

Reforms in Special Education for Optimum Educational Attainment by Persons with Special Needs for National Sustainability

Omede Andrew. A

Department Of Educational Psychology,
Kogi State College Of Education,
Ankpa, Kogi State.

Abstract

This paper attempts a discourse on reforms in special education for optimum educational attainment by persons with special needs for national sustainability. The paper is of the view that there is need for reformation of special education to enable persons with special needs have access to optimum education. The paper makes it clear that several attempts were made to reform special education in the past, yet the impact remains obscure. This is due to the inadequacy of personnel in the field of special education, insufficient assistive technology to support the special educational set up in the teaching-learning process and research as well as lack of special budgetary allocation in favour of special education amongst others. The paper reiterates the need to reform special education by addressing the challenges of manpower, assistive technology and funding as pre-requisites to the realization of the goals of special needs education and conclusion was drawn.

Keywords: reform, special education, national sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Persons with special needs are exceptional individuals such as the visually impaired, hearing impaired, speech disordered, multiple handicapped, the crippled, and a host of others who require adaptable curriculum to suit their peculiar learning needs resulting from their special circumstances. The National Policy on Education (2004) identified and classified children with special needs as the disabled, the disadvantaged and gifted/talented. UNESCO (1994) has added nine new special cases for special needs education. They include children experiencing difficulties in school whether temporary or permanent and those not attending school whatever may be the reason. With these additions the case load of special needs education has doubled beyond the traditional cases with clinical manifestations (Ozaji, 2009).

According to Olubela and Olawale (2009), education is a very vital tool for social change and transformation as well as national development. Special education is an intervention strategy purposely set up to ameliorate educational needs of persons with special needs. Obani (2006) defines special education as the modification, adaptations, adjustments, innovations and managements of the curriculum methods to feet and meet the special learning needs of those who present different forms of disabilities and learning difficulties. The realization of this educational framework develops persons with special needs to be as near normal as possible. Special education can be seen as a special formal kind of education that caters for the educational needs of a given set of people who are exceptional and/or handicapped in nature (Omede,

2009). With this educational provision, persons with special needs are integrated to achieve higher educational objectives same with their counterparts who are without disabilities. In this case, special education plays a key role in the transformation of exceptional persons by making them independent and self-reliant.

The dire need for reform is best understood in the light of the state of education generally. El-Rufai (2011) properly captioned the problem in the following passage:

“At independence, Nigeria’s 56 million people had 15, 703 primary schools with a total enrollment of about 2,912,618 pupils. We had 883 secondary schools, two Federal Government Colleges and 29 Technical/Vocational Schools, all with a total enrollment of 169,019 students. We had one University college at Ibadan by the time we became a republic in 1963 we had four Polytechnics and five Universities with a total of 2,445 undergraduate students. In those days Nigeria spent an average of forty percent of her budget on education compared to today’s two percent, the budgetary attitude to education is yet to recover from this reversal of fortunes. Since 2007, Nigeria spent an average of about 0.7% of GDP and about 3% of the budget on education-among the lowest five ranked countries in the world and so far we are where we are today. The percentage of enrollment at levels of education has increased, but the overall performance is down.”

The British Council/Harvard School of Public Health Next Generation Reports cited by El-Rufai (2011) describes the situation: "...three out of ten graduates of higher education are not working. A highly educated Nigerian is not significantly more likely to find work than one with no education at all." Special education as a branch of education is not exempt from the highlighted challenges but rather is more affected owing to its special character that makes it capital intensive. In Nigeria, special education has witnessed several challenges which inhibit its growth and development. These challenges vary from manpower development, assistive technology, funding, education policy implementation, advocacy among others. With these challenges confronting special education, the need for reforms becomes germane. As a subsystem of education charged with the responsibility of equalizing educational opportunity for exceptional children, special needs education is expected to have its fair share of the reforms because it has its quantum of ills and crisis including lacunae within its shores (Ozaji, 2009). This paper seeks to explore the dire need for reforms in certain areas of special education and thereby suggest useful reforms for a more functional education for persons with special needs.

