



The Gifted and the Challenged in the Nigerian Education system: Curricular Provisions and Propositions

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Abstract

The special child within the African environment needs to be properly provided for in order to ensure a comprehensive preservation of the African philosophy, legacy and march forward. There are provisions recently made to protect their interests in the formal education setting of Nigeria. This paper outlines these provisions and makes further propositions bearing in mind the need to continue the refinement of the African educational system to perfection. The paper calls on all stake holders in the society, particularly the teacher to join in the task of rescuing the challenged and enrich the African heritage and philosophy.

Keywords: Gifted, Nigerian, Educational, Curricular, Propositions

Introduction

Special Education is a formal special educational training given to people (children and adults) with special needs. This group of people may be classified into three categories:

The Disabled: People with impairments and because of this impairment / disability cannot cope with regular school/class organization and method without formal special education training. In this category, are people who are: Visually impaired, hearing impaired, physically and health impaired, mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, socially maladjusted/behavior disorder, speech impaired, and learning disabled.

The Disadvantaged: The children of nomadic pastorals, migrant fisher folks, migrant farmers, hunters etc., who due to their lifestyles and means of livelihood, are unable to have access to the conventional educational provision and therefore require special education to cater for their particular needs and circumstances.

The Gifted and Talented: People (children and adults) who have /possess very high intelligent quotients and are naturally endowed with special traits and therefore find

themselves insufficiently, challenged by the regular school/college/university programmes.

The idea of Special Education is to give concrete meaning to the idea of equalizing educational opportunities for all children whether they are disabled or disadvantaged. It is also to provide adequate education for all people with special needs in order that they may fully contribute their own quota to the development of the nation especially where they are considered as gifted and talented.

History

The Federal Government Academy also known as Suleja Academy was founded in 1980 by Federal Government under the Babangida regime. In 1982, the Nigerian Federal Government set up a committee to brainstorm on the education of “Gifted Children”. Four years later in 1986, Jubril Aminu, the then Minister of education established the Gifted education programme which culminated in what came to be known as the Suleja Academy. The objective of setting up the Gifted Programme as stated in the Blue Print is to provide opportunities for exceptionally gifted children to develop at their own pace in the interest of the nation's economic and technological development.

The academy further serves as a center of academic and moral excellence in identifying and nurturing gifted Nigerian children of secondary school age, providing a broad based education that enables the individual to develop his/her cognitive and creative skills and also for building strong leadership traits that can impact on society. The academy was conceptualized to facilitate and support the education and skill development of these intellectually high class children in order to harness their full potentials for self-reliance and socio-economic development of the country.

The selection process for the pioneer students of the Academy was carried out over two years after its conceptualization. The very first students selected were taken from their secondary schools in their first years and placed in 'Gifted centers' in a number of Federal Government secondary schools throughout the country. Their curriculum was very rigorous as they were required to complete the three years of junior secondary schools in just two years and yet attain a minimum standard in the Junior Secondary school final examinations to continue with the program. Those placed in Junior Secondary one (JS1) were chosen while in their final year of primary school and they were mainly those that had the highest in Primary six examination or common entrance scores. Rigorous examinations were conducted in each of the Nigerian states for these pupils to be selected; those that passed had to sit another examination and less than seventy percent of the students that eventually participated were picked from the entire country. Currently the selection process had changed.

Subsequent gifted and talented identification and selection process

At present, nominations can originate from teachers, parents, and community members during the specified nomination period. Self and peer nominations were accepted at the secondary level. Nominated students submitted formal nomination sheet to specified officers in their campus offices. Written parent's or guardian's permission were also required to screen/assess a student. If a parent did not want his/her child to be screened, the nomination would only be noted and documented. The screening followed a regimented process.

