



## TEACHERS' ROLE IN IDENTIFICATION AND SUPPORT FOR SLOW LEARNERS AT THE LOWER BASIC EDUCATION LEVELS: IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELLING

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### **Abstract:**

Much attention has been given to the categories of children with special needs in the school system in Nigeria but not much has been done concerning the slow learners in the mainstream classes of normal school system in Abia State. This study therefore investigated teachers' role in the identification and support for slow learners at the lower basic levels of education in Abia State, Nigeria. To guide the study, three research questions were asked. Descriptive survey research design was used for the study. A total of 300 lower basic education teachers consisted the sample for the study using simple random sampling technique. The data was collected using a 40-item questionnaire titled "Teachers Identification and Support for Slow Learners Questionnaire (TISSLQ)". The instrument has a reliability index of 84. The data collected was analysed using mean scored test statistic. The result of study showed that slow learners can be identified by low mental ability, short memory, short attention span, interview, observation among others. The result also revealed that one-on-one instruction with the teacher or peers, using different methods of teaching among others provide the most beneficial value to the slow learners. Based on the findings of this study, it was recommended that individual education programme should be provided to children who are slow learners in addition to counselling services in normal school system in Abia State, Nigeria.

**Keywords:** slow learner, identification, support, special needs, low basic education level, individualized education

### **1. Introduction**

Teaching is a challenging profession that requires a lot of patience, innovations and motivation from the teachers in order to bring about an all-round development among

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their students. Inside the classroom, the teacher is faced with a mixture of learners based on their level of intelligence and performance criteria. Among these learners, there are some who cannot cope up with the lessons taught inside the normal classroom as their peers do. Hence, such learners are tagged as slow learners. Consequently, a good teacher will have the greatest challenge of how to identify, guide and help such learners to improve in obtaining good grades and come out with flying colours.

Karen (2014) described a slow learner as a child of below average intelligence, whose thinking skills have developed significantly more slowly than the norm for his/her age. He said this child goes through the same basic developmental stages as other children, but will do so at a significantly slower rate. Karen explained further that even though the development was slow, nevertheless, it was relatively even.

According to Mercer (1996), slow learners are children who are doing poorly in schools, yet are not eligible for special education; their intelligence test scores are too high for consideration as a child with mental retardation. Macmillan, Greshaw, Bocian and Lambros (1998) pointed out that although slow learners may have special education needs, they do not fit neatly into the special education system and general study at normal school.

In addition, slow learners can be described as children who for various reasons fall behind in their school work and require special teaching. Most of these children do not seem to profit from the usual educational methods and content provided in the school system. These groups of children tend to experience many more failures than other children and as a result, they lack motivation to try new learning.

In line with this, Stenhouse (2005) stated that slow learners differ from average students in their rate of learning and that they need much external stimulation and encouragement to do simple tasks. Slow learners are faced with tasks requiring abstracts, symbolic and contiguity.

Krishnakanear, Gecto and Palat (2006) observed that slow learners work at their ability level but below their grade level, which in turn leads to their adjustment problems in mainstream classrooms. Amrita (2011) in her contribution pointed out that slow learners are very sensitive and self-conscious as they are very well aware of their weakness in comparison with the fast learners. She therefore advocated that the first responsibility of the teacher is to build up confidence among these learners and make them believe that they are not inferior to the other students.

Khan (2008) also stated that there are different reasons for slow learning. He said sometimes it is due to their mental ability, sometimes due to their background, illiterate parents, cultural problems, mental illness or neglect by parents between the ages of two to six years. Dobson (2003) in his research found that children who are deprived of stimulation during their early years are more likely to be slow. He further explained that there appears to be a critical period during the first three to four years of life when the potential for intellectual must be realized. There are enzyme systems in the brain that must be activated during these brief years, if the opportunity is missed, the child may never reach his capacity.

Malik, Reham & Hemf (2012) stressed that academically slow learners are usually identified based on their attained scores in intelligence tests, with intelligent quotients (IQs) between 75 and 89. Contributing, Lowenstein (2003) in his investigation discovered that one of every six students that are in the classroom today has been classified as slow learners. He explained that this type of child is very difficult to recognize. He maintained that slow learners are students with below average cognitive abilities who are not disabled, but who struggle to cope with the traditional academic demands of the regular classroom. He emphasized that abstract thinking is difficult for a slow learner and their attention span is short.

A cursory look at the existing primary and secondary schools in Nigeria and Abia State in particular shows that there are many neglected slow learners within the school system. Such group of students has been neglected and goes about with tags such as "Dunces" or "never do well" given to them by their teachers and classmates.

