

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Understanding Individual Differences in Ability and Implications for Classroom Management in Primary Schools in Owerri Municipal Council of Imo State, Nigeria

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Abstract:

The need to identify the different ability level of learners in a classroom cannot be over-emphasized. This is especially so because each student has a unique personality from others. Any attempt to ignore the ability levels of learners can result to serious impediment to effective teaching and learning. The paper sets out to investigate the individual differences in ability among pupils in the primary school and their implications for classroom management. Available literature in the subject matter shows a preponderance of individual differences in ability levels among pupils which certainly affect teaching and learning in the schools. The paper argues that in a typical classroom setting, the teacher needs to provide for various ability levels of learners from the time to time to achieve success the descriptive survey design was adopted and a simple random sampling technique was used in selecting a study sample of 250 primary school teachers from a population of 2,705. The teachers responded to a structured instrument tagged individual differences in learning utilities and implications in classroom management (IDICM). Results from the data analysis showed that there are a variety of individual differences in the classroom. The findings also revealed that the teachers' supportive attitude is required for effective classroom management. However, there are areas where the teachers' supportive attitude is still in doubt. Recommendations were proffered as follows: (i) Teachers should vary their methods of teaching to encourage all shades of ability levels (ii) Classroom instruction should be adapted to cover pupils potentials, interest and needs (iii) Teachers should encourage pupils to learn at their own pace among others' recommendations.

Keywords: *Individuals differences, classroom management primary schools, ability levels*

1. Introduction

The activity of converting educational inputs to output is the cardinal function performed in the classroom.

Teaching has been seriously criticized due to the performance of the products of the schools. Most often, teachers are blamed for the poor performance of pupils. The problems of the school can be traced to a multiplicity of challenges arising from individual differences in ability among the pupils. (Agabi 2002) stated that, there are basic background factors that affect teaching and learning. He argues that basic element such as family size, income levels of parents; socio-cultural orientation affects learning. This assertion shows that the teaching and learning process has remarkable relationship with the back ground of learners, be it at the level of the individuals, household or the society at large. In other words, the context in which pupils grow has tremendous impact on their learning.

Individual differences among pupils influence teaching and learning in various ways. It defines the extent and drive with which pupils grab the teacher's information either positively or negatively in the classroom.

Individual differences simply refer to as the unique characteristics, ability or disabilities that make an individual different from the other. It possesses a challenge to the teacher because he has the responsibility to interpret various shades of individual differences and be able to match them with appropriate strategies. Every classroom teacher should expect the presence of individual differences among his pupils because all learners are not the same. He should be faced with the challenge of treating the pupils differently based on these challenges. Definitely, to treat all pupils alike in a classroom would rather give a picture of insensitivity to distractions and diversities that are capable of frustrating effective teaching and learning. The pupils no doubt come from diverse environments with varying structures and sociological settings. They present varying degrees of strength, weaknesses and preferences.

Pupils learn in different ways in line with their every day experiences. Most of the pupils are endowed with talents and skills more than others. There different ability levels of pupils in a typical classroom setting. Some pupils are slow learners. Such learners have low understanding. They do not follow in the class instruction because they function below average. Slow learners are usually few in a class and the teacher is faced with the challenge of adjusting and readjusting instruction to assist them.

There are the average learners. The average learners constitute the largest number in a typical classroom setting. They have average intellectual functioning and in other areas of development and skill acquisition. The teacher is also required to complement their efforts so that they do not degenerate. There are also the fast learners or the gifted. Nwagbo (1988) described the gifted as those with intellectual superiority. They are usually few in a typical classroom setting. Normal school programs throw insufficient challenge to them, thereby hindering them from full development of their potential.

Marland (1971) quoted the United States Office of Education as follows:

“..... Gifted children are those identified by professionals as having outstanding abilities and capable of high performance. They require differentiated educational programs beyond the normal learners”.

Webb, Mecstroth and Tolan (1982) observed that there are pupils with exceptional abilities who cannot excel without assistance academically and emotionally by understanding, accepting, supporting and encouraging them to succeed. The fast learner or the gifted learners achieve above their school works and programs. This means that they require guidance, program modification in content and process to enhance their development.

