

SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Valentine Ojiegbe

Department of Philosophy and Religion

Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu Alike Ikwo

EMAIL: ogesystems2000@gmail.com. Phone no: 08084745881

Abstract

This paper aims at examining the challenges and opportunities in special education. Special needs education is a critical area of education that requires careful consideration and attention due to the unique needs of the students involved. This study examines the effectiveness of current approaches to special needs education and identifies gaps that need to be addressed to improve the quality of education for students with special needs. The findings of this study will contribute to the development of more effective and inclusive special needs education programs that meet the diverse needs of students with special needs. The paper provides valuable insights for educators, policy-makers, and stakeholders in the education sector to develop policies and practices that promote equitable and inclusive education for all students, regardless of their abilities.

Keywords: Special needs education, Inclusive education, exceptional children, student in special needs, learning environment.

Introduction

Special needs education is developed to support the learning of people, who for a number of reasons, need extra help or adapted pedagogical techniques to participate and achieve learning goals in an educational program. Students with special needs may follow the same curriculum or one that has been modified, and their unique requirements are addressed by focused instructional strategies and/or appropriate resources, such as highly trained employees, equipment, or space. These programs may be made available to certain students inside already established educational programs or may be made available in a different class at the same or different educational institutions. Children with special needs were educated in schools alongside typically developing students for a long period of time. The idea of special needs education originated from the western world and was incorporated into the educational system in Nigerian.

Concept Of Special Needs Education

Special education can be conceptualized as teaching designed to cater for the unique needs of learners with disabilities. Laju (2012) defines special needs education as a practice of educating students with special needs in a way that addresses their individual differences and needs. This process involves the individually planned and systematically monitored arrangement of teaching procedures. Kirk et al., (1994) view special needs education as those additional services over and above the regular school programs that

are provided for exceptional individuals to assist in the development of their potentialities or the amelioration of their disabilities. These additional amenities and services include specialized tools such as braille readers for the blind, hearing aids for the deaf, instruction in sign language for the deaf and unique devices for the physically challenged. However, Rani (2021) defines special education as a form of education provided for those who are not achieving or unlikely to achieve through ordinary provision. According to numerous definitions by authors, special needs education can be described as a type of education that is provided to students whose educational, social, emotional, physical and other requirements cannot be satisfied by the standard or average methods of teaching or learning in a regular school.

Therefore, special education is created to assist exceptional students both the gifted and physically-challenged individuals in making the best use of their abilities to fulfill their own quota of responsibilities for the socio-economic growth of their nation. As noted by Obani (2004), special education is the education that is specially designed to suit the special needs of children who may experience learning problems and learning difficulties as a result of disabilities or handicaps or other forms of special educational needs.

Individuals learn at different rates, and because of this, children differ from one another. This is true for children with special needs as well. There are those who learn very quickly and those who learn more slowly. A sensory, intellectual, psychological, or socio-cultural impairment may cause certain people to have unique learning requirements. Others are young and gifted. To perform at their best, all the above mentioned require special education. With consideration to the unique problems individuals encounter, special education employs unique techniques and tools.

It is clear from the foregoing that special education is created to cater for the demands of those with special needs. In order to fit and meet the unique learning needs of those who exhibit a variety of disabilities and learning difficulties, in addition to the various resources and procedures in the regular schools, special needs education involves improvements, adaptations, transformations, inventions and management of curricular techniques and materials. Special needs therefore cater for the needs of all categories of individuals with special needs and can be viewed as purposeful intervention. Heward (2003) therefore said that the central purpose of special education is instructionally based intervention; this purposeful intervention prevents, eliminates or helps to overcome the obstacles that might keep an individual with special needs from learning and from full and active participation in school and society.

The physiological method, play therapy, and other techniques were found through research to be beneficial in teaching the intellectually handicapped and Valentine Haüy in 1771 discovered that the blind could read and write by making use of their fingers. Moreso, it has been realized that the blind can study up to the higher institution level not withstanding their disability. The concept behind special needs education is that every student, regardless of his or her abilities and disabilities, has the opportunity to access a

high-quality education that fulfils his or her own unique needs and helps the person realize one's full potential.

In line with the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to education. Special needs education acknowledges the possibility that students with disabilities may need different instructional strategies, accommodation and support services in order to access the curriculum, take part in classroom activities, and meet their academic objectives. In order to meet the unique strengths and weaknesses of each student with disabilities, educational programs and tactics must be personalized to their needs.

The inclusion of students with disabilities in conventional educational settings, alongside their peers who are not disabled, is encouraged by the essential principle of inclusive education in special needs education. As a result, all children can learn in a welcoming and inclusive environment that promote positive attitudes toward diversity and inclusion.

