



# **EDUCATING PERSON WITH DISABILITIES IN POST COVID – 19 ERA: ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS TO THEORY AND PRACTICE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION**

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(Received 29, April 2024; Revision Accepted 26, June 2024)

## **ABSTRACT**

The emergence of COVID-19 pandemic has fashioned an unprecedented humanitarian crisis in Nigeria. While the pandemic threatens every person in the country, it is significantly impacting millions of people with disabilities negatively in term of communication approaches, methods and strategies of teaching, which is compounded with their pre-existing condition. This paper highlights the consequential impacts of COVID-19 pandemic, as it affects the new normal (post COVID-19) on education of people with disabilities in Nigeria viz other support services, educational provisions and services. It also presents the COVID-19 impact on the education of people with disabilities and its implications to special education practice in Nigeria. The paper proffers recommendations for government and stakeholders to respond to these challenges both now and in the future in harnessing a full inclusion and consideration of persons with disabilities in planning and formulation of COVID-19 response.

**KEYWORDS:** COVID-19, Persons with Disabilities, Assistive technology. Special Needs Education

## **INTRODUCTION**

The outbreak of a respiratory disease otherwise known as COVID-19 started in the Wuhan province of the Peoples' Republic of China in December, 2019 has developed to a large- scale pandemic disease affecting not only humans' health, but also the education and the economy of many countries across the globe. In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of a novel corona virus disease (COVID-19) to be a pandemic, due to the nature, speed and scale of transmission.

In order to contain the COVID-19 outbreak, WHO, health authorities and governments of different countries around the world have taken actions, which gave way for the implementation of measures such as minimizing mass gatherings, suspension of both local and international flights, closure of borders, recreational centers, schools, libraries, businesses, religious and sporting activities, strict city surveillance and enforced quarantines and isolations in large scales (Fong, Li, Dey, Crespo, & Viedma; Galea, Merchant, & Lurie, 2020)

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Specifically, in Nigeria, since the detection of the first case of COVID-19 on 27<sup>th</sup> February, 2020, the federal government has taken precautionary measures to discourage mass gathering and encourage social distancing in order to limit the spread of the virus. Despite all these efforts, COVID-19 continues spreading in many states of Nigeria, threatening all members of society. However, certain segments of the populations, such as people with disabilities are impacted more significantly by the pandemic. People with Disabilities includes all persons who have long-time physical, mental, emotional, or sensory impairments, whose interaction with the different attitudinal and environmental barriers prevent them from full and or effective performance within the society on an equal basis with others (WHO, 2020).

In fact, over 25 million persons with disabilities living in Nigeria were disproportionately impacted due to barriers to implementing basic protection measures such as difficulties in washing hands, difficulties in observing social distance due to reliance on physical contact to get support, the need to touch surfaces of assistive products for support, barriers to accessing public health information, hygiene and institutional barriers that are reproduced during the COVID-19 crisis (Joint National Association of Persons with Disabilities JONAWPD, 2020; WHO, 2020).

Most governments were not prepared to deal with persons with disabilities. There have been disruptions to services, ranging from education to child protection that has been documented, with disproportionate effects on the most vulnerable persons and families. There is lack of research and data collection to draw attention to the experiences of persons with disabilities during the pandemic, to advocate for a range of services to be available now and in the future, and to inform the design of specific interventions for persons with disabilities (UNICEF, 2020). About one-quarter of world's countries had social protection system disrupted for persons with disabilities (UNICEF, 2020). There are prejudices, stigma, and discrimination against people with disabilities, including misconceptions that they cannot contribute to the outbreak response or make their own decisions (UNICEF, 2021).

Persons with disabilities are among the world's most disadvantaged groups, they are prone to stigma and discrimination that often lead to increased exposure to abuse, neglect, reduced

access to services, and general lack of recognition (UNICEF, 2020). Furthermore, persons with disabilities have greater healthcare needs and dependence on community-based services challenges that were not considered in pandemic response plans (Aishwonya, Ramkuma & Kany, 2020). The COVID-19 lockdown measures that were enforced by governments led to increased anxiety and depression, and the exacerbation of pre-existing mental health issues for persons with disabilities. The lockdown measures led governments to embark on remote homeschooling that was exceptionally difficult to administer special curricula for the rural poor who could not access Internet and related technological resources (Jeste et al., 2020).

