

Paper Name: *An Overview of Deaf Education in Nigeria*

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Paulina Ajavon holds a Bachelor of Education and a Masters of Education in Special Needs Education from the University of Jos, Nigeria. She also hold a PhD. from the University of Hamburg in Germany. She specialised in education of the deaf. Working directly with deaf children and adults in and outside schools for the deaf in Nigeria for many years, has allowed Paulina to appreciate the problems of deaf education in Nigeria.

As a lecturer and researcher in the University of Calabar in Nigeria for over fifteen years, Paulina has participated in the training of teachers of children with Special Educational Needs. Currently, she is carrying out extensive research in indigenous Nigerian sign systems and their influence on education for deaf children. Her most recent research and publication - The Incorporation of Nigerian Signs in Deaf Education in Nigeria: A Pilot Study - laid the foundations for the growth of a Nigerian Sign Language. The first ever-produced Dictionary of Nigerian signs is one of products of her research. This work provides an interesting and novel insight into Nigerian deaf education and in Africa as a whole. She has also published Towards Effective Integration of the Deaf in Nigeria, Educating Slow Learners and Towards a Nigerian Sign language.

Historical overview

Persons with special needs in Nigeria have a history of neglect and marginalisation within their families and communities. Indeed, special needs conditions were seen, and are still perceived by some today, as a form of divine punishment. It is in this context that missionaries and humanitarian organisations, started working with adults with special needs in the early 1950s. (Abang, 1995) This early work often focused on religious education, vocational training and evangelisation.

Miss Alison Izzett, Chief Welfare Officer of the Federal Ministry of Education in Lagos, was a pioneer in the promotion of education for deaf people in Nigeria. She organised a group of philanthropic Nigerians into a society known as *The Society for the Care of the Deaf*. (Alake, 1982 cited in Ajavon, 2003) This society identified deaf children and taught them arithmetics, reading, and writing. There is little detail of the communication methods used in this early work. There is however some evidence that speech was used together with some signing.

In 1957, a class catering specifically for deaf children was set up in the *Yaba Methodist School* by B O Adenusi (Alake, 1982). The *Wesley School for the Deaf* was then established by the *Society for the Care of the Deaf* in 1958. (Ogunmekan 1970, cited in Abang, 1995) A speech therapist, a member of the society, gave lessons on voice production, phonetics and lip-reading to deaf children in the *Wesley School for the Deaf*. In 1968, a nursery school was established in partnership with *Wesley School*.

In 1960, Andrew Forster established the *Ibadan Mission School*. This institution merged with a centre, set-up by Mrs Oyeshola in 1963, to become the *Ibadan Mission School for the Deaf* in 1974 (Mba, 1987). It was in this school that Andrew Foster started his pioneering work with deaf children and first used American Sign Language (ASL) in Nigeria. ASL is still the most commonly used mode of communication for deaf people in Nigeria today. Based on the success of the

Ibadan Mission, Andrew Foster established the *Enugu Mission School for the Deaf* in 1974. He also established a school for the deaf in Kaduna. As well as working with deaf children and setting up a number of special schools, Andrew Foster promoted the education of specialised educators for deaf people. These educators were trained in a teacher training school opened by Andrew Foster in Ghana. Gabriel Adepogu, one of the beneficiaries of Forster's training programme, opened the *Kwara School for the Deaf*. All special schools and centres for the deaf which were opened at the time, were the sole responsibility of the organisations that set them up. No benefits were received from the government.

1975 is a key turning point for special needs education in Nigeria. Indeed, the government recognised for the first time the need to provide for persons with special needs. The first Nigerian National Policy on Education (1975-1980) contained the following statement;

"The problem of providing for children who are handicapped as a result of disabilities such as blindness, deafness, and dumbness has become more complicated with growing awareness in the area. The current level of efforts has proved inadequate in meeting their needs and argues for a change in improving the situation, both qualitatively and quantitatively".

(Federal Ministry of Information, Federal Republic of Nigeria, cited in Ojile, 1994).

Following this realisation, the Nigerian government built special schools and trained special educators. Between 1976 and 1977, twelve schools admitting deaf children were established. State and federal co-ordinators were appointed to monitor the progress of these schools. The Nigerian Federal Ministry of Education also introduced elements of special education in teacher training programmes. The aim was to equip prospective teachers with the skills necessary for working with children with special educational needs. Training facilities for teachers of the deaf now exist in many universities and colleges in Nigeria. Programmes leading to a Certificate of Education in deaf education as well as undergraduate and graduate programmes are now available.

Religious institutions and humanitarian organisations are still actively involved in meeting the needs of deaf children and complementing the efforts of the Nigerian government. The contributions of the Catholic and the Methodist churches as well as those of UNICEF, the Rotary International and the Lions Club have been central in the development of educational services for deaf children.

The Situation Today

There exists at least one school catering for deaf children in the majority of big Nigerian cities today. The schools follow one or more of the following educational arrangements (Ajavon, 2003):

- Schools for Persons with Special Needs

Deaf children are educated alongside persons with other special needs. Emphasis is placed on academic and vocational training. Simultaneous communication is the preferred medium of communication. Signs drawn from ASL and presented in Manually Coded English are used to communicate.

- Schools for the deaf

Education for deaf children is provided separately from other children. All children admitted into schools for the deaf are deaf. Emphasis is usually placed on academic achievement and vocational training. Simultaneous communication with signs drawn from ASL and presented in Manually Coded English is also used to communicate.

- Special Educational Centres

These centres provide educational services for children with varying special needs. In addition to theoretical academic programmes, vocational programmes are available. The main difference between special educational centres and schools for the deaf lies in the centres' greater emphasis on vocational training (Ojile, 1994).

