

CHAPTER SIX

HANDLING CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS IN THE CLASSROOM

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Introduction

Development of a child continues from infancy to adulthood. Education has been identified as a major factor in the development of the child and nation. Thus, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) established a law stating that all children below the age of eighteen years should have the right to be educated, no matter who they are, where they live or language they speak, what they think, look like, living with disabilities or not, no matter who their parents are or what they believe or do (UNICEF, 1989). The author added that governments should remove all obstacles that will prevent children with disabilities from becoming educated, independent and active participants in the community. National Policy on Special Needs Education in Nigeria (2015) defined Children with disabilities as those with various forms of disabling conditions such as autism, visual, hearing and speech impairments, mental retardation, learning disabilities to mention but a few.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neuro-developmental disorder that manifest early in life and typically affects a child's ability to communicate and interact socially with others. The disorder affects children from various racial, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds and it occurs in males five times more often than in females. The exact cause of autism is unknown. However, certain factors increased the risk of autism, such as an existing family history and children born at old age (Centers for Disease Control and Preventions, 2015). According to Bakare, et al., (2019), Lotter in 1979 identified ASD in Sub-Sahara Africa and stated that in Nigeria, 1 out of 145 children with intellectual disability had ASD. Audu and Egbochuku (2010) added that about 190,000 children in Nigeria are living with ASD. Autism is said to be a spectrum disorder because the children with the disorder experience various disabling conditions differently such as social skill problem, poor communication, behavioural disorders and transition problem (Murray, 2015). Autism is characterized with challenges in language, social interactions, restricted behaviours and interests, making school a uniquely

challenging place for academic, social and emotionally activities (Graham, 2021). Bice (2009) added that children with ASD exhibit repetitive behaviours, experience deficits in imitational and observational learning. Although, they often have superior visual processing skills, yet process auditory and linguistic information at a rate much slower than their peers.

Learning becomes very difficult for these children because of the impairment in the executive functioning system in their brain which prevents them from processing multi-step directions needed in education, social skill interactions, organization and self-motivation (Murray, 2015). Studies showed that it is often extremely difficult for them to generalize information across settings and to see a situation from another person's perspective. Autism spectrum disorder generally limits the literacy skills making the child unable to progress above sight word recognition, if no intervention is applied (Adu&Egbochuku, 2010). Meanwhile, the authors added that some children with autism have cognitive abilities that will enable them to decode text but have problems in understanding what they read, because their reading comprehension capabilities do not match their decoding abilities as well as the inability to infer. The combination of communicative, social and behavioural impairments as well as poor fine motor skills and poor visual-motor speed directly affects the chances of excellent academic performance of children with ASD (Graham, 2021).

Inclusive education has inclusively allowed every child to study together in the same classroom. Unfortunately, children with autism enter the educational system already at a disadvantage, due to intrinsic problems associated with ASD (Davies, Zhang & Barrett, 2015). Lagunju, Bella-Awusah and Omigbodun, (2014), identified 2.3% new cases of ASD, at the mean age of 21.2 months among children attending clinics and hospitals in Nigeria, although, the parents observed deviations in their behavior at 6.6 month. Due to the increasing cases of ASD in the inclusion classroom, teachers have the responsibility of handling the educational environments to enable the child acquire academic achievements.

The thesis statement in this chapter includes discussing challenges of children with ASD in inclusive classroom and strategies in handling children with autism ASD in inclusive education. The writers will discuss the implications of proper handling children with ASD in inclusive education. Suggestions will be discussed on how to handle children with ASD in an inclusive education, then the conclusion.

Challenges of Children with ASD in Inclusive Classroom

Apart from the intrinsic problems associated with ASD, there are other obstacles in the inclusive classroom that interfere with education of children with ASD and they include building design, classroom climate, regulations, peer and teacher relationship, lack of learning facilities and inadequately trained teachers (Burton-Hughes, 2019). Davies, Zhang and Barrett (2015) posited that building design have a great impact on the scale of human performance and wellbeing. The

multidimensional concept of class climate refers to the social interaction between students and teachers in relation to collective beliefs, values and attitudes that prevail in classrooms and studies showed that it interfere with learning if not managed (Rathmann et al. 2018). A typical inclusive classroom is crowded and busy. Burton-Hughes, (2019) posited that children with autism usually experience sensory sensitivity from sounds or type of fabric, making them to have intense positive or negative reactions to sensory stimulation in the classroom. Children with ASD have difficulties in receptive and expressive communication, leading to ineffective interaction with others and this could lead to social difficulty, poor classroom engagement and achievement scores (Booren, Downer & Vitiello, 2012).

