
Inclusive Classroom Management Practices in Nigeria: An Observational Study

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Abstract

This study examined inclusive classroom management practices within the Nigerian context. Direct overt observational research design was adopted, and four mainstream inclusive schools in Port Harcourt, Rivers State were used for the study. The study findings indicated that classroom rules as a tactics is poorly used with only one (25%) of teachers periodically reminding students of existing rules; all (100%) of teachers consciously arrange their classrooms daily; albeit not consistently, all (100%) of teachers exhibited friendly gestures to their students; selective ignoring as an effective classroom management practice was merely existing; all (100%) of teachers moderated the use of punishment as an inclusive classroom management strategy; and all teachers (100%) used positive reinforcement as an effective inclusive classroom management practice as passing of pleasant comments and gifts such as sweets and balloons were observed to be used as rewards for proper behaviours on the parts of students. The study concluded that, inclusive classroom management practices in Nigeria are not different from what obtains elsewhere. There is, however, no one strict sets of inclusive classroom management practices that is acclaimed superior over others. Approaching inclusive classroom management through the lens of connection, consistency, and compassion will aid in combating the chaos in most typical inclusive classrooms as these put recognition and respect for humanity at the centre of effective inclusive classroom management practices in special education in inclusive setting not only in Nigeria, but all over the globe. Recommendations for practice improvement were also made.

INTRODUCTION

From the right to education of every individual as enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 (the most widely ratified international treaty in history; the renewal of the pledge made by the world community at the 1990 World Conference on Education for All (EFA) which aims to ensure that right for all regardless of individual differences; and The several United Nations declarations culminating in the 1993 United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, which urges States to ensure that the education of persons with disabilities is an

integral part of the education system; to the World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality in 1994, the Salamanca statement on principles, policy and practice in special needs education was birthed, setting the agenda and roadmap for what is today globally referred to as inclusive education (Ghana Ministry of Education, Science and Sports, (2007); United Nations Scientific, Educational and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 1994; United Nations International Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2005). In addition, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (2006) which posits, inter alia, that persons with disabilities should not be excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability' and should receive 'reasonable accommodation and support required to learn, and specifically mentioning the provision of sign language and Braille for individuals who are deaf and blind also advocates the rights of people with disabilities to quality education.

In Nigeria, the movement for the introduction of inclusive education bore fruits in 1977 with the 1977 National Policy on Education which identified the right of disabled children to education albeit it was unspecific on the type of education they should receive (Pinnock, 2020). She maintained that, it was the 2004 Edition of the National Policy on Education together with the Universal Basic Education Act of 2004 that called for inclusive free education for people with special needs, training of special education teachers, and regular census and monitoring of people with special needs for educational provision that ushered in Nigeria to the league of countries with inclusive education philosophy, policy and practice. Further, Pinnock)2020) maintain that, the 2019 Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act (Nigeria's first law on people with disabilities) articulates Nigeria's commitments under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, imposing requirements to deliver inclusive education for people with disabilities, and supporting their educational and social inclusion rights defines the country as an inclusive state, although implementation is yet underway.

The global focus on EFA and the pursuit for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have generated continued focus on the need to eliminate limitations to participation and learning for the estimated 140000000 out of school children globally out of which about 30%-90% are with disability (Fast Track Initiative, 2008). Speaking at a United Nations Panel on "Special Education: A model for Sustainable and Inclusive Education in Developing Countries", the Permanent Representative of Nigeria to the United Nations, Prof. Tijjani Bande put the number of children with disabilities in Nigeria at approximately 1.3 million (News Agency of Nigeria [NAN], 2018) of which Save the Children International estimated that 95.5% are out of school (Onyedinefu, 2022). For Peters (2003), the vast majority of these out of school children have moderate hidden impairments, resulting in difficulties in identification. Within the framework of the education for all principles however, these children with disabilities are entitled to compulsory education at the least at the basic level just as their counterparts without disabilities in inclusive settings.

Special needs education (SNE) is simply education of people with disabilities. World Health Organisation (WHO, 2019) defined disability as a functional limitation due to physical, mental/emotional, sensory, and cognitive (including intellectual and developmental)

impairments. Synthetically from WHO (2019) then, SNE is education for people functionally limited owing to physical, psychological, sensory, cognitive (including intellectual and developmental) and social (including at risk children) impairments as well as gifted and talented children.

