

Evaluation of special needs education literacy for sustainable change in service delivery to persons with disabilities in University of Calabar

(overview essay)

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Abstract: *This study evaluates the level of special needs education literacy for sustainable change in service delivery to persons with disabilities in University of Calabar. It was guided by a research question, 180 Participants were randomly sampled from faculties and Institutes and open-ended questionnaire was designed, validated and used as instrument for data collection. Survey design and descriptive statistics were used as research design and statistical tool for data analysis. The findings reveal that majority of staff lack basic special needs education literacy; consequently, their services to persons with disabilities in different programmes in the University are inefficient. Based on the findings it was recommended among others that disability literacy awareness programme (DLAP) and blue print on disability should be developed, implemented and monitored as road map to ensuring fundamental literacy among staff in the University.*

Keywords: *Special Education, literacy, disabilities*

1 Introduction

Exceptionality is a norm in human existence or society. Therefore, any society without persons with disabilities (PWDs) is an abnormal, not worthy of habitation. While people may not want to see persons with special needs particularly those with disabilities, the reality is that they are needed to make the society a balanced one. This is also applicable to educational institutions especially in this era of Inclusion, increased universal access to education and renewed agitations for equal rights to all citizens with or without disabilities.

Exceptionality as mother term in special needs education is significant deviation from the presumed norm in intellectual ability social and physical growth and development of humans in a particular society. This deviation has two ends, the

positive(giftedness) and negative(disabilities).When a child is positively exceptional he/she is welcome, cherished and well educated by the society but if the child has disabilities he or she is at risk of not been welcome right from birth, educating such a child is moral consideration and a good will.

Such dispositions have trailed special needs education and its clients since its origin. Despite ability in disability, awareness on education of PWDs as champion by both international policies such as MDG, Inclusive education, Education for All, goal of SDGs and UN convention on Rights of PWDs they are still prone to discrimination, denial of rights and indifferent treatment. In university of Port Harcourt, a student with disability would have been denied admission if the court hadn't intervened. According to Ken (2014) similar cases abound in many other educational institutions.

In University of Calabar experiences and researches such as Ikpaye (1987), Obi (2012) persons with disabilities are admitted but do not receive the desired services or attention. Most times derogatory or uncomplimentary remarks are made on them without minding the psychological implications of such comments. Ozoji (2014) noted such disposition in the 21st century is outright expression of absolute lack of special needs education literacy(SNEL).The author further posits lack/ inadequate SNEL negatively influences the quality of service delivery to PWDs in the society generally and in schools particularly.

Okwudire (2007) argues that the rate of literacy of people determined the level of development of the society. Judging from the above, it could also be argued that a society/school with SNEL is developed, open, objective, and have scientific attitudes to SNE and its clientele. It is equally disposed to provide quality services to PWDs. In the context of this paper SNEL broadly means having basic and general knowledge about special education and its clients with emphasis on appropriate use of its basic terms and complimentary attitudes/ regards for persons with disabilities as well as awareness of simple causes, preventions and rights of PWDs in the society. Howard (2000) observed that the difference in quality of services provided for these clients in developed and developing societies is directly proportionate to the level Special needs education literacy among the people. The implication of this to Nigerians generally and staff of University of Calabar in this era of change is that concrete efforts should be made to be special needs education literate as condition for sustainable change in service delivery to persons with disabilities.

Sustainable Change in Service Delivery

Sustainable change as one of the variables in the conference theme and topic of this study is a direct response to the present administration change initiative to reorient Nigerians on attitude to public service delivery and governance. Change entail a departure from the old approach to handling issues to a better way with focus

on national interest. Sustainable change therefore means new orientation to issues/ services without undermining the prospect of the future generation. It is the ability to hold to new and better orientation to public service matters over a long period of time without being conservative. In the context of this study, it is a well-planned and purposeful shift from the old pattern of thinking and handling of issues of disability/special education to being open-minded, objective and scientific in meeting the present needs of PWDs without compromising the possibility of a brighter prospect. It is a departure from pitying PWDs to empathizing with the clients.

