

Awareness among High School
Teachers about Learning Disabilities
in Rural Area of Gurugram

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ABSTRACT

Learning disability refers to delays, deviations and performances discrepancies in the basic academic subjects e.g., arithmetic, reading, writing, spelling as well as speech and cannot be attributed to mental retardation, sensory deficits, or emotional disturbances or learning disabilities. It is general educational term- an umbrella label- that includes a variety of different conditions. Unfortunately, most of these children are never identified as learning disabled. Due to lack of awareness among teachers, parents and school authorities, these children are usually labeled as slow, behind, incapable and failures. The objective of this study is to assess current knowledge level of elementary school teachers regarding learning disabilities. For this purpose, test of awareness regarding learning disability among school teachers has developed which helps to access the current knowledge level of school teachers. The lack of awareness among the general public as well as educators and officials in the education department is the first problem that needs to be addressed. The findings of the study concluded that the teachers had a meager knowledge about learning disability. It has been recommended that orientation programmes and workshops need to be conducted so that they can diagnose the problem of these children and intervene accordingly.

Keywords: Learning disability, awareness, elementary school teachers, sensory-deficit, mental retardation

INTRODUCTION

Inclusion is the right of all individuals to participate actively in all aspects of community life. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Division for Early Childhood (DEC), “The desired results of inclusive experiences for children with disabilities and their families include a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and development and learning to reach their full potential,” (DEC & NAEYC 2009). Having the opportunity to be appropriately educated in a regular classroom gives child the chance to feel like other kids. Unless all kids go freely and without judgment to a learning center or resource room whenever they need it, the trip to the special education room often has a stigma attached to it. Having the opportunity (in a well – supported and appropriately modified inclusive classroom) to achieve and interact and succeed and fail like the others can really do a lot for a child's sense of self-worth. Kids who do well in an inclusive environment feel more like they “own” the education they’ve been exposed to.

The UNESCO Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education (2009) set out the following justifications for working towards inclusive practices and educating all children together:

- **Educational Justification** – Inclusive schools have to develop ways of teaching that respond to individual differences and benefit all children.
- **Psycho-Social Justification** – Inclusive schools are able to change attitudes towards diversity and form the basis for a just, non-discriminatory society.
- **Financial Justification** – It costs less to establish and maintain schools that educate all children together than to set up a complex system of different schools “specializing” in different groups of children.

However, a number of international reviews have identified the poor quality and inadequate provision of teacher training in the area of special education needs teaching as a major barrier to successful inclusion and outcomes for children with disabilities and special education needs (OECD 2005). Obviously, a teacher who does not believe in, understand or really want to teach in such an environment could do much to undermine the potentially positive benefits of inclusion. A major review of existing literature on teacher attitudes to special education needs concluded that what is necessary to change teacher attitudes and provide them with the skills that they need to successfully implement mainstreaming is for education authorities to develop “a coherent plan for teacher training in the educational needs of children with special educational needs” (Avramidi & Norwich 2002).

Early intervention helps to improve every disability. It is helpful in early detection of the problem as well as is required for appropriate planning of any intervention programme. The lack of awareness among the general public as well as educators is the first problem that needs to be addressed. The educators have to be persuaded to develop a system of early detection and education so that capabilities of these children are identified. For this, the role of teachers is most important. Once teachers learn how to handle these children in classrooms, the status of these children could improve significantly. One such type of disability which is widely misunderstood, that the teachers need to be aware of is learning disability.

A learning disability is a neurological disorder that affects one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using spoken or written language. The disability may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or to do mathematical calculations. A learning disability cannot be cured or fixed; it is a lifelong challenge. Unfortunately, most of these children are never identified as learning disabled. Due to lack of awareness among teachers and school authorities, these children are usually labeled as slow, behind, incapable and failures. Repeated failures results in low self esteem and these children slowly stop trying to learn

and achieve and eventually drop out of school. Later on these dropped out adolescents and teens with learning disabilities, who have not received proper academic attention and support services, run a higher risk than average for becoming involved with tobacco, alcohol and drug abuse. School drop-out is linked to illegal activities and eventual incarceration, and for becoming prone to teenage pregnancies.

In India around 13-14% of all school children suffer from learning disorders. These children are labeled as failures by the society we live in but in reality, it's not that these children who have failed but it is the education system that has failed, failed in recognizing and helping them. As teachers are the link between the children and education system, it's their level of understanding and awareness that sets the path for these children's future.

