

Reading Difficulties of Three Differently Abled Children: An Ethnographic Study

Sheila Ruth C. Bendijo

Mindanao State University

Marantao Community High School

Inudaran, Marantao, Lanao del Sur

Abstract

Moral reasoning refers to individuals' cognitive, emotional and behavioral understandings regarding everyday practices and relationships with others. Moral reasoning touches upon personal beliefs of human interaction the way these are cultivated through mores, principles and values in given societies. The objective of this empirical research was to question males' and females' moral orientations on justice and care. To this aim, participants were distributed dilemmas in a form of stories in which they were asked to offer their personal consideration. It was found that male participants have responded in relation to a justice-based orientation, while females to a care-based one. The interpretation of the findings showed that males tend to reply on moral dilemmas in association with the moral reasoning of justice, whereas females in association with care. This ethnographic study was undertaken as a layman's attempt at a tentative determination and assessment of the reading difficulty of three pre-schoolers for the purpose of providing remediation and mediation. Such treatment of the problem, as designed by the researcher, would allow her incursion into her subject pupils' private world to afford her a more intimate inquiry into their individual cases, for a fuller understanding of their problem and struggle. At the same time, through the mediation offered, she hoped to guide them in negotiating the distance between the two ends of their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), so that before the end of the study, she could let the bridge collapse because the three children have significantly overcome their initial reading difficulty and are already capable of performing tasks independently, or on their own. Regarding the results, two of the respondents had not yet mastered the English alphabet and had not yet fully understood the relationship between letter patterns and sound patterns. The subjects were more focused on television and playing rather than on reading. One of the subjects also showed evidence of verbal abuse from the mother. It was also suspected that the subjects had some degree of visual and/or hearing impairment. The results show that the subjects lacked the nurture component in order to perform well in school.

Keywords: ethnographic study, zone of proximal development, reading difficulty.

Introduction

An avid fan of the very popular ABS-CBN tele-series Budoyis likely to suspect that this inquiry on the language learning and development and reading progress of young children must have been inspired by the said program. If anything, Budoy's case has only added edge to the researcher's interest in her chosen problem, reading difficulties of young differently abled

learners, which saw incubation well over a year already, long before, or probably nearly at the same time that the tele-series was being finalized on the drawing board.

The researcher's interest in learning difficulty, particularly reading problems, in young children below the critical period (Lenneberg, 1967) started with a casual observation of the curious differential learning development of her neighbour's two sons and of her own. The boys belonged to the same age range, six to eight, but while the former received formal instruction in their pre-school years, and could be considered as more fortunate and privileged, and enjoying a head start, the researcher's son did not have the same advantage. The latter, for want of a paid governess to look after him and serve as a caretaker and teacher while his mother spent the better part of the day teaching other children, had to be content tagging along with her to her classes, and be a captive audience to her classroom routine. It was only after comparing her son's reading and writing progress to that of her neighbour's sons that she would have her epiphany. The boy's "sitting in" in her classes worked wonders; it proved to be stimulating, motivating, and facilitating. He learned to read and write faster and more easily than those two playmates.

The case of the two boys next door was something to ponder; it provoked reflection on the part of this author and a series of questions: Why do they seem to lag behind despite their more privileged start? Could it be the kind or quality of instruction they received from the pre-school they attended? Could it be, perhaps, the kind of support or scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978), or the lack of it, that parents and other caretakers in the children's immediate environment need to provide? Could the answer lie in an undiscovered disability that genetics could account for? Or, could the explanation be not a single factor, but a cocktail – a mix – of factors, biological as well as environmental? Or maybe, those were just individual differences. Rates of development are known to vary from learner to learner within the established stages. A slower rate of development does not have to be symptomatic of a disability. There are late bloomers. And as the gentle and perceptive account of Sowell (2011) of his experience as the father of a late-talking child has made many realize, there are just children "who are somehow different and do not fit neatly into pigeon holes."

The researcher would not know how to answer for certain the questions raised. What is however, clear to her is that children in their tender years, or the critical period, as it is called by Lenneberg (1969), need support and monitoring, particularly in the first five years of growth when progress is most rapidly and efficiently achieved, specifically in language acquisition. Other abilities, particularly general cognitive abilities, however, are not precluded. *Critical Period* is used here in its broadest sense to include what some say as maturational phenomena while termed as sensitive by others or optimal, instead of calling them critical periods (Stevick, 1996) In using the term, one could escape prior judging that the extent or quality of such maturational change could perhaps be (for instance, is it an improvement in a language facility versus a rather more general improvement in cognitive abilities)?

