

Educating Linguistically Handicapped Pupils in Cameroon: Stakes and Challenges

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Received: July 23, 2020 Accepted: September 3, 2020 Published: September 8, 2020

doi:10.5296/elr.v6i2.17410

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5296/elr.v6i2.17410>

Abstract

This paper centres on evaluating the education of linguistically handicapped pupils (deaf) in two specialized institutions in the Southwest region of Cameroon. It is an analysis of the education carried out in specialized institutions for the deaf in providing them with basic education so as to meet the EFA goals and to attain the objectives of development for the millennium. With the conviction that education is crucial for their development, Ephphata Institute for the Deaf (EID) Kumba and Buea School for the Deaf (BSD) institutions are examined to assess teaching programmes offered to these children. Analysis proved that these points are relevant for effective teaching to take place: A curriculum which is relevant and can be adapted to provide quality education in order to increase participation in schooling and improve the quality of the education provided. Training which will improve teachers' skills so that they can best perform their functions. This descriptive survey made use of a questionnaire, an observation guide, interviews, and checklist. The sample of the study was 12 teachers and 130 pupils purposively selected from the two schools under investigation. The self-delivery method was used to collect data. Data analysis was descriptive with the use of frequency counts and percentages. The findings revealed that the national curriculum was rigid and extensive for teachers (75%). The most important challenge the teachers faced was on how to adapt curriculum contents (83%). Solutions to these problems are proposed.

Keywords: Evaluation, Deaf education, Curriculum, Adaptation, Tasks, Skills

1. Introduction and the Problem

This study is registered amongst the general problems of special education in Cameroon. This is so because Cameroon is determined to provide quality education to all her population. Since Cameroon signed the agreement to grant access to quality education, many special schools for the deaf were created. This notwithstanding, deaf pupils do not enjoy basic

quality education. Statistics from the World Health Organisation (W.H.O) reveal that their illiteracy rate stands at 40%. This gives room to ask the question if specialised institutions for the deaf in Cameroon have the capacity to provide quality basic education to her population.

This study evaluates the dynamism of the system and models used in these centres. Assessment which can only come from such institutions presuppose using these centres and its learners as the focus of our research. Consequently, two institutions in the Southwest region of Cameroon served as our base and provided responses to all preoccupations.

In Cameroon, linguistically handicapped pupils do not respond as adequately to the environment as would normal children. They still feel isolated and rejected from some social activities even after completing primary school. This affects their educational, emotional and social growth. Some factors are responsible for this problem:

1. Curricula is rigid and extensive. It does not adequately prepare pupils to respond to their environment and its challenges. There is a clear need to review and reform relevant curricula in order to provide quality education. Socio-economic, political, cultural and technological changes are increasingly transforming educational practices across the world. Improved curricula relevant to the life of these learners can increase participation in schooling and improve the quality of education provided.

2. Teaching deaf pupils is an extremely complex task (Bryant & Bryant, 2008). This is because the classroom has pupils with complex challenges apart from being deaf. Some of them are slow learners, mentally retarded, hyperactive, emotionally challenged and others experience low socioeconomic status among others. With such a diverse deaf pupil population, effective teaching and differentiated instruction is necessary to target each pupil's individual needs in the classroom. Consequently, teachers need to employ a variety of teaching methods, tasks, skills and activities to meet the different learning needs of auditive children. In order for them to succeed, teachers are expected to grasp the concept of special education such that they will be vest with all the indicators and be able to use the necessary skills that will facilitate learning.

The appropriateness of having deaf pupils been taught in specialised institutions has been challenged both from a human rights perspective and from the view of effectiveness (Ainscow, Farrell and Tweddle, 2000). Examining this reality prompted many to determine the best manner to educate these children. As a result, much legislation and litigation occurred to define and shape special education.

