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Educating Students with Disabilities in Nigeria: Some Challenges and Policy Implications

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Educating Students with Disabilities in Nigeria: Some Challenges and Policy Implications

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Abstract

The Nigerian society, like every other one, is composed of individuals with and without one form of disabilities or the other. Those with disabilities deviate from average physical, socio-psychological and mental behaviours to such extent that they cannot profitably benefit from regular educational programmes. However, educating students with disabilities in Nigeria is not without some challenges. Thus, this paper examines challenges and policy implications for the education of students with disabilities. It first discusses the concept of special education, before focusing on the meaning and classifications of students with disabilities. Eight types of students with disabilities were identified in the paper, while two strategies for the education of students with disabilities, namely the inclusion and the exclusion, were brought to the fore. Some of the challenges highlighted are inadequacy of educational funding, high cost of educational materials and equipment, lack of specialists and para-professionals among others. Policy implications discussed include admission policy, employment policy, architectural design policy and so on. The paper finally recommends inter alia that the Federal College of Education (Special), Oyo be upgraded to a full-fledged University, the creation of more Departments of Special Education in the nation's Universities, the creation of the Ministry of Disabled Affairs/National Commission for People with Disabilities, and the setting up of Special Students Bursary/Scholarship Awards

Keywords: Students with Disabilities, Inclusion, Exclusion, Special education

I. Introduction

There have been several criticisms about Nigerian education, among which, according to Mba (1995), is its failure to take account of individual differences among learners into consideration. The need to consider individual differences is not unconnected with the fact that children do not develop the same way. For instance, while some may be tall and thin, others may be short and fat. These and many others are just examples of differences in children's physical development. There are also some differences in intelligence, emotional, maturity and social development among children. Thus, we have the hearing impaired children, the learning disabled, the gifted, the talented, the mentally retarded and host of others. These children and youths with variations in their total development are those for which special education is meant to take care of.

According to Osakwe (2010), the school systems now face increasing pressure to raise standards, develop social and personal skills, broaden curricula, pay greater attention to equal educational opportunities and prepare young people for rapidly changing world. Invariably, the modern trend all over the world is shifting towards addressing the educational plights of students with one form of disabilities or the other so as to better their life. The rationale behind this is contingent upon the fact that people with disabilities too have invaluable roles to play in national development, and to be able to do this effectively and meaningfully, their education needs to be given proper attention. This paper therefore sets out to explore some of the challenges facing the education of students with disabilities as well as the policy implications these challenges have towards improving the lives of students with disabilities.

II. The Concept Special Education

Special education has defined in various ways by scholars. For instance, Mba (1991) opined that special education is an ideal general education in which individual differences are considered and provided for. Adima, Ladipo and Abosi (1981), in Oladejo (2001) defined special education as an aspect of education that treats people as individuals and makes allowances for the use of special equipment and methods of teaching according to individual needs. Special education has also been described as classroom or private instructions involving unconventional techniques, materials, exercises, facilities and subject matter designed for children and adults who have physical deformities, behavioural disorders or learning disabilities (Osakwe, 2010).

The Federal Government of Nigeria, gives a comprehensive definition, when it defines special education as:

the education of children and adults, who have learning difficulties because of different kinds of disabilities-blindness, partial sightedness, deafness, hardness of hearing, mental retardation, social maladjustment and limb deformity or malformation, due to circumstances of birth, inheritance, social position, mental and physical health patterns, or accident in latter life.

(National Policy on Education, 2004:34)

According to Osakwe (2010), citing the Unites States Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), special education is that type of education with specially designed instructions to meet the unique needs of people with disabilities. These definitions are relevant to the present discourse, even though, special education is not meant for the disabled only. This is

because the present paper is focusing on the education students with disabilities, who might be disadvantaged in the regular educational programmes.

