

LEARNING DISABILITIES IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS AS A CONTEMPORARY ISSUE IN EDUCATION

Salawu Momoh Bello and C. I. Mgbajiaka

Abstract

The issue of learning disabilities, especially in secondary schools, is relatively unexplored in this country. The fact however remains that several students often portrayed in stereotypical and devaluing ways are only learning disabled. Attention in this paper was focused on the plight of these students. Specifically, attempt was made to sensitize psychologists and school counsellors on the magnitude of the problems associated with learning disabilities among students in secondary schools in Nigeria and the roles of each professional in identification and remediation of learning difficulties encountered by learning disabled students. Also, proposals for dealing with the problems of learning disabilities in secondary schools were highlighted. The paper suggests that, psychologists and counsellors currently on the field should be given every opportunity to attend seminars, workshops, conferences and even part-time in-service training courses so that they can increase their understanding of children's learning difficulties and techniques of managing such problems effectively. The fact that learning disabled students are often good at some tasks and poor at others indicates that their problems could not be attributed to generally low levels of abilities. The school system should therefore provide an opportunity for such students to pursue their varying abilities.

Key Words: Learning, Disabilities, Counselling, Psychologists.

Learning disabilities poses some of the greatest challenges faced by the classroom teachers, especially in the basic classrooms in Nigeria. This could be partly due to the fact that there is difficulty in distinguishing students who truly have learning disabilities from students who are failing for other reasons (Gatz , 1994). Psychologists and Guidance counsellors have long been aware of the role of individual differences as a strong determinant of how and what students profit from learning experiences. Akande (2008) estimated the population of students with learning disabilities at fifty percent of the total number of persons with special educational needs coupled with the heterogeneous nature of the condition, makes it a greater challenge to the regular teachers in most regular basic classrooms in Nigeria. According to Olawale (2000), learning disabilities as a condition affect the brains' ability to receive process, analyze or store information. The condition can make it difficult for the learners to learn as quickly as possible like someone not suffering from learning disability.

Certain kinds of learning disabilities such as hyperactivity and attention disorders can cause students minds to wonder too much. Olawale (2000) noted that these situations may pose great challenges to the teacher in an inclusive classroom with a target of ensuring that every student learn at the same pace. It has been observed that pupils who have learning disabilities often do not try harder, pay closer attention to their teachers or improve motivation on their own; they need the help of their classroom teachers to cope with their studies. However, assistance is also required when the pupils are

to learn how to read in other languages other than their mother tongues. Learning disabilities are in different forms; so many pupils have learning disabilities in spelling, some have in writing, others have in relationship to a particular subject, while some have behavioural problems such as lack of attention during teaching/learning processes. Olawale (2000) asserts that students with learning disabilities are suffering from perceptual disorders, which limits their ability to receive, sort, process, store and retrieve information which those without learning disabilities do. The problem is seriously widening the gap between their potentials and their actual achievement. Except students with learning disabilities are well patiently thought, the problem will continue to affect them; with time, it may start affecting their lifestyles.

Students with learning disabilities encounter difficulties in their academic pursuits compared with other children in the same classroom setting. They find it very difficult to cope with other colleagues in what takes place in the classroom. Parents, friends and teachers of these types of children do complain of their poor performances in school subjects. They are being given all sorts of names by their fellow students due to their inability to cope with the challenges in the conventional classroom setting.

Concept of learning Disabilities

Identification of learning disabled students becomes particularly troublesome because they seem so normal and are quite unlike physically disabled students whose problems are easily identifiable. Even professionals who work with children sometimes fail to recognize it because its victims seem so normal. For instance, learning disabled students are not mentally retarded; they are not emotionally disturbed; and they are not physically handicapped as to require education in special schools. They are not even environmentally disadvantaged as to be limited to specific social class (USOE, 1977). These exclusive clauses incorporated into the definition of learning disability thus vividly portray the subtlety of the disorder. There is however a consensus of opinion in literature concerning the fact that learning disabled student, for whatever reason, has difficulty in learning. The most important index is the fact that the student is failing in some subjects when compared with peers of the same age and basic intellectual abilities. The student experiences severe discrepancy between ability and achievement in one or more specific areas when provided with learning experiences appropriate for his age and ability levels (Lerner, 1981).

