

General and Special Teachers' Perception of Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

This study was an effort to bring out a clear view of concept of learning disabilities by involving the educationists in the process. In simple words it can be said that learning difficulties refer to deficits in specific skill areas in comparison to expected levels of performance. The deficient skill areas involve basic academic subjects thought in expressive and receptive oral language. They are children who can't learn by ordinary method of instruction but are not exceptional. Academic learning may not be the conditions significantly inhibit the process of learning to read, spell, write or compute arithmetically. These abilities show up children are in school and performing well below their academic potential. Main objectives of the study were: to investigate teacher's perception of what constitute learning disabilities and what educational implications they have and to determine if there was a difference in general education teachers and special education teacher's perception of disabilities. Ten null hypotheses were framed to investigate the perception of teachers about different aspects of learning disabilities. A sample of 300 teachers from special education public sector, 300 teachers from general education was the selected community. A five point likert type questionnaire was developed to investigate the perception about the learning disabilities. After piloting the final reliability of the instrument was 0.8143. Main findings showed that the concept of learning disabilities is perceived differently by the teachers of general education and that of special education. Teachers of special education had better perception of learning disabilities in children. In the same way special education teachers had better perception of characteristics of children with learning disabilities.

Introduction

Many definitions of learning disabilities could be stated for instance, Vaughan and Hodges (1973), in designing a study on fractions view of definition were able to assemble thirty-five separate definitions of "learning disabilities". The most widely accepted of definitions of learning disability is that proposed by the National Advisory Committee on Handicapped children (Lilly, 1977); "Children with special learning disabilities exhibit a disorder in one or more basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using spoken or written languages. These may be manifested in disorders of listening, thinking, talking, reading, writing, spelling or arithmetic. They include conditions which have been referred to a perceptual handicaps, brain injury, dyslexia, minimal brain dysfunction, development, aphasia, etc. they do not include learning problems which are due to primarily to visual, hearing or motor handicaps, to mental retardation, emotional disturbance."

Since early 1960's the term learning disabilities has been used as a way of referring to children who experience problems in learning but do not fit other classifications of handicapping, (Bateman 1964, Kirk 1963), often referred to as the founder of the term.

Disciplines such as medicine, psychology and education have contributed to the study of learning disabilities (Learner, 1972) which seems to have resulted in a confusion of term. The program is to arrive at a list of characteristics that exclusively apply to learning disabilities.

Theories of learning disabilities in the sixties and the role of theory in special education research have contributed little in our understanding of the causes of handicapping (Wong, 1979). Leading professional have openly deplored the quality of research, for instance, in the journal of Special Education (1976), several papers directly criticized research in the field (Cohen 1976; Keogh 1976; Elkins 1976). This comment is to draw attention to the fact that they have not as yet, contributed to a clarification of learning disabilities. Wong (1979) presented three general criticisms that could explain the lack of agreement in theories of learning disabilities:-

- a. A tendency to endorse a single-factor or and dimensional concept of learning disabilities
- b. Divisiveness among learning disabilities professionals; and
- c. The narrow and isolated context of learning disabilities research.

The history of learning disabilities as a category is a short one. The process of categorization and hence labeling a child so that he can receive in some way the services of special education have come under attack from a number of professionals. Some of the strongest arguments against the labeling process in special education, have been based upon the view point that this process has a self fulfilling aspect in which the label itself leads to a lowering of a teacher expectations and a consequent lowering of pupil aspiration and performance (Mercer 1977; Dunn 1968; Rosenthal and Fode 1963). The belief that special education labels are solely or at least partly responsible for stigmas, humiliation and often lower pupil performance is still very common in special education. Sociology education seems to have focused its major attention on the part played by the labeler, such as teachers and given little credence to the credence to the labeled, that is, the child. The frequency of the labeling and the child's feeling about the teacher will also influence the child's acceptance of the label. Once again, the child's awareness of the interactions between himself and the teacher will be a contributing factor.

A child could be labeled before entering a class or the child's classroom behavior so deviates from the norm, that the teachers reacts to the child differently and subsequently labels him. Brophy and Good (1974) in an extensive review on literature on teacher-child interaction suggests that some teachers respond differently to the identical behavior of children from different socio-economic status, racial and achievement groups, usually to the disadvantage of lower class students. One reason for this could be that the behavior of learning disabled children in classroom, may, by necessity, evoke different interaction from teachers. Studies dealing with non-labeled children also give credence to the generalization of differentiated interactions between teachers and children.

Teacher's expectations can be basically defined as those predictions made by teachers regarding the behavioral and academic achievement of their pupils (Brophy and Good, 1973). The significance of teacher's expectations lies in the possibility that they may prove to be self-fulfilling expectations. Understandably, an attitude towards a child may influence the teacher's expectation and interactions with the child. Because of this closely linked aspect of attitude and expectations, several remarks about teacher's attitude towards individuals will be made.

