



## Curriculum Development as a Critical Tool in the Education and Rehabilitation of Persons with Special Needs.

R.J. BODANG, A. E. OZEGYA, C. B. EZEANOCHIE  
University of Jos, Nigeria

**Abstract.** The paper seeks to X-ray the visible absence of a specific and operative philosophy (not objectives or goals) of Nigerian education in order to appropriately articulate curriculum development for children with special needs within the context of egalitarian ideology. The paper attempts formulating a humanistic-pragmatist philosophy which could be used to serve as a conceptual and interpretative framework for the education and rehabilitation of persons with special needs in Nigeria. The paper also highlights the socio-cultural needs of Persons with special needs in as well as identified, analyzed and articulated within an evolving nascent and experimental democratic political setting. In conclusion, the paper discusses the existing Eurocentric and elitist curriculum framework and synthesized / integrated with a re-discovered and reformulated Pastoral Care curriculum (SNEC) anchored on enabling life skills and Human Survival Categories. Such an empowerment curriculum, which in reality is a marriage of the official, the Hidden and the Pastoral Curricula, has the potential of accommodating the special needs {content and pedagogical of the handicapped children in and out of the regular schools. Its built in flexibility and teacher prone approaches

make it particularly applicable to urban and rural Nigerian communities because it breaks the traditional barriers between school and everyday knowledge. At the heart of the education and rehabilitation strategies, the overall concern of the Special Needs Empowerment Curriculum (SNEC) development for this project is aimed at arranging, modifying and strengthening the educative environments {formal, informal, non-formal} in which children with special needs grow and develop. In this way, the experiences which they encounter construct and re-interpret will at once satisfy their special needs as well as shape their learning in ways which fit the uncertain and changing future.

### 1. Introduction

A review of the literature on special education within the last twenty-five years shows that the structure, scope and methods of empowering (educating and rehabilitating) children in some of the main curriculum areas have not attracted the attention of educators. It is a fact that accommodating the special needs of children had been dominated mainly by the medical and the psychological orientations. Educators in general and curriculum

developers in particular have only started to analyze the special needs of children in order to provide for their education and rehabilitation. In this context, the National policy on Education (2004) has provided a partial framework of goals and values on which the education of Nigerian citizens among whom are the children with the special needs should be rooted. Accordingly, the philosophy (unspecified) effective of education is based on the integration of the individual into a sound and effective citizen and equal educational opportunities for all citizens of the nation at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels, both inside and outside the formal school system(p.7)

Some of the values which informed such national commitments which the educational system and its curriculum must promote are respect for the worth and dignity of the individuals, faith in ones' ability to develop to his/ her full potentials, self actualization, better human relationship, effective citizenship shared responsibility, moral and spiritual values and the promotion of the emotional, physical and psychological health of all children. Each child is expected by the policy to acquire appropriate skills, abilities and competencies both mental and physical as equipment for the individual to live and contribute to the development of the society (p.8).

While the National Policy on Education (2004) provides the essential ingredients to educate all citizens within egalitarian framework, the policy lacks the philosophical and ideological underpinnings to articulate its commitment and translate them into concrete plans appropriate and pragmatically towards the education and rehabilitation of children with special needs. For example without specifying or identifying its underlying philosophy, the National Policy on Education identifies

three purposes and objectives of special education as:

- (i) to give concrete meaning to the ideal of equalizing educational opportunities for all children, their physical, mental, emotional disabilities notwithstanding
- (ii) to provide adequate education for all handicapped children and adults in order that they may fully play their roles in the development of the nation.
- (iii) to provide opportunities for exceptionally gifted children to develop at their own pace in the interest of the nation's economic and technological development (p.36)

## 2. The Present Situation

The existing situation regarding the education and rehabilitation of children with special need in Nigeria show that the Federal government takes on very little part. The National population Census provides a rough estimate of the current (types, age, sex) of disability in Nigeria.

