

## **Understanding Dyslexia in the Mainstream Classroom: Voices of 8th Grade Learners at Sihole Combined School in Kalabo District**

by

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### **Abstract**

*Dyslexia, a reading disability is one of the disorders with a greater prevalence among all learning disorders (Sako, 2016) that affects academic performance. Since reading is critical to learning all subjects, a disability in reading is likely to frustrate learning at all levels. For learners with dyslexia, the condition does not only affect their academic performance but also their ability to interact with peers. While many studies have been conducted on the prevalence of learning disabilities and dyslexia specifically, the experiences of learners with dyslexia learning in the mainstream classroom have not been explored particularly at Sihole Combined School in Kalabo- Western Province of Zambia. This study explored the experiences of learners living with dyslexia in the mainstream classroom at Sihole Combined School in Kalabo district. A qualitative approach was adopted to study the experiences of Eleven (11) participants comprising Eight (8) grade 8 learners and three (3) teachers purposively selected to share their experiences. The findings revealed that learners with dyslexia suffered ridicule from both their peers and teachers when they failed to read. This affected their participation in classroom activities that involved reading. The study also further revealed that grade eight teachers at Sihole Combined School in Kalabo district had minimal knowledge about signs of dyslexia among pupils in their classes. There is need to sensitise learners on learning disabilities and educate teachers on dyslexia so that they can identify and offer support services to learners with dyslexia.*

**Keywords:** *Dyslexia, Reading Disability, Learning disability, Mainstream classroom*

## **1. Introduction**

**D**yslexia is a condition that is considered a life-term disability (Rauf, Ismail, Balakrishnan & Haruna, 2018), yet it can be managed if better strategies are put in place. The condition is said to be a specific learning disability impacting reading, spelling and writing (Ahmad, Ali, & Salehuddin, 2018). The condition is associated with deficits in phonological processing, word decoding, phonological awareness, deficits in naming speed, auditory and verbal working memory (Zillmer, Spiers & Culbertson, 2008). Learners with learning disabilities, to which dyslexia belong are also associated with language developmental delay (Ismail, Mohamed & Soltan, 2019).

Literature points to many causes such as minimal brain damage and abnormalities in structural brain development (Zillmer et al, 2008; Reynolds, and Fletcher-Janzen, 2009) among other causes. “Learning Disabilities are also linked to several chromosomal abnormalities, such as Klinefelter syndrome and fragile X syndrome in males and females and Turner syndrome in females” (Ismail et al, 2019: 128). The causes of reading difficulties vary from one child to the other.

McGuinness (2004) argues that, children who fail to learn to read do so mainly because of environmental causes and not biological factors. This means that there are certain factors in the environment which may cause the child to have a reading difficulty. For instance, if there is no one to motivate the child both at school and at home, the child might not acquire reading skills. When the effective methods of teaching are missing, learners may have reading deficits. Although learners with dyslexia may face difficulties in reading, they can benefit from listening comprehension (Zillmer, Spiers & Culbertson, 2008). This study aimed at examining the voices of 8th grade learners with dyslexia on their experiences of living with dyslexia in a mainstream classroom. The ability to read is important if one is to succeed in school. This is because the largest percentage of what we learn in school depends on the learner’s ability to read. Lyon (2003) says, if children do not learn to read, understand, write

and use language to communicate their ideas and perspectives, their favorable conditions for a fulfilling and rewarding life are seriously compromised.

Globally, learning disability constitutes a major health problem that affects the education process with prevalence placed at approximately 10–15% among the school age children (Robinson and Robertson, 2003). Reading difficulties have been estimated to be 2-5 % among school-going children (Wong, 2000). In Zambia, education statistical bulletins data on the types of disabilities in Schools show that learning disabilities have the highest numbers (Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education – MESVTEE, 2011). The numbers provided in the bulletins however do not segregate how many have reading disabilities, although literature shows that reading disabilities are the most common among learning disabilities. For instance, findings by Orim and Ezekiel, (2017) indicated that there are eight sub types of specific learning disabilities common among pupils in the sampled schools in Calabar Educational Zone, Cross River State of Nigeria, which included dyslexia 26%, dyscalculia 18%, dysgraphia 16%, ADHD 9%, dyspraxia 15%, dysorthographia 3%, dyspinxia 8% and dysmusia 5%.

