

INNOVATIONS AND ISSUES IN SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper examined innovations and issues in special needs education in Nigeria. In doing this, the paper highlighted salient points such as the philosophical bases of special needs education, the concept of innovation, and innovations in special needs education for sustainable functionality in Nigeria. Finally, the paper concludes among others that innovations are needed in the practice of special needs education to strengthen and maximize its service deliverables to its numerous clients. Besides, proper attention must be paid to some of the innovative strides discussed herein the paper for functionality and sustainability of special needs education as a discipline in Nigeria.

Introduction

The concept, "special needs education" means education of the exceptional child. It is the system of education that uses special tools to address the special learning needs of the exceptional child. Ozoji (2008) explains that it is an individual education that aims at compensating for the special learning problems of the exceptional child (i.e. a child with special learning needs). It is a service-oriented system of education focusing majorly on the content and processes of educational intervention for persons with special learning needs. Also, it is a system of education, practice and curriculum based enterprise that is especially concerned with the classroom instruction of persons with special learning needs (Iroegbu, 2007). In fact, this system of education is currently and constantly expanding its 'modus operandi' in instructional and material provisions for educating persons with special needs in order to achieve universal education for all school-aged children notwithstanding their physical or mental capacity. Invariably, the specialness of special needs education is in its philosophical orientations,

professional practices and customized organizational contents to suit its special clients' needs (Ozaji, 2006).

On the other hand, learners with special needs are beneficiaries of special needs education. They are individuals whose specific abilities or disabilities make their learning needs special. These individuals include children with visual impairments, children with learning disabilities, the intellectually challenged, the gifted and talented, the physically and health impaired. The special learning needs of these categories of persons could be in the areas of wants, deficiencies, exceptionalities, and experiences that require instructional services, treatment or therapies for better achievement of life goals. This paper shall therefore consider (1) the philosophical bases of special needs education, (2) the concept of innovation (3) innovations in special needs education for sustainable functionality in Nigeria, and (4) conclusion

The Philosophical Bases of Special Needs Education

Special needs education as an integral part of the general education employs special teacher, special tools and methods to address the learning needs of persons with special needs. Ozaji (2005) intimates that this system of education 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. In fact, special needs education as a discipline would not have thrived in Nigeria so much without some philosophical bases which writers of this paper have highlighted below.

- ***The Specification of the National Policy on Education:*** According to the National Policy on education (2004), the important aspect of the universal primary education (UPE) is that "special arrangement must be made for the handicapped and exceptional learners." This implies that the UPE was initially meant to be mandatory for all Nigerian children (including those with special needs). In this respect, it is imperative to note that learners with special needs merit education on the ground that it is officially recognized by the Nigerian government.

- ***The Legal Basis:*** The United Nations in 1948 specified that every one has the right to education; and this shall be given free at least in the elementary or primary level. In a related development, the Nigerian Constitution of 1999 specifies that every Nigerian is equal before the law of the land; and further stipulates that "no citizen of Nigeria shall be subjected to any disability or deprivation by mere reason of his/her birth circumstances." Indeed, special needs education provision has a legal basis.

- ***Equity of Opportunity:*** Equity of opportunity means that every Nigerian (including one with special needs) has right to the responsibilities or benefits of citizenship. The implication therefore, is that what is done to some people (e.g. education) must be done too for others with special

learning needs (special education) (Ozaji, 2005). In this regard, special needs education is provided as a right of the persons with special learning needs.

- **Right to Work:** Work is the ultimate of any educational system (Mugu & Iroegbu, 2009). It is central to a man's life and to effectively engage in it a number of preparations are made. Everyone has a right to be prepared for work; and the usual means to do this is education. When this is achieved, it makes everybody equal receivers from and contributors to nation building. It is therefore, imperative that not to provide special needs education is to out-rightly deny persons with special learning needs the opportunity to be prepared for work.

- **The contribution of gifted and talented learners:** Gifted and talented learners can contribute immensely to nation building. They grow to become future problem-solvers, inventing new ideas and technology (Ozaji, 2005). This implies that any country that toys with the education of such citizens will ever depend on other nations that have educated or trained their gifted and talented learners. This is therefore, one of the bases for providing special needs education.

The Concept of Innovation

Innovation involves a new way of doing something or new stuff that is made useful. It may refer to radical or revolutionary changes in thinking, products, processes, organizations and/or educational systems. It could mean invention, an idea made manifest, or ideas applied successfully in practice. In many fields of human endeavours, (e.g. in the arts, economics, business, government policy and special needs education) something new must be substantially different to be innovative. For instance, in economics the change must increase value, customer value, or producer value; and in special needs education such innovation is expected to increase the number of beneficiaries or enhance better policies and service deliverables to its beneficiaries. In other words, innovation aims at positive change; and making someone or something better.

Innovations in Special Needs Education for sustainable functionality in Nigeria

It is imperative to note that the service delivery outlet functionality of special needs education programme is determined by its capacity and continuity in addressing the learning needs and/or challenges of its clients. Maduwesi (2005 pg. 270) outlines some services that special needs education portends to render its beneficiaries including (1) identification process, (2) early childhood education, (3) policy initiative, integration 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.

The framework for sustainable and functional special needs education in Nigeria touches on the practicability of some of the above listed service deliverables. Regrettably, history has it that most of what is done for learners with special needs in Nigeria in terms of programme and service provisions, had been based on “white paper”, “blue print”, “policies”, and “guidelines” (Ihenacho, 1989). This informs why innovations in this system of education and in the process of its service provision are welcomed at this point in time. In this regard, innovations and issues that can add value to special education practice in Nigeria could be in the following areas:

- **Policy Initiatives:** Many a time the rights of the children with special needs are denied and nobody seems particularly interested to fight for their rights. Items in policies (e.g. national policy on education), in acts (e.g. child rights act), in legislatures, in constitution, in community customs and traditions and so on that favour the children were not implemented to their benefit. A sort of innovation appears to have taken place as government now shows more interest in policy initiatives and implementation of same as they affect children with special needs education. Efforts should therefore, be geared towards expanding the policies to cover pre-school counseling; parent education; budget for children with special needs; and review the employment of special teachers in the regular schools to collaborate with regular teachers. These initiatives must however, be facilitated by a functional and sustainable legislation.

