



Full Length Research Paper

School Level Efforts at Helping Pupils with Reading Difficulties: The Experience of Abeokuta Girls Grammar School, Ogun State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper presents the intervention that is required of a teacher in assisting learners who are poor readers in schools. The nature of diverse features of learners in school that is usually regarded as individual differences has been employed in this intervention. The paper explains the importance of the concept in pupils' learning as well as how it can be used to learners' advantage to promote learning especially among pupils who are poor readers. The paper also provides information on the arguments for and against the adoption of mixed ability grouping in the classroom to provide for improved learning among learners.

KEYWORDS: *School, Pupils, Reading, Difficulties,*

Introduction

One of the duties of the school is to provide appropriate learning experiences to learners in accordance with their levels in order to ensure that they are properly educated. This role of provision of learning experiences is discharged alongside catering for those learners who have one form of learning difficulty or the other. Attention given to learners with difficulties raises the level of a school higher than the other. When a school fails to properly cater for learners with difficulties, such school may have succeeded in throwing its responsibilities into the dustbin.

One of the more obvious ways in which the school can do this disservice to those of its pupils who have learning difficulties would seem to be by segregating them from their fellows in a permanent way which labels them as different, inferior, difficult, ineducable, non-examinable or the like. This practice can do their social and emotional development more harm and nothing can do their intellectual development less good. There are arguments for and against segregating pupils according to their intellectual abilities. Either segregating or otherwise, there are psychological and social reasons. Of all reasons, it sounds plausible and highly rewarding those pupils who are experiencing learning difficulties should not be singled out for all purposes and they should not be made to feel that they have no valuable and valued contribution to make to the life and work of the school.

If this is in part the thinking behind the move towards a mixed-ability form of organization, it would seem a contradiction of that thinking to use the individual assignment approach as a device for singling out the less able for remedial treatment at a time when the others are pursuing their own individual or group assignments. One of the strongest arguments for this method, as has been seen, is that it allows every pupil to work at his own pace and at his own level, and as such, learning difficulties cannot be generalized and each case is unique, the individual assignment approach would seem to be most appropriate as a means of diagnosing and dealing with each individual's personal educational problems without viewing him/her as a member of a special group requiring special 'compensatory' or 'remedial' treatment.

Clearly, such pupils would need remedial help in some areas, perhaps especially in basic reading skills, and one must not ignore the development of these important basic skills. Many schools have set out to meet the problems posed by these pupils through a system of withdrawals. At certain times of the week those pupils who need extra help with such basic skills as reading or writing are withdrawn from the class to be given special lessons either by specialist teachers within the school or, in some cases, at a reading centre or other such establishment outside the school. In this way those teachers who have special gifts of this kind or special training can use their talents to the benefit of all the pupils who need this kind of help and not just those who earn a place in a 'remedial' class.

Furthermore, this kind of help is needed, since too often the teaching of basic skills is not attended to beyond the infant school. However, it is important that it should not be provided at times when these pupils would have to miss what the rest of the class is doing in order to take advantage of the facilities that are offered. For there are a number of problems that are created if this cannot be avoided, such as the risk of a lack of continuity in the work of these pupils in the ordinary class context or, worse, of any group or groups they are attached to, as well as the stigma that must go with any suggestion of being taken out of the normal routine for some special purpose. For this reason, some schools arrange things so that at certain times the mixed-ability class does not meet as a class but breaks up into a number of different groupings in which all pupils are given some kind of special provision.

Most pupils need some kind of remedial help. Some bright pupils will need remedial help even with their reading. From experience, very few learners exist with no learning difficulties at all and these difficulties must be seen in relation to specific areas of work and particular skills, not as evidence of some general disability. Furthermore, at such times pupils can be given additional work of all kinds to suit their needs. This is the scheme that is operated at Abeokuta Girls High School. In this school it is recognized that progress would be inhibited if each day does not take up from the one before and that such children who need assistance in reading and basic Mathematics need attention that cannot be given by the non-specialist in the full-class situation.

