

A Review of Special Education Services Delivery in the United States and Nigeria: Implications for Inclusive Education

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Both Nigeria and the United States represent developing and developed countries respectively, and special education policy between these two countries are different. Both countries have contributed to help learners with exceptionalities in their policies. These policies help in the formulation and implementation of special education programmes for learners with exceptionalities in each of these countries. The authors compared special education policies in relation to placement, legal mandate, assessment, least restrictive environment, identification and referral, instructional programming, and present future perspective.

Keywords: special education, service delivery, disability

Introduction

The notion of special education was a Western phenomenon and a concept of Nigerian educational system. What is special education? However, special education has since then witnessed some tremendous improvements in the last decade despite cultural, social-economic, and political constraints (Eskay, 2009; Abang, 1988; Oluigbo, 1986). These improvements began from the provision of section 8 of the National Policy on Education since 1977 and have provided support mechanisms for children with disabilities. In the United States, special education started with series of advocacies, litigations and legislations which resulted in the establishment of PL (Public Law) 94–142 in 1975. The fullest extent of this law has been stretched and utilized to meet the needs of atypical individuals. A recent indication is the promulgation of PL 99–457, which, to a large extent, addresses special education concerns of young children.

However, both Nigeria and the United States have put forth resources to facilitate the provision of services for exceptional individuals in their respective nations. Furthermore, there are still indications of efforts to handle some shortcomings. According to Eskay (2009) and Oluigbo (1986), these shortcomings include: legal mandates, placement issues, assessment, least restrictive environment, identification and referral, non-biased assessment, and instructional programming. In the United States, there are laws, such as PL 94–142 and IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) 2004 that have been used to acknowledge the unique needs of children with disabilities. Nigeria, also a signatory to the United Nations Education on Human Rights and Child Right, acknowledges the need for every child to be free, have leisure and play and be protected from harmful practices, violence, injury, and abuse.

Nigeria also made a decree in 1993 for the provision of clear and comprehensive legal protection and

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security for Nigerians with disabilities. The backing of this education, however, is being resubmitted as a bill yet to be signed by the Senate even in the year 2011.

Furthermore, the following shortcomings viz.: legal mandates, placement issues, assessment, least restrictive environment, identification and referral, non-biased assessment, and instructional programming will help address the special education policy in Nigeria and the United States.

Identification and Referral

Placement of exceptional learners in a setting that is nonrestrictive is one of the fundamental aspects of special education. Without appropriate identification and referral of exceptional learner, it appears difficult to have an appropriate placement. In the United States, many laws have been passed to provide appropriate services for exceptional individuals. These laws have also been catalysts for total mobilization of services.

Further, in the United States, the referral process provides a suitable method for documenting and gathering systematic data for record keeping and reporting purposes. Although there is a variation of practice among states and districts, the referral process is a procedure used throughout the United States. This process is helped by the fact that parents know their rights, and they are free to litigate when their children are inappropriately identified or targeted for inappropriate placements.

In Nigeria, however, the benefits that surround disabilities and brought about negative attitude are gradually giving way to acceptance, advocacy, and education of people with special needs. Okeke (2008; 2010) opined that the global emphasis in EFA (Education for All) 2000, posed a reminder to the Nigerian government on the need to seek new initiatives on how to ensure that children with special needs are in school. Furthermore, the UBE (Universal Basic Education) in 2004 and 2006 found Nigeria launching a National Action Plan for the implementation of the UBE programme.

The global return in education of persons with disabilities made the Nigerian government to adopt mainstreaming and integration approaches to service delivery for persons with special needs. However, the society is yet to view such programmes with positive attitude and train enough experts who will implement programmes for such persons. The issue of provision of appropriate intervention programme that should begin with adequate identification and assessment is inadequate (Osuorji, 2008). Currently, screening procedures for the provision of tangible information on the child's current functioning level is simply based in grade work or teacher made tests. Hence, the haphazard nature of conforming the extent of disabilities development of education plan and subsequent provision of appropriate services. Parental involvement equally just ends with information passed on as some parents are ignorant of what the school is doing or intends to do (Onu, 2008). The Nigerian scenario is pathetic as most parents do not know their rights and hence might not be able to insist on due process. They may not also know when inappropriate placements are given to their children, hence, may not also know when, how, or where to litigate to enforce their rights.

