

Education in Nigeria: Programs and Goals and the Need to Overhaul Education for People with Disabilities in Nigeria

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Abstract

Education is vital to everyone in society. The relationship between education and societal development cannot be overstressed. For any society to develop in every aspect, education must be inclusive i.e., it must include everybody, both able and disabled. Nigeria's education system regarding persons with disabilities needs serious re-evaluation in order that every citizen could have access to quality basic education. This paper will focus on examining the nation's policy on education as it affects persons with disabilities i.e., what programs and goals are laid out to cater for their education and the level of achievement. As with many issues regarding development in Nigeria, the issue or practice of educating persons with disabilities is yet to be properly addressed.

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Introduction

Education is important in every society as a means of realizing and making changes in the quality of life of its citizens. Therefore, for a nation, especially a third world nation like Nigeria, to develop, it must invest in quality education (Kusimo & Chidozie, 2019). Many of the policies adopted by Nigeria, both local and international declarations e.g., Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Education for All (1990), stress the importance of education as a tool for addressing global problems which cannot be achieved without quality and inclusive education made available to all, even the disadvantaged and vulnerable in our society like persons with disabilities. Adeyanju (cited in Kusimo & Chidozie, 2019), maintains that development cannot

take place in any society without education and likewise, there can be no enduring peace and security without development. This makes education a yardstick for measuring the level of development of both the individual and the society, as well as a much desired social commodity that is affordable to only a relative number of people due to limited resources and personnel (Kusimo & Chidozie, 2019).

Our society is made up of mostly able-bodied persons, which means persons with disabilities are in the minority and that makes it difficult and perhaps not the priority of every government to put the needs of persons with disabilities in the forefront of government agenda, especially for developing nations like Nigeria. Persons with disabilities should not be excluded

from receiving education; it is as relevant to them as it is to non-disabled persons because it gives them the feeling of belonging and acceptance within the society, thereby doing away with any feeling of discrimination. In fact, education has now acquired the status of a basic human right as indicated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) which states that “everyone has the right to education and that education should be made available to all” (Kusimo & Chidozie, 2019). P. 4. Many international declarations have come into being that seek to enforce and protect these rights. Nigeria too is a signatory to many of these proclamations, e. g., United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006). But translating the policies into real programs to make real changes and improvements in the lives of persons with disabilities is much more difficult.

Policy makers in Nigeria have become aware of the gap and inequalities in educational opportunities for persons with disabilities. It is estimated that less than 10% of children with disabilities have access to formal education (Ajuwon, 2008), even though Nigeria is signatory to many international declarations that promote access to quality education for all citizens e.g. United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006), UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, (CRC, 1989), Education for All (1990) etc. In this quest to provide equal educational opportunities to every citizen, many developing countries like Nigeria have now acknowledged the

need to educate children with disabilities and harness their abundant potential.

According to UNESCO (cited in Biermann & Powell, 2016) there are over 10.5 million children who are out of school in Nigeria, out of which the majority are children with disabilities. This is in line with the World Bank projection that 15% of the population of developing countries are people with disabilities, out of which 80-90% of them don't enjoy basic needs of life like quality education (FACTSHEET).

In a nutshell, the major reasons for this lamentable situation surrounding special education and which is the objective of this article is the lack of accurate and reliable data on children with disabilities, inadequate trained teachers and personnel, lack of knowledge and understanding of disability issues, non-implementation of government policies as well as insufficient funding. If all these problems are overcome, there will be equal opportunity and access to quality education for children with disabilities in a conducive and stress-free environment. Promoting equality and inclusion, improvement in the quality of life for persons with disabilities and reducing costs of treatment and management of disabilities later are some benefits to be derived from viable and workable programs and policies for people with disabilities. Persons with disabilities should have the same opportunities as everyone else to participate in all aspects of society, including education, employment, housing, and transportation. Programs and goals can help to ensure that people

with disabilities have equal access to these opportunities. These, among others, are what this paper will focus on analysing and making recommendations that may help improve special education in Nigeria.

