

# REFORMS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION FOR ATTAINMENT OF THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS (MDGs)

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## Abstract

*This paper examined salient issues relating to reforms in special education that could lead to the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These issues included special educational goals, reforms in special education and the MDGs attainment, the Universal Basic Education (UBE;) and educational inclusion as reforms in special education. The paper concluded that MDGs are attainable by the targeted year 2015; if the reform agenda (i.e. the UBE programme and educational inclusion) in special education would be pursued with commitment, efficiency and vigor being expended on their implementation.*

## Introduction:

Special education as an integral part of general education seeks to adopt specialized teaching methodologies, teachers and materials in addressing the learning needs of learners with special needs. Learners with special needs (or special needs children) are the disabled/impaired, disadvantaged and gifted/talented children (NPE, 2004); and are actually the beneficiaries of special needs education (SNE). In an Education-for-All (EFA) environment, where lifelong learning is an objective; individuals with special learning needs should receive special aids and services customized to their circumstances; and other aids that could ameliorate their frustrations. Special education, therefore, is a specialized and required type of educational deliverables offered or being offered to learners with special needs (special needs children) in order to facilitate their full development and realization of potentials (Agunbiade, nd). It could equally be considered as an educational system, practice and curriculum-based enterprise that is especially concerned with the classroom instruction of special needs children. It is currently and constantly expanding its frontiers in instructional and material provisions for educating the special needs children (Ozaji, 2004). This is possibly the anticipated means of achieving

universal education for all school-aged children irrespective of their physical or mental capabilities. The specialness, therefore, of this aspect of education (special education) is in its philosophical orientations; professional practices and customized organizational contents to suit its special clients' needs (Iroegbu, 2007).

A millennium means a period of one thousand years (1,000 years) especially calculated before or after the birth of Jesus Christ; while development involves growth, expansion, progress and/or advancement in the operational or functional level of a society, state or nation (Ugbong, 2006). A goal on the other hand, is a target set to achieve or realize an effort in the future. In actuality it is a goal that guides one's focus on the direction to tow in order to achieve or arrive at a feat. The Millennium Development Goals therefore, entail globally targeted levels of growth, expansion or advancement set out to be achieved before or after one thousand (1000 years). They are development targets internationally set out by member nations of UN with the central aim to reduce poverty by 2015 and to accelerate the pace of economic and social development. Specifically, some of the goals include to:

- Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- Achieve universal primary education
- Promote gender equality and women empowerment
- Reduce child mortality
- Improve maternal health etc. (Maduewesi, 2005).

With this focus in view, nations, regions and districts plan around clear targets, measure progress and are responsible for their commitments. By implication, education still plays an indispensable role in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as it is instrumental to sustainable human development at national and international levels. The MDGs have imperatively accorded special attention to primary education, probably because, it is fundamental to other levels of education. However, it is important to note that education (at all levels) entails performance and functionality. If this is true, then the goals of education in Nigeria are not isolated from those of other countries of the world. This implicates that a child must be in school in order to achieve/actualize the goals of education in his life, community and culture.

### **Special Education Goals**

The goals of special education are not different from those of the general education. Special education does for the exceptional child what regular education does for others. In this regard, both educational system perspectives seek to thrive in the same society; and their beneficiaries are equally expected to contribute their

quota toward national development in accordance with their individual capabilities. The special education goals are however divided into two: specific (goals to special education) and general (goals applicable to every Nigerian).

**Specific goals:**

- (i) provision of adequate education for all special cases
- (ii) provision of a diversified and appropriate curriculum for all the beneficiaries.

**General goals include:**

- the inculcation of national consciousness and national unity
- the inculcation of the right type of values and attitudes for the survival of the individual and the Nigerian society.
- the acquisition of appropriate skills and the development of mental, physical and social abilities and competence as equipment for the individual to live in and contribute to the development of his society.

