


Support Services for Caregivers/Teachers of Children in Special Needs School in Bayelsa and Rivers States, Nigeria: A Qualitative Study

Helen Idubamo Wankasi^{1,2*}, Tijani Adelani³ and Josephine Gbobo^{1,2}

¹Department of Nursing Science, University of Port Harcourt; ²Africa Centre of Excellence in Public Health and Toxicological Research (ACE-PUTOR), University of Port Harcourt, River State, Nigeria; ³Department of Nursing Science, Federal University Oye-Ekiti, Nigeria

*Corresponding author's email: helenwankasi@ndu.edu.ng

Article History	Abstract
Received: 13 August 2024 Accepted: 28 September 2024 Published: 24 October 2024	<p>Physical deformities and mental and educational impairments, such as autism and Down's syndrome, are common conditions found in children. Special schools for children with special needs are established in all United Nations member nations. Caregivers/teachers in these schools have the responsibility of providing care and imparting knowledge and skills to these children. These schools also offer specific services to support the work of the caregivers/teachers. This article explored the support services for caregivers/teachers in schools for children with special needs. The study utilised a qualitative design, descriptive method with a voice recorder, paper and pen to elicit 29 participants' opinion (upon data saturation) from four (4) special needs schools. Researcher employed a purposive sampling technique owing to researcher's previous knowledge of caregivers/teachers within a period of one month. A 6-step thematic analysis framework was employed, data was transcribed, cleaned and examined line -by-line and for consistency, Nvivo (version 8.0) was adopted to analyse data in accordance with the objectives. Two themes emerged (Government Support services and Non-government Organization (NGO) support services) and (8) sub-themes, namely- Monetary support and recompense, Conveyance; Vocational or Technical Education and Acquisition; Free Health Services; Free Education, Mid-day meals support service; Health care support services and Specific Support Services. The study concluded and recommended that, governmental and non-governmental agencies should redouble-their effort towards providing support services (periodic training, sustainable financial support, free transportation) for the teachers/caregivers and provide regular mid-day, free healthcare service and adequate vocational training according to each child's needs adequately.</p>
<p>License: CC BY 4.0*</p>  <p>Open Access article.</p>	<p>Keywords: Caregiver/teachers, Government and NGO support Services, schools for children with special needs.</p>

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Introduction

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Physical, such as deformity, mental and educational impairments, such as autism and down's syndrome in children is a prodigy which has always been with man (Kruithof *et al.*, 2020). The issue has presented the affected children with exceptional requirements in all aspect of life. Schools for the children with

special needs are positioned in Nigeria to care for these children with supportive services. The **purpose** of this article was to explore the support services for caregivers/teachers` in the discharge of their duties to increase knowledge.

Background of Study

Carers, whether paid or volunteers, offer assistance to children with special needs in designated schools, focusing on routine care to enhance their quality of life. In contrast, special educators, also known as inclusive education or learning support teachers, provide instruction and mentorship in schools, collaborating with various professionals to meet learning needs. Governments, at federal, state, or local levels, play a central role in safeguarding lives, property, and sovereignty, as well as formulating policies for effective resource management and education for all.

Conversely, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) independently provide services, including education, particularly for marginalized populations, according to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). Special schools, established under initiatives like the Education for All (EFA) movement, cater to children with exceptional needs, such as dyslexia and Down Syndrome, offering free education opportunities. These schools often specialize based on the proprietors' philosophies and students' requirements, accommodating various disabilities like visual or hearing impairments.

Statistically, Nigeria, has 1,177 special needs schools at different levels and diverse requirements serving as refuges for children with disabilities, aiming to provide tailored education and support. Figure 1. Illustrates the distribution of children with special needs across different school levels in Nigeria.