Furthermore, it is based on the human rights perspective, which acknowledges the rights of individuals with disabilities to an education devoid of discrimination and provides equal opportunities for learning and development. It encourages the complete involvement and inclusion of students with disabilities in all facets of school life and it is founded on the ideals of fairness, justice and inclusivity. With special needs education, students with disabilities are empowered, their self-esteem and advocacy skills are developed, and they are better equipped to participate meaningfully in their communities and society. This was supported by Heward et al., (1980), who stated that special education is the systematically, monitored arrangements of physical settings, special equipment and materials, teaching procedures and other intervention designed to help exceptional children achieve the greatest possible self-sufficiency and academic success.

Objectives Of Special Needs Education

The main objectives of special needs education are:

1. Providing appropriate educational opportunities: The primary objective of special needs education is to provide appropriate educational opportunities to students with disabilities, so that they can receive a quality education and achieve their full potential.
2. Meeting individual needs: Special needs education aims to meet the individual needs of students with academic, social, emotional, and physical needs.
3. Promoting inclusion: Special needs education promotes inclusion by ensuring that students with disabilities are integrated into mainstream classrooms and schools as much as possible.
4. Developing independence and self-advocacy: Special needs education helps students with disabilities to develop their independence and self-advocacy skills, so that they can become more self-sufficient and confident in their abilities.
5. Fostering positive attitudes: Special needs education fosters positive attitudes

towards people with disabilities, both among students with disabilities and among their peers.

6. Improving access to the curriculum: Special needs education aims to improve access to the curriculum for students with disabilities, so that they can learn the same content as their non-disabled peers.
7. Supporting transitions: Special needs education supports students with disabilities in making transitions between different educational settings, as well as transitions to adulthood and the workforce.

Overall, the goal of special needs education is to ensure that all students, regardless of their abilities, have equal access to educational opportunities and are able to reach their full potential.

Relationship Between the General Education and the Special Needs Education

Although general education and special needs education take different methods or approaches to education, they are nonetheless linked and dependent upon one another. The term “General Education” refers to the common educational program that all students in school are required to take, which includes courses like arithmetic, social studies, science and language arts. In order for students to excel academically and in their future career paths, general education aims to provide them with a wide range of information and abilities. Contrarily, special needs education is created to address the particular requirements of students with disabilities or special needs. Students with physical disabilities, learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, and emotional or behavioral issues fall under this category. Dunn (2008) distinguishes special education from general education in that it uses special teachers, special curricular content, special teaching and methodology and special instructional materials. The purpose of special needs education is to give these students the resources and support they require to realize their full potential.

The relationship or shared objective of both general education and special needs education is to give the children a high-quality education. While special needs education gives specialized support for children who needs more help, general education serves as a foundation for all students. Integrating special needs education with general education is known as inclusive education. The concept of inclusive education involves educating children with disabilities alongside their peers without disabilities or impairments in the same classroom. This method gives all students the chance to study together, share experiences, and find a feeling of community. Overall, there is reciprocal support and cooperation between general education and special needs education. Both are essential elements of a thorough and efficient educational system which aims to satisfy the requirements of all students.

Categories of Children with Special Needs and Methods Of Educating Them

Children with special needs may have a range of disabilities or conditions that affect their learning and development. These disabilities can be physical, cognitive, sensory, or

behavioral and can be split into three categories for the purpose of special needs education: (a) Social behavior issue (b) Mental Issues (in Learning and behavior) (c) The issue with sensorimotor or sensory-motor dysfunction.

A. Social behavior issue: Children with social behavior problems may have difficulty with communication, social interaction, and emotional regulation. Roihah (2015) describes them as individuals who experience barriers in controlling emotions and social control, which usually lead to deviant behaviors that is inconsistent with the norms and rules prevailing around them. Therefore, to maximize their development and potential value and be able to co-exist peacefully in the society, they require specialized educational training from qualified individuals. Some methods for teaching children with social behavior problems include: using social skills training to teach them how to interact appropriately with peers and adults. Also, providing opportunities for cooperative play and group work to help children develop social skills; utilizing positive reinforcement and rewards to encourage appropriate social behavior. More so, a structured routine to help children feel secure and the use of visual-aids, such as social stories or diagrams, help children understand social situations and expectations.

B. Mental issues (in learning and behavior): Children with mental problems may have difficulty with learning and behavior, which can include a range of conditions such as ADHD, dyslexia and some intellectual disabilities. Abdullahi (2013) states that children with special needs who suffer from mental disorders are divided into two groups namely, mental disorder in the sense of more and mental disorder in the sense of less. Mental disorder in the sense of more are considered to be supernormal and are identified to having high intelligence while mental disorder in the sense of less are considered to be subnormal and are said to have low intelligence. The children with mental disorders, or those who have been confirmed to have low intellect levels (below normal) need specialized assistance or services, particularly in the form of educational programs and direction, to undertake the task of growth. Children in this category, perform less well than children with average mental abilities. They might not have any physical issues or disabilities, but they perform badly in class.

