

A Qualitative Survey on Learning Disability: Implications for Awareness, Policy, and Practices

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ABSTRACT

Empirical evidence provides support for learning disabilities having a neurological impairment, but the affected children were still seen as “poor learners” rather than considering their condition as a real problem. A qualitative survey was conducted to understand the prevalent stigma, malpractices, lack of opportunities, and drawbacks of existing policies. The data was collected using a self-developed survey from eight random participants from culturally diverse regions of India. Thematic analysis findings suggest a substantial lack of awareness among the general population regarding different aspects of learning disabilities. Further, the factors that intensify the negative impact of learning disability, hindrance in early identification and proper management, and lack of facilities and policies were also discussed.

Keywords: *Qualitative Survey, Thematic Analysis, Stigma, Awareness, Talents, Policies.*

“If I can’t learn the way you teach, will you teach me the way I can learn?” - Unknown

Learning disability is a neurodevelopmental disorder that has the potential to influence both children with learning disabilities and their family members. Nevertheless, early identification can help the child by mitigating its negative impact by providing specific interventions at the appropriate stage of life. Some studies found that in school-going children, the prevalence rate of learning disability ranges from 1% to 19% in India (Kohli et al., 2005; Sridevi et al., 2015; Indira & Vijayan, 2015; Bandla, Mandadi, & Bhogaraju, 2017). On average, a total of ten percent of school-going children are found to be suffering from learning disabilities in India (Kuriyan & James, 2018). In addition, most children with learning disabilities belong to slum areas, which might be due to additional psychosocial stressors and adversities they encounter during the crucial developmental period (Padhy et al., 2016). The lifetime prevalence of these disorders ranged from five to seventeen percent in India and was seen more frequently in males when compared to females.

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A Qualitative Survey on Learning Disability: Implications for Awareness, Policy, and Practices

Because of the enormous population and the lack of adequate knowledge in India, these children are often misdiagnosed as inattentive or poor learners and thus, neglected by the parents, society, and teachers. These children get isolated and sometimes offered extra classes at school due to the challenging course and lack of proper diagnosis to bring them near the mainstream population (Divya & Balasubramanian, 2020). These children are offered no better services than poor learners despite their need for special teaching at school. These children are not only unsuccessful at learning and understanding new things but also find it difficult to pass each grade and get stuck at a certain level. It evokes a need to diagnose these students by identifying their issues and needs so that adequate interventions and special education can be provided to this population.

Awareness of different types of learning disorders and the different signs and symptoms is required to detect children with a learning disability. The three major types of learning disabilities are dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia associated with reading, writing, and mathematical problem-solving difficulties, respectively (APA, 2018; ASHA, 1991). These disorders influence language production and motor performance, particularly affecting fine motor abilities, proficiency in reading, learning, and comprehension. (Divya & Balasubramanian, 2020). The manifestation of these disorders may or may not be comorbid with one another. Along with the negative impact on academic performance, the diagnosis of a learning disability hinders such children's psychosocial development as well. The difficulties coexisting with learning disabilities, such as visual disability, developmental deficiencies, and emotional issues, make the condition worse for these children while being influenced by external variables such as insufficient guidance, ethnic disparity or interaction barriers (Shah et al., 2019).

Teachers' lack of knowledge about learning disabilities is a significant barrier for children with LD. Teachers must be aware of different types of learning disabilities, causes, symptoms, instructional approaches, policies, and the services required by these children. In India, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, offers free schooling for these children aged 6-18 years, and not less than 5 percent of seats are also reserved in higher education for them (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2016). National Education Policy, 2020 specified that educational services should be strengthened and extended to include children with special needs in mainstream schools. The law further discussed a need for vocational training for children with disabilities and training programs for teachers to equip them with strategies for educating students with disabilities (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020).

For providing any intervention to a child with a learning disability, firstly, it is essential to diagnose him/her carefully. The diagnosis of a learning disability must be made only by a qualified professional only if the symptoms of a learning disability persist for more than six months because of its significant association with other psychosocial aspects (American Psychological Association, 2013). Only after proper assessment can a plan for that child be implemented to help him/her. Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between the learning disability and other disabilities because of the overlap of symptoms like poor memory and clumsiness. Assessment measures for learning disabilities can be divided into two categories- formal and informal. Even if they are categorized into two groups, almost all these tests are administered individually. Formal tests are standardized assessment tools and can be administered across various situations and places irrespective of geographical location. Instead of scores on these tests, their (child who is being assessed) behavior can

also provide a huge amount of information about the difficulties they face in solving the problems while performing in these tests.

