

ENSURING TEACHER QUALITY IN SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION IN NIGERIA



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Abstract

The thrust of the paper is a review of quality assurance of special needs - teachers in Nigeria. This is with a view to reposition them to contend with the emerging national needs which are in part due to global demands and challenges in the field of special needs education. The paper discussed special needs education in perspective; the state of teacher preparation programme in special needs education in contemporary Nigeria. Some qualities and standard competences required of special needs teachers, and challenges confronting teacher quality assurance in special needs education are also examined. The paper concluded with a reminder and practical suggestions as a way forward in order to attain, retain and sustain high standards in terms of quality teachers who are not only responsive to immediate community and national needs, but also global trends in special needs education.

Introduction

The teacher, at whatever level generally plays a pivotal role of organizing, implementing, directing and sometimes evaluating and reporting the feed-back of educational policies of government and non-governmental organization. In particular, special needs teachers play a dual role: meeting the needs of children with special needs and their family, at the same time attending to the needs of children without special needs. Hence, there is need for such teachers to be professionally trained and qualified from a recognized and accredited university or tertiary institution to render services to all categories of children irrespective of disability in an inclusive setting. This is because special needs education is not only a specialized area in education but more so that it involves collaboration among multi-disciplines related to the education of children with special needs.

Special needs education is an area within the frame work of general education that provides appropriate facilities, specialized materials, methods, and teachers (Reger, et al. 1968, in Ozoji 2003)

This implies that teachers must be properly trained in both regular and special

needs education. One of the aims and objectives of special education as contained in the National Policy on Education (2004), is to give a concrete meaning to the idea of equalizing opportunities for all children, their physical, sensory, mental, psychology or emotional disabilities notwithstanding provision of adequate education for all people with special needs in order that they may fully contribute their own quota to the nation.

The question is, how can these and other noble goals of education be achieved and through what means? The key answer to these and many similar questions is provided in the theme of this year's national conference and workshop, of the National Centre for Exceptional Children' (NCEC), tagged "Teacher Preparation, Quality and Policy in Special Needs Educations in Nigeria". This is because true service to the people, with or without disabilities, is not only being delivered but how it is delivered. In other words, it is not about service delivery but the quality of service delivered in special needs education enterprise is the clarion call and a reminder to all concerned stakeholders to have a re-think of this global issue.

Consequently, the paper is poised to examine some critical issues related to teacher quality in special needs education in Nigeria. These include. Special Needs Education in Nigeria in Perspective;

The State of Teacher Preparation Programme in Special Needs Education in Contemporary Nigeria; Standard Qualities and Competences Expected of Special Needs Teachers and Challenges of Teacher Quality in Special Needs Education.

Special Needs Education in Perspective

The development of Special Needs Education in Nigeria cannot be attributed to private, government and nongovernmental organizations alone. Ozoji (2003) identified three distinct eras of the development of SNE in Nigeria. These are the traditional (informal) era; the voluntary agency (formal establishment) era; and government (expansion era). According to Ozoji, the initial effort to educate the handicapped started informally with the community. This could be described as the modern community based special needs education and rehabilitative services.

The voluntary agency which include (missionary) formalize educational and rehabilitation services. According to Abang (2005), Special Needs Education services started in 1915 through 1965 by the various European missionaries for different categories of persons with disabilities. These are all spread all over the country. This marked the use of assistive technology like the braille machine.

The third era is that of expansion by government involvement in the establishment and support for SNE and rehabilitative establishment. This covers the provision of learning materials, establishment and funding of research and development centers for PWDs.

At the initial stage, the curricular was mostly on acquisition of vocational skills, but later, basic literacy, numerically, mobility and orientation. Now, the use of both low and high assistive technology devices is common prescription for PWDs.

