

# **DILEMMAS OF PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTION**

**By PROF. SUNDAY D. OSAAT & ENEOJO, JACOB ALLAHNA**

Department of Educational Foundations,  
Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to examine the dilemmas of parents of children living with disabilities in Nigeria and how through the instrumentality of educational intervention, both parents and their children can be helped. The study relied on secondary data, observation and interaction with parents of such children. Living with disability in Nigeria has been described as nightmare. This is due to cultural and traditional perceptions of members of the society about their plight. While developed countries of the world are supporting people with special needs not only to cope with their challenges but also to rise beyond their plights to become functional members of the society, their counterparts in Nigeria are suffering from neglects and gross discrimination. Apart of the victim themselves, the other set of people most affected by this are the parents and families of people living with disabilities. There is an increasing call for inclusive education for both learners with special needs and the other learners in the main stream school. Advocates for inclusive system believe that special schools are discriminatory and will not help them integrate properly into the society. Little or nothing is being done in Nigeria to achieve this. Mainstream schools reject learners with special needs and special schools are not affordable, where they are affordable; they do little to help the learners overcome their challenges. It is also found that Parents of children with special needs or disabilities go through a lot of trauma and frustration as they seek help for their children. This is because discrimination and traditional beliefs are affecting them. The study recommends government intervention by educating the public on the causes of disability rather than attributing it to some mystical causes or as consequences for violating a taboo. Government also needs to invest in the training of teachers, care givers to be well equipped to help learners. Provision of modern facilities to help schools admit learners with special needs in order to help cater effectively for their needs. This should be another means of achieving quality, equality, inclusivity and access to education in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Dilemmas, Special Need, Educational Intervention

## **Introduction**

The situation of people with physical and learning disabilities more than ever before has become a great reason for concern, especially in developing countries. Nigeria has a population of over 140 million people. Out of these people, UNDP 2004 World Population Prospects in Smith (n.d) stated that 14 million live with one form of disability or the other. Categories of disabilities

common in Nigeria according to Schneidder in Deepak et al (2017) include seeing, hearing, speaking, moving around; learning disability which include inability to comprehend, inability to reach out to object, hold or grip. These and many other disabilities pose great challenge to one's ability to be educated or become of help to themselves and the community in which they live. The Federal Ministry of Education (2015) admitted that although Nigeria is making efforts at providing special Needs Education but the practice falls short of best practice when compared to what is obtainable in other parts of the world. The practice is not harnessing technological advantage to help people with disabilities. There are little or no human and material resources to cater for the people with special needs education.

Aboluwade (2018) stated that living with disability in Nigeria is a nightmare, not only for the victims, but the entire family. Parents of children with disabilities and people with disabilities face serious dilemmas in Nigeria and these problems are threatening access to educational intervention. The way parents, society, government and other children react to people with disability determines whether or not any government policies or educational intervention will be successful. This work looks at how prevailing societal beliefs, culture and tradition pose threats to the realization of inclusive educational intervention for people with disabilities. Children with disabilities are highly stigmatized in Nigeria. This accounts for why many parents would not want to take their children to mainstream schools. Depending on the physical severity of disability, many parents still prefer to send their kids to special schools where they can meet with children with similar challenges only to avoid stigmatization. All these and more are dilemmas faced by both parents of children with disabilities and the children themselves, and this is affecting the realization of any educational intervention. The purpose of this work is to evaluate the various challenges militating against inclusive educational programme for people with disabilities in Nigeria and recommend measures on how all these dilemmas can be handled so as not to affect the education of people with special needs. The work relies on observations, interviews, personal experiences, books, journal articles and other important government and non-governmental documents, data and information gathering.

### **Perception of Nigerians about disability**

Except for very educated people in the area of health and disability, many people, especially in developing countries like Nigeria have negative perception about people with disabilities. Analysing the situation in Ghana, Tijm, Cornielje and Edusei (2011) noted that family members of people with disabilities consider them as people of no value to their families or society. This in many cases leads to rejection, exclusion and discrimination. In Nigeria, being disabled is like a death sentence. Both parents and siblings do not care about them. When the family goes out for leisure, the child with disability is locked in the house lonely and miserable until they return. In social gathering, people with disabilities are not always welcome. They are discriminated against even in the area of task that their disability does not prevent them from doing. According to Carlson (2013) one may never understand what discrimination really means until you are at the receiving end. We will generally say that discrimination means to be avoided, rejected or not

given the recognition one deserves, but it goes beyond that. It means to be cruelly mistreated and ostracized. Many people with disabilities share their experiences in the society.

