

LANGUAGE PROVISIONS OF THE NATIONAL POLICY AND CONSTRAINTS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

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Abstract

In view of the importance of special educational training given to people with special needs, there is need to give concrete meaning to the idea of equalizing educational opportunities for all children, their physical, sensory, mental, psychological or emotional disabilities notwithstanding. Consequently, to help achieve the national goals and objectives, the paper attempts to review areas in the national policy that concerns special education, meaning and classification of special needs, the use of Nigerian languages in teaching and learning and in designing a diversified and appropriate curriculum for all the beneficiaries. The challenges of providing adequate education for all the people with special needs are discussed. Finally, suggestions and recommendations towards their effective implementation are made.

Keywords: Special education; Educational opportunity; Psychological and emotional disability

INTRODUCTION

Education is meant for the generality of people irrespective of one's physical disposition. Nigerian Educational Research Development Council (NERDC) (1989) stated that education is the social instrument through which the culture of a people is perpetuated, implemented and reformed. In this regard therefore, education must serve not only the physically and academically adequate, but also those who display a wide variety and range of different learning patterns. This implies that every Nigerian child has the right to educational opportunities that are consistent with his or her abilities. Thus the educational programmes must plan and develop diversified curriculum that will satisfy diverse need areas including special education.

Article 25; Section one of the Universal Declaration of Rights, states that every one has the right to education whether blind, deaf or autistic and other physically challenged children who roam the streets of Nigeria (Arenyeka, 2012). The 2006 National census noted that there are 3,253,169 persons with disability in Nigeria with nearly 39 percent of school age. The need to consider individual differences is not unconnected with the fact that children do not develop the same way. For example, some people are born blind while some are deaf. Others also have differences in intelligence, emotional maturity and social development. There are also the learning disabled, the gifted, the talented and the mentally disordered. These categories of children are those for which special education is meant. However, this paper discusses briefly the field of special education, its position in the national policy on education, meaning, classification and curriculum of special needs, the use of Nigerian languages in learning and teaching and the challenges of Special Education in Nigeria.

The concept of Special Education

Special Education is an aspect of education that treats people as individuals and makes allowances for the use of special equipment and methods of teaching according to individual needs (Adima, Ladipo and Abosi, 1981). Osakwe (2010) sees Special Education as classroom or private instructions involving unconventional techniques, material, exercises, facilities and subject matters designed for children and adults who have physical deformities, behavioural disorders or learning disabilities.

The Federal Government Defined Special Education as:

The education of children and adults who have learning difficulties because of different kinds of disabilities - blindness, partial sightedness, deafness, hardness of hearing, mental retardation, social maladjustment and limb deformity or malformation, due to circumstances of birth, inheritance, social position, mental and physical health patterns or accidents in latter life (National Policy on Education, 2004:34).

Ozaji (2005) describes special education as a formal training given to people (children and adults with special needs) who need additional learning commonly identified as:

1. Neuromuscular or physical characteristics;
2. Sensory abilities;
3. Mental characteristics;
4. Communication abilities;
5. Social or emotional behaviour.

These groups of people require some modification of the normal school practice and special education services in order to develop to their fullest potentials. Mba (1991) opines that special education is an ideal general education in which individual differences are considered and provided for.

Federal Government of Nigeria (2004), in its national policy on education states the objectives of special education among others as, to provide opportunities for exceptionally gifted children, to develop at their own pace in the interest of nation's economic and technological development. To achieve the above objectives of special education, the preparation of teachers for adequate education for both learners with disabilities and use of appropriate curriculum and the use of the children's mother tongue, these defamations are relevant to the present discourse because the paper is focusing on the national policy and special education. Children with special needs are known as people with disabilities in one form or the other, capable of limiting their involvement and participation in the regular educational programme, which also affects their academic performance and functioning in the society. This group can be classified into eight groups with respect to the type and nature of their disability problems. These classifications are as follows:

1. The Hearing Impaired

These are people with little or no ability to hear sounds through one ear (unilateral impairment). They can be totally deaf or hard of hearing.

