IFE JOURNAL OF BEHAVIOURAL RESEARCH

Vol. 6, No.1, June, 2014

A Publication of the
Department of Educational
Foundations and Counselling,
Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife.

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Vol. 6, No.1, June, 2014

ISSN: 2141E 3770

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ENCHANCING LEARNING OUTCOMES OF STUDENTS WITH READING DISABILITIES IN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT
This paper described potential areas of reading difficulties among students with reading disabilities in inclusive classrooms as well as three effective instructional strategies that teachers can adopt to improve the learning outcomes of their students in inclusive classrooms namely, differentiated, explicit and scaffolded instructional strategies. Differentiated instruction, allows teachers to modify content, process, and product based on variations in students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. This strategy is useful in inclusive classrooms because it affords students the best possible learning opportunities to excel in their academics. In the case of explicit instruction, students with reading disabilities make much progress in their academics (reading, mathematics, spelling, language, written expression, science and thinking skills) when they receive explicit, strategic teaching that enables teachers to show students what to do, why, how and when. Scaffolded instruction involves teachers providing intense support to students through modeling, guided practice, memory prompts, strategy instruction; use of graphic organizers and gradually reducing the support as students become independent learners. Given this background, it was recommended that general and special education teachers should not only differentiate instruction to meet the needs of students with reading disabilities in their classrooms but also present instruction in an explicit and scaffolded manner for improved learning outcomes.

Introduction

An inclusive classroom is a learning environment where both students with special needs and those without special needs receive teaching and learning within the same classroom. In this educational setting, students with special needs have opportunities to participate and receive support in all aspects of school life alongside peers who do not have special needs. Ideally, a variety of learners in the inclusive classroom ranging from students without special needs to those students with learning disabilities, intellectual disability, hyperactivity, emotional disturbances, autism spectrum disorders, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, speech or language impairment, hearing impairment, visual impairment and learning disabilities.

York-Barr and Vandercook *(2011) noted that* **in inclusive classrooms,** special educators, related service providers, general educators, and other education personnel work together to address the educational needs of students with special needs. By collaborating, these educators better support the learning and participation of *all* students.

Zionts (2005) stated that students with disabilities made academic improvements when included in the general education classroom. One explanation for this is that the expectations and demands of a general education classroom are typically greater than those of a pull-out special education classroom. Similarly, Carter and Kennedy (2006) also found that students without disabilities, who were in inclusive classrooms, showed greater appreciation of diversity and raised expectations of their classmates with severe disabilities. They also found that these typically developing students gained self esteem and developed new friendships.

Additionally, advocates of inclusive education such as The Department of Education, State Government of Victoria (n.d) revealed that mainly, inclusive classrooms recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodate both different styles and rates of learning and ensure quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies and resource use and partnerships with their communities. According to them, all students benefit to a large extent when they receive instruction in inclusive education settings.

In spite of these reported benefits of inclusive education, many students in inclusive classrooms have limited reading skills, a deficit that makes it difficult for students to read and comprehend texts successfully. Catts and Kamhi (2005) noted that when students cannot read fluently and comprehend, they are restricted in developing content area knowledge. This is because reading proficiency is an essential academic skill that enables students to learn in their given subject areas and achieve improved learning outcomes. Thus, deficits in reading can impede performance in academic areas other than reading.

Unfortunately, the most common type of learning disability is in the area of reading with about eighty percent (80%) of students identified as having learning disability, experiencing significant problems in reading otherwise referred to as reading disability (Lyon, 2003). Reading disability has been described in terms of the learner's inability to read up to his or her expectation as determined through intelligence or other standardized texts. In this sense, Isiugo-Abanihe and Nwosu, (1999) stated that a learner with a reading disability may be a student that is reading below his or her ability level, and is therefore underachieving in his academics. Precisely, students may have difficulties in any of the five essential components of reading instruction which are phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and text comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). These problems are present to varying degrees in each student.

Difficulties with phonemic awareness can manifest with recognizing or producing words that rhyme, blending or segmenting syllables, blending or segmenting onset-rimes, recognizing that two words begin or end with the same sound or a different sound, recognizing that two words contain the same or different medial sound, segmenting or blending a word's individual sounds, and manipulating sounds to identify a new word when a sound is deleted or substituted in a word (Bryant, Smith & Bryant, 2008).