In sum therefore, learning disabled students have a wide range of abilities and disabilities. Some students for instance, may be quite good in Mathematics while their reading, spelling, spoken language, written expression and comprehension are considerably below average. Some others may have good verbal and auditory skills and even be excellent readers while at the same time perform far below average in Mathematics calculation and reasoning. Some others still may be very poor in writing and drawing but may be very successful in business and mechanical fields. For practical purposes therefore, learning disabled students could be easily identified by the opposing scores and remarks often shown on their report such as in, Mathematics, 'excellent'; English Language, 'woeful'; Writing 'awful'; Physics, 'excellent' and so on.

Learning Disabilities in Secondary Schools

In general, learning disabilities in regular schools in Nigeria remains a relatively unexplored area of education. To date, efforts in this country seem generally concentrated on learning problems associated with physical schools. Even in parts of the world where learning - disabled children are

being catered for, the emphasis in identification and remediation is limited to the primary school children (Olasehinde 1994). The fact however remains that learning disabilities also exist in the regular secondary schools. Many children are already identified in the primary schools. Several others may even not be identified at all while in the primary school because of the subtle nature of their problems or possibly because of the lower demands of the primary school curriculum. Importantly, adjustment problems associated with puberty experienced by most secondary school students create additional complications for the learning disabled student. Such problems, added to years of failing in the primary school, often lead to behavioural and social problems which may further aggravate the student's learning problems. Again, preoccupation of secondary school teachers with syllabus coverage often limits their interest in adjusting the curriculum or their mode of teaching to meet the needs of learning disabled students. Thus, even if there are no statistical data in Nigeria to back up the claim now, there is no doubt that there exists, within the regular secondary school, a proportion of students incapable of achieving up to their intellectual capabilities in the main school subjects; students so far below in basic academic Skills are often object of mockery among their mate.

Problems Associated with Learning Disabilities

It is almost natural that students who fail to make educational progress will manifest other behavioural and social problems. Learning disabled students are thus often characterized by avoidance of tasks, disorganized study habits, overreaction, lack of attention, and poor use of time' (Lerner, 1981). Such disturbing behaviours on the part of a student elicit some tension and emotion in teachers and peers which in turn, further complicate the problems of learning disabled student. More importantly, learning disabled students have attention difficulties (Tarver, Hallahan, Kauffman & Ball; 2006). They are easily distractible and are generally inattentive in class. Added to this is the fact that they tend to act impulsively (Hallan, Tarver & Kauffman, 2006). They are given to acting before thinking in problem solving situations. No doubt, such attention and problem solving difficulties encountered by learning disabled students often compound their learning problems. The reason is because students who cannot pay attention to any given task for long will have great difficulty in engaging in school work; just as their inability to reflect carefully before responding can be detrimental to learning since several school tasks require students to select among competing choices. Learning disabled students therefore often contend with deficient thought processes which hinder learning and problem solving when compared with their peers.

Remediatory Roles of Psychologists and Counsellors

Psychology and counselling are helping professions that should participate actively in ameliorating the problems associated with learning disabilities. Educational psychologists and school counsellors in this country should therefore assume this desired responsibility of advancing the prospects of learning disabled students in regular school schools. Meaningful remediation programmes begin with accurate diagnosis. Educational psychologists become especially important in this respect. Their contributions to the work done for the learning disabled students have a practical frame work. They must deal with the reality of diagnosing the student as learning disabled. Their expertise thus includes knowledge about diagnostic techniques usually through observation, testing, evaluation and accurate characterization of the outward behaviours of students. Significant also is the contribution of educational psychologists in the provision of remediation procedures. Psychologists must possess functional knowledge of remediation programmes with emphasis on the learning

situation rather than on the causes of the disorders. In general, the contributions of educational psychologists to the work of learning disabilities should lead school counsellors to focus on the learning behaviours of students.

By its nature, remediation of learning disability calls for a multidisciplinary approach. For the purpose of the regular secondary school in Nigeria, psychologists, school counsellors, classroom teachers and parents must individually and severally participate actively in assisting learning disabled students. Importantly, the school counsellor must act as the agent responsible for coordinating the efforts of the contributing organs.

