

Problem Learners in Selected Elementary Schools in Ghana: Toward Understanding, Prevention and Action

Dickson Adom¹⁾ Joshua Ebere Chukwuere Atsu Dennis Dake Jerry Pratt Newton
Kwame Nkrumah University North West University Kwame Nkrumah University Kwame Nkrumah University

Abstract

Problem learners in Ghanaian schools are often marginalized and/or ignored during the teaching and learning processes in the classroom. The study was carried out using the convergent parallel mixed method design with questionnaire, focus group discussion, and one-on-one interviews as the data collection instruments. The purposive, convenient, and stratified random sampling techniques were used in selecting a total sample size of 112 participants consisting of identified problem learners, teachers, parents, heads of institutions, and experts in childhood learning and development. The quantitative data set were analyzed using the descriptive statistics while the qualitative data set were analyzed using the data analysis spiral. The findings revealed that the main causes of the learning and retention challenges among problem learners are more of environmental factors than the perceived hereditary and spiritual factors. It is recommended that the Ministry of Education should organize sensitization education workshops and seminars for teachers, heads of institutions, and the student body in the elementary schools in Ghana aimed at fostering an understanding of the conditions of problem learners. This would help eradicate the stigmatization against problem learners while equipping the teachers with the pragmatic strategies to improve their learning outcomes.

Keywords: problem learners, teaching and learning, elementary school education, learning disabilities

Corresponding author, ¹⁾ adomdick@yahoo.com

Introduction

Spanning across global, sub regional, and national/local levels, literature has been replete in the past decades on issues that touch on diversity in education, of which students with learning disabilities are no exception. Several studies have shown that including problem learners in mainstream classroom settings remains one of the most rancorous issues confronting educational practice (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Levine, & Marder, as cited in Ehrli, 2015). Learning disability (LDs), which is often considered as a neurologically-based impairment, varies from mild or moderate to severe but not cognitive delays. Also, known as “problem learners,” students with learning difficulties have more often than not been disadvantaged in meaningfully partaking in education. Consequently, problem learners exhibit difficulties with academic performance that appears to be at variance with their regular counterparts. Kemp-Koo (2013) opines that the adult with learning disability on the average is less educated, has lower tendency at being employed, and demonstrates higher rates of emotional and interpersonal difficulties. In other words, children with learning difficulties often fall below par their peers even in cases where support and interventions are provided. In effect, the academic and emotional developments of problem learners are affected.

This study sought to investigate and elucidate the causative agents of the conditions of problem learners in the elementary schools in Ghana. It also probed how problem learners are treated by parents, teachers, and colleague students with the ultimate goal of gaining insight into the conditions of problem learners and its impact on the teaching and learning activities in the classroom. The outcome of this important research offers some proactive ways that problem learners could be helped to maximize their expected learning outcomes. The research questions that drove the study were:

1. What are the causative agents of the conditions of problem learners in the elementary schools in Ghana?
2. How are problem learners treated and its impact on their attitudes toward learning?
3. How can problem learners be helped to maximize their expected learning outcomes?

(De) constructing the Concept of Problem Learners

Regarded as a social unit, the school is meant to accept all learners and consequently impart the requisite knowledge, skills, and attitudes in them so that there is an overall socio-economic development of the society in particular and the nation in general. While most children of school-age seamlessly adapt and actively participate in the school curricula, others, however, encounter challenges from the outset. A variety of terms such as the “resident in difficulty,” the “troublesome learner,” the “disruptive student,” and the “impaired physician” have been used to describe the problem learner (Gordon, 1993; Shapiro, Prislín, Larsen, & Lenahan, 1997; Steinert, Nasmith, Daigle, & Franco, 2001; Yao & Wright, 2001). Often referred to as “learning difficulties,” “learning disabilities,” or “learning problems,” this category of learners encounters challenges in participating actively in the classroom. In recent times, however, proponents have argued for a more dignifying recognition of this category to be known as “problem learners” as the term learning disabilities sounds derogatory. Others argue in the opposite that instead of perceiving it as derogatory, the label rather serves as a vehicle for providing special services. Nonetheless, this study did not exceed its scope into the semantics of labelling and as such used the terms “learning difficulties,” “learning disabilities,” or “learning problems” interchangeably.

In general, a problem learner is one who fails to meet the expectations of a training programme because of problem(s) and limitations related to the cognitive, affective, structural, or interpersonal domains of the learner (Vaughn, Baker, & de Witt, 2009). In the year 2000, the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC) (as cited in Kemp-Koo, 2013) provided a definition of learning disabilities to encapsulate a range of disorders that can negatively influence the learner’s “acquisition, organization, retention, understanding, use of verbal or nonverbal information” (p. 8). Impliedly from the foregoing, learning difficulties can be understood as distinct, but not visibly seen and can affect the learner’s cognition, academic performance, emotional functioning, and interpersonal experiences. Lerner (2000) adds that the concept of learning difficulties is dynamic and consequently extends the conditions that make it difficult for students to participate in the learning experiences.

