

Evaluating Public Relations Strategies of Ministry of Education on Inclusive Education for People with Special Needs in Select states of North East Nigeria

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Abstract: *This paper discusses the public relations strategies of the Ministry of Education in the promotion of inclusive education and the North East Nigeria. The paper adopted secondary research method for data collection where qualitative critical discourse analytical method was used for the analysis of the data. Based on the analysis of conceptual, theoretical and empirical data it was observed that to promote Inclusive Education among People with Special Needs organisations such as the Ministry of Education is engaged in the use of public relations strategies such as meetings, media relations and community relations. Others are Sponsorship, specialized training, counseling, mentorship, awards, advertorials, news releases, press conferences, workshops & seminars, newsletters, and use of social media platforms. However, even though organisations are involved in the use of public relations strategies to promote the Inclusive Education among people with Special Needs, the extent of their involvement is just little. As a result, the application of public relations strategies in doing so has achieved a minimal level of success than achieving very high success level in Nigeria. some challenges were also identified as limiting the effective utilization of public relations for enhanced an inclusive education. The conclusion was that the use of public relations in the promotion of programmes among organisations is not in doubt but underutilization and or low commitment in the use of public relations strategies is capable of preventing the organization from achieving desired success in the use of this communication tool as evident in this study. While it was suggested that the use of public relations strategies in the implementation of inclusive education challenges such as Lack of professionals; Corruption; Cultural diversity; Economic instability and poverty; lack of recognition of public relation's strategic role within organizations; Issues of trust and gender inequality; lack of working tools; poor working environment; nonchalant attitude must be addressed.*

Key words: *Evaluation, Public Relations Strategies, Ministry of Education, Inclusive Education, People with Special Needs*

INTRODUCTION

Public Relations is one of the areas that attracts tremendous attention of scholars in media and communication discipline. This is due to its relevance in the coordination and management of modern organizations. In a world that is highly competitive, it has really

become important for almost every institution to keep a long term and trustworthy relations with the community or public groups in order to handle upcoming challenges and also to maintain its survival and success. Public relations activities and practice are necessary in providing a coordinated effort that gears towards promotion of a positive image of the organization (Chukwu, 2012; Emmanuel, Ndolo & Igbara, 2021; Ebere & Okon, 2023; Eniola, 2011; Oyeleke, 2020; Thomas & Omojunikanbi, 2023; Veena, Dayaneethie & Zukiswo, 2012). Public relations practice is “a management philosophy aimed at doing everything possible to create good relationship between an organization and its public” (Chukwu, 2012, p. 169). As stated by Thomas & Omojunikanbi, 2023, p. 50):

Effective relationship development and communication are crucial for firms to succeed in the dynamic environment of stakeholder involvement and complexity that exists today. Public relations (PR) practice is a crucial area that has a significant impact on how people perceive and engage with businesses and organisations (Thomas & Omojunikanbi, 2023, p. 50).

This communication tool is said to be relevant in helping organizations to achieve their objectives in which they are founded (Buike, 2021; Ejioko & Udu, 2023; Effiom, 2019). As a result, previous literature has shown the use of public relations in the management of school in different areas and places around the world (Dighobo & Ayara, 2021; Igben & Ugbome, 2021; Igben, 2022; Omorodion, Ibeneme & Ayodele, 2022; Thomas & Omojunikanbi, 2023; Ugwuonah & Okonkwo, 2018). There were indications that the establishment of public relations across the schools, particularly tertiary institutions to enhance effective communication with external public and stakeholders' engagement has received a significant recognition, acceptability and boost over the years (Aikins & Adu-Oppong, 2015; Çoruk, 2018; Dighobo & Ayara, 2021; Igben, 2022; Ojumo, Nikona & Kiroma, 2006; Okwelle, 2010; Okwumba, 2015; Omorodion, Ibeneme, & Ayodele, 2022; Ugoji, Idibia & Thomas, 2022; Veena, Dayaneethie & Zukiswo, 2012). Dighobo & Ayara (2021, pp. 893-89) affirmed that:

The success of any organization, especially the institutions of higher learning even departments or units or faculty, depends on how information is handled in that organization. The efficiency and effectiveness with which information is managed determines to a large extent whether the institution will consistently be crisis ridden or not. Therefore, no institution or department of ... learning can survive without the activities of the public relations department (Dighobo & Ayara, 2021, pp. 893-894).

Therefore, if public relations is an important communication tool that addresses complex relationship and management issues among organisations, including schools or educational institutions, studying the Public Relations Strategies of Ministry of Education on Inclusive education for people with special needs in select states of North East Nigeria becomes imperative. This is in view of the relevance of inclusive education to the development of the educational system of any nation in the world (Owoh, 2016) on one hand and the need to understand how public relations strategies are also embrace people

with special needs ensuring their inclusivity in educational programmes in Nigeria on the other hand.

It is in view of the presumed strategic role of public relations in organisations, including educational institutions that this study is to evaluate public relations strategies of Ministry of Education on inclusive education for people with special needs in select states of North East North East Nigeria.