Carlson said that she never understood what discrimination really was until she was 14 years old after her spinal cord injury from a diving accident which led to her disability. She said that on a daily basis, people with disability face discrimination in public places that have employees; five out of ten employees believe that people with physical disabilities are mentally ill-equipped. As if their physical disability has affected every good thing about them. At the grocery store, they attend to disabled people with so much reluctance, fearing they may not have the money to pay for what they are ordering. This can be very frustrating. They also complain that vehicles pass them by despite all attempt to call for their services, “not wanting to deal with our extra needs” says Tiffany. Many countries and architects are still not aware or are refusing to accept the fact that people with disabilities are also members of the society with equal rights and privileges. Architectural designs and buildings have deprived people with disability access to certain places. No provision is made in many public places for people who use wheel chairs. This is a subtle way of saying they are not needed here.

### **Religions Perspectives on disabilities**

When one is rejected and discriminated against in the society, the next place they want to take solace is in the loving arm of religion. Snow (n.d) stated that philosophically, places of religious worship such as churches, synagogues and the like should have been “havens of inclusion” for the disabled and handicapped, but it is really not so as we expect. Where some of them are allowed into the church, they are quarantined in a corner of the church where cameras cannot show them. Fellow members of churches may not want to stay or seat close to a person with disability. This is not what we read about Jesus, the very head of the Christian faith. He calls all, helped the helpless, healed the disabled-blind, lame, lunatic, etc. Shouldn't his followers emulate him and make people with disability feel loved and welcome? Regrettably, even many church private schools do not admit their own members with physical disability. Suffice to say then that the church may have worsened the plight of people with disabilities.

In Judaism, persons with any form of disability are not fit to be priest or to even appear before the symbolic presence of God. From different biblical accounts, it appears that people with disability were excluded from public life. David in (2 Samuel 9:3ff) thought that Saul and Jonathan were not survived by anyone, until Ziba told him that Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth was still very much alive with what sound like a stigmatizing qualification “which is lame on his feet”. Even though he was a prince, but because of his disability, he had to live far from public glare. Blanks and Smith (2009) are of the opinion that Jonathan's son was not a threat to David kingship because his obvious physical disability has legally excluded him from ever becoming a king. Israel's kings were able-bodied. No disabled person has ever ruled Israel as a nation as far as biblical records reveals. They were to be fit because of the fact that all kings in Israel went out for war with the armies.

On the part of Islam, Blanks and Smith (2009) have described the religion as the most inclusive of people with disabilities. Islam believes that God (Allah) is perfect and does not create imperfect human. It believes that their condition is the will of God and no human should go against God's will. This is perhaps, responsible for why we see so much of disabled people on the streets of Northern Nigeria. This region of the country is dominated by Muslims. They have so much regard for people with disability in such a way that it does not help them become self reliant. Vast majority of them, rather than the government encouraging them to go to school or learn a skill for self reliance, they are allowed to go around the streets and neighbourhood begging for food and money. Because Islam is also a very generous religion with the command of the Holy Quran to help the poor and disabled, people with disability enjoy begging for alms. Attempts by some state government to clear them from the road and empower them were met with stiff resistance.

While Judaism and the Christian Old Testament scriptures set limits to the extent a person with disabilities should participate in religious and public life, Islamic laws as stipulated by the Holy Quran calls for the involvement of people with disabilities in both social and religious life without fear of contacting or being infected with such disabilities. In Islam according to Miles in Blanks and Smith (2009) one's disability does not religiously or socially define him or her. It is not too clear whether Islam support attempts, medically or otherwise to correct or help people with disability become normal. This may look like a mortal man trying to alter the will of God, since according to Islam God intentionally created them that way.