The State of Teacher Preparation Programme in Special Needs Education in Contemporary Nigeria

Teacher preparation programme in Special Needs Education just as in general teacher education preparation as outlined in National Policy on Education (2004), is also intended to produce highly motivated, trained and qualified manpower. Consequently the national policy document listed some institutions that shall render professional training for such teachers. These include: colleges, faculties, institutes of education, and the polytechnics to mention a few

In line with the foregoing directive, Andzayi (2003), Ozoji (2003), and Ladipo (2010) among others, enumerated a number of institutions that have long been involved in the education and training of teachers and children with disabilities (PWDs). These institutions offer courses at the Certificate, National Certificate in Education (NCE), Diploma, Bachelors, Masters and Doctorate Degree levels in various areas of disabilities and related services. They include: University of Ibadan, Department of Special Education, Faculty of Education, Kaduna Polytechnic, Department of Special and Rehabilitation Education, University of Jos, Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation Sciences, Faculty of Education; University of Kano, University of Calabar; Federal Colleges of Education (Special) Oyo; many Universities and Colleges of Education too numerous to mention here.

To further highlight on the situation, Andzayi (2003) gave a state by state list of about two hundred and six (206) public, and private schools and centers, where programmes and services have been available for the handicapped in Nigeria. Similarly, Ozoji (2003) recorded seventeen (17) special schools established by government between 1974 to 1992. Today, we are living witnesses to the number of uncontrolled privately owned and operated "special" and "inclusive" schools scattered throughout the country. It is lamentable to note how such schools are organized and managed. It is inevitable for one to pause with the following questions as "food for thought" with the motive that they would spur and challenge us to positive action rather than negative reaction. Looking at the present state of teacher preparation in Special Needs Education in Nigeria, can we as key stakeholders confidently say that we have:

- a. Produced, or are producing highly motivated, consciousness and efficient classroom teachers for all levels and categories of Special Needs Education?
- b. Encouraged or are encouraging further, the spirit of enquiry and creativity in teachers and would be teachers?
- c. Help or are helping teachers to fit into social life of the community and society at large and enhance their commitment to national goals;
- d. Provided or are providing teachers and, the would-be-teachers, with the intellectual and professional background adequate for their assignment and make them adaptable to changing situations; and.
- e. Enhanced or are enhancing teachers' and the would-be-teachers' commitment to the special needs teaching profession.

Standard Qualities and Competencies Expected of Special Needs Education Teachers

The qualities and competencies required of a Special Needs Educator are the same with that of the general teacher. As a matter of fact, much is expected of the Special Needs Teacher because of the nature of his discipline and the area of specialization. This involves working with children and persons with disabilities and their families.

The National Policy on Education (1998; 2004) stated that all teachers in education institutions shall be professionally trained, and gave the minimum qualification into the teaching profession as the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE). All teachers here also include teachers of children with special needs who must not only be professionally trained, but educated, qualified and certified by those recognized institutions before launching into the field.

Ladipo (2010) outlined some basic traits of an effective teacher of special needs children. They include the ability to encourage, motivate, promote inclusive ideology, patient, caring, enthusiastic and collaborative spirit to work with parents and other stakeholders. He went further to define some of the responsibilities and work environment of Special Needs Education teachers such as inclusive teaching and consultancy at various school settings.

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), outlined five competency areas. These include the fact that teachers must be committed to students and their learning; they must know the subjects to teach and how to teach those subjects to students and the relationship with others discipline; they should be responsible for managing and monitoring students learning be willing to report to stake "holders; think systematically about their practice and "learn from experience; and should belong to members of learning communities, working in collaboration with other experts and parents of children with disabilities. ([http:// www.nbpts.org/standard/knowdo/intro.htm](http://www.nbpts.org/standard/knowdo/intro.htm) Retrieved June, 2011).

Similarly, Darlington - Hammond (2000), identified some factors which relate to teachers quality and increased student achievement. These include verbal ability content knowledge, education, coursework on teaching methods in their discipline; teaching behaviors including purposefully and diagnostically using repertoire of approaches skillfully that respond to student and curricular needs in addition, they should be part of ongoing voluntary professional learning, enthusiasm for learning, flexibility, creativity and adaptability.

