

**UNDERSTANDING  
THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PERSONS  
WITH  
SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS.**

**Being a paper presented by:-  
Arokhamoni Duro Collins**

**At a One Day Workshop Organized by**

**THE ZAMARR INSTITUTE:  
EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE LEARNING  
DISABLED**

**AT THE BAUCHI STATE LIBRARY COMPLEX  
MAY 9<sup>th</sup> 2007**

## **INTRODUCTION.**

There is a popular adage that says: “experience is the most important teacher”. We get a great deal of knowledge from personal experience. We generalize from what we observe and frequently turn memorable encounters into lifetime “truths”. But the question is: how valid are these conclusions?. Sometimes we err in making these personal observations or misinterpret what we see and hear. You can think of many situations in which you thought other people read your behaviour or action the wrong way, just as they may have felt that you misunderstood them too. The truth is that when we base information only on personal experiences, we are not always completely objectives; because sometimes we make judgments that are myopically inclined to protect our ego and self esteem.

As teachers, care-givers or administrators of persons with Special Educational Needs (SEN), the more we learn about them; the more we can better understand them and support their journey to becoming competent human beings. The modern era of understanding the psychology of persons with SEN spans a little more than a century, an era in which Special Needs Education has become a sophisticated science. Methodological advances in observation as a practical approach and theoretical views characterize this scientific theme of modern era.

Today, psychologists prefer to use more objective scientific method to understand, explain and predict the behaviour of persons with SEN. Psychological Studies are highly structured, beginning with the hypothesis that is then empirically tested. In order to fully comprehend the nitty gritty of this topic, it is pertinent to grasp the key concepts: “Psychology and Special Needs Education”. It is pertinent we get ourselves acquainted with the contemporary definition of psychology and the categories of persons with special needs in order to help us marry these two concepts and establish a more lucid and logical approach from this theoretical views. Let us begin with the word PSYCHOLOGY.

## **WHAT IS PSYCHOLOGY?**

The word Psychology is derived from the Greek word psyche, meaning ‘soul’ or ‘mind’. Psychology is the science of the mind. The question now is how can we study something as complex and mysterious as the human mind?. Even if we were to split open the skull of a willing volunteer and have a look inside, all we would see is the gloopy grey matter of the brain. We cannot see someone’s thoughts nor can we observe their emotions or memories or perception and dreams. So how can we understand the mind of a person with special educational needs?.

Every attempt to explain why people with special educational needs think and behave in the way that they do is inevitably linked to one branch of psychology or another. We will be taking a cursory look at the different disciplines in order to better understand the psychology of the categories of persons with special needs.

- **Abnormal Psychology** is the study of abnormal behaviour and psycho-pathological tendencies as they affect the mind and behaviour. This is mostly as a result of brain malfunction exhibited in forms of neurotic fears and anxieties.
- **Biological Psychology** studies how physiological, bio-chemical and anatomical processes influence the mind or behaviour of persons; including those with special needs. These biological processes are easily observed in body changes during puberty or when there is a deformity, genetic transformation from parents to their offspring and the development of the brain and motor skills.
- **Clinical Psychology** is focused on the identification, assessment, diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders.
- **Cognitive Psychology** is the study of human thought processes and cognition. Under this area of psychology you study topics such as attention, memory perception, decision making, problem solving and language acquisition.
- **Comparative Psychology** deals with the study of the different instinctive tendencies and behaviour in animals generally. This study of animal behaviour can lead to a deeper and broader understanding of the psychology of persons with special educational needs.
- **Developmental Psychology** is a branch of psychology that deals with human growth and development over the life span. Theories under developmental psychology often focus on the development of cognitive abilities, morality, social functioning, moral development and identity among other life areas.
- **Forensic Psychology** is an applied field focus on using psychological research and principles in the legal and criminal justice system.
- **Industrial-Organisational Psychology** is the area of psychology that is concerned with the application of psychological research to select employee, enhance work performance, , improve product design and enhance usability.
- **Personality Psychology** deals with the various elements that make up individual personalities.
- **Educational (School) Psychology** is the branch of psychology that works within the educational system to help children with emotional, social and academic issues.
- **Social Psychology** is a discipline that uses scientific methods to study social influence, social perception and social interaction. Social psychology studies diverse subjects including group behaviour, social perception, leadership, non verbal behaviour, conformity, aggression and prejudice.

What all these different approaches to psychology have in common is the explanation of human behaviour based on the workings of the mind. Another common feature in all these areas is that psychologists apply the same scientific approach, test hypothesis through observation and experiment, and analyse their findings with statistical techniques that help them to identify important findings to formulate theories.

