

LEARNING DISABILITIES: AN IMPEDIMENT TO VOCATIONAL CHOICE OF SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELLING

HARUNA, ABUBAKAR SADIQ

ABSTRACT

This paper presents Learning disabilities (LD) as an impediment to vocational choice and development of secondary school students in Nigeria. Learning Disabilities is a lifelong developmental problem that affects the learner's ability to learn effectively and make a choice of vocation of interest. The main thrust in the theories of learning disabilities is that LD is caused as a result of subtle disturbance in the brain functions and structures. This problem is inherent in the individual thus inhibits learning abilities, social and psychological functioning of the learning disabled student. While the psychoanalytic view on vocational choice is positive for the normal student, it is however not the same for the learning disabled. Although, factors as social, economic, psychological assets determine vocational choice, the problem of choice of vocation is however complicated for the learning disabled. This is because, the presence of emotional conflicts interferes with the ability of the learning disabled to make a choice. The major implication of these problems is that, since the learning disabled students encounter emotional problems, occupation or the work environment should be adapted or altered so as to meet certain needs of the students. Recommendation offered suggests the establishment of model counselling and research centers in schools.

Introduction

'Learning disabilities' (LD) is today a household name. This is because youngsters with LD do not outgrow it. They grow up to become adults with LD (Lowry, 1990). Learning disabilities can negatively affect vocational choice, development and adjustment. Meaning, it can affect self-esteem, education, socialization and daily living activities, which leads to frustration and worries. In order to properly understand the trend of thoughts, this paper is

presented under the following sub-headings: theoretical concept of learning disabilities; predicaments of learning disabilities; psychoanalytic bases of vocational choice of the learning disabled; factors affecting vocational choice of the learning disabled and the implications for counselling.

Theoretical Concept of Learning Disabilities

The term "learning disabilities" is used to describe people with

developmental problems in academic and socio-emotional skills. Such problems affect people's ability to either interpret what they see and hear or link information from different parts of the brain (Fiedorowicz 1999). These limitations can show up in many ways; as specific difficulties with spoken and written language, coordination, self control or attention, which may impede learning, vocational development and adjustment (National Educational Research Development Center, 2004).

Research evidence (Goetz, Hall & Fetsco, 1998) has shown that, disturbance in the information processing model can cause LD. This finding was later confirmed by Neurologists. According to Fiedorowicz (1999), LD is caused by subtle disturbances in the brain structures and functions, which may result in neurological dysfunction. Although, scientists are yet to set up tangible empirical methodology to verify this claim.

Another leading theory is that LD is genetically transmitted (Plomin, 2003). This theory posits that, the genetic influences on common LD are not specific to each disorder. A large but unidentified group of genes each with very small effects on overall brain function work together

to determine most of mental ability. In a different view, Jones, Palinscar, Ogle & Carr, (1998) opines that, if instruction is not constructive, link new information to prior knowledge, given in a guiding social environment or develop automaticity, LD may occur. Though, an individual's ability to learn depends on his or her current maturational status (Haruna, 2008). Therefore, any attempt to speed up or by pass the developmental process may eventually lead to LD.

Predicaments of Learning Disabilities among Secondary School Students in Nigeria

In a typical western education system, mastery of basic academic skills (i.e. reading, writing and arithmetic) is a necessary prerequisites for success in both school and employment settings. Naturally, there are secondary school students who cannot meet this expectation and the seriousness of it is hard to exaggerate.

Learning disabilities can have destructive emotional effects on students. Persistent learning failure leads to embarrassment and frustration. Study by Peak, Farbelow & Litman (1985), showed that youngsters with LD constitute a large percentage of adolescent suicide compared with the general

adolescent population in US. This phenomenon is not unusual in Nigeria. Behavior problem resulting from negative experiences of our secondary school students with LD is on the increase. The strain of underachieving can cause them to be reluctant to go to school; to play truant. Fighting, maiming, cheating, stealing and experimenting with drugs can also result when students regard themselves as failures. In a study conducted by Haruna (2007) on the prevalence of LD among secondary school students in Kano state, 37.8% of 384 (i.e. 145) students was identified with LD. This figure is quite significant and alarming. This signifies that most of our school dropouts have poor educational achievement, (Haruna, 2009), which is partly due to number of difficulties in perceptual ability. Many of the victims of this circumstance experience continued difficulties into and through adulthood. (Life Success.htm).

