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Educational Challenges of Autistic Children within Families in Benue State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The study investigated educational challenges of autistic children among families in Benue state. The study was guided by three research questions. Survey research design was used. Population was made up of 96 autistic children, 96 parents, and 22 teachers totalling 214 derived from three institutional homes in Benue State. Educational package for autistic children questionnaire (EPACQ) and Autistic Children Engagement Training Programme (ACETP) were used as the instrument for data collection. Data were analysed using means, standard deviation and bar charts. Results show that the training programme used for educational development of autistic children showed a significant relevance to changes in intellectual behaviour. It follows that the educational challenges faced by autistic children and families can be modified through selected educational programmes. Recommendations include, among others, that curriculum developers need to develop standardized learning materials for autistic children.

Key words: Autism, Children, Challenges, Programmes, Development

Introduction

Autism is a complex developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life. It is the result of a neurological disorder that affects the normal functioning of the brain, impacting development in the areas of social interaction and communication skills (The Autism Society of America, 2010). According to Barlow and Durand (2007), autism is a childhood disorder characterized by significant impairment in the areas of socialization, communication and by restricted patterns of behaviour, interest and activities as well as a puzzling array of symptoms.

Autism is a spectrum disorder, meaning that there is a wide degree of variation in the way it affects people.

Every child on the autism spectrum has unique abilities, symptoms, and challenges. A major feature of autism is the variety of symptoms that autistic children display. Some children are aggressive, some have problems with eating or toileting and almost all have difficulty with language (Nwanze, 2013).

Autism is today considered a big challenge to the family and it is ranked as the most stressful of all childhood developmental disabilities with a fast prevalence rate. There is an estimate of 190,000 children in Nigeria who may not have been diagnosed because of the low level of awareness in Nigeria (Audu & Egbochuku, 2010). It is a childhood brain development disorder which affects a child's social interaction, communication and behaviour. Most autistic children are normal in appearance but different from the way children behave because of the disruptive behaviour associated with autism. Other characteristics often associated with autism are engagement in repetitive activities and stereotyped movements, resistance to environmental change or change in daily routines, and unusual responses to sensory experiences. Children with autism are usually unstable, less predictive in their abilities, intelligence, behaviours and shows little interest in the world and people around him/her (Smart, 2009 & Heward, 2009, Geier, Kern & Geier, 2010; Mintz, 2016).

It is even more disturbing to parents of African descent, where there is a high belief system in witchcraft and other superstitious beliefs. For example, Obaji (2010) reported that autistic children are perceived as child-witches, destructive, waste, cause hardship, disease and death to their families. Identifiable symptoms of autism such as crying and screaming in the night, hallucinations and others all tend to confirm these suspicious behaviour a situation which worsen the plight of the parents.

Autism remains a puzzling condition and a stressful disorder with multiple causes grouped into biological and psychosocial dimensions. The biological dimension has to do with genetic factors and medical conditions such as rubella (German measles), tuberous sclerosis, difficulties during pregnancy and labour, organic (brain) damage, parental characteristics such as advanced maternal age and advanced parental age while the psychosocial dimensions is as a result of poor parental responsibility occasioned by illiteracy, poor socio-economic status denies the unborn child some basic medical attention and vaccinations (Cook, 2001; LePage, 2001; Barlow & Durand, 2007; Nordqvist, 2008; Geier, Kern & Geier, 2010; Parisi, Filippo & Rocella, 2015; Mintz, 2016).

In many parts of Africa and Nigeria specifically, there is an increasing concern over the rise in cases of autism among children. Nwokolo (2010) stated that the level of awareness about autism in Nigeria is pathetically low, the little awareness among the medical community is grossly insufficient in mediating issues of autism, hence among the medical community, some have limited knowledge on autism, many of the health workers are only knowledgeable on the symptoms and

manifestations of infantile autism with no clue as to where to refer autistic children to for professional attention.

Audu and Egbochukwu (2010) asserted that there is a low level of awareness among parents and institutional care givers about autism, and this has increased the prevalence rate, putting it on growing increase within the West African Sub-region which records about 2-20 cases in 1000 children at birth to three years. Several other researchers such as Bakare & Munir (2012) agree that there is low level of awareness among parents and caregivers in Nigeria leading to an increased prevalence rate of autism with a devastating effect on the child health, social and educational performance and development. School becomes a problem because autistic children do not easily fit into the mainstreaming of children. Autism adversely affects a child's educational performance and social activity at home, school, and community.

