

NEGLECTING IMPLICATIONS OF PERSONS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN NIGERIA:ROLE OF TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to examine the implication of neglecting persons with special needs in Nigeria. The paper identified the different areas in which persons with special needs are been neglected. The paper further posits that total integration is what persons with special needs require to take their rightful place in the society. The paper concludes that full integration of persons with special needs can only succeed where government and others are prepared to provide functional, free and qualitative education, enabling laws, employment opportunities, quality personnel, adequate infrastructure and relevant instructional materials; among others.

Keywords: Implication, Neglecting, Persons, With, Special, Needs & Integration

INTRODUCTION

Persons with special needs have been discriminated against over the years. Attitude towards them was mainly that of hostile neglect, inhuman treatment and rejection. This attitude was largely the result of ignorance, misconception and misinformation. Persons with special need's major problem in the world is how to make them become an integral part of the society in which they live.

“Who are the persons with special needs? The term “persons with special needs” is generally used to describe the significant departure from the normal trends in human development and to imply the associated needs of an individual that make special education imperative for a person if he/ she must live useful life in the society (Mba, 1991, Onwuchekwa, 1993, and Ozoji, 1993). Persons with special needs are therefore children whose special needs as a result of significant departure from normal trend in human development are such that they need special education provisions/ services to live a useful life in the society. Exceptionality has two strata – the handicapped and the gifted/talented. The focus of this paper will be on the handicapped.

When government got involved in Special Education in the early 1970s with laudable policy statements and programmes, people heaved a sigh of relief. Although government has made some efforts but a lot more needed to be done. Experience showed that there has never been a positive march between theory and practice in terms of implementation. Rather, it appears that the realization of the policy statements and programmes is observed more in rhetoric at public for and with official documents.

Given the fact that the persons with special needs are on the increase per day and that they have the right to participate in the life of the society, earn a proper wage and live a full life as others, it becomes necessary and sensible that relevant thoughts and actions be put in place to fully integrate them into the society in which they live. The task of this paper is to trace the historical perspective of persons with special needs and examine the consequences of their neglect. This is followed by a discussion of total integration of the persons with special needs, the way forward and finally, the conclusion.

Historical Perspective

Down through the ages, the birth of the handicapped child has usually been frowned at in most African societies. The frown cannot be divorced from the culturally inherited misconceptions and attitudes toward the handicapped resulting, fear in devaluation, and discrimination against them. In line with this, Mendow (1992) reveal that from the earliest history, handicapped persons have been viewed with a mixture of fear, scorn, awe, misunderstanding and pity. Ansahayomoab (1996) confirmed similar attitude towards handicapped persons among the Akan people of Ghana. Buttressing the above, Adima, Abang, Awanbor, Ladipo and Ogbue (1988) observed that from the days of Aristotle, prejudice against the disabled was almost universal and it affected their

social, economic, educational, mental and psychological well being. Nigeria is not an exception in this contextual negativism.

The Nigerian attitude towards the handicapped children in the past was greatly influenced by superstitious beliefs and stigmatization. In some cases, handicapping conditions were perceived as punishment from aggrieved vengeful gods for wrong doings by individuals, their parents or significant others. Umedium (1983) indicated that before formal education in Nigeria, handicapped children were more or less regarded as accursed and freak people. As a result, parents see the birth of a handicapped child as a bad luck. The negative and discriminatory attitude shown towards the handicapped made parents in the past to either kill their handicapped children or allow them to live and care for temporarily but later pushed out secretly into the streets to cater for themselves. To survive, many of them resorted to begging, therefore littering the streets with countless number of beggars.

However, the negative attitude towards the handicapped epitomized in underrating, neglect and rejection is gradually changing. Adima et al (1988), observed that until recently in Nigeria, the fate of the handicapped persons lacked definition, if not non-existent. The insignificant change of attitude is succinctly absorbed into the society, yet their condition of living is still very inadequate. The consequences of not providing for the handicapped children are enormous (Oghojafor, 1995; Okeke, 1998).

Implication of Neglecting Persons with special needs in Nigeria

In a civilized society, every human being irrespective of disability, has the right to live and contribute to the development of his society. According to World Health Organization's estimate, one out of every ten persons in the world may be disabled at any one time (WHO Report, 1976). The United Nations Organization also estimates disabled persons as constituting at least ten per cent of the total population of every country. Nigeria with a population this number is substantial, overwhelming and therefore warrants a practical demonstration of relevant thoughts and actions by government and others.

