

**IDENTIFICATION AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES FOR LEARNING
DIFFICULTIES**

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Abstract

This paper established that learning difficulty is a phenomena that affects children and is a heterogeneous disorder, which poses difficulty in reading, writing and mathematical calculations. Teachers are to identify such disorder through the use of checklist, observation, use of tests and face to face interviews. The identified disorder include; Dyscalculia or math difficulty, Dyspraxia or motor planning difficulty and Attention difficulty Disorder (ADD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Certain intervention strategies, were proposed amongst which are: direct instruction, individual education plan, development of basic perception skills. The paper recommended amongst other thing that; the curriculum of Teachers Training Institutions should be drawn in such a way that teacher trainer will receive instructions on learning difficulties, on how to help children with such problem.

Introduction

The term learning difficulty have been used by educational psychologist in the united Kingdom since the 1980's to refer to mental retardation. The difficulties experienced by certain students constitute veritable challenges for teachers who work with them. They also call for a great deal of energy on the part of parents learning difficulty may be viewed as to the problem the student may experience in his or her learning progression. These difficulties may be experienced by students who are at risk, disabled or have severe behavioral problems. Learning difficulties can take different forms, some are temporary while some persist throughout the students school career. This situation makes it more difficult to select which intervention measure to use. The paper attempts to identify the types of learning difficulties and intervention strategies.

Learning Difficulties

Learning difficulties and learning disabilities are two terms that are difficult to distinguish; some scholars argued that both have the same meaning and can therefore be used interchangeably, while some argued that learning difficulty is a generic term which encompasses learning problems including disability. Crowl, Kaminsky & Podell (1997) assert that, this implies that learning difficulty could become a disability when it is diagnosed to be a severe disorder. They further posited that, the degree of the learning condition makes the difference. Further arguments by other authorities point to the fact that learning is a non categorical definition, including all these who have difficulties learning one or more of the basic academic skills. On the other hand, learning disability is a categorical definition based on diagnosis. Strydom (2009) opined that learning difficulty is an all embracing term for children with any type of learning problem or disorders. The preference by the United States of America to use the term learning disability is only for the convenience of clarification. Strydom, is of the opinion that, the United States of America classified children with learning difficulty on two grounds, one, that the learning problem is presumed to be due strictly to some Neurological dysfunction and not by external factors. Secondly, a child is classified as a learning disabled when he has been properly diagnosed and the result shows discrepancy between a child's potential and his achievement. Such children are recognized as disabled and covered by the Federal Disability Discrimination Act. The exclusion of external factors in learning

difficulties is one of controversial issues among scholars because many has argued that the existence of a neurological dysfunction has not yet been proved as the cause of learning disability and it is equally very difficult to ascertain that external factors do not have any role to play in establishing learning disabilities.

The most widely accepted definition of learning disabilities was given by the American National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) in Nwoye (1988:18) and re-discussed by Harri (1990) and presented by Abekhale and Okpenge (2009) as:- a generic term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual and presumed to be due to the dysfunction of the central nervous system. Even though a learning disability may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (eg sensory impairment, psychogenic factors) it is not the direct result of these conditions or influences.

The definition, so far are all presumptions because the actual causation of learning difficulties is yet to be determined, since the assumption that learning difficulties have a neurological connections or that they result from a dysfunction of the central nervous system is yet to be empirically proved. Whatever be the case, teachers and counsellors have a stake in the identification and remediation of children with learning difficulties.

Characteristics of Problems Associated With Learning Disabilities.

Following the definition that has just been presented however, it seems possible to identify the following as part of the problems confronting the learning disabled child.

These are:-

- 1) Difficulty in listening comprehension which involves an inability to receive oral language effectively.
- 2) Unusual difficulty in making or learning oral speech, which involves an inability to express oneself in oral language.
- 3) Written language disabilities demonstrated in an unusual difficulty in learning to read and write.
- 4) Unusual difficulty in visual-motor co-ordination which involves the problem of learning how to make one's hands and feet work together with what the eyes see.