Concept of disability

Disability refers to the limitations on the ability of an individual to perform tasks that other people do with ease due to loss or malfunctioning of an organ of the body or the brain. Disability presents itself in different ways and results in the individual's lack of ability to use his body to perform tasks and take part in the life of the community. These challenges of impairment originate from birth, are inherited and sometimes happen as a result of sickness, old age or accident later in life. Disability is now on the increase due to an ageing population, chronic health conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, cancer, mental health disorders, armed conflicts and insurgency etc (Chan & Zoellick, 2011)

The recently released National Policy on Special Needs Education (NPSNE, 2015), defines persons with disabilities as those with significant physical, sensory and mental impairments. They include all those individuals that cannot cope with regular teaching and learning methods without formal special needs education training such as those with visual impairments, hearing impairment, physical impairment, mental disabilities, behavioural disorders, speech impairment, learning disabilities, multiple impairments, autism spectrum disorders, and the gifted and talented (Akogu, et al., 2018).

The National Policy on Education, which is a document that outlines government philosophy and goals in the education sector, has made provision for educating this group of individuals in specially designated schools as children with special needs. The goal is to make the special needs' child able to function and live an independent life. They are categorized into three groups: the disabled (individuals with impairments), the disadvantaged (e.g. nomadic pastoralists, migrant farmers) and the gifted and/or talented (individuals with very high I.Q or those naturally endowed with special talents in music, arts, who may be insufficiently challenged in regular schools). Persons with disabilities are among those to benefit from special education services and henceforth in this paper, special needs persons will be used synonymously with persons with disabilities.

Educational programs for persons with disabilities

Special education: Nigeria has many educational programs for people with disabilities which include special education, inclusive education, and vocational training. Special education was first given official recognition when it was mentioned in a brief paragraph in the first National Policy on Education (1977). The policy describes special education as the services offered in addition to regular school programs for individuals with special needs in the form of specialized assistance to enable them function at their intellectual, social, physical, and emotional level (Omede, 2016). Special education is

supposed to be provided by trained personnel such as psychologists, social welfare workers, and medical personnel in the form of an enriched curriculum to accelerate learning for the gifted and talented children, at the same time providing smaller classes that will give individual training to those that can only learn differently. Special education also involves assessment and diagnostic services to identify and give remedial and counselling services to those involved. Provision of special education services in Nigeria started even before independence in 1960 by the Christian missionaries. Along with special schools, the missionaries also established vocational rehabilitation and skill acquisition centres.

Special education is unique and expensive to practice due to the varied nature of disabilities that require individual instruction, the materials, and equipment needed to cater to such, as well as the high level of trained personnel and experts needed. Special education, by its nature subjects persons with disabilities, i.e. their beneficiaries to exclusion and segregation from schools and education available to children of similar ages, thereby inadvertently reinforcing the very discriminatory practices that children with special needs do not need to live a worthwhile life. This is because they operate outside the mainstream sector with special programs in special schools and special education teachers. This kind of education will only promote exclusion and substandard educational opportunities with limited prospects, which will ensure a life of discrimination

in societal activities. Some educationists argue that special education is better suited to persons with disabilities, i.e. where their needs can be accommodated, is better than putting them in mainstream schools where their needs cannot be addressed. Still, others have sought new methods of educating persons with special needs which gave birth to a new method that is hoped will do away with all forms of exclusion and marginalization (Florian, cited in Akogu et al., 2018). This has led to an alternative to educating persons with disabilities called inclusive education.

Even though special education has been recognized in the National Policy on Education, 1977, (section 8), not many disabled persons have benefited from the program mainly due to insufficient funds, negative cultural beliefs, inadequate qualified teachers and personnel, and lack of legal mandate until very recently (Eskay, Eskay & Uma, 2012). These challenges of educational programs for people with disabilities in Nigeria highlight the need for continued effort to improve the educational opportunities available to people with disabilities in Nigeria.

Special needs education: In line with current trends in education, the federal government is shifting away from the narrow scope of special education to 'a more broad-based focus of Special Needs Education and Rehabilitation Services' (National Policy on Special Needs Education, (NPSNE) 2015, p.9). This new policy was rolled out in 2015 by the federal ministry of education along with its implementation guidelines. Special needs education as

defined in the policy is like special education, though with slight modification. It is based on the Individualized Education Program (IEP) to be provided in schools, homes, and hospitals. The policy also recognizes three categories of persons with special needs: persons with disabilities, at-risk or disadvantaged children, and gifted and talented children. This categorization is broader as it includes cases of autism disorder, albinism and the almajiri.

