitude in the implementation of inclusive education in Nigeria and the need to improve their knowledge on special education.

Keywords: *attitude, inclusion, special needs children, principals*

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1. Introduction

Inclusion of diverse range of children discriminated or excluded from regular schools has gained worldwide attention. This change in educational delivery is advocated because of its obvious advantages notable among which are the beliefs that life preparations and social skills necessary for achievement of much desired inclusive society should start from classrooms. Special needs people are challenged by their disabilities and differences, they in addition face much challenges in many areas of their lives especially those involving people's attitudes [1]. These set of people are also more likely to be discriminated and excluded from educational opportunities as a result of attitudes of others [2]. United Nations (1994) strongly believe that educational systems that are not discriminatory in providing the needs of students with special educational need in regular schools are most effective means of reducing segregation. There is therefore need to understand, accept and integrate discriminated and excluded people in our regular education setting to enable them participate and contribute to the societal growth.

Inclusive education, as the name suggests, is an educational reform that changes the way educational systems tackle exclusion. It is a new approach to

education that allows all children to be educated in modified general education schools in their neighbourhood, alongside their friends and peers, regardless of their challenges [3]. Such modifications should remove every barrier and in addition provide reasonable atmosphere that will enable all learners to gainfully participate in everyday activities. Inclusion was originally formulated to tackle discrimination experienced by disabled children from gaining access to education in their neighbourhood schools, but has expanded to include everyone excluded or discriminated from attending regular schools [4]. This implies that special education schools including one gender schools are to be gradually phased out and students in such schools integrated into modified regular schools. Inclusive schools should therefore serve all students in a community [5] and enhance attitudinal change of her diverse students towards each other.

World interest on inclusive education was captured by United Nations' 1994 Salamanca declaration that set a framework for education of children with special needs. That declaration urged governments to "adopt as a matter of law or policy, the principles of inclusive education, and give budgetary priority to inclusive education ([6], p. ix). Many countries have ratified or adopted this resolution or modified their education policy to reflect inclusive or integration of all students. Riser [7] reported that 140 nations have ratified the resolution of this convention and

another 158 nations adopted it. Nigeria National Policy on Education ([8], p.35) for example, provided for “equal access for all persons, in inclusive setting”.

Many research findings and experienced researchers attest to the benefits derived from educating all children of similar age in the same classrooms regardless of their differences. For example, Cushing and Kennedy [9] in a study that investigated peer support in general education system reported that students without disability who provided peer support to special needs students demonstrated positive benefits. This result was confirmed by [10] study which ascertained that special needs students who were helped made comparable or greater progress than average academic progress when compared with regular students in inclusive classrooms. Mittler, [11] speaking from experience, attested that special needs individuals in inclusive settings are more likely to graduate from school, live in ordinary homes, have families and hold jobs. Some research however, have reported negative outcomes for special needs children in inclusive schools especially when adequate individualized supports are not provided [12].

Many barriers have been identified to hinder effective implementation of inclusive policies in many nations despite important legislations on the issue [13]. Successful advocacy for inclusion does not guarantee that the policy will be favourably accepted by those responsible for its implementation [14]. One major obstacle to inclusion is negative attitude of stakeholders towards inclusion [11], including important stakeholders such as school administrators, teachers, students, family members and general societal attitudes on inclusion [15]. Attitude of stake holders according to [7,16] play a major role towards successful integration of children with exceptionality into regular schools. Loreman [17] noted that more inclusive environments are achieved in schools where positive attitude exists among school staff in spite of the obstacles. It is worthy of note that many special education needs students are often excluded from schools due to superstitious and irrational beliefs held by important stakeholders than their ability to cope in regular schools.

2. Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to determine the prevailing attitude of principals towards inclusion of students with disability into general education classrooms. The study also tested the difference between attitude of male and female principals, those in private and public schools, knowledge of special education and years of service in general education setting. As educational leaders and heads of administration, principals play pivotal role in implementing change initiatives in their schools [18] and in maintaining positive attitudes in schools towards students with special needs [19]. Principals’ attitude is therefore essential in the implementation of inclusive education policies in their respective schools as they have considerable influence in admission and placement of special needs students [20]. Their attitudes also influence actions of school teachers and administrators, students and parents yet not much work has been done on the study of

principals’ attitude towards inclusion when compared to those of teachers [21]. Furthermore, attitudes constantly influence behavioural tendencies of those holding the attitude especially in their relationships with other people [22]. Therefore, there is need to understand attitudes of school principals who have high authority to influence the outcome of inclusive education in their schools, especially in Nigeria where inclusive education has not been properly implemented due to several controversies.

