

The Role of Counseling Services in Understanding the Characteristics and Etiology of Learning Disabilities among Primary School Pupils in Nigeria

Asia Pacific Journal of
Multidisciplinary Research
Vol. 4 No.2, 166-172
May 2016
P-ISSN 2350-7756
E-ISSN 2350-8442
www.apjmr.com

Guyit Ruth¹, Joseph Inah Akwaji², Patrick Mashingil Akos³

¹Institute of Education, University of Jos, ²Comprehensive Secondary School Gaka, Bekwara L.G.A. Crossriver State, ³Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation Sciences, University of Jos, Nigeria
michogun63@gmail.com

Date Received: April 24, 2016; Date Revised: May 20, 2016

Abstract - This paper focused on the pivotal role of counseling services for parents, teachers and children with learning disabilities in primary schools with reference to Nigeria. This is with the view to educate the teachers to become more informed about what learning disabilities are and to create awareness and instill hope in the bewildered parents/guardians of children with learning disabilities to appreciate and serve as advocates for their wards. Consequently, a brief historical perspective of learning disabilities in terms of its origin, the need, characteristics and causes has been presented. It is discovered that learning disabilities is a condition with many manifestations and may be compounded by environmental factors such as the home and school. Contrary to people's conception of the condition, individuals with learning disabilities are of above average intelligence and can be gifted and talented. The paper went further to examine specific areas of counseling services that are needed by pupils, parents and teachers of children with learning disabilities. These include but not limited to personal, social, and academic spheres. Possible challenges of providing effective guidance and counseling services in primary schools are highlighted. Among them are inadequate trained and certified counselors, poor facilities and non patronage by pupils and teachers in addition to parental ignorance. The paper then concluded with suggestions as a way forward.

Keywords: Counseling, Etiology, Learning Disabilities, Primary School

INTRODUCTION

One of the first questions parents always ask when they learn their children have a learning disability is why? What is wrong? Although no one knows exactly what causes learning disabilities, there are, however, a number of identified characteristics including their presumed causes among children, youth, and adults which have been reported by individuals and group of professional organizations. Consequently, many parents, guardians and teachers have different misconceptions about children with learning disabilities. These have created suspicion and frustration among families and teachers of such children who have reacted in diverse ways towards their wards. This calls for awareness, guidance, and counseling about the characteristics and causes of learning disabilities. Counseling here is concerned with the feelings, attitudes and emotional dispositions

of an individual about himself and situations facing him [1].

The objectives of primary education in Nigeria as contained in the National Policy on Education are geared towards character molding and developing in children the ability to adapt to their changing environment, while providing them the opportunities for developing manipulative skills that will enable them function effectively in the society within the limit of their capacities. It is with the same yearnings that the American Government had for her children like Nelson Rockefeller, a onetime vice president of the United States and governor of New York, Thomas Edison, the ingenious American inventor, Albert Einstein the mathematical genius, all with learning disabilities. This was done by assisting them to understand themselves and the world around them to be able to utilize their potentials to the fullest and live

a normal and well-adjusted life. For instance, almost about 2.7 million students with disabilities, or 47% of the special education population, received instruction in general education settings for 80% of the day during the 2002 school year [2]. This included children with learning disabilities who are said to form a larger proportion of the special population. With proper financial, material, and human resource backings which include counseling services, Nigerian children with learning disabilities will also make remarkable achievements.

Learning disabilities are challenges that cut across age, gender, race, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds. This implies that the problem exists among male and female children and adults, from diverse nations and families, whether literate or not. The disability may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, and spell or to do mathematical calculations [3]. Therefore, there is the need for stakeholders to be acquainted with factors that may be responsible and how to identify them with a view to render socio-personal, and academic services to the pupils, teachers and parents. In this paper, a brief history of the term learning disabilities, characteristics, causes, and the role of guidance and counseling service to pupils, parents and teachers will be examined. In addition, some of the challenges that are usually encountered will also be addressed and suggestions given as the way forward.