DISCUSSION

Public Relations

Public relations is one of the concepts that attracts a lot of scholarly definitions from different sources. Public Relations (PR) practice is the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation and its public (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, CIPR). PR consists of all forms of planned communication, outwards and inwards, between an organisation and its publics for the purpose of achieving specific objectives concerning mutual understanding (Jefkins, 2006). The literature presents public relations as a management function, which uses the attributes of management (e.g., planning, collaborative decision making, and research) to foster the organization's ability to build mutually beneficial relationships on which the corporate vision and mission depend (Grunig, 2001). The second stream in the literature presents public relations as communication management, which focuses on the flow of communication between an organization and its publics to achieve effective relationships (Grunig, 2001). The third stream of literature presents public relations as relationship management, so that communication is a property of those relationships rather than the conduit between organizations and publics (Ferguson, 2004; Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 2007).

In the view of Akinwumi (2004), Public relations is the art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting its consequences, counseling organization leaders, and implementing planned programmes of action which will serve both the organization and the public interests. From the many definitions and explanations of public relations, it is clear that public relations touches on the fate of organizations, people within and outside the organization as well as the physical environment within which an organization operates. It is equally not in doubt that the success of one depends on the success of the other in this kind of symbiotic relationship. Public Relations is very relevant in organizations today since it has become the most powerful tool to express the image of an organization to the public. Public Relations is often a key strategic enablers in today's highly competitive business environment. Shamsan and Otieno (2015) are of the view that, well-articulated Public relations strategies will always provide a good working strategy aimed at improving the company's image to the public. Public relations strategy is seen to be the outcome of a strategic thinking process by senior management mainly to improve on strategic management in order to have a better company's image communicated to the public. Strategic Public relations provide the top-level management with vast means of communication to the public in order to be in touch with its clients.

It is evident from the above that public relations is a communication as well as a management tool that organization utilize to establish a cordial beneficially relationship between its various publics (internal and external) for the overall interest of both parties.

By establishing a cordial relationship, organization is able to thrive more favourably in its operations and environment.

Inclusion Education

Inclusive Education or Educational inclusion (EI) is a critical concept for achieving justice and equity for students with disabilities in the education system. Inclusive education tends to tailor the environment to the diverse needs and desires of individuals, rather than requiring them to exclusively deal with the challenges of a given context (Edwin et al., 2019; Onyishi, 2022; Sambo & Bwoi, 2015). Several countries have shifted away from the belief that children with disabilities cannot be adequately educated in regular schools and should attend special schools to the belief that practically all children with disabilities should be able to succeed in regular schools (Hayes & Bulat, 2017). However, placing disabled children in regular schools does not constitute inclusion and may be detrimental to the children's development. Inclusion requires the creation of a rich, accessible learning environment that is tailored to the needs of all students (Edwin et al., 2019; Ferguson et al., 2019; Ngwoke et al., 2020). Nigeria has taken steps towards inclusive education (Adetoro, 2014; Fuandai, 2010), following the United Nations Convention on the rights of individuals with disabilities (United Nations, 2006), which states that persons with disabilities have the right to protection against discrimination on all grounds, including education.

Previously, the inclusion of disabled students in general education classrooms was contingent upon their exhibiting demanding behaviours, sensory processing difficulties, anxiety, and adaptive and cognitive deficiencies (Bölte et al., 2021; Fuandai, 2010; Onyishi, 2022). In most cases, inclusive education is defined as instruction delivered as a part of mainstream education and carried out by ordinary school staff, possibly under the supervision of specialists (Ferguson et al., 2019). Additionally, the method is viewed as one that emphasizes enhancing the learning environment, routines, procedures, pedagogy, staff behaviours, and attitudes, rather than exerting influence over pupils, as the term "integration" implies (Bölte et al., 2021; Efthymiou & Kington, 2017).

Inclusive education is a transformative educational philosophy and practice that seeks to ensure that all individuals, regardless of their abilities, disabilities, or differences, have the right to equitable and quality education within mainstream educational settings. It embodies the principles of diversity, equality, and social justice in education. Inclusive education is fundamentally rooted in the belief that every student has unique strengths, needs, and potential for learning. It rejects exclusion and segregation based on disability or other differences and instead promotes the full participation and engagement of all learners in regular classrooms (Ainscow, 2005; Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Salend, 2015; UNESCO, 2009). Inclusive education is often underpinned by legal and policy frameworks at the national and international levels. For example, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) calls for the right to inclusive education (United Nations, 2006). Many countries have also developed specific legislation and policies to promote inclusive education, aligning with international standards (UNESCO, 2017), including Nigeria.

As cited in Ukpabio & Eker (2022), some issues and difficulties arise as major barriers in the way of implementing inclusive education in Nigeria. Such problems are attitudes and misinformation about disability, physical barriers, curriculum, teacher issues, language of

communication, socio-economic factors, funding, organisation of the education system and policies and its expensive nature.

