

SPECIAL EDUCATION PROVISION IN NIGERIA: ANALYZING CONTEXTS, PROBLEMS, AND PROSPECTS

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Nigeria has made some efforts to educate all of its citizenry, including those with disabilities. And, it has struggled to make sure that programs are available to those who need them. However, its traditional, sociocultural, and educational problems have prevented some programmatic consistency and progress. As a result, the special education delivery system has faltered. This article analyzes contexts, problems, and prospects of special education in Nigeria.

Demographically, Nigeria is the most populous nation in the continent of Africa today. It gained its independence from Britain on October 1, 1960; and since its independence about 50 years ago, it has experienced many political and socioeconomic problems that have retarded its progress (Damachi, 1972; Diamond, 1989). For example, the Nigerian government has been unable to eradicate corruption, nepotism, and tribalism, the three axes of evil affecting its general and special education advancements. The running of the country between civilian and military rules, with more years of military government rule than civilian government, has perpetuated corruption and power grabbing of a few citizens (Obiakor, 1998). As a result, the dream of most Nigerians is to get a government job or political position where the least amount of labor is needed to acquire wealth. Olatuji, 2010).

A lot is expected of Nigeria, a country with the geographical land occupancy of about 923, 768 sq. km (365,700 sq. miles) roughly the size of California, Nevada, and Arizona put together; and a country with a population that is the tenth largest in the world (Bureau of African Affairs, 2005). Sadly, even with Nigeria's diversified talents and natural resources, its general and special education programs continue to flounder in mediocrity. In fact, its socio-political problems are so endemic that they affect all spheres of its educational modernization programs. The consequence is that many Nigerian citizens with disabilities are not in programs that will help them to maximize their fullest potential. In this article, we analyze contexts, problems, and prospects of special education in Nigeria. For a proper analysis, however, we discuss pre-colonial and colonial influences on educational programming in Nigeria.

Pre-Colonial Education in Nigeria

During the pre-colonial period, traditional education flourished and the family played critical roles in the generational growth of the individual. The cardinal goals of traditional education were to (a) develop latent physical skills; (b) inculcate respect for elders and those in position of authority; (c) develop intellectual skills; (d) develop character; (e) acquire specific vocational training and develop a healthy attitude towards honest labor; and (f) understand, appreciate, and promote the cultural heritage of communities and the community at large (Fafunwa, 1975; Obiakor, 1998).

In fact, during the pre-colonial period, the functions of the family included reproduction, child care, socialization, economic support, collective responsibility, and cultural continuity (Obiakor, 1991, 1998). With traditional education, every one was involved, the family and the extended family system progressed, allowing the body and soul to be developed, with the *haves* taking care of the *have nots*. Indeed, the family transmitted educational and sociocultural attributes (Obiakor, 1992). Education, at this time, was not solely academic; it included morality, patriotism, virtues, and all other characteristics that the elders in the community considered to be ideal for community living. Traditional education recognized that all children are not the same and that some are stronger or faster while others are weaker or slower. Yet, all children were dignified, valued, and educated together for the common good (Ozaji, 2005).

Apparently, traditional education was taught in social settings, allowing the adults to be role models as they handed-down family traditions from one period/generation to another. This kind of traditional education produced strong and healthy patriotism in each member of the family helping to create patriotic leadership. With everyone responsible for each other, no one acted in a way that tarnished the reputation of his/her family. Because of the value system taught by traditional education, kinship was handed-down from father to son and from one generation to another. However, there was room for earned honor where a servant who served his master well by working hard, or being the best village wrestler or a great warrior was allowed to marry the Chief/King's daughter. For instance, the proverbial saying popular among the Igbos in the Eastern part of Nigeria is, *When a child washes his/her hands very clean, he/she would be allowed to eat at the King's table* (Obiakor, 2008). This proverb reveals the true essence of Nigeria's traditional education as people learn by doing (i.e., whether they are doing for themselves or whether they are doing for their community, village, and nation). Clearly, traditional education involved all aspects of citizens' lives. Community elders acted as jurors and judges and resolved disputes ranging from common domestic quarrels to land disputes and tribal fights. Everyone was responsible for each other confirming the African proverb that *It takes a village to raise a child* (Clinton, 1996; Obiakor, 2008; Obiakor, Grant, & Dooley, 2002).

