

THE NIGERIAN CHILD: *His Education in a Sociological and Psychological Environment*



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The Exceptional Child in the Nigerian Society

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Who is an exceptional child?

Various attempts have been made to define the term exceptional child. This term may be used when referring to the particularly intelligent child or the child with an unusual talent. A typical or deviant child may also be considered exceptional in his own right. This term is often used and is generally accepted for the description of the handicapped or the gifted.

According to Ansa (1989), a child is considered exceptional when he differs from the norm by his mental, physical and socio-emotional characteristics to such an extent that the goals, methods or educational facilities appropriate for the education of others in his age group needs to be considerably adapted before it can be used successfully to educate him.

An exceptional child is defined as one who deviates from the norm. There are kinds of exceptionalities. For instance, a white headed child in a class would be considered exceptional. Equally, so is a child with a defective or missing finger would be exceptional. Actually, such deviations although of possible importance to physicians, geneticists and psychologists, are of little concern to teacher. Children are considered educationally exceptional only when it is necessary to meet their needs. Thus, a child is considered educationally exceptional if his educational development deviates in kind and degree to such an extent that it requires educational provisions not needed by most children for his maximum development.

From the afore-mentioned, exceptionality could be positive or nega-

Generally a gifted child is known to learn rapidly and easily, retain what he learns without much drill show much curiosity in questioning, and possesses a rich vocabulary marked by originality. He enjoys reading, shows interest in words and ideas, reasons thing out, possesses greater ability to generalised, knows and appreciates things which normal children are unaware of. The gifted child is interested in the nature of man and universe at early stage, seeks older companions, posses a good sense of humor and has desire to excel, Ansa (1989).

With these observable characteristics, it is the responsibility of the parents, teachers and other adults in the society to help in identifying children with such traits as this will help to give them adequate attention. The question of what attention has been accorded these ones in the academic arena will be discussed in the due course in this paper.

2. Identifying the physically handicapped

Identifying the physically handicapped is a relatively easy task as these disabilities are obvious often times. The less obvious situations like the hard of hearing and the partially seeing can be detected on close observation of the affected children. Children who have acute eye problems have symptoms such as incessant complain of eye pains, dry eyes, inability to see except at close range, tear flooded eyes while reading etc. If these problems are identified early and medical attention sought such condition can be brought under control.

Children with hearing difficulties often request a repeat of what has been said. Where they do not sit on the front row, they often move towards the front to be able to hear the teacher well. These children and others with their peculiar problems need special attention if they must benefit reasonably in the school setting.

Societal attitude towards the exceptional child

Like observed while defining who an exceptional child is, we have the positively exceptional and the negatively exceptional. The very intelligent and gifted even though positively gifted does not necessarily have the best of treatments and attention from the society. From the home, such children are tagged names like “I too know”. For those who have the gifts in manipulative skills are generally considered as being destructive. This is because out of curiosity they are given to dismantling objects in order to inspect the build-up. Those children given to reading are also nick named “book worms”. These name-calling does not encourage these children rather often they are pushed back into their shells.

The situation does not seem to improve even at school. The teacher’s inability to identify and give these sets of children the needed attention also affects them adversely. The very intelligent ones feel delayed where they are expected to go at the same pace with other children in class. The delay most often culminates into loss of interest by the gifted child, who at times may be forced to consider himself abnormal since he finds himself always different from others. In recent years, the government has established a school for the gifted children in Suleja – Niger State. This is a welcome relief for those who have the opportunity to attend it.

The negatively exceptional are worst – of in respect of the attitude of the society towards them. They are generally looked at as misfits and as sources of problem. To their immediate families they are sources of embarrassment and a purposed “Cog in their wheel of progress”.

At school, the handicapped are often abandoned, disregarded and generally considered as people who cannot benefit from formal education. Children who are partially blind, hard of hearing even though they look physically normal may not be able to benefit maximally from normal classroom learning, thus, they are easily classified “idiots” or

“morons” for no fault of theirs. It is common to hear parents, teachers, classmates and other members of the society call them names such as dunce, idiots, foolish and the like. This invariably brings down their morale and forces them out of school.

