

MANAGEMENT OF THE PHYSICALLY HANDICAPPED: THE CASE OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

The paper discusses the management of the physically disabled people in Nigeria who are mostly found under the fly – overs, at the motor parks, market squares, on our streets, mosques, churches, public places, etc. The disabilities range from blindness, deafness and other forms of impairments resulting from injuries. Very few of these people within Nigerian society are opportuned to go to school. The physically disabled people within our society should be helped, protected and provided with appropriate programmes for their personal maintenance and economic developments. Hence, the focus of this paper which recommends that adequate attention should be given to the physically handicapped by providing them with suitable training for personal development and self – actualization as opposed to discrimination, exploitation and abuses inimical to their personality characteristics.

In developing nations of the world, the physically handicapped members of the society are properly cared for in appropriate places. For example, the blind are sent to school for the blind, the deaf are sent to the school for the deaf, the lame are rehabilitated in special institutes or at specially equipped homes for vocational training while the mentally handicapped are cared for in psychiatric hospitals. One of the main problems facing the Nigerian people is the ability to make the physically handicapped people who have fallen victims of the rat – race to live a life befitting of their dignity. Social policy experts like Robinson (1989) and Ganst (1973) hold that these people seen as unfortunate can be trained, educated and provided for to function effectively in the Nigerian society.

Observation indicates that in most cases, some normal persons exploit the predicament of the handicapped for selfish motives. To this effect, Obi (1984) stated that a destitute and mentally handicapped woman was seen to be personated by unknown character. Also some herbalists recommend having sexual intercourse with mad people to their clients as a solution to poverty in their lives.

Generally, physically handicapped people are seen everywhere, on the pedestrian bridges, over – head bridges, under the fly – overs, in market places, motor parks and other public places. For decades, these less privileged men and men have increased rapidly and incessantly. Ekpo (1989) stated that the handicapped brigade has swollen via the influx of new recruits. These brands of handicapped people are physically and mentally fit but financially unfit to live an independent life, especially in our extremely capitalist and selfish society. In most cases, they are designated as “the gentlemen beggars.” Robinson (1989) clearly states that not all handicapped people are disabled and not all disabled are handicapped.

The Handicapped /Disabled Person

According to the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, a Handicapped person is one who is suffering from a mental or physical handicap, while a disabled person is that person with permanent illness or injury that makes it difficult for him to use part of his body completely or easily. Disability here is more or less a draw back. In social policy against physically handicapped legislation in Britain, the handicapped is anyone who is incapable of leading an independent life (Marshal, 1989). Two key words are vital here, incapable and independent life. This implies that if the handicapped is to live any other person. On the basis of this definition therefore the handicapped in Nigeria tends to include the physically and mentally incapacitated, as well as the army of fit and healthy persons. These healthy persons are handicapped financially and not disabled.

The United Nations declaration of 1975 on the right of the disabled persons defined a disabled person as one who is unable to ensure by himself or herself a normal life as a result of deficiency in his or her physical and mental capabilities. Therefore, the physically handicapped are those persons who are unable to fend for themselves.

Classification of Physical Disabilities and Impairments

1. Neurological related disabilities which involve the nervous system. It affects a child’s ability to move, use, feel or control certain parts of the body e.g. cerebral palsy or poliomyelitis.
2. Orthopaedic and Musculo skeletal disabilities which affect a child’s skeletal system, that is, the bones, joints, limbs and associated muscles, e.g. amputations arthritis and muscular dystrophy.
3. Health impaired disabilities; these are disorders in which the individuals body is unable to utilize and properly store sugar e.g. diabetes and epilepsy.

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The physical disabilities and impairment classified above are included because:

1. They are likely to lead to a need for special educational provisions;
2. They are among the more common physical disabilities and the resultant need for educational environment adaptations that characterize most special programmes for the students with physical disabilities.

Origin of the Physically Handicapped in Nigeria

The physically handicapped programme was emphasized in Nigeria soon after the Civil War (Obi, 1984). The policy of the three Rs was launched by the Gowon Administration. It aimed at Rehabilitating, Resetting and Reintegrating the citizens of ill – fated Biafra. In line with the provisions of the policy of the three Rs, religious organizations and state government came to the rescue. In 1970, the Marist Rehabilitation Centre Hope Ville, Uturu, Abia State, was established to cater for the material and spiritual needs of the numerous young men and women who were disabled in one way or the other as a result of the protracted by the Marist Brothers - Catholic Humanitarian Organization with the government of the then East Central State. Obi (1984) stated that it was the first of its kind in Africa and it had an electronic department where those who possessed at least West African School Certificate were taught radio and television servicing. In addition, there was a Mechanical department that cared for cars and other mechanical repairs while tailoring/ bag making department trained young men and women in dress making, designing and sawing of fashion bags. Still in Hopeville Rehabilitation Centre, there was an orthopedic department, where artificial limbs, wheel chairs and special shoes for the use of inmates and for commercial purpose were made. At Hopeville Rehabilitation centre, trainees were fed, housed, medically looked after and above all rehabilitated after their training programmes. They were led into the world of work with an independent means of livelihood. There were no fees paid or any form of financial contribution from either the inmates or their parents or relations. The training was absolutely free. The inmates studied worked, ate and had recreations as a family. Variety of training programmes based on the nature of inmates' impairments were provided.