Teaching children with low mental abilities requires that you provide multi-sensory instruction, such as visual aids and hands-on activities to reinforce learning. It also requires the use of positive reinforcement and rewards to encourage good behavior and academic progress, more so, learning tasks should be broken down into smaller and more manageable steps to achieve success and give students the feeling of success. Furthermore, they require repetition and more practice than those with high intelligence, and adjustments such as extra time on assignments or preferential seating to support learning and behavior should be provided to promote learning and behavior.

Sometimes, a child's special needs are caused by a high mental level rather than a so called weakness in their personality, behavior, or performance. Children with this mental condition, which is more commonly referred to as being “super normal”, are considered as gifted. Teaching the gifted requires a different approach than teaching the average or below-average students. Gifted children have unique learning needs, abilities, and interests that require special attention from teachers. Some of these methods include: independent learning, acceleration, enrichment and differentiation methods. It is important to note that not all gifted children have the same strength or learning, so variety of teaching methods should be used to support their individual development. Teachers of gifted children should also regularly monitor their progress to ensure that they are being challenged appropriately and are achieving their full potential.

- C. The Issue of sensorimotor/sensory-motor:** Children with locomotor disabilities, or physical impairment, are faced with sensorimotor problems. Children suffer from anomalies that affect their abilities to hear, see, and move. Sensorimotor problem is the name given to this issue. Although sensory sensorimotor is typically easier to identify, it is not necessarily simpler to find these needs in schooling. This sensorimotor impairment does not impair the individual's cognitive ability. Most children with sensorimotor issues can learn and go to school like a child without these anomalies. Sensorimotor issues can be found in four different categories of disorders, including physical disability, speech impairment, visual impairment, and hearing impairment. Each of these anomalies will require a unique set of talents in addition to teachers who are specially trained in each sort of abnormality. Like a child with visual impairment should learn braille, and a child with an aural impairment should be able to read signs. As a result, the success of educating children with special needs depends on the cooperation of a team made up of every specialist trained in the field. Children with visual, hearing, physical and speech impairments have also benefitted from the use of computers in teaching and learning. Olson (1983) attests that computers have been used to increase the level of interaction between children with visual impairment and sighted world. For this group of people with special needs, computers and technologies that help with low vision and synthetic speech (like the Duxbury word processor) help with mobility. It informs children with vision impairments about additional information shown on the screen. In addition to using braille to communicate with one another, these children can also use an electronic communication system network. The computer aids in the large letter display of typed material. Additionally, the use of telecommunication devices to deliver messages through filmed presentations have opened up a wider realm of communication and learning for children with hearing impairment. The speech synthesizer enables children with hearing difficulties to read what people are saying to them.

Challenges of Special Needs Education in Nigeria

Like in many other nations, special needs education in Nigeria faces several obstacles that may affect the standard of instruction and assistance given to those with special needs there, such as:

- ❖ **LIMITED ACCESS TO SCHOOL:** In Nigeria, many people with special needs experience obstacles in getting education. Particularly in rural areas, there is a lack of suitable infrastructure, resources, and trained personnel to facilitate special needs education. According to Mallabu (2003), the majority of specialized tools and materials used in Nigeria are outdated and frequently fail to yield the desired outcome. Even though we are in a science and technology –dominated era. It has hampered or stopped individuals with special needs from acquiring a proper education.
- ❖ **LACK OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION:** In Nigeria, inclusive education, which encourages the integration of children with special needs into regular classrooms, is still not commonly employed. Many schools lack the methods, guidelines, and teachers with requisite trainings in inclusive education needed to successfully accommodate students with special needs. As a result, disabled pupils are segregated and denied access to regular educational opportunities. Furthermore, there is a lack of knowledge of the various special needs groups and support for them, which is counter to the goal of providing the concept of equalizing educational opportunities a specific meaning. According to Adima (1989), “educational opportunities are far better for the deaf and blind than for the physically and intellectually delayed individuals.
- ❖ **SOCIO-CULTURAL STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION:** People with special needs continue to face widespread socio-cultural stigma and discrimination in Nigeria. Many people have negative attitudes and ideas about people with disabilities, which breeds prejudice, exclusion, and marginalization. The educational possibilities and social integration of students with special needs in classroom and communities have been impacted by this.
- ❖ **LIMITED AWARENESS AND ADVOCACY:** Awareness and advocacy efforts for special needs education in Nigeria are still relatively limited. Many people, including parents, communities and policy-makers, lack adequate knowledge and awareness about the rights and needs of individuals with special needs. This has hindered the development and implementation of effective policies and programs to support special needs education in the country.
- ❖ **LIMITED SPECIALIZED SUPPORT AND PAUCITY OF TRAINED TEACHERS:** In Nigeria, there is a dearth of professional support services for students with special needs, such as speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, and counselling. Even when they are enrolled in regular schools, students do not get the required support services to help them succeed in their education and development. In addition, there is a lack of qualified teachers in Nigeria who are able to teach pupils with special needs in an efficient manner. It

might be difficult for teachers to offer the right support to children with special needs because they lack adequate trainings on special needs education and inclusive practices.