At Abeokuta Girls High School there is Reading Centre, which is furnished with highly specialized necessary equipment. Such an attractive and comfortable room acts as an incentive for the children to be relaxed and responsive and makes it less likely that they will be resentful of going there. It is staffed by a full-time remedial teacher, who not only organizes the children but also advises other staff on the content and style of their courses.

The school's Remedial ('Opportunity') Department operated on a withdrawal basis, attempting to 'cure' retardation to the point where almost all pupils could be integrated into the school's normal teaching programme with only occasional 'reference back' to the remedial area itself. This work, mainly concerned with basic reading and comprehension, was the province of an experienced teacher who had the status - and salary - of other general Heads of Department in the school, and who was assisted wholly by the intake co-coordinator and in part by other members of staff with special interest and skills in remedial work. Quite simply the Opportunity Department attempted to 'free' itself of its existing 'clients' at the end of the first year of study in the school (i.e. by the 14+ stage). By and large, it succeeded,

It has also been found possible by some schools to link this kind of provision, as was suggested earlier, with arrangements for attention to other special needs. Additional work in some areas for the highly gifted pupil, if this is felt to be necessary, can also be made available at these times. In short, a flexibility of grouping, if allowed for in the time-tabling arrangements, can be used to cater for a variety of special needs.

If provision of this kind is properly made, teachers need not feel obliged to try to attend to the teaching of basic skills or the meeting of remedial needs in other contexts. Time allocated for individual and group assignment work should not be seen by the teacher as an opportunity to mount an intensive remedial campaign on his poor readers, except in so far as it gives scope for encouragement and enhanced motivation or provides cues for the teaching of basic skills. To do this is to deprive the other pupils of their share of his attention, to make the poor readers unduly conscious of their difficulties and to deprive them of the opportunities and advantages that individual and group assignments offer to all pupils and to them in particular. For the advantages that have been claimed elsewhere in this book for such work and the advantages of group work in particular are especially important in the education of pupils with learning difficulties.

The special advantages of the Abeokuta Girls Grammar School

In the first place, it has been argued that when pupils are allowed to work at their own pace and level, and perhaps also in pursuit of their own interests, there are great gains in motivation and incentive to work and to learn. This is precisely the kind of gain one is looking for in the education of the pupil with learning difficulties. If he/she can be allowed to do what interests him/her, if he/she can be encouraged to take on what can be coped with, if his/her strengths rather than weaknesses are showcased, then one can reasonably hope to achieve a level of motivation that may lead to more chance of doing something for such a pupil than had often been experienced in the past. If his/her attitude towards school and teachers improves as a result of this so that the pupil ceases to offer behavioral difficulties, something of value would have been gained; but one can hope to gain even more if his/her confidence is successfully built up in this way.

A second advantage that has been claimed for individual and group assignment work, especially when it is also interest- and enquiry-based, is the opportunities it offers for the promotion of creative work of all kinds. Again, such work offers special advantages to those who are having difficulties in other areas of their work and experiencing the emotional problems that can be associated with such difficulties. It is often claimed that such pupils learn primarily by doing. This is probably true of most pupils but is perhaps particularly important to those with learning difficulties. Drama, movement, art, craft and handwork of all kinds are important to all pupils but their importance to pupils with learning difficulties is vital. Such pupils are probably experiencing the greatest difficulty in expressing themselves through the written word and perhaps the spoken word too; reading and writing difficulties will present them with real problems of communication. Other media can offer them a means of expression denied them through language. Pupils who appear to have very little to show for their years of schooling can often be seen nowadays expressing through dance ideas of a complexity that would have been impossible for them to express through words.

Opportunities for self-expression of this kind will contribute also to their emotional development since their feelings need not remain bottled up inside or manifest them in bad behavior but can be channeled into socially acceptable modes of expression through such art forms. Work of this kind will also promote learning in other fields, since, if satisfaction is achieved, they will want to talk about what they have done and might even be persuaded to write about it; they might also

be led by a skilled teacher from such activities into others that arise naturally from them.

