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Abstract

Education is a complete developmental package that facilitates positive changes in society. Special need education also aids the integrated participation of learners with special needs, disabilities, and talents. Although there have been prominent issues with special need education in Nigeria in the early 2000s such as low awareness, funding, and non-availability of a standardised national policy; this paper investigates the successes and concerns with special need education in recent times. The level of implementation of the National Policy on Special Needs Education, 2015 was also investigated. The adopted secondary method of data collection, interpretive research philosophy, and inductive research approach aided in the modification of existing theories and findings. Data collected are analysed using thematic analysis. Findings showed that SEN has enjoyed some level of success such as increased awareness about special needs, partnership with international communities, and improved digital literacy; it is still struggling with funding, policy implantation, poverty, and parental participation.

Keyword: special needs education, education, special needs, children, social participation

Introduction

The subject of education has to do with bringing about positive changes in the lives of learners. Special needs education, on the other hand, has been seen as the process of training and grooming children that have special needs or disabilities which might be social, mental, or physical. The aim of special needs education is geared towards the full and holistic development of children for social participation and independence. According to a study by Rasheed (2014), it was stressed that special needs education is a “special” education designed for children that have “special” needs who learn with special methods, instructions, and resources. UNESCO (2023) asserted that special needs education is facilitated to give full support

to children using adaptive methods. This implies that special needs education is not unconnected with the ability to facilitate learning based on the full capacity development of learners.

Unicef (2023) cited the 'Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities', Article 24 noting that special needs education is a pragmatic, systematic, and strategic type of education that considers the strengths and weaknesses of learners, as well as give them the opportunity to develop their skills and aid effective teaching and learning processes. Adding to this, special needs education is linked to the process of reducing the rate of low self-esteem among learners as well as discrimination and segregation. According to a study carried out by Augusta Family Magazine (2023), it was stressed that special needs education aids the creation of behavioral interventions, management of specialised teaching methods, and the adoption of adaptive assessment approaches. To this end, special needs educations offer children holistic development cutting across social, emotional, and intellectual skills.

In line with the aforementioned, it must be mentioned that special needs education also falls in the category of early childhood education, as it focuses on the development of children between the ages of 0 and 8 years. Accordingly, early childhood education is designed to cater for the growth of the holistic child under the tutelage of teachers and caregivers. It has however been found in line with the study by Ajayi (2008) on “Early Childhood Education in Nigeria: a Reality or a Mirage?” that there are still a lot of lapses that need attention in ECE which includes the issue of teacher-pupil ratio syndrome, issue of minimum standards, low usage of mother tongue as a tool of instruction, inadequate funding, as well as low quality control and assurance. These findings were updated by Ajayi (2019) as it was stressed that Nigerian early childhood education is still

suffering from high levels of social inequity among children. This, therefore, is not unconnected with the goals of special needs education in the promotion of equity among children regardless of their needs, talents, and exceptions.

According to the Bloom taxonomy of learning, education has to be a complete package which shows that it should be focused on cognitive, affective, and psychomotor skill development. That is, while the intellectual skills of learners are developed, their affective and psychomotor skills are also developed. The challenge, however, is that there has always been a large focus on the investigation of affective and psychomotor skills development of children with special needs in Nigeria. It must also be added that the special needs of children will determine the kinds of methods and instructions that will be engaged with them which include emotional, physical, motor, and developmental needs, among others. Hence, special needs education adopts developmental techniques such as positive labeling and diagnosing which promote the early discovery and inclusive management of children's needs'.

In tune with studies (Hyder & Bhamani, 2016; Oluyimide & Adeleke, 2021; Batlolona, 2023), the objectives of special needs education in Nigeria include total delivery of quality care and educational delivery for special and talented children, developing creative children, sound and productive citizens, ensuring full inclusion of children into the community; and reducing the rate of discrimination and segregation in the world. Other aspects of special needs education in Nigeria include the promotion of children's rights, global best practices, nomenclature, and early identification of needs and referrals.

Batlolona (2023) reported a range of special needs in an average special school in Nigeria which include speech impairment (2.04%), physical impairment (3.06%), auditory impaired (2.04%), nearsighted (1.02%), slow learners (38.78%), difficulties in learning (41.84%), hearing impairment (5.10%), epilepsy (4.08%), and down syndrome (2.04%). Though the report by Batlolona (2023) might not fit into other

findings, it still shows the predominance of special needs in Nigeria as this discourse unfolds. Special needs education in Nigeria has therefore been subjected to different arguments and controversies. While Oluyimide and Adeleke (2021) found a shortage of school resources in special needs schools in Osun State; it has been found that the objectives of Nigerian special needs education have not been optimally achieved. However, there seems to be some progress in the training of teachers in promoting special needs in Nigeria (Adebisi & Jerry, 2014). This study looks into the prospects, issues, and way out in relation to the practice of Special Educational Needs (SEN) in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

The theory that is engaged in this study is Abraham Maslow's Need theory which is based on five tenets, namely; physiological (food, clothing, and shelter), safety (security), love and belonging needs (friendship and socialisation), esteem, and self-actualisation. This theory implies that the training of learners has to be done through a holistic process where parents, teachers, and the community at large are committed to qualitative educational outcomes of learners. More so, educational commitment should include the facilitation of the usage of human and non-human resources in Nigeria. Teachers have to be well-trained, teaching facilities school be brought to the limelight, and society should be carried along in the promotion of quality education.

Statement of Problem

The objectives of early childhood education in Nigeria have been fully maximised due to inadequate funding, quality assurance, and the issue of minimum standards. In tandem with this, achieving equity in Nigerian education in the modern age seems impossible due to the increasing rate of discrimination and segregation among learners (regular and special). Other issues such as inadequate qualified teachers, insufficient resources, the need for a more interactive curriculum, and funding are still issues facing the dynamics of early childhood education in Nigeria. This study is therefore interested in investigating issues and challenges facing the quality of special needs education in Nigeria. This

paper also examines the level of National Policy on Special Needs Education implementation.

Aims and Objectives of the Study

The main aim of this study is to examine the success and concerns of special need education in Nigeria. The specific objectives of the study are to:'

- I. determine the successes of special needs education in Nigeria,
- ii. examine the level of implication of SEN policy in Nigeria,
- iii. investigate the barriers facing SEN in Nigeria, and
- iv. recommend the way out to facilitating effective SEN in Nigeria.

Methodology

This study adopts the secondary method of data collection. It is a position paper using a systematic literature review. The adoption of the secondary method is keen on the review of different studies that align with the ongoing discussion. The extensive collection of data in this paper has been done using peer-reviewed journals, reputable textbooks, and viable online sources. More so, an evaluation of the National Policy on Special Needs Education, 2015 has been done using data in tune with the level of implementation of the policy. Based on the research onions of Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2019), the first element of research is research philosophy which can be interpretive, pragmatism, positivist, and critical realism. In this study, interpretive research philosophy has been adopted which allows the extensive collection of data from existing sources. The researcher engaged in critical discussions in the analysis of data collected in making critical conclusions cum the designed objectives. The study further adopted the inductive research approach which helps in the modification of existing theories and findings. Data collected are analysed using thematic analysis.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study are presented as follows in line with the objectives that have been raised. The thematic analysis further aided in the systematic presentation and discussion of data that have been collected.

Successes of Special Needs Education in Nigeria

Awareness Creation

The successes of SEN in modern-day Nigeria have been linked with how awareness has been created for carrying out unique instructions for children with special needs education in the country. More awareness is created for SEN in Nigeria as more parents, teachers, and the larger community are carried along in the process of facilitating quality and holistic education. This is the case that the subject of special needs education is not entirely new to the Nigerian community compared to what it used to be in the 1990s and early 2000s. Ajuwon (2012) found that more teachers and parents (more than 50%) are interested in subjects relating to special needs education in Nigeria. Although most of the teachers undergoing special needs educational training in the country are knowledgeable about special, more than 60% of this population seems to have knowledge of inclusive education. It must, however, be mentioned that inclusive education is yet another area that needs to be improved in the Nigerian educational system. In corroboration with Ajuwon (2012), it has been stressed that though special needs provisions are becoming more evolving in Nigeria, there are still prevailing problems such as funding, and policy issues, to mention a few that must be addressed.

Partnership

According to a report by UNESCO (2023), Nigerian special needs education is starting to get more attention and partnership in the global space as support such as technical assistance as well as training is facilitated in the development of SEN in the country. Between the years 2011 to 2015, the Nigerian Ministry of Education partnered with UNESCO in ensuring that strategic plans are developed for the transformation of special needs in Nigeria. These strategic plans strengthen and develop institutional management, teacher education, access and equity, funding, resource utilisation as well as quality assurance. Although most of the plans might not have been implemented as of the year 2023, it shows that the Nigerian government is making efforts toward the success of SEN in the country.

Improved Digital Literacy

Special Needs Education (SEN) in Nigeria is beginning to enjoy more access to the use of technologies and digital literacy. Nwokeocha (2015) in a study on the adoption of instructional technologies in the Nigerian educational space revealed that special needs teachers, educators, and the government are beginning to appreciate the roles of technologies in educational instruction such as interaction, communication, and the promotion of creativity in learning activities. On the contrary, there is low adoption of these technologies as reported by Oluyimide and Adeleke (2021). The success here is measured by the fact that instructional technologies are becoming indisputable in the global education milieu, and there is no doubt that SEN stakeholders in Nigeria are not unaware of this. The hit of Covid-19 has also brought about an increase in the rate at which online technologies are fast becoming the norm in the field of education.

The Level of Implication of SEN Policy in Nigeria

The Nigerian National Policy on Special Needs Education was developed in the year 2015 based on the rationale that there was a need for more qualitative special education activities in the country. The National Policy on Education as designed in 1997 and reviewed in 2004 and 2012 repetitively has also been the guide for special needs education in Nigeria until the awakening of the federal government during the first regime of President Mohammadu Buhari in the facilitating of a policy that will be targeted in special needs education. Although President Goodluck Jonathan made a move for the policy in the last lap of his second tenure, this was not a success. Hence, in the year 2015, the Honourable Minister of Education, Mallam Ibrahim Shekarau, and his team were involved in the designing of the SEN policy in Nigeria. The objectives and philosophy of the policy are as follows.

I. The first aim of the objective is to facilitate global best practices in special needs education in Nigeria. This is the process of bringing schools, homes, hospitals, and communities to work at the same pace in achieving success. Hence, an integrated special needs education that

is school-bound, home-bound, and hospital-bound.

- ii. Another objective of the policy is the promotion of children's rights and the reduction of negative labelling. It also aims at reducing the level of negative labelling, bullying, discrimination, and segregation among learners.
- iii. The policy also aims at the promotion of the holistic education as well as the reduction of out-of-school children in Nigerian special needs schools.
- iv. The policy is geared towards reducing "name-calling" among special needs children. It further infers that special needs are in typologies and should be addressed as such. These include visual impairment, speech impairment, health and physical impairment, hearing impairment, intellectual developmental disability, multiple disabilities, and others.
- v. The National Policy on Special Needs Education (2015) also aims in the promotion of early identification of needs. Also, the need for making more data available on special needs education. The proposes that more research has to be carried out in improving data availability in Nigerian special education.

Based on the objectives of the National Policy on Special Needs Education (2015), it has been found that there is still a low rate of funding for special schools and special needs activities in Nigeria. Uhunmwangho and Diakpomerere (2019) in a comparative study showed that Nigeria is one of the countries that have the least budget for education (8.4%) compared to Uganda (30%), Morocco (24%), Kenya (23%), Tunisia (17%), Lesotho (17%), and Nicaragua (15%) of the year 2012. This shows how the Nigerian government has not been able to show adequate commitment to the funding of education and special needs education respectively.

There have also been improved global practices in Nigerian special need education in terms of private-public partnerships in the promotion of school-bound, home-bound, and hospital-bound interaction in raising the total child. There are, however, issues with the promotion of child's

rights in Nigeria as more than four of every child with special needs battles with child abuse, trafficking, name-calling, and bullying . In addition to this, there is a need for Nigerian parents to start embracing children with special needs regardless of their needs and exceptionalities . It has also been reported that there is an alarming rate of the trafficking of children with intellectual disabilities . However, in a more recent study by Falodun (2023), it was reported that out of every 160 young autistic children in Nigeria, more than 50% are gaining access to quality training and education.

More so, private special needs educational centres are making efforts in delivering excellent educational services for special needs educators . Research and Development (R&D) as well as record keeping are also gaining more attention in the promotion of special need education in Nigeria . On this note, this shows that there is still a low level of National Policy on Special Needs Education implementation in Nigeria.

Barriers Facing SEN in Nigeria

Regardless of the success of special needs education in Nigeria as well as efforts made by the government in the designing of the National Policy on Special Needs Education (2015), there are still issues, concerns, and barriers mitigating the success of SEN in Nigeria. These are discussed as follows.

Inadequate Access to Fund

This is still a re-occurring problem mitigating SEN in Nigeria. Adejuwon (2012) asserted that funding has continued to hinder the success of quality special education in the country. This affects the professional development of teachers as well as the promotion of access to quality learning resources among learners. Oluyimide and Adekele (2021) revealed inadequate access to learning (human and non-human) resources in Nigerian special needs schools.

Negative Attitudes on the Part of Educational Stakeholders

Parents and teachers are still struggling with the promotion of quality education in Nigeria as they keep promoting segregation and discrimination among learners. Studies (Oluyimide & Adekele,

2021; Adedeji, Fraser, and Scott, 2022) asserted that educational stakeholders need to start seeing special needs children as part of human society, and not otherwise.

Policy Issues

Nigeria is a country that has been observed to have good and structured policies but fails when it comes to the aspect of implementation. This is the reality with National Policy on Special Needs Education (2015) which has been developed on the need to raise the standard and best educational processes. Regardless of the content of the policy, there are still struggles for implementation after 8 years of existence.

Poverty and Parental Participation

Poverty is a big deal when it comes to the quality promotion of education . It has been reported that about 133 million people are living in poverty in the first quarter of 2023 which shows the fact that not all parents can afford to send their special needs children to school. Although public special needs schools in Nigeria are not expensive, some of these schools are not fully equipped for quality education . Hence, while some parents enrol their children in private special needs schools, not all parents can afford the high cost of private-inclined schools. If parents do not also encourage and show their children love, there is little or nothing that can be done in schools .

Conclusion

Special needs education in different countries across the world is facilitated to give full support to children using adaptive methods. However, in the case of Nigeria, SEN has enjoyed some level of success such as increased awareness about special needs, partnership with international communities like UNESCO, and improved digital literacy. Further findings revealed that there is still a low level of National Policy on Special Needs Education implementation in Nigeria. Issues such as funding, policy implantation, poverty, and parental participation are still predominant in special needs education in Nigeria. It was recommended that government should be more involved in special needs education funding and teacher training should be taken more seriously as well as motivation and remuneration.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been made in tandem with the issues that have been raised in the paper.

- I. The Nigerian government needs to be more involved in the success of special needs education through funding, awareness creation, and quality assurance.
- ii. Teacher training should be taken more seriously as well as motivation and remuneration. According to Maslow's needs theory, motivation goes a long way in raising passionate teachers in SEN.
- iii. Parents and the larger community have to be more involved and committed to raising quality SEN. They need to give support to learners and teachers in the promotion of SEN in the country.
- iv. If the poverty rate in Nigeria is reduced, more successes will be recorded in special needs education schools in the country.

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