

CREATING AWARENESS FOR INCLUSIVE LEARNING OF PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS THROUGH COUNSELING EDUCATION PROGRAMME IN NIGERIA

BY

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Abstract

This paper examines creating awareness for inclusive learning of parents and caregivers through counseling education programme in Nigeria. Inclusive education is an educational philosophy and practice aimed at integrating all students, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, or linguistic differences, into regular classrooms and learning environments. However, the creation of awareness for inclusive learning among parents and caregivers through counseling education programmes hold transformative potential for the educational landscape. These programmes empower parents and caregivers with the essential knowledge, skills, and attitudes to support and advocate for inclusive practices, thereby enhancing the academic and social development of all children, particularly those with diverse needs. The resulting benefits include increased parental involvement, reduced stigma, improved advocacy, and the promotion of inclusive practices in schools. Ultimately, these programmes contribute to a more equitable and effective educational system, fostering environments where every child can thrive and succeed. The continued focus on and investment in such awareness initiatives are crucial for advancing the goals of inclusive education and creating a more inclusive society. Therefore, counseling education programmes should incorporate comprehensive training on inclusive education principles. This training should cover the benefits of inclusive learning, strategies for effective parental involvement, and ways to address common challenges. By providing detailed information on these areas, programmes can better prepare parents and caregivers to support inclusive practices and advocate effectively for their children's needs.

Keywords: Care givers, Creating awareness, Inclusive education, Parents, Counseling

Introduction

Inclusive education has gained global recognition as a critical approach for ensuring that all children, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds, have equal access to quality education. The concept of inclusive learning is grounded in the belief that education is a fundamental human right and that schools should accommodate all children, including those with disabilities, learning difficulties, and other diverse needs (UNESCO, 2014). In many parts of the world, significant progress has been made towards inclusive education, with policies and practices that support the integration of children with special needs into mainstream classrooms (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2016). However, in Nigeria, the implementation of inclusive education faces numerous challenges. According to Omede and Momoh (2016), one of the critical barriers to effective inclusive education in Nigeria is the lack of awareness and understanding among parents and caregivers. Many parents and caregivers hold misconceptions about disabilities and inclusive education, often viewing children with special needs as incapable of benefiting from mainstream education. This lack of awareness not only hampers the inclusion of these children but also affects their overall development and future opportunities.

Parental involvement is a key factor in the success of inclusive education. Research has shown that when parents and caregivers are actively involved in their children's education, it leads to better educational outcomes and social development (Epstein, 2011). However, in the Nigerian context, many parents and caregivers are either unaware of their role in supporting inclusive education or lack the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively contribute to their children's learning (Omede & Momoh, 2016). This gap in awareness and involvement necessitates targeted

interventions to educate and empower parents and caregivers. Counselling education programs have been identified as effective tools for raising awareness and equipping parents and caregivers with the knowledge and skills needed to support inclusive education. These programs can provide valuable information on the principles and benefits of inclusive education, strategies for supporting children with diverse needs, and ways to collaborate with teachers and schools (Becker & Luthar, 2012). Studies have shown that counselling education can positively impact parents' attitudes towards inclusive education and enhance their ability to support their children's learning (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

In Nigeria, there is a pressing need to develop and implement counselling education programs specifically designed for parents and caregivers. Such programs can address the existing knowledge gaps, challenge misconceptions, and promote a more inclusive mindset among parents and caregivers. By increasing awareness and involvement, these programs can play a crucial role in fostering an inclusive educational environment where all children can thrive. The purpose of this study is to examine the role of counselling education programs in creating awareness for inclusive learning among parents and caregivers in Nigeria. It aims to highlight the importance of inclusive education, assess the current level of awareness and involvement of parents and caregivers, and propose strategies for the effective implementation of counseling education programs. Through this research, we hope to contribute to the ongoing efforts to promote inclusive education in Nigeria and ensure that all children have the opportunity to achieve their full potential.

The Concept of Inclusive Education

Inclusive learning refers to an educational approach that aims to accommodate all students, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, or linguistic differences, ensuring they have equal access to learning opportunities and are fully integrated into the educational environment (Ainscow, 2020). This approach emphasizes the need for schools to adapt to the diverse needs of students, rather than expecting students to fit into a pre-existing mold. The principles of inclusive learning include:

Equality and Equity: Ensuring all students have access to the same educational opportunities and resources, while also providing additional support to those who need it to achieve similar outcomes (UNESCO, 2017).

