

ISSN 1119-636X

The Exceptional Child

THE JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN

Volume 16 Number 1, July, 2014

NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN

**PARENTS AND PROFESSIONAL PARTNERSHIP IN EDUCATING CHILDREN
WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN NIGERIA**

Prof. Queen I. Obinaju
Faculty of Education, University of Uyo, Uyo,
Akwa Ibom State

LEAD PAPER

Preamble

Education is seen in all societies as an instrument of change and development. Education, therefore, is also seen as any inalienable right to all irrespective of the person's circumstance. Therefore, all needs are provided to aid every child acquire education. Every child is born helpless. They need adult support to acquire food, warmth, health, food and the like. When they grow to school age, special provisions in the form of sandals, uniform, books, pencils, etc are made to enable a child acquire the desired education. Where the child has some undesirable encumbrance like fever, necessary steps are taken to restore a state of equilibrium so that appropriate learning can take place. The above can be linked to children with special needs. Just as the child needs a pen, so does another child need crutches; just as the child needs a pair of spectacles so also does another child need the white cane. And just as the child needs a pair of sandal, another child needs a wheel chair to get to school.

All these are needs and must be provided by somebody. The need for a teacher for every child cannot be over emphasised. Material, human and psychological needs are essentially provided by parents and in some cases by professional and governmental bodies. Needs are needs but where they are not common in nature, they are then termed 'special needs' as can be seen in the topic for today's discussion.

In this discussion therefore, we will be looking at children with special needs; who are they? What is the spread of these children in the population in Nigeria? What is the nature of their needs and how are they currently taken care of? Is the care adequate; or are there gaps? How does the Child's Rights Act provide for those children? What is the role of parents in the care and education of these children? What are professional interventions in their care and education? Are there possible synergies between the home and the professionals in the care and development of these children? This discussion will attempt answers to these questions and together we will depart with a conclusion as to the best practices in the education and care of children with special needs in Nigeria.

THE EXCEPTIONAL CHILD

Children With Special Needs: Who Are They?

This group of children are classified broadly into three categories; the disabled, the disadvantaged and the gifted. The National Policy on Education (2004) describes the disabled as 'people with impairment... and because of these impairment/disability can't cope with regular/school/class organisation and methods without formal special educational training. This group of children include the:

- (a) visually impaired (blind and the partially sighted);
- (b) hearing impaired (deaf and the partially hearing);
- (c) physically and health impaired (deformed limbs, asthmatic);
- (d) mentally retarded (educable, trainable, bed ridden);
- (e) emotionally disturbed (hyperactive, hypoactive/the socially maladjusted/behaviour disorder);
- (f) speech impaired (stammerers, stutterers);
- (g) learning disabled (have psychological/neurological educational phobia or challenges.
- (h) multiple handicapped (NPE, 2004; 47).

The visually impaired (V.I) has the need to overcome his inability to see and in which case he needs braille, braille books, braille machine, white cane and in some cases, a sighted guide for him to benefit maximally from a teaching/learning situation. A hearing impaired child in his own case, needs a sign language interpreter where oral exercises are involved. In this way, all disabled children have special needs if they must benefit maximally from any learning situation.

The disadvantaged child is one whose lifestyle militates against his access to the conventional educational provision. He therefore requires special educational provision to cater for his peculiar needs and circumstance. Examples of such children include children of nomadic, pastoral, migrant fishermen, migrant farmers and the like. These children need adjustment of school calendar to suite their movement such that they could start a term in one location and end it in another location without missing substantial lessons. In fact, Obani (2006) makes a case for criminals, ex-convicts, prostitutes, young single mothers, miscreants, misguided youths and beggars as belonging to children with special needs.

The gifted or the talented child is seen as one who possesses a very high intelligent quotient and is normally not sufficiently challenged by the regular school programme. His special needs will include sourcing for challenging programmes and sufficient innovative experience for him.

Whatever the circumstance, education of this category of children should provide for:

- (i) concrete meaning to the idea of equalising educational opportunities for all children, their physical, sensory, mental, psychological or emotional disabilities notwithstanding;

- (ii) adequate education for all people with special needs in order that they may fully contribute their own quota to the development of the nation;
- (iii) opportunities for exceptionally gifted and talented children to develop their talents, natural endowments/traits at their own pace in the interest of the nations economic and technological development.
- (iv) diversified and appropriate curriculum for all the beneficiaries.

From the Table above, out of 140m people in Nigeria, 3253366 are people with special needs. Taking this from the categories labeled above which include people with needs in seeing, hearing, speaking, mobility and mental alertness, the figure given may be inaccurate as this figure may not have taken care of people with deficiency in social behaviour, the gifted and nomadic children.