- ❖ **FUNDING AND RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS:**In Nigeria, special needs education frequently suffers resource and budgetary limitations. Resources, facilities, and support services for students with disabilities are few due to insufficient budgetary investment for special needs education. Additionally, because of inadequate funding and allocation, the program's beneficiaries suffer from poor quality services.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are some actions that could be implemented to significantly improve special needs education. The government, policy-maker, educators, parents, and communities must work together to promote inclusive education, provide adequate resources and support services, and to raise awareness of the rights and needs of people with special needs in Nigeria in order to address these challenges. In order to support children with special needs in their educational journey, it also necessitates the implementation of policies and practices that support inclusive education as well as the training and professional development of instructors.

In order to address the issue of funding, volunteer organizations, communities, religious organizations, and individuals must work together to raise funds for the provision of special needs education services and programs. The following are recommended as measures that could be taken to achieve significant improvement in the special needs education:

Firstly, addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts from the government, policy-makers, educators, parents and communities to promote inclusive education, provide adequate resources and support services and raise awareness about the rights and needs of individuals with special needs in Nigeria.

Also, it requires the implementation of policies and practices that promote inclusive education and the training and professional development of teachers to effectively support students with special needs in their educational journey.

Finally, to tackle the challenge of funding, cooperative effort of voluntary organizations, communities, religious bodies and individuals are needed in providing funds for the delivery of special needs education services and programs. These will reduce the financial burden on the government.

Evaluation

This study on special needs education examines the concepts, objectives and numerous challenges that have hindered the effectiveness in meeting the needs of students with

disabilities. One major challenge that has greatly impacted this sector is the inadequate funding allocated to it by the government. The budgetary allocation for special needs education is often inadequate leading to a shortage of resources such as assistive technology, learning aids, and trained personnel to cater for the unique needs of special needs students. There is a shortage of trained teachers and caregivers and many who work in this field are not adequately trained to handle the complex needs of students with disabilities. This lack of training results in inadequate support for students with disabilities which often leads to failure to reach their full potential. Furthermore, there is a lack of inclusive education policies and programs in Nigeria. Many schools do not have the necessary infrastructure to accommodate students with disabilities, making it difficult for them to participate fully in school activities. This exclusion from mainstream education further exacerbates the marginalization of special needs in Nigeria society. To improve the situation, the government must allocate more funds to the sector to improve teacher training, and promote inclusive education and programs.

Conclusion

The paper highlights the critical importance of special needs education in ensuring that all students, regardless of their abilities, have access to quality education. It reveals that there are significant challenges that students with special needs face in accessing education and that there is need to develop more effective and inclusive approaches to special needs education. Also, it highlights the importance of collaboration between educators, parents, and stakeholders in developing policies and practices that promote equitable and inclusive education; it provides valuable insights that can inform the development of more effective special needs education programs that meet the diverse needs of students with special needs. The paper underscores the need for ongoing research and evaluation of special needs education programs to ensure that they are meeting the evolving needs of students with special needs. Ultimately, this paper calls for a commitment to inclusive education for all students, where every student has the opportunity to reach their full potential.

References

- Abdullahi,N(2013). *Mengenal anak berkebutuhan khusus*Magistra,No.86 Th.xxv,4
- Adima, E.L (1989): *Special Education*. Ibadan NPS Educational Publisher, Ltd
- Federal Government of Nigeria (1999)*Universal basic education* Abuja, Nigeria:
Federal Government Press
- Heward,W.L and Orlansky, M.D(1980) *Exceptional children*. Columbu's : Merit

- publishing Co.
- Laju, A (2012), *Ability in Disability. Educating Children with special Needs*, Lagos
- Obani, T.C (2004) *.Handicap, Disability and Special Education. What parents and Teachers want to know*. Ibadan: Book Builders
- Olson, M.E (1983) A Study of the Explanatory Behavior of Legally Blind and Sighted pre-scholars. *Exceptional children* 48,321-368
- Mallubu, B.E (2003) 'Problems facing the field of Special Education in Nigeria and the way forward'*Journal of Research in Special Education* 6, (1), 27-36
- Rani, A(2021). *Special Education* .OrangeBooks Publication.
- Roihah, A.I.(2015). Efektifitas pelatihan incredible mom terhadap peningkatan sikap penerimaam orangtua dengan kondisi anak berkebutuhan khusus (Doctoral dissertation, Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim)