
The Enigma of Specific Learning Disability and the African School Child: Case for Programme of Counselling

By

SYLVESTER O. OKENYI, Ph.D
*Kigali Institute of Education, Kigali,
Rwanda*

Abstract

Specific learning disability (SLD) is a problem that affects the perceptual processes involved in learning. A major symptom of SLD in a child is the existence of a discrepancy between the child's learning potentiality and his/her actual learning performance. Because there is usually no observable difference in the child's physical and at times behavioural appearance from that of his/her other peers, his or her condition is usually neglected by planners of special education programmes in Africa. In this paper, an attempt has been made to highlight two basic approaches to the understanding of the phenomenon of SLD neurological and behavioural. Suggestions were made on the intervention strategies that can be adapted to suit contemporary educational practices in public schools in Africa.

Introduction

A contemporary definition of the term "Learning" and perhaps the most popular is that it is "any relatively permanent change in behavior that occurs as a result of practice or experience" (Morgan C.T., King A.T, Weisz J.R. and Schopler J. (2001). This definition is a product of series of researches carried out on animals and human beings mostly by Behavioural Psychologists. Behaviourism as a branch of school of psychology was popularized by such eminent psychologists as Pavlov (1849- 1936), a Russian who primarily was a physiologist, E.I. Thorndike (1874 – 1948), an American psychologist, J.B. Watson (1878 – 1948), an American psychologist, J.B Watson (1878 – 1958), C.L. Hull (1884 – 1952), etc. These psychologists specialized in studying the relationship between emotion and learning, and how the development of "classical", second or higher order conditioning can help in understanding in a small way the complex cognitive processes in human beings.

B.F. Skinner (1904) who introduced the concept of Operant Conditioning and the German "Gestalt" psychologists, W. Kohler (1887 – 1967). K. Kofka (1886 – 1941) could also be classified as Behavioural psychologists though their approaches to human learning differed significantly from Pavlov's and his colleagues. For example, while the proponents of classical conditioning stress the fact that learning is dependent upon strengthening of the existing connections (S-R), Skinner (1974), maintains that in operant conditioning there are a number of responses not initially linked with any particular stimulus. Learning according to Skinner (1974), consists in

establishing new connections between stimulus and response. The Gestaltists, for example, Kofka (1935), on the other hand, reject the idea that learning or other forms of perceptions as propounded by Pavlov, Skinner and their followers can be broken down into individual stimuli. They argued that people tend to perceive things as “wholes”. For them, learning is achieved through “insight”, that is by a sudden flash of inspiration. The Gestaltists emphasized the organization of perception in “wholes” good form” or “good pattern” as a process of learning. Experience seems to support this view, for example, when one looks at a painting; one sees the whole work of art, not the individual; brush strokes.

A lot of criticism has been made against each and every one of these different theories of learning (Crowl T.K., Kaminsky, S and Podell, D.M. (1997). McClellan 1976. Hergenhahn (1982). According to Crowl et al, all the theories are about how normal human beings learn. Little attention is paid to those whose process of learning is abnormal, retarded or who cannot learn at all. McCellan (1976), on the other hand, has wondered whether the theories were really about human learning since they do not seem to agree on a basic definition of learning. According to him, “Learning was relegated to the psychologists much too hastily. Their efforts to study the phenomenon ... have been badly hampered by the fact that no one had bothered to figure out what learning really is”. Some concern has also been expressed on the fact that all the theories have dwelt elaborately on how people can achieve learning through normal process of human learning.

Research in special education and other related fields (Kronick 1988, Lerner 1988) has shown that apart from the blind children, the deaf, the mentally retarded or other handicapped children who have proven organic defects in one of the sensory organ, there is a growing number of children who show remarkable retardation in learning to do some of those basic processes that are fundamental to all education. These include talking, reading, writing, calculating simple arithmetic etc. A curious dimension to the problem of some of these children is that they are not deaf in the conventional sense of the word, yet are unable to understand language after showing all signs of listening. There are others who cannot perceive things visually and yet are not blind. Others just cannot make progress in normal classroom instructions and yet are not mentally retarded.

Children who manifest these various forms of handicap are generally referred to as children with specific learning disabilities (Thompson, 1998). According to Thompson (op cit), “unlike other disabilities, such as paralysis or blindness, a learning disability (LD) is a hidden handicap. A learning disability doesn’t disfigure or leave visible signs that would invite others to be understanding or offer support ... is a disorder that affects people’s ability to either interpret what they see and hear or link information from different parts of the ‘brain’. Here lies the enigmatic nature of SLD. The intention in this paper is to examine some approaches to the understanding of the phenomenon by some specialists so as to suggest intervention strategies based on these approaches.

The Enigma of Specific Learning Disability and the African School Child: Case for Programme of Counselling - Sylvester O. Okenyi, Ph.D

Definition of Learning Disability (LD)

The diversity in the manifestations of the LD phenomenon has turned the field into a meeting point of professionals in different fields, as well as organizations and state governments interested in finding a key to the puzzle of LD. Thus, psychologists, neurophysiologists, speech pathologists, special educators etc have come up with different definitions of the problem, through each with a bias to their specific fields of specialization. Kirk (1963), identified two broad categories into which the definitions fall. These are:

- (a) Definitions that focus on the central nervous system as the origin of LD
- (b) Others that emphasize the behavioural manifestations of LD in preference to the etiology

A typical definition that belongs to the first category is the one given by the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (1989):

Learning disabilities is 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, presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction, and may occur across life. Although learning disability may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (for example, sensory impairment, mental retardation, serious emotional disturbance) or with extrinsic factors (such as cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction), they are not the result of those conditions or influence as quoted in Myers, P.I., and Hammil D.D. (1990).

Researchers on SLF (Thompson 1998, Konnick 1988), criticize definitions in this category as not being of much value in arriving at educational implications of SLD, especially with reference to designing intervention programmes in schools. All behaviour, normal or abnormal is related to brain dysfunction from behavior. As teachers, we can do little to trace the dysfunction in the brain, and even if it is found, we can virtually do nothing.

In view of the above reasoning, professionals in special education and other helping professions tend to prefer definitions which delineate with a child basic behavioural disability or disabilities and by so doing provide a guide to organizing a remedial programme or an intervention. This was the type of definition adopted at a Conference organized by Wisconsin Division of Learning disabilities in March 2003. According to the definition.

Specific learning disability (SLD) means a severed learning problem due to a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in acquiring, organizing or expressing information that manifests itself in school as an impaired ability to listen, reason, speak, read, write, spell or do mathematical calculations, despite appropriate instruction in the general education curriculum. (<http://www.dpi.state.wi.as/dpi/dlsea/een/ld.html>)

The same emphasis in behavioural manifestation of SLD seems to have informed the definition adopted by the National Advisory Committee on ~~Handicapped Children of the U.S. Office of Education (1976 edition):~~

Children with specific learning disabilities exhibit a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using spoken or

written language. These may be manifested in disorders of listening, thinking, talking, reading, writing spelling or arithmetic.....They do not include learning problems which are due primarily to visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, to mental retardation, emotional disturbance or to environmental disadvantages.

The above two later definitions are more relevant to both classroom teachers and special educators since they focus on the specific areas e.g, reading, writing, spelling etc, where a remedial programme can be organized. More importantly, they also underscore the fundamental position of experts in SLD: that the etiology must not be due to such factors as environmental deficiencies as classroom teaching or organic impairments as mental retardation, visual, hearing or motor handicaps.

In this paper, learning disability shall be taken to mean a disorder manifested by children of normal intelligence but who experience difficulties in learning such specific skills as arithmetic, reading, writing, drawing, speaking etc.

SLD and Mental Retardation

Many have questioned the rationale behind the dichotomy between mental retardation (MR) and LD. A popular argument is that since the mentally retarded children exhibit difficulty in learning, SLD is nothing but another word for MR.

Abang (1981) however, maintains that there are some fundamental differences between the two. She noted the following differences.

- SLD is a problem in learning while MR is a condition
- SLD can be cured, MR cannot
- MR is a general difficulty in learning; SLD on the other hand is a specific difficulty in the process of learning e.g. difficulty in reading, in spelling or arithmetic .
- In discussion SLD, “Specific” is usually added to indicate that we are not dealing with general problems but rather specific developmental problem.

Basic Characteristics of Children with Specific Learning Disabilities

An SLD child is a personification of the popular magical slogan: “The more you look, the less you see” Such is the enigmatic nature of the problem that as pointed out by Thompson (op cit), one cannot detect the victim in the midst of normal people. According to Anderson (1970), learning disability is not apparent in the physical appearance of the person; he may have a robust body, good eyes, sound ears and a normal intelligence. He has disability function, however, which is as just real as crippled leg.

Specialists in SLD have come up with a myriad of characteristics that help to identify a child with specific learning disabilities. In this paper, we shall concentrate on those that are relevant to a classroom teacher or a counselor. These include:

Significant Discrepancy between Actual and Expected Achievement

According to a 2001, publication of the National Institute of Medical Health (NIMH) of the U.S Health Office, called “Learning Disabilities” SLD is defined by law as “a significant gap between a person’s intelligence and the skills the person has achieved at each age.” In other words, SLD applies only to a person whose actual

academic performance is significantly worse than his expected academic performance. In practice, this means, that a severely retarded 10 –year old, for example, who reads like a 6-year old probably does not have a reading disability. He has mastered reading up to the limits of his intelligence. On the other hand, a primary six pupil with an IQ of 100, (or even above), who cannot write a simple sentence correctly probably does have SLD.

There are however, certain other general characteristics of SLD as can be gleaned from literature on the problem. In this paper, discussion focus, will be limited to those characteristics that are manifested on academic, emotional, social and physical levels of a child. These are characteristics that are more often prevalent in classroom environments.

Emotional

- Excessively anxious, frustrated and or stressed
- Uneven patterns of motivation
- Poor self-esteem and a lack of feeling of self-worth, and
- Highly sensitive to criticism and/or resistive to help

Social

- Inappropriate social behavior with authority figures and with peers
- Poor or limited eye contact
- Problems controlling impulses, reasoning, defining problems and evaluating consequences
- Difficulty interpreting the non-verbal elements of social interaction, and
- Problems establishing relationships with self and peers.

Physical

- Prone to motion sickness and migraines
- Awkward gross motor movements
- Susceptible to extreme and total fatigue
- Sensitive to strong perfumes and some sounds, and
- Physical pain in the wrist/hand when producing written work.

Most of the characteristics listed above were culled from the NIMH(2001) document referred to above. In Abang (1981) the following characteristics were identified:

- (1) Most of the SLD children have disorders in motor activities which can be manifested in such behaviours as:
 - a. Inco-ordination i.e. poor motor integration and clumsiness in movement
 - b. Hyperactivity – i.e. fidgety, restless, hardly able to sit still, always in unnecessary motion.
 - c. Impulsivity – deciding too rapidly and generally acting on the spur of the moment, not reflecting on the likely consequences of actions.

- d. Hyper distractibility – inability to focus attention on one major aspect of situation.
 - e. Preservation – automatic and often involuntary continuation of behavior
- (2) Disorders in perception – these include both auditory and visual perceptions
 - (3) Disorders in memory – both visual and auditory
 - (4) Disorders in eye-hand co-ordination
 - (5) Specific academic problems in reading, writing, spelling and arithmetic

The above characteristics identified by Abang (1981), have been shown to be more common in African classroom situation than those of NIMH.

It must be noted however, that almost all the SLD children are average or above average in intelligence quotient. In reviewing any list of the characteristics of the SLD children, it must be noted that they have all one fundamental characteristic in common – specific or significant achievement deficiency in the presence of overall general intelligence (Thompson, op cit). The implication here is that any child with any of the above characteristics who does not have difficulty in achievement would not be considered learning disabled.

Remedial Approaches to the Problem of SLD

Since there are variations of SLD, it would be unreasonable to think of only a single remedial programme. For example, a remedial approach that may be appropriate for a child with a visual perception problem may not be good enough for a child whose visual perception is in a very good state but who has a severe auditory perception disability.