According to the 1991 National Census-Children in Nigeria (0-14) years old totaled 44.9% or 40 million of which 20.5 million or 46.10% are male and 19.5 million or 43.8% are female. About 0.5% of the male and 0.47% of the female population are disabled. About 22 per cent of disabled males and 27 disability reported by the census was blindness. The proportions of disabled increases with age especially blindness and deafness. A more recent Federal Government/ UNICEF report titled Situation and Policy Analysis of Basic Education in Nigeria's estimated the population of primary age children in Nigeria to be about 1.51 million. The report noted that 'most regular schools in the

country are not sufficiently equipped to cater for the learning needs of the different categories of disabled children'. The report noted in particular that 95.9 per cent of the disabled in the country have no access to education due partly to the dearth of special other socio-cultural factors (p.85).

Based on these situations and other dictated by conventional wisdom, the present school curricula cannot claim to be innocent. The need to relate the different categories of special needs to their social, cultural and educational context is urgent and imperative. To integrate and rehabilitate special children we must be conscious that the special nature of the curriculum does not exclude children from ordinary learning experiences and concerns. This might invariably give children an unrealistic sense of the world and reinforce their segregation.

A survey (FGN/ UNICEF 1993) shows that: *The largest number of schools, 36 out of 71 {59 percent} were owned by State Governments, 7.5 per cent of the schools were established by Local Governments, 32.0 per cent by various Non- government Organizations and 3.0 per cent by the Federal Government. Only 1 out of the 71 schools {1.5 per cent} was established by a community (p.87).*

The survey also shows that most of the schools are inaccessible to the potential children while the environmental situation; infrastructure and instructional delivery system are nothing to write home about to the extent that little or no learning occurs. These situations, in addition to the fact that the personnel managing these institutions are not professionals, and their curricula are grossly lacking in both academic and pastoral ingredients necessitate a re-assessment of the special needs to include an analysis of a proposed curriculum for its operations.

In whatever way it is conceived or defined, education cannot be separated from good life or the hope of it. The key goal of education remains not only the transmission of selected cultural heritage from one generation to the next but education should in addition, foster informed decision – making that recognizes and in cooperates moral and ethical components to life. For the special educator, education is aimed at showing the individual, regardless of his/ her special needs, how to define himself authentically and spontaneously in relations to his world, not to impose prefabricated definition of the world on the individual. As an enterprise with strong spiritual, moral and ethical components, education's main purpose is to equip and sustain the individual as the creator and center of moral values. In other words any theoretical or practical consideration of the education of children with special needs must recognize, accommodate and emphasize its ideological and humanistic underpinning because the ideological and humanistic provide the strong philosophical framework to articulate the critical dimensions of curriculum development.

It is the absence of this critical philosophical dimension required for the development of curriculum for children with special needs that makes the National Policy on Education (2004) to be prostrate and particularly and particularly vulnerable to attacks by those anxious to use it as a template for education and rehabilitation of children with special needs. It is this lack of a viable philosophical framework for curriculum development that has partly been responsible for the non-realization of the development of a fertile curriculum capable of educating and rehabilitating Nigerian children with special needs increasingly. It is now being realized that philosophical

issues and questions are the core programme development in special education.

At the risk of oversimplifying the magnitude of such philosophical questions for curriculum development for persons with special needs and in order to evolve such framework, the following questions are pertinent:

- Why do we want to educate and rehabilitate children with special needs?
- What are our interests in these categories of children?
- Who are these children and what is the nature of their unique needs?
- What factors (social, cultural, economic, ideological, political etc) influence them and our perceptions about them and their needs?
- What are our individual and collective moral and ethical obligations to these children with special needs?
- What goals and / or objectives should inform these moral obligations and how can these be best met, monitored and assessed?

Answers to these and related questions will provide a unified theoretical and philosophical guide currently absent in the NPE (2004) and justification for practical curriculum activities. It will appear apparent that our search for a philosophical framework for our work with persons with special needs will lead us to a re-discovery of perennialistic and humanistic values necessary to ensure that these children are more than just the products of their particular histories and circumstances of learning, they are or could be in the symbols and reflections of our humanism and ethics. This thus becomes the Cruz of the agenda of the education and rehabilitation of children with special needs.

