

GLOBAL CHALLENGES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION: THE WAY FORWARD

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Abstract

This paper x-rayed special education as an indispensable aspect of general education, put in place to equip people with special needs with the necessary knowledge and skills, to enable them contribute their own quota and become less dependent on others in the society they find themselves. In doing this, the A Author x- rayed the concept of special education, discussed the global challenges of special education, which include lack of legislation, lopsided educational opportunities, architectural and environmental barriers, among others. The paper also identified areas that need to be overhauled to ensure a positive turn around. These areas include the integration of ICT, enactment and enforcement of legislation, adequate preventive measures, and so on.

In an attempt to trace the history of Special Education Ugwu (2008) citing Baker(1960) noted that during the ancient period there was no scientific bases upon which realistic notions about the disabled could be developed, researches in many fields were unheard of, the concept of individual differences was neither understood nor appreciated and notions of democracy were just mere sparks in the imaginations of a few creative individuals, hence generally people regarded the disabled with morbid curiosity and approached them with fear. Though, there were sporadic attempts to provide care, it could not go beyond the provision of shelter and protection from harm. Ugwu (2008) opined that whatever was done for the disabled during this period was purely on humanitarian grounds as there were no laws to differentiate their rights from privileges.

The growing awareness of the rights of the disabled to full life in recent years has led to the appreciation of the need to accept and integrate them into the society, which implies educating, adjusting and training them in order to make them socially well coordinated, less dependent and able to contribute their own quota towards the development of their nation and the world at large. Ugwu (2008) observed that with the philosophy of responsibility for the disabled, marked changes appeared, new laws

and new programmes of education were developed. He pointed to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 which made some assertions about the rights of every human being. The article, one of its declaration stated that all people are born free and equal in dignity and rights. Article 26 stated that everyone has the right to education which shall be free and compulsory at least at the primary school level. It is noteworthy that this declaration was the fulcrum of all agitations for the rights of all the as human beings, worldwide.

Ugwu (2008) also noted that another turning point in the change of attitude towards the challenged persons in America was the public law 94.142 and the education for all handicapped children Act of 1975, established to ensure the rights to education for all persons. It provides safeguards for the evaluation and placement of children in public and private schools. It also requires the fishing out of the children presently unserved, the elimination of architectural barriers, their being educated in a regular class as much as possible, the development of individualized educational programmes, the rights of the parents to have access to records and to participate in the education of their child. It also requires non-discriminatory assessment procedures and confidentiality of information. Ugwu (2008) also drew attention to the United Nations Declaration of the right of the Disabled, 1975, which emphasizes their education.

The development of special education in Nigeria, and indeed Africa followed the same pattern as the “Good Samaritan” acts of the voluntary agencies that established special schools, later touched the heart and conscience of the government. Ugwu (2008) observed that reinforced by the United Nations Declaration of 1975, General Yakubu Gowon, the then Head of State declared the government’s interest in the condition of the handicapped in 1975. Following this closely was the National Policy on Education, 1977, revised in 1982, 1998, 2004 and 2014 which devoted a section to the education of the handicapped.

It is also significant to note that the declaration of 1981 as the International Year of the Disabled showed the height to which they are favoured in recent years. It is said that in a democratic world “every man could be a king” hence in planning and implementing special education programmes, for the disabled, one sees the ultimate in democratic thinking and action. The 2006 National census puts the figure of persons with disability in Nigeria at 3,253,169, with about 39% of school age (Orakpo and Abayomi 2016). This calls for a concerted effort to make life worth living for them especially through education. It is however disheartening that despite efforts towards taking special education to greater heights, a cursory look into it as an aspect of educational system worldwide will reveal a lot of challenges militating against its effective implementation.

