

# REMOVING THE ROADBLOCKS TO THE INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN THE UNIVERSAL BASIC EDUCATION PROGRAMME

*Chris M. Vandeh, Ph.D and Ijir Elisha*

## **Abstract**

The UBE programme has the objective of providing appropriate and relevant education for every Nigerian child of school-going age. This is in response to the global call for Education for all. If indeed the words in the blue print mean what they imply, children with disabilities must not be excluded as the UBE implementation Guidelines seem to suggest. They must be included since they have the same right to education as other children. This paper identified some of the issues that can pose as roadblocks to the inclusion of children with disabilities in the UBE programme and urges that these issues be properly and adequately addressed so that they will not be excluded. They include lack of statistical data, inadequate teacher preparation, difficulty in accessing the curriculum, structural and insufficient equipment for meaningful execution of the programme.

Since 1990, there has been a remarkable global interest in children and especially their education. This interest has resulted in major world conferences culminating in the adoption of the global goal of *Education for All (EFA) By the year 2000*. In order to meet the deadline, the Federal Republic of Nigeria formally launched the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme on 30<sup>th</sup> September, 1999. The programme has been described as Nigeria's response to the global call for the provision of Education for All by the year 2000 (Obani, 2001; FRN (2000)). If the word 'All' is used to mean 'everyone; then it must include those with disabilities. Inclusion means integrating students with disabilities-regardless of nature or severity-of the disability into the activities of a general education, classroom, school and surrounding community. This concept of inclusion certainly goes beyond the idea of integration through special classes and units in the ordinary schools contained in the revised National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1981). The inclusion philosophy advocates that even children with disabilities of school age are absorbed and educated in a common classroom with their counterparts who are without disabilities. Here, they will be directly supervised by regular teachers, with special education support and assistance as judged appropriate.

To make this possible, however, there are lots of issues that if not properly addressed, can be militating to the inclusion of children with disabilities in the UBE programme. Although they are many, this paper shall limit itself to a few which it considers most critical. These include absence of statistics, teacher preparation, access to the curriculum as well as structural and attitudinal barriers.

## **Absence of Statistics**

One of the major roadblocks that may impede the progress of the UBE especially the inclusion of children with disabilities is the absence of statistics. There are simply no comprehensive, accurate and reliable figures on which to base the planning for their inclusion. This problem is occasioned by the controversy that has always attended the conduct of census in Nigeria since the

colonial times which makes the extrapolation of school-age population from published census data difficult.

The National Population Commission's (NPC) failure to monitor, collate and update demographic indicators is another cause of this problem. For example, there are no authentic national surveys reports/records that identify the number of persons with disabilities, the type, where they live and their ages. The age spread will, for instance, indicate the population of disabled children who need education and the adults who may need habitation or rehabilitation.

It is therefore the view of this paper that besides the census of infrastructures and facilities, it is also essential to take a census of persons with disabilities so as to have a realistic quantitative and qualitative demographic figures needed for planning their inclusion in the UBE programme- for appropriate and adequate planning, we need to know for instance, the number, the categories, locations, as well as the ages and special educational needs of these children. Unless this is done, it will be difficult for the UBE programme to really include children with disabilities. But since, the UBE Guidelines (FRN, 2000) has already recognized the problem of lack of educational statistics and the factors that compound it, it is hoped that this data problem will be adequately addressed.

The success of UBE programme will depend so much in how well it is planned for, but no proper planning can be done without the necessary and relevant data.

### **Teacher Preparation**

The success or failure of the education of children with special needs depends to a large extent on the quality of training offered to the people who work with them – teachers. As far as teachers in particular are concerned, there is some fear that the present system of teacher education does not prepare all teachers adequately.

The FRN (2000) in the *Implementation Guidelines for the UBE Programme* acknowledges the fact that 'many laudable educational initiatives have failed mainly because they did not' take due account of the "teacher factor". The Universal Primary Education (UPE) is one of them. This lends support to the position of the revised National Policy on Education (NPE, 2004) that 'no educational system can rise above the quality of its teachers' (Section 9, para. 57). Although the UBE Guidelines stated government's commitment to ensuring the success of the UBE by making Teachers an integral part of its conceptualization, planning and execution, the present programme may not fare better than its predecessors unless there is a redirection of the teacher preparation. This is so especially in relation to the inclusion of children with disabilities.