Public Relations Strategies for Enhanced Inclusive Education among People with Special Needs in Nigeria

Due to the relevance of education to nation building and development, previous scholars believed that public relations is an important tool used in the management and promotion of the sector. This is in view of the perceived impact of public relations in the management of various organisations over the years (Ahrne, Aspers, & Brunsson, 2015; Irwan, Kusen, Andi, & Heri, 2020; Obinna, Ewomazina, & Olley, 2021; Richard & Umor, 2020). Organizations use public relations strategies to increase brand awareness, build trust with the public and improve their reputation. Understanding the different types of public relations strategies available will help you get better results from the strategies you decide to use (Indeed Editorial Team, 2023). Public relations strategies are the collection of methods an organization uses to help it move from its current situation to its end goal, which can include gaining publicity, growing its customer base or improving its reputation. These methods help a company organize its public relations efforts to attract its target audience and identify ways to reach its goals during the planning stage. They are similar to marketing strategies because the primary goal is to spread brand awareness. Public relations strategies also can be useful in crisis management situations because it allows organizations to respond to a negative situation and try to develop a possible outcome from it. A good strategy can help companies increase their reputation if they overcome a negative situation (Indeed Editorial Team, 2023).

Public relations activities in educational institutions is not an easy job or just a part-time job. But it must be done professionally and seriously. It relates to the ability of Public Relations staff in technical management and as managerial skills, as well as full concentration on the part of the Public relations practitioner to manage the Public Relations work programme to achieve goals or objectives as planned (Irwan, Kusen, Andi, & Heri, 2020). Having a public relations strategy, according to Bhattacharya (2024), is crucial because it helps businesses maintain a strong public reputation and boosts your overall marketing strategy. Bhattacharya (2024), therefore, provided the following as the top reasons why having a good public relations strategy is important: reputation management, crisis mitigation: brand awareness, audience engagement: media relations, influence and authority, credibility and trust, strategic messaging, partnerships and collaborations, talent attraction, market differentiation, and business growth. In the words of Asemah (2009, p. 3):

Effective coordination of activities will be needed to achieve goals and objectives. Public relations, which is a management function becomes handy in facilitating effective communication of organizational goals and objectives. The public relations department in any human organization handles various activities, which include: conflict resolution or crisis management, internal or employee relations, community relations, promotions, media relations, environmental scanning and sponsorship programmes.

It deduced from the above that if effectively used, public relations strategies help organisations to accomplish their operational goals and objectives like inclusivity in education among people with special needs. Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier (2002) supported that public relations programmes are important because they help organizations achieve their goals by creating relationships with strategic publics: Individual communication programmes such as media relations, community relations, or customer relations are successful when they affect the cognitions, attitudes, and behaviours of both publics and members of the organization, that is, the cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioural relationships among organizations and their publics. To them, effective public relations programmes are valuable to organizations because of their contribution to the organization's mission, goals, and bottom line. Public relations strategy involves the "big picture"- the overall plan, how the campaign will achieve organizational or national goals and objectives. According to Anatusi & Nwabuko (2013) it involves deciding who the important publics are and which of them will be the recipients of the messages who are target audiences. According to Igben & Ugbome (2021) educational institutions employ the use of the following PR tools in building the corporate image of the institution:

- a. Media Relations. This is done through media statements, media tours, media conferences and press releases.
- b. Advertorials. This tool is used to inform the public on the sales of forms, vacancies etc.
- c. Social media include School websites, Facebook page and Whatsapp Group.
- d. Newsletters on its activities.
- e. Communities relations This is one of its public relations activities in which each year, a member of the host community is employed as a Liaison officer and at the end of that service year, another liaison officer is employed. This is done to have mutual relationship with the host community.
- f. Gifts items. At yuletide, various Christmas gifts are shared to the employees through the platform of employee relations.
- g. The College also strives to maintain cordial relationship with the different category of staff. These staff, which include teaching, and non-teaching staff are given the opportunity to be actively involved in unionism. At the end of each year, the staff are rewarded with different forms of prizes and packages. Staff and their parents' funerals activities receive the unflinching support of the college authorities. These are some of the ways of making the staff to have a good sense of belonging.
- h. Religions activities are also sponsored from time to time. This is done to assure the staff and students of the management interest in their spiritual well-being and protection as such meetings end with prayers for the college community.
- i. The PR office distributes newspapers and calendars to the college staff.
- j. The PR office in conjunction with the Student Union Government, SUG, identify with the students' interest and challenges. Through this, the PR office fosters an enabling environment for learning to take place.
- k. The public relations office liaises between the Governing Council and the state government to allow for free flow of interactions between.

Contributing, Bhattacharya (2024) observes that a well-crafted PR management strategy shapes brand's narrative, fosters meaningful media connections, and contributes to the

overall business objectives. She offers the following as one of the best public relations strategies for organisations: Develop a Clear Communication Strategy; Create Quality Press Materials; Build Relationships with Journalists; Establish an Online Presence; Organize Press Conferences and Events; Leverage Influencers; Provide Expert Opinions and Research; Build Long-Term Client and Partner Relationships; Create Authoritative Video Content; Engage with Bloggers and Online Media; Monitor and Respond to Feedback; and Use Events to Capture Attention. Similarly, according to Indeed Editorial Team (2023) knowing your audience, using research and data, embracing the internet, finding partners, creating compelling content, being inclusive, knowing your competitors, and using the local media, are some of the public relations strategies capable of yielding effective results for organisations when adopted.

