OVERCOMING DISABILITY: PATHWAY TO INCLUSIVE ROLES FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN NIGERIA.

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ABSTRACT: *This study was designed to investigate from among persons with disabilities, their struggles in life to overcome their present conditions of visual impairment/blindness. The area covered in this study spread through the six geo-educational, political and social zones of Nigeria. A total of one hundred (100) respondents were selected through nominations from associations for the visually impaired, departments of the ministries of social development and rehabilitation centres including other stake holders from the ministries of education. The study was conducted over the four months period across the zones already mentioned. All the respondents accepted that discrimination against persons with disabilities in the society including family members in areas of acceptance, community participation, acceptance and placement in schools, teaching and learning approaches and employment opportunities rank first among the major challenges of persons with disabilities in Nigeria. The method used for the selection of the respondents required the use of simple percentages to compute the results. Results of the findings revealed that the visually impaired are venerable to social exclusion, discrimination and poverty. Most of the respondents pointed to the attitudes of the society to be their major hindrances to inclusion in the society. The visually impaired persons generally have to work very hard to convince the Nigerian society that they can excel in social life, academic pursuit, marital life and job placement to be reasonably integrated in the society.*

KEYWORDS: Overcoming Disability, Inclusive Roles, Persons with Disability and Visual Impairment

INTRODUCTION

The challenges associated with being disabled are particularly problematic for individuals with disabilities. The task of finding evidence-based information related to education, rehabilitation, social and cultural problems facing persons with disabilities in Nigeria today is a challenge. The absence of government laws or legislation protecting the rights of people with disabilities in Nigeria has created a challenge for those who are interested in the design and implementation of educational and rehabilitation programmes that could meet their special needs. The sociopolitical and cultural limitation related to the role of the disabled in education and the selected career paths has changed in recent years. But persons with disabilities in many parts of Nigeria are still relegated to begging in the streets. In some parts of the country, any form of disability is still is thviewed as a curse, a result of one's sin or the sins of the parents. Many who succeed in completing their primary and secondary school education, vocational or technical education, do not have equal job opportunities available to them (Obani, 2006). Special education services in Nigeria have been provided within the context of institutionalized settings and community-based rehabilitation programmes designed to improve the educational and working environment for people with special needs (Ashi, 2002).

Segregation

Despite all efforts to integrate people with special needs into the mainstream of society, most people in many communities in Nigeria still manage to categorize people into two major groups. These are the "In-group" or 'normal' and the "Out-group" or 'not - able'. The in-group is said to be the major 'human group'. A member of an out-group may want to be involved and noticed as part of the in-group. This occurs when an individual with disability sees himself/herself as a member of the in-group known as "normal". When this happens he/she develops what is called "self-hate" (i.e. hate for his own group). The visible differences which put the person into the out-group are: visual impairment, hearing impairment, speech impairment, mental retardation, physical and neurological impairment, physical deformities, involuntary movements, their way of walking, and physical aids they may need; such as crutches, braces, and wheelchairs. The person with disability may refuse the fact that he/she has a disability in order to be looked upon as being 'normal" in today's society (Abang, 2005).

In Nigerian society today, the term 'physically challenged' is used to describe all forms of disability with a view to avoid labeling. But the concept of an in-group and an out-group is the bases of all social interaction (Fichtner, 1999). We forget that physical disability does not denote sensory disability, neurological disability, mental retardation etc. As a result, there is a certain pressure on-those who don't seem to fit in. Indeed, adequate performance in interaction situations is the ideal test of eligibility for the status of full-fledged humanness. Those who lack adequate social interaction are those perceived as the misfit, those deemed disabled and the psychologically disturbed. Thus for interaction to be successful, we need to examine who is coming together to engage in what social acts, where and when?

Stereotyping

Stereotyping   According to Abang (2005) is the labeling of groups which in turn leads to stigmatization. Often persons living with disabilities are stereotyped and are labeled as a menace to society. The definition of stereotype is an exaggerated belief associated with a category of people. Stereotyping may also serve as projection screens for our personal conflicts. The labels we place on persons with disabilities can be both positive and negative. From all this, a few more problems arise, that of prejudices, discrimination, anger, fear, guilt and anxiety.

