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Teachers' Knowledge of, and Attitude towards Learning Disabilities.

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Abstract

This study examines the level of teachers' awareness of learning disabilities among primary school learners, the teachers' attitude to pupils possessing such disabilities and strategies adopted by the teachers in ensuring that the pupil still obtain the requisite knowledge s/he is billed to imbibe. One hundred teachers were randomly selected from 10 primary schools in Ife Central and Ife East local government areas of Osun State, Nigeria as participants in the study. Data were collected through a questionnaire titled "Questionnaire on Teachers' Knowledge and Attitude towards Learning Difficulties". Data analysis was by descriptive statistics, t-test and ANOVA. The results provide empirical information on the teachers' level of awareness of learning difficulties among the pupils, their attitudes towards it and how they are coping, with a view to suggesting workable approaches to improving learners' ability to learn more, given the learning difficulties they are experiencing. It will also present possible factors moderating these awareness and attitudes.

Learning is popularly regarded as the process of acquiring of new knowledge, behaviors, skills, values, preferences or understanding, and may involve synthesizing different types of information. A child who is experiencing problems or difficulties in mastering some aspect of his educational work might be termed as having learning difficulty. In some countries it is also used as a synonym for learning disability (LD). The Mexico Child link (2003) opines that there is confusion regarding the use of the terminology "Learning disabilities", as its use varies from country to country and also whether the perspective is medical, social or educational. It posited that learning disability and learning difficulties are used in the US and sometimes elsewhere to denote educational problems of a specific nature, such as dyslexia, in Great Britain, the Department of Health adopted learning disability as the preferred alternative to mental handicap. However it has been argued that intellectual disability is a more accurate term and is used by the World Health Organization (WHO) as well as in Australasia. Chan (1998) raised a need to expand our horizon of understanding children and youths with learning difficulties as according

to him, hidden in the minds of these people are treasures of abilities and talents that could be explored and nourished.

Learning difficulties/disabilities are problems that affect the brain's ability to receive process, analyze, or store information. These problems can make it difficult for a student to learn as quickly as someone who is not affected by learning disabilities. There are many kinds of learning disabilities, but most students affected by learning disabilities have more than one kind (Teenshealth, 2009). Certain kinds of learning disabilities can interfere with a person's ability to concentrate or focus on current learning activities causing his/her mind to wander too much. Other learning disabilities can make it difficult for a student to read, write, spell, or solve math problems.(Teenshealth, 2009)

Most learning disabilities fall into one of two categories: verbal and nonverbal. People with verbal learning disabilities have difficulty with words, both spoken and written. The most common and best-known verbal learning disability is dyslexia, which causes people to have trouble recognizing or processing letters and the sounds associated with them. For this reason, people with dyslexia have trouble with reading and writing tasks or assignments.

Some people with verbal learning disabilities may be able to read or write well but they have trouble with other aspects of language. For example, they may be able to sound out a sentence or paragraph perfectly, making them good readers, but they are not able to relate to the words in ways that will allow them to make sense of what they are reading (such as forming a picture of a thing or situation). And some people have trouble with the act of writing as their brains struggle to control the many things that go into it - from moving their hand to form letter shapes to remembering the correct grammar rules involved in writing down a sentence.

According to Thomas and Thomas (2008), people with nonverbal learning disabilities may have difficulty processing what they see; they may have trouble making sense of visual

details like numbers on a blackboard. Someone with a nonverbal learning disability may confuse the plus sign with the sign for division, for example. Some abstract concepts like fractions may be difficult to master for people with nonverbal learning disabilities.

Researchers maintained that some students who experience learning difficulties do not respond to the usual classroom and additional supportive teaching that schools provide and therefore advised that the term “learning disabilities” should be restricted to these ‘hard to help’ students where it seems reasonable to assume that their limitations in learning might stem from a constitutional impairment (Elkins, 2002). It is not easy to tell by looking that a person has a learning disability and this makes learning disabilities hard to diagnose. Mulla (2010) argued that learning disabilities typically first show up when a person has difficulty speaking, reading, writing, figuring out a mathematics problem, communicating with a parent, or paying attention in class. Learning disabilities in some pupils are diagnosed in nursery school when a parent or a teacher notices that the children cannot follow directions for a game or is struggling to do work he or she should be able to do easily. But other pupils develop sophisticated ways of covering up their learning issues, so the learning disabilities may show up until the teen years when schoolwork - and life - gets more complicated (Jose, 2009).

