News
Ministry



Sr. Scholastica Achinkumbur sings for the pupils at St. Vincent’s Centre for Inclusive Education, run by the Daughters of Charity in Uyo, the state capital of Akwa Ibom in Southern Nigeria. (Kelechukwu Iruoma)

by Kelechukwu Iruoma

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Uyo, Nigeria — November 5, 2020
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

On a cloudy July morning in 2019, Sr. Scholastica Achinkumbur stands at the entrance of St. Vincent's Centre for Inclusive Education to welcome students

accompanied by their parents.

Soon to arrive are Mfoniso Akpan, 10, and Done Kufre, 5, who both have cerebral palsy, a group of permanent movement disorders that appear in early childhood. Achinkumbur collects Done from a man who had carried him into the center and seats him on a couch in the reception area. She calls Sr. Martha Oko, who picks up the 5-year-old in her arms to go to class.

Achinkumbur then takes Mfoniso, positions his hands on a scooter and walks him down to the assembly for the morning devotion.

There the sisters will lead students in prayers and songs, employing sign language for those with hearing difficulties. Done and Mfoniso cheerfully join in.



The exterior of St. Vincent's Centre for Inclusive Education, run by the Daughters of Charity in Uyo, state capital of Akwa Ibom in Southern Nigeria. (Kelechukwu Iruoma)

Done, Mfoniso and others like them benefit from an inclusive education offered by the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, whose mission is to exclude no one on grounds of disability, language, gender, ethnicity or any other barrier to a full education.

Nigeria offers few schools for children with disabilities. As a result, many of them end up staying at home while some resort to begging on the streets. Society makes matters worse when it struggles to accept them.

"The essence of making this school inclusive is to meet the educational needs of children with disabilities," said Achinkumbur, who is also the administrator of the center, "and help children [without disabilities] at their tender age to learn how to live together with those children that have challenges. So as they grow, what they meet in the society will no longer be a new thing."



Sr. Scholastica Achinkumbur addresses students on the assembly ground at St. Vincent's Centre for Inclusive Education run by the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul in Uyo, state capital of Akwa Ibom in Southern Nigeria. (Kelechukwu

Iruoma)

Government failure

One in three primary school-age children with disabilities is not in school, according to a World Bank report. Furthermore, of the estimated 65 million primary and secondary school-age children with disabilities, at least half do not attend school, suggesting that more than 85% of the primary school-age group have never attended school.

The Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey 2018 report revealed that 7% of household members age 5 or above in the west African country have some level of difficulty in at least one functional domain, while 1% have a lot of difficulties or cannot function at all in at least one domain.

Nigeria has about 8.6 million children who are not in school, according to a 2010 UNESCO figure, but no official data break down the number of them who have disabilities.

Nigeria's national policy on education advocates inclusive, free and adequate education for all people living with disabilities.

The federal ministry of education has the responsibility of coordinating special education in Nigeria by funding programs for children with learning disabilities, according to the policy. Yet, the federal and state governments have failed to establish enough special schools for children living with disabilities and failed to fund educational programs for them.

UNICEF said in a 2007 report that "the daily reality for most children with a disability is that they are often condemned to a 'poor start in life' and deprived of opportunities to develop to their full potential and to participate in society."

"They are routinely denied access to the same opportunities for early, primary and secondary education, or life-skills and vocational training, or both, that are available to other children," the report said.



Sr. Martha Oko prepares the pupils on the assembly ground for morning devotion at St. Vincent's Centre for Inclusive Education, run by the Daughters of Charity in Uyo, state capital of Akwa Ibom in Southern Nigeria. (Kelechukwu Iruoma)

Addressing the gap

Established in 2009, the St. Vincent's center, located on the convent grounds, has been a saving grace for children living with disabilities. The two nuns currently teaching at the center specialize in special education. A total of 20 teachers and nine auxiliary staff deliver inclusive education to 144 pupils.

"The aim is to incorporate children with special needs into the society so that there will be harmony and there will be no segregation," said Oko, who points out that it is hard to spot the difference between children with a disability and without.

"They mix up well and they are happy. Children who don't have a hearing problem are using sign language to interact with the children with hearing impairment," she added.

In each class, the sisters combine the pupils. This is to enable those with disabilities to learn faster and eliminate discrimination and communication barriers. The sisters teach the pupils total communication, which is the use of both words and sign language to speak. "It's not just talking with fingers. … Sign language is their [the deaf and partially deaf students'] own language, so the speech and fingers go together," said Oko.