Our philosophical framework for translating such agendum into practical empowerment curriculum activities is pere-humanism (perennialistic-humanism)

An intellectually honest and empowerment curriculum aimed at nurturing and rehabilitating children with special needs (SNEC) predicated on a pere-humanistic philosophical framework must focus on and be judged by its effects on children's subsequent attention span, their threshold of boredom, their independence of existing sensory stimulations as spurs to motivation, their images of themselves as respected and potentially responsible citizens of the Nigerian society contributing their quota proportional to their capabilities to national development. Such a curriculum must address at least seven questions pertinent to the education and rehabilitation of Nigerian children with special needs:

- What education / philosophical framework should be used to guide and justify the education and rehabilitation of children with special needs? We seem to have provided an answer howbeit, a partial one to this question.
- Who are these children and what is the nature of their need?
- What curriculum purposes and rehabilitation strategies should be developed to meet the special needs of these children?
- What (curriculum) learning experiences (knowledge skills, values attitudes etc) and pedagogical systems be packaged to actualize the individual potentials of these children in breath, scope, relevance?
- How can these packaged experiences be organized, administered, supervised and articulated either

within the existing curriculum structure or within a new one?

- How can we mobilize public and legal supports and ensure professional acceptability of the package?
- How can we ascertain / assess whether the special needs of these children are met in their individual and collective contexts?

The critical role of curriculum development in the education and rehabilitation of children with special needs is reflected in the relationships of the questions above with the six questions asked earlier in terms of our search for educational /philosophical guide.

It is pertinent to emphasize that the viability of any educational and rehabilitation programme is predicated on the fact that the curriculum assumed that the child has a genetic –bio-psychological set of conscious coded information i.e. a core of strategic and competing / responses options and blueprints which are not only instrumental to adoption proportional to environmental stimuli but which also simultaneously resist excessive meta-cognitive and effective manipulations. Probably the most important aspect of curriculum development is to characterize the nature of the children (with special needs) and the range of their needs. There are three broad areas of special educational needs:

- (a) Provision of special means of access to curriculum (e.g. a deaf child will need some forms of specialist teaching in receptive and expressive language)
- (b) Need of a special or modified curriculum; and
- (c) Need for particular attention to the social structure and emotional

climate in which education takes place.

### **3. Empowering Children With Special Needs**

One of the most critical structure of an empowering curriculum for children with special needs is to determine their learning abilities, the potentials and efficiencies with which they are applied to rehabilitation strategies including the children with difficulties in learning which are the root causes of special concern to parents, teachers and society at large. In other words, SNEC must focus on the abilities of the children and how these are used by them and their teachers to meet their (children) various need. In order to take advantage of this strategic advantage to advance the education and rehabilitation of children we have been cautioned (Chasty and Friel 1991) that:

- Children do not only learn in school, in class, in a national curriculum. These are artificial structures which seek to facilitate, control and direct the natural learning inclinations of the child, enabling these to be channeled into ways which meet the long term goals of those who know best in education system (p.32)
- What is vital to an empowering curriculum is to inquire about how the child learns now? How does he efficiently apply his/ her abilities to cope with the various services designed to rehabilitate him/ her? What are the unique personality, social and cultural histories he / she brings to the learning situation which are likely to influence the application of his/ her intellectual abilities?
- What levels of stress and anxiety does he/her experience in the

learning process and how does the teacher present information to the child?

In order to communicate these different parameters in the structure of a proposed Special Needs Empowerment Curriculum (SNEC), adequate considerations must be given to an analysis and characterization of the child's functioning, under which we identify and described:

- (i) The child's strengths and weaknesses e.g. physical state and functioning (physical health, development function, mobility, hearing, vision and continence).
- (ii) Factors in the child's environment, which lessen or contribute to his or her need. In the home and family, including the language of the home, at school, elsewhere.
- (iii) Relevant aspects of the Child's history e.g. Personal, Medical, and Educational

#### **4. The Pastoral Care and Human Needs Dimensions**

Observations of the existing curricula for children with special needs show that no substantial provisions have been made to accommodate the unique need of the categories of children identified above. In fact, many of them are still in the normal classroom undergoing the formal curriculum with its core Eurocentric ideology.

