



# The place of a true Special Education System for English Language Learners in Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

*It is well-known that students with learning disabilities struggle significantly in the Nigerian education system when learning the English language is not an exemption. Even though an inclusive education law was passed under President Goodluck Jonathan's administration which mandated schools to close the existing gap between pupils with special needs and their peers, the law offered no guidance for teachers on best-supporting language learners in the classroom. From all of the challenges faced by English Language Learners, the significant ones that confront learners with special needs were extensively reviewed. It was recommended that summits be organized, teachers be evaluated, trained, and developed, and specific bodies be eradicated. There should be a collaboration between the Nigerian government as these would contribute mainly to the evaluation and teaching-learning process of learners with special needs. A conclusion was reached that all stakeholders, including evaluation and guidelines, are a vital part of the Response to Intervention (RTI) structure. Hence, their utmost support is a crucial component.*

**Key Words:** Disproportionate Representation, English Language, Learners, Inclusive learning, Special Needs.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's special education system has been around for a while, but only in the last few decades did it gain widespread attention. In the 1950s, special education began to make inroads into the Nigerian school system. Schooling for the visually impaired took precedence then, followed by programs for people who are deaf or hard of hearing. Early special education was greatly influenced by Christian missionaries. The establishments of Gindiri School for the Blind by the Sudan United Mission in 1953 and Wesley School for the Deaf in 1956 are examples of the first set of schools that were designed specifically for students with special needs (Amos, 2018; Ajavon, 2006). Most of the Churches oversaw special education institutions during that period. Special education should have been addressed in the enacted regional education laws. The government's involvement in special education was limited to funding mission-led special schools. Reading, writing, and arithmetic were emphasized in the special education curriculum. Furthermore, the Blind were provided with reading instruction.

To build its ideal system of Education, after independence, the Nigerian curriculum developed, and certain things were put in place, such as The National Curriculum Conference, The Nigerian Educational Research Council –NERC, and The National Policy on Education. According to Imam (2012:188), the Federal Government of Nigeria convened a seminar that included several eminent experts in 1973, which led to the Federal Government taking over public and specialized schools in 1975. We could state that the embracement of special education by the Federal Government of Nigeria was birthed during this seminar. A collaboration among the Federal and State Ministries of Education in Nigeria later led to ground-breaking decisions concerning special education. The National Policy for Education (NPE) that year mirrored these choices. To the nation's credit, the National Policy on Education of 1977 included a whole chapter devoted to developing a specialized schooling system. Each of the original 19 states in the Federation's Ministry of Education established a Special Education Unit within one of its Directorates to coordinate and direct the expansion and maintenance of the field. The federal government, flush with oil-boom-era tax revenue, offered scholarships to prospective special education teachers to receive education in the United States or Europe. Roughly contemporaneously, a handful of Nigeria's universities and colleges of education established special education departments. In doing so, they responded to a section of the National Policy on Education (NPE, 1977) that called for special education in university-level programs that prepare teachers. Scholarship programs for study abroad were terminated by the Federal Government of Nigeria in 1983. The onus for special education teacher preparation must fall on local universities.

There is a critical shortage of qualified special education teachers, so an increasing number of schools are offering advanced degrees, national certificates, and diplomas in the field. However, the quality of special education offered by our schools is too

conservative and narrow in scope and focus to meet the challenges of teaching children with special needs. In this paper, we will compare and contrast the liberal nature of special education worldwide with the conservative approach taken in Nigeria. The report concludes with recommendations that, if implemented, would advance the field of special education in Nigeria and bring our practices in line with international standards.

Since there is an increasing number of students who are studying English as a second language in tertiary institutions (also known as English language Studies (ELS)), the educational community in Nigeria has strived to on addressing the challenges faced by this demographic and find solutions to the problems that have hindered their academic success. The achievement gap between students with special needs and their counterparts has received continuously increased attention from many stakeholders, which hold schools accountable for closing the gap. Even with the existing information gap on how to carry out an ideal inclusive classroom setting since the commencement of its bill, educators have been concerned about how to give those pupils the best practices.