Diversity and Individuality: Valuing and respecting the unique differences of each student, recognizing that these differences can enrich the learning experience for all (Tomlinson, 2014).

Participation and Belonging: Encouraging all students to participate fully in the educational process and fostering a sense of belonging within the school community (Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

Collaboration and Partnership: Promoting collaborative practices among educators, parents, and the community to support the holistic development of all students (Florian, 2015).

Flexibility and Adaptability: Creating flexible curricula and teaching strategies that can be adapted to meet the varying needs of students.

Benefits of Inclusive Learning for Children with Diverse Needs

Inclusive learning environments are designed to accommodate the educational needs of all students, including those with diverse needs. This approach has been shown to provide numerous benefits, enhancing the academic, social, and emotional development of these students.

- **Enhanced Academic Achievement** Inclusive settings can lead to improved academic outcomes for students with disabilities. By participating in the general education curriculum, students with diverse needs benefit from higher expectations and the same rigorous educational standards as their peers. Research indicates that students in inclusive settings often outperform their counterparts in segregated settings due to increased exposure to a broader curriculum and better teaching practices (Hehir et al., 2016). This inclusive approach fosters a learning environment where all students are challenged to reach their full potential.
- **Social Integration and Development** One of the significant benefits of inclusive learning is the promotion of social integration. Inclusive classrooms facilitate interactions between students with and without disabilities,

which helps in building mutual understanding and friendships (Carter et al., 2015). These interactions are crucial for developing essential social skills, such as communication, cooperation, and empathy. For students with diverse needs, these relationships contribute to a sense of belonging and community, which is vital for their overall social development.

- **Emotional and Psychological Benefits** Inclusive learning environments also offer emotional and psychological benefits for students with diverse needs. Being included in a regular classroom setting helps these students feel valued and accepted by their peers. This acceptance boosts their self-esteem and confidence, contributing positively to their mental well-being (Black-Hawkins, Florian, & Rouse, 2017). The positive self-perception developed in an inclusive setting is crucial for students' overall emotional health and resilience.
- **Preparation for Life Beyond School** Inclusive education prepares students with diverse needs for life outside of school. By participating in a diverse learning environment, these students are better equipped to handle real-world scenarios and diverse social settings. This preparation is critical for their future independence and employment prospects (Schwab, 2020). Inclusive education teaches practical life skills and fosters a sense of agency, which is essential for navigating adulthood.
- **Promotes a Culture of Respect and Empathy** Inclusive classrooms cultivate a culture of respect and empathy among all students. Learning alongside peers with diverse needs allows students without disabilities to develop a deeper understanding and appreciation of diversity (Salend, 2011). This exposure is essential for fostering an inclusive society where differences are celebrated, and all individuals are valued. The inclusive approach encourages students to be more empathetic, supportive, and open-minded, qualities that are beneficial both within and outside the classroom.

However, inclusive learning environments offer substantial benefits for children with diverse needs, including enhanced academic achievement, improved social integration, emotional and psychological well-being, and better preparation for life beyond school. Furthermore, inclusive education promotes a culture of respect and empathy, contributing to the development of a more inclusive and understanding society. These benefits underscore the importance of adopting inclusive practices in educational settings to ensure that all students have the opportunity to succeed.

Role of Parents and Caregivers

Parents and caregivers play a pivotal role in the educational development of children, particularly in fostering an environment that supports inclusive learning. Their involvement is critical to the academic, social, and emotional success of children, especially those with diverse needs.

Academic Support Parents and caregivers are fundamental in providing academic support at home, which complements the learning that takes place in the classroom. Research shows that children whose parents are actively engaged in their education tend to achieve higher academic outcomes (Jeynes, 2012). This involvement includes helping with homework, encouraging reading and other educational activities, and communicating high expectations for academic success. By creating a structured and supportive home environment, parents can enhance their child's learning experience and academic performance.

Advocacy and Collaboration Parents and caregivers often serve as advocates for their children, particularly in navigating the educational system to ensure their needs are met. This advocacy includes working closely with teachers, school administrators, and special education professionals to develop and implement individualized education plans (IEPs) or other support mechanisms (Turnbull et al., 2015). Effective collaboration between parents and educators is essential for tailoring educational strategies that accommodate each child's unique needs and promote inclusive practices.

Emotional and Social Development The emotional and social development of children is significantly influenced by the involvement of parents and caregivers. They provide emotional support, foster resilience, and help children

develop positive self-esteem and social skills (Hartas, 2011). By modelling inclusive attitudes and behaviours, parents can teach their children the values of empathy, respect, and acceptance of diversity. This guidance is crucial for children with diverse needs, as it helps them build confidence and navigate social interactions more effectively.

