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Transformational Leadership and Improving the Quality and Accessibility of Special Needs Education in Nigeria

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Abstract: Special needs education is an important component of the Nigerian education system because it seeks to provide appropriate educational opportunities for learners whose physical, sensory, intellectual, behavioural, communication or learning needs require additional support. Although Nigeria has developed policies and programmes aimed at improving access and participation, many learners with special educational needs continue to encounter barriers relating to inadequate funding, shortage of trained personnel, inaccessible infrastructure, insufficient instructional materials, limited assistive technologies, negative social attitudes and weak implementation of policies. This paper examines transformational leadership as a strategy for improving the quality and accessibility of special needs education in Nigeria. The paper argues that transformational leaders can influence educational institutions by developing a shared vision, motivating teachers, mobilising resources, promoting innovation and creating institutional cultures that value equity and inclusion. Eight major strategies are discussed: developing an inclusive vision and mobilising resources; building teachers' capacity and specialist support services; removing physical, pedagogical and attitudinal barriers; strengthening community engagement, early identification and enrolment monitoring; strengthening implementation of special needs and inclusive education policies; promoting assistive and digital technologies; establishing learner-centred individualised support and flexible assessment; and ensuring sustainable financing, accountability and incentives. The paper concludes that transformational leadership can contribute significantly to increasing enrolment, participation, retention and learning outcomes among learners with special educational needs when leadership is supported by adequate funding, professional capacity, accessible infrastructure, technology and effective policy implementation. It recommends that Nigerian education authorities strengthen transformational leadership capacity among school administrators and institutionalise measurable inclusion targets across education systems.

Keywords: transformational leadership, special needs education, inclusive education, educational accessibility.

1. Introduction

Education is a fundamental instrument for individual development, social integration and national transformation. An effective education system is expected to provide meaningful learning opportunities for all categories of learners, including those who require additional educational support. Special needs education refers broadly to educational provision designed to respond to learners who require additional support or adapted pedagogical approaches because of disabilities, learning difficulties or other educational needs. UNESCO emphasises that inclusive and equitable education requires education systems to identify and remove barriers that restrict learners' participation and achievement [1]. In Nigeria, the development of special needs education has been influenced by the recognition that learners with disabilities and other special educational needs have the right to education and should not be excluded because of their individual characteristics. The country's educational policy framework provides for special educational services and recognises the need for appropriate facilities, trained personnel, instructional materials and other forms of support. More recently, Nigeria has increasingly shifted from approaches that emphasise segregation towards integration and inclusive education, in which learners with special educational needs are increasingly expected to participate in ordinary educational environments with appropriate support.

The evolution of special needs education in Nigeria has therefore involved several interconnected programmes and approaches. These include special schools and special education programmes, integrated education programmes, inclusive education programmes, teacher-training programmes, vocational and skills-development programmes, rehabilitation and support services, guidance and counselling services, and the provision of assistive devices and specialised instructional materials. The current policy direction places increasing emphasis on inclusion and the removal of barriers that prevent learners from accessing and participating in education [2], [3].

One of the earliest organised approaches to special needs education in Nigeria was the establishment of special schools and specialised educational institutions for particular categories of learners. These schools provided educational services to learners who were blind, deaf, physically impaired or had other significant disabilities. Special schools remain relevant where learners require intensive or highly specialised educational support that may not be readily available in ordinary schools. However, reliance exclusively on segregated special schools can limit opportunities for social interaction and equal participation. Consequently, international developments in disability rights and inclusive education have encouraged Nigeria to progressively strengthen integrated and inclusive approaches. The Nigerian National Policy on Inclusive Education provides a framework for addressing barriers and ensuring access to quality education for learners with diverse needs [4].

Integrated education represents an important stage in the development of special needs education. Under an integrated approach, learners with special educational needs may attend ordinary schools while receiving varying degrees of additional support. The approach seeks to bring learners with disabilities into the mainstream educational system rather than educating them exclusively in separate institutions. However, integration can be ineffective if learners are physically placed in ordinary schools without corresponding changes to teaching methods, curriculum, infrastructure, assessment and support services. UNESCO therefore distinguishes genuine inclusion from mere placement by emphasising the removal of barriers to participation and learning.