Like the effect the soil has on the plant, that is what culture and linguistic exposure have on a language learner, which could form a basis for distinctive differences. Hence, the educational requirements for every language learner are different. Aside from these two general causes of challenges in ELS students, those with special needs tend to face additional ones. It is, therefore, expedient to discuss some critical points like policies, instructional recommendations, stakeholders' roles, problem identification, Response to Intervention (RTI) assessment, legal issues, as well as teacher training for instructors of ELLs with special needs.

## **2.0 COMPETITON AND BEST PRACTICES ON A GLOBAL SCALE**

A measure of an education system's effectiveness is its "global competitiveness," or the caliber of the services it provides globally. Our programs need to be in sync with industry developments to compete globally. In order to increase labor productivity, highly educated workers are seen as a source of innovation (Okpala, 2014, p. 3). Okpala cites Benhabib and Spiegel (1994) to make this point. Okpala (2014) states that a country's productivity will suffer if its educational system cannot produce qualified workers. Global competence is essential in today's business environment, according to Van Fleet and Winthrop (2010). Therefore, our special educators must develop a global competence to maintain a competitive edge in the international market. Current issues of global importance, such as inclusive education, social inclusion, sustainable development, social justice, affirmative action, equal opportunity, and human rights, require our active participation and cooperation with the international community. Sadly, in Nigeria, special education does not prioritize these concerns.

Here in Nigeria, we are happy to stick with the same old-school curriculum and 18th-century understanding of special education, so we keep rehashing the same tired ideas instead of adapting to the realities of today's best practices in inclusive education for students with special needs. For instance, modern definitions of 'disability' no longer equate it with lacking a particular body part. It is now understood that those who do not value and develop their unique strengths suffer from a mental impairment. Similarly, "handicap" is no longer synonymous with being unable to carry out an activity within the typical range. Instead, it is recognized as a socially constructed barrier that prevents individuals from realizing their full potential. Although "impairment" is commonly used to describe physical defects or malfunctions, today, it more often describes the emotional state of hopelessness that prevents a person from exploring new options.

Significant shifts and developments in special education on a global scale over the past 48 years (1970-2018) are compared to the state of special education in Nigeria over the same period.

## **2.0 PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS WITH DISABILITIES**

The teaching and learning process may pose a gigantic difficulty for a teacher who has not been groomed to comprehend the concerns to be taken into account while imparting knowledge in ELS with special needs because the group has additional challenges aside from cultural and linguistic differences, as such, may not be able to deliver appropriate services to their ELS students with disability perfectly. This segment, therefore, sheds light on topics like teacher preparation, individualization, professional development, and policies.

In Nigeria, special education needs to be given the attention it deserves. Over forty years after the National Policy on Education (NPE) creation, Ajao (2008) lamented that the policy had failed to be implemented and that education in Nigeria had fallen into a dark age marked by brain drain. As if the shortage of innovative talent in special education was not bad enough, we are at a loss as to how to proceed. Our ideas and theories about special education have been passed down from generation to generation without significant change. We continue as if the fifty years that have passed since the introduction of special education in Nigeria have not occurred. Despite the passage of time, we still need to update our understanding and continue to use the same ineffective methods, theories, and curricula.

Obiakor (1998:57) lamented the poor state of special education in Nigeria, noting that the country had sunk to mediocrity and that its many different cultures constantly interfered with attempts to improve the system. Orakpo and Abayomi (2016) reported that most of the people we currently have in special education are people who did not choose to study the course in the first place, which is a significant factor in how we got to this point. Since they were denied entry to their preferred reading levels, they were placed in Special Education. They were only interested in getting a special education certificate so they could go on to other careers. There was never any consideration for or interest in special education or people with disabilities. They are 'embarrassed' to be associated with 'abnormal' kids and people, and this stigma makes them feel ashamed. They try to hide that they are majoring in special education because they are embarrassed to be associated with students stigmatized by society.

Some specialized schools try to reassure their ad hoc students by portraying special education as a scientific field, like rehabilitation studies. This statement raises doubts. Rehabilitation Science, as defined by the University of Toronto, is an interdisciplinary field investigating the connection between people's ability to perform daily tasks and their overall health and happiness. According to CU Boulder, Rehabilitation Science is a multidisciplinary field that studies and treats people with disabilities through the lens of the health sciences, the social sciences, and engineering. Students enrolled in Rehabilitation Sciences are expected to have a background in fields such as medicine, bioengineering, the social sciences, health economy, and similar fields, but not in education. Only in Nigeria would you find people so desperate to invent a meaningless link between two completely unrelated fields as education and rehabilitation science. Oddly, no academic institution in Nigeria has yet to establish a Department dedicated solely to inclusive education. Inclusion in regular classrooms is a primary goal of special education programs worldwide.