In a study by Webb et al (1982) the gifted learners are superior to their average peers in the following areas:

1. Verbal Proficiency:- the gifted learners recognize problems and can set priorities in solving such problems. They work with plan and adopting systematic procedures not just guessing. They observe verbal proficiency by using word easily and accurately in sharing ideas and exploring difficult vocabularies and concepts.
2. Reasoning: the gifted learners conceptualize abstracts and can distinguish between similarities and differences on concepts. They are bored with normal classroom instruction and traditional methods of teaching which they see as “lazy” methods. Such learners require exposure to varieties of materials, concepts and opportunities to pursue ideas above their average peers
3. Knowledge Based: the gifted learner knows variety of topics and can easily recall facts than his mates. He is interested in adults and difficult topics such as Religion, Racism, war, environmental challenges and philosophy.
4. Intense Curiosity: the gifted learner is fond of asking questions especially provocative ones. He wants to know the whys and how of things in his environment. He needs to be engaged in active research and inquiry of things around him.
5. Originality: The gifted learner can originate new and unusual ways of solving problems and in diverse ways. He is logical and enjoys solving different problems such as puzzles. He has poor interpersonal relationship with peers as he can hardly conform to their actions. He faces rejection from his peers who criticizes his ambition. The teacher should encourage interpersonal relationship with peers in the classroom

Thus, individual differences should be interpreted and differentiated by teachers to achieve success.

A school of thought has it, that individual differences should be ignored in the classroom, since there is uniformity in learning as pupils use same textbooks, teaching aids, they work at the same pace using same syllabi and schedule. Therefore every pupil has an opportunity to excel and attain individual potential. This argument does not hold water even in the present circumstance. Though teaching and learning go on in the same classroom, pupils learn in different ways and at different pace. Every pupil brings a unique assortment of strengths, weakness and preferences. It is therefore necessary to analyze these individual differences especially by the classroom teacher so as to adopt such differences to the learning situation.

The classroom itself is a room mapped out for teaching and learning in any educational institution. It is expected to be safe, devoid of distractions for learning. The classroom remains the dominant setting for learning at the primary schools though the place of classroom is apparently being called into question at the higher levels of education due to the introduction of new technologies and mobile devices which makes it possible for learning to take place outside the classroom especially for adults.

1.1. The Problem

The assumption is that teachers encounter difficulties which can be traced to a variety of individual differences among pupils in the classroom. Identifying and interpreting individual differences help the teacher in supporting the pupils for higher achievement.

Pupils come from diverse backgrounds. Some come from poor socio-economic homes; there are some not living with their biological parents who exhibit negative influences. Some pupils are already frustrated and they come to school with problems which make learning difficult. The assumption that pupil are thought at the same place, pace and setting and could therefore develop accordingly at equal pace is incorrect.

The National Policy on Education (2004) has advocated for adequate education opportunities according to individual capacities. This means that educational provisions should be made to suit different talents and conditions.

The issue of individual differences and its effect on classroom teaching and learning has dominated recent discussions on the development of education in the society. This is because, historical antecedents are clear that people develop their full potentials in line with the required type of educational exposure they received. The required training referred to here, can be in form of general intellectual ability, creative reasoning, skills, academics etc. Thus it is unnecessary to block opportunities to pupils due to compelling priorities in individual differences which ought to be acknowledged by teachers, school administrators and even parents.

The classroom is expected to play a central role whereby the teacher can address the issue of analyzing pupils' strengths and weaknesses with a view to helping them succeed.

Considering the need for better academic performance and attitude towards self and others no child should be denied of adequate education when such pupils could succeed with little assistance. Therefore, the problem of the study border on: whether or not there are individual differences in a typical classroom situation

- Are such individual differences perceived by the classroom teachers?
- Whether or not there are management patterns adopted to address such individual differences
- Whether or not individual differences have effects. On teaching and learning.
- Whether or not there are measures to control the effects on the classroom.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

The Study aims at:

- i. Finding out the areas of individual differences in a typical classroom
- ii. Assessing the management patterns adopted to address such differences.
- iii. Identifying measures adopted to control the effects on the classroom.

