

REPOSITIONING SPECIAL EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper examined the practice of special education within the context of the latest edition of the National policy on Education (2004). The problems of special education programmes in Nigeria are enunciated. Finally some recommendations towards improved special education programmes are considered.

Introduction

Special education is education within general education designed to render specialized services directed towards meeting the individual needs of exceptional persons (Okeke,2001). In Nigeria, special education is not new but dates back to the sixteenth century (Adima 1987). According to him, special education developed with the culture of the people. But special education in its modern (formal) form did not begin until early 1950s when the missionaries and other voluntary agencies started to arrive in the country. The following decade witnessed the establishment of many special schools.

Ozaji (1993) observed that right from the beginning, the partnership between voluntary agencies and the government formed the basis for formal form of special education. This is because the government allowed the agencies the free hands to determine and establish special schools, approved schemes meant for special education, grant-aided the agencies and provided other forms of moral support.

On 1st October 1974, Major General Gowon declared during his broadcast, the interest of the government in providing education and care for the handicapped. Following this declaration,-a number of developments evolved one of which is the devotion of a whole section of the National Policy on Education (section 8) to special Education..

The Concept of Special Education

Special education refers to all the educational programmes designed for those who by the reason of significant deviation from the majority of the children cannot benefit from regular school programme. According to

Ozaji (2003) special education is "a set of interventions tailored to address the usual (common to all children) and unusual (limited to the peculiarities of the child) needs of the children considered exceptional by virtue of their significant deviant traits." Therefore what regular education does for the non-exceptional children is what special education does for the exceptional children.

The latest edition of *National Policy on Education* (2004) defined special education as "a formal special educational training given to; disabled, disadvantaged and gifted and talented adults and children. Special programmes include early intervention programme, education programme, vocational training programme, gifted education programme, homebound programme and hospital instructional programme (Ozaji 2003)

The importance, which the government attaches to special education, is clearly seen in the aims/objectives of special Education (NFE 2004, section 10) as follows;

- (1) To give concrete meaning to the idea of equalizing educational opportunities for all children, their physical, sensory, mental, psychological or emotional disabilities notwithstanding.
- (2) To provide adequate education for all people with special needs in order that they may fully contribute their own quota to the development of the nation.
- (3) To provide opportunities for exceptionally gifted and talented children to develop their talents, natural endowments/traits at their own pace in the interest of the nation's economic and technological development.

(4) To design a diversified and appropriate curriculum for all beneficiaries.

The policy also stated among others that all necessary facilities that would ensure access to education inclusive education, regular census, special equipment and materials, training and retraining of personnel, ideal teacher/pupil ration in special schools, funds and conducive physical environment should be provided.

The foregoing laudable policy intentions and statements notwithstanding, the implementation of special education programmes in Nigeria is still a far cry from what is obtainable on paper as it is bedeviled with a number of problems which defeat the purpose of special education as stipulated in the aims and objectives in the policy. The following have been identified by some authorities (Ozaji, 1993; Ugwu, 1994; Eduwari, 1995; and Mallubu, 2003) as some of the major problems militating against rapid development of special education in Nigeria.

1. Poor funding: Due to poor funding, services provided are substandard and the beneficiaries of the programmes are in great discomfort of hunger and ill health. Consequently many have taken to the streets to fend for themselves as beggars thus constituting social menace.
2. Inadequate equipment: In a recently concluded investigative study on the status of special education facilities in Anambra state, Eberechukwu (2005) found that special equipment and materials in the two special education centers and the four integrated schools in the state, are grossly inadequate. In one of the integrated secondary schools, there was only one old model Braille typewriter. Similarly, Mallubu (2003) noted that most of the special equipment and materials in use in Nigeria are too old and therefore often failed to yield the expected result. In spite of the fact that we are in a science and technology dominated era.
3. Problem of personnel: The curricular content of teachers' training does not prepare the prospective teachers with the needed skills and competence to handle handicapped children on graduation (Oluigbo, 1986) Oluigbo also observed that supportive are generally non-existent. The result of the study conducted by Eberechukwu (2005), also revealed that more than 50% of the teachers teaching the handicapped in the special education centers in the state of study have neither received any form of training in special education nor had any type of in-service training. Without trained hands, how does the nation hope to provide appropriate education for exceptional persons?
4. Inequality of educational opportunities: There is unequal awareness and provision of education for the various types of handicapped persons contrary to the objective of giving "concrete meaning to the idea of equalizing educational opportunities for all children " Adima (1989) noted that "opportunities for education are much better for the blind and deaf than for the physically and mentally retarded." There is no special education facility for the multiply handicapped known to the presenter.
5. Lack of infrastructural facilities: In most cases, the infrastructures are non-existent. The physically handicapped are faced with architectural barriers in their various schools. There are no ramps, many are not provided with wheel-chairs, crutches and artificial limbs (Mallubu, 2003).
6. Problem of legislation: The gap between policy statements on special education and their implementation is due to absence of appropriate legislation. Without appropriate legislation, the developmental rate of special education would be very low since there will be no basis to regulate it.

The problems highlighted above calls for a repositioning of special education in Nigeria especially as it affects the areas touched, in order to allow for better delivery of special educational services.

The following are recommended as measures that could be taken to achieve significant improvement in the implementation of special education in Nigeria.

- (1) To ameliorate the problem of inadequate funding, the prevailing economic crutch calls for the cooperative efforts of communities' voluntary organizations, religious bodies and individuals in providing funds for the delivery of special education programmes. This will reduce the financial burden on government. To serve as incentives to donors or sponsors, honours, awards or tax rebates could be given. The various levels of government can have

consolidated account for financing special education programme under the control of the National Council for Exceptional Children. Thus funds for meeting the divergent needs of the handicapped will be secured.

- (2) No educational education can thrive without adequate personnel. To provide the appropriate teaching and supportive staff needed for the deliver}' of special education services, government should as a matter of urgency, organize seminars, workshops and in-service programmes for the training and retraining of special education personnel as stipulated in the FRN (2004). Government should mount special education programmes in all teacher^ training programmes of universities that presently do not run such programmes.
- (3) Thirdly, to improve the delivery of special education programmes in Nigeria, appropriate legislation should be provided. In the United States of America, legislation has been used to improve the education of exceptional persons. The Education for All Handicapped Act otherwise known as the American Public laws (P.L 94-142) of 1975 (which mandates a national commitment to the education of all handicapped children) is a good example. In Nigeria, legislation should be similarly provided mandating the education of all her handicapped persons. Legislation should also be initiated for special budgetary allocation for special education. By so doing, most of the problems facing the field, which are attributable to lack of funds, would be arrested. Legislation will also reverse the present state of inequality of educational opportunities available for different categories of the handicapped and rid our streets of destitute, as every handicapped child of school age must be in school.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted a sensitization to the need for a repositioning of special education in Nigeria against the background of the most recent edition of the *National Policy on Education* FRN (2004). The need which borders majorly on funding, personnel and legislation has been used as a basis for advancing measures through which improved delivery of special education programmes can be attained. The presenter is hopeful that the recommendations should guide future practice.

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