Meaning and Classifications of Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities, otherwise known as People with special needs are those people with one form of disabilities or the other, capable of limiting their involvement and participation in the regular educational programmes, and subsequently affect their academic performance and functionality in the society. They can be classified into eight, with respect to the type and nature of their disability problems. These classifications are as discussed in turn below:

- **The Hearing Impaired:** These are people with little or no ability to hear sounds through one ear (unilateral impairment) or both ears (bilateral impairment). They can be totally deaf or hard-of-hearing.
- **The Visually Impaired:** These individuals have difficulties in one or more functions of their visual system. They are also either totally blind or partially sighted.
- **The People with Speech Disorders:** People with speech disorders are those that experience lack of development and stimulation which affect the effective mental formation of words or their physical production.
- **The Emotionally Disorder** These are the people that have problems in their emotional development. They are not usually emotionally stable.
- **The Mentally Retarded:** People with mental retardation are those whose mental ability, growth and development are hindered by biological, environmental or hereditary factors that prevent them from adapting and adjusting to the normal environment. They could be

the moronics, the imbeciles, the idiotics, the trainable and the educable based on the degree of their retardation.

- **The Physically Disabled:** The physically disabled people are physically disadvantaged due to conditions that permanently prevent them from exercising normal body control and movement.
- **The People with Learning Disabilities:** These people have disorders in one or more of the fundamental physiological processes involved in the understanding, speaking and writing of language, which include wrong pronunciation of words, spelling, reading and so on.
- **The People with Multiple Disabilities:** People with multiple disabilities, as the classification implies, are those with more than one form of disabilities. They suffer from a combination of any of the aforementioned disabilities.

Government Efforts on the Education and Plights of Students with Disabilities

Atolagbe (1995) described disable people as innocent people, who are members of the human society, having no other world to live in, than the one we jointly own. Hence, the Federal Government of Nigeria had made some efforts in taking care of the students with disabilities for them to have sense of belonging. Ogbue (Oyewo, 1999) reported that the initiative of the Missionaries led to the development of positive attitude of Non-Government Organizations and Governmental Agencies toward the establishment of various Institutions to take care of the needs of the disabled people. Such Institutions include Cheshires Homes, Ibadan School for the Deaf, Wesley School for the Deaf as well as the Pacelli School for the Blind among others.

The Federal Government of Nigeria also recognizes the importance and relevance of the disabled when in the Third National Development Plan, decreed that 'Educational services for the disabled shall be the joint efforts of all tiers of government'. To this end, the Federal Government directed that two percent of positions in their establishments be allocated to qualified disabled persons. It said further that State governments should set up Vocational Training Centres for the disabled as a matter of priority.

Another effort of the Federal Government on the disabled persons is the establishment of National Council for Special Education in 1976, with the aim of looking into the issues of the disabled and advice the government from time to time. Furthermore, the Federal Government established a College of Education called Federal Government Advanced Teacher Training (Special) Education, Oyo in 1977 (now Federal College of Education [Special]) and saddle it with the responsibility of producing teachers for the handicapped as well as the gifted and the talented students. A Special Unit was also created at the Federal Ministry of Education while Special Education Section was also created in all the State Ministries of Education in response to a directive from the Federal Government. Finally, some Federal Universities namely the Universities of Ibadan, Calabar and Jos, offer courses in Special education to both the undergraduates and the post-graduates.

Strategies for Education Students with Disabilities

Osakwe (2010) highlighted two major strategies by which students with disabilities could be properly educated. These, according the scholar as:

- **Inclusion:** This is a process, whereby regular education classes are combined with special education services in a regular system. The scholar further asserted that in this

strategy, continued and planned interactions with contemporaries and freedom to associate in different groups are encouraged. Inclusion is of two models namely full and partial. In full inclusion model, specialized services are provided within a regular classroom by sending the service worker to work with one or more students in the regular classroom setting, while in the partial model, specialized services are provided outside a regular classroom.

- **Exclusion:** This is a strategy, whereby students with special needs are educated or taught using special techniques and equipment by specialist personnel (Osake, 2010). In this model, students are placed in special schools and classrooms so as to cater for their specific educational needs, aspirations and challenges that will enable them learn at their own pace.