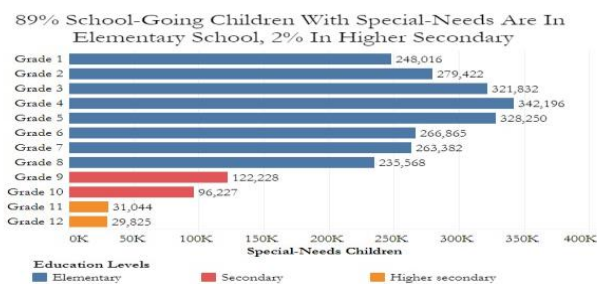


Figure 1: Percentage of children with special needs at different levels of schooling. Source: Agrawal (2022).

The enrolment trend in Nigeria shows higher numbers of children in elementary schools, sharp decline at tertiary levels. Special school distribution varies across states: Kano (153), Kaduna (79), Lagos (75), Rivers (12), and Bayelsa (1). Inclusive schools in Nigeria total 33,603, with notable figures in Kano (3,522), Kaduna (2,296), and Katsina (2,096). These schools offer tailored learning, one-on-one assistance, and Individualized Education Programs (IEP). United Nation International Children`s Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2021) estimated 240 million disabled children globally, urging inclusive education. United Nations Economic Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2022) emphasized this need, citing international declarations like the UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948) and the Convention Against Discrimination in Education (1960). In Africa, 93 to 150 million children are handicapped by age 14, with 6.4% of 3-11-year-olds having moderate or severe disabilities and less than 10% enrolled in school (World Report on Handicap, 2011). To improve access, the World Bank and USAID initiated the Disability-Inclusive Education in Africa Program, allocating a \$3 million trust fund in 2017 (World Bank, 2018). Additionally, the Nigerian National Population Commission (NNPC) estimated 19 million children, with 9.6% being of elementary and secondary school age.

The problem is, around one billion people worldwide, including 240 million children, are estimated to have disabilities, with 1 in 10 children affected (UNICEF, 2021). Caregivers and teachers play crucial roles in providing education and support for these children's physical, health, and emotional needs. However, they often face marginalization and neglect from governments and the public, leading to lack of commitment to their duties. Consequently, children with special needs suffer, with many of these schools being

understaffed and neglected. This results in various physical, mental, and psychological issues for the children, affecting their academic performance and future prospects. If not given adequate attention, this tendency has the potential to result in a higher number of students leaving school prematurely, a rise in individuals resorting to begging on the streets, and the emergence of various social issues. Although much research on these concerns was discovered, the current study fails to address the specific settings of Bayelsa and Rivers States.

Theoretical Review

The theoretical underpin of this study is the phenomenological notion of transcendentalism, propounded by German philosopher Immanuel Kant 1800s. The theory holds that, participants experiences should be explained and understood by researchers as main issue. The constructs are: truth, love, justice/goodness, beauty and home.

Application of Theory into this Study

The phenomenological theory emphasizes subjective experiences expressed objectively, often utilized in qualitative research. Its application lies in identifying support services for teachers/caregivers in special schools, highlighting the importance of asking pertinent questions to comprehend and address issues effectively. Collaboration between governmental and non-governmental entities is crucial to foster an environment of love and support for both educators and students with disabilities. Injustice and unfairness in educational institutions lead to dissatisfaction and hinder equal opportunities. Beauty enhances the enjoyment teachers/caregivers find in their work, while the concept of home provides security and joy. Truth, love, justice/goodness, beauty, and home collectively aim to alleviate stress for caregivers/teachers working with children in special needs schools.

Empirical review

Empirical evidence(s) shows support services are provided for children with special needs by governmental and non-governmental agencies. For instance, WHO, (2022) identified service instituted in northern Nigeria as; training, rehabilitation, inclusive education services for parents, professionals and learners with impairments as well as health, education and vocational services: for instance, Counselling, and others (AGDSH, 2022). Again, Doherty *et al* (2020) carried out analysis to

look at the facilitators, who are receiving primary health care for physical/mental health requirements in the United Kingdom with systematic review from MEDLINE and others. The authors and co-appraiser appraised the papers qualities. Results from foreign and local articles yielded 63 and 6 respectively. To mention, but a few of such result were: training, knowledge and awareness creation as support services for caregivers/teachers.

