DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN SECONDARY SCHOOL EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES IN RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *This article focuses on the place of diversity and inclusion in secondary school educational practices in Rivers State, Nigeria. In the face of advancements in society, Nigeria, a member state of the United Nations at the recent world education forum, held at Incheon, Republic of Korea, adopted the "Education 2030" vision for education. It was translated to the Sustainable Development Goal four (SDG4) and captioned "Towards inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all". This calls for an inclusive education packaged for the benefit of all. Hence, there is need to ensure that education becomes free and a right of all Nigerian children, irrespective of distinct characteristics which set them apart from others of same age bracket, such as gender, socioeconomic status, religious affiliations among many. The major issue of diversity and inclusion is one of respect and appreciation of differences which call for the cooperation of all key players.*

KEYWORDS: Diversity, Inclusion, Educational Practices

INTRODUCTION

There is no gainsaying that many societies in developed and developing countries of the world strive to achieve the betterment of its' citizens through education and the latter has remained the major channel for actualizing this feat. Consequently, in such societies, an individual is expected to be educated to become a functional member. This scenario is the basis upon which the Nigerian state covenants in the sixth edition of the National Policy on Education (NERDC, 2013) that every Nigerian child should have access to quality education that is relevant to the needs of the Nigerian economy. In other words, such education is targeted at equipping members of society with the necessary skill set which would, in turn, position members to transform their communities through hard work. The achievement of this repositions the entire society to be better as everyone is shaped to become an active participant in the smooth running of the society, irrespective of individual differences.

However, adopting education as a channel for ensuring social change is faced with a number of challenges, due largely to the dynamic nature of society. As such, different policies and programmes exist both locally and internationally, with the aim of ensuring that everyone gets equal educational opportunities, irrespective of any individual circumstance or prevailing conditions. Nigeria, in vigorous pursuance of this lofty goal, adopted the new vision for education captioned "Education 2030: Towards Inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all" (WEF, 2015:4, UN, 2015:14), which is in line with the provisions of the National Policy on Education (NERDC, 2013:1) that states as follows: "Education is compulsory and a right of every Nigerian irrespective of gender, social status, religion, colour, ethnic background and any peculiar individual challenges".

This being the case, Nigeria has a range of diverse cultural heritage which creates room for different categories of people including the majority and minority groups, as well as the marginalized, as a result of their social class, gender, religious beliefs, physical attributes and disability, among others. Much more is therefore expected from the Nigerian state, if it is to actually run with the adopted vision of education 2030. While issues that border on exclusion at different levels of the educational system such as denial of admission/attendance of school on grounds of religion as observed in Islamic and Christian schools, inability of parent to pay for fees, gender disparity in school enrolment and disrespect for individual differences, separate schools for the disabled in society continue to exist, one can thus say that there is no true inclusion.

As one of the 36 states in Nigeria, Rivers State has many ethnic groups, and being a cosmopolitan state, it is home to a diverse group of people working and doing business, hence, represents a state with a range of human differences. Education in Rivers state has not been left without challenges. However, giant stride in the adaptation of school structures to cater for the disabled as seen in some secondary schools in Port Harcourt like Government secondary school Borikiri is a step in the right direction. Even in the face of this, there are some students who are indigent and cannot pay for their school expenses. Similarly, there are some others who, by reason of living in remote areas, cannot access quality education. One wonders the fate of a child whose parents have refused to send to school for reasons which may be due to unavailability of financial resources or cultural bias. No child should be discriminated, based on divergent characteristics which set him/her apart from others of similar age bracket. Thus, efforts should be made by the government to overcome every form of discrimination and marginalization in the society at large and in the classroom which is the display point of all educational programmes. This, among many others, is a problem that has to be tackled in Rivers State.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study is to determine the level of inclusion in educational programme in the face of the rich diversity in the school system. Arising from the aim are the following objectives:

(i)   To establish the level of inclusion in secondary school education in the face of diverse

socioeconomic status.

(ii)   To determine the impact of factors such as social class, religion, and gender on the practice of inclusion.

Research Questions

The following research questions would be addressed in the course of this study:

1. What is the difference in the perception of inclusion in education in Rivers State, based on social class?

2. What is the difference on the influence of religion on the practice of inclusion in education?

3. What is the difference on inclusion in education, based on gender?

Hypotheses

H_o1. There is no significant difference on the practice of inclusion in education, based on social class.

H_o2. There is no significant difference on the influence of religion on inclusion in education.