Some formal measures for assessment of various aspects of learning disabilities include-Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals-Revised (CELF-R; Semel, Wiig, & Secord, 1987) for receptive and expressive language assessment; The Beery-Buktenica developmental test of visual-motor integration (VMI; Beery, Buktenica, & Beery, 2004) for visual and motor perception integration assessment; Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-Revised (PPVT-R; Dunn & Dunn, 1981) for assessment of receptive vocabulary acquisition; Test of Language Development-Intermediate 3 (TOLD-I:3; Hammill & Newcomer, 1997) for assessing various language skills like grammatical understanding and oral vocabulary; Test of Written Language 3 (TOWL-3; Hammill & Larsen, 1983) for assessing difficulty in word usage, spellings, etc.; and Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery (Woodcock & Johnson, 1977) which assesses cognitive abilities, achievement, and interest.

Informal assessment techniques for assessing learning disabilities mainly comprise observation, work sample analysis, inventories, criterion-referenced tests, diagnostic probes and teaching, checklists and rating scales, and questionnaires and interviews (McLoughlin and Lewis, 1986). Screening Tool for Learning Disability (National Brain Research Centre, 2012) is a tool to be filled by teachers, which is an example of informal assessment techniques in India. Such assessment techniques identify children who need special services and programs. According to McLoughlin & Lewis (1986), informal techniques were used by the teachers every day “when they observe the behavior of a student in the classroom, or examine a student’s paper and attempts to find a pattern of errors, or interview a student about procedures he/she has used to solve a problem or answer a question.”

Studies regarding the identification of the prevalence rate of learning disability and understanding of LD among teachers were conducted from time to time. However, very few efforts were made to understand the knowledge and perspective of the general population regarding learning disabilities. It is critical for a healthy society to be aware of such issues that impact a child in his/her early years of life for proper and timely management of the symptoms through appropriate early interventions. When a learning disability gets undiagnosed or a child is just considered a poor learner, it becomes a burden for the family and society. The shortage of qualified professionals is also one of the many barriers to the provision of care for disabled children in India. This study aims at understanding learning disabilities from the perspective of the general population, through their opinions and comments, to enhance the condition of these children, and provide insights for policymaking and eliminating stereotypes associated with children with learning disabilities, e.g., “they are slow or poor learners.”

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Eight participants ranging from 21 to 38 years of age ($M = 24.75$, $SD = 5.44$) participated in the qualitative survey. The sample consists of two males and six females from different regions of India, including Haryana, Kerala, New Delhi, and Uttar Pradesh. The educational qualification of seven participants was Post Graduation, and one participant was a Graduate. Data was collected by sending an online survey form through random sampling.

Tool

A Survey for Learning Disability

A survey form was self-developed for collecting the data on learning disabilities consisting of 17 open-ended questions, such as “What is the current as well as a desired social response to children with a learning disability?” “What arrangements should be made by the government to bring these children into the mainstream?” “How can you define learning disability in your own words?” These questions were developed empirically by referring to a literature review from various articles (Saravanabhavan & Saravanabhavan, 2010; Aladwani & Shaye, 2013; Papadopoulou et al., 2004; Campbell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003; Shah et al., 2019; Divya & Balasubramanian, 2020).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was performed on the collected data to identify the themes for implications for policy and practices. The analysis involved familiarizing with the entire data, coding the obtained data, searching for the possible themes in the data set, reviewing the themes, analyzing the relationship between them, defining and naming the themes, and followed by the final analysis of obtained themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Caulfield, 2019).

RESULTS

This study aimed to understand the public’s perspective on learning disabilities and the steps needed to enhance the quality of well-being of children with learning disabilities. The identified themes from the learning disability survey comprise various aspects regarding children with learning disabilities expressed by the participants. These themes are discussed below:

Factors exacerbating negative impact: Several factors are outlined by the participants that can worsen the negative impact on children with learning disabilities, including environmental factors and social factors; labeling the children, presence of unqualified professionals, neglect from parents and society, as well as punishment from parents and teachers because of underperformance. Such factors exacerbated the symptoms which were already causing distress to the victim. Some of these factors, such as insufficient guidance and interaction barriers, were consistent with previous empirical findings that negatively influence the existing symptoms of LD (Shah et al., 2019).

