



GLOBAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH
(Scholarly Peer Review Publishing System)

THE CHALLENGES OF INTERVENTION PRACTICES FOR GIFTED CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS OF ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

The study sought to establish the current state of intervention practices for gifted children with learning disabilities in Zimbabwe. The study focused on the challenges gifted children with learning disabilities are experiencing in the implementation of intervention practices in primary schools of Zimbabwe and how the challenges could be addressed. A survey design was used in this study. Twenty Special Education teachers were purposefully selected from primary schools in Bulawayo participated in the study. The data were collected using a questionnaire. The content was analysed and revealed that the participants perceived the challenges of intervention practices for gifted children with learning disabilities in Zimbabwe to include: lack of specific policy on inclusive education and scarcity of resources such as special needs education trained teachers and assistive devices. The participants suggested several ways to address some of the above challenges. These included enacting a specific policy on inclusive education, training more teachers in special needs education, implementing more community awareness programmes, having itinerant specialist teachers, sufficient funding of the education system as a whole and availing more resources for inclusion.

Key Words: gifted children, disabilities, learning disabilities, intervention practices, inclusion, inclusive education.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article explores the current intervention practices for gifted children with learning disabilities in primary schools in Zimbabwe. Gifted students with learning disabilities are at-risk because their educational and social/ emotional needs often go undetected. The resulting inconsistency in their academic performance can lead teachers to believe that the gifted children with learning disabilities are not putting forth adequate effort. Although there is growing acceptance within the field of gifted education that a student can be both gifted and have a learning disability (Nipcon, Allmon, Siek, & Stinson, 2011), defining and identifying this group of students is difficult because the terms 'giftedness' and 'learning disability' have traditionally been considered to be mutually exclusive, and at opposite ends of the education spectrum (Wormald, 2009).

In Zimbabwe, the concept of giftedness and learning disabilities occurring concomitantly in the same individual has become commonly accepted. Worldwide, several books have been written about gifted children with learning disabilities and numerous articles have appeared in journals. Empirical research on the characteristics and needs of this population has been limited, and relatively few students with Learning Disabilities who are gifted are identified as such or given special services. In this study the focus is on the



examination of the challenges of implementing intervention practices that are given to gifted children with learning disabilities in primary schools in Zimbabwe.

2. GIFTED CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Giftedness refers to an extraordinary, innate ability or exceptional capacity in some domain of ability (Gagné, 2010). This refers to children or youth, who are identified at the preschool, elementary, or secondary level as possessing demonstrated or potential abilities that give evidence of high performance capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, specific academic or leadership ability or in the performing and visual arts and who by reason thereof require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school (Crepeau-Hobson & Bianco, 2010:102). Gifted students with a learning disability are those students of superior intellectual ability who exhibit a significant discrepancy in their level of performance in a particular academic area such as reading, mathematics, spelling, or written expression. Their academic performance is substantially below what would be expected based on their general intellectual ability (Brody & Mills, 1997). Children with a learning disability also represent a diverse group of students with differing learning characteristics. The term 'learning disability' is described as a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes necessary for understanding or using spoken or written language (IDEA, 2004). According to the IDEA (2004) definition which is considered to be the most influential definition of specific learning disability (Kavale, Spaulding, & Beam, 2009), such a disorder may manifest as a limited ability to listen, think speak, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. The two conditions of giftedness and learning disability can occur concomitantly.

A gifted child with learning disabilities has declining skills that sometimes become significant enough for teachers to take notice and make a referral. Many gifted learners with a learning disability are still not identified as requiring additional support, and if they are, the focus is usually on their learning disability rather than their giftedness (Ruban & Reis, 2005; Wormald, 2011). Such learners are often highly creative, inventive, and philosophical when they are not in a learning situation. Even in class these students often have a deep understanding of the underlying concepts of a lesson but struggle when it comes to memorizing the specific facts and details.

There are at least three subgroups of children whose dual exceptionality remains unrecognized (Baum, 1994). The first group includes students who have been identified as gifted yet exhibit difficulties in school. These students are often considered underachievers, and their underachievement may be attributed to poor self-concept, lack of motivation, or even some less flattering characteristics, such as laziness (Silverman, 1989). As school becomes more challenging, their academic difficulties may increase to the point where they are falling sufficiently behind peers that someone finally suspects a disability.