British Colonial Influence on Nigeria's Education

The coming of the Missionaries and European traders brought what is now known as *formal education*. These missionaries and traders did not originally come with the intention of educating Nigerian citizens as their first priority. Their original intent was to convert the people they called and considered *pagans*; and the traders came to sell their goods and persuade the indigenes to sell their artifacts to them for almost nothing. In both respects, the intentions were very personal and selfish. Since Nigeria has great wealth in human and natural resources that were yet to be tapped, the missionaries and traders took advantage and made profits for themselves (Castle, 1975; Fafunwa, 1975). For the missionaries, they acted as *little gods* who came to redeem the *ungodly* Nigerians; and the traders, on the other hand, amassed tremendous wealth for themselves. In his inaugural address to the Wisconsin Branch of the People's Democratic Party of Nigeria, Obiakor (2005) noted that the missionaries and traders cleverly befriended the Kings/Chiefs, elders, and leaders of the communities and fostered self-serving interactions that showed them as superhumans.

To accomplish their goals, European missionaries and traders began a divide-and-conquer philosophy that hampered unity among Nigerians (Obiakor, 2005). The missionaries, without consideration for Nigeria's traditional style of education and the values it exemplifies, imposed their new religion, *Christianity*. While Christianity helped to eradicate some dehumanizing practices (e.g., the killing of twins), it imposed some anti-traditional values. For instance, the British colonial type of education produced colonial subordinates and officials who discouraged traditional education. These officials paid little or no attention to consulting with the indigenes and/or showed no consideration to the cultures of Nigerians in educational planning and development (Obiakor, 2005; Obiakor & Maltby, 1989). As Obiakor noted, colonial officials failed to focus on traditional forms of education and values—they focused on training more subordinate interpreters, clerks, and messengers. Since their objectives were not to educate persons to be of the same status like themselves, they taught only the three *Rs* (i.e., Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic). With this type of education, trained Nigerians remained semi-illiterates; and a few interpreters were able to interpret Sunday services from English to different indigenous languages (in many cases, the interpreters supplemented and/or supplied their own ideas/meaning). To a large extent, persons with disabilities were ignored and not given educational considerations.

Based on the half-hearted education by the colonial masters, what Nigerians valued most before the advent of the British education was overlooked, and in some situations, totally eliminated. Some of the Kings/Chiefs who were bold to disagree with colonial authorities were removed from their thrones using their tactics of divide-and-conquer. Instead of listening to elders, rulers, and Kings/Chiefs of the land, colonial masters became very self-serving and persuaded the indigenes into accepting their own kind of education that enhanced their foreign values. One can conclude that while these colonial masters constantly devised ways through education to meet their selfish end (Bude, 1983; Obiakor & Maltby, 1989), they ignored the Nigerian traditional education that developed the whole person and encouraged vocational skills for self-sustenance (Obiakor, 1998, 2005).

Introducing Special Education to Nigerians

The beginning effort to educate persons with disabilities in Nigeria started in 1915 by the Sudan United Mission (SUM). The missionaries began educating many of the children with visual impairment. These children could not be taught with other children even though they were anxious to learn (Abang, 2005; Jacques, 1979; Ozoji, 2003). These missionaries then thought it would be beneficial if they started a school where children with visual impairment could study the Braille system of reading and writing. Around the same period, they started teaching one Miss Batu grade 11 Braille system in Hausa language. In 1916, Ms. Batu became a pupil teacher of Braille to three other girls whose sights were so bad that they could not read ink print materials (Abang, 2005; Jacques, 1979). On the whole, this system of education was formal, foreign, and organized differently from how the elders and parents educated their children earlier. From this new phase of formal education came the introduction of formal and organized special education that went against the community philosophy which the indigenes and the extended family system had known and supported all their life (Bakere, 1992; Ihunnah, 1984; Obiakor, 2005; Obiakor, Maltby, & Ihunnah, 1990; Ozoji, 2003, 2004).