Autism has life-time consequences with a range of impacts on the health, economic wellbeing, social integration and quality of life of individuals with the disorder, and also on their families especially the parents and potentially the rest of society, this makes it an issue of great concern to the parents, educators, health service providers and the government (Ehiemua, 2014). Today, 3 in about 100 children are diagnosed with autism and the level of awareness of this dreaded phenomenon is still very low in Nigeria (Okey-Martins, 2007). The low awareness continues to serve as a predictor of increased prevalence rate with very poor care and attention given to the autistic children who eventually orients very poor academic grades with their peers in schools (Audu & Egbochukwu, 2010).

In Benue State the level of low awareness is pathetic. This is likely due to what Nwokolo (2011) termed parental misconception and cultural misinterpretation of autistic children as child witching. This could have led to some parents of the autistic children resorting to hiding them while some troop to Christian worship centers or traditional institutions to seek for solutions. Consequently, most autistic children are at risk of being excluded from educational activities.

Several organizations and government grant aided institutions in Nigeria such as the National Society for Autism Nigeria, Autism Associates, Healthcare Assessments, Aids and Training, Lagos and GTB Orange Ribbon Initiative are very commendable in their roles in creating awareness on the causes of child autism, provision of homes, rehabilitation services like functional communication and ample health and educational opportunities for the autistic children. Some Non-Governmental Organizations in Benue State are also responsible in the identification, awareness creation and the educational development and wellbeing of autistic children such as Nan-Tor Special Children's School, Makurdi. Much is however, still needed to be done in reducing the prevalence of child autism, designing

good educational programmes that fits the educational needs and social support for the autistic children in Nigeria. Although several educational practices can be used in the process of teaching autistic children especially in the western world Nwanze (2013) maintains that the combination of specific learning characteristics and highly individualized instruction and programmes suggests the need for continued innovations and ideas on the best strategies for actively engaging autistic children. It is to this effect that this investigation was carried out on the educational challenges of autistic children among families in Benue state with a view of developing a training programme for educational development of autistic children.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this research was to investigate the educational challenges of autistic children among families in Benue State. Specifically, the study:

1. identified the educational challenges of autistic children in Benue State.
2. identified training programmes being used by institutions in educational development of autistic children in Benue State.
3. determined educational intervention for the autistic children in Benue State.

Methodology

***Area of the study*:** Area of the study was Benue State. The study was conducted in three special institutions in Benue state. They are; St. Francis School Vandikya, Elim School Ibilla Oju and Nan-Tor Special School, Makurdi.

Research Design: The research design considered appropriate for this study was in twofold: the survey research design and Research and Development (R&D) research design.

Population for the study: Population of the study consists of a total of 214 respondents in the three special institutions in Benue State. This is made up of 96 parents, 22 teachers and 96 autistic children.

***Sample for the study*:** The population was small and manageable. Thus there was no sampling. The entire population was studied.

***Instrument for data collection*:** The instruments used in data gathering were Educational Package for Autistic Children Questionnaire (EPACQ) and Autistic Children Educational Engagement Training Programme (ACEETP). The study adopted a 5 point Likert scale with Strongly Agree SA – 5points; Agree A – 4points; Strongly Disagree SA - 3points and Disagree D – 2point, undecided – 1point.

ACEETP was divided into six (6) units covering interview with parents and teachers, autistic children's initial problems were evaluation, therapeutic training on vocal speech and communication, training on affective behaviour, skill training and development, and programme evaluation and assessment. The instruments for data collection were validated by three experts in Child/Developmental psychology at Benue State University, Makurdi. The

reliability of the instruments was established using cronbach Alpha and .825 and 0.958 was taken as significant for the instruments respectively.

Data Collection Techniques: A total of 118 copies of the questionnaire were distributed by hand on the parents and teachers. All the copies of questionnaire administered were duly returned. This gives 100 percent return. ACEETP was administered on the 96 autistic children through the use of engagement practices and learning experiences with interactive reading materials using visual cues and music in building engagement behaviour. In addition to visual learning materials, the programme involved the use of music in promoting increased engagement to improve the autistic child attitudes and abilities to process and recall information.

Data Analysis Techniques: Descriptive method of data analysis was used in analyzing the research questions. Specifically, research question one was analyzed using mean and standard deviation, while research questions two and three were analyzed using frequencies and bar charts to show the level of educational development of the autistic children.

Results

The results of data analysis are presented below in Table1 and chart 1–2.