Ozaji (2003) explains that the specific goals are meant to address the unique needs of the exceptional child, while the general goals take care of needs common to all children including the special needs child. Nevertheless, the main goals of special education efforts include helping:

- (a) its consumers (the special needs children) to overcome the barriers militating against full development of their innate potentials;
- (b) the teachers of special needs children to effectively set the stage(s) for learning to take place.
- (c) the special needs children to adequately, appropriately and fully develop their potentials via interactions with educational packages and interventions in the educational delivery system.

Are these goals really practicable in Nigeria? Are they actually being translated in the learners with special needs (special needs children) with regards to their attainment of the Millennium Development Goals? The information in the table 1 below would help a great deal in giving us the picture of special educational system perspective in Nigeria.

**Table 1: Showing the nature of Special Education in Nigeria**

<b>Issues</b>	<b>Score &amp; Comments/scale of 0 – 5 where 0 is non-existent and 5 is high)</b>
Policy	Federal government is largely responsible for special need education – 1
Structure/governance	Not defined – 0
Physical infrastructure	Lack of infrastructure. There is a dearth of schools for special needs persons – 0
Development of technology	Lack of adequate deployment across board – 0
Academic achievement	Undefined parameters – 0
Monitoring & inspection	Inadequate & ineffective – 0
Quality of curriculum	Low. Not well defined – 1
Teacher quality	Medium. Trained staff are available, but lack infrastructure – 3
Funding	Low. Funding for special needs initiatives comes largely from the Federal government – 1
Equity issues	Low – 1

**Source: Education Reform Act (2007)**

A critical look at the table above leaves one with the conviction that a lot needs to be done in special education if the MDGs are to be attained by its beneficiaries (learners with special needs). In this respect, reforms become inevitable in this educational system perspective as its clients are prospective partakers of the MDGs.

### **Reforms in Special Education and the MDGs Attainment**

Special education reforms entail innovations in special educational services and aids being rendered to the disabled/impaired, disadvantaged and gifted/talented children in order that they can attain the MDGs; which are closely related and linked to the goals of Education for All Framework established at the Dakar World Education Forum, 2000. The EFA framework seeks to achieve the following goals:

- (1) Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.
- (2) Ensuring that by 2015, all children (particularly girls), children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities complete, have free and compulsory primary education of good quality.
- (3) Ensuring that learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programme.
- (4) Achieving a 50% improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women and equitable access to basic and continuing education for adults.
- (5) Eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2005 and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality.
- (6) Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all, so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life-skills (Clemens, 2004).

Nevertheless, this paper situates attention only on the UBE and educational inclusion as possible reforms in special education that could enhance attainment of the MDGs.

### ***The Universal Basic Education (UBE) as a Reform***

Gidado (2006) painted the picture of the ugly state of education (both special and general) before the launching of the UBE in 1999 thus:

The local condition in our primary and secondary education sub-sector before the launching of the programme was to say the least appalling. Enrolment ratio was low and teacher/pupil ratio was also low. Over-crowded classrooms, wide gender disparity, dilapidated infrastructural facilities, high percentage of unqualified teachers in the system, low transition rate and low completion rate as well, were a far cry from both national and international targets. These were heightened by the fact



that literacy level in Nigeria was still 52 as at 1996. Furthermore, of the 21 million school age Nigerians, only 14.1 million were actually registered in the primary school. Above all, completion rate was 64%, while transition to junior secondary school was 43.5%. This was the picture of basic education in Nigeria that necessitated the introduction of the UBE programme in September, 1999 (pp. 2 – 3).

