PROFESSIONAL STANDARD OF PRACTICE FOR SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION TEACHERS IN NIGERIA

Christopher Mtadaomyi Vande, Ph.D.
Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation Sciences,
University of Jos,
Jos,
Plateau State.

Juliana Bodang, Ph.D
Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation Sciences,
University of Jos,
Jos,
Plateau State.

And

Elizabeth Ugoh, Ph.D
Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation Sciences,
University of Jos,
Jos,
Plateau State.

Abstract
The paper highlighted issues that are pertinent to professional standards of practice for Special Needs Education Teachers in Nigeria. The requirements for a professional standard of practice were discussed extensively, especially the entry behaviour. Professional code of ethics are re-stated for emphasis and appropriate recommendations are drawn up for standard professionalism of Special Needs Education in Nigeria.

The Longman English Dictionary of Contemporary English (1985) defined a profession as "a form of employment, especially one that is respected in the society as honourable and is possible only for an educated person and after training in some special branch of knowledge (such as law, medicine, and engineering). Similarly, professionalism is defined as the behaviour, skill or qualities shown by a professional person.

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The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) (2008) stated that there is no agreed definition of profession and so adopted the definition proposed by the Australian Council of professions which defined a profession as “a disciplined group of individuals who adhere to high ethical standards and uphold themselves to and are accepted by the public as possessing special knowledge and skills in a widely recognized, organized body of learning derived from education and training at a high level and who are prepared to exercise this knowledge and these skills in the interest of others”.

Inherent in these definitions is for one to be a professional one must:
1. Have a high level of education and be trained in some special branch of knowledge.
2. Be disciplined and adhere to high ethical standards.
3. Must demonstrate competence and skill in the area of specialization.

Special Needs Education being a unique profession should operate within this parameter. Many decades back, the teaching profession was highly respected and honourable, and in fact was regarded as one of the most popular “white-collar-job” in the society. Of course, these teachers lived up to expectation in their acquisition of knowledge, skills and competences. Those of us that were opportune to be trained by some of these teachers can testify to the standard of practice then.

“Standard” simply means “a thing against which something may be compared for testing or measurement, a level of quality or achievement reached or acquired”. In other words, there is a level of operation expected of the teaching profession particularly special needs education because of the specialized skills involved in handling these unique children.

What then are the requirements for professional standard of practice for Special Need Education teachers?

The requirements for professional standard of practice are more or less the same for every profession be it medicine, engineering, law and our teaching profession.

The requirements:
1. The entry behaviour
2. Personnel preparation
3. Professional code of ethics
4. Specialized knowledge, skill and competence.

1. **The Entry Behaviour**

The caliber of people admitted into a profession talks volume about the professional status of such a profession. The basic requirements at ordinary level (O’L) for most professions such as medicine, law, nursing, engineering in Nigeria just to mention a few, is 5 credits which would include English language with or without mathematics (depending on the course and credits in related courses). For example, a candidate proposing to study medicine must have credits in core courses such as English language, mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology. Candidates proposing to study Special Needs Education also at the University level are expected to have 5 credits in the related courses. The distinguishing factor however is the performance of the candidates in JAMB Examination while a very high cut off mark is attached to medicine and some other professions, courses under education generally including Special Needs Education is scored low. The unfortunate thing that compounds this, is also the fact that as many as are not able to get into courses chosen as their first choices, see Special Needs Education as the place to be. In other words, Special Needs Education seems to be the dumping ground for the rejects of the other professions. Adeniyi (1995) expressed that “these students eventually become and remain unwilling and reluctant students; such students even when they manage to graduate usually find it difficult to associate themselves with Special Needs Education. No sooner had they completed their course of study than they began to look for jobs different from the area of their training. They have nothing to add to the improvement of Special Needs Education”. Definitely these ones would be performing below standard.

Another area we need to take a critical look at again is the entry behaviour into our teacher training colleges and Colleges of Education. In this 21st century when other professions are thinking of how to improve on their professions and standard of practices, the admission criteria at Ordinary Level (O’L) is 3 credits, and in some cases may be lower. Majority of these candidates find it difficult to express themselves in both oral and written English language, which is the required language for learning other subjects. We as professionals must insist on 5 credits for Special Need Education, we should expect that anything lower than this will result in lowered professional standard because you can only give what you have.

Fagbemi (1987) while expressing his concern about the decline in teachers’ competence attributed it to massive admission of secondary school drop-outs into the teaching standard and also served as a catalyst towards under-achievement and crisis in education.
If we are to redeem this noble profession, our voices must be heard at the government level and to the policy makers. The standard of admission into the teaching profession should by no means be lower than that of other professions. By this, the teaching profession would earn the respect due to it like other professions.

2. **Personnel Preparation for Special Needs Education**

Children with special needs are usually found in our regular schools, and they have suffered neglect in the hands of the regular teachers because they are not skilled in handling them. For this reason, the report of the Commissioner of Enquiry into the education of Handicapped Children and Young people otherwise called “The Warnock Report” (1978) recommends two levels of training for teachers who will work with Special Educational needs.

1. Training for Regular Teachers
2. Training for Special Needs Education Teachers

The training for regular teachers requires that Special Needs Education courses be included in the curriculum of initial teacher training up to the university level. This is because regular teachers would come across children with special needs at all levels of education – primary, secondary and tertiary. This we know is the practice now in our institutions of learning in the country. This group would be trained in practical skills in the observation of children and in identifying their special needs, it does not matter the nature of disability.

The second training is aimed at those specializing in any area of Special Needs Education ranging from NCE to Doctoral degrees in the Universities. This training would lead to certification.

The Report therefore insists that all courses leading to this recognized qualification must include:

> a general component which would aim to give teachers knowledge on the general characteristics and signs of different types of disability and to equip them with a basic core of teaching skills appropriate to the teaching of children with a range of Special Educational needs. I think we are on course as far as these trainings are concerned. (Warnock Report, 1978:24)

Mitler (1981) projecting into the future of Special Needs Education had this to say that:

> he wondered what the fate of Special Needs Education would be in the 2020s and also the training of Special Needs education teachers in the 21st century. Postulating that Special Needs Education will increasingly continue to move out of four walls of the school into the wider community thought it
necessary that there should be the basic skills which would make up the core curriculum of training.

3. **Professional Code Ethics**

   Ethics are codes of conduct, the basis of moral behaviour. They differ from law in that while ethics are morality oriented, and provided by Teachers’ Unions; laws are legally oriented.

   Professional ethics are the basic habits made up of equitable principles or rules which are worthwhile standards and guides to good conduct of members.

   Oyekan (2006) contended that bad behaviours which constitute unethical practices are wholly discouraged with appropriate sanctions on erring members by the professional body. Professional ethics also have sociological aspects of humanity as they are concerned with the issues of self-control and self-regulation in the discharge of members’ professional duties. Hence, professional code of ethics is a collection of morally acceptable values, traditions and practices primarily intended to guide and regulate the conduct of members of any occupation.

   In fashioning a code of ethics for Special Needs Education, Okediran (1995) noted that it may be useful to refer to the Nigerian Union of Teachers Code of Ethics as outlined by Fafunwa (1974:18)

   A. **Responsibility to the Student**

   1. Deal justly and impartially with pupils and students regardless of their physical, mental, emotional, economic, social, racial or religious characteristics.
   2. Recognize and respect individual differences and seek to meet their individual educational needs.
   3. Have no indecent relationship with the students in his/her school.
   4. Withhold confidentiality about a student, or his own except its release is to authorized agencies.
   5. Have proper knowledge of students problem and give adequate and accurate information about students’ progress.
   6. Keep adequate records of students’ progress.
   7. All students to have access to progress reports.

   B. **Responsibility to Parents**

   1. To respect the basic desires of parents for the education of their children.
   2. Assist and encourage parents to actively participate in the education of their children.
   3. Provide parents information about their children that will excite them to assist their children.
   4. Foster good relationship between home and school.
C. Responsibility to Employers
1. Conduct to his/her professional duties through the proper channels.
2. Refrain from discussing confidential and official information with unauthorized persons.
3. Maintain active compulsory membership in a professional organization, strive to attain the objectives of such a professional body.
4. Not conduct oneself in a manner detrimentally injurious to the interest of the profession.

D. Responsibility to the Community
1. Adhere to a reasonable pattern of behaviours accepted by the community for professional persons.
2. Recognize that the school belongs to the community, encouraging lay particular portion in shaping the purposes of the school.
3. Work to raise educational standard and to strengthen the community’s moral, spiritual and intellectual life.

Basic Professional Skills in Competence Needed for Standard Practice in Special Needs Education

Four (4) major areas were identified by Mitler (1981) as essential ingredients for Special Needs Education teachers if they must have a standard practice. The essential ingredients are:
(a) Skills for working with children
(b) Skills for working with parents
(c) Skills in learning acquiring information
(d) Specialized knowledge, skill and competence.

a. Skills for Working with Children
Professionals in Special Needs Education are expected to have abilities in assessment, diagnosis and evaluation of children’s problems and needs. They must also be experts in designing and implementing individualized programmes to mediate these, making use of several instructional approaches, especially the behavioural.

b. Skills for Working with Parents
Parents are very crucial to the practice of Special Needs Education. It is therefore crucial for professional to acquire skills in counseling, which is needed for securing the cooperation of parents and for involving them in the planning and implementation of programmes for their children.
c. **Skills in Learning and Acquiring Information**

Professionals should acquire necessary skills in learning and to acquire information, this would equip the teachers with the ability to know how to gather and analyze information on the relevant developments in teaching and research.