Screening/Assessment Process

A designed students' profile is used to identify those that perform at remarkably high levels of accomplishment relative to their ages, peers, experiences, or environments (GATES, 2010). The profile reflects a minimum of the three criteria used in the assessment. The criteria use a combination of qualitative and quantitative instruments that may include:

1. School Abilities Test such as Naglier Non-verbal Ability Test(NNAT), the Otis-Lennon School Abilities test(OLSAT), the Cognitive Abilities Test(CogAT), the Screening assessment for Gifted Elementary and Middle school students Edition2 (SAGES2), or other school Abilities Test as deemed appropriate for the students.
2. Achievement Tests such as the Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT), the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS), the screening Assessment for gifted Elementary and Middle School Students Edition2 (SAGES2), or other achievement tests as deemed appropriate for the students.
3. Divergent Thinking Assessment tests such as the Torrence Test of Creative Thinking, the Creative Assessment Packet(CAP) or other divergent thinking assessments as deemed appropriate for the students.
4. Teacher and /or Parent Rating Scales such as the gifted and talented evaluation scales(GATES), the Renzuli Harlman Teacher rating Scales, the Purdue Rating Scales, or other rating scales as deemed appropriate for the students
5. Student interview. The interviews may be scheduled to meet with the students concerned, one on one, to experience their views and dispositions to issues of life and their areas of giftedness or talent that may throw light on their suitability or otherwise for selection and appropriate placement.
6. Student Product Portfolio. This may hold several records of creative performances of the student or evidence of student products in several, general or specified areas that may yield information that could be useful in taking decisions concerning them.

The screening is only a part of the selection process. Unless a student survives the selection process, he cannot claim admittance. Decisions are drawn from the consideration of all or specified assessments to which the student was subjected to.

Selection process

The student profile identifies the student's strengths and weaknesses. The percentiles and or scores from the assessment instruments are placed on the students' profile. Each student's profile is individually evaluated by the gifted/talented selection committee through a blind (no name) process. A student clearly qualifies for the services of the program if the majority of the evidence on the profile falls within the high and/or superior ranges on the profile. The decision is based on the committee's observation of the preponderance of the evidence on the student's profile. The selection committee consists of at least three district educators. All committee members are trained in the nature and needs of gifted students. The selection committee makes a professional judgment based on the recorded student profile data, as the Committee evaluates the data on nominated students.

The committee has 3 options as follows:

- a. The preponderance of profile data includes that the student would benefit from the services offered in the Gifted/Talented Program and services will be offered to meet the education needs of the student.
- b. There is insufficient evidence in the documentation at the time indicating that the student's educational needs would best be met by the Gifted/Talented Program or the preponderance of evidence indicates the student's educational needs would be served with the services of the regular curriculum.
- c. Further information is requested for the committee to make a placement decision.

Once the identification process is completed, parents or guardians were notified of the selection committee's decision through mail. Parents of all screened students may request a conference to examine their child's assessment results. Such requests should be made through the student's home campus.

Provisions for the Gifted/Talented Students

It is estimated that students who are gifted and highly talented encompass 5 -15% of the school age population. These advanced students seem to have increased capabilities in academics, creativity, music, dance arts, and /or leadership. Based on this, the following provisions /recommendations are made according to Stephanie, Polly, Amy, and Gabi, (2010):

- Compact the curriculum and provide enrichment activities: Their curriculum should make provisions for environment that are stimulating and address cognitive, physical, emotional, and social needs of gifted children; let the students move quickly through the required curriculum content and unto more advanced material ; allow for academic rigour.
- Implement a multi-level and multi-dimensional curriculum: Differentiate the curriculum in order to address differences in the rate, depth and pace of learning. This will enable all students in the class to learn about a specific area by creating projects at their own ability level.
- Flexibility with curriculum: Take advantage of real-life experiences that can be translated into problem solving academics for all students. For example, composition of Air can be used to instruct students. Students of different ability levels can be given different tasks, such as figuring out what Air is made of, predicting the direction of the wind at a particular time, and construction of a wind vane whether working or static.
- Make the curriculum student-centered: Engage gifted students in the curriculum decision –making process, giving them an opportunity to learn how to take responsibility for their own learning. Draw the curriculum from the students' interests and educational needs.
- Allow students to pursue independent projects based on their own individual interests: Independent projects can be assigned on the basis of ability level. Encourage creativity and original thinking among gifted students. Allow them to explore ways of connecting unrelated issues in creative ways individually and in groups.

Who teaches the Gifted/Talented Students

The teachers who teach the gifted are specifically trained in handling the gifted. These teachers should necessarily:

Understand the issues in definitions, theories, and identification of gifted and talented students, including those from diverse backgrounds.