Again, teaching and learning practices in class is characterized with deadlines, authority hierarchies and child having limited control over his tasks and activities is likely to be negatively associated with feelings of anxiety and poor academic achievement (Rathmann et al. 2018). Anxiety makes the child exhibit some abnormal behavior such as clapping, hand flapping, self injurious behaviours, yelling, throwing things, stomping and higher rates of physical aggression. Other disruptive behaviours include rocking, mouthing objects, repetitive behaviour, intense staring and fixating on objects (Graham, 2021). Odunsi (2018) is of the opinion that inclusive education may not help children with ASD in Nigeria because the professionals who have the knowledge and understanding of ASD are not training others and this can be attributed to poor leadership from national level to local and down to the school. More so, the author added that Nigeria Federal Ministry of Education only stopped at the formulation of inclusive education policy without clear guidance on its implementation at the different levels of local authority and school, therefore making inclusive education not achievable.

Schools are social environments, where education is facilitated through peer interactions and teacher-student relationships. Therefore, the inability of children with ASD to communicate and interpret social cues lead to struggles in social contexts (Garrota, et al. 2020; Graham, 2021). They appear socially awkward and are rejection by peers and teacher. Rejection directly affects the child's emotional well-being, leading to increased feeling of anxiety and depression. In turn, the continuous anxiety and depression aggravates their social incompetence (Garrota, et al. 2020). Children with ASD suffer peer victimization, which is a precursor of school maladjustment such as loneliness, school avoidance, less engagement in classroom activities, low self-esteem, depression, behavioral problems, limited opportunities and academic failure among children with ASD (Chen, et al. 2020).

Although educators generally report positive feeling toward inclusion, but stated that lack of learning facilities, poor knowledge and practical skills involved in handling children with ASD may hinder their education. Educators feel ill-equipped to deal with the behavioural challenges that often accompany autism, such as emotional outbursts, lack of flexibility, communication and social difficulties (Graham, 2021), so requested the assistance of para-professionals. Some educators have experienced stress while managing and providing classroom

activities for children with ASD. Even with additional in-service training, educators feel unprepared and incompetent to implement evidence-based practices used in the classroom.

Despite educators reporting low self-efficacy and lack of training, students with autism have legal rights for educational programs, since autism may not always affect cognitive ability. Unfortunately, supports are not always in place to meet needs of these children since the teachers are not informed about: (a) the implication of ASD on the child's education, (b) academic profiles of children with ASD across content areas, (c) successful interventions that can improve their academic achievement (Murray, 2015). The implication was that if the children were not properly handled in school, they may spend most of their time in school being disengaged from learning activities (Burton-Hughes, (2019).

Strategies of Handling Children with ASD in Inclusive Education

Studies across the world including Nigeria showed that inclusive education has enabled greater number of children with ASD to be in school and the following interventions could improve their academic performance (Odunsi, 2018: Gavalda&Qinyi, 2012):

a. Social interaction intervention

Interaction between students, peers and teachers in the classroom is very prominent in the theory of education (Booren, Downer &Vitiello, 2012). Student-peer social support refers to supportive behaviours among peers which can enhance students' functioning, learning and resilience to difficulties (Bice, 2009). Peer social support provides the emotional comfort needed by the disadvantaged students against anxiety and stress, helps them cope with difficulties via guidance and feedback (Booren, Downer, &Vitiello, (2012). It leads to positive outcomes such as child's motivation, attention, academic attitudes and achievement. The child learns fast when his friends encourages him to solve problems and do not laugh at his mistakes. Thus, peer support is considered as a primary indicator for adapting and learning in school (Garrota, et al., 2020).

According to Murray (2015), the ability of the teachers to manage interpersonal interactions between students and their peers in classroom, influences the child's concurrent and long-term social, emotional and academic development. The researcher added that proper handling of social classroom environment can positively influence peer social experience because teacher-child interactions can be observed by all classmates. Therefore, helps classmates draw inferences about children's attributes and likeability which form a classroom consensus about children's reputations (Graham, 2021). However, teacher-child closeness such as warm and open communications forms a secure base for child to feel loved and connected to the classroom (Booren, Downer &Vitiello, 2012). Counseling and close relationship has made Nigerian child with ASD to engage in classroom activities and improved competences (Udunsi, 2018). The closeness helped the child with ASD receive greater support from other teachers. On the

contrary, teacher-child conflicts contribute to peer disliking as well as school avoidance, externalizing behaviors, decreased social behaviors and cooperation. Chen, et al., (2020) added that warm and sensitive interactions and well-managed classrooms inclusiveness will reduce behavioural disorders and peer victimizations. Since parents and care givers are the true experts on children with ASD, teacher should coordinate, share knowledge and suggest intervention with them. The relationship also builds the parents' confidence on the school (Burton-Hughes, 2019).