In their definition of a problem learner, according to the American Board of Internal Medicine (as cited in Steinert, 2013), is a student with significant demonstrated problem, thus, requiring “intervention by someone of authority, usually the program director or chief resident” (p. 1035). Furthermore, United States Congress (1975) defined specific learning disability as a disorder in one or more of basic psychological processes involved in using spoken or written language, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, and spell or to do mathematical calculations. It is clear that there is continuous debate around conceptualising the term “problem learner” and even the elements of learning difficulties/disabilities. Nonetheless, in an attempt to resolve the apparent contestations, it is prudent and expedient that some agreement about the concept be reached.

Conclusively, it is clear from the discussion that every problem learner is unique and each of them must be ideally catered for within the classroom. Notwithstanding that, this study proposes the implementation of the varied instructional strategies complemented with a sound framework such as Steinert (2013)’s framework for working with “problem” learners. This will help in promoting the effective collaboration and participation of teachers, experts, learners, and parents towards realizing the full potential of problem learners.

Method

The study adopted the convergent parallel mixed methods design. This was because the researchers wanted to have a holistic comprehension (Creswell & Clark, 2011) of the conditions of problem learners and what can be done to assist them by obtaining both qualitative and quantitative data sets. Further, the researchers wanted to get mutual confirmation to bolster the validity of results from the study (Arozin & Cameron, 2010). The descriptive study was utilized to systematically document the current situation (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012) of problem learners in educational institutions in Ghana.

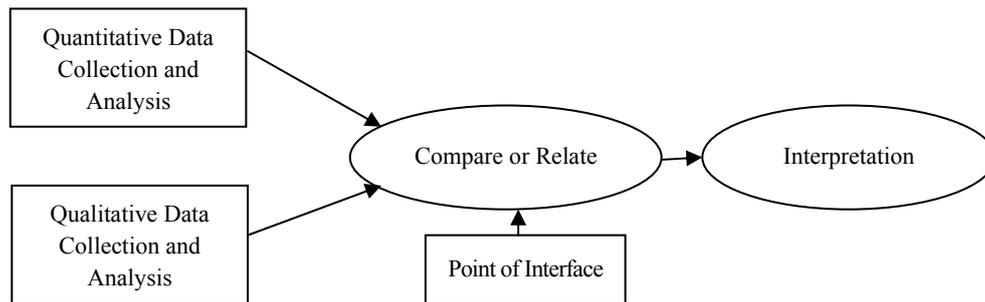


Figure 1. Convergent Parallel Mixed Methods Design (Creswell & Clark, 2011)

The total sample size of 112 respondents was selected using both purposive and stratified random sampling designs. These techniques helped to reduce bias in the sample selection while ensuring true and accurate representation of all the variables within the population. Private interviews were conducted with the problem learners to give them a conducive environment to express all the sensitive information (Fraenkel et al., 2012) about their condition. Likewise, private interviews were conducted for the heads of the elementary schools and the early childhood experts due to their busy schedules and independent offices. To ascertain the peculiar challenges of the problem learners from their teachers, private interviews were conducted for each of them. On the other hand, focus group discussions were organized for the parents of the problem learners and the regular students who are in the same class with the problem learners.

A simple Likert scale-rated questionnaire was designed to solicit quantitative data from teachers in three elementary schools in Ghana. The questionnaire also had open-ended questions to delve deeper into the thoughts of the teachers on the phenomena under study. The quantitative data set from the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The qualitative data set from the personal interviews and focus group discussion were analyzed using the data analysis spiral. The qualitative data generated was initially coded; relationships in the data were identified; emergent themes or patterns were created and generalizations from the emergent themes were made (Scott & Usher, 2011).

Results

From the Quantitative Data Set

The researchers administered 50 questionnaires to the teacher participants, but 48 of them representing 96% returned. As a result, the study analysis was based on the return-rate of the 48 participants that equated to 100%.

Table 1. *Demographics of the General Teachers*

<i>Public and Private Basic Schools</i>			
		Count	Percent %
Gender	Male	19	39.6%
	Female	29	60.4%
	<i>N</i>	48	
Age	Less than 20	1	2%
	20-29 yrs.	14	29.2%
	30-39 yrs.	17	35.4%
	40-49 yrs.	13	27.1%
	over 50 yrs.	3	6.3%
<i>N</i>	48		
Educational Attainment	Pupil Teacher/MSCL	0	0%
	SHS	2	4.2%
	HND/Diploma	15	31.3%
	First Degree	28	58.3%
	Master's Degree	3	6.1%
<i>N</i>	48		
Years of Experience	Less than 1 yr	3	6.3%
	1-3 years	2	4.2%
	4-6 years	5	10.4%
	7-9 years	14	29.2%
	10-12 yrs.	10	20.8%
	13-15 yrs.	13	27.1
	15 yrs. and above	4	8.3%
	<i>N</i>	48	