Research on reading difficulties has recently become a matter of concern considering the amount of unsatisfactory levels of reading ability among school children (Kachenga, 2008). Studies as far back as 1999 have shown that most pupils who reach as far as grade six lack the ability to read (Kelly, 1999). Matafwali (2005) found that 49.1% of the pupils could not read words at all and 57.5% children could not read any single sentence. Yet the ability to read is the most significant ingredient for academic success in a country where examinations depend on reading and writing. The Ministry of Education policy document of 1996 emphasizes the importance of reading skills by stating that, the fundamental aim of the curriculum for lower and middle basic classes (grades one to seven) is to enable pupils to read and write clearly, correctly and confidently in a Zambian language and in English. Likewise, learners who cross from grade seven

to grade eight should have the ability to read in order to be able to learn content at junior secondary school level. The Ministry of Education (1996) attaches the priority to the attainment of this goal. However, while poor performance among learners is mainly blamed on teachers and lack of materials, little or no attention seems to be paid to the extent to which learning disabilities affect learner performance at all levels of education in Zambia. Further, the voices of learners with learning disabilities on how they feel living with a learning disability in the mainstream classroom have not been documented. With the prevalence of learning disabilities topping the statistics of all other disabilities, the probability that learning disability equally have a share in affecting academic performance may be high.

### *1.1 Statement of the Problem*

In Zambia, several studies have been conducted that indicate the presence of learners with learning disabilities including dyslexia in schools, (Kalindi, 2005; Matafwali, 2005, Kasongole & Muzata, 2020). While such studies indicate the presence of learners with learning disabilities in Zambian classrooms, learners' voices of their experiences in mainstream classrooms have not been explored. Following reports of learners with serious reading problems in grade 8 at Sihole Combined School, this study was conducted to establish the learners' experiences of living with dyslexia in the mainstream classroom. Significantly, understanding their experiences in the mainstream classroom would help service providers such as the Ministry of General Education, school administration, teachers and parents know their needs.

### *1.2 Research Questions*

The main research questions that guided the study were:

- (i) How do learners with dyslexia perceive their experiences of learning in a mainstream classroom in Kalabo?

- (ii) What challenges do learners with dyslexia face learning in the mainstream classroom?
- (iii) What is the role of teachers in education of learners with dyslexia included in the mainstream classroom?

### *1.3 Theoretical Framework*

This study draws strength from the Humanistic Hierarchy of Needs Theory of Abraham Maslow who believes that human development or rather success depends on the satisfaction of basic needs first before other needs and that a human strives to achieve higher needs once the lower needs are satisfied. However, although the focus of this study is not on the provision of biological or physiological needs, which equally are significant to human development, psychological needs such as safety, love and belonging, and self-esteem are crucial in determining a learner's ability to learn and reach self-actualization. Safety needs have to do with one's feeling of being safe in any environment in which he or she is found. In this case, the school and the classroom environment need to be free from intimidation, ridicule and any other forms of obstacles to allow for free participation in learning. Love and belonging are very important needs. For children and learners in particular, their development is very much dependent on how much they feel loved and whether the groups they belong to accept them or not. The feeling of being loved and belonging to a group leads to the development of self-esteem. Self-esteem needs relate to the feeling of being worthy before others. Munsaka, (2011) postulates that recognition of the power that lies within learners to drive their own learning is at the centre of the humanistic perspective, encouraging teachers to allow learners to pursue their learning goals freely. Notwithstanding the other needs such as self-actualization and the aesthetic needs that Abraham Maslow has propounded, this study found space to explore how the three middle needs (Safety, love and belonging and self-esteem) may be affected in the mainstream classroom where a learner with dyslexia is placed to learn. This is why the

main research question boards on how the learners with dyslexia perceive their learning in the mainstream classroom. Negative perception may point to the learners not having their needs met and thereby affecting their learning in the mainstream classroom while positive perceptions may influence positive learning.