In specific terms, the counsellor's role is to build a cooperative team that works together. The counsellor needs to be well grounded in the basic knowledge of what other team members must do to assist learning disabled students. It is only then that the school counsellor can perform the important task of integrating the various efforts of assisting the students. The job of the school counsellor begins with adequate knowledge of source and application of learning disability diagnostic instruments. In addition, the counsellor must be well grounded in the art of observing, testing, evaluating, and diagnosing learning disabled students. Counsellors need to know that they can be given advice and assistance by educational psychologists particularly in Departments of Educational Psychology as well as Special Education Units of Nigerian Universities and Colleges of Special Education. For instance, standardized diagnostic instruments may be obtained from such sources.

The work of the counsellor also includes advising classroom teachers as well as parents on practical diagnostic techniques. Teachers are particularly very well placed to observe students' behaviours in a variety of situations and to assess their performance at different tasks. The counsellor should enlighten teachers and parents in this respect. School counsellors play a very crucial role in the area of remediation of learning disabilities. Their roles range from holding counselling sessions with learning disabled students; through implementing remediation programmes; to directing the efforts of teachers and parents towards the same end.

The secret of remediating problems associated with learning disabilities is in understanding the students. Everyone concerned with the plight of learning disabled students needs to understand the importance of not blaming but trying to be helpful and praising the strengths of the students. Also, the need to have empathy for, as well as show unconditional positive acceptance of learning disabled students cannot be stressed too much. The task is on the counsellor to tailor teachers' and parents' reactions to learning disabled students in such manners. Important again is the fact that teachers ought to provide prompt and realistic feedbacks on tests and examination for learning disabled students because such feedbacks provide them realistic views of how well they are performing academically. Counsellors can make teachers appreciate the importance of, as well as coordinate modalities for the provision of such feedbacks. Obviously, certain problems of learning disabled students may be beyond the limits of some counsellors' competence. Counsellors must be humble enough to admit this fact; they must be competent enough to identify such problems; and they must be courageous enough to refer such cases to special education centres.

The point then is that the counsellor, the psychologist, the subject teacher and the parent must have a cooperative working relationship. The counselor must be able to work out, with each member of the team, exactly what their duties are. It is only through such an integrated effort that an understanding of the problems encountered by learning disabled students can be achieved.

Conclusion

In conclusion, educationists in this country must come to grips with the fact that within the regular secondary schools there will always be disabled students who will take up more time effort and who will challenge teachers' skills to the full. Such students should be given appropriate learning experiences to enable them emerge from school with adequate skills and knowledge as their normal-learning colleagues. It is therefore the responsibility of all educational psychologists and school counsellors to harness their resources sufficiently to meet with the challenges posed by such learning disabled students in Nigerian Secondary Schools.

Recommendations

The first step towards sensitizing psychologists and counsellors to the problems of learning disabilities lies in their training. Special education training, relevant to learning disabilities, should be incorporated into Educational Psychology and Guidance and Counselling curricular so that these professionals can be adequately prepared to work with learning disabled students in regular secondary schools. Similarly, psychologists and counsellors currently on the field should be given every opportunity to attend seminars, workshops, conferences and even part-time in-service training courses so that they can increase their understanding of children's learning difficulties and techniques of managing such problems effectively.

Since school counsellors now play prominent roles in Nigerian Secondary Schools, it is assumed that they will have every opportunity to bring their knowledge to bear on the problems of learning disabled students directly. They will however need to be assured of the full support of their colleagues and especially the school administration to function effectively. Psychologists can only have indirect impact on students since they operate outside the school system. Their impact can nevertheless be felt in the schools if sufficient facilities are at their disposal. It is thus here suggested that the Federal Ministry of Education, in collaboration with Psychology, Counselling and Special Education Departments of Universities, should initiate learning disability diagnostic and management centres, manned by school, educational and clinical psychologists, across the country. In addition government can set up more child guidance centres (not just in Lagos) with responsibility not for pre-primary and primary school children alone but also well equipped enough to cater for adolescent secondary school students. Such facilities should enhance the jobs of school counsellors as resource, consulting and referral centres on problems relating to learning disabilities.

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