In an attempt to critically examine the global challenges in special education with a view to suggesting the next way forward, this paper discusses the topic under

the following (i) conceptual framework (ii) global challenges in special education, and (iii) the way forward

Special Education: A Conceptual Framework

Special education is a concept that has been variously defined. On a general note, Ugwu (2008) used education as a process by which a society inculcates its norms, values and attitudes into the young. He used special education which is an integral part of education to refer to all efforts towards the socialization of an exceptional child, that he may be socially well-coordinated able to contribute his own quota, and be less dependent on others for his livelihood in the society in which he finds himself, irrespective of his challenges. Suffice it to say that, while the general education caters for the so called normal children, special education takes care of those that differ from the norm, to the extent that they cannot benefit from the normal school programme.

Love Toknow Corp (2017) used the term special education to refer to the educational programs and practices designed for students, as challenged or gifted students, whose mental ability, physical ability, emotional functioning, etc. requires special teaching approaches, equipment, or care within or outside a regular classroom.

Teach (2017) citing the Individuals With Disability Act (IDEA) defined special education as specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability. Distinguishing special education from the general education of which it is an integral part of, Heward and or Orlansky cited in Ugwu (2009) saw special education as a profession with its own tools, techniques, and research efforts, all focused on improving instructional arrangements and procedures for evaluating and meeting the learning needs of exceptional children and adults. In the same vein Ugwu (2008) citing Dunn highlighted four provisions that distinguish special education from regular education. These are (a) special trained teachers (b) special curricular content (c) special methodology, and (d) special instructional materials.

In Nigeria, the definition of special education proposed in the National Policy on education (FRN, 2014) referred to it as a formal special educational training given to people (adults and children) with special needs. It classified these people into three categories which include:

1. The disabled: People with impairments and because of it cannot cope with regular school/class organization and methods without formal special educational training. This includes the visually impaired, hearing impaired, physical and health impaired, mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, speech impaired, learning disabled, and multiply handicapped.
2. The disadvantaged: The children of nomadic pastorals, migrant fishes folks, migrant farmers, hunters, etc. who due to their lifestyles and means of livelihood, are

unable to have access to the conventional educational provision and therefore require special education to cater for their peculiar needs and circumstances.

3. The gifted and talented: children and adults who have very high intelligent quotient and are naturally endowed with special traits and therefore find themselves insufficiently challenged by the regular school programmes.

Global Challenges in Special Education

The planning and delivery system of special education have been inundated with so many challenges, globally and within Africa in particular, despite all efforts. Some of these challenges are highlighted below:

Endless paper work: The endless paper work in special education in addition to lesson planning, report cards progress reports, Medical billing forms, etc. have overwhelmed teachers and administrators in the system. Shorr (2006) observed that paper work or lack of it has resulted in adverse relationship between parents and schools and also a lot of litigations. She cited the experience of Thorne and other teachers who were sued for conspiring to deny a four-year-old with special needs of his civil rights. They were found guilty and the District was fined #35,000 not because the procedures were wrong but that she had not dated a form that would have proven that she gave the parents information in a timely manner.

Shorr (2006) stressed further that paper-work does not limit itself to legal concerns, but is also expensive in both man-hours and printing cost. She cited the instance of Time Management special education teachers that spend five hours per week completing forms and doing administrative paper-work, about the same amount of time they spend preparing lessons. She emphasized that more time is spent on paper-work than grading papers, communicating with parents, sharing expertise with colleagues, supervising paraprofessionals and attending individualized educational programme (IEP) meetings. She also lamented about the cost of printing and mailing resulting from paper-work annually.

Inadequate identification scheme: Ugwu (2009) citing Obani (1999) observed that there is dearth of indigenous and culturally relevant test materials, screening and referral agencies especially in under developed and developing countries leading to over reliance on foreign tests. The informal methods of assessment usually adopted are sometimes biased and have led to a situation where those that require special education services are not identified, while those not eligible find themselves provided for.

Corroborating the above assertion Shorr (2006) lamented that there are race wars, resulting in a disproportionate number of children of colour and the poor getting labeled special needs more often than white kids and the rich. She cited the landmark study by the civil rights project at Harvard University which found that in most states,

African –American children are one-and-a-half to four times as likely to be identified as having an emotional disturbance or being mentally retarded.