Unbiased Assessment

Assessment is an important ingredient in the whole process of special education. Observation, screening, referral, evaluation, identification, and individualized education plans relate to the assessment process. An appropriate assessment should ensure an appropriate placement of exceptional learners. When these individuals are inadequately placed, they carry with them the negative baggage of labels and categories. In the United States, there has been considerable support for research, especially in the area of assessment. However,

assessment instruments have been consistently criticized for their lack of reliability and validity in assessing intelligence, academic capabilities, and daily living skills. In other words, these instruments have been found to be ineffective in assessing the strengths and weakness of at-risk or culturally and linguistically diverse learners. In spite of these problems, the laws mandate, at least in theory, a nondiscriminatory assessment of exceptional learners at all levels. Assessment in Nigeria has a different goal. Often, assessment is utilized for placement and detection of what the child knows or does not know. In most cases, they are curriculum-based assessment which is frequent, systematic, and measured learned tasks (Huda, 2008). Informal measures, tests, class work, home work, and assignment projects are equally used with modifications for people with special needs. The flexible and individualized nature of these assessment strategies encourage higher motivation for all learners and increase their development of confidence. Furthermore, it eradicates the discriminatory nature of fixed tests that are used in labeling and that may be culturally insensitive to address the day to day reality of persons within some given culture.

Assessment, which is an integral part of Nigerian education, rarely has high degree of diversity. Instructional programmes are arranged to allow for assessment that will monitor students' programmes while other assessments are referred to specialist at various centers. The problem, however, according to Ahmed (2000), is the paucity and lack of standardized tests, hence, children are placed in schools at the discretion of their parents and are taught by teachers who may not have been previously trained to handle diverse learners with special needs.

Least Restrictive Environments

One goal of special education programmes in today's world is to place learners with exceptionality in least restrictive environments that would allow them to maximize their academic and social potentials. In the United States, the promulgation of the Education of All Handicapped Children's Act (PL 94-142) in 1975 and its re-authorization as the IDEA (PL 101-476) in 1990 have led to the total mobilization of services for exceptional learners. Also, it is worth noting that in the United States, placement decisions by law are made through an M-team (multi-disciplinary team). This team includes a psychologist, educational diagnostician, teacher, administrator of special education, physician (if requested), parent(s), student (where appropriate), and other specialists who work with the students (Smith, 2010). Students are usually placed in self-contained classrooms, resource rooms, or inclusive classrooms. Children with special needs like all other children have a right to education in a non-threatening environment. Section 8 clearly stated that all children in spite of their physical, mental, and emotional disabilities must be provided with equal educational opportunities. Adequate education must be ensured for all children, so they can fully play their roles in the development of the nation. The schools, according to the National Policy on Education, are supposed to provide for students with gifts and talents in order that they may contribute towards nation building. However, the question is: How far are these objectives being achieved in Nigerian classroom?

The truth is that these theoretical objectives are yet to be fully realized in schools. The practices of policies in the National Policy on Education are yet to be implemented and the objectives are not yet functional. Yet, it is of great importance that equal educational opportunities be made available for all children, since everyone has to have the same chance of getting a job or doing well.

In reality, the idea of quality, as far as special children are concerned, refers to the provision of equal educational treatment to the end that the individual gets an opportunity to develop to the best of his ability.

Therefore, it entails the provision of a free education, and deliberately planned programmes to suit the child's ability at no cost to him/her and his/her parents.

