

Equity Access to Education and Children with Special Needs: Towards Achieving Education for All

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Abstract: *The state of education industry in Nigeria in general and Specific Needs Education (SNE) in particular has always drawn the attention, interest and concern of all stakeholders in the sector at all levels to examine the present situation and proffer the way forward. The philosophy thrust on which the National Policy on Education (NPE) is built is the provision of equal educational opportunities and access to education by every child in Nigeria irrespective of sex, religion, political and economic status of his/her parents. In line with this policy statement, the first objective of special education is to effect equalization of educational opportunities for the physically and emotionally challenged children as well as the gifted and the talented. This will enable every learner to so that every learner to reach his/her optimum educational and career development. The goal of this paper therefore is ensuring the provision of a type of education that is so skillfully adapted to the learning characteristics of every child with Special Needs which will enable him or her to succeed.*

Keywords: Employed Mothers, Marital Roles Expectations, Work-Family Balance, Nigeria's Challenges, Counselling Implications

1. Introduction

Education has to do with the systematic training of the individual in order to develop his/her latent abilities and bring about positive changes in his/her behaviours, for the purpose of making him/her a responsible and a fulfilled citizen. Hence in most societies, education is an inalienable right of every individual. It is for this reason that the Federal Government of Nigeria adopted education as an instrument per excellence for effecting national development. The issue of equity in making education available is very important as it relates to every citizen irrespective of gender, tribe, socio-economic status or disabilities. Opportunities should be specially provided especially for children with disabilities (Life Challenges) to make up the shortfalls in their abilities.

As defined by Obani (1998), special education represents the range of educational managements and provisions encompassing curriculum adaptations, modification of teaching approaches, methods and materials, different schools placement alternatives, ranging from special schooling, through partial to full integration into the regular school system put in place for children with different special educational needs. This paper advocates that the government should extend the right to equal educational opportunities to every individual no matter the circumstances of his/her life and existence.

The idea of equalizing educational opportunities for all children, their physical mental or emotional state notwithstanding, should be a task to be achieved by the government. The government should make ceaseless efforts to provide education that will be both adequate and appropriate to the different needs of all children especially, those that are physically challenged and those with moderate to severe learning difficulties. Children should receive education that is meaningful, adequate and appropriate to their needs. The concrete meaning in

equalizing educational opportunities lies in differentiated educational provisions, so that every learner is afforded an opportunity to reach his/her optimum development. Special education therefore is the education that is so skillfully adapted to a child's learning characteristics that it enables him to succeed. Such education will convert the physically challenged from a state of dependence on the public, to a state of largely independent, self reliant contributory members of their communities. Special education includes the provision of opportunities for exceptionally gifted children to develop at their own pace in the interest of the nation's scientific and technological development.

2. Who are the Children with Special Needs?

Children with special needs are persons having different physical and emotional challenges and who because of the challenges are in need of special education and related services. Hallahan & kauffman (2001) view them as those exceptional children who may be physically, socially or intellectually different. They are children who are either below or above average, and as such require educational arrangements that are individually planned and systematically monitored. Ozoji & Mugu (1999) defined a child with special needs as one who requires special learning needs either because of significant sensory deficits or unusual high intellectual ability that are not being properly addressed in the regular school programme. Some of the challenges facing children with physical needs are:

- 1) Visual impairment (total or partial blindness)
- 2) Hearing impairment (total or partial deafness)
- 3) Physical and Health impairment ((deformed limbs)
- 4) Speech impairment (stuttering or stammering)
- 5) Emotionally disturbed (Hyperactive, behaviour disorders, etc)

The gifted and talented children also manifest a range of problems as a result of their abundant gifts. Likely problems

are perfectionism, competitiveness, unrealistic appraisal of their gifts, rejection from peers, and confusion due to mixed messages about their talents, and parental and social pressures to achieve, as well as problems with unchallenging school programme or increased expectations. Some encounter difficulties in finding and choosing friends, a course of study, and eventually a career. The developmental issues that all children encounter in different stages of development exist also for gifted children. However they are further complicated by the special needs and characteristics of being gifted. Once teachers, counsellors and parents are aware of these obstacles, they are better able to understand and support the gifted children. The adult can assist the gifted to own and develop their talents by understanding and responding to adjustment challenges and coping strategies (Swanson, 2001)

3. Challenges of children with Special Needs

1) Labelling or Categorization: Children with special needs are often referred to as handicapped or disabled children characterized as those who consume services rather than those who contribute to the community. They are seen as children who require special attention because of their significant departure from normal trend in human development. As educators, our thoughts, perceptions and definitions of these children should change from seeing them as abnormal to normal children. As cautioned by Wolfolk (2004) these negative labelling often disables and make them to develop low self esteem, perceiving themselves as those who can never be successful in life. In developed countries, the children in this category are assisted to adjust to normal situation of learning and they are no longer being referred to as disabled children but as children who are coping with challenges. We should therefore learn to embrace this culture and refer to them as children who are physically and emotionally challenged having special needs and who could be helped to overcome some of these challenges or satisfy the needs and thereby become responsible individuals in life.

