

EQUITY OF ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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Abstract

The paper examined equity of access to education and children with special needs. In doing so, salient issues such as some philosophical bases for education of children with special needs; concept of equity of access to education; how special education ensures equity of access to education for children with special needs; and ways to enhance equity of access to education for children with special needs were discussed. Re-visitation of special educational programmes in order to reposition the profession for richer and quality assurance in the service delivery system for special needs children was recommended among others. The paper concluded that equity of access to education by special needs children is a possibility if issues raised are considered for actions in the service provision and delivery of special education profession.

Introduction

Education in Nigeria is expected to foster the worth and development of an individual, for his sake and the society. This informs why every Nigerian child must have a right to equal educational opportunities irrespective of any real or imagined disabilities and/or deficit or precocity in intellectual abilities. Regrettably, the rationale of providing education for children with special needs has often been questioned by many people, especially those who do not understand why government should expend the scarce public funds on the education of these children considering it a waste of resources. Nevertheless, there are justifiable grounds for providing an area within the framework of the general education that provides the right facilities, specialized materials and teachers with adequate training for all types of children with unusual

learning needs. This educational system perspective is known as special education. It is a set of interventions tailored to address the usual and unusual needs of children considered exceptional by virtue of their significant deviant traits (Ozoji, 2003) including the disabled, disadvantaged and the gifted (NPE, 2004).

The importance which Nigerian government attaches to special education could clearly be seen in the aims/objectives of this educational system perspective as contained in the National Policy on Education. These aims/objectives have been itemized below.

- To give concrete meaning to the idea of equalizing educational opportunities for all children, their physical, sensory, mental, psychological or emotional disabilities notwithstanding;
- To provide adequate education for all people with special needs in order that they may fully contribute their own quota to the development of the nation;
- 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; and
- To design a diversified and appropriate curriculum for all the beneficiaries.

It is deducible; therefore, that special education does for the special needs child what regular education does for others. This implicates that the two educational systems complement one another and are, at the same time, compatible. Thus, their principles are germane to the two categories of children – special needs children and others. In this paper, issues such as some philosophical bases for education of children with special needs, the concept of “equity of access to education”, how special education ensures equity of access for children with special needs, ways to enhance equity of access to education for children with special needs shall be highlighted.

Some Philosophical Bases for Education of Children with Special Needs

The philosophical thrust of special education is that every child deserves to be educated as a right no matter what. Specifically, some of the justifiable bases for providing this type of education include:

1. The national policy on education
2. The United Nation declaration of the “right” of every child to education.
3. Section 18 (3) of the Nigerian constitution which stated that “Government should strive to eradicate illiteracy and to this end government should and when practicable provide free, compulsory and universal education

4. Section 18 (11) of the Nigerian constitution which stated that “Government should direct its policy towards ensuring that there are equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels.”
5. Universal and basic education for every exceptional child irrespective of the severity of impairment or the precocity of intellectual performance.
6. The educability of all learners irrespective of degree of development i.e. the issue of ineducability is not in the dictionary of special education.
7. The education of special needs children in the mainstream of the regular school community.
8. The belief that the value and worth of any child is not diminished by the reason of impairment no matter the severity.
9. The special needs child is a full fledged human being with equal status, values and worth compared to his peers.
10. The belief in the equality of opportunity of rights
11. The belief in the philosophy of “catch them young” through early intervention programme.

The Concept of “Equity of Access to Education”

“Equity of access to education” means to have equal right to what others are entitled to, in terms of educational service provisions. In other words, it refers to educational equalization implying that what is done for some persons must be done for all on equal footing. Imperatively, this ideology has been the cardinal message of global educational policies such as education for all (EFA); inclusive education (IE) and the universal basic education (UBE).

Consequently, both private and public schools have been involved in packaging educational programmes and services for children with special needs. These efforts, no doubts, are geared towards giving concrete meaning to the idea of equalizing educational opportunities to all children irrespective of their physical, sensory, mental, psychological or emotional disabilities as stipulated elsewhere in the National Policy on Education (NPE, 2004). In fact, all the international statements and frameworks for action insist on equality of educational opportunities (Ozaji, 2003).

Nevertheless, special education serves as a tool for educational equalization for children with special needs through its service provisions. The contemporaneous issue about this educational system perspective is that:

It is constantly expanding its ability to provide strategies and

materials for educating the rejects of the past, the overlooked of the present and indeed every other child with or without learning difficulties (Ozaji, 2005: 3).

By implication, it is functional by its capacity to continually address the needs and challenges of its service beneficiaries – special needs children. Maduewesi (2005) delineated special educational services to include (1) identification process (2) early childhood education (3) policy initiative interaction and provisions (4) educational development (5) instruction and personal development (6) research and resource development (7) recreation and health; and (8) individual and parental counseling; census and enrolment. Obviously, if all the services enumerated above are adroitly provided and enjoyed by different categories of the special needs children, their equity of access to educational opportunity would not be doubted.

How special education ensures equity of access for children with special needs

Ozaji (2003: 6) explains that the services planned, packaged and monitored by special education include:

- (a) Customized physical settings to remove barriers and increase access and performance
- (b) Materials which are learning/performance facilitators
- (c) Special equipment to mobilize and enhance functioning
- (d) Teaching procedures that take into account the peculiar nature of the child
- (e) Other interventions such as assessment, specialized teachers and support staff, counseling, assistive devices etc.; which are intended to accelerate performance.