This also has great implications for medical and educational intervention. So as to answer what Islam has to say about treatment of disability. Though its position about disability as the will of God creates the impression that any form of treatment will amount to violating God's will, Ghaly (2008) stated that Islam fully support the treatment of ailment or disabilities. There were ancient Muslim Physicians who see medicine as an important medium to bring someone close to God. According to Qaradawi in Ghaly (2008), Alshafi'I was thus quoted. "Do not live in a place where you have no scholar to inform you about your religion and no physician to inform you about your body". (Al-shafi'I in Ghaly 2008). If this is the case, Islam should necessarily come to terms with the fact that disability like other ill health conditions are deviation from what is normal. If we say something is in its perfect state, you do not do anything to correct what is already perfect. Disability is not a perfect condition; some can be treated while others can be managed to help the individuals master their conditions and become independent of others' help.

### **Cultural/Traditional beliefs about disabilities**

Culture and traditional beliefs still have great influence on how Africans interpret or define events and occurrences. We may think that education has eroded many of these beliefs, but it hasn't. One of the most difficult ideas to erase from the hearts of people is culture/traditions that are rooted in belief. Traditional beliefs about the causes of disabilities are one of the biggest challenges that are confronting any action towards helping people with disabilities. A person living in any community in Nigeria does not need any literature to see the different diagnosis

given by traditional healers on the cause of disabilities. When a child with disability is born, parents in some traditional setting are made to take the child to a traditional healer to state what the problem is and what was responsible for such birth. Depending on the type and severity of the condition, the traditionalist may say that the family has violated a taboo, or the child is evil and have been sent to cause destruction in the land and must be banished at once. For example, MacDonald and Butera (n. d) state that the Nandi people of Kenya believe that it was a taboo for a husband to have sex with his wife during pregnancy as that will result in physical deformity in the child. Some are attributed to reincarnation. A very wicked man in his previous life has been born to pay for his wicked deeds in the first life. Among the Igala people in Nigeria, when a child is born deformed or with some mysterious ailment, it may be because the woman had committed adultery.

A classic example is the ancient Yoruba mythology 'Abiku'. It literally means to give birth and the child dies. In her review of Abiku by Wole Soyinka, Alabere (2016) stated that Abikus are spirits who may be having spiritual families in the invisible world. These spirits are hungry and since no one offers sacrifices to them, they come into families by birth and at the peak of happiness they die after making the parents go through some hardship. While some of the frequent deaths of children in such families may be as a result of sickle cell anaemia, but are attributed to some mysterious occurrences. The United Nations' Department of Economic and social Affairs (n.d). Corroborate that many Nigerians believe that disability is as a result of either curse from God or disobedience to ancestral laws, family sin, witchcrafts activities, misfortune, etc. All these make parents of children with disability hide them from public glare or even kill them in order to avoid the shame.

Eskay, et al (2012) stressed the importance of studying a culture before proposing any intervention. This is because the culture in which persons with disabilities live determines the place or position given to them. According to them, one of the biggest problems faced by children with disabilities is misunderstanding and misrepresentation of their conditions. It is the misunderstanding that has led to the negative treatments meted out on them. To this effect, aggressive awareness campaign must be carried out in order to correct the negative attribute of the society. Some children with disabilities have taken their own lives because they cannot stand the emotional trauma resulting from the negative attitude against them. In such a culture, how many children will be willing to go to school?

Another factor that leads to negative attitudes towards people with disabilities is ignorance. The reason why some members of the society discriminate against people with disabilities is not because of religion, cultural, or traditional beliefs, but pure ignorance. Persons may be well educated but since they do not know the cause of the condition, they want to keep it at a distance. When a person does not know that untreated infection of a pregnant woman could lead to blindness of the baby, may think that some mysterious event must be responsible. Some parents never knew the existence of certain disease or deformity until they are born into their family. One of the causes of deformity at birth is attributed to genetic factor, where either of the parents

passes onto their babies genetic abnormalities. According to Healthline (2017) this occurs when a gene is flawed as a result of a mutation or change. In other instance, it may be that part of a gene is missing. Healthline admit that some causes of abnormalities are difficult or even impossible to identify but certain lifestyles increase the chances of giving birth to defective children. Such behaviours include drinking alcohol, smoking, illegal substance such as drugs during pregnancy. Others are excessive exposure to viruses and toxic chemicals.