## **WHO ARE THE PERSONS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS?**

Persons with Special Educational Needs are those who manifest/experience more than the usual difficulties and problems in learning and training. The difficulty manifested could hamper or impede the normal physical, mental/cognitive, social and emotional development of these persons. They are the group of persons who need closer personal attention, some modifications and adaptations of the school routines and practices, of the general curriculum and practical approaches to teaching and learning in order to attain their optimum learning levels and development. They are better taught when the teachers are patient enough to recognize and understand their problems or difficulties. And this is best achieved when the teacher is innovative enough to find the most appropriate methods and approaches to meet their special learning needs.

In the past, it was believed that persons with special educational needs were only those with such obvious physical and/or functional impairments as blindness, deafness, physical handicaps, mental or intellectual retardation [Obani, 1997]. However, contemporary views have widened the range and elongated the list. There are also milder forms of these challenges which often go unnoticed in schools. There are those who can be described as being socially, psychologically or culturally disabled (Obani, 2001). This includes those who have serious behavioural, emotional and attention disorders that negatively affect their school life and learning. Others include those who are socially and culturally rejected and stigmatized, such as ex-convicts, former leprosy patients, former child prostitutes, street urchins and street children. Others are those who have other kinds of social disadvantages like being destitute or poverty stricken, suffering from chronic illnesses, or those living in remote areas where there are little or no opportunities of getting a good quality education.

A composite list of persons with Special Education Needs can be divided into groups as follows:

- a. The relatively smaller group of children and learners with the obvious severe cases of sensory, mental or physical impairment and disabilities such as deafness, blindness, mental retardation and physical handicaps of the crippling and paralytic types.
- b. The relatively larger group of children and learners with moderate to mild forms of (a) above, who manifest:
  - Moderate to mild forms of hearing impairment.
  - Moderate to mild forms of visual impairment.

- Mild mental/ intellectual retardation manifested in generally poor, low-average performance in all school subjects.
  - Mild physical handicaps (non-paralytic). These affect the control and use of the muscles of the hands needed for such educational activities and skills as writing, training, drawing, cutting along lines, throwing and catching , and some other body movements involving the use of fine-motor skills.
- c. The large group of children or learners exhibiting undue specific learning problems in specific subjects or aspects of subjects while performing averagely or above average in other subjects. This is the group called the learning disabled, or persons with specific learning difficulties. They are said to have hidden handicaps which many teachers misunderstand for laziness, truancy, and so on.
  - d. The intellectually very superior- the gifted and talented of varying types and degrees. Many teachers who misunderstand them regard them as rude, impudent, show-offs and perhaps cheat.
  - e. The delicate or health-impaired few who present what are termed episodic (periodic) handicaps.
  - f. The chronically sick and hospital bound persons who cannot attend classes. They need to be reached in their homes and hospitals.

In addition to the groups that have more severe or milder physical, mental, sensory or multiple impairments, the following are also listed by UNESCO (1994) as persons with special needs.

- Those enrolled in schools but who are experiencing much difficulty, whether temporary or permanent. (this corresponds to the 'hidden handicap' group above)
- Those not currently enrolled in schools but who could be enrolled if schools were made more responsive to their needs (corresponds to the socially disadvantaged group above).
- Those living in severe poverty.
- Those who for one reason or the other lack interest or motivation in learning.
- Those living in remote places far from any schooling facilities.
- Street children and urchins (almajiris).
- Those who are victim of war and armed conflict.
- Females generally, and members of minority ethnic, linguistic and religious groups (UNESCO, 1994)

Those who are socially and culturally stigmatized, rejected and marginalized are also persons with special needs. They include:

- Criminals and ex-convicts
- Prostitute and young single mothers who have dropped out of schools
- Miscreants and misguided youths on the street touting and hawking wares.
- Children of school age who are adult disabled beggars are around.

The list of persons with special needs is endless, but the point I want to stress here is the need for us to understand how they behave so we can know the best methods and approaches to help them overcome their difficulties.

### **PSYCHOLOGY OF PERSONS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS (SEN)**

The psychology of persons with special needs depends greatly on how emotional the person is, how prepared the person is to accept the condition and make the necessary efforts and adjustments needed to ameliorate the effects of the condition. The nature of the special needs can be considered:

1. By category of difficulty
2. The level and degree of manifestation schematically, these can be summarized as follows

#### **1) Hearing Impairment (HI)**

This is the inability or inefficient ability to hear and to use speech. It includes total deafness and muteness, partial deafness, being hard of hearing, and very slight hearing loss.