Furthermore, these are areas in which the confidence of such pupils can be developed because they can perhaps achieve something worthwhile here. There are those who, although experiencing difficulty with reading and writing, reveal real talent for painting, modeling, dancing or acting. If they have such strengths, the teacher should take advantage of them. Even those who do not possess talent in these directions however, can be helped by an imaginative teacher to achieve real success in these areas. Art does not have to be conceived as painting or sculpting; it can be seen as the creation of a 'montage' out of a variety of materials. Dance does not have to be interpreted in a strict balletic form; it can be viewed as free expressive movement. Drama need not be restricted to the acting of plays written by others; it can be the expression of one's own feelings through mime or improvised dialogue. In short, although all of these areas can provide opportunities for some pupils to reveal and develop great skills and although it should be the teacher's aim to enable pupils to develop these skills to the highest level in order to achieve the greatest scope for self-expression and satisfaction, skilled performance is not always an essential and all pupils can achieve some satisfaction in them.

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The school play can also offer a vehicle for the child who in most other respects has little opportunity to stand out from the throng to be an important segment of a whole. In spite of initial sight reading difficulties, children have been seen of well below average academic ability grow visibly in stature during rehearsals to overtake their erstwhile superiors on the home straight, once the barrier of learning the words has been overcome

A third main area in which it has been argued that individual and group assignment work offers advantages to pupils is that of social learning, which, as we have seen. Also has its effects on academic learning. Again, this is the kind 'of advantage that the pupil with learning difficulties most has need of, since, as we have also seen, if his difficulties are not the result of the social climate of his home or the school itself, they will certainly be a potential cause of the development of certain social or anti- social attitudes. His social education must. Therefore, be handled very carefully.

It has been stressed that the move to mixed-ability groups implies a move away from competition towards cooperation as a prime educational principle. The pupil with learning difficulties needs a cooperative rather than a competitive atmosphere in which to work if anyone does. Competition can only draw attention to his deficiencies and too much of that will cause him to become disheartened. A cooperative atmosphere, on the other hand, can do much to build his confidence by showing him that his work is worthwhile, that it is valued by others as adding something of value to a joint undertaking and is thus as worthy of respect as the work of the more gifted pupils. Only in this way can we hope to promote his social learning and avoid the development of emotional difficulties.

The emotional development of all pupils requires the teacher's careful attention but that of those who are experiencing special difficulties requires particular attention since, as a general rule, their emotional development is most at risk. To have a mental age of twelve at a chronological age of sixteen is not to have an emotional age of twelve. It is, however, to be in danger of developing serious emotional problems. These problems of social and emotional development may be especially important in the final years at school, since it is at this age that the adolescent is becoming socially aware and needs to be enabled and encouraged to make contributions at a number of levels that can be seen to be socially valuable. It is for this reason that many schools have found it helpful to engage pupils in their final year in various kinds of community service. Such activities are to the advantage of the community but the one who really profits from them is the pupil. They are advantageous to all pupils but particularly so to those with learning difficulties. If teachers are not aware of these needs and do not cater for them, they can and should expect such pupils, especially in their last year of school, to give them hell, as so many of them do.

Discussion

Teaching is still by and large, considered a matter of presenting the material to be learned and reinforcing the correct answers that the learner gives back to the teacher. Teachers and teacher trainers have made some progress in recognizing the importance of corporate experiences prior to using words, but the emphasis is still on words and the correct answer that the teacher wants. At the pre-school level, there is an incredible preoccupation with the teaching of language without coming to grips with how the preoperational child really thinks. In junior high school, youngsters still answer the question at the end of the chapter by copying the book day after day. A typical question is "Define photosynthesis".

Conclusion

In general, what is being asserted here is that remedial education, or whatever we wish to call the education of pupils with learning difficulties, is not to be seen merely as a matter of providing additional instruction. Rather, it is a matter of approaching their total education in a different frame of mind, of seeing the need to create the right social and emotional climate for them to work in and of building up their confidence in themselves by playing to their strengths, encouraging them to do the things they can and ensuring that their achievements in these fields are valued by us and by their fellows. Clearly, this requires the mixed-ability class, and within the mixed-ability class it can best be achieved not by singling them out for special provision but by providing for them along with the rest in a situation where each pupil is working as part of a group or subgroup on an assignment suited to his abilities.

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