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Challenges Faced by Learners with Severe Intellectual Disabilities in the Acquisition of Adaptive Behaviour: Insights from Teachers of Special Classes in Zimbabwe

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Abstract
This study investigated adaptive behaviour of learners with severe intellectual disabilities with the view of trying to mirror their problems in the acquisition of adaptive behaviour. Respondents comprised teachers of learners with severe intellectual disabilities. The survey used a modified form of the critical incident technique. The purpose of the study was, therefore, to analyse the nature of some of the major problems experienced by learners with severe intellectual disabilities in developing adaptive behaviour. Initially, ten classrooms were randomly selected from two criterion-sampled special schools in Harare. Ten learners with severe intellectual disabilities were then randomly sampled from the ten criterion-sampled classrooms. The teachers of the ten learners were then used as units of analysis. The results of the study indicated that learners with severe learning disabilities do indeed have problems in the acquisition of adaptive behaviour most of which are related to unrealistic demands and expectations on the part of members of society without intellectual disabilities. Some of the areas in which learners in this study experienced difficulties included demonstration of self-direction; acquisition of academic skills; verbal communication and grooming for girls. The significance of the results of this study lies in the realisation that helping learners with severe intellectual disabilities involves an element of risk whose extent depends on the teacher's expertise and estimation of the learners' capabilities.

Keywords: learner, disabilities, teachers, behavior, Zimbabwe

INTRODUCTION

Staddon (1983) defines adaptive behaviour as the age-appropriate behaviours necessary for people to live independently and to function safely and appropriately in daily life. Adaptive behaviours include real life skills such as grooming, dressing, safety, safe food handling, school rules, money management, cleaning, making friends, social skills and so forth. Some learners with severe forms of intellectual disabilities do learn how to take care of their basic needs, but they invariably require training in order to reach the levels of performance necessary for independent living. As Ncube (2006) aptly points out, it is not uncommon for learners with severe intellectual disabilities to require specially designed instruction to learn adaptive behaviours. The adaptive skills required by learners with severe intellectual disabilities are critical factors for success in school, community and home settings. Limitations in domains such as self-care skills and social relationships present significant challenges for many learners with severe intellectual disabilities.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Learners with severe intellectual disabilities are usually subjected to a great deal of deprivation mainly because of ignorance and unrealistic demands on the part of teachers, parents and communities. Many of these learners are left without any form of meaningful intervention.

Given the afore-going, this study attempts to seek answers to the following questions:

1. What are the most common characteristics of learners with severe intellectual disabilities?
2. What skills are necessary for the acquisition of adaptive behaviour by learners with severe intellectual disabilities?
3. What problems do learners with severe intellectual disabilities face in acquiring adaptive behaviour?
4. How could learners with severe intellectual disabilities be assisted to acquire adaptive behaviour?

DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study is delimited to ten (10) learners with severe intellectual disabilities and ten (10) special class teachers from two special schools in Harare, Zimbabwe.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The adaptive behaviour of the ten (10) learners was studied through the observation of ten (10) special teachers using a modified form of the critical incident technique (CIT). It would have been more gratifying had the data sources had been the learners themselves. This was not possible because of the learners' level of intellectual disability.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The significance of the study needs not be emphasised. First, this study is bound to contribute to the existing body of knowledge of the problems faced by learners with severe intellectual disabilities. Such generation of new knowledge is likely lead to improved intervention strategies for assisting learners with severe intellectual disabilities to acquire adaptive behavour.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Grossman (1973: 11) defines adaptive behaviour as "the effectiveness or degree with which the individual meets the standards of personal independence expected of his or her age and cultural group." Since these expectations vary for different age groups, deficits in adaptive behaiour will vary at different ages. For example, deficits in adaptive behavior during infancy and childhood of a child with intellectual disabilities might be manifested by lags in sensorimotor skill development and delays in speech on the one hand. For an adolescent, on the other hand, self help and socialization skills may provide a more accurate estimate of his or her genera ability to adapt.

Harrison and Oakland (2003) posit that one of the main defining features of intellectual disabilities (ID, formerly mental retardation) is the limited development of life skills. These important skills enable learners with intellectual disabilities to live in a safe and socially responsible manner. As already explained, these skills are collectively referred to as adaptive behaviour.