Again, in Massachusetts, the United States, Moyer *et al.* (2020) carried out a qualitative study entitled "foster youth's" population, instructors (n = 19), parents (n = 14), teenagers (n = 12), and three individuals who doubled as both teachers and foster parents made up the study population and sample sizes. Participants indicate that, pupils who experienced issues in their academic careers should be provided with academic and extracurricular support programmes for easy care/teaching services.

Not only that, McGhie-Richmond *et al* (2019) did a study on "teachers' perceptions on inclusive education in rural Canada". The authors performed a poll of teachers/caregivers to all-inclusive education support services; utilized 123 surveys of elementary to secondary school teachers and adopted 14 qualitative interviews with caregivers in which, four themes emerged: empowerment, capacity building, communication/collaboration; construction of classroom and community services. The proposal was for teachers/caregivers to be empowered financially and governments to create monetary incentives for teachers/caregivers for effective service delivery. Not only that, Paltasingh, and Bhue, (2022); Kaur (2021) researched on influence of Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS)/services on school enrolment in India and utilised instrumental variable technique in their studies. The findings of those papers suggest that the mid-day meal plan improved registration in elementary school and on-time enrolling in first grade and that governments at all levels laid emphasis on schools for children with special needs. Furthermore, a scoping review was done by Powell *et al.* (2020) to "examined the role of family caregivers....." through all computerised data bases/ peer review journals from 2000-2016. Researchers employed modified Arksey and O'Malley framework focused on qualitative, quantitative, mixed and systematic as reviewed methods. Findings, 2062 studies of which 52 were eligible. Three themes emerged: provision of reproductive health, empowerment and motivating

services for teenager/elderly who are caregivers in handicap school.

Study

The study aims to support those focusing on this critical yet overlooked aspect of our lives by providing policies and various services. It will benefit government, private sector, donor agencies, and civil society organizations. By offering these services, caregivers and teachers can better contribute to children's overall well-being.

Methodology

Considering the uniqueness of the study and intent to support services, this study adopted a qualitative design, utilized a descriptive technique as was used by Collins and Hussey (2021) to elicit the flexible multiple views of participants and for researcher to further probe.

Study area

The study took place in Bayelsa state, particularly in Opolo, a high-brow area at the capital city, Yenagoa, established in 2000. It operates a single site for both elementary and secondary sections, with a total population of 260 pupils and 198 students in the secondary sector. Eighteen teachers serve both sections, except for home caregivers. In Port Harcourt, Rivers State with a larger and older population (established 35 years ago), both elementary and secondary components share resources. These settings are preferred for their rural nature and relative poverty levels.

Population of Study

In this study, the population of the study included caregivers and teachers who fulfil teaching obligations in the schools for children with special needs, two each (one elementary and one secondary) in Bayelsa and Rivers States respectively.

Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion Criteria; Willing and consented participants (teacher, parent or caregiver in the selected schools). **Exclusive Criteria;** Any teacher that any-one who declines even after signing the consent and unavailable were ineligible.

Sampling size determination: The sample size for this article was established at the point of data saturation. At the 16th participant from Bayelsa State and 6th participant data saturation were attained, but taken further to produce a total of 29

participants employing a-3 direct question interview guide.

Sampling (Technique): In this study, a purposive sampling strategy was utilised, judging the researcher had a prior knowledge of persons.

Study Instrument

In this study, three instruments used for data collection were: - four section semi-structured interview guide. Section one of the instrument was demographics and section two-three (3) direct research objectives for participants to respond. The second instrument was a voice recorder rather than video for anonymity and to have participants' exact voice tune and words.

Trustworthiness: To establish trustworthiness in this study, researcher employed Lincoln and Guba (1986) four-dimensions framework", namely credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability.

For credibility

In this study, researcher-maintained contact with relevant participant, within the eligibility threshold of the study with the required knowledge to respond to questions that were forwarded and time spent on each interview sessions was (25-35mins) in no particular order.

Dependability: In this study, the researcher guaranteed the results of this qualitative inquiry can be replicated if the same participants, coders and the identical setting are the same to ensure consistency.