Prejudice

Many people, for instance, may think a person with speech impairment is not only having speech impairment but may also be retarded. The following statement was made by someone who worked with persons with disabilities in an institution. He said, "You need so much patience." "The greatest problem is when they cannot speak well. Then, at first I think they have a problem here, too. It's very hard. I just want to send them out of my office, get them out of my sight....." Hume (1990) asserts that the distortion of disabilities may also result if a child is raised in a household that views the disabled negatively. The child will then most likely carry this negative attitude into adulthood.

Most people will alter their views when they finally meet a disabled person who has established himself as a member of society, possibly with a family of his/her own. In almost all the success stories that get to the public, there is a dual message. The first one is very important for instance, Phiri (2010) remarked "Just because we have polio, blindness, or deafness, or have limited use

of our mouth, limbs or speech our lives are not over. We can still learn to be happy, be lovers, spouses, parents, and even achieve great deeds." The second message states that if lawyers, teachers, craftsmen/women in our society could overcome their handicaps, so could and should other people with disabilities. "If we fall, it is our problem. Our personality defects our weakness." Even this is not always true; sometimes people believe that if one disabled person has made an extraordinary achievement, they feel that all people with disabilities can do the same. Since some people with disabilities made it, it means that every person with a chronic disease or handicap could do the same and if they don't, it must certainly be their own fault. Unfortunately, this is not true because it depends on the severity of the disability. As a result of this theory, there is even a greater burden placed on the disabled. This burden is not only on their ability to succeed, but also to fit in.

Rectification

The question now is how persons with disabilities correct the prejudices of society. Victims of prejudices may, of course, inflict on others what they themselves receive. Deprived of power and status, one craves to feel power and a sense of status (Phiri, 2010). This is known as responding to prejudice with prejudice. People who are physically, sensory or mentally disabled usually cannot fight back with the type of violence that a non-disabled person may use to correct these prejudices. Instead, they can fight back with non-violence. This method consists of teaching and talking to people about their disabilities and other handicaps that exist.

 A twenty two-year-old young woman with a disability spoke to a Special Education class at Hunter College, USA. The disabled woman has cerebral palsy. The topic discussed was mainstreaming. She told the class of her many experiences with the "normal" students of her school. Many questions were asked about her disability and her social life. The answer she gave was:

"No matter how disabled anyone is, they should not feel sorry for themselves. The disabled are not special, just a little different" (Ashi, 2002 p. 58).

This was the first kind of reaction to prejudice at Hunter College and she hoped to continue the wonderful experience. It should be noted that people with disabilities should not only try to teach others but they should also have to learn how to ignore the negative attitudes that may exist, and must try to overcome their disability as best they can. These are the words of a person who has come to terms with her disability and is able to share her experiences with others. In addition to this are two major problems.

First of all, not every disabled person is physically, mentally, emotionally able to express themselves as effectively as this person was. As a result, if the wrong words are used, the non-disabled might misinterpret these experiences and think they are complaining about their situation. It is difficult for the individual with disability to integrate one's experience into one's own world, let alone communicate it to others. Secondly, if the persons with disabilities are not able to talk about their disabilities they might be regarded as being introverts. This would be an overall negative image the persons with disabilities might be presenting. There are many who are not able to talk about their disability and who do spend most of their lives feeling sorry for themselves, frustrated, and angry. From many other experiences, these feelings are also a result of what the person was taught. If a disabled person was babied as a child and told he/she can do nothing, then he/she will not want to do anything but feel sorry for him/herself.

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Inclusion

Three forms of inclusion are paramount in any society for example sociopolitical inclusion where persons with disabilities are included in all forms of activities such as the right to employment opportunities in their social order, the right to politics/administrative positions and inclusive education. Inclusive education is a system where by the disabled and non-disabled children are educated together in one classroom with modifications in physical structures, equipment and methods to suit the needs of the special learners (Ashi, 2008). Inclusive education could be partial or locational (proximity to resource facilities) and functional inclusion. Functional inclusion is one of the goals of special education in Nigeria today with the aim to concretize the meaning of equal opportunities for all special needs children, their disabilities not withstanding (National Policy on Education, 2004). It should be noted that treating all children in the same way educationally does not guarantee equal opportunities for children with disabilities. These children include a diverse group and as such inclusive education must ensure social inclusion within and outside the school system. In Nigeria, locational or partial inclusion is being practiced in special education schools/centres as the only option in the absence of full functional inclusion for children and adults with disabilities.