However, the Federal Government of Nigeria's inability to fund general education has led to the total abandonment of any request for setting up suitable structures for special education and special needs children. The funding and service delivery has left much to be desired. The policy document is neither classified any criteria for personnel training nor co-ordination of its special education unit. This situation has led to the stagnation of special education in Nigeria.

In other words, the government is yet to come up with accurate number of those in need of special education services. The lack of professionalization of the field, lack of training facilities, lack of human and material resources, and the unfavourable attitude of the society towards children with special needs, their families and even their teachers, and these have led to further non-interest in the profession. It has also reduced the effectiveness of those already working.

IEP (Individualized Education Plan)

Instructional programmes are consistently designed to respond to categorical placement options of exceptional learners. In United State, the federal mandates ensure placements of exceptional learners in least restrictive environments. PL 94–142, for example, mandate an IEP (Individualized Education Plan) for every student served in special education programmes. The IEP must contain the current functioning level of the student, as well as annual goals, short-term objectives, and services to be provided to the student (Smith, 2010). In addition to the identification of services provided, the IEP must include projected dates for initiation and duration of services, as well as appropriate objective criteria and evaluation procedures and schedules for determining, on at least an annual basis, whether short-term instructional objectives are being achieved (Smith, 2010). In the United States, the concern still remains that many ethnic minority students are inappropriately placed. This, in turn, affects their instructional programming in school activities. Individualized educational plan is a concept that has not yet been fully adopted in Nigeria. Keeping children with special needs in segregated set ups for teachings and living is still practiced. Reasons adduced in the past included the need to avert discrimination, deprivation, and other forms of denial as these people learn to exist among people of like exceptionalities. The truth, however, is that most parents would be happy when relieved of the responsibility to keep their special needs especially when they lack information about what to do with them.

However, in his observation, Okuoyibo (2001) noted that the deliberate discovery of these children with special needs for whatever reason is already a societal rejection and prejudice which may lead to low achievement motivation. The teachers who, on the other hand, may be relieved from planning for diverse learners are said to give low quality teaching since there will be no competition from the other children without disabilities. The increasing influx of children with special needs in school has made policy makers insist in the retraining of serving teachers in Nigerian schools.

Legal Mandates

In the United States, special education started with a series of advocacies, litigations, and legislation which resulted in the final promulgation of PL 94–142 in 1975. The fullest extent of this law has been stretched, amended, and used to meet the unique needs of exceptional learners (Smith, 2010). For example, in 1986, an amendment of PL 94–142 was instituted as PL 99–457 to address the special education concerns of children

from birth and provide IFSP (Individualized Family Service Plans) for each child. In 1990, the IDEA (PL 101–476) was instituted to respond to the incessant needs of exceptional individuals. With this law, the term “handicap” is out of fashion, and there is a real understanding that individuals can have disabilities or impairments and not be “handicapped”. Additionally, traditional categories of exceptionality are solidified and two new additional categories (Autism and Traumatic Brain Injury) are created. Concepts that are critical to special education today include: (1) referral and identification; (2) non-discriminatory assessment; (3) parental consent; (4) procedural safeguards; (5) placement in the least restrictive environment; and (6) individualized education programming. These concepts have impacted not only special education placements, but all aspects of professional preparation and related services (Smith, 2010).

Nigerian Laws

Nigeria is a signatory to United Nations Edict on Human Rights and Child Right. The child has a right to be free, enjoy leisure and play, and be protected from harmful practices, violence, injury, and abuse.

Also, Nigeria promulgated a decree in 1993 for the provision of clear and comprehensive legal protection and security for Nigerians with disabilities. Individuals with disabilities are guaranteed equal treatments, integration, education, and their eventual mainstreaming into the society.

However, children/youth with disabilities are yet to be provided with free education as provided by the decree. Lots of teachers do not have the professional skills to work effectively with the various disabilities. Educational policies and programmes do not reflect the need of individual differences or disabilities. The educational set up is mainly structured and not accommodating to children with special needs. How are children with wheel chairs expected to participate in classrooms upstairs? How will the child with speech and language defect be taught by a teacher who lacks the skills to communicate?