Inadequate funding: This is one of the greatest global challenges in special education in underdeveloped, developing and even developed countries of the world. Finance is required for the provision of infrastructures, payment of salaries, and offsetting administrative costs. Ugwu (2008) citing Akubue(2007) posited that in Nigeria like in many other countries in Africa, financial constraints arise from under-estimation of programmes, over-estimation of anticipated financial resources or over reliance on external assistance. In many countries in Africa, inflation, economic recession, unfavourable terms of trade, undue politicization and scramble for resources and access to educational provisions does not favour special education, which to many is a social welfare programme.

In the United State of America, the situation seems to be the same. Shorr (2006) lamented that the number of special education students grow as the member of dollars shrink. She stressed further that budget reductions has resulted in some students not receiving special services, like in her district of 26,000 students only, 4000 or about one in six students access special services.

Inequality of educational opportunities: There is an unequal awareness and provision of special services for the various categories of exceptional children especially in undeveloped and developing countries of the world. Ugwu (2008) citing Aloba noted that inequality exists between disabled and non-disabled people, different categories of disabled and people of the same disability in different parts of the country. Ugwu (2008) also observed that some categories due to the visible or sympathy inducing nature of their challenges receive more attention than others. Adima, (1989) specifically noted that the opportunities for education are much better for the blind and the deaf than for the physically challenged and the mentally retarded in Nigeria.

Inadequate/low morale of personnel: in Nigeria like in many other underdeveloped and developing countries of the world, there are indications that the number of teachers and other resources personnel in the field are grossly inadequate, coupled with low morale of personnel. Orakpo and Abayomi (2016) pointed out succinctly that in the first instance there is low enrolment of students in special education, and even those who eventually choose to study it, do so because they could not get admission to read the course of their choice. Quoting Umolu, they lamented that some of the students who get enrolled opt for other courses later because students outside the department look down on special education students.

An addendum to the foregoing is that even those trained in the field, cross carpet to other fields on economic and other related grounds. Shorr (2006) observed that in

America there is abysmal teacher morale as special education teachers are often considered second-class citizens and treated disrespectfully by general education teachers who feel they know education better. Commenting on the rate of brain drain in special education, Dage, cited in Shorr (2006) posited that 50% of special educating teachers leave their jobs within 5 years, and half of those who stay more than 5 years will leave within 10 years. The World Bank cited in Ugwu (2009) reports that there is a staffing deficit in Nigerian colleges and universities, as it regard special education teachers.

Legislation: Nagee cited in Ugwu (2009) pointed out that in many countries of the world that there has been the problem of absence of or non-implementation of available legislation. For instance in Nigeria, there have been a number of laws and statues, providing for the handicapped, like the 1948 education ordinance, the 1963 Northern Nigeria law, and the National Policy on Education. Orakpo and Abayomi (2016) lamented that the passage of disability bill by the National Assembly awaiting assent by the president is dragging too long. He stressed further that this delay and insensitivity on the part of government hampers the implementation of the formulated policies for the rights, education and inclusiveness of persons with special needs into the mainstream of one education system.

Estcheidet and Bartlet, (2006)cited in Ugwu (2008) highlighted some of the benefits accruable from legislation to providing special education services which includes: (a) Guarantying the rights to receive specific services (b) Stating the time of onset and phase plans (c) Punishment for non-compliance (d) Room for litigation (e) Accountability, evaluation and monitoring procedure and (f) Financial backing and structure.

Unemployment of professionals: Ugwu (2009) laments that after the much needed training and education, most challenged children and other professionals do not have job opportunities, especially in underdeveloped and developing countries like Nigeria where they are discriminated against. He stressed further that the promises of suitable employment and establishment of sheltered workshops for the challenged as contained in the National policy on Education were just unfulfilled dreams. He attributes low enrolments and high dropout in special schools to this irrational discrimination against the challenged in employment.

