

Institutionalization, Mainstreaming or Inclusion: Challenges for Special Education in Nigeria.

Florence Banku Obi, Ph.D
Institute of Education
University of Calabar, Nigeria.

Abstract

Educating young citizens with disabilities of any nation is a special challenge. So whatever are the other pressures on the education system and on public expenditure, it is imperative for every nation to provide appropriate education for her young citizens with disabilities. It is on this note that the government of Nigeria establishment the first school for the disabled in the country in the middle of the 50s. Since then the government has come up with different programmes for children with special needs. In addition, the government has signed a number of international agreements and treaties for the provision of services for the disabled. Despite this development, they seem to be no clear cut marriage between the seemingly government policy for the provision of educational services to children with special needs and what is on ground. This study raises pertinent questions about what seems to be government policy and the ground reality of the situation. It also shows that there is no consistency between perceive policy and implementation. It highlights these discrepancies and suggests the way forward.

Introduction

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1949, the United Nations General Assembly Charter in 1959, and the United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child in 1989 placed education is a human issue. This means that all children have a right to receive the kind of education that does not discriminate on the grounds of language, ethnicity, disability, gender, religion, etc. In addition the 1959 charter states that “the children who are physically, mentally and socially handicapped shall be given special treatment and care required of his particular condition”. Perhaps all these influenced the provision of educational services to children with disabilities in Nigeria. However, before 1975, the education and care of Children with Disabilities (CWD) was principally the concern of religious and voluntary bodies. The first school for children with disabilities was the school for the blind in Gindiri, Plateau State in 1953 by the Sudan United Missionaries (SUM) now Church of Christ in Nigeria (COCIN). This was followed with the establishment of Pacelli School for the Blind; the Wesley School for the Deaf all in Lagos and St. Joseph’s School for the Blind Obudu by the Roman Catholic Church. Other early schools established by the missionaries included the Oji River

Rehabilitation Centre, Enugu, in 1960 by the Anglican Church, among others. All these schools were segregatory in approach. CWD were never given the opportunity to interact with their peers who are not disabled. In these schools, these children were isolated and educated in self-contained classes. These schools were considered discriminatory in approach since these children were expected to eventually live their lives after school in the society.

The turn of events in the provision of educational services for children with disabilities came in 1975 when the government indicated interest to intervene in the education of children with disabilities. This interest was followed with the Nigeria National Policy of Education 1977 devotion of section 8 to Special Education. The Policy was followed with the launching of the Blueprint on the Education of Children with Disabilities in 1989. The policy and blueprint brought a rare of hope, limitless promises and great expectations for both CWD and practitioners in the field. The method and system of educating these children was clearly spelt out in the National Policy (1977, revised 1981) inter alia;

“ the government has decided that integration is the most realistic form of special education since handicapped children are eventually expected to live in the society. Therefore it has already accepted that special classes and units will be provided in the ordinary schools under the Universal Primary Education Scheme. These will be well-staffed and equip. However, special Schools, where necessary, will be established for the handicapped, mentally retarded and other disabled children.

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This provision in the Policy adopted integration of children into the ordinary school as the major method of providing educational services to CWD although those who were considered severely handicapped and envisaged not to benefit from integration were to be in segregated schools. The adoption of integration as the educational policy for children with disabilities was in line with the global movement to protect the rights of CWD and make life as normal as possible for them.

Despite these provisions, more segregated special schools are being open in more states of the federation for special children and even for those with mild disabilities who given the opportunity will function normally in regular schools. This perhaps is because the regular schools do not have facilities and supportive staff to meet the needs of these children. Studies have shown for instance, that, most children in schools for the blind have enough residual vision to be in regular schools in Nigeria (Skyes & Ozoji, 1993; Olukotun, 2003). Integration which is the approved system of educating these children is an exception rather than the case. Very few schools in Nigeria are known to integrate special children. Most parents complain that their children are being denied admission due to their disabilities. Nigeria government cannot claim to have implemented the policy of integration in schools.

As if to make a mockery of the Nations Educational Policy and its failed implementation as regards integration, Nigeria government went ahead to ratify some international treaties for

the education of children with disabilities/special education needs. These include;

- The 1990 World Conference on Education for All (EFA) at Jomtien, Thailand, where the world reaffirmed its commitment to EFA.
- The 1993 United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Person with Disabilities (PWDs) which reemphasized the need to make education of PWDs an integral part of the educational system.
- The 1994 Salamanca Statement and Frame work for Action on Special Needs Education, which provided a special opportunity to place special needs education within the wider framework of EFA as well as a call for children with special needs to be included in all educational initiatives and have a rightful place in the general educational setting.
- The 2000 Dakar World Education Forum which revisited the Salamanca Conference and Declaration with the challenge to ensure that the broad vision of EFA is an inclusive concept adopted by all governments and funding agencies.
- The 2001 EFA Flagship on Education and Disability which aimed at placing disability issues on the development agenda and advance inclusive education as a primary approach to achieving EFA by all national governments.