Brief Historical Development of Learning Disabilities

The term learning disabilities came into use in 1963 by Dr. Samuel Kirk at the meeting of stakeholders which include the professionals and parents of children suspected with learning disorders. Today, there are many definitions just as there are diverse organizations related to the field. However, the most widely used is that given by the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) in 1981, modified in 1990 and 1997 as follows:

Learning Disabilities is a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group disorder 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 with learning disabilities, but do not by themselves constitute learning disabilities. Although learning disability may

occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (for example, sensory impairment, mental retardations serious emotional disturbance), or with extrinsic influences (such as cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction) they are not the result of those conditions or influences. (NJCLD, 1997).

One of the reasons for the introduction of this new category was to have a common unifying umbrella term for the diverse labels used to describe children with conditions like minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and aphasia. Another reason was to have a collective concern and action as advocates for children with learning disabilities. The later reason was the origin of the present Learning Disabilities Association (LDA) of America. Today in Nigeria, there are a number of professional organizations for persons with different kinds of disabilities, including learning disabilities. These include among others, the National Council for Exceptional Children (NCEC) and the National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASSET).

Characteristics of Children with Learning Disabilities in Primary School

Pupils with learning disabilities in Nigerian schools, exhibit a number of learning disorders. According to Lere [4] and Nwokolo [5], children with learning disabilities are those who though may have no obvious disability, yet are unable to perform and achieve academically, socially, emotionally and even physically. Nwokolo [5] further stressed that children with learning disabilities may manifest an array of symptoms which include difficulties in mathematics, reading, writing, spelling, comprehension, poor memory and reasoning skills. It can be said here that every individual with learning disability is unique and shows a different combination and degree of difficulties. This implies that one person with a learning disability may not have the same kind of learning challenges with another person. The characteristics can be viewed under pre-school, elementary, and secondary levels.

Many pupils with learning disabilities have poor social skills which are necessary for interaction in school and at home. In Nigeria, they are given labels such as 'dull child', 'troublesome', and 'lazy' [6]. They lack sensitivity to others, have a poor perception of social situation, and suffer social rejection [7]; [8].

Children with learning abilities in elementary school may be identify easily when they failed to acquire and use academic skills commensurate with their age and class. At the beginning classes, they are easily noticed by their inability to attend and concentrate; poor motor skills during writing and other related activities and apparently difficulty in learning to read [9].

Similarly, in the upper primary classes, pupils with learning disabilities encounter difficulty in areas like math, science, social studies. According to Lerner and Kline [9], as a result of repeated failure, emotional problems become more pronounced and disturbing as pupils become aware of their achievement in comparison with their peers. Furthermore, some pupils have difficulty in making and keeping friends which is a social problem for them.

Causes of Learning Disabilities

Causes of learning disabilities are still not clear. However, from the definition given by the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, it is obvious that the condition is intrinsic to the individual and presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction. The definition went further to shade more light that although learning disability may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (for example, sensory impairment, mental retardation, serious emotional disturbance), or with extrinsic influences (such as cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction), they are not the result of those conditions or influences. This implies that learning disabilities are a product of an individual's make-up, while other environmental factors may predispose or confound the condition. The causes can be examined under, pre-natal, peri-natal, and post natal factors.

At the pre-natal state, which is before birth especially the first three months of pregnancy, the fetus may be affected by smoking, drug abuse, misuse, or infected by diseases like rubella or German measles. These have been found to affect the development of the brain and the central nervous system while in the womb, which in turn affects the reading, language and speech abilities of individuals [10], [11]. This is the case in many developing nations like Nigeria where poverty and ignorance make it difficult for mothers to attend ante-natal care. The pre-natal causes include genetic factors through inherited genes from the parents [12], [13], [5].

The peri-natal causes of learning disabilities relate to factors or agents that occur during the process of birth. They include prolonged labour resulting into inadequate supply of oxygen to the unborn child, a condition referred to as anoxia [14]. Similarly, unsterilized instruments may also be used by traditional mid-wives or professional negligence by qualified mid-wives which may result to contracting diseases.

The post natal oriented causes of learning disabilities are events or factors that occur after child birth. This could be through accident where the new baby slips off and falls injuring the brain. Lack of proper nutrition for healthy growth and development of the child may also be a post natal factor. Other confounding factors include poor socio- economic home and school environments [10], [15]. Thus, Abang [6] summarized the causes of learning disabilities as medical, genetic, biological, and environmental factors.