The documented cases of feral children (Steinberg, 1993), particularly, Viktor the Wild Boy of Aveyron, Genie, Isabelle, and Helen Keller, are often cited to support the critical period hypothesis, that is, age as a determiner of language acquisition and development. Viktor and Genie never progressed beyond minimal language/speech production despite the special training afforded them because they were nearly past the critical period when found. Although in later years, Genie showed some progress (the case study suggesting that semantic and cognitive development are parallel, both proceeding normally with training), syntax and morphology development were quite delayed and to a certain extent only. On the other hand, Isabelle and Helen Keller were only six years old and seven years old, respectively, when they started to

receive specialized attention. The amazing progress made by Helen Keller, especially under the tutelage of Anne Sullivan, could be in a way explained by the critical period hypothesis.

There are other sources of inspiration and ideas for this study. On her return from a field trip with her graduate classes in October 2011, one of the researcher's mentors enthused over the Special Tertiary Education Program (STEP) for Exceptionally Abled Students and Youths (EASY) of the Western Mindanao State University (WMSU) in Zamboanga City. The pioneering program is an affirmative action on the philosophy that every individual is born with gifts and talents exceptional and unique from all others, and endowed with innate potentials that should be explored, appreciated and nurtured. The WMSU initiative calls to mind the inspiring line in a song: "... no one will be left behind." Even such individuals, despite their disability, deserve a chance to find their place in mainstream society and uplift their quality of life.

WMSU takes pride in being the first to break ground in this area by opening up opportunities for the gifted, hearing-impaired and physically challenged to pursue degree programs or aspire for higher educational attainment above vocational training. The institution's University SPED Resource Center makes available the space, equipment, tools and staff to provide academic assistance and guidance to clientele enrolled in its different colleges. They boast of a pool of interpreters, academic advisers and tutors who are specially trained to communicate with their charges in the latter's own code or sign language (AMESLAN). Their bulletin of offerings for special children persons includes the following:

Special Certificate Courses (adaptive computerized communication technology for the visually impaired); Arts Management (visual arts, media arts and performing arts); Computer Application Technology for the hearing impaired (College of Engineering and Technology); Early Childhood Education for Special Learners (College of Education); Food Service and Home Management; Office and Library Technology (University Library: record management, bookkeeping, and other office and library procedures; Special Automotive Technology; and four-year baccalaureate degree programs.

Method

Participants

The study's sample comprised three (3) respondents chosen by purposive sampling from a population of undetermined size, since no statistics on this segment of the population – the handicapped or disabled and young learners with learning disability or difficulty – are expected to exist, or to be found in any office in Marawi City. In schools or centers offering Special Education (SPED), a list of enrolled learners may be found. Such schools/centers are known to exist or operate in Iligan City and other urban centers like Cagayan de Oro, Zamboanga City, and Davao. Marawi City boasts no such facility or entity.

There is thus something worth noting about the study's respondents. Whatever their difficulties would not be at once obvious to the unprofessional, untrained, or less discerning eye because, as described in an earlier section, their appearance does not give away or betray their problem. A less than searching, appraising look would show a normal child, with complete limbs, seeing eyes, etc., but in reality, there is nearly, if not as serious, as that of a disabled person wearing thick glasses or strapped to a wheel chair. The subjects' anonymity was protected throughout the investigation. They were assigned fictitious names of their choice – e.g. Naruto, Ben 10, and Tinker Bell.

Naruto and Ben 10 are first cousins who live inside the school campus of Dansalan College. Tinker Bell, the third participant, also resides in the same place. These subjects, based on their grade cards last year, showed depressed performance in school. They really were failing academically behind their classmates. Their teacher's evaluation and assessment showed their poor achievement and lack of self-discipline. This confirmed the initial suspicion of the researcher who, as a teacher herself living in the same neighbourhood, has ample opportunities to observe and compare their progress with that of her son.

The objective results of achievement tests could only be glossed as a desperate cry for help. It was clear to the researcher who, at first, observed these three children at some distance that their basic problem was inability to read. If their reading problems would remain untreated, and persist, they might as well be written off as "programmed for, or doomed to, failure." In school these children were forced to face their inadequacies day after day and were often rejected by teachers and peers. Why were they fed a daily diet of textbooks when they could not read?