As defined in the Salamanca Statement, inclusive education recognizes the need for education for all, celebrates differences, supports learning, and responds to individual needs (UNESCO, 1994). It is based on the idea that all children should learn together, regardless of differences or disability. It is the view of the author of this paper that, inclusive education is a philosophy of education in practice, backed by sound policy for the provision of access to quality education for all children/persons irrespective of their abilities, religion, race/ethnicity, orientation, etc in a least restrictive environment in such a manner for them to be maximally developed. This implies the adequate provision of material and non-material resources to meet the needs for the educational development of the learner without limitation to where the educational services are delivered, provided that it is convenient for the learner as well as other critical stakeholders in the delivery processes.

Critical to and at the centre of special needs education in an inclusive setting is the teacher, without whom learning is difficult. Classrooms in the current age have necessarily become inclusive, typically combining general education and special needs students (mainly students who present with mild to moderate learning and behavioural challenges), adding another layer of complexity to classroom management, and requiring teachers to be highly structured, consistent and reinforcing (Polirstok, 2015). Albeit the teacher is required to demonstrate high levels of competence in content knowledge, this would amount to little in terms of knowledge transfer to the learner (especially learners who are off tasks and present with disruptive behaviours), without effective inclusive classroom management practices. Classroom management is the process of getting students organised, focused, on tasks, and being academically productive in class using a variety of techniques. Classroom management could be viewed as the process of organizing and running the classroom. It may also be seen as teacher led classroom maintenance. Beyond all of these, classroom management also includes setting up and maintaining the teaching environment so that the educational goals can be achieved (Savage & Savage, 2009). Osakwe (2014) refers to classroom management practices as the tactics or methods adopted by teachers to ensure decorum in the classroom and thus create a healthy and conducive atmosphere for learning.

Inclusive classroom management practices are therefore, those classroom management practices (methods, tactics, and techniques) that specifically aim at organising, managing, and running classrooms with learners with special needs, who by their nature, are of different categorisation and severities. The extent to which educational/learning/instructional goals and objectives for learners with special needs may be achieved may not be decoupled from the inclusiveness of the classroom management practices adopted/deployed. Summarily therefore, inclusive classroom management practices are classroom management practices that are used in special needs education in inclusive settings, and will be so used interchangeably in this paper.

The objective of this paper is to identify effective classroom management practices in special needs education in inclusive settings in the literature, and bring to bear on these practices, observations of classroom management practices in four inclusive mainstream schools in Port Harcourt to reflect the Nigerian context.

Effective Classroom Management Practices in Special Needs Education in Inclusive Settings

Various techniques are probable in effectively managing classrooms in special needs education in inclusive settings. For Polirstok, (2015), changing the teacher approval to disapproval ratio, using selective ignoring, focusing on structure and routine, increasing student locus of control, de-escalating student aggression and hostility, and limiting the use of punishment are the effective inclusive classroom management practices/strategies/techniques to promote the right learning environments, and ensure success in achieving teaching/learning goals and objectives.

- Approval to disapproval ratio: Approval and disapproval are reciprocal as approval (praising a student for good behaviour for example) attracts more approval while disapproval (for example, punishing a bad behaviour) attracts more disapproval; resulting in cycles of interaction that are either mutually pleasing or mutually aversive (Polirstok & Gottlieb, 2006; Polirstok & Greer, 1977). The key to maintaining an emotionally warm environment in an inclusive classroom is to keep disapproval comments to students to a minimum.
- Selective ignoring: Here teachers intentionally focus on appropriate behaviours and recognize students for their compliance. By choosing to adopt this technique, teachers can limit the negative exchanges that sometimes characterise classrooms where teachers are continuously naming students who are off-task and noncompliant. This classroom management practice provides the teacher with an alternative strategy that can help to limit disapproval and focus on keeping the classroom emotionally safe and well regulated. However, where there is likelihood of harm being caused, teachers must take appropriate measures.
- Focusing on structure and routine: Besides high teacher to student approval ratio, creating the right/appropriate classroom environment where students can be successful also requires an emphasis on structure and routine as this could avail/ensure safety for students (especially those with mild to moderate learning and behavioural challenges). Helping student to learn the day to day expectations requires consistency in the daily routines (Wong & Wong, 2014). Often teachers believe that teaching the routines and expectancies occur during the first weeks of school. In reality, routines and expectations are taught each day through the teacher's use of approval of student appropriate and compliant behaviours. Any change in daily schedule or routine requires that the teacher prepares the student in advance to understand what such changes will be and what is expected of the students.