Administrative bottle neck: In many countries of the world, this manifests in form of mounting of attractive programmes, that cannot be actualized, refusal to delegate duties and in what Adima (1989) described as inflexibility of allocation and distribution of scarce educational resources resulting in inefficient use of available facilities. Orakpo and Abayomi (2016) lamented that in most cases desk officers in most local, state and federal units are managed by non-professionals who do not have

passion for the needs of persons with special needs. There is no gainsaying that these arrangements jeopardize planning, monitoring, data collection, training and re-training of special education teachers, social mobilization, provision of infrastructural facilities, funding and management.

Architectural and environmental barriers: it has been observed that one of the greatest challenges of special education globally is that many architectural and environmental designs that do not conform to the idea of full accessibility with respect to general access to facilities and its spaces, as well as the various code requirements for maneuvering through spaces. There is no gainsaying that the Americans with Disability Act (ADA) takes care of this issue but in, most under developed and developing countries there is no consideration for special needs students that range from the visually and hearing impaired to mild or severe autism to downs syndrome and dwarfism, to physically disabled or wheelchair bound students, when a new facility is being designed or renovated. Nelson (2016) observed that some of the challenges that special needs students face in facilities include those related to level changes in multi level buildings, way finding, and basic access into space.

Conclusion

An in-depth look at the service delivery system of special education globally, reveals a lot of challenges that seem insurmountable. To rise up to these challenges, efforts should be intensified in the areas of integration of ICT, adequate identification scheme, and preventive measures, equality of educational opportunities, special teacher capacity building, recruitment and condition of service, and architectural and environmental designs.

The Way Forward

There is no gainsaying that the delivery system of special education worldwide particularly in Africa cannot succeed with the seemingly insurmountable challenges highlighted above. There is need for a total overhaul of the entire system, adopting serious and far reaching measures, to ensure a position turn around, especially in the identified areas.

Integration of Information, Communication, and Technology (ICT): Innovation in the special education system globally should involve the incorporation of ICT, if it is to be qualitative and responsive to emerging global challenges. Etesike (2015) observed succinctly that the current digital age is an era where several technological resources have permeated every aspect of human endeavour, especially education and are enhancing the teaching-learning process. Technologies have been found useful in instructional delivery, student /staff assessment and audit research, administrative performances, and so on. Some of the innovative educational technologies include

language laboratories closed circuit television (CCTV), video cassette recorder (VCR), interactive whiteboard, internet and social networking media, mobile devices, etc.

Emphasizing the role of ICT in special education service delivery system, Shorr (2006) opined that switching to ICT takes care of the endless paper-work, streamlines the process, and greatly reduces the need for photocopying and mailing. She stressed further that it allows them to plan better, allocate resources better and look at how an individual student is doing on an ongoing bases. On the cost implication, she pointed out that switching to the online database has saved her District above \$50,000 in annual printing and administrative cost.

Adequate identification scheme: There is need to put in place an adequate identification scheme to take care of the error of over representation of children of colour and the poor being labeled special needs more than the white kids and the rich. There is need for indigenous and culturally relevant test materials, screening and referral agencies especially in underdeveloped and developing countries. Suffice it to say that test materials and screening for the purpose of identifying and labeling children with special needs should be relative to culture and environment. Shorr (2006) also asserted that tech-based assessment and data management tools are finally offering educators true picture of student abilities.

Adequate preventive programme: A saying goes that prevention is better than cure. In tandem with this, efforts should be made to prevent or reduce the incidence of the various challenges. Creating awareness through different public enlightenment agencies and programmes on the possible causes, preventive measures, rights and privileges of the challenged will stimulate discussions to demystify, raise interest and reduce the number of people that need special education services. Against this background, Ugwu (2008) opined that there should be guidance and counselling programmes for children, parents and the general public in homes, churches, hospitals, and public places, with emphasis on improved health care, genetic counselling , rich and balanced diet, etc. He stressed further that professional associations in special education worldwide like the National Council for exceptional Children (NCEC Nigeria), The National Association for Special Education Teachers (NASSET), American Amputee Foundation (AAF) etc, and other Non-Governmental organization (NGOS), Community Based Organization (CBOs) and Institutional Based Organizations (IBOs) should pursue this agenda in a more sustainable manner.