Design

This Ethnographic study made use of participant observation in gathering data. Following a case study approach, the three respondents were observed up close in their daily reading activities and in various context or situations to get as complete and intimate a picture of the true case of each as possible.

The researcher based her study on direct observation of the three pre-school subject pupils' reading difficulties. Opportunity to pursue the desired extent of observation was made possible by the role the former assumed in the investigation. She volunteered her services as tutor to the three participants, who happened to be her own neighbours. In addition to providing them the kind of supplemental service they needed, the researcher, for purposes of the study being conducted, documented or meticulously recorded the struggle and progress of the subjects.

Materials

The researcher employed the questionnaire and interview as the primary methods for obtaining the needed data on the subjects' background, and past and current reading problems. Observation, including classroom observation, and documentary analysis and close examination of documents, school file and pupils' work were also done to find answers to the crucial research problem concerning the symptoms or manifestations of disability or difficulty exhibited by the subjects. Reading assessment or diagnosis, through the Informal Reading Inventory (IRI), was conducted to ascertain the existence, nature and seriousness of the problem.

The research tools used were: self-designed questionnaires, the Parent Information Form and the Student Information Form, the former for the parents to fill out and the latter for the subjects to answer under the guidance of the researcher (Appendices B and C, respectively); interview guide used in the one-on-one interviews with parents, teachers, other adults in the subjects' immediate environment, and friends/classmates (Appendix D), and the Informal Reading Inventory or IRI, in short (Appendix E).

Procedure

Before the researcher began collecting data, she secured official permission, through a letter request, from the key informants who included the identified subjects' parents and teachers. Permission was needed not only for administering the questionnaires (Parent Information Form and Student Information Form) and conducting the interviews, but also for the pupils' school

file review and more importantly, the supplemental service (tutorials) that the researcher intended to render as part of her inquiry.

Assured of the cooperation of all the people involved in the study and the school attended by the three subjects, the researcher started the data-gathering phase by administering the questionnaires and following up on this by conducting initial interviews. From “leads” provided by information elicited through these two instruments, she was able to identify the offices where scholastic and medical records of the three subjects could be accessed. Within the same time span, the IRI was administered to them and the results immediately analysed. To validate the results of the assessment and obtain further evidence of the subjects’ learning difficulties, observation inside the classroom and in other contexts was made by the researcher. The focus of the observations was on their reading problems.

After gathering all the essential information through the specified instruments, the researcher then designed a remediation program to help the three children overcome their reading difficulties. It is important to have a wealth of background information that could be collected about a student with reading difficulties. These information shed light on the possible cause or nature of the reading problem and helped the researcher understand better the factors that contributed to the problem. It also aided the researcher in planning motivating and effective instruction.

Generally, background information was collected at the beginning of the researcher’s work with the subjects. The assessment tools most frequently used were: 1) interviews and questionnaires, informal talks with the subjects, parents, and professionals; 2) careful examination of records of previous testing, school achievement, or report cards; and 3) observation.

Interviews and questionnaires with informed and concerned people yielded information about the subjects that could not have been obtained in any other way. These two modes of gathering information from those concerned with the respondents’ reading problem proved very effective; the latter offered important information willingly frankly and fully.

For the one-on-one interviews with key informants, the researcher followed a prescribed set of questions. The researcher interviewed parents, the subject pupils or participants, their friends and classmates, and their classroom teachers. The personal and informal atmosphere of an interview encourages the sharing of valuable information in a sympathetic setting. The researcher interviewed the parents separately from the subject pupils and used different guides.

Like an interview, the questionnaire consisted of a group of questions to which parents or another professional responded. However, the list of questions was responded to in writing.

Results

The researcher adopted a back-to-basics attitude, thinking it was wise to resort to phonics instruction and begin the reading sessions with teaching the three participants letter-sound patterns, particularly Naruto and Ben 10. The pedagogical decision was based on her assessment of the three cases. She was convinced that she must begin where she found the. Although already in Kinder 2, the two boys had not yet mastered the English alphabet and lacked understanding of the link between sound patterns and letter patterns. The first sessions were devoted to the “sounding it out” activity and gradually focusing the learners’ preoccupation on noticing sound patterns/letter patterns in the major components of syllables. With Tinker Bell, she adjusted her

approach; gradually and gently, she introduced the girl to the reading/identifying of words and constructing meaning.

