

## TRIUMPHANT SPIRITS: CONQUERING THE CHALLENGES OF DISABILITIES

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### Abstract

*This paper explored the strategies for conquering the challenges of disabilities in Nigeria. It particularly examined discriminatory practices and social problems encountered by challenged persons and emphasized the need for such challenged persons to sustain self-esteem despite the odds. The paper also looked at legislations for assisting persons with disabilities in Nigeria. It regretted that most of these legislations were either forgotten or poorly implemented. It is recommended that persons with disabilities should be entitled to all rights and privileges enjoyed by other citizens. They should also be given responsibilities at the helms of affairs of society to tap from their ingenuity and to give them a sense of belonging.*

**Key Words:** Triumphant spirits, Disabilities, Physically challenged.

### Introduction

In handling this topic, there are few concepts we will look at so as to make our deliberations clearer. They include Impairment, Disability and Handicap.

**Impairment** When an individual has a problem with any part of his body which may be genetic or resulting from an injury, hazard and so on, the individual is said to be impaired.

**Disability-** Disability is a limitation that makes an individual incapable of performing a function or a task due to the loss of one or more body parts. This disability may be observable as in blindness and orthopedic impairment, or it may be unobservable, as in learning disabilities.

**Handicap** This refers to the sum total of obstacles, difficulties or problems a person encounters on account of a particular disability or disabilities. The disability becomes a handicap when an amputee, for instance, is unable to carryout the functions the arm does or does that with great difficulty.

It is necessary to note that the three concepts – Impairment, Disability and Handicap are similar. In as much as they are similar, each one of them represents a different stage in the disability process. This viewpoint is the consensus of many researchers in this field and they include Thorburn (1988), Lambo (1990) and Okeke (2000).

Little wonder that a lot of people use disability and handicap interchangeably. Since they are similar, it implies they are not exactly the same. An individual could be disabled without being handicapped.

At this juncture, it is necessary to refresh our minds with the meaning of the words 'triumphant' and 'conquer'. According to Chambers Dictionary, triumph means

complete or signal victory or achievement; exultation for success; in ancient Rome, a solemn procession in honour of a victorious general; a captive led in triumph; to celebrate a victory with pomp; to rejoice for victory; to obtain victory. In the same vein, to conquer means to overcome or vanquish. It also means to gain control, by force or with an effort, to be the victor.

From the above paragraph, there is the need for our brothers and sisters who have special needs, who are challenged in one way or the other to rejoice and thank God for his mercies. Majority of the challenged are not facing such challenges as a result of their own making. Note that no human being is free from being challenged as long as the individual is alive. Why you should rejoice and thank God is because you have won the race. You have conquered what could not be conquered in the past. In fact you are victorious and God will not forsake you in Jesus name.

### **A Brief History of the Challenge**

In the past, the challenged children were merely left to the mercy of nature. At birth some of these children were killed while others were left to die a slow and painful death. They were abused, ridiculed and neglected. There were some cases where human hearts were moved with pity, these challenged children were allowed to live in the community but to be neither a part of the community nor to interact with 'normal' people. They were excluded from schools and from public gatherings. Most handicapped people were condemned to beggary instead of being trained and given employment.

One unfortunate thing about the challenged is that they were often known by 'labels' instead of by their names. It is necessary to note that these labels are not badges of honour and hence should not be applied to any one. They have the names given to them by their parents and they are meant to be used. Let those of us who are still indulging in such act put a stop to it.

It was a general belief that the presence of a handicapped person in the family was an indication that a number of that family has sinned grievously against God and for that reason the Almighty God was punishing the family for the sin by sending them the handicapped child. The community therefore reacted to the child and his or her parents with contempt and looked on them as an ungodly and wicked family. Is this belief true? The answer is capital NO. Remember that disability and indeed handicap could surface at any time during any individual's sojourn on earth. A disabled child can be born into any family, or any social class or race. The family may be rich or poor, black or white, it makes no difference. The disability may range from slight to severe or from mild to profound.

As Abang (1981) rightly stated fortunately, as the world continues to change and the sun continues to give light to both handicapped and non-handicapped persons alike, the fate of the handicapped continues to change for better. Currently, handicapped people are not only tolerated in the various societies, they are gradually being integrated into both the society and regular schools. In addition, handicapped children are not only being accepted into the community but are being encouraged to seek, and to demand their rights from the community.

## **Some Discriminatory Practices against Persons with Disabilities**

It is a well-known fact that many people with disabilities have been discriminated against with regards to issues of employment. According to Chukwuka (2008), most employers do not deem it fit to offer them job placement even when they are more qualified than their non-disabled counterparts. Such employers focus on the disabilities of these people without any consideration for their abilities. He stated further that a person with visual impairment once attended an interview for a civil service job in one of the states of Nigeria, only to be told by the panel of interviewers that they were not in a position to interview him because they did not know anything about Braille. One then imagines whether all the applicant did to bag a master's degree was to study Braille. The behaviour of the non-disabled persons is due to their orientation towards persons with disabilities even when it is glaring that the disabled are more qualified.

A number of people with disabilities have been denied access to educational opportunities especially at the tertiary level. Some heads of institutions refuse to offer admission to some of the people with disabilities as a result of ignorance about their capabilities. A student with visual impairment who had an admission letter from the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board to one of the Universities in the South West to study history was turned down at the registration point by the Head of Department because he felt he would not be able to cope. It took the intervention of the Deputy Vice Chancellor to get the boy admitted. He later turned out to be the best graduating student in the department (Chukwuka 2008).