A second group includes students whose learning disabilities are severe enough that they have been identified as having learning disabilities but whose exceptional abilities have never been recognized or addressed. It has been suggested that this may be a larger group of students than many people realize. Inadequate assessments and/or depressed IQ scores often lead to an underestimation of these students' intellectual abilities. If their potential remains unrecognized, it never becomes a cause for concern or the focus of their instructional program.

Perhaps the largest group of unserved students are those whose abilities and disabilities mask each other; these children sit in general classrooms, ineligible for services provided for students who are gifted or have learning disabilities, and are considered to have average abilities. Because these students typically function at grade level, they are not seen as having problems or special needs, nor are they a priority for schools on tight budgets. Although these students appear to be functioning reasonably well, they are, unfortunately, performing well below their potential. As course work becomes more demanding in later years, and without the help they need to accommodate their limitations, their academic difficulties usually increase to the point where a learning disability may be suspected, but rarely is their true potential recognized.

2.1 Identification of gifted students with learning disabilities

Identification procedures of the Gifted/Learning Disabled can be a difficult and, at times, cumbersome task - in part because many may never have cause to come to the attention of professionals. Those that do, present a wide range of variables, for there are no clear cut cognitive or learning assessment profiles that distinguish this population. The only valid alternative is to review each child on a case by case basis, which, for practical purposes, can become a monumental task. Early identification of students who are gifted with



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Learning Disabilities is crucial (Dole, 2000). Many students who are gifted/Learning disabled are not identified until high school and college when academic work increases in difficulty.

To identify a student with learning disabilities who might be gifted, one should find evidence of a special gift, talent, or ability whereby the student exhibits performance at a high level or the ability to perform at a high level. The talent or gift can be general ability or a specific talent in any of a variety of areas. When gifted students begin to struggle in school, their identification for gifted services is sometimes questioned. Just because students have disabilities does not mean they are not gifted. Many eminent people have struggled in school and later gone on to make substantial contributions to society.

Early identification and appropriate interventions can help to prevent the development of social and behavioural problems that can occur when the needs of a gifted child with learning disabilities are overlooked (Brody & Mills, 1997). There is no consensus on one defining pattern or set of scores to identify gifted learners with disabilities. Gifted potential is seldom identified in students with failing grades and incomplete assignments. Some educators question if a student with serious learning problems can be gifted (Brody & Mills, 1997). Research by Bianco (2005) found that once a child was identified with a disability, teachers were reluctant to refer him for gifted programming. Gifted students with emotional and behaviour problems often are not referred for gifted programs or they are terminated from gifted programs because of their behaviour (Reid & McGuire, 1995).

3. INTERVENTION PRACTICES FOR GIFTED STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Educating students with exceptional needs requires the implementation of programming components to meet their diverse abilities. Universal screenings, systematic assessments, and monitoring of students' progress leads to more effective and earlier identification of those who are at risk of academic failure. Gifted learners with learning disabilities need early interventions for their disabilities and, at the same time, they need interventions that provide additional challenge in their area of giftedness.

Schools should provide training for collaborative groups comprised of classroom teachers, gifted and special education specialists, parents, and other specialists such as school psychologists, counsellors, behaviour specialists, occupational therapists, and administrators. The training should focus on the unique characteristics of gifted learners with learning disabilities, develop a comprehensive plan, and monitor the learner's progress. The collaborative teams need to discuss, reflect, and apply the information they have learned to case studies of students and then to specific students in their schools.

Classroom teachers need support from both gifted and special educators as well as other education specialists to address the diverse needs of gifted learners with learning disabilities. Research found that the best results are achieved when an individualized plan was developed through a collaborative team effort involving a gifted education specialist, special education specialist, school psychologist, classroom teacher, parents, and the student (Baum, Owen, & Dixon, 1991). Occasionally, administrators, counsellors, social workers, and occupational or physical therapists are included on the team. The collaborative team members share their expertise as they identify students' needs, determine the level of support students need, select research-based interventions, assist teachers in developing and implementing a plan, and monitor students' progress.

