

Educating People With Special Needs in Nigeria: Present and Future Perspectives

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For a long time, children with special needs were educated along with other regular children in schools. The notion of special education was a western phenomenon and concept in Nigeria. How were children with special needs educated without special education programs? This paper will provide cultural perspectives on issues of disability and caring for children with exceptional needs in Nigeria.

Keywords: special education, advocacy for learners with disabilities, service delivery for learners with disabilities, special education law

Introduction

Nigeria is located on the West Coast of Africa, bordering the Gulf of Guinea, between Benin and Cameroon. With an estimated population of 146 million, it is a heterogeneous society with more than 250 ethnic and language groups (The World Fact Book, 2008). Its most populous and politically influential ethnic and language groups include the Igbos, Hausas, and Yorubas. Nigeria got its independence from Britain in 1960. Following nearly 16 years of military rule, a new constitution was adopted in 1999, and a peaceful transition to civilian government was completed. However, the government continues to face the daunting task of reforming a petroleum-based economy, with revenues that continue to be squandered through corruption and mismanagement. In addition, even as Nigeria continues to institutionalize democracy, it continues to experience longstanding ethnic and religious tensions. Although both the 2003 and 2007 presidential elections were marred by significant irregularities and violence, Nigeria appears to experience its longest period of civilian rule since independence. The general elections of April 2007 marked the first civilian-to-civilian transfer of power in the country's history.

In theory, Nigeria is a democratic government, yet the military characteristics still dominate most part of the country. This means that not enough positive changes have been made in the fields of general and special education. Many Nigerians have not benefited from special education programs, as outlined by Section 8 of the Nigerian NPE (National Policy on Education), mostly because of inadequate funding (Mba, 1989; Obiakor, 1998), cultural beliefs (Afolabi, 1990; Eskay, 2001; Marten, 1990; Obiakor, 1998; Onwuegbu, 1977), negative perceptions (Afolabi, 1990; Obiakor, 1998), teacher qualification (Abosi & Ozoji, 1995; Ekeleme, 1974), and the non-existence of legal mandates (Obiakor, 1992). Other scholars (Abosi, 1992; Marten, 1990) have noted

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that continuous negative perceptions of learners with disabilities have made accountability difficult to achieve, especially when federal, state, and local responsibilities are mishandled. Nwaogu (1988) further found that the deeply ingrained cultural beliefs about people with disabilities and their alleged mistreatment by some administrators cannot be overlooked. Because of negative societal perceptions, teacher training and certification in special education are not maintained, and these in turn, affect funding of special education. These cultural beliefs have continued to influence the formulation and implementation of special education policies.

Onwuegbu (1977) noted that ignorance, superstition, and taboos have caused the lack of care of learners with disabilities in Nigeria. Caulcrick (1980) further found that cultural behaviors resulting from superstition and negative perception of these learners have led to poor identification, evaluation, placement, and instruction. Obiakor (1998) also found that because of the negative perceptions, screening, evaluation, placement, and instruction have been affected. Further, the absence of legal mandates indicates that parents lack their legal rights to due process, and as a result, they cannot initiate litigation against any form of discrimination against their children in terms of admission, initial screening, comprehensive evaluation, subsequent placement, individualized instruction, and service delivery. Despite the decision of the federal government to give quality education to all Nigerian children through the 1977 NPE, some administrators still perceive people with disabilities negatively (Eskay, 2001). Even in the areas of teacher training and certification, deeply ingrained cultural beliefs create strategic problems. The question that comes to mind is: How can special education programs forge ahead with problematic cultural views and strategic plans? Many advocates, including some contemporary scholars (Abosi & Ozorji, 1990, 1995; Eskay, 2001; Marten, 1990; Obiakor, 1991) have decried the continuous cultural misrepresentations that impede general and special education programs at all levels. Clearly, there is a critical need to shift paradigm and powers to maximize the fullest potential of people with disabilities. This is the focus of this chapter.

