



**A PRINCIPAL'S PURVIEW OF LEARNING DISABILITIES IN CONTEMPORARY  
SCHOOLS: AWARENESS, CHALLENGES & TRAINING PROGRAMMES**

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### **Introduction**

Teacher Education has come to face some rather contemporary challenges in recent time. School education in the 21st century has grown exponentially in terms of administrative dynamics, Key Performance Indexes (KPIs), challenges posed as well as the basic required expectations of the society from the school infrastructure. There are usual processes such as curriculum planning & management, strategies, skills, attitude, knowledge, performance & progress in the learning system and lastly, assessment policy, system & its use to create reports, which have now gained considerable ground to be termed as performance indicators. These performance indicators have a benchmark, based on which their positive & negative growth is measured.

The focus of backend processes has shifted from the macro to the micro, thereby gaining and giving key insights into minute issues arising in the classrooms and covering the general functioning of the school as a whole. From the amount of teaching needed to explain a topic, to the teaching aids, smart classrooms, etc. The focus of the school, the usual refresher courses has shifted from merely the completion of syllabus to the understanding of each topic

by the student. This has altered perspectives and brought the spotlight on the various tools, processes and aids used for the enhancement of the teaching-learning experience.

This paradigm shift also altered the participation and the role of the teacher, which has enhanced from an educator to a facilitator. At the same time the role of the educational administrator has altered from merely execution of plans to charting out roadmaps, expanding the perspective, thought and functional horizon of the school as a unit. While teaching is a multi dimensional construct and is essentially based on communication, any disruption of the communication channel leads to a faulty teaching-learning process.

This is where our research began and made us understand that in the contemporary classrooms, amongst the many challenges, disabilities in general, and Learning Disabilities to be more specific, have grown to be a major cause of concern due to their latent potential for growth in numbers and difficulty in early identification.

### **Learning Disabilities: A Growing Concern**

As school administrators/heads are coming to terms with the fact that Learning Disabilities pose a major challenge to a smooth and successful teaching-learning experience, their strategies to deal with it are altering rapidly with more research and information being made available to them. In short, making them more aware is synonymous to making them better equipped to take this challenge, head-on. Thus it is imperative to understand their perspective in the day-to-day dealing with Learning Disabilities. While the research was based on a general idea of how wide the effect of Learning Disabilities went, we found an in-depth idea on going through related literature.

In a 2012 online survey by NCLD, most the people who responded (84 percent) see LD as a growing concern in the U.S. And about two-thirds of them know someone who has LD. The same survey found that **91 percent** of the surveyees have heard of dyslexia, but **66 percent** don't know about dysgraphia, dyscalculia and dyspraxia. **76 percent** know genetics can be a cause of LD. The Emily Hall Tremain Foundation 2010 GfK Roper Study on Public Attitudes About Children With Learning Disabilities also revealed some positive things, such as **79 percent** of Americans believe that children learn in different ways, while **96 percent** of parents think that with proper teaching kids can make up for LD. The most positive finding was that 8 out of 10 people agree that "children with LD are just as smart as you and me."

With controversies raging regarding the diagnostic criteria for LD, the estimates on the prevalence of LD in the U.S. show marked variation. However, it is a fact that the LD category now accounts for 52% of all students with disabilities served in special education

under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Between 1976–77 and 1996–97, the number of students serving as LD increased from 797,213 to 2,259,000, a 283% increase (Macmillan, et al., 1996). In India these factors namely, the poor exposure of many of these children to education, knowledge and language makes diagnosis even more problematic. Developed countries today face some of the same difficulties due to large number of children from immigrant populations; the diagnosis of SLD is certainly not easy. An important landmark in the history of LD was the Washington Summit on Learning Disabilities in 1994. At the summit, the prevalence of LD was quoted as 15% of the population. Among the array of learning disabilities, deficits in basic reading skills were the most prevalent (Reid L, et al., 1994). *Screening for LDs for Classes I to VII in schools with follow up assessments by experts in 10 panchayats in Kerala revealed that 16% of these school children have a learning disability (Suresh, 1998). Other studies have been done at child- guidance clinics in India (Khurana, 1980; John & Kapur, 1986) where 20% children attending the clinic were diagnosed to be scholastically backward.*