The goals of special education as stated in the National Policy on Education (1977) were as follows:

- Give concrete meaning to the idea of equalizing educational opportunities for all children, their physical, sensory, mental, psychological, or emotional disabilities notwithstanding.
- Provide adequate education for all people with special needs in order that they may fully contribute their quota to national development.
- Provide opportunities for exceptionally gifted and talented children to develop their talents, natural endowments at their pace in the interest of the national economy and technological development.
- Design a diversified and appropriate curriculum for all beneficiaries.
- The new rolled out National Policy on Special Needs Education in Nigeria (NPSNE, 2015) meant a review of goals and objectives of

special needs education which are as follows:

- To take care of total service delivery of the physical, mental, and emotional disabilities of the Nigerian child, irrespective of setting (school, home, or hospital).
- To provide adequate and qualitative education for all persons with special needs in all aspects of national development endeavours;
- To ensure that all persons with special needs develop at a pace commensurate with their abilities and to contribute to the nation's socio-economic and technological development.

Inclusive education: Inclusive education can be understood as the practice of educating students with disabilities in regular classrooms alongside their non-disabled peers (Ajuwon, 2008). It involves bringing assistive devices and services to the disabled child rather than isolating the child in settings where the services are located. This policy of inclusion means that teachers must be able to teach children of different circumstances and disabilities, working with special education teachers. Inclusive education 'is about removing barriers to learning and involving all learners who otherwise would have been excluded through marginalization and segregation.' (National Policy on Inclusive Education in Nigeria (NPIEN), p.8, cited in Akogu et al., 2018). Current and emerging trends in education suggest that the most effective method

of educating persons with disabilities is in mainstream schools. This new method has the advantage of changing deeply ingrained negative societal attitudes towards disability, as disabled children interact with their non-disabled peers regularly. Having access to quality education is fundamental for the social inclusion of persons with disabilities in their societies. According to the National Policy on Education (NPE, 1981, p.3) 'integration (inclusive education) is the most realistic form of education' for both able and disabled persons. Many people do not understand persons with disabilities or their needs, and they are looked down upon by able-bodied members of society. Inclusion enables persons with disabilities to feel part of the society and enables others to understand and accommodate them. It acknowledges the differences and challenges each child is facing and accepts them in regular school despite these challenges. As UNESCO describes it, 'inclusion is a reform that supports and welcomes diversity among all learners' (Kusimo & Chidozie, 2019 P. 13).

Inclusive education has received worldwide support because it is seen to provide education for persons with disabilities in a less restrictive environment. Inclusive education practices are based on the principle of basic and fundamental human rights, which seeks to provide education for all students regardless of their special circumstances in the same classroom with modifications put in place. The revised NPE (2004) has embraced the

policy of inclusion for persons with disabilities by stipulating that persons with disabilities should receive education in regular schools side by side with normal children. This new policy, though quite desirable, has not taken off fully in Nigerian schools. Oladejo & Oladejo (cited in Adetoun, Oluwatoyin & Stephen, 2016); observed that the changes in educational institutions that will make inclusive education a reality in Nigeria are yet to be put in place. For inclusive education to take off in Nigeria, the school environment, appropriate school facilities and materials, modified curriculum and trained personnel and staff have to be provided. Most importantly, an accurate and current data of persons with special needs with their demographics, i. e. type of disability, year of onset, how acquired, etc. should be available to make appropriate plans for inclusive practices. Obani (cited in Danlami, 2015) noted that 'the old special education system with its restrictive practices cannot successfully address these problems (of persons with disabilities). The answer, he argues, lies in inclusive schooling, in changing and reorganizing the entire school system to accept all children and cater for their varied 'special' or 'ordinary' learning needs and difficulties' (P. 50). This means that the old policy of special education is no longer effective in addressing the educational needs of disabled persons. Proponents of inclusion also believe that children with disabilities learn social skills easily in more normal conditions of growth and development. Such arguments gave rise to the overwhelming support for inclusive education. Nigeria has now

adopted the policy of inclusive education as a method of educating persons with disabilities. This is partly because of external influence in the form of historical ties between developed and developing nations as well as the influence and role of international donor agencies, who have a big influence on the recipients of aid and grants (Ajuwon, 2008).