Confirmability: In this study, confirmability was gained through audit or confirmability trails of the procedure to ensure there were no counterfeits.

Transferability: This was established in this study through, the suitable sampling procedure and relevant context where the participants were drawn.

Data analysis: To make sense of the raw data, data was analysed following a standard six-step thematic analysis to establish valuable evidence(s) (Clark 2022; Braun & Clark 2014). Line-by-line analysis and to confirm findings, NVivo 8.0 was used. The processes spanned through 1st of February all through 2nd of May, 2024. The six-steps were:

Step 1: The researcher listened and transcribed data verbatim after each data collected.

Step 2: The researcher read through the transcript and noted codable areas with different colours of highlighter.

Step 3: The researcher having the objectives in mind, the likely information that corresponds were grouped.

Step 4: The researcher categories were made sub-themes

Step 5: The researcher created themes out of the sub-themes

Step 6: The researcher reported on the themes at the point of discussion in this article.

Ethical Consideration

The study adhered to **ethical guidelines** with these measures: obtained **ethical approval**, permission from head teachers, obtained **consent forms**, ensured privacy during interviews, limited interview duration to 25-35 minutes, maintained confidentiality of data, used pseudo-names for anonymity, and used a password-protected hardware for transcript storage. Additionally, participants were not harmed and were provided with snacks.

Limitations of the Study

Identifying, meeting teacher and caregivers involved in care of schools of children with special needs in both States, notably the Rivers State was a great limitation, because of the prevailing economic issues in the country.

Findings/Discussion

Demographics of 29 Participants

Females=16; Males=13; Bayelsa =19; Rivers=10; Age range=25-61; Number of Caregivers=6; No. of Teachers=23; Retirees=2; Educational levels Part=NCE, HND, B.Ed., BSc, MSc. (1-FSLC); No. of years in service 2-29years.

Interviews were carried out in both institutions over one month. Observation: Both the primary and secondary schools are co-located, share same facilities/resources. The importance of this data is that, all participants, regardless of their demographic characteristics, shared opinions on support services provided at special schools. The data yielded two themes: government support services and NGO support services and eight (8) sub-themes below.

Table 1.: Themes and sub-themes of the results

Themes	Theme 1: Government support Services	Theme 2: Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) support Services
Sub-themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monetary support and recompense 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mid-day meals

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conveyance Vocational or Technical Education and Acquisition Free Health Services Free Education | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> support service; Health care support services and Specific Support Services. |
|---|--|

Incidentally, both government and non-government organizations provide same things-in terms of support services. However, there are more done by the government owned institutions and others by other private counterparts. Judging from the fact that, the selected schools herein were government owned, the presentation and discussions were based on government support services provided to these schools namely: Government supported services five (5) sub-themes: Monetary support and recompenses; Conveyance support services; Vocational or Technical Education and Acquisition; free health support services as well as free educational support services. NGOs Supported services. Whereas, support services provided by NGOs in the government schools were as follows-Mid-day meals support service; Health care support services and specific support services, such as teaching aids, prostheses and hearing aids. Making a total of eight (8) sub-themes emerged from the two themes.

Theme 1. Government Supported Services

A number of participants, were of the opinion that government engages in support services in the schools for children with special needs their teachers/caregivers. Examples of such quotes are given below under each sub-theme:

Sub-theme 1. Monetary Support and Recompense Support Services.

A number of participants stated monetary support and recompense as part of services the government renders to the caregivers/teachers. While monetary support and payment of recompense refer to the provision of funds in this context provided by the government to facilitate ongoing operations of an organisation, recompense has to do with payment of allowances and incentives of various kinds. Although, some participants stated the financial assistance as monetization activities came through

payment of salaries and allowances, others did not specify. Below are some of the quotes to that effect.

“.....Shortly after the flood, the school was handed over to a private person. But before then, it was monetized, so the principal does the buying and preparing (PB2). “Some of the services I know we here receive from the government is payment of regular salary” (PB7). “We are employed, paid salaries and allowances, but remaining the 30%” minimum was as approved by the federal government (PB13).

