

## **EDUCATION OF THE DISABLED IN NIGERIA: ACCESS AND PERCEPTION**

**Christopher M. NKECHI, Ph.D<sup>43</sup>**

**Institution: Dept. of Communication and language Arts, University of Ibadan,  
Ibadan Nigeria**

**Postal address: U.I. Post Office Box 14427, Ibadan Nigeria**

### **Abstract**

*Grappling with various elements of development, Nigeria has not been well placed to tackle problems confronting the education system in general and those of the disabled persons in particular. To find out the state of affairs of education of the disabled in Nigeria and students' perception of inclusive education, among other issues, an exploratory study was carried out. The study indicates that Nigeria has limited facilities for the education of disabled children, many children apparently lack access to education and learning aids and equipment are extremely inadequate. It is obvious that Nigeria needs to address the issue of access to education while working towards achieving inclusive education.*

**Keywords:** *disability, poverty, segregation, facilities, education*

### **Introduction**

A significant number of Nigerians are disabled and without access to education. The National Television Authority (NTA) reported on 10 August 2008 that the Federal Office of Statistics estimates that 30% of 150 million Nigerians are disabled. The same medium informed the next day that 14 million disabled persons inaugurated a disabled people's group. ASCEND (Association for Comprehensive Empowerment of Nigerians with Disabilities), officially launched in 2006, claims that 19 million Nigerians live with disabilities, (<http://www.ascendnigeria.com/aboutusascend.html>). However, until recently, this set of people had largely been ignored, partly because their voice was not being heard. Their number, predicaments and needs are only just beginning to get into public consciousness as the disabled persons pushed for the passage of a Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities Bill in the National House of Assembly.

Prior to this time, they were only on public consciousness as street beggars; that is, disabled people were, as a norm, expected to beg to meet their basic daily needs, while those able-bodied people that beg are scorned. Poverty and limited level of development have militated against the disabled people of Nigeria: families scarcely can provide the needs of other members, including basic education, and are therefore not in the position to take on the additional more demanding responsibility of a disabled member. Similarly, since the country is behind in the provision of basic infrastructural facilities for the larger

---

<sup>43</sup> [nmxtopher@gmail.com](mailto:nmxtopher@gmail.com)

society, the needs of the disabled could not be attended to by a country grappling with the pains of evolution from its primordial state into a modern society. Specifically, the public education system today has failed because governments at various levels are yet to get on top of rudimentary issues surrounding the provision of quality education to the ordinary Nigerian child at any level. Therefore, dedicating needed attention and resources to developing a system of care for little-known portion of society whose need however is enormous can understandably not have come to the front burner of national policy design, especially considering that disability was yet to attract enough sympathy from communities. Again, providing for the disabled is a learning process; and integrating them into mainstream society requires creativity, all of which can take place when the disabled are very visible. Fortunately, Nigerian government is beginning to give them recognition.

Having accepted that every citizen is entitled to formal education, the government must now provide functional education to the disabled people of Nigeria so as to liberate them from excessive dependency and despondency. Education is important for the wellbeing of the individual and enables a person to function in society. In fact, the ramifications of education as a human right continue to unfold as efforts are being made to realise education for all. Today, education is not only the gateway to meaningful living, but in addition, life-long learning has become crucial for survival and progress in an information-based networked world. In an ever-changing world order people need information to be able to adapt to life in their community, and can only do so if they are sufficiently literate. An uneducated non-disabled person today is incapacitated, and an uneducated disabled person is despondent. The uneducated person is a burden on society, and the disabled more so, because, rather than contribute to development, they deplete resources. Investment in the education of the disabled is therefore seen as an investment for the general good of the society, since the uneducated disabled persons will most likely remain poor and increase the incidence of poverty in society (Lawrence, 2004; Jonsson & Wiman, 2001).

