

The Place of Psychology in Special Needs Education

By

Victor Umunna Iroegbu

Department of Special Education & Rehabilitation Sciences,
Faculty of Education, University of Jos

Abstract

This paper discussed the place of psychology in special needs education. In doing this, salient issues such as the concept of special needs education psychology, major themes characterizing psychology of special needs education, importance of psychology to special educators, the learning process/situation and the characteristics of effective teaching were highlighted. The paper concludes that psychology is an indispensable aspect of special educational programmes and services; as it is imperative in the identification of the psychological problems of children with special needs and effective teachers' behaviours, characters, or qualities that could promote good teaching and learning processes.

Introduction

Special needs education (SNE) is an educational system that attempts to address the learning needs of exceptional children. It involves educational experiences and activities that have been designated and designed for children with special needs. Ozoji (2006) considers it as a carefully designed instructional programme for meeting the educational needs of children with special needs so that they attain their potential in life. Psychology on the other hand, involves the study of an individual's behaviour from conception, through infancy, childhood, adolescence and adulthood (Bahago, 2004); and therefore, forms the basis of education without which its professionalism would be incomplete. It is exciting to teach and be involved in the development of children. Good teachers are needed in every classroom to improve the quality of children (learners) in our schools.

Knowledge central to the discipline of educational psychology can be a major contributor to the success of a special educator. The place of psychology in special needs education therefore, cannot be overlooked. Often times, educators who have no knowledge of psychology tend to treat all children alike irrespective of the fact that individual learners have different inborn qualities and are unique. Nevertheless, the fact still remains that no two persons with special needs are psychologically the same. Also, it is noteworthy that exceptionalities (or disabilities) naturally precipitate a number of psychological problems that psychology in special needs education becomes a necessity to address. In this respect, the psychological foundations of teaching including individualization of instruction, concreteness, unified instruction, additional stimulation, and self-activity (Ozoji & Mugu, 1999) must be religiously adhered to, in special needs education.

In this paper, the concept of special needs education psychology; major themes characterizing psychology of special needs education; importance of psychology to special educators; the learning process/situation; and the characteristics of effective teaching shall be highlighted. In the end, this paper hopes to underpin the place of psychology in the teaching and learning processes involving children with special needs.

The Concept of Special Needs Education Psychology

Psychology of SNE involves the application of psychological principles in educational provisions for special needs children. Specifically, it is the application of fields, tools and methods of psychology to study problems in the teaching-learning activities involving special needs children. It entails how the educational process affects learners with special needs. That is, how the learner can most successfully be brought into useful interactions with the materials to be learnt. "Because every learner is unique and each learns in ways different from the others" (Mang, 2002 pg. 92); the special needs education psychologist has to plan ways of helping each child both in the classroom and at home in consultation with parents and teachers.

The concept of special needs education psychology entails the psychological aspects of educating children with disabilities, special needs and specific syndromes (Ajaegbu, 1992). In this respect, the special needs education teacher must be knowledgeable in handling children's attitudes, self-concepts, motivation and personality styles in the classroom. He must study the psychology of learning and teaching; and family influences on development and functioning of the child with special needs. This would enable him to become aware of the rights of parents and children; and legislation relating to special education and child's welfare.

Therefore, during his professional training, the special needs education teacher (or psychologist) must be vast in knowledge about issues relating to child neglect; deprivation and abuse, school influences on child development and educational progress. Special needs education psychology, however, should enable its practitioner (the special teacher or psychologist) develop wealth of experience in topical issues relating to inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream education, special schools and units as well as the role of other relevant professionals.

Major Themes Characterizing Psychology of Special Needs Education

Every discipline has its own psychological foundation. For instance, the military psychology is based on defence, and that of medical sciences (medicine) is life prolongation. In the same manner, special needs education dwells more on contemporaneous issues such as educability of every individual; equalization of educational opportunities for children with special needs; uniqueness of the individual; sensory training and application of psychological principles (i.e. individualization of instruction, concreteness, unified instruction, additional stimulation and self-activity) in the learning and teaching processes involving children with special needs than any other discipline.

As individuals bear different faces and names the same manner they differ from one another in varied characteristic behaviours. These psychological differentiations appear to emerge significantly when the individual or group of individuals concerned is/are exceptional in trying to meet up with the challenges of their social milieu. For instance, no two individuals in the same category of exceptionality behave in the same way or get adjusted to life challenges associated with their physiological, anatomical and psychological structures. Because, exceptionality (special or uniqueness of the individual) naturally precipitates a number of psychological problems including inability to see physically, inability to hear spoken language; inability to conceptualize and/or coordinate ideas with the acceptable level of mankind, etc.