- The teachers should recognize the learning differences, developmental mile stones and cognitive/affective characteristics of gifted and talented students, including those from diverse backgrounds and identify their related academic and socio-emotional needs.
- All teachers should understand, plan and implement a range of evidence-based

strategies to access gifted and talented students; to differentiate instruction, content and assignment for them (including the use of higher-order, critical and creative thinking skills), and to nominate for advance programmes or accelerations as needed.

- Educators of the gifted are guided by ethical and professional practice standard. They practice multiple roles and complex situations across wide age and developmental ranges. Their practice requires on-going attention to professional and ethical considerations. They engage in professional activities that promote growth in individuals with gifts and talents and update themselves on evidence-based best practices. Educators of the gifted view themselves as life-long learners and regularly reflect on and adjust their practice. They are aware of how attitude, behaviour and ways of communicating can influence their practice.
- Educators of the gifted understand that culture and language interact with gift and talent and are sensitive to the many aspects of the diversity of individuals with gift and talent and their families.

However, it is a known fact that every individual is endowed with some natural gifts but some seem to have gotten a greater portion of it. Such people should be recognized and given the support required for their meaningful contribution to the society they belong and world in general. Unfortunately, there are issues or trends that need to be tackled in order to accomplish the goals and objectives of Special Education in Nigeria.

Issues and trends for the gifted

More frequently, educationists are seeing many more gifted and talented programs that are overlooked for enrichment education but deemed to be not as important as students failing to meet standards. The issue is that funding for gifted and talented is not often allocated to low socioeconomic schools especially with the increasing emergence of a variety of socioeconomic class schools. The talented child can be found in any school initially. Many Nigerian parents may not notice the precocious child or could wrongly label and dump him on any teacher he can reach. This situation does not make the child any less a talented or gifted child. The need to treat every school with care as well as provide adequately for their clientele should not be taken for granted. However, lack of funding in education, inadequate curriculum, Nigeria factor, dumbing down of school curriculum, lack of fairness and equality, incompetent teachers and attitude of classmates are always important and attention needing issues. These are trends that are leading to the issue of leaving behind many of the most gifted and talented children. These trends or issues are further elaborated as follows:

- **Inadequate Curriculum:** A disjointed school curriculum that does not match talent and is not challenging enough can be frustrating to a gifted who may take stubbornness and apathy to classwork in resistance to it. Gifted students are known to learn faster than others and at a point where others are expected to be learning the simple A B C D, he may have mastered words and sentence formations. Forcing him to follow others in learning what he has mastered will make him to abandon both the activity and the teacher who may view him as disruptive, non-disciplined and disrespectful.
- **Incompetent teacher:** one issue that gifted / talented students suffer most in Nigeria is when they are unfortunate to have an inexperienced teacher as their class teacher. This is the case with some schools in Nigeria where some teachers are not properly trained and some of these teachers feel threatened by the nature of questions they receive from such alert students. In most situations, such inexperienced and incompetent teachers go on to intimidate or brand the students as 'I too Know'. Gifted students in the wrong hands -eg of a bad teacher, might end up being psychological wrecks. they may even suffer inferiority complex in future because their innate expression ability has been forcefully taken away from them through teachers' continuous hacks and shouts.
- **Attitudes of Classmate:** the attention enjoyed by a gifted, and his domination of class discussions and activities may incur the jealousy and anger of others who see him as boring, domineering, show off and impudent. In some cases, he finds himself in a class with people that are older and more physically mature, who may bully him to compensate for their being beaten in academic works. An over loaded teacher may ignore bullies and leave the class under their mercy because of much academic weight.
- **“Dumbing down” in school program:** One of the issues which seem to compound the problems that gifted students face in finding adequate contents and experiences that challenge their abilities in school is a process that has been referred to as “dumbing down” of the curriculum. In this “dumbing down” process, the textbooks for a grade level are written in overly simplified terms and ideas are presented in simplistic ways that even for the average students of the age group do not strain at all to decipher tasks or organize them. The curriculum which is often based on the textbooks is also “dumbed down” to make an already conceptually easy set of lessons even simpler. The initial defense of this process was in the excuse of integration of pupils as proposed in the integrative education argument. Unless the teacher provides alternative reading materials of adequate complexity, the gifted student is likely to be extremely bored and remain

unchallenged by such simple texts. This process of “dumbing down” of content material compounds the boredom and frustration of gifted students looking for challenge and intellectual adventure and affects their performances.

