SPECIAL EDUCATION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF NIGERIA EDUCATION SYSTEM: PROBLEMS, PROSPECTS AND REMEDIES.

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Abstract

The philosophy of Special Education in Nigeria as contained in the National Policy on Education (NPE) is based mainly on integration of all exceptional children in our regular schools. The Federal Government believed that this is the most realistic system of education for our exceptional children. However, this seems to be contrary. This paper examines the concept of special education and discusses its objectives as outlined in the NPE. It also explains the obstacles to the progress of this sub-system of education. Lastly, the paper highlights the prospects of this field of education and proffers suggestions for improvement.

Education can be described as the total training of an individual leading to development of the mind and personality, including self-concept. Education will create opportunity for every citizen to effectively help himself and also contribute his quota to the development of the society. This may explain why the United Nations General Assembly in 1975 declared that: Disabled persons have the right to education which will enable them to develop their capacities and skills and will hasten the process of their social integration (Adehiran, 1989).

Special Education developed as different societies searched for suitable methods of caring for the children who deviate physically or mentally from the normal, children. It was observed that such children were not benefiting from schools. One of the early advocates of special education was Plato. In the early Greece, Plato advocated the
provision of specialized form, of education for children with superior intelligence. He mapped out a specialized curriculum in science, philosophy, logic and metaphysics for training of those children. The selection of such children was done at an early age. Plato's view was that after the rigours of educating those children, the most intelligent and knowledgeable of them would become the leaders of the state. This implies that they were to be appointed or elected as leaders. Plato was of the opinion that Creek democracy depended on its ability to educate the superior citizens for leadership positions in the society.

Plato also felt that in every democratic government, there should be people who are highly intelligent enough to encourage and allow rights of citizenship such as freedom of speech, religion, opinion association, minority rule and respect for the rights of minorities. Plato's idea of special education for the gifted spread from Greece to the Mediterranean Coast, to North Africa and other parts of the world.

In Nigeria, just like many other developing countries, special education has not been given much recognition, until of recent. Even the progress of general education is slowed down by serious problems. For instance, the educational industry in Nigeria is plagued with problems of frequent teachers strike, frequent changes in educational policies, political inference, administrative lapses, and selective funding etc.

Special Education is the individually planned and systematically monitored arrangement of physical settings, special equipment and materials, teaching procedures and other interactions designed to help exceptional, children achieve the greatest possible self sufficiency and academic success.

This definition emphasizes the maximum development and use of potentials by the exceptional children. This is only possible if the special needs of exceptional children are met through special educational programmes. A very comprehensive definition which includes some aspects not mentioned in other definitions is stated in the National Policy on Education (2012) as:

The education of children and adult who have different learning difficulties because of different sort of handicaps: blindness, partial sightedness, deafness, hard of hearing, mental retardation, social maladjustment, physical handicaps, etc. due to circumstances of birth, inheritance, social position, mental and physical, health patterns or accident in later life. There are also the specially gifted children who are intellectually precocious and find themselves insufficiently challenged by the programme of the normal school and who may take to stubbornness and apathy in resistance to it.
This definition has mentioned the categories of people to benefit directly from special education programmes, it highlighted some possible causes of their learning difficulties and the danger of not giving these exceptional children immediate special care, the definition also explains special education as an individualized instruction in which the exceptional child is treated according to his needs and abilities.

A critical examination of those national objectives as they relate to special education indicates that:

- Exceptional children have equal educational opportunities just like other children.
- After training or receiving education, an exceptional child has a role to play in promoting unity and making the nation self reliant (technologically, politically, economically etc).
- Exceptional children are entitled to fair treatment in the society.

The policy document also states that Nigeria philosophy of education is based on the integration of the individual into a sound and effective citizen and equal educational opportunities for all citizens of the nation at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, both inside and outside the formal school system. It went further to state that the quality of instruction at all levels has to be oriented towards inculcating the following values:

- Respect for the "worth and dignity of the individuals.
- Faith in man’s ability to make rational decisions.
- Moral and Spiritual values interpersonal and human relations.
- Shared responsibility for the common good of society.
- Respect for the dignity of labour,
- Promotion of the emotional, physical and psychological health of all children.

The federal government of Nigeria has recognized the need for special education by including it as one of the twelve sections in the National Policy on Education. In section 8, Article 55 and 56, the policy document outlines the objectives of special education and also how the government hopes to achieve these objectives. The three laudable objectives are:

1. To give concrete meaning to the idea of equalizing educational opportunities for all children, their physical, mental, and emotional disabilities notwithstanding
2. To provide adequate education for all handicapped children and adults in order that they may fully play their roles in the development of the nation,
3. To provide opportunities for exceptionally gifted children to develop at their own pace in the interest of the nation's economic and technological development.