Children with special needs, therefore, are so referred because of their significant sensory or intellectual deviation from the normative traits of the majority others. Blindness for instance,

is a significant deviation from normal eyes (in function and structure); just as giftedness is from the average intelligence of mankind (Ozaji, 2003). Each of these deviations establishes a set of educational performance/functional needs that are not easily met using the conventional measures of teaching/intervention. Granted that the child is central to the success or failure of any educational programme; the degree of deviation of the child with special needs must be taken into consideration. This will actually help in determining the type of placement programme to adopt for such a child.

Again, it is noteworthy that the psychological make-up and adjustment capacity of child "A" is likely to differ from that of child "B". This implies that some children might be psychologically prepared for learning whereas others may not. In this regard, the need to prepare those who are unprepared cannot be overlooked. Psychology as an applied science studies the life problems of children with special needs, develops and administers an array of psychological, intelligence, ability and personality tests. These tests serve as gauges for decision-making in special needs education matters.

Importance of Psychology to Special Educators

Psychology studies human behaviours, which can either be normal or abnormal as the case may be. It has been stated elsewhere that exceptionality naturally precipitates a number of psychological problems. In this regard, knowledge of psychology guides special educators to understand, for instance, whether or not an individual's body structure (or deviation) has any impact on his behaviour. Similarly, the psychology of special needs education enables special educators to understand the impact (if any) of environment on bodily functions of the individual. This implicates that the various branches of psychology handle particular problems in special needs education. Thus, "clinical psychology deals with psychotherapies, social psychology with interpersonal relations and attitudes towards the disabled, rehabilitation psychology with the life problems and adjustment of disabled persons, and counseling needs of the disabled" (Ozaji, 2005 pg. 60).

Again, psychology would enable the special educator to acquire skills in:

1. Teaching-learning involving children with special needs.
2. Assessment and test procedures in special needs education.
3. Problem-solving in issues relating to special needs education and its beneficiaries.
4. Training others on special needs educational system perspective.
5. Counselling children with special needs and their families.
6. Planning intervention programmes for children with special needs.
7. Research in special needs education.
8. Information and communication technology.

However, in a formal educational setting the teacher is usually responsible for initiating learning process, and sustaining of learner's interest on the task (through proper stimulation). The teacher's personality, needs, motives, desires, ability and other reserves of his personality are important aspects that affect his teaching and learning activities. His roles in addition to teaching (which is his primary role) include counseling, assessing learning outcomes, discipline, modification of unwanted behaviour, developing curricula and creating effective human relationship (Ajaegbu, 1992). In this regard, psychology becomes imperative in special needs education in relation to identifying effective teacher's behaviours, characteristics, or qualities that could promote good teaching and effective learning. Invariably, the use of psychological

principles in special needs education would be very important in assessing and identifying the severity, category and intensity of disability; developing programmes (treatment, rehabilitative or instrumental); and/or evaluating programmes' effectiveness.

The Learning Process/Situation

Learning process involves what people do when they learn. It includes the activities of teacher who sets learning in motion; and the behaviour of the learner (both observable and non-observable) such as thinking, remembering, identifying and perceiving. Thus, educational psychologists would use principles from psychology of learning to understand the ways the learner (the child with special needs in this context) processes information and achieve competences.

Learning process reveals the nature of teacher-pupil relationship and their interaction (whether positive or negative); and the teaching methods or strategies the teacher uses to effect positive results in the learner. Again, the teacher's classroom control or techniques as well as classroom milieu in generating sense of belonging to the learner are parts of the learning process. Ajaegbu (1992) argues that:

If we consider that the way a teacher acts will influence not only his thoughts, ideals and his principles but also his conscious and unconscious feelings as well as his skills in reaching to the feelings of his or her students; we should also, consider the fact that each of the students (learners) has his or her own needs, motives, desires, abilities and expectations in life (p.8).

This implies that it is the feelings which the teacher transmits that hold the key to control and channel the multi-dimensional variables from which the learner learns and this counts very much in bringing out the best in him/her. In this respect, it is important that the special teacher (if he desires to bring out the best in the special needs child) should empathize rather than to sympathize with the learner. This gives him the opportunity to think and feel the way the learner does and hence be able to identify his or her problem so as to know the best ways to assist with the learner's special learning needs.

In addition to learning process, good learning situation is an indispensable factor in the teaching and learning activities involving the child with special needs. In this regard, issues relating to the location of the school; the physical environment of the school; the classroom facilities; and the emotional and social climate of people (including attitude and behaviour of teachers, students, and workers within the school community) should be taken into consideration. Also, the cultural context of the school and surrounding community where children with special needs are provided special education must be such that would enable them to maximize their potential in life. These and several other factors have remarkable influences on teaching and learning in general and special needs education in particular.

It is important, therefore, that the psychological principles are applied in the designing and placing of the child with special needs in the best learning situation that could facilitate maximal achievement of his educational goals. In so doing, appropriate and effective special needs education (SNE) system would have emerged to address the numerous psychological and learning needs of the child with special needs.