Indeed, equity of access to education by children with special needs is possible if special education profession should be desirous in rendering services relevant to the nature of educational services it provides and the returns it generates for its beneficiaries.

Ways to enhance equity of access to education for children with special needs

Some of the ways through which equity of access to education for special needs children could be enhanced include legislation, partnership, volunteerism, funding, inclusion, special schools, free education, and maintaining a manageable class size. These points are further highlighted below.

Legislation: This could be in the form of law passed by a parliament, national assembly, state house of assembly, legislative council of the local government levels to protect the interest and basic rights of its citizens (Olajumoke, 2006). The enforcement of legislation protecting the interest and rights of the special needs children would no doubt, place at vintage point to equity of access to educational provisions in their society.

Partnership: This refers to a single body that brings together representatives of different sectors and communities to pursue common aims. It is based on the premise that teamwork divides the efforts and multiplies the effects. Partners are in a unique position to engage fully with the local community, particularly as in many cases they have been set up to reach communities where previous attempts by public bodies have had limited success. In this regard, parents could partner with school teachers and of course, the government in deciding matters that have to do with their special needs children, especially their educational needs. Because, parent partnership with special teachers is a credible factor sustaining service delivery to special needs children in developed economies (Ozaji, 2005). This informs that partnership between parents, teachers and the government could go a long way in ensuring equity of access to education for these children.

Volunteerism: This is an indispensable service in special education that can enable special needs children equalize their access to educational programmes. Globally, government alone cannot provide all the educational services needed by special education; there must be a joint venture between volunteers and government. Volunteer services however, involve assistance in the form of time, talent or treasure given freely and willingly to special needs children by individual or group of individuals without financial or material benefits. As education of special needs children involves so much work loads that regular and special teachers alone cannot cope with; it becomes imperative that volunteerism is an option that must be readily used to supplement those service areas that are seemingly left out. By so doing, special needs children would have been provided the enabling environment to equity of access to education. For instance, volunteer services such as braille transcription, provision of recreational services and advocacy for the special needs children are imperatively necessary in special education.

Funding: Proper funding of the services rendered in special education would no

doubt enhance success in the attainment of equity of access to education by special needs children. It is however, important to note that special education is equipment driven. The assistive and adaptive technologies needed in special education should operate from customized infrastructure in order that its beneficiaries will be able to equalize their educational needs. Ozoji (2005) noted that the low incidence of the children (put at 10% of the school population) vis-à-vis the number of personnel (put at 1: 10 ratio by the National Policy on Education, 2004) has high cost implications. In this regard, it would not be an overstatement to say that special education is costlier to run than regular education. If specific formula and source could be mapped out by government for the running of special education; special needs children would be sure of equity of access to education in the Nigerian polity.

Inclusion: This conveys continuity in the process of breaking down barriers to learning and participation for all citizens in Nigeria's educational system. In other words, inclusion implies that every Nigerian child and/or youth must have a right to belong to the mainstream or a joint undertaking to work toward equal educational opportunities. Iroegbu (2007) observes that inclusive philosophy advocates that children be educated and provided for within the mainstream of their polity. Therefore, educational inclusion is part of the universal right to education being extended to all children, youths and adults with or without disabilities and/or learning difficulties. This right has been enshrined in the Rights of the Child (1989); addressed in International Declarations like Education for All (1990); Equalization of opportunities for persons with Disability (1993); the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (1994) and the Dakar Framework for Action (2000). United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2001) intimates that inclusion in mainstream education is important as a means of promoting social integration and avoiding a sense of separateness or inferiority.

Special schools: These are educational environments where special needs children are educated apart from the regular schools. They provide access to educational opportunity for the severely disabled children who cannot fit well in the mainstream of regular schools. It is imperative that not all special needs children can benefit from inclusive education; and in order to ensure that those who could not benefit enjoy equity of access to education, special schools are employed to provide professional staff to neighbourhood schools or provide support to children in the inclusive settings (where the special teachers could serve as consultants to regular

teachers). Besides, they may serve as research centres on inclusive schooling (Ozaji, 2006).

UBE Programme: Special needs children could be assisted to enjoy equal access to education through the implementation of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme. The UBE appears to be Nigeria's response to the world statements and frameworks for action on major international conferences she attended. In actuality, if the objectives of this scheme (UBE) including (1) to develop in the entire citizenry a strong consciousness for education and a strong commitment to its vigorous promotion (2) the provision of free, universal basic education for every Nigerian child of school-going age; and (3) reducing drastically the incidence of school dropout from the formal school system (through improved evaluation, quality and efficiency) are realizable, exceptional children would be sure of equalizing their educational opportunity.

Recommendations

1. Attitude change towards special needs children and their education should be reconsidered by the society.
2. Special educational programmes should be revisited in order to reposition the profession for richer and quality assurance in service delivery system for special needs children.
3. Quality assurance is needed to take urgent measures to institute internal and external quality control mechanism in service delivery packages meant for special needs children.
4. Research is the engine that drives education in developed countries (Egbo, 2005); and could be used in resolving many of the problems that hinder special needs children from actualization of equity of access to education. In this respect, government at various levels should encourage research in special education so as to enable special education profession to render the deserved services to exceptional children

Conclusion

Equity of access to education by special needs children is a possibility if the salient issues highlighted in this paper are considered for actions in special educational service provision and delivery. Special needs children are after all human beings with needs and aspirations like the other children. Their individual rights to

education must not be tampered with for whatever reason; they too can make it academically.

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