Poor foundation skills were seen in the case of Naruto and in Tinker Bell's case which caused some expectancy violation on the part of the researcher as the two had attended the same private school in the last two years. The reading tutorial sessions were indeed expensive in terms of time, but there was no other way. The researcher started from scratch. Poor memory, or to be more precise, poor retention and lack of focus were other characteristics exhibited by the subject pupils. There is no real learning without memory or passage into the retention of lessons in the holding memory. Memory is a mystery, a complex process involving ability to remember or recall recognition and identification (Stevick, 1996). The word itself is used in different senses, the more common of which are memory as *product*, that is, 'the sum of all changes that are lefty in the mind' as a result of what has happened to a person/learner, memory as a *place* or *site* where images are stored (as when somebody says, "There are images that get impaled in the memory"), and memory as *power* as used in this advertisement: "Three Weeks to a More Powerful Memory!"). All these senses are implicated when memory is used in connection with learning. The reminder of Stevick (1996) bears repeating: "To remember" is more than to recall what one saw or heard in the past it also means retrieval or having it available for use at an appropriate time, and for definite purposes, as when a school child is called to read the letters of the English alphabet in an oral test or recitation.

As the researcher discovered through observation, the respondents' minds were set on TV and playing than on reading. It would have been all right had the parents provided guidance and encouraged them to watch educational programs like *Sesame Street* and *Dora*, and as importantly, regulated the television-viewing of the young learners. Admittedly, the latter are part of a visually fixated generation, hence, the fascination for them of television shows. However, when not subject to some control or monitoring, television program-viewing can be a serious distraction and has deleterious effect on the learning process of young learners. Apparently, this is the problem in the case of the study's subjects. It is not served up as a cause here, but as an aggravating factor.

Emotional factors like the "psychological wound" caused by abuse or trauma (past or ongoing) could justifiably be considered as detracting from the self-confidence and self-esteem of Ben 10, especially. These result in a high affective filter (Krashen, 1981) which prevents input from being used for language acquisition and language learning. Ben 10, as found out by the researcher, has had to endure his mother's verbal abuse. Calling him names or labelling him a simpleton or imbecile ("gago" or "tanga") seems habitual with her. To overcome the damaging effect of this experience, positive feedbacks or praises whenever Ben 10 turned in a good performance or showed progress. The boy experienced anxiety not only in school, but in the home as well. This unpleasant and ego-deflating experience left a dent on his self-confidence and self-esteem.

Everything accessible for inquiry by the researcher must be taken into account. A process of elimination was employed. The respondents were also suspected of having visual and hearing impairment because it took the researcher more than two months to teach them (except Tinker Bell) the letters of the alphabet together with their phonetic sounds. This initial conjecture was not, however, borne out by medical test results or reports. It is already the responsibility of the children's parents to seek professional help for this.

English language is definitely not the native or mother tongue of the respondents, nor the language used at home. This made reading doubly difficult for them. They were learning English sounds, which were alien to them. Because the subjects indisputably showed difficulty in reading and were lagging behind their peers in school, the researcher did not have any moment to waste. She provided the supplemental service denied the subject pupils in school and relentlessly and resolutely tutored them on reading in the next three months after equipping herself with the demographic profile, home and school background, and information on the reading problems or difficulties of the three (the latter ascertained through the informal reading inventory (IRI)).

The result of the IRI supported inferences drawn from the variables examined: the subject pupils could only read with the instructional promptings of the researcher as their self-appointed tutor. This support is not unlike that provided in a typical classroom. It was clear that what the three needed was the mediation of an MKO (more knowledgeable other) to help them negotiate their way from one end of the ZPD which, as explained by Vygotsky, is the distance between the point where they could do the same independently or without help to the other. Due to the relative severity of the reading difficulty of Naruto and Ben 10, the researcher felt that she must provide more scaffolding to support or reinforce them in their struggle.

The reading difficulty of Tinker Bell was of another kind. There were fewer problems with retention, recognition and identification of letters or sounds. However, her pronunciation was faulty – a problem that needed attending to, to ward off the possibility of getting fossilized.

Discussion

Based on observations made by the researcher, file review and interviews conducted by her, the learning problems of the Tinker Bell, Naruto and Ben 10 have more to do with the nurture half of the “nature or nurture” issue than with the other half. The social inter-actionist theories, particularly the formulations of Russian Lev Vygotsky (1978), have considerable explanatory power in relation to the lack of motivation or drive, lack of focus and poor retention manifested by the three children. Their home and school environments failed to provide stimulation.