One of the challenges faced today in Cameroon is educating linguistically challenged pupils in special schools. This is because most of these teachers have inadequate professional training in inclusive education. Consequently, deaf learners are increasingly finding themselves in disadvantaged situations that stem mostly from lack of competence from teachers and specific learning needs (Kapp, 2002). Remediation of these problems is a highly specialized subject area which requires specific knowledge and skills from teachers. According to Kapp (2002), many teachers in special education have little knowledge or experience working with deaf children. Without knowledge of human development and professional skills in instructional design and delivery, most of them face difficulties in their classrooms (Yuh, 2014).

Recently, in Cameroon, government has implemented many educational provisions for pupils with special educational needs (SEN), backed by policies and international statements. Despite the ratification of a number of international conventions and laws to support inclusive education, inadequate actions have been taken to implement these laws in Cameroon. Few government and private institutions have been set up for the training of teachers to handle pupils with diverse needs in Cameroon. This study is designed to respond to such problems through the identification of deaf centres in which education programmes are being carried out.

The researcher, perhaps caught up in the excitement of it all, but also with genuine commitment, felt the need to share this realistic view of what the future holds for deaf children, their parents, and educators of these pupils in Cameroon. Given the sense of new beginnings, it is important to evaluate the education of deaf children from the perspective of what is happening in Cameroon. As far as the current state of the art allows, implications are drawn from teachers, pupils, parents, educational administrators and other gate keepers. The study was embarked with the following objectives.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

The study sought:

- To assess curricula. In order to provide quality education to deaf pupils, there is need to evaluate curriculum relevant to the life of the learner. This can increase participation in schooling and improve the quality of the education provided.
- To explore the different tasks and skills teachers used in adapting the curriculum.
- To propose solutions to these problems.

The above objectives led to the following research questions.

1.2 Research Questions

The following research questions were used in collecting data.

- 1). Can curriculum be adapted to meet the needs of linguistically challenged pupils in Cameroon?
- 2). Did the teachers use appropriate tasks and skills to effectively adapt the curriculum?
- 3). What can be done to ameliorate the teaching process?

1.3 Literature Review

Review of related literature covers the conceptual, theoretical and empirical framework within which the present study was carried out. The conceptual frame examined concepts that are related to the topic. The theoretical frame focused on Reigeluth's Instructional Design Theory which supports the research in question. The empirical frame looked into previous research studies on similar topics and their short comings.

1.3.1 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual frame examined concepts that are related to the topic such as curriculum adaptation and the various tasks and skills employed by teachers during lessons.

1.3.1.1 Curriculum Adaptation

Majasan (1995) defines a teacher as one who teaches (especially with young ones), builds up, instructs, trains and guides them for healthy growth and stable adult life. The teacher is also

someone who instructs others through activities, materials and guidance that facilitate learning in either formal or informal situations.

Shulman (1987) states that adapting curriculum requires sound reasoning on what to adapt (curricula content, textbooks, teaching material, methods, and learning environment) and how to adapt it (instruction and explanation) and with what to adapt (by using their knowledge base, facts, principles, beliefs, and experiences of inclusive practices), to provide valid reason for any choice made, actions, and inactions taken during instructional adaptation.

Steenkamp and Steenkam (1992) posits that deaf learners do not achieve equally hence, instructions have to suit each child's ability. It therefore requires the teacher to do a lot of preparatory work. The teacher has to adapt activities to ensure learners' participation. Without the educational skills, it would be difficult for the teacher to succeed in such tasks.

Teachers need to examine the content of what is to be taught and determine curriculum modifications and alternates for assessment (Turnbull & Turnbull 1998). To do this, they must have knowledge of how to adapt teaching methods, assign tasks and use instructional materials that can best suit deaf learners. This concept is useful in this study because it throws light on issues of practical classroom situations.

1.3.1.2 Teachers Tasks and Teaching Skills

Teaching involves a range of goals and processes for which an effective teacher should develop a catalogue of strategies or skills to promote learning. Wolfendale (1992) states that the skills and expertise needed in teaching deaf pupils are different from the teaching skills required for normal learners. Teaching skills include the different techniques, approaches and strategies that would help the teachers to plan and impart instruction, provide appropriate reinforcement and effective classroom management skills, as well as preparation and use of instructional materials. Professional skills include the techniques, strategies and approaches such as information retrieving and management skills, interpersonal skills, counselling skills, which teachers will use to assist children.