- 5) Problems of inattention which involves two kinds of difficulties: difficulty in selecting attention and difficulty in sustaining attention.
- 6) Disabilities in authentic skills/concepts, which involve unusual difficulties in computational skills, symbolic language expression, understanding of spatial relationships, effective development, arithmetic concepts, seriation and conservation abilities and the ability to associate written numerals or figures with the quantities they represent (Nwoye, 1988).

How to Identify a Child With Learning Difficulty.

In order to identify children with learning difficulty, Denga (2009:34) posited the following methods:

i. The use of Checklist

Checklist can be constructed by the teacher and used to identify and assess the child with learning difficulty. The checklist contains the child's name, his class, the sex, approximate age and the various items against which the extent of learning difficulty can be checked.

ii. Observation: Observation by teachers, counsellors and special educators is very important initial activity. It is tied up with the checklist because a teacher or counsellors can more confidentially check what he has observed rather depend on secondary source. If possible visits can be paid to the parents home to find out what the child does at home. Observation calls for a team effort.

iii. Use of Tests: If standard psychological tests are available, they could be used to ascertain the extent of learning difficulty. These tests can be obtained from experts on tests construction or from the Faculty of Education nearest to the school.

iv. Face to Face Interviews with the Children Suspected to have Learning Difficulty: The teacher can ask the child to tell a story, to read a passage, to narrate about his achievements and his relationship with other children. During this face to face discussion, several problems can be identified for treatment. Assessment may be done both in mother tongue and in English. A child can be asked to write short passage from a book so that the ear-hand coordination can be assessed.

Types of Learning Difficulties

Deficits in any area of information processing can manifest in a variety of learning difficulties. However the umbrella term learning difficulties is used to cover a wide variety of learning difficulties. Many people use it synonymously with dyslexia (a difficulty with words), but it is now generally accepted that dyslexia is only one of a group of difficulties, that may include others to be discussed in this paper as follows:

Dyslexia or Reading Difficulty

This is the most common learning difficulty. It is often referred to as dyslexia which is a language based disorder of institutional origin characterized by difficulties in single word decoding, reflecting insufficient psychological processing.....including problems in acquiring reading, writing and spelling (Kenyon 2003:6). Kenyon further mentioned that dyslexia can rise from mild to severe difficulty. It is assumed that this disorder has a hereditary connotation because it is often seen a run in families. A reading difficulty can affect any part of the reading process, including difficulty with accurate and/or fluent word recognition, word decoding, reading rate, prosody (oral reading with expression), and reading comprehension. According to Wikipedia (2009), before the term “dyslexia” came to prominence, this learning difficulty used to be known as “word blindness”

The common indicators of reading difficulty include: difficulty with phonemic awareness the ability to break up words into their component sounds and difficulty with matching combinations to specific sounds)sound-symbol correspondence).

Strydom (2009), identified severe signs of and symptoms of reading difficulty, amongst which are the following:

- i. Reading slowly and painfully
- ii. Experiencing decoding errors especially with the order of letters
- iii. Showing wide disparity between listening and reading comprehension of some text.
- iv. Having trouble with Spelling
- v. Exhibiting difficulty recalling known words
- vi. Having difficulty with written language
- vii. Substituting one small sight word for another like a, I, he, the, there, was.

