

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

EDUCATIONAL STRESS AND STRESSORS AMONG SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS IN INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS IN NIGERIA

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Introduction

Stress is a nonspecific response of the body to any demand. Stress is defined in terms of physical and physiological effects on a person and can be psychological as well as emotional too. Stress is simply a reaction to a stimulus that tends to disturb the physical or mental equilibrium of an individual. It triggers the 'flight and fight' response of the sympathetic nervous system of an individual and the person either fights with the stressful situation or tries to escape from it (Srivastava & Sharma, 2017). Many factors may induce stress from the personality of the individual to the environment in which the individual operates. Thus, educational stress refers to the kind of stress emanating from the academic activities which the individual experiences in the school. These activities are wide range; and for students, they include expected regularity in classroom participation, assignments, preparation for examinations and so on. For special needs students, the possibility of educational stress is heightened as a result of their peculiar circumstances. Although the definition of special needs education varies across countries, a student is commonly recognised as having special educational needs (SEN) if he or she is not able to benefit from the school education made generally available for children of the same age without additional support or adaptations in the content of studies (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO, 2012). Therefore, special need students include those students with physical or mental disabilities, and cognition or educational impairments. They include also exceptional students who may be found to perform well above their cognitive age.

It is a universal practice to place students with special need in special schools where their needs could be addressed better. Educational programmes in special needs schools may follow a similar curriculum as that offered in the 0parallel regular education system, however they take individuals' particular n5needs into account by providing specific resources (e.g. specially trained personnel, equipment, or space) and, if appropriate, modified educational content or learning objectives. These programmes can be offered for individual learners within already existing educational programmes (inclusion), or be offered as a separate class in the same or separate educational institutions (UNESCO, 2012).

There has been however, a paradigm shift from the practice of exclusiveness to inclusiveness in educational delivery in the recent time. The term inclusive education refers to the education of students with special needs in a regular classroom with their same-age peers who do not have disabilities (Suleymanov, 2014). Inclusion is thus seen as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all children, youth and adults through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing and eliminating exclusion within and from education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a common vision that covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children (UNESCO, 2009). The aim of inclusion is to achieve the principle of equal educational opportunities for all students.

While inclusive education has enormous advantages for the students with special need, it could impose some challenges to them and subsequently constitute educational stress.

The thesis statement of this chapter explores educational stress and stressors surrounding students with special needs in inclusive classroom, effects of stressors on these students' life and performance in the school, strategies for dealing with stress of the students, implications of doing or not doing something about the stressors, conclusion/summary and suggestions.

Educational Stress and Stressors Surrounding Students with Special Needs in Inclusive Classroom

Special need learners may undergo some stress in inclusive schools. The sources of educational stresses include school work, social interactions, treatment by teachers, discipline and classroom management procedures, extracurricular activities, and public performance. There are also fear of failing, teachers not liking them, failing to meet parent and teacher expectations and teachers not understanding them. The educational stress and stressors surrounding students with special needs in inclusive classroom have been organized under the following clusters: curriculum, instructional, assignments and assessment.

Curriculum as source of stress

In inclusive classroom, students with special needs are expected to share the same curriculum experience with their counterparts without special needs. This suggests competing with other students in class work and activities in which their peculiar conditions may put them at disadvantage. In a study, Omizo and Omizo (2020) asked special needs students what things made them nervous. Three categories emerged: school achievement (they study hard and still forget the answers); affiliation (they do not want to do anything to make their friends laugh or mad at them); and family situations. Of particular interest is their desire to compete and record appreciable achievement. Since achievement in our educational system is often categorized along a continuum, the quest to record good achievement can be a source of stress to students with special needs.

Stress associated with the nature of instruction

Inclusive classroom presupposes that the teacher should have the requisite skills to handle the peculiar challenges of special needs students. In practice however, these skills may be lacking in many a teacher. This can pose serious challenge in instructional delivery with the special needs students at the receiving end. A teacher who wants to engage students in a more participatory and active learning process may soon find that special needs students in the class may have challenges following up with classroom activities. For instance, the deaf and dumb in the classroom may be willing to participate like the rests of the students, but may not have such capability to participate like others. It is only the teacher's expertise that can make a difference. It is not every teacher; however, that has such competence.

