

Towards the Universalization of Access to Basic Education for the Exceptional Children in Nigeria

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Abstract: Education has become the most important and powerful instrument for reducing poverty and inequality as well as for laying the basis for a sustainable economic growth in modern societies. This has made it mandatory for all member countries of the United Nations to make education accessible to all their citizens irrespective of their social, economic or physical conditions. This study therefore highlights the state of special education institutions for the exceptional children in Nigeria. Suggestions for making education not only accessible but also serving as a means of developing the potentialities of the exceptional children are also made.

Key words: Basic education, exceptional children, universalization, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Implicit in the World Summit for Children declaration on education as in the Convention on the Rights of the Child is the right of the child to basic education (FGN/UNICEF, 1993). The United Nations and the African Union as well as other international organizations have stressed the need for all countries to make the optimum development of their citizens a priority in their welfare programmes. In actual fact, the optimum development of every citizen through the provision of basic education is the only means of creating what Plato once referred to as a stable society (Akinbote, 1995). In other words, basic education provides opportunities for poverty reduction, gender equity and child health among other things.

Nigeria like many other countries of the world has introduced basic education programmes at different times in order to provide equal educational opportunities to all her citizens irrespective of their status. This is probably in realization of the fact that basic (primary) education is essential for reducing poverty and ignorance as well as serving as a gateway to all higher levels of education for all citizens.

It is pertinent to note however that the objectives of such a mass literacy campaign cannot fully achieve the desired objectives if there is no adequate plan to take care of the interest of all the citizens including the exceptional children of school age. The existence of a very few special schools to cater for the relatively large number of handicapped children which was once projected to increase to 1.93 million by the year 2000 (FME/UNICEF, 1993) is grossly inadequate.

By exceptional children, we mean those children that are different in some way from the normal or average child. The term refers to those with special problems related to physical disabilities, sensory impairment, emotional disturbances, learning disabilities and mental retardation (Shenberger, 2005).

Therefore if these exceptional children are to reach their full potentials and make any meaningful contribution to the development of the country, they require a lot of understanding, patience, attention and encouragement as well as special education and related services. If government is serious about making education accessible to all citizens, then all the exceptional children no matter their location should benefit from the World declaration for all which Nigeria claims to be pursuing vigorously.

It is in view of the importance now attached to the empowerment of the exceptional children globally that this paper highlights the trends in the provision of special education and related services in Nigeria.

Trends in the development of special education in Nigeria in the last decade:

As at 1993, the estimated population of disable children of primary school age in Nigeria stood at 1.55 million (FME/UNICEF, 1993). On the other hand, there are only 73 registered schools for primary level of handicapped children in the country. While some states such as Oyo, Lagos and Edo have 12, 6 and 5 of such schools, respectively others such as Yobe, Taraba, Kogi and Abuja have none. The ownership of these special schools as revealed in the SAPA survey shows that there is some partnership in the provision of

special education for the exceptional children. According to the report of the survey, about 59% of the special schools are owned by State Governments while Religious Organizations have 20.9%, the Local Governments 7.5, 32.0% by various Non-Governmental Organizations, 3.0% by the Federal Government and about 1.5% by the community.

The relatively few number of special schools in the country means that many of the exceptional children will have no access to formal education and may therefore be unable to develop their potentials. The end result of course is that, majority of them will end up begging for arms in the streets and public places. For instance, the SAPA reports show that in 1986, only about 2.1% of the handicapped children were in school, while in 1991, only 4.23% were enrolled in formal schools. In other words, about 95.77% of the estimated 1.55 million exceptional children of primary school age have no access to formal education. Even among the lucky ones that have access to the special schools, the enrolment of males is higher than those of the females (Table 1). Does this then mean that girls are still being discriminated against or there are more handicapped boys than girls in the country?

Similarly, the SAPA report on the sampled schools show that the visually impaired are more favoured with 25 schools while the mentally disabled has one and the hearing impaired with the largest number of pupils has only seven schools.