There is a cost to the current trend of shoving everyone who doesn't fit the mold into special education and the demand for fake and misleading names. The field of special education needs to catch up on its true north, its *raison d'être*, and its ultimate goals. These days, we care more about enrolling a large number of students in our programs than providing the high-quality education we were initially tasked with providing. As a result of class sizes being too large, many students in our country need more opportunities to receive a good education. We are so focused on outnumbering other Departments' enrollment numbers that we still need to remember that we are competing for global excellence and raising our standards to global best practices.

There has been a lot of damage done by our current methods, not just to the field of special education but to the students, special needs learners, and teachers in the field as well. We are only contributing to the country's high unemployment rate when we enroll a hundred or more students who find themselves in special education against their will and then see them graduate four years later. Hundreds of our graduates in the field of special education each year are left wondering where the jobs are. What have we taught these alums that will help them succeed in alternative fields of special education? We dumb down our instruction to a level only suitable for pupils in primary schools just so those reluctant students will pass our courses and feel like they belong as if special education in Nigeria had not been damaged enough already. Can we seriously claim that we are training the teachers who will establish a robust special education system in the country if we lower our standards to such an absurd degree? For our students with special needs, what kind of a future are we planning? By continually reinforcing the most fundamental ideas, we stunt our growth. Knowledge and development will be stifled if we are unable to think beyond the level we are accustomed to teaching. Employees in the field of special education should be creative thinkers, not religious fundamentalists.

### **3.0 TEACHER EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Difficulties in professional development and teacher preparation as well as identification and assessment may spring forth if a teacher needs to learn how to teach or assess English Learning which may eventually lead to the instructor struggling to meet his or her learner's classroom requirement. To avert this, it is expedient that teachers who are teaching special needs learners of the English language acquire significant work knowledge work of culture, disability, and linguistics (Hammer et al., 2010) because a child's overall intellectual, cognitive, and academic excellence may be impacted by factors like his or her culture and mother tongue, so, the teachers ought to know little about all of these (Kushner & Ortiz, 2000).

Many teachers who teach ELS classes for students with and without Special needs are unfortunately not well equipped because they need to engage in courses or training programs emphasizing various linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Ortiz & Yates, 2001), leading to insufficient credentials and experience. Equally, teachers with certification in special needs education are very scarce, leading to a shortage of qualified instructors in the field (Boe et al., 2008). All of these shed light on the fact that the academic standards of a citadel of learning cannot be high if the teachers deliver low-quality to students with or without learning impairments.

#### 4.0 CONSIDERATION FOR POLICIES AND LAW

In Nigeria, there is a significant minority representation of students living with special needs, and their educational environment is overly restrictive. To address this, there is a need for policies that enforce and monitor their overrepresentation in an educational environment to be put in place. Having put the policies in place, total adherence to these policies, which includes methods, rules, and practices, must be seen to achieve desired results (Mueller et al., 2004).

Finally, because there is a shortage of licensed special education teachers and school counselors, identifying, understanding, assessing, and evaluating pupils with special needs could be more efficient, thus, leading to improper referral of ELS with special needs. Although all hands are on deck to ensure the policies progress, the disproportionate presence of ELS in special education reflects a general need for more awareness of the impact of language and cultural diversity on student accomplishment.

#### 5.0 RESOLUTIONS TO PROBLEMS THAT ARE FACING TEACHING-LEARNING PROCESS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS WITH DISABILITIES

**5.1 CURRICULUM:** How to determine an appropriate curriculum and enrich an educational environment that will help with easy identification, assessment, and instruction of ELS with special needs has been one of the concerns raised given the increasing number of students with special needs and their probable low academic achievement. Regarding these concerns, assessment standards, Response to Intervention which constitutes a large quota to the acceptable curriculum, and the roles of all relevant stakeholders will be discussed because all of these factors, plus the participation of all relevant parties, make a rich learning environment.