Shotel, Lano and Shotel McGelligan (1972) in a study to determine the attitudes of regular classrooms teachers toward handicapped children found that teachers preferred the learning disabled child emotionally disturbed and were least favorable towards the educable retarded. This finding is consistent with that of Fine (1976), more in the way of academic achievement from low ability children who have learning problems which are primarily the result of visual learning or motor handicaps or mental retardation, or emotional disturbance, or of environmental cultural or economic disadvantages.

One of the hardest tasks for a special education expert is to distinguish students with learning disabilities from those who have learning problems. The learning problems in both of these kinds of people in the educational institutions are very similar. Some work in the area of learning disabilities helped the educationists and educational planners to deal with the issue. Special education in general and learning disabilities were among the most ignored area of education before the era of Late General Zia-ul-Haq who took a keen interest in education of special children in Pakistan. Different organizations from advanced countries were invited for this purpose that provided information about modern teaching techniques and facilities for the training of teachers in 1985. Directorate General of special education was setup that developed a network of special institution throughout the country.

This effort introduced many terms from vocabulary of special education in the education sectors. Still many of the stake holders including policy makers, planners, curriculum developers, teachers, the students are not fully aware of the in-depth sense of the term learning disabilities and learning difficulties. Individual in both groups often present academic problems-there appear to be multiple causes and not all children with learning disabilities have the same set of deficits-Most have trouble in learning to read and write, while other have trouble in mathematics and others have problem in all three.

Learning difficulties in the children can be due to the result of social, emotional or environmental problems. These may not be generic or neurological. Learning difficulty is not related to any type of brain function, while learning disabilities are related to brain dysfunction. Learning difficulties can be deviations from normal development in psychological or linguistic functions. Often these abilities are related to information processing in the way the individual receive, intercept and responds to sensory input problems. Information processing is often, but always, associated with problems in academic achievement. Some children with perceptual motor deficits can't read, others with the perceptual difficulties do read. In some instances the association between developments and academic difficulties reflect a lack of perquisite skills. For example, before children can learn to write they must develop certain skills-eye hand coordination, memory and sequencing abilities to learn to read, children need auditory and visual discrimination ability and memory to see relationships and learn from reception and the ability to concentrate their attention. Persons with learning disabilities have in common same type of failure in schools or in the community. They are not able to what others with same level of intelligence are to accomplish.

Significance of Study

The justification of this study is two folded. Firstly, it will attempt to gather data in an area where there is little research. To the writer's knowledge no such study has been carried out in Pakistan. Secondly, there could be educational benefits. If the study indicates that teachers have inadequate or vastly different perceptions about learning disabilities, implication for in-service development of teachers become obvious, especially in a country where integration of such children regular class room is very common. The study may help the key players and stake holders in educational process to understand the misconceptions in the minds of teachers. The study may also benefit the special education writers to develop literature targeted on the teachers with special emphasis on the clarification of the concepts. The successful completion of this study may also benefit the special education field in the following ways. This research may identify variety in perceptions of learning disabilities found in the minds of teachers. The study may be helpful to the teachers, parents and educational administrators to identify students with learning disabilities and take measure for proper treatment. The study may become a base for the development of literature in the field of special education. This study may work as a base to giving specific recommendations for future research in the area.

Hypotheses

- Ho 1: There is no significant difference of the perceptions about learning disabilities between teachers of General Education and that of Special Education.
- Ho 2: There There is no significant difference of the perceptions about Characteristics of Children with Learning Disabilities between teachers of General Education and that of Special Education.
- Ho 3: There is no significant difference of the perceptions about Causes of Learning Disabilities between teachers of General Education and that of Special Education.
- Ho 4: There is no significant difference of the perceptions about Assessment and Placement of the Children with Learning Disabilities between teachers of General Education and that of Special Education

Sampling

A sample of 300 teachers of special education and 300 teachers of general education from public primary, elementary and secondary schools of Punjab were selected randomly as sample of study. Stratum wise selection of teachers was as:

Sr. No.	Category	Level of teachers	Sample Size		
			Male	Female	Total
1.	General schools in Public sector	Primary	50	50	100
		Elementary	50	50	100
		Secondary	50	50	100
2.	Schools for special education in public sector	Primary	50	50	100
		Elementary	50	50	100
		Secondary	50	50	100
Total			300	300	600

Instrumentation, Data Collection, and Data Analyses

A five points rating scale type questionnaire was developed to investigate the perception about the learning disabilities. Some open-ended questions were also added at the end of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was validated through expert opinion and then it was piloted among fifty respondents of the study other than the subjects included in the sample. To cross check the data an interview schedule was also developed. Reliability of the final instrument was 0.81431. Data was analyzed through SPSS computer software. Simple descriptive statistics was used to see the overall picture in the form of frequencies and percentages. It was best fit for the demographic data only. Z-test and t-test were applied to analyze the opinion of people and hypotheses testing.