Other missions quickly copied what the Sudan United Mission did with Ms. Batu, and opened their own schools, using their places of worship as classrooms. Following the trend during that era, a special education school opened in 1953 at Gindiri Plateau State of Nigeria (Ozoji, 2003, 2005). The missionaries formalized their curriculum and instructions. Through the formal special education program which they instituted, they were able to assist persons with disabilities to obtain certificates, just like anyone who completed the regular education course of studies. This new form of education was kind of inclusive, mirroring or similar to the traditional form of education practiced before the coming of the colonial era. Ozoji (2003) noted the Royal Common Wealth Society for the Blind in London was instrumental in stabilizing this inclusive educational placement. Slowly, the efforts of voluntary agencies found home in the hearts of the indigenes of Nigeria; as a result, they consolidated their place in the nation, especially because of the laissez-faire attitude of the government towards education in general. Obviously, the missionaries' great quest for evangelization of all people, especially persons with disabilities became more evident. Through the process of evangelization, intertwined with teaching in a formal manner, persons with disabilities were introduced into the Western form of education (Abang, 2005; Ozoji, 2003). See Table 1 below:

Table 1:
Schools and Centers Established by Volunteer Agencies

NAME OF SCHOOL	YEAR	VOLUNTEER AGENCY	STATE
School for Blind Children, Gindiri	1953	SUM	Plateau
Special Education Center, Orji River	1958	CMS	Enugu
School for the deaf, Ibadan	1963	Mrs. Oyesola	Oyo
Wesley School for the deaf, Surulere	1957	Wesley Mission	Lagos
Pacelli School for the Blind, Surulere	1962	RCM	Lagos

Source: Ozoji, E. D. (2003). *Special education for beginner professionals* (2nd ed.). Jos, Nigeria: Enterprises Publications.

Expansion of Special Education in Nigeria

Though the educational system in Nigeria continues to struggle, it has come a long way from what it used to be before the British colonial masters introduced their system of education to Nigerians. Along with their system of education came what is known today, as special education program for children, youth, and adults. Somehow, the traditional form of education that was already in place before the advent of the British system of education was given no consideration in planning both the curriculum and pedagogical methodologies (Bude, 1983; Obiakor, 2005; Obiakor & Maltby, 1989; Ogunsanya, 2010). Nonetheless, Nigeria has to move forward to expand general and special education services for all its citizens (Federal Ministry of Education, 1977, 2004; Universal Basic Education Commission, 2008).

It is common knowledge that no policy on education can be formulated without first identifying the overall philosophy and goals of the nation. No doubt, these goals must reflect the needs of the nation's citizenry, including those citizens with disabilities. The National Policy on Education noted that (a) education is an instrument for nation development; to this end, the formation of ideas, their integration for national development and the interaction of persons and ideas are all aspects of education; (b) education fosters the worth and development of the individual's sake, and for the general development of the society; (c) every Nigerian child shall have a right to equal educational opportunities irrespective of any real or imagined disabilities each according to his/her ability; and (d) there is need for functional

education for the promotion of a progressive, united Nigeria; to this end, school programs need to be relevant, practical and comprehensive while interest and ability should determine the individual's direction in education (see Federal Ministry of Education, 2004; Universal Basic Education Commission, 2008). Based on the aforementioned policy, the overall aim of education appears focused on educating children in a comprehensive manner to the extent that those with disabilities will find something at their skill level for self-sustenance. Central to the National Policy on Education is,

