

Extending the role of guidance counselors to address quality assurance in inclusive schools in Nigeria

Samuel C. Ugwoke, Chiedu Eseadi, Leonard T. Ugwuanyi, Amaka B. Ikechukwu-Ilomuanya

Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to explore how and why guidance counselors can extend their roles to include quality assurance in Nigeria. It is an awareness-raising paper in which policy document and literature are reviewed. Based on the conceptual review, inclusive schools are educational institutions that support and welcome diversity among all learners, and where all groups of children at risk of exclusion are adequately cared for. The previous studies reviewed show that there appears to be a laissez-faire and negative attitude toward inclusive education among teachers that invariably affects the realization of the goals of quality assurance. However, with the involvement of a guidance counselor, this attitude is likely to change and become positive. To that end, educational policies should, at the very least, target the inclusion of a guidance counselor as part of the team of quality assurers from the education ministries/boards. Overall, the paper drives the notion of guidance counselors having a prescribed role in quality assurance for inclusive schools as a useful goal, driven by monitoring and attendance of addressing human rights, specifically, the rights of the child.

Key words: educational policy, guidance counselors, inclusive education, inclusive schools, quality assurance

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Introduction

In recent years, quality education has become something that every society wishes to deliver to all its members. [1] stressed that quality education for all means enabling all children to master the basic skills required for living in society and ensuring that those who can and want to continue their education may do so.

This means that education system managers and teachers must be attentive to all children, regardless of their gender and their social, geographical, ethnic, religious, or other background. However, the question of how best to achieve quality education appears to be more complicated. One method has been to emphasize quality assurance in education for all. The adoption of quality assurance in education for all as an emerging education policy emanated from the World Conference on Education for All in 1990. The participants acknowledged that, overall, the current educational provision was seriously deficient and that it must be made more relevant, qualitatively improved, and made universally available [2]. Since then, the issue of quality assurance in education has become a matter of concern for governments, educational institutions, and other stakeholders in relation to meeting society's expectations. At a World Education Forum meeting in 2000, participants reaffirmed the need for quality education and committed themselves to the achievement of education for all goals and targets for every citizen and for every society. At this meeting, representatives of the international community (including Nigeria) agreed that all countries should pay greater attention to improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence in all areas. This would ensure the achievement of recognized and measurable learning outcomes in schools, especially in literacy, numeracy, and essential life skills [3]. Hence, pursuing quality improvement in educational service delivery becomes necessary, especially as it relates to inclusive education as practiced in Nigeria and other parts of the world today. This also raises the issue of how best to promote a value system in institutional management that emphasizes quality outcomes for learners in the teaching and learning process, both in Nigeria and internationally. One way to do this could be through extending the role played by school guidance counselors, especially in Nigeria. Therefore the purpose of the paper is to explore how and why guidance counselors can extend their roles to include quality assurance for inclusive education Nigeria

Research Method

The paper reviewed policy document and literature.

The Review

Quality assurance in the Nigerian school system

The quality of education being received by students in inclusive schools is of concern for all stakeholders in education, especially guidance counselors, school administrators, special educators, parents, and policy makers. A report by the [4] observed that a major issue that has been the focus of national discourse is the quality of educational service delivery. According to this document, many respected and eminent educators believe that the education provided in Nigeria is characterized by inconsistent policies and a lack of accountability in the implementation process. The consequences can be seen in declining standards, examination malpractice, the ill-equipped teaching workforce, inadequate institutional facilities, and unsuitable school environments in the country. Thus, in order for effective educational practices to exist in Nigerian schools at all levels, there is a need to adopt best practices to promote quality educational service delivery. Quality is something good, ideal, and of a