- De-escalating behavioural crisis: It is not uncommon that some students may be disrespectful and presenting non-co-operating behaviours in class, especially towards teachers instructions. When this happens, the response of the teacher is key. Teachers should respond professionally and not personally to avoid escalating the crisis. Maintaining low/appropriate tone and calm on the part of teachers is essential. Lemov (2010) and Polirstok (2015) recommends, among others, that teachers should tone down, avoid entering the personal space of students, lower hands to sides, assert instruction with low/appropriate voice tone, etc as measures to adopt in such instances. Once the situation is under control, positive reinforcement should be applied if the student complied with instructions.
- Increasing students locus of control: Assisting students to understand that some of the choices they make regarding their behaviours are better than others is considered an important component of classroom management. Good choices should be appreciated and reinforced while poor choices should be corrected compassionately with explanation of need to understand why what such choices are poor choice and what alternative responses they could have chosen that would have been better choices. Many included students who have learning and behavioural challenges could have internal locus of control (acceptance of responsibility for their choices). Yet many others have external locus of control (typically blaming others or external factors for the poor choices they make). In inclusive classrooms, there are many students with mild to moderate learning and attention disorders who have an external locus of control (Tarnowski & Nay, 1989) that should be corrected. Polirstok (2015) suggests four possible steps to achieving this: 1) Give the student free space to explain what happened, 2) ask the student to identify what rules have been violated, 3) allow the student to suggest what alternative responses would have been used, 4) assist the student identify which of the response alternatives is best and which is worst, and 5) ask the student to respond appropriately next time.
- Limiting the use of punishment: Punishment as viable classroom management practices have been over relied on. Students with attention deficit problems often present with reduced sensitivity to rewards and punishments (a neurological consequence of the disorder). Applying these tactics is retrogressive for this category of students as over use of punishment does not teach the expected behaviour but instead, engenders resentment on the part of students. The key for teachers is to predominantly use positive behaviour supports and strategies; punishment can work only if it is used sparingly.

In Nigeria as with other countries, the intendment of inclusive classroom management practices is for teachers to provide the necessary supports aimed at actualising learning goals and objectives. Should classroom management practices be lacking, control and order that enhance teaching and learning process will be inhibited. Inclusive classroom management practices are a fundamental part of teachers' success in creating a safe and effective learning environments in inclusive settings. Therefore, teachers should know how to use and apply strategies that will

allow and help students learn (Zuckerman, 2007). Zuckerman enumerated some classroom management practices as:

- Good classroom arrangement to manage the facilities provided for students' usage, which are often lacking or inadequate in Nigeria.
- Use of incentives to motivate students and provide counselling services for those with deviant behaviours.
- Make rules and regulations simple and understandable and be consistent in enforcing them.
- Plan the lessons using the scheme of work as a guide, and present lessons from known to unknown facts.
- Delegate specific responsibilities daily to students and request for regular update and reports from such students.
- Treat the students' cases justly and equally without bias/partiality.
- Set up a positive behaviour for rewards and punishment system.
- Modelling - the teacher should serve as a role model for the students to emulate.

Levings (2021) gave seven effective classroom management practices for inclusive setting from a practical hands-on perspective as follows.

1. Create an inclusive learning environment: Developing a welcoming environment for students is crucial and depends reasonably on the words and attitude of the teacher. Make the students feel safe, respected, and acknowledged by doing or performing simple friendly gestures such as greeting the students and being friendly with them throughout the day.
2. Familiarize yourself with students' unique rhythms: Getting to know your students is one essential classroom management tactics as figuring out the points of their strengths and weaknesses/challenges is key in understanding how to relate with them. Positively reinforce their strong points and be more intentional when teaching difficult topics. For example, it is important to understand students with learning disabilities as environmental triggers such as colours, noises, people, locations, etc could make them become easily agitated and uncontrollable. Once you can identify what causes a student to lose focus, you can adjust and plan accordingly.
3. intentional classroom seating: Research data indicates that disruptions happen two to three times as often when students choose their own seats) et al., 2012), it is therefore, important to create seating chart or arrangement for the class. Levings (2021) recommends row seating style over group/circle seating arrangement as it provides students with their own space, so they don't feel uncomfortable. It also keeps their attention directed forward. Students with attention disorders, for instance, should not be seated near windows or computers as active screensavers or moving objects can draw their focus away from the lesson, leading to disruptions down the road when students don't understand the material.