Students with disabilities are seen as more difficult to teach. With the advent of inclusive education the number of students with special needs continues to grow daily. School policies on inclusive education and other school situations are stressful for both the student and the teacher. The result for the student is an awareness of negative teacher expectancies and attitudes towards them. These school policies may result in further stress because they dictate student placement and levels of integration. The National Policy on Special Education in Nigeria (2015) provides that there "shall be 1:5-10 in inclusive classroom, 10 being the maximum and 5 being the normal". This ratio underscores that the number of teachers and facilities for the programme will be higher relative to normal classroom requirement. In practice however, this ratio is barely maintained. Students are lumped together as in regular classrooms thus constituting another source of stress to the students with special needs

Peer interaction

A student with special needs may be integrated one year and not the next. These changes can have many consequences. A student may be put in a classroom with younger or older children. At the least, they may have different classmates. Those friendships which may have been made over the year may be lost in the next. Students with special needs tend to become socially isolated when put in a regular classroom because they are rejected or ignored by their non-disabled peers. This can constitute a source of stress to this category of students. Wayment and Zetlin (2019) found that handicapped students reported conflict with their peers and social injustices such as being teased as their most frequent stressors. This rejection and social isolation can be devastating to a child's self-concept and can inhibit the development of crucial social skills.

Not only do students with special needs perceive themselves as handicapped, they are aware that their peers, classmates, and teachers view them as different (Phillips, 2013). As a result of their peculiar circumstances, some teachers and school administrators may view these students as stressors. Blom, Bruce and Snoddy (2016) examined school stressors in relation to various school issues and practices. They found that aggressive behaviors in schools were very

stressful for children. Moreover, this study specifically identified children with disabilities as being faced with extreme stress. Other studies have identified potentially stressful factors which impact students with disabilities in their school experiences such as Fox and Weaver (2019) in a study of students identified as having learning disabilities; and, Polloway, Epstein and Cullinan (2015) in a study of students with educable mental retardation. Both studies point out several factors which may be problematic in forming successful peer relationships and positive teacher attitudes.

Differences in adaptation

Two factors on which children with disabilities may differ from non-disabled children are lack of cognitively and behaviourally learned social skills and attention span. These factors may generate negative attitudes on the part of their teachers which may further aggravate stress among the special needs students. This can only compound any negative feelings classmates have already brought into the classroom. Omizo, Omizo and Suzuki (2018) identified four types of manifestations of stress in persons with disabilities: psychological, physiological, behavioral and emotional. Psychological symptoms include anxiety, depression, and lack of motivation; physiological symptoms included: headaches, stomach aches, fatigue. Symptoms such as restlessness, lower achievement, and acting out are classified as behavioral while fear of failure and success, inappropriate reactions, irritability and low self-esteem are viewed as emotional symptoms.

Assignments stress

As part of curricular activities, teachers give students take-home assignments which are they expected to do at home and present to the teacher at a later date. These assignments afford the learner an opportunity to make further exploration in the area, get exposed and enrich his knowledge and skills. In an inclusive classroom however, the teacher is faced with ethical dilemma over uniformity of assignment for the divergent learners. When uniform assignments are given to the two categories of students, special need learners especially those who are challenged may find themselves competing with those without special needs in terms of quality of output as well as time for the completion of such assignments. This can be stressful to the disadvantaged students with special needs.

Assessment

Assessment is one of the central and leading factors in educational process. Being an integral part of teaching and learning process assessment serves effective and fast learning of students in classroom. Assessment is addressed with a view to providing an accurate record of the student's cognitive and attitudinal strengths and to identifying clearly opportunities for future learning. Assessment of special needs learners however, has not yet been standardized where instructional materials are concerned, yet their capabilities differ from those of mainstream school children. Oketch (2009) note that the assessment is often unfair, and does not assess these children according to their capabilities. Yet in order for inclusion

to work well, it is necessary for flexibility. This can constitute stress to learners with special needs.