One Step Forward and Two Steps Backwards: Conflicting Actions

As it appears, special education has made some progress in Nigeria. However, the more things change, the more they remain the same. Abang (1995) argued that while special education programs have embraced some slight recognition in some parts of the country, they have failed in other parts of the country. Eskay (2001) noted that cultural beliefs, division among ethnically diverse Nigerians, and divisive politics still account for the unequal representation and treatment of learners with disabilities. Based on recent findings, Muuya (2002) indicated that many people do not see any significance in educating people with disabilities, and thus, there exists division among policy makers. Because of political and cultural issues mitigating against special education programming, there seems to be a continuous stagnancy of special education programming since the enactment of Section 8 of the NPE more than three decades ago. Below are three important sub-sections that demonstrate the state of special education programming in Nigeria.

Issues in funding of special education. Funding for special education in Nigeria limits the progress of special education. Funding seems to be either insufficient or not provided for the education and service delivery of learners with disabilities. There are constant unending debates and policy maneuvering among education policy makers that end up defeating any funding appropriated for special education. Even the money donated by non-governmental organizations and philanthropists for the education of these learners are not used for that purpose. Obiakor and Maltby (1998) compared Nigeria to other countries and found that funding of special education has been slow and difficult to procure because Nigeria lacks the legal mandate to enforce special

education policies. As a result, services for people with disabilities are not delivered appropriately. Smith (2007) concluded that, funding of special education has “always” been a problem in countries that have negative perceptions of learners with disabilities.

Nepotism, stateism, and corruption still dominate in Nigeria, where the dream of many educated Nigerians is still to push a pen behind an office desk. This kind of attitude has resulted in little venturing in creating private businesses to improve employment and expand wealth. The government is the major source of income for socio-economic and educational advancements. Funds are generated from oil revenue and exportation; and corruption centers on how to be wealthy without regard to socio-educational investments. Contracts are awarded to people not because of their ability to do quality work but because of their ability to bribe their ways through (Obiakor & Braggs, 1998).

Qualified general and special education practitioners. There are still not enough qualified special educators to meet the educational needs and care of persons with disabilities in the society. Many unqualified special education teachers are left to teach these individuals. As a result, there is poor implementation of the NPE. Akon (1991) examined the status of in-service education for teachers in Nigeria and found that it represents in-service teacher education is an effective means of augmenting inadequacies of pre-service training, and updating teachers’ knowledge, skills, and interests in their chosen field. In Eskay’s (2001) research, he found that because of societal perception, few qualified special education teachers give up their teaching responsibility to unqualified special education teachers. Sadly, these unqualified teachers do not last long due to their lack of knowledge and methodology coupled with high enrollment in classrooms. Many students (both the disabled and nondisabled) are put together in the same classroom and poorly prepared teachers find it difficult to identify their individual needs.

There are consistent problems of how teachers and service providers are prepared in Nigerian. Colleges of education and universities are not preparing their future teachers for the realities that they will confront. In addition, it is unknown how the teaching practices incorporate experiences of individuals with exceptionalities in their educational processes. Pre-service and in-service teachers are rarely prepared to design individualized educational programs and the individual family supports programs for parents and guardians. In fact, teacher preparation has traditionally been on a crash-program sort of mentality. It is unclear if programs incorporate knowledge about categories of exceptionalities, assessment tools, procedural safeguards, and innovative techniques. Again, the lack of funding impacts any form of innovations in quality teacher preparation.

Address to legal mechanism. In any democratic society, no program can be successful without legal enforcement. As it stands, there is no legal mandate from the government to carry out the objectives enumerated in Section 8 of the NPE with regard to people with exceptionalities. This absence of legal mandate, leads to civil right violation and lack of adequate programming. In addition, it challenges the local, state, and federal governments to fund special education programs. No doubt, the availability of funds would have helped in providing adequate in-service training for teachers, and erecting classroom buildings to accommodate these learners. As Ajuwon (2008) pointed out, the absence of legal mandates to enforce special education programs perpetuates negative societal perceptions of these learners.

It is human knowledge that the lack of legal mechanism affects:

- (1) The knowledge of who should be served, why someone should be served, how a person should be served, and where a person should be served;
- (2) Procedural safeguards and due process rights;

- (3) Non-discriminatory identification and assessment;
- (4) Confidentiality of information;
- (5) Individualized educational programming;
- (6) Parental rights and responsibilities;
- (7) Appropriate categorization, placement, and instruction.