The indication is that Nigeria is not yet positioned to mainstream disabled people into the larger society due to the absence of facilities and amenities that are disabled persons friendly. Similarly, although it is recommended that disabled children should learn in an inclusive environment because “children learn best when they learn together” (World Bank, 2003 [p. 2]), it may yet be impracticable for Nigeria to do so right away, since roads and buildings will need restructuring. For this same reason, inclusive education which has been found to be cost-effective in the long run (Peter, 2007) may not be practicable in Nigeria yet, if the highest number of disabled people are to access education. While inclusive education should be practised where practicable, the most important concern might be how to make education accessible to all disabled children *immediately*, even if through the establishment of special schools and units. Moreover, the importance of adequate experience and increased manpower (teachers and care-givers) cannot be ignored or downplayed in designing inclusive education.

Considering that there are many children on the street, a study was embarked upon to find out the education opportunities available to disabled children and how disabled students perceive their education. This paper reports on an exploratory and descriptive study that was carried out on three states in Nigeria on two aspects of the education of the disabled. The next section discusses findings on disabled children’s access to education using information derived from interview sessions with education managers and school

teachers in institutions for the disabled, while the section after presents students' perception of their education programme as elicited using a questionnaire administered with assistance of teachers.

### **1. Access to education**

In the 1980-90 decade notable achievements in the field of special education were recorded. To meet the nation's special educational needs, the Nigerian government sponsored studies in diverse areas of special education within and outside the country (FME, 1986). In addition to special schools and special units in mainstream schools, it also established rehabilitation centres around the country for the education and vocational training of people with disabilities. Nonetheless, a lot still needs to be done to guarantee Nigerian children quality education that can empower them to cope with or transform the world around them. Generally, disabled children attend special (integrated) schools for handicapped children at primary level; and mainstreaming is practised to a large extent at secondary level, but with schools dedicated to a particular disability, for example visual or hearing impairment. Although inclusive education has become a major focus internationally, ensuring that disabled children have access to education at all is still a major concern in Nigeria, there being limited access to schools for the disabled.

### **2. Policy**

The Nigerian government offers Universal Basic Education (UBE) to every Nigerian child – free primary and junior secondary nine-year education. UBE documents emphasise “access, equality, equity, inclusiveness, affordability and quality” (e.g. Osuji, 2004: 4) of education among all Nigerian children. By implication disabled children are entitled to free education that should guarantee sufficient level of literacy for future learning in vocational or academic pursuit. UBE has led to astronomical increase in school attendance, yet there are indications that many disabled children are not captured by the UBE programme. Prior to UBE, a Federal Government document (FME, 1986) on special education in Nigeria clearly outlined steps and procedures that are in line with current international recommendations and best practices (e.g. Lawrence, 2004), and which ought to have ensured early intervention and effective inclusive education by now if implemented. According to the World Bank (2003 [p.3]) “early intervention in small, multi-ability groups is important when children are still in the formative stage of development.” However the policy on special education was not carried through and the momentum of that decade was lost. Nonetheless, a landmark achievement is the establishment of Special Education as a field of study in tertiary institutions and colleges of education.

The task of educating Nigerian children is enormous, considering that the country's population is large and its growth untamed, and that the country is transiting from agrarian-based economy to a modern one. Hopefully, with the current active participation of educated disabled persons in pushing for recognition of people living with disabilities and their special needs in society, the education of disabled children will eventually extend beyond the privileged few to all. The disability groups in different states are no longer silent as this excerpt indicates:

About 5000 disabled people in Anambra State yesterday protested what they saw as government's neglect and political exploitation of their plight... One of the disabled, Mr.

Ambrose Okeke, said although they were not beggars, they wanted government to touch their lives and assist them in various areas, instead of treating them like animals. He said, “Our members were angry because they kept us waiting [on World Disabled Day] from 10am to 4.30pm without a word from either the Governor or any official” (Collins, 2010: 4).

Ekiti State in December 2009 passed a bill to protect and promote the rights of people living with disability – it offers automatic scholarship to disabled persons (Ikujuni, 2009). This came after the Nigerian Senate passed a bill on Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities in March 2009 (Ogala, 2009).