Ten million is the population of some African countries. In fact, some African countries have populations that are less than 10 million. Perceiving these enormous number of people as weak, incapable and perpetually dependent on others will not only amount to denying these persons their rights but will also amount to slowing down the wheel of development. The neglect of these number of individuals has obvious consequences. Apart from consulting a barrier to the quest for scientific and technological advancement, the individuals can constitute nuisance to the society.

For instance, today on our highways and streets, we cannot but notice numerous 'fit' and 'unfit' children and adults begging for alms. Nigerians are comfortable with dropping coin in their palms or plates without realizing that we are encouraging the dependency syndrome. Any reflecting person who sees these persons with special needs begging for alms in our streets, corners and highways cannot but conclude that government has not done its job. We must remember that a nation is judged, not by how the affluent few live, but by how assisted to become functional and contributing members of the society. In this regard, the Chinese adage finds a privileged position here – it is better to teach a child how to fish instead of giving him fish. In order to lift the persons with special needs from that level of dependency and inadequacy, there is need for total integration. Our people should also be made understand that "disability is not inability". This can be done through sensitization programmes such as we are witnessing today.

Total Integration of Persons with special needs

Any meaningful discourse on total integration must, of necessity, consider social and economic dimensions. Integration, according to Husen and Postlethwaite (1995), represents a more challenging and demanding policy of changing conditions and expectations at all levels of society as well as regular school classes in ways that will make full participation possible for people with disabilities. Continuing, they add the overall aim of integration is to maximize the social interactions between the disabled and the non-disabled while at the same time improving academic standards and the self concept of the disabled pupils. Although government, in the National

Policy on Education (revised 2012), has identified integration as “the most realistic form of special education since persons with special needs are expected to live in the society”. Unfortunately, integration in Nigeria is used as mere placement. Such placement does not in line with the above, Lewis (1993) affirms that it is not enough to place all reform, not pupil placement. He further adds that integration as a matter of school of valuing and celebrating individuals not judging all against one standard.

Total integration should aim at achieving complete acceptance and a loving understanding of the persons with special needs without discrimination. In other words, total integration should aim at accepting, recognizing and according the persons with special needs their rightful place and status in the society.

Social Integration

Man is a social animal and thus has the unique characteristics that propel him to long to associate with others. Man also lives in a society and must therefore relate with people around him. Segregating persons with special needs by way of putting them in separate institutions is temporal because by and large, they will eventually relate with the larger society. This may have been one of the rationales for integrating persons with special needs into regular school classes. Social integration is viewed as the practice whereby persons with special needs and their non-exceptional counterparts interact during non-academic time (Ntukidem, 1998). Persons with special needs, like their non-exceptional counterparts, have legitimate, social, emotional and physical needs. One of the major justifications for educating persons with special needs in regular schools, many believe, is to further their social and emotional development.

Eleri (1993) however laments that persons with special needs are at a disadvantage because of certain barriers which prevent them from fully satisfying their needs. These barriers he identified as social customs, values, attitudes and expectations. Others include the human parts of the physical environment. In training an individual to acquire technical skills for instance, the acquisition of non-technical skills are never taught. They are acquired through interaction and experience. When our customs and beliefs segregate and isolate the exceptional child from mixing and interacting with peers and significant others, how can he acquire the non-technical skills? Although the customs and beliefs are gradually changing, the change is such at a snail pace that it is hardly observable. We must do something positive to socially integrate the persons with special needs.

Economic Integration

Work occupies a central place in the life of an individual. It enables an individual to be economically self-supporting and assures him of a rightful place at home and in the community. Work is one of the prime realities of life, a very important focus on human motivation, even for formal education. Work has a therapeutic quality, a stabilizing force in life in that it opens up goals for achievements, attainments, independence and self esteem. Work has a social value in that much of the recognition a man receives, even in his home/community, is accounted for by what he does (Oghojafor, 1995; Okeke, 1998). Buttressing the above, Togonu- Bickerteth, (1996) adds that work provides us with money with which to meet our personal needs and fulfil societal obligation. He further adds that work also enables us to contribute our quota to the socio-economic activities of our community and the nation at large, therefore affirming our sense of pride. Hence, when disability becomes a handicap to employment, it creates problems for the individual, the family and the society.