Educational Challenges of Autistic Children

Table 1: Educational Challenges of Autistic Children in Benue State

Educational Challenges	Mean	Standard deviation	Decision
Language difficulty	4.31	0.91	Agreed
Less attentive in class	3.85	1.17	Agreed
Aggressive with class mates	3.48	1.44	Agreed
Low IQ	4.31	0.91	Agreed
Reading Difficulty	3.48	1.44	Agreed
Exclusion from academic activities	3.48	1.44	Agreed
Drop out of school	3.85	1.17	Agreed
Poor organization ability	3.48	1.44	Agreed
Less predictive in behaviour	3.48	1.38	Agreed
General learning disability	3.85	1.17	Agreed

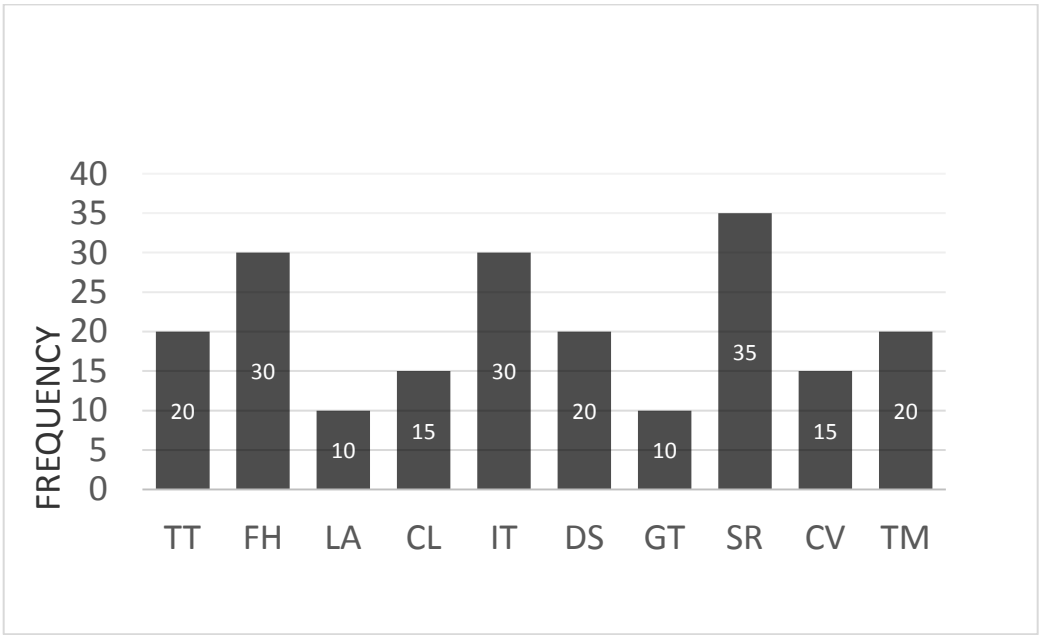
Table 1 shows respondents' view on the educational challenges of autistic children in Benue State. The mean response to each question shows that difficulty in language and communication and low IQ with a mean of 4.31 each is the highest educational challenge of autistic children in Benue State. This is followed by general learning disability; drop out of school and less attentive in class with a mean of 3.85 each. The

standard deviation ranges from 1.44 to 0.91 indicating low variation in the responses among the respondents.

Training programmes being used by institutions in educational development of autistic children in Benue State

It was found that the three institutions studied did not have specific programme for training of autistic children in educational development. The children receive training from their parents and their teachers. This training centred on toilet training, feeding habit, cleanliness, learning ability and integration (self management skills). The performance of the autistic children is presented on the chart 1.

Chart 1: Performance of Autistic children on Educational programmes being used by institutions in educational development of autistic children in Benue State.



Key: TT = Toilet training, FH = Feeding habits, LA = Learning ability, CL = Cleanliness, IT = Integration, DS = Dressing, GT = Greeting, SR = Sharing, CV = Conversation, TM = Table manners.

