

## **The Dominant Methods Teachers Use In Assisting Pupils With Learning Difficulties In Public And Private Primary Schools In Awka-South Local Government Area, Anambra State, Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

Special education sprang from general education so that people with learning difficulties could also have meaningful education which the general classroom could not offer. As a result, teachers witness diversified learning difficulties and choose the methods deemed fit to help these pupils achieve their potentials. Even though the intention of the government for these pupils is that they develop their fullest potentials but, its strategies for achieving these aims seem to be unproductive. Therefore, for them to learn in an inclusive setting, which is the accommodation of those with and without special needs in the general classroom, the teacher has to implement the proven methods in their individual learning as learning difficulties are not always congenital but can also be as a direct result of certain environmental exigencies such as ill-timed identification, negligence and the dominant methods used by teachers. Teachers need a variety of appropriate methods to meet the diverse needs of learners in the classroom. The use of these methods will help the learners to learn effectively and actualize their potentials to the fullest. This is because the use of developmentally appropriate method for children will help to produce responsible proactive learners for the society. The concern of this paper is to show the dominant methods teachers use in assisting pupils with learning difficulties.

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**Keywords:** dominant methods; learning difficulties; pupils; assisting, teachers

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Learning difficulties is seen on functional and behavioral levels in slow or unusual learning new skills. Children with learning difficulties most times may not benefit from the general education classroom because it exposes them to 'learned helplessness' as a result of children having tried and intrinsically given up because they could not meet up with others in their class. Such learning experiences make them cynical about learning, miss the opportunity to practice, improve skills and abilities. Sometimes, they develop cognitive deficit because they may not have been properly oriented at pre-primary and primary levels. In other word, they may not have been properly taught the rudiments of numbers and letters, using the most appropriate method, necessary for effective take off on academic path. This does not necessarily mean that those rudiments were not taught but they may not have been presented appropriately, having in mind child-pedagogy which includes teaching methods, instructional material, teachers' competence and curriculum content. Probably, these pupils may not have learnt effectively because of their special needs. Education for pupils with special needs, is providing equal educational opportunities to all Nigerian citizens, but finds itself battling for enhanced methods and environment to meet the needs of alienated learners. The much needed enhancement is necessary to include among

others these learners into the mainstream schooling help them to attain and maximize their fullest potentials.

Holmberg, Nilsen and Slogan, (2014) in Norway, observed that the use of traditional methods for pupils with special needs by teachers make lesser contribution to the enablement of wide-ranging methods for pupils' different needs. Unfortunately, in spite of teachers' training programmes and certification, teachers' approaches are extremely embedded in cultural beliefs which generated deliberate problems. In other words, some teachers despite their trainings, still hold on to certain old superstitious beliefs that children with learning difficulties are either cursed or suffering the repercussions of their parents' misdeeds, therefore need harsh or rigid response. It can be argued that the impact of this on teachers' obligation is prejudice, bias and resignation to the children's supposed fate. Some teachers do not expect much from such children in terms of academic achievement. Such views also adversely affects teachers' attitude and commitment to work. It made them work without enthusiasm reducing their duties to mere routine. Arguably, children also developed learning difficulties from incompetent teachers, who often use inappropriate teaching methods, inadequate instructional materials and unrealistic curriculum. If

early intervention is not provided, they perform below their mates in terms of reading, writing, calculating and spelling amongst others.

Children at different developmental levels and learning styles are found in the classroom. As a result of individual difference, every child has his/her own unique method of learning; though most times children without special needs tend to have some uniformity in their method. With the inclusion scheme being practiced pupils with special needs are often taken for granted. Westwood (2008) stated that in a general classroom, children with and without difficulties are accommodated, but then consideration ought to be given to those who practically cannot benefit from the general classroom by means of full implementation of the intervention strategies, provided by special education. These interventions are manifested in modification of classroom teaching methods, curriculum content, instructional materials, assessment, use of specialist teachers. Learning and Skill Council (LSC, 2005), in England revealed that

There are some 579,000 learners with a self-declared learning difficulty or disability enrolled in the whole of learning and skill sector, representing 11% of the fulltime equivalent student body. Of this group, around 70% are adult.... Over the last 30 years the learner group has not only grown in size but has changed in complexity, gradually widening to include students with a wide range of difficulty in learning. These learners all experience generalized difficulties in learning arising from a wide range of cognitive, physical and/ or sensory impairment as well as social disadvantage. Pg.8

Similarly, Oladejo (2011) reported that the total number of primary and secondary schools' enrolment in Nigeria stood at about 20 million, with students and youth with disabilities constituting about 2.4 million. The National Policy on Education (FME, 2009) defined primary education as education given from the age 6-11, the key to success or failure of pupils, since the rest of education system is built on it. It is believed that permanent skills such as the ability to read and write are inculcated in the children at this age. This is why the researchers see the need for Children to start well, so that their advancement in life would anchor on the basic skills which are the ability to interpret printed illustrations, audio-visual materials including books and speeches gained from primary education. However, difficulties in learning can be averted by providing a child with meaningful learning experience which would depend on the identification, prevention, and remediation of these learning difficulties such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, aphasia, attention deficit hyperactive

disorder and visual-motor in coordination. Interestingly, these methods are vital for the achievement of the National Goal and are advised by the National Policy of Education (2009) to be employed by teachers in helping pupils with learning difficulties. This paper discussed teaching methods used by teachers for pupils with learning difficulties.