2.1. Review of Related Literature

Principals are pivotal to school-level compliance of inclusive education laws and regulations including publicity of inclusive philosophy and ensuring that stakeholders follow the philosophy. The school principal is therefore central to the promotion of positive inclusion climate [19]. They also play major role in admission, placement, integration, and success of children with disabilities in schools [23]. Chances of success of an inclusive policy [24] will be less if attitude of operators responsible for its implementation are not in agreement with the policies. Principals’ attitudes are therefore key to effective inclusion of diverse students and implementation of various programmes in their schools.

Integration of special needs students in mainstream schools can be very challenging to principals. Ainscow & Sandill, [25] noted that principals face tremendous challenges managing inclusive education requirements in general education schools entrusted in them. Principals’ roles have evolved over the years and new roles came with new expectations, pressure and risks. Principals are expected to continuously restructure regular programs to accommodate broadening inclusive practices, contend with opposing views on inclusion, facilitating individualized education plans, and ensuring success for all students. The main challenge or obstacle to change according to Mittler ([11], p. viii) are within self especially in attitudes and fears, and in individuals’ “tendency to underestimate people and to exaggerate the difficulties and disappointments that they might encounter if they failed”. Principals should first battle and conquer their negative attitudes on inclusion in order to make meaningful progress in students’ integration.

It is heartwarming that majority of research findings indicate that principals have positive attitudes towards inclusion of special needs students into general education classrooms. Topping and Jindal-Snape [26] in a study of teaching and management staff in Scotland concluded that school principals were most inclusive when compared with other employees in schools. Several other studies have reported principals’ positive attitude about the philosophy of inclusive education [27,28,29,30]. Research indicate that special needs students and those at risk for school failure benefit most from administrative supports, especially from principals on issues of inclusion, instruction and teacher development [31]. For example, a study in South Africa [15] revealed that attendance and graduation of special needs students were influenced by attitude of schools heads especially their attitude that students with disability do not have capacity for higher education. Another study conducted by Sharma & Chow [32] on attitudes of Hong Kong primary school principals

towards integration however reported that principals in that study had slightly negative attitudes. If heads of institutions are not conversant with and supportive of inclusive education, it may be difficult for them to regulate teaching staff directly involved in daily implementation.

Principals are not expected to be experts in special education to effectively manage inclusive schools. Fundamental knowledge about disability, inclusive guidelines and laws are however, essential for successful administration of inclusive education programmes. Aiden and McCarthy [1] emphasized that much of the discomforts people experience about special needs people stem from lack of understanding. Lack of understanding of the needs of diverse students in a school will affect quality of design and implementation of inclusive programs, and feelings of included students. A study conducted among 108 school principals in Texas [33] confirmed that good knowledge of special education and classroom experience significantly influenced principals' attitudes on inclusion. Further, these principals are more likely to place special needs students in least restrictive classrooms. Livingstone, Reed, & Good [34] reported similar result in their study of rural principals in South Georgia. Principals with greater knowledge or working experience with special needs students had better understanding and support for inclusive placement. Reluctance to include disabled students into regular classrooms was attributed to lack of knowledge on inclusion [35].

One factor that is frequently investigated is the influence of gender on attitude of school principals towards inclusion. Inclusion of gender variable in research helps to eliminate gender bias in the findings and improve research quality. Research findings on the attitudes of principals and gender are mixed, although majority of the studies did not find significant relationship between the two variables [34]. For example, Vazquez [36] that investigated attitudes of 98 elementary school principals in Florida and Smith's [28] study of 202 principals in Georgia did not find significant relationship between gender and attitude towards inclusion. However, a study of 122 educators in KwaZulu-Natal Zululand reported that male and female administrators differ significantly with females having more favourable attitudes [37]. Other studies, Tsakiridou & Polyzpoulou, [38] reported similar finding. Bhatanagar & Das [39] reported that males and younger teachers had more positive attitudes towards inclusion.