### **Methods & Materials**

A study was conducted, by the authors, to understand the school Principal's purview on the present level of awareness, challenges and training programmes that exist, on Learning Disabilities. The study covered Chhattisgarh, Gujarat and Maharashtra to gauge a broader spectrum of results coming from school principals, under different systems, schools, languages, backgrounds and regional settings. 20 schools were surveyed, in total, from Pune, Bilaspur district in Chhattisgarh and Ahmedabad. The school principals, presently serving, who were selected on the basis of purposive sampling technique. The sample consists of 20 principals, of which 5 are females and 15 are males. The questionnaire was administered to them after obtaining prior permissions from them through explaining the purpose of study.

### **Instrument**

The investigators developed a closed ended questionnaire, which consists of 16- items, of which two were kept open ended. Of the 16, 11 of the items were meant to ascertain the knowledge and awareness of the school principals, with regards to Learning Disabilities. The questionnaire was made in two languages, hindi & english, to make it easy & comfortable for both kinds of principals to participate in the survey. The principals in Chhattisgarh found it difficult to answer in english, and their knowledge of learning disabilities was extremely restricted, hence a brief of Learning Disabilities, was translated into hindi & administered prior to their answering the questionnaire.

### **The Principal's Perspective**

The data analysis of the questionnaire revealed a mixed bag of replies. While 60% of the principals agreed on having CWSN (Children With Special Needs), in their schools, only 15% of the principals had special educators in their schools. All 20 principals agree to the fact that they need a special training programme for training their teachers to teach better, it was surprising to note that one principal felt that a training programme would not really benefit the quality of education being imported to children with learning disabilities. 8 out of the 20 principals acknowledged that they were aware of acts, laws or legislative bills on learning disabilities. Only a minuscule number of 30%, i.e. 6 schools, have provisions made for the CWSN. Only 15% claimed to have any knowledge of a working institution in their city, which imparts education to students with learning disabilities. 100% of the principals feel that if the pupil teachers were given given a stronger foundation in Learning Disabilities and how to deal with them in regular classrooms, they would provide the schooling system, with more stable & certain way of handling the in-classroom challenges.

### **Implementation Strategies**

To implement a training programme with a foundation in learning disabilities for pupil teachers, the trainees, need to undergo a sensitisation programme, which makes them aware of the issues faced by CWSN, and the children with learning disabilities. This is followed by a foundation programme, which would have a brief on the different forms of learning disabilities, their symptoms, detection, identification post which the child can be sent to an independent testing facility to validate or rather, formally test for the kind of learning disabilities. On confirmation of this, the child would be taught using a specific learning strategy, called as the IEP of Individualised Education Plan, which the trainee would need to read & create one on their own. The foundation programme can be initially introduced as a small module, as probably a series of lectures, and then later-on implemented as a complete module in-itself, in education colleges. The same module can be provided as an in-service training programme for teachers, with more of hands-on learning.

### **Conclusion**

With the growing numbers of CWSN, it is becoming more & more clear that, objective plans & tools are needed by creating training programme in Inclusive education for B.ED pupil teachers, who would later on, become teachers, teaching in various institutions.

With a special emphasis on the administrative perspective of school principals. The fact that they feel a foundation course on Learning Disabilities should be a part of the teacher training

programme at education colleges, is one of the few key insights gained by the authors. There should be a special remedial unit/resource centre, in all the schools where the teachers can go to for support & such units would be manned by teachers/experts, who have a better understanding & a background in dealing with CWSN. The schools should provide the necessary infrastructure instead of the parents going hunting for it. According to government reports, only 3 per cent of children with special needs are admitted to regular schools but this needs to change.

People should also stop thinking about special schools as being a social stigma for the child. The need for special schools is the same as integrating them into the mainstream and bringing about a change in the mindset. We help them in their learning process. For students who are vision, speech or hearing impaired, special schools are extremely important and not a blot on the student's academic career. These children are examples of the triumph of human endeavour in the face of adversities, and so are the teachers who create channels & bridge gaps, to inspire, enable & grow these children. Thus, the creation of such teachers is gradually become an essential requirement for the growth of quality education.

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