### **Child-Centered Pedagogy**

Learning difficulties can be prevented or remediated early enough if proper interventions are applied especially in terms of pedagogy, the correct teaching strategy, and restructuring of the environment. Scholars are advocating for child-centered pedagogy instead of teacher-centered because children are at the center of teaching and learning therefore this action makes them accountable to their learning. According Boyer (1990) child-centered learning is a method of learning or teaching that puts the learners at the center. Likewise, Alhassan and Abosi (2014) stated that one of the major problems facing educational system is that there are growing numbers of children who experience difficulties in learning at basic school level. This indicates that inadequate teaching method is a contributory factor in making children develops learning difficulties, learning processes which suit learners start from the curriculum, course content and interactivity of the learning process for pupils with learning difficulty. With reference to Boyer (1990), when teachers make the needs of the children the center of the learning and also are available to assist them, there would be improvement in their academic performance.

This method of learning allows the pupils to shape their own learning paths and construct knowledge independently. This method of learning gives room and time for teachers to support and assist children that require extra help in their process of learning. For example children that struggle with reading may need extra time and guidance to decode some words using the knowledge of phonemic awareness, prearranged by the teacher. Children in child-centered learning are the concern for learning unlike in traditional setting where students are passive recipients of information. Educators embrace child-centered pedagogy because it encourages collaborative learning and peer tutoring, Craig (1998) poised that when teachers are actively involved and empowered in the reform of their own classrooms and schools...are capable of changing the classroom environment and improving the achievement of these students... Child-centered learning creates many opportunities for pupils with learning difficulties to choose activities from the area that is most developmentally appropriate and interesting. This makes it possible for them to fully participate at their own rate. For instance, pupils with dyslexia can participate in activities that involve sounds, listening skills and pronunciation.

Eekelen, Boshuizen and Vermunt (2005) believed that this approach changes the role of the teacher from being entrusted with the transmission of knowledge to supporting and guiding self-regulated student learning. Teachers make available instructional materials that are didactic, large in number, relevant and appealing to the learners so that each child has sufficient choice for a meaningful experience in constructing and reconstructing knowledge. With this method, the teacher becomes the guide, with the aim of instilling idea of collaboration with an impression of healthier student-teacher relationship. Papert (1986) view learning as a reconstruction rather than a transmission of knowledge... learning is most effective when part of an activity the learner experiences constructs a meaningful product.

According to Alexander (2000) training helps to keep teachers in check with the aim of maximizing learning experiences and academic achievement for pupils with learning difficulties with the use of educational toys, and materials that would enhance their learning experiences. A school with small number of teachers and larger number of students may not encourage adequate assistance to pupils with learning difficulties rather it worsens the problems of these children. On the part of materials use, a child-centered learning enhances learning materials that are didactic, that is, materials that teaches specific skills. Currently, both the classroom and the outdoor environment of primary schools in Nigeria are ill-equipped. The problem of assessment in measuring each child's achievement against that of the peer, norm-reference test, makes it difficult for children's progress to be properly monitored thus, subjecting them into rote learning rather than meaningful experiences through the construction of knowledge.

### **Classroom Modification**

Special education focuses on classroom modification to enable those with learning difficulties learn better. Classroom modification encourages the restructuring of the environment to suit these groups. It is specifically done for learners with learning difficulties, so that they would not be left out in an inclusion setting which seeks to cater for pupils with special needs alongside pupils without. The modification does not really change the content rather it presents learning in friendlier manner.

Classroom modifications includes, assessing children's knowledge by asking questions rather than paper work, giving enough time for activity, reducing the size of assignment, and skipping some information that the school deems inappropriate for the pupils' abilities. For example pupils with dysgraphia may be taught to write block letters rather than cursive handwriting. Ugwu (2008) maintained that classroom modification requires that tasks are

broken down into components parts and at the end combine the components. It is needful also to repeat instructions and important tasks. Classroom modification is an adaption strategy for pupils with learning difficulties in mathematics, with writing, in interpreting visual information, excessive attention problem and receptive or an expressive language. Classroom modification necessitates adjustment in every area of learning, especially in language skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing. In addition, Ugwu (2008) emphasized that the physical setting should be spacious; this means that in classroom arrangement, pupils need to seat with more space between them. The learners may require small group instruction with limited number of peers in the group and it is required of the teacher to pair each child. Another area that needs modification in the classroom is the curriculum; Ugwu (2008) stressed that adequate curriculum for learning difficulties should emphasize language, motor conceptual, perceptual and social development in addition to self-skill like putting on dresses and buttoning up.