high standard. In [5] view, quality is a grade of achievement, a standard against which to judge others. It is the totality of the features of a process, product, or service with respect to its performance, as well as customers' or clients' perceptions of that performance. According to [6], quality assurance involves ensuring effective resource input and control, refining the process, and raising the standard of output in order to meet the goals set and to satisfy public accountability. Quality assurance in education is the efficient management, monitoring, evaluation, and review of the resource inputs and transformation processes (teaching and learning) to produce quality outputs (students) that meet the standards and expectations of society [7]. The aim is to prevent problems relating to quality and to ensure that the products of the education system conform to the standards expected. Operationally, quality assurance is described as all efforts, strategies, and measures that are geared toward monitoring and maintaining the standards set and guaranteeing excellence in teaching and learning in schools. Such efforts include, but are not limited to, inspection and supervision, the provision of quality instructional activities, and the adequate provision of quality teachers and quality educational facilities. In Nigeria, the state and federal governments have set up quality assurance agencies to ensure quality in the country's school system. Quality assurance agencies are autonomous but collaborative educational bodies set up by the government to control quality in education, including the quality of teachers, educational facilities, and instructional activities, through monitoring and maintaining set standards at all levels of education. They are mechanisms that ensure excellence in educational service delivery at both the primary and post-primary school levels through supervision and inspection, advisory solutions, publications, workshops, meetings, seminars, and conferences. There are three main quality assurance agencies in Nigeria: Federal Quality Assurance Agency (that is, Federal Ministry of Education), State Quality Assurance Agency (that is, State Ministries of Education/State Education Board/FCT Education Secretariat), and Local Government Quality Assurance Agency (that is, Local Government Education Authorities). This structure reflects the views expressed in a document from [8] that the ministry of education and local education authorities play a pivotal role in influencing the education system and making it more flexible; as such, it is vital to engage these agencies in order to make schools inclusive.

The goals of quality assurance agencies, according to the education policy of the [9], are to set, maintain, and improve standards in all aspects of the school system, that is, at all levels of education below tertiary level; ensure minimum standards and quality assurance of instructional activities in schools through regular inspection and continuous supervision; regularly disseminate information on the problems faced by teachers and institutions, and offer practical solutions; and encourage the dissemination of information on innovative and progressive educational principles and practices in the school system through publications, workshops, meetings, seminars, and conferences. The paper from [8] stressed that teacher training is vital for effective inclusive education. In addition to the aforementioned goals, one of the goals of quality assurance agencies should also be to organize the supervision and inspection of all educational institutions under their jurisdiction, in collaboration with the Federal Quality Assurance Agency. The quality assurance agencies are staffed with quality assurance officers, usually educational administrators. The primary responsibility of quality assurance officers is to undertake inspection visits; disseminate information about instructional materials and effective teaching methods and good practices; obtain information on challenges experienced by teachers in schools and institutions, as well as provide advisory solutions through appropriate authorities; monitor, document, and publicize the overall quality of education in schools and proffer practical and positive advice; and organize meetings with, and workshops for, teachers as necessary, with a view to improving their professional competence [9]. According to the [10], since inclusive school practices are synonymous with successful school practices, indicators and targets for school success, including indicators for inclusive practices, must be clearly defined and evaluated, by school districts and by schools, and areas for improvement identified and addressed. This is one thing that quality assurance in education seeks to achieve, and it is an approach that could be used to ensure quality in inclusive education.

Inclusive education in the school system

Inclusion is the concept that is used worldwide today with respect to learners with special needs, and is a major challenge confronting education systems around the world [11]. Inclusion relates to a child's right to participate and to benefit on an equitable basis with their peers. Inclusion stresses the duty of schools and education systems as a whole to adapt and, in principle, to accept all children. Twenty years ago, the Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs Education endorsed the idea of inclusive education. The Salamanca statement argued that regular schools with an inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, building an inclusive society, and achieving education for all. Furthermore, it suggested that such schools can provide an effective education for the majority of children and improve the efficiency and, ultimately, the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system [12]. Since then, inclusion has become a burning issue that educators can no longer ignore. Hence, many countries around the world have been struggling with putting inclusive education policies into practice. The concept of inclusion asserts that students with special needs can be active, valued, and fully participating members of a school community in which diversity is viewed as the norm and high-quality education is provided through a combination of meaningful curricula, effective teaching, and necessary supports [13]. This implies that inclusion of students with special needs cannot be realized without effective support, especially from special educators who, by virtue of their training, have acquired the necessary skills to teach learners with special needs. In this regard, [14] stated that inclusion is distinctly different from integration or mainstreaming, in which students with special needs are educated in physical proximity to their age peers, yet without significant attention being paid to the qualitative features of this arrangement. Inclusion assumes that all students belong in the same general education classroom and should be taken out only when appropriate services cannot be provided in the inclusion setting. The acknowledgment of the fact that all children, including those with disabilities, have a right to education, that all schools have a responsibility to teach every child, and that it is the