2. The Visually Impaired

These are people with difficulties in one or more functions of their visual system. They are also either blind or partially sighted.

3. The People with Speech Disorders

They are people with speech disorders who experience lack of development and stimulation which affects the effective mental formation of words or their physical production.

4. The Emotionally Disordered

These are the people with problems in their emotional development. They are not usually emotionally stable.

5. The Mentally Retarded

They are people with mental retardation whose mental ability, growth and development are hindered by biological environmental or hereditary factors that prevent them from adapting and adjusting to the normal environment. They could be the moronic, the imbeciles, the idiotic, the trainable and the educable based on the degree of their retardation.

6. The Physically Disabled

The physically disabled people are physically disadvantaged due to conditions that permanently prevent them from exercising normal body control and movement.

7. The People with Learning Disabilities

These people have disorders in one or more of the fundamental physiological processes involved in the understanding, speaking and writing of language which include wrong word pronunciation, spelling and reading.

8. The People with Multiple Disabilities

These are people who are with more than one form of disabilities. They suffer from a combination of any of the above mentioned disabilities (Akinwale and Abimbola, 2011).

The People with Multiple Disabilities

Designing an appropriate special education curriculum should take cognizance of every Nigerian child whether disabled or not, such curriculum should provide opportunities for activities and or all children.

Special Education Curriculum:

Designing an appropriate special education curriculum should take cognizance of every Nigerian child whether disable or not; such curriculum should provide opportunities for activities for all the children. In this respect, Nwachukwu (2006), identified the following areas as where teachers and curriculum planners should focus attention:

- (1) The content of curriculum that is taught to children generally at school.
- (2) The adapted curriculum that addresses the peculiar needs of children with special needs.
- (3) The curriculum that would make special needs children education worthwhile; and
- (4) The curriculum that is specially designed to address the specific learning needs of special needs children.

Mogbo (2002) defined curriculum as encompassing the content, structure and processes of teaching and learning which the school provides in accordance with its educational objectives and values. This includes the knowledge, concepts and skills that children acquire including the factors that inform the ethos and general environment in the school. The source continued that the way in which the curriculum is defined, planned implemented and evaluated crucially will influence the quality of education provided.

The above definition sees curriculum as the life-wire of any school be it special education or normal education. Ozoji (2003) agreed with the above idea when he pointed out that any effective and ideal curriculum process should be made up of such fundamental issues like objectives, content, learning experiences, organization and evaluation. Nwachukwu (2006) noted that planning is one of the defining features of any good curriculum. Planning therefore should involve:

- ❖ breadth and flexibility and
- ❖ The choice it offers in the selection and sequencing of content that ensure its adaptability to the dignity of children's circumstances and experiences.
 1. Activity-based learning;
 2. Self-directed learning;
 3. Cooperative and group work; and
 4. Peer-learning.

The Use of Nigerian Languages in Teaching and Learning the Special Needs Children:

The importance of mother-tongue is stressed in the national policy of education - 1978, 1983 and 2004 revised. The Federal Government appreciates the relevance of indigenous language as a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion and preserving cultures. The policy therefore indicates that every child shall learn the language of his immediate environment. It also emphasized that every Nigerian child should learn his mother tongue as well as English and French. It is possible that a child's first language (i.e. mother-tongue) used in his home is not the language spoken in that area. So he will be forced to learn the language spoken in that area. Thus every Nigerian child is expected to be at least bilingual. The child should speak more than one language. Ikediashi, Iroegbu and Agugoesi (2014) noted that bilingualism and multilingualism involve speaking and writing in two languages as well as being able to comprehend meaning either orally spoken or written in these languages. The source noted that every language has its own vocabulary, grammar, word-meaning and pronunciation, so that the bilingual child is expected to learn two different words for every object he names and for every thought he wishes to express.

