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# COUNSELLING INTERVENTION: A PANACEA FOR AMELIORATING THE EFFECTS OF LEARNING DISABILITIES AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN IBADAN

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## Abstract

Many researchers have found out that problems encountered by students with learning disabilities be it in the academic areas, social relationships areas, vocational areas or transition to adulthood can ripple outward from the student with learning disabilities to family, friends and peers at school or work. Historically, deficits in academic areas such as reading, writing, listening, speaking and mathematics are the hallmarks of learning disabilities. Guidance counsellors are therefore, employed to utilize research based interventions in order to diminish if not totally close the highly publicized performance gap between students with learning disabilities and their counterparts without learning disabilities. In this paper, counselling as an academic field is reviewed, and the effect of learning disabilities on secondary school students are highlighted. In addition, counselling interventions applied by guidance counsellors are discussed while recommendations for better counselling services were suggested.

## Introduction

Guidance and counselling is a broad area of study that exposes individuals to different approaches of looking at learning and consequently of solving imminent problems that occur in life. A major component of effective teaching is to have knowledge of the learner. Understanding your students in terms of their strengths and weaknesses influence the approaches you would combine for effective teaching and learning. As noted by Okeke-Oti (2010) guidance and counselling enables educators to understand that students have diverse needs and even those regarded as disabled and “never do well” can actually achieve to the best of their ability if emphasis was focused more on the approaches rather than on content.



Counselling as defined by Shertzer and Stone (1976) is a learning process in which individuals learn about themselves, their interpersonal relationships and behaviours that advance personal development. These scholars further explained that guidance is an umbrella term which covers a total school programme of activities and services aimed at assisting pupils to make satisfactory adjustment in life. In their opinion, counselling is subsumed by the general term guidance, in that it is one service within guidance rather than a synonym. Also, Idemudia and Lazarus (2010) observed that counselling is an interdisciplinary profession, that interacts with various fields such as psychology, sociology, cultural anthropology, education, economics and philosophy. They reiterated that in addition to the three fundamental areas in counselling namely, vocational, educational and socio-personal, counseling places emphasis on individual adjustment in the environment and developmental processes and child-rearing.

Moreover, Longe (2010) stressed that the function of counselling is also to facilitate normal development and prevent great frustrations, activities, and stresses that might arise from psychological changes. Counselling in other words, helps an individual to realize oneself, potentials, capabilities, interests, abilities, needs and aspirations in order to formulate one's own goals and make adequate plans for realizing those goals. Thus, Longe (2010) maintained that the concept of guidance and counselling represents an extension of the role of the school to the lives of the students and this implies the assumption that any guidance and counselling programme does more as a means to academic tutoring. It is a help given to each student in an effort to assist in personal growth in a way most beneficial to the individual and the society.

Furthermore, UNESCO (1997) presented counselling as a learning oriented process which usually occurs in the literal relationship with the aim of helping the person learn to put such understanding to effective use for self and society. Kolo (2003) on the other hand, viewed counselling as a process in which the helper expresses care and concern toward the person with a problem to facilitate that person's growth and positive change through understanding.

According to Etokebe and Alasa (2010) the symbolic relationship and complementary status of counselling and special needs education as regards content and service delivery make counselling an



effective adjustment strategy for families of children with learning disabilities. They emphasized that the therapeutic nature of counselling will do good to students with learning disabilities and at the same time help parents and guardians understand, appreciate, and manage the disabilities no matter how debilitating.

### **Learning Disabilities**

Many definitions for learning disabilities have been proposed. Probably the most commonly accepted definition is that endorsed by the Federal Government of the United States of America. According to them, "Specific Learning Disability" refers to a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or to do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia and developmental aphasia. The term does not include children who have learning problems which are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, or mental retardation, of emotional disturbance or of environmental, cultural or economic disadvantage (The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990, PL 101 – 476).