So, according to McGhie-Richmond *et al.* (2019), teachers/caregivers believe that providing financial support is crucial for enhancing their capacity to care for and teach children with special needs. Without this support they argue, there would be little improvement in the outcomes of care and education for these children.

Sub-theme 2. Conveyance Support Services

Participants in both schools acknowledged that conveyance support services in form of transportation of caregivers/teachers and even students/pupils support services are rendered by the Bayelsa and Rivers States governments was acknowledged by participants from both schools. Below are some attestations to that effect.

“I am aware that the government provides free school transportation and food for the pupils, but I am unaware of additional services it offers.1. This is viewed by the government as an abandoned project (PB1)”

“In terms of support services, the government of Bayelsa State is trying, because, the school is free education, free feeding, free transportation, fueling by the government to the children with special needs, the school is getting support from the ministry of education and used in conjunction with U.B.E from Abuja but the government should please do more to assist the children with special needs” (PB4). “It is student transportation-- Transporting of the

students to and from school to their various houses for safety and convenience” (PB6).

Sub-theme 3. Vocational or Technical Education and Acquisition

A number of participants also observed and verbalized the above sub-theme as quoted below;

“Study of vocational and technical education and acquisition of practical skills, attitude, entrepreneurial skills, such as; tailoring, volcanizing, carpentry, baking among others” “They also provide funds for smooth operation of the school especially in conveying the students and pupils to the school and back home, also provide free lunch for the students to encourage learning. They also provide scholarship for special needs teachers”. “They also provide psychosocial support, community-based service, pediatric services, referrals, prescription lenses and assistive devices” (PB17).

“The support services provided for caregivers/teachers in selected handicap elementary schools in Bayelsa state is training them in workshops and giving scholarship training to some pupils with disability so that after graduation they in turn will work with special schools (PR21).

These quotes align with the findings of Moyer *et al.* (2020) in their qualitative study conducted in Massachusetts. The study specifically examined the support services provided to the kids of foster parents. The study determined that the parents of the young individuals were given comprehensive assistance in both academic and extracurricular areas, resulting in a significant reduction in the difficulty of caregiving for them.

Sub-theme 4: Free Health Support Services

Although the particular services were not outrightly indicated, in this study, the participants confirmed that both Bayelsa and Rivers States` governments provided for the special needs children according to each state`s capacity. However, this sub-theme was attributed to both government and the

NGOs. *“Government provides free health care for teachers through the Bayelsa Health Insurance Scheme (BHIS)” (PB10). “Although,, braille machines for the blind and some other important material used in taking care of them” and some free will donations are made by clubs and associations in this area (PR22).* This implies that the little assistance goes a long way in helping the system, thus their appeal that the government should do more for effective service delivery. *Government provides free health care for teachers through the Bayelsa Health Insurance Scheme (BHIS)” (PB10).*

UNICEF (2022) and AGDSH (2022) acknowledged the significance of free health services in northern Nigeria, particularly in education, focusing on rehabilitation and inclusive education. Services include counselling, physiotherapy, and hearing screening for the hearing impaired. These services are vital for caregivers and instructors, offering essential support to children with disabilities.

Sub-theme 5. Free Education Support Services

A number of participants attested to the fact that, free educational support services are provided to promote the children`s educational participation, concentration and attainment of good grades.

“Bayelsa Government ...organizes workshop for the teachers at no cost to caregivers/teachers. The Government makes on time (Lunch) feeding arrangement” (PB8). “Although, it’s not enough, in my view, the support services provided forwheel chairs for the cripples, braille machines for the blind and some other important material used intaking care ofcan participate in school and then, the children will concentrate” (PR22).

Again, this sub-theme is consistent with (AGDSH 2022) stance on training of specialists in transactional communication in braille and sign language at affordable rates or outright free services to ameliorate the plight of parents. According to the institution, training of other professionals in the field of

inclusive and special education in Nigeria is essential.

Theme 2: Non-governmental Organizations` (NGO) Supported Services.