Learners with severe general intellectual disabilities are likely to be severely impaired in their functioning in respect of a basic awareness and understanding of themselves, of the people around them and of the world in which they live. Many of these learners will have additional disabilities such as autistic spectrum disorders (ASDs), challenging and/or self-injurious behaviour, emotional disturbance, epilepsy, physical impairment and severe impairment in communication skills. Insofar as IQ (Intelligence Quotient) may be used as an indicator of general learning disability, a learner with a severe general intellectual disability is described as having an IQ in the range 20 to 35 on standardised IQ tests

Adaptive behaviour, as Frieman (2001) points out, is affected by three basic skill sets. The first skill set is conceptual skills. This set includes reading, numbers, money, time, and communication skills. The second skill set is social skills. These skills help learners with severe intellectual disabilities to get along well with others. These skills include understanding and following social rules and customs; obeying laws; and detecting the motivations of others in order to avoid victimisation and deception. The third skill set is practical life skills. These are the skills needed to perform the activities of daily living. This includes feeding, bathing, dressing, occupational skills, and navigational skills.

Harrison and Oakland (2003) assert that situations in which learners with severe intellectual disabilities can function effectively are limited because they do not have the required ability to meet the expectations and demands of others in many situations. In this regard, as Aanes and Haagenson (1978) perceptively point out, it is also true that in a lot of situations, those others have not the required ability to meet the expectations and demands of learners with intellectual disabilities or expectations that others have on their behalf.

The phenomenon of expectation discrepancy accounts for the attitude that sees learners with severe intellectual disabilities as more dependent than they are or need to be. Thomas (1982) points out that when a person's expectations are not matched by reality, the discrepancy has to be resolved. But usually, the resolving of expectation discrepancy spells catastrophe for the learners with intellectual disabilities. In schools, for example, the expectation discrepancy is resolved in several ways. One common way is to change the manifest reality so that it accords with the expectations of the school. Put differently, many schools spend a lot of time trying to alter the manifest behaviour of learners with severe intellectual disabilities.

Ncube (2006) asserts that some of the problems faced by learners with severe intellectual disabilities in achieving adaptive behaviour have their roots in strategies designed to help deal with a variety of environments and situations. He identifies three major strategies that are usually adopted to overcome lack of adaptive behaviour in learners with severe learning disabilities.

The first is "accommodation" which attempts to develop the behaviour patterns of a learner with a severe intellectual disability so as to enable him or her to cope in the social situations he or she is likely to encounter. Hendrix (1981) argues that this, in effect, is an attempt to alter the manifest reality in order to produce the kind of behaviour that fits the beliefs and expectations of those who control the environment in the school or home, for instance.

The second approach is "locomotion" which refers to the removal of the learner with a severe intellectual disability from the situations in which he or she cannot cope to those in which he or she can. In effect, this leads to the restriction of the learner to a limited range of environments and situations. Clearly such environmental barrier limit the ability of learners with severe intellectual disabilities. Perceived as

having limited social competence, these learners continue to be deprived by environmental barriers to their development which are usually justified in terms of their presumed deficiencies.

The third strategy is "construction" which attempts to alter the demands and expectations of others in situations which the learner with a severe intellectual disability is likely to encounter, so as to enable him or her to cope despite his or her lack of social ability. Put differently, the learner with a severe intellectual disability takes part in social situations because the others make reduced demands often because they have special experience or simply out of sympathy (Woods and Shears, 1986).

What does it mean to translate experience into a model of the world? (Bruner, 1966) Consider the implications of this question in respect of learners with severe intellectual disabilities who must build a model of the social world out of inconsistent and generally unverified fragments of social competence. Most of these learners are exposed to adaptive behaviours that are a simulation of the real world and they are expected to translate them into the real world. In this regard, McNamara (1972) argues that the learner who has not experienced the actual situation lacks the ability to organise elements into higher levels of abstractions and his or her ability to verify information is severely limited. Donaldson and Martinson (1977) suggest that there is a central problem of mismatch between the learner with intellectual disabilities and the non-handicapped learner's conception of normative behaviour.