Though slow learners have social, health, school-based, psychological and family problems, their problems are not easily identified and most of the school dropouts, dropins and stay outs fall into these groups of children. As a result, they constitute a unique set of problems to schools and society at large. Researches indicated that academically slow learners pose significant educational and behavioural difficulties in the schools because of their deficiencies in intellectual and psycho-social skills (Shaw, 2008, Anastasis, Elem & Effi, 2006). The problems of slow learners confront the teacher in different ways and as a result, it has not been easy to identify slow learners among other children in the class.

On the national level, not much is done to accommodate the slow learners. No special services are provided nationwide, nor are there services provided at state or Local Government Level. They are not given special attention in the schools and are often bullied, scolded and sometimes punished for failing to solve school task. A lot have been written on the factors that influence slow learning among students but their problems appear to be more serious than is probably imagined.

Government has been trying in assisting the physically challenged children but the slow learning children have not been well cared for. Slow learners are neglected in our present school system.

This study is timely because it has become expedient that slow learners be identified at this level of basic education since it is the foundation for sustainable life-long learning. According to Federal Government of Nigeria (FRN, 2013:15) in its National Policy on Education (2013) (section 3:15), basic education shall be of nine years duration comprising 6years of primary education and 3years of junior secondary education. It is divided into three components namely:

- Lower Basic Education – Primary 1-3;
- Middle Basic Education – Primary 4-6 and
- Upper Basic Education – Junior Secondary 1-3.

The Lower Basic education level is the most appropriate period to identify these slow learners so that they would be able to cope up with future education activities.

This research is of vital importance for the fact that the data collected may be used to correct the erroneous ideas that slow learners are dunces or never do well in school tasks.

Also, the result of this study would help the teachers to easily identify slow learners in the classes and be able to give them support needed by such children. It would also expose the problem of slow learners in the school system which would in turn motivate the stakeholders to find out ways of helping them.

Bearing in mind the non-recognition and negligence of slow learners in the schools, the researchers saw the need to carry out a study on the role of teachers in the identification of slow learners at the lower basic levels of education in Umuahia education zone. Malik, Rehman & Hemf (2012) in their study discovered that slow learners could be identified by low mental ability through intelligent tests, short attention span, difficult to think abstractly, awkward self-expression and low self-esteem. Consequently, slow learners can be identified in the mainstream classrooms.

The study would also suggest ways of supporting them in order to achieve their academic goals in the mainstream classrooms of the school system.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the factors that could help a teacher in identifying slow learners in the classroom?
2. What are the likely causes of slow learning in school children?
3. What strategies could teachers effectively adopt to support slow learners in the mainstream classrooms?

## **2. Methodology**

The study adopted a descriptive survey design. The study covered the primary schools in Umuahia education zone of Abia State. The population of the study was all the lower basic level education teachers in Umuahia education zone numbering 300 teachers were selected from 25 selected primary schools in Umuahia education zone reflecting urban and rural areas, using simple random sampling technique. They constituted the sample for the study.

The instrument used for data collection was Teacher Identification and Support for Slow Learners Questionnaire (TISSLQ). The instrument contained three sections namely: A, B and C. Section A elicits information on personal data. Section B sorts information on identification and causes of slow learners while section C indicates supportive information for slow learners. The 36 items questionnaire was composed based on extensive literature review, experience and interaction with teachers. The instrument was face and content validated by experts from Psychology and Counselling, Measurement and Evaluation department of College of Education, Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike. The questionnaire was subjected to a reliability test using Cronbach Alpha method and a value of 0.84 was obtained as reliability index.

The respondents were given 300 copies of the questionnaire through their sectional school heads and were collected through the same channel after two days. The data collected was analysed using mean scores. The values for the two point scale were 2 for agree and 1 for disagree. The acceptance level was 1.50 i.e  $2 + 1 = 3 \div 2 = 1.50$ .

### 3. Findings

The results were analysed according to the research questions.

#### Research Question 1:

What are the factors that could help a teacher in identifying slow learners in the classroom?

The mean scores were used of analyze the teachers identification of slow learners in classrooms as shown in table 1.