1.3. Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

- i. What are the areas of individual differences observed in the classroom?
- ii. What are the management patterns adopted to address the individual differences
- iii. What are the measures adopted by teachers to control the effects on the classroom.

1.4. Research Hypotheses

- i. There is no significant difference between the experienced teachers on the management pattern of the individual differences in the classroom.
- ii. There are no significant differences between male and female teachers on the measure adopted to control individual difference in the classroom.

2. Methodology

The study sought to gather information from primary school teachers on the individual differences and their implications in classroom management. The population of the study was made up of all the primary school teachers in the public schools in Owerri municipal council of Imo State. According to the data collected from the state primary education board, there are 32 public primary schools with a total of 2, 718 teachers. A representative sample of 250 teachers was used using a simple sampling technique. This was done to avoid bias in the selection of respondents.

Data was gathered using a self structured instrument titled “individual differences and implications for classroom management questionnaire (IDICMQ). The questionnaire was validated by experts in educational measurement and evaluation and its reliability was established at a correlation coefficient of 0.82 at 0.05 level of significant showing high reliability. The questionnaire was personally administered to teachers in the sampled schools by the researcher and was returned after completion.

The data from the questionnaire were coded using the 4-point likert scale; mean scores, standard deviation and t-test were computed in tables

In response to the research questions, deductions from the tables were used to arrive at solutions to the research questions while t-test was applied to test the hypothesis.

3. Results

3.1. Research Question 1

What are the areas of individual differences observed in the classroom?

S/No	Items	A	%	D	%	Total	Rakes
1	Pupils exhibit low level of understanding in the classroom	158	63	92	37	250	
2	They do not follow in classroom instruction	238	95	12	5	250	
3	Very few pupils do not follow in classroom instruction	150	60	100	40	250	
4	Pupils cannot learn without instructional materials	228	91	22	9	250	
5	Majority of the pupils learn at moderate rate	203	81	47	19	250	
6	Pupils function at moderate creative ability	113	45	137	55	250	
7	Pupils need exposure to instructional materials	228	91	22	9	250	
8	Pupils require teacher motivation to learn	158	63	92	37	250	
9	Only very few pupil learn easily	235	94	15	6	250	
10	Pupils can conceptualize abstract	43	57	107	43	250	
11	Pupils are not challenged with normal classroom instruction	158	63	92	37	250	
12	Pupils share ideas independently and dominate the classroom.						

Table 1: showing areas of individual differences observed in the classroom. #=250

Table 1 above table shows that generally there are individual differences in the classroom as shown by all the respondents. The responses especially items 2,4,5,7,9 and 12 respectively indicate that there are slow, moderate and fast learners in the classroom. It also shows that the learners require varying degrees of attention to cope with teaching and learning in the classroom.

3.2. Research Question 2

What are the management patterns adopted by teachers in the classroom?

S/No	Item	A	%	D	%	Total
1	The teacher uses supportive attitude to encourage the pupils	103	41	147	59	250
2	The teacher considers students interest and needs in the classroom	112	45	138	55	250
3	The teacher gives assignment and homework	125	50	125	50	250
4	The teacher uses variety of instructional materials in the classroom.	90	36	160	64	250

Table 2: showing management patterns in the classroom.

Table 11 indicates high opinion that teachers do not adopt a variety of management patterns in the classroom. Items 1, 3, and 4 show low rating for teachers in the adoption of management patterns for individual differences.

3.3. Research Question 3

What are the measures adopted to control the effects of individual differences in the classroom.

S/No	Item	A	%	D	%	Total
1	The teacher plans instruction from simple to complex to suit pupils	52	21	198	79	250
2	The teacher varies his method of teaching	32	13	218	87	250
3	The teacher motivates pupils to improve	87	35	163	65	250
4	The teacher gives challenging task to pupils	100	40	150	60	250

Table 3: showing measures to control the effects of individual differences in the classroom.

