

Collaborative strategies for promoting inclusive education in rural communities: A case study of Okigwe education zone

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Abstract

Rural Nigeria's inclusive education promotion in the Okigwe Education Zone, in Imo State, is a big concern. Although Nigeria's National Policy on Education requires inclusive education for the disabled, the situation in rural Okigwe contrasts this with neglect, infrastructure breakdown, a lack of specialists in special education, as well as cultural stigmatisation. However, this study contends that public allocation of funds alone as a solution would be inadequate. Rather, there is the urgent call, through this conference's subtheme, "Building Bridges," to explore the gap that must be bridged between administration of schools and other stakeholders. With the use of a descriptive survey, this researcher collected information from three strategic public secondary schools within the zone (Okigwe National Grammar School, Community Secondary School, Ihube, Secondary Technical School, Umulolo). By incorporating the Social Capital Theory, this study endeavours to explore the use of strong social frameworks that already exist within the social dynamics of the entire Okigwe zone with a view toward evaluating their transformation into educational infrastructure. Evidence shows that, although Okigwe's social group members participate more in projects that increase physical classroom infrastructure (Bonding Capital), they less often participate in other aspects, such as policy advocacy, aimed at assisting the disabled (Bridging Capital). Having presented the theories with empirical evidence, this study through this conference, recommend the use of the Community School Inclusion Model (CSIM) that provides recommendations on different paths that School Principals must pursue in establishing linkages with existing Town Unions, as well as transforming them from observers to active participants that would minimize the dropout rate of the most vulnerable populace, namely, the disabled.

Keywords: Rural education, Inclusive education, Education, Community partnerships, Social capital, Sustainable development.

1. Introduction

Education is widely agreed to be a basic human right, a tool for social mobility, as well as a force for economic development [1]. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number 4 is specifically concerned with "inclusive and equitable quality education" for all [2]. However, the application of this global ideal in the local context is faced with many challenges, especially for the Global South. Children with disabilities in Nigeria provide a case in point. Inclusive Education as a concept relates to the idea that all children, whatever their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other requirements, must be catered for together in the same classes [3]. This is a paradigm shift from segregation (in special schools) or integration (putting disabled children in schools, with no change in the system) towards inclusion whereby the system changes for the child. However, the application of this policy within rural settings is under extreme challenges; at the Okigwe Education Zone within Imo State, the magnitude of this problem is critical. Rural schools within this zone may be facing challenges such as infrastructure, the absence of assistive devices (for example, braille writing machines or hearing aids), as well as untrained tutors with expertise in educating children with disabilities. Typically, the approach of most

schools would be to wait for the coming in of the relevant government assistance. However, as shown in historical data, such aid is mostly delayed, inadequate, or channelled to urban areas [4].

Statement of the Problem

The focus problem in this research project is the paradox of community participation in the Okigwe zone. Just as in south eastern Nigeria, the people of Okigwe are well known for their self-help philosophy [5,6]. By Town Unions and through their age grades, they have been able to provide their communities with town hall buildings, civic centres as well as electricity schemes. They provide schools, constructing classroom blocks [7,8]. However, inclusive education, despite this strong level of investment, is still overlooked; the child in a wheel-chair in a rural Okigwe village may find that the very school erected by their Town Union lacks ramps. His blindness will mean he will not see any braille text. Indeed, the "Bonding" form of social capital, which refers to the social cohesion that is built within the village, is not aligned with the "Bridging" form, which is concerned with working together with the school as a solution to more complex educational issues. If this gap is not filled, the schools in Okigwe will remain places of exclusion, where children with disabilities will be forced to quit school or move to cities, thus continuing the cycle of poverty that already pervades the rural area.

Purpose of the Study

Generally, the main purpose of this proposal is geared towards developing collaborative efforts with regard to inclusive education within the Okigwe Education Zone. Specifically, this proposal shall:

- 1) Evaluate the existing level of inclusive infrastructure within some schools within Okigwe Zone.
- 2) Ascertain the extent of existing collaboration between Town Unions and School Management on Special Needs Education.
- 3) Apply Social Capital Theory to propose a new framework (The Community-School Inclusion Model) for sustainable partnership.

1.1 Review of Related Literature

Conceptual Framework: Inclusive Education in Rural Contexts

Rural communities usually misinterpret inclusive education as merely allowing disabled children to be in the classroom. However, this is not the case because inclusive education necessitates the reconstruction of school culture, policies, as well as practices [9]. Rural schools face additional disadvantages associated with the rural penalty. In Nigeria, the National Policy on Education and the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act (2018) offer the enabling regulatory environment for inclusive practices. These documents specify that public buildings must be accessible [10]. However, the policy remains unenforced in the rural area of Okigwe.