Inclusive education represents a broader contemporary approach to special needs education in Nigeria. It seeks to ensure that educational institutions accommodate learner diversity and provide opportunities for all learners to participate and achieve. Nigeria's National Policy on Inclusive Education identifies the removal of barriers and provision of quality education for diverse learners within the same learning environment as central to inclusive education [5]. The policy provides for measures including specialised facilities, adapted instructional materials, assistive technologies, teacher professional development, guidance and counselling services and support for learners with severe and multiple disabilities. It also emphasises the importance of adapting teaching approaches to meet diverse learning needs. The transition toward inclusive education is significant because it changes the responsibility from asking learners to adapt to rigid educational structures to requiring education systems to adapt to learner diversity. UNICEF similarly identifies teacher preparation, accessible buildings, appropriate learning materials, supportive policies, data and the reduction of stigma as important components of inclusive education [6].

Another important component of special needs education in Nigeria is the development of teachers' knowledge and competencies. Effective special needs education requires teachers who understand disability, differentiated instruction, inclusive classroom management, adapted assessment, assistive technologies and appropriate communication methods. Nigeria's inclusive education policy emphasises continuous professional development and the acquisition of competencies necessary to support learners with diverse needs [7]. Transformational leaders have an important role in ensuring that teachers participate in relevant professional development rather than treating training as an occasional activity. Special needs education programmes also include the provision of assistive devices and adapted learning materials. These may include Braille materials, large-print resources, magnification devices, hearing-support technologies, communication aids and accessible digital resources. The Nigerian National

Policy on Inclusive Education specifically recognises the importance of Braille, hearing aids, magnifiers, large-print materials and assistive technology in supporting learners with special educational needs [8].

The National Policy on Inclusive Education recognises the importance of functional guidance and counselling services within educational institutions [9]. Transformational leaders should therefore ensure that counsellors and other support personnel are integrated into institutional support systems. Parents should also be involved in educational planning and decision-making concerning learners' needs.

The effectiveness of these programmes depends substantially on educational leadership. Transformational leadership is particularly relevant because special needs education requires changes in institutional culture, resource allocation, teaching practices, professional capacity and stakeholder attitudes. Transformational leaders develop a shared vision, inspire staff, encourage innovation, support professional development and mobilise stakeholders toward institutional improvement. UNESCO's 2024 Global Education Monitoring Report identifies leadership as a critical factor in educational quality and highlights leadership practices such as setting expectations, focusing on learning, fostering collaboration and developing people [10]. In special needs education, these leadership functions can be translated into practical actions. Leaders can establish inclusive school visions, mobilise resources for accessible infrastructure, train teachers, promote assistive technology, challenge stigma, strengthen parent-community partnerships and monitor enrolment and learning outcomes. Consequently, improving special needs education in Nigeria requires more than the creation of policies and programmes. It requires transformational leadership capable of converting policy commitments into institutional practices. Where leadership is weak, programmes may remain largely administrative or symbolic. Where leadership is transformational, policies can be translated into measurable improvements in access, quality, participation and learner achievement.

2. Methodology

Conceptual Terms

Concept of Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership is a leadership approach in which a leader influences, inspires and motivates followers to move beyond routine expectations and work collectively toward the achievement of important organisational goals. The approach emphasises vision, motivation, innovation, individual development, collaboration and organisational change. Unlike leadership that concentrates mainly on supervision, rules and compliance, transformational leadership seeks to change people's attitudes, commitment, capabilities and aspirations so that they can contribute more effectively to organisational improvement. The concept is strongly associated with Burns, who distinguished transformational leadership from transactional leadership. Burns explained transformational leadership as a process through which leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality. Bass subsequently developed the concept further by explaining how transformational leaders influence followers to transcend their immediate self-interests for the achievement of collective organisational objectives. Bass and Riggio identified four major dimensions of transformational leadership: idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration.

Major Characteristics of Transformational Leadership

Development of a shared vision:

Transformational leaders establish and communicate a clear vision of what an organisation should become. In educational institutions, such leaders can develop a shared vision of quality, equity, inclusion and improved learning outcomes. UNESCO's 2024 Global Education Monitoring Report notes that setting expectations is closely associated with transformational leadership because it involves influencing, inspiring and motivating members of the school community toward improvement.