- **Funding of Special Needs Education:** Education of children with special needs is cost intensive. Sufficient funds specially earmarked for special needs education is important if it is not to collapse sooner than expected. For instance, money is needed to procure materials and machines; and where these are imported the cost could be prohibitive. Over the years, government had not been able to fund this system of education alone. However, the activities of voluntary agencies as well as the collaboration between government and non-governmental organizations seem to have changed the trend and brought a sort of innovation in the funding of special needs education in Nigeria.

- **Teacher Education:** This is the type of education that relates mainly to the teacher. A teacher must possess certain basic skills acceptable for practice in the teaching profession. Eruka (2006) describes a teacher as a person who had undergone approved professional training in education at appropriate levels, capable of imparting knowledge, attitudes and skills to the learner. It is quite unfortunate that over the years, special needs education teachers were not exposed to teaching subjects during their training. This situation had, no doubt, negatively affected the possibility of being employed outside their areas of specialization. The introduction of teaching subjects, which is hopefully facilitating the special needs education teacher to function well in an inclusive classroom, is therefore an innovative approach to special education system. Similarly, the introduction of elements

of special education in the regular education is equally an innovation in special needs education; as it provides regular teachers in training the opportunity to acquire skills about persons with special needs in three major areas including curriculum modification, behavior modification and methodological approaches (Ozaji, 2005).

- **Classroom management:** The ability to control inappropriate behaviour in the classroom is part of the classroom management competence of the teacher. The teacher of children with special needs ought to ensure that the classroom is physically set up according to age group; instructional material needs and subject content coverage that will make it conducive for learning to take place. Efficiency in classroom management demands that the teacher is knowledgeable about his learners; and has the ability to relate contents, methods, sequences and space of his work to the unique needs of individual learners (Iroegbu, 2009). The innovative strides in this perspective are the involvement of the children in establishing classroom routines, maintaining discipline, rule-making and developing conducive atmospheres of mutual respect. Besides, teachers who show love, respect and treat children with special needs as unique individuals have basis for a good teaching relationship and are apt to better manage problems of discipline in the classroom.

- **Methodology:** The teacher must be skilled in the use of various instructional strategies for transmitting knowledge and attitudes to the learner. These instructional strategies were previously based on regular methods common to ordinary children (e.g. lecture, demonstration, dramatic, discovery, project, storytelling); but innovative methods including enter-educate, futures wheel, programmed instruction, peer tutoring, concept mapping, team teaching, individualized instruction, and so on now make the teaching and learning of children with special needs a worthwhile and an interesting endeavour. Other elements of innovation in methodologies such as lesson plan/scheme of work should be noted as well.

- **Information Communication Technology (ICT):** Special education is technology driven. A lot of equipment is used in various special need areas such as identification, assessment and teaching of children with special needs. Increasingly, ICT is now being used on teaching generally and has proved specifically successful in teaching children with special needs. The children do use ICT to further their learning. This is indeed an innovation in the country's education system with particular reference to special needs education.

- **Attitudes competence:** Every discipline has its core attitudes that doctor the worldview and actions of its practioners that is why professionals behave in particular ways not done exactly the way by other professional. These attitudes make doctors, lawyers and special educators to practice in their various professionals. It is in this vein that a special teacher is ever disposed to learn about his client, how best to serve him, new development

in the field, practices to be discarded or promoted in special needs education system. Similarly, teaching children with special needs requires a great deal of patience, and only the patient teacher can enjoy his/her special education profession. For a good number of reasons, patience must be second nature to special teachers. This characteristic trait of the special teacher will go a long way to enhance full integration of children with special needs in not just schools but in every fabric of the society. In doing this, the inclusive philosophy will no doubt, become the major pre-occupation of the government in resistance to segregative policies and practices; and in fighting to integrate the child with special needs into the society. Above all, special needs education teachers appear to have team spirit nowadays far beyond what used to be. They now cooperate, collaborate and even network with other professionals in the best interest of their clients.

- **Subject-matter knowledge:** Competencies and attitudes are not enough to have an effective special teacher. These must be backed up and extended by a sound knowledge base of issues in special needs education. Thus, innovative approaches in the understanding of the children with special needs; curriculum planning and blending; and contemporary educational programmes have been made. Therefore, special needs education teachers now ensure clarity in the peculiarities, problems and assets that may influence these children and how to serve them better through their knowledge of psychology of disability and exceptionality. Similarly, special education curricula activities are now generated, packaged and blended to best serve the interest of children with special needs. Sound special teachers are contributing to the ongoing discourse about inclusive education as the most current educational programme option for educating children with special needs.

Conclusion

Special needs education as a discipline would not have thrived in Nigeria much without some of the philosophical bases highlighted in this paper. This system of education requires special programmes and services, facilities and resources beyond those required by the general education. Also, innovations are needed in its practice to strengthen and maximize its service deliverables to its numerous clients in Nigeria. Given this situation therefore, proper attention must be paid to some of the innovative approaches and strides discussed herein the paper for functionality and sustainability of special needs education as a discipline. Besides, adequate and functional legislation enforcing special needs education provision in Nigeria can no longer be toyed with else we are doing a disservice to both individuals with special learning needs and the nation in general.

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