Phonic analysis difficulties differ among students with reading disabilities. Many students are able to

identify lettersound correspondences and know how to say letter combinations in isolation. For these students, the problem often lies in blending letter sounds together to read words. This is especially apparent as they try to decode pseudowords (nonwords such as *zim*) that are used to assess phonic analysis skills. In addition, students with reading disabilities experience problems with accuracy and speed, basic word reading difficulties, small sight vocabulary, read word by word, and rarely self-correct their errors during their reading (Bryant, Smith & Bryant, 2008).

Similarly, in respect to vocabulary, Lyon (2003) stated that students with reading disabilities are deficient in all the skills that efficient readers utilize. They lack confidence to apply context clues, or they don't know the clues to begin with. They struggle with using dictionaries and often lack the reading ability to use guide words to access unknown words in the dictionary. Also, as in word identification, students with reading disabilities struggle with identifying prefixes and suffixes, so it stands to reason that they would have difficulty understanding word parts and meanings.

Students with reading disabilities do not develop their own reading strategies, especially in the area of reading comprehension, and do not know how to adjust their reading to aid comprehension (Antoniou & Souvignier, 2007). Likewise, Akinrinade (1999) noted that students with reading disabilities exhibit poor strategies for organizing and using knowledge and skills involved in comprehension. Conversely, efficient readers are strategic readers. They demonstrate the ability to use effective strategies before, during, and after reading to enhance comprehension. They possess strategies to access and understand text, and they can generalize their strategies to all kinds of reading materials.

Apparently, if left unaddressed, reading disabilities among students in inclusive classrooms may lead to unpleasant consequences such as lack of success, poor self-esteem and difficulty in social development. Therefore, educators need to appreciate the utilization of effective instructional strategies for these students, and how this will impact their students' ability to learn and improve learning outcomes across all content areas and all grade levels.

Strategies to Enhance Learning Outcomes of Students with Reading Disabilities in Inclusive Classrooms

In this age and time when general education schools globally, are beginning to include students with diverse needs into their classrooms, it has become necessary for general and special educators to recognize the place of utilizing research-based strategies with their students especially, those with reading disabilities. This paper therefore, discussed three instructional strategies (namely, individualized instruction, differentiated instruction and explicit instruction) that are effective in enhancing the learning outcomes of students with reading disabilities in inclusive classrooms.

Differentiated Instruction

In order to effectively enhance the learning outcomes of students with reading disabilities in inclusive classrooms, teachers may consider differentiating instruction in their classrooms. Landrum and McDuffie (2010) submitted that in contrast to individualized instruction, which represents perhaps the most fundamental

and defining characteristic of special education, differentiated instruction, represents a relatively recent response to the growing trend of including students with disabilities in general education, which demands individualizing within increasingly heterogeneous classrooms. According to Stradling and Saunders (1993) differentiated instruction is the process of matching learning targets, tasks, activities, resources, and learning support to individual learners' needs, styles, and rates of learning. It is a teacher's response to the diverse learning needs of students in an inclusive classroom.

Rock, Gregg, Ellis, and Gable (2008) explained the theoretical framework of differentiated instruction, based on Tomlinson's (2001) work, through four guiding principles. The four guiding principals include: (a) a focus on essential ideas and skills in each content area, (b) responsiveness to individual student differences, (c) integration of assessment and instruction, and (d) ongoing adjustment of content, process, and products to meet the individual students' levels of prior knowledge, critical thinking, and expression styles.

Tomlinson (2001) suggested that content, process, and product may be differentiated based on student needs and interests. *Content* refers to the knowledge or information that students will learn, that is what students are to master, what educators want the students to accomplish after instruction. *Process* refers to the activities and experiences that will bring students to the desired learning outcomes. It involves how the student interacts with the content, and those learning interactions will in part be determined by the various learning preferences of the students (for instance, is this student an auditory learner, a visual learner, and/or a learner who needs concrete demonstrations).

Not only can students learn concepts and skills in different ways, they can also demonstrate that learning through different *products*. Demonstrations of learning allow the teacher to determine the students who have mastered the material and those who may need more time and continued instruction. Art projects, role-play mini-dramas for groups of students, library or Web-based research, multimedia projects, paper-and-pencil projects, written reports, or oral reports all represent excellent projects that students may complete to demonstrate their knowledge (Bender, 2002).

