

Awareness of Mainstream Elementary Level Teachers About Learning Difficulties Among Their Students in Mainstream Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Awareness of mainstream elementary level teacher regarding learning difficulty (LD) is very crucial to identify and deal with students having LD at an early stage. Subsequently, there are insufficient studies that investigate the mainstream teacher's awareness of LD in Pakistan. Therefore, the focus of the current study is to measure the level of awareness of mainstream elementary school teachers about learning difficulty, and the influence of variables i.e. gender, age, educational qualification, working experience of teachers, private and public sector schools on the awareness of LD. The design of the study was descriptive in nature. The population comprised of two hundred mainstream teachers of public and private elementary level schools (6th grade, 7th grade, and 8th grade) of Rawalpindi and Islamabad, Pakistan. Selection of sample for the study was based on the stratified random sampling technique and data was collected by self-developed questionnaires. After statistical analysis, it was established that majority of respondents (73.5%) have a low level of awareness about LD. Appropriate professional training, at different levels and durations, can be provided to teachers in the direction of building capacity of teachers' instructional practices to deal with and facilitate students having a learning difficulty.

KEYWORDS

Awareness, Teacher Training, Learning difficulty, Elementary level

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INTRODUCTION

Generally learning difficulty (LD) is associated with the hindrance in learning new skills i.e. listening, speaking, reading, writing and logical reasoning. The level and type of LD vary from person to person. Today mainstream classrooms are becoming increasingly packed with gifted students, culturally diverse and students with learning difficulties (McKee & McKee, 1992). Students with learning difficulties are not dumb or indolent; however, often spend too much time in mainstream classrooms without significant academic achievements, which has negative effects on the overall development of society in specific and country in general. Regardless of intense research, identifying the precise cause of LD is difficult. However, may major contributing factors be genetics, poor nutrition, pregnancy complication and environmental contaminants etc. (Cooper, 2007).

Usually, LD is first diagnosed in the school age, because of their low achievements as compared to their classmates. Here, the role of teachers become very important, since, without the knowledge and awareness about LD, a mainstream classroom teacher could not identify students having LD (Gandhimathi Jeryda Gnanajane Eljo, 2009). Therefore, the teachers having training and knowledge about LD could easily identify and manage the students having LD as compared to the teacher having a general educational background (Mohr-Jensen, Steen-Jensen, Bang-Schnack, & Thingvad, 2015). In addition, the LD specialist mainstream classroom teacher would professionally implement effective special teaching strategies and approaches to support LD students, so that they can achieve and deliver better results.

The first step is to identify the type of learning difficulty faced by the students. Then effective learning strategies are adopted and performance is compared before and after the learning strategy is applied. Continuation of strategies depends on the significant social gains i.e. improvement in grades and timely completion of tasks. Carefully designed strategies could be inefficient and ineffective without proper implementation by teachers (Langberg, Epstein, Urbanowicz, Simon, & Graham, 2008). Because without proper professional training, mainstream classroom teacher might not be able to provide significant commitment and time to the learning strategies. While applying effective strategies, the mainstream classroom teachers and students work in harmony, in the diagnostic stage, in intervention stage and outcome stage (J Kos, 2008). Therefore, it would be beneficial that teachers should receive a professional capacity-building course or training for LD identification among mainstream classroom students and proficient implementation of validated learning strategies. Once the mainstream classroom



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teachers have mastered this course or training, they would be able to improvise a strategy coherent with the needs of an individual student (Mohr-Jensen et al., 2015).

Regardless of early identification and judgment of learning difficulties, teachers are unlikely to spot and appreciate gifted qualities of students having LD. Instead of focusing on the growth of students' gifted qualities, teachers solely focus on LD. Therefore, this shift of focus to the student's discrepancies, as opposed to student's assets can adversely influence the student's interest, confidence and inspiration in emotional and academic vitality (Conforti, 2012). Moreover, professionally certified teachers in LD will provide the environment that is much needed for the individual students to balance between his/her gifted qualities as well as LD.

