

## ROLES OF PARENTAL ADVOCACY IN SHAPING SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION POLICIES IN ENUGU STATE, NIGERIA

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### Abstract

*The study examined the roles of parental advocacy in shaping special needs education policies in Enugu State, Nigeria. Two research questions and two hypotheses guided the study. The researcher adopted descriptive survey research design for the study. The population for the study was 289 respondents which comprised 54 school administrators and 235 parents of children with special needs. There was no sampling procedure because the population is manageable. The instrument for data collection was a researchers' developed questionnaire titled "Roles of Parental Advocacy in Shaping Special Needs Education Policies Questionnaire (RPASSNEPQ)" which contained 12 items. The instrument was validated by three research experts. The reliability of the instrument was determined by the use of Cronbach Alpha statistic which yielded .81 for cluster 1 and .79 for cluster 2 with an overall reliability index of .80 which made the instrument reliable and was used for data collection. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions while t-test statistic was used to test the hypotheses at .05 level of significance. The findings of the study showed that Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and Inclusive Education Practices are significant roles of parental advocacy in shaping special needs education policies in Enugu State, Nigeria. In view of the findings, the study recommended that Education authorities in Enugu State should actively encourage and support parental involvement in the development and implementation of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for children with special needs.*

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**Keywords:** Parental advocacy, special needs education, policies, global best practices

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### Introduction

In recent years, the importance of inclusive education for children with special needs has been widely recognized globally. In Nigeria, like many other countries, the journey towards an inclusive education system has been ongoing. Special needs education policies refer to the set of guidelines, regulations, and practices that govern how educational institutions and authorities provide support and accommodations to students with disabilities or special needs. The aim of these policies is to ensure that all students, regardless of their abilities, have equal access to quality education and opportunities to reach their full potential (Isuwa and Lengen, 2014). Drawing on global best practices in special needs education, one can identify successful models that promote inclusivity, early intervention, and a holistic approach to nurturing the potential of differently-abled children. Parental advocacy ends with special needs education policies as it is the culmination of their efforts to ensure that their

children with disabilities or special needs receive the support and resources they require to thrive in the education system. Meanwhile, parental advocacy refers to the act of parents or guardians advocating on behalf of their children's needs, rights, and best interests. It involves actively supporting and promoting the well-being and rights of children, especially in various settings such as education, healthcare, social services, and legal matters (Eskay and Angie, 2013). The significance of parents in influencing educational policies for children with special needs should not be underestimated. Parents of these children possess invaluable understanding of their unique needs, difficulties, and potential. Their active involvement in advocating for appropriate policies and support systems holds immense sway over the success of inclusive education programs. In the pursuit of a just and all-encompassing education system, parental advocacy has emerged as a potent force in shaping special needs education policies worldwide (Eskay and Angie, 2013). Parental advocacy serves as a crucial force in empowering parents as key stakeholders in the education system. Parents' intimate knowledge of their child's unique strengths, challenges, and needs positions them to provide valuable insights into the deficiencies and strengths of the current special needs education policies. Their lived experiences make them more attuned to the practical implications of these policies on their children's education and overall development. Through advocacy efforts, parents of children with special needs amplify their voices to raise awareness about the importance of inclusive and equitable education. By sharing their personal stories, struggles, and triumphs, they shed light on the gaps in existing policies and advocate for changes that foster an environment of understanding and inclusivity within educational institutions (Mantey, 2014).

The partnership between parents and educational institutions plays a pivotal role in fostering an inclusive environment where students with special needs can flourish. Parents have a distinctive perspective, comprehending the specific challenges and strengths of their children, offering valuable insights into the most effective support mechanisms. Furthermore, parental advocacy has the capacity to mobilize communities, policymakers, and stakeholders to address systemic gaps and enhance educational provisions for children with special needs (Omeda, 2016). The issue of quality education for children with disabilities and learning differences has long been a challenge on a global scale, including within the context of Nigeria. Parental advocacy can come in different ways which include; Special Education Services, Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), Inclusive Education Practices, Teacher Training, Evaluation and Monitoring, Transition Planning, Early Intervention and others. However, this study focused on Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), Inclusive Education Practices. An Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is a legal document created in the United States and some other countries to outline the specific educational needs and goals of a student with a disability. The purpose of an IEP is to ensure that the student receives appropriate and individualized educational support and services that are tailored to their unique learning needs. An IEP is a personalized plan developed for each student with special needs. It outlines the student's specific learning goals, required accommodations, and support services tailored to their unique needs. Parental advocacy is essential in the development of Individualized Education Plans. An IEP is a personalized education program tailored to meet the specific needs of a child with disabilities (Omeda, 2016). Parents are actively involved in the IEP process, collaborating with educators and specialists to set appropriate goals and