Relevant research in different parts of the world have found that teachers' acceptance of inclusion may be promoted by educating them about the characteristics and behaviors of students with special needs (e.g., Carroll 2003; Koay, Lim, Sim & Elkins 2006). However, numerous studies have indicated that regular education teachers feel that both pre-service and in-service education programs were inadequate in preparing them for teaching students with learning disabilities in regular classrooms (DeSimone & Parmar 2006).

Al Khatib (2007) investigated the Jordanian regular education teachers' knowledge of learning disabilities and whether this knowledge differed as a function of selected variables. The sample consisted of 405 regular classroom teachers teaching 1st to 6th grade students in 30 schools in three Jordanian districts. Teachers completed a 40-item test designed by the researcher, which had adequate psychometric properties. The results of the study revealed that teachers had a moderate level of knowledge of learning disabilities. Female teachers were found to be significantly more knowledgeable than male teachers. Teachers' level of knowledge was unrelated to teachers' age, teaching experience, or academic qualifications.

Malusu & Kamau-Kang'ethe (2010) assessed the teacher awareness and intervention for pupils with Learning Disabilities

in inclusive education in Makadara Division. The study concluded that: teachers were aware of inclusive education in their schools, teachers had different interventions in place to ensure the success of inclusive education e.g. the use of corrective approaches, direct instructions, systematic phonics and using connectivity' with pupils' individual learning needs and that teachers were not professionally prepared to cope with pupils with learning Disabilities in inclusive education.

Aladwani & Shaye (2013) investigated Kuwaiti primary school teachers' knowledge of the early signs of dyslexia and their awareness level of the related difficulties that dyslexic children suffer. They concluded that Kuwaiti teachers are aware of this problem, but lack of time, and being overloaded with daily school routines and responsibilities, prevent them from helping and assessing these children.

Sharma & Samuel (2013) studied the awareness that teachers have about learning disability and the provisions made by the government and CBSE board. It was a cross sectional study with sample size of 100 teachers from private English medium schools in Ludhiana, Punjab. They concluded that although the teachers claimed to have knowledge regarding Learning disability but they only had a vague idea about it, only a few teachers were aware about the provisions provided by the government. Most of the teachers blamed the student's attitude and home environment for performing poorly in studies.

Various studies carried out to investigate the knowledge and awareness of teachers regarding learning disabilities found out that the success of inclusion of students with learning disabilities partially depends on teachers' awareness of these students' needs (Campbell, Gilmore & Cuskelly 2003).

METHODOLOGY

The study was descriptive survey type in nature. The study was conducted on 50 elementary teachers teaching in schools of rural area of Gurugram. These teachers had an average 5-10 years of experience in teaching. A test was prepared by the investigators to test the basic awareness of learning disability among these

teachers. The test consisted of 20 items testing general meaning of LD, its types, management and concessions given by CBSE board to LD students. The test was administered individually with adequate instructions to the teachers.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The data collected was statistically analyzed on percentile basis and analyses were done on the basis of Level of awareness of learning disabilities and scores achieved in test items by the teachers.

Analysis on basis of Level of awareness: The scores were divided into high, medium and low level of awareness as depicted in Table 1.

Table 1. *Percentage distribution of teachers across various levels of awareness regarding learning disability*

Levels	Scores	% age of respondent
High	>14 – 20	0%
Medium	>7- 14	86%
Low	0-7	14%

It was found that 14% of the teachers scored between the 0-7 range thus depicting low level of awareness regarding learning disability. 86% of the teachers scored between the >7-14 range thus depicting medium level of awareness regarding learning disability and no teacher was able to score in the >14-20 range thus 0% of the teachers fall under high level of awareness for Learning disabilities. The overall picture depicts that not even a single teacher scored above 14 which leads us to conclude that there is a great need to generate awareness among the teachers regarding learning disabilities. The graphical representation of the data is evident from Figure 1 given below:

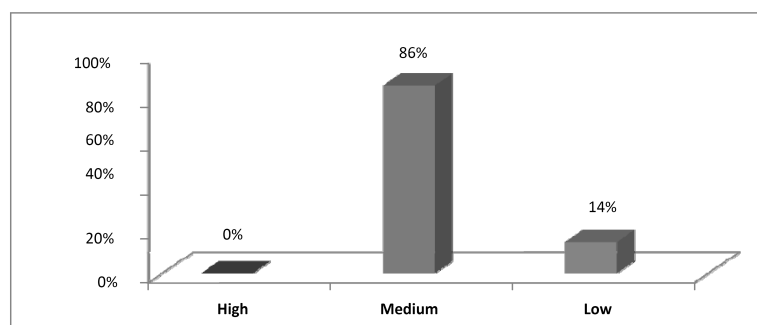


Figure 1. *Percentage distribution of teachers across various levels of awareness regarding learning disability*