The improper implementations of some of these strategies and the neglect of others have led to many problems. The setting of coordinating committee does not seem
to have been fulfilled and if the committee exists then it is not functional enough to really coordinate special education programme. Just as Cirfat, Hill, Jurman and Yaksat (1996) observe.

*The existence of such a wonderful committee to our understanding seems to be in theory than practice. May be the individual roles of the different ministries need to be specified, At best, the situation seems to be that of “the right hand not knowing what the left hand is doing”*

The promise to conduct a census for all handicapped children and adults has not been fulfilled. If at all it has been conducted, this was not made known to the public and must have excluded many areas of disability. It is difficult to make any meaningful plan for the handicapped and execute it without a reliable statistical data. This implies that after twenty years of the policy provision Special Education funding has been based on estimate.

The inclusion of elements of special education in all teachers training institutions is another achievement. The in-service training for all teachers of handicapped children is still not adequately practiced.

The decision to adopt integration as the most realistic form of special education for exceptional children is good if properly implemented. So far the policy is most on paper and not practically implemented. In most of the schools, the exceptional children have not been integrated but dumped among their, able-bodied peers. The promise to establish special classes and units in regular school has not been fulfilled. In the few schools where these special classes are established, they are poorly staffed and equipped. Bello (1995) reports that no single regular primary school in Adamawa State had any form of arrangement for the handicapped children. In a similar survey Cirfat Hill; and Yaksat (1996), found that only twelve handicapped children are fairly integrated at primary school level in Borno, Edo, and Plateau States. They also reported that only a total of eighty-two children were integrated at secondary school level in 19 States. Integration should make it fully possible for all categories of exceptional children within the regular school to live a normal life. It implies that the special needs of the exceptional children must be fully taken care of, to make them learn more effectively. They should feel accepted, respected, and clued just like other children.

The promise of special education programmes, for the gifted children in regular school has also not been fulfilled. This problem is more serious at the primary school level because identification of gifted children for special educational programme is only emphasized at the end of primary school or junior secondary school level.

The policy provision that the education of handicapped and gifted children will be free at all levels up to the university where possible has not been adequately implemented. After consultations with some exceptional children and their parents, the
author discovered that exceptional children are not enjoying free education at all. They still pay school fees and other levies just like their able-bodied or normal peers.

The provision of vocational schools, sheltered workshops and job opportunities for handicapped children and adults is another neglected area in the policy implementation. The few existing, vocational training centres do not equip the handicapped with adequate skills to enable them make a living. No sheltered workshops for handicapped children and adults to be trained or employed. The unemployment rate of handicapped is very high. As at the time of writing this paper, the author is aware of a Master’s degree holder who is handicapped and has been going about looking for job for some years.

Prospects

Despite the numerous problems militating against the progress of Special education in Nigeria, there is still hope for exceptional children. Recent development has shown that the government, some private organizations and even individuals have realized that disabled children can also be trained to contribute to the development of the society in business.

In 1981, the then president of Nigeria, Alhaji Aliyu Shehu Shagari launched the International Year of the Disabled (IYD) with a great public celebration. It was also launched in all State capitals by the civilian governors. This was a positive response to the United Nations declaration of the year as the International Year of the Disabled (IYD). Activities like public lectures, debates, film shows and sports were organized to educate the public on the needs of the disabled, and the societal role in educating or taking care of this unfortunate group of people.

Two years later a newspaper (Daily times) also reported that the President of the country had assured all trained disabled children in the country of job opportunities. He assured them of both federal and state government preparedness to take care of the disabled properly.

The hope of exceptional children in Nigeria lies on, the proper implementation of the laudable special education objectives stated in the NPE. The achievements made so far in the area of special education are positive indicators of the bright future for exceptional children.

The inclusion of elements of special education in teacher training programme implies that in the near future, all teachers especially, at primary, and secondary school level shall be competent, enough to identify and manage cases of exceptional children. The establishment of department of special education in college of education is another indicator of prospects of special education in Nigeria.

The provision of scholarship scheme for some exceptional Children is a recognition of the importance of special education for exceptional children. If the government can finally implement the proposed free education for exceptional children there will be more educated handicapped and gifted children in the country.
A philanthropic gesture of some Nigerians is another positive indicator of better life for the disabled. For example, in 1985, it was reported that the then Governor of Ondo state, commander Michael Akhigbe, directed that all his allowances should from then onward be paid towards the upkeep of disabled children in the State (SNF, 1985). Similarly, in 1986, there was another report, that the then Governor of Bauchi State, Lieutenant General Chief Garba donated two wheel chairs to two patients who were paralyzed as a result of spinal injuries they received in different accidents. It is not unusual to hear similar reports over the radio, television, newspaper, etc. whether negative or positive.

