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## **A Collective Behaviour Towards an Advocacy for Persons With Learning Disabilities: A Sociological Approach**

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### **Abstract**

*Special needs persons constitute a significant group of the Nigerian population. Issues affecting their welfare therefore deserve more than a mere cursory glance. More so, it is now evidently apparent that there is ability in disability. The main thrust of the paper is creating a collective behaviour towards legislation for persons with learning disabilities. It advocates a synergy of positive efforts from all quarters – parents groups, the press, legal angle, education terrain, in fact, the general public towards ameliorating the plight of individuals living with learning disabilities.*

Every human being is born with some qualities and characteristics. When a child has need for special education, that does not mean that the child should be denied

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care and respect which other children enjoy. Human beings are complex creatures, therefore attempting to label who is “disabled” or “retarded” does not always help in providing the appropriate education for that child. However, definitions, are supposed to be used for funding, research and professional exchange of information purposes and not judgmental.

Many attempts had been made to define learning disabilities, since Kirk coined the concept in 1963 (Haring, 1982). In 1993, the British Draft Code Practice defined children with learning difficulties as those whose general level of academic achievement is significantly lower than that of peers. Others view children with learning disabilities as students who learn differently or more slowly than others. They believe that such children have process deficits, demonstrate uneven development of abilities, process information differently, have neurological or neuropsychological deficit or disorders, perform poorly in school but are not mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, environmentally disadvantaged or sensorily impaired (Smith, 2007).

#### **A. Learning Disabilities and National Policy on Education (NPE)**

The result of deliberations of the 1969 National Curriculum conference held in Lagos led to the publication of the National Policy on Education in 1997. This policy on Education (2004) is based on the development of an individual into a wholesome, functional and self reliant citizen. It guarantees full integration of the individual into the community, provision of equal access to educational opportunities for all citizens of the country at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. The NPE also stipulates that education facilities that would ensure access to education would be provided. It is over half a century since the first educational facility on special education was established in Nigeria. Though the school had brought a ray of hope to millions of persons with disabilities in this country, yet the life and conditions of our children who are so challenged are still crippled by the manacles of stagnation, discrimination, rejection and exclusion (Abang, 2009).

#### **B. Nigeria with Disability Decree**

Abang (2009) records that in 1993, the military government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria promulgated a decree called “Nigeria with disability decree”. The purpose of the decree is to provide a clear and comprehensive, legal protection and security for Nigerians with disabilities. It is also to establish standards for enforcement of the rights and privileges guaranteed under the decree and the laws applicable for the people with disabilities in the Federal Republic of Nigeria. In the declaration of the policy, people with disabilities are guaranteed treatment as equals to other Nigerians for all purposes. Unfortunately, though these policies have been so logically and coherently postulated, they have never been put to practice. Ugwu (2009) recorded that Nigeria, a developing country is a signatory to the document of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) 2000 and child Rights Acts 2003; so it is pertinent that issues on the sociological challenges of people living with disabilities be addressed objectively rather than paying lip service to the agonizing situations of such persons.

### **Nigeria Disability Decree and Collective Behaviour**

The term “collective behaviour” is a sociological theory which stipulates a social movement carried out by those who perceive the environment as not meeting its expected obligations. The theory also proposes that when people become impatient with a failed expectation, actions which generate news must be considered and this news must add value to the society. The Nigerian disability decree is yet to gather such momentum to effect the necessary change. This is a clarion call for such collective behaviour among Nigerians for positive impact on special needs persons.

#### **C. The Concept of Advocacy**

An advocate is someone who pleads the cause of another or who defends or maintains a particular cause or proposal. As a general movement, child advocacy for example can be defined as any social, political or legal action that is intended to achieve a better life for children from infancy to adulthood (Lourie, 1975). There are several forms of child advocacy especially relevant to special children.

1. **Case Advocacy:** Case advocacy functions in the interest of a specific child and seeks to secure for the child those services to which the child is entitled to. The objective of case advocacy includes such as gaining or increasing existing rights, services, resources and developing new rights.
2. **Class Litigation:** Legal action on behalf of a class of children is a form of advocacy in which the courts are used to promote change. Class action litigation for special children can be involved for a variety of purposes:
  - to remove children from mental institutions when there is the appearance that they have been committed by parents as a punitive action;
  - to secure services for special children who have been excluded from public schools;
  - to remove children from special classes that parents consider to be inappropriate.
3. **Monitoring:** a monitor is someone who watches over something or someone. The purpose of monitoring in child advocacy is to hold systems accountable for the rights that have already been defined and upheld by law or legal action.
4. **Legislative Advocacy:** Legislative advocacy seeks to ensure that law themselves are appropriate to the needs and rights of children. Those who are involved with the needs of children must be willing to bring pressure to bear at both Federal and State levels in order to ensure the adequacy of legislation that affects rights to critical services. Public law 94 - 142 is an example of the central importance of legislation as a means of addressing the needs of special children.

#### **D. How Would Advocacy Be Carried Out?**

The fulcrum of this advocacy would be on the reactivation of the disability decree. It is believed that if the steps enunciated below are followed, success shall be achieved.

##### **1. Education**

- Public awareness and enlightenment on the significance of equal rights for the children with learning disabilities.
- Just as enlightenment on HIV/AIDS, TB and Malaria. Unequal treatment of those with learning disability, the tax payers and the general public and indeed, all Nigerians would begin to identify all forms of disability decree to be operational.

2. **Parental groups:** The American experience has proved that this is the most powerful pressure group in working for the rights of the children with disabilities. These are parents who are directly experiencing the problems of the children the learning disability.

3. **The Press:** The significant role of the press in the legislation for those living with learning disability must be given high priority. Parents' groups with excellent press relations might consider inviting the press to attend their executive sessions on an off – the record bases. This will indicate to the reporters that parents trust them and want their cooperation too. When organizing a press conference; the parents group should be properly prepared so that they can communicate effectively to the public the need to support the activities of the group. At the press conference, the key persons among the parents must surround themselves with knowledgeable persons who would be able to provide specific information to the public without jargons, ambiguity or superfluity.

#### **Conclusions**

The challenges/predicament of special needs persons have now ceased to be an individual's plight. It is therefore time to bear it corporately and so collectively brainstorm on possible ways of alleviating the scum. After all, no one picks how, where and to whom to be born. Outstanding personalities in fields such as:

- **Education:** Chiefs S. O. Osunkeyesi, S. A. Okubanjo, Dr. P. O. Mba, Mr. F. A. Ayoku, O. A. Odudanya and Prince P. A. Adelabu;
- **Music:** Benjamin Aderohunmu (“Kokoro”) and John Yekini;
- **Sports:** Eka Ekpe Okon, Godwin Uno and Folake Ayola;
- **Law:** Mr. Adekanmbi and Stephen Adewumi

have successfully proved to the world that there is ability in disability. They have risen to the peak in their chosen areas of endeavours despite their disabilities.

A reactivation of the disability decree would go a long way in sensitizing the public as well as creating a conducive environment/condition for the persons with learning disability to maximize their potentials.

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Parents groups, educators, learned gentlemen, the press and public are called in as partners in this advocacy.

**Recommendations**

It is now time to “do the talk”, concretize on all the facts, postulations, proposals, views and stances generated from the numerous conferences, workshops, seminars and symposia held to map out a way forward for persons with special needs. For those with learning disability, parents groups and education practitioners with a strong support from the press, public and legal sector can cause a resuscitation of the disability decree in Nigeria. Its workability can be an index of success. They could also seek for an amendment of the decree or the promulgation of a more enabling law. This paper calls for team work, a sociological approach towards legislation.

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