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The Place of Special / Gifted Children in the Universal Basic Education in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examined the fact that many special/gifted children are left to roam the street without any form of education. The schools have no place for such children, because even the normal children have not been properly catered for as regards spaces. The UBE is intended to ensure, that all children irrespective of their status are given spaces in schools in order to acquire some form of skills or knowledge to be able to sustain their lives later in future. Most public schools where these gifted/ special children attempt to learn do so with much difficulties and only determination crown their efforts. Therefore, with adequate monitoring and supervision, availability of funds and facilities these special/ gifted children would be adequately catered for.

Key words: Special/ gifted children, Universalize access to education, Universal basic education.

Introduction

There is no gain saying, that the predicament of special or gifted children/people in our locality today is nothing to write home about. In Nigeria today, many special/gifted children have been discovered to be left behind in educational activities as more often than not they are not well provided for educationally. Many of such special/gifted children are found outside the school premises because special attention has not been given to them since their inability to comprehend what their fellow mates can do.

Special/gifted children are children who defer averagely from normal children who are physically, mentally, socially and otherwise not fit or lacking certain abilities. Special/gifted children may include the following:

- (a) children with visual / hearing difficulties
- (b) retarded children
- (c) children with emotional / behavioural disorder
- (d) physical disabilities
- (e) children with learning disabilities
- (f) children with special talents and many others.

In more recent years, the Nigerian government has acknowledged these special/gifted children and people as part of the community and should be entitled to the benefits that everyone enjoys. As a result, the revised National Policy on Education (2004) articulates the needs of the special / gifted children to the right to education by stating that: '..... the purpose and objectives of special education should be to give concrete meaning to the idea of equalizing educational opportunities for all children, their physical, mental, emotional disabilities notwithstanding to provide adequate education for all handicapped children and adults in order that they may fully play their roles in the development of the nation'.

The fact that Nigeria is a democratic nation, every member of the society should be given the opportunity to earn a living commensurate with their abilities and talents with a view to contributing their quota to the development of the society. As a result, the Universal Basic Education was formally launched by President Olusegun Obasanjo in September 1999 in Nigeria for all children of school age. However, it has been observed, that since inception of the UBE, all efforts put in place has been directed

towards the education of normal average children to the detriment of the special / gifted children.

Goals and Objectives of the Universal Basic Education

The goals of the universal basic education are to universalize access to basic education, create conducive learning environment and eradicate illiteracy in Nigeria in the shortest possible time, Babalola (2000). According to Obanya (2000) UBE had its objectives redefined as follows:

- developing in the citizenry a strong consciousness for education and a strong commitment to its vigorous promotion
- the provision of free, universal basic education for every Nigerian child of school age
- reducing drastically the incidence of dropout from the formal school system through improved relevance, quality and efficiency
- catering for the learning needs of young persons who for one reason or the other have interrupted their schooling through appropriate forms complementary approaches to the provision and promotion of basic education
- ensuring the acquisition of the appropriate levels of literacy, numeracy, manipulative, communicative and life skills as well as the ethical, moral and civic values needed for laying a solid foundation for life long education.

To ensure that these objectives are achieved, concerted efforts were put in place to publicize the program.

Relevance of Universal Basic Education to Special/Gifted Children

Basic education has been described as that level, type and form of learning needed to build a firm foundation for literacy and numeracy to inculcate basic life skills and more importantly to consolidate the skills of learning, how to learn according to the document of the declaration and framework for Action of the world conferences on Education for All held in 1990. Basic education comprises both of formal and non-formal, public and private educational activities offered to meet the learning needs of the people of all ages in Nigeria. With a view to the special / gifted children, the concern of the Nigerian government is that all children receive education that is appropriate to their needs and peculiarities.

Basic education is relevant to the special need of special/gifted children in Nigeria in that, it will assist those in the field of special education to identify children who are at risk of developmental delays. Basic education can equally provide or

produce lasting benefits on the intellectual and school achievement of these special/ gifted children. It will have positive effect on the children's cognitive, language, social, emotional and psychomotor growth. It will also provide the children the opportunities of acquiring social skills which these children may have lacked as a result of the disabling condition previously and in the end help them in the development of positive attitudes which will climax in the enhancement of the development of their personality. In the same vein, Basic Education for the special/ gifted children will enable them acquire the basic skills or tools for self-reliance which is one of the many objectives of educating the citizenry. To further throw light on the plight of these special/ gifted children in public schools an interview was carried out. About 80% of the learners interviewed on why they attend public schools rather than the special schools, they responded that, their parents could not afford the varying school fees and more often than not these schools are relatively far away from their homes.

Another question asked was what was their relationship like with both teachers and other learners in their school? About 90% of them responded that it was easier for them to relate with normal person than with their fellow special/gifted persons. It is easier for them to relate with their teachers and the normal children than relating with their fellow mates. The learning environment has created the arena where it is possible for all the learners to relate irrespective of the defects they may have.