In view of the above issues, the language contents should start as from pre-primary and primary levels indicating that there should be at least one Nigerian language to be taught to pupils plus French language from primary 4 - 6 classes. The NPE stressed that the medium of instruction in the primary schools shall be the language of immediate environment (LIE) of the child for the first 3 years (i.e. primary 1 - 3), in areas or communities where only one language is spoken or used (i.e. monolingual communities), while English Language shall be taught as a subject. It also stipulates that from primary 4 - 6, English shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction and the language of immediate environment and French and Arabic shall be taught as subjects. Thus provision is made for every Nigerian child to be at least bilingual or multilingual as the case may be.

The curriculum planners should take cognizance of every Nigerian child whether disabled or not. Such also should provide opportunities for activities and experiences of all educational needs of every child as specified in the national policy of education to suit every child using his mother tongue.

Constraints of Special Need Education in Nigeria

There are many challenges facing children with special needs in Nigeria. Egbo (2005) noted that despite many well-intentioned educational policies that have been adopted by the Federal Government of Nigeria, for example, the 6 - 3 - 3 - 4 system and the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Scheme, education in Nigeria has fallen victim of the nation's chronic, social and political challenges that tend to reduce institutional efficiency. Abang (1992) noted that the implementation of the 6 - 3 - 3 - 4 system of education has not been successful in the schools for learners with disabilities because the government has not required commitment and seriousness in the implementation of the system.

Nigerian education is not adequately funded and this has effects on the education of students with disabilities. For instance, facilities and equipment which could have enabled the disabled to learn are not provided. Nwoagba (2013) identified funding as the major constraint and barrier to the growth of special education in Nigeria. Article 3, Salamanca Framework for Action (1994), advocated that schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, emotional, social and linguistic conditions. However, since 1994, Nigeria and other developing countries of the world have been very slow in implementing this framework. Adebisi (2010) noted that the shortage of funds leads to shortage of resources, inadequate facilities and unemployment of personnel.

The Nineteen eighty to nineteen-ninety six (1980-1996), made a notable success in the field of special need education both within and outside the country (FME, 1986). As the old infrastructures and equipment become obsolete, many special needs education children have dropped out of school because inclusive schools are not available. The government pays attention to disabilities like hearing impairment, visual and handicapped more than other special need areas. The major concern in Nigeria is the policy of inclusive education since it remains unimplemented thereby, limiting access to schools for children with disabilities (Nkechi 2013).

The policy on Special Education as contained in the national policy of education made the stated objectives clear. The Adebisi and Onye (2013), noted policy problem to the federal government which failed to stipulate the administrative structures or functions of the three tiers of government thereby making it difficult for proper funding. Osuji (2004) stated that the Nigerian Universal Basic Education offers free primary and secondary (nine-year basic) education with the document that emphasizes - access, equality, equity, inclusiveness, affordability and equality to every Nigerian child. This means that children with special needs are entitled to free education that can bring about adequate level of literacy for them to learn in vocational and academic institution.

The findings of Okeke (1987) in Benue, Kogi, Enugu, Anambra, Imo and Abia States in Nigeria revealed that poverty related factors rank first among other factors as most prominent barrier inhibiting families or communities from participating in the education of persons with special needs in Nigeria. Adebisi, Jerry, Rasaki & Igwe (2014) noted that a nation is judged not by how the

affluent view life but by how it takes care of its less fortunate citizens. For instance, high cost of educational materials and equipment such as Braille machines and papers, typewriting machines and sheets, carbon papers, thermoforming papers, tape recorders, cassettes, ear mould hearing being used by these students cannot be afforded by families of these students.

Eleweke (2003), and Adebisi, et al (2014), noted that most of the promises in the national policy on education (NPE) document relating to the implementation of plans and programmes for special needs education and provision of other essential services have remained at the theory level due to lack of mandatory legislations to give support to their implementation. Iheanacho (1988), however noted that without a supporting legislation, the implementation of the provisions of the NPE document is not obligatory on the Nigerian government and thus lacks organizational backing and administrative clear-cut line of action. Hence achievement of programmes and policies contained in the NPE and other documents concerning special needs education remain subjective.

