ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES IN THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENT IN AN INCLUSIVE SETTING IN NIGERIA.

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is an assessment strategy in the education of children with visually impaired in an inclusive education. Issue highlighted include need concept of assessment approaches of children with visual impairment. Assessment has been found to be a crucial aspect of special education as well as an indispensible tool for making decision regarding appropriate education placement and designing intervention programs for children with visual impairment proper assessment of children visually impaired eliminated haphazard placement and misplacement of these children with visual impairment in the school system because it facilitates effective instruction and provides feedback to teachers and the children with visual impairment, besides, assessment serves the purpose of evaluating programmes for children with visual impairment.

Introduction

Every child with visual impairment came to school different from the other children in terms of strength and weakness, abilities and disabilities, level of readiness or preparedness to learn, moods, temperaments, home background and with the level of motivation. Assessment becomes a necessary tool for decision-making regarding appropriate educational placement and programme interventional for the children with visual impairment.

Assessment is not a once end for all procedure, but rather a continuing process forming an integral part of teaching through the school (Galloway, 1987). It is used to determined some particular students required special education services (classification) and which educational techniques and approached are most appropriate (intervention) as well as" for referrals, diagnosis, placement, vocational planning and so on (Alfredo & Zamora-Duran, 1977).

Sight plays a critical role in learning development. The child with visual acuity progresses in all aspects of development while child with visual impairment has some effects on the psychological, social and emotional development of the body. The World Health Organization (WHO) recognizes three level of visual capability:
- ➢ Normal vision
- ➢ Low vision and
- ➢ Blindness

Inclusive education framework adopted at the Salamanca Conference in 1994 states that "- schools should accommodate all Children regardless of their physical, intellectual, emotional, social, linguistic or other conditions. (Article 3 Salamanca framework for Africa). UNESCO (1979).

Concurrently inclusive education is a transverse issue which cuts across all education initiatives from early childhood education to primary education, vocational, adult education, teacher education and curriculum development as well as in sphere related to culture and social development. It means that all students in a school, regardless of their strength and weakness in any become part of the school community Ozoji (1993).

Concept of Children with Visual Impairment

The integrity of vision can be impaired essentially in three ways:

(1) Visual acuity may be reduced
(2) The field of vision may be restricted and
(3) Colour vision impairment as for instance in amblyopia, ex anopsia, a dimming of vision from disuse of the eye as a result of strabismus. Lowenfield (1973).

In measuring visual acuity, the Snellen chart is used. It consists of lines of letters, number or symbols of graduated size which must be read at the distance of 20 feet each sight corresponds to the standard distance at which a person with normal vision can distinguish it. Thus, if the 20-foot size letter or symbol can be read at a distance of 20 feet, the eye has a visual acuity of 20/20, which is normal. When a person can read only the large 200 feet size at a distance of 20 feet, he has 20/200 vision. In other words an object that the normal eye can discern 200 feet away must be brought close to 20 feet away in order to be distinguished by a person who has 20/200 visual acuity. In visual acuity lower than 20/200, the numerator varies, since, the 200-feet letter or symbol is usually read at a distance closer than 200 feet. Thus, 5/200 means than an objects which can be distinguished by the normal eye at a distance of 200 feet must be brought as close to 5 feet in order to be recognized LowenField (1973).

Concept of Assessment

Ysseldke and Algozine (1984) defined assessment as a process of collecting data for the purpose of making decision about individuals. In special education, assessment is carried out in order to decide whether a child is eligible for a special kind of instruction.

According to Ezera (2005) in Nigeria, there is no clear approach or procedure in identifying children with disabilities. The main limitation is that instruments for identification and skilled professionals to use effectively are not available. The result is that several children are unidentified and therefore, said to receive service that would have removed or reduced their handicaps.

Assessment Strategies

The National Society to Prevent Blindness (NSPB) recommends that the best way to prevent the development of serious vision problems and even the unnecessary loss of sight is to have the child's eyes examined shortly after birth and again by the age of four, within yearly examinations therefore, to ensure both eyes are maintaining good vision.

