

ENHANCING ACTIVE LEARNING FOR CHILDREN WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENT IN THE NIGERIAN BASIC EDUCATION PROGRAMME

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Abstract

The paper attempts to provide an insight into how active learning can be enhanced for children with visual impairment as a way of improving their overall educational achievement. With its main focus on basic education which forms a major component of the educational reforms agenda in Nigerian education, the paper tried to identify the main thrust of the basic education programme, the basic characteristics of active learning, how active learning can be used to meet the educational needs of the visually impaired and some of the problems that may be associated with active learning for this category of special needs children. It finally made some useful recommendations and suggestions on techniques and strategies that could be used to enhance active learning for the visually impaired with particular emphasis on the basic education programme in Nigeria.

Introduction

Vision is believed to serve as a person's primary mode of gaining information about the environment in which he or she lives. It is also postulated that vision also acts as a counter-check for all other sensory information that enables individuals to carry out daily life activities safely, satisfactorily and independently (Kimbrough, 1976; Yakwal, 2004; Andzayi & Yakwal, 2004). Vision loss must therefore inadvertently serve as a great impediment to the successful performance of independent living skills especially in the area of acquisition of education.

With the current clamour for inclusive education all over the world including Nigeria, one can only imagine the limitations that a visually impaired individual face every day of his or her life. Considering the multitude of limitations faced by the visually impaired as a result of vision loss, it would seem that the provisions made for them in the Universal Basic Education (UBE) component of the 2007 document that spells out the country's 10 year strategic plan for the educational sector must be welcomed. However, in view of past experience in relation to the provision of various services for Nigeria's teeming population, least of all individuals with special needs, one may be a little skeptical of what to expect in the latest arrangement.

It is against this background that the paper attempts to examine various issues affecting active learning for the visually impaired in the basic education arrangement bearing in mind the country's education reform agenda.

The Basic Education Programme: An Overview

Education has been seen as a social process in capacity building and maintenance of society from time immemorial. According to Ekemode and Oduolowu (2006), education has been used as a weapon with which to equip the citizenry to acquire relevant knowledge, skills and habits for surviving in the modern world and to cope with the changing realities and uncertainties of human life. It is noteworthy that the UBE programme, a forerunner of the Basic Education Programme, is situated within the large context of a global quest for Education for All (EFA).

The World Declaration on Education reportedly highlighted among other things that satisfying basic learning needs requires an expanded vision which encompasses

- Universalizing access and promoting equity
- Focusing on learning
- Broadening the means and scope of basic education
- Enhancing the environment for learning and
- Strengthening partnership.

(Bernard Van Leer Foundation, 1990)

As pointed out by Ekemode and Oduolowu, this assumption formed the springboard of the framework of the Universal Basic Education programme formally launched in 1999. According to Obani (2001), the Universal Basic Education programme, which as pointed out elsewhere in this paper is a fore runner of the current Basic Education programme, is Nigeria's response to the call for the provision of Education for All by the year 2000. There is no doubt therefore that the basic education programme is an important national agenda socially, politically and economically. This is evident in the place allotted to it in the 10 years strategic plan for education otherwise referred to as the educational reform agenda (2007).

The UBE implementation guideline (2000) stated as one of the programme's five specific objectives "ensuring the acquisition of appropriate levels of literacy, numeracy, manipulative, communicative and life skills... for laying a solid foundation for life-long learning "(par. 1).

As part of the education reforms, the federal government has indicated that a Basic and Secondary Education Commission is to be set up with its equivalent at the state and local government level. In part two dealing with the main provisions section 13 sub-section (g) (iii) of the act setting up the commission. it was stated that in the provision of basic education facilities, the body should among others ensure that the basic national curricula and syllabi as well as necessary instructional materials are in use in early childhood care and development centres, primary and secondary schools in Nigeria. As pointed out

in the Education Reform Act (2007), basic education means the combination of six years of primary education and three years of junior secondary education. On the other hand, the same act states that UBE means the nine years of formal schooling, adult literacy and non-formal education, skills acquisition programmes and the education of special groups. The special groups mentioned include “nomads and migrants, girl-child and woman, almajiri, street children and disabled” (p. 6). Can this arrangement enhance active learning for the visually impaired in the light of what has transpired before now in the Nigerian basic education system?