Challenges in the Use of Public Relations Strategies in Promotion of Inclusive Educations in Nigeria

Despite the relevance of public relations in the management of organisations there are also challenges that face its effective practice. Amujo & Melewar (2011), cited in Ugoji, Idibia & Thomas (2022) were of the opinion that contemporary institutions in Nigeria needs to surmount specific challenges affecting the practice of public relations in the country. The following, according to Ugoji, Idibia & Thomas (2022), are pitfalls that do hamper implementation of public relations in schools and the technical and vocational education institutions may also have to experience:

- (a) Convincing Staff and Teachers Technical and Vocational Education Schools may experience resentment from teachers and administrators that all these outside publics are having a say in the educational process, and making demands on their already overworked schedules. But if they don't listen and respond, schools will deteriorate, their working conditions will become less favorable, and in the long run, they will be hurt by the public's lack of engagement. It is in everyone's best interests to open the doors and let the public in as meaningful partners. As long as schools can convey that the best interests of children are at the core of their activities, and that they have the will and capacity to successfully implement their strategies, the public will be satisfied. The public does not want or need to be involved in the minutiae of school management. When people feel schools are run capably they are happy to let administrators administrate and teachers teach.
- (b) Balking at the cost The perception is widespread that a public relations activity is not a legitimate expense for a public entity. Yet, frequently there is concurrent demand for schools to communicate better and more openly. May be this problem would have been solved by funding public relations activities creatively sometimes through grants from local businesses or targeted federal and state support. Also, to involve parents and recruit students, are able to draw on federal funds marked for desegregation efforts to fund public relations strategies such as parent information centers.
- (c) Giving lip service Relegating the public relations function to a person or committee without the skills, time, and resources to perform constructively is a mistake. Without a plan, and training and resources to back it up, public relations efforts will be scattershot and ineffective.
- (d) Forgetting the audience Educational jargon is off-putting to a reader. It implies exclusivity, the very image schools want to avoid. As every good writing teacher

stresses, “remember your audience.” Most people are annoyed by others’ use of jargon.

- (e) Doing too much Define goals narrowly, then choose no more than three to accomplish in a given year. Then, as those goals are accomplished, establish additional goals. When you say you will do something, be sure to take action and do it.
- (f) Administration’s values and support for educational PR Considering the fierce competition for student recruitment, the increasing conflicts between the public and schools, and more and more criticism and pressure from the representatives of educational communities and the media, school administrators need to appropriately utilize PR to build a good image for their institutions, ease the conflicts, and build a collaborative atmosphere. In a setting of higher educational institutions, the university/college administrators generally were deemed by educational PR practitioners as key people who manage the earlier issues for their universities/colleges. Furthermore, the university/college president’s value and support for PR were indicated as influential, to some extent, on the existence, the primary functions and the working process of the PR organization.
- (g) School Administrators’ perceptions of PR School administrators’ perceptions have an impact on the practice of PR in their schools. They were also identified as primary users of PR as a communication tool. This conception of PR is similar to the misconception that PR is just another term for communication. Based upon this misconception of PR possessed by some school administrators, the practice of PR in their institutions was directed to focus on, and limited to, such areas. Also, the Practitioners and management frequently disagree as to its function and objectives. Public Relations practitioners complain that management did not inform them on important matters or consult them in policy- making plans and significant public relations aspects. Hence, it also hinders the development of PR in their schools.
- (h) The stability of a university/college The PR practice is influenced by the stability of a university/college as the frequency of being attacked by public opinions or being negatively covered by news reporters. Also if a university/college is often threatened by the public’s criticism or often negatively covered by the news media, the stability of the university/college is low. PR practitioners of this university/college then have to put much more effort into running PR than those whose university/college is less threatened.
- (i) The Inadequacy of New Information and Communication Technologies (NCTs) In modern Public Relations practice, traditional communication devices like files, index cards, paper pencils, pens, telephone, typewriter, news-letters, group and interpersonal forums or meeting are increasingly being replaced or supplemented by NCT input, storage and communication devices like intelligent typewriters, computer terminals, optical disk, intelligent circuitry, word processors, electronic mailing system, teleconferencing, computer conferencing, satellite, electronic fund transfer system and computer management information system. The lack or short supply of these gadgets means ineffectiveness in PR services in our institutions of learning.