In collecting assessment data, the learning needs are set to analyze the academic, psychological, behavioral, social and psychomotor domains for a comprehensive intervention program. The individualized educational plan then forms the content for the differentiated programs and assessment. The I.E.Ps is described as primary documents that are based on specific plans for placement, service and transitional planning. (Smith, 1990).

Special need teachers can use the Checklist to identify children who should be referred for further screening and possible examination. Children who are screened as having a potential visual problem should be referred to an OPHTHALMOLOGIST for a full eye examination. Below are the recommended ways of identifying children with visual impairment.

- ➢ Pediatric ophthalmologist
- ➢ Parent observation and referral
- ➢ Pediatric Nurse Referral
- ➢ Teacher Observation & referral
- ➢ Local Government/private agencies that conduct vision screening.
- ➢ School conducting periodic and regular screening of student's vision
- ➢ Special educator's Disabilities screening team
- ➢ Interview by specialized personnel

Procedure on Assessment of Children with Visual Impairment
- ➢ Observation
- ➢ Test of visual acuity by ophthalmologist
- ➢ Test using standard Snellen chart
- ➢ Test for low vision
- ➢ Dynamic Assessment
- ➢ Intelligence tests
- ➢ Aptitude tests
- ➢ Evaluation of student's school work
- ➢ Test of language abilities
- ➢ Behavioral and Emotional Development tests
- ➢ Social Development tests

Recommendation

Based on the issue discussed in this paper and for effective improvement and appropriate education placement of children with visually impairment, the following are some recommendations:

1. Increase eye function-spectacles, operation
2. Improve ability-lighting, print, indentations
3. Modify environment-public education access
4. Training in skills such as fixation, trading, focus and so on enhances efficiency.
5. Sequencing of visual task e.g. through farms, objects, pictures, and symbols.
6. Children with visual impairment should be taken to the hospital by their parents as soon as eye problems are noticed.
7. Classroom teachers should be able to refer parents to the appropriate person for help.

Conclusion

Without doubt, assessment of children with visual impairment has become imperative when any form rehabilitative measures are to be initiated. Indeed, assessment makes their placement and management easier. Not only that facts results and data appropriately made available will enhance service provision as well as follow-up of clients. Therefore, the usefulness of assessment of children with visual impairment stand to benefit in Nigeria cannot be over emphasized. It is therefore, suggested that these forms of assessment strategies should be put into practice by all agencies and instructions serving children with visual impairment for the success of inclusive education program.

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INCLUSIVE LITERACY TEACHING: ISSUES AND STRATEGIES

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Abstract

In view of the instrumental role of literacy as a key to learning across the various disciples on the one hand, and the widespread interest on inclusive literacy teaching on the other hand, this paper attempts to present an overview of past events and trends of inclusive education and inclusive literacy with a view to unravelling their strategic relevance and impacts in formal education setting across the globe. The paper also discusses the concept and dimension of literacy in order to establish a framework for an extended discussion of inclusive literacy and its teaching strategies. In the process of this, some issues and insight that revolve around inclusive literacy have been highlighted. In addition to this, the paper identifies and discusses some strategies for effective teaching of inclusive literacy in schools based on the principles of recent research findings and informed opinions of linguists.

Introduction

For decades, interest in inclusive education has been growing as a movement to enhance education for all kinds of learners (Beloin, 1997). In this context, the debate on effective literacy learning for different kinds of learners arose. While formal schools teach many subjects, the most central and long time expectation on these schools has been the teaching of children the ability to read and write (literacy). For instance, in the Year 2000, many countries gathered in Dakar, Senegal, for the World Forum on Education in order to review progress in the Education For All (EFA) as a global agenda (Magrab, 2003a). The agenda, according to this author, aims at assuring that all children receive basic education and, in the process, improve the level of literacy among them. In addition to this, in 2003, the United Nations (UN) launched the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD) to improve literacy for all girls, boys, women, and men in both developing and developed countries. The Literacy Decade recognises the strong connection between literacy and economic sustainability, health and peace around the world. Based on this, the UNLD, established the Literacy Initiative For Empowerment (LIFE) which centres on empowering learners in countries with literacy rate of less than 50% or population of more than ten million without literacy competency (Magrab, 2003b). It is on the light of this background that the motivation for writing this paper arose. The paper is set to

Concept and Dimension of Literacy

Literacy which is widely considered as the ability to read and write is a phenomenon that has wide-ranging practical implications and advantages in modern human life. Ability in literacy skills bears a number of advantages in one's socio-economic and political life. In Nigeria, for example, electoral regulations set a minimum of School Leaving Certificate (which implies acquisition of literacy) as a requirement for contesting for electoral posts.