There is a need to move the decree from paper and allow for its implementations in the classrooms. The teachers have to be trained to ensure their adherence to the decree.

Parents, professionals, lawyers, and the disabled should form pressure groups to make the government provide for:

- (1) Research institutes for the development of educational materials for disabled students;
- (2) Early identification and programming of children with disability;
- (3) Special services in schools to allow for mainstreaming and inclusion;
- (4) Funding of the educational professions of the disabled in schools. Also, the government must be willing to sue or support parents and advocates for the disabled when their rights are abused.

Problems Associated With Intervention Programme in Nigeria

The problems associated with intervention programme in Nigeria are as follows:

- (1) Non-existence of facilities or screening, identification assessment, and evaluation;
- (2) Stagnation of programmes due to inadequate funds;
- (3) Only educational and vocational programmes are available and may not be based on data collected and equipment's are outdated;
- (4) Poor attitudes of the public towards the disabled. Some parents would rather avoid screening their disabled children, and others may not seek intervention due to ignorance;
- (5) Lack of enforced legislature;
- (6) Lack of accurate data to show accurate figures of children needing intervention. Hence, no reliable data

on prevalence of disabilities among Nigerian children.

Counseling Intervention for Persons With Special Needs

The presence of a child naturally heralds joy, pleasure, and satisfaction. The newborn is showered with a lot of love, attention, and many expectations. When those expectations are not met, disappointments, fears, and nightmares set in. The initial shock and reactions sometimes lead parents to reject the child and deny him/her the love and care he/she needs for development.

Generally speaking, the announcement and the confirmation that a child has disability is expected to bring a feeling of sadness and disappointment, but outright rejection and even secretly wishing the child dead is an injustice and a denial child's of the human right to exist.

Parents therefore need to be helped to see that disabilities in children may not necessarily be due to their own fault. Sometimes, they may be due to ignorance (like not vaccinating children against killer diseases like poliomyelitis) or even the child being born with unexplained deformity. Parents' reactions have been discovered to be almost the same as they pass through shock, denial, grief, fear, and sense of loss. For mothers, it has been discovered that they exhibited some feelings of helplessness for others, and it is like the light snuffed out. Many reasons, of course, can be adduced for these feelings, some of which include the sudden realization that the extra burden might affect the upbringing of their siblings.

It is at this stage that a counselor's intervention inputs helps allay their fears and helps them get support in keeping with the challenges ahead. Also with the support of a counselor, parents and other siblings learn to love and accept the reality that they cannot change the obvious. Therefore, they must learn to live with the truth and adjust for the good of the child. Parents must bring themselves to terms and accept the child and seek ways to help the child as much as they can.

With counseling, the parents of the child with disability will find out that:

- (1) A child with disability ought to have outstanding ability;
- (2) A disabled child has a right to live and develop to the fullest possibilities;
- (3) With proper support and training they can still become productive members of the society;
- (4) A disabled child is not necessarily possessed of demons;
- (5) The ultimate in educating the disabled person is to get the person from the level of dependence to independence;
- (6) Love and care exhibited by the parents and other siblings will promote the development of a child undergoing stress due to adjustments required to accommodate the disabled member of the family.

It is therefore recommended that the following strategies be adopted to get parents involved in the early intervention programmes for their children:

- (1) Parents can be reached through conferences and workshops purposely organized to inform them on the causes and early signs of disabilities;
- (2) Production of fliers with information on available help and resources they can approach, which may be very helpful;
- (3) Training can be provided during antenatal and postnatal visits of parents in their various clinics;
- (4) Professionals can work with homes on how to provide stimulation activities, which parents can use on their children to enhance their development.