The attitude of the smaller units of society home and school – is a reflection of the attitude of the general society. This is evident in the general lack of interest in the welfare of this group of people. Apart from schools and rehabilitation centres developed, and manned by philanthropic organizations and church groups the government is generally disinterested and uncommitted. This is evidenced by the number of handicapped people on our streets begging for alms.

If the government of Nigeria is to cater for all her citizens, their situation at hand is very unbecoming and should be addressed with the urgency it deserves.

Educational opportunities of the exceptional child

The Nigerian educational objectives as provided in the constitutions of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, section 18 subsection 1, merely states that “Government shall direct its policy towards ensuring that there are equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels” Section 18: 3 further states that “Government shall strive to eradicate illiteracy, and to this end, Government shall as at when practicable provide:

- ◆ free compulsory and universal primary education
- ◆ free secondary education
- ◆ free university education and
- ◆ free adult literacy programme.”

However, it must be noted that this constitutional provision does not confer automatic right to education and no citizen in Nigeria can force any government to provide education of any type for him.

The philosophical concept that "all men are created equal" is upheld the world over. This concept implies equal educational opportunities for all. By implication, every child has the right to receive help in learning to the limits of his or her capacity. Thus, whether a child has average high, low or retarded intelligence, he has the right to education adapted in order that he can develop maximally subject to his capacity. In other words, notwithstanding the physical state, every child has a right to education

Having man as its unit of development, education is not designed for normal people only but for all who can benefit from it including the physically handicapped (Ekpenyong, 1995). The Federal Government in its National Policy on Education (1981) states its purpose and Objectives thus:

- ♦ To give concrete meaning to the idea of equalizing educational opportunities for all children, their physical mental, emotional disabilities notwithstanding and
- ♦ 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.

Despite obvious limitations of the child, in other democratic societies, the denial of the right to education is unjustifiable, but in Nigeria, the case is different. Even though lip service has been paid to the education of the handicapped in the National Policy of Education (1981) the actual implementation and the realization of these educational objectives is far from being fulfilled.

In order to be able to help children with various forms of limitation (suffered through no faults of theirs) there must be a process to identify and select them for special attention. Without a pre determined identification and placement procedure, the partially seeing, the blind, those with impaired hearing, the dumb and the orthopedically handicapped can easily be neglected.

In our regular school system, it is common knowledge that most of these children are marginalised mocked, or outrightly asked to withdraw from school. Where they are allowed to continue in school, no special attention is accorded them to enable them learn, bearing in mind their peculiar circumstances. For example, a child with sight problems may easily be regarded as a dull child especially when he can not read as well as his mates without any extra effort on the part of the teacher, this child can be abandoned and attention given to the brighter children. The neglect will most likely force the child out of school. The situation can also be applicable to children with auditory problems. If their handicap were identified early and appropriate attention and treatment given then, the latent talents in these ones could have been tapped and harnessed properly. Due to lack of interest in these children, they end up as school dropouts and invariably a problem to both their parents and the larger society.

Others, whose handicaps are obvious, like the very blind, deaf, dumb and the orthopedically handicapped even from their homes, may usually not be given adequate attention. They may be considered as social misfits, a burden to their families and at times a source of embarrassment to their parents and immediate families. It is then not uncommon to see this set of humans litter the streets, and public places just to beg for alms to enable them keep body and soul together.

If these people were given any opportunities to be trained, they would have been gainfully employed. One may then ask whose responsibility it is to train these children. In Nigeria today, the welfare of the less fortunate has often been seen as the responsibility of philanthropic organizations, churches and well meaning individuals. The government has done negligibly in this area. Until lately where government funded women organization like (Family Support Programme) have developed destitute homes and similar institutions to cater for this group of less privileged human beings; the care for the handicapped

had been left mainly to philanthropic organization and church groups.

For exceptional children to be given adequate education there must be a degree of specialty due to their peculiar educational needs.