b. Academic Activities Intervention

The important of education of children with autism cannot be over emphasized since they have some level of cognitive ability. Education will help them fully develop their personalities, talents and abilities (UNICEF, 1989). Besides handling the social interactions in the classroom ecology, the teacher makes sure that the structures in the school environment suits academic activities (Davies, Zhang, & Barrett, (2015). Since, an inclusive classroom is typically crowded, Murray (2015) stated that teacher is the key person to ensure that the classroom environment is less overwhelming and ensuring that rules are maintained. He considers the strength and weakness of the child with ASD while developing Individualized Education Programme (IEP). The teacher develops daily routine and makes it clear to them, because autism works best when there is routine. Creating a visual timetable by placing images and simple words on a timetable in chronological order and describing the activities and transitions in the child's day is effective because it gives the child a sense of security, while acting as a reminder (Burton-Hughes, (2019). The writer added that autism imparts on child's ability to communicate and interpret meaning. Therefore, the teacher should not use metaphor or rhetorical questions, rather use simple words and well structured sentences when giving instructions.

More so, children with ASD exhibit behavioural disorders that can disrupt learning. The disorders include difficulty in listening and following instructions, difficulty in abiding to rules and displays of disruptive repetitive behaviours. Through a research, Elliot and Gresham (Graham, 2015) compiled a list of ten social skills necessary for successful learning within the classroom as follows: listening to others, following steps, obeying rules, ignoring distractions, taking turns, asking for help, getting along with others, staying calm, taking responsibility for one's own behaviour and doing nice things for others. According to Bice (2009), children with ASD frequently depend on positive reinforcement throughout learning processes. They are discouraged whenever teachers do not give them one hundred percent attention. Thus, it becomes imperative for educators and administrators to set a long term goal of independence, which is an unspoken expectation for the children. The teacher fosters independence by gradually thinning reinforcement schedules and delaying the corrective feedback.

With reference to technological interventions, the use of iPads is emerging as an effective tool that decreases challenging behaviours of children with ASD in

classroom (Murray, 2015). The author compared the use of iPads to traditional paper/pencil method and discovered that children with ASD showed higher levels of academic engagement when using the iPads as compared to traditional methods of instruction. The iPads acted as motivational factors and the tasks did not seem like academic work. iPads can also improve transitioning skills for students with ASD. Considering that many individuals with ASD are visual learners, iPads have numerous applications that can provide students with visual schedules and make transitioning much easier. As a social strategy, the use of computers encourage turn-taking with a parent, teacher, peer or even the computer itself (Jacklin & Farr, 2005). According to Obiyo, Etoneaku and Ofoegbu (2013), Nigeria teachers are clearly aware of most of the assistive technology tools that could be used in teaching children with ASD and can adopt the instructional strategies to a greater extent.

In preparing an effective Individualized Educational Programme (IEP) for children with ASD as well as reducing stress during transition of knowledge, Murray (2015) made the following recommendations: (a) Include students in the development of their transition plans and IED, to ensure they have a clear understanding of the expectations. (b) Predict stressors that students may encounter and pre-teach coping strategies to deal with them. (c) Provide students with general strategies to deal with various forms of stress. (d) Ideally, implement independent learning programs to decrease students' reliance on adult support.

c. Social Skill Imitation

Children with ASD struggle to learn social skills because they have limited imitation skills. It becomes apparent for teacher to teach them social interaction literally in class. Social skills are most effective for children with autism when they are taught within the natural environment in which their demonstration is expected, because they cannot generalize or transit skills across various settings (Murray, 2015). Teaching social skills that are appropriate within school will be most effective when taught in school environment (Garrota, et al., 2020). Example, if you are planning to change classrooms in a week, take the child to view the class in advance or attach some predictability, to enable the child adjust mentally and transit easily (Burton-Hughes, (2019). The teacher can employ the use of social stories to describe relevant aspects of specific social situations as well as interpret social cues to the children and enable them to read meaning to social situations. The teacher can use pictures, words, long, short, typed or handwritten to tell story. Social stories should consist of descriptive, directive, perspective and affirmative sentences and be individualized to each situation (Bice, 2009), such as drill, change in scheduling and preparation for a substitute. More so, in learning new social skill and cognitive development, Murray (2015) posited that observational method is effective. Mimicking the behaviour of children with ASD encourages them to do the same and can result in them copying the teachers' behaviour for other desired actions.