The Table above attempts to show a general perspective of persons in the Nigerian population. It leaves room for us to extrapolate the approximate number of disabled children with spelling needs within the population of children in Nigeria.

Table 2 therefore presents the population of children in Nigeria in the 36 States and FCT. It further states the percentages of people with special needs in these states. From these percentages, one can extrapolate the population of children with special needs with an average percentage of 2.32%.

The number of children with special needs taking into consideration the parameters used earlier stands at 17,14697. This figure is significant to attract the attention of educationists, government and well meaning philanthropists to attempt remedial strategies with an aim at providing the needed care to ensure that these children achieve functional education.

For children with disability, it is clear that providing gadgets to ease the effect of the disability is a step in the right direction. For the blind child, braille books could be acquired; braille machines could be provided for him to take down his notes and make notes for himself; tape recorders could be given for him to hear and record directly essential communication while in extreme conditions sighted guides may be provided for his mobility aid.

In enlightened and privileged homes, parents try to provide the above assistance to alleviate the effect of the disability in question. Where gaps are observed, philanthropists and governmental agencies assist in the provision. From a cursory observation, it can be observed that only a negligible percentage of homes can adequately provide the needed care / needs for optimal education of this child. It is only when the parents have struggled to put the child to the fore or to give the initial impetus that government will recognise the existence of this child so as to give assistance. What this means is that for a larger population where the family of origin is not privileged the existence of the child is concealed. The child therefore is neither noticed by government nor philanthropists who could render help. He is therefore seen as abandoned. This condition persists irrespective of the provision of the National Policy on Education that

'the education of children with special needs shall be free at all levels' (NPE, 2004: 48). For those abandoned at home, they are seen as objects of shame and liabilities. Their needs are hardly taken care of. They are left largely to their fate to cater for themselves.

For the hearing impaired, just like the speech impaired child, a similar situation like the one described above ensues. Gadgets are needed to aid the trainable child. Privileged families try to provide and where attention has been drawn, governmental agencies and philanthropists assist. The learning disabled child may not need gadgets but may need therapists and group simulations which are largely done in schools. The government feels satisfied that they have provided special schools for these children. Parents also feel satisfied that they facilitate attendance of these children at school. But the question is: Is this sufficient especially given the fact that the out-of-school life of these children may not be a replica of the school situation?

For children of nomadic parents, attendance at school and motivation of parents to permit attendance may sound sufficient especially where the scheme has been stabilised throughout the country but one wonders if there are no emotional and psychological effect of seeing different faces, making new friends each time and familiarization of self with new physical environment.

Gifted children have their special needs in having sufficient stimulation. They need more books which may not be limited to class texts, more manipulative gadgets, more space for creativity. Above all, they need understanding teachers who would not term their creative behaviours as destructive. I must confess that such teachers are in short supply.

For the others who have special needs in adaptation, it is clear that their peculiar need is reformation so as to behave in a socially acceptable manner for them to gain acceptability in the society to which they belong. Currently, they are placed in remand homes when they are caught and expected to be trained on socially acceptable behaviours. The mere fact of being in a remand home stigmatises and another psychological revolt emanates in their character.

From the foregoing discussion, it is evident that the care for special needs children is inadequate. Though some effort has been made by government and non-governmental agencies, philanthropists and even families, there is still need for intervention and synergy in order to provide functional education to children with special needs.

Special Needs Children and the Child's Right Act

Children are children. All children have needs. All children are to be protected. All children are provided for in the Child's Right Act irrespective of their circumstance. Children have rights to survival and development, name, association, family life, personal dignity among others. In particular, and with special reference to children with special needs, they have need to parental care, protection and maintenance. Children with special needs, just like other children, have right to free, compulsory and Universal Basic

Education. This presupposes that all the hindrances which would prevent him from acquiring functional basic education should be removed as a step to ensuring his rights to free and compulsory education.

The Child's Rights Act provides that:

(1) every child who is in need of special protection measures has the right to such measure of protection as is appropriate to his physical, social, economic, emotional and mental needs and under conditions which ensure his dignity, promotes his self reliance and active participation in the affairs of the community.

(2) Every person, authority, body, or institution that has the care of the responsibility for ensuring the care of a child in need of special protection measures shall endeavour within the available resources to provide the child with such existence and functioning which are necessary for his education, training, preparation for employment, rehabilitation and recreational opportunities in a manner conducive to his achieving the fullest possible social integration and individual development and his cultural and moral development.

