REPOSITIONING SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract
The paper attempted to review the concept of special needs education from the perspectives of both academic and professional definitions. It then gives a highlight on the categories of individuals who require special needs education. A number of factors which include negative societal attitudes, lack of child-friendly school environment, lack of adequate teacher preparation and other professionals, lack of funding, lack of adequate figure of persons with disabilities, lack of specialists to carry out diagnostic procedures, lack of knowledge on the part of regular classroom teachers to handle learners in their classrooms requiring special attention as well as wrong placement of students in classes and schools where their needs are not taken into consideration have been identified as militating against effective provision of special needs education which consequently hamper effective national development. Besides some ways of surmounting the problems which have also been regarded as the way forward have been extensively elaborated. They include ascertaining the estimated figure of the special needs children, healthy and favorable societal attitudes, availability of qualified/competent teachers, modification of our school curriculum and vocational training. Conclusion was made in the light of what is expected from the government and other stakeholders in terms of teaching relevant and functional skills and ensuring barrier-free learning environment to be able to reposition special needs education so that meaningful national development could be achieved.

Introduction

It is pertinent to note that education improves the development of any society. The Federal Republic of Nigeria as an instrument par excellence for effecting national development (FRN, 2004). Certainly, education is the best legacy a country can bequeath to its citizens. In fact, education is a human right that should be accorded to all human beings essentially by reason of being
human. Education is the bedrock of any serious nation’s development. Government and relevant stakeholders should take issues pertaining to making education it is the fundamental growth and development of the nation and serves as critical indices to measure the progress of development agenda (Muhammad, 2014). It has been argued that education enables a person to perform worthwhile activities (Nworgu, 2013). Education is therefore a means of bringing about a cultured man. A person may be described as a gentleman since what characterizes a cultured man may be embedded in what is also described an educated man. In fact, Muhammad (2014) strongly postulated that education is the most powerful driving instrument for reducing poverty, increasing health care services and ensuring peace and stability.

Special need persons are expected to contribute their own part towards national development. This has been clearly stated in the National Policy on Education (NPE, 1981) as reflected in the objectives of special education below:

a) To give concrete meaning to the idea of equalizing educational opportunities for all children their physical, mental or emotional disabilities notwithstanding.

b) To provide adequate education to all handicapped children and adults in order that they may fully play their roles in the development of the nation.

c) To provide opportunities for the exceptionally handicapped children to develop at their own pace in the interest of the nation’s economic and technological development.

Looking at the objectives cited above, it is rightful to posit that exceptional persons or persons with disabilities obviously have the capacity to contribute to societal development in a way that they do not become liabilities on society. A key goal of special education is to nurture the abilities and capacities of exceptional persons for contributions to societal development (Kolo, 1994). In special education, for exceptional children to educationally benefit, normal school arrangements must be modified. This will go a long way in making them acquire useful skills that can enable them to be more functional and relevant in their immediate environment in particular and the society at large.
The Concept of Special Needs Education:

The concept of Special Education has been subjected to various definitions. According to Ozoji, Unachukwu and Kolo (2016), Special education can be defined from academic and professional perspectives. From the academic perspective, it refers to specialized teaching, learning, psycho-educational services, training and research meant to enable individuals with disabilities or exceptional conditions to maximize their capacities for life endeavors to the fullest (Obani, 2006 cited in Ozoji et al, 2016).

However, from professional perspectives special education has been defined as specialized educational and training services meant to enable people with disabilities or potentials to achieve their educational and rehabilitative capacities in life endeavors (Okeke, 2001). What is important to note is the fact that an academic special educationist is also a consultant for the professional practitioner working in special educational settings. It is also relevant to emphasize that different categories of learners require special education intervention. These include the visually impaired, the hearing impaired, the mentally retarded, the those with emotional and behavioral disorders as well as the gifted and the talented. All of these special need categories and many others not mentioned are expected to contribute their own quota to national development socially, politically, economically, morally, scientifically and even technologically. Such contributions, however, cannot be effectively rendered unless they are adequately and appropriately educated (Okeke, 2001).