Kirk and Kirk (1971), delineated five approaches to the remedial programmes for the SLD. These include.

1. Neurological approaches
2. Perception motor approaches
3. Visual perception approaches
4. Multi-sensory approaches, and
5. Remedial reading approaches

The first two above are based on the conception that SLD stems from brain damage, and so their remedial programme do not emphasize much behavioural manifestations that can be observed under classroom conditions. In view of this therefore, we shall concentrate on those approaches that are more relevant to the classroom situation.

Visual Perception Method

This approach is based on the work of Frostig (1984). The approach is based on the fact that children who have visual perception problems will have problems learning in school. It believes that the only way future school failures can be averted is by remedying the visual problems.

Frostig designed a battery of tests (Developmental Test of Visual Perception) in five areas of perceptual skills, which include:

- Eye-hand co-ordination (the child traces increasingly narrow boundaries)
- Figure-ground discrimination (the child traces figures on increasingly complex background)
- Constancy of shape (the child recognizes geometrical figures presented in different sizes, contexts or positions)
- Position-in-space (the child discriminates reversal and rotations of fingers)
- Spatial relations (the child perceives space relations between simple forms and parts of a pattern and their relationship to self)

The scores from the tests are used in charting a profile, which shows a comparison of abilities and disabilities among five visual perceptual skills outlined above. Based on this, a programme can be worked out to remedy the specific learning disability.

Multi-Sensory Approaches

Unlike Frostig's approach, which focuses on the learning disabilities that have visual origin, multi-sensory approaches endeavour to evaluate various aspects of the SLD with emphasis on communication process including memory, cognitive, associative and expressive abilities.

One of such approaches was developed by John and Myklebust (1967). This approach tries to identify the specific learning disability in a child Diagnosis and assessment combine neurological, psychological and educational measures. When the specific disability is isolated, treatment and management of the problem is organized to correct the deficit. The following were suggested as areas to be screened so as to identify a specific learning problem:

- Disorders of auditory learning
- Disorder of reading
- Disorders of written language
- Disorders of arithmetic, and
- Non-verbal disorder of learning

Remedial Reading Approach

This approach is based on the fact that of all learning activities conducted in the classroom, reading is the areas were learning disability is mostly evident. Reading in the early stages of the primary school education can be developmental – that is the usual graded sequential method by which reading skill is acquired. It would be corrective when it seeks to rectify certain bad habits or fill up certain lapses created in the course of the earliest reading lessons at home or in the school. Remedial reading is the method adopted where both the developmental and corrective reading approaches have failed to deliver the goods.

Neglect of the Problem of Children with SLD in the Special Education Programmes in Africa

Special education services provided for the handicapped generally in Africa do not seem to have improved a lot from what they were since the 1950s when they started in some parts of Africa. The services apart from being exclusively for the blind, the deaf, the crippled and the speech impaired are also provided mostly in exclusive centres where the inmates are confined.

SLD as a problem is to receive serious attention by planners of Special Education in Africa. In Rwanda, for example, the types of people listed under Special Needs Education include the disabled, orphans, street children and child heads of family.” According to the Revised Education Sector Policy Document of the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Scientific Research (2001), “Some of the children in these categories have been mainstreamed in ordinary school facilities, while others attend the three existing special schools in Gatagara, Butare and Nyamirabo.” The “disabled” mentioned above no doubt refers to the physically handicapped. The practice of classifying handicapped children according to each one's major handicap is very common in most educational systems in Africa. The ultimate result of such broad classifications is to place the children in one of the existing programmes for the blind, the deaf, the crippled, the mentally retarded, speech defective, emotionally disturbed, or sub-categories of these such as visually impaired or hard-of-hearing. The inclusion of the orphans, the street children and the child heads of family as requiring special education in Rwanda is very understandable. Most of these children lost their parents or guardians during the 1984, genocide in Rwanda. This class of children would otherwise waste away without any special provision for their education.

The government of the Rwanda has established a forum for people with disabilities and given the following as the specific objectives of the special education for such people.

