A STUDY OF EARLY INTERVENTION GUIDELINES FOR CHILDHOOD SPECIAL EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

Studies showing developmental delays in infants and children with visual impairments have triggered early childhood special education studies for this population. Early childhood special education guidelines for visually impaired infants and children range from individualized services to personnel preparation issues while all display certain limitations in practice. This study focuses on the problems faced in the implementation of these guidelines and some possible solutions regarding these limitations, in light of a thorough literature review. These guidelines included steps to be taken in determining the developmental patterns of visually impaired young children, providing instruction in all areas of development, personnel preparation, assessment and evaluation as well as mainstreaming practices and several solutions to overcome barriers were proposed. Then, the data were analyzed thematically which were preset in relation with research questions. Through the discussion, environmental inaccessibility, inflexibility of financial guidelines in schools and lack of training among teachers were identified as major school challenges for education of students with visual impairment. This discussion is believed to shed light on planning and implementing effective support services for infants and children with visual impairments.

KEY WORDS: Visual Impairment, Early Childhood Special Education, Program Guidelines.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to identify challenges that students with visual disabilities faced in the primary schools of Weldeya town in Ethiopia. Principals, students with visual disabilities and teachers were invited to take part in the study. With this, a phenomenological design was used to investigate the experience of participants regarding school challenges of students with visual impairment. The researcher used a semi-structured interview, focused group discussion and observation checklist to gather data.

The history of the education of the blind in India has been profoundly anchored into the past Christianity. For this, the India n Orthodox Church has played a matchless role to educate the blind for the purpose of church rituals (Zelalem, 2014). As Sergew and Tadesse (1970) noted, the church education derives its distinctive character from the unique Christian heritage of the country. With this, again, India is the only African country to have preserved Christianity as its own religion for over thousands of years. The religious heritage, therefore, contributed for the country to have its own written language and literature which makes the country still unique in Africa. For this, the widely scattered monastic tradition which are dated back to the fifth century enlightened particularly those children of the nobility who were visually impaired (Binns, 2013; Tekeste, 2006; Zelalem, 2014).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Sergew and Tadesse (1970), noted in their historical record, in the early Ethiopian church schools, children were taught how to read and write in Geez and Amharic. Nevertheless, to address the different need of the blind, the church adapted oral rehearsal as an alternative to reading and writing Geez which was the original language of the religious rituals. It is worth doing to highlight that the Church was fully aware of the necessity to train its own future leaders in such a way that they fulfilled their duties and responsibilities in the society (Binns, 2013; Tekeste, 2006). Such education played a wider role for the increment of the national literacy rate and provided more instruction for adults as well as young pupils including persons with visual disabilities (Zelalem, 2014; Tekeste, 2006; Binns, 2013).

As Tekeste (2006) reported, until the time of emperor Menelik II (1889–1913), education was determined mainly by the church. However, following the introduction of the Western civilization to the country, American Missionaries established the first school for the Blind in the history of special education in Ethiopia at the town of DembiDolo in 1925. The second and third special schools for persons with visual disabilities at Entoto and Kasanchis around Addis Ababa.In 1948 by Swedish Missionaries and the government in collaboration with Mennonite Missionaries respectively (Teshome, 2006). The schools started their operation by catering a very few children with visual disabilities by importing teaching materials from America and other Western countries in the form of aid (Teshome, 2006).

However, neither of this nor other similar beliefs described about the population with visual disabilities has no well-established research findings (Johnsen 2001). Persons with visual impairments are a diverse group in the society. Hence, they are thin and fat, tall and short, fun loving and irritable. They have all the characteristics found in any group of the society in which they live (Degefa, 2001). The common characteristics that persons with visual impairment viewed differently by different researchers. For instance, Hyvarainnen (1996), states, as blind persons exhibit characteristics such as eye pressing, head banging which is a sign of understimulation. Whereas, the report of Scholl (1986) reveals as blind person posses no characteristics specific to themselves as blind persons and show no typical reaction to being blind. He further states that like all people, they are the

products of their own unique heredity and environment and are individuals. Thus, it is not possible to generalize about any common characteristics of persons with visual impairments.

The non-disabled persons' refusal to accept the individual difference that persons with disabilities have possessed; and the deep- rooted misunderstanding "disability is inability," denied children with special needs to equal opportunity of education (Tirussew, 2005; UNESCO, 1994). Exclusion of students with visually impaired from any school participation subsequently, has a devastating impact on the physical, social, academic and psychological wellbeing of the group (Degefa, 2001).

As Mastropieri& Scruggs (2010) well noted, most of the barriers associated with education of children with visual disabilities are negative attitudes. As with society in general, these attitudes and stereotypes often stem from lack of knowledge and understanding about the group. The attitudes and abilities of general education teachers can also be taken as major limitations in the process of education of children with visual disabilities (Sherrill, 1993).

