



Coping With Handicapped And Exceptional Learners By Student Teachers Of Tertiary Institutions

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Abstract:

This paper takes into cognizance the fact that student – teachers are teachers in training who will come across different types of students in school while they are on teaching practice and thereafter. Like the actual teacher, they need to know the needs of individual learners in order to assist them for better performance. This paper therefore highlights the characteristics of handicapped and exceptional learners in schools. This is to create awareness among the student- teachers and intimate them on the need of these categories of students in order to cater for them for effective learning and attainment of educational goals at that level and beyond that level. The paper recommends among others that teachers should not isolate the learners as a result of their handicap or exceptionality, give group activities that will involve the handicapped and exceptional learners as members or as leaders and arrange the class to favour these group of learners though not at detriment of other learners.

Keywords: *Handicapped Learners, Exceptionality, teaching practice, educational goals, student-teacher.*

1.Introduction

The student-teacher is a teacher who is undergoing training to become a teacher at the educational level he has chosen. Mostly these student teachers who are undergraduates in Nigerian universities, are prepared to teach at secondary school level after their course of study. Therefore they are sent to secondary schools for practical teaching. During teaching practice, the student teachers are prepared for the challenges they will encounter when they become teachers. That is why teaching practice is defined as

A means of providing opportunities under typical school conditions in selecting co-operating schools for student teachers to secure experiences in observing and participating in diverse educational activities of teachers in school. (Olaitan & Agusiobo, 1981)

The experience they gain at this stage will be of help later when they are faced with real classroom situation. Besides, it is expected that they assume the role of the actual teachers while they are on teaching practice, be in school early and remain till closing time and perform both curricular and extra curricular activities.

The student-teacher, like the actual teacher should know the different types of learners so as to assist them for better academic performance. According to Denga (2002), categorizing learner types “is predicated on the belief that individuals are unique in many waysWhile some children learn normally, others learn with immense difficulty regardless of teacher’s efforts to utilize the most pedagogical skills.” This is an indication that learners are not the same in ability or intelligence and should be treated differently. There is need to understand the categories of learners. Understanding the categories of learners will assist teachers in preparing suitable materials to cater for the varying learners’ needs and types.

The teacher is the custodian, the catalyst or facilitator of the learning process. He is the link between the learner and the learning process. The learner is the focal point in learning. All teachers are concerned with the academic progress of learners by promoting intellectual skills in the acquisition of knowledge. If effective learning must take place, the teacher should have thorough knowledge of the learner and study the network of learner’s needs in order to understand the nature of needs and how to meet such needs. If needs are not satisfied the learner becomes restless, tense and may exhibit abnormal behaviour which will hinder effective learning. The handicapped learners and exceptional learners have needs that are peculiar to them. Unfortunately, there is the lingering fallacy that brilliant students can take care of themselves and do not need

special attention. Their needs may not be the same with others but every learner has special needs. It is necessary to help each needy child to adjust and compensate for his or her ability. Teachers need to know who these handicapped and exceptional learners are in order to offer help.

Denga (2002) categorizes learners into three types.- the slow learners, the normal or average learners and the gifted or fast learners which are also known as the exceptional learners. In addition to the three basic types of learners, a fourth “minor” group are those learners with physical disabilities. The major concern of this writer is the last two- the physically handicapped and the exceptional learners.

2.The Physically Handicapped Learners

Denga (2002) refers to this group of learners as minor probably because most of them, especially at primary school level, are found in special schools like the school for the Deaf or the Blind. The debate as to whether handicapped children should be integrated into the regular school has been on and may continue as long as people are entitled to their opinions. According to Denga (2001), those who fly the banner of keeping handicapped children separate from normal children tend to feel that putting the two categories of children will worsen the feeling of inferiority among disabled children as they continually compare themselves with their normal counterparts and get reminded of their handicaps. Also they believe that the special schools may have specialized equipment and knowledge that are far beyond the capacity of the regular school.

Denga (2001) highlights the reasons behind advocate of integration which are as listed.