Knowledge of these will change people's negative attitude to people with disabilities. In Nigeria, all odds are against people with disabilities, especially children who have the potentials to change their fortune, if necessary, help and support are given. The resultant culture according to Kolawole (2016) has robbed this group of Nigerians their rights to the dignity of human person despite their challenges and the opportunity to contribute their own quota to the development of their country. This is happening not because there are no laws or legal documents that specify the rights of these people, but their rights continue to be violated because there is no pragmatic efforts by the government to protect them. Efforts by international community through various instruments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Salamanca Statements among others have not yielded the desired results.

### **Parents and Family Reactions to Children with Disabilities**

Finding out that your child has a disability can be very traumatizing. Imaging a family expecting the birth of their first child, only for them to be greeted with the sight of a physically deformed child. Logsdon (2018) believed that such situation is one of most serious stressors for the parents. One cannot exactly explain how parents of children with and disabilities feel, especially when the disability will require that another person takes care support the child for the rest of his life. According to Logsdon (2018), common reactions of parents include denial, anger, grief and eventual relief. Many times, parents refuse to accept any diagnosis that their children have any learning disability, especially when the disability is not an obvious physical handicap. They give excuses why their children are not doing well academically. It is common to see parents telling the school that they are not doing enough to help the child's academic challenges. They go as far as changing school for their wards to prove their point. Some parents accuse their children of being too lazy and that is what is responsible for their setback.

Many of such parents display obvious anger against the school, their children, teachers and whoever comes their way. When eventually they come to understand the problem of their child through empirical evidence, what follows is grief. They are grieved as if they have lost a child. The dream of every parent is to see their child grow into becoming a responsible, functional and successful adult member of the society. Grief may occur throughout life as long as the problem persists. Rejection, anger and grief may continue, especially when parents do not know what the problem really is with their child. During an interview with a young mother who gave birth to a collodion baby, she was asked to talk about how she felt having such a baby. She explained that before the birth of the boy, she had never heard, read or seen a collodion baby all her life. The

doctor who conducted the delivery said that he had never seen such a thing in his life. They went from one hospital to another in search of not just the solution, but what the problem is. They went to four hospitals in a major city in Nigeria, but the doctors did not know what the condition was. A friend directed them to a paediatrician whom on sighting the baby, exclaimed “Ah this is a collodion baby!”. The mother of the baby felt great relief just to know that the condition has a name and there are people who have gone through and are still going through the condition. Others feel better to know that there is a remedy for the problem.

Siblings of children with disabilities are not left out. The knowledge that a family member has a disability affects the other siblings. Ritchie (2013) reported that siblings exhibit feeling of shame and embarrassment to be associated with someone with disability. They feel rejected and abandoned because all the care of the mother is given to their brother with disability. Some of them are afraid they could be affected by the disability or they may be carrying the gene and one day, they may give birth to a deformed child. In some Nigerian homes, it is common to see a child being deprived of education in order to stay at home to take care of a brother or sister who has disability. While the parents go out to provide for the needs of the family one of the children stays back continually at home to care for the incapacitated brother or sister. In Nigerian society where traditional and cultural beliefs place a stigma on people with disabilities, siblings suffer a lot of embarrassing situations. They can be socially isolated and stigmatized in school and community by their peers. Only very few persons are willing to be their friends. This goes a long way to negatively affect their academic achievement. They are always sad that people treat them the way they do because of their sibling. Sometimes, they go through more emotional trauma than the child having the disability. It is common in Africa, especially in Nigerian communities to find a husband divorcing his wife for giving birth to a child with disability. A study on Down syndrome conducted in Israel as reported by Ritchie (2013) showed that 25% of families abandon their children in the hospital. This is how much disability can tear families apart, devastate individuals and deprive others of a successful future.