## **2.0 Literature**

**D**yslexia is a processing of different experiences by pupils, often characterized by difficulties in literacy (Reid, 2009). It can affect other cognitive areas such as memory, speed of processing, time management, co-ordination and directional aspects. There may be visual and phonological difficulties and there is usually some discrepancy in performances in different areas of learning. It is important that the individual differences and learning styles are acknowledged since these will affect outcomes of assessment and learning. It is also important to consider the learning and work context as the nature of the difficulties associated with dyslexia may be more pronounced in some learning situations (Chitsa and Mpfu, 2016).

In the United Kingdom, a study by Mortimore and Crozier, (2016) revealed that the fundamental elements of studying, such as organization and planning, attending to lectures, taking notes, reading and producing written work, cause problems, and mean that a considerable effort has to be invested in order to keep up with fellow students and these difficulties had an impact on student identity, with concerns about the stigma of disability and the potential for unpleasant interactions with staff. The study further revealed that tutors should recognize that the difficulties that students with dyslexia experience are not restricted to reading and spelling and are not overcome simply by provision of access to word processors with grammar and spelling checks. There has to be effective coordination among support units, academic departments and those units in central administration with responsibility for assessment, and the official recognition of special needs for examinations purposes.

In South Africa a study by Leseyane, Mandende, Makgato,

and Cekiso, (2018) revealed that there was a poor relationship between the dyslexic learners and their peers because of negative attitudes in the public school. Learners with dyslexia were exposed to ill treatment by other learners who despised, ridiculed, bullied and undermined them. When dyslexic learners failed to read and write properly, they became objects of ridicule by their classmates who could read and write better than them. The findings further revealed that teachers in public schools were not patient with dyslexic learners, did not give them extra attention and that some teachers used negative comments that embarrassed them. Such suffocating situations led students with dyslexia to develop a negative self-concept of themselves Leseyane et al (2018).

In Malaysia (Ahmad et al, 2018) reports that English Second Language teachers found it challenging to teach pupils with dyslexia and teachers lacked effective teaching methods to support learners in the classroom. This is because teachers lacked proper training to teach learners with dyslexia. These findings expose learners to experiences that make them fail to appreciate the relevance of inclusion in the mainstream classroom. Orim and Ezekiel, (2017) in a study of prevalence of specific learning disabilities and its management among pupils in Calabar Educational Zone Cross River State found that teachers did not exhibit ability in managing specific learning disabilities in schools. Like Richardson, (1996), Kasongole and Muzata, (2020) doubt the authenticity of inclusion for learners with learning disabilities in mainstream classrooms when teachers are not well prepared to teach such learners.

In Zambia, a study by Mwanamukubi (2013) found that most of the grade six pupils were not able to read fluently as expected of their grade level. As they read, they committed errors such as mispronouncing, substituting, adding and omitting some words. The study also revealed a significant correlation between teachers' ability to identify specific reading errors and actual performance of learners. In Monze- Zambia, Chuunga (2018), made an observation learners with reading difficulties did not benefit from the mainstream classroom because of over enrollment, teacher-pupil ratio and lack of teaching and reading

materials, further emphasizing that the assessment procedures used to identify learners with reading difficulties only work to further widen the gap between the so called ‘slow learners’ and ‘fast learners’. Although this study focusses on the voices and or experiences of learners in the mainstream classroom, such challenges appear to be real in Zambian classrooms.