- The physically disabled can intellectually compete favourably with their normal counterparts in regular school. When a disabled child beats other normal children, it raises his ego and makes him forget his physical handicap.
- For the purpose of socialization, integrating disabled into regular school will play down the social gap between the two categories since it is likely that friendship may develop between the two categories of children. Integration in non – academic activities will reduce the effect of the derogatory reference to the special children.
- Integration will facilitate the mutual benefits which the weak and talented children may derive from one another.
- Integration will minimize the feelings of inferiority and sense of futility which disabled children experience especially if they are segregated.

A number of handicapped children in Nigeria are now receiving their education within the ordinary school environment and it is most likely that the student teacher will come across them.

The physically handicapped learners have physical deformity or are disabled. Fagan and Wallace (cited in Denga 2001) declare that “disability may be considered as the person’s observable, measurable characteristic that is judged to be deviant or discrepant from some acceptable norm. Blindness, loss of limbs, deficient reading and extreme shortness are examples of disability”. He described disability as stable aspect of exceptionality but on the other hand handicap refers to barriers, demands and general environmental press which other people as well as the environment place on a person. A blind person for example is disabled (stable condition). He becomes handicapped when the demand to read a text that is not written in Braille is placed on him. If Braille is available, his disability is no handicap to him in reading. A person disabled with loss of legs becomes handicapped when a challenge is posed on him to walk or negotiate the stairs. The psychologists believe that in a generic sense, nearly everybody is handicapped in one way or the other at a particular time. For instance a normal person can be handicapped in reading comprehension because of emotional disturbance.

The handicapped children are “those assessed as being deaf, deaf-blind, hard of hearing, mentally retarded, multi-handicapped, orthopaedic impaired, other health impaired, seriously emotionally disturbed, specific learning disability, speech impaired, visually impaired, who because of these impairments need special education and related services”.(Fagan & Wallace cited in Denga, 2001)

- Hearing impairment is a kind of hearing handicap that is so severe that a child cannot process linguistic information through hearing with or without amplification, which adversely affects academic performance.
- Hard of hearing is a handicap whether permanent or fluctuating which adversely affects a learner’s academic performance.
- A deaf person has severe hearing disability that makes processing of linguistic information through audition difficult.
- Deaf-blind refers to a concomitant hearing and visual impairments. This combination results in serious problem and such children cannot benefit from education programmes organized solely for the deaf or the blind.

- Visually –impaired are “those children with partial sight with a visual acuity greater than 20/200 or less in the better eye with acuity of more than 20/200 if the widest diameter of field vision subtends an angle no(sic) greater than 20 degrees”. (Kirk & Gallagher cited in Denga 2001).
- Speech impairment refers to communication disorder which may include impaired articulation, stuttering, voice impairment which affects the child’s education.
- Mental retardation means significant sub- average general intellectual functioning which exists con currently with deficits in adaptive behaviour especially during the developmental stage of a person which affects his academic performance.
- Serious emotional disturbance is characterized by an inability to learn which cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory or health factors, an inability to build and maintain health and satisfactory interpersonal relationship with others; inappropriate behaviours or feeling under normal circumstances; a general pervasively mood or depression; a tendency to develop fear, anxiety or anti-social behaviours and all of these are taking place for a long period of time.
- Orthopaedic impaired children are those who suffer from impaired caused by congenital anomaly such as clubfoot or an absence of any part of the body. Others include those caused by diseases such as poliomyelitis, bone tuberculosis, cerebral palsy, amputations, fractures and burns which causes contractures.
- Other health impaired refers to general weaknesses like limited strength, lack of vitality or alertness due to chronic or acute health problems. Diseases like epilepsy, anaemia, leukaemia, heart diseases diabetes etc.
- Multiple-handicapped means concomitant impairments involving a number of handicaps at a time. Mental retardation, blindness and orthopaedic conditions may occur in one person at the same time.