Table 2. *Mean and Standard Deviation of Research Items*

Research Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	Remarks
Some children have problems with learning.	3.51	1.21	Agreement
Problem learning is hereditary.	2.96	1.02	Disagreement
The behavior of problem learners contributes to their learning challenge.	3.25	0.91	Neutral
The environment where problem learners find themselves contribute to their condition.	3.56	0.99	Agreement
People having problem with learning have spiritual undertone.	2.58	0.99	Disagreement
Problem learners are looked down upon by people around them.	3.58	1.01	Agreement
Problem learners are stigmatized by their friends.	3.27	0.93	Neutral
Teachers usually ignore the views of problem learners.	3.17	0.90	Neutral
Problem learners are not given the opportunity to answer.	2.67	1.02	Disagreement
Problem learners are not trusted with school and class responsibilities like other children.	3.10	0.96	Neutral
Problem learners do not enjoy coming to school.	3.67	1.05	Agreement
Problem learners are more interested in extracurricular activities.	3.77	1.01	Agreement
Problem learners hardly do personal learning.	3.15	1.28	Neutral
Problem learners will not volunteer to answer questions in class.	3.41	0.99	Neutral
Problem learners do not pay attention in class.	3.31	1.04	Neutral
Mentors and coaches must be assigned to problem learning children to help improve their academic performance.	4.00	1.07	Agreement
Extra time must be allotted to children having problem in learning to help improve on their performance.	3.66	0.96	Agreement
Psychological and counseling services must be provided for problem learning children.	3.57	0.92	Agreement
Problem learners must take their destinies into their own hands and help themselves.	3.00	1.02	Neutral
Parents must provide all the educational needs of problem learners.	3.82	1.01	Agreement

* $N = 48$

From the table above, there were 19 males, representing 39.6% and 29 females, representing 60.4%. Age-wise, category 30-39 years had the highest number of 17, representing 35.45% and the least being less than 20 years, having a number of 1, representing 2%. For educational attainment, first degree recorded the highest number of 28, representing 58.3%. Most respondents fell within the 7-9 years of working experience category with a number of 14 and a percentage of 29.29%. The high academic background of the teachers interviewed may probably have influenced their better understanding of the causes, conditions of problem learners, and strategies to assist them from the academic point of view. Their stances may also be attributed to the courses in guidance and counseling as well as in special education many of them read during their undergraduate programmes in education. Again, having majority of the teachers within seven to nine years experience in the teaching profession was encouraging. This teaching experience might have contributed to their great understanding of the conditions of problem learners in their classes over the years.

A descriptive statistics was conducted using the mean ratings of each item on the questionnaire. In order to describe the respondents' ratings, an assumed mean of 3.5 and above have been intuitively chosen to represent an "agreement" to a question item. In addition, a mean of 3.0 to 3.49 represents a "neutral" view of respondents for a question item. Finally, a mean below 3.0 represents a "disagreement" to an item. The results are presented in Table 2 below.

From the table above, there were nine items, which showed a mean rating of 3.5 and above, depicting an agreement to a question item. It can be seen that respondents agreed that some children have problems with learning, the environment where problem learners find themselves contribute to their problem, problem learners are looked down upon, problem learners do not enjoy coming to school, problem learners are more interested in extracurricular activities, mentors and coaches must be assigned to problem learners, extra time must be allocated to problem learners, psychological counseling must be provided for problem learners, and parents must provide all the educational needs of problem learners. Their correspondent standard deviation was also around 1.

Also, eight of the items had a mean rating between 3.0 to 3.49 which depict a neutral stance. These items are: (1) behaviors of problem learners contribute to their learning challenge; (2) problem learners are stigmatized by their friends; (3) teachers usually ignore

the views of problem learners; (4) problem learners are not trusted with school and classroom responsibilities like other children; (5) problem learners hardly do personal learning; (6) problem learners will not volunteer to answer questions in class; (7) problem learners do not pay attention in class; and (8) problem learners must take their own destinies in their hands. The standard deviation for these items was also around 1. Lastly, three of the question items recorded a mean rating below 3.0, meaning there was disagreement with the question. These include: (1) problem learning is hereditary; (2) individuals with problem in learning have spiritual undertone; and (3) problem learners are not given the opportunity to answer questions in class. The standard deviation for these question items were also around 1.

From the Qualitative Data Set

The researchers administered 78 interview guides to the interviewees three weeks before the interviews were scheduled. Out of that, 64 of them, representing 82.5%, participated in the interview sessions. A breakdown of the interviews (focus group discussions and one-on-one interviews) is shown in Table 3 below. The selection of the six categories of interviewees (Table 3) was done purposively by the researchers. This was because these respondents were considered crucial in answering the research questions. However, the potential members in each of the categories were selected purposively, randomly, and conveniently. The students in the lower “Primary One to Six” who were identified by their teachers and parents as problem learners were purposively selected. Preliminary study on this research theme showed that a high number of problem learners existed at the foundational levels of education from “Primary One to Six.”