4. Practice consistency: Diversity or variety in lesson plan keeps could student interested and engaged. However, all activities should fall into a structured lesson plan or schedule. Behaviour management studies show that all students benefit from having a dependable routine. Having constant variation or unpredictability can be destabilizing. This is even more evident in students with learning disabilities.
5. Encourage social interactions: Peer tutoring is an effective classroom management practice. Pair students with learning disorders with cooperative peers to help them stay focused. This may produce mutual benefits. Social interactions also extend to behaviour modelling. Do not exhibit always right attitude as students respect teachers more when they admit their wrongs or overreactions.
6. Understand the importance of visual aids and stimuli: Verbal repetition isn't always the best way to get an idea across. Visual learners will benefit more from having information posted around the room. However, be conscious of students with visual impairment when displaying graphics/pictures. Verbalise the information for their understanding. Classroom rules should be put in conspicuous places as this will keep visual learners in constant reminding and help teachers easily point at them when violated.
7. Be flexible and stay abreast of the latest techniques: No two students are exactly alike, and no two days will be the same either. Adaptability is a key component of any successful behaviour management strategy. Stay organized and plan for potential disruptions. Keeping up to date with emerging classroom management researches, practices and tactics is essential.

Irrespective of the inclusive classroom management practices being used, Bronke (2021) advanced three critical principles that should be considered in classroom management, which he termed 3 Cs of classroom management as follows.

1. Connection: On the surface, this might seem simple. When teachers are connected with their students, two things are probable: Students will want to behave appropriately, and even when they behave poorly, it is easier to correct them. As simple as this may sound, it is very useful as there is much more to using connection as a classroom management technique than just building relationships with students. Connection is most productive when deliberate efforts are made in collaborating with all stakeholders such as parents, head-teachers, athletic coaches, administrators, co-curricular sponsors/teachers, counsellors, etc. When teachers use their connections to all of these different stakeholders who have supports relationships with the students, they are better able to manage behavioural issues. In addition, students see and better appreciate just how many adults in their lives care about helping them to succeed. This level of connection helps everyone to be in the know and to collaborate together for the benefit of the students.
2. Consistency: This is perhaps the most obvious, but yet the most difficult of the three Cs. There may be no gain saying that teachers need to be consistent when managing

behaviour but, being consistent is beyond the superficial. In classroom management, consistency is often thought of in terms of being consistent when handing out consequences. Whereas that is very important, consistency cannot end there as it is imperative for consistency to apply equally in other ways such as being consistent with the tone of the voice to each student, time spent building connections with each student, and more. Teachers are humans and humans naturally connect with certain people more or less than others, and this is what makes consistency hard. Teachers tend towards students who share common interests, and other students could easily notice it than the teachers realize. Consistency in classroom management therefore should go farther than just being consistent with consequences. Teachers must work hard to ensure that all aspects of their behaviours are consistent as doing so helps the students see that teachers care equally about all of them, and makes managing behaviour much easier.

3. **Compassion:** Compassion is the most important of the 3 Cs. Students are learners with varying characteristics. Age and disability, among other characteristics of students, come with associated behavioural challenges. Teachers must understand that they are teachers of students and not necessarily content. When students are at their worst behaviours teachers must be at their best, teaching and coaching even the more. Managing behaviour with compassion does not mean excusing wrongdoing. It simply mean acknowledging the mistakes and using them as avenues for teaching humanity. It also means modelling humanity as instrument for managing mistakes, so students may not develop poor self-worth/esteem.

Classroom management can be very challenging, and this may be because so many elements of classroom management are not teachable. However, when teachers work to create a classroom that is connected, consistent, and filled with compassion, the humanity in the profession is brought out and everyone is a winner (Bronke, 2021).

Methods

The study adopted a descriptive overt direct observational research design in line with Holmes (2013). Inclusive classroom management practices of four inclusive mainstream classrooms in Port Harcourt were directly observed with the awareness of the subjects.

Procedure

The researcher, who was on a six week internship placement as part of the requirements of his postgraduate study in Special Needs Education at Ignatius Ajuru University of Education in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, presented himself at the inclusive mainstream schools with letter of introduction that was issued him by his department. Meetings of the head-teachers, classroom teachers of the mainstreamed classrooms, counsellors, administrators and social masters were held in each school to brief attendees of the purpose of the study, and their consents were sought. In line with best practices in educational research, they were assured of the confidentiality of their bio-data as well as data/information they availed in addition to the identities of their

schools. Attendees were given the right to refuse participation. Incidentally, they all agreed to partake in the study, hence voluntarily consenting.

Thereafter, for five weeks, the researcher, in company of two research assistants, reported early enough and left late at the schools each visit day (one day per week per school) to observe behaviours of both students and head-teachers, inclusive classroom teachers, counsellors, administrators, and social masters before, during and after classroom instructions for each visit days.