One of the devastating effects of LD is that it can negatively affect a student's social growth (Hammill & Bryant, 1998). Students who do not have many friends will feel lonely, sad and misunderstood. They get into fight easily because they feel disapproved. (www.Children'sCorner.htm). It is emphatically apparent that frustration

due to low perceptual ability can lead to delinquent behavior. (ABCs of LD & ADHD.htm). A cross section of our secondary school students encounters considerable difficulties in learning to read and write, (Haruna 2007). Some find it more than continued failure and are unable to fit into the society emotionally, socially and financially (Learner, 1997). Ironically, the search for the right professionals to conduct assessment and evaluation of the extent and forms of these disabilities as well as providing instructional, psychological and counselling support are insufficient.

Psychoanalytic bases of Vocational Choice of the Learning Disabled Students

The psychoanalysts believe that theory of vocational choice rests upon the basis of the delineation of certain basic character types. These basic character types are said (Learner, 1997) to be related to the relative dominance in the individual of one of the stages of psychosexual development. Freud (1924) listed three traits as pronounced in the anal character: 'a love of orderliness often approaching pedantry, a parsimony often reaching miserliness, and obstinacy sometimes developing into defiance' (p.309). The oral character traits as listed by Freud are

optimism, curiousness, generosity, sociability, verbosity. He concurred that the oral character may be inactive, dependent, asking or aggressively demanding, impatient, envious, jealous, hostile (particularly in speech) (p. 310). The oral stage proceeds the anal stage in development, so that fixation at or regression to this stage would represent more severe disturbance than fixation at or regression to the anal stage (Freud, 1924). This may mean that, the lack of interest in work, the desire for, expectation of, and satisfaction with being taken care of which appears in many of the emotionally disturbed would appear to be consistent with this concept of learning disabilities.

The anal character traits of cleanliness, parsimony, orderliness, for example, are reaction formations against coprophilia (i.e obsession with faeces). It thus arises that two opposite traits may be attributed to the same source, one as a direct expression of, and the other as a reaction formation to, a drive, while another trait may be viewed as sublimation of the drive. It is this possibility of attributing contradictory traits to the same source that exasperates many critics of psychoanalysis. On the one hand a meticulous, perfectionistic, compulsive bookkeeper may be said to be an example of an anal erotic

character, while at the same time an untidy, eccentric artist may also be cited as a product of trauma in the anal stage of development. Brill (1921) advocates that; Investigation shows that the normal individual needs no advice or suggestion in the selection of a vocation; he usually senses best what activity to follow. For it is known that all our actions are psychically determined by unconscious motives, that there is no psychic activity which does not follow definite paths formed in the individual since his childhood, and as work or profession is nothing but a sublimating process in the service of hunger and love we, may assume that it must also be guided by the individual's unconscious motives (pp. 314 - 315).

Further, It makes no difference whether a man is a banker, preacher, actor, physician, cook, or shoemaker, provided he himself has selected this vocation and was not forced into it by home environment or social conditions; he will find his proper outlet in his work and under normal conditions he will never become fatigued by it or wearied of it (p. 328).

Besides ignoring the matter of aptitude for an occupation, this theory runs into difficulties. As Abraham (1927) states, "in the normal formation of character we

shall always find derivations from all the instinctual sources happily combined with one another" (p. 405), so that the normal individual might not find it so easy to find an affinity for a particular job. It might appear that in the abnormal individual, where the character traits appear in the extreme form, this would not be an objection.

Factors Affecting Vocational Choice of the Learning Disabled students

One of the most extensive theories is that of Ginzberg, Ginsberg, Axelrod & Herman (1946). They have described the process of occupational choice, and identified some of the broad factors involved, but have not studied specific factors, nor demonstrated how the factors operate, nor how and where the personal-emotional factors originate. They distinguished between the work oriented and the pleasure oriented person. The former seeks intrinsic satisfaction in performing a job, while the latter seeks the monetary and social satisfactions concomitant with the job. Their suggestion that failure to find a solution to the problem of intrinsic satisfaction may be related to inability to make an occupational choice, and that this failure may be a consequence of emotional maladjustment, (a feature

of LD) is an interesting hypothesis. Experience certainly would indicate that preoccupation with emotional conflicts inhibits the development of interest in work, as well as other activities. The process of occupational choice is complex. Many factors influence it. Social and economic factors affect occupational opportunities and thus often limit choice (Ginzberg, *et al.* 1946). Identification with emotionally significant figures affects choice (Patterson, 1957). The individual's physical and psychological assets and equipment are important factors. Included among these are personality factors, and the interests and needs of the individual (Torgensen, 1991). The process of occupational choice is an integration of these factors over a period of time, leading to the selection of one among the many occupations available.