Gregory and Chapman (2002) opined that because of the diversity of learning styles and preferences demonstrated by students today, the differentiated classroom will typically involve a wide array of activities (such as modeling, rehearsal, choral chanting, movement associated with the content, and/or educational, games, individual and group-oriented learning) to address the different learning needs of everyone. Differentiated instruction entails that teachers must know the learners in the class, understand not only such things about each learner as the learning style and learning preferences but also show a concern for each student by tailoring instruction to meet the needs of each individual student.

Differentiated instruction benefits students with special needs because it creates and promotes an environment in which learning differences are not just tolerated, they are expected and valued. A differentiated approach supports an inclusive education system in which all students have the best possible learning opportunities. With this

approach, students receive different materials or instructional strategies depending on their individual learning needs, within the context of an inclusive classroom setting (Marshak, Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2011).

Similarly, the range of instructional options and supports in place in a differentiated classroom will address many of the unique learning needs of students with special needs. Besides, the process of ongoing assessment *for* learning, which is embedded in a differentiated instruction approach, also benefits students with special needs. It allows teachers to more quickly and naturally identify which types of instructional strategies and supports individual students are responding to positively or not responding to.

Explicit Instruction

Students with reading disabilities will benefit maximally in inclusive classrooms, as teachers provide instruction that is explicit and strategic. Explicit, strategic instruction shows students what to do, why, how, and when. Explicit instruction refers to the active and deliberate development of all aspects of students' learning rather than leaving anything to chance. In other words, the teacher provides detailed explanations and models to the student about how to approach, think, perform, and evaluate learning and performance. Vaughn, Wanzek, Murray, and Roberts (2012) described explicit instruction as overtly teaching the steps or processes needed to understand a construct, apply a strategy, and/or complete a task. Explicit instruction includes teacher presentation of new material, teacher modelling, and step-by-step instruction to demonstrate what is expected so that students can accomplish a learning task.

Archer and Hughes (2011) examined several literatures on explicit instruction and concluded that there are sixteen instructional elements that characterize an explicit approach to teaching. Some of these elements are: (a) **focusing instruction on critical content such as** skills, strategies, vocabulary terms, and concepts, that will empower students in the future and match the students' instructional needs; (b) **sequencing skills logically for example,** teaching easier skills before harder skills, teaching high-frequency skills before skills that are less frequent in usage; (c) **breaking down complex skills and strategies into smaller instructional units (in other words,** teaching in small steps); (d) **designing organized and focused lessons;** (e) **beginning lessons with a clear statement of the lesson's goals and teacher's expectations; and (f) reviewing prior skills and knowledge before beginning instruction (that is,** the teacher verifies that students have the prerequisite skills and knowledge to learn the skill being taught in the lesson.

Furthermore, other elements of explicit instruction include: **providing step-by-step demonstrations, using clear and concise language, providing an adequate range of examples and non-examples, providing guided and supported practice,** allowing students to respond frequently (that is, oral responses, written responses, or action responses), **monitoring student performance closely, providing immediate affirmative and corrective feedback, delivering the lesson at a brisk pace** to optimize instructional time, the amount of content that can be presented, and on-task behaviour, **helping students organize knowledge, and providing**

distributed and cumulative practice in order to address issues of retention as well as automaticity (Archer & Hughes, 2011).

Explicit instruction has been found to be effective in teaching academic skills such as reading, mathematics, spelling, language, writing, science and thinking skills. Research has associated interventions incorporating explicit instruction with improved outcomes for students with learning difficulties for both basic skills and higher-level concepts (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Gersten, Chard, Jayanthi, Baker, Morphy, & Flojo, 2009).

Scaffolded Instruction

Scaffolded instruction is an overarching strategy that is most effective for students with learning disabilities in reading who are placed in inclusive classrooms. **Scaffolding** is the support that teachers give students as they learn content. Scaffolded instruction ensures that what the learner already knows is used as a guide to determine the next step for instruction. Rosenberg, Westling and McLeskey (2011) explained that scaffolding resembles the kind of assistance offered to a toddler learning to walk in which case, parents and others provide support (scaffolding) as a toddler learns to walk by holding her hands, catching her before she falls, encouraging her to walk short distances, purchasing devices that provide support but require her to move herself along with her legs, and so forth.