We can no longer deny the role the pastoral care in the education and rehabilitation of the children with special needs. The Pastoral Care (PC) component of our proposed curriculum is based on an analysis of the philosophical and etymological roots of the term 'pastor' and its evocation of the images

of a shepherd. The very term pastoral evokes images not only of rural tranquility but also an idealized community in which can be found security refuge and belonging-ingredients that are lacking in the existing curriculum of most schools for children with special needs. Pastoral care provides opportunity for children to engage in critical primary learning because of the framework it offers for making meaningful connections between school knowledge and everyday knowledge. the inherent advantage of a pastoral care dimensions to the education and rehabilitation of children with special needs has been alluded by Whitty (1985 p.164). He states that:

*An approach to social and political education is either merely 'relevant' in a narrow sense or merely 'academic' in its content. Rather, it would need to make sense to pupils in terms of their actual or potential experience outside the classroom but t also involve critical reflection upon that experience and involvement in the strategies that might change it.*

The Pastoral Care is defined as that part of the curriculum which caters for the social and emotional needs of pupils as opposed to the subject-centered curriculum which is mainly academic. When this definition and the general implications of Pastoral Care are interpreted, what results is an egalitarian Afro-centric humanistic and normative framework.

#### **5. Who is the Child with Special Care?**

The focus of curriculum empowerment is the individual child with special needs (the exceptional child) and his/ her development which will include how the forces around that child (family, school, peer culture and society) adapt to meet his / her needs. The child with special needs is the typical child-

the child with developmental disabilities and the child with unusual talent i.e. who is exceptionally able. A disability results from a medical, social or learning difficulty that interferes significantly with the child's normal growth and development such as the ability to profit from schooling experiences or the ability to participate successfully in work activities (Ysselldyke-Algozzine 1995).

Children with different forms of disabilities require special needs to deal with their social and psychological problems. Gifted children for example, feel isolated from their classmates and they require programmes which will both challenge them intellectually and also help to deal with their feelings of alienation. An empowerment curriculum for children with special needs must provide relevant learning experiences in sufficient breadth, scope and differentiation to cope with not only the challenges of specific handicapping conditions but also with the societal / cultural relations to their circumstances.

In general, both medical and social standards are used to identify and categorize children with special needs and both standard are identifies within the context of, and with reference to medically and socially approved concept of normality. For example genetic abnormalities, parental problems, infections and physical trauma define the range of special learning need within medical circles for the curriculum must accept responsibilities. In the same vain societal and sub-cultural codes of normal behavior which are either written or otherwise clarified in us, form explicitly rules, including teachers expectations of an experiences with students learning difficulties are indices used to define the parameters of special needs in curriculum development. Hence using both

conventional medical and social standards, Kirk et al (1997) used five variable to define and categorize (exceptional) children special needs. These are:

- Mental characteristics.
- Sensory abilities.
- Communication abilities
- Behavior and emotional development and
- Physical characteristics.

The development of a curriculum to empower children with special needs must therefore accommodate the following categories of children identified using five characteristics above:

- Visual impairments- children who have special learning needs in areas requiring functional/ actual use of vision in daily life
- Hearing impairments- children who have learning needs in areas requiring functional use of hearing.
- Deaf and Blind- Children who have special learning needs in areas requiring functional use of hearing vision
- Orthopedic impairments or other health impairments- children with special learning needs in functional use of hands, arms, feet and other body parts including children with serious illness or medical conditions e.g. heart conditions.
- Mental retardation- children with special learning needs in functional use of intelligence and artistic ability
- Special Learning Disabilities- children with learning needs in functional use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning and arithmetic skills
- Serious (Emotional) Disturbance- Children with special learning needs in functional use of language and

- communication skills  
(communication disorders)
- Multiple Disabilities- children with special learning needs in more than one area requiring functional use of skills
- Traumatic Brain injury- children with brain injury caused by an external physical force or by an internal occurrence such as stroke.
- Autism- children with specific developmental disability that significantly affects communication and social interaction.

A Special Needs Empowerment Curriculum (SNEC) structured to cope with the problems identified above will attempt to organize learning experiences so as to avoid as far as possible, and to compensate for, its limitations. The SNEC would be concerned about how the content and pedagogy of special education will provide not only for the special teaching requirement of children with particular disabilities but also for the full educational experiences required as they grow through different ages or maturity levels. It is imperative that SNEC keeps continually in view the needs of handicapped children as persons (human beings) growing through the normal stages of human development.