Furthermore, Inaccessible information and communication mean that persons with hearing, visual, intellectual or physical disabilities may not receive key information about prevention and assistance (UNICEF, 2021). Different countries-initiated programmes that empowered persons with disabilities with risk communication and community engagement knowledge that helped to improve childcare skills and feeding practices, especially during the pandemic. UNICEF Georgia launched a special television broadcast and a Facebook-based platform geared towards helping parents of persons with disabilities. While other countries like Lebanon and Mongolia launched child-friendly videos on COVID-19 messages that were accessible to persons with hearing impairments. In Philippines easy-to-read materials, text captioning, braille, large format print, among others augmented the communication needs of persons with disabilities (Cahapay, 2020). UNICEF recommended the supported caregivers of persons with disabilities with their own mental health and psychosocial wellbeing. Most countries in the world offered stimulus packages that supported the continuity of inclusive health and social services used by persons with disabilities, including rehabilitation, assistive technology, and personal assistance. In addition, public messaging created respectful and free of bias that avoided the potential for stigma against any part of the population based on age or disability that might lead people to assume that rise in COVID-19 transmission is increased with people with disabilities (UNICEF, 2021). Many protocols would, more or less directly, deprioritize people with chronic disabilities as a group (Dan, 2020).

## **PERSONS LIVING WITH DISABILITIES IN NIGERIA**

Disability has been a concern in the world from time Immemorial and it is part of the human condition. It is a complex, dynamic, multidimensional and contested issue (Charlton, 1998). The issue of disability is prevalent in both developed and developing countries, rich and poor families and communities. As such, every government world over has faced the moral and political issue of how best to include and support people with disabilities (Mishra & Gupta, 2006). Bickenbach, (1999) posit that disability refers to difficulties encountered in any or all three areas of functioning that are impairments, activity limitations and participation limitations. Impairments are problems in body functions or alterations in body structure such as paralysis or blindness. Activity limitations are difficulties in executing activities such as walking or eating. Participation limitations are problems involved in any area of life, such as facing discrimination in transportation, schooling or employment. On another note, the Nigeria Disabled Persons Act, Chapter 17:01 of 1992, defines a disabled person as:

**a person with a physical, mental or sensory disability, including a visual, hearing or speech functional disability, which gives rise to physical, cultural or social barriers inhibiting him from participating at an equal level with other members of society in activities, undertakings or fields of employment that are open to other members of society.**

In addition, the International Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (ICRPD, 2016) uses a social model of disability, and sees disability as long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder the full and effective participation of the affected persons in society on an equal with others. Thus, due to such body restrictions, persons with disabilities are more likely to experience adverse socioeconomic outcomes such as less education, poorer health outcomes, lower levels of employment, and higher poverty rates. This is likely to have more impact on girls with disabilities. World Bank report of October 2020 postulates that one billion people, or 15% of the world's population, experience some form of disability, and disability prevalence is higher in developing countries.

In Nigeria, according to UNICEF (2013) as many as 600,000 persons are living with disabilities. Furthermore, many disabled persons in Nigeria fail to realize their full potential as they struggle to access basic rights, such as education and health (World Bank Report, 2020). In addition, Amlambo, Newsday staff reporter on June 13, 2013 said that the plight of disabled persons in Nigeria is made worse due to lack of statistics, almost all schools in the country were not wheelchair user friendly and most of the toilets at schools were not compatible with wheelchairs.

Therefore, in addition to the challenges caused by disabilities, the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the plight of persons with disabilities and their families are experiencing particular obstacles in comparison with other families (UN, 2020). COVID-19 challenges can negatively influence disabled person's well-being. Although persons are less likely than adults to exhibit COVID-19 symptoms, persons with disabilities are considered to have more health care needs (UN, 2020), since COVID-19 infection may aggravate existing health conditions, especially those related to respiratory function, immune system function, heart disease, or diabetes (UN, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic is having a disproportionate impact on persons with disabilities who were already experiencing social and educational disadvantage. However, the social needs, barriers, and issues for persons with disabilities in Nigeria urban and rural settings during this COVID crisis have not been well researched. There is a paucity of information in Nigeria, on how disabled persons are coping with the COVID-19 pandemic and how they have been affected by the lockdown. Furthermore, the impact of the pandemic on rural persons living with disabilities has not been well documented. It has also been observed that the supporting needs of disabled persons in this pandemic era have not been established. It is, therefore, the purpose of this paper to analyze the strategies that can be used to help persons living with disabilities during COVID-19 period.

## **IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN NIGERIA**

While having a disability does not probably place someone at a higher risk of contracting the COVID-19, people with disabilities generally have more health-care needs than those without disabilities (United Nation: Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020).