### **3.0 Methods and Materials**

A qualitative research method was used and it allowed the researchers to understand the participants’ thoughts, feelings and viewpoints on the difficulties pupils with dyslexia face learning in the mainstream classroom at Sihole Combined School in Kalabo district. In applying a qualitative method, the researchers had an opportunity to record and understand the participants’ subjective views, opinions, behavior and attitude (Mkandawire, 2019). Kalabo District is a rural district in Western Province, 57 KMs from Mongu-the provincial capital. A phenomenological design was used to study the learners’ experiences. Such a design fitted in the study because it contributed to a deeper understanding of lived experiences by exposing taken-for granted assumptions (Sokolowski, 2000). The approach allowed a chance to probe into the unique perspectives learner experiences and challenges in mainstream schools.

The total sample of the study was 11 participants comprising 8 learners with dyslexia, 4 boys and 4 girls, and 3 subject teachers. Purposive sampling was applied in the selection of the participants. Data were collected using interview guides for teachers and Focus Group Discussion guides for learners with dyslexia. The questions centered on establishing learners’ experiences of living with dyslexia in the mainstream classroom. Learners were the main participants in the study while the 3 teachers were involved to establish their knowledge of dyslexia and whether they paid attention to the learning needs of learners with dyslexia. Focus group questions centered on how learners with dyslexia described their experience of living with the condition in the mainstream classroom and the challenges they faced in learning as a result.

Data were analyzed in themes guided by the research questions. Verbatim excerpts were selected and used to highlight participants' experiences of living with dyslexia in the mainstream classroom. Analysis followed six basic steps by Creswell (2003) Organizing and preparing the data for analysis, reading through all the data, beginning a detailed analysis with a coding process, using the coding process to generate a description of the setting or people as well as categories or themes for analysis, advancing how the description and themes was represented in the qualitative narrative and making an interpretation or meaning of data.

## **4.0 Findings and Discussion**

The findings of this study have been presented following the research questions that guided the study. There were three research questions as follows; (1) how did learners with dyslexia perceive their experiences of learning in a mainstream classroom at Sihole Combined School in Kalabo? (2) what challenges did learners with dyslexia face when learning in the mainstream classrooms? (3) What is the role of teachers in education of learners with dyslexia included in the mainstream classroom?

### *4.1 Experiences of learners with dyslexia in the mainstream classroom*

During a Focus Group Discussion with the learners sampled to have dyslexic related difficulties, the participants were asked how they found reading and their experiences in reading within a mainstream classroom. A number of responses were recorded. One of the learners coded as learner 'A' had this to say;

*I admire my friends who read well in class I wish I could read like them but it's hard. I feel ashamed when I fail to read myself yet my friends find it easy. (Learner A).*

Another learner said;

*I try to read but sometimes I fail to recognize letters, they look*

*like numbers. What is bad is that my friends laugh at me.*

*Sometimes I can read a word or sentence once but when am told to read the same sentence or word again I fail to read it the way I did it at first. Maybe I forget but I don't know why this happens to me.*

Learner D said “*reading aloud in class is my worst nightmare, my fellow pupils laugh at me including the teacher. I really feel bad.*”

Another participant learner C said:

*I don't like reading aloud in class because my fellow classmates makes fun of me outside the classroom so I would rather keep quiet than say a word when am pointed at in class.*

Learner F expressed himself by saying:

*I feel bad, sometimes I just feel like staying home and not coming to school because there's nothing am doing here.*

Most learners in the Focus Group revealed that they felt shy to read aloud in class because their friends laughed at them, so they would rather keep quiet than read even if they are pointed at by the teacher. From the excerpts above, learners' self-attestation that they fail to recognize letters as some letters looked like numbers is a true reflection of what literature says about the signs of dyslexia. According to Zoubinetzky, Bielle and Valdois (2014), learners with dyslexia may see letter 's' as '5' and letter 'd' as '9'. Problems with reading speed and poor spellings also signal the presence of dyslexia (Muzata, 2015). Further, learners with dyslexia tend to have low self-esteem, low confidence, anger anxiety, depression and poor self-image among others (Sako, 2016), similar to what learner 'A' narrated in the first excerpt, an experience that results from stigmatization of such learners. Mwanamukubi (2013) equally found that difficulties in reading were rampant in Zambian schools. Memory problems are synonymous with learning disabilities (Zillmer et al, 2008). Learners with learning disabilities experience.