Inspirational motivation:

Transformational leaders motivate staff and other stakeholders to commit

themselves to institutional goals. They communicate high expectations and encourage teachers to see their work as contributing to a larger educational mission rather than merely completing routine duties.

Intellectual stimulation:

Transformational leadership encourages innovation, creativity and critical thinking. Leaders challenge teachers and administrators to question ineffective practices and develop new approaches to teaching, administration, assessment and student support. This is particularly important where educational institutions must respond to technological change and diverse learner needs.

Individualised consideration:

Transformational leaders recognise that followers have different abilities, experiences and professional-development needs. They therefore provide mentoring, professional development, encouragement and opportunities for individual growth. In schools, this may involve identifying teachers' capacity-building needs and supporting them to acquire new competencies.

Empowerment and participation:

Transformational leadership encourages teachers and other stakeholders to participate in decision-making. UNESCO describes effective school leadership as involving the ability to influence, mobilise and coordinate people around shared educational objectives rather than relying solely on positional authority (UNESCO, n.d.).

Commitment to organisational change:

Transformational leaders are change-oriented. They identify weaknesses in existing systems and mobilise people and resources to improve them. In education, transformational leadership can therefore support reforms involving curriculum, instructional practices, digital learning, quality assurance, teacher development and inclusive education.

Transformational Leadership in Education

Transformational leadership is particularly relevant to educational institutions because schools and other educational organisations require continuous improvement. The leader is expected not merely to administer existing programmes but also to develop people, improve teaching and learning, promote collaboration and establish conditions that support educational achievement. UNESCO links transformational leadership with setting expectations and motivating members of the school community to improve institutional performance. In the context of special needs education, transformational leadership can help educational managers move institutions away from exclusion, discrimination and rigid educational practices toward supportive, accessible and learner-centred environments. A transformational school leader can motivate teachers to embrace differentiated instruction, encourage the use of assistive technologies, promote collaboration with parents and specialists, and mobilise resources for learners with disabilities and other special educational needs.

Concept of Special Needs Education

Special needs education refers to educational provision designed for learners who require additional educational support, specialised resources, adapted teaching methods or modified learning arrangements because of particular physical, sensory, intellectual, behavioural, emotional, social or learning-related needs. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) defines special needs education as education designed to facilitate learning for individuals who require additional support and adaptive pedagogical methods to participate and achieve learning objectives. Such provision may involve specially trained personnel, equipment, specialised spaces and, where necessary, modified educational content or learning objectives (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, n.d.). UNESCO similarly explains that special needs education involves educational approaches designed to support learners requiring additional assistance or adapted teaching methods because of physical, intellectual, emotional, behavioural or social challenges (UNESCO, n.d.). In Nigeria, the National Policy on Special Needs Education provides an important policy framework for responding to learners with special educational needs. The policy emphasises principles such as the least restrictive environment, zero rejection, total inclusion and diversification of educational services. The Nigerian policy framework also recognises the need to provide educational

opportunities for persons with special needs and to remove barriers that prevent them from participating fully in education. The earlier National Policy on Education similarly described special education as a customised educational programme designed to meet the unique needs of persons whose needs cannot adequately be addressed through general educational programmes.

Categories of Learners Covered by Special Needs Education

- 1) Special needs education may serve learners with different educational requirements, including:
- 2) Learners with visual impairment, including learners who are blind or partially sighted.
- 3) Learners with hearing impairment, including deaf and hard-of-hearing learners.
- 4) Learners with physical and health impairments.
- 5) Learners with intellectual disabilities.
- 6) Learners with emotional and behavioural difficulties.
- 7) Learners with speech and language difficulties.
- 8) Learners with specific learning difficulties.
- 9) Learners with multiple disabilities.
- 10) Gifted and talented learners, where educational provision requires differentiated approaches.
- 11) Learners whose social, environmental or other circumstances create significant barriers to learning. UNESCO's broader understanding of special educational needs recognises that additional educational support may be required for reasons extending beyond disability, including barriers that affect learners' ability to make optimal progress.

Major Features of Special Needs Education

Individualised educational support:

Special needs education recognises that learners differ in their abilities, strengths and educational requirements. Consequently, educational programmes may need to be adapted to individual learning needs.