It is glad to note however that the available special schools have professionally qualified teachers. This is not surprising because of the many higher institutions of learning available for the training of Special Education teachers. Apart from the College of Special Education Oyo that produces about 700 NCE teachers yearly there are nine Universities providing Special Education courses at NCE and graduate levels.

Problems of special education at the pre-primary and primary level in Nigeria: Like many other educational programmes in Nigeria, special education has its own problems that may not be strange but which requires special and urgent attention. One of the most important problems facing the special education schools is the lack of adequate facilities, equipment and suitable environments. For instance, only about 36.6% of the schools surveyed by SAPA were considered to the suitable while 35.2% were completely unsuitable.

The implication of this is that many of the handicapped children attending the special schools may not even be having adequate education which could make them useful to themselves and the society.

Table 1: Enrolment by type of disability by sex at the pre-primary and primary school levels

Type of disability	Pre-primary		Primary		Total
	M	F	M	F	
	Hearing impaired	102	53	358	
Speech impaired	133	209	1968	1299	3865
Physically disabled	135	98	170	97	500
Mentally disabled	113	33	264	152	562
Behaviour disorders	130	24	12	49	215
Total	1002	501	3236	2111	6850

Source: SAPA, National reports

Table 2: Special schools with equipment for vocational skills training

Equipment	Frequency	(%)
Sewing machine	31	43.7
Typewriters	28	39.4
Farming implement	21	29.6
Weaving loom	20	28.2
Cooking utensils	15	21.2
Woodwork equipment	10	14.1
Cookers	8	11.3
Cleaning machine	8	11.3
Knitting machine	5	7.0
Oven	2	2.8
Pomade making Machine	2	2.8
Gari frying equipment	1	1.4
Auto mechanic Equipment	1	1.4
Hair dressing Equipment	1	1.4
Oil extraction Equipment	1	1.4

Source: SAPA, National reports

Another problem is the fact that many of the schools which are located in urban centres have no boarding facilities and school buses. This means that children who are living far away from the schools might be discouraged from coming to school regularly particularly if their parents are poor and cannot afford the cost of bringing them to school daily. On the other hand, the absence of such special schools in the rural areas means that the exceptional children there are being denied access to the special education facilities necessary for their proper educational development.

The special schools are expected to develop various skills that could lead to self reliance among the pupils, majority of whom will not go beyond primary education level. However, the pupils may not be taught many of the essential vocational skills since most of the schools do not have the necessary facilities and equipment (Table 2).

It may be pertinent to note here that the major cause of all the problems highlighted above is finance. Majority of the special schools are funded by State Governments and religious organizations with their very limited resources. One may therefore not expect anything different from what is presently available in the special

schools in terms of resources. This could probably have been a different thing if the Federal Government has shown more interest in special education as it has done in the case of primary education for the normal children and the normadic education programme among others.

More importantly is the general attitude of people to the exceptional children. Although there has been an increasing awareness on the need to give this category of children proper education, yet many people and organizations still do not know much about them. While it is true that the special schools sometimes receive some assistance from individuals and organizations, such assistance are not regular. Majority of donations to these special schools come only on festive occasions such as religious festival. This means that for most part of the year, they are forgotten and left to their fate.

Vision and mission of pre-primary and primary education for the exceptional children in Nigeria: Nigeria being a focus country of the Nine Most Populous Developing Countries with a desire to accelerate basic education and literacy in the Education for All initiative (FME/UNICEF, 1993), there is the need for a new vision and mission of a comprehensive plan of action that will include all categories of citizens whether, normal, exceptional, young or old. With the enormous resources already invested in the mass literacy programmes in recent years, no one could doubt the commitment of Government towards the achievement of education for all.

Nevertheless, it would seem as if Government has deliberately concentrated more on the education of the normal citizens (both young and old) in the country at the expense of the exceptional children. By and large, to neglect the exceptional in their education is to make a mockery of Nigeria's philosophy of education which is:

...based on the integration of the individual into a sound effective citizen and equal educational opportunities for all citizens of the nation at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels, both inside and outside the formal school system (FRN, 2004).