H_o3. There is no significant difference on the practice of inclusive education, based on gender.

Theoretical Framework

Salamanca Framework for Action

Diversity and inclusion are mainly issues of representation and involvement, hence the need for the Salamanca framework for action which states that "Every child has a fundamental human right to education and must be given the opportunity to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning" (UNESCO, 1994:1). This is to be achieved, bearing in mind that "Education systems are to be designed and educational programmes implemented to take into account the wide diversity of these characteristics and needs" (UNESCO, 1994:1). The foregoing stated framework demands the education of children regardless of tribe, gender, social status, religious affiliations and disability, among others. Consequently, no child should be excluded, marginalized or treated unfairly. Rather, the peculiarities of this divergent group of people should be harnessed to build and promote better teaching and learning experiences. As such, all children should be allowed to enroll and participate in school activities to ensure their participation in society which will in turn create the right mix of talents to provoke respect and solidarity for one another. This is in line with the proposals of UNESCO (1994) which require that effective structures be put on ground taking into consideration their peculiar circumstances and should include children residing in remote areas, nomadic children, those from ethnic minorities and the marginalized in society. UNESCO equally adds that equal access to educational opportunity would be enhanced with the provision of educational facilities to all children, irrespective of different barriers that try to ensure their exclusion. All schools therefore should in practice accept all children, irrespective of their diverse characteristics, attend to their educational needs, and engage them in creative classrooms. Florian (2014) asserts that this process would require the use of an inclusive pedagogy that supports teachers responding to the needs of individual students with diverse characteristics but devoid of marginalization which results when certain students are given differential treatment. This is particularly important because, while it may be easy to identify and recognize diversity in its many forms, the feeling of being accepted which is the desire of all is usually difficult to measure by the classroom teacher.

Conceptual framework

Diversity

Most often, people tend to lump diversity and inclusion side by side and this practice makes its true significance to be lost. However, to Harkins (n.d), diversity refers to a range of human differences which covers ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, social class, physical ability or attributes, religious beliefs, national origin and many others. It is any dimension that can be used to differentiate groups and people from one another (Internet a, 2017). It represents respect for, and appreciation of human differences. Sherbin and Rashid (2017) opine that diversity stands for representation.

Inclusion

Inclusion deals with issues of involvement and empowerment which take cognizance of the dignity and worth of all. According to Oxford Dictionaries online (internet), it is the action or state of gaining membership within a group or structure. In relation to education, it is the practice of welcoming all children, despite their individual differences such as socio-economic background, disability, religion and gender, among others, in general schools/classes that are appropriate to their age group. As such, inclusion can be likened to equal participation of all representatives of different range of human differences. However, Sherbin and Rashid (2017) assert that diversity on its' own does not drive inclusion but, in the absence of inclusion, there is often a diversity backlash.

Relating inclusion to education, the National Centre on Educational Restructuring and Inclusion (NCERI, 1995:1) asserts that "it is providing for all students, including those with significant disabilities, equitable opportunities to receive effective educational services". This stance as argued by Loreman, Forlin, Chambers, Sharma & Deppler (2014) examines inclusion, using a disability lens. They argue that the primary objective of inclusion should be targeted at the elimination of social exclusion which is a result of perceptions and reactions to diversity in social class, religion, gender, ethnicity, physical ability/disability, among others. The Incheon Declaration document of education 2030 stipulates in clear terms that inclusion and equity in and through education form the bedrock of a transformative education agenda.

Inclusion in the Face of Diversity in Secondary Education in Rivers State

The Education Sector Support Programme in Nigeria (ESSPIN, 2013) asserts that inclusion relates to making the educational environment suitable for all learners, irrespective of their characteristics, while taking their individual needs into account. This ensures that diversity as it applies to the educational system is properly harnessed to promote healthier classrooms where everyone is appreciated. This is supported by Ainscow, Booth and Dyson (2006:15) who assert that a broader explanation of inclusion should,

> …question the usefulness of an approach that, in attempting to increase participation of students, focuses on the disabled or special needs part of them and ignores all the other ways in which participation for any student may be impeded or enhanced.

This implies that proper inclusion could be achieved if emphasis is not placed only on the inclusion of the disabled but expanded to cover every other way by which a child could be excluded from available educational opportunities in terms of access and equal participation. Uchem and Ngwa (2014) opine that Nigeria needs to move beyond categorical provision statements of policy to practical on ground implementation of inclusion as required of a society characterized by diversity. Thus, there has to be full participation of all relevant bodies to ensure the effectiveness of the policy. In Rivers State, inclusion in education is influenced by many variables which include but not limited to social class, gender, religion, residential location and disability.