Adapted teaching methods:

Teachers may use differentiated instruction, multisensory approaches, sign language, Braille, large-print materials, audio resources and other pedagogical adaptations according to learners' needs.

Specialised personnel:

Effective special needs education requires teachers and other professionals with appropriate knowledge and skills. These may include special education teachers, counsellors, psychologists, speech and language specialists and other support personnel.

Assistive technology and specialised resources:

Learners may require assistive devices and technologies to participate effectively in education. Such resources can include Braille materials, hearing devices, magnification equipment, communication technologies and accessible digital learning resources.

Accessible learning environments:

Special needs education requires educational facilities that learners with different physical and sensory abilities can access and use effectively. This includes accessible classrooms, toilets, pathways, laboratories, libraries and other educational facilities.

Inclusive participation:

Modern special needs education increasingly emphasises participation within ordinary educational environments where appropriate. UNESCO's inclusion framework stresses the removal of barriers to learners' presence, participation and achievement rather than merely placing learners in mainstream settings.

Collaboration among stakeholders:

Effective special needs education requires collaboration among teachers, school leaders, parents, learners, government agencies, specialists and communities. Such collaboration helps schools identify learners' needs, provide appropriate support and monitor progress.

3.Result and Discussion

Strengthen Implementation of Inclusive and Special Needs Education Policies

Transformational leaders should ensure that national policies on special needs and inclusive education are translated into concrete institutional practices. Nigeria has developed policy frameworks that promote access, participation and quality education for learners with diverse needs, but the existence of policy alone does not guarantee effective implementation. The National Policy on Inclusive Education in Nigeria emphasises the removal of barriers to education, provision of specialised facilities, teacher development, assistive technology, support services and appropriate instructional materials [11]. Transformational leaders should therefore develop institutional implementation plans based on national policy requirements. Such plans should specify responsibilities, timelines, resources, measurable targets and monitoring mechanisms. School leaders should also regularly assess the extent to which their institutions comply with accessibility, staffing, curriculum, instructional-material and learner-support requirements. UNESCO emphasises that inclusion requires systemic transformation rather than isolated interventions. This means that educational leaders must examine policies, curricula, teaching practices, assessment systems, infrastructure and institutional cultures together. Transformational leaders can consequently use policy implementation as an opportunity to reform institutional practices and increase the participation of learners with special educational needs.

Promote the Use of Assistive Technology and Digital Inclusive Education

Transformational leaders should promote the effective use of assistive technology and accessible digital learning resources to improve the educational participation of learners with special needs. Technology can help overcome communication, sensory, physical and learning barriers when it is appropriately selected and supported. Examples include screen readers for learners with visual impairment, Braille displays, magnification software, hearing-support technologies, speech-to-text applications, text-to-speech tools, alternative and augmentative communication devices, captioned instructional videos and accessible digital learning platforms. Nigeria's National Policy on Inclusive Education recognises assistive technology as an important component of educational provision for learners with special needs [12]. Transformational leaders should therefore include assistive technology in institutional development plans and budgets. They should also train teachers to use available technologies rather than simply purchasing equipment without developing the capacity to use it. UNICEF identifies assistive technology and accessible learning materials as important components of disability-inclusive education [13]. Digital inclusion can also improve access for learners who experience geographical, mobility or communication barriers. Transformational leaders should therefore encourage the development of accessible digital resources and ensure that online educational platforms comply with accessibility principles. This can expand educational opportunities for learners who may otherwise experience difficulty accessing conventional learning environments [14].

Establish Learner-Centred Individualised Support and Flexible Assessment Systems

Transformational leaders should promote learner-centred educational management in which individual differences are recognised and appropriate support is provided. Learners with special educational needs should not be expected to succeed through exactly the same instructional methods, materials and assessment arrangements. School leaders should encourage teachers to identify individual learning needs and develop appropriate support plans. Depending on the learner's needs, support may involve differentiated instruction, additional learning time, modified teaching strategies, alternative communication methods, adapted instructional materials or appropriate assessment accommodations. The National Policy on Inclusive Education provides for adaptation of teaching methods and materials to respond to the diverse needs of learners. UNESCO similarly argues that inclusion and equity require education systems to identify and remove barriers to learning and participation rather than expecting learners to adapt to inflexible systems. Transformational leaders can strengthen this strategy by establishing multidisciplinary teams involving teachers, special education personnel, counsellors, parents and other relevant professionals. These teams can monitor learners'

progress and recommend appropriate interventions. Such an approach can improve learning outcomes, retention and completion because learners receive support that reflects their actual educational needs [15].