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**d. Specialized Knowledge, Skill and Competence**

Special needs education teachers must be an embodiment of knowledge in theory and practice of Special Needs Education. This would enhance their skill and competence. For example, Special Needs Education teachers must be competent in identification, assessment, diagnosis and management of children which affect the educational placement of such a child.

Ipaye (1996) in agreement with the need for specialized knowledge and competence for Special Needs Education teachers, examined the competences and skills required by these teachers and children with special needs vis-à-vis ability to do some minor diagnosis and identification to categorize children according to the types of disabilities especially in cases where the type of disability is not easily apparent. Such diagnosis, he said, would serve as first step in programme planning, referral and placement.

Acquisition of specialized knowledge also has to do with how to source for information in our discipline. For instance, through current books, journals and the use of the internet. It is highly commendable that a number of us in this profession are doing well in these areas. However, a good number of us are still non-computer literate in this 21st century, hw then do we expect to keep abreast with what is going on in the world in our special areas? How do we expect to be role models and mentors to our students?

Again, some of us in special areas such as hearing or visual impairments are not competent in sign language or the use of Braille Machine. What then are we teaching these students? Definitely, we are lowering the standard of practice of our profession. We need to have a change of attitude and respond positively to what is going on in our environment.

Interestingly the National Policy on Education (2004) have all these expected standards of practice spelt out in the philosophy and goals of education in Nigeria. Often times, the problem we have in this country is the implementation of such policies. We need to have Special Needs Education Teachers as part of the policy makers at the Federal and State levels. They would know what it takes to practice
Let us briefly look at the professional standard of practice for Special Needs Education teachers in two developed countries.

1. South Australia
2. England

(1) Professional Standard for Special Needs Education in South Australia

Areas identified as mandatory for the special needs education teachers are:

1. Professional values
2. Professional knowledge
3. Professional practice
4. Professional relationships

Professional Values

Special Needs Education teachers are expected to have value for students’ capacity for learning, inclusive practice partnership in teaching and learning. They should also embrace change collaborative consultative approaches, value for diversity, individual abilities and learning styles.

Professional Knowledge

Special Needs Education teachers must be:
1. Knowledgeable in theory, teaching and learning
2. Must be knowledgeable about the state and national legislation and policies.
3. Must be knowledgeable about curriculum specific to the individual needs of the learner.
4. Must have understanding about pedagogies and assessment strategies that facilities learning.
5. Must be involved in current research, curriculum, innovative practices, trends and issues.

Professional Practice

Three areas are critical to professional practice
1. Professional learning and leadership
2. Inclusive methodology, that is, the practices that cater for the diversity of learners and assessment of learners to know and plan for their needs.

Professional Relationships

Special Needs Education teachers must believe that
1. Professional standard of practice has to do with collaboration with a range of professionals.
2. Engaging actively in sharing expertise and connecting with professional groups, support services, agencies and networks.
3. Partnership with parents and students are respected; valued and maximized.
4. Mentoring was also seen as important as was built capacity within their professional communities and empowering families (Caroline Palmer, 2008).

(2) **Professional Standard for Teachers in England**

It is expected that teachers should:

1. Be willing to take a leading role in developing workplace policies and practice and in promoting collective responsibility for their implementation.
2. Should research and evaluate innovative curriculum practices and draw on research outcomes and other sources of external evidence to inform their own practice and that of colleagues.
3. Have a critical understanding of the most effective teaching, learning and behaviour management strategies, including how to select and use approaches that personalize learning to provide opportunities for all learners to achieve their potential.
4. Know how to improve the effectiveness of assessment practice in the workplace including how to analyze statistical information.
5. Have an extensive knowledge on matters concerning equality, inclusive and diversity in teaching.
6. Take a lead in planning collaboratively with colleagues in order to promote effective practice.
7. Demonstrate excellent ability to assess and evaluate.
8. Work closely with leadership teams taking a leading role in developing, implementing and evaluating policies and practice that contribute to school improvement.

(Extracts from the Rewards and Incentives Group (RIG) evidence (Section 9 “The New Teacher Professionalism” to the school Teachers’ Review Body (STRB) on 25th May 2005).