***Availability and types of facilities for disabled children:***

The number and spread of special education facilities differ from state to state – some areas/cities do not have any. For example, as at 2009, Oyo State had 18 facilities for primary education in 14 local government areas (LGAs) with four in one LGA, two in a second and one each in 14; implying that 15 (out of 33) other LGAs have none. Similarly, as at 2008 while Oyo State had 26 public primary and (junior) secondary schools for disabled children, Osun State had 18 (both states are in the South western zone of the country), Bayelsa State (South-south) had just one facility for both primary and secondary education. Further, the level of inclusion practised at secondary school level differs. In one school in Oyo State, the deaf learn in the same class with the non-disabled students through an interpreter, while in another, a special deaf unit has been upgraded to a school within a school. Few schools have residential facilities.

Effort is being made to supply the necessary equipment, materials and learning aids; but as in other areas, state governments differ somewhat in the assistance given to disabled students. In Bayelsa State, students are given bursary awards annually; Oyo and Osun States provide residential facilities and offer lunch. In all, the gap between minimum requirements and what is provided is still much. For example, there are little or no assistive technologies; and computers are uncommon.

In Nigeria today, the presence, rather than absence of special schools or units (in regular schools) are indications that attention is being paid to the education of the disabled; their absence implies that those children with special needs are excluded. Therefore, with only one special school for the education of the handicapped, and no other provision in regular schools, Bayelsa State guarantees the disabled little access to education, especially since it has no residential facilities. Further data on the three states are given below:

***Table (i): Public facilities available for the education of disabled children in three states***

		<b>Bayelsa State</b>	<b>Osun State</b>	<b>Oyo State</b>
<i>As at</i>		<i>2008</i>	<i>2007</i>	<i>2005</i>
Primary	Number of schools	1	10	16
	Population	<89	974	2,040
Secondary	Number of schools	1	9	10
	Population	<89	NA	500

Bayelsa State: the primary and secondary schools are in the same place, and the total population as at 2008 is 89.

From available data, 76% of children with disabilities attend schools that admit diverse cases of disabilities, which constitute 75% of schools. In Osun, all schools are integrated, with only one private school dedicated to just one disability. Classes are however differentiated for each type of disability. However, the data obtained for Oyo State indicate that the percentage that transit from primary to secondary is low. As Jonsson and Wiman's (2001) observe, disabled children enrolment and attainment rates are lower than those of the non-disabled, and more so in developing countries for which 1–3% enrolment is estimated.

### ***Some factors limiting access to education***

The number of special educators is small and limits how many special units can be established in schools, as well as the extent inclusive education can be practised. Similarly, facilities are too few and far apart, and many are not disabled people friendly. At such facilities equipment, aids and material provision is inadequate. Some blind people lacked basic learning tools such as typewriters, brailing machines, brailing sheets, stylus, textbooks, and talking calculators; and some hearing impaired needed hearing aids, etc. In fact, many were unaware of existing learning aids. This lack discourages continued schooling, as it also leads to only the highly determined and exceptionally intelligent choosing to pursue their education to a reasonable extent.

It is expensive for families to educate disabled children, especially in an environment (infrastructures) that is generally people unfriendly and definitely unsafe for free movement by the disabled. People lack the wherewithal for transporting the disabled to and from school. Some families are just too poor to be of help to a disabled child, so much so that some fail to pick up their children for holidays or return them to school at the end of holidays (when they are taken to them by care-givers). The cost of educating a disabled child in Nigeria is variously put at 4–10 times that of a non-disabled child (personal interviews). As Jonsson and Wiman (2001: 11) observe:

The incentives of households to enroll their disabled children is discouraged by lack of appropriate schooling options, poor accessibility of facilities, long distances and lack of transportation, school fees and cost of uniforms, and/or low expected returns to schooling for disabled children.

Besides, while some perfunctorily send their disabled ones to “somewhere” just because a place exists for the disabled many feel that investment in the disabled child is a waste. In addition, disability is still considered a taboo, a disgrace, a thing of shame, an embarrassment to a family, etc., such that many parents lack the courage to expose their disabled children to the public, preferring to hide them rather than seek means of educating or empowering them (early). Due to lack of timely intervention and remediation, it is no surprise that many disabled children enter school much later than their non-disabled counterparts, as the table below indicates.