In Nigeria, primary education lays the foundation on which other educational levels build and since learning difficulties seem to be more manageable if it is discovered early enough in the life of the individual, teachers in primary schools have important roles to play at least in maintaining the learner’s self-esteem and by extension his/her willingness to learn. Westwood (2008) noted that, for many years, experienced early childhood teachers are reasonably skilled in noting when young children are having learning problems. He argued that these teachers are at the cutting edge of the early identification process in addition to the specific cognitive and physical skills mentioned above, lower primary teachers take into account such things as a child’s

ability to maintain attention to task for adequate periods of time, work without close supervision, persist with task despite frustrations, listen to and understand instructions, socialize with peers, show interest in books and make serious efforts to learn. The contribution of these formal observations to the identification of at-risk children is as important as results from more formal testing or assessment (Flynn and Rahbar, 1998).

Robuck (2009) alleged that general education teachers usually have very little knowledge about disabilities in general and gave some common reasons for this. First, teacher training programs devote little or no class hours to understanding the challenges learners with particular disabilities face and how to help them learn. Second, general education teachers typically don't undertake any further studies that focus on effective ways to teach learners with learning disabilities. Last, educational authorities do not provide ongoing in-service training for teachers about teaching learners with special needs.

Robuck argued that many teachers may not realize that kids with learning difficulties have to work much harder than their peers to acquire, retain, and perform academic and social skills on a daily basis. This can cause overwhelming stress for the learners who have limited coping resources which very often is translated into behaviors that are likely to be misinterpreted or not noticed by teachers who do not have a good understanding of learning disabilities. Such learners may engage in work-avoidant behaviors, such as repeatedly getting out of their seat for various reasons, constantly asking to go to the toilet, disturbing classmates during independent work time, or frequently getting up to sharpen pencils. They can also develop anxiety-related symptoms including such as not wanting to go to school, complaints of headaches or stomachaches, routinely asking to see the school nurse, or crying in school, arguing with the teacher, being verbally or physically aggressive with peers, or noncompliance with teacher requests or directions. Robuck (2009) asserted that the solutions teachers usually offer to assist

with these behavioral difficulties usually focus on the child, rather than themselves. Oftentimes, a teacher can successfully reduce or eliminate a child's difficult behavior with a simple change in the way she presents information, provides assistance, or alters the way the child can demonstrate performance of academic tasks.

On the other hand, Reddy (2006) suggested that the challenge of achieving full educational and social integration of children with disabilities within the society can be easily achieved if the teachers possess better knowledge about disabilities, attitude towards children with disabilities and competencies to handle the children. He argued that the teacher should possess some specific competencies in assessment, planning individualized educational programme apart from guidance and counselling; the teacher should possess thorough understanding about the concept and nature of disabilities with their causes and characteristics, identification and assessment, teacher and training methods, and guidance and counselling to parents as well as the children with disabilities. Such knowledge and understanding, he claimed, will enable them to develop positive attitude towards children with disabilities which in turn leads to acquiring or developing better competencies to handle the children.

In view of the foregoing, the researchers examined the awareness and attitude of primary school teachers to learning difficulties in their respective schools. It is also targeted at finding what coping strategies the teachers employ in ensuring that the learners still achieve their god-given potentials. In this study, awareness is defined as having knowledge or being fully aware of or well informed about the concept of disabilities in children, causes and characteristics of children with disabilities, teaching and training methods and guidance and counselling to the children as well as to the parents and the community. Also, attitude is used to refer to the special and normal school teachers' beliefs, feelings and behaviours towards the different aspects of children with disabilities.

Procedure

The study employed descriptive survey designs. Descriptive research, according to James, (1997), is used to obtain information concerning the current status of the phenomena to describe what exists with respect to variables or conditions in a situation. One hundred primary school teachers participated in this study. Ten (10) teachers were selected randomly from each of the 5 Nursery primary schools also selected randomly from each of two local government areas of Osun state: Ife central and Ife East local government areas. The schools consisted of 6 private Nursery and Primary schools and 4 public primary schools. In some cases, the school heads and the assistants participated in the study. Data were collected through a self-constructed questionnaire titled "*Questionnaire on Teacher Knowledge and Attitude towards Learning Difficulties*" and which was trial tested on 14 participants who were not part of the actual research sample. This enabled us to obtain reliability information (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.79). The scree plot of a factor analysis conducted on the instrument showed that it contained only three factors and only one first dominant factor, by so doing, can be said to be valid for the study. The instrument consists of four sections. Section A sought biographical data, section B elicited information on the respondents' awareness of learning difficulties while section C was used to collect information on their attitudes toward learning difficulties and section D sought information on teachers' coping practices. In sections B, C and D the respondents were expected to respond using a three category response scale of agree, indifferent and disagree. Section B consist of factual information about learning difficulties and hence, an agree response was scored 2, indifferent 1 and disagree 0. In sections C and D, an agree response is scored 3, indifferent 2 and disagree 1. Except for negative statements in which the scores were transposed. Data

collected were presented in contingency table and frequency table. Simple percentage, t-test and ANOVA were used to analyze the data.