**Table 1:** Mean scores analysis of teachers identification of slow learners in classrooms

| s/n | Item  | Agree | Disagree | $\bar{X}$ | Decision |
|-----|---|-------|----------|-----------|----------|
| 1   | Low mental ability (low intelligence)           | 270   | 30       | 1.90      | Accepted |
| 2   | Low Self Esteem                                 | 198   | 102      | 1.66      | Accepted |
| 3   | Poor health factors                             | 120   | 180      | 1.40      | Rejected |
| 4   | Truancy   | 120   | 180      | 1.40      | Rejected |
| 5   | Poor concentration skills/short attention span  | 246   | 54       | 1.82      | Accepted |
| 6   | Poor academic performance                       | 210   | 90       | 1.70      | Accepted |
| 7   | Slow responses to questions and other tasks     | 222   | 78       | 1.74      | Accepted |
| 8   | Exhibits aggressive behavior                    | 72    | 228      | 1.24      | Rejected |
| 9   | Always gets easily distracted                   | 186   | 114      | 1.62      | Accepted |
| 10  | Appears immature in inter-personal relationship | 144   | 156      | 1.48      | Rejected |
| 11  | Poor Language communication                     | 180   | 120      | 1.60      | Accepted |
| 12  | Short memory (forgetfulness)                    | 276   | 24       | 1.92      | Accepted |
| 13  | Poor time management                            | 204   | 96       | 1.68      | Accepted |
|     | Grand mean                                      |       |          | 1.63      | Accepted |

The result of table 1 showed that out of the 13 items on the table, four were rejected while the rest were accepted as constituting a means of identifying slow learners in the classroom. This is indicated by the mean values of 1.50 and above on the items which is significant. The grand mean which is above 1.50 showed that the teachers agreed that slow learners are identified by most of the items listed on the table.

**Research Question 2:**

What are the likely causes of slow learning in school children?

**Table 2:** Mean scores analysis of the causes of slow learning in school children

| s/N | Item                                     | Agree | Disagree | $\bar{X}$ | Decision |
|-----|--|-------|----------|-----------|----------|
| 14  | Absenteeism (not regular in class)       | 180   | 120      | 1.60      | Accepted |
| 15  | Untrained teachers                       | 132   | 168      | 1.44      | Rejected |
| 16  | Illiterate parents                       | 108   | 192      | 1.36      | Rejected |
| 17  | Medium (language) of instruction         | 192   | 108      | 1.64      | Accepted |
| 18  | Large class size                         | 222   | 78       | 1.74      | Accepted |
| 19  | Very busy parents                        | 168   | 132      | 1.56      | Accepted |
| 20  | Health problems                          | 216   | 84       | 1.72      | Accepted |
| 21  | Teaching methods                         | 180   | 120      | 1.60      | Accepted |
| 22  | Frequent transfer of teachers            | 168   | 132      | 1.56      | Accepted |
| 23  | Psychological problems e.g fear, anxiety | 270   | 30       | 1.90      | Accepted |
|     | Grand mean                               |       |          | 1.612     | Accepted |

Results from table 2 above indicated that the listed items on the table contribute to slow learning in school children. This is shown by the grand mean of 1.612 which is greater than 1.50. However, the respondents disagreed on items 15 (1.44) and 16 (1.36) as not part of the causes of slow learning in school children.

**Research Questions 3:**

What strategies could teachers effectively adopt to support slow learners in the mainstream classrooms?

Table 3 shows the mean scores of strategies teachers could adopt to support slow learners in mainstream classrooms.

**Table 3:** Mean scores analysis of teachers strategies in support slow learners  
in the mainstream classrooms

| s/N | Item   | Agree | Disagree | $\bar{X}$ | Decision |
|-----|--|-------|----------|-----------|----------|
| 24  | Use of different methods of teaching, especially demonstration and play way methods, individualized teaching, use of appropriate audio/visual aids | 288   | 12       | 1.96      | Accepted |
| 25  | Use of memory flash cards  | 258   | 42       | 1.86      | Accepted |
| 26  | Pesting pictures of stories/lessons taught on the classroom wall to remind them of the lessons.  | 264   | 36       | 1.88      | Accepted |
| 27  | Giving him opportunity to participate in class activities e.g reading.   | 288   | 12       | 1.96      | Accepted |
| 28  | Paying special attention to their writing, grammar, punctuations and giving immediate corrections  | 270   | 30       | 1.90      | Accepted |
| 29  | Group class participation  | 240   | 60       | 1.80      | Accepted |
| 30  | Give shorter class and home assignments  | 246   | 54       | 1.82      | Accepted |
| 31  | Use of experienced teachers at that level of education   | 276   | 24       | 1.92      | Accepted |
| 32  | Use of reinforcement (e.g. praise, commendation, gifts to boost their confidence at any little effort made by them                                 | 270   | 30       | 1.90      | Accepted |
| 33  | Teachers should treat them with empathic understanding   | 276   | 24       | 1.92      | Accepted |

|    |   |     |    |      |          |
|----|---|-----|----|------|----------|
|    | and show them love  |     |    |      |          |
| 34 | Conducive and safe school/working environment   | 264 | 36 | 1.88 | Accepted |
| 35 | Parents to be encouraged to be involved in their education by assisting them with their homework etc. | 276 | 24 | 1.92 | Accepted |
| 36 | Referring them to the school guidance counsellor where available                                      | 270 | 30 | 1.90 | Accepted |
|    | Grand mean  |     |    | 1.89 | Accepted |

The results in table 3 indicated that all the items have their mean value above the cut off point of 1.50, indicating that the respondents accepted that all the items are strategies that should be used in supporting slow learner in the mainstream classrooms. The grand mean of 1.89 showed that the items are significant.