In Heward (2000), change in disposition of the society to special needs education and its clients is directly related to the level of service delivery. The author further posits that poor level of service delivery in developing country like Nigeria is proportionate to how fast or slow the pendulum swims. Ikpaye (1987) observed that change in special needs education is slowly progressive and sustainable. It progressed through the era of extermination, ridicule, asylum, education and litigation. Each of these stages was preceded by many events, policies and laws. In terms of its nomenclature (name) it has witnessed to changes from handicap education to special education to a more refined, professional and inclusive name, special needs education. Even in description of the clients/categorization it has changed from using condition first approach (the deaf man or blind child) to person first approach (the man with hearing Impairment/child with visual Impairment). The former one was derogatory and saw nothing in the person apart from the disability but the later sees the human dignity /ability in the person despite his/her disability. Ozoji (2014) noted that the latter is expression of the level of special needs education literacy and it has proportionately improved the nature of service delivery to PWDs / contributes to the development of special needs education. The implication of this to staff in the university is that both personal, informal, cooperate and formal efforts should be geared towards special needs education literacy if improved services must be delivered to persons with disabilities in the university in line with global standards.

Special Needs Education Literacy

Literacy in its traditional context means ability to read, write and do arithmetic which is commonly called 3Rs. In modern terms it expanded to include ability to effectively communicate using computer and related means. In this paper, special needs education literacy simply means basic knowledge about special needs education and its clients with emphasis on correct use/application of basic terms that facilitate understanding and communication in the field. According to Ozoji (2014), special needs education literacy “is ability to read and write special education. It is reading and writing using enlightened terms that correctly mirrors the situation of children with special needs, that leads to their proper understanding, that uplifts not debases

them, that is guided by denotative rather than connotative perspective, that corrects misconceptions, platitudes, axioms and traditions of elders about the children. Writings that employ discarded and discourteous terms/labels, that are pejorative of the children, that heighten their helplessness or handicaps cannot be considered literate by any academic standard. Such writings epitomize special education illiteracy irrespective of the professional calling of the writer.”

In broader perspective, special needs education literacy is:

- ability to know who has special needs
- ability to appreciate exception as norm in human society
- ability to empathize rather than sympathize/pity those with special needs
- knowledge of basic etiology of exceptionality
- knowledge of common categories of exceptionality in the society
- knowledge of basic preventive measures and rights of persons with disabilities.

According to Orim (2015) knowledge in the above parameters culminate in SNEL with corresponding improvement in service delivery to PWDs. For instance, if someone understands that it is only nature that can determine when/type of disability (possibility /otherwise) he/she will have a better dispositions/approach to PWDs and special needs education matters especially on issues that concerns education, employment and accessibility to environment.

Riechmann and Grasha (2010) study on special education literacy among teachers in developing nations reveals that in every 100 teachers only 5 of them are literate. The author further observed that teachers in rural areas are more special education illiterate than those in the urban ones. The implications of these findings are Nigerian teachers in both rural and urban are predominately illiterate. This trend speaks volume of services rendered to clients with disabilities both in school and the society. In a similar study among staff in Nigerian universities south---south Moor (2013) findings shows that special education literacy among academics is 35% and that of the nonacademic staff is 26%. As noted above such findings are expression of the nature of services students/ staff with disabilities receives in such academic society. Lynch and Hanson (2004) posits that such level of SNEL does not facilitate implementation of Inclusive education and achievement of goal 4 Sustainable Development Goals for persons with disabilities. In another study, the findings of Moon (2014) are contrary to others above, it indicated that special needs education literacy is 72% among teachers in most schools in America and Canada. The table below gives an insight into the level of special education literacy that can enhance better service delivery to PWDs and contribute to optimal development of special education.