While reading aloud is a method used in teaching reading so that learners are assisted when they do not read accurately,

learners at the school of this study felt reading aloud was more embarrassing to them. This is because other learners made fun of them both in and outside class. This leaves a lot to be desired in a classroom that is supposed to be inclusive for all learners. A classroom that has learners who understand each other's needs would not take to ridicule their peers that fail or struggle to read. The repercussions of laughing at peers who fail or struggle to read are withdrawal and low self-esteem motivated by such attitudes. Learners should be taught classroom virtues that encourage them to help others to learn and not to discredit them while learning. If inclusive education is to promote participation of all learners (Wonani & Muzata, 2019), the classroom should be friendly and accepting, devoid of negative attitudes. Teachers have a huge responsibility to promote such a classroom.

#### *4.2 Challenges faced by learners with difficulties in reading?*

Most grade eight learners disclosed that teacher attitude was a challenge experienced during lessons in class. They revealed that teachers shout at them for failing to read or for being too slow in reading or solving mathematics. Thus, it made them feel bad about themselves. Learner A expressed himself by saying *"teachers say am dull that's why I can't read"*.

Time was another challenge learners with dyslexia faced, they disclosed that they are not given enough time to copy notes in class during lessons. Thus they fail to finish copying notes from the board before the board is erased. Learner D and C both said:

*we don't finish copying notes from the board because of time, we write slowly because it takes time to make sense out of a sentence on the board.*

Teacher's handwriting on the board was another challenge faced by learners with dyslexia. Learners revealed that they could not read some words written by the teacher on the board thus they just assume what that word could be and write what they assume. Learner E revealed that she had difficulties reading the teachers' handwriting on the board but she feared to ask the teacher because she was afraid of being shouted at.

Learners complained of being ignored and sidelined by the teachers when it came to choosing class leaders like class monitors. This makes learners with dyslexia have low self-esteem. Learner E said that:

*I asked my teacher if I can be vice monitor because I admire being a leader but my teacher declined my request saying how you can be a monitor when you can't even read?*

Teaching methods, learners with dyslexia testified that some teachers always gave pupils to write notes on the board while the teacher attends to his/her business or just sits behind in the classroom. They complained that the pupils who were assigned to write on the board wrote too fast and their handwriting was not clear.

Four pupils indicated that they approached their teacher for help in reading but the teacher turned them down saying he had a lot of classes to attend to instead they should just be concentrating in class. Learner B said:

*my friends and I approached teacher x for help concerning reading but he declined saying he is too busy.*

Learners complained that the school did not have enough reading books which they could barrow to go through during the weekend or holidays, hence it was hard for them to master the few words they learned during school days.

Some learners complained of lack of motivation as teachers always point at the same learners who read every day, learners felt left out and not motivated. This makes learners to relax and wait for the teacher's favorites' to read.

### *4.3 Teachers' role in the education of learners with dyslexia*

When the three teachers that taught the grade eight class from which the learners were drawn for this study were asked about the role they played in helping learners with dyslexia, the findings suggested that the teachers did not have knowledge about learning disabilities and dyslexia in particular. The following responses were given during interviews with teachers. Teacher A expressed himself by saying:

*pupils who fail to read or read at a slow pace are slow learners or just dull. There is nothing a teacher can do.*

Teacher C said:

*learners who can't read are just not serious, most learners fail to read because they are too playful. You give them homework, they return to school with the homework not solved.*

Teacher B said:

*we don't have good knowledge on signs and possible causes of dyslexia. I personally thought dyslexia has something to do with blindness.*

Teacher C said:

*We never have workshops or seminars on dyslexia so it's hard for us to notice anything because we don't have enough knowledge on dyslexia.*

From this study, we observe findings similar to Kasongole & Muzata, (2020) where they revealed teachers' lack of knowledge of learning disabilities tagging such learners as dull and as learners that had visual, hearing and physical disabilities. Thus, grade eight teachers at Sihole Combined School in Kalabo district expressed that they had little knowledge, no access to information about the signs and causes of dyslexia among pupils. This made it difficult for them to realize their role in helping learners that had dyslexia in class.