Accountability: Beyond Tradition

Accountability is an imperative that is necessary to build programs. It can be diagnostic, formative, and summative. Because of this lack of accountability in Nigeria, special education programs and service delivery systems have embraced sluggish progress. The government may have good intentions in the education of its citizens through the 1999 UBE (Universal Basic Education) (1999); however, persistent ingrained negative perceptions about people with disabilities have tremendously affected special education programs. Why should we care? The reason is simple: Every citizen is valuable in advancing our humanity. It is therefore important that students, parents, schools, communities, and governments agencies remain accountable in advancing the humanity of Nigerians.

Funds that are specifically earmarked for innovative special education programs must be accounted for—They should not be allowed to end up falling into the wrong hands and be subsequently diverted for personal gains (Obiakor, 2004). In the authors' experience with accountability, the following areas will help tremendously:

(1) Accountability in funding special education: Moneys that are meant for the special education programs must be accounted for. They should not be allowed to end up falling into the wrong hands and be subsequently diverted for personal gains (Eskay, 2001; Obiakor, 2004);

(2) Accountability in service availability: There are few services available for people with special needs. Services like transportation, medical, counseling, living accommodation, and many others are not easy to procure; and those who succeed, end up not getting all the necessary services (Obiakor & Bragg, 1998). There must be accountability in these areas;

(3) Accountability in teacher preparation: Most teachers who work with people with disabilities are not qualified to teach. Some of those who are qualified to teach, end up going into other fields. There must be accountability on how teachers and service providers are prepared (Akon, 1991; Obiakor, 2004);

(4) Accountability in identification, screening, and appropriate placement: Though students with special needs are housed in one class, they are not included with those without disabilities in state academic assessment that is used for accountability purposes. Instead, they are left behind. The idea of leaving these people behind raises the question of how their progress is measured in order to determine their annual goals (Smith, 2007; Smith & Tyler, 2010). Bakere (1992) and Obiakor (1998) noted that assessment standards and accountability provisions should be designed to capture and represent growth in high priority skills among people with special needs. Mukuria and Obiakor (2004) argued that the overall goal should be to design and implement assessment systems that are culturally valid and reliable;

(5) Accountability in parental involvement and due process: A closer examination of parental involvement and due process reveals the urgency for a fundamental policy shift to facilitate successful collaboration between policy makers, special education teachers, and parents of students with special needs. Many Nigerian parents' voices continue to be silenced and excluded from their children's education (Mukuria & Obiakor, 2004).

Clearly, schools and parents should collaborate and work together to accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, and linguistic or other circumstances.

Nigeria's continuous struggle to restructure its special education program to suite its citizens with special needs could well be attributed to the following historical factors.

The Colonial Era

During the Colonial Era, a different kind of educational system took place. The European colonial "masters" mishandled the already instituted educational system for their own benefit. Bude (1983) did not see any useful educational program planning and development given to the Nigerian people by these European colonizers. Bude (1983) stated that colonial education focused on the production of clerks, messengers, and partially educated people, who were intimidated by the authority figures. It appears evident that special education had no place in the school curriculum under colonial governance. Therefore, there were no adequate preparations for educating the special education population in Nigeria and it has been demonstrated in scholarly literature that when people are adequately prepared for dealing with at-risk populations, the attitude is bound to be positive (Eskay, 2009). Since the colonial "masters" had no place for special education, their colonies had no place for it either, even after independence. Nigeria has continued to struggle since independence in the area of educating the special-needs population (Obiakor, 1998). There is a simple logic to the disinclination of the colonial regime in developing special education curriculum. Indeed, one could ask whether the education of the disabled would have enhanced the power of the colonial masters since the educated disabled citizen might not provide the type of service that would accentuate the machismo—a paternalistic and chauvinistic tendency—of the British royal polity. Of course, we know that the answer is negative. To underscore this point, Eskay (2001; 2009) showcased the Herculean effort that the Ghanaian government has made in constituting and reforming special education in the nation. According to him, all of these activities have taken place in Ghana only after Ghana became independent in 1957. The example of Ghana, the first independent nation in West Africa, crystallizes the fact that education in the mindset of colonial powers is antithetic to progressive attitudes towards special education in Africa.