Government also, in the National Policy on Education (revised 2012), sub-section 7 had said that government will provide suitable and appropriate employment opportunities for the exceptional and disabled people. In spite of the fact that the above is a policy statements, successful placement of the job-ready rehabilitees into suitable jobs have been a major problem for special educators and other social workers. Thus, during the 8th General Meeting of the National Council for Rehabilitation of the Disabled held in Enugu in 1983, it was agreed that the International Year of Disabled Persons (IYDP) National Committee should include “Employment of Disabled” in their national seminar. The IYDP national committee had recommended that the Federal Ministries of Economic Planning, Employment Labour and productivity, and Social Development, Youth and Sports should jointly sponsor before June 1983, a national workshop on the Employment and Aftercare of Disabled persons,

including the problems of beggars (Mba, 1989; Alade and Abosi, 1990). In 1986, the workshop on “Employment of the Disabled” was held. The workshop sponsored by the Federal Ministries of Social Development, Youth and Sports; National Planning; Education; and Employment, Labour and Productivity; Nigeria Employers Consultation Association and the Nigeria Labour Congress, discussed extensively the issue of employment for the disabled. Two types of employment were highlighted and categorized. These are (a) paid employment and (b) self-employment (individual or through co-operatives).

Other recommendations include the giving of special grants by government to employers of labour to defray the cost of extra facilities that may be necessary to make exceptional person functional in his working place and the waving of import duty on equipment meant for enhancing effective functioning of the disabled (Alade, Abosi, 1990). In fact, a president of this country once directed that 2% of job opportunities be reserved for qualified exceptional persons. These recommendations were hardly implemented.

Research studies on job placements and opportunities for the disabled, however, have revealed that when the persons with special needs are considered for jobs, they are often given menial jobs – as cleaners, attendants, gateman and other unskilled positions. Most employers are unwilling to employ them and when they are forced to do so, they do not offer them the same conditions like the normal workers (Babalola, 1997). But it has been observed that when exceptional persons are given job opportunities, they are found to be dedicated, polite, honest, punctual and hardworking (Aderugboye, 1999).

A look at various policy statements and programmes may make one conclude that government is doing quite a lot for the persons with special needs. A closer observation will however reveal to discerning minds that the value the society places on the handicap has constituted a conflict between socially desired intentions and the implementation of those intentions. This is why Sommers (1994), a former president of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), speaking about unemployment problems facing the disabled, observed that “in a situation of mass unemployment such as we are facing now, one may wonder why we should bother ourselves about the employment of the disabled when the nation is moving towards full unemployment for the “able-bodied”. This statement of Chiroma epitomizes the societal attitude towards the exceptional people. This statement of Chiroma against the employment of the persons with special needs prior to the full employment of their able-bodied counterparts is patiently antithetical to the view of civilized world. For instance, the United Nations General Assembly (1975) declared that “ No society can deny a person the right to participate in the life of the community earn a proper wage and live a full life as others just because he is disabled in some way”.

The attitude of Nigerians towards the persons with special needs has made many of the laudable policy statements to remain pious statements of intent without practical effect. What can be done? What is the way forward?

The Way Forward

To fully integrate the persons with special needs, the following should be done by government and well-meaning Nigerians:

- i) Provision of free, functional and qualitative education;
 - ii) Provision of enabling laws;
 - iii) Involving groups/associations in advocacy movement;
 - iv) Creating awareness aimed at changing public attitude towards persons with special needs;
 - v) Provision of qualified personnel, required infrastructure and instructional materials;
 - vi) Provision of employment for the job-ready persons with special needs.
- i) Provision of Free, Functional and Qualitative Education

Education is an indispensable tool in the integration of an individual into his society. Education enlightens, liberating and prepares one for useful living. The place of education in liberating an individual and maintaining world peace and understanding has been articulated by the President of the Rotary Club International, Kinross. According to him (1998); the strongest weapon that the world can wield against poverty and hunger, and the

most powerful tool for world peace is education. There can never be a sustainable progress to lift people from poverty unless we teach them to read and write and do basic arithmetic. In this era of the global market place, no one can even get a toe-hold on the lowest rung of economic ladder unless they have these functional skills. Still stressing the importance of education in the scheme of things, Hegarty (1990) observed that all children have the right to be educated and that one of the tragedies of our time is that very many children are not educated because they have no opportunities to go to school and that those with disabilities who, ironically have greatest need of education are the least likely to receive it. Let me quickly add here that one of the purposes and objectives of Special Education, as contained in section 55(a) of the National Policy on Education (revised 2012), is to “give concrete meaning to the idea of equalizing educational opportunities for all children; their mental, physical, emotional disabilities notwithstanding”. This is well said and worthy of commendation. But the reality of the matter is that not much of this policy statements has been practicalised. This explains why in this day and age when our country is going technological, our rehabilitation centres still prepare inmates for broom and basket making. Do we blame employers of labour if they do not employ them? Do we need a prophet to tell us that most of our rehabilitation centres are substandard and need upgrading? Adequate preparation of persons with special needs for a living must take cognisance of the changes around us. The advancement in science and technology that has rocked all spheres of human endeavour, for instance, should be reflected in the programmes or the preparation of persons with special needs (Okeke 1998).