- (j) Inadequate Number of Qualified or Competent Public Relations Practitioners This also tends to militate against the effective practice of Public Relations in Technical and vocational education institutions. Another is education and training of practitioners in Nigeria for instance, the Nigeria Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) determines the nature and scope of knowledge required to practice the profession. "What such bodies usually prescribe is considered to be basic. A true professional or successful practitioner of Public Relations must therefore endeavour to go beyond this basic prescription." Some practitioners are intellectually lazy and not upright in the course of discharging their professional duties. What they fail to realize is that the body of knowledge and skills required to survive in Public Relations is rather wide and the industry's scope or area of coverage is always expanding.
- (k) Lack of Specialization in the PR Many people or professionals do not consider this as an area that needs much expertise. Many would rather major in science disciplines or business and still finds themselves in a public relations job. Most of those who occupy the positions of public relations in both government and private organization are not public relations major. Some claims to be practitioners simply because they are practicing journalist. Come to think of it, even those who eventually had training in public relations refuse to specialize in a particular aspect of public relations, just because they wants to keep every account that comes their way. E.g : Consultancy, Media Relations, Event management, PR Education, Reputation Management, Community Relations, Research and so on. Also, they want to do everything so they could make much money from practice. Money is a drive why so many people dive into public relations profession.
- (l) Language Barrier Even with specialized courses, Nigeria is a country with many tribes that speak in native languages; hence, it is hard to define a common or national language to pass the information to the masses. It is just of recent that the country is trying to settle down with one official language that will be suitable for everyone to communicate with. That is the English language is adopted as her official language, this was possible because the bid to settle for one of Nigerian three major languages; Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba has proved abortive.
- (m) Lack of Technological Skill The world is developing many machineries like Computers, Scanners, Printers, Faxes, iPods, Tablets, Midgets, Recorder, Blackberries, etc to fasten both the field and office work, but it is a sad news that many Nigerian are not learned, they cannot effectively and efficiently operate these technologies. This is at the disadvantage of the PR in this nation. Those, who eventually can use them, rather preferred to flaunt them lieu of maximizing their technological potentials.
- (n) Infrastructural Limitations These are majorly communication problems and lack of proper equipment to finance or fasten public relations duties. In case of a public relations function like sponsorship, such issues like bad or inaccessible roads can make your work a disappointment. Emma and Akua (2015) noted the challenges militating against PR operations are scarce telecommunication equipment, lack of official means of transportation and lack of trained personnel. Also public relations position is neither accorded the same status as other senior management positions nor involved adequately in decision making in our tertiary institutions. Sometimes,

you may want to convey your sponsors to the venue where a project is to be established, but if the road to the site is sick, then be sure that that campaign will surely be sick. Sometimes it could be power issues, in the case of Nigeria, power problem is inevitable. If you have packaged a media campaign that you want to get across to your targets at a particular belt of the broadcast schedule, when the time to disseminate the information reaches, and power is interrupted, be sure that the effort on that programme will be useless, as well as turning futile.

- (o) Negative Cultural Habits, Attitudes and Taboos Cultural practices cum religious beliefs are held in high esteem in Nigeria and in fact Africa. If you prepare a campaign that tread negatively on this tenacious testament you may fail to reach a mutual understanding with them. This also goes with diverse ethnic groups and their various tribes which are characterized by the different states in the country. Hence, as you plan a campaign or advertising method you have to ensure not to go against particular groups' believes.
- (p) Poor funding In Nigeria and other developing countries where Public Relations management is relatively young, Public Relations programmes are under-funded, thus, this inadequate funding has grossly affected the effective practice of the profession. The present situation by which foreign Public Relations firms are contracted for Nigeria will not give room for Public Relations practice in Nigeria to grow into a powerful tool of rural and national development.

Similarly, Thomas & Omojunikanbi (2023) opined that public relations (PR) practice in Nigeria is fraught with numerous challenges that stem from the complex socio-political and economic context of the country. These challenges significantly impact the effectiveness of public relations efforts in building and maintaining positive relationships between organizations and their audiences. Several key issues need to be addressed to improve the state of public relations in Nigeria (Thomas & Omojunikanbi, 2023). Below, according to Thomas & Omojunikanbi (2023), are some of the challenges of public relations practice in Nigeria:

- (a) Lack of professionals: The Nigerian media landscape presents a challenge due to a lack of professionalism and widespread sensationalism (Olowu, 2017). This makes it difficult for public relations practitioners to communicate accurate and well-crafted messages to the public. Moreover, the rise of social media has contributed to the spread of misinformation and fake news, further complicating the task of managing reputations (Ogunyemi & Adegoke, 2018). There is a shortage of skilled public relations professionals in Nigeria, exacerbated by the absence of standardized education in the field (Ejiogu, 2018). This results in subpar execution of public relations campaigns and a lack of understanding of public relations strategic importance.
- (b) Corruption: Political interference and corruption can greatly impact public relations efforts. The government's control over the media and the reluctance to allow dissenting voices can hinder transparent communication (Okorie, 2019). This is evident in instances where public relations campaigns are used to propagate political agendas rather than serve the public interest.
- (c) Cultural diversity: Nigeria's cultural diversity poses a challenge for public relation professionals, as messages must be tailored to resonate with various ethnic and linguistic groups (Olaniyan, 2020). Effective communication requires a deep

understanding of the cultural nuances of different regions, which can be challenging to achieve.