However, being disabled could be devastating for those who experience inadequate social and cultural emancipation in their state of life. The major factors which influence their impact is the age of unset, degree of severity, attitudes of parents, siblings, the community and the larger society.

As a society, we have to work towards the inclusion of persons with disabilities; fitting them into the mainstream of society. We have to plan programmes that empower them through education, rehabilitation, employment, training, consultation and assessment in assistive technology, day care, and social service support. We work in partnership with people who have all forms of disabilities to maximize their potentials and help them to be self-reliant and independent. We can succeed in doing all these if we have attitude change from negative attitudes to supportive attitudes.

Systematic efforts have been made to some extent through public enlightenment in Nigeria and around the world to ensure change of attitudes. Nevertheless, the situation is still an uphill task in our society today. We can adopt the ancient Indian adage which states that **disability; if it has not reached you, it has not passed you.** From this point of view, all members of the family, the community and the society at large are encouraged to serve as agents who are supportive and inclusive.

Inclusive Practices

 Recently inclusive practice in Education and social life has increasingly become a focus of debate in discussion about the development in Educational policy and practice around the globe and more seriously the social placement for children, young people and adults with social and special educational needs specifically those with disabilities. This study was designed to investigate from among persons with disabilities, their struggle in life to overcome their present conditions of visual impairment/blindness. The area covered in this study spread through the six geo-educational, political and social zones of Nigeria.

METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

Major instrument employed in the study were personal interviews and observation by the research assistant involved in the study. A total of one hundred (N=100) respondents were drawn through nominations from association for and of the Blind, Welfare Department of the Ministries of Social Development and Rehabilitation Centers including other stake holders like Heads of Special Education centers. The study was conducted over four month's duration and the following report reflect the exact responses and opinions of the subjects used for the study.

Instrumentation

The main instruments used for data collection was the questionnaire designed by the researchers to investigate their opinions of the public acceptance of their roles in the Nigerian society despite their disabilities. It was generally, the opinion of educated respondents that inclusion is a matter of human right and equal opportunity which persons with disabilities must not be denied of as a right to inclusive society. A hundred percent representatives all accepted that overcoming disabilities and creating all inclusive society remains a matter of great concern and a fight which all must join hands in order that all challenges as a result of difficult policies and practices that serve to exclude persons with disabilities from taking their places in the society including education and social status. Eighty-five percent (85%) of the respondents pointed to the attitudes of the society to be their major hindrances against actualizing their desire in life.

DISCUSSION

According to the respondents, discrimination from the society including family members in areas of acceptance involvement in family role and community participation, admission and placement in schools, classroom environments, teaching and learning approaches. These include employment opportunities, job schedule, acceptance by colleague in offices, marriage contracts and inclusion in major government policies which enumerate poverty and disease e.g. HIV/AIDS campaign, Ebola, poverty reduction programme as well as skill acquisition training programmes. Fifteen percent (15%) of the respondents representing educated group from among those interviewed saw full inclusion and acceptance of the disabled as **wisdom.** However, respondents who fall below secondary level of education argue that, it will be impossible to overcome disability in a place like Nigeria where even though those who are said to be "normal" are still suffering and struggling to make earns meet. The disparity between the lowly and the highly educated among those interview with regard to the subject matter under discussion was visible in the following areas; Self-esteem and personal compartment; economic independent, role play in and outside the family, inter and extra- personal relationship and cooperation with others where those with reasonable educational background demonstrated superiority.

A minority group representing ten percent (10%) do not believe that anything can be done to change the situation other than sympathy from other members of the society, wives and children to the subjects under study who also were participants agreed that their spouses and parents with disabilities were of equal status and should be valued as such. According to one of the respondents **" the world is a process shaped by our theoretical and ideological disposition and experiences and of course, our attendance limitation,"** Consequently she

went on, there is a need to think carefully about the language we use to describe those who we consider different and how we treat them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Services to people with disabilities are expensive ventures that require collaborative efforts by the government, the voluntary agencies/church and individuals in the attempt to combat the stigma of disability in our society today.

The government should provide strategies that will lead to attitude change in the society such as Bills/Laws protecting the rights of persons with disabilities.

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