support strategies for their child's academic, social, and emotional development. The IEP is tailored to meet the unique needs of each student with a disability. Inclusive education embraces this individualized approach by recognizing and valuing the diverse learning styles, strengths, and challenges of all students. By having an IEP, students receive personalized instruction and accommodations that allow them to actively participate in the inclusive classroom. Inclusive education refers to the practice of providing all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, with equitable access to quality education within their regular classroom setting. Inclusive education is a system of education that cater for the special needs of pupils and students with visual, auditory and hearing impairment, mental retardation, emotional disorder, physical and health impairment and learning disabilities (Isuwa and Lengen, 2014). Ajuwon (2008), described inclusion or inclusive education as the philosophy and practice for educating children with special needs in general education settings.

The goal of inclusive education is to create a learning environment where every student feels valued, supported, and included in all aspects of school life. The policies promote the integration of students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms and school activities whenever possible. Inclusive education emphasizes creating an environment where all students can learn together, fostering understanding, and reducing stigmatization. Parents advocate for the inclusion of their children with special needs in mainstream classrooms whenever possible. They push for the principle of the Least Restrictive Environment, which states that children with disabilities should be educated with their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate. By advocating for inclusion, parents help ensure that their children have opportunities to learn alongside their peers and have access to the general education curriculum. Enugu State's education system is currently undergoing reforms, and there is a growing awareness of the importance of inclusive education for all children. Parental involvement in this process can provide valuable insights and grassroots-level perspectives that complement the efforts of policymakers and educational authorities. It is based on the above background that the present study ascertained the roles of parental advocacy in shaping special needs education policies in Enugu State, Nigeria with particular reference to Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and Inclusive Education Practices.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Special needs education in Enugu State faces several challenges in effectively catering to the unique learning requirements of students with disabilities. Among the various strategies to address these challenges, Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and Inclusive Education Practices hold great promise for fostering personalized learning experiences for special needs students. The problem at hand is the lack of adequate parental advocacy in shaping special needs education policies, particularly concerning the development and implementation of IEPs. Parents play a critical role in advocating for their children's needs, preferences, and strengths within the educational system. When parents are empowered and actively involved in policy-making processes, it can lead to more effective IEPs that better address the individual needs of each student. However, the successful implementation of IEPs and Inclusive Education Practices largely depends on the involvement and active participation

of parents in the educational decision-making process. Despite the existence of special needs education policies in Enugu State, Nigeria, there may be insufficient or ineffective implementation and utilization of these policies. This could be due to various factors, one of which is the lack of active and influential parental advocacy. Therefore, the study investigated the roles of parental advocacy in shaping special needs education policies in Enugu State, Nigeria.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to ascertain the roles of parental advocacy in shaping special needs education policies in Enugu State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. examine the roles of parental advocacy in shaping special needs education policies in Enugu State in terms of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs);
2. determine the roles of parental advocacy in shaping special needs education policies in Enugu State in the area of Inclusive Education Practices.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the roles of parental advocacy in shaping special needs education policies in Enugu State in terms of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)?
2. What are the roles of parental advocacy in shaping special needs education policies in Enugu State in the area of Inclusive Education Practices?

### **Hypotheses**

The following hypotheses guided the study and were tested at 0.05 level of significance:

**Ho<sub>1</sub>:** There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of school administrators and parents of children with special needs on the roles of parental advocacy in shaping special needs education policies in Enugu State in terms of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs).

**Ho<sub>2</sub>:** There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of school administrators and parents of children with special needs on the roles of parental advocacy in shaping special needs education policies in Enugu State in the area of Inclusive Education Practices.