The Impediments to the Effective Provision of Special Needs Education:

Actually, a number of factors are militating against the effective provision of special needs education in Nigeria and include the following, among others

- Negative attitudes toward the special need persons in the society generally. Attitudes are the strongest force affecting the status of persons with special needs, particularly those with visible and obvious disabilities, and also their integration into the society. In fact, even practical experience has shown that societal attitudes towards people with disabilities are generally unfavorable. Nkanwung (2011) strongly posited that such negative and unhealthy attitudes like stigmatization, labeling and discrimination are mainly due to myths and misconceptions people hold.
about those with disabilities. Hence, necessary steps must be taken to do away with such attitudes, as evidence suggest that negative societal attitudes predominate and affect adversely the quality of service provision for people with disabilities in many countries of the world (Abang, 1999 and Eleweke, 1996).

- Lack of a child-friendly school environment is also a factor to reckon with as constituting a nuisance to the effective provision of special needs education for national development. It is pertinent to note that the situation and Policy Analysis Project (SAPAP, 1993 cited in Olorode, 2002), portrayed that the unfriendliness of the Nigerian primary school environment was disturbing. Further highlights of the report revealed that 12% of pupils of the sampled states on the floor. 87% of the schools had overcrowded classrooms, 33% had no chalkboard, 38% of the classrooms had no ceiling, 77% of the pupils lacked textbooks and 36% had no writing materials. This situation, therefore, which prevails in our primary schools is the greatest hindrance to the provision of special needs education, especially in schools where inclusive education is practiced, which, if properly given, will result in national development. In fact, a working visit by the writer to some of the special schools in the country revealed similar situation as it exists in regular or public schools. No doubt, the special and regular schools are controlled, funded and supported by the same governments at federal, state or local levels.

- Lack of adequate teacher preparation and other professionals to handle the special need learners effectively in the classroom. This is largely due to the fact that it is the teacher who imparts knowledge, information, skills, values and attitudes to learners, who are assumed to be inexperienced (Okeke, 2001). Thus, the absence of a trained teacher may hamper the acquisition of the necessary skills that will be needed for proper national development. This is because the teacher may make or mar the learning process.

- Lack of funding is also an important factor militating against the effective provision of special needs education in Nigeria. It is a well-known fact that education is poorly funded. Special needs education is not an exception. In fact, education as a big venture is expected to be adequately
funded, according to the United Nations. Unfortunately, this has not been so for general education not to talk of special needs education. In spite of the fact that government has published laudable policies in this area, most of the time it is most unwilling to provide the necessary funding that will be used to implement its policies. For instance, in the National Policy on Education, Government has explicitly stated that it wants to provide adequate education to all handicapped children and adults in order that they may fully play their roles in the development of the nation, yet a significant number of special needs persons are roaming on our streets because funds have not been released to build enough schools for them. Besides, in the Nation’s education policy (1977), it is clearly stated that scholarships will be made available to exceptional persons and even those willing to read courses in special education. However, up to this time, special needs persons are given the same treatment with their non-special needs counterparts. In fact, there are more talks than action for exceptional children (Ozoji et al, 2016). Thus, it constitutes a source of worry and a stumbling block to the effective provision of special needs education hence, national development is impeded.

It is worthy of mention that the provision of special needs education is being hampered by a series of problems beside the ones highlighted above. There is the inability of government to come up with accurate figures of persons with disabilities, lack of specialists to carry out diagnostic procedures and lack of knowledge on the part of general classroom teachers of children in their classrooms having required special attention as well as the wrong placement of children in classes and schools where their needs are not taken into consideration (Israel and Akinmasure, 2010).

Special Needs Education and National Development

No doubt, the impediments highlighted above pose serious threats and challenges to the effective provision of special needs education in Nigeria. Yet, it promotes national development, especially if the problems are addressed. It will go a long way in repositioning special education in order to pave the way for national development. One of the ways forward as far as the effective provision of special needs education is concerned is that of ascertaining the
estimated figure of persons with special needs. This is based on the fact that planners of educational programmes do not have at least an estimated percentage of all school-aged children and school-aged adults for who they needed facilities and personnel can be effectively provided. For adequate and appropriate planning, it has been suggested that the number, the categories and the location as well as special educational needs of these children should be known (Nkangwung, 2011).