The British replacement of the already instituted educational system did not historically encourage productivity as did the previous system. Rather, the British system of education focused on reading, writing, and mathematics. This kind of education acquired from the British colonizers provided "basic" education that would enhance "good" character for the colonial masters and diminish development of vocational skills, which were greatly needed in the society of Nigerian citizens. The cultural heritage, which included an emphasis on the excommunication and killing of people with special needs who could not contribute to the smooth running of the society, was not appreciated or promoted.

The Post-colonial Era

The Post-colonial Era did not produce any noticeable educational system for the people of Nigeria. The British educational system remained unchanged in this country. That is to say, they left Nigeria with six years of primary, five years of secondary, and four years of university education. This educational system left behind by the colonial "masters" was not carefully planned to include people with special needs. According to Fafunwa and Asiku (1982), the British government did not give the Nigerian people a realistic system of education that could help their social, cultural, economic, and political needs. These needs, which included productivity, would have helped the Nigerian people tremendously in transforming their resources into

commodities and services. Addressing the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) on productivity and education, Eskay (2009) argued on why productivity should depend on the attitude, knowledge, and skill of people. In their opinion, adequate education and training should be the economic pivot needed for productivity in any modern society. Unfortunately, the British government did not address the need for building this adequate base of an educational system that would embrace different cultures in this heterogeneous society. Thus, regionalism, sectionalism, tribalism, bribery, mismanagement, and corruption resulted instead. These negative results were embraced due to the inadequate and solid base of educational foundation, which was supposed to help the people of Nigeria in their educational direction. Unexpectedly, civil war resulted and thereby contributed heavily to the destruction of Nigeria's social, cultural, political, and economic progress.

Era of Innovation and Action

Realizing the unsuitable system of education the British government has brought to the people of Nigeria and the unexpected harms such system has begun to cause in the society, the citizens of Nigeria began to search for suitable ways to ameliorate these damages that were in the educational system. In the 1970s, Nigeria realized a huge profit from oil. With these oil profits, Nigerian innovative planners began enacting short- and long- term goals and objectives with which to help their deteriorating educational system. Some of these goals include the need to educate its people and improve its deteriorating system of education. In order to achieve these goals and objectives, Nigeria embarked on: (1) giving scholarships to its people to study within and outside the country; (2) building more universities, colleges, high schools, and primary schools within the country; and (3) creating more states to accommodate these schools. Furthermore, in an effort to phase out illiteracy, superstition regarding people with special needs, ignorance and diseases, the Nigerian government in 1976 began the UPEP (Universal Primary Education Program). Embracing these goals and objectives that were put forward by the innovative Nigerian educational planners, Eke (1972) noted that:

Nigeria cannot afford to leave the question of education to the whims and caprices of individual choice and that our educational policies must take full cognizance of the needs of the country, first, in terms of the national requirements for manpower and skills, and second, in terms of free, just, united, egalitarian, and democratic society in Nigeria. It is clear that education should henceforth be looked at from two separate perspectives: first, from the capital investment perspective; and second, from the consumer good(s) perspective—though the two intersect somewhere along the line. (p. 5)

In his statement, Eke added that if the goals and objectives were well mapped out, coordinated and enforced, it would lead the country into becoming: (1) politically united and democratic; (2) economically strong and dynamic; (3) socially accommodated; and (4) freedom for all its citizens.

It is worth pointing out that during this era of realization, special education for students with disabilities was not thought about. Only the general education for those students considered "normal" was mapped out and implemented in the country. Between 1974 and 1975, the Federal Ministry of Education fully embarked on the education of all Nigerian children from the age of six. In an effort to accomplish this goal, a UPEP was established around the same year. In collaboration with the federal government, a sizable amount of money was spent for making this program successful. In 1977, the federal government looked into the need to include students with disabilities in this free Universal Primary Education Program.