Woods and Shears (1986) aptly observe that teaching learners with intellectual disabilities adaptive behaviour is one of the most important functions of special needs education. Direct instruction and environmental supports, such as increased number of prompts and simplified routines are essential in order to ensure that deficits in these adaptive domains do not limit the learner's participation in human activities.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a modified form of the critical incident technique (CIT), which basically consists of procedures for collecting incidents of human behaviour that have significance. The CIT was developed by John Flanagan in 1954 as a method to gather specific data on children with intellectual disabilities. As Reynolds and Kamphaus (2004) point out, adaptive behaviour in respect of learners with severe to profound intellectual disabilities is usually assessed using either interviews with or questionnaires completed by parents, teachers or social workers. In this study these incidents are significant in that they show the problems and successes of learners with severe intellectual disabilities in adapting to social demands.

Incidents of positive adaptive behaviour by each of the ten learners with severe intellectual disabilities were solicited during interviews with their teachers. Initially, the teachers were asked to cite the most common characteristics found in the learners under study. Teachers were then asked to report specific incidents that revealed problem behaviour or those behaviours that teachers would not tolerate. The incidents did not necessarily have to be recent. Teachers reported incidents that occurred soon after referral. Participants were then asked to cite specific examples of behaviour that showed successful adaption to normative demands.

With each incident, data were collected on the age and sex of the child involved in the incident. By and large the reported incidents were based upon both the actual behaviour problems of the learners and the teacher's expectation concerning the acceptance behaviour. Thus, the obtained results were not exclusively assessment of social norms held by teachers. Subsequent steps in this adapted CIT consisted of identifying the content or themes represented by clusters of incidents which were subsequently sorted into content dimensions or categories.

PARTICIPANTS AND SETTING

Participants comprised ten (10) criterion-sampled teachers of learners with severe intellectual disabilities from two criterion-sampled special schools in Harare, Zimbabwe. Participants were in the main female (80%) over 30 years of age and married. At the time of the study these participants taught at special schools for learners with severe intellectual disabilities. The collected incident reports on normalised behaviour were classified under two broad areas of behavior—that is, the area of Acquired Skills and Abilities and the area of Approved Attitudes and Interpersonal Relations. The choice of the units of analysis was guided by Miles and Huberman's (1994) insight that when choosing participants, a researcher is not only choosing participants for the study, but he or she is also selecting the settings, events, and processes. Franklin (2012) describes the selection of participants in a qualitative study, as purposeful selection. This is a strategy that deliberately selects the settings, people, and activities in order to provide data that cannot be easily found elsewhere.

THE INTERVIEW GUIDE

In line with Kavale's (2002) advice, the researcher used an interview guide comprising three parts: the facesheet which was used to record details such as date and demographic information, the interview questions and the post-interview comment sheet. To

put each participant at ease, the researcher prefaced each session with introductions before explaining the purpose of the study. The permission of each participant was sought prior to recording the session. This flexible structure of this interview guide allowed the researcher to explore, probe and ask pertinent follow-up questions.

DATA GENERATION AND ANALYSIS

Data were generated through interviews which were recorded on audiotape and then transcribed into a written form. Analysis of data involved re-reading interview transcripts to identify themes emerging from the participants' answers. Each interview session lasted about 45 minutes. For data analysis, the researcher employed the inductive approach, using the thematic content analysis. To establish trustworthiness, the researcher returned to each participant and asked him or her to carefully read his or her interview transcript which resulted in some adjustments being effected in certain instances.

RESULTS

The analytical approach adopted in this study was informed by the process of recursive abstraction. From the data analysis, the participants provided various insights in response to the following sub-research questions extracted from the four main questions cited previously:

1. What are the common characteristics of learners with severe intellectual disabilities?
2. What skills are necessary for the acquisition of adaptive behaviour by learners with severe intellectual disabilities?
3. What problems do learners with severe intellectual disabilities face in acquiring adaptive behaviour?
4. How could learners with severe intellectual disabilities be assisted to acquire adaptive behaviour?

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Table 1: Demographic characteristics by sex (n=10)

Sex	nf	%f
Male	2	20
Female	8	80
Totals	10	100

As Table 1 indicates, the participants comprised 2 males and 8 females. This disparity is not surprising as it serves to confirm the fact that there are more female than male teachers in Zimbabwe's urban special schools.

Table 2 indicates the distribution of participants by level and type of education. It is significant to note that 70% of the participants had a Special Needs Education qualification. It is also important to note that all the participants had some form of pre-service teaching qualification.

