

IMPLEMENTATION OF SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper examined the implementation of special needs education (SNE) to determine the extent to which policies guiding its operations as a discipline are being implemented. In doing this, the paper discussed salient issues bordering on government policies on special needs education; milestones in the implementation of special needs education in Nigeria; policy directives for establishment of special schools; the inclusive philosophy; barriers to effective implementation of special needs education in Nigeria; and strategies for effective implementation of special needs education in Nigeria. In conclusion, the paper warned that the good intentions of government towards this education system should not be frustrated at the implementation level; therefore, good implementation strategies and selfless commitment on the part of the stakeholders of special needs education are required for its effective implementation.

Introduction

Special Needs Education refers to the educational system that is concerned with classroom instruction matters of children with special needs. The uniqueness of this educational system is in its philosophical orientations, professional practices and organizational configurations. It is service-oriented and focuses on the contents and/or processes of educational intervention for children with special needs.

For many years, special needs education appears to be given low priority attention in Nigeria. This does not, however, mean that Nigerian government has not shown sufficient concern for the beneficiaries of this education system. But the general feeling that they are already 'down trodden and out' often makes effort to pull them up fruitless. Many people do question the rationality of expending so much of government resources on the education of children with special needs when many 'normal' children are out of school. Nevertheless, reference must be made to the benefits accruing from a child with special needs who is able to manage himself later in life. This therefore, informs that money spent on the education of special needs children is that invested in extra-ordinary human growth and development. Ozoji (2005) contends that:

Currently, special needs education profession is constantly expanding its ability to provide strategies and materials for educating the rejects of the past, the overlooked of the present and indeed the every other child with or without learning difficulties (p.3).

In the light of the above, government now places due emphasis on special needs education; and formulates policies supportive of its establishment. Therefore, if the national policy on education is religiously implemented the policy directives of government on education of children with special needs in Nigeria would be realized. Otherwise, the psychology and philosophy guiding special needs education and its establishment will be found wanting.

Implementation of special needs education implies enforcing, carrying out or bringing into effect the laid down policies and practices meant for the advancement of this field of education. It means ensuring that laws, directives, decrees, policies, statutory statements, etc. concerning the education of these categories of children are adroitly and religiously put to work.

In this paper, therefore, issues bordering on government policies on special needs education, milestones in the implementation of special needs education in Nigeria, policy directives for establishment of special schools, the inclusive philosophy, barriers to effective implementation of special needs education in Nigeria and strategies for effective implementation of special needs education in Nigeria shall be discussed. In the end, it is hoped that this discourse would have driven home feasible sustainable strategies for effective implementation of special needs education in Nigeria.

Government Policies on Special Needs Education

Government policies on education of children with special needs in Nigeria have focused on vital issues including identification of predominant handicapping conditions through census; necessary facilities and channels for effective service delivery system; and special equipment and materials. Besides, personnel development; schedule of responsibilities for the three-tier government system; curriculum and research development; establishment of special schools; funding of education; educational structure; legislation and the coordination of inter-ministerial programme have been parts of these policies regarding the education of children with special needs. The National Policy on Education (NPE) (2004) projects government's commitment to accelerate the implementation of equal educational opportunities for these children. No better demonstration of the Federal Ministry of Education's determination to actualize government objectives for special needs education in Nigeria than the National Policy on Education (NPE).

The National Policy on Education published in 1977 (and subsequently reviewed in 1981, 1998 and 2004 respectively) holds limitless promises and expectations for children with special needs. No doubt, education provides them opportunity to escape from obstacles to progress into life of achievements and self-fulfilment. The Universal Primary Education (UPE), which was introduced in 1976, gave these children right to education along side the 'normal' children.

Unfortunately, government provided for all children at school without specific provision for the extra budgetary needs of children with special needs.

Nevertheless, the National Policy on Education (2004) has devoted section 10 subsection 95 to special needs education with the following clearly stated objectives:

- (i) To give concrete meaning to the idea of equalizing education opportunities for all children notwithstanding their physical, sensory, mental, psychological or emotional disabilities.
- (ii) To provide adequate education for all children with special needs in order that they may fully contribute their own quota to the development of the nation.
- (iii) To provide opportunities for exceptionally gifted and talented children to develop their talents, natural endowments/traits at their own pace in the interest of the nation's economic and technological development.
- (iv) To design a diversified and appropriate curriculum for all the beneficiaries.