In Pakistan, there is not yet any formal training program for mainstream classroom teachers regarding LD. Consequently, many students having LD underperform and may be rejected from the classroom. This study will provide an insightful review of LD situation and probable solution for the classroom management for teachers in the mainstream classroom in Rawalpindi and Islamabad, one of the big cities of Pakistan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research examining the academic achievement of children with LD revealed that they underperform in reading, writing and listening skills during their early academic years (Zentall, 1993). Along with significant deficit in academic achievements, elementary school students having LD reflect problems in social competence and behavioral regulations during their school time. It would be very useful to attend students having LD with the combination of teachers and parents mutual and coherent effort (Ph, Fletcher, & Ph, 1991).

Cheng, Ritzhaupt & Antonenko (2019), Lawrence & Tar (2018) and Pantić & Wubbels, (2010) are about to say that a number of the studies have been conducted that explore that the role of teacher is very crucial in the process of educational learning. The teacher is the backbone of the whole educational circle. Teacher and student are two main pillars of the whole educational system because the whole educational system is encircled around these two pillars. The teacher teaches and the student learns and further gives benefit to the society. The effective teacher engages the students in a way that highlights mutual respect and an acknowledgment of the learning process. As a result of the teachers' efforts in this direction, a positive learning environment is established that nurtures the relationship between teachers and the learners (Williams & Williams, 2011)

Considerable literature is available about social and academic difficulties of the students having LD, but it is less known regarding knowledge and skill of mainstream classroom teachers to deal with such students. It is beneficial that teachers should have an increased awareness about student's social, financial, cultural and family background (Julie Kos, Richdale, & Hay, 2006). The interaction denotes interaction between learners and teachers and amongst learners in the classroom. Different researchers have investigated fundamental factors that trigger positive interaction in the classrooms and outcomes of such interactions that help in evaluating the effectiveness of teaching methods, which eventually impact improvement in learning gains. (Williams & Williams, 2011) Flanders divided interaction into two major categories, 1) teacher talk and 2) student talk. Teacher talk is further divided into direct influence and indirect influence while student talk has three main categories that include, 1) student response, 2) student initiative, and 3) silence/ confusion. (Flanders & Havumaki, 1960)

Learning disability has overlapping conditions with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and teachers should be prepared to deal with these situations in the classroom (Mather, 2008). Although there is no cure for LD, however children having LD can be a better performer and high achiever, in the classroom specifically and in life generally. With the appropriate help provided by the teachers and parents, they could learn and do successfully (Roger Pierangelo & George Giuliani, 2008). Preservice and on job training are crucial for mainstream classroom teachers to proper handle LD students. The curriculum of these trainings should be tailored and updated in line with to regional conditions of that city and country (Al-Omari, Al-Motlaq, & Al-Modallal, 2015). Validated and verified research instrument is very important for studies to investigate the subjective relationship between attitude and knowledge of teachers about LD (Mulholland, 2016). The instructional process is a very important component of the educational process. It is the role of instruction that may lead to effective or ineffective ways of teaching and assessment of the students. The better instructions by the teacher will produce the brighter results. On the other hand, it may lead to poor results if the instructions are not task oriented and student related. Instructional objectives primarily include a goal that a teacher as an instructor of the students aims to achieve through teaching. At one side, it provides the direction and planning that teacher hopes to employ while performing his/ her instructional duties and provides the criteria for assessing the outcomes of the teaching process on the other side. (Cheng, Ritzhaupt & Antonenko 2019)

There are different objectives of classroom instructions that are considered the backbone of this process. First of all, the language is considered the very important figure of classroom instruction because the language is the basic indicator that allows the individual to communicate with one another. Further strategic, socio-effective, philosophical and methods of the process are also significant indicators of classroom instructions. The strategies that are used to communicate, learn and think critically are known as strategic objectives. (Lawrence & Tar, 2018)