Rechards, Platt & Weber (1985) classify literacy into functional and basic categories. While the ability to read and write sufficiently well for various personal, official and related communicative purposes is seen as functional literacy on the one hand, the ability just to read and write numbers is considered as basic literacy. In relation to this, Obanya (2004) observes that people that are functionally illiterate are illiterate for all practical purposes to do with written communication for various contexts and purposes. Thus, in addition to the peculiarities of inclusive literacy learning, literacy/ language teachers need to ultimately ensure the achievement functional literacy skills among their students.

Inclusive Literacy: Issues and Insights

It is common knowledge, at least among language educators, that conventional literacy (ability to read and write) may not be clearly open or applicable to children or adults with propound learning disabilities. However, in terms of inclusive literacy, there could be ways or methods in which even the most propound disabled can be trained (Willis & Schiller, 2014). This means that learners with, for example, visual impairment, hearing impairment, cognitive challenges, motor delays, speech/ language delays, emotional/ behaviour challenges can be taught some literacy skills by means of inclusive literacy skills teaching (Willis & Schiller, 2014). The facts that language is an instrumental key to learning, and that literacy is an aspect of functional language skills, motivate the debate across issues and insights on inclusive literacy and language learning in formal learning setting.

Peterson (1995) explains that the debate on ways to the attainment of constructivist and child-centred education embarked upon by inclusive educators led to the identification of inclusive literacy as critical to effective language learning in particular and inclusive education in general. Although the scope of inclusive literacy cuts across all kinds of students, those with special learning needs are, in many ways, at the centre of this debate because schools are often judged as effective or otherwise depending based on the degree to which students with disabilities become literate citizens (Beloin, 1995). Nonetheless, language approaches to literacy in schools may welcome sending students with special challenges to highly specialized programmes for instruction.

In the course of exploring issues, values, approaches, and best practices, inclusive and whole language educators sometimes work on parallel lines or have varying views on

inclusion in education at local, national, and regional levels due to variations in levels of development, education policies, social settings, etc. For example, levels and scope of teacher training, access to state of the art teaching resources and facilities can make the difference between schools, nations and regions. In another twist on the debate, Wells (1986) states that special educators often assume that students with learning disabilities cannot effectively develop their literacy abilities in general education programmes with no-disabled peers, and that they more readily develop these abilities through intensive remedial instruction in special classrooms.

Strategies for Teaching Inclusive Literacy

In many instances during lessons, some language teachers disregard students with disability believing that these learners need special learning contents and instruction. This type of teachers do not realise that, with the appropriate handling of the lesson, both non-challenged students and those with learning disabilities can perform quiet successfully in the general education classrooms. In other words, with creative planning and professional handling, both learners with and without disability stand good opportunity to learn literacy skills in inclusive classrooms (Stainback, 2005). In tune with this, Lauton & Turnbull (2014: 26), Kluth & Olcott (2007: 1), and Jolly (1984: 17) identify a number of ways in which literacy education for all learners (inclusive literacy) can be effectively offered as follows:

(i)   Treating all Students as Potential Literacy Learners

Inclusive literacy teachers should treat all their students as potential literacy learners and members of the literate community. To achieve this, they should be given the opportunity to participate in activities that cut across their various interests capacities. Such activities may include group discussion of issues and ideas appropriate to their cognitive, socio-cultural and gender characteristics, sharing stories, embarking on literary-related activities like story-telling and writing, etc.