Challenges Confronting the Education of Students with Disabilities

There are several challenges facing students with disabilities, and these challenges hinder their personal, vocational, academic and social adjustment.

First, is the challenge of general inadequacy of educational funding. Nigerian education is not adequately funded, and this also has effects on the education of students with disabilities. Certain educational materials, facilities and equipment which could have enabled them to learn without tears are not adequately provided.

Another challenge, which is closely related to the just discussed one has to do with the high cost of the educational materials and equipment such as braille machines and papers, typewriting machines and typing sheets, carbon papers, thermoforming papers, tape recorders

and cassettes, ear-mould, hearing being used by these students, which, of course, many of them cannot afford buying.

Lack of adequate specialists and para-professionals such as the physiotherapists, the pathologists, the braillists, the sign language interpreters, among others constitute a challenge. Those available are not enough to service the population of students with disabilities. Ojerinde (1999) and Ladipo (1999), cited in Oladejo (2001) reported that the total number of primary and secondary school students' enrolment in Nigeria stood at about 20 million, with students and youth with disabilities constituting about 2.4million in Nigerian Schools.

The architectural designs of most of the Institutions where the education of students with disabilities take place did not take into consideration, the disability nature of these people. It appears that only the Federal College of Education (Special) takes note of this architectural consideration. This greatly hinders the education of these categories of learners.

Finally, there is the challenge of poor and ineffective implementation of the policies formulated towards the betterment of the education of students with disabilities. This has been the usual case with almost all educational policies in Nigeria.

III. Policy Implications

The challenges identified above have certain policy implications for the education of students with disabilities. These policy implications include the following:

The policy guidelines and provision in Section 8 as stipulated in the nation's National Policy on Education (2004) should implemented with immediate effect by setting up an Implementation Action Committee.

Admission policy of students with disabilities should not be as strict as the one for the students without disabilities in order to encourage and motivate them towards their education.

The employment policy of the Federal Government that at least, 2% of the available positions in all establishments be reserved for the people with disabilities should be immediately implemented. This is to further motivate these categories of disadvantaged people.

Special Students' Bursary/ Scholarship policy should be formulated to enhance students with disabilities' easy access to financial supports.

Policy for the architectural design of lecture rooms where the education of students with disabilities take place needs to be put in place so as to ease the process of teaching-learning for the special learners

IV. Conclusion and Recommendations

Oyewo (1999) remarked that the growth of the human society depends almost entirely on the contributions of its members. The disabled persons without any doubt, are members of the Nigerian society that can contribute to its development if they are encouraged properly and adequately. Also, if truly the youths of today are the leaders of tomorrow, then today's students with disabilities, who are part of the today's Youths, should be well taken care of, for them to become the leaders of tomorrow in their respective chosen professions. After all, almost all disabled children can be trained to live productive lives (Olawale, 2000). It is hereby recommended that:

The Federal College of Education (Special), Oyo should be upgraded to a full-fledged Degree Awarding Institution to cater for educational advancement of the NCE holder in special education and lead to the production of more academically sound and qualified teachers for the

disabled students. In addition, more Departments of Special Education should be created in our nation's Universities in order to address the problem of shortage of teachers and other para-professionals for disabled students.

Also, private individuals and Non-Governmental Organizations should be encouraged to establish more special schools as well as vocational and rehabilitation centres. Educational materials and facilities that would be needed by students with disabilities should be provided at affordable prices and be within the reach of the poor.

The Ministry for the Disabled Affairs or the National Commission for People with Disabilities should be created at the Federal and State levels with disabled person(s) as the Minister/Commissioner/Chairman of such Ministries/Parastatals.

The Federal Government should compel all the three-tiers of government to start giving scholarship and bursary awards to the deserving disabled students in order to alleviate their financial problems. Finally, Federal Government should ensure that reasonable percentage of the Education Trust Fund Allocations is made available for the education of students with disabilities.

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