1. To ensure the access to physical rehabilitation services for children with disabilities.
2. To enhance prevention programmes for early childhood disabilities.
3. To ensure access to formal and non-formal education for children with disabilities either in mainstream schools, special schools, special classes or at home.
4. To promote community based support systems to ensure that children with disabilities can stay in their natural home while receiving the necessary support.

(source: National Policy for Orphans and Vulnerable Children – Report of the Ministry of Local Govt. Information and Social Affairs, 2003).

In Nigeria the situation is practically the same. In the Federal Government of Nigeria National Policy on Education (1998 edition), Special Education was defined as the education of children and adults who have learning difficulty because of different sorts of handicaps: blindness, partial sightedness, deafness, hardness of hearing, mental retardation, social maladjustment, physical handicap, etc.

The Enigma of Specific Learning Disability and the African School Child: Case for Programme of Counselling - Sylvester O. Okenyi, Ph.D

The aims of special education as stated in the policy are as follows:

1. To give a concrete meaning to the idea of equalizing educational opportunities for all children, their physical, mental and emotional disabilities notwithstanding.
2. To provide adequate education for all handicapped children and adults, in order that they may play their roles fully in contributing to the development of the nation.
3. To provide opportunities for exceptionally gifted children to develop their skills at their own pace, in the interest of the nation's economic and technological development.

In addition, the policy also contains the following provisions that are beneficial to persons with special needs.

- Integration of children with handicap into the mainstream of regular schools;
- Provision of special education for children;
- Provision of special education services for the gifted and talented children

As child with specific learning disability, as stated earlier, as usually found in a mainstreamed classroom but the fact remains that he cannot benefit maximally in a mainstreamed classroom if there is no special provision for intervention in his specific problem.

In South Africa, the situation is relatively better. Prior to the end of apartheid, legislation and policy excluded large portions of the population that have special needs. Post apartheid constitution of South Africa, however, places much emphasis on equality of opportunities and non-discrimination at all levels of education. A cardinal principle in the constitution is that "all state resources must be provided according to the principle of equity so that all learners have access to equal educational opportunities." In line with this principle, the South African education policy is designed to:

1. Give all learners equal educational opportunities within an inclusive system (emphasis mine)
2. Prevent learning difficulties and offer all learners optimal learning opportunities as far as it is practically possible.
3. Quicken progress in schools and offer all learners opportunities for lifelong learning
4. Eventually offer effective education to all learners with special educational needs.
5. Use all available resources to the best effect.

(Source: South Africa, west Cape Education Department. The Directorate of Special Educational Needs, Information Brochure, 2001).

A common feature in all the educational systems mentioned above is the lack of direct reference to children with specific learning disabilities in the category of children for special needs education. According to Abang (1981), "the most neglected of exceptional children..... today in Africa at large are those with learning disabilities."

Another feature is the emphasis most of the countries place on mainstreaming as a panacea for all children needing special education. Where inclusive education is mentioned, as in South, the reference is often vague, and provision for its implementation, non-existent.

Recommended Special Education Services for SLD: the Role of the Counselor

Planning a special education programme for the SLD requires the involvement of a counselor. This is because counselor training in most countries in Africa incorporates in-depth programme in special education service delivery. Though most teachers training programmes in higher institutions in Africa include Elements of Special Education, regular classroom teachers are ill-equipped to provide special services for children with SLD. Delivery special education services to children with SLD begins with systematically identifying what the child can and cannot do. This involves looking for patterns in the child's gaps. For example, if the child fails to bear the separate sounds in words, the counselor should try to check whether there are other sound discrimination problems. If the problem is with handwriting, the counselor should try to discover if there are other motor delays. Are there any consistent problems with memory?

The counselor also should identify the types of tasks the child can do and the senses that function well. By using the senses that are intact and bypassing the disabilities, many children can develop needed skills. These strengths offer alternative ways the child can learn.