The existing special schools are often very expensive and far away from home. These special/ gifted children always want to be close to their families in order that they contribute to their upbringing and better their lifestyles. There is the tendency these special/ gifted children to develop easier and faster when close to the people they are used to.

Most of the children were of the opinion that mixing with the normal children makes them to appreciate life better. As there are those areas of their defects that are better than the said 'normal children.' Also, they get dignified when in presence of other children. There is the tendency for special/ gifted children to exhibit what they can do or perform irrespective of their defects among other children.

As much as possible, special/ gifted children feel that they are better placed when they compete with normal children in the same motor skills than with fellow special/ gifted children. In doing this, they are able to know what to expect in that particular activity which gives them better chances of doing better than others. In an attempt to be educated, most of these special/ gifted children find themselves in public schools.

Inherent Benefits for the Special/Gifted Children from Universal Basic Education

In considering the anticipated expectations of the special /gifted children from the program of the UBE, one would observe that no particular mention was made in the National Policy on education but it is expected that these persons must benefit from whatever educational program put in place. However, for the UBE to fully attain its set objectives, it should ensure that proper attention and services be provided for the special /gifted children. In this regard, the UBE program must ensure the following:

- there should be specially trained teachers to be recruited to handle the special needs of these children at all levels of education. In addition, these special trained teachers must be adequately motivated to stay at their work places for the sake of the children
- there must be adequate provision of relevant teaching / learning materials for all categories of these special/gifted children
- at all times, there must be adequate funding for effective implementation of the program
- that the teachers in the field are aware of the varying or different learning needs of those they are attending to. This can be carried on by organizing or scheduling regular seminars, conferences or workshops for these teachers to train as well as in regular schools
- the participation of special / gifted children in education is far from being satisfactory. Even at that, only a fraction of them are given appropriate requirement to enable them learn. This should be reviewed by the appropriate bodies such that adequate provisions would be put in place. As a result, such special / gifted children would become self-reliant at the end of such educational activity.

Universal Basic Education Program for Special/Gifted Children and Its Implications

The participation of special/gifted children in the educational activities is far from being satisfactory. In a survey reported in Action Plan December 2006, about 40% of schools with special / gifted children had only 10% who have appropriate provisions for these children, Theobald, Umar, Ocheke and Sanni (2008).

Attainment of greater commitment on the part of all tiers of government especially as provision of education is on the concurrent legislative list in the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria. To a large extent, the political will of the various governments have not been too encouraging as regards the educational sector. This has manifested

in the poor funding, inadequate supply of material and human resources etc., Adenipekun (2009).

The special/gifted child expects the universal basic education program to provide a friendly school environment for all. A friendly school environment will be a place where learning/teaching is conducive for all participants. More importantly, there should be necessary structures to make the learning / teaching processes enjoyable that no one is left out in the scheme of things.

The special/gifted child expects the universal basic education program to provide enlightenment to the public with a view to change their negative attitudes towards the disabled persons. This can be done by using the various multimedia to propagate or rather re-orientate the public on the nature of disabilities and the type of cooperation required from parents, siblings, teachers and the general public.

The special/gifted child requires that the full implementation of the inclusive education and all it involves with special regards to the modification of the entire school system in order to be able to respond to different needs of the learners should be put in place. This can be done through curriculum flexibility, appropriate teaching /learning aids and strategies.

In addition, there should be adequate qualified professionals. These professionals should be both teaching and non-teaching members of staff in the various schools to care for the varying needs of all the learners.

The special / gifted child requires that the UBE creates a more manipulative, practical and work relevant programs and less of abstract concepts in the schools. These programs should be planned in such a manner that it would be easy for the special / gifted child to transit from school life to work life.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The universal basic education was launched by the Nigerian government to cater for all its citizenry of school age in 1999. A lot more has to be done by government before the universal basic education can attain its universality. In order to attain this, efforts should be put in place involve experts in special needs to work with the planners and implementers of the UBE program.

The slogan for Nigeria's UBE is 'education for all is the responsibility of all'. This assumption is that, if government at all levels, non-governmental organizations and individuals accept their responsibility for expanding access to education and making participation in quality education available for all, gifted/special children would not be left out in the scheme of things.

Appropriate specialist personnel in the field of special education should be included in the supervisory and implementation teams to guide government on the provision of appropriate facilities and services delivery if the special/gifted children are to benefit from the UBE programs. These specialists should serve as advisory board to government for the welfare of the special / gifted children.

For the success of the UBE program, the various tiers of government must active play their roles by adequately providing funds, maintaining and employing qualified personnel and facilities for the various schools. In order to incorporate the special /gifted children in the universal basic education, we recommend: -

- (a) that there should be special units or centres for special/gifted children in all schools across the federation;
- (b) there should be renovation of already existing special schools in the country;
- (c) there should be provision of facilities, equipment and resources for such special schools;
- (d) establish more special schools at one per local government area within the country;
- (e) there should be adequate monitoring and supervision of these schools;
- (f) there should be adequate funds available.

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