- **Fairness and equality:** One of the most elusive but seemingly most power, inhibitors of programs for gifted students involves the value issue of fairness and equity. Many people ask, “Is it really fair for some children to have so much ability while others have so little? Is it fair for to provide special education opportunities for students who already have so much going for them? Isn't this type of special educational programming akin to giving tax break to the rich?

Such concerns seem to be made worse by the additional realization that minority groups have a lesser presence in programs for the gifted students than in proportion to the general population. This underrepresentation enhances the image that programs for gifted are really designed, as “Special privileges for special people. Abilities are not equally distributed, nor are the opportunities to enhance aptitudes present in every child. The issue of unfairness should be constructively combated because those students that are referred to as gifted will have the best chance when properly educated, to do something about the array of social problems facing the next generation. Therefore, enlightened self-interest should not argue against special education for the gifted but press for a solid preparation for the most talented of our students.

- **Nigeria factors:** Many gifted children end up not being recognized for what they can do, thus do not make meaningful contributions to the society because of certain Nigeria factors like tribalism, quota system, or outright disregard for merit. In some cases, when identification test is conducted for the gifted, what is upper most is whether a child is Hausa, Yoruba or Igbo and not his performance. The issue of quota system or the so called Federal Character is another big problem. The Joint Admission and Matriculation Examination is a case in point. A child may score 290 in Medicine but will not be taken because another child who belongs to the catchment area scored 240 and should be taken. This system is also used in admission into Federal Government Colleges . Could it even have been implemented in selecting the gifted for special education purposes?

Emphasis in Gifted Education.

Due to their outstanding levels of aptitude and /or competence, gifted and talented students often find the general education curriculum un-motivating and un-challenging. There are several program delivery models available to gifted and talented students that allow these students to remain motivated and stimulated in their learning which are specially designed

and are aligned with student's level of competence and interests. These should be emphasized for this group of students that need gifted education programme that will challenge them in the regular classroom settings ever before they are sifted into such programmes. These emphases could be named for focussed discussion as:

- **Enrichment:** This could be provided in a regular or a special school and involves the provision of resource materials including books, Laboratory equipment, teaching aids, adequate learning experiences and added opportunities that could enhance independent and individual studies. The idea behind this is that with a better equipped classroom, the learning environment will be more pleasant and render teaching and learning more rewarding.
- **Ability grouping:** This could be done in a special class or in a regular class but it involves grouping the gifted children, taking cognizance of their subject aptitudes, intellectual or creative abilities and other interests. This arrangement enables them to progress at their own pace without the hindrance of the average children.
- **Modeling or Mentorship:** This involves the encouragement of contact between gifted children and the Mentors or models who are accomplished and well known professionals in the different areas of children's giftedness and talents. They help in motivating the gifted child through holding talks, seminars, lectures and demonstrations.
- **Cluster grouping:** this is the gathering of four to six gifted and talented or high achieving students in a single classroom for the entire school day. Cluster teachers are specially trained in differentiating for the gifted learners. Clusters are typically used in upper elementary grades. Within a cluster group, instruction may include enrichment and extensions, higher-order thinking skills, pretesting and differentiation, compacting, and accelerated pace, and more complexity in content.
- **Differentiated Instruction:** There is need for differentiated instruction, especially when the gifted is in a regular class. Modifying curriculum and instruction according to content, process, or product to meet unique student needs in the classroom helps to focus and heighten their interest in educational efforts. A consultant teacher is invited from time to time to provide challenging activities to compliment what the regular teacher has done or does.
- **Independent Study:** A self-directed learning strategy where the teacher acts as a guide or facilitator and the student plays a more active role in designing or managing his/her own learning.