In their views, Erscheidet and Bartlet (1999), argued that legislation is a key approach for improving services provided to individuals with special needs. The source explained that mandatory laws are necessary in the provision of services with the following benefits:

- ❖ Protective safeguards which guarantee the rights of the beneficiary to receive specific services;
- ❖ Time of onset and phase plans;
- ❖ Consequential effects (i.e. punishment) for non-compliance; room for litigation;
- ❖ Accountability, evaluation and monitoring procedures; .
- ❖ Financial backing and structure; and
- ❖ Unemployment of trained manpower.

Employment of manpower and development is one major challenge to the special needs education and its policies at national and international levels. Adebisi et al (2014) stated that special education teachers, psychologists, physiotherapists, social workers, vocational instructors, doctors and nurses are not employed directly to take care of educational and other needs of children with disabilities. Vandeh (2003) remarked that the successful education of students with special needs requires the involvement of the different professionals to assist in the areas of identification, referral, diagnosis, treatment and provision of appropriate educational services.

Evidence from the World Bank (1999 and 2005), reports that there is a staffing deficit in Nigerian colleges and universities and also that the position of special school in Nigeria indicated grossly inadequate numbers of special education. The irony is that the programmes for the training of support personnel such as educational audiologists, psychologist speech and language pathologists and communication support workers like interpreters are not offered in most of the institutions of higher learning in Nigeria (Adebisi et al 2014). Adebisi and Onye (2013) maintained that if there is political will by the policy makers, things would be done in favour of persons with special needs. People in charge of policy making and the administration of special needs education at various levels of policy implementation are professionals who do not have passion for the needs of persons with special needs. As such, all efforts to see that things work well for the special needs are jeopardized.

Suggestion and Recommendations

Resolving the problems of special education in Nigeria requires the involvement of practitioners and policy makers in schools, local government authorities, the health service, voluntary and other stakeholders in the training of disabled children. Oyemo (1999) remarked that the growth of the human society depends entirely on the contributions of its members. It is evident that almost all disabled children can be trained to live productive lives. Thus, it needs government's vision to provide clear national leadership supported by an ambitious programme of sustained action and review in the following areas:

❖ Early Intervention

There should be early intervention to ensure that children who have difficulties in learning receive the help they need as soon as possible and parents of children with special need have access to suitable childcare services .

❖ Delivery

There should be delivery improvements in partnership with NGOs and other national and international agencies on approaches to enable parents have confidence that their children will receive the education they need without feeling that the only way to achieve this is through policies on paper but action at the local, state and national levels to build the skills and capacity of the children.

❖ Inclusion

Disabled children could be properly educated by inclusion and exclusion strategies (Osakwe, 2010). Inclusion is a process by which regular education classes are combined with special education services in a regular system. Inclusion according to Osakwe is two models namely full and partial. In full inclusion model, specialized services are provided within a regular classroom by sending the service worker to work with one or more students in the regular classroom setting, while in the partial model, specialized services are provided outside a regular classroom.

❖ Exclusion

This strategy involves teaching children with special needs with special techniques and equipment by specialist personnel (Osakwe, 2010). In this model, children are placed in special schools and classrooms so as to cater for their specific educational needs, aspirations and challenges that will enable them learn at their own pace.

❖ The Use of Indigenous Languages (Mother Tongue) in Teaching and Learning

Indigenous languages should be used in teaching at the levels of nursery, pr-primary, primary and junior secondary schools to enable our children grab the teaching from the grassroots. Special attention should be paid to the introduction of new concepts using local languages. This however will encourage those who would have dropped out at the primary level of education (NPE 2004). It is said that practice makes perfect, children should be allowed to learn concepts in their local language and use them frequently first before application with English language. This method will help them remember and recall the concepts faster and easily too.

❖ Government should encourage private agencies and NGOs to establish more special schools as well as vocational and rehabilitation centres and fund them to enable the schools provide educational materials and facilities needed by students at their levels.

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