(ii)   Maintaining an Inclusive Literacy Learning Environment

Researchers (e.g. Koppenhaver & Ericson, 2003) found that young learners with autism and communication challenges who were educated in literacy-rich environments have high understanding of print materials and tools.

In a related development, Lauton & Turnbull (2014) maintain that for dramatic success in the teaching of literacy, delivery of learning should be set to motivate and engage generally all the learners in various active learning activities. Furthermore, a wide range of teaching strategies, in tune with the learners' levels of literacy and other language skills and sub-skills, should be utilized. These authors further maintain that recognizing and using a variety of teaching styles is particularly important in enhancing literacy, language and number skills development.

(iii)   Offering a Wide Range of Literacy Materials

Teachers who make the learning environment literacy-friendly and challenging by providing relevant visual and audio resources such as chats, tables, photographs, illustrations, physical objects, scenery, radio sets, tape-recorders, television/video sets as well as a mini-library containing the appropriate books, magazines, newspapers, pencils, markers, and cardboard sheets stand to achieve dramatic success in their work.

Similarly, inclusive literacy teachers are expected to make their classrooms more inclusive in contents such that the various demands by the learners can be met. For example, a student who has low vision would need a book with large print, and a student who reads below grade level may need books with less complex language. Some adaptations most learners may need on books include highlighting key areas of the book, more illustrations and insertion of glossaries of unfamiliar words, etc.

(iv)   Utilization of Task-Oriented Teaching Strategies

Since the acquisition of literacy skills is invariably the acquisition of the language skills, the achievement of the former by secondary school students revolves around exposing the learners to various reading and writing tasks. According to Jolly (1984: 17), in addition to exposure to textbooks and related learning materials, functional literacy teaching should be set to expose the learners to:

(a) the appropriate vocabulary, phrases, sentence structure, writing format, discourse organization, and idiomatic expression;

(b) write various types of formal and informal letters, lecture notes, reports, minutes of meetings, etc;

(c) write argumentative, expository, descriptive, and narrative essays;

(d) write materials in items a-c above with least ambiguity, vagueness, lack of cohesion and coherence, and related deficiencies.

(v)   Giving Special Attention to Reading and Writing Skills

Although reading and writing skills can indirectly be learnt through the process of learning the other subjects taught in the schools, Lauton & Turnbull (2014: 44) assert that effective literacy learning can best take place through good teaching strategies by language teacher. Such strategies in terms of teaching reading skill include the following:

(a) using readable texts and explicitly developing the learners comprehensions skills through activities relating to the texts;

(b) writing up new terms and key words and clarifying their meanings;

(c) encouraging the learners to highlight new words and expressions in the texts as they read;

(d) using effective questioning, setting the scene and stimulating prior learning before the reading activity;

(e) using reciprocal teaching whereby pairs of learners take turns to be tutors and students thereby formulating questions for each other about the text;

(f) reading handouts and other reading materials aloud in a group;

(g) reinforcing written materials with visuals such as demonstration or diagrams;

(h) train the learners to develop reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, and critical reading.

These strategies for literacy teaching through the wing of reading skill clearly appear to be thorough and well grounded. The application of these strategies will be promising to effective literacy learning.

In the case of training on the writing skill, teachers should engage in the following strategies:

(a) explicitly teaching the conventions of text types required in assignments, for example, note-taking, report writing, essays, etc;

(b) offering models and, if necessary writing text frames for the learners, for example, notes, assignment and reports;

(c) teaching the drafting process (planning, drafting, editing, and proof-reading through a flexible and responsive approach to the learners' needs;

(d) encouraging the use of ICT to produce assignment;

(e) encouraging peer support, for example, peer proof-reading.

A critical study of these literacy leaning strategies proves the strategies to be far-reaching and effective for achieving the desired objectives.

Conclusion

The trend in which the issues of inclusive education and, inevitably, inclusive literacy continue to attract the attention of linguists and educators in special education agencies and departments marks a clear landmark in improving the prospects and practices in special education system across the world. This development is logically expected bearing in mind not only the changing nature of needs, practices and expectations in the education circles, but the changing nature of human life in today's relatively liberal world. It also marks a cheering context for those of us with learning disabilities.

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