Effects of Stressors on the Students' Life and Performance in the School

Stress can affect the life and performance of students with special needs if not well managed. Stress can lead to poor academic performance especially stress related to relationship constraints in students. The stress emanating from poor relationship with their peers can lead to poor academic performance by not passing most of their exams. Where students are unable to cope with school activities as their counterparts by reason of their incapacitation, they experience frustration and dislike for academic activities thus resulting to stress.

There are two broad categories of conflicts which may have adverse effect on special needs learners: environmental conflict and personal disturbance, subsuming most adjustment problems of students with learning disabilities. Their environmental conflict category referred to aggression, disruption, and social maladjustment. Aggression may be a consequent of their inability to adjust properly like their counterparts. Also included are the inadequate learning environments as found in most schools in Nigeria. Some of these special needs students may need assistive technologies in order to measure up to their peers without challenges. These however, may be lacking and therefore, frustrating for this group. Personal disturbances include anxiety, apathy, inferior self-concept and social isolation. These may be indicative of the lack of social skills frequently seen with these students. Special needs students have not learned the social-behavioral skills necessary for success in school. An important component of these social skills is appropriate coping skills. Students' methods of resolving conflict in school affects their relationships with teachers and classmates. When the prerequisite skills are not learned, a cycle of dysfunctional interactions begins.

Strategies for Dealing with Stress of the Students

The following strategies are required in inclusive education in order to deal with stress and stressors among students with special needs: recognition that special need learners have diversified needs, uniqueness of the child requires continuous support and attention, mixture of various means and media along with strategies of communications, no fixed teaching style, flexibility in learning and different assessment and evaluation techniques. Each of these features distinguishes inclusiveness from the normal classroom practices for the teacher.

Recognition that special need students have diversified needs

Inclusive education means accommodating children with diverse needs. These children are much heterogeneous and diverse. This means that teachers need to understand the peculiar needs of these children and be able to provide effective support to enhance learning. Attitudes on inclusion can serve to support or act as a barrier. For inclusion to work, classroom teachers must be willing to acknowledge their responsibility for the educational program and success of every

student in their classroom, including those with special needs. This acceptance is demonstrated by teachers who structure positive and welcoming classroom settings, embrace the value of diversity, and view each student as a contributing member of the group. Inclusive teachers recognize that children have more commonalities than differences. They also have an attitude that fosters problem-solving in order to find ways to create opportunities for all students to participate successfully (Philips, 2013). When this category of students feel a sense of belonging and accommodation, tension and associated stress are contained.

Mixture of various means and media along with strategies of communications

The availability of various assistive technologies have lessened the burden of teaching and learning in an inclusive classroom. These technologies facilitate the effort of the teacher and provide assistance to different learners based on their specific needs. Instructional interventions are dependent on the provision of resources. Specialized materials and equipment should be available when needed. Technology and environmental adaptations that support a student's success should be based on their need and available to all students. Restrictions to access to these resources may contribute to stress among special needs learners.

Flexibility in teaching and learning style

Diversity in classroom composition requires that there should be no fixed teaching style. The teacher should vary his style in order to accommodate differences in students' make-up. A successful inclusion experience must be tailored around the strengths and needs of individual students, not around a label or designation. The Special Education Association (SEA) believes that there are certain, vital components required for successful inclusion (Fewster, 2006). These components include, but are not limited to: an accurate understanding of inclusion; an attitude of acceptance of the inclusion philosophy and the use of this philosophy to guide instructional decision making and practice. Teachers need to diversify their teaching styles in order to accommodate various and divergent learning styles.

The learning process in an inclusive classroom is not as regimented as in traditional classroom. Learning should be as flexible as possible in order to accommodate all shades of students in the classroom.

Different assessment and evaluation techniques

Teachers are already familiar with the conventional assessment techniques. The inclusive classroom however, requires that the teacher get familiar with different assessment and evaluation techniques due to the diversity of learners. Assessment procedures, whether for the identification of a special learning need or for ongoing progress evaluation, need to be timely and linked to instructional decisions. Without this, there is the risk of loss of early intervention opportunities, which are proven to be more effective than late remediation.

Conclusion/Summary

Inclusive education is conceptualized in diverse ways by different groups and countries. It however, may be viewed as the practice of educating children with

special needs together with others without special needs. Due to the peculiar condition of special need persons, it means that a lot needs to be put into consideration in order to implement inclusive education that will be accommodating and effective for all.