Social class

Every society has elements of class structure. This stratification of societal members comes with its own challenges. Of these challenges, the issues of equal access and participation in educational provisions and opportunities cannot be ignored. Social class is a pure

representation of the diverse categories of people in a society. Thus, only inclusionary measures can cancel out any backlash due to human diversity. Leathwood and Archer (2004) assert that wealth differences exist in school enrolment and attainment in almost all developing countries. In other words, the amount of available disposable cash among members of society determines, to a large extent, the places they enroll their children. In the United Kingdom, social class is downplayed, and in its place individualization is encouraged largely due to the classless nature of that society (Leathwood and Archer 2004:6). However, there is mutual agreement on the need for inclusion for the disadvantaged groups in the United Kingdom. The World Economic Forum (WEF, 2017:xii) indicates that "the implicit income distribution system within many countries is severely underperforming or relatively undeveloped". Nigeria had a low Inclusive Development Index (IDI) which is an indication of her failure to translate her economic growth into social inclusion. Thus, it is pertinent that there should be equitable distribution of economic resources and equal access to opportunity for all since access to opportunity is dependent, to a large extent, on the availability of financial resources.

Gender

Different ethnic groups in Rivers state place different levels of premium on both the male and female children as some offer limited educational opportunities to boys, while others do same for girls. Connell in Wight (2010) posits 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 good and acceptable for one is not good for the other. Lynch (2016) asserts that individuals who do not fit laid down gender norms imposed by society suffer discrimination and social exclusion. These norms, to a large extent, are derived from prevailing societal beliefs and values attached to each sex. Mundi (2013) asserts that gender inequality implies that the interest, needs and priorities of both men and women and by extension boys and girls are taken into consideration, recognizing the diversity of different groups of women and men.

Available data indicate that in Rivers State, there are considerably more females than males in secondary school, in spite of the government's policy on equal educational opportunity. Dolan (2012) asserts that getting a child into school is just the first step, as many countries are struggling to keep children in school. This indicates that the child whether male or female should be given equal opportunity and participation be it in education or the society at large.

Religion

It is generally known that Nigeria is a secular state with religious people. Considering the large population of Christians in Rivers State, the latter could be considered a Christian state, in spite of people from other existing religious affiliations. This characteristic makes the state rich in human diversity as it relates to religious practices. However, with the number of Christian schools run by Church organizations, one wonders if chances for enrolment are given to Muslim or traditional religious students and if provisions are put in place to accommodate their religious practices. The same could be said of public schools where everyone is expected to conform to the prevalent religious practice accepted in schools. Lancee and Dronkers (2011) assert that diversity in whatever aspect has detrimental effects on trust. Their study of religious diversity in the Netherlands reveals that "high religious diversity implies big differences between people with respect to their identity, norms and values and could lead to out-group distrust (Lancee and Dronkers, 2011:600). Hunter in Balkin, Schlosser and Levitt (2009) asserts that there is a tendency among highly religious people to perceive themselves as having a stronger moral attribute. Hence, people of different religious inclinations tend to associate

only with members of same beliefs on the basis of trust and in-group solidarity. This impacts on the educational inclusion of these groups, since the group may feel that their children should only attend schools where children of like religion attend.

METHODOLOGY

The estimated study population includes all 537,944 parents with children in public primary and junior secondary schools in Rivers State. Sample survey design was adopted and the random sampling technique was used to select 6 Local Government Areas (LGA's) from the three senatorial districts in Rivers State. Sample size of 400 respondents was obtained, using Yamane's model. This value was increased to 600 for ease of generalization. To ensure content and face validity, the instrument for data collection made by the researcher was submitted to experts for evaluation. The reliability of the instrument was established, using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient (r) and calculated to be 0.72. Mean, Standard Deviation and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were used to analyze the data obtained from the instrument distributed, with the help of research assistants. 582 of returned copies were valid and thus were used for the analysis.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Table 1. Summary of Mean and Standard deviation.