All these expected standards of practice in these two countries have been legislated, and from time to time they are reviewed, just to ensure that the teachers are working within the parameter art for their practice. Any erring member is punishable by the law.
The Role of the National University Commission (NUC), National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) and Teachers’ Registration Council (NRC) in Setting Standards

While the NUC is exclusively for the Universities, the NCCE for COEs and the Teachers’ Registration Council (TRC) is responsible to all arms of the teaching profession at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels.

The NUC is responsible for accreditation of programmes in the Universities. Accreditation has to do with the evaluation of the standard of the programme vis-à-vis the number of qualified teachers, available equipment and teaching materials, teacher students’ ratio, whether it is adequate, etc.

All these are done to ensure standard of practice; and any department found short of this would not be accredited and they have the power to close such department(s) down. The universities know the implication of this that is why they make every effort to ensure that everything is in place.

Same goes for all the Colleges of Education, their programmes are accredited by the National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE). This is also to ensure quality control. The power is also vested on them to cancel any programme that is found short of their expectation. This obviously keeps us as teachers on our toes to ensure that we have adequate requirements and are operating with the expected standard.

The Teachers Registration Council (TRC) is responsible for certification of all teachers at all levels – primary, secondary and tertiary. This means that they are responsible for regulating the entry behaviour, code of conduct, etc.

We are all aware of the fact that a few years back all teachers have been mandated to register and be issued certificates by this council. This is to ensure that right people are in the profession. Those that are not trained teachers especially at the University level have since enrolled for the Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE). Well, we can say that this is a step towards a positive direction, but then, how effective has this been? Is it really being enforced? How many teachers that got registered even about three years ago have gotten their certificates? This is not good enough. This does not happen in other professions, such as medicine, nursing, etc.

These professionals mandatory at the completion of their programmes get registered with their respective councils, and they are issued pin numbers for their practice. This is renewable every three years, and part of the requirement for renewal is an evidence of attendance of a conference or a workshop within those three years.
With this, a standard is maintained and there would be a check on the quacks that may want to infiltrate into the profession.

Alao (1990) showing concern about what goes on in the teaching profession has this to say: “Regrettable, teaching has become the melting point for the influx of all sorts of people who are not professionally qualified as teachers”. Even in some of our special schools we have some that are not Special Needs Educators; obviously, the standard of practice would be below the expectation.

The teaching profession therefore should take a cue from other noble professions that would not admit unqualified and unregistered members into their profession. This is food for thought for our council and those of us in the profession.

Factors that can Affect the Standard of Practice for Special Needs Education Teachers in Nigeria
1. Lowered standard of admission into the profession.
2. Unskilled teachers in the classroom.
3. Wrong personnel as policy makers for special needs education.
4. Poor/low remuneration for special needs education teachers.
5. Non-procurement of equipments and teaching materials.
6. Refusal to acquire knowledge and skills in their special areas: ICT, conferences, workshops.
7. Poor monitoring or (lack of mentors).
8. Wrong people in the special needs education profession.
9. Poor funding.

Conclusion
A number of issues that are pertinent to professional standards of practice for Special Needs Education Teachers in Nigeria have been highlighted and discussed in this paper, especially the entry behaviour. By no means should we encourage lowered standard in the entry requirements into the teaching profession. Excellence in practices should be our watchword. Special needs education is unique and requires highly skilled and competent professionals, hence we need to see the reasons for acquisition of knowledge and competence in our areas of specialty.

However, factors that can affect our standard of practice were highlighted and recommendations were made. Conclusively, we have come a long way in this profession and we know we are making progress, even though it may be at a snail speed, we would get there.
The admonition to us today is that we all rise up to the various challenges facing us in this profession, let us not grow weary, we are the ones that can redeem our noble profession from the present state. I can say with all confidence that we are better than yesterday and tomorrow will be better than today.

**Recommendations for Improved Standard of Practice in Nigeria**

The following are the recommendations for standardized professional practice.

1. Admission of qualified candidates into our colleges of education/universities.
2. Supervision of newly qualified teachers/internship like some other professions.
3. Ensuring that teachers develop their skills and competencies, e.g. the use of computer, reading of books, journals, attending conferences, workshops, etc at local and international levels.
4. Ensuring collaboration with other related professionals.
5. In-service training should be encouraged.
6. Registration of teachers by the recognized council, which should be renewed every three or five years as the case may be.
7. Good leadership
8. Good mentoring
9. Good funding by the government
10. Legislation of policies made
11. Special allowances for special needs education teachers are allowed to teach special needs education courses.
12. Heads of institutions of special needs education at all levels should be qualified special needs educators.

**References**