Understanding the cause of an individual's learning disability is very important. According to Gates [16] the identification of a cause of learning disability and the provision of an early diagnosis are crucial in limiting the feelings of self-blame that may be experienced by some parents of children with learning disabilities. Hence the provision of counseling services which is based on some fundamental principles and sterling qualities expected of the counselors.

Principles of Guidance and Counseling

Guidance and counseling service no matter the level being rendered is based on certain principles. Iliya, Telfim and Bewul [17] observe that: Guidance services are people centered; voluntary in nature for clients at all levels; aimed primarily at preventive measures while recognizing that guidance and counseling services are continuous based on changing needs of the clients. Therefore, guidance and counseling services should be based on the total development of individuals while taking into consideration their ecological aspects. One other principle and a caution to counselors is that guidance services do not provide solution to all problems. Counselors should bear in mind that their duty or role is to provide assistance in a mutually beneficial atmosphere of trust and confidentiality while collaborating with other specialist in other related fields in their service delivery.

In other to be able to render professional service to pupils with learning disabilities and their teachers, parents or guardians, the counselor must possess some qualities. They include but not limited to: empathy, acceptance, honesty, patience, consistency, intellectual competence, sensitivity, ethical behavior and flexibility [17].

Okeke [10] recommends that during counseling emphasis should focus on the development of social competence, personal adequacy and inter-relationship. Other sterling characteristics of a counselor include warmth, receptiveness and caring. According to the Federal Government of Nigeria (2004), the objectives of primary education in Nigeria include:

Counseling Services for Pupils with Learning Disabilities

For any effective counseling service delivery for persons with disabilities in general and pupils with learning disabilities in particular, there is the need for counselors and other collaborating stakeholders to be acquainted with characteristics and causes of learning disabilities. This is with a view to identify and encourage their children/ wards with such condition. The Federal Government of Nigeria (2004) recommended counseling as one of the educational services for primary schools. This is because of the importance of primary education in the nations' educational system of which children with learning disabilities are integral part of the system. In agreement, Oraegbunam [18] opined that since the primary school children are in their formative years they need mostly developmental and preventive counseling rather than remedial.

Counseling in primary schools is in three dimensions namely resolution of problems, prevention of problems and growth counseling which is available to every child so as to enable him develop the hidden potentials and capabilities. One to one counseling should be carried out with pupils since pupils and students with learning disabilities usually benefit and do well with this individualized instruction [19]. The counselor should encourage the pupils to express their likes and dislikes and should always inform him or her when they are in problem. School counselors should know and call their clients by their names, keeping records and only providing them on request for the purpose of the child's progress.

Counseling Services for Parents of Children with Learning Disabilities

Family counseling offers parents help in accepting the problems, in developing empathy for the child, and in providing a beneficial home environment. Guidance- counselors and social workers often play important roles in providing such help. Some research suggests that interventions by parents can have a positive impact on the child's self concept [20]. Consequently, family counseling is important working with parents and giving direction.

Often, the step in parent or family counseling is to help the parent get over their initial feeling. In addition to the feelings already mentioned, the initial period of reacting may include feelings of mourning, misunderstanding, guilt, self-deprecation, or even shame. Parents may respond to these feelings by turning away in confusion, or they may overreact, become aggressive, and needed in our profession because they keep educators moving. Educators should empathize with parents to help them get through the initial reaction period. Therefore, parent support groups and family counseling offer the following benefits:

- i. Helping parents to understand and to accept their child's problem;
- ii. Reducing anxieties stemming from apprehension about the psychological and educational development of their child; parents can discover that they are not alone; other parents have similar problems and have found solutions;
- iii. Helping parents to realize that they are an integral part of their child's learning, development, and behavior, they can learn to perceive their children differently and to deal with their problems more effectively; and
- iv. Helping parents learn about discipline, communication skills, behavioral management, parent advocacy, special education legislation, social skills development, helping one's child make friends, home management, and college and vocational opportunities.

