

**ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT DEFICITS OF ADOLESCENTS WITH
LEARNING DISABILITIES: IMPLICATIONS FOR REGULAR AND SPECIAL
NEEDS EDUCATION TEACHERS IN NIGERIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS**

K. U. Lazarus

*Dept. of Special Education,
University of Ibadan, Nigeria
E-mail: ppadaeze@yahoo.com
Phone: +234 (0)8032322859*

Abstract

Adolescents with learning disabilities exhibit several academic deficits that impede their overall performance in school and society. However, past special needs education research has focused on fostering the needs and challenges of children with learning disabilities. As a result of teachers of adolescents with learning disabilities do not have adequate information and tools to enable them cater for the needs of adolescents. This paper explored the special academic achievement deficits of adolescents with learning disabilities and the implications of these special academic achievement deficits of adolescents with learning disabilities for regular and special needs education teachers in Nigerian secondary schools. On the basis of the implications highlighted, this paper recommended among others that regular and special needs education teachers of adolescents with learning disabilities should endeavour to be patient with adolescents, be resourceful, creative, empathic and skilfully collaborate with content-area teachers, parents and other professionals in order to help adolescents with learning disabilities overcome the numerous difficulties they encounter in their academic pursuits.

Key Words: Adolescent, learning disabilities, academic achievement deficits, regular teachers, special needs education teachers

Introduction

Individuals with learning disabilities experience great problems that do interfere with mastering many academic, physical, communication, adaptive, social and emotional skills in life. On the part of adolescents, the subtle nature of their problems and the increased demand of the secondary curriculum expose these problems once these students enter into the secondary school. This is because adolescents are now moving from a pupil-oriented primary school environment to a content-driven secondary school setting. And in most occasions, adolescents with learning disabilities lack the requisite skills needed to meet secondary school academic expectations and demands (McNamara, 2007). Consequently, teaching adolescents with learning disabilities could be quite demanding and laborious, as they would require specialized instruction and access to accommodations and other adaptations that will permit them to succeed in life (Lazarus, 2014). However, as adolescents with learning disabilities seek to grapple with their several personal physical, emotional, and social transition plans, shifts and expectations, the onus lies on regular and special education teachers to acquaint themselves with the adolescents' special academic achievement deficits, learning strengths, weaknesses and interests. Since knowledge is power, when teachers become more knowledgeable about the unique academic achievement deficits of adolescents with learning disabilities they will experience considerable improvement in teaching these students. This description provides a structure for this paper.

There is some evidence to show that over the past decade the number of students identified as having learning disabilities ages twelve to seventeen has been growing while the number of students aged six to eleven has dropped slightly, probably, because younger students may be assigned the more general (and relatively new) designation of developmentally delayed (United States Department of Education, 2004, cited in Friend, 2008). In Nigeria however, research on adolescents with learning disabilities is still scanty, a sign that demonstrates that the field of learning disabilities is still evolving and that more studies are needed. Therefore, this paper explored the special academic achievement deficits of adolescents with learning disabilities and the implications of these special academic achievement

deficits for regular and special needs education teachers of secondary school students with learning disabilities.

Special Academic Achievement Deficits of Adolescents with Learning Disabilities

Heward (2003) maintained that the defining characteristic of students with learning disabilities is specific and significant deficiency in the presence of adequate overall intelligence. Adolescents with learning disabilities have at least one low basic academic skill (reading, writing, or mathematics), which may interfere with their academic achievement (McNamara, 2007). Indeed, one common characteristic shared by all students with learning disabilities including adolescents, is uneven development of academic skills also referred to as heterogeneity (Mercer, Mercer, & Pullen, 2011). This means that students with learning disabilities achieve at significantly lower levels in some academic areas than in others. Therefore, academic achievement deficits should be separated into several categories or subtypes of learning disabilities (that is, students with reading problems, those with mathematics disabilities, students with language difficulties, and so forth). Going by this submission, this paper highlights the following academic achievement deficits of adolescents with learning disabilities.