The Need for Reforms in Special Education

Reform means to put or change into an improved form or condition; to amend or improve by change of colour or removal of faults or abuses, beneficial change, more specifically, reversion to a pure original state; to repair, restore or to correct (Wikipedia, 2011). Reform is a drastic and extensive replacement of the formal situation with a newer one whose effects could be difficult or even painful to accept (Akpan, 2007). The issue of reform has to do with a lot of thinking, creativity, initiative, devotion, diligence, sensitivity to our environment and the consciousness of the growth (Okobia, 2007). Reforms must involve a change of character of an existing fact or set of facts, formulation of new policies or frameworks, geared towards improving the state of human and material resources that create positive impacts on various sectors of the economy. Educational reformation, therefore, is revolutionizing the educational system such that the nation is developed as the individuals become more creative, knowledgeable, skillful, disciplined, better and useful citizens (Dewey and Vygotsky in Okobia 2007). Okobia (2007) further maintains that "if we are serious about education reformation, we must be willing to be retrained, we must redefine the goals of education, do a rethink of the purposes of education, be creative, be sensitive to our environment, reorganized and reoriented on our values". Ozaji (2009) affirms that the education sector reforms initiated by the Obasanjo presidency are by far the most radical of all the education reforms in this country.

Special education as an integral part of education designed with unified curriculum to address and cater for educational needs of exceptional persons and the handicapped was started in Europe and America as early as the 19th century but special education started in Nigeria in the 20th century through the effort of concerned individuals, philanthropists and the missions. According to Olubela and Olawale (2009), the education of learners with special needs in Nigeria has witnessed gradual transformation from segregation of persons with special needs in the special school setting to partial and total integration and mainstreaming education. The contemporary trend in the education of learners with special needs is inclusive education.

In Nigeria, military administrations and democratic governments have attempted different education reforms in line with the national development philosophy. The National Policies on Education 1997, 1981, 1998 and 2004 editions reflect these reforms. The idea of special education got first official support in the Nigerian National Policy on Education 1997, which was detailed on paper. It was an idea of a Nigeria where all exceptional children or children with special needs will receive education to enable them participate in nation building. Mohammed (2006) asserted that special education has been the greatest change agent in the education industry. It is a platform for the provision of education that will be both adequate and appropriate to the different needs of all children with special needs and those with moderate to severe learning difficulties. It also opens up series of research, innovations and changes which have improved the quality of education given to children in general. But when one undertakes a close study of the present situation special education, it tells that the idea spelt out by the National Policy on Education 34 years ago has achieved little success. The promised census and monitoring of people with special needs to ensure adequate educational planning and welfare programme has not been done up to this time because there has not been adequate and comprehensive head-count of handicapped persons in various cultural societies (Ihianacho in Mohammed 2006). Up till the present, there has been no special census or head-count of persons with special needs. In analysis of section 10 (special education) NPE (2004) paragraph 95, the aims and objectives of special education are defined as being;

- I. effective equalization of educational opportunities for all children, regardless of their disabilities;
- II. provide adequate education for all people with special needs in order that they may fully partake in the development of the nation;
- III. provide opportunities for exceptional gifted and talented children to develop their talents

and national endowments at their own pace in the interest of the nation's economy and technological development;

- IV. design a diversified and appropriate curriculum for all beneficiaries.

In paragraph 96 (1-b) 97 and 98, the federal government pledges to:

- I. provide special education programmes for the gifted and talented people;
 - II. provide all necessary facilities that would ensure easy access to education;
 - III. the education of children with special needs shall be free at all levels;
 - IV. the federal, state and local governments shall fund this programme within their areas of jurisdiction.
97. Architectural designs of school designs shall be barrier free for the purpose of handicapped persons.
98. Schools shall be required to arrange regular sensor medical and psychological screening assessment to identify any incidence of handicap.