2) Societal Attitudes: People affected by disability are placed at the margin of decision-making and influence not only at the household level but also at the village, district, local government, state government and national levels (Fatoki, 2007). Consequently, decisions are made without consultation with this category of people resulting in their needs not being put into consideration. Thus, they are plunged into a continued state of despair, hopelessness and neglect. It is a fact that education is the best legacy that a child can receive from the parents or nation. The situation in Nigeria is that education of persons with disabilities tends to proceed at a slower pace than that of their able counterparts. This could be attributed to neglect on the part of the government at all levels in Nigeria, coupled with community apathy towards such people. This has led to an increase in poverty among people coping with challenges due to unemployment, underemployment and lack of education. Some revert to street begging and other social malaise in order to make ends meet and cushion the effect of their seemingly hopeless situation. Furthermore, the recently adopted National Curriculum for family life and

HIV/AIDS Education does not cater for the needs of children with special needs in its implementation.

3) Poor Environment of Learning: It is unfortunate that almost all the government-owned schools for the physically challenged are not structured to meet their 'special education needs, in terms of ease of movement and the condition of learning (Fatoki, 2007). Facilities and equipment for the education of special needs children are grossly inadequate.

4) Non-availability of special education teachers: Facilities for training special education teachers are not fully provided in tertiary institutions. The curriculum in most Colleges of Education does not include detailed courses in special education. Teachers of special education are fully trained at NCE level only at the College of Education, Oyo. There is the need for more of such colleges to be established to ensure rapid provision of highly trained special needs teachers who are competent in handling instructional materials that will facilitate learning and social interaction of special need students. Some universities such as the University of Jos has a department of special needs education under the faculty of education. More of such provision is needed for adequate training of special needs education teachers.

4. Provision of Special Education

Functional education for the needs of special children could be achieved through the successful implementation of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) scheme which remains the task of all stake-holders in the educational sector. To achieve this task, the scheme should be pupil- centred; promote acquisition of skills; encourage local technology, team-work and group project. Also it should be made relevant to local as well as community needs and services. As identified by Ozoji (2006) & Taiwo (2006) the relevance of the UBE curriculum to the education of special children will necessitate the provision of the following:

a) Teaching aids and learning materials: All the specialised learning equipments and facilities for the acquisition of skills should be readily available. Such facilities include walking sticks, Braille machines, tape recorders, type-writers, talking books, close-circuits television (CCTV), tracing wheel, the abacus, computers etc. The use of these aids will increase the ability of these children to grasp and transform instruction into practical realities.

b) Inclusion of special needs children in the Nigerian main stream schools: Inclusion is a philosophical position based upon the belief of the need for one educational system for all students, and that every student is entitled to an instructional programme which meets his or her individual needs and learning characteristics. A major strategy for achieving inclusion is integration which identifies students with special needs, and provides them with the necessary accommodation and adaptations, determined on an individual basis, to guarantee their success. The Government is making serious efforts to identify the exceptionally gifted children and educate them separately so that they can help the nation in development. However, the policy states that the provision for the gifted will be within the normal educational set-up. The present method of segregating

them could create disparity between the children. Moreover, the process of identifying the gifted totally ignores the children with special needs who are intellectually gifted. It is being advocated that the provision be made for all the children to be taught together so as to enhance the intellectual ability and emotional stability of students with special needs (Adeniyi & Egunjobi, 2003).

c) **Establishment of Special Education Needs**

Commission: A Special Education Needs Commission (SENC) should be established as a special form of the Universal Basic Education Commission to coordinate the special education activities in collaboration with other relevant organs of Government such as Ministries of health, Social Welfare and labour. The Commission when established should be backed up by law which may be termed, 'the guidance of children with special needs'. This law should mainly regulate and define the possibilities for guiding children with special needs into various educational programmes and the chance to move between programmes. It should also stipulate the preparation of individualised programme for each child in an educational institution in accordance with the programme into which the child has been guided. The active role of parents which is very important in the process of guiding a child to the most suitable programme should also be provided in the law.

d) **Adequate statistical data:** There is the need for the Government to set up a database of special needs children by age, gender, locality and type of need. Also the schools should furnish the Education Ministry with information on children who could be classified as being highly gifted. The aim is to be able to harness their potential beyond the mere granting of scholarships. The provision of up-to-date data will help Government to make adequate preparation for the needs of these children.