Table 2: Demographic characteristics y level and scope of education (n=10)

Level and scope of education	nf	%f
O-A Level plus a pre-service teaching qualification minus a Special Needs Education teaching qualification	2	20
Degree plus a pre-service teaching qualification minus a Special Needs Education teaching qualification	1	10
O-A Level plus a pre-service teaching qualification plus a Special Needs Education teaching qualification	6	60
Degree plus a pre-service teaching qualification plus a Special Needs Education teaching qualification	1	10
Totals	10	100

INCIDENTS

A total of 320 incidents were reported. Of theses 38 were of normalised behaviour. Twenty nine of these incidents cited positive behaviour in Acquired Skills and Abilities and 17 cited positive behaviour in Approved Attitudes and interpersonal Relations. Under the sub-area of Acquired Skills and Abilities the largest number of incidents were cited in the category of Toileting and Dressing. Other categories with over 3 incidents were those of eating and moving around independently. Under the Sub-area of Approved Attitudes and Interpersonal Relations, the largest number of normalised incidents were reported under Showed Approved Interpersonal Relations.

Table 3: Distribution of positive incidents cited (N=38)

AREA 1	SUB-AREA	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL INCIDENT CITED 0% 3% 6% 9% 12% 15% 18%
1. **Acquired Skills and Abilities**	Eating	15.5
	Toileting and Dressing	13.0
	Grooming (Girls only)	6.6
	Good Personal Hygiene	7.3
	Moving Around School Independently	7.2
	Improving verbal Communication	5.3
	Acquired Miscellaneous Skills	8.5
	Improving Academic Skills	2.5

	SUB-TOTAL 65.9%	
11. **Approved Attitudes and Interpersonal Relations**	Showed Approved Interpersonal Relations Demonstrated Self Direction Showed Ability to control self Showed initiative in Human Relations **SUB-TOTAL 34.1%**	12.0 1.5 9.8 10.8

Table 4: Distribution of cited normalised incidents by age and sex

AREA	SEX	AGE				
1.		3-6	6-9	9-12	12-15	TOTAL
Acquired Skills and	Female	2	2	6	4	14
Abilities	Male	2	4	4	5	15
	Sub-total	4	6	10	9	29
11.						
Approved attitudes	Female	0	1	2	1	4
And	Male	0	2	2	1	5
Personal Relations	Subtotal	0	3	4	2	9
	TOTAL	4	9	14	11	38
	Percentage of Total					100%

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are suggestive rather than all inclusive. From the data generated by the teachers through in-depth interviews, it emerged that most of the ten (10) learners in this study manifested some type of gross physical abnormality or neurological involvement. Among other complications, sensorimotor deficits and minimally controlled seizures were cited by the majority of participants. The most common syndromes cited by the participants include Downs syndrome, cretinism and hydrocephaly. Each of these results in easily identifiable characteristics and all restrict the learner's capacity to learn.

The results in this study suggest that teachers are sufficiently concerned in the acquisition of toileting and dressing and self care skills. Under the area of skills and abilities, the sub-area of toileting and dressing was cited most frequently. Arguably, the frequency of citing certain behaviours indicate that such behaviours involve a critical demand by society. It is evident from the data that while the prognosis is continually improving with advances in educational sophistication, there are nevertheless competences that learners with severe intellectual disabilities do not achieve. Learners with severe intellectual disabilities, especially toddlers, seldom care for themselves in any meaningful way. As Anderson and Greer (1978) point out, learners with severe intellectual disabilities usually must be dressed, fed and toileted by others. Meaningful communication, if any, is usually restricted to nonverbal gesturing and physical contact.

Ncube (2006) reporting on the acquisition of the self-help skills of toileting and ambulation, showed that there were no significant differences in the product between segregated and integrated learners. The Ncube findings might point the way for better provision in learners' homes with regards to the development of critical normalised behaviours. In other words, programmes could be made available to learners with severe intellectual disabilities at pre-school level. However, this is not always possible because of different attitudes toward learners with severe intellectual disabilities.

Under the second area, the frequently cited sub-area of Showed Approved Interpersonal Relations involved incidents that ranged from behaving well at assembly, greeting guests appropriately to playing with other children in an acceptable way. The other sub-areas frequently cited, showed increases in ability to control self and showed initiative in human relations involved incidents that ranged from holding conversations to helping those with more severe intellectual disabilities. These cited incidents record not only the successes in normalised behaviour of learners with severe intellectual disabilities, but reflect the concerns of teachers. It is doubtful whether some of the skills acquired and interpersonal relations handled by these learners in segregated day schools would be possible in inclusive settings.