Infact, many could have underlying health challenges as secondary aspect of their disability that could suppress immune system and make them more vulnerable and susceptible to contracting the virus. They may be at greater risk of developing more severe cases if they become infected with COVID-19 disease (WHO, 2020). To many people with disabilities in Nigeria, access to support services from caregivers will significantly lead to safe, healthy and independent living. Furthermore, persons with disabilities who are dependent on support from caregivers for their daily living may find themselves forcefully isolated and thus be unable to survive the social distance and lockdown measures during the COVID-19 crisis. Lack of better health services for the people with disabilities in Nigeria makes them vulnerable to COVID-19 disease. Despite being the segment of the population that is particularly at-risk to Contracting COVID-19 and developing severe cases if infected with COVID-19 disease; persons with disabilities in developing countries like Nigeria face even greater difficulty in accessing healthcare services and information, medical guidelines and protocols that may possibly minimize the risk level of contracting COVID-19 (United Nations: UN, 2020; Olapegba et al., 2020). Nigerians with disabilities have less access to social insurance than others when considering their employment status. This may have an effect on their economic resilience in the current COVID-19 crisis (World Bank Group. 2020). Those who are self-employed may be prevented from working from home during lockdown due to the absence of equipment and support and thus face increased risks of losing their income and livelihood. This lack of income represents a disproportionate burden on persons with disabilities and their households which typically face extra costs and expenditures related to their disabilities (UNICEF, 2020). Equally, the economic impact of COVID-19 may likely bite harder within existing services in the post-pandemic period (World Bank Group, 2020). Nigerians with disabilities, who live in slumps areas where physical distancing is hard to comply with due to their living arrangements, are in the danger of contracting COVID-19 disease. The homeless among them and those living in emergency settlements (like the Internally Displaced Peoples' Camps) are particularly vulnerable to contracting COVID-19 on account of overcrowded living conditions, lack of access to water and sanitation, and due to their pre-existing

health conditions (Nigeria in Emergencies Working Group: EIEWG, 2020).

Before the advent of COVID-19, Nigeria has been experiencing gender-based violence crisis, which are associated with harmful social, cultural, traditional and religious practices (National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons: NAPTIP, 2020). However, this crisis has become pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic, with widespread evidence that the crisis has significantly increased since the beginning of the lockdown due to the pandemic (UN, 2020). Initial data on reported incidents of this crisis in just 23 states in Nigeria shows that between March-April 2020, the total number of incidents reported sharply spiked from 346 to 794, indicating a fifty-six percent (56%) increase in just two weeks of lockdown (UN Women, 2020). Although, information on disability and gender-based violence in the context of COVID-19 is not currently available, however, experience revealed by NAPTIP and United Nations indicated that the circumstances of COVID-19 lockdown may have a peculiar impact on women and girls with disabilities. For women and girls with disabilities stand the risk of facing even higher rates of gender, sexual and domestic violence compared to other women (WHO, 2020). Nevertheless, it is important to note that reporting domestic violence and sexual harassment may particularly be challenging for women in Nigeria, talk less of women with disabilities (Yusuf, 2020).

People with disabilities usually have greater health requirements and poorer health outcomes (UN, 2020). As was observed by the researchers, in Nigeria most isolation, health and transport facilities used as part of the COVID-19 response have no adequate provision to cater to the requirements of Nigerians with disabilities, which may be infected with COVID-19 disease. The pandemic and the related containment measures such as quarantine, social distancing, and self-isolation may have disruptions to the health services people with disabilities rely on. These posed barriers to accessing healthcare during the COVID-19 crisis, making timely and appropriate care difficult for persons with disabilities. This has detrimental impact on their health needs. Many of these functional consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic will have long-lasting effects on individuals with disabilities. These challenges may even be significant for the people with disabilities living in informal settlements and those in IDP

camps as a result of humanitarian emergencies. Awareness of these challenges may lead to better responses that can reduce the disproportionate impact experienced by persons with disabilities.

### **IMPACT OF CO VID-19 ON THE EDUCATION OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES**

In Nigeria, while COVID19 is primarily affecting public health, its effects on education are so enormous and are arising largely from extended school closures. In essence, the lives of not less than 46 million students and their families have been significantly affected by the school closures caused by the COVID-19 outbreak (EIEWO, 2020). The EIEWG, maintained further that out of the 4.6 million affected students, 4.2 million were the most vulnerable group' of persons, including people with disabilities who are likely to be impacted the most. Although, most state governments have responded by the Implementation of remote learning, large on states TV stations to ensure that students continue to study. However, this measure does not address the educational needs of all students, arising from discontinuity and disruption of schools (Albino Foundation, 2020). Students with disability represent a diverse population of people with different forms of impairments and care support requirements, which face significant barriers that expanded their exclusion from education, especially during crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic (Agnoletto & Queiroz, 2020; UNICEF, 2020). Currently, in Nigeria due to lack of disaggregated data and information on social statistics, it is quite unclear as to how many students with disabilities are receiving educational support as a result of extended suspension of schools due to COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, how to keep learning in disruption for this category of students has become a major challenge to both the federal and state ministries of education, who are operating a special education system that was already incapacitated as a result of underfunding and lack of political will before the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic (Dominic, et al, 2020).

Students with disabilities may be negatively affected by the school shutdown, as they stand the risk of exclusion from education, when states continue to implement online distance learning programmes that may not be accessible to them, since they do not have necessary assistive devices that may allow participation and accommodation base on their unique learning needs (UNESCO, 2020).