Equality of educational opportunities: the issue of equal access to special education should be taken seriously irrespectively of the category of challenges, place, gender and time. Efforts should be made to counteract and expunge all prevailing beliefs, attitudes and practices that justify the discrimination, lopsided and subordination

status of children with special needs, which perpetuate inequality in access to education.

Special teacher capacity building: It is agreed that no education system can arise above the quality of its teachers, and if it is so, a lot has to be done about his professional training and development. Ugwu (2017) pointed out succinctly that globally, the capacity building of special teachers should be seen as a tripod of pre-service, in-service and upgrading. In the pre-service training, efforts should be made to admit the best brains, not leftovers into the special teachers training institutions. The practice of admitting students who did not chose to study special education because they could not get admission to read the course of their choice should be stopped forth with, as they do not have the passion and are likely to abandon the profession after graduation. The objective of the in-service training should emphasize the provision of more content background at a higher level, since the special teacher is expected to be more knowledge in his subject area than the special needs children. There should be sound training in the nitty-gritty of teaching, test construction and scoring, and in improvisation of instructional materials. Conferences and workshops should be organized regularly at federal, state and local government levels, for upgrading the teachers.

Recruitment and condition of service: Staffing is a complex process where one has to bring human resources into an organization, and at times replace them, if need be. The practice of recruiting teachers in the field of special education without proper survey of their traits (intelligence, personality interest, aptitudes, training and skills) should desist globally. Efforts should be made to recruit special teachers that have basic requirement, and comply with the due process of entry into the profession of teaching special needs children.

Associated with the foregoing, is ensuring the retention of competent and experienced special teachers through adequate condition of service. The practice where special teachers suffer economically should not be allowed to continue. Adequate funds should be made available for prompt payment of salaries, leave allowance, in-service training, sponsorship to conferences and workshops, staff quarters, and other incentives that will not only ensure the retention of those in the profession but encourage new entrants and discourage brain drain and moonlighting.

Legislation: To make special education more pragmatic globally, there is need for enactment and enforcement of laws. In tandem with this Ugwu (2008) posited that laws should provide for the mainstreaming of the special need children, employment without discrimination, adequate funding and procurement of facilities needed, recognition of the rights of the child and his family as to their confidentiality, adequate health needs and subsidies for their health care, and protection against test

biased results. It is against this background that the bill to establish Federal special Education commission passed by the National Assembly should be considered a priority. The plateau State government that was the first to establish such a commission should be encouraged to implement it to the letter.

Accommodating special needs students in architectural and environmental designs: Efforts should be made to accommodate special needs students in the architectural and environmental designs, globally irrespective of their challenges. In doing this, they should be considered from both general perspective and individual student's needs basis, as they have some peculiarities. Contributing to this, Nelson (2016) stated emphatically that it should be ensured that the door ways are wide enough to accommodate them, and that multilevel buildings have elevator or ramps to facilitate their movement through buildings.

Citing Reilly, Nelson (2016) also shared some thoughts in special education spaces, these include, that in the use of colours, softer, muted colours and neutral tend to work better, as bright primary or so many colours in a space, can be a trigger. On textures, carpet is preferred in special education spaces, as it helps to lesson sound issues that can be a trigger for some special needs students. Lighting levels also need to be on the softer side, as fluorescent tube lighting has a visual flicker and a clicking sound that can be an issue for some students. On space allocation, some special needs students require additional space to access things and maneuver around in a classroom on the use of technology, what is on the smart-board or is being projected should be linked to a tablet or ipad to enable some special needs students to access them directly.

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