UNIJERPS
Unizik Journal of Educational Research and Policy Studies VOL.18 (1); ***July-December, 2024*** https://unijerps.org
2023 Impact Factor: **6.834;** 2022 ***Impact Factor***: 5.156; ***2021 Impact Factor: 5.641;***
2020 Impact Factor: 5.355. *Indexing and Impact Factor URL: http://sjifactor.com/passport.php?id=21363*

ASSESSMENT OF INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT FOR PUPIL LIVING WITH AUTISM FOR ENHANCED EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT IN PUBLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN AWKA NORTH LGA OF ANAMBRA STATE, NIGERIA.

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ABSTRACT

The study assessed inclusive classroom environment for pupils living with autism for enhanced educational achievement in public primary schools in Awka North Local Government Area of Anambra. The study is aimed at ascertaining the adoption of inclusive classroom environment by teachers for pupil living with autism for enhanced educational achievement in public primary schools in Awka North LGA of Anambra State. Two research questions were raised to guide the study. Descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. The population of comprised all the teachers in 38 public primary schools in Awka North LGA numbering 1,268. Simple random sampling technique was employed to draw the sample size of 634 teachers which is 50% of the entire population. The instrument for data collection was designed by the researchers and named "Assessment of Inclusive Classroom Environment for Pupil Living with Autism Questionnaire" (AICEPLAQ). Validity of the instrument was guaranteed. The reliability of the instrument was ascertained using test re-test method and the results subjected to Pearson Moment Correlation method which gave rise to index of 0.79 which was considered adequate for the study of this nature. Arithmetic mean and frequency counts were used to answer the research questions. The findings of the among others include that teachers arrange seats in rows as well as ensures adequate ventilation as inclusive classroom management strategies for children living with autism for enhanced educational achievement in public primary schools in Awka North LGA of Anambra State. It is therefore recommended that varieties of seats and colorful images and pictures should also be provided for them to accommodate their restiveness among others.

Keywords: Inclusive classroom, Environment, Autism, Educational Achievement and Public Primary Schools.

Introduction

The promulgation of the basic education in Nigerian educational system by Obasanjo regime of 1999 ushered in the Universal Basic Education (UBE). UBE is a mandatory education for all children with the age bracket of 6-15 years sequel to this was made free. It is in line with this assertion that the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN, 2013) in her national policy on education stressed that this type of education is mandatory irrespective of tribe, gender and family socio-economic status. The declaration stressed that its universality

means that it is meant for every Nigeria child within that cohort as a result promises school feeding and provision of other educational services to make educational delivery process accessible to all pupils. This scenario captured the children with special needs such as children living with autism.

Autism spectrum disorder is a neurological and developmental disorder that affects how people interact with others, communicate, learn and behave. It is not an intellectual disorder. Sequel to this positioned the children as trainable in school activities and programmes. Autism is a serious developmental disorder that inhibits the ability to communicate and interact. It is also referred to as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Centers for Disease Control and prevention (2022) noted that people living with ASD could behave, communicate, interact and learn in special ways with adequate support in enabling environment. Cleveland Clinic (2024) posited that autism spectrum disorder has no cure but stressed that the symptoms may decrease overtime under proper management. The author went ahead to outline some of the signs of autism in human person to include but not limited to;

1. Difficulty in understanding the feelings of others or line of thought.
2. Displays extreme anxiety in social situation.
3. Trouble making friends
4. Prefers to stay alone
5. Speaks rudely to people, use words carelessly
6. Finds it difficult to express himself
7. Prefers persistent routine
8. Dislikes change in daily routine
9. Avoids eye contact
10. Comes too close to people when in contact with them.
11. Displays repetitive behaviours

WHO (2024) saw the need for rehabilitation of children living with autism so partners with member countries to strengthen abilities to promote the optima health and well-being of all people with autism thus advocates for;

1. Increasing the commitment of governments to taking action to improve the quality of life of people with autism.
2. Providing guidance on policies and action plans that address autism within the broader framework of health, mental and brain health and disabilities;
3. Contributing to strengthening the ability of the health workforce to provide appropriate and effective care and promote optimal standards of health and well-being for people with autism and
4. Promoting inclusive and enabling environments for people with autism and other developmental disabilities and providing support to their caregivers,

This crop of children was hitherto kept in a secluded environment either for teaching/learning purposes or for care-giving. In recent times with the introduction of inclusive education or mainstreaming, children with special needs are accommodated in the regular schools with normal children. In consonance with the above opinion, Ibiam (2020) reiterated that inclusive education is a kind of strategy put in place to accommodate all children as fully

fledged human beings in the system in such a way that all the children would be given opportunity to participate equally in classroom encounter, share life experiences and strive to be successful at the long run.