On the other hand, the heads of the educational institutions of the identified problem learners, their teachers, and parents were selected purposively to give their opinions on the study’s research questions. However, the early childhood experts were selected conveniently at the time the researchers visited the education units. The data was collected in English since respondents understood it. However, the researchers occasionally clarified questions with the local language of the respondents known as *Asante Twi*, particularly in many of the one-on-one interviews with problem learners and their parents.

Table 3. *Breakdown of Interviewees Engaged in the Qualitative Enquiry*

No.	Category of Interviewee	Total No. Selected	Details
1	Problem Learners	17	Each of the problem learners were interviewed individually (one-on-one interview).
2	Regular Students	15	Five regular students in each of the three schools were formed into focus groups and interviewed in three focus group discussions sessions.
3	Parents of Problem Learners	19	They were interviewed in focus group discussions in each of the schools. A total of three focus group discussion sessions involving the parents were organized.
4	Heads of Institutions	3	Each of the heads of the three schools was interviewed privately (one-on-one interview).
5	Early Childhood Experts	6	Each of the early childhood experts was interviewed privately (one-on-one interview).
6	Teachers of Problem Learners	4	Each of the teachers of the problem learners was interviewed privately (one-on-one interview).
TOTAL = 64			

Table 4. *Demographic Profile of Interviewees*

<i>Public and Private Basic Schools</i>			
		Count	Percent %
Gender	Male	37	57.8%
	Female	27	48.2%
	<i>N</i>	64	
Age	6-9 yrs.	24	37.5%
	10-19 yrs.	9	14%
	20-29 yrs.	0	0%
	30-39 yrs.	9	14%
	40-49 yrs.	19	30%
	over 50 yrs.	3	4.5%
	<i>N</i>	64	
Educational Level	Uneducated	8	12%
	Elementary Level	32	50%
	MSCL	12	19%
	SHS	2	3%
	HND/Diploma	4	6%
	First Degree	3	5%
	Master's Degree	3	5%
	<i>N</i>	64	

Emergent Themes from the Qualitative Data

Problem learners are students with learning and retention challenges. All the respondents admitted that there are students with problems and/or difficulties associated with their learning abilities. One of the teachers interviewed who seemed to know the state of problem learners said, “Problem learners are slow learners who need great attention during the teaching and learning processes” (T3, Personal Communication, 8/3/2018). Similarly, the parents of the problem learners indicated that their children had challenges with their learning. They mentioned the poor academic reports they constantly get about their children’s performances. These responses show that problem learners exist in the academic environment. These problem learners have great difficulty in grasping and recalling the learned concepts taught to them.

Environmental factors are the principal causes of the learning and retention challenges among problem learners and not hereditary or spiritual factors. The majority of the respondents admitted that the causes of problem learning are far from hereditary and spiritual factors. Only seven respondents admitted that the challenges in learning faced by problem learners are hereditary and spiritual. Three interviewees opined that hereditary factors may have an impact on students learning, but are not absolute causes of problem learners. Other interviewees held the view that hereditary factors could not be responsible. To them, learners with low IQ levels from the genetic history of their parents could easily overcome all learning challenges if they utilized fully the avenues of learning given them.

Interestingly, four respondents agreed that spiritual factors could be one of the causes of problem learning. Three parents mentioned that evil spirits like witches usually bewitch enterprising students with dullness in thinking as well as learning. As such, when the problem learner and the relatives are not prayerful, the evil spirits would achieve their evil intent.

Contrastingly, 56 interviewees rejected the claims that spiritual factors are causes of problem learning. They opined that attributing problem learning to spiritual cause could be psychological due to the belief systems in the African cosmology. They rather attributed the real cause of problem learning to environmental factors, which include but not limited to

lack of preparation, bad study habits, poor parental and teacher supervision.

The problem learners, teachers, and early childhood experts interviewed said that many parents are engrossed more in their business and daily affairs with little or no time to oversee and/or inspect the assignments given their wards. In the views of some problem learners, their single mothers are saddled with demanding work responsibilities. This leaves them with no time to supervise or assist them in their studies. The lack of parental supervision also propels many of the students to engage in unwholesome and uncensored entertainment that takes up all the time they should have invested in learning.

Sadly, some problem learners indicated that their tutors mostly ignore them due to their slow pace in learning during the teaching and learning activities in the classroom. The early childhood experts and some of the teachers interviewed also mentioned that the problem in learning among some elementary pupils is that they lack strong foundations for learning, which often results from delayed enrolment in school. They said that parents are to inculcate the habit of learning into their children at a very tender age and enroll them in school at the early years of their lives from three years to six years.