- Deaf Units

Units for the deaf are established within a regular school environment. Deaf children are either mainstreamed in regular school programmes or taught in self-contained classrooms. Educational and social inclusion is practised.

Despite some significant achievements over the years, services for people who are deaf in Nigeria still remain inadequate.

Deaf Education in Nigeria: Some General Problems

Ajavon (2003) identified some general problems in the provision of educational services to people who are deaf in Nigeria:

- The negative attitude of many Nigerians towards people with special needs

This attitude is often a consequence of ignorance and a lack of understanding of special needs. Some people still believe that deafness and other special educational needs conditions are the result of a divine punishment or a mark of evil.

- Inadequate funding

When the first schools and centres for the deaf were being set up, funding was dependent on private donations and the efforts of institutions themselves, philanthropic organisations and religious bodies. Today many schools have been taken over by the Nigerian government thus ensuring a minimum level of funding. Special education is however not a priority for the government and remains under-funded and at the margins of federal educational policy-making.

- Lack of equipment

Essential equipment such as audiometers, speech trainers, hearing aids, etc. is lacking. Where basic equipment like hearing aids are available, they are beyond the reach of most Nigerians. Maintenance is an additional problem.

- Shortage of Personnel

Despite the existence of training programmes in special education for deaf people at many colleges and universities in Nigeria, the lack of well-trained and experienced staff is a problem. The number of deaf children requiring educational services outnumbers the number of teachers and available services. In a comparative study of deaf education in Nigeria and Canada (Ojile, 1996 cited in Ojile 1994), the educational levels of teachers of the deaf was as follows: teachers with Masters degree 6%, teachers with Bachelor of Education degree 11%, teachers with

diploma and Certificates of Education 31%, teachers with grade 1 & 2 Certificates 24% and 37% respectively.

- Late identification of deafness

Most Nigerian deaf children's hearing loss is diagnosed very late in comparison to other countries. There is no systematic hearing-screening programme for children at birth or later in life. One of the many consequences of this late diagnosis is the general lack of awareness of a deaf child's special needs in their family as well as education and community environment.

Despite developing home signs with which they communicate with their deaf children, parents and family members are often unable to provide their deaf child with the rich language environment they need at this critical period of their language development. This can have serious consequences on a deaf child's language acquisition and will have long-lasting effects on the child's personal and professional development. In addition, there are very few parental support or education programmes for parents in Nigeria.

- High levels of illiteracy and low-income levels also constitute a big problem.

Teaching Method and Related Problems

The simultaneous communication approach is the most common approach used in Nigerian schools for the deaf. It is used for language acquisition and the transmission of curricular material. Spoken English, supported by signs drawn from ASL as well as special signs developed for use with spoken English are used in schools. The American finger-spelling alphabet is also used to complement the communication approaches outlined previously.

Unfortunately, this speech centred approach is adopted in the absence of appropriate amplification and oral language training. It is worthwhile to note that no reference is made to the use of home signs which is often the only means of communication available to deaf children before starting school.

The simultaneous communication approach has been controversial among linguists and deaf educators. The argument supporting such an approach is that speech acquisition is facilitated by seeing and hearing simultaneously and that language acquired in this way is conducive to a greater integration of a deaf child in the hearing world. A study of different teaching methods and their related problems in some selected schools for the deaf in the Cross River State of Nigeria by Ajavon, P. A. 2000, highlighted the following:

- a) The simultaneous communication approach, characterised by the use of ASL signed following spoken English word order and sentence structure is highly problematic, particularly when it is used in a classroom environment. As Bellugi & Fisher (1972) have indicated, it takes significantly longer to sign a complete sentence than it takes to say it. Different communication codes are used in different ways. Some teachers insist on the meticulous use of English markers, others do not. There is therefore no uniformity and consistency in the linguistic information available to deaf children.
- b) The systemic failure to distinguish between language acquisition for deaf children and the acquisition of English is another important limitation. Emphasis is placed on learning English instead of developing an age appropriate language. Since 90% of deaf children in Nigeria are born to hearing parents who are unable to meet the linguistic needs of their

children, deaf children often start school with significantly weaker language basis than their hearing peers. Confronting the simultaneous communication system, of which they know nothing, is often confusing for deaf children when they start school and are required to abandon the communication system they previously used (most often home signs).

- c) The lack of sufficient qualified deaf adults in the education of deaf children is another important limitation of deaf education in Nigeria. Deaf adults would, in addition to their educative functions, act as positive role and language models for deaf children. The role of deaf adults as language models cannot be emphasised enough. Indeed, the fluency and quality of the language used by educators is crucial in a deaf child's learning process. (Mylander & Golden-Meadow, 1990).
- d) The lack of skilled sign language interpreters is another problem. Hearing adults constitute more than three quarters of the teaching body in schools for the deaf, they are sometimes not trained in special needs education and have a limited capacity to communicate with deaf children. The services of interpreters in these circumstances cannot be stressed enough. These would not only ensure that deaf children are capable of accessing the education which is provided to them but would also act as positive role models.
- e) There are no mechanisms to review and assess methodologies used in education for deaf children. The opportunity for feedback, consultation and improvement is very slim if not non-existent.
- f) Low expectations and levels of achievements for deaf children are also considered to be an important problem in education for deaf children in Nigeria. These have come to be regarded as normal and are not conducive to a positive learning environment for deaf children.

In conclusion, it is important to stress that services for deaf children in Nigeria have improved considerably over the years. It is vital however to note that a lot of work remains to be done. The need for improvement is as great as ever.

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