Among those who criticized this federally mandated definition because of its inherent weaknesses is the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) which is a group of official representatives from ten professional organizations involved with students with learning disabilities. One of the weaknesses of the federal definitions is that it focuses on exclusionary criteria while failing to define the core features of a learning disability. The exclusionary clause requires that all other possible causes for the learning problems be ruled out. This is problematic because it is well known that learning disabilities can co-exist with other conditions, most notably attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). In addition, this definition does not address etiology and treatment response (Shapiro & Gallico, 1993). Furthermore, the definition fails to provide guidelines regarding what the "basic psychological process" of learning are or how marked an "imperfect ability" to learn must be to constitute a disability. In an attempt to deal with these limitations, the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities proposed the following amended definition:



*“Learning disability is a generic term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual, presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction, and may occur across the life span. Problems in self-regulatory behaviours, social perception and social interaction may exist with learning disabilities but do not by themselves constitute a learning disability. Although learning disabilities may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (for example, sensory impairments, mental retardation, serious emotional disturbance) or with extrinsic influences (such as cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction), they are not the result of those conditions or influences (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 1989, P.I.)”.*

In the words of Church, Lewis and Batshaw (1997), this definition has a number of advantages namely, it emphasizes the heterogeneous nature of learning disabilities; it recognizes that the impairments extend beyond childhood; it acknowledges cultural disadvantage; and it states that there can be comorbidity with other developmental disabilities.

By way of providing further clarification on identification of individuals with learning disabilities, Lerner (1997) noted that criteria which must be met during the diagnosis of learning disability are:

- a. There must be evidence of an inability to achieve at the same level with one's age mates within the same potential ability level. This means that the child will perform below his or her age level and also perform at a pace, lower than his or her ability level.
- b. There must be a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability in one or more of the basic school subjects such as oral expression, listening comprehension, writing, reading skills, reading comprehension, mathematics calculation and mathematics reasoning.



### Characteristics of Students with Learning Disabilities

According to the centre for Teaching and Learning (2001) the following are the common characteristics of students with learning disabilities:

- Demonstration of marked difficulty in reading, writing, spelling, and/or using numerical concepts.
- Having poor handwriting, their papers may contain Cross-Duts, write-over, and erasures.
- Appearing clumsy or poorly coordinated.
- Exhibiting such behaviours as an inability to stick to schedules, repeatedly forgetting things, losing or leaving possessions, and generally seeming “personally disorganized”.
- Sometimes seeming disorganized in time space; confuse up and down; right left.
- Having trouble understanding or following directions.
- Confuse similar letters and words such as “b” and “d”, “was” and “saw”.
- Being easily distracted.
- Often displaying anxiety or anger because of inability to cope with school or social situations.
- Often demonstrating difficulty in understanding the subtleties in a social situation and do not seem to perceive how their behaviour come across to others.

Besides, many learning disabilities professional such as Lerner (1997) and Smith (2007) identified that most students with learning disabilities have deficits in all scholastic areas of reading, spoken language, writing language, mathematics, social skills, attention and hyperactivity, poor motor abilities, mobilizing cognitive strategies for learning and behavioural problems. Likewise, these scholars agreed that students with learning disabilities exhibit other common characteristics such as holding negative attributions, being non strategic, being unable to generalize or transfer learning, processing information inefficiently or incorrectly and possessing poor social skills. All in all students with learning disabilities have been described as individuals that exhibit a great deal of inter-individual and intra-individual variation. In any classroom of students with learning disabilities, some will have problems in reading, some will have problems in mathematics, some will have problems in spelling, and some will be inattentive and so on.



This is called heterogeneity. Also, students with learning disabilities have a tendency to exhibit variability within their own profile of abilities. For instance, a student may be two or three years above grade level in mathematics. Thus, some students have specific deficits in just one or a few areas of achievement or development (Lerner, 1997).

### **Effects of Learning Disabilities on Secondary School Students**

The effects of learning disabilities can actually be devastating for secondary students if appropriate interventions, strategies, models and teaching approaches are not utilized for these students. Smith (2007) noted that during the secondary school years, students with learning disabilities experience widening performance gap as the school curriculum widens. Over time, this gap grows wider and wider and worsens in the later classes when the academic growth of at-risk student plateaus. As a result of this performance gap, students are unable to meet the demands of required subjects in the content areas in senior secondary school, and their resulting failure leads to discouragement and disengagement in school. Lerner (1997) opined that reading disabilities which is one major broad category of learning disabilities often leads to persistent lack of success, with attendant frustration and feeling of insecurity which consequently brings emotional maladjustment. According to Ikujuni (1995), this feeling of insecurity is frequently enhanced by the discouraging attitudes of classmates, parents and even the teacher, especially when the student with reading disabilities performs below expectation. In the same vein, Lerner (1997) indicated that students with learning disabilities if not properly assisted during their secondary years may have minimal opportunities for gainful employment because individuals require proficiency in comprehension to handle job requirements. Thus, the onus lies on school personnel to use effective strategies with students with learning disabilities. The guidance counsellor as an important member of the multidisciplinary team for students with learning disabilities has an enormous job at hand.