- (d) Economic instability and poverty: Economic instability and poverty can limit access to communication channels, making it challenging to reach target audiences effectively (Uzuegbunam, 2019). Moreover, the lack of reliable data and research tools can hinder public relation professionals from making informed decisions about their strategies (Okereke & Emeka, 2018).
- (e) Lack of recognition: There is a lack of recognition of public relation's strategic role within organizations, leading to its underutilization in decision-making processes (Nwosu & Edegoh, 2017). Public relation is often seen as a tactical, reactive function rather than a strategic, proactive one.
- (f) Issues of trust and gender inequality: The lack of trust and gender inequality is one of the serious challenges of public practice in Nigeria. Issues of trust and credibility plague the Nigerian public relation landscape. Past instances of misinformation and deceitful communication by both public and private entities have eroded the public's trust in official statements (Nwosu, 2017). Issues of gender inequality persist within the public relations industry, with fewer women occupying leadership positions (Ejiogu, 2018). This imbalance hinders diverse perspectives and can influence the nature of communication strategies.

Empirical Evidence on the Adoption of Public Relations Strategies for Enhanced Inclusive Education in Nigeria

Consequently, a number of previous empirical studies have been conducted from different places and by different scholars which are related to the current study. For instance, Owoh (2016) found in a study that the identified public relations strategies were important and that there was no significant difference between the perceptions of male and female technical teachers on the issue. According to a study by Aikins & Adu-Oppong (2015) the University's public relations department is poorly resourced to perform its functions. Based on the study, among the challenges militating against its operations are scarce telecommunication equipment, lack of official means of transportation and lack of trained personnel. Furthermore, the study revealed that the public relations position is neither accorded the same status as other senior management positions nor involved adequately in decision making.

Similarly, Shimawua & Kusugh (2022) found in their study that the use of public relations strategies was relevant to engage stakeholders in safe schools' reopening plans; target resources to where they are most needed; get children back to school confidently; make school environments safe; and quick recovery of lost learning activities among others. Oluwagbemisola & Oduola (2018) have revealed in their study that compromise or dialogue, collective bargaining, effective communication and confrontation are Public Relations Strategies adopted in conflict management by the University of Kogi management. Also, Public Relations experts are given the chance to take part in decision-making process while management is faithful to the bargain of public relations. The study concluded that Public Relations Strategies such as collective bargaining and effective communication are effective in managing conflict. Adams, Ofordi, Ahmad & Eneje, (2023) also found in a study that despite the challenges posed by resource disparities and institutional weaknesses, the study finds that public relations can play a pivotal role in addressing societal gaps. Strategic communication, advocacy efforts, and crisis

management are advanced as effective tools for promoting inclusiveness and shaping a more unified national identity (Adams, Ofordi, Ahmad & Eneje, 2023). Ogbonnaya, Mahmoud & Odinaka (2021) studied and found that equity and inclusive education is necessary sustain objective public relations that will not misguide professional and public on crime statistics in Nigeria.

A study by Nwafor, Omoevah & Umuze (2022) revealed that the Anambra State Government used public relations strategies like press releases, press conferences, announcements, town hall meetings with critical stakeholders like the market unions, transport unions, town unions etc in disseminating appropriate information and behavior that helped in managing the various COVID-19 related crises in Anambra State. It was also found that the state government employed various media platforms like ABS Radio and Television, Newspapers, Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter in doing the same. Oyeleke (2020), similarly found that public relations and crisis management strategies in UNTH and FETHA have significant effects on staff performance. According to a study by Okwumba (2015), public relations strategies are relevant in managing strike actions in Nigerian universities. As a result, it becomes very imperative for university authorities to apply and utilize these public relations strategies in order to prevent strike actions from taking place in academic environments like universities and where such strike actions have taken place, these public relations strategies can be used to quell them from degenerating into adverse industrial actions.

Ebere & Okon (2023) found in a study that Public Relations practice of Pabod Breweries (108 or 60.7%) are more effective than Daewoo Nigeria Limited (84 or 44%). Findings also revealed that both Pabod Breweries and Daewoo Nigeria Limited maintain their relationship with their host communities. Okwelle (2011) studied and identified the following strategies for improving enrolment in technical teacher education through student's involvement in public relations: integrating public relations in school curriculum; proper funding of the scheme and engaging students regularly in exhibitions and job fairs. Ugoji, Idibia & Thomas (2022) noted in a study that in the sense of attracting community support and drawing in parents, especially those who shy away from school involvement, school public relations is less about transmitting information, and more about listening and responding to the expectations and concerns of all citizens. Schools cannot operate as independently as they once did: the public demands more accountability and more participation, and parents have more school choices than in the past. The goal of school public relations should be a community of citizens that believes the motto, "public schools, there is no better place to learn." When that happens, schools will have the resources and community support they'll need in the always-changing educational environment (Ugoji, Idibia & Thomas, 2022).

Buike's (2021) study has identified PR as a veritable tool of corporate image building and sustenance as it helps shape the way publics of an organization see or perceive the organization. In building or sustaining a corporate image of an organization by the Public Relations Officer, several important tools very can be identified, including press / news release, press / news conference, sponsorships, house organs, Annual General Meeting etc. Furthermore, different types of PR are presented (Buike, 2021). Ejiofo & Udu (2023) found in the study that (a) public relations and social responsibility are modern concepts in Nigeria and require planning based on new social needs and therefore demands new methods and perspectives. (b) No certain conclusion can be made on that training should

be included as an indicator on social responsibility in south-south, Nigeria as the opinions of people opposing and agreeing on the issue is almost similar. (c) workers right is not considered as an indicator of social responsibility in south-south, Nigeria. (d) economic development is considered as an indicator of social responsibility in south-south Nigeria. (e) Most studied people agree that effective management of oil spills, pollution and environmental degradation is an indicator of social responsibility. (f) hygiene in the society is considered as an indicator of social responsibility. (g) respecting audience's perception is considered as an indicator of social responsibility.