The UBE programme is however, a nine-year basic education programme which demonstrated the commitment of President Obasanjo to the eradication of illiteracy, ignorance, poverty and other associated social problems. It is also a reform agenda and strategy for the achievement of the Education For All (EFA) as well as the education-related Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The philosophy of the UBE programme therefore, is to ensure that at the end of nine years of continuous education, every child that passes through the system would have acquired appropriate level of literacy, numeracy, communication, manipulative and life skills and eventually becomes employable in the Nigerian polity. To this end, the UBE Commission serves as a principal energizer of a national movement for the actualization of the nation's compulsory Universal Basic Education and to ensure that education for all becomes the responsibility of all towards the benefit of all (including learners with special needs). In this regard, the programme covers initiatives for early childhood education and development; six years of primary education and the three years of junior secondary education with the following goals:

- i. ensuring free access to nine years of formal basic education;
- ii. the provision of free universal basic education for every Nigerian child of school-going age;
- iii. reducing drastically the incidence of drop-out from the formal school system, through improved relevance, quality and efficiency;
- iv. ensuring the acquisition of appropriate levels of literacy, numeracy, manipulative, communicative and life skills, as well as the ethical, moral and civic values needed for laying a solid foundation for lifelong learning.

Similarly, the objectives of the programme include:

- i. Developing in the entire citizenry a strong consciousness for education and a strong commitment to its vigorous promotion.
- ii. Provision of free Universal Basic Education for every Nigerian child of school-

going age irrespective of his/her physical, mental and psychological conditions.

- iii. Reducing drastically the incidence of dropout from school system (through improved relevance, quality and efficiency).
- iv. Catering for the learning needs of young persons who, for one reason or another, have had to interrupt their schooling through appropriate forms of complementary approaches to the provision and promotion of basic education.
- v. Ensuring the acquisition of appropriate levels of literacy and laying a solid foundation for life-long learning.

It is imperative to note that the goals and objectives of the UBE programme have been derived principally from the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, EFA goals, the relevant aspects of the MDGs including the achievement of universal primary education (UPE); promotion of gender equity and women empowerment; and poverty reduction. By implication, no group of individuals is neglected in the aforesaid programme in order to attain the "Education for All" as well as the MDGs. Special education system perspective therefore requires that the following issues be addressed in order that learners with special needs benefit from the Millennium Development Goals:

- Expanding and improving comprehensive special education for learners with special needs (the UBE is strongly advocating for this).
- Providing and ensuring access to Education For All (including learners with special needs). Also, the Child Rights Act seeks to protect children with special needs including their right for education.
- Ensuring that special teachers and other stakeholders in special needs education (SNE) are given opportunity to appropriate learning and life skill acquisition programmes for independent living in order to avoid street begging.
- Ensuring improvement of any aspect(s) of education for learners with special needs.

It is noteworthy that the Universal Basic Education Programme (UBEP) is unique when compared with other prior reform programmes. The programme has a set mechanism that has provided a legal framework guaranteeing its funding through the allocation of at least 2% Consolidated Revenue Fund (CRF) for its implementation (Gidado, 2006). Besides, the framework has defined roles and responsibilities for the continuity of the programme including that:

- i. Every government in Nigeria shall provide free, compulsory and universal basic education for every child of primary and junior secondary age.
- ii. Every parent shall ensure that his child or ward attends and complete

his primary school education and junior secondary education by endeavouring to send the child to primary and junior secondary school.

A parent who defrauds this commits an offence and is liable to a sanction.

- iii. Stakeholders in education in a Local Government Area shall ensure that every parent or person who has the care and custody of a child performs the duty of registering the child in a school.
- iv. Federal Government shall intervene only by giving assistance to the State and Local Governments in Nigeria for the purpose of uniform and qualitative basic education.

However, the monitoring of fund utilization is ostensibly multi-sectoral; thus, involving the Universal Basic Education Commission, the Federal Ministry of Education, the National Assembly, Budget Monitoring (Presidency), the Accountant General and the Auditor-General of the Federation, Peer Review Mechanism, etc. The introduction of these guidelines depicts a departure from the status-quo as they ensure multiple tracking of the funds and give value to the funds allocated to States. Relatedly, the Nigeria Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) has been assigned the responsibility of curriculum review in order to ensure that the products of the UBE programme are properly trained and prepared to become useful to themselves, the society, and eventually become employable. If these reforms could be translated to special educational system perspective, learners with special needs will be doubly sure of meeting the MDGs.