Proper preparation of persons with special needs include ensuring that the teacher is psychologically prepared and professionally equipped to meet the needs of these children. The physical environment should not only be spacious but also barrier – free. There should be relevant teaching materials and equipment. The curriculum needs to be modified according to the needs and interests of persons with special needs. To achieve all these, there is need for a comprehensive vocational training as well as free and qualitative education at all levels for them.

ii) **Enabling Laws**

There is need for special educators, parents and professionals in related disciplines to pressurize government to enact both federal and state laws that will facilitate the total integration of persons with special needs. Such law/ legislation should be patterned along the famous “ Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975”, otherwise known as Public Law 94 – 142 of the United States of America. The Law stipulates a number of things to be adhered to by both the persons with special needs have available to them, within the periods specified, a free appropriate public education which emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs” (P.L. 94 – 142, 1975, Sec. 3. C). to further ensure that persons with special needs are protected from the discriminatory practices in public education, there was the need to entrench, in this public law, the following “bill of rights for the exceptional learners”. They include the right to a free appropriate public education, the right to an individual education programme, the right to due process of law and the right to the less restrictive environment. Nigeria can do the same to record the same rewarding and success here that the enactment of law should be followed with allocation of adequate economic and human resources for a meaningful implementation.

iii) **Involving Group/Associations In Advocacy Movement**

Responsible groups/associations should assist to pressurize government to enact laws that will enhance the full integration o persons with special needs. Such groups include various professions that render services for victims of exceptionalities like the Nigerian Medical Association; the Nigerian Nursing Association; the Nigerian Union of Teachers and the Nigerian Association of Physiotherapists. Other professional associations or organizations such as the Nigerian Bar Associations the Nigerian Chambers of Commerce and Industry, the Nigerian Union of Journalists and the National Council of Women’s Societies should also lead the campaign for civil and human rights for exceptional Nigerians. Humanitarian and philanthropic organizations like the Rotary club, the Lions and Lioness Clubs, the Soroptomist International Club, religious groups and public spirited individuals should assist in the movements for equal rights for all, exceptionality notwithstanding. The exceptional persons too should organize themselves into groups or associations and not only cry out for their needs but also claim their rights. Parents of persons with special needs should form associations to assist

themselves and their children. They should identify with their children having known that exceptionality is not something to be ashamed of (Oghojafor 1995, Okeke 1998).

iv) **Creating Awareness Aimed at Changing Public Attitude Towards Persons with special needs**

There is need to change public attitudes towards what constitutes proper treatment for persons with special needs. This can be achieved through the use of handbooks, pamphlets, bills and posters, radio and television programmes in form of drama and demonstrations. Professionals can be assisted financially, not only in upgrading their services and assisting in educating the lay people about the care of the persons with special needs, but also in organizing conferences, workshops and seminars.

v) **Provision of Qualified Personnel, Required Infrastructure and Instructional Materials**

Quite often, noble ideas conceived by government fail to achieve designed objectives due to inefficient implementation, caused by the ineptitude of the personnel chosen to run the project. Consequently, in order to achieve optimum result, it is imperative that qualified personnel be charged to passionately plan and execute programmes meant for persons with special needs.

We cannot be talking about total integration of the persons with special needs without talking adequate care of infrastructure and instructional materials. Architectural barrier should be taken care of and relevant instructional materials provided. With regard to the above, let us congratulate the former Military Governor of Niger State, Colonel Lawal Gwadabe; who made Minna, the Niger State Capital, the most accessible city or capital in the whole federation. The Five Star Shiroro Hotel at Minna, was also made completely accessible to all, exceptionality notwithstanding. This should be the attitude of all and sundry in erecting public buildings.

vi) **Provision of Employment for the Job-Ready Persons with special needs**

The education provided for the persons with special needs is incomplete until the job-ready persons with special needs are given employment. Getting Nigerians to employ persons with special needs requires enacting enabling laws. Employing these children is not enough. There should be supportive services aimed at providing them with the needed assistance and beefing up their knowledge where necessary.

CONCLUSION

Finally, the burden of changing our society rests squarely on all of us. And we do know that "disability is not inability". Consequent upon this, the persons with special needs, if lifted from the quagmire of disability through free functional, qualitative education and gainful employment, can achieve higher state of existence. When equipped with the above information and opportunity and we fail to accept to improve the lots of persons with special needs, we cannot go home with clear conscience. We should all strive to ensure total integration of all children irrespective of exceptionalities.

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