

Innovative Strategies for improving Special Educational Needs for Students with Learning Disabilities in Nigerian Schools: An Analytical Study

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Abstract

This study was designed to determine innovative strategies for improving special educational needs for students with learning disabilities in Nigerian Schools. The study used descriptive research design and was conducted in ten selected secondary schools in Ebonyi State Nigeria. The researchers selected 100 teachers in the sampled schools and 65 senior secondary school students were also selected using simple random sampling from 214 students with learning disabilities. Three principals and four (4) special need education teachers were selected through sampling. The data sources were teachers, students, and principals. The main data gathering instrument for the study was questionnaire. Interview and observation were also used to supplement the information obtained through the questionnaire items. However, out of 172 people that formed the study population and were given study questionnaire items, the researchers randomly selected 80 items, which was used for data analysis. Data collected were analyzed using mean and percentage. Based on the data collected, the reliability of questionnaire was computed using Cronbach alpha method at 0.76. This coefficient indicates that the tool was consistent. Findings among others revealed that developing alternative activities and to use less of the traditional method of teaching and learning processes will improve supports for students with learning disabilities. Also, Students with learning disabilities are highly neglected with little or no understanding of their conditions. The study concluded by recommending that special educators should focus on the abilities of students with learning disabilities and not on their physical or behavioural disabilities.

Keywords: behavioural disabilities, Learning Disabilities, Special Educational Needs

Introduction

Learning disabilities poses one of the greatest challenges to the classroom teacher, 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 (Kayer and Genteno , 2009). Obani 92006) estimated that population of students with learning disabilities at fifty percent of the total number of persons with special educational needs as it 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 Salami (2013), 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 without the condition. Certain kinds of learning disabilities such as hyperactivity and attention disorders can cause students'

mind to wonder too much. Salami (2013) noted that these situations may pose great challenge to the teacher in an inclusive classroom with a target of ensuring that every student learn at their 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 reading in other languages order 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 mathematics and calculation, while some have behavioural problems such as lack of attention for a longer time (concentration to the teacher during teaching/learning processes), hyperactivity, or hypo-activity. Salami (2013) asserts that teachers in inclusive education should be acquainted with the fact that students with learning disabilities are suffering from perceptual disorders, which limits their ability to receive, sort, process, store and retrieve information of 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.

To ensure that students with learning disabilities realize their potentials, reading/spelling should be made compulsory in primary and secondary schools in Nigeria and other developing countries. This is to curtail the rate at which students loses their reading and writing skills due to the use of mobile handsets and other computer devices. Learning disabilities can also be academic or developmental; academic learning disabilities are those that are directly related to academic activities while developmental learning disabilities are those related to activities needed to perform academic tasks e.g. attention, memory etc.

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. Their areas of difficulties could be in their ability to listen, speak, read, write and carry out mathematical calculations among others (Dafwat, 2013). One of the most common deficits among children with learning disabilities is their inability to read, written or printed materials. Pierangelo and Giulian (2006) postulated that reading difficulties are observed among children with learning disabilities more than any other problem area of academic performance. Lemer and kline (2006) reported that most children with learning disabilities, at least 80% encounter difficulties in their ability to read.

Special Educational Needs

A student child requires Special educational needs if s/he has disability which either prevents or hinders the child from making use of educational facilities of a kind generally provided for children of the same age in schools within the area of the local authority (Jha, 2002). According to Adebisi (2013), the concept of special educational needs and identification of children with special educational needs has always been a thing of negligence as there is still a high proportion of ignorance and lack of legislation to pursue the implementation of inclusion, at least at pilot level. Mitller (2000) sees the identification of children with special educational needs as labelling and discriminatory.

Meanwhile, people with special educational needs according to Obani (1994) are exceptional people who may be experiencing learning problems and difficulties as a result of difficulties or handicap or other forms of special needs. They however, require individually planned and systematically monitored arrangements of physical settings, special requirements and materials, special teaching procedures and other interventions in order to achieve their greatest possible independence, self sufficiency, academic success and self fulfilment. Education for persons with special educational needs Act 2004 of the Federal Republic of Nigeria defines special educational needs as a restriction in

the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability or any other condition which results in a person or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition. Special educational needs as a term is related to terms like disability, impairment, handicap and special needs (Egunjobi, 2013).

