

## **SPECIAL EDUCATION IN POLITICAL DISPENSATION: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES**

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### **Abstract**

*In this paper, attempts have been made to discuss the concept of special education particularly as it relates to the current political dispensation in the country. Major issues worthy for consideration in the education of children with special needs have been raised and thoroughly highlighted. Equally featured, are some of the expectations in form of challenges facing the government, special and regular teachers and all the stakeholders of education in seeing that special needs children are properly educated. Finally, conclusion is drawn in terms of what needs to be done to ensure a more worthwhile provision of educational services all categories of children irrespective of the uniqueness of their learning needs.*

### **Introduction**

It is a well-known fact that education in any society tends to reflect the political philosophy of that society. Under Mao-Ise-Tung, the former political leader of Chinese Government for example, man was held in high esteem. Thus, the Chinese education then was geared towards producing people-oriented schooling products. The same thing can be said of the United States of America where the state is believed to exist for the welfare of the individual. Therefore, education is being organized primarily towards making the state useful to the individual (Uever 1991).

In Nigeria, the philosophy of education emphasized among other things establishing a land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens (FRN 1981). This goes in line with the statement that all men are born equal, and it has an important implication for education particularly under political dispensation. Impliedly, each and every individual should be given equal educational opportunity, mindless of his physical, mental or emotional disabilities.

Government is currently making concerted efforts with a view to seeing that the level of poverty amongst the Nigeria's populace is drastically alleviated if not completely eliminated. However, this will appear to be a difficult task unless the citizens of the country both special needs and non-special needs are properly educated. This is because there can never be the sustainable progress to lift people from poverty unless we teach them to read and write and do basic Arithmetic (Kincross 1998).

Gbengbin (1998), carefully noted that the goals and functions of education are determined by socio-economic and political factors as well as interest of a nation. It is therefore in this light that equal educational opportunities are required for affecting

irrespective of their abilities and disabilities in order to enable them develop their potentials for self-benefit and for societal development.

### **The Concept of Special Education**

Different scholars or professionals in the field have defined special education in different ways. However, despite variations in approach to defining the concept and the definitions tend to convey the same meaning. According to Okeke (2001), special education is an education within general education, designed not only to prevent, reduce or eliminate all the conditions that produce significant defects in all-round functioning of exceptional persons but also designed to render specialized services directed towards meeting the individual needs of exceptional persons.

It should be noted that from whatever perspective special education is defined, the fact remains that it entails modifying the teaching strategy, instructional materials, as well as the learning environment so that individual instructional needs of the students are met. This is important as Mba (1987) rightly pointed out that special education is a process in which individuals are considered and provided for.

### **Political Dispensation**

Political dispensation refers to a situation whereby leaders are elected not appointed mainly through a voting process. Since they are elected, it means that the leaders have to respect the wishes, needs and aspirations of the people being governed regardless of their abilities and disabilities.

Similarly, in political dispensation, people are governed democratically. And Democratic governance as opined by Ihenacho (2001) implies or can be likened to communal democracy where equal chance and opportunity exists for all irrespective of creed, religious affiliations, race, colour or special inclination and political party, where everybody has the same amount of opportunity to become self-actualized.

Linking it to political dispensation, the much preached slogan “Education for all by the year 2000” suggest that all people have a right to be educated whether they are handicapped or not so long as they are members of the society. This is so given the fact that education helps to develop the whole man physically, mentally, morally as well as politically to enable him function effectively (FRN, 1981).

Certainly, under political dispensation, freedom of expression, association and respect for the views of others are guaranteed. However, such freedom could only be realistic when the society’s thinking, feeling and action towards individuals with disabilities are in such a way that promote respect and acceptance for such individuals (Ozaji, 1994),

### **Issues in the Education of Children with Special Needs:**

One of the national objectives in the Nigerian National Policy on Education (1981) emphasized establishing a just and egalitarian society where every citizen will be

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given right to education, right to work among other things. Also, the UNESCO Salamanca report (1994) declares that our regular schools should serve as means of combating discriminatory attitudes and also a means of achieving education for all, In spite of all these however, children with special needs are still not getting their rights. This is reflected in what Ikwulono (2001), described as dehumanizing attitudes of Nigerians towards people with disabilities. The disabled are seen as people to be exploited as consumers and not producers and builders of government. They are to die wretched with no glory and graves.

No doubt for proper education of children with special needs, availability of supportive materials is worthy of consideration. However, such materials and equipment are not available in our regular schools: The necessary materials for the effective catering for the needs of such children as observed by Adedoja (2003), include wheel chairs, artificial limbs, special writing tools, book stand or holder for the physically disabled, Also, Braille machines and typewriters for the blind, magnifying glass for those with low vision, learning aids for the deaf among others.