Results and Discussions

Table 1: Schedule of Observations (visits)

Classroom ID	1	2	3	4
Days of Week	Mondays	Tuesdays	Wednesdays	Fridays
Start Dates	June 27, 2022	June 28, 2022	June 29, 2022	July1, 2022
Total Number of Visits	5	5	5	5

Source: Field Schedule

Table 2: Distribution of teachers and students

Classroom ID	Gender of Teacher	Number of Students
1	Male	5
2	Male	3
3	Female	5
4	Male	8
Total	4	21

Source: Field Data

In relations to the inclusive classroom management practices earlier identified in the literature and discussed in the study, and against the 3Cs of Bronke (2021), the following observations were made.

1. Classroom rules: Save for one inclusive classroom where the teacher momentarily reminded the students of the rules, none of the four classrooms had classroom instructions visibly displayed. This runs against Zuckerman (2007) that advocated clear classroom rules as effective classroom management practice.
2. Classroom environment/arrangement: Across all four inclusive classrooms, it was observed that teachers consciously arrange the classrooms, an effective practice as advocated by Levings (2021, Polirstok (2015) and Zuckerman (2007). This was observed to be done either first thing on each day prior to students arrival in class or at close of each day after the last student vacates the classroom. In one of the schools, the arrangement of the classroom was consistently done by an administrator as part of her routines. In one out of the four inclusive classrooms, the teacher (female) painstakingly

re-arrange the classroom environment to reflect each intended lesson instructions, often moments before introducing the lessons. All classrooms had students with visual impairment on the front central roll, and in line with Levings (2021), all classrooms had seats arranged in rows as against groups/circles.

3. Create inclusive environment: Whereas all teachers were observed at some time to be seen welcoming students as they entered the classrooms each morning, in sync with Levings (2021), only one teacher (female) was consistent with this practice each day as advocated by Bronke (2021) and went further to personally asked each student if they slept well the previous night.
4. Selective ignoring: This practice was observed once in one of the classroom (managed by the female teacher). A student with autism spectrum disorder violated her instruction to sit down. He would rather stand, obstructing the view of another student with hearing loss. After asking the student with ASD to sit down twice and following his refusal, the teacher ignored him, went to the other student with hearing loss and pleaded with him to take a change of sit momentarily which he did and the class went on.
5. Limiting the use of punishment: Punishment was observed to have been used by all teachers at some point in the course of the study. However, it was not applied in all instances of rule braking. This practice conformed with the advocacy of Levings (2021), Polirstok (2015) and Zuckerman (2007).
6. Positive reinforcement: It was observed that all teachers used pleasant comments and gifts such as sweets and balloons as rewards for proper behaviours on the parts of students, conforming with literature.
7. Connection: It cannot be categorically said that teachers were all connected to their students. It is more difficult to opine that other stakeholders (head-teachers, counsellors, administrators, and social masters) fully connect with the students.
8. Consistency: The female teacher could be adjudged the most consistent of the four teachers in all the observed classroom management practices. The researcher cannot however, put a gold stamp on her as it was observed in all instances that she was attracted to a female student with learning disorder, accompanying and chatting with the student from the classroom to the social area for lunch. The researcher are of the view that in line with Bronke (2021), the teacher should have alternated this gravitation to other students at other times/days.
9. Compassion: It may be a reasonable verdict that all teachers were compassionate as they were all observed to reach out to the humanities in their students with disabilities at some point in time during the period of the study.

CONCLUSION

Classroom management practices in special needs education in inclusive settings in Nigeria are not different from what obtains elsewhere. There is, however, no one strict sets of inclusive

classroom management practices that is acclaimed superior over others. The goal of every tactics or strategy being employed to manage the inclusive classroom is aimed at availing the students with disabilities the best possible opportunity to maximally develop their abilities. Furthermore, it is suggested for teachers to be dynamic in their approach and always be abreast with latest developments in technologies as it relates to imparting knowledge to the students with disabilities. Finally, approaching classroom management through the lens of connection, consistency, and compassion will aid in combating the chaos in most typical inclusive classrooms as the 3 Cs put recognition and respect for humanity at the centre of effective classroom management practices in special education in inclusive setting not only in Nigeria, but all over the globe.

RECOMMENDATIONS

After a reconciliation of the inclusive classroom management practices as evident in the literature and those observed in the Nigerian context, the researcher makes the following recommendations.

1. The scope of the present study should be broaden in terms of number of inclusive mainstream schools, time/duration of study, and methodology among other parameters.
2. Teachers should be more exposed to capacity building training/workshops on effective inclusive classroom management practices for inclusive classrooms.
3. Further study should be commissioned to determine whether female teachers are more connecting, consistent and compassionate with their differently able students than their male counterparts.
4. Operators of inclusive mainstream schools should try and introduce co-teaching in inclusive settings in Nigeria.

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