Description	N	Mean	Criterion Mean	SD	Remarks
Social class	582	3.33	2.5	0.67	Positive (VHL)
Religion	582	3.40	2.5	0.53	Positive (VHL)
Gender	582	3.61	2.5	0.68	Positive (VHL)

Table 2. Summary of Analysis of Variance for testing the hypotheses

Description	Type III sum of squares	df	Mean square	Significance	F ratio	F tables	Remarks
Social class	42.962	3	14.321	0.031	2.985	2.605	Reject
Religion	280.169	3	93.390	0.000	18.011	2.605	Reject
Gender	69.007	3	23.002	0.000	6.748	2.605	Reject

DISCUSSION

Following the results obtained, each group mean (3.33, 3.40, 3.61) is greater than the criterion mean of 2.5, thus, it could be said that each of these factors (social class, religion and gender) has a very high level (VHL) of positive influence on the practice of inclusion in education, since each of the mean ranges above 3. In other words, parental perception, with regard to their

social class, religion and gender respectively, has a very high positive influence on the practice of inclusive education at secondary schools in Rivers State.

Furthermore, the analysis of variance reveals a significant difference in the practice of inclusion in education based on social class, religion, and gender (See f-calculated values of 2.985, 18.011 and 6.748 respectively). In other words, these factors significantly influence the choices and decisions made by parents in Rivers State, with regard to the practice of inclusive education at secondary schools.

The findings of this study on the significant influence of social class on inclusive education is in line with the earlier findings of Leathwood and Archer (2004) who identified the differences in class enrolment and choices of school for students as a major consequent of differences in parental social status. Similarly, Connell in Wight (2010) posits that children get to learn that the world is gendered at a very young age by the process of socialization. This notion makes them believe that what is good and acceptable for one is not good for the other. Lynch (2016) asserts that individuals who do not fit laid down gender norms imposed by society suffer discrimination and social exclusion. These norms, to a large extent, are derived from prevailing societal beliefs and values attached to each sex.

With regard to religion as a factor, the findings of this study equally supports the study of Lancee and Dronkers's (2011: 600) on religious diversity in the Netherlands that reveals "high religious diversity (which) implies big differences between people with respect to their identity, norms and values and could lead to out-group distrust". Similarly, Hunter in Balkin, Schlosser and Levitt (2009) asserts that there is a tendency among highly religious people to perceive themselves as having a stronger moral attribute. Hence, people of different religious inclinations tend to associate only with members of same beliefs on the basis of trust and in-group solidarity. In other words, the religious inclination of a person could influence the decision to send a child to an inclusive school.

Implication to Research and Practice

Following the diverse nature of the state, the parental perception of the practice of inclusion still differs partly because the reaction of parents to placing their normal children in same classroom with those having disabilities was yet to be felt despite the policy declaration on 'Education for All'. This is basically important because the parents' understanding of the practice of inclusion, to a large extent, determines the success of the policy. However, success could be harnessed through religion by calling on leaders of different religions to teach their followers the need to allow their children learn in inclusive settings to broaden their mindset about the beliefs of others and probably reduce the need for religious schools. By this, religion acts as an avenue to promote tolerance, acceptance and respect, all of which inclusion, in the face of diversity, stands for. This success will, no doubt, challenge and most likely change the existing practice of religious intolerance that is prevalent in the society.

While existing records reveal gender parity at the junior secondary level, there is still more to be done by the government to cover the identified gender gap to ensure equal mix of both gender and respect for the individual characteristics by the classroom teacher and between students.

CONCLUSION

Diversity and inclusion in secondary school educational practices serves as an important route to the development of education. Appreciation of diversity and inclusion could act as a force of unification which could lead to development in society. From the foregoing literature, it is evident that social class affects the inclusion of children into mainstream general education. This is particularly true for people of the upper class who may be inclined to send their children to private and exclusive schools which do not truly represent inclusion. Furthermore, religion is a factor of exclusion for certain groups of people as their religious practice may demand certain practices that are not permitted by the secular laws of the state. Thus, such people will tend to associate with their kind only. No sex should be made to believe that they could get away with anything due to cultural bias. In the words of Oxfam in Wight (2010:27), "children will want to come to school and will enjoy the experience of learning if schools implement good quality gender equitable curricula and ways of teaching".

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following suggestions reached at the end of this discussion include the following:

1. Community forums should be created in to enlighten members on current advancements in education as well as members' role in enforcing these advancements.

2. The government should execute the implementation of current education policies, particularly with regard to the requirements of 'Education for All'.

3. Teachers should be trained periodically to handle the realities that accompany including diverse groups of children in same classroom;

4. Teachers should identify unique talents, strengths and weaknesses of each child and build on them to eliminate their weak aspects. This demands every teacher to pay individual attention to the learners and use varied teaching methods to build on the strengths of each child.

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