The results in this study seem to lend credence to Anderson and Greer (1978)'s assertion that providing the best possible services for learners with severe intellectual disabilities must begin with the "principle of normalisation" which dictates that society provide services and facilities that allow the learners with severe intellectual disabilities to live in as normal a manner as possible. Based on a philosophical position that had its inception in the Scandinavian countries (Gearheart and Litton, 1975), the concept of normalisation emphasises the right of the learners

with severe intellectual disabilities to live in a family environment or, at least , in their home community. Even in cases in which the severity of the intellectual disability dictates institutionalisation, the living conditions are expected to approximate the patterns of mainstream society.

The results in this study show the teachers to be primarily concerned about the learners' ability to care for themselves and behave in an approved manner with other people. Obviously, the degree of normalisation that can ultimately be realised will depend on a number of factors. First of all, efforts to implement this principle must be based on a sound estimate of the capabilities and characteristics of each learner with a severe intellectual disability. Secondly, the current attitudes and misconceptions that typify the ordinary teacher's understanding of the learners with severe intellectual disabilities must be replaced by a more enlightened conception. Finally, a continuum of services and programmes must be made available to accommodate all the divergent habilitative and placement needs of the learners with severe intellectual disabilities. The latter factor, a continuum of services for a learners with intellectual disabilities implies an array of services that has both vertical and horizontal dimensions (Anderson and Greer, 1978).

CONCLUSIONS

While this investigation of problems and successes of learners with severe intellectual disabilities was based on an incidental population, the investigation revealed some gains and difficulties in a less normalised environment. Similar gains may be possible in a more normalised setting. The same cannot be said of problems. These are likely to be exacerbated in inclusive settings because of different attitudes toward learners with severe intellectual disabilities.

The results in this study also point to the fact that there may be a mismatch between the expectations of teachers and the actual gains learners with severe intellectual disabilities are capable of making. This may be due to insufficient knowledge about severe intellectual disabilities on the part of teachers. If this is the case, it is in keeping with Ncube's (2006) conclusion that for learners with severe intellectual disabilities to make meaningful gains in normalised behaviours, it is crucial for teachers of such learners to understand their resources and limitations. It may also be essential for teachers to examine more closely the nature of prejudices and misconceptions about learners with severe intellectual disabilities in our society.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS OF LEARNERS WITH SEVERE INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

From this study, the author identified three major implications for teachers of learners with severe intellectual disabilities. Helping learners with severe intellectual disabilities to develop normalised behaviour involves an element of risk within instruction recognition of the transience of the teacher-student situation and modification of attitudes toward the participation of learners with severe intellectual disabilities in society.

The Risk Component

Teaching adaptive behaviour to learners with severe intellectual disabilities involves an element of risk. The characteristics and degree of risk depend on the teacher's expertise and estimation of the learner's capability to deal with the normalised behaviour as well as the consequences of the behaviour. For example, the learner with a severe intellectual disability who attempts to prepare a meal on a gas stove encounters risk and the teacher should be aware of its configuration and consequences.

Need for Closer Co-Ordination between Classroom and Home

Helping learners with severe intellectual disabilities to develop normalised behaviour requires co-ordination between the instructional activities of the classroom and home. Teachers and parents must be mutually informed about expectations and experiences of the two settings if the learner's problems in respect of normalised behaviour are to be kept at a minimum. This is particularly essential if the teachers' interpretation of the learner's capability varies from that of parents'. Needless to mention, variance of opinions can interfere with the combined effort toward teaching the child adaptive behaviour.

Modification of Attitudes

The viewing of learners with severe intellectual disabilities in such future roles as parent, employee or self-advocator is an essential component to the teacher's endeavours. It is however contended that teachers should be aware that certain learners with severe intellectual disabilities will not function at the projected level of social competence to successfully fulfill defined objectives. The question, however, is not whether learners with severe intellectual disabilities will attain designated levels of social competence at some future date, but whether teachers can visualise these future functions within the present frames of instruction and prepare learners to develop toward the projected future active participation.

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