Ratifying these treaties implies that the government of Nigeria was ready and willing to implement them by making them an integral part of the educational policy and approach.

The Salamanca declaration of inclusion aimed at identifying ways in which the school, as part of the social environment can create better learning opportunities for all children and by this means address the issue of the school being the most pervasive source of learning difficulties for children. Interestingly, more than 28 years after the policy came into effect and with government trying to provide for children with special needs in special schools, the revised NPE (2004) advocated for inclusion of children with special needs in regular schools. This perhaps is to be seen to implement the signed declarations.

What is Integration and Inclusive Education?

Integration is the process of teaching special needs children in regular classrooms with children who have no special needs. The approach involves the use of supportive devices and services to enable the special needs children benefit from instruction. Some characteristics of integration include; the involvement of children with disabilities in the regular class; the modification of the instructional aspects of the process; the utilization of special services, placement in the least restrictive environment and cooperation among educators. Integration encourages interaction between the special and non special needs children.

Inclusion as adopted by the Salamanca declaration calls for a shared responsibility and commitment between general and special education and the use of effective special education techniques beyond the special class setting. Inclusion seeks to achieve better academic outcomes than had been demonstrated by the traditional segregated and institutionalized settings as well as the remaining barriers posed by integration. Inclusion means that children with special needs would be served alongside normally achieving children as opposed to

their being separated from them. More so, inclusion should open windows of opportunity for children with special needs to gain uninhibited access to education as well as their being educated with their non-disabled counterparts in neighbourhood schools. Kanu (2001) sees inclusive education as the provision of educational services for children with special needs in regular schools attended by non disabled children in appropriate regular classrooms directly supervised by general education teachers and with appropriate special education support and assistance. With inclusion, the regular classroom will become a melting point for all children their disabilities notwithstanding with each child drawing strength and support from the other. The question one will need answered is what is the educational policy for children with special educational needs? Is the country implementing segregation, integration or inclusion?

Disparity between Policy and Practice

As stated earlier, Nigeria adopted integration as the most practicable way of educating children with special needs in Nigeria in the 1977 and 1981 National Policy on Education. Integration was to be made feasible following the 1977 and 1981 NPE by the introduction of elements of special education into the curriculum of the teachers to prepare them for the challenges ahead. Till date many teachers still graduate in colleges and universities without taking any course in the education of children with special needs. Resultantly these teachers find themselves being unable to assist these children when the need arises hence the children are frustrated out of school. This handicap by regular teachers usually results in their refusal to admit these children into their schools. With integration provisions some head teachers and teachers who would ordinarily not wished to accept special children into their schools where made to do so. Parents, individuals and Non Governmental Organisations working as advocates for these children have capitalised on this provision to insist that schools admit these children despite their inability to provide for them.. Such parents, individuals and NGOs have not only relied on the NPE provisions but also the constitutional provision of equal rights and non discrimination based on gender, tribe, circumstance of birth etc as their tool for legal action when faced with such circumstances.

Ironically, in the current revised edition of the NPE (200 4) the policy of integration was completely dropped as no emphasis was given to it any longer. The revised edition rather emphasised inclusive education for all children as one of the ways to ensure access to education for the disabled. This however is a welcome development and an improvement over the 1977 and 1981 policy. This revision is in line with the global declaration that inclusion should be the ideal mode of educating children with special needs. The revision of the NPE from integration to inclusion goes to also show that the country is ready to go with their consent to Salamanca declaration of inclusion and the Jomtien declaration and Framework of Action on Education for All. This stand was again reiterated by the country's president Olusegun Obasanjo during the launching of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) on 30th of September 1999 at Sokoto State of Nigeria. The UBE is to provide free and compulsory basic education of 9 years to all children. Under this programme all children with special needs, nomadic children and out of school youths are to be given equal access and rights to

education without prejudice and discrimination based on ethnicity, tribe or disabling condition NPE (2004). Going by the formulated policies (NPE & UBE) Nigeria government seem to have awoken to her responsibility of catering for all her children. However, despite this development inclusive education is still a mirage in Nigeria. This situation might remain so for a long time as no practical actions are being taken to make education accessible to all despite the rhetoric of government. There is no overstating the obvious that segregation is still largely the method of providing special education services to special need children in Nigeria. Special schools still dot all the states of the federation and more special schools are still being opened not for the very severe cases but also for those with mild conditions such as the low vision children. Studies have shown that many of the children in blind schools in Nigeria have low visual problems (Sykes and Ozoji 1992, Olukotun 2003).