Table 1. *Indicate people's level special education literacy*

Special needs education literacy	Special needs education illiteracy
Persons with disabilities	Disabled persons
Inclusion	Exclusion
Scientific approach to disabilities and its causes	Superstition approach to disabilities and its causes
Focused on ability despite disability	Focused on the disability despite ability
Special needs education or education for persons with special needs	Education for the handicapped
Empathy	Sympathy/pity
Use person' first approach (e.g. children with learning disabilities)	Use condition first approach (e.g. learning-disabled children)
Regular school	Normal school
School for children with learning or visual impairment	School for the blind/deaf
Have positive attitudes	Have negative attitudes

Sources: Adaptive from Hunt & Marshall (2005), Ozoji (2014)

2 Statement of Problem

One of the major problems associated with Special needs education and its clientele is misconception about the field, misapplication/use of basic terms that would have enhance understanding and communication among professionals and non-professionals as well as indication of the level of special needs education literacy as a condition for sustainable change in service delivery for persons with disabilities (PWDs) in the society particularly among university community. The clients are derogatorily and uncomplimentary labeled, remarked and described. If these remarks are associated with the uneducated they could be excused on grounds of their level of reasoning and understanding but it is common to see or hear those who are educated treat or react to disability issues with contempt and disregard. This becomes serious when PWDs try to acquire formal education at higher level or try to gain employment.

They are denied admission, employment, other basic rights and treated indifferently. These dispositions are to a large extent expression of the level of special needs education literacy. Such stereotype, connotative and uncomplimentary attitudes whether in developed or developing society influences the quality of service delivery and by extension thwart the development of special needs education and related services. It is against this background of this study which is designed to evaluate the level of special needs education literacy among staff in University of Calabar.

3 Purpose of the Study

The main thrust of this study is to evaluate the level of special needs education literacy among staff in the University of Calabar.

4 Research Question

The study was guided by a research question framed thus:

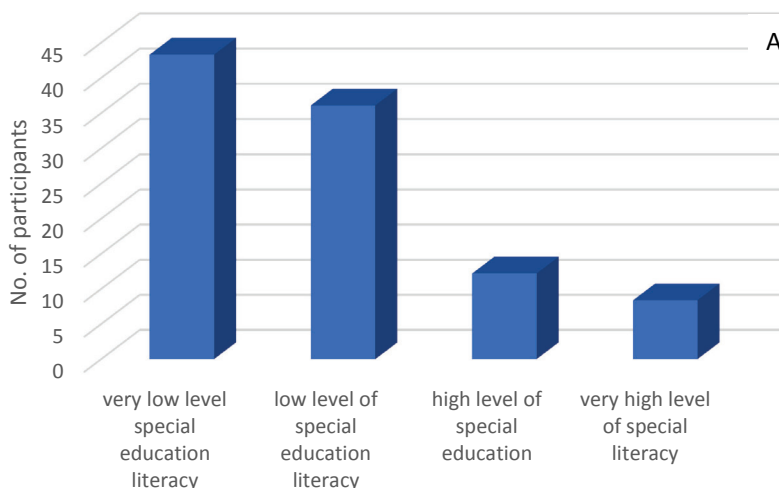
What is the level of special needs education literacy among staff in the University of Calabar?