After assessing the child's strengths and weakness, the counselor designs an Individualized Education Programme (IEP). The IEP outlines the specific skills the child needs to develop as well as appropriate learning activities that build on the child's strengths. Many effective learning activities engage several skills and senses for. Example, in learning to spell and recognize words, a student may be asked to see, say, write and spell each new word. The student may also write the words in sand, which engages the sense of touch. It is a common belief among most learning experts that the more senses children use in learning a skill, the more they are to retain it. The underling assumption here is that the counselor has the requisite training to administer all the above. Where that is not the case, it is his professional duty to make a referral.

Inclusive Education

We have pointed out earlier that because of the fact that it is usually difficult to distinguish a child with SLD from his/her normal peers, the former is usually placed in regular classrooms. Teachers in such classrooms are not equipped with the necessary skills to detect such children or to manage them. As a result, such children grope through learning activities with extreme difficulty. Many of them ultimately drop out of school when they find it impossible to continue to cope. Others keep repeating classes and on the process earn for themselves all sorts of derogatory remarks from their ill-informed teachers. The implication here is that "mainstreaming" such children in regular classrooms as is done in most education systems in African cannot solve their problems. If anything, it compounds them.

What is Inclusive Education?

According to Staub D. Peck C. (2001), inclusive education refers to full-time placement of children with mild, moderate and severe disabilities in regular classrooms”. It is a step further in mainstreaming, as it presents a means “by which school attempts to respond to all pupils as individuals, by reconsidering and restructuring its curricular organization and provision, and allocating resources to enhance equality of opportunity. Through this process, the school builds its capacity to accept all pupils from the local community who wish to attend, and in doing so, reduce the need to exclude pupils’ Sebbas J., Sachdev T. (1997).

Rationale for Inclusion

The UNESCO in its Salamanca Declaration of 1994 makes it clear that the “task of the future is to identify ways in which the school, as part of the social environment can create learning opportunities for all children and by this means, address the challenge that the most pervasive source of learning difficulties is the school system itself” The report adds further that: The fundamental principle of the inclusive school is that all children should learn together wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have. Inclusive schools must recognize and respond to diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles of and rates of learning and ensuring quality to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships with their communities. There should be a continuum of support and services to match the continuum of special needs encountered in every school.

Benefits of Inclusion in National Education Systems in Africa

Inclusion as a strategy meant to retain children with SLD and other marginalized groups in mainstreamed school systems holds a lot prospects for Africa.

1. Inclusion enhances the attainment of the objectives of EFA Education cannot be for all until it is received by all. A system that excludes some people, cannot be for all and should therefore give way to one that is accommodating of all. It has been argued, “A system that serves only a minority of children while denying attention to a majority of others that equally need special assistance ... need not prosper in the 21st century” (Garuba, 1997).
2. Inclusion promotes a sense of cooperation and the feeling of togetherness in the learner
3. It promotes favourable competition among school children of different abilities, endowments and backgrounds.
4. In addition to its direct benefit on learners with special needs, inclusion allows for the resources of counselors and special education teachers to be tapped to the fullest.

International Journal of Research Development

5. It should be noted here that special education teachers and counselors have the unique ability to teach and work respectively in both the special and regular schools. Inclusion thus presents an avenue for full utilization of the resources of all the members of the community.

6. Inclusive education provides a means of building a cooperative school community, where all are accommodated and able to participate
7. Inclusive schooling is cost effective, as all the learners are accommodated in the same environment using virtually the same facilities.

Facts to be taken into Consideration in Establishing an Inclusive Education System

- There must be an adequate planning that must be proactive and should take into consideration the developmental level of the education system in the country.
- There is need for a nationwide awareness campaign aimed at enlightening all the stakeholders on the peculiar problems of children with SLD and other special needs.
- The curriculum of the Teacher Education as well as that of Counselor training programme must be restructured to equip the trainees with the necessary skills to handle the different forms of disabilities and within the respective capacity building of the different professionals.
- Governments should mobilize people to form Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to pursue the cause of children with SLD and other special needs.
- Governments should put place an elaborate monitoring and assessment system to ensure an effective implementation of the innovative system of education.
- Professionals and other stakeholders in the field of education should work towards getting their individual legislative bodies to legislate the creation of special funds for educating children with special needs.

