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Learners with Learning Disabilities in Inclusive Education Programs in Nigeria: Intervention Techniques that Work

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ABSTRACT   One of the greatest challenges facing educators in this 21st century is managing learners with learning disabilities in inclusive settings. Educators are unsure of adequate approaches to implement in the classroom, parents are at a loss when it comes to managing their children at home, and children have a difficult time understanding and controlling their own behavior. Research within this area has been profound since 1960s. Currently, according to DuPaul & Barkley (1998), urban learners in inclusive education programs in Nigeria appear to be the most widely studied issue. This paper presents an overview of learning disabilities affecting the education of our learners and examines social, academic, and classroom management techniques.

KEYWORDS :

Introduction

Learners with learning disabilities are constantly facing issues that are critical and thereby making them to be consistently at risk of mis-identification, miss assessment, misclassification, misplacement, and misinstruction. This is due to the fact that their ways of behaviour, looking, speaking, working, walking, and learning styles are different from their counterparts. Further, educators' failures to address intra and inter individual differences of these learners have added to their problems of identification, assessment, classification, placement, in-struction (Ford et al, 1999; Hillard, 1999). Educators in inclusive class-room apply traditional ways of gathering and disseminating informa-tion, which has led to labeling, categorization, and discrimination as opposed to addressing the individual learner's differences through parents' interview, student observation, academic records, health re-cords, attendance records, discipline records, and peers observation (Weissglass, 1998). He further stated:

The beliefs that some people are better than others and that success is a matter of genes and independent of societal and familial con-ditions tend to perpetuate discrimination, This discrimination falls the hardest on people from lower socioeconomic classes who do not receive equal educational opportunity and who endure subtle and sometimes blatant discrimination that affects their learning and self-confidence (p, 45),

The purpose of Disability Decree of 1993 was to ensure that all people of school age have equal access to Education for All. Section 5 of this Decree states that, disable persons shall be provided for in all public institutions, free education at all levels of education system. This sys-tem of education is however, known as inclusive education. It is dis-heartening to note that since the declaration of this Decree, the entire public has long been waiting to see its manifestation. The present state of infrastructural and instructional facilities in our educational system creates a lot of doubt as to whether the objectives of inclusive education will ever be achied. Based on the foregoing this study is or-ganised to look explicitly on the following:

--- learning disabilities,
--- inclusive education,
--- learners with learning disabilities in inclusive education: prob-lems and prospects,
--- assessing learners with learning disabilities in inclusive setting,
--- effective intervention for learners with learning disabilities, and
--- a way forword.

What is Learning Disabilities (LD)?

Learning disabilities (LD) is a general term describing a group with learning problems. On the other hand, it is a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculation (Federal Registrar, 1977, U.S, Department of Education, 2004)

Researchers and scholars have continued to decry abuses associat-ed with classifying and labeling learners with learning disabilities in inclusive classroom because they look, behave, speak, and learn dif-ferently (Duvall, 1994 and Hilliard, 1995). Students with learning dis-abilities can best be described as special need learners who need to be given attention in inclusive settings. The term inclusion has been used to describe the education of students with disabilities in general education settings. This term is generally taken to mean that students with disabilities are served primarily in the general education class-room under the responsibilities of the general classroom teacher.

Many urban schools learners have been associated with learners with special needs. Many urban schools have been associated with drugs, guns, and crimes. For many of these students, the methods of be-havioral assessment remain critical (Karr &Wright, 1995). Educators in urban inclusive settings tend to forget that the information that applies to one student in one setting may not apply to him/her in another setting, and even when such information is correct, it cannot be generalized to suit all students. Additionally, what works for one teacher/professional may not work for another teacher/professional. Many of these pedagogical knowledge seem to be lost when issues affecting urban learners come to the limelight. Is it any wonder that educators in inclusive settings continue to use a one-method-fits-all technique to identify, assess, place, and instruct urban learners who bring multidimensional "baggage" to school programs? Put anoth-er way, traditional labels and categories have failed to address the unique abilities of learners. Surprisingly, educators continue to assign worth to these learners by viewing intelligence as a single entity (Hilliard, 1995).

Learners with learning disabilities in inclusive settings: Problems and prospects

There are contrasting differences and similarities between learners with learning disabilities in urban and rural communities. For exam-ple, both urban and rural learners with learning disabilities face the risk of misidentification, misassessment, misclassification, misplace-ment, and miseducation, simply because of their behaviors, looks, and learning styles (Eskay, 2009, Ford et., 1995). On the other hand, rural learners with learning disabilities live on farms or in homes com-pared to the urban learners who may live in squatters (public lands under government control), beg for alms on the road.

There are apparent disadvantages in globalizing behaviors those learners in inclusive settings exhibit and in wrongfully interpreting their capabilities. These misinterpretations by professionals might be internalized by these students resulting in negative self-fulfiling

behaviors (Obiakor, Algozzine, &Campbell-Whatley, 1997). The irony is that many learners in inclusive education have rough time in schools where their devaluation has led their negative perceptions in a society. Some parents give up on them, they fail to get along with c1assmates, and teachers consistently attempt to get rid of them. It becomes necessary to establish support mechanisms and divergent assessment and intervention techniques that work with these students. The programmatic goal should not be to label or get rid of urban students-the goal should continue to be to provide education in rewarding environments.

