

# CATERING FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN THE REGULAR CLASSROOM: CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARD

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## **Abstract**

*The National Policy on Education specifically stipulates that there is need for equality of educational opportunities to all Nigerian children irrespective of any real or imagined disabilities (FNG 2004). The policy further states that Education of children with special needs shall be free at all levels and all necessary facilities that would ensure easy access to education shall be provided via inclusive education or integration of special class and units into ordinary/public classes under the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme. These policy statements appear lofty but their attainment under the present situation seems to be a mirage. Already, about seven million Nigerian children of school going age are out of the school system. Besides most of the public schools are overcrowded and over populated with little or no attention paid to the special child. Furthermore, there are not enough qualified personnel and instructional materials in the school system. The implication of this state of affairs in children with special needs is not adequately catered for. Worst still, most of the children with special needs are not identified early enough let alone intervention and remedial programmes arranged for them. This paper, therefore, examines the current classroom environment vis-a-vis the desire to cater for the special needs of the child. It further identifies the challenges involved in catering for the special needs child and the way forward.*

## **Introduction**

One area that has not been given the pride of place in Nigeria's educational system is special needs children. These are children who,

because of their unique features and endowment, cannot be adequately and satisfactorily catered for in the regular classroom. For a long time the assumption has been that the children we find in the classroom can be taught using the same approach or methods. However, experience has shown that each child comes from different home background and some may have some special needs to be given special attention.

Unfortunately, public schools in Nigeria are often times over crowded and lack the qualified personnel and facilities to identify children with special needs and design remedial or intervention programme to handle same. The result is that such special needs children are forced to go through the regular classroom without having their special needs met let alone benefiting from the teaching - learning experiences. This could have grave consequences for the National Policy on Education, which stipulates equal opportunity in access to education for all Nigerian children of school age (FGN, 2004).

### **Concept of Special Needs Child**

Special needs children include all children who, for whatever reasons, are failing to benefit from school (UNESCO Report, 1994). Ozoji and Mugu cited by Unegbu (2006) define special people as "those with significant sensory deficits or unusual high intellectual that are not properly addressed in the regular programme". They further opine that a highly intelligent child is a child with outstanding achievement and ability who is not well catered for in the regular classroom. Similarly, Kami (2008) is of the opinion that people with special needs are those generally referred to as exceptional persons and they comprise children, youths and adults with one form of disability or learning difficulty or the other. In the same vein, Akuogibo and Dada cited in Nwachukwu (2006) see the special needs child as one who:

*Deviates from the ordinary child such that he/she requires special attention, special services and other areas that could make life more meaningful and worth living ... those who require special education service in order to benefit from the regular school curriculum. They are those who learning difficulties or disabilities compel to require additional help in order to achieve their full educational potentials within the curriculum (p. 278).*

In other words, special needs children are those children who cannot benefit maximally from the regular classroom teaching/learning

experiences on account of physical, mental, emotional and other sundry disabilities, which may or may not be easily identified. Therefore, special needs children are special children who need to be given special attention in the classroom.

### **Identification of Special Needs Children in the Classroom**

Since children with special needs come from different family backgrounds and mix-up freely with the other children with/without disability, some of them may pass through the school system without being identified. It is therefore imperative that efforts should be made to identify those with special needs. Some of the strategies include among others:

- Observation especially those with special needs. This could be done by parents, teachers, siblings and classmates.
- By self-reporting by the child with special needs.
- By teachers made assessment tests.

### **Categories of Special Needs Children**

From the definition of the special need child, many categories can be identified. For instance, the National Policy on Education categorized special needs children into three main categories. These are:

1. ***The Disabled:*** Under this category are people with impairment (physical, sensory) and because of impairment/disability cannot cope with regular school/class organization and methods without formal special education training. They include those who are visually impaired, hearing impaired, physically or health impaired, mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, learning disabled and those with one form of handicap or the other.
2. ***The Disadvantaged:*** Those who fall under this group are the children of nomadic pastorals, migrant fishermen, migrant farmers, hunters, etc. They are those who, due to their lifestyles and means of livelihood, are unable to have access to the conventional educational provision and therefore require special education to cater for their particular/peculiar needs and circumstances.
3. ***The Gifted and Talented:*** People (children and adults) who possess very high intelligent quotient and are naturally endowed

with special traits and therefore, find themselves insufficiently challenged by the regular school programmes.