According to a study by Ibrahim (2020), SMEs in developing counties as Nigeria can use public relations to raise their profile however there is need to educate SME owners on the function and importance of public relations. Furthermore, the unethical practice of paying for media coverage need to be investigated. Iyadi & Okolie (2017) found that public relations programmes have significant effect in resolving conflicts between FMC Asaba and her patients ($t=12.312$, $p =0.0012$); adequate information available to management significantly assists in resolving conflicts in FMC ($t = 2.692$, $p = 0.004$) and; public relations play a significant role in resolving conflicts in FMC (chi with 4 degree of freedom 376.36, $p 0.000$). For a study by Effiom (2019), the application of public relations in the management of secondary school in the area is zero percent. Respondents also embraced the idea of engaging public relations experts in the running of these schools in view of its enormous contributions to the well-being of organisations. To Bulama & Tika (2011), the Technical and Vocational Education teachers are hardly involved in performing public relations activities. It was also found that teachers with higher educational qualifications were more involved in public relations activities compared to those with lower educational qualifications where the functions were performed.

Thomas & Omojunikanbi (2023) concluded in their study that the fields of public relations practice and community relations hold paramount importance for organizations aiming to foster positive relationships, enhance reputation, and contribute to both their stakeholders and local communities. While public relations practices serve as a strategic tool for managing an organization's reputation and establishing transparent communication channels, community relations play a vital role in establishing connections with local communities. By addressing their concerns, participating in charitable initiatives, and demonstrating social responsibility, organizations can create a positive local reputation and foster trust. Igben (2022) revealed in a study that some higher educational institutions use some of the tools as a matter of custom without establishing whether such tools are relevant to addressing their corporate public relations needs. Others try to allow research to precede their selection of the public relations tools of the schools, while some yet do leave their public relations tools in reckless abandon. The result in a study by Ugwuonah & Okonkwo's (2018) indicated that the international oil corporations operating in Nigeria, have a wide array of public relations tools and strategies for checkmating and managing crises and conflict with their host community publics. That the public relations crisis management tools employed by the IOCs do not have significant effect in maintaining mutual understanding between them and majority of their host community publics. That the public relations crisis management tools of the IOCs have contributed significantly to their corporate performance over the years.

A study conducted by Omorodion, Ibeneme & Ayodele (2022) revealed among others the public relation activities practiced by the School of Secondary Education (Technical),

Federal College of Education (Technical) Asaba, Delta State technical such as; having open talk-show with basic school pupils, creating awareness of technical education to the community organizations and visiting religious and social gathering to create public awareness on the need for technical education. It concluded that school public relations are a significant tool for improving students' enrollment in technical education programmes which in turn will create skilled manpower. According to a study by Emmanuel, Ndolo & Igbara (2021), public relations help in uplifting the image of First Bank of Nigeria Plc Calabar. For Dighobo & Ayara (2021), hiring of human resources, use of audience targeting and use of social media marketing enhances the implementation of school public relations programmes in TVET in Rivers State Universities. Based on the findings of the study, it was deduced that technical vocational education and training can be implemented through public relations through social media, audience targeting and hiring of human resources. A study by Igben & Ugbome (2021) revealed that there was heavy use of community relations activities by the college to build healthy relationships with her host community. From the study, the public relations unit of the college is building the positive image of the college. However, tools that can bring the college face to face with their publics to encourage two-way dialogue to build relationships have not been fully utilized. This has led to a poor image perception of the college with the resultant effect of a progressive drop in the population of students in the past 4-5 years. Each of the college publics needs to have a favourable perception of her corporate image as each public is affected by its own interest.

Findings in a study by Obinna, Ewomazina & Olley (2021) revealed that the University has a public relations office, but does not have public relations department, and that the extent of her public relations activities' effectiveness is average, amongst others. Based on the data, it was concluded that a public relations office exists rather than a Public Relations (PR) department; and that the effectiveness of public relations at Edo State University Uzairue is on the average side. A study by Irwan, Kusen, Andi & Heri (2020) revealed that the following strategies among others were identified for improving enrolment in technical teacher education through students' involvement in public relations: integrating public relations in school curriculum; proper funding of the scheme and engaging students regularly in exhibitions and job fairs. According to Gabriel (2021) public relations practice promotes the librarians' image among the library users by improving job performance of the librarians, librarians and users' interpersonal relationship, creating awareness for the various information services available in the library, increasing library patronage, increasing use of information resources by users, user satisfaction. Furthermore, the study indicated that public relations help identify users' information needs easily and encourages provision of conducive environment for users. The study revealed further that the obstacles to effective application of public relations on information service delivery and librarians' image in federal university libraries studied are; use of ambiguous language terms; frustration due to poor working condition; lack of adequate listening skills; lack of funds; lack of passion for public relations activities; lack of good communication skills and lack of interpersonal skills and so on. The study recommended among others that the library management of the universities studied should organise seminars for librarians and training on work etiquettes, good communication skills and interpersonal relations and should also create platforms where users of the library can express their dissatisfaction with the services rendered by the

librarians while monetary motivation should be given to librarians so as to get the best out of them.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGIES OF MINISTRY OF EDUCATION ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN SELECT STATES OF NORTH EAST NIGERIA