Reading Deficits

Reading provides a fundamental way for individuals to exchange information. It is also a means by which much of the information presented at school is learned. As a result, reading is the academic area most often associated with academic failure (National Association of Special Education Teachers, 2015). Corroborating this assertion, Lazarus (2009) argued that reading is a foundational skill that is necessary if students are to progress throughout the school years yet many students with learning disabilities encounter the most difficulties in this area. Historically, reading deficits remain the most prevalent type of academic achievement deficits for adolescents with learning disabilities. Furthermore, most authorities agree that reading deficits displayed by adolescents with learning disabilities manifest as difficulties with: word recognition skills (Gargiulo, 2004 as cited the National Association of Special Education Teachers, 2015), reading fluency (Hunt & Marshall, 2005 as cited by the National Association of

Special Education Teachers, 2015), reading comprehension (Lazarus, 2009) and reading habits (Gargiulo, 2004). For instance, Williams (2000), Curtis (2002) and Snow and Biancarosa (2003) in their own explanation, maintained that some secondary school students have acquired some decoding skills but not at a level that is sufficient to deal fluently with subject-matter reading demands and they lack the skills and strategies necessary to meet comprehension expectations.

In addition, Leach, Scarborough and Rescoria (2003) suggested that complex reasoning and thinking skills needed for success at the secondary school classes may be deficient in adolescents with learning disabilities particularly, in reading. This explains why some secondary school students still manifest signs of reading disabilities such as mispronunciation of words, reversal of words and letters (for example, a “d” will look like a “b”), omission of letters, substitution of letters, sounds or words in the text with others that are not meant to be there, making wild guesses, tracing the words on the page with fingers and very slow reading (Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2001). Besides, Lerner (2003) enumerated five reading habit difficulties of students with learning disabilities. These difficulties are: reversal of words and letters, such as /b/ for /d/; /no for /on/; /p/ for /q/; and /was/ for saw/, finger pointing, lip moving, dysfluent oral reading, and inability to read silently. These difficulties often lead to inability to comprehend text.

Deficits in reading become intense as adolescents move from the skills emphasis of elementary classes to the content emphasis of secondary classes. These adolescents face greater demands to read from textbooks, take notes from lectures, work independently, and express understanding in written compositions and on paper pencil tests (Schumaker & Deshler, 1984 as cited by Kerka, 2007). According to the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (2008), significant number of adolescents who do not read or write at levels needed to meet the demands of the 21st century have difficulty with one of the following: literal understanding of what is read; ability to identify specific aspects of the text that reflect overall meaning; extension of the ideas in the text by making simple inferences; and drawing conclusions based on the text.

As a result of the reading deficits encountered by adolescents with learning disabilities, high school dropout rates for this group has been estimated at 31.6 % as compared to 9.4 % for students with no

disabilities (United States Department of Education, 2007c). Only 11 % of students with learning disabilities, as compared to 53 % of students in the general education population, have attended a four-year postsecondary programme within two years of leaving high school (National Longitudinal Study II, 2003).

Mathematics Deficits

Another area of marked academic difficulty for adolescents with learning disabilities is mathematics. Bryant and Dix (1999) stated that students with learning disabilities most often have difficulty with one of four areas related to mathematics: (i) Learning mathematics facts to allow quick, automatic response; (ii) Learning strategies to complete mathematics calculations (for example, regrouping); (iii) Comprehending word problems; and (iv) Learning strategies for completing word problems.

Written Expression Deficits

Many adolescents with learning disabilities have marked academic difficulty in written expression: as approximately two in five students have Individualized Education Plan goals in this area (Kavale & Forness, 1995). Similarly, Troia and Graham (2004) averred that because reading and writing are intimately related, most of these students also have problems with written communication. Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) on reading and writing assessments (Perie, Grigg, & Donahue, 2005; Persky, Daane, & Jin, 2003; Grigg, Donahue, & Dion, 2007) indicate that at the 12th-grade level, 26% of 17-year-old students in the United States do not demonstrate a fundamental ability to communicate in writing, which means they may have difficulty with skills such as the following:

- (i) General understanding of both the writing task at hand and the audience to be addressed;
- (ii) Organization that reflects consistency in topic, sequencing, and a clear introduction and conclusion;
- (iii) Inclusion of details that support and develop the central idea of a piece, and
- (iv) Grammar, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization accurate enough that they do not interfere with meaning.

Memory and Metacognitive Deficits

Adolescents with learning disabilities are often characterized by certain cognitive problems that contribute to the difficulties they have in learning academic content. One of the most frequently noted problems among adolescents with learning disabilities is a memory deficit (McNamara, 2007; National Association of Special Education Teachers, 2015). Many adolescents with learning disabilities have difficulty with long-term memory and experience great frustration in attempting to learn basic information and rapidly retrieving this information during school activities. Adolescents with learning disabilities may also have difficulty with metacognitive skills. Metacognition relates to an awareness of thinking processes and how these processes are monitored. Adolescents with learning disabilities often have difficulty monitoring their thinking, and these difficulties contribute to academic problems (Nett, Goetz, Hall, & Frenzel, 2012).