Similarly, Kanu (2008) identified twelve categories of special needs to include:

- (i) Mental retardation
- (ii) Learning disabilities
- (iii) Emotional and behaviour disorder
- (iv) Communication disorders
- (v) Hearing loss
- (vi) Blindness and low vision
- (vii) Physical disabilities
- (viii) Autism
- (ix) Severe disabilities
- (x) Multiple disabilities
- (xi) Deaf/blindness
- (xii) Gifted and talented

#### **Catering for the needs of the special child**

As indicated earlier on, the National Policy on Education (FGN, 2004) states that the aim of special education should among others "provide adequate education for people with special needs in order that they may fully contribute their own quota to the development of the nation" (p. 42). To achieve this objective, it is imperative that adequate arrangements be made to cater for the individuality of the child. Unegbu (2006), for instance, suggests that in the school setting, materials for the following services should be provided:

Reading  
Speech and language therapy  
Daily living skills  
Counselling  
Identification screen and assessment placement  
Evaluation service among others.

Other materials and personnel to be provided in the opinion of Unegbu include chairs, tables, vehicles, earphone, Braille machines and papers, wheel chairs, virtually impaired specialists, and hearing impaired specialists. In the same vein, Nwachukwu (2006) opines that "children with such an array of problems need a flexible curriculum that would provide an enabling environment for total development of their three

domains - cognitive, affective and psychomotor" (p. 278). Similarly, special needs children need to be encouraged to discuss their fears and anxiety about the future, about their ability to find and keep a job, and their chances of forming a stable relationship with a sexual partner among others (Milaham, 2006). It is also advocated that as much as practicable all issues affecting special needs children should be discussed with them and they be actively involved in the decision-making process that affect them.

Mallum and Haggai (2000) and Yusuf, Ohando and Yusuf (2002) recommended ways of catering for the needs of the special child. These include among others:

- (i) Introduction of remedial programme. This is intended to remedy the deficiency identified with the child. It is with a view to enabling him/her to catch up with his mates,
- (ii) Ability grouping. This is where children are grouped according to the level of their intellectual ability so that they can progress at their own speed.
- (iii) Child-centred learning. Here the child is made the centre of the teaching/learning process. The teacher merely serves as a guide by providing the enabling learning environment.
- (iv) Adoption of individualized instruction. This allows the child to learn at his or her rate.
- (v) Intra - class grouping
- (vi) Programme instruction. Here the learning material is arranged step by step beginning with the simplest.
- (vii) Use of class projects. In the opinion of Yusuf et al "class projects provide a wealth of opportunities for adapting instruction to the variations of differences among students".
- (viii) Use of field trips.

Equally Mallum (2004) suggested some of the ways to cater for gifted and slow learners to include:

- (i) Giving the gifted child extra work to do.
- (ii) Encouraging the gifted child to do more supplementary reading and writing,
- (iii) Getting the gifted to assist the slow learners,
- (iv) The teacher should not make a caricature of slow learners
- (v) They should be allowed to progress at their own rate. A record of their progress should be kept which should serve as feedback to assess their progress at school

(Lere (2009) has also recommended that teachers in the regular classroom should ensure that prospective teachers are specially trained to cope with the special needs child. He also advocated for:

- Availability of instructional materials.
- Availability and utilization of audio- visual aids with regard to classroom management and organization.
- Good sitting arrangement.

Lere went further, to suggest that the teacher should:

- Place the partially sighted and low vision in front to enable them see the chalkboard
- Place the hearing impaired and hard of hearing where they can best hear the teacher.
- Be sure their locations do not disturb other students from seeing the chalk board
- Attend to slow learners and the gifted as well.
- Arrange classroom to provide easy movement for all students.
- Ensure they do not place their bags anyhow.
- Damaged desks and benches should not be kept in the classroom.
- Children on wheel chairs should be placed in front of the side rows.
- Where a child on wheel chair is also farsighted, they should be moved to the back of the classroom where it will be convenient for them to see the chalk board.

### **Challenges:**

The challenges of catering for the needs of the children are many and varied. These include, among others:

- (i) The challenge of large classes. This is characteristic of public schools where the population far exceeds the number allowed by law.
- (ii) Inability to identify special children early enough, if possible before they enter school.
- (iii) Lack of trained specialists to handle special children in the classroom. Right now there is a dearth of teachers especially those trained to attend to the needs of special children.
- (iv) Non-availability of instructional materials to assist the teacher in managing the special child.

- (v) Lack of cooperation from other staff in dealing with special children.
- (vi) Lack of proper funding to procure equipment and train specialists in special needs education,
- (vii) Negative attitude of members of the public towards special needs children.
- (viii) Lack of equipment and writing materials such as Braille, and typewriter to mention just a few.

### **The Way Forward/Recommendations**

1. There is the need for multidisciplinary collaborative effort and team work between parents and the school in identifying and catering for the needs of special children.
2. There is the need for the early identification and intervention programmes for infants and pre-school age and the development of extensive family support services (Ozoji, 2005).
3. There is the need to train more teachers of special education so as to be able to cater for the needs of the special child in the school.
4. There is the need for proper funding for special needs education.
5. All programmes designed to cater for the needs of the special child should constantly be monitored and evaluated.
6. Diversification of school curriculum.
7. Public enlightenment of members of the public so as to change their negative attitude towards the special needs child.

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