### **Methodology**

The researcher employed a descriptive survey research design for this study. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2013), this design is utilized to examine a population by selecting, studying, and analyzing a sample taken from the target population, allowing for inferences and generalizations about the entire population. The study's population consisted of 289 respondents, including 54 school administrators and 235 parents of children with special needs. Due to the manageable size of the population, there was no need for a sampling procedure. To collect data, the researcher used a questionnaire they developed, titled "Roles of Parental Advocacy in Shaping Special Needs Education Policies Questionnaire (RPASSNEPQ)" which consisted of 12 items. The questionnaire's validity was established by three research experts, and its reliability was assessed using the Cronbach Alpha statistic,

resulting in a reliability index of .80, indicating the instrument's reliability for data collection. In addressing the research questions, the mean and standard deviation were employed, while the hypotheses were tested using the t-test statistic at a significance level of .05. The mean was calculated based on numerical values assigned to response options, ranging from Strongly Agree (SA) with a value of 3.50-4.00, to Strongly Disagree (SD) with a value of 0.00-1.49. To interpret the results of the hypotheses testing, the significance (sig.) values from the SPSS output were used. Null hypotheses were not rejected if the probability values exceeded .05 but were rejected if the probability values were less than .05.

## Results

**Research Question 1:** What are the roles of parental advocacy in shaping special needs education policies in Enugu State in terms of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)?

**Table 1: Mean ratings of school administrators and parents on the roles of parental advocacy in shaping special needs education policies in Enugu State in terms of Individualized Education Plans**

S/N	ITEMS	School Administrators 54			Parents 235		
		$\bar{x}$	SD	Dec	$\bar{x}$	SD	Dec
	<b>Parental advocacy in terms of Individualized Education Plans include the following:</b>						
1.	monitoring their child's progress to know if the IEP is being implemented effectively, and make adjustments as needed.	2.61	.94	A	2.54	.89	A
2.	participating in setting meaningful goals for their child's education.	2.58	.89	A	2.53	.90	A
3.	advocating for their child's rights throughout the IEP process.	2.55	.91	A	2.63	.92	A
4.	providing valuable information that helps in developing a comprehensive IEP.	2.62	.85	A	2.55	.95	A
5.	requesting an evaluation for special education services.	2.52	.93	A	2.61	.91	A
6.	initiating the process of evaluating their child's needs.	2.60	.90	A	2.57	.88	A
<b>Cluster Mean</b>		<b>2.58</b>	<b>.90</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>2.57</b>	<b>.91</b>	<b>A</b>

The analysis of the data in Table 1 indicates that the mean scores of school administrators and parents ranged from 2.52 to 2.62 and 2.53 to 2.63, respectively. The cluster mean values for school administrators and parents were 2.58 and 2.57, respectively, with corresponding standard deviations of 0.90 and 0.91. These findings suggest that parental advocacy, particularly through Individualized Education Plans, plays a significant role in shaping special needs education policies in Enugu State.

**Research Question 2:** What are the roles of parental advocacy in shaping special needs education policies in Enugu State in the area of Inclusive Education Practices?

**Table 2: Mean ratings of school administrators and parents on the roles of parental advocacy in shaping special needs education policies in the area of Inclusive Education Practices**

ITEMS		School Administrators 54			Parents 235		
S/N	Parental advocacy in the area of Inclusive Education Practices include the following:	$\bar{x}$	SD	Dec	$\bar{x}$	SD	Dec
7.	encouraging schools to embrace diversity and celebrate the uniqueness of each child.	2.61	.93	A	2.64	.91	A
8.	collaborating with schools to create inclusive learning environments.	2.58	.95	A	2.53	.93	A
9.	raising concerns with school administrators to ensure that every child's right to an inclusive education is upheld.	2.61	.90	A	2.62	.90	A
10.	being vigilant in addressing any discriminatory practices within the educational system.	2.58	.89	A	2.55	.89	A
11.	collaborating with other parents to create inclusive extracurricular activities.	2.65	.91	A	2.63	.91	A
12.	ensuring that schools have the necessary resources to cater to the needs of all students.	2.60	.95	A	2.61	.90	A
<b>Grand Mean</b>		<b>2.61</b>	<b>.92</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>2.60</b>	<b>.91</b>	<b>A</b>

The analysis of the data presented in Table 2 indicates that the mean scores for school administrators ranged from 2.58 to 2.65, while for parents, the scores ranged from 2.53 to 2.64. The cluster mean values for school administrators and parents were 2.61 and 2.60, respectively, with standard deviations of 0.92 and 0.91. The findings from Table 2 demonstrate that parental advocacy plays a significant role in shaping special needs education policies in Enugu State, particularly regarding Inclusive Education Practices.