Table III indicates low rating for classroom teachers planning and motivating pupils to improve. Generally, the respondents expressed very low opinion about teacher's adoption of measures to counter the effects of individual differences in the classroom.

- Hypothesis 1. There is no significant difference between the experienced and inexperienced teachers on the management patterns of individual differences in the classroom.

Table 5 showing test scores of management patterns between experience and inexperienced teachers.

S/o	Respondents	N.	Mean	SD	DF	Value	2-tailed	Sig. level	Remarks
1	Experienced teachers	150	20.7	3.32	548				Significant
2	Inexperienced teachers	100	19.1	4.19		4.7	1.96	0.5	

Table 5: showing test scores on management patterns by male and female teachers in the classroom.

- Hypothesis II: There is no significant difference between the male and female teachers on the management patterns of individual differences in the classroom.

S/No	respondent	N	Mean	SD	Df	t- cal	2-tailed	Sig. level	Remarks
2	Male	101	21.3	3.07					
2	Female	149	21.12	2.48	548	0.75	1.96	0.05	Not significant

Table 6: showing t-test of management patterns between male and female classroom teachers

From table 6 above, the t-cal (0.75) is lower than the t-value (1.960). the null hypothesis is therefore rejected.

3.4. Summary of Findings

The findings revealed that:

- There are slow learners, moderate learners and fast learners in the classroom.
- That teachers adopt supportive attitudes in managing the pupils. However, there are cases where teachers do not appreciate the needs and interest of pupils
- Teachers are not highly committed to the measures in controlling the effects of individual differences in the classroom.

- iv. There was a significant difference found between the mean scores of experienced and inexperienced teachers in managing individual differences in the classroom.
- v. There was no significant difference found between the mean scores of male and female teachers in the management of individual differences in the classroom.

4. Discussion

The teachers' responses to the occurrence of individual differences in the classroom confirm the saying that pupils learn in diverse ways based on their background. A more possible explanation of the finding is that in any classroom situation, pupils bring in assortments of strength and weaknesses which affect teaching and learning in diverse ways. This agrees with Oladele (1990) who observed that the negative effects of individual differences are a source of concern to every classroom teacher. The study also revealed that the teachers adopt a supportive attitude in managing individual differences, though evidence still show that there is lack of support by a number of teacher. The findings agree with Feldman and Goldsmith (1986) Hollingsworth (1942) and marker (1986) who posited that more time and resources might be spent on pupils that exhibit some variation that can be accommodated in the inclusive classroom.

In a related manner, the opinion of teachers revealed that measures are adopted to control the effect of individual differences as in the classroom. This findings agree with Nnosiri and Nwagbo (2006) who stated that students' needs and interests should be considered in planning instruction. In other words, there is need for differentiated educational programs to encourage varying educational needs of pupils apart from the regular classroom activity.

The study revealed no significant difference in the management patterns between male and female teachers. This is related to the assertion by Schaufele and McDonald (1994) that attention should shift to pupils with special learning problems who are already terribly behind

Furthermore, the inexperienced teachers tend to indicate absence of knowledge in adopting appropriate management patterns for individual differences in the classroom. This is not encouraging because supportive attitude of teachers in the classroom has a lot of consequences to managing individual differences and for classroom control.

4.1. Implications

- Individual differences in the classroom implies that the teacher should enrich the classroom instruction to cover various ability levels
- There should be differentiated programming of instruction even in the inclusive classroom to meet educational needs of the learners.
- Teachers should support and motivate pupils to improve through reinforcement strategies.
- Challenging assignments can be provided to exceptional pupils.

4.2. Recommendation

- Teachers should vary their methods of teaching to encourage all shades of ability levels in the classroom.
- Classroom instructions should be adapted to encourage pupil's potentials.
- All pupils should be encouraged to learn at their own pace.

5. Conclusion

The classroom plays a central role in teaching and learning in the primary school. It serves as a laboratory for the teacher to analyze individual differences in the abilities of pupils. It is also a meeting point for pupils from diverse background with varying degrees of strengths and weaknesses.

Pupils can still derive success in the midst of individual differences through appropriate management patterns by the classroom teacher.

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