responsibility of the school to make any necessary adjustments to make sure that all children can learn, is known as inclusion in education [15]. According to the [10], inclusive education is a combination of philosophy and pedagogical practices that allows all students to feel respected, confident, and safe so that they can learn and develop to their full potential. In this view, inclusive education is based on a system of values and beliefs centered on the best interests of the student that promotes social cohesion, belonging, active participation in learning, a complete school experience, and positive interactions with peers and others in the school community. These values and beliefs are often shared by schools and communities. In its Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, the [16] stated that inclusive education is based on the principles of acceptance and inclusion of all students. In an inclusive education system, students see themselves reflected in their curriculum, their physical surroundings, and the broader environment, in which diversity is honored and all individuals are respected. According to [17], inclusive education involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures, and strategies, with a common vision that covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children. The implication is that this approach to education also ensures that quality education is provided for all, taking into account the diversity and different needs and abilities, characteristics, and learning expectations of the students and communities. Similarly, [18] stated that inclusive education is feeling welcomed and having a sense of belonging in the school. This can only happen if children are part of the school community and are included in as many aspects of school life as possible. For [18], inclusive education also means that all students attend their neighborhood school, participate in the regular classroom to the fullest extent possible, and receive the proper support. [19] opined that inclusion is an educational option that enables all learners to participate fully in life and in a mainstream work setting. The general principle of inclusive education, therefore, is that people with a disability make better progress educationally and socially when they mix with peers who do not have a disability. In a restrictive national context, most authors would actually see inclusive schools as general education institutions where students with all types of disability are educated together in the same classroom with their non-disabled counterparts. Within the international context, however, inclusive schools should be seen as any educational institutions that adopt a reform that supports and welcomes diversity among all learners and where all groups of children at risk of exclusion are adequately cared for. Inclusive schools act upon a set of beliefs based on the idea that students with disabilities have the right to be members of classroom communities with their non-disabled peers, whether or not they can meet the traditional expectations of those classrooms [20]. Inclusive schools are places where all students are welcome, and where they all learn essential academic and non-academic lessons in preparation for life in the community [21]. Similarly, [22] conceptualized inclusive schools as those that meet the dual criteria of enrolling a diverse student population and improving academic standards for all. [23] identified five factors that are critical to the success of the inclusion of students with special needs: a sense of community and social competence; an appreciation of student diversity; attention to curricular needs; effective management and instruction; and personnel support and collaboration. [24] added three critical elements for the successful inclusion of students with special needs: active, meaningful participation in the mainstream; a sense of belonging; and shared ownership among faculty. [25] added administrative support to the list. Hence, when the features noted by [23, 24, 25] are put in place, the likelihood of inclusion being successful is significantly increased. Thus, an inclusive school system should be fully accessible for children with disabilities, all learning materials should be accessible for the specific needs of each individual, and the curriculum must be sufficiently flexible to ensure that all children can participate in all activities. Furthermore, [15] listed the following groups of children who are at risk of exclusion: children from ethnic minorities or language minorities, refugees or displaced children, child workers, domestic workers, children who have HIV/AIDS or are HIV/AIDS orphans, children who are abused, migrant children, children from religious minorities, poverty-stricken children, street children, children in conflict zones and child soldiers, nomadic children, and children with disabilities. In addition to children who never attend school, there are also large numbers who drop out early and fail to complete basic primary education. Thus, the issue of exclusion from education is not limited to children with disabilities. There is also an implication that all these categories of children should receive inclusive education and that the guidance counselor, by virtue of their professional training, can assist them all to benefit meaningfully from the classroom instruction and in school adjustment.