For children with disabilities to be included in the UBE programme, our personnel preparation must take into serious account how to meet their special educational needs. To this end, all teachers require training in the teaching of children with disabilities. This follows naturally from the NPE's emphasis on integration as the best form of education for these children (NPE, 2004). If pupils with special needs are to be educated in the regular schools then, any teacher might at any time, have to teach one or more pupils with disabilities.

This being so, all teachers would need some preparation for teaching pupils with special educational needs. The obvious time and place for this preparation on Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses (Alcott, 1987), such as the NCE and the pivotal teachers being trained for the UBE. However, teachers who are already working in schools and who had no such preparation, should have opportunities to attend courses as part of their ongoing professional development. All teachers will need training in ways of identifying, assessing and meeting a child's special needs.

## **Curriculum**

For children with disabilities to be successfully included in the UBE, they must be taught using the curriculum. A visual impairment for instance, limits the quality and quantity of a child's understanding and development. Education must provide an appropriate curriculum, which will address this issue of non-inclusion of the disabled in the implementation. The visually handicapped child like other children needs full implementation of the curriculum to satisfy his interests and prepare for life after school. Because of his special needs, he also needs a special curriculum (Best, 1992).

According to Best (1993) there are two elements to the solution. One is the provision of appropriate support to access the regular school curriculum. The second is to access a special curriculum. Which develops skills, such as mobility, cane, Braille, typing and Daily Living Skills (DLS) that are needed by the child. To effectively do this, adaptations must be made in the methods of presenting learning experience, the nature of materials used, and the learning environment. Class teachers need support from specially trained teachers who provide advice, direct teaching and modified learning materials.

It has been noted that the UBE, from the point of view of special needs education, will succeed more if among other things, it ensures that there is flexibility and differentiation in the curriculum and curriculum content offered in every class to cater for the different needs, styles, and rates of all learners (Obani, 2000). Some students may need certain special equipment and special learning materials in order to gain to certain aspects of the curriculum. The school must provide them with these equipment and materials. Whatever action government is taking in the area of textbooks and non-text materials must include the adaptation of these texts and materials to suit or meet the needs of persons with disabilities, especially those with visual disabilities. This is necessary in order to give them full access to the enriched curricular for the UBE programme. Akpa (1999) saw textbook provision, utilization and management in primary education as imperative because the success of teaching and learning and indeed, every educational programme including the UBE depends on this. For some student, these textbooks must be in Braille.

## **Structural Barriers**

The UBE Guidelines promises that adequate infrastructures and facilities, i.e. the physical and spatial enablers of teaching and learning, will be provided. They include classrooms, libraries, laboratories, workshops, play fields, etc. It is worthy of note here that existing infrastructures and facilities in our schools are not designed to meet the needs of children with disabilities. There are a lot of architectural barriers in our school environment, which impede the mobility of these children, especially those with visual or physical disabilities.

If the UBE is indeed for *every* Nigerian child, which means that children with disabilities must be included, our schools must provide the enabling environment that will promote meaningful teaching and learning for them. School environment must be made disabled-learning-friendly by providing appropriate forms of infrastructures and facilities i.e. buildings, furniture, books, boards, as well as by removing all forms of barriers to the proper functioning of children with disabilities within that environment. Obani (2000) observed that the schools as presently organized (in favour of the majority of children regarded as non-disabled) present more obstacles and handicaps to many children's learning, especially those with disabilities.

### **Attitudinal Barriers**

Attitude studies are well-researched areas in special education and psychology. Attitudes are the strongest force affecting the status of persons with disabilities and their integration into the society. Studies as well as practical experience show that society's attitudes towards people with disabilities are generally negative. This is largely due to myths and misconceptions people hold about others with disabilities. The Nigerian Society is no exception. This is why Obani's (2000) called for family and community members to be better educated about disabilities, human worth and the needs of children with disabilities. For by so doing, they may develop positive attitudes towards their disabled members, accept them, encourage, prepare and assist them to go to schools in their neighbourhood under the UBE.

Positive attitude towards oneself and others are particularly relevant in a class containing handicapped students. Since handicaps are often in the eyes of the beholder (Schulz, Carpenter & Turnbull, 1991), teachers and peers need to guard against negative attitudes and perceptions that might impose a greater handicap on the person than really exists. Teachers' attitudes have been identified as being crucial to the success of any mainstreaming programme as these not only set the tone for the relationship between teachers and handicapped students, but also substantially influence the attitudes of non-handicapped classmates (Schulz, 1991).

People's attitudes towards persons with disabilities can be changed through accurate formation and positive encounters (Nkangwung, 1998), It is therefore important that the nationwide public enlightenment and social mobilization educate all Nigerians that the UBE should include information and activities that will result in positive change in attitudes towards persons with disabilities. In this way, the writers believe, that attitudinal barriers to the inclusion of children with disabilities in the UBE programme can be removed.