Siyanbola and Osobisi (2013) categorized people with special educational needs as follows:

- Those enrolled in schools but are experiencing much difficulty, whether temporarily or permanently.
- Those living in severe poverty.
- Those living in remote places far from any schooling facilities.
- Those who are victims of war and armed conflicts.
- Street children
- Criminals and ex-convicts.
- Prostitutes and young single mothers who have dropped out of school.
- Miscreants and misguided youths on the streets, touting and hawking wares.
- Children of school age who lead adult disabled beggars around.

All the above mentioned categories of persons with special educational needs require the support of well trained teachers and there is need for innovative strategies to handle and manage such people at schools.

Statement of the Problem

Improving and promoting Special Educational Needs for Students with Learning Disabilities in Nigerian Schools is a very brilliant one, but it seems to only be brilliant on papers. However, the reality on ground is that it is almost impossible to attend to the special educational needs for pupils with learning disabilities in Nigeria. This is because of the various challenges facing the educational system in Nigeria. Many efforts to improve learning in schools for students with learning disabilities have focused attention on current rather than long-range problems and needs and have relied on readily available information that has often been inadequate in doing this. This study principally, is interested in providing innovative strategies for promoting the quality of education for pupils with learning disabilities in our schools.

Purpose of the Study

The central purpose of this study was to determine innovative strategies for improving Special Educational Needs for Students with Learning Disabilities in Nigerian Schools. The study therefore tends to:

- Determine how the attitudes of teachers and other classmates affect students with disabilities.
- Determine innovative strategies for organizing lessons for students with learning disabilities/ special educational needs.
- Determine the major challenges in providing special educational needs for students with learning disabilities in inclusive education setting.

Research Questions

- How do attitudes of classroom teachers and classmates affect students with learning disabilities?
- What are the innovative strategies for organizing lessons for students with learning disabilities/ special educational needs?
- What are the major challenges in providing special educational needs for students with learning disabilities in inclusive education setting?

Methodology

In order to meet this objective, descriptive research design was used. The study was conducted in ten selected secondary schools in Ebonyi State Nigeria; the researchers selected 100 teachers in the sample schools and 65 students were selected using simple random sampling from 214 students with learning barriers. 3 principals and 4 special need education teachers were selected through sampling. The data sources were teachers, students, and principals. The main data gathering instrument of the study were questionnaire. Interview and observation were used to supplement the information obtained through the questionnaire. However, out of 172 people that formed the study population and were given the study questionnaire items, the researchers randomly selected 80 items. Data collected were analyzed using mean and percentage. Based on the data collected, the reliability of questionnaire was computed using Cronbach alpha method at 0.76. This coefficient indicates that the tool was consistent. This coefficient indicates that the tool was consistent.

Findings/Discussion

This presents the data analysis of the study and as well discusses the findings.

Research Question 1: How do attitudes of classroom teachers and classmates affect Students with learning disabilities?

Table 1: *Percentage Responses of Respondents on how the attitudes of classroom teachers and classmates affect Students with learning disabilities*

Items	NO	Agree	%	Disagree	%
Many Principals/Teachers hardly accept students with learning disabilities	80	61	76.25	19	23.27
Children with special educational needs as labelling and discriminatory	80	57	71.25	23	28.75
Parents, friends and teachers of students with learning disabilities complain of their poor performances in school subjects	80	51	63.75	29	36.25
Students with Learning disabilities are called all sorts of names by fellow students due to their inability to cope with challenges in a usual classroom setting	80	71	88.75	09	11.25
Students with learning disabilities are highly neglected with little or no understanding of their conditions	80	55	68.75	25	31.25

Table 1 shows the responses of respondents on how the attitudes of classroom teachers and classmates affect Students with learning disabilities in the usual classroom setting. The analysis shows that many principals/teachers hardly accept students with learning disabilities; this is due to the fact that it is somehow difficult to manage their situations. The study also revealed that Children with special educational needs as labelling and discriminatory. This is in line with the words of Mitller (2000) that people often identify children with special educational needs and have learning disabilities as labelling and discriminatory. In a study done by the African Child Policy Forum (2011), nearly 50% of children identified with disabilities do not attend school. Of that 50%, 65.8% have never attended public school. Some of the reasons for not