As the Ministry of Education, (2012) reported, in Ethiopia, training teachers to understand and work with children with disabilities is often inadequate, fragmented and uncoordinated. If educators have negative attitudes toward students with special needs, then, children will unlikely receive a satisfactory, quality education (Tirussew, 2005). Negative attitudes held by teachers, school administrators, overprotection by parents and lack of motivation of students with visual impairments themselves are critical barriers that hinder their full school participation (Sherrill, 1993; Mastropieri& Scruggs, 2010).

EARLY INTERVENTION GUIDELINES FOR CHILDREN WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS

Anumber of authors have addressed certain guidelines pertaining to effective early childhood special education programs for visually impaired children (CEC, 1994; Corn, &Hatlen, 1996; Davidson, & Harrison, 2000; Salt et al., 2005). These guidelines mainly point to issues involving children, their families, and service providers such as providing services on an individualized basis, providing instruction on all developmental areas, concentrating on family involvement, using suitable assessment tools and procedures, dealing with mainstreaming issues, and providing professional development opportunities to specialists working in the field. Despite their importance in programs for the visually impaired, studies like Hatton's (2001) have pointed the lack of these guidelines in service deliverythe lack of effective service delivery for children with visual impairments calls for a discussion on what route should be taken in the future. The most important areas of concern are discussed below.

The Developmental Patterns of Children with Visual Impairments: Studies on the developmental patterns of visually impaired young children mainly show significant delays in all developmental areas compared to their peers (Brambring, 2001, 2006, 2007; Celeste, 2005; Özyürek, 1995; Salt et al., 2005; Shon, 1999; Skellenger, & Hill, 1994; Skellenger, &Rosenblum, 1997; Troster, &Brambring, 1994). Nevertheless, a few

studies show opposite findings, claiming that these children on average pass through developmental milestones at or around the same time as their peers (Norris, Spaulding &Brodie, 1957 cited in Shon, 1999; Ferrell, 1990 cited in Deitz, & Ferrell, 1994). Some authors believe that it is nearly impossible to determine the developmental patterns of visually impaired young children due to lack of research and those factors such as the etiology, level, and onset of disability exert critical effects on development (Celeste, 2005; Davidson, & Harrison, 2000). Thus, since early intervention programs are developed on the basis of developmental characteristics of children (Dale, & Salt, 2007), more research is needed to determine the developmental patterns of children with visual impairments.

The Developmental Domains of Concern: Early intervention programs for children with visual impairments mostly focus on orientation and mobility, play skills, and daily living skills (Goergen, 1997; Lanners, Piccioni, Fea, &Goergen, 1997). Orientation and mobility is one area that diff erentiates visual impairment from all other disabilities and is one in which these children seek the most support (Brambring, 2001, 2006; Celeste, 2002; McAllister, & Gray, 2006; McHugh, & Lieberman, 2003). Providing a home environment to children with no obstacles is a key issue for orientation and mobility (Lowry, & Hatton, 2002; Özyürek, 1995; Shon, 1999). It is a critical developmental area for its effects on other areas of development. Therefore, early intervention programs for this group of children need to focus on the development of orientation and mobility skills. As such, orientation and mobility is among the most tackled areas of intervention in developed countries (DeMario, & Caruso, 2001; McAllister, & Gray, 2006).

Surely, this does not mean that other areas of development should be left behind because research shows that all areas affect one another (Recchia, 1997; Rettig, 1994; Skellenger, & Hill, 1994; Skellenger, &Rosenblum, 1997; Troster, &Brambring, 1994). Thus services should focus on all developmental areas, perhaps with extra emphasis on orientation and mobility.

Parent-Child Interaction: The important role of mother-child interactions and the need to shape early childhood special education accordingly have led visual impairment research towards the issue (Behl, & Akers, 1996; CEC, 1994; Dale, & Salt, 2007; Loots, Devise, &Sermijn, 2003). Several studies found significant relationships between mother expectations and involvement and the development of their visually impaired children (Baird, & Mayfield, 1997; Craig, 1996; Dote-Kwan, 1995; Jacob, 2005, Loots et al., 2003; Recchia, 1998). These studies have at least three implications for early intervention programs for the visually impaired. First, each mother-child dyad has its own dynamics coupled with its unique needs and thus early intervention programs should be tailored to these dynamics and needs. Secondly, mothers should be shown how and when to react to their children in different circumstances in order to meet their children's needs, which is believed to support children in gaining daily living skills. Lastly, the expectations of mothers, as well as other family members should be formed on the basis of the child's best performance in order to help the family create a rich learning environment for the child.