The Concept of Active Learning:

Active learning, according to Anikweze (2007) and Usman (2007), is a learning process in which a learner is actively engaged in planned learning activities in a conducive, gender sensitive school environment where the teacher acts as the facilitator. Apparently looking at active learning proponents as adopting constructivist ‘theories of learning’, Fabes and Martin (2000) stated that in this type of learning, students are encouraged to actively participate in their own education. According to them, teachers involved in active learning strategies think of themselves as mentors for their students by encouraging them to discover and transform complex information for themselves. However, it is pertinent to point out the fact that based on the theories and characteristics of active learning; one may be safe to conclude that it is a combination of numerous techniques of teaching and learning in any educational setting.

Basic Characteristics of active learning:

Active learning happens when learners are given the opportunity to have a more interactive relationship with the subject matter of the lesson, encouraging them to generate rather than simply to receive knowledge (Anikweze, 2007). As postulated earlier, in an active learning environment, teachers facilitate rather than dictate the direction of learning. Anikweze identified some characteristics of active learning to include the provision that could make this technique successful. Some of these are

- ✓ Teachers responsibilities:
 - Facilitates learning activities
 - Prepares classrooms
 - Plans the lesson
 - Motivates learners
 - Creates an appropriate and safe learning environment
- ✓ Learners’ roles
 - Autonomy (independence)
 - Initiate activities
 - Take increased responsibility for their learning
 - Participate
 - Write (Braille)

- Think and conclude
- Talk and listen
- Ask questions
- Contribute
- Argue
- Brainstorm
- Work in groups
- Being physically active
- Manipulate etc
- ✓ Learning methodologies/Activities
 - Brainstorming
 - Collaboration learning
 - Minute papers
 - Writing (brailing) activities
 - Student-led review sessions
 - Games
 - Debates
 - Analyzing case studies
 - Concept mapping
 - Case studies
 - Focused listening
 - Exploration
 - Role playing etc
- ✓ Learning Environment
 - Learners initiative should be encouraged
 - Excitement should be maximal but contained
 - Classroom seating should be flexible and space adequate for required activities
 - Equipment and materials needed should be available
 - Time should be properly apportioned and managed
 - Required resource persons should be available and briefed
 - Rules/instructions for tasks should be available to learners (visually impaired)
 - All safety requirements should be met

Considering what has been outlined above, there is no doubt that to enhance active-learning for the visually impaired, there would be need for a lot of considerations especially in the current basic education arrangement of the millennium development goals.

Meeting the Educational Needs of the Visually Impaired through Active learning:

Sykes and Ozoji (1992) posit that the Nigerian constitution guarantees every Nigerian equality of status with the National Policy on Education serving as a bold attempt to concretize learning for the visually impaired.

According to the education reform act (2007), the provisions of the section 15 of the Child Rights Act (2003) shall apply in relation to:

- ✓ The duty of every government at all levels in Nigeria to provide free and compulsory basic education to every child in Nigeria;
- ✓ The duty of every parent or guardian to ensure that his child or ward attends and completes basic education; and
- ✓ The right of every child of school age in Nigeria to receive full-time basic education suitable to his age, ability and aptitude by regular attendance at school.

Fabes and Martin (2000) forcefully argue that research findings show the fact that constructivist approaches (active learning techniques) have been used effectively for teaching many different topics including science (Neale, Smith & Johnson, 1990) and reading (Rosenhine & Meister, 1997). Fabes and Martin quoted Slavin (1997) as identifying some active learning techniques that could be used to encourage students including the visually impaired to become actively involved with learning materials to include

- ❖ Cooperative learning in which students work together in groups to solve problems
- ❖ Discovery learning in which students are encouraged to discover principles for themselves and
- ❖ Generative learning in which students are taught how to use specific methods of problem solving to integrate new information with pre-existing information

(Fabes & Martin, 2000: 328)

According to Heward (2004), because they must frequently teach skills and concepts that most children acquire through vision, teachers of the visually impaired must plan and carry out activities that will help their students gain as much information as possible through the non-visual senses. This, according to Heward, can be done by participation in active, practical experiences through which visually impaired children can gradually obtain more thorough and accurate knowledge about situations thereby enhancing their education in an active manner.

Usman (2007) identified six active learning strategies that could be effectively adopted for use with visually impaired children to promote learning for them. These include:

- * Cooperative learning in which the teacher's role is to provide structure and guidance for specific kinds of tasks to groups of (visually impaired) students. It is used to design classroom activities that allow learners to discover answers on their own as well as allow student-student interaction to occur.