Special education has been defined by Ekpenyong, (1995) as those additional services, over and above the regular school programme, that are provided for exceptional children to assist in the development of their potentialities and or ameliorate their disabilities.

Special education for the gifted child

Due to their high intellectual and creative endowment, this group of children find it difficult to cope with the regular classroom situation. Very often, learning experiences adjudged adequate for his class and age mates often become a source of draw back and therefore frustrating to the gifted child. Where they are found in a regular classroom the teacher is expected to give them special attention by assigning them with activities that are higher than what others are given. Teachers are also expected to give them extra lessons to help satisfy their curiosity and stay ahead. Yet these are mere wishes as the conditions in the schools do not seem to allow for this type of extra work.

First, individualized learning in the Nigerian educational system is very different, as the extraordinarily large classes do not allow the teacher to give each child a personal attention. An average class in most Nigerian school contains between 35-45 children. Moreover, in our primary schools for instance a class teacher is expected to teach at least five to eight subjects in a day. This kind of workload in an already very large class does not give a good environment for individualized learning.

The poor remuneration and lack of incentives for the teachers is another limitation, which does not encourage the teachers to take an additional burden. It is common knowledge that most schoolteachers

engage in other trades and jobs for them to generate enough income to take care of their families and responsibilities. If the teacher must give these special sets of children an extra attention and time, there is need for improved remuneration and increased incentive for teachers.

Despite the situation in our schools, all hope is not lost as the government has established a few schools for the gifted. Even though these schools are considered as schools for the privileged few, yet it is considered as a start step forward to care for the education of this group of children.

Problems of integrating the handicapped child into the Nigerian educational Setting.

Even though the need to educate the handicapped has been identified in the country the actual implementation has been bugged down by various and varied problems as identified by Obot (1998).

- (a) Lack of Personnel: a regular teacher cannot teach the handicapped adequately. In this wise, the inclusion of special education as a compulsory course in undergraduate teacher training programme is a welcomed development. This training will increase the general awareness of the teachers on the needs of the exceptional child. This general training should not impede the further training of specialized teachers in this area.
- (b) Lack of Public Enlightenment: The public needs to be aware of the need that the handicapped children can live a normal life. Parents of these children should be encouraged to send them to school.
- (c) Poor Public attitudes towards the physically handicapped: In Nigeria the handicapped is generally looked at as societal misfit. Where care is given to them, it is done with an attitude of pessimistic sympathy rather than an optimistic attitude emphasizing this breed of pupils and reinforces the feeling of helplessness in the disabled. (Eleri, 1992).
- (d) Lack of transportation: The physically handicapped lacks accessible transportation. It may not be easy to convey his wheel

- chair to school, for example; hence, he cannot go to school.
- (e) Poor Finance: Available private special schools are reasonably expensive. So an average handicapped child cannot attend. Where the government or philanthropic organizations try to help the financial implication obviously limit the adequate equipping of such schools.
 - (f) Inadequate curriculum: Regular school curriculum cannot benefit all categories of physically handicapped children. There is the need to re-evaluate and adapt the present school curriculum to suit the physically handicapped children in areas of safety and introducing relevant vocational education programmes.
 - (g) Architectural Accessibility: Wherever the disable children are, physical barriers to their independent functioning and movement frequently confront them. These and other inconveniences make integration difficult. For instance, absence of ramps does not allow children with wheel chairs or crutches to enter building easily.
 - (h) Lack of Employment: Even when they overcome some teething limitations to get educated, a regular employment becomes another task. This tends to discourage their efforts towards self-fulfillment.

With all the good intentions of government as spelt out in the National Policy on Education (1981), the listed problems still make it obvious that Nigeria is not adequately set out to implement educational integration for all categories of citizens.

Conclusion

The exceptional child either positive or negative needs a special attention. This responsibility starts from the home, to the school to the general society. The government must set up specific programmes, facilities and amenities for this group of citizens. It is unethical for them to be neglected or abandoned.

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