The Role of a Counselor in an Inclusive Education System

Ideally a regular school under an inclusive education system should be able to provide the following services:

- Consultation to regular educators
- Itinerant or resident counselor special educator
- Resource room assistance
- Partially self-contained classroom

However, the availability of the services listed above in a regular school depends on the status of the inclusive education system in the country. In view of this, the under-listed roles of the counselor will vary.

The Enigma of Specific Learning Disability and the African School Child: Case for Programme of Counselling - Sylvester O. Okenyi, Ph.D

1. As the head of the school Guidance and counseling team, the counselor should be able to coordinate the services listed above in conjunction with school authorities, the special education teachers and the regular teachers.
2. The counselor is in a strategic position to work with the school authorities to promote change process in the school curriculum reform.

3. As trained facilitator; the counselor can provide technical and staff support to facilitate change efforts and team building within the school and community (Sheidon, 1998).
4. With his specialized knowledge and skills in collaboration, coordination, cooperation, resource building and an expert in assessment and evaluation, the school counselor can be a leader in policy and process changes that can positively impact on inclusive education system.
5. He should be able to help regular education teachers, psychologists and other resource personnel to identify specific learning problems of the students, design the most appropriate and innovative programmes or modification as intervention strategies for students so identified.
6. He should devise appropriate mechanisms for handling special education referrals as a means of advocating appropriate interventions within the inclusive education system thereby, curbing the over-identification of students for special education outside the school system (Clark and Stone, 2000).
7. Keenan (1993), noted that special needs students do better when they know that their parents are working in partnership with the counselor, the teacher and the school authorities to improve their learning ability.
8. He should be able to make a case and stand firm on such issues as termination of intervention programme for a return to a regular classroom, or when to transfer a child to special education class.

Counseling the Teachers and Parents of Children with SLD

There is no doubt that with the present low status in the development of inclusive education system in many parts of Africa, the best some counselors could be doing is to provide counseling services to parents and teachers of children with SLD on how best to understand and manage them to help them attain their highest learning capacity.

LD is usually detected at very early age in the education of the child. Many of the children would still be in the primary school. As a result, they are still dependent on their parents and teachers for direction. Because of the fact that the child spends most of his learning time with the teacher it follows that the teacher should be given the necessary counseling on how to manage the child. This explains why many of the programmes for training teachers for both primary and secondary schools in many countries incorporate elements of guidance and counseling. However, it is the duty of the school counselor to organize a counseling programme for the child through the teacher.

Based on the clear understanding of the LD phenomenon, counselor should provide the teacher and the parents (if they are enlightened enough), of the LD child with the following facts:

1. The teacher should know that LD is not the same thing as mental retardation.
2. He should have an insight into the remediation approaches that are specifically applicable to the child. For example, if the child has an auditory memory disorder, he will have to be taught by the sight method. If it is a

visual- memory disorder, remedial programme should lean heavily on the phonics with sight approach augmentation so that he does not have to sound out every word he sees.

3. A variety of approaches should be tried first and then a selection of those that the child is most responsive to should be done and applied.
4. The teacher should be instructed on the need to segment difficult tasks into components so that the child can master each successfully and repeat material that has been learnt so that it is reinforced in a varied of forms numerous times.
5. He should be educated on the need to investigate the possibility of conditions that might exacerbate the LD problem. Such conditions include hearing or visual impairment, allergies, nutritional deficiencies etc. This will direct attention to the type of remediation that will be more effective.
6. The teacher should be made to know when to stop intervention. This decision might generate some emotion, but then it has to be made in the interest of the child and the parents. At a stage during the process of remediation, the parents, the teacher and the child must weigh the amount of remediation the child has received over the years, the extent to which he has improved, the cost of remediation to date in terms of energy expended, financial outlay and the activities forfeited. These issues should be balanced against his current coping level, the skills needed to reach vocational and other goals of living and the demands made on the child and the family's time and energy. These factors will determine whether or not to terminate remediation.