### **Learners with Disabilities in School**

It is important to state here that the prevailing cultural practices and beliefs in a society cannot be divorced from its educational system. The negative attitudes towards people with disability are being imported into the school. Even in the developed countries of the West where inclusive education has been a subject on the front burner of their educational research for many decades, Boer, Piji and Minnaert (2012) stated that some children with disabilities still find it very difficult to be accepted by peers or school. Considering researches on student’s behavioural intentions towards peers with disabilities, Boer, Pijl and Minnaert reported that many students held neutral behavioural intentions towards students. This shows the extent of awareness in such societies and the students in particular. It is either they were neutral towards them or they displayed positive attitude towards the students with disabilities. The case is different in developing countries. Due to the general negative or unwelcome attitudes towards students with disabilities, many of those children do not go to school. Many parents do not even send them to

school due to shame and that the child may be abused and ridiculed. Parents of children with disabilities and the children themselves do not like to be steered at when they go out.

Teachers' attitude towards inclusion and students with disabilities is a big factor to consider if inclusion will be a success in any school. Different studies reveal that while some teachers favour inclusion, some opposed the idea. For instance, Florian in Dukmak (2013) reported that many regular classroom teachers objected to the inclusion of learners with special educational needs as that will either slow down other learner or even disrupt the effectiveness of their lessons. Indeed, depending on the severity of the condition, severe disability can indeed slow down the pace of other learners in a situation every learner has to be carried along. However, in a situation where the goal is not that all students must study at the same pace, inclusion is possible. Other teachers believe it is the best way to help learners with disabilities. Results of a study carried out on Greek teachers by Zoniou-sideri and Vlachou, 2006 as reported by Kukmak (2013) stated that teachers believe that inclusive education is a better way of improving students' relationship with children with disabilities. It helps to reducing discrimination, marginalization and stigmatization of such children. However, they believe that children with learning disabilities can be better help in certain areas of their learning when they are separated. Ordinarily, majority of teachers will not support inclusive education system for learners with disabilities, this is because it is hard work, and efforts to carry the slow learners along may frustrate and drag the smart learners. Not too many researches are available regarding teachers' attitude towards children with disability in inclusive classroom generally in Nigeria. However, from the few works available and observation from inspections, unpublished data and reactions of teachers in such classroom, one can have an idea of what their attitudes are. Fakolade, Adeniyi and Tella (2009) in a research conducted in Nigerian on teachers' attitudes to inclusive educational programme found out that female teachers have more positive disposition to children with disabilities in a general school. Teachers who are married have more positive attitude to inclusion of students with special needs in a mainstream school than unmarried ones. This may not be unconnected with the fact that mothers and women are more empathic than men and unmarried women. More so, they reported that most of the negative attitude of teachers is as a result of lack of knowledge and training.

### **Other Barriers to Inclusive Education in Nigeria**

Beside the challenges confronting inclusive education for people with disabilities that have been discussed above, other barriers are institutional and government related problems. A major problem is funding. For a long time, budgetary allocation to education has been grossly insufficient for its operation. Educational practitioners have on a yearly basis lamented over the poor funding of education in Nigeria. One of the major reasons why education in Nigeria has not been able to compete favourably with other countries is due to the poor attitude of government in funding. In 2015 for instance, 12.46% of the total budget was allocated to the Federal Ministry of Education, but was cut down to 7.04% in 2018 despite increase in the general budget (Budgit, 2018). In 2012, 9.86% of the total budget was allocated, in 2013, it was 10.21%, 2014 has



12.05%, in 2015, 12.46% was allocated; 2016 got 9.17%, 2017 was given 7.31% and in 2018, it was further reduced to 7.04%. A casual look at the figures shows a very sharp decrease in 2016 under a new government and since then, it has been crumbling. These figures do not show commitment on the part of government to make education succeed in the country. There is also the monster called corruption in Nigeria that swallows funds meant for good things. Individuals in positions of leadership divert money meant for development. This is greatly affecting the quality of education delivery in Nigeria.