(Child Right Act, Sectn. 16, Sub-section 1 & 2).

The Child's Right Act further stipulates that where the parents are not capable of providing the needs of the child that the State should take over the responsibility. We had earlier in this discussion highlighted situations where underprivileged homes conceal the existence of some children with special needs, the resultant effect of this non-disclosure rubs the child of his basic rights.

Although the Child's Right Acts stipulates that the provision of special needs for children should be "within the available resources, it should also make it criminal to conceal the existence/availability of children with special needs. By so doing such parents will be forced to expose and encourage their attending special schools where an umbrella provision of their needs could be accessed. By attending special care centres, governmental and other agency attention could be attracted.

Special Needs Children and their Education

In as much as children with special needs do not have a world of their own, there is need for their education to be inclusive in nature. They must be trained to cope with their needs within a wider integrative society. This raises the issue of mainstreaming of children with special needs. Children with special needs may have the initial form of specialised training in the use of special gadgets but their education in this sphere should not completely alienate them from the society where they will function in later life.

Special needs children need special training and no one person can be an expert of all. Teachers in special education in the present dispensation are few in number but

when their special areas of qualification are taken into consideration, the situation becomes pitiable.

There is acute need to train special education teachers with specialty in the different areas of need. These teachers require training in mainstreaming and specialised situation. They also require inducement to maintain their profession.

Facilities for use in training children with special needs is the next area which deserves attention. No matter the qualification, a workman without tools can never be productive. This calls for provision of specialised equipment as required by the different array of needs. We would want to reiterate here that emphasis should be laid on children with serious needs like the blind, the deaf and the speech impaired child. But the discussion on this topic has led us to realize that all children have their particular needs and that there is need for these needs to be identified and provided for.

Synergy in Educating Children with Special Needs

From our discussion so far, we have noted that the job of providing functional education to children with special needs is enormous and no one agency can achieve maximal result. The situation therefore calls for collaboration of stakeholders such as parents, professional bodies, government, non governmental organisations and faithbased organisations in providing the needed needs so as to ensure that the child acquires to the fullest social integration, individual development, cultural and moral development. Areas of possible collaboration include:

- (1) Provision of educational materials such as books, educational toys, computers, etc.
- (2) Provision of materials to aid the child overcome possible disabilities such as braille machine, hearing aid and the like.
- (3) Training of special teachers in the various areas of need. This can be done through provision of scholarship, provision of educational programmes, sponsorship to seminars and conferences, etc.
- (4) Reduction of stress on the child with special needs by provision of body maintenance supplement e.g. feeding, uniforms, etc.
- (5) Equipment of special centres with facilities such as recreational and adaptational facilities.
- (6) Motivation of functionaries to remain in the profession by provision of enhanced salaries and other inducements.
- (7) Research on further development in the area by professionals and making their research results available.
- (8) Encouragement of children by parents to aspire high and attend the highest possible in life without paying undue attention to areas of handicap.
- (9) Counselling services for parents and the society to encourage acceptability and inclusion of children with special needs.

- (10) Legislation and enforcement of provisions as encouraged by Obinaju (1996) that “what remains to be done is the enforcement of these provisions i.e. parents should send these children to school especially as school is likely to provide a more conducive environment for development than most homes.”

Conclusion

We have been led so far to understand that all must be educated especially because education is an instrument of change and development. Children with special needs should not be left out as they have their quota to contribute to their society and generation. We have further noted that all children have needs and if children with special needs are to be equated with those who have hindrances to benefiting from the normal classroom provision, they constitute a significant percentage of the population of children in Nigeria. This percentage of children can therefore not be ignored. They have the right to be protected, cared for and provided for. This paper therefore has highlighted areas where parents, governmental and non-governmental organisations should synergise to ensure that children with special needs acquire functional education. It is their right and they have a lot to contribute to development. Thank you for your audience.

References

- Obani, T. C. (2006). *Teaching Pupils with Special Educational Needs in The Regular UBE Classroom*. Ibadan: Book Builders.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004). *National Policy on Education*. Lagos: NERDC Press.
- Government of Akwa Ibom State (2008). *Child Rights Law*. Uyo: Ministry of Justice.
- National Population Commission (2009). *2006 Population & Housing Census of the Federal Republic of Nigeria*. Abuja: National Population Commission.
- Obinaju, Q. I. (1996). Society's Attitude Towards the Mentally Retarded/Learning Disabled Child: Need for Attitude Change. In: Nwazuke I. A. and Kolo, I. A. (Eds.) *Exceptional Persons in the Community*. Ibadan: National Council for Exceptional Children.