#### 4. Discussion of Findings

The result of the study showed that the respondents (teachers) used in the study agreed that they have slow learners in their classes. The result of the analysis of research question 1 on teacher's identification of slow learners showed a grand mean of 1.63 which is above the cut-off point of 1.50 indicating that the teachers agreed on most of the items as ways slow learners could be identified in the classroom. Looking at the table item by item analysis, the teachers accepted that low mental ability (1.90), short memory (1.92), short attention span (1.82), poor academic performance (1.70), slow response to questions (1.74), poor time management (1.68), low self-esteem (1.66), easily distracted (1.62), and poor language communication (1.60) as factors that could help them to identify slow learners in their classes. The highest factor is short memory (1.92) followed by low mental ability (1.90). However, the respondents did not agree on truancy (1.40), poor health factors (1.40), exhibiting aggressive behaviour (1.24) as ways of identifying slow learners in the class. The result of the table 1 showed that slow learners could be identified by their teachers using most of the items on the table. This study is in agreement with studies carried out by Lowenstein (2003), Malik, Rehman & Hemf (2012) who discovered that slow learners could be identified by low mental ability through intelligence tests, short attention span, difficult to think abstractly, reacts slower than average, awkward self-expression and low self-esteem. However, Servio (1998) advised that slow learners can easily be misidentified, so it is critical that teachers and parents consider a variety of sources of information before they assume that poor school performance is due to a slower rate of learning rather than to a real disability or situational factors.

The perception of the respondents on the causes of slow learning was shown on table 2. The result showed a grand mean of 1.612 which revealed that most of the factors on the table causes slow learning. Out of the ten items on the table, only two items untrained teachers (1.44), illiterate parents (1.36) were rejected as causes of slow learning. The result of the study identified psychological problems (1.90) as the highest cause of slow learning in school children. Other causes identified by the respondents include, large class size, health problems, teaching methods, medium of instruction,

absenteeism, very busy parents and more. The findings of this study is at variance with the studies carried out by Khan (2008) who found that the causes of slow learning is as a result of their background, illiterate parents, cultural problems, mental illness or neglect by parents between the ages of 2-6years. This could be as a result of cultural differences on the areas of studies of the two researches.

The result of the study on table 3 showed strategies teachers could adopt to support slow learners in the mainstream classrooms. The result indicated that all the respondents accepted the items on table 3 as strategies that should be adopted to support slow learners. This is because the items on the tables, as well as the grand mean are above the accepted value of 1.50. Use of different teaching methods (1.96) and giving the slow learners opportunity to participate in class activities (1.96) are rated highest by the respondents. Other strategies rated high include: use of experienced teachers (1.92); parents involvement (1.92); treating them with empathic understanding and showing them love (1.92), paying special attention to them (1.92), use of reinforcement (1.90), referring them to guidance counsellors where available (1.90) among others.

In line with this result of the study revealed the important role of the teacher in the identification and support of slow learners to fit into the mainstream classrooms. Most of the strategies are to be performed by the teachers and to be supported by the parents and school counsellors. This study is in line with Karen (2014) who observed that for teachers to help slow learners, they should make the classrooms safe and non-threatening, tolerate them by being warm, supportive and also use praise statements. Amrita (2011) in agreement with the result of the study, asserted that for teachers to bring positive impact on slow learners, they should put up encouraging words to the slow learners, have constant interaction with them, apply individualized teaching, give them simple home assignments. He said these will boost them to perform better in school. The teachers therefore have great tasks in helping slow learners to adjust well in the mainstream classrooms.

Some lower basic school teachers were also interviewed when the researchers were collecting the questionnaires from the respondents. They all agreed that they have slow learners in their classes. On how they have been trying to help them, a good number of them replied that they used peer tutoring, repetition of lessons, giving extra time, keeping track of their progress, positive comments to build up their confidence and class participation. The teachers interviewed also agreed that repetition is the key to the success of the slow learners. The teacher is therefore the first and most suitable person to help slow learners pursue and achieve their educational goals.