The subject pupils’ parents did not make good role models when it comes to reading. According to Lyons (1997), children at their age learn by imitation; they imitate the reading habits of their parents. Unfortunately, these children’s parents who are only high school graduates (except Ben 10’s father who finished a two-year course in college) are not habitual readers themselves. They prefer watching television programs and it does not help at all that the programs that appeal to them have no educational or instructional use for their young children.

Research has shown that children with rich experiential and language background are better prepared for beginning than children who lack such background (Grolier Encyclopaedia of Knowledge, 2007). This has been confirmed or validated again and again by subsequent research. Wallach, for example, reports on such research findings, specifically, that children from high-print homes enjoy an advantage over those who come from low-print homes, where academics or learning is concerned. Pre-school pupils who can distinguish letters of the alphabet are often from households where materials like magnetic letters and books on the alphabet can be found and serve as channels of interactions with parents.

According to the same sources, good or appropriate exposure, that is, through good materials, prepare young children for formal reading, enabling them to master auditory mastery and to discern the likenesses and differences among sounds, letters, and words. When it comes to vocabulary development, children who receive rich oral language and literary experiences from

infancy onwards have an edge; they develop a general understanding of literary and print concepts and the goals of reading. Reading to children who have yet to attend school, exposes them, in engaging and interesting ways to the sounds of language (Lyons, 1997). Rich oral interactions with adults facilitate oral comprehension abilities. As observations and interviews with the parents of Tinker Bell, Naruto, and Ben 10 and the latter themselves revealed, the abovementioned early exposure or experience was denied the children, hence, their poor skills foundation and lack of preparedness for formal reading.

Another factor that could help account for the reading difficulty of the subjects is the lack of parental involvement which is crucial to a child's development. Parental involvement are of two kinds: direct parent-child interaction (for example, sharing a story and discussing it) which contributes to facilitating learning) and participating in school's activities in the interest of their children). The parents of the children concerned failed the latter in this respect probably because they did not fully grasp the importance of their role as primary caretakers and advocates of their children's education. The boys especially came to the reading sessions unwashed and looking very untidy. If hygiene could not even be paid attention by their parents, attending to other duties like monitoring or following up on the progress of their children in school, through periodic consultation with their teachers, is even more unlikely.

Common to the three parents was their attitude of entrusting everything about the education of their children to the teachers. This is tantamount to parental Neglect, which creates an impoverished environment. As studies have shown, such an environment has developmental consequences, for example, in regard receptive language ability as reading. In their study, children who were severely neglected scored significantly lower than maltreated children on measures of language comprehension. In another related study (Culp, Watkins, Lawrence, Lets, Kelly & Rice, 2008), there was found to be a delay in both the receptive and expressive language skills among neglected children. Its developmental consequences are in fact greater for this group of children than for other groups: neglected children typically were six to nine months delayed in their development of language skills while the children belonging to the abused and neglected category were four to eight months delayed, and children identified as abused but not neglected were zero to two months delayed only. In light of these findings, the investigators concluded that "language development is particularly vulnerable in an environment devoid of parent-child social language exchange" (Culp et al., 2011), such as those previously mentioned – e.g. shared story book reading and discussion of read texts.

Their teachers, at the other end, when asked about the respondents' performance, had nothing positive or encouraging saying about the subjects; they gave the impression of accentuating the negative and of having given up on the latter. Both parents and teachers manifested lack of "disability awareness" (Gonzales, 2013). Or maybe, as this researcher would realize in the course of daily holding reading sessions with the three children for three months, it was more insensitivity to the special needs of the subjects. Simple monitoring or follow up by the parents could have made a difference. The teachers could do only so much; in a large class, they could not equally attend to the need of each member. Falling behind the others, Tinker Bell, Naruto, and Ben 10 must plod along without much help. Usually, teachers carry a load that does not allow room for providing supplemental service like tutorials. By mentioning this, the researcher does not want it to be misconstrued as an attempt to completely absolve them from responsibility for the outcome of their lack of effort.