The No Child Left Behind Act emphasized that public elementary and secondary teachers must be fully licensed or certified by the state and must not have had any certification or licensure requirements waved.... (<http://www.ecs.org/ecsmain.asp?Page=html/special/ESEAmain.ht>) Retrieved from the Education commission of the" state website on ESEA, June, 2001. But, what is obtained now is that most teachers in regular or special education claim being professional teachers even when they are trained but not qualified, and certified.

Some common features of effective teacher education programs in general

education and also relevant to special needs education have been reported by Brownell et al.(2003).These are: coherent program vision; conscious blending of theory, disciplinary knowledge, and subject - specific pedagogical knowledge and practice; carefully crafted field experiences; standard" for" ensuring quality teaching; active pedagogy that employs needs of a diverse student population; and collaboration as a vehicle for building professional community. But are the curricula of our colleges and universities relevant and technology compliant?

In Nigeria today, many people in the general and special" needs education and related services, practice 'without being certified professionally. All general and special need education teachers are expected to be duly registered with the teachers Registration Council of Nigeria (TRC). In addition, there could be some courses that might not have been updated for decades in our institutions of learning.

Challenges of Teacher Quality Preparation in Special Needs Education

There are a number of challenges that are encountered in relation to teacher quality, preparation. Some of them are inherent right from Policy formation stage, to its implementation. Others are related to student's entry qualification, caliber of the trainers, nature of curriculum, method, material and facilities, inadequate personnel and provision for capacity building. These are summarized as follows:

The National Policy on Education (2004) clearly spelt out that teacher education shall continue to be given major emphasis in all educational planning and development. However, in practice much is required to be implemented. This must have led to delay in the provision of some services and facilities required for teacher education preparation in particular, and special need education in general.

The number of students per teacher is very high. This affects the quality of work done by both the teacher and the students. The official ratio as stipulated by the National Policy on Education is one teacher per ten' pupils in special schools. But how about an inclusive class? Mallubu (2003); Kolo (2003) decried the situation there are very few (5 Universities run full fledge degree programmes in special education among about 32 universities then. By 2011 there about 36 state federal universities and 36 state owned universities and 45 privately owned ones in Nigeria. Out of these 117 universities, not more than 7 Universities run courses in special needs education at an acceptable standard.

Another challenge is the type of students admitted to pursue courses in special needs education. Some of them come in as their last resort, while others do not know what the profession is all about. The implication is that low quality and uncommitted teachers are produced. The caliber of teaching staff is a major determinant in quality teacher preparedness. This is very obvious that one cannot give the best, if he is not one of the best. The question is how qualified, professionally committed, and up- to date in terms of global standard, are the teachers of the teachers, whether general or special?

Similarly, even when there are the right students, professionally qualified and

dedicated staff, without the appropriate and up-to- date instructional, materials' and facilities, certainly the best cannot be expected. This is unacceptable in a field of special needs education which is now a global concern, as witnessed from the various United Nations Declarations.

Finally, the lack of political or administrative will on the part of the governance - whether government or management of higher institutions to provide enabling conditions. These include funding, partnering, welfare and staff development which may in part affect teacher quality preparation. When not adequately provided.

Conclusion

From the brief memory lane of special needs education, to the present state of teacher preparation in the country, one would agree with Egbo (2005) that we are in the period of crises in our education system (1980 - date): Egbo further lamented that qualitative expansion has not logically followed quantitative growth. In other words, the number of public and especially private Universities and other learning institutions compared to the quality of their teachers and students outcomes, is nothing to write home about. Maduewesi (2005) also decried that in-spite of the apparent growth; access quality and equity appear to have been seriously impaired.

Consequently, unless some quick, rational and expert evaluation and accountability of the National Policy on Education is done, especially of teacher education - general and special needs education in particular, so long shall we continue in educational flux and dilemma. However, it is hoped that such timely theme like this year's, will not end as conference paper bound for personal shelves or library references but would evoke action. For this reason, there is the need for the Ministry of SNE and University of Special Needs Education and Rehabilitation Sciences, which shall be responsible for quality teacher and related services preparation. Similarly, teachers' welfare for SNE, and other related issues should be looked into, with the view to reposition quality teacher preparation in special needs education.

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