Today there are several hundreds of such centers in Nigeria. In Akwa Ibom State for example, there is St. Joseph Rehabilitation Centre, Ukana Iba in Iket Ekpene and there is Destitute Home located along Aka – Itiam Road in Uyo, capital city of Akwa Ibom State. In Lagos there is the Redeemed Christian Church of God Rehabilitation Centre at Epe, where the Inmates learn some forms of trades or vocations like music, typing, basket weaving, table mat cane work handbag, foot mats, etc, Also in Lagos state there is a psychiatric Hospital at Yaba for the mentally incapacitated where the inmates are taken care of. They engage in vocational training or trades like tie and dye, clothing and textiles bead making, tapestry, cookery, weaving hair dressing and bag making so that when they are out of the hospital they would be useful to

themselves. The inmates have recreation as member of a family. Physical education is also taught the inmates.

In Ogun State there is a Psychiatric Hospital at Aro in Abeokuta, the state capital where the mentally incapacitated are taken care of. The psychiatric hospital is of the same pattern like that of Lagos State. In addition to the treatment the inmates are given, they are taught some forms of vocations or trades like clothing and textile, fashion designing, tapestry, bead making, hair dressing, weaving and bag making. The inmates also have recreations as members of a family. They are also taught physical education. Still in Ogun State the Gateway Front Foundation founded by the wife of the State Governor, Chief (Mrs.) Olufunke Daniel in 2003, assists the physically disabled by giving them money to use in establishing themselves in some kinds of trade of vocations. Gift items like wheel chairs, generators, sewing machines, blending machines, etc are also given to them to assist them develop economically.

Cause of Disability in Nigeria

According to the United Nations Organization (UNO) out of every ten children in the world is born with or suffers from one blindness to deafness, from mental retardation to physical discomfort. Momodu (1984) states that 80% of the World's 140 million disable children live either in urban slums or rural villages of developing countries where they receive little or no help at all. Today, over 500 million of the World's populations are disabled. Out of this figure, 15 million from mental retardation and another 40 million have psychiatric disorders (UN figures).

In Nigeria, we do not really know the population of the disabled persons but do know that a very significant percentage of the estimated 80 million people is disabled. Even though, we may not ascertain the number of disabled persons in our rehabilitation centres but we can at least see them on the streets of our major cities. It has been discovered that giving them money cannot solve their problems. This was why the Federal Government declared the years 1983 – 1992 as decade of the disabled persons. November 20 every year has also been declared as a national Day for the disabled in Nigeria. The United Nation had earlier declared 1981 as the International Year of the Disabled Persons (IYDP). But the simple question is what causes of disabilities are? Momodu (1984) emphatically explains, “the commonest cause of deformity can be traced to genetic factors, malnutrition, noise and accidents”.

Some disabilities like blindness, deafness and lameness can be inherited from parents. Lee (1978), states that the risk of disability is heightened by extreme poverty. Where food is available at all, the right quantity and quality remains questionable. Hence, many disabilities are linked to malnutrition. Many Nigerians go blind because of

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lack of vitamin A. Some others suffer cretinism and dwarf ness as a result of lack of iodine in their diets.

River blindness is a very common disease in the Northern parts of Nigeria. Extreme noise has also been identified as one of the causes of deafness. Thus, more of the deaf may be found in our cities where there are large industries using heavy and noisy machineries without any protection for their workers (Momodu, 1984).

Also prevalent in our cities are recording studios and disco jamborees with the level of noise generated. Accidents through playing or working at home, driving on the roads and sports have led to disabilities (Garret and Levine 1978). Physical exercises should also be done with caution and under the supervision of a coach to avoid accidents. Children playing at home could inflict wounds on themselves especially in the eye which could lead to partial or complete disabilities. While in the kitchen, children could sustain injuries which could lead to permanent disabilities. Participants in games like boxing, wrestling and football do sustain injuries which never heal.

One needs not forget the alarming rate of accidents on our roads. Most of those who usually survive do so without their complete bodies. Therefore they become disabled persons. In addition to all these, the effects of the civil war in Nigeria in 1967 – 1970 caused people to become maimed and lame and have remained deformed up till today. They are either in rehabilitation centres or have joined myriads of beggars on the streets of our major cities. Disability could also be traced to old age. At certain advanced age, some people may not be able to walk, hear or see clearly.