Passive Learning

In response to failure-producing experiences, many adolescents develop an attitude of “learned helplessness”. This “learned helplessness” (that is, when individuals become less willing to attempt tasks and less able to believe that their actions can result in success) increases the likelihood of poor performance (Smith, 2007). They learn to be passive instead of active learners. Instead of trying to solve a problem, they tend to wait passively until the teacher directs them and tells them what to do. In an academic task, they fail to associate new information with what they already know and they do not elaborate in their thinking. Smith (2007) noted that these students do not ask questions, seek help, or read related material to learn more. These characteristics compound their disabilities.

Being Non-strategic

Approaching learning in an organized manner leads to effective learning. Not paying attention to the important features of a learning task or not structuring one’s learning is a problem observed among many students with learning disabilities (Deshler, 2005). Scholars (Dole, Duffy, Roehler & Pearson, 1991; Duke & Pearson, 2002) have also asserted that although students with learning disabilities may have the ability to process information, they do so with great inefficiency. It is

atypical for students with learning disabilities to be unaware of basic strategies that effective readers use as a matter of course, such as re-reading passages they don't understand, predicting, summarisation, questioning, use of text structure to organise their understanding and recall of important ideas, use of visual representations et cetera.

Attention Deficits

Many adolescents with learning disabilities often lack attention capacity to meet the demands of secondary school. The demands of the secondary curriculum can place a strain on the adolescent's capacity to attend to the varied sources of input from teachers, instructional materials, and peers. Given the long periods of concentration needed for studying and listening in class, deficits in attention can seriously impede progress. Most adolescents with learning disabilities are hyperactive too as portrayed by restlessness, aimless activity, and random movement (McNamara, 2007).

Lack of Motivation

Adolescents with learning disabilities lack resiliency and come to believe that their efforts to achieve is futile (Luther, 1993). They display low persistence level and give up as soon as something appears to be difficult. They attribute success to luck or something the teacher did or an easy task. Zigmond (1990) noted that no success can be achieved in teaching these students except if they are motivated to learn and can attribute success to their own efforts.

Deficient in Study Skill

Majority of adolescents with learning disabilities perform poorly in such areas as test-taking skills, note taking, studying, listening comprehension; monitoring writing and scanning. Many adolescents with learning disabilities lack the necessary skills to succeed in general education settings, and many drop out of school. Data from the United States Department of Education (2004) revealed that adolescents with learning disabilities now outnumber primary school pupils. In fact, adolescents with learning disabilities experience many problems that can range from mild to severe and these problems can interfere with mastering many of the subjects of the secondary curriculum.

Implications of the Special Academic Achievement Deficits of Adolescents with Learning Disabilities for Regular and Special Education Teachers in Secondary Schools

The following major implications for regular and special education teachers of secondary school students with learning disabilities are hereby identified.

1. *Patience:* It is critical that a teacher maintain his patience and keep the student's learning disability in mind at all times. Adolescents with learning disabilities often feel frustrated with the problems they have with learning, and that frustration can further interfere with their ability to learn. If a teacher becomes frustrated as well, learning may become even more difficult for the adolescent. In fact, he may want to give up or suffer from self-esteem issues if a teacher shows his frustration or berates him.

2. *Resourcefulness:* Since adolescents with learning disabilities have memory difficulties, are non-strategic, have deficient study skills and other academic achievement deficits, their teachers are expected to do everything possible to help them to boost their memory, acquire learning strategies and effective study skills. All these cannot be done without the art of resourcefulness. Only highly resourceful individuals can teach adolescents with learning disabilities how to use mnemonic devices to remember materials; use visual aids in class, including graphs, charts, and examples, to explain problems; provide examples of well-written papers, assignments, and projects and explain why they are well written; encourage the use of thesaurus, dictionary, and word processing programmes; and encourage peer tutoring and cooperative learning activities which enable students to share and review notes with one another.