Problem learners usually perform better in extra curricula activities. The teachers and the regular students contend that many of the problem learners performed better in sporting and athletic activities in the school. Fourteen out of the 17 problem learners admitted that they liked playing football, tennis, and some athletic games. Many of them said that they were determined to pursue such extra curricula activities as future careers.

Problem learners have less or no interest in academic activities (teaching and learning processes) and do not actively partake in class discussions due to social stigmatization. Owing to the mockery, indifferent attitude, and demoralizing actions from their classmates, siblings, parents, and teachers, many problem learners are mostly discouraged, depressed, and sometimes lose interest completely in academic activities. One of the early childhood experts opined that some problems learners end up being socially reserved and emotionally disturbed all the time due to the social stigmatization they face. All the problem learners admitted that they are often downhearted and feel no urge in actively partaking in the classroom activities because they are often looked down upon by

their teachers and colleagues.

Two parents interviewed told the researchers that they had no option than to change the schools of their children twice because of the stigmatization faced by their wards in their former schools.

Strict parental and teacher supervision, motivation, ensuring active involvement in the teaching, and learning activities can help problem learners maximize their learning outcomes. The respondents noted that the learning standards of problem learners were improved significantly when the supervision and monitoring of their learning were intensified and closely monitored by their parents and teachers. One of the female teachers interviewed disclosed that she constantly monitored problem learners in her class, took great interest in their academic welfare, and geared them on with encouraging words.

The early childhood experts expressed similar remarks. They stated that when teachers and guardians take great interest in their learning, problem learners could be assisted to overcome their learning disabilities. One parent observed significant results when her son was supervised actively engaged by his teacher in the classroom. She added that his son, who hitherto was not interested in learning, now engages in personal learning with little or no coaching.

The use of regular and varied assessment strategies of the academic development of problem learners as well as extra or remedial teaching and learning activities to complement the regular school schedule can maximize the learning outcomes of problem learners. The experienced teachers who have taught many problem learners suggested the regular use of varied forms of assessment to track the academic progress of problem learners. They insisted that to ascertain their progress in academic performance requires the use of multiple assessment strategies such as multiple choice questions, open ended questions, fill-ins, oral presentations, individual projects, group projects, knowledge-transfer projects, and others.

Another teacher suggested the allocation of extra or remedial time to assist problem learners after the regular tuition after school in the school premises or elsewhere. Dedicated teachers do this at no cost. Notwithstanding, many teachers charge parents fees, thus,

making it difficult to offer such extra tuition to assist problem learners improve their learning.

The services of counselling units and facilitators aid problem learners in improving their academic performance. The early childhood experts and some parents opined that many of the learning challenges faced by problem learners are psychological in nature. As such, they suggested the provision of special counselling units in every educational institution in Ghana in the long term. However, in the short term, the parents suggested the immediate training of teachers in counseling and guidance to equip them in handling the condition of problem learners. They believe this would aid in preventing the stigmatization from teachers that often leads the regular students in wrongly emulating their teachers. The early childhood experts suggested massive training of special personnel to discharge these counselling and guidance services to learners. One early childhood expert mentioned that aside the woefully minimal number of trainees in special education, most of the few special education teachers are sent to regular classrooms to teach because of the lack of special counselling units in schools. It is sad that at the elementary school level where the services of counsellors and facilitators are needed most, these few trained personnel are rather sent to the regular schools.

Discussion

Both the qualitative and quantitative data sets indicated that there are some school children who have problems with learning. These problems are basically with the grasping and retention problems (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994; Will, 1986). In all the case study schools, the problem learner respondents admitted that they had deficiencies in learning.

Research Question 1: The Causative Agents of the Conditions of Problem Learners in the Elementary Schools in Ghana

Both the qualitative and quantitative data sets suggest that problem learning is not

hereditary, but is caused by environmental factors. This finding is contrary to the views of earlier researchers (Ayres & Robbins, 2005; Guttmacher, Porteous, & McInerney, 2007) that problem learners acquired the defects in learning from the genes of their parents. However, the findings concur with Kormos and Smith (2012) that problem learning is not heredity. They explained further that learning challenges of problem learners have no connection with genetics.

On whether the behavior of the problem learners contributed to their challenge, the quantitative data revealed that respondents were neutral in that regard. The qualitative data, however, showed that attitudes toward learning are driven largely by the students themselves. Indeed, students' preparedness and personal motivation to learn are central to boosting their desire to learn while positively affecting their learning outcomes. To buttress, Mokhele (2006) states that if the behaviors of children are not guarded, they will have challenges with their learning. Poor parental and teacher supervision, poor time management, and study habits, coupled with unregulated entertainment, have been the driving forces behind the challenges of many of the problem learners as revealed by the findings of the study.