**Table (ii): Respondent average percentage, age at primary 1 and age at first year in junior secondary**

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>	<i>N</i>
Respondents' Age	18.69	13	36	4.360	89
Age in Pry 1	8.68	4	18	2.957	66
Age in JSS 1	15.77	11	22	2.499	61

*Note: Only four students in the sample are mentally challenged.*

Schools lack adequate teachers and other specialists, as well as equipment and resources. Expectedly, not many children spend enough time schooling. In many instances, getting through with education depends on the individual disabled person's determination to overcome challenges in the environment, and where people do not believe that disabled people can tap their potentials to become useful to themselves and society at large. However, asked to indicate their agreement with the statement that "the society has *not* provided what will help me become who I can become," 34.4% of students in this study disagreed, 36.7% agreed, while 28% could not say.

### **3. Students' perception of their education programme**

A questionnaire was administered on secondary school students with various disabilities. Of the 90 students drawn from five schools in two states, 39 were in regular schools, 51 were in special schools. There were more males (55) than females (34). The table below shows the distribution of the respondents according to disabling conditions.

**Table (iii): Distribution of respondents by type of disability**

		<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Cumulative Percent</i>
1	Blind	11	12.2	12.2
2	Physical disability	21	23.3	35.6
3	Deaf	44	48.9	84.4
4	Mentally challenged	3	3.3	87.8
5	2+4	1	1.1	88.9
6	2+3	10	11.1	100.0
	Total	90	100.0	

Students' perception on various issues that have to do with their education was elicited using two sets of five-point Likert scales requesting them to indicate 1) how much they agreed with a statement and 2) the extent to which a statement was true. Their responses are discussed under three subsections below, focusing on what education means to the individual, individual's assessment of own academic potential and performance, and whether inclusive or segregated education is preferred.

#### ***What education means to the individual***

According to Lawrence (2001:5) education is "a facilitator in everyone's human development and functionality." Further, the World Bank (2003 [p.2]) observes that it is

“lack of schooling and not their disability [that] limits their opportunities.” This study finds that students’ perception of the significance of education in their lives supports these assertions. Several of the students (86.5%) saw education as a means of achieving their dreams, 85.4% considered it important for inclusion in society, while 78.7% agreed that educated disabled people are in a position to manage disability better than the non-educated. In addition, 63% believed that disabled people can easily find jobs.

On whether, generally speaking, education is a right, privilege or favour, 62% of all respondents saw it as a right, 61.5% as a privilege, but 45.5% saw education as a favour. Furthermore, asked to characterise the education they were receiving, 37% saw it as a right, 34% as a privilege and 29% as a favour. Given the Nigerian environment where many disabled persons cannot access education, government-supported education may be perceived as a favour. In addition, it seems that an environment that supports interaction of a disabled person with others with similar disability gives a disabled person more confidence to cope with the challenges of disability. Thus, of 28 respondents that described their own education as a privilege, 21 belonged to the same (residential) school which is fully catered for by the government. Some of the respondents were glad to have special educators that could appreciate and attend to their special needs. Even though this is in line with the advocacy for universal education (e.g. Peters, 2007), such “privilege” is indeed a favour in an environment where regular education is neither funded or is partially supported by governments. In addition, it would have become obvious to the students that most parents are helpless without government support. The implication is that the education of the disabled in Nigeria today will suffer if placed on the same pedestal with regular education, which is yet to attract sufficient funding and provision of material resources.

No matter how it is viewed (a right, privilege or favour), education of the disabled is of utmost importance; and there is a growing realisation that it is key to securing their other rights in society (Peters, 2007).

#### *Assessment of academic potentials and performance*

The respondents in the study seem to be highly motivated by their aspirations. As many as 96.6% were positive about their future after their secondary education and as many indicated that they wished to further their studies in a tertiary institution. Although 43% indicated that disability limits what they want to do or become, as many as 85% were convinced that they can study whatever they wished to. Most (73.5%) believe that, with the right assistance, disabled people can do well academically. Similarly, 78.4% assessed themselves as capable of performing as well as non-disabled children, and 85.2% as possessing equal potentials with the non-disabled for becoming professionals.

In terms of actual performance, 77.7% believed that they were doing as well as other children academically. However, 24% were not sure that they understood what was being taught (69% were certain that they did), and while 34.5% were not sure that they were performing well in the class, 60.9% assessed themselves positively.