Why guidance counselors should extend their roles to include quality assurance

To reinforce the place of guidance counselors in the school system and in Nigerian society, the [9] emphasized that the government will continue to make provision for the training of teachers in guidance and counseling; that the government will establish and equip counseling clinics, career resource centers, and information centers; and that proprietors of schools will provide an adequate number of guidance counselors for their institutions. The [26] sees counseling as a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to achieve mental health, wellness, education, and career goals. For the purpose of this paper, counseling can be seen as a helping profession that assists individuals of all ages—including students, teachers and school administrators, and parents—to achieve professional competence, to attain educational goals, and to live a well-adjusted life. One of the purposes of counseling is to impart specific skills and learning opportunities in a proactive, preventative manner, ensuring that all students can achieve school success through academic, career, personal/social, and global-perspective experiences. Counseling programs provide the rationale for school counselors, school administrators, and parents and guardians to engage in conversations about expectations for students' academic successes and the role of counseling programs in enhancing student learning [27]. In this regard, [28] stated that professionals rendering counseling services have four major roles: strategizing, consulting, training, and coordinating. In performing these roles, the guidance counselor as a psychological service provider is capable of

re-engineering the school system and promoting quality assurance practices in the inclusive school system. [17] noted that guidance counselors are the key players in ensuring that the goals of inclusive education are actualized in Nigeria and in other developing nations. For them, it is the responsibility of guidance counselors to guide and assist students with special needs, as well as those without disabilities, to accept differences and make a diversity of friendships; and create opportunities for them to cooperate, become resourceful and creative, and enhance their self-respect. In the same line of thought, [14] pointed out that having a learner with special needs in the classroom might seem overwhelming, as the learner may require a variety of modifications in classroom management and in certain instructional practices. The implication is that a major concern for guidance counselors and special educators should be to identify each child who has a disability and determine the nature of their disabilities in order to ascertain what kind of modification is required. This should be followed by special provisions being made to ensure that the child has adequate educational opportunities. There should be a general agreement that students should be assigned to special classes only where this is necessary to enable them to advance satisfactorily and to prepare them for resuming work in regular classes. Teachers of such students need to cooperate with other teachers who are responsible for the classes to which these students usually belong. The teacher should bear in mind the various types of students in the inclusive education classroom, for instance, the slow learners, the gifted or talented, and the physically challenged. Such cooperative attitudes and knowledge can be developed and sustained with assistance from guidance counselors through a variety of behavior modification counseling programs for teachers in the school. Although teachers are seen as key people for implementing inclusive education, the issue of inclusion has been a major challenge facing school systems worldwide [29]. For instance, research by [22] considered how some secondary schools in England have been able to respond to the conflicting demands of school improvement policies, as measured by high academic standards, and the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs. The study revealed that many teachers did not think they could teach children with disabilities. Similarly, [30] found that many teachers' attitudes toward inclusion are not particularly positive. With a detailed case study using documents, records of pupil progress, an interview, and a questionnaire using a Likert-type attitude scale and open-ended questions, these researchers found that pupils with special educational needs made the least progress in science, where teacher attitudes were the least positive. In The Netherlands, [31] found that teachers hesitated to accept responsibility for students with special needs in regular education. They generally did not have positive attitudes toward inclusive education, citing a lack of personal knowledge and skills to teach students with special needs, an area that was not sufficiently covered in their basic teacher training. Further, a review of 26 studies by [29] revealed that the majority of teachers held neutral or negative attitudes toward the inclusion of pupils with special needs in regular primary education. [32] revealed that a general lack of support and resources, and the prevailing negative attitudes toward disability, are contributing to the general bewilderment toward inclusion in South African schools. These findings are unlikely to be very different from those that would be obtained in Nigeria with respect to attitudes toward the inclusion of children with special needs. In Nigeria, [33] investigated the attitudes toward inclusive education held by 141 special education teachers. The findings revealed that special education teachers employed in northern states were more likely than their southern counterparts to believe that students with behavioral issues should attend their neighborhood schools. In spite of these results, [17] stated that, with the assistance of guidance counselors, many teachers would be able to develop confidence and positive attitudes, and their repertoire of teaching strategies would develop over time. Besides, the lack of guidance counselors in schools means that many teachers are unaware of the potential or the needs of the young people in their classrooms. This knowledge gap often makes it difficult to understand what progress an inclusive program of education could or should achieve, and how to measure whether the education service is providing quality and having the best possible impact [8]. To this end, quality assurance implementation process schemas that emphasize the effective use of guidance counselors may be helpful in facilitating quality assurance practices among teachers in inclusive schools.