The instructional plans specify what a teacher wants to teach to the students. It also elaborates what should be taught to the students at a particular time. It usually provides the roadmap that is to be followed in the whole educational plan. The effective instructional plans are those that are well equipped and well researched according to the requirements of the students. It consists of many plans, rules, and regulations that ought to be followed by the teacher to achieve the educational goals. The well-established instructional plans are target oriented and provide clear guidelines to facilitate teaching & learning. It ensures positive and encouraging results when the process of evaluation is undertaken. The well-established plans of instructions allow the instructors to apply equal courses of teaching in an effective way. (Mulholland, 2016)

The instructional plans that are very useful include some unique aspects that should be followed. The teaching assumptions of teachers have a great influence on the outcome of their on-job training. Many studies show that teachers' professional commitment and development always enhance the quality of education. Subsequently, instructors are relied upon to encounter persistent expert advancement to stay informed concerning the determined change occurring in the training framework. Some of the teachers take trainings as an opportunity to improve their teaching for students with learning difficulty while many teachers do not take teachers professional development seriously to improve their teaching hacks (Al-Omari, Al-Motlaq & Al-Modallal, 2015). So teachers' interest for professional development shows their motivation to improve themselves for effective teaching and learning which ultimately have good impact on teachers and students self-efficacy beliefs. Subsequently it has turned out to be less compelling in helping the educators enhance their own particular practice. It shows a link between teacher self-efficacy beliefs and student academic achievements and their commitment (Norris, Qureshi, Howitt & Cramer, 2014; Mulholland 2016).

The teachers who recognized their feebleness recording LD better performed after having on job training (Yeh, 2018). Moreover, teachers need training and assistance in classifying mistakes related to LD and using these mistakes to improve the learning method of students (Pale, 2018).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The central objectives of the current study were;

1. To measure the awareness of mainstream elementary school teachers about LD.
2. To study the impact of variables gender, age, educational qualification, working experience of mainstream classroom teachers, private and public sector schools on the awareness of elementary school teachers towards LD.
3. To suggest corrective measure to increase the public sector and private sector schools' teachers' awareness about ADHD.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This nature of the study was mainly descriptive in nature and the study was conducted by the survey. The self-developed questionnaire, based on an intensive survey of prior research related to students having a learning difficulty, were used for the mainstream elementary level teachers. Randomly selected, two hundred teachers (6th grade, 7th grade, and 8th grade) from private and public sector schools of Rawalpindi and Islamabad.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

The questionnaire was used to measure the level of awareness of mainstream elementary school teachers about learning difficulties kept in mind the following aspects: Concept, Causes, Characteristics, Identification, Training, and Guidance. Each question comprised of three options that are (not at all, aware to some extent and aware to a greater extent). The pre-test was conducted in two public and two private mainstream elementary schools. Questions that are ambiguous and similar are excluded from the final questionnaire.

PROCEDURE

After finalizing the questionnaire, the data was collected from the mainstream elementary school's teachers. After data collection, the data were tabulated. The data collected for the level of teachers' awareness were analyzed by using different suitable descriptive statistical techniques with the help of the software Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Statistical techniques used were: t-test, chi-square and percentages (Norris, Qureshi, Howitt, & Cramer, 2014).

Table 1: Demographic Characteristic of Respondents (N=200)

<i>Demographic Information</i>	<i>N= 200</i>	<i>Percentage %</i>
Age		
20-30	48	24
31-40	93	46.5
41 and above	59	29.5
School sector		
Public	100	50
Private	100	50

Educational qualification		
Teachers Training	55	27.5
BA/ BSc	31	15.5
B. Ed	88	44
M. Ed	13	6.5
Others	13	6.5
Experience		
1-5	81	40.5
6-10	47	23.5
11-15	34	17
15-20	18	9
21 and above	20	10