Moreover, the findings revealed that problem learning attributed to spiritual causes is not substantially valid. This is in sharp contrast with the findings of Constantine, Miville, Warren, Gainor, and Lewis-Coles (2006), who posited that there is a strong positive correlation between spiritualism and academic performance. Most of the respondents indicated that the perception about evil spirits hampering the studies of brilliant learners is not justified. Learning is out of the spiritual scope and depended largely on a student's preparedness and positive environmental variables at the learners' disposal.

Further, the study showed that the main causes of problem learning at the elementary schools level include poor parental and teacher supervision or monitoring, which are environmentally related as purported by Rickinson (2001).

Also, the saddled responsibilities of some parents and dedication of all their time to their work responsibilities with no or poor monitoring of their wards are one of the causes of problem learning. These correspond with the view of Masino and Niño-Zarazúa (2016) who posited that the poor parenting skills and "chaotic" families of problem learners are driven by the long working hours, which leads to the neglect of their wards in terms of monitoring

their studies. Overloading problem learners with house chores and petty trading after school affect their learning habits. Thus, poor environment, not conducive for learning, aggravates the problems associated with their learning.

Additionally, poor study foundation due to overly delayed ages before enrolling in school and the lack of learning logistics negatively affects problem learners in Ghana. Though delayed age of school enrollment helps learners in acquiring cognitive, social, linguistic, or physical abilities (McEwan & Shapiro, 2008; Stipek, 2002), overly delayed ages between 7-9 before enrolling in school were cited as one of the causes of problem learning. The minds of such children are preoccupied with entertainment activities and playful thoughts with less of no interest in learning. Therefore, parents must enroll their wards at the appropriate age of three to six years (Dee & Sievertsen, 2018).

Research Question Two: How Problem Learners are Treated and Its Impacts on Their Attitudes toward Learning

The quantitative data revealed that problem learners are looked down upon regarding stigmatization; however, respondents were neutral on their stance. Likewise, the research item on problem learners being discriminated against by some teachers and students recorded a neutral stance. Contrarily, the qualitative data affirmed the discrimination and stigmatization faced by problem learners within the school and home environments. This can affect their studies by demoralizing many problem learners from actively engaging in the teaching and learning activities. Barga (1996) also posited that children with problems face so much discrimination in their learning. As noted in the study, teachers often take great interest in the active and brilliant students rather than those with challenges with their learning. This compounds their learning difficulties. Kaukiainen et al. (2002) found that children with learning difficulties are teased and bullied by their colleagues. The study's findings confirm that problem learners are teased and ridiculed at school and in their homes by siblings and, sometimes, their own parents.

Luciano and Savage (2007) argued that beyond being looked down upon, problem learners are also stereotyped. They are mostly ignored and this aggravates the social segregation gap between their colleagues in the school, their relatives in their homes, and

the community at large. This attitude is unhealthy, making problem learners lose their confidence to succeed in their learning activities. Invariably, making them experience emotional difficulties in getting along with the society, they find themselves (Nabuzoka & Smith, 1993). Although the qualitative and quantitative data allude to problem learners actively excelling in other extra curricula activities like sports, their social dejection does not motivate some of them to partake in those activities. Therefore, the school, home, and communities must be sensitized to ensure the educational and social inclusion of problem learners in all curricula and extra curricula activities. This would bolster the interest and confidence of the problem learners in these activities.

Research Question Three: Strategies to Remedy the Challenges of Problem Learners to Maximize Their Learning Outcomes

The key remedy endorsed by all the respondents was the strict monitoring and supervision of the learning of problem learners in the school and home environments. It was suggested that parents must be interested in the learning of their wards, supervising their schedules for learning, and assisting them with their academic assignments. McNaughton et al. (2008) propose strong support for parents towards the learning challenge of their children to enhance their study habits and consequently their learning outcomes. They must also create conducive learning environments for the problem learners by providing the required learning materials (Masino & Niño-Zarazúa, 2016) and not overloading them with home and/or business-related activities. In addition, they must encourage and motivate the problem learners rather than passing derogatory comments due to their low academic performance. This would provide problem learners with a strong buffer against the learning challenges they have.

In the school environment, head-teachers must set good examples in showing keen interest in the academic welfare of problem learners. Also, teachers must actively involve the problem learners even more in the teaching and learning activities as well as develop the potentials of problem learners in extra curricula activities. This correlates with the view of van Hoorn, Monighan-Nourot, Scales, and Alward (2014) that special attention given to problem learners serves as a great boost to their academic performances. In addition,

teachers must employ varied assessment strategies to monitor the learning progress and outcomes of problem learners. This would deepen their understanding of the learning patterns of the problem learners so that effective teaching strategies can be implemented to assist them increase their learning outcomes.