Similarly, Brown (2023) defined inclusive classroom for children with autism as that type of classroom that provides maximum support a while providing minimal disruption. Classroom management strategy for children with autism is of essence it provides them with adequate support, care and encouragement to grapple with the learning challenges. This implies that teachers need to go extra miles to ensure that their classroom management covers the physical, psychological and social environment to accommodate these children with special needs. This is the reason McClafferty (2016) and Brown (2023) emphasized that managing inclusive classroom is easier when personalized teaching strategies are earmarked for the special need children. The scholars further recommended the following inclusive classroom strategies for children with autism;

1. Using computer based programme to hold the interest of the children with autism; Brain parade programme is a veritable tool in this regard when teaching children with autism. This programme contains 44,000 images and 2,200 exercises which was created by an expert in behavior analyst. However, the teacher could create his/her images and exercises according to the spur of the moment.
2. Arrange their desks and seats in rows; this is because these children are easily distracted. When they are in rows, they are not too close to the teacher or class mates. Avoid placing near the window or doors to avoid creating distractive opportunities for them. For instance, regular school desks, a stand-up desk, a bean-bag chair and other types of seating to make the classroom enticing for them to learn their lessons.
3. Use intervention packages; this is a situation whereby the teacher adopts intervention package to teach two students with autism to read what is called social stories. Study has shown that there is increased participation among the duo which in turn reflects in their social behaviours positively over time.
4. Place classroom rules in a strategic position in the classroom and review them regularly; To ensure all children master and internalize the rules, make sure they read the rules in turn. Ensure that the implications to non-compliance be unveiled to them. Explain the rules in simple and clear terms to enable them understand.
5. Keep the rules simple; establish verbal clues which should be used frequently so as to allow it sink into their heads. Make the instructions precise and comprehensible.
6. Employ teaching aids such as charts, graphs and pictures; they pick interest in what they see or touch. Remember that they get fascinated to colorful images and/or pictures thus make them participatory.
7. Peers are wonderful role model; the teacher should always pair them with the normal children when carrying

out project or assignment so as the normal ones influence them positively.

8. Build a predictable schedule; children with autism tend to predictable routine. Inform them before time if there is any change of activities, programmes or events. In case of having a visitor or substitute teacher or field trip. This is important because children with autism could easily get confused at any little alteration from the normal routine. Flexibility could also be of immense help.
9. Teach social skills such as falling in line, hand raising and spirit of sharing; children with autism engage in self-stimulating behavior like hand flapping, rocking or even slapping themselves in the face. This social skill when implanted in them could divert their energy to meaningful use of their hands.
10. Create break period; be aware that children get bored when seated in a particular place for a while. Allow them to do something different by either stand up and seat method, short interesting story telling, engage them in call and response song etc.
11. Identify the children's strengths; whatever the children show interest on, give them support and provide such as the teaching strategy. This could be different types of animals they watch and to include them in their computer based programmes. Identify their areas of interests so as to motivate them in the right direction.
12. Be conscious of what triggers their environment; in doing this try as much as possible to eliminate, loud noise, very bright light, hot or cold temperature. All of these could affect them negatively while in the classroom.

On their own part, obidike, Anyachebelu and Okika (2017) postulated that using 'teach' to create a classroom that is designed purposely for the child. According to the authors, teach is used to describe treatment/education of the autistic and related communication of the handicapped children. Teach strategy is not inclusive or mainstream friendly because it focuses on isolation of the individual for learning. It however supports communication copy skills as they learn at their own pace.

National University (2024) recommended four teaching strategies for students with autism spectrum disorder namely:

1. Limiting sensory overload; sensory overloading is capable of making the normal students bored in the lesson thus more cumbersome to children living with autism. In this regard too loud a noise could be very discomforting and needed to be totally avoided.
2. Using reward and incentives; just like normal children, reward and incentives should be applied to encourage positive behavior while withdrawn when the behavior is not palatable. Behavior analysis therapy which reward and incentive is all about helps to put a stop to self-harm or causing discomfort to their mates.