In order to rectify this obvious anomaly, it is necessary to identify the major areas of National focus in the education of the exceptional children in the 21st century. These are:

- Making access to educational institutions universal in order to promote equality of opportunities is very crucial to the over-all success of the mass literacy programme. All children irrespective of their location, social, economic, mental or physical conditions

should be given the opportunity to receive the form of education most suitable for them. A situation where some are educated and some are not, apart from not helping to build a stable society, is unjust and anti-social (Awolowo, 1976).

Therefore, the Federal Government should establish a Commission to take care of special education of the exceptional children. This Commission when established should be responsible for the funding, administration and supervision of special education at the primary school level just like the National Primary (Basic) Education Commission and the National Commission for Normadic Education is doing for the primary schools and normadic children, respectively. This will ensure that special schools are provided in all parts of the country, both in rural and urban centres. In a way, this will ensure the universalization of access to education for the exceptional children thereby promoting equity among all children of school age.

- Providing a conducive environment for learning in the school is basic to the success of any educational programme. It is not enough to provide a school. The school environment must be made attractive and suitable for effective teaching and learning to take place. The experience of the public schools for the normal children where most pupils and teachers in the past had no chairs and tables, where school buildings had no roof among others should not be allowed to happen. What is worth doing at all is worth doing well. Right from the planning stage, adequate steps must be taken to ensure that only competent and professional qualified people are involved. Political expediency, tribal or religious sentiments which have in the past made a non-sense of very good programmes must be avoided.
- Focus on both literacy and vocation training of the exceptional children: Since the education of various categories of exceptional children will be involved, it will not be enough to just provide literacy and numeracy skills in the schools. As we are all aware, many of the children will never go beyond primary education for various reasons. Therefore, whatever education they are given should include the acquisition of certain vocational skills with which they could provide for their immediate needs in future rather than becoming a burden on the society.

This requires the provision of adequate human and material resources in all the schools wherever they may be located. There are enough institutions in the country for

the training of various cadres of teachers to teach in the special schools. All that is required is the adequate funding of such institutions in order to produce effective and efficient teachers for special education and the various crafts.

Government alone cannot be doing this. Therefore, there should be a means of encouraging more cooperation, partnership or support from individuals, religious bodies, international organizations and non governmental organizations. A certain percentage of the Education Tax should also be set aside for the special education programme in addition to the regular budgetary allocations.

- The posting of Special Education teachers to the (normal) public primary schools to serve as an interim measure particularly in rural areas where the population of handicapped children is not large enough to warrant building a special school for them is recommended. There should be no problem at all in this regard since all the Colleges of Education in the Country, who are now mainly concerned with the education of primary school teachers teach special Education as a course to all students irrespective of their areas of specialization. All that may be required is for this general special education course to be made more comprehensive so that teachers will at least be able to communicate effectively with the handicapped pupils in their classes.

Alternatively, a special education teacher might be posted to schools in the rural areas where the population of the handicapped children is not large enough for a separate school.

CONCLUSION

The main goal of every modern society is the optimum development of all her citizens. This will ensure

a stable society where everybody does that which he or she is most suited to do by nature. One sure way of doing this is the universalization of access to primary education so that every one will receive the type of education that is most appropriate for him/her. No child should be denied this fundamental right to education for whatever reasons.

In as much as the prosperity of a country is not measured only in the abundance of its revenue, nor in the strength of its fortifications, but also in the number of its cultivated citizens, men of education, enlightenment and character (Hanson, 1964) it has become necessary to invest in the education of all citizens of the country.

The battle against illiteracy, poverty ignorance and disease can only be said to have been won when all the citizens irrespective of their status are educated. We have all the resources to so and we owe it a duty to do so in the interest of peace, stability, equity, justice and progress.

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