Students’ performance can be mediated by many factors, some of which have already been pointed out. Incidentally, some of the students were not aware of what devices are needed to aid learning. One other factor was teacher capacity and availability. Sixty-four percent (64%) of the students indicated that teachers were available for all subjects, but some also pointed out a need for more special educators. Similarly, 63.6% assessed

their teachers as capable of helping them to learn – but there is a wide variation in response among schools. More than half of those (30 of 55) that made the assertion that their teachers were capable belonged to the same school (the only special school involved in the study); and only one person from that school was not sure. All of 12 students from an inclusive school did not assess their teachers as capable. Nonetheless, 79.6% of the respondents think that teachers need more training so as to relate better with disabled students. This also suggests that for inclusive education to be beneficial and conducive to disabled and non-disabled students alike, all teachers will require some form of training in relating with and teaching those with special needs.

#### 4. Inclusive or segregated education

In view of international advocacy for inclusive education, this study elicited students' responses on inclusive education and its inherent benefit. Equal numbers of students (46.6%) were for or against persons with disability living in a community of their own – the deaf favoured segregation. However, 65% felt that teasing was not a problem to them, just as 60% disagreed that name-calling and teasing (question of acceptance of person) constitute sufficient reason to put disabled children in separate schools. In terms of preference in individual relationships with the disabled and non-disabled mates, 19% did not enjoy either, while 44.6% enjoyed both. Overall, 54% wanted to associate with non-disabled mates, and 68.6% wanted to associate with disabled age-mates. The table below gives further information.

**Table (iv): Percentage of deaf respondents that enjoy being with mates**

	<i>With non-disabled</i>	<i>With disabled</i>
School 1 (high inclusiveness)	54%	83.3%
School 2 (low inclusiveness)	25%	37.6%

In School 1 the deaf learn in the same class with non-impaired students through an interpreter, while in School 2 the hearing impaired students occupy a block of classrooms exclusively but within the bigger school. School 2 students are taught exclusively. Expectedly, there would be more interactions between hearing-impaired and non-impaired students in School 1 than in School 2, since the non-impaired would also be able to pick up sign language with which to communicate with their hearing-impaired mates. The data in the table suggest that hearing impaired students in School 1 (high inclusive) had better interaction within the disability group and across group than those in School 2 (low inclusiveness) whose relationship within and across group might be poor. Therefore, the deaf in the high inclusive school might have a higher level of wellbeing. This finding supports Jonsson and Wiman (2001) and Peters (2007) assertion that inclusive education is far more beneficial to the disabled and society than non-inclusive education. Contrary to expectation, a blind student in the present study, who incidentally was in a higher class than his non-disabled twin brother, in expressing preference for inclusive education, asserted that the superior performance of the disabled could serve as motivation to the visually unimpaired, by encouraging them to put in more effort in their studies.

Bakker and Bosman (2003) found in their study that students' self-image is strongly related to performance level, and therefore suggest that students' social and emotional wellbeing be given more consideration since school experiences could affect emotional health well into adulthood. The above notwithstanding, the debate on inclusiveness or exclusiveness is not over – studies reviewed by Bakker and Bosman (2003) show mixed

outcomes on students' self-image in inclusive and non-inclusive environments. Besides, inclusive education does not guarantee integration or inclusiveness of disabled students pedagogically (Peters, 2007) or in everyday activities of regular school communities without some efforts (Copeland et al., 2005). According to Copeland et al. (2005), discussants in focus groups observed that during school interactional programmes disabled students did not participate in everyday social and academic events. The high school students in their study believed that the general education environments are typically unsupportive of students with severe disabilities.

Nevertheless, most respondents (80.7%) in the study reported here agreed with the statement that "Disabled children should attend the same schools with other children." It should however be borne in mind also that special schools/units in Nigeria may provide superior pedagogy, as students' assessment of their teacher competence and availability in this study suggests.