Findings

Data were collected through two types of research instruments i.e. a rating scale and an interview schedule. The purpose of this study was to obtain information about teacher's perceptions of learning disability (LD). It was felt that the questionnaire method was the most appropriate technique as it is one of the investigation methods of a professional's problems, knowledge and attitudes towards a specific problem. Interview data was used to cross check the rating scale data. So this part of data analyses consists of transcriptions of interviews taken from principal/headmaster and five male teachers from two public schools for boys, principal/headmistress and five female teachers from two public schools for girls, and principal/headmaster/headmistress and five teachers from two special education schools each.

The hypotheses testing yielded the following results.

Sr. No.	Hypothesis	Stratum	#	Mean	Z-value	P-value	Results
1	There is no significant difference of the perceptions about learning disabilities between teachers of General Education and that of Special Education.	General Education Teacher (M&F)	300	169.92	-18.512	0.000	As p-value (0.000) is less than α (0.05), so we reject H_0 and conclude that "Concept of Learning Disabilities" is perceived differently by the teachers of General Education and that of Special Education.
		Special Education Teacher (M&F)	300	431.08			
2	There is no significant difference of the perceptions about Characteristics of Children with Learning Disabilities between teachers of General Education and that of Special Education.	General Education Teacher (M&F)	300	182.98	-16.303	0.000	As p-value (0.000) is less than α (0.05), so we reject H_0 and conclude that "Characteristics of Children with Learning Disabilities" are perceived differently by the teachers of General Education and that of Special Education.
		Special Education Teacher (M&F)	300	411.28			
3	There is no significant difference of the perceptions about Causes of Learning Disabilities between teachers of General Education and that of Special Education.	General Education Teacher (M&F)	300	170.91	-18.335	0.000	As p-value (0.000) is less than α =0.05, so we reject H_0 and conclude that "Causes of Learning Disabilities" are perceived differently by the teachers of General Education and that of Special Education.
		Special Education Teacher (M&F)	300	430.09			
4	There is no significant difference of the perceptions about Assessment and Placement of the Children with Learning Disabilities between teachers of General Education and that of Special Education	General Education Teacher (M&F)	300	167.10	-18.887	0.000	As p-value (0.000) is less than α =0.05, so we reject H_0 and conclude that "Assessment and Placement of the Children with Learning Disabilities" is perceived differently by the teachers of General Education and that of Special Education.
		Special Education Teacher (M&F)	300	433.89			

Discussion and Conclusion

To address the problems with identification, gifted-LD students need someone in the school environment who understands how to address the social and emotional areas of student development that may be affected by the interaction between academic talents and learning problems. School counselors can help to ameliorate or prevent developmental issues for these students by proactively addressing student academic, career, and personal/social developmental needs. For example, school counseling goals for improving academic self-concept, acquiring self-knowledge, and acquiring interpersonal skills are an integral part of the ASCA National Standards (Campbell & Dahir, 1997) and should help to direct school counseling programs. School counselors are in key positions to assist with identifying students who have special needs (Bowen & Glen, 1998). A recent study of school counselors' attitudes toward inclusion found that elementary school counselors have greater levels of confidence about tasks associated with serving the needs of special needs students than either middle or high school counselors (Isaacs et al., 1998). Isaacs et al. believe that with this "advantage" in confidence, elementary school counselors "appear most ready to be consultants for tasks closely related to those they traditionally assume--consultation with teachers and parents and assisting in the identification and evaluation process" (p. 74).

Additionally, with the knowledge of the social and emotional characteristics of this population, counselors can assist in helping both to identify and to provide services that may prevent some of the social and emotional problems experienced by students in this study. This study was designed to explore the teacher's perception of Learning Disabilities and their implications on the educational process. Learning disabilities is commonly considered as a disorder in one or more basic psychological process involved in using language, spoken or written which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, read, write, spell or to do mathematical calculations. The terms can also include such condition as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia and developmental aphasia. This study explored that there is significant difference of the perceptions about learning disabilities between teachers of General Education and that of Special Education. Special education teachers perceived learning disabilities better than the general education teachers. It is strongly recommended that teachers in general education schools should be provided special training to identify the learning disabilities because results showed that mostly they are not aware of the learning disabilities. Special materials should be constructed to aid students and teachers to be used to identify the Learning disabled students in general schools. A well structured regular programme of guidance and counseling with the help of well trained teachers and psychologists should be launched to save the children with learning disabilities who go with out identification in general schools. All children and youth age 3 through 21 with disabilities should have the right to a free and appropriate public education.

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