Sequel to the foregoing policy directives, the Federal and State Ministries of Education shall in collaboration with appropriate bodies, provide special programmes for gifted and talented children. These programmes provision should include early age identification and nurture; early age admission into primary, secondary and tertiary institutions; and early completion of education programmes at the three educational levels. In doing this, the education of children with special needs shall be free at all levels.

In this regard, necessary facilities that would ensure easy access to education for all categories of children with special needs (e.g. inclusive education, special equipment and materials, special training and retraining of personnel) must be provided. Again, Federal, State and Local governments must fund these programmes within their areas of jurisdiction; and ensure that architectural designs of school buildings are barrier-free to all the beneficiaries of this education system. The implication therefore, is that schools should embark on regular sensory, medical and psychological screening assessments to identify any incidence of exceptionality. More so, to actualize the objectives of special needs education for the Nigerian child, government policy directives need to be implemented to the letter.

Milestones in the Implementation of Special Needs Education in Nigeria

Successes made in the delivery of special needs education in Nigeria have been itemized below.

- (i) A joint Consultative Reference Committee on Special Education set up to coordinate programmes for the education of children with special needs in Nigeria.
- (ii) A statistical data on the education of children with special needs is being proposed.
- (iii) The Universities of Jos, Ibadan, Uyo, Kano, and Calabar; and the Federal College of Education (Special) Oyo now produce special personnel for the education of children with special needs for Nigeria and other African countries.

- (iv) About fifty percent of an estimated enrolment of 15, 000 children with special needs at different levels of education in Nigeria are integrated into the regular school system.
- (v) There are facilities for the education of children with special needs in every state of the federation. By the year 1992, some states had already projected for at least one special school in every Local Government Area.
- (vi) Some states of the federation have fully implemented the free-education policy for all children with special needs up to the tertiary level. The Federal Ministry of Education now maintains a scholarship programme for these children.
- (vii) Provision has been made to integrate children with special needs into Federal Government Colleges. Those who are unable to continue pure academic programmes are placed in the Federal Technical College to learn vocational course.
- (viii) The education of the Handicapped Branch of the Federal Ministry of Education collaborates with several other Ministries and bodies in matters of job-placement, indigence, human rights, health and rehabilitation for persons with disabilities.
- (ix) Several programmes are mounted each year to promote the course of children with special needs; and to generate interest among the private sectors as well as accelerating efforts towards better life for these children in Nigeria.

If we can maintain the trend, and of course, expand our frontiers in implementing policy directives that have been enshrined in the NPE, special needs education would be sure of moving to an enviable height in the nearest future. Nigerians with special educational needs can then boast of equity of access to education as their counterparts who do not need special needs education.

Policy Directive for Establishment of Special Schools

The federal government policy on the education of children with special needs encourages integration as much as the degree of their disability permits. According to the Blue-Print on Education of the Handicapped in Nigeria (undated), any indiscriminate establishment of special schools for these children would encourage over-institutionalization. Therefore, in order to control indiscriminate establishment of special schools in Nigeria, the National Board for the Education of Children with Special Needs and the State Branches of the Board are to draw up guidelines. This is to ensure that qualitative education is given these children in every special school established. To achieve this objective, trained special teachers, supportive staff, special equipment and materials should be considered. Importantly, only special schools which meet the benchmark rules and regulations should provide education for Nigerian children with special needs. Indeed this directive had appeared to be adhered to; and it is still in vogue otherwise, special schools would have been indiscriminately established in the society. Nevertheless, as for what had become of the National Board for the Education of Children with Special Needs and the State Branches of the Board; the writers of this paper seem not to have the slightest idea.

The inclusive philosophy

The inclusive philosophy which has received global attention; is a policy that all children and young people with or without disabilities or difficulties learn together in ordinary pre-schools, primary schools, colleges, and universities with appropriate network of supports. Inclusive education was introduced as a programme and a philosophy to guide service provision for special needs children in the society. It is part of the universal right to education, which is extended to all children, youth and adults with disabilities. The Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education (2002) intimated that:

The ultimate goal of inclusive education is that no child should be denied inclusion in mainstream education provision; and that this provision should offer full range of support or specialist services necessary to give all children their full entitlement to a broad and balanced education (p.7).