Further, clear and strict ethical rules that guard against discrimination against problem learners should be meticulously followed by every member of the school community with penalties and sanctions to defaulters. Highly depressed problem learners could contemplate suicide when ignored. To avert such situation, the Ministry of Education must organize sensitization workshops and seminars for teachers to effectively deal with problem learners and, through its allied agencies, decisively deal with any of its employees who fall foul.

Problem learners need extra tuition to improve in their learning outcomes. Masino and Niño-Zarazúa (2016) concur that teaching and learning is enhanced when compensatory or remedial schemes are instituted, which results in positive learning outcomes. Educational institutions with the parents of problem learners must arrange for such remedial lessons. There should be common grounds to rewarding teachers who offer such remedial tuitions to problem learners. This issue should be discussed at the regular Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education must set up a special fund to assist problem learners in Ghanaian schools to incentivize teachers who spend extra time to assist problem learners in their studies.

To improve the study habits and learning outcomes of problem learners, relevant stakeholders in education must collaborate. In this regard, Llewellyn, McConnell, Honey, Mayes, and Russo (2003) stress on the collective efforts of all stakeholders in education; namely teachers, parents, society, educational counsellors and facilitators, and others work towards helping problem learners to overcome their learning difficulties. This will require concerted efforts from the school community, home community, counselling units, and others in that regard.

Conclusion

The study affirms that problem learners exist. Nonetheless, the causes of their learning

difficulties were not hereditary, but largely due to environmental factors, either in the schools, homes, and community. Problem learners are often looked down upon and stigmatized by the society, especially in the school. This makes many problem learners lose interest in the teaching and learning activities carried out in the classroom. The findings also indicate that problem learners may not be academically excellent, but they have a strong interest in extracurricular activities in the school. Problem learners can be helped to improve their learning outcomes if strict parental and teacher supervision of their learning is put in place; appropriate learning logistics are provided; complementary and remedial tuition is done with teachers adopting varied assessment strategies while ensuring their active participation with motivation and encouragement. Drawing from the outcomes of the study, the following recommendations are proposed for policy implementation to assist problem learners' increase their learning outcomes, especially in the elementary schools:

1. The Ministry of Education through its allied agencies must provide sensitization education to foster an understanding of the conditions of problem learners to teachers, heads of institutions, and all students in the various educational institutions in Ghana to help eradicate the stigmatization against problem learners. This would gradually bolster the self-confidence and harness acceptability of the problem learners in the school community, thereby affecting their learning outcomes positively.
2. The government of Ghana through the Ministry of Education and other NGOs responsible for inclusive and special education must set up a fund or reward system for teachers who offer remedial lessons to boost the learning outcomes of identified problem learners. This fund can partly be used to assist the needy problem learners with important learning logistics.
3. The government of Ghana through the Ministry of Education must set up counselling units and posting of trained special education personnel to the various elementary schools in Ghana. These units and trained personnel would ensure that the interests of problem learners in the respective elementary schools are catered for. In addition, during Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings, parents should be educated on how they should handle their wards with learning challenges.
4. As problem learners often face neglect and stigma from colleagues, teachers, and the community, teachers and community members should be open-minded to accommodate and encourage problem learners so they can improve their learning abilities and performance.
5. Strict teacher and parental supervision of the study patterns of problem learners, ensuring extra

remedial tuition, using regular and varied assessment strategies, as well as providing mentors and counselling units to motivate and bolster the confidence of problem learners, would assist problem learners to improve their learning outcomes.

6. In order not to stigmatize special education needs, the Ministry of Education in Ghana must promulgate a policy that would allow teacher autonomy in schools. This could be an alternative strategy in leveraging teachers and teacher training schools in Ghana to be able to cater for the distinctive nature of problem learners.

References

- Arozin, J. M., & Cameron, R. (2010). The Application of mixed methods in organizational research: A literature review. *Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods*, 8(2), 95-105.
- Ayres, A. J., & Robbins, J. (2005). *Sensory integration and the child: Understanding hidden sensory challenges*. Los Angeles, CA: Western Psychological Services.
- Barga, N. K. (1996). Students with learning disabilities in education: Managing a disability. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 29(4), 413-421. doi:10.1177/002221949602900409
- Constantine, M. G., Miville, M. L., Warren, A. K., Gainor, K. A., & Lewis-Coles, M. A. E. (2006). Religion, spirituality, and career development in African American college students: A qualitative inquiry. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 54(3), 227-241. doi:10.1002/j.2161-0045.2006.tb00154.x
- Creswell, J. W., & Clark, V. L. P. (2011). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Dee, T. S., & Sievertsen, H. H. (2018). The gift of time? School starting age and mental health. *Health Economics*, 27(5), 781-802. doi:10.1002/hec.3638
- Ehrli, H. W. (2015). *Examining the perspectives of students with learning disabilities through their lived experiences* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Central Florida, Orlando, Florida.
- Fraenkel, J., Wallen, N., & Hyun, H. (2012). *How to design and evaluate research in education* (8th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Companies.