### **Implications**

The implications of all the dilemmas enumerated in this work for inclusive educational intervention are glaring. The situations have kept children and adults with disabilities out of school. Many cannot stand the humiliation created by the prevailing cultural, religious and traditional beliefs about people with disabilities. Where parents are willing to send their disabled children to school, schools are ill-equipped to meet their needs. It is on this premise that Oladele, Ogunwale and Dafwat (2016) lamented that even though the Nigerian National Policy on Education appears viable but has not been able to provide inclusive educational opportunities for people with disabilities. Very importantly in the case of how disabled are treated, is the fact that its has a serious implication on the government educational intervention programme to the extent that quality, equality, inclusivity and accessibility to education cannot be achieved in an appreciable level in Nigeria.

### **The Way Forward**

Successful inclusion of people with disabilities in mainstream schools requires a lot in Nigeria. First is to be able to create an atmosphere where people with disabilities can be willing to attend school. There is need for cultural and traditional reorientation. The Nigerian National Orientation agency must take the lead role in the awareness campaign. Members of the Nigerian public must be educated on the causes of disabilities. It will really take concerted and persistent effort to achieve this, because when beliefs are internalized, logical reasoning becomes difficult. There was a time in Nigeria when Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) was a serious problem. One can recall how the government through various media was able to halt the barbaric practice. In the same vein, government and non-governmental organizations can take up campaign against discrimination against people with disabilities. Laws that protect the rights and privileges of people with disabilities should be revived. Public or private schools that refuse to admit people with disabilities should be sanctioned. Parents should be encouraged not to hide their children, but release them to go to regular schools. Audio, visual, print and social media in different languages should be employed.

There is also acute shortage of information about inclusive education practices among educational practitioners; teachers, school administrators and school owners in Nigeria. Oladele, Ogunwale and Dafwat (2016) noted that very few teachers are aware of inclusive educational practice. They lamented that participants in the study who are supposed to be at the fore-front of

advocacy for inclusion are ignorant of the concept, practice and importance of inclusive education. If teachers are this ignorant, what will one expect from the members of the public?

There is need for training and retraining of teachers for the task of inclusive education. This is because many teachers believe that having learners with disability in the regular school makes teaching very difficult and stressful. Most teachers recommend special schools for learners with disabilities. Training should include strategies for individualized teaching, full knowledge of the disabilities and soft skills such as patience, empathy and love for such learners.

There is also need for increased funding. This is because there will be need to equip classrooms with technological aids to teaching and learning to help learners with disabilities. The need for reconstruction, renovation and reorganization of classroom will definitely arise to cater for the needs of divergent learners. Ashi, Olayi and Ikwen (2015) asserted that provision of services for people with disabilities are quite expensive and encouraged government, philanthropists, agencies and other organizations to lend helping hands in the provision of all it takes to help special need learners. Other learners should not only be educated about the fact that disabilities are part of human existence, they should also be taught empathy and tolerance.

## **Conclusion**

The dilemmas of parents of children living with disabilities and the children themselves in Nigeria are enormous. They are being restricted and marginalized from all angles. The society appears to be very unfriendly to their plight. Culture, tradition and religious beliefs are not providing comfort for them. These and many more have forced parents to keep their children at home or prefer to take them to special schools where they meet the children of their kind and where no one will reproach them as a result of their disabilities. Some of the problems are institutional. Regular schools are not willing to accept children with disabilities into their schools because they believe they do not have the facilities to cater for them. Their reasons are subjects for consideration. What is the cost of having a school that can accommodate and effectively cater for all categories of learners, including those with disabilities? The government should be able to provide fund for public schools in order to provide teaching and learning facilities for all kinds of learners. Schools that are owned and managed by private individuals without financial support from government may find it extremely difficult to run an inclusive classroom system of education. This is because many of such schools in Nigeria do not have the fund to do that and it will be injustice to prosecute such institutions. It also implies that the cost of education in an inclusive schools and classroom will become very high and expensive so that poor parents cannot afford it. For instance, a school that will accommodate children with physical and complex medical needs must be equipped with modern gadgets and well-trained teachers to deliver success. Medical facilities in such schools will go beyond mere nursing services as seen in regular schools. The cost of education will not remain the same, except the government is willing and ready to invest heavily in education by subsidizing its cost and providing necessary modern facilities and environment.

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