The Rights of Physically Handicapped / Disabled Person

The United Nations General Assembly on December 9, 1995 (resolution 3447, xxx) proclaimed a number of rights of the physically handicapped persons. Some of these rights are summarized as follows:

1. Physically handicapped persons shall enjoy the inherent right to respects for their human dignity without discrimination on the basis of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinions, states of wealth, birth or any other situation applying to the physically handicapped persons or to his or her family.
2. The physically handicapped persons have the same civil and political rights as other human beings.
3. The physically handicapped persons are entitled to measures designed to enable them to become as self – reliant as possible.
4. The physically handicapped persons have the rights to medical psychological and functional treatment to education, vocational training and rehabilitation and to

other services which enable them to develop their capabilities to the maximum and hasten their integration.

5. The physically handicapped persons have the right to live with their families or with foster parents and to participate in all social, creative or recreational activities. If the stay of a
6. Physically handicapped person in a specialized establishment is indispensable, the living conditions there in shall be as close as possible to those of the normal life of a person of his or her age.
7. The physically handicapped person shall be protected against all exploitation, all regulations and all treatment of a discriminatory, abusive or degrading nature.
8. Physically handicapped persons shall be able to avail themselves of qualified legal aid when such aid proves indispensable for the protection of their persons and property.

Ironically, one discovers that right No.3 above has not been adequately provided to the physically handicapped person in Nigeria. No one seems to be really concerned about their plight. Many people exhibit a *laissez – faire* attitude towards the physically handicapped persons. Nobody appears to be interested in their welfare. Even the physical assault the mentally deranged persons amongst them have caused innocent members of the public means nothing to nobody.

Managing and Education of the Physically Handicapped Persons

The physically handicapped like other disabled Nigerians, are far removed from any meaningful participation in education and other forms of national development. Mostly ignored is their labour power, which they should sell in order to care for themselves. Disability, therefore, becomes the mask, under which these set of individuals are denied access to such rights as education and health care services that could bring about psychological adjustment and increased self – worth that propel one to function in the society.

Education aims at developing a person in such a way that he becomes useful to himself or herself and the society. Education is not designed for normal people only but for all can benefit from it, including the physically handicapped (Ekpeyong, 1995). The Federal Government in its National Policy on Education (2004) states its purpose and objective thus:

- (a) “To give concrete meaning to the idea of equalizing educational opportunities for all children, their physical mental, emotional disabilities notwithstanding”, and
- (b) “To provide adequate education for all handicapped children and adults in order that they may fully play their roles in the development of the nation” (p.36).

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The physically handicapped persons require some adaptations to school facilities and instruction. The National Policy on Education (FRN, 2004) also states that: Government has decided that integration is the most realistic form of special education since handicapped children are eventually expected to live in the society” (p.37). Unfortunately, less than 2% of children with disabilities are included in formal education (Watkins, 2000). There is no denying the fact that physically handicapped people roam our streets today but thank God there are institutions established for special education where the disabled could be trained.

In Lagos State there is Wesley School for the Deaf where deaf children are taught. Teachers who specialize in special education teach them. They are taught speech reading, mathematics, English language, social science, science and have recreations like normal children. When they graduate from the institution, they proceed to the Federal Technical College (Formerly, Trade Centre), Yaba where they go to learn trades or undergo vocational training like mechanical engineering, carpentry, blacksmithing, welding, etc.

Still in Lagos State, there is Pacelli School for the Blind. The teachers are mostly expatriates who specialize in special education. They teach blind children with Braille. When the pupils graduate they proceed to secondary schools of their choice or the Federal Nigeria Society for the Blind Vocational Training Centre at Oshodi (Lagos). The institution was established in 1955 by a handful of Nigerians and expatriates because of the exigency of providing a more honorable way of earning a livelihood for the blind. According to Momodu (1984), its other objectives were to train blind adults and adolescents from all over the federation so as to provide them with gainful employment and create a sense of belonging in them. The centre trains inmates for two academic years divided into twelve months of academic work. The trainees take instruction on Braille, type – writing and shorthand, while the remaining twelve months are for crafts and mobility training.

Momodu (1984), states that the crafts include cane work, raffia work, foot mat making, weaving and making of stool tops and brushed.

Furthermore, only those with reasonable standard of education, with high aptitude, are taught Braille reading and writing, telephone switch board operating and Dictaphone typing (audio – typing). The syllabus also includes brailled shorthand to cover those with secondary education and other much higher qualifications prepare them for advanced stenography courses. Apart from classroom training, extra – curricula activities like washing up after meals, washing and ironing of personal clothing and beddings are taught. Female trainees do compulsory home craft, knitting and cookery. Graduates from this centre are in gainful employment in government establishments and industries.