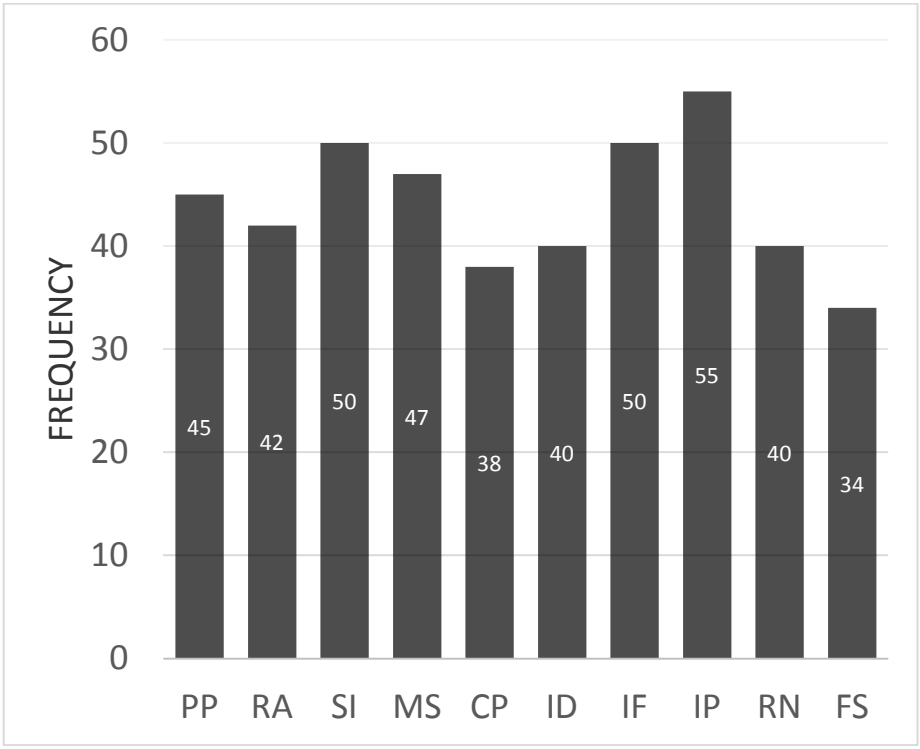
Chart 1 shows performance of autistic children based on self management training received in their institutions before application of educational programme administered by the researchers. The result reveals that sharing have the highest frequency of 35. This is followed by feeding habit and integration with frequency of 30 each while learning ability and greeting have the lowest frequency of 10 each. It is clear from above that educational skills of autistic children were

neglected and the children exhibited poor performance in self management.

Educational Intervention for Autistic Children

This involves the use of engagement practices and learning experiences with interactive reading materials using visual cues and music in building engagement behaviour. In addition to visual learning materials, other educational intervention identified involves the use of music in promoting increased engagement, and improves autistic children attitudes and abilities to process and recall information. The performance of the autistic children based on the educational intervention is depicted on Chart 2.

Chart 2: Result of Educational Intervention for Autistic Children in Benue State**.**



Key: PP = Picture pointing, RA =Repetition of alphabets, SI = Speech imitation, MS = Music (rhythms), CP= Constructive play, ID = Identification of colours, IF = Identification of farm animals, IP = Interactive play, RN = Repetition of numbers, FS = Finger spelling.

Chart 2 shows the result of the educational intervention for Autistic children in Benue State. The result reveals that interactive play have the highest frequency of 55 followed by speech imitation and identification of farm animals with a frequency of 50 each while finger spelling have the lowest frequency of 34. The educational intervention method has proved effective since autistic children show significant responses to the training

parameters designed for the development of their educational skills. Hence, the educational intervention strategy could be said to have a significant impact on the educational development of the autistic children in Benue State.

Discussion

The result of the analysis of research question one reveals that the major educational challenges of autistic children in Benue State are difficulty in language acquisition and communication, and low IQ (intelligent quotient). Other challenges include self-withdrawal leading to dropping out of school, general learning disability, and less attentive and engaging in classroom activities among other challenges. This agrees with Obrusnikova and Dillon (2011) who identified challenges such as inattentive and hyperactive behaviours, emotional regulation difficulties, difficulties understanding and performing tasks, narrow focus and inflexible adherence to routines and structure, isolation by classmates, negative effect on classmates learning and need for support. Autistic children are considered abnormal with special needs, including educational developmental needs. The educational challenges no doubt can frustrate parents and care givers in and outside the home, if they are not able to help them develop appropriate behaviours and learn like other children (Barlow & Durand, 2007).

The wide range of behaviours that are associated with autism make such children less available for learning, or less engaged, during academic instruction. Thus, children with autism are often excluded from academic activities (Kluth & Darmody-Latham, 2008). According to Le Page (2001) problems such as the absence of language, bizarre anti-social behaviours and tantrums are likely to produce high levels of deficits in learning and developmental disabilities, withdrawing from the class or dropping out of school.