- * Multi-level thinking based on Blooms (1956) taxonomy of learning in which teacher guides (visually impaired) students to arrive at conclusions through analysis and evaluation instead of just memorizing.
- * Modeling which is teaching that shows the learners the thinking process and the way to solve problems through the provision of the tools to explain their thinking process. Modeling supports the process of guessing or developing explanation about a topic.
- * Multi-sensory learning: According to Usman (2007), research shows that learners vary in their styles and learning channels:
 - o 30% of learners are visual (they learn by using images and pictures)
 - o 30% of learners are auditory (they learn by talking and listening)
 - o 40% of learners are physical (they learn by doing, touching, hands on, real time involvement). This active learning strategy seeks to give learners access to information through multiple learning channels.
- * Student self assessment: This process involves learners in the assessment and evaluation of their work by drawing upon students past experiences, interests and abilities as a point of reference. Furthermore, it guides students in order to achieve greater understanding of learning tasks.
- * Continuous assessment: This is the practice of evaluating learners on a regular basis in individualized ways beyond mere testing. This active learning strategy helps in tracking the progress of each individual learner and gently but firmly correct learners when necessary.

It is note worthy to observe that the above strategies seem to tally with the principles that have been used over the years to teach visually impaired children. These include principles of individualization of instruction, concreteness, unified instruction, and provision of additional stimulation as well as the encouragement of self-activity.

Problems associated with active learning for the visually impaired.

As pointed out by Sykes and Ozoji (1992), children with visual impairment, like their non-handicapped counterparts, need opportunities to develop qualities of individuality, originality, flexibility, sensitivity and independence. Visual impairment results in visual disability which reduces an individual's abilities in tasks such as reading, mobility and daily living skills necessary for the performance of economic activities including job performance. Considering the limitations faced by visually impaired persons generally, and based on past experience in relation to the provision of services for this category of special needs person in Nigeria, one may be tempted to insist that some of the problems that may be associated with enhancing active learning for them could be numerous. This is irrespective of the fact that there seem to be a focused consideration of the issues affecting provisions for the special needs children in the basic education component of the education reform act (2007) as well as the ten year strategic plan of the Federal Ministry of Education. The fact still remains

that some of the problems that could militate against enhancing active learning for the visually impaired may include the following:

- * Poor planning
- * Poor management
- * Inadequate personnel
- * Poor funding
- * Lack of adequate legislation
- * Environmental/architectural barriers
- * Inadequate statistical data
- * Inadequate facilities
- * Attitudes
- * Lack of political will.

(Maila, 2007: 28-30)

Recommendations/Suggestions

For the effective enhancement of active learning for visually impaired children in the Nigerian basic education programme, it is recommended that

- # Planning of learning activities for the visually impaired should embody all the steps and needs of this category of exceptional children taking into consideration their peculiar limitations.
- # Management of learning outcomes for the visually impaired should be carried out based on the practicability of available resources.
- # Personnel at all levels of the provision of services for the visually impaired should be made adequately available and well motivated
- # The issue of poor funding, which has bedeviled the educational sector in Nigeria for quite some time should be looked into with a view to finding lasting solutions to this cankerworm that militates against the enhancement of learning for children generally and the visually impaired in particular.
- # Adequate legislation should be developed and passed into laws that would lead to the enhancement of active learning for the visually impaired in Nigeria.
- # Environmental/architectural barriers, which Moven, Yakwal and Milaham (2004) identified as one of the contentious issues in the provision of services for the visually impaired in Nigeria, must be addressed if active learning for this category of special needs persons can be promoted. This is in view of the fact that they are expected to use a lot of safe space efficiently for learning purposes.
- # Adequate statistical data in respect of incidence and prevalence of visual impairment in Nigeria must be obtained to aid in preparations for the provision of all kinds of services for the visually impaired.
- # There is need for a more pro-active political will and determination to provide adequately for the visually impaired as a strategy to enhance active learning for them. Thus, our politicians should henceforth desist from making pronouncements that are meant to shore up their political

profiles rather than make meaningful impact on educational provisions for special needs persons.

- # There is need for a change of attitudes towards the visually impaired from the hitherto negative response to their needs as exceptional persons to a more positive attitude in which it is recognized that they can benefit from and contribute to the development of the society in which they exist.

Conclusion:

The development of teaching/learning strategies to be used by teachers of the visually impaired as well as for the visually impaired themselves is no doubt a continuous process. It is therefore expected that in future, new practical techniques may be developed and used with them effectively. Equally too, some of the strategies that have been used over the years may have to be discarded having outlived their usefulness. It is therefore expected that enhancing active learning for the visually impaired would lead to the success of the Nigerian basic education programme with its attendant benefits to the entire nation.

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