Based on the aforementioned details, it appears that learners with learning disabilities or special needs in inclusive settings are miss-assessed because of the failure of societal "categories" to respond to contemporary paradigm shifts. Recent outrageous murders have occurred in urban schools. Ironically, these schools are viewed as "good" schools located in "good" neighborhoods where "good" parents and their "good" children and youth live. The behaviors of these "good" children have caught the national media attention, especially in Enugu, Lagos, Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Rivers states, to mention a few. One great misconception is that these urban learners who mostly come from well-to-do homes do not engage in drugs, crimes and violence. They are magnified as "perfect kids" because they make high scores in standardized tests. On the other hand, learners with learning disabilities are viewed as incapable learners who come from "poor" and disadvantaged backgrounds. These myths have had devastating effects on them, their parents, and communities. As a consequence, many questions remain unanswered in our inclusive education practices. For instance, how can powers and paradigms be shifted in the identification, assessment, and instruction of these students? What can educators do to maximize the learning potential of these learners with learning disabilities in Nigeria?

Assessing learners with learning disabilities in inclusive setting

Assessment has been viewed as the process of organizing test data into interpretable forms (National Teacher's Institute (NTI2007) through a wide variety of instruments such as tests, observation, questionnaire, etc. in which the teacher becomes the only assessor (Ezegbe 2011). The ongoing reform in educational system calls for innovation in the assessment practices. School-Based Assessment (SBA) according to Ezegbe, (2011) is one of the innovative approaches through which Universal Basic Education (UBE) objectives could be achieved. NTI (2009) describes SBA as assessment base that is broadened to include not only the teachers but also all significant others that impact on the child's readiness, capacity, and interest to learn. Implicit on the above statement is the fact that assessment in inclusive setting should be multidimensional so as to accommodate all sorts of learners.

• Multidimensional assessment:

Different types of standardized tests are administered each year to students in Nigeria. The question is, how feasible is this process considering visible differences of learners with learning disabilities in inclusive setting? Diagnostic, formative, and summative evaluations are necessary to determine effectiveness of students and programs. Diagnostic tests are given before programs are initiated, formative tests are given during the operation of programs, and summative tests are given after program operations. All these procedures must be viewed as functional processes. While tests are only samples of behavior, assessment includes much more than testing (Karr & Wright, 1995). In fact, school-based assessment in inclusive education should involve consistent collecting and synthesizing of information about a particular problem. According to Witt et al.(1994), assessment is:

an ongoing process which involves a wide array of materials, techniques, and tests across a variety of time periods and situations. Teachers, parents, counselors, psychologists, speech clinicians, and even children can be involved actively in the process of assessing the strengths and weaknesses at school or home. Thus assessment, particularly for purposes of special or remedial education, is multifaceted and should be a team process whereby professionals and laypersons work cooperatively toward the solution of a problem (p. 5).

Based on the above statement, assessment of learners with learning disabilities should not be unidimensional; it should not also be lim-

ited to the use of formalized standardized tests for these students. Garhart and Garhart (1990) argued that test selections have ignored societal changes and changes in children's needs. Similarly, Karr and Wright (1995) explained that:

although the utilization of traditional assessment is essential for individuals with problem behaviors, a broader base approach appears to be of much use in today's changing society. Educators' awareness of the need to utilize more contemporary assessment procedures calls for a more holistic approach to address the needs of our ever changing multicultural society (p. 64).

• Creating Avenues for Appropriate Instruction/Inter vention

As noted earlier on, assessment of   learners in inclusive settings should not be unidimensional.

There is no "one-size-fits-all" assessment tool or intervention technique. Two basic testing procedures are the direct and indirect approaches. Direct approach measures precisely the same skills which are usually sampled from a larger domain, and may not actually be thought in the classroom (Ysseldyke, Algozzine, &Thurtlow,). In this case, urban learners with learning disabilities are not being tested over relevant information and when this happens, indirect tests have little validity in determining the relevance of the outcomes for urban learners with learning disabilities in inclusive settings (Obiakor, 1995).

The social importance of assessed and possibly treated behaviors should be clear. Socially valid behaviors are those reinforced by society. Social validity also refers to tolerance of a given behavior in a given situation. For example, at home a parent may accept aggressive behavior which might be totally unacceptable at school.

Although data obtained from others' ratings and self-report instruments are useful first steps in documenting social skills, behavioral, learning, and affective problems, they are not sufficient for planning interventions (Garner, Shafer, & Rosen, 1992). There is the need to be verified in the various settings of the urban learners with learning disabilities. Hoy and Gregg (1994) suggested that preliminary observations should be done before the student is interviewed by the observer who is usually a teacher, school psychologist, or other trained school personnel.