### **How to translate UBE as a reform to Special Education in order that Special Needs Children attain the MDGs:**

In order to ensure that UBE as a reform agendum actualizes and achieves for the special education clients (special needs children) the attainment of the MDGs, the following implementation strategies are necessary and must be adopted:

- Ø Provision of infrastructure and instructional materials must be given optimal emphasis in the programme.
- Ø Constructing and reconstructing of the physical structures must be done with the special needs children in mind.
- Ø With appropriate provision of the 2% Consolidated Revenue Fund (CRF) and the devotion of 70% of the matching grant to infrastructural development, it is anticipated that our schools will be child-friendly and be ready to cater for the special needs children.
- Ø UBE programme has necessitated and mandated that books, especially



those on the core subjects are provided to learners free; the special needs children e.g. the visually impaired who cannot read print must be provided with Braille books and materials.

- Ø Each SUBEB should ensure that it spends part of its allocation on the provision of ICT equipment in order that UBE products (including the special needs children) would keep abreast with the global trends of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- Ø Awareness creation must be employed in refuting the misconception that UBE programme is a federal business by some states and other stakeholders. In doing so, adequate budgetary provision and ownership of the programme would have been ensured.
- Ø Transparency in the utilization of the federal government-UBE intervention funds must not be compromised by stakeholders.
- Ø The Universal Basic Education Commission should ensure that resource rooms with appropriate facilities and trained teachers who can man them are provided for the special needs children in the pre-primary, primary and junior secondary schools.
- Ø States' Universal Basic Education Boards must reconsider the modification of some physical facilities in public structures to make them accessible to persons with physical disability such as the wheelchair bounds.
- Ø The provision of special equipment and services such as the Braille library in Lagos, wheelchairs, mobility canes, Braille machines, slates and styluses, talking books, tape recorders, relief maps, etc. is a must.
- Ø Itinerant teachers must be recruited to serve a cluster of schools.
- Ø Counseling and welfare services, especially for the mentally and emotionally disordered are necessities.
- Ø Research and Development units in research centres to enhance solutions to identified problems such as the one in NERDC Unit must be established to assess the curricular issues in special education.
- Ø The scope and depth of the UBE programmes and projects should not be limited only to the urban dwellers but must be extended to the majority of the special needs children in the rural areas.
- Ø SUBEBs must ensure that schools arrange regular sensory, medical and psychological screening/assessments in order to identify any incidence of handicap for early intervention purposes.
- Ø The new UBE law provides for a universal compulsory free access to a 9-year basic quality education for all. In this respect, *all* must be interpreted to

include the disabled, disadvantaged and talented (Shuaibu, 2006).

### **Educational Inclusion as a Reform**

Inclusion implies that persons in all manners and conditions of physical, spatial and psychological existence stand to benefit from a programme. It entails that special attention be given to special needs children in all sectors of life. Educational inclusion therefore, encourages the provision of teaching and learning facilities for both early childhood education and development with due attention given to the special needs children (Anyanwu, 2006).

Following the Salamanca conference in 1994, the quest for special education to meet the EFA and MDGs increased and climaxed to the introduction of a new philosophy to the concept of integration called inclusive education. Inclusive education was introduced as a programme and a philosophy to guide service provisions for special needs children (learners with special needs) in the society. This philosophy which has received global attention could be defined as a policy that all children and young people with or without disabilities or difficulties learn together in ordinary pre-schools, primary schools, colleges and universities with appropriate network of supports. This cuts across all educational initiatives from early childhood education to primary, vocational, adult, teacher education, curriculum development and higher institutions. Educational inclusion is therefore, part of the universal right to education that has been extended to all children, youth and adults with disabilities (Iroegbu, 2007). The Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education (2002) intimates that:

The ultimate goal of inclusive education is that no child should be denied inclusion in mainstream education provision, and that this provision should offer full range of support of specialist services necessary to give all children their full entitlement to a broad and balanced education (p.7).