Issues and emphases for the challenged (Disabilities)

A student must be identified as having a specific disability in order for him or her to receive special education services. The education for all Handicapped children mandated that only students who are identified as handicapped and whose handicap prevents them from benefiting from regular education instruction can be placed in a special education setting. Unfortunately, there are some issues and trends that hinder the progress of the education of the challenged. These include but are not limited to the following:

- **Lack of Personnel:** The Federal Government in 1975 sponsored scholarships for prospective teachers in the field of special education, in established Colleges of Education to train teachers and resource personnel in the field, yet even those trained, cross carpeted to other fields on economic and other related grounds. The inability to meet up with the quantitative and qualitative requirements of personnel in all aspects of special education is a problem that spoils the Government's intentions to provide education for all irrespective of ability or disability. Every programme should be properly taught for them to be properly understood. Training of the appropriate personnel to effectively teach should be a great emphasis in the special education process. Training them to minimal levels would really not solve the personnel issue being portrayed here. Training personnel to the highest levels possible is very important and should be undertaken by the government agencies in charge of special education in Nigeria.
- **Unemployment:** Most handicapped children are discriminated against in the area of employment, even after certification by recognized authorities. Most employers of labour erroneously believe that they are economic wastes as that they may not perform as well as their non-disabled counterparts. This irrational discrimination against the educated or trained handicapped children affects the rate at which many of them accept to go to school even when it is free as they see it as a fruitless venture. Unemployment is also the remote cause of high dropout rate in various special schools as many prefer to start begging earliest in their lives instead of still resorting to begging after their education simply because they were discriminated against. They just start begging which yields immediate benefits rather than devote attention to schooling.
- **Inequality of Educational Opportunities:** There is an unequal awareness and provision of education for various types of handicapped persons. Some groups, due to the nature of their handicap receive more attention than others. Adima quoted in Ugwu (1994) noted that the opportunities for education are much better for the blind and the deaf than for the physically handicapped and the mentally retarded.

- Architectural designs of school building: this is a barrier to the handicapped in their pursuit of education as some buildings have steps instead of ramps, some doors are narrow instead of wide for wheel chaired, and some even have lower toilets than those suited to the challenged and handicapped.

Rescuing the challenged

Early Identification/Intervention services reduce the prevalence and severity of significant poor achievement and behavior problems. Early intervention programs have been designed to provide services, resources, and support to meet the unique needs of children with delays or disabilities. The goal is to foster the children's development and ultimately reduce the costs to society, through minimizing the need for special education. Whatever problems that were identified early enough were focused on and assiduously worked at to get them resolved or terminated before they wrecked serious havoc on the children.

Furthermore, intervention programs strive to enhance the capacity of families to meet the needs of their children while maximizing the potential for children with disabilities to later live independently. Early identification/intervention services for children have long been recognized as critical to the prevention of later disabilities or academic failure. Intervention programs that focus on comprehensive care (ie multiple services are provided to families and their children) were found to be more effective than intervention that focused on targeting specific single factors in child development. For instance, children of families who received comprehensive services including pediatric follow-ups, home visits, support groups, and educational programs had significantly higher intellectual ability. Early childhood intervention program has been found to be effective in empowering parents to meet the needs of their infants and toddlers with disabilities, as well as in reducing the biological and environmental risks that affect child development. This program also focuses on training parents and on enhancing their care giving skills that can produce positive effects on premature infant's neurodevelopment.

Home Base interventions are designed to provide special education services for exceptional children from one month to three years at home. Even the professional who handles five to eight exceptional children at a time move from house to house to render special education services within a locality. The parents also receive training from the professionals on how to demonstrate or train them as well as on appropriate keeping of the records of their activities.

Hospital Base services can also be provided for those severely sick and that are hospitalized. The professionals can provide training for the hospital officials and the parents on how to instruct, demonstrate or provide exercise for the exceptional child. The professionals also provide periodically instruction on self-help skills, cognition, socialization, motor skills to the exceptional child.

Individualized Education Programme takes into account the totality of the child in terms of his needs, interests, abilities and disabilities before presenting him with any task. It is individualized in the sense that that the programme is directed towards the peculiar needs of a particular child, it is educational because the programme is directed towards learning, and it has systematic and clearly formulated goals.

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