Based on these needs, Section 8 of the NPE was enacted. Like Public Law 94-142 in the United States, Section 8 is a section of the NPE with the following purposes:

- (1) To give concrete meaning to the idea of equalizing educational opportunities for all children's physical and emotional needs;
- (2) To provide adequate education for all learners with disabilities, so that they may fully play their roles in the development of the nation;
- (3) To provide opportunities for exceptionally gifted students (who were also considered disabled within the Nigerian society) to develop at their own pace in the interest of the nation's economic and technological development. (pp. 33-34)

To ensure that these objectives worked, the Federal Ministry of Education decided to set up a committee to coordinate special education activities. This coordination of activities would be a joint collaboration with the Ministry of Health, Social Welfare, and Labor in taking a census of all children and adults by age, sex, locality, and type of disabilities. Although it was seen to be a good intention, its implementation has always proved abortive (Eskay, 2001). Onwuegbu (1977) conducted studies on the role of cultural perception and care of learners with disabilities. He found that the inadequacy of care of learners with disabilities is attributed to ignorance, superstition, and taboos as a result of different cultural groups in Nigeria. Eskay's (2009) study revealed that culture and poor funding have had a devastating effect on the reform of special education in Nigeria.

According to their findings, the lack of reform in special education is due to the difficult ties to cultural norms associated with Nigerian society. Abosi and Ozoji (1990) also found that poor funding, ignorance, greediness, and jealousy among some professionals have contributed adversely to the difficulty in reforming special education in Nigeria.

Era of Affliction

In the 1980s, Nigeria, the giant of Africa, began to lose its grip on those wonderful ideas of universal primary education, a politically democratic society, an economically strong and dynamic society, and freedom for all that she had promised to her citizens. In the midst of all these utopian ideas, socioeconomic and political problems began to distort the Nigerian goals and objectives made during the era of realization. What actually led to this socioeconomic and political instability in Nigeria?

First, Nigeria faced many military coups that led to changes in the government.

These coups severely devastated its economy. These coups later gave room for corruption and adversely affected the educational direction of the country. Nigeria was found to be in difficult economic shape. Second, disunity in the management of its resources became problematic and subsequently led to corruption and mismanagement of resources to meet the goals of educating all Nigerian children, including those with special needs.

Future Perspectives

Through these years, special education in Nigeria has made some progress; however, there are no legal mandates that are put in place to enforce it. The only special education mandate comes from Section 8 of the NPE. As a result, accountability for special education is affected; services for people with disabilities are not reachable, parental rights to due process are denied; and these people with special needs are left to suffer for a cause they do not know. To look at the future, Nigeria must join other progressive nations to advocate for the rights of learners with disabilities and help them join the mainstream society (Eskay, 2001; Mukuria & Obiakor, 2004; Obiakor, 2004). From the authors' perspective, Nigeria must build on the foundational knowledge that it has established. Proactive efforts must be made to:

(1) Shift paradigm—How we think about people with disabilities must change;

(2) Enforce the NPE—Currently, there are no laws that enforce the NPE. Unlike other countries that have special education laws that guide their special education activities, Nigeria still struggles on this issue. Even the Section 8 of the NPE does not provide room for due process. The lack of legal enforcement in special education makes it difficult for people with special needs and their parents to fight for their due process rights;

(3) Institute advocacy groups—An institution of advocacy groups will be extremely helpful. Individuals must lobby for the rights of persons with special needs;

(4) Recognize and accommodate various forms of exceptionalities—At present, a couple of exceptionalities are recognized in Nigeria;

(5) Give quality and equal educational opportunities to all learners—All learners deserve quality and equitable treatment and education. The federal, state, and local governments must be involved in these processes.

Conclusions

Education for people with special needs, which began as an excellent path for providing equal education to all Nigerian citizens has found itself struggling with how to make it better for learners who are disenfranchised. It is not surprising that for decades such struggle has not produced any measurable progress in the education and service delivery for these learners.

To join other progressive countries in recognizing, protecting, and maintaining the rights of learners with exceptionalities, it is imperative that Nigeria begins to shift its paradigm in the 21 century by putting away the old tradition of negative perceptions on these learners. Clearly, it is critical that Nigeria looks at the future as it includes these learners into the mainstream society and helps them to maximize their fullest potentials.

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