The integration method of education if properly implemented will increase such positive attitudes towards exceptional children. This will lead to better understanding of exceptional persons their full acceptance and active participation in various occupations.

Currently, there are some sophisticated facilities that make it possible for the blind, The deaf, the dumb and other handicapped people to read up to the university level.

Special hospital and institution for certain kinds of handicaps have been established in some parts of the country.

The establishment of Suleja Academy for the education of gifted children is another achievement.

The existing rehabilitation and training programmes make it possible for some of the disabled to become valuable and economically contributing members of the society.

It is hoped that the government will intensify its efforts towards the achievement of all the educational policy provisions as contained in the constitution and the NPE for better educational progress of every Nigerian child and exceptional children in particular.

**Conclusions**

The wide gap between policy statements and implementation should be bridged as soon as possible. Although the financial implications of special education programmes is quite enormous, it should be noted that there is no country however big or small that can ignore the proper education of its gifted children and continue to survive effectively in the modern world. Nigeria is blessed with some gifted and talented people who are creative enough to contribute to the economic, political and technological development of the country if given the opportunity to acquire adequate education and support.

The reality is that these trend-setters in Nigeria are not comfortable in the regular schools and the special schools are not enough to accommodate all those identified. Cirfat et al (1995) similarly observed that in providing education for all the
exceptional children, a true and realistic understanding of the problems and a realistic attitude to these exceptional persons must be maintained at all times.

Although the National Policy on Education recommended integration as the most realistic form of special education, the choice of method for teaching a particular exceptional child depends on the social, economic, educational background and extent of his disability. Adima, Ladipo, Obi and Abogi (1981:9) emphasized this by stating, that no particular method of educating exceptional child is the best but that method which effects a positive change on the child.

Lastly, the education of exceptional children should be a cooperative venture involving the home, government and non-governmental agencies.

Recommendations
1. The government should provide more funds to all educational institutions. All special schools and rehabilitation centres should be given full financial support, especially those owned by private or voluntary organizations. Without adequate funding of educational institutions, it is impossible for the exceptional children to be in regular schools or the society.

2. In tackling the problem of inadequate highly trained personnel, the government should make more provision for training of teachers and supportive staff in higher institutions and universities. This will be possible if special education is included in the courses of all Nigerian universities. Early identification of disabled children is necessary so that prompt action is taken to reduce the intensity of disability.

3. Faluro (1996) points out the need for early identification of disabled children stating that in order to benefit from post secondary education, sensory impaired children need adequate education programmes right from the pre-school level.

A survey should be conducted on regular basis to detect all exceptional children. The census, if properly conducted will provide reliable demographic and statistical data to be used in formulating plans for medical rehabilitation, vocational training and education of exceptional children. Proper identification techniques for the selection of gifted and talented children are also necessary.

The government should provide more teaching facilities and equipment in all the educational institutions. Special consideration should be given to exceptional children in the mainstreaming system so that they can learn more effectively.

The Federal Government should make it mandatory for all government ministries, government and private industries to employ a certain minimum number of disabled people at suitable level according to their acquired education or vocational training.
Regular workshop should be organized to review and consolidate the various training and rehabilitation programmes for the disabled.

The mass media should be effectively used to educate the Nigerian public on available special education programmes, special schools, rehabilitation centres or units. The government should build more special schools and rehabilitation centres for the disabled. More regular schools should be expanded to include special classes for exceptional children. The existing special schools and centres should be made less restrictive and more attractive through the provision of recreational facilities and equipment. The libraries in all the educational institutions should be modified to make them accessible to the disabled or gifted persons.

The societal negative attitudes towards exceptional children must be radically changed to positive attitudes and this change sustained continuously. This is possible since attitudes are learned and can also be unlearned. Ozoji (1991) supported this by stating that:

*Attitudes are learned and predictable attitudes towards the disabled can be changed either congruently (i.e. Increasing the negativity or positivity of existing attitude) or incongruently (i.e. from positive to negative or negative to positive).*

This implies that those who manifest negative attitude towards exceptional children can be gradually persuaded to change through the use of various attitude change techniques (Reinforcement, Modeling).

Effective follow-up service should be organized to have a more reliable assessment of the various special education programmes. For instance, a follow-up service to find out the employment status of trained disabled will throw more light on are of emphasis during vocational training, or difficulties in job placement. It will also reveal the status of the disabled during the transitional period between training and employment.

National commission for Special Education should be established without delay, to facilitate effective control monitoring and redirection of special education programmes in the country.
References


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