The Characteristics of Effective Teaching

Teaching and learning processes involving a child with special needs do not just happen; the teacher must be part artist and scientist to ensure effective teaching and learning. Effective teachers with knowledge of psychology can, indeed, make a difference in the lives of children with special needs education. Aside the personal and professional knowledge that a teacher needs to be successful, issues may arise that the special teacher has to address as an educator. For instance, the thought of how best to meet the diverse needs of his class; what does research on motivation say that can guide him in thinking about instructional and assessment strategies? Or ways and means he can use the ever expanding knowledge base of educational psychology as a tool for improving his teaching effectiveness.

The application of psychological principles (or foundations) in teaching and learning of children with special needs makes the special teacher effective. These psychological principles include individualization of instruction; concreteness, unified instruction, additional stimulation and self-activity (Ozaji & Mugu, 1999). A learning process/situation where the special teacher is versatile utilizes these principles is bound to be effective. Good and effective teaching is closely related to good facilities, material resources and positive social environment. When these are adequate and pleasant they contribute to making learning process interesting and enjoyable.

A teacher's writing and use of oral language helps children to learn while his ability to communicate effectively shapes his relationships with them. Again, being well informed and able to move freely in disciplines is essential if a teacher is to prepare learners with special needs to succeed in a complex world. Therefore, effective teaching implies that a teacher meaningfully relates what is known to children so that they become aware of the power of knowledge. It may include lesson clarity, instructional variety, orientation and engagement in learning process and student's success rate. For clarity of purpose these variables are further discussed below.

Lesson clarity: This involves how clear a teacher makes his presentation to a class. The presentation must be done in such a way that learners understand the teacher's message. In the light of this, once the teacher decides on objectives of the lesson, he should step back and ask himself (as if he were a student) if he could understand what it is that he is asking the class to do. Some 'dos' and 'don'ts' may be helpful here e.g. don't talk over the heads of your pupils/students; and don't be too complicated. But do organize materials carefully and be precise in your directions; do use instructional strategies that are appropriate to the materials, ages and cognition of your pupils/students. All these practices will help to maintain clarity.

Instructional variety: This implies that one's teaching techniques remain flexible during the presentation of a lesson. Instructional variety demands that the teacher should use different materials switching from recitation to a discussion technique. In addition, the teacher must know how to blend questions in order to be able to integrate questions into his lesson; this helps to keep pupils/students' interest high. There has to be variation in the use of reading materials, audiovisual aids, reference tools, and any other learning resources.

Task orientation and engagement: This has to do with the time spent in learning academic subjects. When pupils/students' academic learning time is increased their achievement improves; this is especially true for low-learning or at-risk students (Berliner, 1988 cited in Elliott, Kratochwill, Cook & Travers, 2001). To encourage effective use of time, Borich (1992) as cited in Elliott et al (2001) suggests that teachers make sure students (or pupils) know the classroom rules so that they don't have to ask each time they want to do something. Imperatively, the

teacher should monitor seatwork carefully to ensure that pupils/students remain engaged. Besides, independent assignments should be interesting and worthwhile so that the teacher does not have to spend time in constantly giving directions.

Students' success rate: This implies the rate at which students (or pupils) understand and correctly complete their work. For instance, if instruction produces a moderate to high success rate, students/pupils' achievement must increase. In this respect, time is a major contributor because if they spend more than an average amount of time working toward high success; their achievement scores will rise and retention improve.

Conclusion

Psychology is imperatively an aspect of special educational programmes and services that can enable the teacher to identify the psychological problems associated with the various categories of children with special needs. Besides, it is indispensable in the identification of effective teacher's behaviour, character or quality that could promote good teaching and learning process involving these categories of children. Also, knowledge central to educational psychology exposes the teacher to appreciate issues bordering on normal and abnormal child and adolescent development. In this regard, the special needs education psychologist (or teacher) must be knowledgeable about child development in relation to cognitive, social, physical, emotional, behavioural, play and communication skills. Besides, he must be versatile in the application of the psychological foundations (individualization of instruction, concreteness, unified instruction, additional stimulated and self-activity) in the teaching and learning process involving children with special needs.

References

- Ajaegbu, K.J.U. (1992). *Introduction to educational psychology*. Jos: Department of Arts and Social Science Education, University of Jos.
- Bahago, B.A. (2002). *Perspectives in educational psychology*. Jos: Deka Publications.
- Elliot, S.N.; Kratochwill, T.R.; Cook, J.L.; & Travers, J.F. (2001) (Eds.) *Educational psychology: Effective teaching and effective learning*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Mang, L.G. (2002). Psychological bases of curriculum development in T.O. Oyetunde & C. Piwuna (Eds.). *Curriculum and instruction (insight & strategies for effective teaching)*. Jos: Department of Arts and Social Science Education, University of Jos.
- Ozaji, E.D. & Mugu, Y. (1999). *Selected issues in special education*. Jos: Deka Publications.
- Ozaji, E.D. (2005). Re-positioning special needs education for effective service delivery in Nigeria. Jos: Deka Publications.