One other intervention practice for gifted learners with learning disabilities would be develop the individualized educational program through a team effort involving the parents, a gifted specialist, a learning disabilities specialist, a diagnostician, the general classroom teacher, and the child himself or herself. In developing the student's unique educational program, his or her particular strengths and weaknesses, as well as the resources available in the school, should be considered. The specifications should depend, of course, on the nature and severity of the student's disability as well as his or her degree of giftedness; however, there is much consensus that it is important to focus primarily on the student's strengths rather than his or her weaknesses. Generally, remediation is not the primary need of these students; instead, attention should be placed on developing the gift or talent. Learning strategies and adaptations can help ensure these students' success in whatever placement seems appropriate, whether that is in a special class for gifted students with learning disabilities or another environment.



4. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The study sought to establish the current state of intervention practices for gifted children with learning disabilities in Zimbabwe. It sought to answer the following question: *What are the challenges of implementing intervention practices for gifted children with learning disabilities in primary schools of Zimbabwe?*

4.1 Research Questions

- a) What intervention practices are often used by teachers in assisting gifted children with learning disabilities in primary schools in Zimbabwe?
- b) What problems do teachers encounter in implementing intervention practices in assisting gifted children with learning disabilities in primary schools in Zimbabwe?

4.2 Goals of the Study

The study sought to establish the challenges that teachers encounter in implementing intervention practices in assisting gifted children with learning disabilities in primary schools in Zimbabwe.

5. METHOD

5.1 Design

A qualitative design was used. Qualitative designs are normally used when the study aims at describing and understanding a phenomenon from the participants' point of view (Leedy and Ormrod 2005). Since the present study sought to establish the challenges that teachers encounter in implementing intervention practices in assisting gifted children with learning disabilities in primary schools in Zimbabwe, the design was deemed suitable.

5.2 Sample

Twenty Special Education teachers (8 male and 7female) teaching in inclusive primary schools in Bulawayo participated in the study. The Special Education teachers hold BSc Special Education degrees and are qualified teachers who were knowledgeable about gifted children with learning disabilities.

5.3 Instrumentation

An open-ended questionnaire focusing on the challenges that teachers encounter in implementing intervention practices in assisting gifted children with learning disabilities in primary schools in Zimbabwe was used. An expert in Special Education was asked to check on the relevance and usability of the items on the questionnaire.

5.4 Procedure

Special Education teachers teaching in inclusive primary schools were asked to complete the open ended questionnaire. Participation was voluntary. The participants were informed that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time during the data collection exercise.

5.5 Data Analysis

Data were thematically analyzed. Data were examined for recurrent instances. These instances were then systematically identified across the data sets and grouped together. Thus, responses were categorized on the basis of the meanings they conveyed in relation to the main focus areas of the questionnaire.



6. RESULTS

6.1 Intervention practices often used by teachers in assisting gifted children with learning disabilities in schools

Most of the respondents indicated that there were many intervention practices that are used by teachers to assist gifted children with learning disabilities in primary schools of Zimbabwe. The gifted students with learning disabilities would be best served by separate programs developed especially for them. Individualized programmes are developed through a team effort involving the parents, a gifted specialist, a learning disabilities specialist, a diagnostician, the general classroom teacher, and the child himself or herself.

The following extracts from some of the participating teachers confirm the above:

'Gifted children with learning disabilities in my class need individualized educational plans to ensure that their special educational needs are met (Participant 10).

'I have included parents, specialist teachers for special education, the child and other resource persons in assisting my children with learning disabilities (Participant 5).

Acceleration and enrichment are two intervention strategies that can be used to meet the needs of the gifted. Acceleration can include moving ahead of one's age peers in grade placement and/or subject matter (Southern & Jones, 1991). Subject matter acceleration may be particularly beneficial as a vehicle for gifted children with learning disabilities to receive advanced course work in their areas of strength without having to be placed at the same level in their areas of weakness. This is supported by one of the participants who said:

"I have given Mathematically talented children work to do at their own pace through an accelerated mathematics class, even if their learning disabilities pose some problems for them."