To ensure adequate placement opportunities for trainees after graduation, a “placement after – care officer” is employed to go round the job opportunity for the graduands. It is his job to give feedback on their performances. Others who are not fortunate to get job in private and public forms engage in self employment craftsmanship (Momodu, 1984).

Problem of Integrating the Physical Handicapped Persons into Nigerian Regular Education Setting

Some physically handicapped Nigerian children probably attend regular school when handicap are less severe and their intellectual functioning is not impaired. The number of disabled children attending regular school is very small. Some of these children attend private school that are mostly manages by Christian Churches. And being private school, the facilities are in most cases inadequate and can accommodate limited number of inmates. Many physically handicapped children in the Nigerian society are still pushed behind closed doors in their individual homes because of numerous problems that make integration in regular school difficult. Some of the problems include:

- (a) **Lack of Qualified Personnel:** The regular classroom teacher cannot handle the physically handicapped children. It is only teachers trained in special education who can handle them.
- (b) **Lack of Public Enlightenment:** Many parent of the physically handicapped children and the general public do not see the need for educating their children in special school or in public schools like the normal children, hence parents hide their handicapped children at home and do not plan for their education at all.
- (c) **Poor Public Attitude towards the Physically Handicapped:** The attitude of the Nigerian Society towards the physically handicapped is negative. It is an attitude fraught with pessimistic sympathizing than optistimic emphasizing a system that breeds and reinforces the feeling of learned helplessness in the disabled (Eleri, 1992).
- (d) **Lack of Transportation:** The physically handicapped child lacks accessible public transportation to convey him / her to school and where it is available it may not be able to convey his / her wheelchair, hence he / she cannot go to school.
- (e) **Poor Sources of Finance:** Most existing private special schools for the handicapped children cannot expand due to lack of finance. As a result the schools cannot expand. And considering the number of regular schools, implementing integration would require a lot of money.

(f) **Regular School Curriculum which cannot benefit All Categories of Physically Handicapped Children:** Regular schools have failed to re – elevate and adopt their curriculum to suit the physically handicapped children in terms of ensuring safety and introducing vocational education programme for those who cannot benefit from the regular school curriculum.

(g) **Architectural Accessibility:** Physical barriers to independent functioning and movement frequently to confront the handicapped children. Children in wheel chairs or crutches have difficulty in entering the buildings easily. In many older buildings, wheelchairs cannot enter freely because the doorways are narrow. Toilet facilities, play areas and drinking water pots sometimes need to be adjusted to suit the disabled.

“Grab bars” or “support railings” need to be installed along the drinking area, toilet, stalls and near the chalkboard to aid the physically handicapped.

In the classroom, some furniture may need to be removed to make room for wheel chairs. Footrest and adjustable seats that swivel are needed to allow children with braces to sit down more easily.

(h). **Lack of Employment:** Getting a job could be very difficult task for the physically handicapped children. This tends to discourage their efforts towards self – fulfillment.

With all the good intentions spelt out in the National Policy on Education the problems listed above indicate that Nigeria is yet to take positive steps to implement educational integration for all categories of handicapped individuals in our schools.

Conclusion/Recommendations

Many physically handicapped people are seen on our roads. Their rehabilitation by the government has remained puzzling. That notwithstanding, Adamo (1992) argues that preference should be given to the handicapped people because of their lack of the three essential things of life, which are food, shelter and clothing. However, for one set of disabled people, the mentally disabled, seems to have been satisfied to some extent.

The care of the mentally disabled people is still lagging as far as Nigeria is concerned as we still see some of them walking on our streets naked and posing a threat to lives of some innocent citizens. Others are probably neglected because they do not pose immediate threat to the society. After begging for alms in the day, they sleep in open places at night in the rains and in the cold. Alternatively, they sleep under the

bridges, railway stations, market places, outside residential and office blocks only to pack away early in the morning.

The writer believes that what government could do is to house those without shelter in a centre according to their disabilities. The deaf and the dumb can be housed together while it is good to have separate accommodation for the blind and the maimed. And they should not be crammed as sardines. There should also be space for recreational activities.

To prevent epidemics, doctors and nurses should be assigned for their check – ups at intervals. Indoor games and sporting activities should also be made available to make them feel as part of the society.

Another important fact the government seems to neglect is that most of the physically handicapped people parading our streets for alms have their children most of whom are still of school age as their companions. It should be expected that when they grow up, they will become a burden to their parents or the nation due to lack of prior training in a particular craft, trade or education. To avert such a situation, the children of the disabled persons should be enrolled in schools or given special kind of training.

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