### **5. Outlook on education of children with disability in Nigeria**

Government and the general public are becoming more aware of disabilities and people with disabilities. The media has been instrumental in propagating the message of hope and solution to those families with disability problems. Of particular note is a live TV programme sponsored and co-presented by a blind lawyer, Sunday Ayodele Adekanbi titled, "Beyond the Limits." The programme has created much awareness and interest about people living with disabilities in society, leading to the appreciation of disability (it is not a mysterious evil) and acceptance of disabled people. Consequently, local governments, social associations, organisations, churches and individuals are assisting people with disability through provision of needed equipment. The Oyo State government, for example, has built two additional primary schools since 2005 (making it 18 of such facilities in the state). Further, efforts are being made to equip all schools for the disabled and provide full boarding facilities.

"Beyond the Limits" paved the way for the creation of the office of Special Adviser on disability matters to the state governor in Oyo State. Adekanbi has succeeded in spreading the idea to other states, and a coalition of nine special advisers in 2008 had 16 members by the end of 2009. Their goal is to ensure that the interest of disabled people is represented, and that they participate in decision-making. Efforts by disability bodies has culminated in the passing of relevant bill by the House of Assembly, which in respect of education provides that all higher institutions should install elevators for free movement of people with disabilities, that visually impaired people should be provided all texts in Braille from primary school level to ensure early start in literacy in Braille, and that education should be free for the disabled.

### **6. Conclusion**

The study suggests that students' wellbeing is better in inclusive than segregated education, but, however, that teachers in special schools are better skilled in handling learning disabilities (Jenkins and Leicester, 1992) than those in regular schools. The study further reveals that education is important for the formation of positive self-image and for functioning in society and that despite disabling conditions the disabled students rated their own academic potentials and performance positively. These indicate that if the 1986 policy on special education is revisited and implemented it will align the education of the disabled

in Nigeria with international best practices. It is important to note that inclusive education cannot succeed without inadequacies in general education properly and forcefully addressed; and that quality need not be compromised for quantity so that children are not disabled through schooling, rather than enabled through education. In addition, to encourage free movement of people with disability meaningful changes in public infrastructures is inevitable.

Nigeria may not attend optimal mainstreaming of the disabled in schools and society at large in the nearest future. It should however ensure access to quality education. Special schools may be expanded and special units established in as many schools as feasible, and select schools can have residential facilities for the disabled. Inclusiveness can increase as experience is gained about disabilities and education of those with special needs, disabilities are accepted by people as normal in society, and physical infrastructures are made friendly for all. Meanwhile, henceforth universal design should be employed in future construction of buildings, roads and other amenities.

### References

- Collins, C. (January 31, 2010). NBA, disabled citizens, stage protest. *The Guardian*, p.4.
- Bakker, J. T. A. and Bosman, A. M. T. (2003). Self-image and peer acceptance of Dutch students in regular and special education. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 26, 5–11.
- Copeland, S. R. Hughes, C., Carter, E. W., Guth, C., Presley, J. A., Williams, C. R., Fowler, S. E. (2005). Increasing access to general education: Perspectives of participants in a high school peer support program. *Remedial and Special Education*, 25, 342–352.
- FME. (1986). *Statistics of special education development in Nigeria, 1986: A case study*. Nigeria: Federal Ministry of Education.
- Jenkins, J. R. & Leicester, N. (1992). Specialized instruction within general education: A case study of one elementary school. *Exceptional Children*, 58, 555–563.
- Jonsson, T and Wiman, R. (2001). *Education, poverty and disability in developing countries: A technical note*. Retrieved July 22, 2008 from World Bank website: <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DISABILITY/Resources/280658-1172610312075/EducationPovJonsson.pdf>.
- Lawrence, J. (2004). The Right to Education for Persons with Disabilities: Towards Inclusion: Conceptual Paper. Retrieved July 22, 2008 from UNESCO website: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001378/137873e.pdf>.
- Osuji, F. (2004). *The education system at the beginning of the twenty first century: An overview and assessment. A presentation at the Forty-seven session of the International Conference on Education*. Geneva, 8 – 11 September. [Electronic version].
- Peter, S. J. (2007). ‘Education for all?’ A historical analysis of international inclusive education policy and individuals with disabilities. [Electronic version]. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 18, 98–108
- World Bank (August, 2003). *Education Notes*. Retrieved July 30, 2008 from World Bank website: <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EDUCATION/Resources/Education-Notes/EdNotesDisability.pdf>.