## **5. Conclusion**

It is evident in this study that teachers have great role to play in the identification and support of slow learners in the mainstream classrooms of the lower basic education levels in Abia State, Nigeria. The classroom is a small society where teacher/pupils and student/student interactions occur and a setting within which instruction and learning



take place. The study found that there are slow learners in almost all the mainstream classrooms at the lower basic education levels in Abia State. Slow learners will always be behind their chronological peers which do not mean they cannot be expected to improve. It only means that they are slow in learning. It is left for the teachers to identify these slow learners in the mainstream classrooms.

Accordingly, if a teacher identifies that a child is a slow learner; proper evaluation should be done to identify the weakness of the child. After evaluation and identification of slow learners, the question arises on how to handle them in the classrooms, how to teach them and the type of class they need. Hence, there comes the greatest challenge of a good teacher on how to guide and help such children to improve their academic performance. There are a number of things the teacher could do to help and enhance the slow learning behaviour. They include; building up the slow learners confidence as this will make them believe they are not inferior to others in the class, showing them love, frequently interacting with them and attending to them individually, avoid placing them in situations likely to lead to frustration, encourage a sense of self-esteem, killed over learning into lessons, use record keeping techniques, use programmed instruction, mentoring among others. For instance mentoring provides support for changes slow learners' behaviour attitudes and ambition.

Slow learners should never be made to feel neglected or unwanted as it might create a feeling of inferiority among them which might affect their grades. Consequently, to help slow learners to obtain good and suitable grades is a challenge that marks the qualities of a good teacher.

### **5.1 Implications for Education and Counselling**

The results obtained from this study established that we have slow learners in the mainstream classrooms of the Nigerian school system. These slow learners need to be identified and supported by the teachers in the mainstream classrooms. They equally need the help of professional counsellors in order to overcome low self-esteem and function properly in the academic environment.

The services of the counsellor should be provided simultaneously with that of the teachers to obtain optimal result in the academic realization of the slow learners.

The school counsellor should realize that the slow learner has special needs. It is not that they are not intelligent but most teachers are not helping to resuscitate them for effective learning. Guidance and counselling services should therefore be introduced to the slow learners especially at the lower basic education level to help them get over their education difficulties in order to achieve their academic goals. Counselling should aim at catching them young at the lower basic education level so that they would be better adjusted at their higher levels of education. In essence, managing slow learners need the expertise and psychological care which counselling can provide for their overall academic achievement.

The counsellor needs to employ psychological tests especially observations, interviews, case studies, dialogues with parents and teachers daily observation in the classroom and out of classroom to improve the slow learners learning ability.

The counsellor should have empathetic understanding of the slow learners and use study behaviour techniques to facilitate effective learning of the slow learners.

## **5.2 Recommendations**

In view of the findings of the study and the conclusion drawn, the following recommendations are made:

1. Teachers should make use of adequate instructional materials like chart, memory flash cards, audio/visual aids etc. to make the lessons more practical.
2. The lesson period should be short and their working time limited so that they will not be easily exhausted and distracted. They should be given shorter assignment that they can comfortably do in the time allotted for the lesson. Also simple and shorter home assignment should be given to slow learners to avoid over-whelming them because any work that is too hard can turn them off.
3. Variety is the spice of life. Teachers should invariably vary their methods of teaching to avoid monotony and boredom to the slow learners. Teachers should make learning more fun interesting and comfortable. The teaching methods for slow learners should include role playing, drama, and holding special classes for them in order to catch up with others.
4. Special attention should be paid to slow learners. Consequently, individualized education programme should be introduced by teachers to help them progress at their own pace.
5. Teachers should repeat their lesson as often as possible because slow learners need planned repetition for every lesson delivery and activities and it is a key factor on how they can learn optimally.
6. To boost the self-esteem of the slow learners, teachers need to employ positive contact, immediate feedback, intimacy, empathic understanding, using lots of reinforcement strategies frequently at any little effort made by them. This will boost their confidence and make them put more effort in their academic pursuit.
7. Some children respond well to the guidance of a friendly but higher performing classmate. It is therefore advisable that teachers should employ peer tutoring to help slow learners
8. Parents should be encouraged to be involved in their slow learning children education by supporting them in their homework, attending school functions, provision of learning materials and other essential needs, and communicating with their teachers frequently. Parents' involvement enhances their performance.
9. Every school should have counselling units so that counselling services will be made available to slow learners. The services of the counsellors will help them to adjust well in the school environment and thereby improve their academic performance. In this respect, counselling is a process of rendering service to slow learners, especially clearing with their emotions, distress and behavioural difficulties. It also involves dialogue and mutual interaction aimed at facilitating, problem-solving, understanding, motivation and decision-making.

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