attending included, a) schools’ refusal to accept children with disabilities (8.5%); b) poor health of child (34%); c) lack of school readiness (6.4%); d) family refusal to enroll their children (8.5%); e) no available neighbourhood school (2.1%); and f) teachers’ unwillingness to accept children with disabilities in their classrooms (12.8%). One participant in my study who worked for the Ministry of Education highlighted poverty as a key factor impeding families’ willingness to enroll their children with disabilities in school because these children were often a source of income for the family (Kumar, 2013). The family uses (the child) to eat. They ask their child to go beg. If you take this child and bring him/her to school, the family does not have any more resources. This child is a weapon (against poverty). He permits [the family] to survive. The family is going to say, if I send him/her to school, I will no longer eat. So if you convince the family (to enroll their child in school), sometimes they are waiting for something in return. You have to understand their situation. Therefore, it is not at all easy. Sometimes you encounter situations that really sometimes make you cry (Drame and Kamphoff, 2014).

The study also revealed that Students with Learning disabilities are called all sorts of names by fellow students due to their inability to cope with challenges in conventional classroom setting. However, UNESCO (2006) refers to children with special educational needs and those with learning disabilities to include those that have emotional, behavioural, sensory, physical or mental disabilities. Students who for a variety of reasons (intellectual, physical, social, psychological) experience learning difficulties, which are more significant than those experienced by the majority of learners of the same age; such students needs special educational assistance. Essentially, students with special educational needs refer to persons with visual, auditory, physical impairments, the mentally challenged and the learned disabled (Egunjobi, 2013). These students must be loved, cared for and be given adequate and equal love with other students without learning disabilities.

As seen in the table presented, students with learning disabilities are highly neglected with little or no understanding of their conditions and are often called all sorts of names by fellow students due to their inability to cope with challenges in a usual classroom setting. This is in line with Nwuzoke (2010) that some forms of neglect and labelling of names to students with learning disabilities include but not limited to physically challenged, disabled, deaf and dumb, mute, blind, imbecile, moron, mentally derailed, stupid, handicapped etc. Adeyemo (2013) asserts that all these terms connote negatively and have been recklessly deployed to qualify people with special needs. They are indeed aberrant terms more so that they are concerned with characteristics intrinsic to persons. Garcia (2002) opined that when such derogatory labels place people with special educational needs in the realm of the deviant, abnormal, taking on with this situation. When label is assigned to students with learning disabilities; it has negative effects on such students. The need for counselling by people with special needs is accentuated by the enormous problems confronting people with special needs. Among others, the problem areas pertain to: stigmatization, discrimination, emotional, negative experience, employment related issues, family support, environmental impediment, castification, resilience, interpersonal relationship and academic and related issues.

Research Question 2: Innovative Strategies for organizing Lesson for Students with Learning Disabilities/ Special Educational Needs

Table 2: *Percentage Responses of Respondents on Innovative Strategies for organizing Lesson for Students with Learning Disabilities/ Special Educational Needs*

Items	NO	Agree	%	Disagree	%
Develop alternative activities and avoid the traditional method of teaching and learning processes	80	58	75.50	22	27.50

The teachers should Plan for frequent breaks during classes as this would enable students who are hyperactive to cope.	80	66	82.50	14	17.50
The teacher can introduce a system of turning students to their partners and explain.	80	51	63.75	29	36.25
Teachers should provide lesson outline for the students	80	70	87.50	10	12.50
The teacher should use physical activities to keep the interests of the students.	80	59	73.75	21	26.25

Table 2 shows that developing alternative activities and to use less of the traditional method of teaching and learning processes. The item agreed that teachers should plan for frequent breaks during classes as this would enable students who are hyperactive to cope. Students who are hyperactive (including many students with learning disabilities) will need recurrent opportunities to get up and move about the classroom. Building thirty-second “stretch-breaks” very often into a teacher’s class period can help lessen many problems coming from students with disabilities. The teacher should use physical activities to keep the interests of the students. Many children who may not be able to concentrate for a longer period will benefit if the teacher uses this method. The teacher can introduce a system of turning students to their partners and explain. The idea behind “turning to one’s partner and explaining is entrenched in the fact that what a student can explain, she/he understands. When having a lesson at school, at various points, teachers may have the students’ pair up and explain those numerous points to one other, as a comprehension check. Building this routine into the lesson can greatly enhance comprehension of students with learning disabilities.