### **Counselling Interventions/Services for Students with Learning Disabilities**

Counselling which is a technique used in assisting individuals to achieve a style of living satisfying to him or her and congruent with his or her



status as a citizen may be required to treat underlying psychological disorders. This can be provided individually or in groups. During such counselling sessions guidance counsellors can do the following:

**Advancement of students' academic achievement:** Historically and now, guidance counsellors have focused on students' academic achievement/success as well as on personal/social and career development (Gysbers, 2001). According to the American School Counsellor Association (2004) effective counselling programmes are important to the school climate and a crucial element in improving student achievement.

Lee, Yu and Lee (2005) emphasized that for better intervention, guidance counsellors need to be aware of factors affecting the academic performance of students with learning disabilities. They stressed that counsellors need to explore particularly how to close the academic achievement gap between poor students and other counterparts. In their opinion, guidance counsellors need to be a leading figure in the development, coordination, and implementation of school-wide support systems designed to improve, by working with teachers and other personnel, the learning success for students who are experiencing difficulty.

Thus, guidance counsellors may need to provide students with learning the same quantity and quality of information and guidance often received by their more efficient peers, and encourage more adolescents to complete the preparatory actions that are consistent with their stated educational goals. This is because without adequate motivation, students with learning disabilities will not put in effort in their studies.

Guidance counsellors can also design and provide a classroom guidance curriculum on student achievement. Such curriculum would greatly benefit students with learning disabilities and help them to become active and effective learners rather than passive learners. Likely topics for the guidance curriculum could be study skills (self assessment, organization and planning), positive attitudes and behaviours toward school and learning, test-taking strategies, effective writing, and homework completion skills (Sink & Stroh, 2003).



**Advocacy services:** Specially, it is believed that guidance counsellors serve as student advocates for various purposes. For instance, guidance counsellors can work with other school personnel, community and parents to ensure that all programmes and supports are offered to contribute to academic success for all students including those with learning disabilities (Bemak & Chung, 2005; House & Hayes, 2002). Family – centered counselling may be appropriate as guidance counsellors may also teach students with learning disabilities and their families how to access support systems for academic success by informing students and parents about tutoring and academic enrichment opportunities. In addition, the guidance counsellor can provide a pscho-educational conference for teachers to teach them how to enhance self-concept of all students, particularly students with learning disabilities (Lee, Yu, & Lee, 2005).

Furthermore, House and Hayes, (2002) noted that guidance counsellors can work with administrators to provide ongoing support for classroom teachers to become sensitive and competent educators who hold their students to high standards. It could be a conference focused on the understanding of learning styles, development and maturation of students' classroom behaviours and learning difficulties faced on regular basis.

In collaboration with other school leaders the guidance counsellor can develop and conduct in service staff development programmes for teachers and parents in crucial areas such as educational planning academic motivation, student appraisal and achievement, identification of and intervention for special needs students particularly students with learning disabilities and issues of student diversity and related attitudes.

Guidance counsellors can advocate for broad based career plans that focus on students' abilities and that will increase future career options. Counsellors can engage in a lot of vocational exploration activities for all students particularly students with learning disabilities. They can organize excursions to places of interest such as higher educational institutions, work experiences, career exhibitions and other career-based activities that would foster appropriate career choices by students with learning disabilities.

As a key member of the multidisciplinary team concerned with the education of students and young adults, the guidance counsellor



makes substantial contributions in the identification and diagnosis of students with learning disabilities. Once a student is identified, the next thing would be to develop an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) following a fairly standard procedure (Lerner, 1997, Smith, 2007). Guidance counsellors can help the IEP team contextualize classroom activities such as choice making and social skill development as important components of vocational preparation.