Organisations such as the Ministry of Education are engaged in the use of public relations strategies such as meetings, media relations and community relations. Others are Sponsorship, specialized training, counseling, mentorship, awards, advertorials, news releases, press conferences, workshops & seminars, newsletters, and use of social media platforms. This aligns with the one in a study by Irwan, Kusen, Andi & Heri (2020) which revealed that the following strategies were identified for improving enrolment in technical teacher education through students' involvement in public relations: integrating public relations in school curriculum; proper funding of the scheme and engaging students regularly in exhibitions and job fairs. Same with Omorodion, Ibeneme & Ayodele (2022) who revealed that the public relation activities practiced by the School of Secondary Education (Technical), Federal College of Education (Technical) Asaba, Delta State technical such as; having open talk-show with basic school pupils, creating awareness of technical education to the community organizations and visiting religious and social gathering to create public awareness on the need for technical education.

Organisations such as the Ministry of Education are involved in the use of public relations strategies to promote the Inclusive Education among people with Special Needs but the extent of their involvement is just little. This aligns with a study conducted by Igben (2022) which revealed that some higher educational institutions use some of the tools as a matter of custom without establishing whether such tools are relevant to addressing their corporate public relations needs while others try to allow research to precede their selection of the public relations tools of the schools, while some yet do leave their public relations tools in reckless abandon.

It also implies that the commitment in the application of public relations strategies in the promotion of inclusive education among the People with Special Needs is not much high but low.

The application of public relations strategies in the promotion of Inclusive Education among People with Special Needs has achieved a minimal level of success than achieving very high level of success in Nigeria. This corroborates with the ones in a study by Igben & Ugbome (2021) which revealed that there was heavy use of community relations activities by the college to build healthy relationships with her host community. From the study, the public relations unit of the college is building the positive image of the college. However, tools that can bring the college face to face with their publics to encourage two-way dialogue to build relationships have not been fully utilized. This has led to a poor image perception of the college with the resultant effect of a progressive drop in the population of students in the past 4-5 years. Likewise, a study by Obinna, Ewomazina & Olley (2021) which revealed that the Edo State University Uzairue has a public relations office, but does not have public relations department, and that the extent of her public relations activities' effectiveness is on the average and not to a great level.

Furthermore, the challenges that may hamper the implementation of public relations for enhanced inclusive education among people with special needs are: Lack of professionals; Corruption; Cultural diversity; Economic instability and poverty; lack of recognition of public relation's strategic role within organizations; Issues of trust and gender inequality; lack of working tools; poor working environment; nonchalant attitude of some Public Relations Officers, etc.

CONCLUSION

Public relations as a concept has gained a significant level of relevance among scholars as it has attracted different definitional perspectives among them. Its utilization as a communication tool in the promotion of the Inclusive Education among People with Special Needs is not in doubt and the most public relations strategies used in doing so are meetings, media relations and community relations as compared to sponsorship, specialized training, counseling, mentorship, awards, advertorials, news releases, press conferences, workshops & seminars, newsletters, and use of social media platforms. However, the use of public relations strategies to promote the Inclusive Education among people with Special Needs is to a little and not to a great extent.

As a result, the commitment of the Ministry of Education in the application of public relations strategies in the promotion of inclusive education among the People with Special Needs is not very high but low. Nevertheless, the application of public relations strategies in the promotion of Inclusive Education among People with Special Needs has achieved a minimal level of success than achieving very high level of success in Nigeria.

Challenges such as Lack of professionals; Corruption; Cultural diversity; Economic instability and poverty; lack of recognition of public relation's strategic role within organizations; Issues of trust and gender inequality; lack of working tools; poor working environment; nonchalant attitude of some Public Relations Officers are may hamper effective implementation of public relations strategies for enhanced inclusive education among people with special needs.

Finally, the use of public relations in the promotion of programmes among organisations is not in doubt but underutilization and or low commitment in the use of public relations strategies is capable of preventing the organization from achieving desired success in the use of this communication tool as evident in this study.

SUGGESTIONS

- i. Public Relations strategies should be adopted to enhance the effective implementation of inclusive education among people with special needs in any organization where applicable.
- ii. In the use of public relations strategies for enhanced inclusive education for people with special needs among organisations, particularly the Ministry of Education, effort should be made to ensure that appropriate strategies are employed for more effective results.

- iii. To achieve better results in the use of public relations strategies in the implementation of inclusive education challenges such as Lack of professionals; Corruption; Cultural diversity; Economic instability and poverty; lack of recognition of public relation's strategic role within organizations; Issues of trust and gender inequality; lack of working tools; poor working environment; nonchalant attitude must be addressed.

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