To meet the needs of the pupils and ensure those who are slow learners can keep up, the sisters put two teachers in each class.



Sr. Martha Oko uses sign language to teach pupils at St. Vincent's Centre for Inclusive Education, run by the Daughters of Charity in Uyo, state capital of Akwa Ibom in Southern Nigeria. (Kelechukwu Iruoma)

A pursuit requiring patience

Achinkumbur has been working at the center as an administrator for five years. "We need a lot of patience to work with them. When you understand them, you enjoy

them and they will be happy and eager to learn more," she said.

"Being a sister is good," she told told Global Sisters Report. "The spirit of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul has helped me because it has something to do with humanitarian service. If I were not a Daughter of Charity, I would not be doing this. The congregation has fully helped me to be involved with the less privileged in my day-to-day activities."

Oko was trained by the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus while in secondary school. After her education, her uncle who was a priest took her to a community where the Daughters of Charity worked. She fell in love with their work.

"I made up my mind to join the congregation of the Daughters of Charity in 2001," she said, and later developed an interest in studying special education at the university.

Oko, who is a specialist in teaching children who are deaf or partially deaf, said she feels fulfilled when working with the children. "If I were to be a married person, I would be reluctant to do the work" because of the time it requires, she said.



Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul and children living with disabilities gather outside the school administration block in Uyo, state capital of Akwa Ibom in Southern Nigeria. (Kelechukwu Iruoma)

Tackling stigma

The sisters said parents are frustrating their efforts because they still don't understand their children living with disabilities, given the communication barriers.

"The children feel sad at home and happy when they are in school," said Oko. "Education of a child is home and school. I will always battle the one I can do," she said, noting she sometimes has to start afresh after the children return from long vacations.

If the parents would learn to communicate with their kids, she said, the sisters' work would be easier, and so would the life of the disabled child.

"Sometimes people take them to be aggressive but they are not aggressive. They are nice, and truthful, too," said Oko.

To support their efforts toward inclusive learning, the sisters require families to have a sibling attend school with the child who has a disability, when possible. The hope is that having a family member learn to communicate with the child who has a disability will help him or her assimilate more fully into the family and society.

Anastasia Essien, 10, who is in Grade 6, does not have any siblings with disabilities but feels comfortable learning with children who do. "It benefits me because I have knowledge of communicating with them and if I go outside and meet them, I will be able to express myself with sign language," she said.

Parents with children without disabilities find it difficult to accept the inclusive type of education the Daughters of Charity offer. "They are scared that their children may become deaf or dumb, and they claim they can't bring their children to where they are talking with hands and fingers," Achinkumbur said.



Sr. Scholastica Achinkumbur, the administrator of St. Vincent's Centre for Inclusive Education (Kelechukwu Iruoma)

Yet, the sisters are not discouraged and, during their community outreach, educate the masses that disabilities are not contagious.

The center, which celebrated its 10th anniversary in July 2019, lacks funding.

The sisters have resorted to charging fees for every term — about $55 for day students and $167 for boarders. They teach the curriculum of the federal ministry of education and have graduated five primary school sets.

After that, some students drop out due to the lack of special needs secondary schools in the state. The Daughters of Charity hope to convert an unused building to address part of that need.

"It is the demand of the people," but the congregation's plans are unknown, said Achinkumbur.

The sisters offer religious training, praying the Angelus with students daily at noon, praying before meals and saying the rosary. The priests celebrate Mass, interpreted by sisters in sign language, for students on Fridays and Sundays in the chapel. The sisters organize catechism classes for those who want to learn morals and receive Holy Communion.

Advertisement

Nuns respond to COVID-19 disruption

With the emergence of the COVID-19 global pandemic in February and the subsequent lockdown in March by Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari, the government ordered all schools, including the St. Vincent's center, to be closed.

"It affected us badly," said Achinkumbur. "Since that closure, we have not been able to pay our staff."

In September, the federal government ordered the full reopening of schools, which was supported by the Akwa Ibom state government, where the center is located. The center resumed operations on Oct. 5.

Achinkumbur said the center had put all the COVID-19 protocols in place, including maintaining social distancing to stop the spread of the virus that has infected more than 60,000 people in the West African country. More students are continuing to return to the school.

Meanwhile, Oko stresses the continuing need for more inclusive schools to be established for the development of children living with disabilities.

"If we didn't have inclusive education, it would have been difficult for the pupils to cope because people would not understand their language, leading to isolation," she said.

[Kelechukwu Iruoma is a freelance journalist based in Nigeria.]