### **The need to sustain self-esteem by special needs individuals**

Psychological implication of disabilities makes special needs individuals underrated especially in the midst of their non-disabled peers. This always reflects in their poor socialization, slow academic/vocational training progress and other related task accomplishment.

The above calls for the need to develop self-esteem (positive self-concept) in the special needs individuals so that they too can compete favourably with their non-special need peers. An individual may have what it takes to perform any given task or relate with others in whatever way but with negative self-concept or low esteem he cannot accomplish the said task.

Johnson (1979) viewed self-esteem as a judgment about one's self worth, one's competence and value, based upon the process of gathering and conceptualizing information about oneself and one's experiences. It is the "functional soul" in man which makes him feel equal to his peers. A positive self-concept energizes acceptable behaviour and warm disposition towards task or persons.

Those individuals that are challenged in one form or the other must realize that those they refer as 'normal' have one type of challenge or the other. No human being is perfect and no human being is sound in all respect. Bearing this in mind, the challenged should face their challenges with the zeal to succeed in life. They should not place themselves in the position where people will sympathize with them. Sympathy does not help rather what helps is empathy. The challenged must note that they are already triumphant since they have not died since they were born.

In many parts of the world, Nigeria inclusive, the handicapped (the challenged) are no longer looked upon as people who can be silenced by merely dropping a naira or two in their plates. On the contrary, the challenged people are now looked upon as individuals who have contributions to make to the community. They are no longer thought of as dependants of the community.

### **Legislative framework on persons with disabilities in Nigeria**

For many years, there have been conscious effort and attempts to enact and adopt certain legislation to protect and cater for the needs of individuals with disabilities. Salawudeen (2007) stated that legislation on special education in Nigeria dated back to the colonial regime. He further outlined the legislations of include:

**The 1943 Young People and Children Act:** This was enacted by the Colonial Welfare Service to cater for the welfare of the delinquent children in Nigeria.

**The 1948 Education Ordinance:** This was enacted for the purpose of grants-in-aid to approved voluntary organizations and local authorities that catered for the needs of persons with disabilities.

**The 1954 Western Religion Education Law:** This required the minister to define the various categories of children with special needs and make provision for the special method required for educating them. The law provided that children with several disabilities should be educated in special schools, while those with mild disabilities should be integrated into the ordinary classroom.

**The 1957 Federal Government Education Act** made provision for children requiring special education treatment in Nigeria.

**The 1962 Northern Nigerian Statute:** This legislation authorized the Minister of Education to provide special schools with adequate supply of trained teachers and also to equip them with special facilities for their training.

**The 1981 Handicapped Education Law of Plateau State** contained some clauses covering the definition of special education, free education, the services to be available, and the placement of children and the role of local government education authorities in the provision of services in special education in the state.

**Nigerians with Disabilities Decree 1993:** This decree has fourteen sections. It covers among others, rights and privileges of persons with disabilities, education, rehabilitation, health, vocational training and counseling, employment, other supportive social service, sports and section 6 of the decree focused on vocational rehabilitation and employment, saying that:

1. Government shall take measures to promote the employment of the disable accordingly. Vocational rehabilitation centers to develop the skills and potentials of persons with disabilities shall be established in all local government areas. Training programmes shall be established to develop vocational skills. Vocational guidance and counseling shall be available to the disabled.

2. All employers of labour shall reserve for the disable not less than 10% of the workforce.
3. At least 10% of all funds allocations to training and personnel development shall be reserved by employers of labour for the disabled.
4. Private employers who employ the disabled persons as regular employees shall be entitled to tax Deduction of 15% of all payable tax upon proof to the internal revenue department.

Although, the government has taken some steps in implementing a number of the issues raised above, many are yet to be enforced. At this juncture, it is necessary to observe that since the government have been enacting and adopting the above legislation, one would safely say that there is a strong hope that it shall be well for the disabled in the nearest future.

### **The Way Forward**

Persons with disabilities are citizens of this country. They deserve the right to gain from the society and also contribute to the society. They have the same rights like those of the non-disabled members of the society. They deserve the right to be protected by law. It is necessary to observe that some members of the society have variously infringed on the rights of the persons with disabilities. This has been done through some discriminatory practices in terms of employment, education etc.

To guarantee equal opportunities for persons with disabilities and their non-disabled counterparts, it is necessary to state that enforceable legislations must be enacted. There is the need to have penalties on those who violate the rights of people that are challenged. This no doubt will give them succor and enhance opportunities for them to fully develop themselves and be fully integrated into the national economy.

There is the need to put the right person to direct the affairs of special education in the ministries (Federal and State). When someone that is well grounded in special education is given responsibility of administering special education, he/she would be able to know what is next to be done, who is to serve and demand for the rights of the persons with special needs.

The era of not involving the persons with special needs in our daily activities either to assign them a position of responsibilities or carry out a task they are capable of doing is gone. It is necessary to note that if persons with special needs are assigned with responsibilities at the helm of affairs, they can equally move mountains like their 'normal' counterparts. For example, there are lawyers who are visually impaired and are performing excellently well. A special adviser to a state governor (Kano State) is visually impaired.

The principal of Rehabilitation Center, Moniya, Ibadan, Oyo State is physically handicapped and he is performing excellently well. This is an indication that if they are given higher responsibilities, the sky is their limit. Commendations should go to the present Anambra State government for its responsive disposition to the needs of the disabled and for celebrating the World Disabled Day with them. I have no doubt that

all will be well with the disabled. Other states should emulate Anambra State Government in demonstrating awareness that the disabled are members of the society.

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