**Liaison between the home and the school:** The guidance counsellor can render assistance with home programmes, demonstrating of procedures used in classroom or treatment sessions to boost social interaction at home and with peers. The counsellor can educate parents and siblings on behavior management techniques, discipline, parental expectation, and the student's self-esteem. Church, Lewis and Batshaw (1997) added that families also should be provided a source of information about learning disabilities, a support group, and knowledge about legal rights and responsibilities in the education of their child.

Lee, Yu and Lee (2005) revealed that guidance counsellors can develop family-centered programmes such as family centres, parent education programmes for encouraging parental involvement. They also noted that for the "hard to reach" parents workshops at nearby places in the community; home visiting would also be a powerful channel for connecting with families.

**Promoting students' use of effective learning strategies:** According to Lapan, Kardash and Turner (2002) guidance counsellors can develop guidance curriculum units that promote students' use of effective learning strategies within the context of specific courses. Learning Strategies instruction offers a viable and promising approach for students with learning disabilities to learn to take control of their own learning. Lerner (1997) maintained that the objective of learning strategies instruction is to teach students how to learn rather than what is contained in a specific curriculum. With proficiency in learning strategies students can overcome or lessen the effects of learning disabilities. Thus, the guidance counsellor can be instrumental in teaching students how to become self regulated learners.



**Assisting in the transition from school to adult life:** To successfully negotiate this transition all adolescents require varying degrees of assistance from friends, family and social personnel. Some kinds of assistance that the counsellor can offer to students with learning disabilities in ensuring smooth transition to adult life include the following: Current levels of performance, interests and aptitude, post-secondary school goals, vocational and career education, work experience and community based – instruction, employment, maintaining a home, involvement in the community and establishing satisfactory personal and social relationships. It is the duty of the counsellor to assist students with learning disabilities in exploring financial aid opportunities (scholarships, loans, and grants for colleges) and in completing formal applications for admission and financial aid (Lerner, 1997).

### **Recommendations**

On the basis of the foregoing, the following recommendations are made.

1. Counsellors should equip themselves with effective communication, problem – solving, and conflict resolution skills, as well as an understanding of team dynamics to enable them render guidance, counselling, advocacy, as well as other services discussed earlier.
2. To date, many guidance counsellors are saddled with a lot of clerical and non-counselling related duties by their school heads. This practice will not allow for effective guidance counseling programmes in the school. It is therefore necessary that the issue of role confusion and lack of clarity of roles be addressed by policy makers and educational administrators. The earlier this is done the better for our schools as this will usher in new breed counsellors who will be efficient in their roles, be it to students with or without disabilities, to their teachers and their families.
3. Policy makers should create more awareness within our society in general, of the benefits of patronizing the professional guidance counsellors when and wherever necessary.
4. Parental involvements in the education of students with learning disabilities should be emphasized.



5. Equally important is the issue of frequent periodic professional development programmes for guidance counsellors and other school personnel. Through conferences, workshops, seminars, short-term and long-term courses especially outside the shores of this country, guidance counsellors acquire new skills, interact with other practitioners and gain more confidence that will be highly beneficial in the discharge of their duties to all students, especially students with learning disabilities.
6. Government should enlighten the public on the need to train their children with special needs not only in academic skills but also in vocational skills acquisition as individuals with learning disabilities effectively cope in diverse vocational careers.
7. Networking among guidance counsellors will also pay off especially those in similar school system. Sharing of ideas, information, experiences and recommendations about counselling resources should be encouraged.
8. Policy makers should ensure that would-be-teachers in training are exposed to special education courses to enable them gain knowledge and understanding about students with special needs in order to serve them better in this era of inclusive education.

### **Conclusion**

It has been established through this paper that guidance counselling as a discipline affects not only the human development of individuals without disabilities but also the overall adjustment to life of those with disabilities. Clearly, guidance counsellors are in a critical position to focus on issues, strategies and interventions that will alleviate the effects of learning disabilities on secondary school students. Guidance counsellors serve in a number of roles and provide direct services to students with learning disabilities. They assist in career planning, advancement of academic achievement, adjustment to school life, serving as liaisons between home and school, and offering management suggestions to teachers and administrators.



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