It is a known fact that, this policy is imperative, but the issue is that there is no effective actualization of this policy on special needs education. This lofty policy has been saturated with numerous challenges that necessitate reforms of such characters that would indent on, man-power development, assistive technology, and special budgetary allocation among others. This is a pathetic situation and a concern to this writer and indeed authors in the field of special education. A lot of authors have carried out some surveys of handicapped persons in schools but most of the surveys carried out and data presented were mere estimates and general in nature (Mohammed, 2006). Mohammed (2006), Ogwu (2007), Ozoji (2009) and Bolaji (2010) all lament this trend.

In the past, certain initiatives were introduced in special education such as the several boards and associations put in place to ensure efficiency and character change of the programme to properly address the educational needs of persons with special needs to wit; National Board for The Education of The Handicapped, Rehabilitation Board, Nigeria Association Of Special Education Teachers, National Center For Exceptional Children (N.C.E.C), special education units in government ministries and non-governmental organizations etc. The essence of the aforementioned is to ensure the growth and development of special education for national sustainability. The relevant questions, however, are what is the positive impact of these bodies on special education? What roles have they played in ensuring total reformation of special education? Are they truly agents of reform in special needs education? Do they have the power to initiate and implement reforms? A

reform-oriented government must first address these questions. It is obvious that not much has been done in spite of the much outcry for the education of citizens with special needs in Nigeria (Omede 2005).

Indeed, the various bodies have not been able to facilitate landmark reforms in special needs education because more often than not they make recommendations as their output shifting the onus of implementation on the government. For example, the N.C.E.C. organize annual conferences and workshop for academic deliberation on these goals and in addition propose useful recommendations which have over time gone down the drain either through government neglect or inefficient implementation or both. Likewise, the N.A.S.E.T is a professional body that organizes seminars and workshops and also clamours for the overall interest of special educators and special education in general. One fact that is common to these bodies is that while they may initiate reform objectives and shape education policies, they cannot effect or implement same. Some of the challenges underlying the call for reforms in special education are indentified below to further substantiate the imperative of reforms in special needs education.

Man-Power

Man-power refers to the personnel or human resources who are trained in a particular discipline working to achieve particular goals. Man-power in special education includes the special educators or teachers. Ireyefoju (1999) views a teacher as one who teaches skills, factors and values that aid the development of the society. Here, there is a challenge of availability and that of competence.

Assistive Technology

This refers to teaching and learning devices made for persons with special needs to facilitate their learning. Examples of such technologies include the talking calculator, Braille embosser, hearing aids, laptop computers, voice synthesizers among others. These devices play significant roles in educating persons with special needs. Reforms in special education must therefore, enable a shift in teaching methods from archaic methods to modern methods. In other words, assistive technology can be considered as teaching support services to simplify learning for persons with special needs.

In the 21st century, Nigeria is yet to embrace recent assistive technology devices and deploy same in teaching special children. Old materials such as the Braille writing frame are largely in use. This is less than desirable.

Funding

The importance of fund to any establishment cannot be over-emphasized. This is because without it an

establishment cannot boast of its existence (Omede, 2009). There is no gain saying that funds are pivotal to any educational venture, more so with special needs education which is equipment-driven and expensive. Justifying the imperative of funds to special needs education, Thani (2006) declared that money is required to employ desired manpower, procure and maintain infrastructural facilities, instructional materials and to cope with emergencies arising from expansion or increase in special needs education. In view of the foregoing the need for reforms in government fiscal policy as it relates to education generally and special needs education in particular assumes a front burner issue.

In spite of the urgent need for reform in this aspect, the government appears not to feel same sense of urgency. For instance, in the 2011 budget, a total sum of N4.485 trillion will be spent by the federal government, 75% of which is recurrent while capital expenditure has fallen to 25%. Apart from the fact that no specific budgetary allocation was made to special needs education, the quest for more classrooms and other school infrastructure, instructional materials and assistive technology in schools is to compete with the need for stable power supply in the country, adequate infrastructure to support the economy-and these challenges have been allocated a paltry sum of N1.147 trillion out of which N1.136 trillion is the budget deficit-that is to be borrowed (El-Rufai, 2011). For lack of adequate statistics, the writer is unable to analyze what the state governments are investing in special education. However, what the writer is sure of is that following the spending trend in the above budget would work great hardship for a successful implementation of policy provisions on special needs education. Reform therefore, becomes necessary not just in budgetary allocation but also to guarantee proper utilization of funds received by the various special educational institutions.