3. Providing appropriate feedback for students with ASD; it is good to be explicit when explaining things to them, ask simple questions and give clear directives. Avoid abstract terms and use of metaphor to avoid confusing them.
4. Focusing on autism reading comprehension strategies; to do this efficiently and effectively, The following tactics should be utilized;
   a) Start cultivating the habit of reading at an earliest age possible
   b) The choice of reading material should be intellectually provoking for the student for instance those that bear relevance to their subject of interest.
   c) Be in synergy with the child's home to encourage home reading activities.
   d) Figurative and metaphoric terms that are found in-between the comprehension exercise should be deliberated
   e) Introduce technological literacy; making them aware of the technological devices that enables them read from all devices.

Research Questions

1. What are the inclusive classroom management strategies for children living with autism for enhanced educational achievement in public primary schools in Awka North LGA of Anambra State?
2. What are the instructional procedures in inclusive classroom for children living with autism for enhanced educational achievement in public primary schools in Awka North LGA of Anambra State?

Research Method

Descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. The population of comprised all the teachers in 38 public primary schools in Awka North LGA numbering 1,268. Simple random sampling technique was employed to draw the sample size of 634 teachers which is 50% of the entire population. The instrument for data collection was designed by the researchers and named "Assessment of Inclusive Classroom Environment for Pupil Living with Autism Questionnaire" (AICEPLAQ). Validity of the instrument was guaranteed. The reliability of the instrument was ascertained using test re-test method and the results subjected to Pearson Moment Correlation method which gave rise to index of 0.79 which was considered adequate for the study of this nature. Arithmetic mean and frequency counts were used to answer the research questions. Four- point rating scale were used for the study as follows; Strongly Agree [SA=4], Agree [A=3], Disagree [D=2] & Strongly Disagree [SD=1]. The criterion mean is therefore, 4+3+2+1=10/4=2.5. Going further, any mean score that is 2.5 or above is considered as "Agree" while any mean score that is less than 2.5 is taken as "Disagree". Administration of the instrument was carried out by the researchers along with three trained research assistants. Fill-on-the-spot technique was used, however, out of 634 copies of questionnaire distributed, 358 copies were recovered and used for the study.

Presentation of Results

Research Question 1. What are the inclusive classroom management strategies for children living with autism for enhanced educational achievement in public primary schools in Awka North LGA of Anambra State?

Table 1: Teachers' Response On The Inclusive Classroom Management Strategies for Children Living with Autism for Enhanced Educational Achievement in Public Primary Schools in Awka North LGA of Anambra State.

S/N	Item statement; What is the level of your agreement on the following inclusive classroom management strategies in your classroom?	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Remark
1	Varieties of seats	28	32	186	112	1.93	Disagree
2	Allowing the children seat in rows	156	136	38	28	3.17	Agree
3	Preventing them from sitting close to the windows or doors to avoid distraction	163	149	22	24	3.25	Agree
4	Avoiding loud noise	132	98	54	74	2.80	Agree
5	Ensuring adequate ventilation	129	105	66	58	2.85	Agree
6	Maintaining clean classroom environment	137	142	58	21	3.10	Agree
7	Setting rules in clear terms	109	127	88	34	2.86	Agree
8	Encouraging them to recall the rules by giving clues for easy retrieval.	89	77	102	90	2.46	Disagree
9	Encouraging social relationship with their peers	111	87	99	61	2.69	Agree
10	Identifying their strength and supporting them accordingly.	76	115	109	58	2.58	Agree
	Grand mean					2.76	Agree

Table 1 shows the teachers' responses on the inclusive classroom management strategies for children living with autism for enhanced educational achievement in public primary schools in Awka North LGA of Anambra State. The participant agreed that some of the inclusive classroom management strategies for children living with autism for enhanced educational achievement are but not limited to; allowing the children seat in rows, preventing them from sitting close to the doors and windows, maintaining clean classroom environment, setting rules in clear terms, encouraging social interactions with peers looking at the items with serial numbers 2-7 & 9 and 10 which have the mean scores of 3.17, 3.25, 2.80, 2.85, 3.10 and 2.86. All of these mean scores were above the criterion mean of 2.5 thus agree that teachers adopt inclusive classroom management strategies for children living with autism for enhanced educational achievement in the area under study. On the other hand, some of the participants disagreed that; varieties of seats and encouraging them to recall the classroom rules by giving clues are inclusive classroom management strategies for children living with autism for enhanced educational achievement n public secondary schools in Awka North LGA of Anambra State. The grand mean stood at 2.76.

Research Question 2. What are the instructional procedures in inclusive classroom for children living with autism for enhanced educational achievement in public primary schools in Awka North LGA of Anambra State?