Conclusion

All the known theories of learning seem to dwell exclusively on how learning can be achieved through the normal cognitive processes. Little attention is paid to situations where specific forms of learning cannot take place in people with normal intelligence and who do not exhibit any proven organic handicap. Children with this type of problem are identified as having specific learning disability. When such children are placed in regular classrooms, as is usually the case, they make little progress. The situation is even worse when they are sent to isolated special education centres. Current studies tend to indicate that such children have more chances of overcoming their learning problems in an inclusive education system. To achieve the goals of inclusive education system, governments in Africa are required to restructure their respective education systems so as to provide counselors and regular classroom teachers the needed skills to run effective inclusive education system. Counselors in

*The Enigma of Specific Learning Disability and the African School Child: Case for
Programme of Counselling - Sylvester O. Okenyi, Ph.D*

recognize the problem of the children with SLD so as to work jointly with parents and teachers of such children to remedy the problem.

References

- Abang, T.B (1981). Educating mental retarded and gifted children in Africa. Jos, Nigeria organization for children with specific needs (Revised edition).

- Adelman, P. & Wren, C. (1990). Learning disabilities, graduate section and Careers, lake forest, learning opportunities programme, Barat College.
- Anderson, W. (1990) *Education of exceptional youths*. Englewoods, Cliffs, Prentice Hall, Inc.
- Crowl, T.K.; Kaminsky, S. & Podell, D.M (1997). *Educational psychology-windows on teaching*. New York, Brown and Benchers Publishers.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (1998). *National policy on education*. Government printers, Abuja, Nigeria.
- Florain, L. (1998). An examination of practical problems associated with the implementation of inclusive education policies. *Support for learning*. Vol. 13(3) 35-36.
- Garuba A. (2003). *Basics of special education*. Nigeria, Yola education and management services.
- Hergenhahn, B.R. (1982). *An introduction to theories of learning (2nd ed)*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall, inc.
- Kaufman, N. Hallan, D. (1995). *The illusion of full inclusion*. Austin, T.X. Pro.ED.
- Keenan Jo-Anne (1993). Constructing an urban village school/home collaboration in a multi-cultural classroom, march 1993.
- Kirk, S.A. (1963). *Exceptional Children*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Coy.
- Kirk, S.A. & Kirk I.N. (1971). *Psycholinguistic learning disabilities: diagnosis add remediation*, Urban, Illinois, University of Illinois Press.
- Kronick, D.A. (1981). *Social development of LD persons*, San Francisco, California, Jossey Bass Publishers.
- McClellan, J.E., (1976). *Philosophy of education*. Englewood-Clifs; Prentice-Hall.
International Journal of Research Development
-
- Morgan C.T; King A.T; Weist J.R & Schopler J. (2001). *Introduction to psychology*. New Delhi, Tata McGraw-Hill Edition.
- Mykleburst, H.R. & John D. (1967). *Learning disability – educational principles and practice*, N.Y., Grune and Straton.

- National Advisory Committee on the Handicapped: The unfinished revolution: education for the handicapped. (1976 Annual Report). Washington D.C. Dept. of education and welfare, U.S.A. office of education 2001.
- Revised education sector policy, ministry of education, Kigali, Republic of Rwanda 2002.
- Sebba J. Sachdev (1997). What works in inclusive education. *Barnado's Essex*. 1 Vol. 3, pp. 4-5.
- Sheldon, C.B. (1998). School counselor as change agent in education reform. *School counseling: New perspectives and practices*, Jackie M. Allen G. (Ed) N.C. Eric Clearing House on Counseling and Students Services.
- Smith D.D. (1981). *Teaching the learning disabled*, N.J. Englewood Cliffs. Prentice-Hall Inc.
- Staub & Peck C. (2001). What are the outcomes for non-disabled students? *Education leadership* vol. 52, No 4, pp. 40-45.
- Stone C.B & Clark May (1999). School counselors using technology of advocacy. *The journal of technology in counseling* Vol 1(1) pp. 15-20.
- Thompson, Paul (1998). *Understanding learning disabilities*, Ontario, U.S.A learning disabilities association.
- UNESCO and Ministry of Education and Science, Spain: The Salamanca statement and framework for action on special needs education, as adopted at world conference on special needs education: Access and quality, Spain, June 7-10 1994.