To do this, teachers must have knowledge of how to adapt teaching methods and the type of instructional materials that can best suit learners. This concept is useful because it illuminates this study.

1.3.2 Reigeluth's Instructional Design Theory

Reigeluth's Instructional Design Theory (1999) is design- oriented. The theory holds that instruction can be broken down into more detailed components. When lessons are broken down into smaller steps and teachers make use of concrete materials, pupils with special needs also benefit from the lessons. Emphasis lies on how to teach and bring people to learn. Most teachers who teach deaf children face difficulties because they might not have knowledge or understand which particular materials to use to assist these children.

Deaf children require modification of lessons or adaptations and specialized teaching materials to facilitate their learning in all subjects. Modification need professional knowledge that will facilitate the design of curriculum materials, specialized teaching strategies, behaviour management techniques and specially designed equipment or facilities. This theory is relevant to the study because its application enables teachers to understand the type of materials and methods to use that will help children with special needs understand better

regardless of differences in abilities. If this theory is applied in a classroom with deaf learners, it will explicate and enhance effective learning.

1.3.3 Empirical Framework

The following previous works from other researchers was used to support and improve on this work.

Nwendo (2011) carried out a study on the challenges faced by teachers in teaching autistic children in inclusive classrooms in South Africa. The study focused on classroom behaviour management strategies. A case study design was adopted for this study. The sample comprised 50 respondents who were purposively sampled from the entire population of 75. Questionnaires, interview schedules, focused group discussions and observation schedules were used. Results of this study indicated that lack of a special curriculum in the special unit for children with autism was a hindrance to teaching these children. The government has to monitor the implementation of inclusive education so that the curriculum should suit every learner.

Mcheka (2009) highlight challenges faced by teachers of learners with disabilities with particular reference to children with intellectual disabilities in Malawi, so that policy makers can provide necessary support for efficiency. The sample consisted of 196 teachers drawn from some selected schools in Tifala Province. The simple random sampling technique was used to select the teachers and the questionnaire was the main instrument in the study. Findings of the study revealed that there was insufficient statistics on the number of children with learning difficulties, leading to a challenge in the provision of education for them. Long distances and lack of transportation allowances was a major problem since teachers had to travel about 5km to meet the children. Teachers also faced problems of lack of support from parents and regular teachers who were not trained to teach these children. These teachers wish that a fully staffed specialist service be provided and the construction of more resource rooms to facilitate the programs of children with learning difficulties.

2. Methodology of Data Collection

In this study the quantitative and qualitative descriptive survey (mixed method design) was employed with the help of observation checklist, interview guide and questionnaires as instruments for data collection. The descriptive survey is concerned with conditions that exist, practice that prevail, point of view or attitudes that are held, processes that are on-going, effects that are being felt or trends that are developing. To evaluate the education of deaf pupils in some institutions in the Southwest region of Cameroon, the study was done in the following deaf schools: Ephphatha Institute for the Deaf (EID) Kumba and Buea School for the Deaf (BSD). These schools had pupils from classes 1 to 6. Interest focused on deaf pupils found in strictly deaf institutions. Ephphatha and BSD fitted our study. Emphasis dwelt on class six pupils for reasons that they were in an examination class preparing to write the Common Entrance and First School Leaving Certificate Examinations and also because they were older and used to the school environment. The population of this study consisted of 12 teachers from both institutions. 8 teachers were deaf and 4 hearing. The study registered 130 deaf pupils. It was seen that in Ephphatha Institute for the deaf, primary 1 to 6 had a total number of 67 pupils. Buea School for the deaf had 63 pupils from classes 1 to 6 mixed with

boys and girls of varying ages. The questionnaire and interview guide were semi-structured to obtain quantitative and qualitative data. Observation checklist was established to naturally witness what was happening in the classroom. The self-delivery method was used with the researcher collecting data from each school. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics.

3. Findings

Findings from the data collected through questionnaires, interviews and observations in classrooms reveal that:

1). Can curriculum be adapted to meet the needs of linguistically challenged pupils in Cameroon?