1. In the year 2013, the federal ministry of education, which oversees the programs and policies of education for the country, constituted a panel of seventeen members to develop a National Policy on Special Needs and Disability (SEND). This policy was a deliberate effort by the government to make persons with disabilities benefit from quality education. The outcome of this panel in 2015, was in the form of the National Policy on Special Needs Education (NPSNE) with its implementation guidelines that were released at all levels of government to help in the implementation of Special Needs Education and Disability (SEND). A year later, in 2016, the Nigerian government came out with another program, the National Policy on Inclusive Education in Nigeria (NPIEN) with its guidelines for implementation. All these policy interventions reflect a shift in the trend of educating persons with disabilities, which is partly due to Nigeria's membership of several international declarations that recognize the right of persons with disabilities to quality education in regular schools with the least

restrictive environment, zero rejection to fulfil their basic right to education. To achieve this goal, special education in Nigeria shall be provided to persons with disabilities from primary up to university and which are supported by law and budgetary allocations as stipulated in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, chapter (11). We can see that Special Education Needs and Disability (SEND) in Nigeria has progressed since it was first mentioned in the first National Policy on Education (NPE, 1977) to having its policy, (NPSNE, 2015) and a National Policy on Inclusive Education (NPIEN, 2016). All these developments, however, have been at the national level. Both state and local governments are yet to adopt their versions of the policies. Furthermore, there is still no law that protects the rights of persons with disabilities in Nigeria (Akogu, 2018). This absence of legal backing makes it difficult to prioritize the funding and implementation of the policies.

2. Current practice of special education in Nigeria

Current special education practices in Nigeria are inadequate for persons with disabilities, as there is no facility in place that will detect and identify children with special needs. Early identification means intervention programs will be provided in a timely manner. The goal of these programs is to prevent or reduce the severity of disabilities and to help children with disabilities reach their full potential. The

bulk of the responsibility for training and treatment of children with special needs and disabilities lies with the parents. In fact, the government's attention is mainly on children with obvious physical, neurological, vision, hearing, speech, and mental disabilities. Not much attention is given to behaviour disorders, autism, traumatic brain injury and emotional disability (Agunloye, cited in Akogu et al., 2018). The National Policy on Special Needs Education in Nigeria (NPSNE, 2015) recognizes three major categories of persons with special needs as persons with disabilities, at-risk children and youth, and the gifted and talented. What is in practice though is different, i.e., they have basically three groups of persons with special needs: the visual, hearing, and physical handicapped. These three kinds of impairment are quite obvious and hardly need any trained personnel to identify them. This practice means that there may be children with special needs and disabilities that go undetected and therefore do not enjoy any special attention or training (Akogu, et al. 2018).

Recommendations and Conclusion

Giving quality education to persons with disabilities in Nigeria will continue to be a challenge, since educating non-disabled children has not attained its stated targets yet. Without quality education, the social exclusion and marginalization of persons with disabilities will continue to be on the increase, as the ability to gain employment, to access health care and other social services will be seriously hampered. As long as most children with

disabilities do not have full access to quality education, their immense talents and potentials will remain undetected and underutilized. It is not enough for the Nigerian government to merely endorse international declarations regarding the education of persons with disabilities (Danlami, 2015). These international policies have to be studied, and a local application strategy developed to suit our needs. With an estimated figure of about 20% of the entire population living with disabilities (Adetoun et al., 2016), Nigeria cannot afford to brush aside disability issues and miss out on all the contributions they can make to national development.

Consequently, it is recommended that the government should involve people with disabilities in the planning, development and implementation of disability programs and services. People with disabilities know what they require better than anyone, they must take part in every process, from identifying needs to designing solutions and development of programs and services, e.g. providing physical access and making information and materials available in different forms; training and retraining of staff on how to work with people with disabilities, communication, assistive technology etc.

Employers and the community should develop a culture of inclusion to create a comfortable setting where people with disabilities feel welcome, respected, and valued as fellow employees and members of the society. This can be achieved through public awareness campaigns, media coverage, and events that celebrate the achievements of people with disabilities.

The community should support the development of self-advocacy skills among people with disabilities that will help them to advocate for their needs and rights, as well as change attitudes and misconceptions about disabilities.

Most importantly, governments should be held accountable by parents of children with disabilities, the disabled persons and well-meaning members of society for upholding the rights of people with disabilities. This includes monitoring legislation, enforcing laws, and providing funding for implementation of programs and policies without which many of the programs cannot come to fruition.

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