How guidance counselors can extend their roles to include quality assurance

In a desirable inclusive school system, every student is valued, nurtured, and seen as equal, and has the opportunity to contribute meaningfully, with equal respect accorded to each contribution they make. With this in mind, [34] described the ideal inclusive school setting as a caring and nurturing place with a strong sense of community, where all students' needs are addressed. Thus, students with special needs are truly included in their classroom communities only when they are appreciated by their teachers and socially accepted by their classmates [14]. Accordingly, these authors [14] believe that an understanding teacher more effectively meets students' instructional and curricular needs, and social acceptance among classmates contributes to self-perception of value. These elements are critical to creating effective inclusive settings and responsible learning environments in a publicly funded education system, both in Nigeria and elsewhere. The provision of inclusive public education is based on three complementary principles: public education is universal; public education is individualized; and public education is flexible and responsive to change [10]. These principles in part inform the need for a proactive strategy for achieving the goals of inclusive education and will help to assure quality inclusive education in which all children can reach their full learning potential, and where decisions are based on the individual needs of the student and are founded on evidence. Figure 1 shows a schema that suggests that guidance counselors can extend their roles to cover quality assurance in inclusive school system in Nigeria.

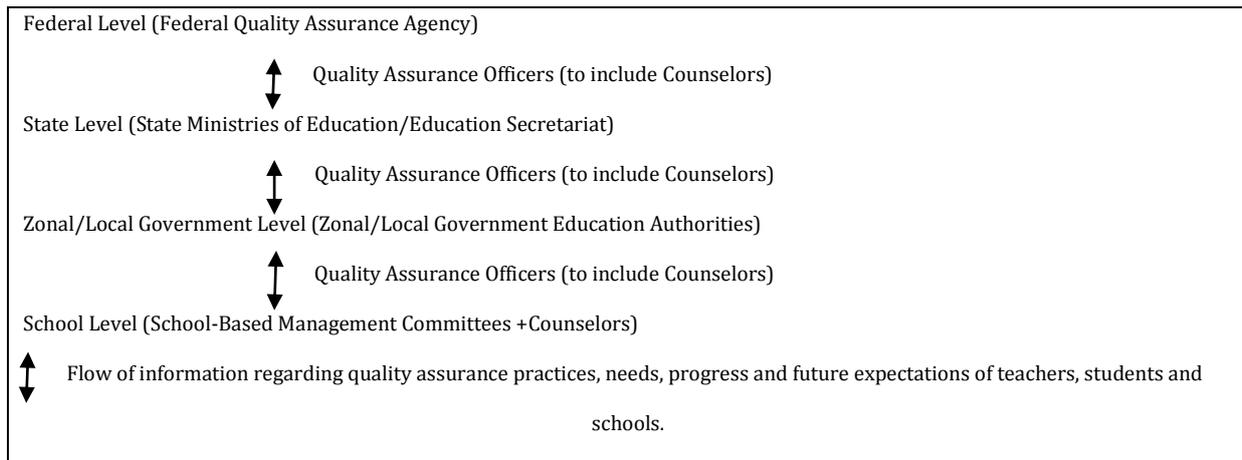


Figure 1: Quality Assurance Implementation Process Schema

The schema for a quality assurance implementation process shows that quality assurance is a collaborative activity and/or team approach for achieving the goals of inclusive education, and that its efficiency and effectiveness lie in the degree of collaboration between the various quality assurance agencies. These agencies operate at the federal, state, and local government levels. The schema shows that quality assurance should be implemented by government agencies autonomously. Each of the agencies should be staffed with quality assurance officers, such as guidance counselors and special educators, and headed by the Minister of Education, the Commissioner for Education, the Chief Supervising Principal, or the Chief Inspector of Education, as appropriate. In line with this model, the [16] stated that it would support the development, implementation, and monitoring of equitable and inclusive education policies, programs, and practices in the ministry, school boards, and schools. Other key players required for the successful implementation of quality inclusive education are school personnel, students, parents, and communities (co-opted as members of the school-based management committee). This is in part supported by the document from [8], which stated that parents and other family members are also crucial to the success of an inclusive education because they are the people who know the children who have disabilities, and who may have the best understanding of both their problems and their abilities. For them, the key stakeholders within inclusive education programs should also include community leaders, local government representatives, and other relevant contacts because they can play an important role in facilitating the implementation of inclusive education. The School-Based Management Committees lie at the end of the continuum presented in the schema, discussing, liaising, and providing feedback to quality assurance officers on the challenges