Lerner and Kline [9] suggested that parents should be alert to their children with learning disabilities strengths and weakness; they should not push their children into activities which there are not ready; simplify family routine such as eating, sweeping etc; match task to the child's level of functioning; be direct and positive not criticizing in talking to your child (be

supportive and provide guidance); teach the child how to interact with others outside the home.

School counselors should encourage Parent-Teachers Conferences or Associations (PTC/PTA) as avenues to discuss and understand the characteristics and causes of learning disabilities. Parent-teacher conferences are a bridge between the home and school. At these conferences parents, teachers and students challenges and progress are discussed. However, teachers should exhibit a sense of confidentiality, honesty and emphatic towards parents of children with learning disabilities.

Counseling Services for Teachers of Pupils with Learning Disabilities

The responsibilities of both regular and special teachers are increasing nowadays and vary according to the needs of their pupils. This is because of the emphasis on inclusive education at the primary school level (FGN, 2004). The regular classroom teacher has to collaborate with special educators, parents of children with and without learning disabilities other professionals related to their pupils individualized plans. These professionals include language experts, educational psychologists, physiotherapist, and school nurses. In addition to these, the regular class teacher has to plan his scheduled of responsibilities and to attend workshops, conferences in other to improve on his competence in particular, the ability to identify characteristics and causes of learning disabilities. Similarly, the special teacher in particular learning disabilities teacher has the task which requires professional and human relations competences.

Therefore, with the collaboration of the school counselor both regular and special teachers will be encouraged and guided on how they need to plan their responsibilities and mutually relate to their pupils, other colleagues, parents and collaborating professional with their knowledge of principles of collaboration [21]. The principles include mutual goals, the quality among participants, honesty, respect and confidentiality.

In addition, the counselor keeps records of children with learning disabilities and provides information as needed by the stakeholders who include regular and special teachers, parents and other professionals. The records may include those related to pupils' socio-economic backgrounds, health and their academic strengths and weaknesses. In this direction teachers are counseled not to focus on the

weaknesses of these children, but on their strengths and use those recognized strength when determining the child's teaching plan (Levine, 2002, 2003). In other words, it is the responsibility of a counselor to emphasize that there is ability in the disability of their pupils. All their children need is patience, tolerance, empathy and love to push them to their fullest potentials. From the life stories of eminent personalities with learning disabilities with proper instructional, human and material support they eventually become successful contributors to their society and the world at large. They include Nelson Rockefeller, a dyslexic who had difficulty in learning to read served as vice president of the United States and Governor of the State of New York. Albert Einstein, the mathematical genius had language disability although his teacher predicted that nothing good would come out of him [9].

Challenges of Counseling Services in Nigerian Primary Schools

There are a number of challenges facing the practice of counseling in primary schools today. They include inadequate professional counselors which results in high counselee – counselor ratio [18]; [22]. Another challenge is lack of cooperation and non-recognition of counselors by headmasters which results in low pupils patronage and other teachers support as manifested inprovision of counseling on the timetable [23], [5]. Other challenges as lamented by Anagbogu and Nwokolo (2010) include lack of facilities for guidance and counseling. Findings from their studies revealed that those necessities like computer, training the counselors in ICT, counseling clinic, equipment for counseling such as radio, television, one-way mirror, generator and furniture are still lacking.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

It is obvious that there are a sizeable number of unidentified children with learning disabilities in our schools today whether in developed nation like America or developing nation like Nigeria. This is against the background of the diverse characteristic manifestations of such children which include disorders of attention like restlessness; disorder of emotionality like impulsiveness; disorder of memory like short memory span; and disorders of perception and motor-activities like poor eye-hand coordination. Of concern to most parents, teachers, government and

the general public, is disorders of academic performance like serious reading disability (dyslexia), math or arithmetic disability (dyscalculia); and writing disability (dysgraphia). Similarly, there are inadequate provisions or lack of trained and qualified professionals rendering related services for children and youths with learning disabilities in our school system, especially in the primary schools. They include regular and special teachers, guidance counselors, school psychologists, nurses and physiotherapists, who sometimes provide either skeletal or haphazard services due to inexperience or poor or obsolete facilities. In the long run, both the counselor and the counselee are usually demoralized for lack of incentive and motivation.