Table 2: Teachers' Responses on the Instructional Procedures in Inclusive Classroom for Children Living with Autism for Enhanced Educational Achievement in Public Primary Schools in Awka North LGA of Anambra State

S/N	Item statement; I adopt the following instructional procedures in inclusive classroom	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Remark
1	Preventing occurrence of excess sound and/or noise	158	102	43	55	3.01	Agree
2	Giving reward and incentive to support positive behavior	122	76	89	71	2.69	Agree
3	Withdrawal of reward and incentive to discourage unwanted behavior	99	89	89	81	2.57	Agree
4	Avoiding overloading of activities to avoid boredom.	103	89	93	73	2.62	Agree
5	Asking simple questions in class	123	145	39	5`	2.94	Agree
6	Explaining facts in clear concrete terms	105	129	60	64	2.76	Agree
7	Avoiding the use of abstract and metaphoric terms	69	78	125	86	2.36	Disagree
8	Reading exercise should be intellectually arousing	56	98	101	100	2.32	Disagree
9	Making use of colorful images or pictures	89	79	68	122	2.37	Disagree
10	Introducing technology literacy to enable them get familiar with it	87	90	98	83	2.50	Agree
	Grand mean					2.61	Agree

Table presents the responses of the participants on the instructional procedures in inclusive classroom for children living with autism for enhanced educational achievement in public primary schools in Awka North LGA of Anambra State with items with serial numbers 1, 2, 3.4.5.6 & 10 having the mean scores of 3.01, 2.69, 2.57, 2.62, 2.94, 2.76 & 2.50 which met the benchmark of 2.5 therefore agree that preventing excess sound, giving reward and incentives, withdrawing reward and incentives among others are instructional procedures involved in inclusive classroom for children living with autism for enhanced educational achievement. Few of the respondent however disagree that; avoiding the use of abstract and metaphoric terms, use of intellectually stimulating reading exercise and adoption of colorful images are among the instructional procedures employed by teachers in inclusive classroom for pupil living with autism for enhanced educational achievement in public primary schools in Awka North LGA of Anambra State with all their mean scores below the criterion mean of 2.50. The grand mean gave rise to 2.61.

Discussion of Findings

In view of the analysis of the study, the following findings were made; most of the respondents in table 1 agreed that preventing excess sound, giving reward and incentives, withdrawing reward and incentives, provision of adequate ventilation, arranging the seats in rows among others are instructional procedures involved in inclusive classroom for children living with autism for enhanced educational achievement. The respondent however disagree that; avoiding the use of abstract and metaphoric terms, use of intellectually stimulating reading exercise and adoption of colorful images are among the instructional procedures employed by teachers in inclusive classroom for pupil living with autism. With the grand mean of 2.61 which is an indication that majority of the participants agreed on the concept. Children living with autistic spectrum disorder are

among the special needs children and should be given special treatment in classroom management strategies such as providing variety of seats to allow them change seats as they desire. This is not different from what earlier researchers such as McClafferty (2016) and Brown (2023) who posited that; regular school desks, a stand-up desk, a bean-bag chair and other types of seating make the classroom enticing for the pupil living with autism to learn their lessons. This seating arrangement enhanced their educational achievement.

It is also the finding of the study that most of the respondents agreed that; preventing excess sound, giving reward and incentives, withdrawing reward and incentives among others are instructional procedures involved in inclusive classroom for children living with autism for enhanced educational achievement. Few of respondent however disagree that; avoiding the use of abstract and metaphoric terms, use of intellectually stimulating reading exercise and adoption of colorful images are among the instructional procedures employed by teachers in inclusive classroom for pupil living with autism for enhanced educational achievement in public primary schools in Awka North LGA of Anambra State with all their mean scores below the criterion mean of 2.50. Autism is not an intellectual disorder consequently the affected children could do well when the teachers apply adequate instructional procedures. It is in the light of this that obidike, Anyachebelu and Okika (2017) aptly recommended the use of "teach" which is an exclusive treatment for children living with autism for personalized instruction. The trio posited that this treatment allows them to learn at their own pace for enhanced educational objectives.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis and findings, it is concluded that teachers adopt inclusive classroom environment management strategies for pupil living with autism for enhanced educational achievement in public primary schools in Awka North LGA.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion, the following recommendations were made:

1. Relevant authorities should do well to provide varieties of seats in schools to enable teachers use it for enhanced educational attainment for children living with autism.
2. The appropriate educational agency should as a matter of necessity provide exceptional colorful images, charts and pictures so as to stimulate the interest of the children with autism while learning in the class.

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