Results

Only 94 of the total questionnaire administered was used in this study as some were incompletely responded to or were not returned. Out of these 13 were male while 79 were females and two of them did not indicate their gender identity. Other biographical information was as presented in the table below.

Table 1: Biographical information of the study participants

Variable	Levels	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	No response	2	2.1
	Male	13	13.8
	Female	79	84.0
	Total	94	100
Age	No response	3	3.2
	18 - 25yrs	9	9.6
	25 - 35yrs	42	44.7
	35 - 45yrs	23	24.5
	Above 45yrs	17	18.1
	Total	94	100
Highest Educational Qualification	No response	1	1.1
	SSCE	8	8.5
	OND	9	9.6
	NCE	61	64.9
	B.A/B.Sc./B.Tech	5	5.3
	B.Ed/B.A.Ed./B.Sc.Ed	9	9.6
	M.A./M.A.Ed./M.Sc.Ed	1	1.1
Teaching Experience	No response	1	1.1
	Less than 1 yr	7	7.4
	1 to 5yrs	36	38.3
	6 to 10yrs	20	21.3
	More than 10yrs	30	31.9
	Total	94	100

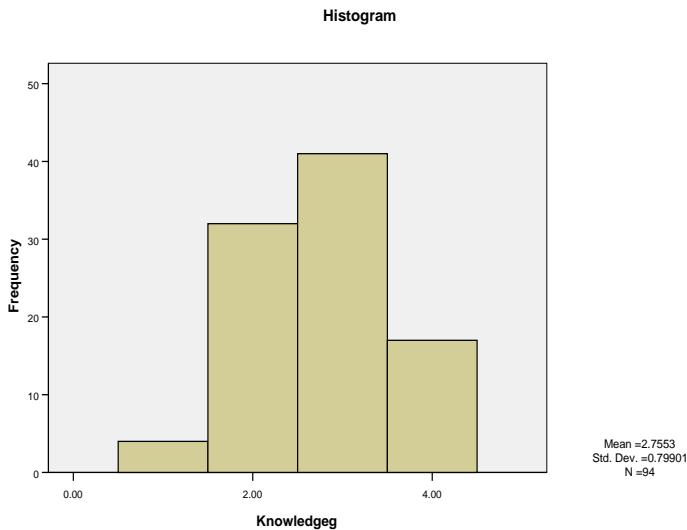
Research Question 1: How much knowledge of learning difficulties do the teachers under study possess?

To answer this research question, the section A of the questionnaire was given a descriptive analysis. After scoring as earlier described, the scores were summed up to give a measure of respondents' knowledge and were then categorised using the level of knowledge they were found to possess. Teachers' knowledge was found to range between 0 and 20 on this scale with a mean score of 13.43 and standard deviation of 3.33. Teachers who possess scores that were less than 8 (less than 40%) were regarded as having poor knowledge of learning difficulties, scores of 8 to 12 were regarded as having fair knowledge, 13 to 16 were said to have good knowledge and above 16 were said to have excellent knowledge. The result of the descriptive analysis were as presented in the table 2

Table 2: Distribution of teachers according to their knowledge levels

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Poor Knowledge	4	4.3	4.3
Fair Knowledge	32	34.0	38.3
Good Knowledge	41	43.6	81.9
Excellent Knowledge	17	18.1	100.0
Total	94	100.0	

Table 2 shows that most of the teachers (43.6%) had good knowledge of learning difficulties while another 18.1% had excellent knowledge of what constitutes learning difficulties. However, a considerable percentage (38.3%) still had just fair knowledge while 4.3% had poor knowledge of what learning difficulties entails. It can therefore be concluded that considerable proportion of the teaching population under study still had unacceptable level of knowledge (fair and poor) of what learning difficulties mean. This is also graphically presented in Fig. 1



The researchers attempted to determine if factors like age or teaching experience could account for the observed trends and by so doing a test of difference via ANOVA was carried out on these two variable and the results were as presented in table 3

Table 3: Test of differences in teachers' knowledge of learning difficulties on the basis of age and teaching experience

Variable		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Age	Between Groups	74.354	3	24.785	2.274	.086
	Within Groups	948.327	87	10.900		
	Total	1022.681	90			
<hr/>						
Teaching Experience	Between Groups	44.273	3	14.758	1.326	.271
	Within Groups	990.522	89	11.129		
	Total	1034.796	92			

It can be seen from table 3 that the significance levels exceed the 0.05 threshold and hence we can conclude that there is no significant difference in the teachers' knowledge on the basis of age and teaching experience.