Students with special needs should be objectively assessed (McLoughlin & Lewis, 2008). To evaluate ELLS with special needs, a variety of evaluations and sampling techniques that instructors can adopt as guides without any form of bias being added should be considered. Some of the evaluations are conventional intellectual performance assessments, functional behavioral assessments, and learning disability identification tests (McLoughlin & Lewis, 2008), while some of the sampling techniques include: classroom observation, interviews with students and parents, and task portfolios, which can produce meaningful data (Ysseldyke & Algozine, 2006).

**5.2 TEACHERS** are to be open when directions are being delivered, when tasks are being presented, or when questions are being responded to during evaluation procedures due to their limited knowledge of the student's cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Hence, they must familiarize themselves with students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Familiarizing themselves with learners' linguistic and cultural background will also help teachers consider an intensive curriculum, and supplemental help have been offered impartially within a multi-tiered structure before referring a kid with special needs.

The teacher should focus more on watching the students because classroom behavior and participation are more important than test results from exams. As such, ELLs with special needs should be assessed based on classroom performance rather than test exams that do not wholly measure their ability (Figueroa, 2002). It is also important that the teacher consider s all of these when planning the lesson plan. The former would help.

Diversity may pose a challenge in offering educational programs and services channeled at meeting each student's specific needs. RTI can replace conventional approaches for identifying, assessing, and teaching. It is a multi-stage process that involves (a) systematic, research-based interventions, (b) measuring student response to implemented interventions, including level and pace, and (c) making instructional decisions based on data (Mellard, 2004; Johnson et al., 2006). In order to combine assessment and intervention and achieve grade-level state criteria, it also mandates that schools keep a close eye on each student's development (Fuchs et al., 2003). At higher levels, instruction must be more prolonged and more intensive.

#### 5.3 FAMILIES AND STAKEHOLDERS

English Language Learners and students with special needs benefit from increased communication and collaboration among school administrators, teachers, and parents (Keller-Allen, 2006). Educators should take the initiative to collaborate with all parties involved, including policymakers, governmental agencies, researchers, and the families of students with special needs. They can significantly impact learners' schooling and life outcomes individually and in tandem. For this reason, educators must work together with parents, administrators, and community members to share academic progress and strategies for success. In addition to fostering a cooperative relationship, scheduling regular meetings with the parents of special needs students can provide valuable information for planning and implementing lessons.

## 6. 0 RECCOMENDATIONS

If the education of people living with special needs, learning difficulties, or disabilities in Nigeria is to be improved, then numerous modifications need to be put in place or established. Here is a list of significant ones:

Departments of Inclusive and Special Education: In lieu of the name Special Education Department, Inclusive and Special Education should be adopted in higher learning institutes and government parastatals.

**6.1 INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATIONS:** Knowledge exchange at the international level should be sought, which can be done when Universities and the Federal Ministry of Education and Universities liaise and collaborate with international organizations and some overseas universities to improve teachers' abilities to engage in the inclusive teaching-learning process.

**6.2 EDUCATION SUBMIT FOR ALL:** An international standard-level summit on inclusive education aiming at discourses surrounding reimagining national and institutional special needs education ought to be organized by the federal government of Nigeria. Like this, every stakeholder in the industry will be driven by a common goal of aligning and updating teaching methods to fit into international practices and implementation of inclusive forms of education in Nigeria.

**6.3 ASSOCIATION IN SPECIALISED FIELD** Since The National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET) serves almost the same function as The National Association for Exceptional Children (NAEC), then they should be abolished so that the latter can be fully equipped with activities such as international cooperation, capacity building, staff development, and advisory services. There is also a need to identify experts in relevant fields distinctively. This will encourage lively debates amongst experts in the relevant sectors and lead to the adoption of best practices in inclusive and special education in Nigeria.

## 7.0 CONCLUSION

The receptiveness to changes enhancing special needs education in Nigeria is glaring because the country has ratified the optional protocol and the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD). It is expedient that the country unendingly searches for assistance from its Western world counterparts on special needs education reform and apply the strategies here without delay. Equally, the body in charge of passing the bill, "The National Assembly," should implement the bill that supports disability rights even if it means having a constitutional revision. As the head of the nation, the President is expected to promulgate the National Assembly's recently authorized disability statute. With these projects completed, disabled people in Nigeria would experience newfound hope and prospects for participation in societal advancement.

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