CONCLUSION

This paper has been able to identify the challenges that weigh on the success of special education in Nigeria and the ensuing need for reform. There is need to properly reform special education to achieve its goals and objectives as outlined in the National Policy on Education 2004. The paper therefore reiterates the need to reform special education by addressing the challenges of manpower, assistive technology and funding as pre-requisites to the realization of the goals of special needs education.

REFERENCES

Akpan, E.U.U. (2007). Educational Reforms and the Improvement of Standards. In E.D. Ozoji, B.C. Dala, Y. Mugu and A.Y. Mustapha (eds) *Nigerian Education System: Which Way Forward?* Asaba: NPTEA.

Bolaji, Y.O. (2010). The Role of Special Education in Achieving Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) in Nigeria. *The Special Educator*, 9(1) 75-81.

Ireyefoju, J.O. (1999). *Curriculum Development And Research In Social Studies*. Warri: Dapo Fils Publishers.

El-Rufai, N. (2011). What Nigerians Pay FG. <http://www.thisdaylive.com/articles/what-nigerians-pay-fg/942277>.

El-Rufai, N. (2011). Why Education Can't Wait. <http://www.thisdaylive.com/articles/what-nigerians-pay-fg/942277>

Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004). *National Policy on Education*. Lagos: NERDC Press.

Obani,T.C. (2006). *Teaching Pupils with Special Needs in the Regular UBE Classrooms*. Ibadan: Book Builders Editions Africa.

Ogwu, O.M. (2007). Reforming Special Education Programmes In Nigeria For National Developments In The 21st Century. In A. Sule (Ed) *Reforms in Education for National Development in the 21st Century*. Lagos: Sam Artrade.

Okobiah, O. (2007). Reforms in Education for National Development in The 21st Century. In A. Sule (Ed), *Reforms in Education for National Development in the 21st Century*. Lagos: Sam Artrade.

Olubela, O.I. and Olawale, S.G. (2009). Education Sector Reform And Learners With Special Needs In Nigeria. *The Exceptional Child*, 11(2) 406-414.

Omede, A.A. (2005). Towards Effective Implementation of Educational Policy Provisions for Citizens with Special Needs in Nigeria. *National Association Of Science, Humanities And Education Research Journals (NARSHERJ)*, 3(1) 84-88.

Omede A.A (2009) Improving the Standard of Education in Nigerian Primary Schools: Challenges for the 21st Century. *International Journal of Educational Research and Administration*, 6(3) 67-71.

Omede A.A (2009) Challenges of Educating the Visually Impaired In Nigeria: Strategies for Improvement. *NASHERJ*, 7(3) 114-119.

Mohammed, I. (2006). Critique of Special Education in the New National Policy on Education. In E.D. Ozoji (Ed) *Contemporary Issues in Special Needs Education*, Jos: Deka Publications, pp. 196-202.

Ozaji E.D. (2009). A Review Of Education Sector Reforms And Learners With Special Needs In Nigeria. *The Exceptional Child*, 11 (2) 297-306.

Thani, J.W. (2006). Funding in Special Needs Education. In E.D. Ozaji, I.O. Ezera, N.E. Ezeani and M. Abednego (Ed) *Contemporary Issues in Special Needs Education*, Jos: Dekka Publications, pp. 220-227.

UNESCO (1994). *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Education*. Retrieved On October 26th 2010 from http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/salama_e.pdf
Wikipedia (2011). Reform. Retrieved On 5/8/2011 from [Http://En.Www.Wikipedia.Com/Reforms](http://En.Www.Wikipedia.Com/Reforms)