The Curriculum must establish a basis of classroom practice in terms of the following principles:

- That each child with special needs has a right to a broad and balanced curriculum relevant to his/ her particular needs
- It is not enough for such a curriculum to be offered by the school, it must be fully taken up by each pupil

- The curriculum should also offer a range of personal and social opportunities and responsibilities to each pupil so that he/ she may develop as an individual , as a member of the society and as a future adult member of the community

Kirk et al (1997) identified six categories of exceptionality which can provide broad conceptual opportunities for rooting SNEC. These are:

- Intellectual differences including children with learning disabilities and children who are slow to learn
- Communication differences, including children with learning disabilities or speech and language disabilities
- Sensory difference, including children with auditory or visual disabilities
- Behaviours differences, including children who are emotionally disturbed or socially maladjusted.
- Multiple and severe handicapping conditions, including children with combinations of impairments (cerebral palsy and mental retardation; deafness and blindness)
- Physical differences, including children with non-sensory disabilities that impede mobility and physical vitality.

## 6. Terminological Clarification

There are at least three mutually related contexts around which to structure an empowering curriculum for children with special needs as noted earlier.

The overall aim is to rehabilitate the child as far as possible into his/ her social cultural and community lives. Aduwo {1982}

identified and discussed three forms of integration- vocational, social and functional, noting that functional integration is achieved where the vocational and social association of children with special needs with their fellows leads to joint participation in educational programme {p.72}. the author uses integration and rehabilitation interchangeably, in a manner which dwarfs the unique and critical factor or curriculum, training, therapy and guidance- which are the core of rehabilitation. What makes rehabilitation particularly challenging and appealing to the special educator is the professional requirements and inputs of the Counselors and curriculum experts. This is important because the idea of integration conveys ‘assimilation’, which virtually dissolves the uniqueness of the special needs concept associated with the handicapped. Definitely the purpose of providing for the needs of a special child is not dissolve away or negotiate their individuality to the general curriculum. This is the idea reflected in the concept of integration or assimilation. Our proposal for an empowering curriculum for children with special needs is predicted on:

- Our concepts of special education i.e. to provide children with special needs services not available to them in the regular {formal} school's curriculum. Such services which are in the form of empowerment programmes are different from formal/ regular curricula because they try to accommodate (not assimilate) children's inter-individual and intra-individual differences. We should note that such empowerment programmes are not developed because of the failure of the formal curricula, the guilty verdict we earlier established against the formal curriculum notwithstanding.

- Our observations that classroom teachers and the existing curricula in the public schools simply cannot respond fully to the special needs of children without a substantial change in the structure of the formal curriculum and attitude and values of the teachers.
- Our beliefs that we can rehabilitate these children with special needs by (a) varying their learning environments to create a conducive and socially relevant settings to learn (b) modifying the specific knowledge codified in the curriculum (c) restructuring the skills identified for learning and (d) introducing appropriate technology that meets the special needs of these children.

In general, however, there are different ways by which the proposed empowerment curriculum can be actualized in rehabilitating children with special needs. These are:

- Normalization- creation of a learning and social environment as normal as possible for the children
- de-institutionalization- releasing as many children with special needs as possible from the confinement of residential institution into their local communities
- Mainstreaming- bringing children with special needs into daily contact with children with ordinary needs in an educational institution.

It is pertinent that we recognize that the successful implementation of an empowerment curriculum and proposed in this paper depends on what and how the Nigerian society feels about children with special needs. And because these feelings are expressed through and reflected in the

major institutions of the society (the schools, the legislatures and the law courts) there is a compelling need to identify and relate to these institutions in implementing educational and rehabilitation programmes for children with special needs.

This is so because:

- Schools plan, develop and teach curricula which prepare these children for a productive and satisfying adult life.
- the legislature, especially in a democratic society provides the money and authority for the different innovative programmes and curricula strategies aimed at meeting the needs of special children and
- the courts decide { rules } on what is fair, just and equitable with regards to these children with special needs

## 7. Conclusion

Even within these contexts, an appropriate empowerment curriculum, an adequate pedagogy and a competent teacher remains the triangulate which provide a robust philosophical perspective to formulate, articulate, extent, interpret and justify the education and rehabilitation of children with special needs. It is in fact within such education and democratic setting that the curriculum is not only a critical factor, it is also innocent mirror to reflect and actualize the genetic- bio-psychological potentials of children with special needs as feelings, thinking and valuing humans whose rehabilitation and care constitute a moral national challenge to us all.

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