Sub-theme 1. Mid-day Meals Support Services

Mid-day meals was repeatedly mentioned in this study and that was why it constituted a sub-theme. A number of the participants attested to the fact that government provides mid-day meals to the school children with special needs. Aside the fact that the meal is for nutritional purposes, it also increases school attendance, concentration and above all, it ensures also that children from poor families will have one adequate meal for the day. Below is an example of one of the quotes.

“Yeah, there are feeding services carried-mostly mid-day snacks or light the pupils/students, it’s a big relief to us teachers and even parents. Because, it saves us from controlling loitering children in the name of getting something to eat. Sometimes,.....snacks etc. Then once in a long while, they provide bread-sandwich, jollof rice. Again, this school is a free-education school, so to a large extent the government is trying” (PB2).

This is comparable with the findings provided by Kaur (2021) and Paltasingh, and Bhue, (2022). In those studies, the authors stressed the influence of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS) or mid-day meal initiatives on school enrolment in India. The outcomes of this article imply that the mid-day meal programme boosted caregivers` readiness to register their children and wards into elementary school and on-time enrolment in first grade.

Sub-theme 2. Health care Support Services

This sub-theme was also earlier mentioned under government support services. It would be necessary since individuals and other associations do donate to the schools. Thus, is the response to that effect below.

“Some of the children hadn’t wheel chairs, and crutches; at least four of them. They needed it desperately. So, some philanthropists bought the chairs for the students, during the last open days” (BR22). “Although, ………, in my view, the support services provided for caregivers/teachers from the Government are textbooks, wheel chairs for the cripples, braille machines for the blind and some other important material used in taking care of them” and some free will donations are…… by clubs and associations in this area (PR22).

In agreement with the above quotes, Doherty *et al* (2020) carried out a detailed analysis to look at the implementers of a programme who are caregivers of handicap children mentioned in connection to receiving primary health care for their physical and mental health requirements in the United Kingdom. This also means that, free medicals for children with special needs is required.

Sub-theme 3: Specific Support Services

Participants from Rivers States confirmed that, though not much, but, both government and non-governmental agencies do render helping hand in the scheme of the special needs schools with specifics. These specifics are textbooks, toys and other unspecified relevant materials. Below are two of such quotes with regards to government and non-governmental agencies` support of the schools with materials.

“The support services from ……… provided for the caregivers and teachers to support the handicap are textbooks, for all the handicaps, toys for all too and other necessary materials for them also” (PR20).

“Some of the support services, ………For instance, the Special School for handicapped Children in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, has now been equipped with a befitting science laboratory, built and equipped by a non-government. The Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria Limited (SPDC) and its joint venture partners precisely. “The school had been without a

science laboratory for the 35 years of its existence” (PR29).

These results are also consistent with a scoping review that was conducted by Powell *et al.* (2020). The overall aim of Powell *et al* (2020) study was to “examine the role of family caregivers regarding sexual and reproductive health services for women and girls with intellectual disability”. Although, which of the organisations provided the services were not ascertained, but to extend hand of fellowship, there was provision of reproductive health services for adolescents and the elderly who are caregivers in handicap school? Meaning, what shell SPDC delivered to the school was a start in the correct way. However, in Bayelsa State, some participants reported that certain groups arrived with a promise to help, but never returned to deliver the commitment.

Conclusion

This article explored support services for caregivers/teachers in special needs schools, aiming to enhance their knowledge. Government assistance includes monetary support, free transportation, vocational education, healthcare, and education. NGOs and philanthropists offer mid-day meals, healthcare, and specific services. Some services overlap between government and NGOs. However, existing support is insufficient, necessitating more training facilities, improved teacher compensation, and additional services for children to reach their life goals. Fulfilling global declarations like Education for All, Health for All, Universal Health Coverage, and Sustainable Development Goals 3 and 4 hinges on adequately supporting these children.

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Conflict of interest: No competing interests exist.

Financial support: Monetary support, free transportation, vocational education, healthcare, and education. NGOs and philanthropists offer mid-day meals, healthcare, and specific services. Some services overlap between government and NGOs.

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