The present study explored the relationship between principals' years of service in general education setting on attitude on inclusion. Topping and Jindal-Snape [26] in a study of teaching and management staff in Scotland concluded that length of service was not significant factor in attitude towards inclusion. Years of teaching experience and attitude of principals towards inclusion did not produce significant relationship [5] study referenced earlier. However years of teaching experience in general education schools measured by years of service related positively with attitudes in a study of 232 school administrators, principals and assistant principals in Sakara province, Pakistan [30].

Comparison of the attitude of principals in private and public schools in Nigeria have not received the much

needed attention. Almeida [40] study on inclusion of students in private schools around the world observed that little data exist on private schools participation. Search by the researcher to obtain data on private schools in Nigeria on the subject was not successful. Percentage of enrolment in secondary education in private schools in Nigeria stands at about 19 percent [41]. Students in private schools pay higher school fees than those in public schools. Parents in most private schools are expected to pay additional school fees for their special needs children to be included in some private schools.

2.2. Research Questions and Hypotheses

1. What is the nature of principals' attitudes towards inclusive education?
2. There is no significant difference in principals' attitudes towards inclusive education with respect to their knowledge of special education.
3. There is no significant difference between principals' years of service in general education settings and their attitudes towards inclusive education.
4. There is no significant difference between the attitudes of principals' in private and in public schools towards inclusion.
5. There is no significant difference in the attitudes of school principals on inclusive education with respect to their gender.

3. Methodology of the Study

The study adopted a survey research design. Survey design was considered appropriate because much knowledge could be ascertained in the short time required for the study. The researchers adapted an instrument titled: **Scale of Teachers' Attitude towards Inclusive Classrooms (STATIC)** developed by Cochram [42]. The instrument has two sections; section A was on teachers personal data comprising gender, years of service in general education, knowledge of inclusive education and school type (public or private), and section B which elicited information on teachers attitude towards inclusive education has 20 items adopted from Cocharam [42] to be responded on a six point likert scale. Positive item responses are scored as 1= Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3= Not sure, tend to Disagree, 4=Not sure but likely to Agree, 5= Agree and 6= Strongly Agree. However, the reversed form of scoring pattern was used for negative item responses. Therefore, the total scores on the scale range from 20 – 120. The higher scores represent positive attitude while the lower scores represent negative attitude towards inclusion. The sample for the study was drawn from public and private secondary schools located in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State, Nigeria. A total of 132 schools who indicated that they admit special needs students were given the instrument for data collection. A total of 119 principals finally returned their instruments; however, three of the returned instruments were not used due to error in completion thereby reducing the final sample size for the study to 116 principals. These principals consisted of 55 males and 61 females within 71

private schools and 45 public schools respectively. The instrument was administered by the researchers with the assistance of 3 research assistants who were recruited, trained, tested and showed understanding of the instrument STATIC. Copies of the instruments were addressed and sent to principals by the researchers and their assistants. Some principals responded and returned the instrument the same day. Some principals who were not on seat gave the research assistants and the researchers' dates on when to come back. Thirteen principals were not on seat during the visit neither completed nor returned the instrument left for them. Hence the researchers studied 116 principals who rightly filled and returned the instrument. The reliability of the part B which was 20 adopted items from Cochram's (STATIC) survey in 32 schools across five school districts in a Southern Eastern State in America with a return of 36% indicated a consistent Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient of .89. However the adapted instrument was subjected to a test re-test reliability using Cronbach Alpha and yielded a reliability coefficient of .79 which was high enough to be used for the study. The study employed descriptive analysis and t-test to obtain data for inferential statistics at 0.05 alpha levels.

4. Results

Table 1. Principals' Attitude towards Inclusion And Special Needs Children in Regular Private and Public Secondary Schools

Attitude	N	%	Range Score
Negative	28	24	20 - 53
Neutral	52	45	54 - 86
Positive	36	31	87- 120
Total	116	100	120

Table 1 shows result of attitude of principals towards inclusion of special needs children in general education classroom. 24 percent of the principals in the study had negative attitude (N = 28), 45% (N = 52) had neutral attitude while 31% (N = 36) had positive attitude. Scores ranging from 20–53, 54–86 and 87–120 were used as cut off marks for negative, neutral and positive attitudes respectively. It is concluded that 76% of the principals have neutral or positive attitude towards inclusion of students with special needs in general education classrooms.