Out of the 12 teachers that were questioned, interviewed and observed 9 (75%) faced difficulties in adapting the curriculum to suit the needs of deaf pupils due to its inflexible nature.

2). Did the teachers use appropriate tasks and skills to effectively adapt curriculum contents in order to teach deaf pupils?

10 (83%) out of 12 teachers faced serious challenges with the various tasks and skills employed to adapt the curriculum through such activities as modifying, adding or deleting, reorganising content and addressing omissions. Hence, teachers felt inadequately prepared and equipped to teach deaf pupils.

4. Discussion of Findings

Discussion of findings deals with the presentation and analysis of data gathered on the field using the materials and method already described above. The details are organized in accordance with the objectives and research questions posed.

4.1 Research question 1: To verify if curriculum can be adapted to meet the needs of linguistically challenged pupils in Cameroon?

Findings of this research show that 9 (75%) out of 12 teachers faced difficulties in adapting the curriculum to suit the needs of deaf pupils due to its inflexible nature. Deaf pupils in Cameroon experience a range of barriers to learning and participation in school. These barriers are located within the curriculum, the learners, teachers, the centres of learning, the educational system, families and within the broader social, economic and political context. Barriers manifest themselves in different ways and become obvious when learning breakdown occurs. The educational provisions for deaf pupils in special institutions remain basically segregative and command a low priority area for the government and the country as a whole. Institutional discrimination against deaf children is ingrained throughout the present educational system.

4.2 Research question 2: To verify if teachers used appropriate tasks and skills to effectively adapt the curriculum?

Findings from this study show that 10 (83%) out of 12 teachers faced serious challenges with the various tasks and skills employed to adapt the curriculum through such activities as modifying, adding or deleting content, reorganising content, addressing omissions, limited time to complete task and maintaining children's attention during lessons. Teachers had limited competence in the above six adaptive teaching practices. Due to these challenges

most teachers felt inadequately prepared and equipped to teach deaf pupils. Through the process of adaptation, the teacher had to personalise the text, made it a better teaching resource, and individualised it for learners through the following activities:

1) Modifying Content

Teachers had an enormous task during the teaching process. They were obliged to change some of the contents in the textbooks because it did not suit the target learners, perhaps because of factors relating to the learners' physical, social or cultural background.

2) Adding or Deleting Content

Textbooks, especially the English reader contained too much for the programme. Whole units had to be dropped or omitted. For example, a course which focused primarily on listening and speaking skills was omitted.

3) Reorganising Content

The teachers had to reorganise the syllabus of the book and arranged the units in what they considered a more suitable order. Within a unit, the teachers decided not to follow the sequence of activities in the unit, but to reorder them for particular reasons.

4) Addressing Omissions

Texts which omitted items that the teacher felt was important were adjusted. For example, the teacher added vocabulary activities or grammar activities to a unit.

5) Limited Time to Complete Task

Timing was another great challenge for the teachers. They needed more time in presenting information visually as well as in sequential explanatory text for pupils. A series of short tasks were set to be completed in 10 minutes to match pupils' span of concentration. Extended tasks took half an hour or more. The biggest challenge was on how to organize time. It was difficult for lessons to be finished promptly; exercises could hardly be practiced against the clock. Hence, teachers always rushed to catch up.

6) Maintaining Children'S Attention During Lessons

Gaining and maintaining children's attention during lessons was an important ingredient for effective teaching practice which the teachers found very challenging. For this reason, a sound theory of instruction would have no use without a teacher getting on well with pupils, teaching adaptively, and important of them all, gaining learners' attention to listen to the teacher's instructions. Teachers' lack of competence in this item implied that majority of deaf pupils' attention were not addressed in the classroom. In all, solutions to these problems are proposed.