Role of Town Unions in Igbo Development

In order to comprehend the context of the Okigwe zone, one must comprehend the nature of the Town Union. In Igbo-speaking Nigeria's South East, the Town Union is commonly conceptualized as "the fourth tier of government" [11]. It is essentially a democratic body composed of all adult males, with a women's wing, that provides governance direction over the group's development agenda. Historically, since the Civil War in Nigeria (1967-1970), the government was not strong enough to rebuild the infrastructure. Igbo societies formed "Town Unions" so that they might be able to tax themselves as well as establish schools [12,11]. For instance, most community secondary schools in Okigwe were erected wholly through the efforts of the people, who then presented them to the government for administration [13]. Indeed, this study contends that this same zeal may be channelled towards sponsoring inclusive technologies as well as accessible infrastructure.

Theoretical Framework: Social Capital Theory

Specifically, this conceptual framework is based on Social Capital Theory, particularly on the differentiation proposed by Robert Putnam between Bonding Capital and Bridging Capital [14,15].

- Bonding Social Capital: This helps in relating individuals who resemble one another (for example, relatives or clan members within Okigwe). It is strong in the rural areas of Nigeria.
- Bridging Social Capital: Social Capital that links disparate social units (for example, school principal, market association or village head and a medical non-governmental organization).

Application to Study

The study argues that Okigwe has strong Bonding capital (the communities come together) but weak Bridging capital in education (the communities do not know how to work with schools professionally). The aim of the proposed solutions is to transform the existing Bonding capital into Bridging capital for the benefit of disadvantaged children.

2. Methodology

Research Design

The type of research design used in this study was that of a descriptive survey [16]. This design enables the researcher to gather data that describes the situation as it is with regard to participating communities, without manipulating any variables [17-20]. This design was suitable for determining opinion, attitude and facility availability [21-24].

Area of the Study

The research was conducted in the Okigwe Education Zone, which is one of the three education zones in Imo State, Nigeria. This education zone consists of six Local Government Areas [13]. Geographically, this zone is found in a transition area between the derived savannah zone and the rainforest zone. In terms of economic aspects, the villagers are agrarian, while the Okigwe town is the commercial centre. This zone was chosen because of the huge gap that existed between the urban and rural educational infrastructure.

Population and Sample

The population was made up of Principals, Senior Teachers and Town Union executives within the zone. A multi-stage sampling method was adopted.

To choose three schools that would represent the diversity found in this zone, purposive Sampling was applied:

- Okigwe National Grammar School (Urban): Large, older school in the zonal headquarters. Picked as a test group to examine whether urban benefits mean better inclusive education.
- Community Secondary School, Ihube (Rural): In a community well-known for its activism in the Town Union. Selected as a test case for the "community effort" hypothesis.
- Secondary Technical School, Umulolo (Rural/Technical): Rural school that teaches technical skills. Was selected to evaluate inclusive education practices with regard to vocational education.

Based on these schools, a total of 60 respondents were selected (3 Principals, 45 Teachers, 12 Town Union Executives).

Instrument for Data Collection

The instrument used was a structured questionnaire entitled ‘Community-School Partnership for Inclusion Scale’ (CSPIS) (Appendix). It was structured into four sections:

Section A: Demographic Details

Section B: Availability of Inclusive Infrastructure (Checklist).

Section C: Extent of Community Collaboration (Likert Scale).

Section D: Social Capital and Attitudes

Method of Data Analysis

The collected information was analysed through Mean (\bar{x}) and Standard Deviation (SD). A mean value of 2.50 was considered as the criterion of acceptance for the gathering of information through the Likert scale. With regard to the infrastructure checklist, frequency statistics were applied.

3. Results

Table 1: Availability of Inclusive Infrastructure in Selected Schools

Facility	Okigwe National (Urban)	CSS Ihube (Rural)	STS Umulolo (Rural)	% Availability (Total)
Standard Classrooms	Available	Available	Available	100%
Wheelchair Ramps	Available (Partial)	Not Available	Not Available	33%
Accessible Toilets	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	0%
Braille/Vision Aids	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	0%
Special Ed. Teacher	Available (1)	Not Available	Not Available	33%

Data collected from the physical checklist of the three sampled schools

Table 1 paints a worrisome scenario; although 100% of schools possess conventional classrooms, the inclusivity of the structures is zero. Only the urban school (Okigwe National) had a ramp that was partially achieved. None of the rural schools (Ihube or Umulolo) with huge support for the construction of such facilities possessed any form of accessibility. Zero schools possessed accessible toilets. This indicates that infrastructure is being erected with the "able-bodied normative" perspective.