Research Question 2: What are the teachers' attitudes to learning difficulties in their classrooms?

In order to answer this research question, the section C of the questionnaire was subjected to appropriate descriptive and inferential statistical analyses. The section basically assumes that teachers' attitude would be negative and this is typified in that most of the items were negative and were scored in such a way that an agreement to the statements were given the lowest (negative) value of 1, indifferent 2 and disagree 3. However there were some positive statements to correct for response set such as items 1, 5 and 9 and they had their own scores transposed. The scores were now added together to give a measure of the respondents' attitude to learning difficulties. Hence, the larger the total scores, the more positive the attitude. The teachers were also categorized into classes on the basis of their attitude to learning difficulties in such a way that those who scored 10 or less were said to have negative attitude towards learning difficulties in their classrooms, scores of 11 to 20 were regarded as been indifferent and scores greater than 20 were said to have positive attitude. The results were as presented in table 4

Table 4: Distribution of respondents across attitude groupings

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Negative attitude	4	4.3	4.3
Indifferent	48	51.1	55.3
Positive attitude	42	44.7	100.0
Total	94	100.0	

Table 4 shows that most of the teachers under study (51.1%) were indifferent in their attitude to learning difficulties in their classrooms, although, a considerable percentage (44.7%) had positive attitude towards it and were ready to assist learners undergoing such difficulties. However, some of them (4.3%) still had negative attitude towards the learning difficulties present in their classrooms. The researchers wondered why this should happen given the level of knowledge of learning difficulties the teachers were found to possess. As a result, a test of difference in the teachers' attitude was conducted on the basis of their highest qualification, age, sex and teaching

experience. The result of the test of difference on the basis of gender is presented in Table 5 while those of age, teaching experience and highest educational qualification are presented in Table 6.

Table 5: Test of Difference in teachers' attitude on the basis of their gender

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Male	13	18.8462	3.02341		
Female	79	19.5063	5.07602	-.455	.651

From table 5, it can be seen that the p-value of the t-test surpasses the 0.05 threshold, hence it cannot be said to be significant. Hence we can conclude that there is no significant difference in the teachers' attitude to learning difficulties on the basis of their gender. The differences on the bases of other parameters are presented in table 6.

Table 6; : Test of Difference in teachers' attitude on the basis of their age, teaching experience and highest qualification

Variable		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Age	Between Groups	19.814	3	6.605	.276	.842
	Within Groups	2078.933	87	23.896		
	Total	2098.747	90			
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Teaching Experience	Between Groups	27.005	3	9.002	.326	.807
	Within Groups	2460.307	89	27.644		
	Total	2487.312	92			
<hr/>						
Highest qualification	Between Groups	30.456	5	6.091	.216	.955
	Within Groups	2449.351	87	28.153		
	Total	2479.806	92			

Table 6 shows that no significant difference in the teachers' attitude towards learning difficulties in their classrooms was obtained on the basis of any of the factors examined, hence we cannot attribute the differences observed in the teachers' attitude to any of the factors earlier listed.

Research Question 3: what are the coping strategies adopted by the teachers against learning difficulties in their classrooms.

In order to answer this research question, the section D of the questionnaire was given a descriptive analysis. The relative percentages of respondents and their responses were collated and presented in table 7

Table 7: Coping strategies adopted by the teachers against learning difficulties

		Agree %	Indifferent %	Disagree %	No response	RSI
1	I try to place learners with poor eye sight in vantage position to enable them see the chalk board/magic board.	87.2	3.2	4.3	5.3	0.9308
2	I walk around the class when I am teaching to enable me locate any pupil with difficulty early enough.	91.5	4.3	0.0	4.3	0.9580
3	I locate learners with hearing impairment close to the teacher's seat.	80.9	6.4	6.4	5.3	0.9079
4	I promptly call attention of the school authorities to any pupil I think may have learning difficulty.	79.8	5.3	10.6	4.3	0.9015
5	I send pupils with learning difficulties home to their parents.	11.7	5.3	78.7	4.3	0.5610
6	I help pupils with bad hand writing to write their assignments.	22.3	11.7	60.6	5.3	0.6270
7	There is a clinical psychologist in my school who helps to diagnose pupils with learning difficulties.	10.6	16.0	67.0	6.4	0.5770
8	I give alternative or modified assignments to slow learners in my class	61.7	12.8	21.3	4.3	0.8303
9	I devote special or extra period to pupils with learning difficulties.	74.5	5.3	12.8	7.4	0.8673
10	I encourage parents of pupils with learning disabilities to enroll them in a special school.	48.9	10.6	35.1	5.3	0.7573