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 training of the mind in understanding of the world around and the acquisition of appropriate skills and the development of mental, physical, and social abilities and competencies as equipment for the individual to live and contribute to the development of the society. (p. 8)

There is no doubt that the government of Nigeria arrived at the scene of special education late. While it appears that the government was coerced, dragged, and forced into developing special education for its citizenry, it has been in partnership with foreign volunteer agencies since the inception of special education (Onwuegbu, 1988; Ozoji, 2003). For example, it approved the schemes meant for special education, grant-aided the agencies, approved certificates of occupancy for the agencies, and provided other forms of moral support (Eleweke, 1999; Obiakor, 1998; Ozoji, 2003, 2005). In addition, it supported the establishment of special education by making provisions for its existence, at least in theory. Some of these include the 1948 Education Ordinance, the 1954 Education Law, and the 1962 Northern Nigeria Education Law. It was not long after this law that Nigerians began to experience political and tribal crises that led to unrests and military coups. As a consequence, from 1967-1970, the Nigeria government was involved in a devastating civil war (the Nigerian-Biafran war); and, the impact of this war is still felt today. With the end of the Nigerian-Biafran civil war in 1970, the Nigerian government became more aggressively involved in providing special education and rehabilitation services for the veterans of the civil war. Many schools for students with disabilities began to spring up. See Table 2 below:

Table 2:
Special Education Schools by the Nigerian Government

NAME OF SCHOOL	YEAR	STATE
Kwara State School for the Handicapped, Ilorin	1974	Kwara
Special Education School for the Handicapped, Abeokuta	1976	Ogun
Special Education Center, Orlu	1977	Imo
Plateau State School for the Deaf, Jos	1977	Plateau
Special Education School for the Deaf, Kaduna	1977	Kaduna
Benin Special Education School for the Deaf	1977	Edo
Special Education Center Tudun Maliki	1977	Kano
Special Education School for the Handicapped, Shagamu	1977	Ogun
Ondo State Special Education School for the Blind	1977/78	Ondo
Special Education Center, Jada	1981	Adamawa
Special Education Center for the Exceptional Children, Calabar	1981	Cross River
Niger State Special Education for the Handicapped, Minna	1983	Niger
Special Education School for the Handicapped, Sokoto	1984	Sokoto
Special Education Center, Bauchi	1984	Bauchi
Special Education School for the Blind, Umuahia	1985	Abia
Special Education School for the Visually Impaired, Zuba	1991	Abuja
Special Education for the Hard of Hearing, Kuje	1992	Abuja

Source: Ozoji, E. D. (2003). *Special education for beginner professionals* (2nd ed.). Jos, Nigeria: Enterprises Publications.

Educational policies after the Nigerian civil war revealed some improvements regarding special education programming and how the citizens with disabilities were treated (Abang, 2005; Obiakor, 1998; Ozoji, 2003). The inference could be drawn from the provisions of the Third National Development Plan (1975-1980), which included some benchmarks for special education (Federal Ministry of Education, 1977). The philosophy, objectives, and provisions of this plan especially favored the operation of special education (see Obiakor; Ozoji). Targeted actions in the national plan for special education included (a) establishing an efficient system of special education institutions throughout the federation; (b) instituting a National Council on Special Education to carry out a national census of persons with disabilities and identify their needs; (c) establishing the cooperation of the Ministry of Education in training special educators; (d) providing free education at all levels for persons with disabilities; (e) publicizing the National Policy on Education which in particular ways

elaborated the provisions and operations of special education; (e) including elements of special education in teacher education; and (f) introducing 6-3-3-4 system of education.