Making a Case for the Disabled Children in Nigeria

Disability should be a source of worry and concern to all. As human beings, the right of the disabled to a free and appropriate education, provision of adequate and special facilities by policy-makers, cannot be questioned. Hence, there is the need for legislation as a means of ensuring that children with special needs are being provided for.

The absence of a legislative mandate to support adequate provisions for the disabled in Nigeria has been made. In spite of the mention made in the National Policy on Education, and Nigeria being a signatory to the United Nations' Declarations and Resolutions on the education, social integration and normalization of persons with disabilities, member of United Nations' Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities of 1993, and a signatory to the New Delhi Declaration of 1994, not much can be recorded as practical steps taken to prevent and alleviate the sufferings of the people with disabilities in Nigeria.

Similarly, it is embedded in the Nigerian Constitution that no Nigerian citizen shall be subjected to any form of discrimination or deprivation merely by reason of the circumstances of birth. Yet, the rights of individuals with disabilities including their lives, liberty, security, dignity of person-hood, fair hearing, private and family life, and freedom from discrimination is constantly being violated.

In the recent past, the wife of the president, Mrs. Stella Obasanjo in an International Conference of Special Children empowered programme in 2001 noted that the neglect of the plight of the people with disabilities has constituted a great loss of human talents and productivity. The neglect is compounded by the negativity attitudes, beliefs, and apathy of the Nigerian public to the plight of children with disabilities, hence, its limitation against effective development.

Such situations, such as this, demands urgent action from professionals and practitioners to reflect on and assess the continued relevance and validity of our beliefs and practices and to review policies made, gauge the levels and types of successes and failures encountered in the past, in order to chart a new course for the future.

Positive steps to be taken to correct the wrongs done to the disabled and their families include the need for:

- (1) A reliable data stating categories of disabilities and their prevalence in the society;
- (2) The use of Psycho-Educational Testing Center for the early assessment and prevention of disabilities;
- (3) Poverty alleviation and prevention of child labour and child begging;
- (4) Educational and economic empowerment of children and youth with disabilities and provisions of sheltered workshops where they can be employed in each state;
- (5) The need for circulation of information on the causes and preventions of disabilities at the pre and postnatal clinics;
- (6) The urgent need to review policies and put in place a legislative mandate to support adequate provisions for the disabled in Nigeria.

Conclusions

In spite of the fact that both countries' goals are to maximize the social and academic potentials of learners with disabilities, it is imperative for a small scale society like Nigeria to emulate the United States in the practical implementation of such goals.

Nigeria as a nation that participated in signing the United Nations' Declarations and Resolutions on the

education, social integration, and normalization of persons with disabilities needs to urgently practice what they signed. The policy statement that no Nigerian citizen shall be subjected to any form of discrimination or deprivation merely by reason of the circumstances of birth which should be actualized by ensuring that children with disabilities are detected early, and intervention programmes that will ensure their liberty, security, dignity of personhood, fair hearing, private, and family life are put in place.

The use of professionals to disseminate information, carry out trainings, and ensure the safety of Nigerian children therefore is long overdue. Indeed, it has constituted a great loss of human talents and productivity and encourages child abuse and labour by a significant number of adults who should be caring for the disabled children.

Intervention Programmes

The current trend in dealing with disabilities in children is the issue of early intervention. Once a child is detected as having disabilities, the programmes activities must be designed to ensure that the condition of the child does not deteriorate. In other words, during intervention programmes, children at-risk are identified considering their biological and environmental genesis in order to completely arrest or prevent further progression of disabling condition.

For a good programme to be put in place, the present cultural, social, and financial environment in the country must be borne in mind and the dangers that ignoring these anomalies can have on the development of the country considered.

Concept of Intervention Programme

Intervention in special education connotes all efforts made to help children/persons with special needs to overcome their presumed or identified problems. It is a designed effort at reducing the complexity and multiplicity of variables affecting the children or persons in question. The keyword here is the reduction of the possibility of the progress of the disabling condition. In agreement with this idea, Abosi (1992) also opined that intervention.

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