The findings are also consistent with Chitsa and Mpofu (2016), who found that grade seven teachers in Mzilikazi district in Bulawayo- Zimbabwe had minimal knowledge or understanding of dyslexia. The findings are consistent with other studies such as Orim and Ezekiel (2017), Ahmad et al, (2018), who also found deficiencies in teacher abilities to teach learners with learning disabilities. The findings by Ahmed et al (2018) in South Africa also revealed learners with dyslexia were ill-treated, despised, ridiculed, bullied and undermined by other learners and teachers in public schools. One necessary skill teachers for these learners

need to exercise is patience (Muzata, 2015). Teachers lack of patience with learners' learning pace led to negative labeling of learners with dyslexia. This lack of understanding affects service provision to learners with learning disabilities such as those with dyslexia. The lack of understanding may further perpetuate negative attitudes toward the learners as a result of ignorance about the nature of problems the learners exhibited.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to establish learners' experiences of living with Dyslexia in the Mainstream Classroom at Sihole Combined School in Kalabo district. Eight (8) grade eight learners shared their experiences while 3 teachers shared their role in helping learners with dyslexia. Learners' voices indicated that they faced difficulties learning to read in a classroom where both their peers and teachers demonstrated attitudes which made them feel as though they were not part of the classroom and the learning process. Such attitudes included being despised when they failed to read and being given negative labels such as dull, lazy and slow learner. Thus, according to Abraham Maslow's Theory of Needs, the theory that guided this study, the learners may have lacked safety, love and belonging and esteem needs. From the study although the learners were physically present in the classroom, being despised as a result of failing to read denied them the opportunity to participate in the learning process, thus technically excluding them from the classroom.

Limited by the design of our study, there could be more learners with dyslexia and other learning disabilities. Learning disability has been found to be statistically significant with the increase in grade level, since academic study and skills become increasingly difficult with increased grade level (Ismail, et al 2019). This however needs further investigation especially in the case of Zambia and particularly Kalabo district where this study was conducted. It calls for a quantitative study to establish the prevalence of dyslexia in Zambia. The need to adopt standardized instruments that help measure the prevalence of learning disabilities

would provide accurate data about the presence of different learning disabilities including dyslexia in the country. The study also revealed that grade eight teachers that participated in this study had minimal knowledge about dyslexia and therefore could not provide any form of assistance to the learners. There is need to educate teachers on dyslexia through continuous professional development and short courses so that they can identify and offer support services to learners with dyslexia accordingly. The lack of knowledge of the signs of dyslexia inadvertently denies learners extra attention from teachers not because teachers do not want but because they do not know. The revelation from the findings about negative attitudes can easily be shredded with continued sensitization and education of both teachers and learners about dyslexia. School administrators need to develop school policies that discourage negative attitudes and stereotypes towards learners with low and slow learning abilities. Negative attitudes and stereotypes indirectly exclude learners from school because they would not participate in learning in an inclusive classroom and they may eventually withdraw from the learning environment. Learners with dyslexia need extra support in school and at home to keep practicing to read so that they can benefit from the school curriculum. They further need counseling. Without the necessary support, the concept of inclusive education remains rhetoric.

## **6.0 Recommendation for future study**

**F**uture research on dyslexia in Kalabo should take the quantitative dimension so that some form of generalization can help inform policy and the need to educate teachers through capacity building. Teachers need knowledge of learning disabilities and the strategies to help such learners.

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