The foregoing problem is borne out by a discovery made about the cause behind Ben 10 abandoning schooling. Despite his parents' coaxing him to return to school, he has remained resistant to the idea. He claimed he felt intimidated by his teacher. Ben 10 had nowhere to turn

to. In the home, he has known verbal abuse by his mother who labels him as “simpleton” and “imbecile”. The damaging effect of this on the child’s personality development could only be speculated about or reflected on.

Only proper assessment by specialists like an educational psychologist and a reading specialist could determine the real nature and extent or severity of the subjects’ reading disability. The services of an EENT should have been sought to eliminate the possibility of visual or hearing impairment, so that assessment could focus on other suspected problems. No effort was made in this direction. As feared by Gonzales (2013), the lack of disability awareness among educators could be a bigger problem than commonly perceived. Consequently, efforts made to adapt or adjust to students’ idiosyncratic or special needs are inadequate.

To recapitulate, the characteristics or symptoms the three respondents exhibited in this ethnographic study were: First, they were not completely ready with, or had not mastered their English alphabet when two of them were currently enrolled in kinder 2. For example, Tinker Bell had not committed to memory five letters of the twenty-six letters, and Ben 10 could only identify three out of the 26 letters. It was obvious they critically needed help. No help was forthcoming from either the home or the school. There was default on both sides.

Second, they were not aware of the phonetic sounds of each of the letters of the alphabet. They could not start reading the initial of a consonant vowel consonant word association because they did not have any knowledge of phonics. For instance, they could not start with the initial sound of *cap* simply because they did not have any idea as to how the letters of the alphabet were to be sounded.

Third, retention was a great problem because those children were wanting in motivation and would not focus on the lessons. It took the researcher three months of closely monitoring them on a day-to-day basis, and individually meeting them for an hour in reading sessions, before she was able to make them learn to read. A concrete example of the trials she willingly braced up for was her gruelling experience with Ben 10; it took the boy more than a month of memorizing the letters of the alphabet alone, another month for connecting and producing the corresponding sounds (mastering the letter-sound relationship), and half a month of the syllables like *ba as in bat, ca as in cat, da as in dad, fa as in fan, etc.* It was a slow and tedious process.

Having read the syllables, the remaining meetings were spent on teaching him to read blends on CVC words like; *bag, hag, sag, wag, tag, bat, mat, fat, sat, vat, cap, nap, gap, map, tap, lad, dad, bad, had, fan, man, can, pan, van, ham, ram, dam, jam, and yam.*

Conclusions

A review of the results and findings has led the researcher to conclude that in the ‘nature or nurture’ debate in attempts to account for some phenomena or problems, such as the subjects’ reading disability examined in this inquiry, the choice leans heavily on the ‘nurture’ half. Although there was mention of some manifestations, such as tendency to be distracted and difficulty retaining and remembering things being common to other family members (in the case of ben 10) being observed in other children in the family, the evidences seem to point to nurture. Nurture here refers to the home and school environment which, for the social inter-actionist Vygotsky, are a prime determiner of development.

It is safe to presume that Tinker Bell, Naruto and Ben 10 are, by nature, slow learners. Another way of looking at their cases is, they turned out to be slow learners because of lack of, or poor, foundation skills. They did not come from nurturing home environments, like that described and

called by Wallach (1990) “high-print” homes. Voluminous research offer evidence those preschool children who are able to distinguish among the letters of the alphabet live in homes where there are found learning/reading aids, specifically magnetized letters and alphabet name books. Lyons (1997) describes reading as a lengthy process and begins before the learner goes to school, and stresses the benefits of early oral and literacy experiences, for example, being read to by parents. Had the three young learners been blessed with a more nurturing home environment?

The school environment in which the three respondents had their earliest formal training (preschool) failed as dismally to provide support system. In fact, practically no gains were made by the subject pupils in the 2-3 years spent in the same school. They are not only **neglected children**, but also **neglected pupils**. Despite the learning/reading problems, they were all but abandoned to their own resources. Instead of receiving supplemental or individualized instruction, they were made to work with fast learners or readers in class; the latter could hardly be considered MKOs competent enough to “fill the shoes” of the teacher. The futility of the scheme adopted by the teachers is revealed by the seriousness of the learning problems of the participants after two years of preschool experience.

As pointed out by Meier Sizer as cited by Routman (2013), more than coaching or instruction is required of a kindergarten teacher. A teacher is not limited to the role of lecturing or delivering instruction; he or she must also be a hand-holder, cheerleader, and caretaker. Kindergarten teachers, according to Meier, know that learning must be personalized. It was found out in this study that the value of a successful teacher-pupil relationship cannot be overestimated; it is more important than the methods or materials used for instruction. This lends support to Sizer’s belief that “coaching” is second nature in the kindergarten classroom.