Personnel Preparation: The primary specialties working with children with visual impairments are teachers of the visually impaired and orientation and mobility specialists. Family counselors, speech therapists and physical therapists are among the other service providers for this population. These specialists need to be aware of the developmental patterns of babies and children with visual impairments, the impact of vision on child development and the effects of vision loss on the child, the family and the society. Specialists also require the knowledge and skills for collaborating with families and other service providers, assessing the needs of children and families and working with children with multiple disabilities (CEC, 1994). Studies show that services for young children with visual impairments among developed countries run on a local basis rather than on specific guidelines and that personnel preparation programs and the number of service providers are few in number (Denni- son, 2000; Dote-Kwan, Chen, & Hughes, 2001; Gray, 2005; Pogrund et al., 1996; Summers, Leigh, & Arnold, 2006). One way of dealing with personnel issues is providing pre-service and in-service programs through distance education. Studies show that distance education programs are effective in training personnel at both undergraduate and graduate levels (Griff in-Shirley, Almon, & Kelley, 2002; Walker, & Bozeman, 2002). Therefore, alternative models such as distance education should be considered in preparing personnel to work in early childhood special education programs for children with visual impairments.

Developmental Assessment: Developmental assessment is another area of concern in providing services to children with visual impairments (Brambring, &Troster, 1994). According to U.S. laws, the assessment tools should not by their characteristics, inhibit children's performance. Literature, on the other hand, shows that such tools lack in number and quality. Some of the widely used assessment tools for children with visual impairments are the Reynell-Zinkin Developmental Scales (Fazzi et al., 2005) and the BOS-BLIND (Brambring, &Troster, 1994), which have been criticized for their psychometric properties (Brambring, &Troster, 1994; Dale, & Salt, 2007; Vervloed, Hamers, van Mens-Weisz, & de Vosse, 2000). Th e assessment of functional vision also displays certain downfalls (Vervloed, Ormel, &Schiphorst, 2001; Hatton, 2001). The main reason for this seems to be the verbal and nonverbal responses needed to assess functional vision, which may be very diff icult to get from children under 18 months (Pogrund et al., 1996). Thus, there is a need for developing valid and reliable assessment tools for young children with visual impairments in all developmental areas as well as functional vision.

Mainstreaming: It is the main aim of education to help the visually impaired become a part of society beginning from the early years of life, which results in the need to analyze preschool mainstreaming practices. Mainstreaming can best be practiced in environments "natural" to children with and without visual impairments. Richert's (2007) discussion in this matter is interesting for he believes that the laws do not fit with the term "natural environment" in education. He states that according to the law, natural environments are to be the least restrictive ones but that most mainstreaming practices lack the necessary physical and social conditions that make the environment natural for these children. Headds that, if this is so, perhaps a separate

school for the visually impaired children where the conditions are met may be much better for these children (Richert, 2007). Parallel with Richert, Chen (1999) believes that laws leave parents with only limited options to place their children in natural environments. These views show that mainstreaming needs time and effort to be successful and these practices should be questioned on the basis of arguments such as Richert's. The positive consequences of such efforts can be seen in the literature (D'Allura, 2002; Ek, Fernell, & Jacobson, 2005; McGaha, &Farran, 2001).

Early Childhood Special Education for Children with Visual Impairments in India

A number of efforts for the visually impaired are currently taking place in India but the main problem seems to be the lack of research and practice in the area of early childhood special education. Research is very limited due to lack of university programs (GaziÜniversitesiEğitimBilimleriEnstitüsü, 2004) and practice takes place only at a few special education schools in some of the metropolitans. There isn't any research to date that has questioned the efficacy of these programs. Thus, more research and practice are needed for the early intervention of children with visual impairments in India.

CONCLUSION

This study focused on the factors that are considered critical for the early education of children with visual impairments. According to this review, effort is needed in the area of determining the developmental patterns of children with visual impairments in order to tailor programs to each child's and family's needs. Secondly, programs should be designed to cover all developmental areas with an emphasis on orientation and mobility skills and parent-child interaction. An equally important factor is developing sound assessment tools to determine the developmental characteristics of children with visual impairments, since valid and reliable measurement will lead to better program planning and implementation. There is also a personnel issue where the field seeks more specialists with the necessary knowledge and skills to work with children with visual impairments and their families. Increasing the concept of collaboration among team members should be a center is-sue in personnel preparation programs using alternative models such as distance education. Mainstreaming is another issue to be considered in the field of visual impairment and more work is needed to address the conditions that make the environment natural for these children. It is noteworthy to say that all findings related to these factors should be based on empirical evidence. Last, but not least, one should keep in mind that program effectiveness is closely linked with the belief of all stakeholders that children with visual impairments can grow and learn just like their peers.

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