



## ABSTRACT

The prevalence of pupils with learning disabilities is quite high in Bayelsa State, Nigeria and this condition has not been accompanied with adequate treatment. In fact, an understanding of children with learning disabilities itself is still limited in the State. There are opinions for and against inclusion of children with learning disabilities. The aim of this study was to portray

# **INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES: TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

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## INTRODUCTION

The existence of pupils with specific learning difficulties or pupils with learning disabilities is common in developed countries which occupy the highest percentage compared to children with other special needs. Approximately 2.5% of the total early child school age pupils are with learning disabilities in the UK 2.8 million kids are actively getting services involving special education in the US. Research on pupils with learning disabilities in Nigeria is still rare and limited to only certain areas of the population.



teachers' knowledge and experience dealing with pupils with learning disabilities in inclusive early childhood education in Bayelsa State and its implication in providing learning accommodations and modifications for pupils with learning disabilities. Also to develop the capacity of teachers to make their classroom more inclusive for children with disabilities in the process provide all their pupils with an improved standard of education. The study adopted the descriptive survey design, observation and questionnaire was used for data collection. Observation used as guide in the form of a checklist of pupils with learning disabilities that arise based on the knowledge and experience of teachers and questionnaire along with the efforts of teachers to accommodate and modify learning. The findings of the study revealed that the teachers still do not understand how to distinguish between children with learning disabilities and children with difficulties in the classroom. Furthermore, the teachers provide curriculum adjustments as a part of learning accommodation and modification on the basis of the knowledge and experience they have. It was concluded that, inclusive education is every child's right and should be free, compulsory, good quality and available in local communities. As much as possible, all children including children with disabilities should attend their local neighbourhood schools and learn alongside other children. Also, the above commitments means more and more children with learning disabilities in an inclusive classroom setup should be equipped with the necessary skills to accommodate and modify. Also the teacher training programme should be comprehensive enough to prepare teachers who are able to apply a specific body of knowledge within the unique integrated classroom setting.

**Keywords:** Teachers Knowledge and Experience, Children with Learning Disabilities, Early Childhood Education, Barriers and Opportunities.

Having a disability can be one of the most marginalizing factors in a child's life. In early childhood education, finding ways to meet the learning needs of pupils with disabilities can be challenging, especially in states and countries with severely limited resources. Inclusive education which fully engages all pupils, including pupils with disabilities or other learning challenges, in quality education has proven particularly effective in helping all pupils learn, even while challenges to



implementing inclusive education systems remain. Children with learning disabilities experience academic problems due to a disturbance in the process of receiving and processing the stimulus information. They might have a problem in one or more of the attention, sensation, perception, information processing, or storage and retrieval of information which link to the understanding of learning. These processes are fundamental psychological processes.

The criteria are challenging in the processes of diagnosis, if the teachers do not have enough support from other expertise. The situation in Bayelsa State where counsellors and psychologist are rarely found in the school compound caused challenging situations to recognize and provide adequate educational services. Children with learning disabilities in this study do not include children with intellectual disabilities. The conditions which mentioned in terms of children with learning disabilities occur in conditions of perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia and aphasia development are not widely known by teachers. For this reason, teachers in this study recognize the pupils who are suspected as learning disabilities through pupils' daily academic performance which are below the regular pupils and have specific error patterns in their assignments. In this situation, teachers' competencies would be the only alternative way to recognize and provide educational services for pupils with learning disabilities.

Challenges to deal with pupils with learning disabilities as part of diverse learners require high competence of teaching. When the teachers do not have adequate competencies, they might have more stress. Two major issues that cause teachers' stress and burnout are behaviour problems and inadequate teaching competence to provide an appropriate education programme for all pupils. In addition to this, the competence of teachers is very influential in the teaching – learning process. Furthermore, teachers with a variety of professional competence are required, one of them is to provide learning accommodation and modification to meet a variety of learning needs of learners.

Teachers' knowledge and experience of the value of teachers' professional beliefs as the basis for professional action is also related to how to solve the challenges in the classroom, especially for pupils with learning disabilities. The teachers' competencies to deal with learning challenges need improvement, because it is still problematic. In one way the teachers need to overcome these challenges and provide adequate educational services. In another way, they have limited



information about the children with learning disabilities and how to deal with them.

Furthermore, how teachers' action to overcome the challenges with limited knowledge and experiences will shape their perception of a pupil with learning disabilities. The teachers' knowledge and experience described in this study as the result of the knowledge and experience of teachers will be used as the basis to provide training for teachers to increase the professional competence in handling pupils with learning disabilities in early childhood education centres. The way teachers prepare and implement the learning strategy is developed on the basis of prior knowledge and experience. Previous knowledge and experience which is the perception of teachers that will shape their behaviour in professional duties, guiding and providing learning for learners with special needs. Thus, this research is focused on the current knowledge and experiences of the teachers to provide learning accommodations and modifications for pupils with learning disabilities. Also, the present study encourages strategies that are specifically intended to support inclusive education strategies for all children, regardless of the type or severity of disability, because an ideal system would be able to serve all children equitably. At the core, this paper recognizes that inclusive schools and classrooms benefit all pupils, not just those with disabilities, and that pupils do not need to be officially identified as having a disability to benefit from inclusive education strategies.