Table 2. Mean, Standard Deviation and Summary of t-test on Principals' attitude towards inclusive education with respect to their knowledge of special education

Groups	N	Mean	SD	t	df	P
Low knowledge	55	69.5	5.52	2.11	115	.043
High knowledge	61	73.2	7.61			

Table 2 shows the results obtained from t-test conducted to compare principals' attitude towards inclusion of students regarding their knowledge on special education. Mean score of attitude of principals with low knowledge is 69.5 while those with high knowledge is 73.2. Results from t-test indicate a P value of 0.043

< 0.05. There is therefore significant difference between the overall attitude of the two groups. The null hypothesis that stated that there is no significant difference between the attitudes of principals with high knowledge and low knowledge of special education on attitude towards inclusion of special needs children in general education classrooms was rejected. Principals with greater knowledge on special education have better attitude towards inclusion of students with exceptionalities into general education classrooms. This means that the higher the knowledge of principals about special education, the more they have positive attitude about inclusion.

Table 3. Mean, Standard Deviation and Summary of t-test on Principals' years of service in general education and attitude towards inclusive education

Years of experience	N	Mean	SD	t-cal	df	p
Less than 15years	46	68.51	2.88	1.76	115	0.80
More than 15 years	70	70.11	2.60			

The result of t-test on the relationship between principals' years of service in general education setting and their attitudes towards inclusive education is shown in Table 3. T-test results on the scores of principals with long years of service in general education system (m = 68.51, SD = 2.88) and short length of service in general education setting (m = 70.11, SD = 2.60), df (115) t= 1.76, P = 0.80 was not significant. P=0.88>=0.05. This result suggests that principals with long years of service do not have better attitude of principals towards inclusive education than those with short years of service.

Table 4. Principals' attitudes towards inclusion with respect to school type

Groups	N	Mean	SD	t-cal	df	P
Private Schools	71	68.81	4.55	3.28	115	0.12
Public Schools	45	71.27	6.12			

Table 4 shows the t-test results of the hypothesis which tested the difference between school type (private/public schools) and attitude of principals in such schools towards inclusion of students with exceptionality into regular classrooms. Mean score of 68.81, SD = 4.55 and mean score of 71.27, SD = 6.12 were obtained for private and public schools respectively. There were no significant difference in the scores of principals in public and private school df(115) t= 3.23, P=0.12>=0.05. Both set of principals did not differ in their attitudes towards the inclusion of students with disabilities.

Table 5. Mean, Standard Deviation and t-test on Attitudes of principals to inclusion with respect to their gender

Groups	N	Mean	SD	t-cal	df	P
Male	55	76.1	4.50	5.88	115	0.77
Female	61	80.9	2.21			

Table 5 shows the result of two sample independent t – test carried out for male and female principals' attitude towards inclusion. The sample mean for male principals is 76.1 and the females is 80.9, SD=4.50 and 2.21 for male and female principals respectively. P-value is not statistically significant, df =(115) t = 5.88, P= 0.17 > 0.05.

The null hypothesis that no significant relationship exists between principals attitude with respect to their gender was accepted. This suggests that gender of principal does not have not significant attitude of principals towards inclusion.

5. Discussion

5.1. General Attitude towards Inclusion

Result obtained from this study indicates that majority of principals who participated in this study have neutral or positive attitude towards educating students with special education needs and those with diverse needs with students who do not have such needs in the same age appropriate classrooms. This finding brings hope to effective integration of disabled and other excluded students from general education system as principals' attitudes is one of the key elements of inclusive education. Result from this study is in agreement with those reported by most studies [26,28,29]. This agreement may be due to consistent awareness being created by non- governmental organizations on the need to support individuals living with disabilities.