From Table 7, it can be seen that the teachers claimed have adopted various approaches to help learners cope with their learning difficulties. Most popular amongst which is that they walk around the class when teaching to locate any pupil with difficulty early enough with RSI value of 0.958. Other approaches popularly adopted include placing learners with poor eye sight in vantage position to enable them see the chalk board/magic board (RSI = 9308) and locate learners with hearing impairment close to the teacher's seat. They mostly rejected the idea of sending the pupil back home to his/her parents (RSI = 0.561), and that "There is a clinical psychologist in my school who helps to diagnose pupils with learning difficulties" with RSI value of 0.627.

Discussion

There is a need for teachers to have requisite understanding of what constitutes learning difficulties and be able to develop appropriate attitudes if he/she would be able to assist Nigerian learner to trap adequate knowledge, attitude and skills which will make him function effectively in the society. This was the premise on which the first research question was based. The study found that the teachers possess good knowledge of what learning difficulty may entail in primary schools. This is in agreement with Westwood (2008) who claimed that early childhood teachers are skilled in noting when young children are having learning problem as they take into account such things as a child's ability to maintain attention to task for adequate periods of time, work without close supervision, persist with task despite frustrations, listen to and understand instructions, socialize with peers, show interest in books and make serious efforts to learn. However the findings contrasted those of Robuck (2009) who alleged that general education teachers usually have very little knowledge about learning disabilities in general. This may be due to increasing awareness generated by seminars and workshop currently being organized for

teachers at all levels of Nigerian Education by state governments, the Universal Basic Education authorities, societies and academic institutions. In fact, the theme of the recent annual conference of the Nigerian Society for Education psychology (NISEP) held in 2009 at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-ifé was focused at understanding learning disabilities in Nigerian learners. Primary and secondary school teachers were invited and they were adequately present.

The study also found that there was no significant difference in the knowledge possessed by respondents on the basis of age or teaching experience. It however found that the attitudes of the teachers towards these learning difficulties were at best those of indifference and that these were not as a result of any of the demographic variables like gender, educational qualification or age. Reddy (2006) opined that the challenge of achieving full educational and social integration of children with disabilities within the society can be easily achieved if the teachers possess better knowledge about disabilities, attitude towards children with disabilities and competencies to handle the children. Since none of the socio-demographic variable could be said to be responsible for the undesirable attitude the teachers were found to have, their condition of service need to be examined with a view of improving their attitude toward children with learning disabilities.

The teachers were found to be adopting some basic coping strategies to manage their classroom and their students to enable the learners trap enough knowledge. These mainly consisted of placement in the classroom, teacher moving round to spot any form of learning difficulties and ensuring that the child's self esteem is not battered. This confirms the view expressed by Robuck (2009) that the solution teachers usually offer to assist children with learning difficulties are usually focused on the child rather than the teachers themselves. He advised that teachers can successfully reduce or eliminate a child's difficult behavior with a simple change in the way he/she presents information, provides assistance, or alters the way the

child can demonstrate performance of academic tasks. The involvement of psychologist or any other educational support service practitioner was not found to be popular among the teachers who participated in this study.

Recommendation

In view of the foregoing, the study found that the following recommendations became expedient:

1. Federal and state educational authorities should ensure that school heads and even class teachers in private and public schools periodically attend this type of conference in order to improve their understanding of learning difficulties and approaches for tackling them.
2. Teacher preparation Institutions should include specialize courses aimed at improving knowledge and research on learning difficulties in their curricula.
3. Post graduate students in educational psychology should be made to undertake a field experience training in primary and secondary schools in order to sensitize the learning community to their relevance to the education of the Nigerian child; to train them in practical aspects of their course and to help in identify, managing and/remediating learning difficulties in the learners.
4. Practicing teachers should be schooled in means of reducing or eliminating a child's difficult behavior with a simple change in the way by which information is presented, assistance is provided, or altering the way the child can demonstrate performance of academic tasks.

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