4.3 Research question 3: To propose ways of ameliorating the teaching process

Solutions are seen as remedies to facilitate and improve the education of deaf pupils in Cameroon. A flexible curriculum which allows for appropriate adaptation with a content that is relevant to real life and takes cognisance of the language background of deaf learners will be vital. If deaf schools have to follow the same regular curriculum, they should be given opportunities to participate in curriculum planning. When planning a curriculum unit, topic or modules, planners should think of including a disability dimension. They should ensure that disability issues are in the curriculum. Children with special needs should receive additional

instructional support in the context of the regular curriculum, not a different one. The guiding principle should be to provide children with the same education at the same time making provisions for additional assistance and support which they require.

All personnel involved in teaching deaf pupils should be well trained and be bilingual in spoken (written) English and sign language. Teachers have to acquire competence in strategies to achieve effective teaching. The major challenge lies in providing in-service training to teachers. Education managers need to ensure that they provide training in appropriate areas such as sign language, deaf culture, bilingual-bicultural approach and counselling workshops for teachers, assistants, parents etc, to better empower and equip them in order to communicate appropriately and effectively, and to assist deaf learners in other areas.

5. Discussion of Findings

Results of the study show that the national curriculum was rigid and extensive for teachers (75%). Hence, teachers faced difficulties in curriculum adaptations. As a result, the teachers had to adapt teaching methods so that deaf pupils could grasp the lessons. They mostly used common strategies to help pupils within certain areas of the curriculum. Deaf schools in Cameroon follow the regular curriculum with other normal schools. Findings indicate that the curriculum is extensive and demanding, centrally designed and rigid, thereby leaving little flexibility for adaptations. Deaf children learn the same subjects as children in ordinary schools. Evaluating the whole curriculum, its timing for completion is unrealistic for deaf pupils since the teaching and learning processes are slowed down because of the various styles and techniques involved for better understanding.

The most important challenge teachers faced was on how to adapt curriculum contents (83%). To support the teaching and learning process they needed to enhance teaching through such activities as modifying, adding or deleting content, reorganising content, addressing omissions, managing limited time to complete task and maintaining children's attention during lessons. The national curriculum changed the task of the teacher as far as content was concerned. Teachers experienced enormous pressure since they were expected to acquire enough knowledge to teach the whole curriculum content. They needed good knowledge of subject matter to teach deaf pupils since they had to select what was appropriate and this proved difficult because their own knowledge too was limited. Note was taken on the different tasks undertaken during teaching and the way pupils were managed since they exhibited non-productive behaviors which often interfered with their learning at school. In order to effectively teach deaf pupils from classes one to six, all teachers were obliged to know the subjects, appropriate teaching methods, sign language and curriculum areas. Teachers had to understand the ways deaf pupils learned. One key aspect which formed the basis of observation schedules was the ability and skills teachers developed to adapt textbooks.

Deaf education has its specific didactic strategies which should be explicitly described and codified for use where need be. Activity-based instruction was difficult, since it had to be used in different ways. This method acted as a framework for the presentation of instructions. Teaching involved a range of goals and processes which the teacher had to develop a catalogue of skills and strategies. The classroom was a challenging place for deaf pupils. It

was difficult for them to sit still, listen quietly and concentrate all day long in school. Hence, these children required effective teaching methods adopted by their teachers relevant to their auditory conditions. Teachers used direct instructional methods, experimentation and group learning methods during instructions.

6. Conclusion

From an overview of the present study conducted in two specialised institutions for the deaf in the Southwest Region of Cameroon, it was discovered that teachers faced difficulties in teaching deaf pupils. Teachers had some challenges in adapting the curriculum because it was rigid and extensive for deaf pupils. The range of curricular activities for deaf children in special schools was enormous. Due to these difficulties, adaptations of different methods to suit deaf pupils seemed to be problematic. In this situation, how could teachers teach better and meet the needs of deaf pupils in classrooms? Findings hold that most of the teachers had not yet received training on how to teach deaf pupils. As a result, they faced difficulties in adapting tasks and the necessary skills to be employed in the classrooms. This study therefore suggests that teachers be empowered with skills in order to make learning possible and also to improvise by developing various kinds of hand-made learning materials in order to improve on the overall quality of deaf education in Cameroon. The work highlights the importance of pre- service and in-service training of teachers in order for deaf education to become a reality in the investigated schools in particular and national education system in general.

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