Effective intervention that work for learners with learning disabilities in urban inclusive settings

To effectively intervene for learners with learning disabilities in urban inclusive settings, more comprehensive holistic model are presented:

1. Information Sources (e.g., teachers, administrators, parents/ guardians, children, and other pertinent school personnel).
2. Environment (e.g., home, school, whole class, and structured activities behaviors).
3. Data Sources (e.g., structured interviews, observation, and behavior rating scales, psychological test, checklist, and specialized informal/formal test).
4. Comprehensive Responses (e.g., conferences, program design, duration of services, follow-up services, and reassessment of program and service semi-annually).

There is no doubt that parents, teachers and practitioners would like to see an immediate termination of students' behaviors using the "magic pill." The problem however occurs when the wrong pill is used for the right behavior or right pill is used for the wrong behavior. This creates an iatrogenic effect (Dettmer, Thurstoll. & Dyck, 1993). This term is derived from the medical field, but it has many educational implications for urban learners with learning disabilities in inclusive settings. Iatrogenic intervention results from an iatrogenic assessment of behaviors and capabilities of urban learners. More than a decade ago, the Council for Children with Learning Disabilities (1989) linked problems in the assessment of diverse learners to shortcomings of the existing assessment procedures of learning disabilities. Three factors make diverse learners in inclusive settings susceptible to misdiagnosis of learning pattern. First, language differences may impede the students' academic and social competence. Second, teachers may have faulty perceptions and/or lowered expectations for diverse

learners' academic and social competence. Third, diverse learners are misclassified as learning disabilities since disproportionate numbers of them are referred for special education services. Based on these problems, the Council recommended a functional approach to assessment which "examines the student's performance within the context of existing instructional practice" and concluded that "direct observations of teaching/learning interactions should provide enough information to determine the adequacy of existing instructional formats and durations" (p. 270). Put another way, the learning accuracy or inaccuracy should be determined through curriculum-based assessment and analyses of work samples. As Park et al. (1994) remarked, "(1) concerted efforts aimed at developing and using relevant assessment instruments and practices should occur, and (2) recruitment, preparation, and retention of a more diverse and multicultural competent population of personnel to serve learners with learning disabilities.

· **The Role of Teacher Preparatory Programs**
Teacher preparation programs are redefining their roles in building individuals as a collective growth of all learners (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 1994; Dilworth, 1992). The reasons are simple. Perception continues to matter in schools and communities (Bell, 1992and Brol 1994), and many educational programs continue to be tied to the apron string of traditional educational programs (Diaz, 1992; Grant & Gomez, 1996). Consider a few examples of problems associated with traditional teacher preparation programs:

1. Teacher preparation programs still rely on entry and exit tests that lack reliability and validity (e.g., NECO, WAEC Exams). Even what these tests produce consistent results, they fail to measure what they purpose to measure.
2. Teacher preparation programs still focus on competition rather than cooperative problem solving technique.
3. Teacher preparation programs still do not have enough multicultural learners to respond to current demographic changes in schools and society.
4. Teacher preparation programs still do not have enough special education faculty and staff who can be role models for both learners with/out disabilities.

A WAY FORWARD FOR LEARNERS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES IN INCLUSIVE SETTINGS
The responsibility for change lies with educators in inclusive settings. Learners in inclusive settings are not beyond redemption-they should be valued as persons and not categorized as nonentities. They bring a lot to classroom and school programs.

This is the time to prepare for shifts in power and paradigms. According to Samuelson and Obiakor (1995), "the best way to anticipate the future is to start very early to search for 'new' meaning" (p. 1). Learners in inclusive settings present wonderful challenges for innovative educators. It is self-destructive to categorize them, their parents, schools, and communities based on their personal idiosyncrasies and socio-economic backgrounds. Rather, learners in inclusive settings and their parents must be given the opportunity to work with schools and communities.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS
In this chapter, the authors examined the plight of learners with learning disabilities in inclusive education programs. In more specific terms, they discussed traditional assessments issues that consistently magnify this plight and suggested ways to ameliorate these problems. Further, the authors believe that learners with learning disabilities have the potential to succeed in learning environments where they are appropriately identified, assessed, placed, and instructed. The authors also believe when a person or group of people is viewed as "poor," "deprived," and/or "disadvantaged," it shows an inability to confront real problems of real people. Educators cannot assume that learners with learning disabilities cannot learn and at the same time expect them to perform academic, social, and economic miracles. When identification and assessment fail to respond to individual differences, classification, placement, an instruction seem to be loaded with negative assumptions, denigrating stereotypes, and illusory conclusions.

The information the authors have about our learners in inclusive education programs must be multidimensional to address individual differences and build self-concepts. The goal must be to maximize the fullest potential of these learners who look, behave, learn, and speak differently. Like other learners, learners with learning disabilities come to school with unique strengths and weaknesses. As educators prepare them for the twenty-first century, they must avoid traditional labels, categories, and prejudicial conclusions that have tended to minimize their sense of being. Educators,whether urban or rural cannot assist them unless they begin to challenge themselves as educators .

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