According to the Ontario Ministry of Education (2004), Vygotsky's theory of learning describes each student's current level of achievement as the zone of actual development, where the student can apply his or her knowledge and skills independently. Teachers model and scaffold learning that is just beyond this zone (that is, in what Vygotsky calls the zone of proximal development) to stretch each student towards a new or the next level of actual development. Teachers begin by demonstrating, through modelling and/or thinking aloud, effective strategies for reading, writing, talking, listening and thinking, and then move to coaching or guiding, and eventually arrive at a point where the student practises the skill or strategy independently. Thus, specific types of scaffolding include: modelling, guided practice, memory prompts and supports, strategy instruction, and use of graphic organizers For instance, during a reading lesson, graphic organizers that accompany the guided and independent reading help to scaffold students' understanding of text (Scholastic Research and Results, 2009).

Specific strategies can overlap and can also be used in tandem. For example, when working with higher-order cognitive thinking processes, modelling, guided practice and memory prompts could all be used to support student learning. Scaffolding is a key component of a differentiated instruction approach and is especially important for students with learning disabilities. Collaborative and supportive interactions between a student and a more knowledgeable person (such as the teacher, a parent, or another student) help students bridge the gap between what they know and what they do not know. Scaffolding support can also be created by technology or written material that provides prompts and other needed material Rosenberg, Westling and McLeskey (2011).

Effective scaffolded instruction involves intentional planning, provides tailored assistance that is adjusted where necessary, provides emotional support

(for instance, praise and encouragement), helps students begin to generalize and internalize learning, controls for frustrations and risk by creating learning environments that are safe and learning tasks that are within what a student can do, helps students become more confident and independent learners.

Moreover, Fisher and Frey (2008) reported that teachers can enhance students' comprehension of text by using techniques such as providing a gradual release of responsibility to the student and scaffolding instruction. Gradual release helps students assimilate new concepts by giving them the time, opportunity, and support they need (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2008). Scaffolded instruction helps students internalize and transfer skills and strategies (Duke & Pearson, 2002). Likewise, scaffolded instruction helps older students with learning disabilities become independent learners (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 2008).

Recommendations

In view of the foregoing, it is recommended that general and special education teachers in inclusive classrooms should provide instruction that is differentiated to precisely meet the learning needs of their students particularly, those with reading disabilities. Teachers should ensure that they make instruction more explicit and intense. Students with reading disabilities will benefit when lessons are scaffolded and include the use of modeling, guided practice, memory prompts and graphic organizers. All these will assist students with reading disabilities to achieve better learning outcomes across all content areas and all grades.

Teachers should endeavour to differentiate each of the components of instruction (that is, content, process and product) appropriately as the need arises to meet student interest, readiness, or learning profile. For instance, matching instruction to students with reading disabilities' interests will make the student to become more engaged in his learning and reading tasks.

Teachers should consider differentiated instruction as a means of providing students with the structures to maximize strengths, work around weaknesses, and experience timely remediation. This would enable students to take advantage of effective learning strategies as they begin to understand their own personal learning styles, interests, needs, and engage with their learning. As a result, students' motivation and overall learning outcomes will increase.

In addition, teachers should provide explicit, systematic and strategic instruction at all times. They should endeavour to demonstrate how to apply a range of learning strategies. Teachers should break down complex reading skills and strategies into smaller instructional units. They should review prior skills and knowledge before beginning instruction and provide instructional support for students when introducing unfamiliar knowledge and skills. Above all, differentiated, explicit and scaffolded instruction in inclusive classrooms will succeed if high level collaboration is maintained among different professionals involved in educating students in inclusive classrooms such as general and special teachers.

Conclusion

Inclusive education is gradually gaining more grounds globally because of the academic and social gains students

derive from it. This trend has led to the debate about whether the professionals involved in providing inclusive education, particularly to students with reading disabilities possess adequate skills to meet up to the challenges. This paper discussed the potential areas of difficulty for students with reading disabilities in inclusive classrooms and concluded that to offer quality education that results in improved learning outcomes for students with reading disabilities in inclusive classrooms, teachers must practice teaching that is differentiated, explicit and scaffolded at all levels and across all content areas. Suggestions on ways of implementing the three instructional strategies presented were made.

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