e) **Provision of Special Education Support:** Special educational support through special arrangements of regular education programmes (inclusive education remedial teachers and additional teaching hours). Education with special support should be organized in mainstream schools in co-operation or with assistance and practical support of special teachers or other professionals. Special support is provided inside the classroom, during class lessons, or outside the classroom, part-time or full-time depending on the individual, organisational and institutional situations.

f) **Adapted education programme:** An adapted programme retains the learning outcomes (equal educational standards) for the prescribed curriculum, but adaptations are provided so that SEN pupils can participate in the programme. Adaptations, which take different forms for specific categories of pupils, are offered in segregating setting (in special classes or special schools). There are 5 types of such special schools: For visually impaired and blind pupils; for hearing impaired and deaf pupils for pupils with impaired speech; for physically disabled pupils and for pupils with severe behavioural problems. Special classes should also be offered in pre-school institutions and in elementary schools.

g) **Modified Educational Programme with different learning outcomes (educational standards at the lower level):** A modified programme has learning outcomes which are substantially different from the prescribed curriculum, and specifically selected to meet special needs of pupils with mild mental disabilities. It should be offered in (1) Special classes of elementary schools and in (2) elementary classes of special institutions. Modified in this case means that certain subjects are omitted from the general curriculum (less intensive curriculum) and that educational standards are set at the lower level.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

From its objectives, the UBE programme should have the entire citizenry which include children with special needs as its target. Physically challenged children constitute an important segment of the population and any special provision for equipping and providing equity of access to education for this class of persons is very much welcomed.

Unfortunately, every indication of equity of access to education of children with special needs in Nigeria seems to be a mirage presently. Only special provisions in terms of legislation and adequate budgetary allocation for these classes of people will guarantee the much desired access to education. Genuine efforts to achieving the objectives of the Education For All (EFA) under the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with regards to children with special needs in Nigeria is more of dreams than reality. To make it a reality, this paper makes the following recommendations:

- 1) The government should extend the right to every individual to acquire education to his/her fullest ability, no matter the circumstances of such individual's life and existence.
- 2) The government should provide education that is adequate and appropriate to every learner's needs and circumstances and within the inclusive or responsive regular school system. Provision should be made for inclusion of special needs children in the Nigerian main stream schools. Learners with special needs should be integrated into the day-to-day life of the classroom and be provided with the necessary accommodation and adaptations relevant to their needs to guarantee their success.
- 3) Department of special education should be established in colleges of education with provision of necessary facilities for training of teacher who specialize in special education. Also more universities should offer degree programmes. In special education to ensure adequate training of teachers.
- 4) Special education instructors should be employed for schools who could work together with general education teachers in inclusive classrooms. Both the general education teachers in inclusive classrooms. Both the general education teacher and the special education teacher can collaborate to assume equal responsibility for the education of the physically challenged. They can do cooperative teaching or consultation as well as planning together on how to teach students with special needs or solve their problems. They could do team

- teaching, alternative teaching or one could teach, while the other gives the needed support.
- 5) The government – owned schools for the physically challenged should be structured to meet the needs of the students. Adequate facilities and equipment should be provided together with teaching aids for effective learning. For example, there should be resource rooms allocated to different classes depending on the population of physically challenged students in a school. A resource room is a classroom with special materials and a teacher professionally trained in special education who could work directly with special – need students.
- 6) Through in-house seminar government should train the general education teachers on how to teach effectively in inclusive classrooms. For example
- (i) Teachers could make students to do class assignment together in cooperative groups with the physically challenged learners and the regular education student put together for the group work. The teacher should keep similar schedules and activity patterns for all students.
 - (ii) Teacher could incorporate the special help for students with challenges into the class settings, perhaps during a time when the other students are working independently. Students needing special help can also go to resources room to receive instruction individually or in small groups, such instruction could be on speech therapy or remedial coaching in any subject.
 - (iii) The teachers’ language and behaviour towards students with challenges should be encouraging, accommodating and pleasant.
 - (iv) The teacher should teach about differences among people as part of the curriculum. Such knowledge will make the students to be familiar with aids for students with special needs such as hearing aids, sign language, communication boards etc. with such knowledge students in the regular education will be able to communicate better with the physically challenged while the latter will improve in social adjustment and academic performance.
 - (v) Teachers should make teaching to be highly practical and participatory. They should give the students assignment that will unfold their abilities in different ways. Such assignment could include writing, drawing, moulding, organizing, demonstrating, cooking, helping, planning etc.
- 7) Government should create a unit of inclusive education in the inspectorate division and programme should include supervision of schools which operate inclusive education for the purpose of evaluating the success and wellbeing of special education need children.
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