### **Direct Instruction**

Stotsky (2006) describes direct instruction as teacher helping pupils to become aware of what they need, to learn, and how they are to use this knowledge. This direct instruction can come inform of class discussion and activities. For example a teacher showing them how mathematical problem can be solved and also fully explaining it. Hirsch (2002) believed that it focuses on small chunks deliberately isolated from the complexities of actual situations. Direct instruction is similar to scaffolding, it requires full guidance with explanation until the learner is able to capture what is being taught, and then the teacher can gradually withdraw. Stone (2002) asserted that direct instruction has been advocated as a highly structured approach that uses explicit teaching and well scripted lesson plan. When pupils with learning difficulties receive partial instruction, it might register in them as rote learning, with no meaningful relationship to the child's previous experience. Meaning that most prepared children are likely to learn when partial instruction is used while the rest are frustrated.

Among all the approaches, direct instruction is seen to breaks down learning activities to its roots, helping learners of all difficulties to participate equally, at the same time and, carrying them on at a fast rate. Unlike the classroom modification method, direct instruction focuses mainly on the learning process or the instructions rather than the physical setting such as seating arrangement, classroom environment, collaboration or instructional materials. The researchers maintain that this method is useful in helping children learn in their zone of proximal direction (Vygotsky, 1978). Direct instruction will ensue a proper monitoring of children's progress, so that developmental appropriate contents are taught,

with respect to the children's learning difficulties. Becker (1973) believed that direct instruction focuses on academic objectives, with the belief that any child can achieve academically if they receive adequate instruction. The researchers believe that pupils with learning difficulties require the learning processes that are broken down so that they would be able to learn at their own pace and meet up with the rest of the class, so direct instruction is adequate for them. Again, this same method assist pupil with learning difficulties to have a better understanding when tasks are broken down into themes. Mayer (1966) concluded by saying that the...direct approach to learning is the better way for a meaningful experience.

### **Individualized Education Plan**

Individualized Education Plan is a strategy for the teacher, designed for children with special needs. It addresses the needs of individual child by systematically plotting the various methods of dealing with his/her difficulties specifically. It create a platform for teachers, parents, school administrators and pupils to work together to improve the educational results of pupils with learning difficulties. According to Toscan Academy (2013) the IEP is an educational plan and is an essential document that provides basic information on the child present academic functional achievement at the time it is being developed. They further stated that IEP is expected to raise the academic attainment of students through planning, focused teaching, target setting and evaluation. Smith, Robb, West and Tyler (2010) observed that IEP is based on adaptation, modification and differentiation. The main criteria in drawing an IEP for pupils with learning difficulties involves seeing a child as having a need for special education. A close observation by an informed teacher is to see the period of the occurrence of learning difficulties symptoms over a long period of time. UNESCO (2004) noted that the teacher is expected to teach, have these in mind

- Setting suitable learning challenges
- Responding to pupils diverse learning needs
- Overcoming barriers to learning and assessment for individuals and groups

IEP must contain information on the child and the educational programme set-up to meet the children's need such as the child's current performance and annual goals. Ugwu (2008) claimed that pupils with learning difficulty have different learning styles and rate, which can only be met by the use of Individualized Education Plan for each child. The IEP is a clear-cut means for attending to children with learning difficulties because it offers them the programmes most suitable for their level of

development by-passing the hindrances posed by these difficulties. This implies that IEP help teachers to work closely with children with learning difficulties and be able to include them in the lesson plan, following their progress for an improved effort in learning.

### **SUGGESTIONS**

The following steps are to be taken in order to ensure the use of the most appropriate methods for the achievement of pupils with learning difficulties

1. Teachers should be encouraged by ASUBEB to use child-centered pedagogy in teaching and learning such as role-playing, children's activity.
2. Government should advocate and ensure that both public and private primary schools employ teachers trained in Early Childhood Education.
3. Organization of meetings for parents by Anambra State Universal Basic Education Board; it will enable parents to be fully aware of children's challenges and the role of teachers, so that they will complement the efforts of teachers.

### **CONCLUSION**

There is urgent need to address all the challenges found in this paper as identification, intervention and remediation for the academic success of pupils with learning difficulties in Awka-South Local Government Area. This is crucial in meeting Nigeria's National Goals and the Education for All (EFA). It will help the pupils with learning difficulties in Awka-South Local Government Area to have their needs met, and the teachers to have full knowledge on the possible difficulties found in classroom, identify areas that need attention and the best methods to tackle the difficulties, depending on each child's unique challenges. The active role by teachers will make pupils with learning difficulties in Awka-South Local Government Area to have a meaningful learning experience with equal opportunity to attain self-realization, and better human relation for national development.

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