The participants observed that enrichment programs are intended to provide gifted students with a more varied educational experience, either by modifying the curriculum to include depth and/or breadth or by offering exposure to topics not normally included in the curriculum. Teachers may provide special services for children with learning disabilities by helping them to remediate weaknesses.

Enthusiasm for learning can be enhanced by helping gifted students with learning disabilities take responsibility for their own learning, exposing them to new and interesting methods of inquiry, teaching them self-assessment techniques, providing experiential learning, exposing them to a broad range of topics to encourage new interests, and assisting them in locating information. One very promising approach for working with gifted students with learning disabilities is helping them to develop their metacognitive abilities and strategies.

Some of the participants pointed out that they counseled the gifted students with learning disabilities in order to address their social and emotional needs. Participant 1 pointed out that:

Students may require attention to their unique problems and needs that is more likely to occur in one-on-one individual counseling.

6.2 Challenges that teachers encounter in implementing intervention practices in assisting gifted children with learning disabilities in primary schools

The participants pointed that the main problems encountered by the teachers in educating their gifted students with learning disabilities were stigmatization, negative attitudes from members of the society and parental ignorance. They argued that one of the challenges was that the quality of teaching in implementing intervention strategies was affected where both the regular and the special pupils were



taught in the same class since the teachers concerned had to divide their time and attention between both the two category of learners and this made the syllabus coverage a very slow process. One participant had this to say:

“My students with learning disabilities suffered from stigmatization, discrimination and negative attitudes from fellow students and this affected them such that they could not concentrate on remedial work I would have given them (Participant 8).”

Some of the participants pointed out that in assisting gifted children with learning disabilities the most serious challenge is making certain that the giftedness is recognized. Difficulties in understanding verbal information and/or in expressing oneself are a common feature of many learning disabilities. These language-based problems may reflect a variety of factors, such as an underdeveloped vocabulary, a concrete style of thinking, difficulties in remembering and keeping track of what is said, or difficulties in organizing one's thoughts, for example

7. DISCUSSION

The findings show that although many gifted students with learning disabilities would be best served by separate programs developed especially for them, it is likely that the needs of many could be met through appropriate identification of strengths and weaknesses and a flexible, individualized approach to using the existing services and resources available in and out of school. Ideally, the individualized program would be developed through a team effort involving the parents, a gifted specialist, a learning disabilities specialist, a diagnostician, the general classroom teacher, and the child himself or herself (Van TasselBaska,1991). In developing the student's unique educational program, his or her particular strengths and weaknesses, as well as the resources available in the school, should be considered. The specifications should depend, of course, on the nature and severity of the student's disability as well as his or her degree of giftedness; however, there is much consensus that it is important to focus primarily on the student's strengths rather than his or her weaknesses.

Parents sometimes make the mistake of investing all of their time and energy into the school as the primary solution for their child's learning disability. It is better to recognize that the school situation for your child will probably never be perfect. Too many regulations and limited funding mean that the services and accommodations your child receives may not be exactly what you envision for them, and this will probably cause you frustration, anger and stress. Try to recognize that the school will be only one part of the solution for your child and leave some of the stress behind. Your attitude (of support, encouragement and optimism) will have the most lasting impact on your child.

8. CONCLUSIONS

From the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the teachers were not trained to use the available intervention strategies for assisting gifted learners with learning disabilities in secondary schools of Zimbabwe. This study also concluded that problems encountered by the teachers in educating their gifted students with learning disabilities were stigmatization, negative attitudes from members of the society and parental ignorance that hindered the performance of these learners. The teachers used different intervention practices for assisting gifted children with learning disabilities in primary schools which included the use of collaborative team approach, enrichment strategies, acceleration and use of individual educational programmes.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- ❖ There is need for continuous training of teachers and in servicing of teachers in assisting gifted learners with learning disabilities in Zimbabwe.
- ❖ There is need to provide enough resources in schools to assist gifted learners with learning disabilities in Zimbabwe.
- ❖ Teachers are encouraged to intervene earlier on behalf of a greater number of children who are at risk for school failure. Early interventions could reduce the frustration these students experience and prevent the social.



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