Establish Sustainable Financing, Accountability and Incentive Mechanisms

Transformational leaders should advocate for sustainable and transparent financing of special needs education. Quality and accessibility cannot be achieved where schools lack adequate funding for specialised teachers, assistive devices, accessible infrastructure, learning materials, transportation and support services. The National Policy on Inclusive Education identifies the need for adequate facilities, instructional resources, specialised personnel and assistive technologies. UNICEF's analysis of education for children with disabilities similarly emphasises that inclusive education requires investment in accessible infrastructure, teacher preparation, learning materials and support systems [16], [17]. Transformational leaders should therefore establish dedicated budget lines for special needs education and ensure that allocated funds are used transparently. They should also explore partnerships with government agencies, development partners, NGOs, philanthropists, disability organisations and the private sector to supplement public funding. Leaders should introduce accountability and incentive mechanisms. Schools and education authorities can establish measurable inclusion indicators, conduct periodic accessibility audits, publish progress reports and recognise teachers or institutions that demonstrate outstanding commitment to inclusive education. Such incentives can motivate personnel to embrace inclusive practices. Sustainable financing should also extend to families. Where possible, leaders should advocate for scholarships, transportation assistance, learning-material support and other interventions that reduce the financial burden on families of learners with disabilities. Reducing these economic barriers can improve both enrolment and retention [18], [19].

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Special needs education is an essential component of an equitable Nigerian education system. Nigeria has developed different approaches and programmes, including special schools, integrated education, inclusive education, teacher capacity development, assistive technology provision, vocational and rehabilitation programmes, and guidance and counselling services. These programmes demonstrate a progressive movement towards increasing educational opportunities for learners with diverse needs. However, the existence of programmes and policies does not automatically guarantee accessibility or quality. Persistent barriers involving inadequate funding, insufficient specialist personnel, inaccessible infrastructure, inadequate instructional materials, limited assistive technology, negative attitudes and weak policy implementation can continue to restrict enrolment and participation. UNICEF notes that children with disabilities frequently encounter barriers involving stigma, inaccessible environments and inadequate educational support. Transformational leadership provides an important mechanism for addressing these challenges. Transformational leaders can create inclusive institutional cultures, inspire teachers, mobilise resources, promote innovation, strengthen stakeholder collaboration and hold institutions accountable for inclusion outcomes. The effectiveness of special needs education in Nigeria will therefore depend not only on what policies say but also on how educational leaders translate those policies into accessible, adequately resourced and learner-centred educational practices. Based on the findings, the paper recommends the following: Federal and state education authorities should provide regular leadership-development programmes for principals, head teachers, education administrators and other managers on transformational leadership, inclusive education and disability management. Dedicated and sustainable funding should be provided for accessible infrastructure, specialised personnel, assistive technologies, instructional materials and support services. Continuous professional development should equip teachers with competencies in differentiated instruction, inclusive classroom management, special needs assessment, sign language, Braille, assistive technology and learner-centred pedagogy. Education authorities should recruit and deploy special education teachers, counsellors, psychologists, therapists, sign-language interpreters and other relevant professionals according to institutional needs. Existing and new educational facilities should comply with accessibility standards.

including accessible classrooms, toilets, pathways, libraries, laboratories and recreational facilities. Schools should be equipped with appropriate assistive devices and accessible digital learning resources, while teachers should be trained in their effective application. Schools should conduct community sensitisation and enrolment campaigns to reduce stigma and encourage parents and communities to support the education of children with special educational needs. Education authorities should maintain reliable data on enrolment, attendance, retention, completion, disability categories, support services and learning outcomes to facilitate evidence-based planning. Educational institutions should adapt curriculum delivery, instructional methods and assessment arrangements to accommodate legitimate differences in learners' educational needs. Education authorities should develop measurable indicators for inclusive education and regularly assess schools based on enrolment, accessibility, teacher capacity, resource availability, participation, retention and learning outcomes.

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