It is a fact that our special schools are very limited considering the number and categories of children with special needs. Even if more schools are sited, the current emphasis is on inclusion phenomenon. That is to have all children with special needs participate as full time members of their neighborhood schools (Knight, 1999). That is why even the government of the federation launched the Universal Basic Education programme in order to keep abreast with the current world trend (i.e. including all children in our schools and catering for their special or ordinary learning needs and difficulties (Obaii, 2002).

In order to ensure effective education of children with special needs, therefore, the role of regular teachers is very pertinent. Unfortunately most of them are ignorant of elements of special education. Thus, they cannot provide proper instruction to special needs children. Added to this, the non-availability of Braille specialists for the blind, speech interpreters for the deaf etc coupled with inability to secure itinerant teachers for frequent visits and assistance to the regular schools have left much to be desired in the education of children with special needs. The issue of labeling has equally not been taken care of. Label as a stigma breeds negative reaction (Adedoja, 2003). This is because when labels are used particularly for an individual with visible handicap, it may generate a feeling of more handicaps on the part of that individual. For this reason, Gbengbin (1991), cautioned that labels should not be used arbitrarily adequate teacher preparation is also a very sensitive issue yet to be fully resolved in the education of children with special needs. This is essential since no nation can rise above the quality of its teachers (FRN, 1981). Besides, teacher preparation which is an aspect of professional development is central to the performance of the learner and the overall tone of the school at a social organization (Olawale et al, 2002).

**Challenges:**

Looking at the issues raised above, it is evidently clear that the need for a more proper and effective education of children with special needs can hardly be contested. When properly educated, such individuals would be more useful to themselves and the society. As Igwe (1994) cited in Okeke (1999) rightly pointed out that education creates awareness, appreciation of self and societal values as well as development of self such that one can be most beneficial and productive to both self and the society at large.

Fundamentally, there is the need to mount a campaign with a view to changing the unfavourable public attitudes toward children with special needs. The public should be made to understand that such category of individuals should not only be conveniently accommodated but also should as well be accepted and respected as people who are worthwhile. This is because when special needs persons are given a sense of belonging, their sense of positive self-concept and self-esteem will be enhanced.

The need for a more effective legislation in matters affecting the special needs children is very pertinent particularly under the era of political dispensation.. This will enhance their rights against discrimination. As Jatau et al (1998), rightly observed that this will make for a shift from welfarism to mandatory provision of services to special needs persons.

Certainly, under the current political dispensation, there is a hope for universalizing Basic Education. This is in fact what made the President Olusegun Obasanjo launched the UBE project on 30th September, 1999 at Sokoto. That the success of the USE cannot be ensured without absorbing the special needs children. In fact, special education is of vital importance in the success of every innovative educational programme and the USE is one of such. Therefore, special education should feature in the UBE's organization. Programming needs, Curriculum innovations, special approaches, pedagogy and evaluation (Uyanwa, 2002), similarly, the Universal Basic Education in the country is in line with the UNESCO (1994) Salamanca declaration that is geared toward inclusive schooling. This suggests modifying the entire school system so that it suits every learner irrespective of his needs. According to Olorode (2002), this can be achieved through curriculum flexibility, curriculum adaptation, curriculum differentiation and appropriate teaching aids and strategies.

It is worth noting that special needs persons need the services of specialist teachers. Behind this background therefore, efforts should be geared towards seeing that all teachers pass through the basic rudiments of special education, since the current advocacy is on inclusion of special needs children in the regular schools. Thus, there is the need for adequate teacher preparation so that special needs pupils/students will be able to gain from our educational system especially in the era of child-care Trust (Dada, 2002).

There is no gain saying the fact that under current political dispensation government is instituting measures aimed at alleviating poverty amongst the citizens of the country. Perhaps this is with a view to realizing the objective of establishing a united,

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strong and self-reliant nation (FRN, 1981). In line with this, the review of the structural frame work of the curriculum of the training centers for the disabled is needed. Adedoja (2003), suggested that the curriculum should be reinforced to enable trainees acquire skills such as self-reliance skills, self-employment skills and computer and information technology skills.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it could be unequivocally posited that special education in political dispensation should be accorded the necessary recognition and attention it deserves. Therefore, inadequacy of specialist teachers coupled with non-availability of the needed supportive materials should be viewed with much seriousness. Also, issues pertaining to unfavourable discriminatory attitudes to the disabled, issues of labeling, difficulty in securing itinerant teachers, regular teachers' ignorance of elements of special education among others should be squarely addressed and resolved. It is by so doing, special education would be made more functional to its recipients.

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