The Federal Ministry of Education (1977) instituted Section 8 of the National Policy on Education to buttress the provision of special education programs to all Nigerians. Around this period, the nation's first Federal College for Special Education Program was established at Oyo, Oyo State, Nigeria. Since its inception, the college has graduated many students in the various aspects of special education. To show that the Federal government was determined to make special education work well for its citizens, elements of special education courses were introduced into teacher education programs and other higher institutions of learning (Abang, 2005; Fabunmi, 2005; Ogunsanya, 2010). The government continued its efforts to accelerate proper functioning of special education by creating the Department of Special Education at the University of Ibadan, one of the nation's oldest universities with Dr. Mba as its first Head of Department. Then in 1980, a similar department was established at the University of Jos with Sister (Dr.) Theresa Abang as its pioneering Head of Department. Today, there are about 105 special education schools that are located all over the nation. The latest school is the Ganaka International School of Special Education established on September 29, 2005 (Abang, 2005; Ogunsanya, 2010; Universal Basic Education Commission, 2008). Earlier, Obiakor (2001) argued that applying the phrase *treat everyone equally* is not very appropriate or even applicable in all situations in Nigeria. Rather, he concluded that it is our moral obligation to treat every one with justice and equity. Though the government of Nigeria attempts to provide education for all its citizens, it has not been done equitably. There continues to be deficiency in high technology; and even many of the schools using low technology materials (e.g., pencil grips, soft bottom scissors, and calculators) find it difficult to procure them.

Building Cultural Bridges to Enhance Special Education Services

It is evident that Nigerians can never be divorced from the apron of strings of their traditional cultures and values. However, it is also evident that Nigerians must embrace some foreign cultures to advance the education of those with disabilities. Put another way, Nigeria must face its 21st century challenges to advance special education services to all its citizens. For example, there are new paradigms, technologies, methodologies, and techniques that Nigerians must value and incorporate into their traditional practice to foster special education. The question is, how can Nigeria build cultural bridges that value traditional and European cultures to enhance special education? Rather than see persons with disabilities as abnormal *evil* people, Nigerians must see them as *normal* people who can live *normal* lives. They must shift their cultural paradigms and powers in this regard. In other words, whether people have cognitive disabilities or emotional/behavioral disorders, they must never be subjected to sub-human treatments or living conditions. This new *normalization* idea is what is now called inclusive intervention (Garuba, 2003; Ozoji, 2003, 2005). It is critical to see special education not necessarily as a service for some people, but essentially as a service for everybody. The thinking underlying this view is that everybody has unique needs. When individualized attention is directed towards those needs, what is being truly provided is special education (Abang, 2005; Garuba, 2003; Ozoji, 2003, 2005). Not surprisingly, the lack of mandatory legislation buttresses the *abnormality* mentality that says that since one is *abnormal*, he/she cannot be protected by law. The inability of the Nigerian government to pass laws to support persons with disabilities has continued to create ongoing myths about causes of disabilities (Abang, 2005; Fabunmi, 2005; Obiakor, 1991; Ozoji, 1991, 1993, 2003; Yaksat & Hill 1982).

Attitudes toward persons with disabilities have very significant influence on special education in many developing countries. Though these attitudes might be culturally relevant to Nigerians, they might be retrogressive when they fail to use all necessary means to help educate persons with disabilities. For example, how particular disabilities are perceived might be counterproductive to how people with those disabilities are treated in Nigeria. Since what people do go from people to people and culture to culture, educational progress might be difficult to achieve. Understandably, Nigeria is a multi-ethnic nation with each tribe teaching and living its own culture to influence attitude of tribal members regarding persons with disabilities. There is no homogenous *Nigerian cultural attitude* toward anything; and in today's Nigeria, there is an apparent intrusion of the European culture in all aspects of activities. The question then is, how can we build cultural bridges between the Nigerian cultural values and those of the Europeans? These bridges will be difficult to build, especially since some Nigerians see disability as (a) a curse on the family or the wider community for offenses against God or the gods, (b) an anger of the ancestors or ancestral gods for neglect or breach of promises, (c) a punishment of the child for offenses committed in the previous incarnation, (d) a punishment for a parent's misdemeanor, (e) a way

to know a potential evil person curtailed by the gods, (f) a punishment for offenses against the laws of the land or breaches of custom, and (g) a wicked act of witches and wizards (Obani, 2002; Obiakor, 1991; Ogbue, 1995).