Furthermore, students must learn self-management skills because they are expected to be actively engaged in their educational programme in inclusive education. Steps to evaluate once skills are: Self-correction, self-recording, self-monitoring, self-reporting and self-graphing. The teacher educates the children to monitor their own work, record their own behavior, report findings to teacher, produce a graph of their own evaluations of behaviour and use their finding to reinforce themselves with schedules and rewards (Bice, 2009). Indicators used in the classroom to monitor self-management skills are verbal cues, hand motions, physical prompts, timers and an alarm watch.

d. Repetitive Behavioural Intervention

Children with ASD tend to repeat a pattern of behaviour or focuses on an issue repeatedly. Repetitive behaviour leads difficulty in listening and following instructions as well as abiding by classroom rules. At times, introducing situations to limit repetitive behaviours can be stressful to them and can result to severe irritability, aggression and self-injury (Murray, 2015). The researcher showed that Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP) interventions helps to achieve desired outcome by increasing the amount of time used in academic activities, delaying trigger stimulus and repetitive display. The use of Picture Communication System (PCS) to control the behavioral problems of children with ASD has been proven to be effective. According Bice (2009), PCS helps young children with autism to initiate requests and communicate their needs. The system uses behaviorally based program to teach the child to exchange a picture card for something he likes and wants. It starts with single pictures and then the combined with statements for requests. The pictures may be kept in a binder and be used for classroom assignments to enable the children participate in activities.

Implications of Proper Handling Children with ASD in Inclusive Education

Inclusive education encourages the achievement of right of education for person with disabilities. The finding showed that inclusive education is applicable in Nigeria, if children with disabilities especially those with ASD are handled properly and evidence based interventions are applied. The study showed that Nigerian teacher are computer literate and can apply the knowledge on children with ASD. Therefore, in-service training of teacher should be continuous, to enable them get the latest knowledge about the training children with ASD. The parents and family members should be involved in the development of IEP, so that they will be assured of academic involvement and security of their wards in school. The curriculum planners should plan and adjust the curriculum to suit children with ASD. Nigerian government should produce an implementation strategy for the inclusion of children with disabilities in the mainstream classroom. Government should be engaged in the funding, employment of special educators in schools, in-service training of teachers with the intension of supporting inclusive education. Government and school administrators should provide adequate learning environment, educational facilities and recruit other professionals to assist in

inclusive education. Researchers in the medical and educational sectors should develop applicable evidence based practices to assist the education and development of children with ASD.

Suggestions

In handling children with disabilities in Nigerian inclusive classroom, the writers suggested that teachers training should not be just a one-off event but rather an ongoing journey that builds upon teachers' skills. The teacher as the key person in the education, should understand the educational profile of children with ASD, focus on the strength of the child and be flexible in tailoring classroom lessons to meet the specific needs of children with ASD through the Individualized Educational Programme (IEP). Special education should form part of basic training skills for all teachers in Nigerian training institutions. Federal government of Nigeria should provide free education for persons with disabilities and provide learning facilities needed for the implementation of inclusive education. The inclusive school environment should be serene and less of distraction, so as to reduce anxiety among children with neurological disabilities such as ASD. School management should encourage the implementation of evidence-based programme that will facilitate learning. Content of the curriculum should be structured to meet the needs and progress of learning. Nigerian researchers should conduct more studies on scientific method of reversing problems associated with ASD and prevention of ASD among Nigeria children.

Conclusion

Autism is a neuro-developmental disorder with many disabling conditions. Children with ASD are unique individuals with their own strengths and challenges. Due to the intrinsic nature of the challenges, students with autism spectrum disorders often find the classroom environment challenging. Schools have a moral and legal obligation to provide inclusive education for students with autism, but they often fail to meet requirements. Aside special educators, teachers do not feel knowledgeable or confident in handling children with autism in the classroom. However, successful inclusion is possible if educators and managements commit to ongoing training that uses evidence-based practices to support children with ASD in the school. Therefore, it is important that educators are well-prepared and confident in their ability to handle children with autism spectrum disorders in inclusive classroom.

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