

EMPOWERING CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

The learning disabled need some empowerment to facilitate their functioning to maximum satisfactory levels within the social, physical and intellectual environments. Consequently, this paper focused on techniques required for the improvement of learning capacities of children with learning disabilities. This paper is highly optimistic that empowering a child with learning difficulty for self actualization depends not only on the curriculum and instructional materials but further on improved strategies such as learning styles, accommodation, remediation, self-management techniques, encouragement of problem solving opportunities and monitoring client's progress.

Introduction

Learning disability is all-encompassing term for different problems that affect specific areas of learning and behaviour in an otherwise "competent" person (Martin, 1995). The individual has more difficulty acquiring, applying and retaining information than would be predicted from other facts about the person. Learning disability arises from a deficiency in basic cognitive (thinking processes) which in turn contribute to academic failure.

According to the U.S. Office of Education (USOE, 1977 Vol.42 No.230) criteria that indicate that learning disability exists are (1) The student is not achieving at the proper age and ability levels in one or more of several specified areas when provided with appropriate educational opportunities (2). The student has a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability in one or more of six areas. These areas are oral comprehension, listening comprehension, written expression, basic reading skill, mathematics calculations and mathematics reasoning. Thus areas of learning that are affected may include the input, output, storage, retention retrieval or processing of information. That means also that the student can have difficulty in acquiring, remembering, organizing, recalling or expressing information.

Despite the many kinds of learning difficulties enumerated all have one characteristic in common. That all the children have all had more failure experiences in school than normal children.-They may have felt (he frustration of being given homework they did not know how to do and they have developed poor self concept (Mba, 1995). Out of all the areas of special education in the country learning disability is the area in which the exact numbers may never be known but is a problem of great magnitude and importance. However the learning-disabled children are there in regular schools in considerable number.

The Current Education of the Learning Disabled: The Inclusive Approach

The education of the learning disabled involves wide range of services. Schools have the technique of organizing various models of services for learning disabled children in technologically advanced countries like Britain United States of America and Canada. In Nigeria the availability of these models of service ranging from more restrictive environment to less restrictive environment is more of a policy than realism. The government has advocated that education of the disabled, the learning disabled the inclusive, should be integration into regular schools as recorded in NPE (1981).

Integration and its new buzzword inclusion are the terms used when children with learning disabilities receive any part of their instruction in a regular classroom. It intends bringing the support service to the child. The World Conference On Special Needs (Salamanca, Spain1994) adopted the following; Inclusive Education should be practiced in all schools; access to accommodation by all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, emotional, social and linguistic condition; is the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes created by individuals, communities and organizations towards the disabled and it's cost effective.

Feasibility of Inclusive Education for These Children

How well, Inclusion works for a given child will depend on many factors. These include the co-existence of other problems like disruptive behaviour, the composition of the regular classroom and the willingness or ability of the regular teacher to modify the curriculum to meet the needs of the learning disabled pupils.

- A regular classroom setting in schools in the country cannot provide the specific concentrated instructional services some learning disabled pupils will need. For example a pupil may need intensive daily help for a severe reading disability. On the other hand, if classroom teacher can assist a particular learning disabled pupil by using appropriate accommodation and auxiliary aids, the situation may work out well. For instance, a word processor can help a primary five pupil with poor handwriting to better express his or her creative ideas.

Techniques for Improving the Inclusive Education

If the Inclusive Education will achieve what it's purported to achieve which is the actualization of the potentialities of pupils with learning disabilities in public schools, accommodation and remediation strategies must be used, along with related methods. The Inclusive Education of the pupil should include the following strategies:

Learning Styles

The basic idea of learning styles is that children have unique approaches to learning. Each person has certain ways of learning that work best for him or her. These modality strengths, to use the technical term, translate into preferences to communicate and learn in certain ways. Some children learn best using a visual approach; others are auditory learners. Some are kinesthetic and learn best by doing rather than by seeing or listening.

Learning-style preferences also include consideration such as whether one learns better in a quiet or busy setting with high levels of light or low and with group interaction or alone (Tobias, 1994).

One's learning-style can be seen as his or her general pattern of strengths: while learning disabilities are specific areas of weakness. To help a child, it is important to understand his or her strengths as well as liabilities, so identification of both learning styles and learning disability can be useful in planning educational strategies.

Assumption of learning styles is that each of us receives and processes information differently. Therefore, teachers should make every effort to identify how pupils learn best and teach to those specific styles. Various teaching methods should encompass the variety of learning styles. Research to support the effectiveness of using learning-styles methods to improve pupil performance is limited but there is ample evidence that some children have benefited from it (Curry, 1990).

Accommodation

Accommodation according to (Martin, 1995) is the modification and adaptation of materials such as textbooks and worksheets, as well as assignments and classroom routine. The intent is to help the children with learning disability to participate in as many classroom functions as possible and thus achieve more success. Examples of accommodation include:

Using taped textbooks so the children can listen to the content rather than read it.

Allowing oral presentations instead of written for the pupil/student who has trouble expressing his or her thoughts in writing.

» Extending time on tests.

Arranging room/space to minimize distraction, including test taking in a quiet place.

Having a scribe write out answers to tests for the student who has trouble writing but can express his or her ideas verbally.

Allowing tests to be taken orally instead of in writing.

Using a reader during test taking to assist the pupil/student with reading problem.

Tutoring for specific needs by a peer, aide, or teacher.

Using large-print text and worksheets.

Using computers to take notes and prepare assignment.

Using large-print text notes and prepare assignments.