There is the need therefore, as a way forward, to reposition our national priorities in terms of the provision of educational and other related services for children with learning disabilities. These can be achieved through collaboration and networking among counselors and between them and pupils, the parents, school authorities and other providers of related services. Hence issues of personnel, effective legislation, funding, advocacy and awareness on early identification and causes should be vigorously attended to so that no child is left behind (NCLB) by the end of 2015 universal dateline.

REFERENCES

- [1] Tambawal M.U. (2007). *Counseling for effective management of human resources*. Paper presented at the 2007 CASSON conference at Ota, Ogun State.
- [2] U.S. Department of Education. (2002). *To assure the free appropriate public education of all children with disabilities* (24th annual report to Congress on the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities education act). Washington, DC: U.S. Government printing office.
- [3] L.D.A. (2005). *Learning disability association*. url: http://www.idaamerica.org/about/parents/id_basics.
- [4] Lere, M.M. (2005) Teaching the learning disabled child for permanent and meaningful learning. *Journal of education Studies*. II (1) 50-55.
- [5] Nwokolo, M.O. (2006). *Understanding learning disabilities: Intervention and prevention*. A paper presented at the 2nd Annual National Conference on learning disabilities organized by the centre for learning disabilities and Audiology, Abuja. October 31st – November 2nd 2006.
- [6] Abang, T. (2005). *The exceptional child: Handbook of special education*. Jos: FAB Educational Books.
- [7] Sridhar, D. & Vaughn, S. (2002). *Bibliotherapy: Practices for improving self-concept and reading comprehension*.
- [8] Wong, B. & Donahue, M. (2002). *The social dimension of learning disabilities: Essays in honor of Tanis Bryon*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- [9] Lerner, J.W. and Kline, F. (2006). *Learning disabilities and related disorders: characteristics and teaching strategies*. New York: Houghton Miffling.
- [10] Okeke, B. A. (2001). *Essentials of special education*. Nsukka: Afro-Orbis Publishing Company.
- [11] Lere, M.M. (2001). A gifted child in a mainstreamed elementary school in Nigeria: *Pancen Journal of Education*. 3, 54-63.
- [12] Heward, S. and Orlansky, A. (2002). *The source for learning disabilities*. East Moline: IL: Linguis systems. <http://www.linguisystem.com>
- [13] Lornnides, S. (2003). *Causes and manifestations of learning disabilities*. London: University Press.
- [14] DSM-V (2013). *American psychiatric association: Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th Ed.). Washington D.C.: APA.
- [15] Jatau, M.N., Uzo, C.C., & Lere, M.M. (2009). *Elements of special education for prospective teachers*. Jos: Deka Publications.
- [16] Gates, B (2000). "Knowing: the importance of diagnosing learning disability: *Journal of learning disabilities*, 4 (1) 5-6
- [17] Iliya, H., Telfim, K. S., and Bewul, N. R. (2005). *Principles and practice of guidance*. Jos: Deka Publications
- [18] Oraegbunam N.M. (2008). Guidance and Counseling: A missing link in the pre-primary and primary education in Anambra State. *International Journal of Educational Research and Development*. 3(1): 19-27.
- [19] Vaughn, S., Gersten, R., & Chard, D. (2000). The underlying message in LD intervention research: Findings from research syntheses. *Exceptional Children*, 67(1), 99-114.
- [20] Elbaum, B., & Vaughn, S. (2001). School-based intervention to enhance self-concept of students with learning disabilities: A meta-analysis. *Elementary School Journal*, 101(3), 303-321.
- [21] Friend, M. & Cook, L. (2003). *Interactions: Collaborative skills for school professionals* (4th ed.). New York: Longman.
- [22] Okere, A. (2005). The effective school counselors: Perception of students, teachers and counselors. *Journal of Educational Foundations*, 1:147-152.
- [23] Ifelunni, I. (2005). *The missing links in Nigerian education system*. Keynote address presented at a conference on the state and future of Education in Nigeria. F.C.E.(Technical) Asaba 13-17 June.

Copyrights

Copyright of this article is retained by the author/s, with first publication rights granted to APJMR. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)