The Blue Print on Education for Handicapped Children in Nigeria states that about The Blue Print on the Education of the Handicapped in Nigeria for instance listed as government achievement in the implementation of the NPE of the Handicapped in Nigeria as the projection by “some states of the federation to have at least one special school in every local Government Area” page 3 What this implies is that segregation is still being encouraged at official levels and by special education experts who worked on the Blue Print and listed the provision of more special schools as an achievement in the implementation of the NPE.. That these experts sanction the establishment of more special schools as against the NPE provision for inclusion and integration shows that both the practitioners and policy makers are not yet in agreement as to the official mode of providing educational services to children with special needs.

Equally, millions of Nigerians are confused as to the Nations Educational Policy regarding children with special needs. More so, despite the UBE policy of free and compulsory 9 years basic education for all children, millions of Nigerian children especially children with special needs still roam the streets begging for alms rather than being in schools. It is a known fact that school children in the basic levels are still pay money for their education ranging from development levies to examination fees. In addition, many children with special needs have dropped out of school because of their inability to cope with the harsh situation they find themselves in both special and regular schools. Most special schools lack the basic facilities for teaching and learning. The situation is worse in regular schools where majority of the teachers have no idea on how to teach these children or their learning method.

They seem to be a great discrepancy between theory and practice in the provision of educational services to children with special needs in Nigeria. While the government may score high on policies implementation is virtually zero. Government budget for special education programme is quite little. Most often even the budgetary allocation made for special education is hardly released. Also special children are not given any special attention by government in terms of admission, the provision of facilities and scholarships as provided for in both the blue print and the NPE. Most of the children with disabilities in schools are there courtesy of Charitable Organizations and individuals.

Today, the government of Nigeria makes pronouncements and talks about inclusion education for children with special needs in major education fora having been a signatory to the Salamanca Declaration. Garuba (2003) pointed out that the government of Nigeria has fared better at the level of policy formulation and not in the area of policy implementation. The poor implementation of policies for children with special needs has led to low enrolment of children with special needs in schools and other service outlets (Garuba, 2003). According to Garuba enrolment of school age children with handicaps stands at 0.42% while that of their non disabled counterpart stands at 67.05%. This shows that there is no equity in the provision of educational services to children in Nigeria. The inadequacy in the delivery of special education in Nigeria is supported by the admission of the Blue Print on the Education of the Handicapped in Nigeria that “successes made so far are minimal in terms of anticipated effect, due largely to inadequate funds” page 2.

Despite being a signatory to the inclusion education treaty, no concrete steps have been taken with regards inclusive education in Nigeria. At the implementation level, segregation remains the focus of providing special education services. One is right to say that inclusive education is only paid lip service in Nigeria. Presently in Nigeria, integration and inclusion still remain in the realm of theory and far from practice.

Recommendations

The country need to have a clear educational policy for children with special needs. Although integration and inclusion are better options to the provision of special educational services than segregation, the country need not rush into making pronouncements when the basic facilities for implementation are not yet in place. No doubt the idea of inclusive education in Nigeria is a welcome development. The government should consciously work towards the success of the policy. This can be done through the training and retraining of regular general education teachers. Elements of special education as advocated by the National Policy on Education and the Blue print for the Education of Handicapped should be introduced into the curriculum of all teachers training institution. All practising teachers should be sponsored for workshops and short courses on how to work with children with special education needs.

There should also be some enlightenment programmes for the public on the desirability of both integration and inclusion in the country’s educational system. This should involve both special and general teachers, parents, and all stake holders in the educational system. It is a known fact that parents of non disabled children resort to withdrawal of their wards from schools once a child with some disability is admitted into such a school.

Most importantly, it should be recognised that the problem of educating children with special needs in Nigeria lies not with policy formulation but with policy implementation. To make this effective, they should be a back up law similar to the United States of America 1975 Public Law 94-142 (Education for all handicapped children). This law made provision for a free public education for individuals with disabilities and is seen as a springboard for advocating

for equalization of educational opportunities for persons with disabilities in USA (Wood, 1993). The law will empower the disabled children, parents and other stakeholders to seek redress in the court of law in event of discrimination.

Above all, they should be consistency in government educational policy. If the government emphasis and policy is on inclusion of children, the establishment of new special schools by either the federal or state governments should be stopped as they are currently enough special schools to cater for children with severe cases of disabilities. Efforts should be geared into making inclusion possible through adequate funding and the provision of the needed facilities.

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