Creating Inclusive Home Environments Parents and caregivers also play a key role in creating inclusive home environments that reflect and reinforce the principles of inclusive learning. This involves adapting home activities to be accessible to all children, encouraging inclusive play, and promoting positive attitudes towards diversity and inclusion (Hornby, 2011). When inclusive practices are embedded in the home environment, children are more likely to carry these values into their interactions at school and in the broader community.

Continuous Learning and Support For parents and caregivers to effectively support inclusive learning, they must be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills. This can be achieved through participation in counseling education programs and other forms of training that provide information on inclusive practices and strategies (Blue-Banning et al., 2014). By engaging in continuous learning, parents can stay informed about best practices and emerging trends in inclusive education, enabling them to provide better support to their children.

The role of parents and caregivers in promoting inclusive learning is multifaceted and indispensable. Their active involvement in academic support, advocacy, emotional and social development, and the creation of inclusive home environments significantly contributes to the success of inclusive education initiatives. By participating in ongoing education and training, parents and caregivers can enhance their ability to support their children's diverse needs, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and equitable educational experience.

Counseling Education Programmes

Counseling education programmes are structured initiatives aimed at training individuals to become professional counselors. These programs provide the necessary theoretical knowledge, practical skills, and ethical grounding required for effective counseling across various settings, including schools, hospitals, private practices, and community agencies (Gladding, 2018). The primary objective of counselling education is to prepare counselors who can support individuals in addressing psychological, emotional, and social challenges. counselling education programs encompass several critical components. First, they provide a foundational understanding of counselling theories, which serve as frameworks for understanding clients' behaviours and developing intervention strategies. Commonly taught theories include cognitive-behavioural therapy, psychodynamic theory, humanistic approaches, and systems theory (Corey, 2016). Practical skills training is another crucial aspect of counselor education. Students learn techniques such as active listening, empathy, questioning, and non-verbal communication. Role-playing, simulations, and supervised clinical practice are often employed to develop these skills (Neukrug, 2016). Additionally, ethical training ensures that future counselors adhere to professional codes of conduct and understand the importance of confidentiality, informed consent, and boundaries in the counselor-client relationship (Remley & Herlihy, 2019). Programs emphasize the ethical guidelines set by professional organizations such as the American counselling Association (ACA).

Many counselling education programmes also offer specialized training focusing on specific populations or issues, such as child and adolescent counselling, substance abuse counselling, marriage and family therapy, and career counselling (Erford, 2017). This specialization allows counsellors to develop expertise in areas where they are most needed. Moreover, these programs often include training in research methods and program evaluation. This component equips counselors with the skills to assess the effectiveness of their interventions and contribute to the broader field of counselling through research (Heppner, Wampold, Owen, Thompson, & Wang, 2016).

Benefits of counselling Education Programmes

The benefits of counseling education programmes extend to both the individuals who undertake them and the communities they serve. These programs provide individuals with the knowledge and skills necessary to become competent, ethical counselors. Graduates are well-equipped to address a wide range of issues, from mental health disorders to career development (Gladding, 2018).

Furthermore, by training counselors to work with diverse populations, counseling education programs help ensure that all individuals have access to high-quality mental health care. This is particularly important in multicultural societies where counselors must be adept at working with clients from various cultural backgrounds (Sue & Sue, 2016). Counselors trained through these programs often engage in community outreach and education, raising awareness about mental health issues and reducing stigma. This can lead to increased help-seeking behavior and early intervention, which are critical for effective treatment (Myers & Sweeney, 2008).

Additionally, graduates of counseling education programs frequently contribute to the development of the counseling profession through research, advocacy, and leadership roles in professional organizations. Their work helps to advance best practices and improve outcomes for clients (Heppner et al., 2016).

Impact of Counselling Education Programmes for Creating Awareness on Inclusive Learning of Parents and Caregivers

Creating awareness for inclusive learning among parents and caregivers through counseling education programs has a profound impact on the educational and developmental outcomes of children, especially those with diverse needs. These programs empower parents and caregivers with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to support inclusive learning environments, thereby fostering a more equitable and effective educational system.