3.Characteristics Of The Handicapped Learners

The characteristics listed here are not exclusive and general to all the types of handicaps listed above. However student teachers will find them useful.

- They seem to be more unhappy than other children and they are always withdrawn

- The handicapped children can be aggressive and sometimes display hostility or anger which make other students to be afraid and may not want to associate with them.
- There is psychological feeling of inadequacy or low self concept as a result of their handicaps.
- The handicapped can be disturbed emotionally and this may lead to the following:-
 - Exhibition of an inability to learn which cannot be adequately explained by general or sensory factors.
 - Experience of general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression
 - Inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with others.
 - Exhibition of inappropriate or immature types of behaviour or feelings.
 - Tendency to develop physical symptoms of pains or fears associated with personal or school problems.
 - They need an unusual amount of prodding to get work completed.
 - Absent from school or dislike school intensely.
 - They can be inattentive, indifferent and apparently lazy.
 - Make odd noise.
 - Excluded by most children if they have a choice of doing so.
 - Exhibition of nervous reactions such as nail biting, sucking thumb or fingers, restlessness, hair picking and scratching, deep and frequent sighing.

A good teacher will not want to experience these types of situations if effective teaching and learning must take place and efforts must be made to control them by assisting the learners to cope in the classroom even with their disabilities.

4.Exceptional Learners

The exceptional learners are those learners who deviate sufficiently from the average or normal children that they need special attention or consideration if they are to develop their potentials (Cromson & Force cited in Denga 2001).

Denga (2002) also describes exceptional learners as gifted, talented, or fast learners whose intellectual ability, social maturity and specific abilities or talents are exceptional and consistently outstanding.

A gifted learner in other words demonstrates remarkable ability and potential to perform outstandingly in academic, social and vocational skills. He may not be a genius but has potential to become one.

Before a person can be declared exceptional, certain measurements must be used to estimate his or her traits. In this case the measurement may include human judgement in the context of school achievement tests, tests of general ability, tests of creativity, aptitudes tests, and others.

5.Characteristics Of The Exceptional Learners

- The exceptional learners have a persistently high and remarkable academic achievement.
- They have higher divergent thinking. They are able to monitor their own thinking, strategies and adjust them while they engage in a task.
- They think very fast.
- they have characteristics of earlier development in reading, writing and talking
- They display imaginative and constructive effort persistently.
- They possess superior social skills and outstanding leadership qualities.
- They have good memory and consequently good knowledge base
- Gifted children have greater speed of problem solving. They work at great speed on a task but may spend longer time in planning.
- They are persistent in tasks of interest with high power of concentration.
- They have remarkable aptitudes in special areas such as Science, language writing, mechanical ability, painting and other special abilities.
- They enjoy complexity and tolerate ambiguity
- They can make and keep friends. Most children like them but some may envy them.

6.Implication For Student Teachers

The need to recognize this group of learners is paramount in the sense that the awareness will help the student teachers to give special consideration to them. Student teachers should avail themselves the appraisal techniques which are abound for the identification of the various types of learners. They could use psychological test and non-test instruments such as

- observation
- interviews
- case study
- special dialogue with parents
- interaction with the previous teacher
- teachers daily observation within and outside the class

Dunlap (cited in Oladele 2007) suggests fourteen characteristics that can help to identify them. They are likely to

- learn rapidly and easily.
- retain what they learn without drill.
- show much curiosity as indicated by the kinds, depth, scope and frequency of their questions.
- have rich vocabularies marked by originality of thought and expression.
- enjoy reading usually at a matured level
- show interest in words and ideas as demonstrated by their frequent use of dictionaries or encyclopaedia.
- reason things out, think clearly and precisely and be quick to comprehend
- have the ability to generalize, see relationship and make logical associations.
- examine, tabulate, classify, collect and keep records.
- be interested in the nature of man and his universe at an early age.
- know and appreciate many things of which others are unaware.
- seek older companion among children and enjoy relationship with adults.
- possess a good sense of humour.
- have a strong desire to excel.