It is clear from Table 1 that 46.5 % responded are of 31-40 years age, 29.5 % responded are of 41 and above years age and 24 % responded are of 20-30 years age. So, the majority of teachers are among the age group of 31-40 years. It is obvious from the table that 50 % responded are from the public sector and 50% are from the private sector. The table showing that 44 % have done with B.Ed. degree, 27.5% have completed teachers training, 15.5% of respondents have completed BA/BSc, 6.5% of respondents have done masters and remaining 6.5% have other courses respectively. Tables reveals the teaching experience of respondents. 40.5% teachers have 1-5 years teaching experience, 23.5% of respondents have 6-10 years of experience, 17% have 11-15 years of teaching experience, and 9% have 15- 20 years teaching experience. Other 10% have more than 21 years' experience.

Table 2: The general level of awareness about Learning Difficulties (N=200)

<i>Scopes</i>	<i>N=200</i>	<i>Percentage %</i>
Overall awareness		
Low	147	73.5
High	53	26.5
Idea of LD		
Low	147	73.5
High	53	26.5
Features of LD		
Low	112	56
High	88	44
Reasons for LD		
Low	130	65
High	70	35
Identification of LD		
Low	156	78
High	44	22
Training about LD		
Low	150	75
High	50	25
Guidance about LD		
Low	161	80.5
High	39	19.5

The above table 2 illustrates the entire level of elementary school teachers' awareness of learning difficulty in various scopes. 73.5% of respondents have a low level of overall awareness about learning difficulty. Majority of respondents 73.5% mentioned that they have a low level of awareness about the concept of learning difficulty. Value of 56% shows that respondents have a low level of awareness about the features of learning difficulties. Most of the respondents 65% have responded low level of awareness about the causes of learning difficulty. 78% shows a low level of awareness about the identification of learning difficulty. 75% displayed a low level of training about learning difficulties, 80.5% of respondents have exposed that they have a low level of awareness about guiding learning difficulty students.

Table 3: The relationship between the general awareness about the learning difficulty and the age of the respondents (n=200)

Age (Years)	General awareness about the learning difficulty		Statistical Interpretations
	Low (132)	High (68)	
20- 30	42	20	$\chi^2_{=0.259}$, $df=2$, $P > 0.05$ Insignificant
31- 40	70	36	
Above 41	20	12	

The Table 3 exposes that there is an insignificant relationship between the overall awareness about the learning difficulty and the age of the respondents.

Table 4: The relationship between the general awareness about the learning difficulty and the educational qualification of the respondents (N=200)

Educational qualification	General awareness about the learning difficulty		Statistical Interpretations
	Low (149)	High (51)	
Teachers Training	49	16	$\chi^2=7.304$, $df = 4$, $P > 0.05$ insignificant
BA/ B.Sc	34	7	
B. Ed	42	22	
M. Ed	15	4	
Others	9	2	

The Table 4 reveals that there is an insignificant relationship between the overall awareness about the learning difficulty and the educational qualification of the respondents

Table 5: The relationship between the overall awareness about the learning difficulty and the teaching experience of the respondents (N=200)

Teaching Experience	Overall awareness about the learning difficulty		Statistical Interpretations
	Low (132)	High (68)	
1-5	45	26	$\chi^2 = 9.837$ $df = 4$, $P > 0.05$ significant
6-10	28	14	
11-15	32	22	
15-20	18	4	
21 and above	9	2	

The Table 5 shows that there is significant relationship between the overall awareness about the learning difficulty and the teaching experience of the respondents.

Table 6: The relationship between the overall awareness about the learning difficulty and the sector of school

Sector of school	Mean	SD	Statistical Inferences
Public	1.3684	0.4955	$t = 0.346$, $P > 0.05$ Insignificant

The Table 6 reveals that there is an insignificant relationship between the overall awareness about the learning difficulty and the school sector.