Writing Difficulty or Dysgraphia

This difficulty is also known as Dysphasia or Aphasia in DSM-IV or Dysgraphia (Kenyon 2003). The difficulty results from an impairment of written language ability which may include impairment in hand writing, spelling, organization of ideas and composition. Strydom (2009) asserted that, dysgraphia is assumed to be a neurological disability which is characterized by impairment in written language ability such as hand writing and the machineries of writing, spelling, etc. Kenyon asserted that, the actual cause of this disability is yet to be known though assumed to be a neurological difficulty. Some of the signs and symptoms of Dysgraphia as identified by Kenyon (2003) include the following:

- i. Poor and distorted handwriting that is difficult to read
- ii. Inappropriately sized and spaced letters, irregular shape or slant letters.
- iii. Illegible printing and cursive writing
- iv. Poor Spatial planning on paper
- v. Copy or writing slowly with strain
- vi. Difficulty in thinking and writing at the same time.
- vii. Inconsistence spacing between words or letters
- viii. Poor drawing capabilities
- ix. Persistence wrong or odd spelling despite instruction
- x. Being a messy cater
- xi. Has unfinished words or letters, omitted words
- xii. Has cramped or unused grip and many complaint or sore hand.

Math Difficulty or Dyscalculia

People with dyscalculia have a normal ability for printed words but have difficulties with mathematical skills such as addition, subtraction, division, multiplication and mental arithmetic. They do notice there common mistakes such as transposing, omitting and reversing numbers. They also have difficulty with abstract concepts of time and direction, sequence of events and memory for names. They lack big picture thinking, are confused by time tables and may often be late. They may have a poor sense of direction and can get lost.

It is common knowledge that most people generally have problems with mathematical calculations while in school but a person with Dyscalculia often has more difficulty in scoring basic mathematical problems such as quantity, placing value and time. They also have difficulty memorizing mathematical formula or facts, organizing numbers or understanding how problems are organized on a page, this is referred to as having poor number sense by Kenyon (2003). Kenyon (2003) asserted that, this difficulty may not be quite noticeable during the early period of a child's life but may be manifested when the child is faced with mathematical calculation, this difficulty may affect the child's ability in the management of money as well as spatial reasoning later in his life (Abekhele and Egbe-Okpenge 2009). Kenyon (2003), identified the under listed characteristics of people with Dyscalculia as:-

- i. Inability to remember or retrieve math facts
- ii. Inability to use virtual imagery effectively
- iii. Visual spatial deficit
- iv. Confusion with mathematical operation especially those that involve multi-steps process.
- v. Difficulty in language processing that may affect the ability to complete mathematical problem solving. (p.7)

Additional sign and symptoms as identified by Strydom (2009) include the difficulty in understanding concept of place value, quantity, number lines, positive and negative value, carrying and borrowing as well as difficulty in understanding concepts related to time such as days, weeks, months and years.

Motor Planning or Dyspraxia

Dyspraxia is a developmental disorder that affects coordination. This can impact on movement, perception and thought, so many affect speech, fine motor movement, whole body movement and hand-eye coordination, sequencing and organization. Wikipedia (2009) asserted that it is sometimes referred to as motor planning disorder because it has to do with a number of difficulties with motor skills such as combing of hair, brushing of teeth, wearing cloths properly, the inability to accurately put things in their respective positions, problems with hand writing, clumsiness and even the difficulty of waving goodbye.

Attention deficit disorder (ADD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

The attention deficit disorder information and support service (2010), opined that those who has attention disorder (ADD) or attention hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) tend to have disruptive behaviors that cannot be described as being of a psychiatric nature. The behaviors are not age appropriate, so an older person may misbehave in a similar way to a much younger peer. Individuals have difficulties focusing their attention to complete a specific task; they can be hyperactive and impulsive and can suffer from mood swings and social clumsiness.

Intervention Strategies

There is a unanimous agreement by scholars that learning difficulty is a life long and heterogeneous disorder whose actual cause and cure have not yet been determined (Bootzin, Acocella, Alloy 1990). However, scholars have equally argued that the academic and learning skills of affected students can be greatly enhanced with specific intervention strategies, which are designed specifically for the improvement of students' areas of weakness in academics. An early intervention will drastically reduce the number of students who meet with the diagnostic criteria for learning difficulties (Sternberg & Grigorcenko, 1999). This paper equally agrees with the position of Fulton (2009) that the earlier a learning difficulty is identified, the easier it becomes for treatment. For any intervention strategy to have a meaningful impact therefore, early diagnosis through accurate assessment of affected students in our schools must be considered as a paramount step. Some of the coping or intervention strategies include the following.