Teachers on their own should often derive innovative strategies for making sure that students/pupils with learning disabilities are provided opportunities to cope with other ones without disabilities as this will enable them overcome challenges; this is where the services of professional special educators are highly needed in our schools. The central idea of special education form of education according to Obani (2006) and (Siyanbola and Osobisi, 2013) is to;

- Ensure that schools provides for the diversity of their pupils without exception or discrimination and to make them responsive to and inclusive of all.
- Emphasizes what schools or the educational system should provide to facilitate learning for all learners rather than focusing on the deficiency (disability of the children).
- Make school focus on the individual differences (i.e. the learning difficulties and needs) of their pupils rather than treating them in categories.
- Promote the view that there is no dividing line between the individual needs, but that all learners take their position or a straight line of educational needs, problems or difficulties and benefits each according to one’s needs, abilities/disabilities, capacities and aptitudes, interests, styles and rate of learning.
- Make schools or the education system to see special educational needs and learning disabilities largely and relatively as educational problems rather than as personal, permanent characteristics of children.

Research Question 3: What are the major challenges in providing special educational needs for students with learning disabilities in inclusive education setting?

Table 3: *Percentage Responses of Respondents on the major challenges in providing special educational needs for students with learning disabilities in inclusive education setting*

Items	NO	Agree	%	Disagree	%
There are adequate modern instructional facilities for pupils with learning disabilities	80	11	13.75	69	86.25
There are enough classrooms for the Students	80	23	28.75	57	71.25
Lack of Training/ retaining of Special Education teachers	80	63	78.75	17	21.25
Lack of Special Education Teachers motivation	80	74	92.50	06	7.50
Lack of funding of most activities in Schools	80	58	72.50	22	27.50

Table 3 shows that there are no adequate modern instructional facilities for pupils with learning disabilities in our schools. This is in line with the words of Daramola (2005), that the available instructional facilities for academic programme in our schools as at today are inadequate quantitatively and qualitatively and besides many of the available facilities is obsolete. Many schools in Nigeria do not have laboratories or workshop space let alone usable equipment and facilities and where they exist, they are grossly inadequate, as the laboratories only have the items or equipment that were provided when the schools were established. It is however most surprising to know that most schools still depend on theoretical old traditional methods of teaching and learning to teach subjects in this 21st century.

The study also proved that there are not enough classrooms for the Students. All these contribute to the challenges of special education in Nigeria. Also, there is lack of training/ retaining of special education teachers as seen on the table; the study revealed that there is lack of special education teachers' motivation. Most a times, the teachers are not paid salaries on time. Some other times, they are not paid at all. This results in strike action by the teachers. This type of attitude by the government kills the interest of the special education teachers on imparting the required professional skills to the students. The training of academic staff is ordinarily a continuous exercise to ensure consistent improvement in the quality of their outputs. The training is in two-fold: training to acquire minimum qualification to teach and continued professional training. Both types of training can be acquired either locally or overseas (Ekemede, 2005).

Conclusion

Students with learning disabilities are those who have difficulties in realizing their human potentials. Their emotional, physical, emotional, social or intellectual performance falls below or rises above that of the other students. The different may be related to physical, cognitive, emotional or psycho-social factors or a combination of these. The persons with special needs includes: those with hearing impairment, gifted and talented, visual, speech and language impairment, orthopaedic impairment, social maladjustment, learning disabilities and multiple impairments. Students with special educational needs require skilled identification, intervention and special care from trained professionals. This study determined innovative strategies for improving the special educational needs for students with learning disabilities in Nigerian schools, and has presented some innovations through the responses of the study populations. All hands must be on deck to ensure that this aspect of education is given the attention needed as it'll go a long way to ensure education for all.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study the following recommendations were made:

- The education of learners with learning disabilities especially those with behaviour problems require working together with special education experts. Team work benefits the individual

teacher, learners, and the school as a whole; it leads ultimately to the improvements of the delivery of suitable education.

- Special Educators should use less of the traditional methods of teaching and learning. Use more of innovative teaching strategies such as developing alternative activities, using physical activities to keep the interests of the students etc.
- Special Educators should focus on the abilities of these students with learning disabilities and not on their physical or behavioural disabilities.
- Governments should provide adequate funds for procuring recent educational modern equipment and instructional materials to enhance educational needs of the students with learning disabilities.
- Classes with learning disabled students should not be over crowded. Hence should be less and be managed by a professionally trained special core educators.

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