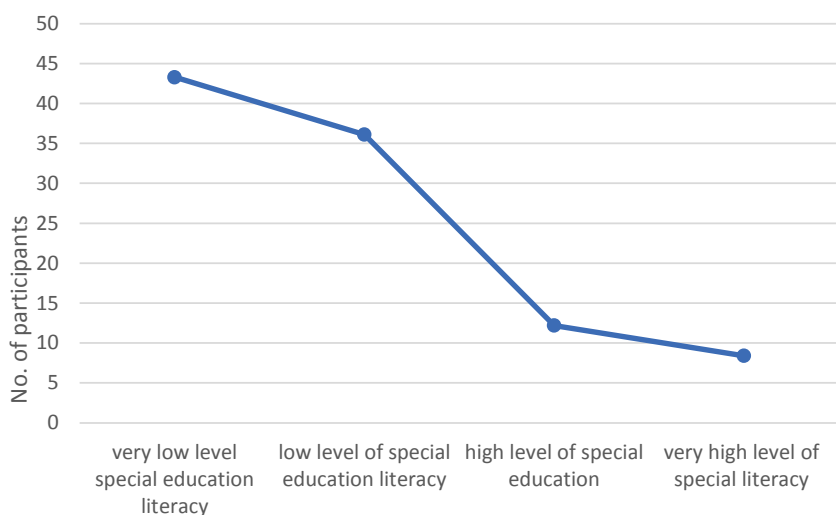
5 Methodology

The study adopted survey design, 180 teaching and non-teaching staff were randomly sampled from across faculties and Institutes. A four-response scale Questionnaire with 15 items was designed by the researcher, validated by experts in special education, educational measurement and used as an instrument for data collection. It had reliability index of 0.81 which was considered good enough to be used for the study. The researcher administered the instrument personally to the participants whose contacts were gotten from their general offices and informed ahead of time through email and social media. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse data from the field.

6 Presentation of Result

Figure 1A and B shows participants responses





Results in figure 1a & b above indicates that 78 (43.3%) of staff have very low level of literacy, while 65 (36.1%) have low, 22 (12.0%) have high and 15 (8.4%) have very high literacy. From this result it is obvious that majority of staff of the university of Calabar are special education illiterate unlike few who are literate. One hundred and forty (143) participants substantiate this who responses fall within very low and low in the response scale as against 37 that fall between high and very high scale. The implications of this is that there can hardly be any substantial and sustainable change in service delivery to persons with disabilities in the university in line with Federal government change initiative.

7 Discussions of Result

The main thrust of study is to assess the level of special education literacy as a condition for sustainable change in service delivery to persons with disabilities in University of Calabar. The study reveals that majority of staff are not special education literate consequently there cannot be any marked improvement in the provision of and delivery of services to the target population. This current study is in affirmation with Anderson (2009) whose research on special education literacy among teachers in most developing societies indicates that only 5 out 100 are literate. This study is also corroborated by that of Yinka (2015) study on special needs education literacy among university staff in south –south Nigeria which indicates that 65% and 75% of academics and non-academics are illiterate. On the other hand, it is at variance with Heward (2000) whose study shows that 72% of teachers in developed countries like America and Canada are special education literate. This is primarily among other

reasons why special education and related services in these countries are developed and are adequately and promptly provided.

Considering the high level of illiteracy among highly esteemed members of academia it is worrisome that in the 21st century the effect of globalization is yet to influence this aspect of national life as critical as it is. The implication of the findings of this research is that academia is sympathetic, pitiful, bias and unscientific in their disposition to persons with disabilities instead of being empathic and scientific. A society with sympathetic perspective to disabilities matters sees provision of services to these clients as a moral/act of good will while empathetic one is legally committed to providing needful services. Westson (2016) noted that such society makes conscious efforts, policies and programmes to educate and empower those disabilities to the extent of their ability. Furthermore, this study shows that PWDs in Nigeria and University of Calabar particularly will not be able to compete with their peers globally and they will be consequently ranked very low in the global community of persons with disabilities. Again, it is an indication that Nigeria is not prepared to achieve global dream (SDGs) for persons with disabilities.

8 Conclusion

History has shown that disability has been and will remain an integral part to complete. Based on this deliberate and institutionalized effort should be made to provide needed services to PWDs in line with global policies and conventions. Nigerian Universities as major agent of national development should formulate policies on this subject matter to improve the literacy level of staff to enhance their capacity for the provision of quality services. This has become imperative now that PWDs has a role to play in socioeconomic development of nation as shown in the 2016 special Olympic and the task of achieving SDGs as the change agenda of the Federal government. Based on the findings of this study it is recommended among others that:

- Disability literacy awareness programme (DLAP) should be formulated implemented and monitored in schools.
- Stakeholders' particularly special educational professionals should take advantage of increased usage of social media to educate the public on disability matters.
- Persons with disabilities(PWDS) organizations should have robust informative and educative programmes to improve the rate of literacy on the subject matter among the public
- Government should provide legal frame work that will enhance legislation and litigation on special education and its clients rather than having window dressing laws on disability.

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