5.2. Knowledge of Special Education

Principals' knowledge of special education related positively with their attitudes towards inclusion of students with exceptionality into general education classrooms. Knowledge of special education or children with special needs enhances principals' willingness to work with and accept them into general education classrooms alongside students who do not have such disabilities or needs. This finding supports the general findings reported by most of the studies that investigated principals' attitudes on inclusion with respect of their knowledge on inclusion, [1,33,35]. It is always said that knowledge is power. When principals are equipped with useful knowledge and they gain the understanding that there is ability in disability all most all the principals will embrace inclusion as a welcome development in general education setting.

More efforts should be made to increase principals' knowledge on disability, diversity, and also in the successes and benefits of educating diverse students in general education classrooms. This will go a long way in helping their attitudes and that of the others who work with them. Principals, school boards and governments should make necessary arrangements to enhance the knowledge of principals towards inclusion through seminars and other forums. Limited awareness about special education by principals may be hindering the attainment of the objectives of inclusion in many schools in Nigeria and other nations where compliance is low.

5.3. Years of Service in General Education Schools

This study did not find significant difference between years of teaching experience in general education setting with the attitudes of principals towards inclusion. It is possible that majority of the principals in this study may not have had much experience with children living with

disabilities being brought to general education classrooms during their early service years because then such children were usually taught in special or segregated classrooms. As discussed early, inclusive education is relatively new and many people are skeptical about its functionality in Nigeria due to enormous human and material resources needed. The result of this study supported the findings reported by Topping and Jindal-Snape [26], but fails to support (Bayrakci et.al) result of school administrators in Sakara Province. It is hoped that more consistent finding will be reported as inclusive education gains more ground in the country.

5.4. Gender

This research examined whether there is a difference between male and female principals' attitudes towards inclusive education. The result obtained from the analysis indicates that both males and females did not differ significantly on their attitudes towards the concept of inclusive education of children with special needs education. Research evidence on the study regarding the issue of gender did not support the relationship between gender and attitude. Though the finding of this study is surprising to the researchers because women particularly mothers as care – givers to children should have a different attitude from their male counterparts towards inclusion. However, the finding is in line with many previous studies [28,36,37]. Suffice to report that the finding is in disagreement with other studies that found significant difference between male and female attitude towards inclusion [39,43] especially those that reported that women have more positive attitude than men.

5.5. School Type

Attitudes of principals in public and private schools were investigated in this study. Result indicates that principals in both schools did not differ in their attitudes towards including students with disabilities in their various schools. It was expected that attitudes of principals in private schools will be better than those in the public schools since many parents offset the additional cost of placing their children in the same class with others who are not disabled. There is need to carry out more studies on this subject since the number of private schools in Nigeria continues to increase on regular bases more than public schools.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings the following recommendations were made

1. Principals should improve their knowledge and skills on the need for inclusion.
2. Workshops, seminars and conferences on inclusive education should be organized for all principals and key administrators in the general education setting.
3. Awareness campaign on the implementation of inclusive education should be carried out by the ministry of education and other non- governmental organizations principals in both private and public secondary schools.

4. Special needs children should be supported by every stakeholder in the general education.

5. All stakeholders should work collectively towards the achievement of the objectives behind inclusion.

7. Conclusion

This study was designed to investigate principals' attitudes towards inclusion of students with special educational needs into general education classrooms. Inclusive education has been accepted all over the world as the new road map for education. Attitude of principals towards inclusion is pivotal to the successful implementation of this new educational agenda. The principals' attitude and four independent variables: knowledge of special education, years of service in general education setting, gender and school type were investigated. Majority of the principals that participated in this study had positive attitudes towards inclusion. Only one factor that was investigated, principals' knowledge of inclusive education produced significant difference with attitudes of principals regarding the inclusion of special needs students with those who do not have such needs in the same general education classrooms. There is therefore need to improve their skills and knowledge on the needs of people with exceptionality. The other three variables: gender, years of service in general education classrooms and the type of school they head (private/public) failed to produce significant difference in their attitude towards inclusion. Separate study of each of these independent variables should be conducted in different Local Government Areas in Rivers State to fully understand the effects of rural and urban settings on these results. More studies should be carried out in private schools to generate much needed data in Nigeria. All stakeholders should work collectively towards the achievement of philosophies of inclusion.

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