##### **Psychological features.**

- Always want to sit in the front row
- Often make signs to indicate that he/she has not heard the teacher properly.
- He/she ignores or confuses verbal instructions.
- Cannot follow conversations.
- Makes spelling mistakes.
- May develop sense of fear, suspicion, inferiority complex and isolation.
- May exhibit signs of aggression.

##### **How the teacher can help.**

- Keep the face unobstructed and avoid putting the hands in front of the mouth when talking.
- Stand in one place while talking rather than moving around.
- Stop talking when you turn your back.

- Avoid changing the subject abruptly.
  - Be ready to repeat or change vocabulary if it is not understood.
  - Writing down information and instructions may help.
  - Maintain the normal rhythm and intonation of speech.
  - Be conscious that group work may present problems if several people are talking or interrupting.
  - Find out if the child can benefit from a hearing aid.
- These should be faithfully observed for good teaching efforts.

## 2) **Visual Impairment**

Visual impairment is the inability to use vision or to do visual activities appropriately. It ranges from total and partial blindness and slight loss of vision to forms of minor visual errors including refractive errors which can be corrected by wearing appropriate glasses.

### **Psychological features**

- Lack emotional security
- Exhibit behaviour such as;
  - Frequent or long pause when reading
  - May frequently walk up to the board to read
  - Reading with books too close or too far from the eyes
  - Exhibit functional problems in varied lighting conditions.

### **How the teacher can help**

- Make appropriate consultations and referral
- Requisite services should be provided for the child
- Large print materials should be provided for each pupil
- Teachers should be willing to recommend the best individualized services for the visually impaired.

## 3) **Mental Retardation(MR)**

This refers to a generalized low level learning capacity in school and social learning, and has various degree of severity.

### **Psychological features**

- Learn very little
- Has low language and vocabulary level
- Display 'zigarmick effect', that is, it is easier to remember what is wrong than what is right.
- Has a very short attention span.
- Has a very low mental age.
- May show signs of withdrawal.

### **How the teacher can help**

- Work out a modification technique by which environmental events are arranged to produce specific changes in observable behaviour.
- Develop a teaching strategy based on task analysis.

#### **4) Learning Disabilities (LD):**

Learning disabilities manifest in undue specific learning difficulties in a few subjects. The level of difficulty experienced varies from slight to more profound in the different aspects of the subjects affected.

### **Psychological features**

- Hyperactivity
- Impulsivity
- Distractibility
- Perseveration
- Emotional instability.

### **How the teacher can help.**

- Try to understand the educational problem(s) of every child in your class.
- Identification and diagnosis rely heavily on informed teacher observation, comments and records.
- A good teacher will be able to observe whether a child is following his/her teaching or not, or if a child is impulsive in attending to class work and problems; is impatient with assignments, is easily distracted, is unhappy and more uncomfortable with some subjects more than with others, or when he/she surprisingly performs very poorly in some subjects than in others.

Teachers must, therefore, be able to observe and record the study habits and pattern of the children with special education needs. Observe their behavioural patterns and their learning and achievement trends.

#### **5) Physical Handicap**

Physical handicaps present the special needs of reduced or impaired (independent) mobility and other forms of body movements needed for both access to, and participation in schooling and learning activities.

### **Psychological features**

- Show difficulty in processing visual, auditory sensations.
- Some children with hydrocephalous may develop articulate speech and appear to function at a high level linguistically.
- As a physically handicapped child grows older he or she moves from the family to the larger society, beginning from the neighbourhood to the school and the community.
- A very important factor which affects the physically challenged child in the community is the attitude of the non-disabled members.
- A person who is physically handicapped feels defeated where love does not exist.

**How the teacher can help.**

- Teachers should be alert to signs of an impending seizure and be ready to assist the pupil.
- You must understand your pupil's condition, be comfortable with it and be able to foster a sense of understanding and acceptance among the pupil's peers.

Just as the psychological state of persons with special education needs varies according to different categories, so does the level and degree to which it affects the persons that manifest them. There are mild, moderate, even temporary and occasional (episodic) cases that can easily be remedied. This can be achieved by using appropriate and creative teaching. There are also profound cases of special education needs which place enormous obstacles in the way of schooling and learning. For such cases, some special arrangements and adjustments need to be made in the school practices. Also, some specialized attention and handling will be needed; depending on the nature of the Special Education Needs.

Thank you for listening.