While the practice exerts a lot of demand on the teacher including knowledge of the peculiar characteristics of the special need students, the students with special needs may pass through a lot of stress that they would not have under the differentiated learning situation. These stressors may be categorized under curriculum, nature of instruction, assignment, peer interaction and assessment. Students with special needs are not the same with those without. A learning atmosphere that places them in a competitive condition can be a source of stress. This can have adverse effects on the social life and performances of this category of students. There are also some implications of not doing something about this situation.

For special needs students, inclusive education open doors to them in many areas of human endeavour. Exposing them to inclusive classroom where they are integrated with able-bodied mates gives them a sense of belonging and enables them to acquire skills that will help them survive in any environment they may find themselves after graduation. This gives them opportunity to acquire professional skills in computer literacy, conflict resolution experience of volunteer activities and peer to peer learning. These skills will serve as groundwork for further studies. Skill of computer literacy will help special needs persons obtain higher education through distance learning.

What is lacking in infrastructure and general conditions for teaching and learning to reduce stress in inclusive classroom is made up for by empathy, resilience, flexibility, companionship and solidarity. Challenges that are difficult to achieve in non-inclusive system of education are almost naturally find in inclusive system of education as a result of collaborating learning. The rigidity of the classroom as witnessed in non-inclusive system of education does not apply in inclusive education. Inclusive system of education welcomes people with all kinds of disabilities who see education as an opportunity not only to learn, but also to socialize, to meet other class of people and escape from loneliness and exclusion.

While the gains inherent in inclusive education are worthwhile, authorities need to adopt some strategies especially in making adequate provision for the resources that will enable the special needs students to level up with their counterparts without special needs. This will mitigate the sources of stress for special needs students.

Suggestions

For a less stressful inclusive education in Nigeria, the following as adapted from the Curriculum Relation Model (Johnsen, 2012) are suggested:

1. The students: Fundamental shift from discipline-centred educational traditions towards child-centred education is a prerequisite for stress-free inclusive education. Discipline-centred education, with its overall focus on teaching in accordance with the logic and content of the discipline, leaves some students, most possibly those with special needs, out of attention. Consequently, because of over-loaded content of schooling they cannot catch up with the others in the class. Whereas, child-centred education dedicates itself to serving each student individually.
2. Intentions: Intentions function as a locomotive leading teaching-learning process towards development. The intention or aim to teach a student with special educational needs cannot be attained at one step at all. Therefore this process should be divided into certain periods and be taught on regular basis.
3. Content: Intention of teaching-learning process is achieved via content. Time period and quality of teaching considerably depends on content. General quality criteria for a learning activity should be embraced in planning individually adapted curriculum: consistency with the whole teaching program; adequacy compared to goals; variety and multiplicity; adaptive to individual students and group; balancing and cumulative; relevance and meaning; open to optimal integration with other learning activities; open to the students' choices.
4. Teaching methods and classroom organization: Teaching method is a way of effective instructions and productive use of content towards success in classroom activity. A teacher should approach method and content as two legs carrying teaching-learning process ahead. Serious drawback in either will cause the process lag behind. Considering varying individual needs, a teacher needs to realize various methods accordingly.
5. Assessment: For an effective method of individual assessment, a teacher may refer to the following general examples of methods and approaches: interviews and conversations; questionnaires; pupil's self-evaluation; assessment as part of mediating; achievement tests; specific mastery or ability tests.
6. Communication: Communication is an important phenomenon in which language manifests itself most effectively and language or speech in its turn is a vital mediator for learning and human development. In an inclusive class environment communication is a means for a teacher to build friendly relations with students and encourage all students into active interrelation through communication. Social interaction promotes self-confidence and willingness to deal with the stress of the learning process.
7. Care: Care means to see and support each student as a unique individual with her or his personal possibilities and needs. In a classroom environment, showing care such as smiling, appreciation, patting, eye contact with each pupil and respect to them will boost mutual relations with pupils, reduce

the likelihood of stressors and increase their enthusiasm for learning and classroom activities.

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