experienced by teachers and their successes in inclusive schools. The information flow regarding quality assurance practices should be bi-directional, as shown in the schema. It should be noted that in most states in Nigeria, such as Enugu State, there are Education Zones comprising three or more local government areas. These zones coordinate the affairs of schools in local governments under their jurisdiction. In places where such zones operate, the quality assurance implementation process may need to go through the Education Zone, which is often headed by a Chief Supervising Principal. This schema, therefore, is to some extent in line with [35] assertion that decisions on policy and practice for the education of children with disabilities should be made in collaboration with education officials, schools, parents, communities, families, and organizations for people with disabilities. The schema also seeks to support a greater focus on the education of disabled children and other categories of learners at risk of exclusion; to develop mechanisms to monitor exclusion; and to increase community and family involvement in inclusive school management.

Educational Implications

The paper promotes the notion of guidance counselors having a prescribed role in quality assurance for inclusive schools as a useful goal, driven by monitoring of and attention to human rights, and specifically the rights of the child. Based on the findings of previous studies, there is no gainsaying the fact that guidance counselors should be enabled to help the achievement of the goal of quality assurance in inclusive schools. Therefore, educational policies should at the very least target the inclusion of a guidance counselor as part of the team of quality assurers from the education ministries/boards. Future research should explore the strategies that guidance counselors could employ in facilitating efficient and effective quality assurance practices in inclusive schools. Future studies may also need to investigate the extent to which guidance counselors could assist in facilitating efficient and effective quality assurance in the inclusive school system. The outcome could be helpful to guidance counselors, as part of the quality assurance team, to facilitate and sustain quality assurance practices in inclusive schools, and could be utilized by policy makers, educational managers, school administrators, and special education teachers to further the goals of the inclusive school system.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to raise awareness about the place of the guidance counselor in quality assurance. It is also clear that inclusive education could be feasible within school communities that value diversity and nurture the well-being and quality of learning of each of their students, and that this is informed by the degree of collaboration in the implementation process. Therefore inclusive education approach should be based on quality assurance principles, with a view to ensuring that established standards of quality are being met, especially in relation to teaching and learning. To ensure that this practice is sustained, any quality assurance implementation process for inclusive schools should employ the services of guidance counselors. In essence, there is a need for governments and inclusive schools to use a quality assurance implementation process to help intensify the collaborative efforts of the various quality assurance agencies, of which the guidance counselor would be one, in order to help to assure a quality inclusive education.

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Samuel C. Ugwoke, Chiedu Eseadi, Leonard T. Ugwuanyi, Amaka B. Ikechukwu-Ilomuanya, Department of Educational Foundation, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria.