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Implementing Instructional Programs for Special Needs Learners in Nigeria

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Education in Nigeria

Nigeria is the largest country in West Africa, with a population currently estimated at over 70 million.* It occupies an area of 365,669 square miles and is made up of nineteen states. The Nigerian army has continued to rule since it took over the government of the country in January 1966, but a return to civilian government is expected to take place in 1979.

The responsibility for education is shared between the federal government and the state governments. Education in Nigeria was originally provided by Christian missions such as the Church Missionary Society, Church of Scotland Mission and the Methodist Church. After Nigeria attained independence in 1960 education increasingly became the responsibility of the state governments. State governments established public schools and also gave grants in aid to church operated schools. Between 1970 and 1975 most states took over all church owned and private owned schools and made it illegal for any agencies other than the state and federal governments to establish and operate schools.

States, however, soon discovered that the financial cost of operating schools for Nigeria's millions of school children was more than they could bear.

*A 1973 population census placed the population at 79 million but this figure was subsequently rejected by the government as being unreliable.

They called on the federal government for help and the federal government responded by taking over most of the cost of education. The federal government was in a good position to do so as it derived substantial revenue from mineral oil sales.

The years between 1973 and 1976 saw an unprecedented expansion in educational opportunities. Vast resources were channeled into education. The number of universities in the country was increased from six to thirteen, more secondary schools and colleges of technology were built, and the secondary school tuition fee was reduced to twenty naira a quarter (about 32 dollars). However, the most far reaching action taken by the government was the introduction of universal free primary education.

Before the introduction of universal free primary education, elementary education was limited to a relatively small percentage of the population. Universal free primary education aimed at making primary education available to all children without cost to the parents. This was a gigantic project in terms of cost, the number of teachers who had to be trained and the number of classrooms that had to be constructed. Universal free primary education started in the fall of 1976 with about 7.4 million children in elementary schools. This figure is expected to rise to 11.5 million in 1980. (Nigeria Year Book, 1975, p. 263)

Government Policy on Special Education

The introduction of the universal free primary education system cleared the way for governmental efforts in other areas of education. Special education had all along received very little emphasis in educational planning in Nigeria. This is perhaps to be expected since resources were hardly even sufficient for the education of students without any special needs. But all this has changed. In a recently published national policy on education the federal government defined special education as the

. . . education of children and adults who have learning difficulty because of different sorts of handicaps: blindness, partial sightedness, deafness, hardness of hearing, mental retardation, social maladjustment, physical handicap, etc., due to circumstances of birth, inheritance, social position, mental and physical health pattern or accident in later life.
(Federal Republic of Nigeria National Policy on Education, 1977, p. 23)

These children and adults are unable to cope with normal school organizations and methods because of their learning difficulties. But the policy statement also included within special education the education of

. . . specially gifted children who are intellectually precocious and find themselves insufficiently challenged by the programme of the normal schools and who may take to stubbornness and apathy, in resistance to it.
(Ibid.)

The three major special education goals announced by the government are:

- (i) to give concrete meaning to the idea of equalizing educational opportunities for all children, their physical, mental, emotional disabilities notwithstanding;
- (ii) to provide adequate education for all handicapped children and adults in order that they may fully play their roles in the development of the nation;
- (iii) to provide opportunities for exceptionally gifted children to develop at their own pace in the interest of the nation's economic and technological development.
(Ibid.)

In order to implement its policy on special education the federal government plans to set up a committee to coordinate special education. This committee would be established by the Federal Ministry of Education but would work in collaboration with the Ministries of Health, Social Welfare and Labor. The government also intends to identify all handicapped children and classify them by age, sex, locality and type. Schools would also be required to identify highly gifted children and draw the government's attention to them.

Identification of Special Needs Learners

The identification of special needs learners is not likely to be an easy task. The government plans to conduct a census of handicapped children but such a system of identification will only reveal children with a clearly visible physical handicap. Most special needs learners are not in school and therefore cannot be identified by teachers. There is at present no clear system for identifying special needs learners. Teachers, who should play an important part in the identification of special needs learners, may not be aware of the existence of many of these special needs learners.

The identification of special needs learners should involve collecting information with which to answer the following questions:

- (a) Which children have special learning difficulties?
- (b) In which part of the country do they live?
- (c) What is the nature of each child's handicap or learning difficulty?
- (d) What strong qualities does each child possess?

- (e) What learning environment or situation will be ideal for assisting each child to learn?

The problem of identifying and prescribing instructional strategy for special needs learners is complicated in Nigeria by lack of qualified personnel in the area of special education. The federal government, however, is taking steps to remedy the situation. The government plans to establish a National Teachers College for Special Education to train teachers and supporting staff required by schools, colleges and centers enrolling special needs learners. In the meantime the government awards scholarships to Nigerian students in foreign institutions who major in special education.

Instructional Arrangements

It is planned that most special needs learners will be educated in the ordinary primary and secondary schools. Separate schools for special needs students would be established only for the seriously handicapped, mentally retarded and the disabled whose handicap is so severe that they cannot reasonably be expected to derive much benefit from the ordinary school.

Elementary education in Nigeria starts at the age of 6 and continues until age 12. The introduction of universal free primary education means that all children will now be able to have this basic education. Education, however, is still not compulsory and many special needs learners may fail to attend school and may not be identified.

Elementary education is followed by a five year secondary education in either secondary grammar schools, secondary technical schools, commercial secondary schools, trade schools or trade centers. Places in secondary schools are severely limited and only selected students are given admission. Special needs learners are affected adversely by the selection process and rarely gain entry into secondary

schools.

If special needs learners are to be educated in the ordinary elementary and secondary schools more schools should be established and special facilities provided to assist the special needs learners. There is also an urgent need for the training of teachers who have the necessary skill and experience to plan and implement adequate instructional programs for children with learning difficulties. Without well trained personnel the education of special needs learners will not be effectively implemented.

Instructional Implementation

Instructional implementation will involve:
(i) analyzing instructional materials to determine their appropriateness for special needs learners;
(ii) providing appropriate feedback and reinforcement to ensure desired performance by special needs learners; (iii) modifying learning environment to minimize the learning difficulty of each special needs learner, and (iv) planning and coordinating work experience programs designed to serve special needs learners. (Phelps, 1976, p. 241)

The implementation of instruction requires qualified teachers and this the federal government of Nigeria is aware of. As noted earlier, a college will be established for the training of special needs teachers. The government intends to require vocational schools to reserve places for handicapped children and adults. Special programs would also be provided in the normal educational system for gifted children. The government also plans to provide suitable employment for handicapped adults who may be discriminated against in the job market.

Conclusion

The federal government of Nigeria is aware of the need for education of the special needs learner so that he can make his contribution to the

development of the country, but much remains to be done before an efficient system of special education can be implemented. Since many students without any learning difficulty are still not adequately educated, it is difficult to make far reaching plans for educating special needs learners. However, a plan has been drawn up and will be implemented as teachers and facilities become available.

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