### **The UBE and Children with Disabilities**

One of the specific objectives of the UBE is 'the provision of free Universal Basic Education for every Nigerian child of school-going age (FRN), 2002:2): The idea of internalization of basic education is in line with 'the educational objectives of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN, 1999) stated in section 18 thus:

'.....Government shall direct its policy towards ensuring that there are equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels.

'..... Government shall strive to eradicate illiteracy and to this end, government shall and when practicable provide:

- (a) free, compulsory and universal education;
- (b) free secondary education;
- (c) free university education; and
- (d) free adult literacy program.

This perhaps, is why the UBE, according to the *Guidelines* for the implementation is intended to be UNIVERSAL FREE and COMPULSORY; terms which 'imply that appropriate types of opportunities will be provided for the basic education of every Nigerian child of school going age...' (FRN, 2004:4) Paragraph 6 of the UBE Guidelines emphasize the universal aspect of the UBE, which according to it has the following implications.

- ✓ Inclusiveness implying that persons in all manners and conditions of physical, spatial and psychological existence will benefit from the programme.

- ✓ Special attention to special groups, implying that the special needs of all sectors of the population will be taken into account; and
- ✓ Encouragement to the provision of facilities for early childhood care and socialization, with due attention given to the needs of specific social groups and geographical zones of the country, bearing in mind the early childhood.

Paragraph 4 of the *Guidelines* lists the coverage and intended beneficiaries of the UBE programme. However, Obani (2000) observed the seeming needs not only from this list but also from the mission statement of the UBE programme. With the exception of the nomadic populations, no other groups or those with special educational needs were specifically mentioned. This raises the fear that they may not have been recognized or considered for the programme, but it avoid use of personal pronoun opined that children with disabilities and who have special education needs must be accorded the same right to education as other children. Excluding them will, to say the least, amount to serious injustice.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has discussed, though briefly, the need for inclusion of children with disabilities in the UBE programme because this group of children have the same rights to educate as other children. It also identified lack of statistical data, inadequate teacher preparation, difficulty in accessing the curriculum, as well as structural and attitudinal barriers as some of the issues that can become obstacles to the inclusion of children with disabilities the stand of this paper is that these and other issues must be properly addressed for the child with disability to take his rightful place in the UBE programme. This position agrees with that of Obani (2000) who opined that for the UBE to achieve its objectives of providing appropriate and relevant education for every Nigerian child of school-going age including those with disabilities, it has to prepare adequately. This will, include modifying the school system reviewing teacher training programme, ensuring access to the curriculum by all and removing all forms of structural and attitudinal barriers to the inclusion of every child. If the UBE fail to include the child with disability, then it can no longer claim to be a universal or inclusive programme that serves every Nigerian child.

### **References**

- Akpa, G.O. (1999). Textbook provision, utilization/3 and management primary education in Nigeria: An Imperative for the success of UBE. *The Jos Journal of Education* 4(1), 147 – 155.
- Alcott, M. (1997). *An introduction to children with special education needs*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Attitudes Towards the Visually Handicapped. Unpublished M.Ed Thesis, University of Ibadan.
- Best, A.B. (1992). *Teaching children with visual impairments*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Best, A.B. (1993). Access to the curriculum for children with visual impairments. In A.R. Fielder, A.B. Best, & M.C.O. Bax (Eds.). *The Management of Visual Impairment in Childhood* London: Mac Keith.

- Federal Republic of Nigeria (1981). *National policy on education*: Lagos: Federal Government Press.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999). *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria*. Lagos: Federal Government Press.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (2000). *Implementation Guidelines for the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme* Abuja: Federal Ministry of Education.
- Nkangwung, F.O. (1998). The influence of information and daily contact on students’.
- Obani, T.C. (2000). *The UBE programme in Nigeria, the people with special educational needs*. A public lecture delivered at the school of special education, Federal College of Education (Special), Oyo, 6, September.
- Obani, T.C. (2001). *Preparing children with disabilities towards the universal basic education (UBE) Programme in Nigeria-Implications for practice*. A keynote address delivered at a Workshop for Special Education Practitioners at Ibadan, 13-15 February.
- Schulz, J.B., Carpenter, C.D. & Turnbull, A.P. (1991). *Mainstreaming exceptional students: a guide for classroom teachers* (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.), Boston: Allyn and Bacon.