The reason for the majority of teachers falling in medium level of awareness of learning disabilities can be attributed to the fact that the general curriculum of B.Ed. does not cover inclusive education as a separate subject. Thus, these teachers are not even able to distinguish learning disabled children from the slow learner as it has been observed and checked through the self-made test that most of the teachers answered the very 1st multiple choice question with the observation that the learning-disabled children are ones who are academically backward with low IQ.

Analysis on the basis of scores achieved: Table 2 describes the percentage distribution of correct response of the respondents to the test items. The percentage of teachers who correctly answered each of the 20 questions comprising the test of knowledge used was calculated. The percent of correct responses to the test items ranged from 2% to 34%. The mean score obtained by teachers on the total test was 9.95, meaning that teachers only demonstrated medium level knowledge i.e., 50% the total questions in the test of learning disabilities.

Table 2. *Percentage of correct respondent to the test items*

Raw Score	%age of respondent
5	2%
6	10%
7	4%

8	10%
9	14%
10	8%
11	34%
12	8%
13	4%
14	6%

It was evident from the data that 2% of teachers responded correctly to 5 items out of 20, 10% teachers to 6 items, 4% teachers to 7 items, 10% teachers to 8 items, 14% teachers to 9 items, 8% teachers to 10 items, 34% teachers responded correctly to 11 items, 8% teachers responded to 12 items correctly, 2% to 13 items and only 6% responded correctly to 14 items.

The results suggested that a very small group of teachers have basic knowledge regarding learning disabilities. A graphical representation of the data is depicted in Figure 2.

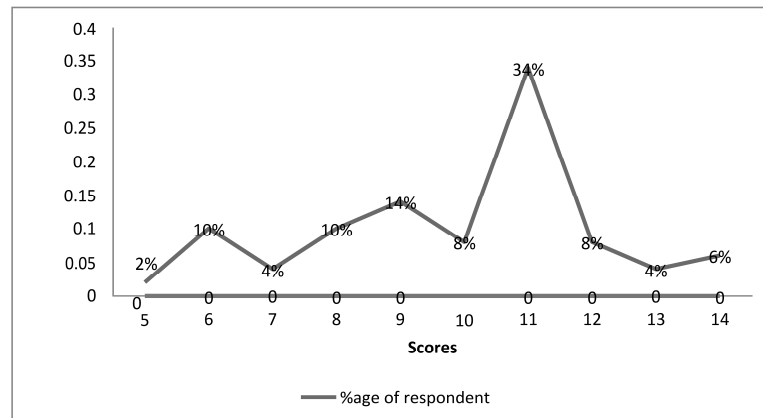


Figure 2. Percentage of correct respondent to the test items

It is evident from both Table 2 and Figure 2 that majority of the teachers have only 50% knowledge about learning disabilities which is insufficient and inadequate as it cannot be enough to help them identify learning disabled in their class. Only 6% teachers i.e., 3 out of 50 teachers achieved a score of 14 i.e., 70%

knowledge of learning disabilities again a very small number of teachers reaching the highest score in medium level of awareness. Elementary education is the stage at which such students can benefit the most from intervention strategies if identified by the class teachers at the right time and that can be possible only if teachers have adequate awareness and knowledge of the same.

There is thus a great not only to have inclusive education component in B.Ed. course but also to have in-service programs for the teachers in the system.

The investigators next step is to generate awareness by preparing modules on identification and intervention for the learning disabled and orient the elementary teachers through workshops and training programmes.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This study will prove to be helpful for students, teachers and school administrators as follows: Students will be able to get more help from their teacher, and receive adequate assistance as needed, if the teachers have appropriate knowledge and understanding of the students' problems. Teachers, viewing these results, will compare their current knowledge of learning disability with the help of self-made test. The results will help the teacher to attend workshops and in- service training to understand who are learning disabled children, which help them to identify and assess their problems. They will also learn the right support school children need, the various strengths and weaknesses of interventions, and how to encourage further professional interventions programs if required. The school administrators and educational policymakers will benefit from these results by being able to base their actions on valid data. The teacher's actual knowledge of learning disability and will also try to assess their own current perception of this learning difficulty.

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