Table 2: the extent of existing collaboration between Town Unions and School Management on Special Needs Education

Item No.	Item Description	Mean (\bar{x})	Std. Dev	Decision
1	The Town Union donates land for school expansion.	3.75	0.45	High Extent
2	The Community contributes money for building projects.	3.60	0.50	High Extent
3	Community leaders attend graduation ceremonies.	3.40	0.62	High Extent
4	The Town Union funds assistive devices (e.g., wheelchairs).	1.45	0.30	Low Extent
5	Community volunteers act as aides for disabled students.	1.60	0.45	Low Extent
6	The community advocates for the enrolment of disabled children.	1.85	0.55	Low Extent
Cluster Mean		2.60		

Data obtained from Section C of the CSPIS Questionnaire

Table 2 shows that there was a divide. Items 1, 2, and 3 (Land, Building, Ceremonies) were well above the benchmark level of 2.50, showing that there was a High Extent of collaboration with regard to traditional aspects. Items 4, 5 and 6 (funding aids, volunteering and advocacy) were well below the

benchmark. This shows that the Town Unions in Okigwe are active builders but passive includers. They engage with the school infrastructure, but not with the needs of the vulnerable students.

4. Discussion of Findings

The Brick-and-Mortar Paradox

Findings indicated that although the communities in Okigwe value their schools greatly, this value is exclusively within the bounds of "Brick and Mortar." Although the mean value of facilities (3.60) indicates that the Town Union design as defined by [11] is effective, the absence of functional toilets (0%) and inadequate advocacy (1.85) indicate a knowledge gap, not capacity. The leaders of the communities, Ihube and Umulolo, may not be aware that the law requires that there be ramps. They provide stairs because "that is the way schools are built." This corresponds with "Bonding" within Social Capital Theory, as the community emulates their own standards [14,15]. Also, as the community is not exposed to knowledge of the rights of the disabled, their projects reflect that.

Barriers to Bridging

The qualitative response provided through the questionnaire helped; as one of the respondents commented: "We believe the government provides us with money for the children with handicaps. We, the village, only provide the roof." This shows a misunderstanding of roles. "Special Needs" is seen as a concern of the medical/state sector, not the community.

Proposed Framework: Community-School Inclusion Model (CSIM)

On the premise that the resource exists (presence of high bonding capital) but the direction is absent, this paper recommends the Community School Inclusion Model (CSIM).

Phase 1: The Sensitization Bridge (The "Why")

School Principals, in the Okigwe area, must move from administration to advocacy.

Action: Principals must attend the "August Meeting" (the annual homecoming of Town Unions).

Message: Rather than asking for funds for a new hall, the principal shows statistics of village children dropping out because they do not get any support. They must frame their proposal in terms of community preservation' stating; "We're losing our own children."

Phase 2: Asset Mapping (The "How")

Also, the community possesses assets that are not monetary.

Human Capital: Volunteer support staff for reading/writing intervention can be drawn from retired teachers in the village.

Vocational Capital: Skilled locals in Umulolo (carpenters or welders) can be contracted to design and erect ramps as well as basic desks for physically-challenged students as their "community levy" payment in lieu of money.

Phase 3: Institutionalisation (The "Structure")

Inclusion's Desk: An education and inclusion secretary desk must be formed within every Town Union. This desk will be independent of the secretary. They will be liaising directly with the school's guidance counsellor.

5. Conclusions

The paper shows that more than the absence of public funding, the Okigwe Education Zone's dilemma lies in its inability to optimise social capital. Indeed, the people of Okigwe, through their representative schools (Okigwe National, Ihube and Umulolo) are eager to contribute. Unfortunately, their generosity remains ignorant of the requirements of differently-abled students. To allow rural schools to fill the existing gap, there is a paradigm shift required, from state dependency to community partnership.

Recommendations

- 1) For School Principals: Launch a school access audit with the PTA. Go through the school with some leaders of the community, showing them barriers in person (for example, "look, a wheelchair cannot cross this gutter").
- 2) For Town Unions: Change the constitution of the Town Union to provide that every year, 10% of all education levies shall be set apart for "vulnerable student support" (VSS) for the acquisition of hearing aids or glasses.
- 3) For the Government: Imo State Ministry of Education can establish a recognition called "Most Inclusive Community" so that there will be healthy competition within the town communities to see who can provide the most inclusive environment.

By incorporating such collaborative strategies, the theme of this conference is live out. The rural village is transformed from an once place of disadvantage into a place of support, where every child, regardless of their abilities, gets a seat at the education table.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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