- Using computer-assisted instruction, multimedia presentation, and technology enhancements for various-special needs.
- Using a note taker for students who can't listen and take their own notes.
- Tape recording lectures and/or transcribing tapes into notes for students with auditory or writing disabilities (Martin, 1995; Feldman, 2000).

It is important to recall that the use of any item, piece of equipment, modified to increase or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities is referred to as assistive technology. Appropriate assistive technology for students with learning disabilities can include but is not limited to computers, taped books, spellers, word processors, tape recorders, readers, calculators and electronic data books. Devices may be high tech (sophisticated electronics) or low tech (abacus for Devices math computation or a grip for a pencil) (Educational Services Committee, 1994).

Another example of accommodation is a reduction in assignments for students who have trouble writing out their work. Many of the children of learning disability can acquire the understanding and demonstrate their competency in mathematics for example, with far fewer problems each day. They tend to be overwhelmed by the magnitude of a 20-problem daily assignment and just give up. It isn't that they don't know how to do all the problems, they just can't write efficiently enough to get all of it done in a reasonable time. This sets up a vicious cycle of failure. If the problems are much, the student avoids the assignment, develops a bad attitude, key concepts are not learned and future performance is impeded. This gradually puts him into a failure mentality.

Remediation

This involves developing an Individualized Educational Programme that should first identify the precise needs and deficits of the student through adequate assessment by multidisciplinary team of relevant professionals.

The lesson plans to be implemented must cover the scope and sequence of what the child needs to learn. The children are better taught by a type of task analysis where concepts and skills are broken down and taught on small incremental steps. Each step of information builds on the previous concepts. This makes learning more reinforcing to the student and builds up confidence and a willingness to keep going.

The remediation process often employs a slower pace of instruction and frequent repetition. The deficit skills are presented and practiced many times in a variety of ways to assist them to "over; learn" and thus master the material. There should be immediate reinforcement for correct responses, rewards, progress charts, contracts and various incentive systems utilized to keep the student on the task and motivated about the process.

The relationship between the student and teacher must be cordial. The teacher must be encouraging and positive about the student and his or her progress. The classroom must have a high degree of structure and organization. The expectations are often clearly outlined (Mba, 1995). The learning disabled students must know exactly what's required, consequences for appropriate and inappropriate behaviour and when various things will take place.

There should be a close monitoring of their progress. Some form of continuous evaluation is needed. It can take the form of "pretest teach-post test" where the student is given a pretest on the skills and concepts to be learned in a particular unit. The material is then taught and followed by a posttest evaluation to determine if a certain criterion of success is achieved.

Self-Management Techniques

The student should be taught self management techniques rather than expecting the teacher to make all the adjustments (Martin, 1995). This can include the child using mnemonic devices to help remember materials for a test or record a lecture and then have someone listen to the tape and criticize the student's note - taking skill.

The goal would be to improve the ability to listen and take good notes. However it may be that for certain kinds of content, he will need to listen to the lecture several times. Audiotaping may then become necessary. Yet another student may find that if he or she translates lecture content unto some kind of visual picture or collection of symbols and diagrams. The materials make more sense and recollection is much easier. In this aspect a visual strength is used to compensate for an auditory weakness.

Involving the Parents

The education of the child should not end within the four walls of the classroom but rather to be

continued at home by parents. For example, parents should encourage problem solving at every opportunity. This should be started at very early age of the child. Children with learning disabilities have to learn to deal with the frustrations and disappointments both academically and socially. The use of SODA approach for problem solving is recommended .S stands for stop and examine the problem. What's going wrong? What needs to be changed or be handled differently? O is for options. Be creative in the options being offered. The next step is to Decide which of the options is the best solution for this problem. Look at the pros and cons apply principles of fairness and consistency and choose what to do. The final step is to Act on the solution. Implement the idea and evaluate how it works if not satisfied, have another SODA and try again.

Parents should be told to focus; on what their child should do and not on what he or she can't do.

Respect and challenge their child's natural intelligence. Most learning-disabled children have strengths that can be engaged through a Multisensory Approach.

Teach and model that mistakes don't equal failure.

Make sure books are at their child's level regardless of their age.

Keep a regular routine. The learning disabled child needs a predictable schedule and limit the amount of TV. If you allow it at all, for the LD child.

Recommendations

To facilitate the functioning of learning disabled children to their maximum potentials the following recommendations have been made:

- * Frequent meeting of various professional for the effective implementation of Inclusive Education.
- * There should be a low teacher-student ratio if we are to empower the learning disabled children in this century.
- * It should be mandatory for all schools to provide a resource room where assistive technology materials are stored.
- » There should be parents awareness on how they could assist their learning disabled children.
- * The existing curriculum should be modified to include computer literacy.
- i All students should have access to computer for writing or word processing functions and be minimally proficient in keyboarding skills. 4 Improved funding for the education of the learning disabled is needed so that all the required adapted modified materials are readily available in our schools.
- * There should be local production of cheap, affordable computers and other assistive technology materials.

Conclusion

To empower the children with learning disability, concepts must be presented in sequence and in their strongest modality of learning. We have also stated that for Inclusive Education to produce actualization of the potentials of the learning disabled, it should be made functional and appropriate using different techniques like self management skill, teaching towards the child's learning styles, modification and adaptation of materials and other related strategies.

Since no one technique can actually achieve the expected goal; teachers should individualize their instructions and painstakingly combine all the different strategies to satisfy uniqueness of the learning disabled. The education of these children will be better achieved if parents are embraced.

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