

RELIGIOUS APPROACH TO SPECIAL EDUCATION FOR
HANDICAPPED CHILDREN IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Special education is a vital aspect of Nigerian education because it promotes the education of the handicapped children and enhances their status in the society. The reason is because the handicapped children, as Nigerian citizens have the right to be educated for them to be self- dependent rather than being social misfits. It is therefore the responsibility of the government, voluntary organizations and religious bodies to attend to the plight of these disabled children for the development of Nigerian society. This paper therefore examined the contributions of religious bodies to the education of handicapped children in gender to alleviate their sufferings. It also x-rayed the schools established by the government, but observed that the handicapped children in the society are not well catered for due to the few schools established which are not enough for their training. This paper adopted historical method which enabled the researchers to trace the genesis of the establishment of special schools for the handicapped in the nation. There are several handicapped children scattered all over the nation without formal education making them societal nuisance and totally dependent. Besides, most of these special schools are neither adequately funded nor fully equipped, for the proper education of the handicapped in order for them to contribute their quotas in the development of the nation. A number of recommendations were made which included the giving of moral instructions to the handicapped children and their parents in order for them to be well cared for and develop their full potentials.

Keywords- Religion, Special Education, and Handicapped Children

Introduction

Nigeria as a fast growing nation is faced with the challenges of placing the handicapped children in their appropriate positions in the society. The reason is because as Nigerian citizens, they have the right to be adequately trained in order to enhance their status in the society. It is therefore the responsibility of the government to formulate and implement policies that will have positive impact on the lives of these disabled children. Oladejo and Oladejo (2011) posit that "the Nigerian society like every other one is composed of individuals with or without any form of disability. Those with disabilities deviate from average physical, socio-psychological and mental behaviours to an extent that they cannot profitably benefit from regular education programme".

Undoubtedly, the challenges faced by handicapped children are innumerable and of great concern to parents, guardians, counsellors, teachers, religious bodies medical personnel and others. Oken (2013) observes that the above mentioned stakeholders are always confronted with the question of what to do to reduce disability or prevent the number of disabled children from increasing in the society. They are also interested in placing them in educational institutions where they can acquire skills and quality education that would enable them to be comfortable and self dependent. Based on this fact, the paper examines the importance of religious education as well as the roles of religious bodies on special education of the handicapped children for them to be accorded a prominent position in the society.

Nmah (1998) defines religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices which is related to sacred things set apart or forbidden, beliefs and practices that unite one single moral community called church and all those who adhere to them. According to Adogbo (2000), religion is the feeling of absolute dependence on a supernatural being believed to direct the affairs of men and the course of nature. Also Maclean (1996) defines religion as the worship of transcendent or Supernatural being whose existence is outside or above the realm of the normal, which is mortal and temporal. Religion is of great ethical significance because what people ought to do is obtained from the existence, nature and will of God.

According to the National Policy on Education (2004) special education is a formal special educational training given to people (children and adults) with special needs. These group of people may be classified into two categories: the Disabled and Disadvantaged. Osakwe (2010) defines special education as classroom or private instructions involving unconventional techniques, materials, exercises, facilities and subject matter designed for children and adults who have physical deformities, behavioural disorders or learning disabilities. Odirin (2005) asserts that special education is a discipline in the field of education which caters for the training of the speech impaired, visually impaired, physical and health impaired, the hearing impaired, mentally retarded, learning disabled, emotional and socially disturbed, the gifted, the talented as well as the teachers who would teach them.

Handicap is an interference with normal growth or development or capacity to learn, caused by a continue disability to body, intellect or personality to such a degree as to need extral care or treatment from medical nursing, social or educational services (Omiegbe and Omumu, 2005). Osakwe (2010) confirms this fact by defining the Handicapped as people with a form of disability which is, capable of limiting their involvement and participation in the regular educational programmes and subsequently affect their academic performance and functionality in the society.

The Aims/Objectives of Special Education:

- To give concrete meaning to the idea of equalizing educational opportunities for all children, their physical sensory, mental, psychological or emotional disabilities notwithstanding.
- To provide adequate education for all people with special needs in order that they may fully contribute their own quota to the development of the nation.
- To provide opportunities for exceptionally gifted and talented children to develop their talents, natural endowments/traits at their own pace in the interest of the nations economic and technological development.
- To design a diversified and appropriate curriculum for all beneficiaries.

Importance of Special Education for the Handicapped Children

Education is a vital aspect of the human society, hence one of the goals of education as stated in Nigerian philosophy of education is that "every Nigerian child shall have a right to equal educational opportunities irrespective of any real or imagined disabilities, each according to his or her ability". Since handicapped children are important members of the society, they deserve to be educated for them to contribute their quotas to the development of Nigerian society. Akinpelu (1998) avers that in recent times, handicapped persons are known to have made important contributions to the development of the society so much that they are now given first class status in most developed nations.

As a matter of fact, persons with disabilities have excelled in various spheres of life such as arts exhibition, sports, crafts, music and so on. Based on their unique performance in various fields, the United Nations General Assembly made a declaration on the Rights of the Disabled Persons in 1975 that "disabled persons have the right to education which enables them to develop their capacities and skills and will hasten the process of their social interaction" (United Nations, 1975).

Naturally, handicapped children have a sense of inferiority complex due to their inability to mix up with their peers who are not deformed. Therefore proper education should be given to them to encourage good social integration, free association, morale boosting, respect and value for one another's feelings. Abdulrahman, Oniye and Agbonlahor (2009) remark that adequate education for the handicap will enhance fair treatment, peaceful co-existence and will consequently, bring about development of socio-economic, political and religious advancement of the Nigerian populace.

Government Approach to Special Education for the Handicapped Children

The government has the responsibility of establishing, co-ordinating and financing schools for the handicapped children in Nigeria. Thus, government has the ultimate goal of providing adequate education for all people with special needs, as well as making education free at all levels (NPE, 2004). The realization that children with disability need special services such as enriched curricula and learning environment, which could not be provided

by the regular school prompted the government to establish special schools.

Some of the schools include: the Ijokodo High School, Ibadan, Oyo State and Technical Secondary School, Umuoka Enugu State (Akinpelu, 1998). Kwara State School for the Handicapped, Ilorin, Niger State Schools for the Handicapped, Imo State School for the Deaf; Ordo-werri School for the Handicapped School for Deaf and Dump in Agbor, Delta State. A College of Education (special) was also established where teachers for the handicapped are trained. There are also vocational training and rehabilitation centres. Abamba (2005) observes that as at 1991, there were seventy three (73) special schools in Nigeria. A cursory look at these special schools may prompt one to feel that the government has done enough to alleviate the suffering of the handicapped children.

However, there are several handicapped children scattered all over the nation without formal education making them societal nuisance and totally dependent. Besides, most of these special schools are neither adequately funded nor fully equipped.

Teacher's Approach to Special Education for the Handicapped Children

The handicapped need specially trained teachers to attend to their various educational needs. Teachers are trained to teach different types of handicapped. Omiegbe (2005) affirms that these teachers are specially taught on how to teach the handicapped. They are trained at colleges of education, polytechnics and at the Faculty of Education in the Universities for proper handling of the handicapped. Thus, these teachers are trained to show love, cater for their needs, design curriculum that will meet their individual needs and provide instructional materials designed specially to help them learn easily and acquire knowledge and skills that will enable them to be self dependent and useful members of the society.

The Roles of Religious Bodies on Improving the Conditions of the Handicapped Children

Religion is a holistic inner domain within which people deal with essential issues such as the meaning of life, the causes of and cures for human suffering. It is a social institution organized around specific human needs - to know the meaning of life, to cope with reality of suffering and death and to have a concept of moral life. Certainly, religious beliefs, spirituality, and faith traditions provide structure that individuals with disability (and others) use to create meaning for their lives (Blanks, 2009). Religion is very vital in modern society, but people rarely explore how it relates to beliefs about handicapped children. An understanding of what religion depicts about disability can deepen their ability to understand how to improve the services provided for children with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

According to Oguamanam (2004), religion plays important roles or functions in societal development. It is seen as a thing binding people together, explaining the human predicament, helping to control social behaviour, and providing individual with emotional support in the uncertainties of life. Spirituality and religion are important to millions of individuals across all cultures. Until recently, however, the spirituality of handicapped children has been largely neglected by both communities of faith and secular social institutions and educational systems.

The search for the care of the handicapped children, date back to the Hebrew Law, which represented prophetic thoughts and teachings. The law acknowledges the needs of children with disabilities and admonishes that they must be cared for. Hence, the needs of the blind, the deaf, the cripple and the widows were to be met by the community (Leviticus 19:14). Also, Christ exemplifies the necessity of caring for the handicapped, by healing the deaf, the blind, the cripple and the lepers. Based on these facts, the care of the disabled is very vital in the church. The Islamic faith also advocates the care of the handicapped. No wonder Prophet Muhammed states that serving the disabled is serving God Himself. Afrooz (1994) avers that in most countries of Islamic faith, People are very concerned about the welfare of the handicapped people.

All religious leaders create time to educate their adherents in order for them to fit properly into the society irrespective of their deformities. Thus, it was the desire to enlighten the handicapped.

children on religious matters improve their quality of education that propelled the early missionaries to establish schools and rehabilitation centres. When the missionaries observed the way the Africans treated the handicapped as exemplified in the killing of twin babies and sending away of the handicapped children to die in the bush, the missionaries got touched and felt concerned with the preservation and education of the handicapped (Omiegbe, 2005). Consequently, they established schools, vocational and rehabilitation centers for the handicapped to learn some skills that would enable them to be self sufficient in the society.

Among the early Missionaries in Nigeria that were interested in the welfare of the handicapped children were: the Sudan Interior Mission which established the first school for the blind in Kano. Also, in 1953, they open special school in Gindiri, Plateau State with the aim of teaching craft and basic literacy that would enable the blind to read and write in Braille. In 1945, the Leprosy Settlement, School/Centre, Uzuakola was established by the Methodist Church of Nigeria. The Wesley School for the Deaf, Lagos was founded in 1956. Special Education Centre, Oji River was founded in 1958 by the Church Missionary society (CMS). The Nakan Memorial Secondary School, Barkin Ladi Plateau State, was founded in 1973 by Ekan Church of Nigeria to cater for the physically handicapped persons and Catholic Rehabilitation Centre in Delta State (Omiegbe, 2005).

Moreover, there are Islamic associations that are interested in the welfare of the handicapped children and they established several schools and rehabilitation centers. Although, the Nigerian Government was partially involved in these special schools through provision of grants, the missionaries and Islamic associations were fully involved in the day-to-day activity of the special schools until 1970's when the then head of State, major General Yakubu Gowon declared government interest in the education of the handicaps.

In recent times, several religious bodies have been attending to the plight of the handicapped children and promoting their education. For instance, Job Orphanage Home, established by Prophet Ighodo Joseph, founder of Divine Faith Evangelical Mission, takes care of the handicapped children physically, spiritually and socially. Also, Prophet T.B. Joshua, the founder of Synagogue Church for all Nations is currently awarding scholarship to visually impaired and other disabled persons. So many have

benefited from his kind gesture. Every Wednesday on weekly basis, the Independent Television Authority Benin- City presents a life broadcast of the prophet's Philanthropic services to people with disabilities. Most of the physically challenged receive cash gifts ranging from one hundred thousand naira and above and at least three bags of rice, wheel chairs and other gift items. Altonji and Christopher (2005), remark that religious organizations provide counseling social services, income support or a network of social contact for the disabled. Also, Dr. Bitrus Gani established a Christian Orphanage Rehabilitation Centre as well as home for the blind in Wusasa, Zaria.

Furthermore, the Federation of Muslim Women Association in Nigeria (FOMWAN) founded the Fedcration of Handicapped Children Projection League in Africa (HACHPLE, Africa). Their major focus is to promote education for handicapped children. In addition, Alhaji Arisekola Azceez, the patron of more than one hundred Islamic organizations within and outside Nigeria, donate buses to handicap homes, hospitals, schools and recreation centres.

Conclusion

The growth of the Nigerian nation depends solely on the contribution of the entire Nigerian populace. Therefore the disabled children will contribute their quota to the development of the nation if they are properly educated. It then behoves on the government and religious bodies to work together for the education of the handicapped children to enable them achieve their full potentials.

Recommendations

- Government should establish enough special schools built specifically to suit different handicapped conditions.
- Government should specially train enough teachers who will attend to the educational needs of the handicaps.
- Government should provide adequate fund and facilities for teaching and learning in the schools for the handicapped.

- Government should provide special training and re-training of the personnel to develop capacity and to keep abreast of the latest teaching technique, for the various categories of disabilities.
- There should be regular census and monitoring of handicapped children to ensure adequate educational planning and welfare programmes.
- Moral instruction should be given to handicapped children to enable them cope with their challenges.
- There should be creation of awareness to help the handicapped through campaign advertisement and enlightenment to be self dependent and avoid being social misfit.
- The Federal College of Education (special), Oyo should be upgraded to a full-fledged Degree Awarding Institution to cater for the NCE holder in special education which will lead to the production of more qualified teachers for the disabled students.
- More Departments of Special Education should be created in our nation's universities in order to address the problem of shortage of teachers for the disabled students.
- Private individuals and religious bodies should be encouraged to establish more special schools as well as vocational and rehabilitation centres.
- The Ministry for the Disabled Affairs should be created at the Federal and State levels with disabled persons as the Minister/Commissioner of such ministries.
- The parents of the disabled children should be given moral instructions and counseled on how to care for their handicapped children for them to be able to develop their full potentials.

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