This paper does not address barriers that extend beyond the school system, such as those related to inadequate transportation systems or parental or community-based resistance to enrolling children with disabilities in school such barriers are real, relevant and deserve serious attention in all communities. However, they are not included in this paper so that it can focus more deeply on the constraints and opportunities of education system themselves.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The challenge of inclusive early childhood education for children with learning disabilities in Bayelsa State is exacerbated by a lack of teachers' knowledge and competencies in identifying, accommodating, and modifying learning strategies to support these pupils. While inclusive education is a fundamental right, teachers in the state struggle to differentiate between children with learning disabilities and those with general learning difficulties due to inadequate training, limited



exposure to psychological and educational assessment tools, and the absence of school-based support personnel such as counselors and psychologists. This gap in knowledge and skills affects the quality of education provided, leading to ineffective teaching strategies and heightened teacher stress. Furthermore, without proper training, teachers rely solely on their prior experiences, which may not always align with best practices for inclusive education. The need to equip teachers with adequate competencies through targeted training programs is crucial to fostering an inclusive learning environment where children with learning disabilities can thrive academically alongside their peers. Therefore, this study aims to assess teachers' knowledge, identify the challenges they face, and explore opportunities for improving inclusive early childhood education for children with learning disabilities in Bayelsa State.

### **Methodology**

The study adopted the descriptive survey design. The sample of the study was 40 caregivers of inclusive early childhood education centres in Bayelsa State. Research on modification and learning accommodations for pupils with learning disabilities in inclusive classrooms is the necessary steps to provide knowledge about the restrictions known as learning disabilities. Perception is already held by teachers as a basis for determining the training materials and product development guidance on modification and learning accommodations for pupils with learning disabilities in inclusive early childhood education centres.

In order to gather the necessary information about the teachers knowledge and experience, focus group discussions on children with learning disabilities was used, then the teachers were given questionnaire and observation checklist to identify pupils that may be categorized as children with learning disabilities. Discussion groups were to discuss with each other about the challenges of identifying pupils who are categorized as having learning disabilities and follow-up in learning. The results of the discussion need to be captured through a questionnaire to find out if the teachers' perception changes and were able to identify learners who are categorized as learning disabilities particularly those with specific learning difficulties category. Questionnaire was to dig into the aspect of knowledge, attitudes and actions to be taken by the teacher if found out pupils with specific learning difficulties or learning disabilities.



Results that consist of knowledge, attitudes and actions of teachers through a questionnaire and the result were analyzed with descriptive qualitative analysis techniques broadly used as a basis for discussion with team collaboration of researchers from the faculty of Early Childhood Education, Isaac Jasper Boro College of Education, Sagbama, Bayelsa State. Discussions in the form of a comparison of the prevalence of pupils with learning disabilities, knowledge, attitudes and actions of teachers to pupils who have learning disabilities.

### **Result and Discussion**

The findings of the study showed that the statements and questions raised by teachers during the group discussions and results confirmed the statements in the questionnaire and were categorized into three major groups, namely teachers' knowledge of pupils with learning disabilities in inclusive early childhood education, attitudes of teachers towards pupils with learning disabilities, and actions taken by the teachers based on the knowledge that has been held as the basic same perception of the phenomenon of pupils with specific learning difficulties or learning disabilities in inclusive early childhood education. Results were expressed among others as follows:

At the time of the study, the team explains that among learners with learning difficulties, there are types of learners that are categorized as specific learning disabilities or learning disabilities. This category of pupils experience barriers in the field of basic psychology that shortfall to certain academic fields. That is because there are specific areas of the brain that dysfunction resulting from the neurological function which is also impaired. When given an explanation of the teachers and then spontaneously stated that the definition of the pupil they do not know, so long as they perceive that learning disabilities are pupils whose cognitive barriers namely, intellectual disabilities.

Teachers' knowledge and experience about children's learning disabilities include: knowledge and experience of the characteristics of children with learning disabilities, the perception of learning materials that can be given, and the perception of learning appropriate ways teachers do against children specific learning difficulties. The knowledge and experience they have of these children is what is often found in the classroom as children that are categorized as intellectual disabilities. It is proved that in 10 inclusive early childhood education centres, here are 90 children suspected learning disabilities, but after further





assessment, only 40 children have learning disabilities, while the other children have intellectual disabilities. It was also found out by a team of researchers from the faculty of education University of Port Harcourt that a majority of the incidence of children with learning disabilities in early childhood centres are children whose mild intellectual disability category and a slow learner. The characteristics that are link with the inability to follow the lessons associated with the use of symbols on reading and writing and mathematics.