FINDINGS

Following findings are revealed form the analysis. It is clear from Table 1 that the relationship between learning difficulty and age of respondent is insignificant. The relationship between the overall awareness about the learning difficulty and the educational qualification of the respondents is insignificant. The relationship between the overall awareness about the learning difficulty and the teaching experience of the respondents is significant. The relationship between the overall awareness about the learning difficulty and the school sector is insignificant.

CONCLUSION

Based on findings the following conclusions have been derived that teachers have a low level of awareness about the learning difficulties in the mainstream elementary classes. Moreover, findings also depict that there is no effect of teachers' age, Qualification, and school sector on overall awareness of teachers. It is observed from results that there is effect of teachers' experience on awareness level of teachers about LD.

Teachers are pillars of any educational structure because they have a direct influence on the student's academic, ethical and physical concepts. As teachers are the better resource for knowledge, enthusiasm, affection, care, and support for their students in the process of learning. Because teachers have to face diverse type of learning difficulties in the classrooms, to handle those diversities teachers may be trained and educated in that way. For professional development and capacity building of teachers, training is a necessary element and when there is a matter of knowledge about special focus, awareness, and treatment of learning difficulty students. The awareness level of teacher would be increased by the short courses or in-service training.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The current study has certain methodological limitations and strengths in its progression. On the basis of limitations of the study, following are some of the recommendations for the future research:

- The future research may involve a larger sample size that could be more representative of the population and findings could be generalized to the larger population. A Larger population would yield better results regarding the topic.
- Future research may involve an experimental design of the study that would enable the researcher to find out the direct relationship between the variables. The current study only gave us the level and trend of educational indicators but future research could involve causal design to find out how learning outcome of the students with learning difficulties is dependent upon certain indicators.
- In future research, special or inclusive schools may also be a part of the study. This would surely widen the scope of the study. The inclusion of special or inclusive school to measure the impact of certain indicators on the learning achievement of the student with learning difficulties would be more beneficial.
- In the future research, some significant statistical test in the form of regression analysis could be applied. This would give the reader predictive values of the different indicators and how each of these indicators contributes in improving the learning outcome of the students with learning difficulties.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The findings of the study can be utilized in framing the policies and how the students learning outcomes can be enhanced.

- One of the major benefits of the findings of the study can be for the policy makers both in public and private sector, who can frame their policies in accordance with the needs of the students and the parents as well as communities of local areas. The current study found that how students learning outcome are influenced by the educational indicators and learning difficulties. Hence, policy makers can use the findings of the study to focus their policies towards the better educational performance and learning outcome of the students.
- Another benefit lies in for the teachers of the schools who can also get inspiration from the findings of the study. The study found some very good points that how teacher's application of materials and methods influence improved classroom interaction and learning achievements and that how a teacher can manage the classroom without using violent methods of disciplining the children with learning difficulties. Similarly, what is the role of student-teacher relations? Such findings are very fruitful and useful for the teachers' community as they can improve the learning of the students by adopting and applying all the above indicators.
- The study also implies the provision of the instructional materials and equipment in the form of curriculum, textbooks, syllabi and other materials and that how learning environment help improves the performance of the learners. This is important on part of the government, school administration and community to ensure the provision of all the logistics and materials necessary for the teaching and learning process for the children having learning difficulties.
- The findings of the study can also help the parents before selecting any educational institution. They can visit the school and find out how such educational indicators are being practiced by the school. They can select such schools with the maximum implementation of such indicators for a better learning outcome of their children having learning difficulties.
- Teachers working in the school sector are among the primary users of this research as a whole. They may refer to the major findings pertaining to the instructions, learning environment, and how they impact the learning achievements of the learners with learning disability.

CREDIT AUTHOR STATEMENT

Farrukh Kamran: Conceptualization, Methodology **Ayesha Afzal:** Data curation, Writing- Original draft preparation. **Dr. Saadia Khan:** Investigation. **Shahid Rafiq:** Writing- Reviewing and Editing

COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

It is declared that all authors don't have any conflict of interest. Furthermore, informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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