It was found that the three institutions studied did not have specific programme for training of autistic children in educational development. The children receive training from their parents and their teachers. It was clear from investigation that educational skills of autistic children were neglected and the children exhibited poor performance in self management. This scenario is indicative to a number of challenges similar to those identified by Nilford (2014). These include lack of skills amongst teachers that enable them to function effectively and the use of instructional materials that do not take into consideration the operational levels of those with learning disabilities. In the study of Lindsay, Proulx, Thomson and Scott (2013) the participants (teachers in an inclusive class room) reported that teachers considered that they do not have enough information about autism spectrum disorder, especially with specific ways to work with a child in a class room and how to deal with a child when a behavioral explosion occurs. Kavita, Amina, Eben, Muideen, Karren, Diane, Harry, Kirsten, Jo, Andy, David,

and Charles (2016) maintained that at school level, education providers require basic knowledge of autism not only to manage the challenging behaviours, but appropriate training would help caregivers take into account the individual needs of a child with autism so as to address his challenges in the school environment.

The educational intervention and training methods for educational and psychosocial development of the autistic children in Benue State identified were administered and the outcome indicates that the training model significantly helped to improve their psychosocial and educational development of the autistic children. This agrees with Paul (2003) who asserted that daily exposure in peer play with trained peers has found to increase several social behaviours in children with autism including proximity, appropriateness and eye contact. Hillman (2018) maintained that since children with autism have difficulty relating to others, play therapy may be a wonderful tool for helping them move beyond self-absorption into varied, shared interactions. Also Reichow and Volkmar (2010) ascertained that visual supports have been found to be an effective method for enhancing social understanding and structuring social interactions for pre-school and school aged children with autism. McCorkle (2012) confirmed that the students she worked with respond well with visual schedules and teaching support.

Early behavioral, cognitive, or speech interventions can help autistic children gain self-care, social, and communication skills. Therefore, there is need to diversify autism intervention programmes and promote the use of interactive reading materials using visual cues and embodied music-based approaches to facilitate learning process and engagement behavior of the autistic children. Meadan, Ostrosky, Triplett, Michna, and Fettig (2011) sees visual supports such as real objects pictures and visual task analysis and others as a method of teaching. This has the implication that, the real objects and visual aids the teachers use for their students are useful. Gersham and McMillan (1997) accepted that children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) can benefit from specific behavioral and educational interventions that take cognizance of implications of ASD for the children's learning and teaching programmes. Soomro and Soomro (2018) therefore advocates the development of Autism Children's app using Picture Exchange and Communication System (PECS) since (PECS) truly helped people grow spoken language, reduce tantrums and strange manners and improved socializing.

LaGasse (2017) maintained that the unique stimulus of music provides an engaging way for children with ASD to interact socially and work toward non-musical social outcomes. Alzerayer and Banda (2017), Xin and Leornard (2015) advocates the use of tablet based devices such as ipads to improve communication skills of autistic children. Nepo (2018) maintained that advancement of technology in the past

few decades has made many high-tech devices available that help to overcome the limitations experienced by people with autism. The high-tech devices can be effectively integrated with other Evidence Based Practices (EBPs), such as video modeling/prompting to improve social, communication, and organizational skills.

Kaufman (1994); Nind (1999) agrees that participation in interactive approaches can effect progress in children's social communicative abilities. According to Malgorzata (2012) students and their teachers can use the available mental resources as well as share the knowledge, experience and competencies of the whole class, and thus should be perceived not only as an important enrichment of the experiences associated with the learning process but also as a form of support of the activities related to the proximal development of all children with disabilities.

Conclusion

Autism is a mental condition characterized by difficulty in communicating and interacting, therefore this study established that autistic children face educational challenges, but special educational programmes can assist in the training of these children to become functional adults. The study established that there is significant difference between training and change in educational behaviour of autistic children and that a well developed training programme would promote and developed their learning and communication skills and help them achieve optimal educational status.

Recommendations

In view of the need for appropriate facilities for early intervention in the educational challenges of autistic children, the following recommendations are made.

- Families and parents should involve every form of positive parenting practices to enhance the education of the autistic child. A combination of efforts by parents, grandparents and siblings in proper care and love can make a beautiful life for the autistic child.
- Government should provide adequate budgetary allocations to enhance proper funding of programmes, facilities and care for autistic children and welfare support to parents. Specifically, Benue State Government should aim at supporting institutions charged with working with autistic children.
- Curriculum developers need to develop standardized learning materials for autistic children. Care givers for the autistic children, must include behavioural skill training programmes and other integrated approaches in the curricula for the training of autistic children. Also professional care givers must undergo continuous education in behavioural skills.
- Home Economists especially those that specialise in child development should take advantage of the prevalence of autism by setting up

consultancy officers for counselling of parents, training of Autistic children and continuous research on Autism.

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