Early identification: Early identification is essential for proper interventions and countering the negative impact of learning disabilities. The foremost step toward identifying a learning disability is having knowledge about it. Thus, awareness about learning disabilities among the general population is vital for their early identification. Initial steps that can be taken for screening for learning disability in children include poor academic performance, analyzing writings and drawings, their social interaction, and speech. According to the participants, lack of attention and poor learning can also provide a clue about learning disability. Informal techniques such as observations are also effective in initial screening (McLoughin & Lewis, 1986).

Expressing talents: The children with intellectual disabilities mostly have spared intellectual capacity. Sometimes, they possess talents in some areas, such as singing and painting, other than reading and writing. Thus, they require an appropriate channel to show their talents. They require proper knowledge in their area of interest, encouragement from their parents and teachers, the opportunity to display their skills in various fields, as well as special programs designed for them.

A Qualitative Survey on Learning Disability: Implications for Awareness, Policy, and Practices

Associated stigma: These children face stigma associated with learning disabilities in various settings such as in school, playground, and home settings by the parents. They are thought to possess lower than average intellectual capacity, sometimes mentally retarded. They are considered inattentive with no actual problems (Sawhney & Bansal, 2014). They are widely considered poor learners without being aware of the neurological reasons behind the existing conditions, and thus, parents seek no intervention.

Helping children with LD: These children can be helped only after considering it a problem or disorder. They need proper support from their family, peers, and teachers. Engagement in various artistic activities is reported to minimize the impact of deficits (De Simone & Parmar 2006; MacMillan & Meyer 2006). Appropriate specialized interventions are required as they have specific deficits such as auditory processing and visual processing, including reinforcement at every achievement they make to encourage them for more effort (McArthur, Atkinson, & Ellis 2009; Bowers & Ishaik 2006).

Providing facilities: Because of their deficits, children with learning disabilities require some specific facilities. Appropriate diagnostic or screening facilities should be available in schools. They need special educators or teachers who have an understanding of teaching children with learning disabilities, as it can help in providing better education and services to these children (Khatib, 2007; Malusu & Kamau-Kang'ethe, 2010). Special schools, as well as inclusive education, should be available for them. In addition to this, they also require occupational training. Current education policy in India also made provisions for such training for special children (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). They should be provided appropriate training to enhance various skills such as communications skills.

Spreading awareness: Spreading awareness is essential in promoting the well-being of children with learning disabilities. It helps overcome the ignorance and stigma and promotes early identification of learning disabilities (Shukla & Agarwal, 2015). Awareness can be spread among the general population by organizing campaigns, role-play, and competitions for special children. Social media platforms can be very helpful in spreading awareness nowadays. Awareness about learning disabilities can also be spread to the parents of students through schools.

Government involvement: Government also plays an integral part in the well-being of children with disabilities. It should make appropriate policies for children with specific disabilities, such as learning disabilities. Promoting access to facilities and positive outcomes should be the core of these policies (Gartland & Strsnider, 2018). Large-scale campaigns should be organized to provide knowledge and spread awareness about these issues. Appropriate facilities should be provided in primary schools for screening and interventions. Research should also be encouraged by providing funds to enhance the policymaking process.

Likely issues that might be prominent in the future: Children with learning disabilities suffer greatly, both because of ignorance or lack of awareness and inappropriate facilities (Carroll, 2003; Koay et al., 2006). Likely issues that might be prominent in the future include the inclusion of these children in society as they are mostly the source of fun among peers and society, occupational and financial independence (Campbell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003; Papadopoulou et al., 2004). Enjoying equal rights by this population might also be an issue

in the future. Other issues can include the need for specific policies and the proper implementation of existing policies.

Further, two definitions emerged from the participants' perspectives. These are: "Learning disabilities involve delayed development of skills, including characteristics such as delayed oral language development, memory skills deficit, & difficulty learning social rules"; and "Learning disability is the disorder that disrupts the proper interpretation of stimuli coming through various modalities, resulting in impairments in reading, understanding, speaking, and social interaction."