As stated by almost all teachers in early childhood centres that the repetition of materials is often carried out to be able to master the material for children with learning barriers. This is consistent with the statement of the teacher of early childhood education “I often reduce the content of the subject matters, and often I repeated the explanation that I have given, but why bother once they understand, but with patience, eventually the child can understand better”. Materials that relate to reading are beginning from the smallest component, for instance, began the introduction of letters, assembled into syllabus, then the newly formed word. The material is organized on the stage of the most easily trained to the child if the child is able to achieve learning targets, new material to proceed with the next target. Knowledge and experience of how learning is done by teachers of children with learning disabilities were found. Based on the knowledge of teachers who have owned up before, having the perception of children with learning disabilities, that they are categorized learning difficulties need to be given a way to learn to use more time, repetition to practice to study the material and the use of props appropriately.

Knowledge and experience about the characteristics of children with specific learning difficulties that teachers are referring to them as problem children. Thus, the teacher requires more ability to provide solutions instead of giving lessons to pupils who are not with learning disabilities.

They expressed various objections, even the limitations of teachers in inclusive care centres as an obstacle to giving lessons to pupils with learning disabilities. The attitude of the teachers to the pupils was so because, they do not have the right competence to learning for those who are considered learning disabilities, rather than specific learning difficulties in particular.

The teachers’ behaviour because of their perceptions of the pupils with learning disabilities include: provide an additional task on a perceived difficult subject. The task was used as exercises to do things that seem difficult, so we need to add time



to learn. Other actions are, teachers provide assistance with media props concrete objects on the material that is deemed difficult. This is done by the teacher because, his/her perception of children with learning difficulties are difficulties in the field of abstract thought.

### Discussion

Teachers' knowledge and experience that children with specific learning cognitive barriers due to child-specific learning disabilities appear as children experiencing difficulties. Thus, the criteria referred to child specific learning disabilities is not known properly by the teacher. That perception becomes a matter that applies to all teachers in inclusive early childhood education that all children with learning challenges are children with learning disabilities. Knowledge and experience that is generally accepted according to the results of research shows that teachers perceptions of pupils with special needs are actually fun, but they do not have a source of special education, adequate and inadequate training for work in the field of learning for children with special needs, including anxiety and the pressures when dealing with children with special needs.

Knowledge and experience of teachers that pupils with specific learning disabilities is included among pupils who have cognitive barriers. This result shows that, they have not been able to provide professional handling. The implication is that, early childhood education centres' teachers need training for handling children with specific learning disabilities, especially treatment for children with special needs in early childhood education centres in general. Professional demands of a teacher for dealing with children with special needs is a must because the professional duties of a teacher to be effective in pedagogical and didactic.

Teachers' knowledge and experience of children with specific learning difficulties or children with learning disabilities that have not been properly identified. This will also result in the non-implementation of the task they have to fulfil professionally. For teachers' professional duties to be fulfilled, they need to be very influential on the teaching-learning process, this has become a source of frustration for the teachers themselves and the pupils concerned.

Perceptions and expectations of profession, form highlighting the belief that beliefs are formed due to accumulation of prior experiences in the home and at school, as a result of mutually sequential and the continuing need to look for





solutions with the guidance and training to inclusive early childhood education teachers. This is understandable because of the knowledge that has been acquired previously. As a result, teachers prioritize actions with the approach of accommodation, for a special accommodation measures to simplify the material is easy compared to the main action. The action is easier in an inclusive classroom learning, because of the use of curriculum adaptations. Modifications will be of more use of complex actions and this requires an intensive training for teachers who are not specialized in special education.

Teachers have not been perceived correctly that among children with learning difficulties, there are children with specific learning difficulties or children with learning disabilities, so accommodation is more likely to be done by adjusting the curriculum and modifications to the conversion method can be done by teachers on the basis of perceptions they have. Perceptions of teachers may also imply that the inclusive school teachers professional standard cannot be met, so they need to be given a guide that is also done with the use of training.

### **Conclusion**

Teachers have not been perceived correctly that among children with learning difficulties, there are children with specific learning difficulties or children with learning disabilities, so accommodation is more likely to be done by adjusting the curriculum and modifications to the conversion method can be done by teachers on the basis of the perception that they have.

Secondly, teachers often face various challenges that make it difficult for them to include children with disabilities in their classes. For example, they may teach large classes and have few resources. Teachers may also have to deal with the negative attitudes of certain colleagues or some community members. Even the parents of children with disabilities may sometimes be reluctant to send their children to school because they fear their children will struggle to keep up with others.

However, the findings also shows that hard-working, knowledgeable and creative teachers can have a significant impact in even the most challenging circumstances.

### **Recommendations**

1. Teachers and parents should jointly develop strategies for promoting inclusive education and ensure children acquire skills and knowledge.



2. The resource room organization has the advantage of assembling adequate materials and equipment which can be used for more than one child. The resource room should accommodate a minimum of 8 and a maximum of 20 children, each for part of the school day. There should be a resource room in each local early childhood education centres.

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