

IMPLEMENTATION OF GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper reviewed government policies on the education of special needs persons within the purview of the National Policy on Education (2004). The problems of implementation of the relevant and needed policies were itemized and examined in order to evaluate the extent to which these have been realized. The paper advanced recommendations to ensure positive implementation processes.

Introduction

Government policies on education of special needs children in Nigeria have focused on vital issues including identification of predominant handicapped conditions through the conduction of census; the necessary facilities and channels for effective delivery of education; special equipment and materials; 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 for the education of special needs children. The National Policy on Education (NPE) (2004) projects government's commitment to accelerate the implementation of equal educational opportunities for special needs 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 special needs children. No doubt, education for these children provides them opportunity to escape from obstacles to progress, into life of achievements and self-fulfilment.

The paper however, discussed special needs education under the purview of National Policy on Education (2004); government policy on special needs education; implementation of educational policies; and problems of implementing relevant and needed policies.

Special Needs Education (SNE)

Special Needs Education refers to the educational system perspective that is concerned with classroom instruction matters of special needs children. The

uniqueness of this educational perspective 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 the special needs children.

For many years, special needs education has been given low priority. This does not, however, inform that government has not shown sufficient concern for the beneficiaries of this education system. But the general feeling that these children 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 these children's education when many 'normal' children are out of school. Mention must be made of the benefits accruing from a special needs child being 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).

Realizing these benefits, government now places due emphasis on this educational system perspective. Therefore, special needs education is a welcome development; and if the national policy on education is religiously implemented the policy directives of government on education of special needs children in Nigeria would be realized.

Government Policies on Special Needs Education

The Universal Primary Education (UPE) which was introduced in 1976 gave special needs children right to education along side other children. Unfortunately, government provided for all children at school without specific provision for the extra budgetary needs of the special needs children. The National Policy on Education (2004) 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 special needs children 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.

Also stated are the following specific policy directives:

- a). The Federal and State Ministries of Education shall in collaboration with appropriate bodies, provide special programmes for gifted and talented children e.g.:
 - i. early age identification and nurture
 - ii. early age admission into primary, secondary and tertiary institutions
 - iii. early completion of education programmes at the three educational levels.
- b). The education of children with special needs shall be free at all levels.
- c). All necessary facilities that would ensure easy access to education shall be provided e.g.:
 - i. inclusive education or integration of special classes and units into ordinary/public schools under the UBE scheme.
 - ii. regular census and monitoring of special needs children to ensure adequate educational planning and welfare programme.
 - iii. special education equipment and materials e.g.:
 - Perkins brailier, mobility canes, brailled text books, abacus, braille talking watch.
 - Audiometers, speech trainers, hearing aids, ear mould machines etc.
 - Educational/psychological toys, for the mentally retarded.
 - Callipers, prostheses, crutches, wheelchairs, artificial limbs, etc. for the physically challenged.
 - Standard library, audio-visual equipment, Internet facilities, etc. for the gifted and talented children.
 - iv. Special education training e.g.:
 - braille reading and writing
 - mobility training; use of regular typewriter, for the visually impaired.
 - total communication technique – speech, sign language, the 3 Rs, etc. for the hearing impaired.
 - daily living activities or skills for the mentally retarded.
 - v. Special training and retraining of the personnel to develop capacity building and to keep abreast of latest teaching technique, for the various categories of special needs children.
 - vi. The teacher-pupil ratio in special schools shall be 1:10
- d). Federal, State and local governments shall fund these programmes within their areas of jurisdiction.
- e). Architectural designs of school buildings shall be barrier-free.
- f). Schools shall be required to arrange regular sensory, medical and psychological screening assessments to identify any incidence of exceptionality.

The foregoing documentation and extracts from the NPE are evidences that special needs education philosophy is meant to provide strategies and materials for educating children with special needs. To actualize the objectives of special needs education for the Nigerian child, government policy directives need to be implemented to the letter.

Achievement so far on the Implementation of the National Policy on Special Needs Education in Nigeria

Successes made in the delivery of special 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 special needs children in Nigeria.
- ii). A statistical data on the education of special needs children is already being maintained.
- iii). The Universities of Jos and Ibadan; and the Federal College of Education (Special) Oyo now produce special personnel for the education of special needs children for Nigeria and other African countries.
- iv). About fifty percent of an estimated enrolment of 15, 000 special needs children at different levels of education in Nigeria are integrated into the regular school system.
- v). There are facilities for the education of the special needs children 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 special needs children 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 special needs children into Federal Government Colleges. Those who are unable to continue pure academic programmes are placed in the Federal Technical College to learn vocational course.