Furthermore, special education teachers' lack of Information and Communication Technology skills in Nigeria makes them unprepared to teach online and with high-tech learning platforms and resources; and therefore, cannot ensure students with disabilities' engagement, during Interrupted classes due to COVID-19 (Chukwuemeka & Dominic, 2020). Lack of support and access to the internet, accessible software and hardware learning materials is likely to widen the gap for students with disabilities (UN: Policy Brief on Disability Inclusive Response to COVID-19, 2020). Hence, an online approach is not always ideal for creating an inclusive learning environment (UNICEF, 2020).

Extended school closures and disengagement of students with disability from the learning process could result hi an increased risk of dropout for people with disabilities,

Particularly, those from lower income households. This will present a greater challenge to Nigerian government and its aim of reducing the out of school persons and street begging, which is pronounced in the northern part of the country.

### **IMPLICATION OF CO VID-19 PANDEMIC TO SPECIAL EDUCATION PRACTICE IN NIGERIA**

Considering the suddenness of the COVID-19 crisis and its impact to the Education system, it clearly appears that response is a matter of urgency. Governments and institutions worldwide began to shift their school programmes to online distance education platforms (Toquero, 2020). The reason for the adoption of massive online learning programme is that it does not require instructors and students to come together for the face-to-face interaction; therefore, there is prevention and control over the spread of the virus (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020). In Nigeria, as a way of modifying the pedagogical and policy impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on the education system, both the federal and the state governments have since commenced education on TV and Radio stations largely for the elementary and secondary education. This may not serve for instance, students with visual, hearing or intellectual impairments if it is not provided in multiple and accessible format (Albino Foundation, 2020). To effectively respond to the threat of the pandemic on special education, government need to reassess the curricular interventions for students with disabilities in order to gear up readiness towards meeting their learning needs.

This will require aligning the competencies of students with the online format or any other provision put in place to ensure continuous learning.

As institutions continue to shift to the online alternative, these online platforms can present barriers to the special education teachers since they do not acquire the required ICI driven competencies in planning and implementing Instruction as well as assessing and reporting the performance of their students online (Chukwuemeka & Dominic, 2020). Thus, it is difficult for these teachers to effectively assist in the implementation of special education electronically. Equally, the high-tech assistive devices needed for innovative teaching and learning that the teachers can access to promote remote learning for the students with diverse educational needs are not adequately available (Dominic et al., 2020). Extended school closures and exclusion of students with disability in the provisions for continuous learning process during the COVID-19 crisis will impact negatively on special education system and could raise the risk of disengagement and dropout of people with disabilities, particularly those from lower income households. This will present a greater challenge to Nigerian government and its aim of reducing the out of school persons, street begging and violence against women and girls with disabilities, which is experienced in all parts of the country. Hence, based on the education needs of people with disabilities, this article presents opportunities in the recommendations for special education to respond to the educational problems that arise due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## CONCLUSION

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, which is disproportionately impacting millions of people with disabilities in Nigeria. People with disabilities are affected in varieties of ways by the enforced lockdown and social distancing measures due to COVID-19 pandemic. Many of these functional, economic, health and social consequences of the pandemic remain visible even after the pandemic.

This requires an unprecedented inclusive response that will better serve everyone. Hence, the pandemic has opened up opportunities for the government to upgrade special education system by redesigning the curricular and technology needs of the changing times, and train teachers to use the emerging high-tech assistive technologies.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**Based on the challenges of COVID-19 pandemic, the following recommendations will help government and the entire stakeholders to effectively cater for the needs of people with disabilities in a future crises.**

- i. Government through the ministry of health and the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control should raise awareness by providing information on pandemic diseases and related measures of containment and make them accessible to persons with disabilities in multiple and accessible format, such as through sign language interpretation, captioning, braille and easy to read format for people with disabilities in Nigeria.
- ii. Government and other stakeholders should provide palliative, financial aid and benefits through social insurance, soft loans and grants for medium and small scaled self-employed persons with disabilities who have lost their income and source of livelihood.
- iii. Government and the stakeholders in special education should assess the capabilities of students, teachers, and infrastructure in order to improve assistive technology solutions for students with disabilities to be able to explore various options for distance learning made available during school shutdown. Additionally, special education teachers should be trained on how to instruct and engage students with disabilities through flexible distance learning high-tech tools and ensure accessibility to the internet, and internet resources by engaging service providers to minimize internet cost.

- iv. Stakeholders in education of persons with disabilities should provide awareness campaigns to familiarize government and their agencies about disability inclusive protocols. Encourage and support more research to identify additional barriers to the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the COVID-19 response and recovery efforts.
- v. Collect and share accurate national disability data, strengthen inclusive education system to ensure that persons with disabilities are not excluded from virtual learning during periods of lockdown.

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