The respondents with reading difficulties need to feel that their teachers accept them as whole individuals. By the time the subject pupils were identified by the researcher as having learning disability, behavioural problems had already developed. They were low-achieving pupils, who suffered Low self esteem, lack of self-confidence, poor motivation, nervousness or anxiety, and defeatism. These negative attitudes and feelings were reinforced by the teachers’ lack of sympathetic understanding and concern. One of them, Ben 10, was traumatized by his teacher’s treatment of him and adamantly refused to return to school.

Learning from the three participants’ experience in school, the researcher consciously or deliberately avoided the same pitfalls. She offered them personalized or individualized instruction, meeting them separately on a daily basis. Knowing them to be starved for positive feedbacks, she was generous in praising whatever progress they made, and made psyching up or pep talk part of the routine. Praise was given only when the subjects did something well. An “I know you can do it” attitude on the part of the researcher was also motivational for them. The researcher as much as possible also avoided making negative comments, which were powerful disincentives to learning.

She also communicated her interest in, and concern for them as persons by engaging them in heart-to-heart talks without their being aware of it and listening to their narratives and complaints about their classmates and teachers. Teaching, particularly the young, is not from head to head, but more from heart to heart. This approach of the researcher as mediator or tutor fostered intrinsic motivation in the participants. They came to realize intuitively that learning is its own reward.

In relation to that, these pupils with reading difficulties also needed to feel secure in the instructional setting. One way to instil this feeling is to start each instructional session in the same way so that they have a sense of routine. The researcher saw to this.

Security involves a sense of personal space. To this end, the researcher transformed her bedroom into an “acquisition-rich” classroom, changed the colour of the walling, and bought some charts and a blackboard. Her renovation efforts paid off: She saw sustained and intense interest in Naruto and Tinker Bell, most especially. The latter hardly made any absence. She looked forward to the reading sessions. Emotional security also was crucial for allowing these subjects to take such risks as reading difficult material. Unlike Ben 10’s mother who would “blow her top” because she expected the boy to be letter- or word-perfect at once, the researcher assured them that making some mistakes was all right and that nobody is perfect; learners would take the kinds of instructional risks that are needed to become good readers.

The subjects with reading difficulties were in desperate need of experiencing success. Too often, their lives have been filled with unrelieved failure. The researcher planned lessons so that tasks could be accomplished successfully. She did her utmost to build a solid relationship with her three charges. It was important that the researcher believe in the capabilities or promise of her respondents. If the researcher expected her subjects to succeed, these subjects’ performance must improve. As Gonzales (2013) asserts, the panacea sought for learning disabilities has less to do with ‘wonder’ methods or sophisticated assessment and instructional instruments, and more with parents’ and teachers’ attitudes. Parents and teachers are the primary caretakers in their domains, the home and the school, respectively. Failure on their part to provide the crucial support system for children with special needs spells tragic waste.

The only weapons the researcher worked with were patience, commitment, and sincere interest in her respondents. These sustained her through those three months of reading sessions. In the early days, she almost decided to give up from her first taste of frustration and despair, but drew strength from Benjamin Franklin’s line that states that he who can have patience can have what he will and although it was bitter, its fruit is sweet.

References

- Gonzales, V. (2013). *Assessment and Instruction of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students with or At-Risk of Learning Problems: From Research to Practice*. Needham Heights, MA 02194.
- Krashen, S. D. (1981). *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Lenneberg, E. H. (1967). *Biological foundations of language*. New York, NY: Wiley.
- Lenneberg, E. H. (1969). On explaining language. *Science*, 164(3880), 635-643.
- Lyon, G. R. (1997). *Why Reading Is Not A Natural Process*. Education and the Workforce Committee, U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C.
- Sowell, T. (2011). *Late-Talking Children*. New York: Basic Books, a Division of Harper Collins Publishers.
- Steinberg, D. D. (1993). *An Introduction to Psycholinguistics*. London: Longman Group UK Limited.
- Stevick, E. W. (1996). *Memory, Meaning and Method: A View of Language Teaching*. (2nd Ed.). Boston: Heinle & Heinle.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *The Role of Play in Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 92-104.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Problems of Method*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 52-75.