In the light of the above beliefs, it is hardly surprising that attitudes toward persons with disabilities in Nigeria are generally negative. The consequence of such negativism is the lack of parental involvement in the education of their children. To build cultural bridges, literacy must be increased through innovative educational programming. Educated parents must form powerful parental organizations that advocate for improvement of services, better educational environment and facilities, and quality education. The problem in Nigeria is that many parents are insufficiently informed and aware of the role of special education in equalizing educational opportunities for their children with disabilities (Galadima, n.d; Obiakor, 2005; Ozoji, 2003; Yaksat & Hill, 1982). Since special education is an expensive enterprise, efforts must be made to provide technological equipments that are needed to equalize individual opportunities. Unless the government is willing to spend a good amount of money, it will be impossible to provide good special education programing to the Nigerian citizenry. In the face of continued dwindling of revenue and earnings from oil, Nigeria must (a) develop creative ways to fund educational programs, and (b) understand that insufficient funding may adversely mar the progress of special education (Obiakor, 1998; Olatuji, 2010; Ozoji, 2003).

There is no doubt that Nigeria has recognized the importance of special education for its citizens with disabilities. For example, it has published very laudable policies for special education (Universal Basic Education Commission, 2008). To build cultural bridges, the government must be willing to provide the necessary funding that will make implementation of the laudable ideas a reality. Sadly, there is no funded mandate in the form of legislation passed to guide the implementation of special education in Nigeria. The reason for this may be due to low financial base of those expected to implement the bills and the low political awareness of those whose rights are being protected. To bridge this gap, a good solution may be to focus on political education of Nigerians on how to value their rights; and when denied theirs rights, how to initiate due process and take legal actions (Anderson, 2004). There is an urgent need for legislation to help increase awareness and growth rate of special education in Nigeria (Eleweke, 1999; Eleweke et al., 1993; Obiakor, 1998; Ozoji, 2003). To solidify cultural bridges, there must be coordinated efforts by either the federal government, state government, or local government to educate the public regarding special education and the different disabilities that some Nigerian citizens might have. Therefore, instituting a national commission for persons with disabilities and public enlightenment will be a major task (see Ozoji). In addition, private sectors must be involved in organizing volunteerism to help destroy the erroneous myth that the government is responsible for doing everything for its citizenry. Through volunteer works, graduates who have learned how to advocate can help organize the community, the society, and even the private sectors to engage in volunteer work for students with special needs (Abang, 2005; Ozoji, 2003).

Conclusion

In this article, we have analyzed the contexts, problems, and prospects of special education in Nigeria. To buttress our analyses, we have discussed the impacts of traditional education, colonial education, and post-colonial educational efforts. With traditional education, morality, patriotism, obedience, honor, respect, and other virtues flourished. For instance, people were responsible for their neighbors and recognized that all children are not the same (i.e., some stronger, faster, weaker, or slower than others). During the colonial period, traditional education was dismantled and formal education was introduced. In addition, voluntary agencies began to formally and informally educate individuals with disabilities. During the post-colonial period (i.e., after independence), Nigeria began to design programs to educate all its citizens, including those with disabilities.

In the 1970s, the government got itself involved in programs to help rehabilitate the nation's civil war veterans. Even then, there was really no concrete action until 1977 with the promulgation of Section 8 of the National Policy on Education. However, while this government's effort seemed laudable, there are traditional sociocultural values and beliefs that seem to impede progress. In addition, there is no mandatory law that guides the provision of special education services. This could be attributed partly to the lack of funding, lack of educational philosophy, high illiteracy rate, and lack of political will. We believe the Nigerian government needs to enact laws and policies to guide the proper implementation of special education. We also conclude that individuals and private sectors must be encouraged to educate parents and the public about different disabilities and what they entail. In the end, we feel strongly that through education, public attitudes towards persons with disabilities will be changed.

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