The inclusive concept, therefore, could be seen as an extension of integration or mainstreaming in the sense that with inclusive education, all children with disabilities are expected to be educated in the ordinary (regular) schools. This no doubt determines the type of supports that are needed in the ordinary schools where children with special learning needs are to be educated. Educational inclusion therefore requires a conducive school-friendly environment and classroom practices that cater for the needs of all children. Schools that practice inclusive education are those which plan educational programmes for and accommodate all children

notwithstanding their physical, intellectual and linguistic needs.

Reforms in special education for the attainment of the MDGs began many decades ago from segregation, integration (or mainstreaming) and now inclusive education programmes. These reform agenda in special education have no doubt, enjoyed the support of individuals, national and international agencies. Irrespective of the aforementioned reform efforts, the African continent (Nigeria inclusive) has continued to experiment and renew special education activities and programmes. In order that special education attains the Millennium Development Goals, the following reforms ought to be taken into cognizance:

- i. Curriculum design and its implementation have to meet the challenges of diverse needs of children especially those with diverse disabilities. Special educators and other stakeholders must partner to design developmentally appropriate curriculum and instruction that would not only meet the needs of learners with special needs but also that which reflects the diversity of the group.
- ii. Availability of physical environment and materials to meet the needs and challenge the special education clients for the inclusion programme. Olaniyi (2006) argues that inclusion is part of problem-solving approach in special education to access special needs persons and their environments, identify their learning needs and implement the strategies for meeting the MDGs as they affect special needs child.
- iii. Educational professionals need an understanding of practical methodologies for problem-solving that effectively focus on knowledge and intervention skills to benefit the disabled child. In this respect, all problem-solving efforts must be geared towards enhancing individual skills of team members through collaborative planning, decision-making and support. These, no doubt, would strengthen relationships between the school psychologist, general education teacher, and special educator regarding problems of the child.
- iv. Supports from administrators, families and the community. In order that special education in Nigeria attains the MDGs, administrators, parents, families and community ought to be involved in assessments, planning, interventions, implementation and monitoring of educational programmes for learners with special needs.
- v. Promoting etiquette of professionalism and development in special education. Besides the supports from colleagues, school administrators,

parents, national and international organizations; special educators and other teachers involved in teaching and learning of children with disabilities at different levels of education need an ongoing and appropriate professional development to stand the test time in the profession. Professional development provides insight into how teachers view their roles in diverse classrooms and how to become reflective practitioners (Phillips & Crowell, 1994).

## **Conclusion**

The attainment of the MDGs is possible with the introduction of reforms such as Universal Basic Education and educational inclusion in special education. The UBE programme has been a laudable programme, which aimed at developing Nigeria and reducing the high level of illiteracy, poverty and ignorance amongst its citizenry. It is a reform agendum that has brought many landmark changes into the education sector in general and special education in particular geared toward the attainment of MDGs by 2015. With commitment, efficiency and vigor being expended on the implementation of the programme, we are sure of the MDGs through the UBE programmes by the targeted year 2015.

In the same vein, educational inclusion as a reform agendum in special education is not an option in Nigeria but a compulsion to reach out to learners with special needs and create a demand for multi-sensory teaching in the regular classrooms and schools. The inclusive concept acknowledges diversity amongst learners in the general classroom and addresses the uniqueness of individual learners. For this reason the National Policy on Education (2004) seems to recognize inclusive education under the UBE scheme. Besides, special schools and integrated education models have not been able to provide access to all. Therefore, the Education For All (EFA) goals, which are related and linked to the MDGs should not become "education for all minus learners with special needs". If the EFA and MDGs are to become real in the case of these categories of learners (i.e. those with special needs); inclusive education must be wholly adopted and nurtured as a reform agendum in special education.

However, it will be highly appreciated if discussions, deliberations, brainstorming sessions and contributions in conferences of this nature will centre on proffering solutions, suggestions and proposals that will impact further on how UBE and educational inclusion as reform agenda can be translated in special education to enable the special needs children attain the MDGs.

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