Enhanced Parental Involvement and Support: One significant impact of creating awareness through counseling education programs is the enhancement of parental involvement in their children's education. When parents and caregivers understand the principles and benefits of inclusive learning, they are more likely to engage actively in their children's schooling. Research has shown that increased parental involvement leads to better academic performance, higher levels of motivation, and improved behaviour in children (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). This involvement is particularly crucial for children with special educational needs, who benefit greatly from a coordinated support system at home and school (Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007).

Reduction of Stigma and Discrimination: Counseling education programs also play a critical role in reducing stigma and discrimination associated with disabilities and learning differences. By educating parents and caregivers about the value of diversity and the potential of all children to succeed, these programs help to foster more inclusive attitudes and behaviours. This shift in perspective can lead to a more accepting and supportive community, where children with diverse needs feel valued and included (Gavish, 2017). Reduced stigma can also encourage parents to seek early intervention and support for their children, leading to better long-term outcomes (Corrigan & Watson, 2002).

Improved Advocacy and Collaboration: Educated parents and caregivers are better equipped to advocate for their children's needs within the educational system. They can work more effectively with teachers, school administrators, and policymakers to ensure that appropriate accommodations and supports are in place (Trainor, 2010). Counseling education programs provide parents with the tools and confidence to navigate the often-complex educational landscape, advocating for inclusive practices and policies that benefit all students (Staples & Diliberto, 2010).

Promotion of Inclusive Practices in Schools: Awareness programs that target parents and caregivers also contribute to the broader promotion of inclusive practices within schools. As more parents understand and demand inclusive education, schools are pressured to adopt inclusive policies and practices. This can lead to systemic changes, such as the implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, differentiated instruction, and collaborative

teaching models (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014). Inclusive schools are better equipped to meet the diverse needs of all students, leading to improved educational outcomes and greater equity (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Strengthened Social and Emotional Development: Finally, creating awareness for inclusive learning through counseling education programs supports the social and emotional development of all children. Inclusive environments promote social interactions among children with and without disabilities, fostering friendships and mutual respect. These interactions are essential for developing social skills, empathy, and a sense of belonging (Staub & Peck, 2015). For children with disabilities, being included in mainstream classrooms can boost self-esteem and reduce feelings of isolation (Finke, McNaughton, & Drager, 2009).

However, creating awareness for inclusive learning among parents and caregivers through counseling education programs has far-reaching impacts. It enhances parental involvement, reduces stigma, improves advocacy efforts, promotes inclusive practices in schools, and supports the social and emotional development of children. These benefits contribute to a more inclusive, equitable, and effective educational system, where all children have the opportunity to succeed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the creation of awareness for inclusive learning among parents and caregivers through counseling education programs holds transformative potential for the educational landscape. These programmes empower parents and caregivers with the essential knowledge, skills, and attitudes to support and advocate for inclusive practices, thereby enhancing the academic and social development of all children, particularly those with diverse needs. The resulting benefits include increased parental involvement, reduced stigma, improved advocacy, and the promotion of inclusive practices in schools. Ultimately, these programmes contribute to a more equitable and effective educational system, fostering environments where every child can thrive and succeed. The continued focus on and investment in such awareness initiatives are crucial for advancing the goals of inclusive education and creating a more inclusive society.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that;

1. Counseling education programmes should incorporate comprehensive training on inclusive education principles. This training should cover the benefits of inclusive learning, strategies for effective parental involvement, and ways to address common challenges. By providing detailed information on these areas, programs can better prepare parents and caregivers to support inclusive practices and advocate effectively for their children's needs.
2. Counseling education programmes should include practical workshops and simulations. Hands-on experiences, such as role-playing scenarios and interactive workshops, should be integrated to allow parents and caregivers to practice and refine their advocacy and support skills. These practical exercises can enhance their ability to implement inclusive practices and engage constructively with educational institutions.
3. Counseling education programmes should foster partnerships with schools and community organizations. Collaborations with schools and local organizations can create a supportive network for parents and caregivers, providing them with additional resources and support. Such partnerships can facilitate the sharing of best practices and enhance the overall impact of inclusive education efforts.
4. Counseling education programs should emphasize the importance of continuous learning and self-assessment. Programs should encourage parents and caregivers to engage in ongoing education and self-assessment to stay informed about the latest developments in inclusive education. This can include providing access to updated materials, resources, and opportunities for further training.
5. Counseling education programs should evaluate and adapt their curricula based on feedback and outcomes. Regular assessment of program effectiveness and participant feedback should be used to refine and improve

the curricula. This iterative approach ensures that the programs remain relevant and effective in addressing the evolving needs of parents, caregivers, and their children.

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