- Fuchs, D., & Fuchs, L. S. (1994). Inclusive schools movement and the radicalization of special education reform. *Exceptional Children*, 60(4), 294-309. doi:10.1177/001440299406000402
- Gordon, M. J. (1993). A prerogatives-based model for assessing and managing the resident in difficulty. *Family Medicine*, 25(10), 637-645.
- Guttmacher, A. E., Porteous, M. E., & McInerney, J. D. (2007). Science & society: Educating health-care professionals about genetics and genomics. *Nature Reviews Genetics*, 8(2), 151-157. doi:10.1038/nrg2007
- Kaukiainen, A., Salmivalli, C., Lagerspetz, K., Tamminen, M., Vauras, M., Mäki, H., & Poskiparta, E. (2002). Learning difficulties, social intelligence, and self-concept: Connections to bully-victim problems. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 43(3), 269-278.
- Kemp-Koo, D. (2013). *A case study of the Learning Disabilities Association of Saskatchewan (LDAS) Arrowsmith program* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.
- Kormos, J., & Smith, A. M. (2012). *Teaching languages to students with specific learning differences*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Lerner, J. (2000). *Learning disabilities: Theories, diagnosis, and teaching strategies* (9th ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Llewellyn, G., McConnell, D., Honey, A., Mayes, R., & Russo, D. (2003). Promoting health and home safety for children of parents with intellectual disability: A randomized controlled trial. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 24(6), 405-431. doi:10.1016/j.ridd.2003.06.001
- Luciano, S., & Savage, R. S. (2007). Bullying risk in children with learning difficulties in inclusive educational settings. *Canadian Journal of School Psychology*, 22(1), 14-31. doi:10.1177/0829573507301039
- Masino, S., & Niño-Zarazúa, M. (2016). What works to improve the quality of student learning in developing countries? *International Journal of Educational Development*, 48, 53-65. doi:10.1016/j.ijedudev.2015.11.012
- McEwan, P. J., & Shapiro, J. S. (2008). The benefits of delayed primary school enrollment discontinuity estimates using exact birth dates. *Journal of Human Resources*, 43(1), 1-

29. doi:10.3368/jhr.43.1.1

- McNaughton, D., Rackensperger, T., Benedek-Wood, E., Krezman, C., Williams, M. B., & Light, J. (2008). "A child needs to be given a chance to succeed": Parents of individuals who use AAC describe the benefits and challenges of learning AAC technologies. *Augmentative and Alternative Communication*, 24(1), 43-55.
- Mokhele, P. R. (2006). The teacher-learner relationship in the management of discipline in public high schools. *Africa Education Review*, 3(1-2), 148-159. doi:10.1080/18146620608540448
- Nabuzoka, D., & Smith, P. K. (1993). Sociometric status and social behaviour of children with and without learning difficulties. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 34(8), 1435-1448. doi:10.1111/j.1469-7610.1993.tb02101.x
- Rickinson, M. (2001). Learners and learning in environmental education: A critical review of the evidence. *Environmental Education Research*, 7(3), 207-320. doi:10.1080/13504620120065230
- Scott, D., & Usher, R. (2011). *Researching education: Data methods and theory in educational inquiry* (2nd ed.). London: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Shapiro, J., Prislun, M. D., Larsen, K. M., & Lenahan, P. M. (1997). Working with the resident in difficulty. *Family Medicine*, 19(5), 368-375.
- Steinert, Y. (2013). The "problem" learner: Whose problem is it? AMEE Guide No. 76. *Medical Teacher*, 35(4), e1035-e1045. doi:10.3109/0142159X.2013.774082
- Steinert, Y., Nasmith, L., Daigle, N., & Franco, E. D. (2001). Improving teachers' skills in working with 'problem' residents: A workshop description and evaluation. *Medical Teacher*, 23(3), 284-288. doi:10.1080/01421590120048139
- Stipek, D. (2002). At what age should children enter kindergarten? A question for policy makers and parents. *Social Policy Report*, 16(2), 1-20. doi:10.1002/j.2379-3988.2002.tb00018.x
- United States Congress. (1975). *Education for All Handicapped Children Act*. Retrieved from <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/94/s6/summary>
- van Hoorn, J. L., Monighan-Nourot, P., Scales, B., & Alward, K. R. (2014). *Play at the center of the curriculum*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Vaughn, L. M., Baker, R. C., & de Witt, T. G. (2009). The problem learner. *Teaching and*

Learning in Medicine, 10(4), 217-222. doi:10.1207/S15328015TLM1004_4

Will, M. C. (1986). Educating children with learning problems: A shared responsibility. *Exceptional Children*, 52(5), 411-415. doi:10.1177/001440298605200502

Yao, D. C., & Wright, S. M. (2001). The challenge of problem residents. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 16(7), 486-492. doi:10.1046/j.1525-1497.2001.016007486.x