The process of vocational development is the process of achieving integration, a fit, between these two groups of factors. There may be no perfect fit possible for many, if not most, individuals. But on the other hand there are usually a number of equally good approximations. Thus a choice is necessary usually involving compromise. Counselling can assist the individual in two ways: first, in acquiring and developing knowledge

about occupational requirements and about himself, and secondly, in making a choice among the several or many possibilities. A series of choices, sometimes on a trial-and-error basis, may be required to achieve a satisfactory fit. The process is not entirely irreversible, as Ginzberg et al (1946) claims. Problems arise chiefly in the area of personality factors. Little is known about the personality demands of jobs, or about the emotional satisfaction of various needs which they provide. In addition, the assessment of the personality of the individual, and of his emotional needs, is inadequate in our present stage of knowledge.

Problems of Vocational Choice of the Learning Disabled Students

The problem of vocational choice is complicated for the learning disabled in several respects. First, the presence of emotional conflicts may interfere with the making of a choice due to preoccupation with these conflicts (Learner, 1997). The student may not be able to concentrate on the vocational problem, or the interest in the emotional problems may overshadow, or inhibit the development of, interests in work or occupations. Secondly, the disturbance affects the self-concept of the student, and his ability to

evaluate himself realistically, as well as to evaluate occupations realistically (Hammill & Bryant, 1998). This factor is probably related to a third, which is the effect of learning disabilities upon the needs of the student leading to so-called neurotic needs, or conflicting needs (Plomin, 2003). These needs are expressed in interests, and thus account for the impractical or unreal interests often found in these individuals.

Learning disabled students tend to present patterns of vocational interests which are different from those of normal students in that they tend to be more unrealistic in terms of aptitude and ability requirements, and which more often reflect interest in talent and personal-social occupations (Plessis, 2000). These interests, or choices, are of course related to the emotional (personality) needs of the individual. The nature of these needs appears to be in two general areas. One type of interest seems to be a reflection of a need for autonomy, or freedom in one's works, a need to work for oneself, independently, to avoid detail and routine, and to avoid close personal relationships (Patterson, 1957).

A second type of interest is expressed by a desire to work with people, to help them with their problems; that is, a social welfare

interest (Nagee, 2002). This type of interest perhaps represents a need to find answers to one's own problems, or to impose one's own solutions-or apparent solutions-upon others. Both these interests result in occupational choices in the professional areas. Whether they are unrealistic depends on the talents and abilities possessed by the client, as well as his personality characteristics, of course. It is no doubt true that the client's needs in many cases result in vocational interests and choices which are not supported by aptitudes and abilities. These needs appear to be rather general among the emotionally disturbed, or, since they are possessed to some extent by most people, it might be better to say that they tend to be stronger in many of the learning disabled clients.

Implications for Counselling.

Theories of vocational choice do not appear to contribute much of a specific nature beyond the stressing of the influence of individual (student) needs. The major emotional determinants of occupational choice in the learning disabled student appear to fall into the two broad areas described above. Presumably with improvement in the emotional condition, through therapy or otherwise, the needs will become less intense. But this cannot be counted upon, and they will continue

to exist to some extent since they are probably characteristic of the basic personality. This is not to imply that these needs are indicative of personality types which are predisposed to learning disabilities, although this is a possibility. The needs therefore should be given consideration in the selection of an occupation.

As was suggested by Patterson, (1957) other occupations than the talent and social welfare fields might offer satisfaction of some of these needs. Occupations or jobs can sometimes be adapted, or the work environment altered, to meet certain needs.

Finally, the strength of these needs may overshadow other needs and interests which may be of significance in occupational choice and adjustment, so that the counsellor must be alert to the presence of these other needs and interests in the counselling process. Since we cannot depend on theories of vocational choice, or even upon personality or interest measures for specific, practical help in the search for appropriate occupational goals for the learning disabled, we must seek for empirical evidence of appropriate occupations for these clients.

Conclusion

Occupational choice is a complex process related to numerous characteristics of the individual and his environment. The characteristics of the individual include his intelligence level, his special aptitudes, his educational achievement, his interests and preferences, and his general personality characteristics. Aptitudes and abilities tend to determine the level of his occupational choice, while interests and preferences are apparently more important in determining the nature or type of work chosen. While the average individual may adjust fairly well to an occupation into which he was forced by chance or circumstances, and which does not fully satisfy his needs and interests, the learning disabled may have more difficulty in making an adjustment in such a situation. The vocational interests and adjustment of students with learning disabilities appear to be more strongly influenced by certain emotional needs, or, to state it differently, less affected by reality factors.

Recommendations

Since qualified guidance and counsellors are scarce, Federal, State and Local government should

encourage people to go for such training.

Model research and counselling centers should be provided in various secondary schools.

Psychological tests for diagnosing learning problems should be made available.

Efforts should be made to create awareness of the need for early diagnosis and counselling.

Parents should be sensitized on the effects of LD on human development.

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