However, the implementation of this educational philosophy requires adequate preparation and adoption of procedures. Adequate preparation needed may include:

- Government policy and back-up i.e. policies favouring inclusive education should be backed up with actions for effective implementation.
- Research to point up to ways forward, problems, solutions, etc.
- Adequate funding.
- Effective public information because community support is needful for success.
- Extensive training and re-training of staff/support personnel.
- Provision of continuing support services.
- Individualized education plans i.e. education tailored to specific individual needs.

On the other hand some procedures to be followed in order to establish inclusive schools have proposed to include the following:

Steps 1: Carry out a feasibility study of what is and should be if inclusive school is to be provided.

Step 2: Develop training manual for the major stakeholders in inclusive education.

Step 3: Establish pilot schools for pilot-testing

Step 4: Creates disability awareness.

Step 5: Develop awareness of the new policy, through for instance, putting in place an administrative machinery to coordinate the programme (e.g. State Universal Basic Education Board).

Step 6: Implementation (Ozaji, 2006: 18 -19)

The writers of this paper deem the aforementioned procedures appropriate for the establishment of sustainable inclusive schools in Nigeria if they are religiously followed.

Barriers to Effective Implementation of Special Needs Education in Nigeria

Imperatively, the National Policy on Education (2004 revised) outlined some policy statements that would benefit children with special needs if implemented. Unfortunately, these policy statements depicting government's good intention towards education of these children (special needs education) are not usually implemented to the letter. This situation could most often be attributed to the negative attitudes of those in authority towards special needs education; this is imperious in the way most government policies get frustrated at the point of implementation. Besides, the following may pose barriers to effective implementation of special needs education in Nigeria:

1. Improper management of funds allocated for implementation of educational programmes for children with special needs.
2. Lack of proper and up-to-date statistics of children with special needs.
3. Shortage of professionals in the various categories of exceptionalities.
4. Lack of proper implementation monitoring team on the policies and planned educational programmes for children with special needs.
5. Lack of legislation to enforce the implementation of government policies regarding special needs education.
6. Under-estimation of funds and cost-effectiveness of special needs education.

Strategies for Effective Implementation of Special Needs Education in Nigeria

(a) **Census of Children with Special Needs:** A census of these children is necessary for effective programme planning, implementation and monitoring. The availability of correct statistical data would enhance rational allocation and utilization of human and material resources as well as funds. The census of Nigerian children with special needs is therefore, a necessity. In order to ensure the realization of government objectives for special needs education, the census should be conducted in these guidelines:

1. The National Population Commission should incorporate in its census format a section on the category of children with special needs.
2. A census of these children must be carried out by the federal and states' Ministries of Education.
3. Data collection and records on special needs education development must be a regular exercise in order to identify children for early intervention programmes.

(b) **Physical Facilities for Children with Special Needs:** Children with special needs require special facilities to enhance mobility and learning depending on their exceptionalities. For example, children who are physically challenged require architectural barrier-free facilities like ramps instead of stair ways. Therefore, government must ensure that:

All facilities (public buildings, highways, schools, health institutions, public parks and centres, swimming-pools, recreational areas, markets, etc.) in each community all over the Federation are built or modified (where and when feasible) to accommodate the special needs children in

Nigeria (Blue-Print on Education of the Handicapped in Nigeria; p.7).