Direct Instruction

Students with learning difficulties would require a highly structured intensive and direct instruction from teachers and psychologists who would place more emphasis on carefully planned lessons for small learning increments (Wikipedia. 2009). Under this strategy, the specialized teacher is not expected to be scarce or infrequent in attending to the students. There must be a rapid placed interactions between the teacher and the students such that mistakes could be corrected as soon as they are noticed. By this interaction, the teacher will avail himself the opportunity of making progress report on the students.

Individual Education Plan (IEP)

In some developed countries like the United States of America, the individual Education plan for students with learning difficulties was tested and found worthwhile. It is the belief of this paper that the programme will equally be found useful in Nigeria for the same purpose. Under the plan, the affected children, their parents and specialized teachers are fully involved. It is a programme that helps in the monitoring of the students' comprehensive verbal, written, motor and social skills both at home and in school. Through series of assignments, affected students' strengths and weaknesses are clearly defined, which will in turn give room for adequate planning of learning activities that will enable the child do his best at school (Lyness, 2007)

Development of Basic Perceptual Skills.

The problem of real perception as noted by Bootzin, Acocella, Alloy (1990) include visual and auditory perceptions which show difficulty in either seeing things in correct order or distinguishing between sounds. Four skills that may be relevant in this direction have been identified by Cusimano (2001). They are visual perception, visual memory, auditory perception and auditory memory skills. He suggested that close attention should be given to visual memory skills like the visual memory of words because research has indicated that about 80% of all learning in schools are done by means of visual modes. In addition, he suggested that since many students have weak auditory memory skill development especially in the areas of listening, attention and recall, specific instruction should be presented to facilitate improvement in those aspects so that students with learning difficulties can learn with relative ease.

Development of special training skill for students with Dyscalculia:

This paper observes that some students have real difficulty in comprehending mathematical concepts. This is different from the general apathy students have towards mathematics and calculations. Such students require some special coping skills to remedy their situations. Affected students should be allowed to use their fingers and scratch paper in counting and solving calculations because their memories may likely fail them. In the course of teaching, teachers should be encouraged as much as possible to make good use of diagrams in the explanation of some concepts. Affected students should be

encouraged to equally seek assistance from classmates through the formation of peer reading/study groups. Other skills include the use of coloured pencils to differentiate problems; drawing of pictures of word problems on the chalkboard and the use of memories to learn steps in mathematics (Strydom. 2003).

Conclusion

The goal of identifying students with learning difficulties is not for the purpose of labelling which may have adverse effects on the students but to seek for possible coping strategies of helping them achieve optimal results in their academic pursuits. If Nelson Rockefeller who was diagnosed to have so much reading problem (Papalia & Feldman (1999) could rise to the position of the president of the United States of America, there is therefore no reason to loose hope on children with learning difficulties. With a positive attitude and attention from peers, teachers and parents, affected students will learn to cope with their conditions without shame or stress.

Recommendations

1. The curriculum of Teacher Training institutions, e.g Colleges of Education, Faculties of Education should make the curriculum in such a way the teacher trainer would receive institutions on learning difficulties and how to help children with such.
2. A well articulated policy be put in place for the Nations Education Policy for children with learning difficulties.
3. Psychologist and profession counsellors should be involved in a policy formation for children with learning difficulties both at State and National Levels.
4. Special equipments be provided in schools to take care of the various children with different kinds of learning difficulties.
5. The general education system be designed and implemented in its present form to have the adequate ability to cater for children with learning difficulty.
6. To ensure proper handling of children with learning disability, all serving teachers from the elementary to secondary school level should attend intensive courses in preparatory to cater for the varying needs in the classroom.

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