Healthy and favourable societal attitudes are very essential. In other words, for the provision of functional education to special needs children, attitudinal changes are very significant. In fact, meaningful services, such as vocational education, vocational rehabilitation, referral, job placement, follow-up and evaluation services, among others, can only be provided to individuals with disabilities when there is a positive attitude (Eleweke & Hadadian, 2001).

In essence, some scholars have suggested that family and community members should be better educated about disabilities and about human worth and the needs for children with disabilities (Obani, 2000). Special needs persons have talents and potentials. Therefore, with necessary support and education, relevant skills that will help in societal development could be acquired. This is based on the fact that there is a popular saying that disability is not an inability.

Besides, qualified and competent teachers are very significant in this respect. In fact, teachers constitute the essential ingredients for success or failure of the education of children with special needs. The quality of training offered by teachers speaks volumes for the regular teachers in general and special learners in particular. Hence, for children with special needs to be adequately educated, Odiba (2002) recommended that such children’s areas of needs should be identified and our personal preparation must take into account how to meet their special educational needs. Also, if special needs children’s areas to be educated in the regular schools, especially since the current world trend is tilted towards inclusive education, all teachers will need special education training to equip them in identifying, assessing and meeting the child’s special needs. Once their needs are met, their effective contributions to national development will be more feasible and realistic.

The need to modify/expand our school curriculum to accommodate all categories of special need learners is very crucial. Actually, for special needs
education to prosper the traditional curriculum needs to be modified and in some instances even expanded. This is meant to introduce sign language interpretation, cuberism for teaching visually impaired pupils basic calculations. Training in speech development and current therapies for students with learning disabilities and those with emotional and behavioral disorders. It has been noted that special education will succeed more if, among other things, it ensures that there is flexibility and differentiation in the curriculum and curriculum contents offered in every class to cater for the differences in the needs, styles and rate of learning among the heterogeneous composition of learners in the same classroom (Obani, 2000).

Removing the architectural barriers in our schools is also worthy of serious consideration. According to Obani (2000), schools presently organized in favor of the majority of children regarded as non-disabled present more obstacles and handicap to many children’s learning, especially those with visible disabilities. Therefore, if special needs education is to be provided, particularly within the regular school environment, an enabling learning environment should be provided, an environment that will promote meaningful teaching and learning processes. In the words of Nkanwung and Adeyemi (2002), the school environment should be disabled–learning friendly by providing appropriate forms of infrastructure and facilities as well as removing all forms of barriers to the proper functioning of children with disabilities within that environment.

In fact, special needs education should be repositioned in such a way that it is provided in a child-friendly school environment. Such an environment should be a place where learning is conducive (Okebukola, 2000), and also where the child is at peace, comfortable, secured and loved. Most importantly, the necessary structures should be put in place to make teaching and learning interesting, enjoyable and appealing to the senses.

Vocational Rehabilitation should be given great emphasis in the process of educating special needs children. This is because when adequately trained, such categories of individuals can acquire relevant and useful skills that will enable them to be self-sufficient and self-reliant. They will, therefore, be of benefit to themselves and the nation at large. This is in the line with the Nigerian philosophy of education, as stated in the national policy on education, which states, among other things, to build a united, strong and self-reliant nation (FRN,
Thus, apart from reducing the impact of disabling and handicapping conditions, rehabilitation helps in shifting from the position of dependency to independency as well as Contributory Members of the Society.

**Conclusion**

Special education as a discipline is aimed at concretizing the idea of providing equal educational opportunities for all children irrespective of their physical, social, emotional or mental disabilities, so that special need persons can contribute their own part in societal development. This is what is supposed to be embraced whether in an integrated or segregated settings, respectively. Unfortunately, a series of impediments have constituted a nuisance to the provision of special education in Nigeria. There is therefore the need to reposition special education through attitudinal changes, ensuring the availability of qualified and competent personnel, curriculum modification, the provision of a barrier-free learning environment and vocational training, among others. It is by so doing that the special needs individuals would acquire the relevant knowledge and skills that will enable them to contribute their own quota in the nation’s development.

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