Dunlap also says that such negative characteristics as restlessness, carelessness with handwriting, impatience with subjects requiring rote learning and drill, indifference towards uninteresting class work and a critical attitude towards themselves and others can be found among the exceptional learners

Various methods can be used to help the gifted. Child (2007) suggested acceleration, enrichment and segregation.

6.1. Acceleration

Acceleration occurs when a child is allowed to pass through the standard curriculum faster than his or her age group and to undertake the work appropriate for older children. This assumes higher and faster rate of achievement. Such a course of action is not known to be harmful.

6.2. Enrichment

Enrichment involves giving gifted children an extended, modified curriculum both in content and presentation. These children will not be separated from their age group but given specially designed teaching programmes. Passow (cited in Child 2007) set out four principle of enrichment – modification in breadth of approach, pace of presentation, content of material and teaching process skills like critical thinking, problem –solving, communication and social skills. The enrichment may range from a special corner with advanced book and materials to a full programme of lessons, projects and visits designed to stimulate intellectual interest.

6.3. Segregation

Segregation involves teaching the gifted (or children with learning difficulties) as a separate group but in the same classroom with their peers. Integration takes place when ever possible. The gifted are given different tasks of varying levels of difficulty (differentiation by ‘inputs’) and or required to give more advanced responses than their peers (differentiation by ‘outputs’).

The student teacher can decide to use any of the three or combine them when necessary.

7. Recommendation

This presenter looks at the various characteristics of the handicapped and exceptional learners in order to create awareness among the students teachers that these students exist. This awareness is necessary because they are likely going to come across them as they go for teaching practice. When this happens, they need to know how to cope with them and the situation. Based on the highlights of this paper, the presenter recommends the following.

- The student teachers should be aware of the fact that handicapped and the exceptional children are likely to be in their classes and find a way of discovering them.

- Psychological tests and non-test such as observations, interview, case studies, interaction with previous teacher and special dialogues with parents could be used to find out the level of disability or exceptionality of these learners.
- They should inform the school authority about their discovery.
- The student teachers should not think that the exceptional children should fend for themselves. They should design programme that will keep them busy.
- They should assist the learners in their areas of need by moving the hearing or visually impaired to the front seats where it is likely for them to hear or see better. The class should be arranged to favour or assist these learners
- Some parents may not know what to do even when they are aware of their children's disability or exceptionalities. The student teacher should encourage them to seek medical counsel for their wards and provide the devices that will help the children like hearing-aid devices or pair of glasses for them.
- They should counsel the students and ask them to seek medical attention if necessary
- Teachers can also seek the advice of the professionals like psychologists and language or speech therapists.
- Student teachers are expected to show these categories of students that they are loved by encouraging them even when they have performed below expectation. They need empathy and not sympathy.
- Other children should be encouraged to relate with them.
- The students could be given group assignments where handicapped and the gifted will be members or even leaders.
- The student teachers should avoid placing these students in frustrating situations. Activities that are not too demanding to the physically challenged should be given.
- Extra coaching could be given to the mentally handicapped learner and an extra assignment or class work to the gifted otherwise he will disturb the class or be depressed.
- They should monitor their records especially academics records and let them know that there is concrete evidence to show that they are succeeding and progressing and point out the areas that need improvement.

- The exceptional students should not be labelled as 'gifted' as this may get into their heads and prevent them from making progress as before. Parents and educators express concern about labelling their children gifted as labelling arouses high expectations. If they fail to meet up, they are depressed.

8.Conclusion

In conclusion, student teachers should know that provision for learners with special educational needs is part of their daily work. Since the aim of every teacher is to help individual learner to adjust in preparation for adult life and socially as a member of a community, the handicapped should be allowed to benefit like other learners in the curriculum provided. This category of students should be helped to adjust and compensate for their disability or exceptionality. Teachers should dis-sensitize them from irrational thoughts of self devaluation. They should let the handicapped and the exceptional learners perceive that the teachers have positive feelings for them. This will make their teaching effective and learning interesting to all.

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