3. *Creativity:* Mulligan (2011) submitted that teaching requires the utilization of various strategies and approaches. To Mulligan, two ingredients of effective teaching are flexibility and creativity. Because of the academic achievement deficits of adolescents with learning disabilities, teachers of adolescents with learning disabilities are required to use a lot of creative techniques in their classrooms such as multi-sensory techniques that combine listening, speaking, reading,

tracing and visualizing. It is also important that they utilize variety of teaching strategies that work with the adolescents' strengths such as independent reading programmes, phonics instruction, reading alouds, shared reading language experience approach, sight word recognition approaches, sight word games and the like. They need to encourage adolescents to predict possible essay questions and practice writing answers. Whenever possible, the teachers also have to relate material to concrete examples that are meaningful to the students (Weingarten Learning Resources Centre, 2002).

4. Flexibility and Adaptability: A flexible teacher makes use of oral language to facilitate the writing process for his or her students. Some teachers can discuss the topic with someone or record his or her own thoughts on a tape recorder if appropriate for the adolescent's learning style. Other teachers can review and develop test-taking strategies: circle/box key terms, underline key verbs or words. An overwhelming amount of print can be read line-by-line by using a piece of paper to reveal only a selected amount at a time (by covering the rest of the written text). Teachers can introduce new concepts at a rate that encourages retention. These acts of flexibility and adaptability will go a long way to facilitate learning among adolescents with learning disabilities (Weingarten Learning Resources Centre, 2002).

5. Skillful in Assessment: Assessment and evaluation are ongoing processes among students with special needs. This could be conducted by using either formal or informal measures. Through assessment and evaluation, regular and special education teachers of adolescents with learning disabilities get to make appropriate referrals, screen all students for learning disabilities, make necessary placements, classification and evaluation, and monitor the progress of their students. Once assessment information is obtained, the teacher would be able to provide adequate individualized education to the adolescents (Lerner, 2003).

6. Demonstrate Empathy: Adequate understanding of the special academic achievement deficits of adolescents with learning disabilities enables both regular and special education teachers of secondary school students with learning disabilities to sincerely demonstrate

empathy, unconditional warmth and positive attitude to the students. Knowledge of students special academic achievement deficits would help teachers to willingly share emotions and feelings (that is, enthusiasm, affection, sadness, disapproval) as well as show a sincere interest and care about the students. To a large extent, teachers are assisted to help adolescents gain an understanding of their personal learning styles and find ways of capitalizing on their strengths (Weingarten Learning Resources Centre, 2002).

7. Demonstrate Skill in Collaboration: Another implication of knowing about adolescents academic achievement deficits is to enable teachers of adolescents with learning disabilities to become efficient collaborators with content-area teachers. For example, teachers of adolescents with learning disabilities ought to collaborate with regular educators who teach content-area subjects, parents of adolescents with learning disabilities and other professionals such as psychologists, reading specialists, and guidance counsellors in the assessment and management of students (Lerner, 2003).

8. Organization and Planning Ahead: Adolescents with learning disabilities have problems with organizational skills which are necessary for success at school (Ito, 2005). Therefore, it becomes necessary that when teachers are aware of these deficits, they would have to ensure how these students will get organized. teachers' responsibility to assist their students to organize their personal space (that is, desk, locker, book bag, pockets and purses), notebook (provision of list of materials needed for the year, checking notebooks and recording assignments), and time (setting goals, making choices and establishing priorities) (Kerka, 2007).

The teacher could set deadlines that break large assignments into smaller parts. He could prioritize responsibilities and improve time management skills and find a system that works for the adolescents. The teacher could teach his students to get in the daily habit of organizing and filing school work, and make use of colour as a way of organizing and highlighting information (Weingarten Learning Resources Centre, 2002).

Conclusion

This paper emphasized that adolescents with learning disabilities experience both fascinating and challenging special academic achievement deficits. It revealed that for effective teaching and learning, regular and special education teachers should understand the academic achievement deficits of adolescents with learning disabilities. It implies that practitioners' good knowledge will enable them to cater for the individual and group unique needs of these adolescents as they all strive to achieve the desired personal and institutional academic goals.

Recommendations

On the basis of the academic achievement deficits and the implications of these deficits to their teachers, the following recommendations are made: Regular and special education teachers of adolescents with learning disabilities should endeavour to be resourceful, creative, flexible, patient, accommodating, caring, and empathic. They should be skillful in organization and planning, skillful in conducting assessment and interpreting assessment results and in designing individualized education. These teachers should also be good communicators, and be able to collaborate with both school personnel and family of adolescents with learning disabilities. They should endeavour to use individualized instructional strategies in their classrooms.

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