- (c) **Special Equipment and Material:** The provision of special equipment and material is an indispensable factor in the education of children with special needs either in the integrated or residential schools (Ozaji & Mugu, 1999). Priority attention ought to be given to provision of special equipment and materials to ensure meaningful impact of government investment in the education of these children. Therefore, to ensure that adequate and appropriate special equipment and materials are available for Nigerian children with special needs, government should:
1. Procure in bulk specialized equipment/materials, deduct at source their cost and distribute same to each State and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja.
 2. Establish equipment depot where children with special needs could purchase at subsidized rates.
 3. Commission a research centre for designing, fabricating and testing for suitability, special learning materials in Nigeria.
 4. Set up a special equipment factory in Nigeria for the production of the much needed special equipment using local sourcing.
- (d) **Personnel:** The Federal Ministry of Education has made laudable efforts under the present administration towards the improvement of the well-being of children with special needs, particularly, in the equalization of educational opportunities for them. There is however, urgent need for highly trained and specialized personnel as enunciated in section 10 sub-section 96 (5) of the National Policy on Education (2004). In order to meet the personnel needs for the education of these children, the Federal government bursary award for personnel development must be extended to persons with special needs in tertiary institutions. Also, Federal College of Education (Special) Oyo, Universities of Ibadan, Jos, Uyo, Kano and Calabar should be adequately funded to enable them produce the high level manpower required for special needs education. On the other hand, prospective teachers who have apathy towards special education training must change their attitude towards this education system and its beneficiaries.
- (e) **Service Delivery:** Special needs education should provide sequential arrangements of instructional alternatives to suit different categories of children with special needs. Based on this arrangement, the under-listed options should be considered:
1. Regular class enrolment with resource help to classroom teachers
 2. Enrolment in regular classes after short-term remedial and assessment tutoring.
 3. Enrolment in regular classes with intensive (individualized) or group attention and tutoring.
 4. Special class in regular school with structured contact with children enrolled in regular classes in both academic and non-academic situations.
 5. Special class in regular schools with limited or not structured contact with children enrolled in the regular class.

6. Special classes in a special day school with programmes geared to group characteristics e.g. the hearing impaired, mentally retarded, visually impaired, gifted and talented.
 7. Residential school with programme geared to group characteristics.
 8. Integration of the children at tertiary level must be encouraged. For instance, a university must be adequately prepared and equipped to provide education for all visually impaired persons who qualify for university admission.
- (f) **Curriculum:** The curriculum must be adapted or modified to address the needs of exceptional learner where necessary (most especially those mainstreamed in the regular school); bearing in mind that they are expected to take the same examination with the ordinary Nigerian children.
 - (g) **Research:** Education of children with special needs requires extensive research to meet with their everyday challenges. Government should therefore consider making available grants to institutions of higher learning and other research bodies and individuals to carry out research in specific areas of the education benefiting these children.
 - (h) **Educational Structure:** The educational structure of children with special needs should be as flexible as the regular school system taking into consideration the individual child's learning needs. A degree of flexibility must be applied with special reference to children with intellectual retardation that may not be able to complete any level of the structure within the stipulated time.
 - (i) **Early Intervention:** This is essential for ameliorating handicapping condition and giving these children early head-start before embarking on their primary school programme. It should be the responsibility of:
 1. Each Local government to ensure that pre-school education is provided.
 2. Private organizations who are interested in establishing preschool for children with special needs can do so, on the approval of the State government.
 - (j) **Post Primary:** A child with special needs who reaches this level of education has shown an evidence of success in academic learning. It is therefore, imperative that placement must be contingent on performance. Again, successful integration at this level necessitates the removal of architectural barriers, establishment of resource centres, provision of mobility facilities, special equipment adapted to the needs of the learner, provision of relevant books including braille, and other supportive services and special trained personnel.

Recommendations

- (1) Government should ensure that monies allocated for special needs educations and programmes are not diverted to other areas or sectors.
- (2) Legislation is needed to backup the implementation of SNE policies, especially as they are contained in the NPE (2004).
- (3) Researches involving specific areas of special needs education should be encouraged by stakeholders to this system of education through provision of funds.

- (4) Efforts should be geared towards proper and up-to-date census of children with special needs in Nigeria.
- (5) Adequate personnel in the various categories of exceptionalities should be trained and employed too.
- (6) Experts need to be employed in the planning and budgeting for special needs education in order to overcome the problem of under-estimation of funds; and to enhance cost-effectiveness.

Conclusion

The paper has overtly outlined the laid down policies and practices meant for the advancement of special needs education in Nigeria. Government good intentions towards special needs education should not be frustrated at the implementation level; selfless commitment and good implementation strategies are therefore required on the part of stakeholders to this system of education to make it workable and sustainable. In this regard, efforts should be geared towards removing every barrier to effective implementation of government policies and directives supporting this system of education.

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