DISCUSSION

This is an important study in an Indian context because it throws light upon region-specific prevalent stigma and practices with respect to learning disabilities from the public's viewpoint. Several factors are identified that are suggested to maximize the negative impact of learning disabilities, such as the stigma that these children face from peers and society because of being labeled as learning disabled. Other factors such as early adversities, including neglect and abuse from the parents and society, were also suggested to be potentially debilitating for the child. Because of a lack of awareness among the teaching professionals, these children were often abused by the teachers too. The negative symptoms of learning disability can be reduced if they are identified at an earlier stage while the brain is still developing. For its early identification and proper intervention, teachers and the general population should be fully aware and have appropriate knowledge of learning disabilities so that these children do not go unnoticed and receive proper care, instructions, and opportunities.

Despite an increase in children diagnosed with learning disabilities every year, there is relatively less progress in spreading awareness among the general population about such disabilities. Studies investigated the awareness of learning disabilities among primary school teachers and observed a significantly low level of understanding and awareness about LD, where 67% of teachers have no awareness about LD (Shukla & Agarwal, 2015). Comparatively, female teachers were found to have a better knowledge of learning disabilities than male teachers (Khatib, 2007). Because of lack of awareness, the specific talents of these children were not identified and not given equal importance as typically developing students. They face stigma in different settings, including school, playground, and home, and are considered poor learners.

Studies have found that understanding LD and the needs and behaviors of children with LD promotes their acceptance and inclusion by the teachers as well as by society, and lack of knowledge results in a negative attitude towards them (Carroll, 2003; Koay et al., 2006; Papadopoulou et al., 2004; Campbell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003). In some studies, it was found that even when teachers have knowledge about inclusive learning, individual needs, etc., they are not professionally prepared to meet the needs of these children (Malusu & Kamau-Kang'ethe, 2010). Despite awareness about LD, teachers face other issues such as time management, responsibilities, and routines, which came as a hindrance in properly helping these children with special needs (Aladwani & Shaye, 2013). Many teachers of government schools, slightly aware of LD, criticize children's attitude towards studies, home environment, and parental carelessness for their performance in school (Sawhney & Bansal, 2014). Studies also suggest that teaching experience and familiarity with LD children do not affect the knowledge and understanding of teachers about LD (Saravanabhavan & Saravanabhavan, 2010).

A Qualitative Survey on Learning Disability: Implications for Awareness, Policy, and Practices

These children can be helped only after considering learning disabilities a real problem. Proper support, attention, and acceptance are required for their healthy development by not increasing the already existing hardships. They should be consulted with the respective professionals such as a clinical psychologist, psychotherapist, and neurologist. Further, policies need to be formulated with a proper implementation framework for this population to help them while focusing on various aspects such as overcoming stigma and misconceptions associated with learning disabilities, spreading knowledge and awareness about learning disabilities, and providing appropriate resources and facilities to the population with learning disabilities. The general population is unaware of existing policies for such children with special needs and thus, unable to access the available facilities.

Various disciplines such as psychology, education, and medicine, expanded the understanding of various aspects of learning disabilities to a large extent. There is a need to promote collaborative research among various disciplines to advance the understanding and practice that is needed for children with learning disabilities. With a significant proportion of children with learning disabilities in schools in India, the teachers must have a proper understanding of neurological causes, psychological impact, and their effect on academic performance. In addition to this, teachers must also be properly trained to work out with these children to make education and achievement productive. They must be fully aware of the perceptual, verbal, behavioral, and social features of LD to establish proper curriculum frameworks for such children.

Finally, according to the general public, the issues like lack of inclusion, independence, and equal rights might prevail in upcoming years because of a lack of understanding and awareness about it. Policies regarding specific populations are framed repeatedly but never adequately implemented to gain the most out of it. Future researchers must focus on the drawback of existing policies, better implementation of these policies, and other likely issues that interfere with the well-being of children with learning disability and hinders them from enjoying their freedom.

CONCLUSION

This study discusses specific issues regarding learning disabilities, such as lack of awareness, early identification, and lack of facilities. Emerging findings throw light upon the initial solutions from the general population's perspective that should be considered while preparing and implementing policies. All the stakeholders should be taken into account before making policies, including children, teachers, and parents (Gartland & Strsnider, 2018). This study drafts the themes depicting the knowledge, beliefs, and prevalent practices in society regarding the well-being of children with learning disabilities and provides insight into the need for awareness and resolving other issues, as well as the need for ethnographic and grounded research for in-depth knowledge about core beliefs and prevalent practices.

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A Qualitative Survey on Learning Disability: Implications for Awareness, Policy, and Practices

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A Qualitative Survey on Learning Disability: Implications for Awareness, Policy, and Practices

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Conflict of Interest

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