**Ho<sub>1</sub>:** There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of school administrators and parents of children with special needs on the roles of parental advocacy in shaping special needs education policies in Enugu State in terms of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs).

**Table 3: Summary of t-test analysis of the mean ratings of school administrators and parents of children with special needs on the roles of parental advocacy in shaping special needs education policies in Enugu State in terms of IEPs**

Group	n	$\bar{x}$	SD	df	p-value	Decision
School Administrators	54	2.58	.90	287	.106	H <sub>01</sub> not rejected
Parents	235	2.57	.91			

The information presented in Table 3 indicates that at 287 degrees of freedom, the obtained p-value was 0.106. Since this p-value is higher than the predetermined significance level of 0.05, it means that the null hypothesis was not rejected. Consequently, there is no substantial difference between the mean ratings of school administrators and parents of children with special needs regarding the impact of parental advocacy on shaping special needs education policies in Enugu State, specifically concerning Individualized Education Plans (IEPs).

**Ho<sub>2</sub>:** There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of school administrators and parents of children with special needs on the roles of parental advocacy in shaping special needs education policies in Enugu State in the area of Inclusive Education Practices.

**Table 4: Summary of t-test analysis of the mean ratings of school administrators and parents of children with special needs on the roles of parental advocacy in shaping special needs education policies in Enugu State in the area of Inclusive Education Practices**

Group	n	$\bar{x}$	SD	df	p-value	Decision
School Administrators	54	2.59	.92	287	.098	H <sub>02</sub> not rejected
Parents	235	2.58	.94			

The information presented in Table 4 indicates that at 287 degrees of freedom, the calculated p-value was .098. Since this p-value exceeds the significance level of .05 set for the study, it implies that the null hypothesis was not rejected. Consequently, there is no significant difference between the mean ratings given by school administrators and parents of children with special needs concerning the impact of parental advocacy on shaping special needs education policies in Enugu State, specifically in the realm of Inclusive Education Practices.

### Discussion of findings

The study's results indicated that parental advocacy plays a crucial role in shaping special needs education policies in Enugu State, with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) being a significant aspect. The findings demonstrated that there was no significant difference

in the perceptions of school administrators and parents of children with special needs regarding the importance of parental advocacy in terms of IEPs.

Furthermore, the study highlighted that parental advocacy also has a significant impact on shaping special needs education policies concerning inclusive education practices in Enugu State. Similar to the findings related to IEPs, there was no significant difference in the views of school administrators and parents of children with special needs on the role of parental advocacy in promoting inclusive education practices. In summary, the study's results underscore the importance of parental advocacy in influencing special needs education policies, particularly concerning Individualized Education Plans and inclusive education practices in Enugu State. Both school administrators and parents recognized the valuable contributions of parental advocacy in these areas.

### **Conclusion**

The conclusion drawn from the findings of the study is that parental advocacy plays a significant role in shaping special needs education policies in Enugu State, Nigeria, particularly through the implementation of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and Inclusive Education Practices. This means that parents of children with special needs have a considerable impact on the development and implementation of policies that cater to the educational needs of their children. By actively advocating for and participating in the creation and execution of Individualized Education Plans, parents can ensure that their children receive tailored and personalized education suited to their specific needs and abilities. Additionally, their advocacy for inclusive education practices fosters an environment where children with special needs can learn alongside their typically developing peers, promoting diversity, understanding, and integration within the education system.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were proffered:

1. Education authorities in Enugu State should actively encourage and support parental involvement in the development and implementation of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for children with special needs. Parents should be recognized as valuable partners in the educational process and be given opportunities to contribute their insights and preferences in designing suitable education plans for their children.
2. Enugu State government should promote the implementation of inclusive education practices that prioritize the placement of children with special needs in the inclusive education practices. This means providing opportunities for these children to learn alongside their peers without disabilities whenever possible, while still receiving appropriate support and accommodations.



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