If we can maintain the trend, and of course, expand our frontiers in implementing the government policies as enshrined in the NPE, special needs education would be sure to move too 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 education.

- 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 cause of special needs children and to generate interest among the private sector as well as accelerating efforts towards better life for the special needs children in Nigeria.

Establishment of Special Schools

The Federal Government Policy on the education of special needs children encourages integration as much as the degree of the disability permits. According to the Blue-Print on Education of the Handicapped in Nigeria, 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 special needs children 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 laid down rules and regulations should provide education for special needs Nigerian children.

Conditions for Establishing Special Schools

The National Policy on Education (2004 revised) spelt out that the Federal Government should be responsible for the provision of free education for all special needs children. However, any private organization or individual wishing to establish special school must meet the following conditions:

1. Physical plan of the school must be adapted to accommodate the special needs of the category of children for which the school is intended to serve (Ozaji, 2006).
2. Facilities must be specially designed to suit the needs of the children (Okeke, 2003).
3. Instructional equipment/materials must be sufficient enough to enhance teaching and learning.
4. Certificate of inspection carried out by Fire Service, Local Government Area Committee for education of these children and the Ministry of Health must be obtained by the proprietor of the special school.
5. A staff list with details of professional qualifications must be produced for inspection.
6. The proprietor must show evidence of strong financial standing.
7. Medical records and services for the children must be available.
8. Admission requirements must conform to the National standards.
9. All fees chargeable must be clearly stated.
10. School rules and regulations must be clearly set out.

11. School programme or curriculum which should reflect the academic, prevocational and vocational skills/training must conform to the National standards.

Implementation Strategies

(a) *Census of the Special Needs Children:* A census of the 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 and funds as well. The census of special needs children in Nigeria 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 under review.
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 Special Needs Children:* These children need special facilities to enhance mobility and learning depending on their special needs. For example, the physically challenged children 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 special needs children 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 special needs Nigerian children, 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 these 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 special needs children, 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 special needs persons in tertiary institutions. Also, Federal College of Education (Special) Oyo, Universities of Ibadan and Jos should be adequately funded to enable them produce the high level manpower required for these children's education.
- (e) *Service Delivery*: Special needs education should provide sequential arrangements of instructional alternatives to suit different categories of the special needs children. Based on this, the underlisted options should be considered in the education of these children in Nigeria:
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 hearing impaired persons who qualify for university admission.
- (f) *Curriculum*: The curriculum must be adapted to meet the needs of these children where necessary, bearing in mind that they are expected to take the same examination with the ordinary Nigerian children.

- (g) *Research*: Education of special needs children requires extensive research to meet with the day-to-day 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 of these children.
- (h) *Educational Structure*: The educational structure of special needs children 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 the mentally retarded that may not be able to complete any level of the structure within the stipulated time.
- (i) *Early Intervention*: This is essential for ameliorating handicapped 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 special needs children can do so on the approval of the State government.
- (j) *Post Primary*: A special needs child that reached this level has shown an indication of success in academic learning. Therefore, it is imperative that placement must be contingent on performance. Also, 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 child, provision of relevant books including braille, and other supportive services and special trained personnel.

Problems of Implementing Government Policies on Special Needs Education

The National Policy on Education (2004 revised) outlined some policy statements that would benefit children with special needs if implemented. Unfortunately, the NPE which depicts government's good intention towards education of these children is usually not implemented to the letter. This situation could be attributed to the negative attitudes of those in authority towards Special Needs Education (SNE). Chindi (1991) contends that this is seen in the way most government policies get frustrated at the point of implementation.

Other problems have been itemized below:

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

Recommendations

Effective implementation of the policy would produce the desired objective in special needs education. Therefore:

1. There is need for attitude change towards special needs education and its beneficiaries, in the Nigerian polity.
2. Since no programme of activities could be effectively implemented without funds, government (local, state and federal) should ensure that enough funds are earmarked for SNE during the yearly budgetary allocations.
3. Government should ensure that monies allocated for special needs educations and programmes are not diverted to other areas or sectors.
4. Legislation is needed to backup the implementation of policies contained in the NPE.

Conclusion

The good intentions of government towards Special Needs Education should not be frustrated at the implementation level. The NPE has overtly outlined government policies and concerns on the education of special needs children. Selfless commitment and attitude change, on the part of individuals, authorities in education and the three tiers of government, are required for implementation of these policies; because what is good for the goose is good for the gander. The special needs children are after all human beings with feelings, desires and aspirations just like other children. Policies concerning their education and general well being should not be toyed with.

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