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EMPOWERMENT OF PEOPLE WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES (DYSLEXIA) TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

K. JAYASREE
RESEARCH SCHOLAR
DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS
LOYOLA COLLEGE
CHENNAI

ABSTRACT

This article seeks to make a point that we need to create more awareness on Learning Disabilities at all levels to empower people with learning disabilities towards sustainable development. The inclusion of special procedures in schools and colleges is a 'Must' if the educational establishment is to meet the needs of the whole population.

KEYWORDS

learning disability, inclusion, mainstreaming, dyslexia, staff education, built-in procedures.

INTRODUCTION

The need for providing services to college students with learning disabilities was first felt in the United States of America in the 1970's. College programs for students with Learning Disability began to emerge when it was found, that having learning disability need not imply that one could not aspire to advanced learning and achieving 'white collar' goals in life. The fact is that here are people with learning disabilities, who want to learn, grow, develop, and work towards professional careers. Education, especially higher education plays an important role in the ability to compete in the job market. College Degrees are thus a matter of great value to the individual but also to society and the nation. While there is an increase in the literacy rate in India, considering the growing importance of higher education due to increased global competition and awareness among the people about education; one might wonder why some students are not properly trained and even opt to drop out of schools and colleges. There have been a lot of studies on why there is a discrepancy between the government's policies and programs to uplift the education system and lead them to self-sustainment in programs for people with learning disabilities, lower social economic status etc. In general, the students with learning disabilities drop out of school more frequently than students without learning disabilities. (Miller 1988) Also the transition from high school to college can be traumatic for even the most competent student with learning disability.

PROBLEMS FACED BY COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH DYSLEXIA

We know that LD college students are more vulnerable to academic stress and failure than their non-LD counterparts. Studies also indicate that, compared to non-LD students, LD college students experience lower levels of self-esteem; display higher rates of examination failure and lower college graduation rates. In India children with learning disability, are considered a burden to the education system. With the standard of competitive exams and wholesale job recruitment of highly talented and professionally qualified people, the stress on children with learning disability is increasing (Sadaket 2009). The stress comes from their parents, teachers, peers and the society at large. The Right to Education Act, 2009 does not address most of the issues faced by children with learning disability.

So comes the question of 'How to ensure that they get educated'?

This requires answers to a number of questions.

- How have they managed their disability?
- What is their experience in the college setting and what are the challenges in their lives?
- How have the successful people with dyslexia survived in the college environment?
- Further answers to these questions would also be helpful:
- What are individualities of 'helpful' teachers?
- What are the learning strategies that have worked for them?
- What are the accommodations needed to complete their degrees successfully?

These questions need to be explored to implement ways to reach out to these students and help them cope better in school and college and help them to find suitable jobs. Further these procedures should become part of the basic protocols of the institutions; to be automatically invoked when the need is perceived. This is true sustainability.

STATUS OF LEARNING DISABILITIES IN INDIA

An epidemiological study (1995-2000) of child and adolescent psychiatric disorders in urban and rural areas of Bangalore, was done by the Department of Psychiatry, Epidemiology and Biostatistics, National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro- Sciences, Bangalore to determine prevalence rates of child and adolescent psychiatric disorders for the Indian Council of Medical Research. The total prevalence rate in 4-16-year-old children in urban middle class, slum and rural areas was 12%. However, the children with SLD were eventually excluded from this study as most of them lacked adequate schooling as per the ICD-10-DCR criteria for SLD. In addition, many of the assessments were incomplete due to lack of cooperation for the lengthy testing for Specific Learning Disabilities (Srinath S, et al., 2005).

The prevailing study on Learning Disability conducted at the L.T.M.G. Hospital, Sion, Mumbai reveals that of the total number of 2,225 children visiting the hospital for certification of any kind of disability, 640 were diagnosed as having a Specific Learning Disability. These children came from the lower, middle and upper middle socio- economic strata of society. Referral was due to their poor school performance (LTMG, 2006).

The Institute for Communicative and Cognitive Neurosciences (ICCONS), Kerala, has been conducting research programs in child language disorders and developing research and rehabilitation programs for learning disabilities. 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. However, variables such as the socio-economic class, exposure to language act as confounding variables in such clinic-based studies (GEON, 2005).

However, investigation of educational institutions shows that many schoolteachers, parents and caretakers have limited knowledge of Learning Disabilities. This lack of awareness leads to a negative and unsympathetic attitude towards these children.

The sad fact is that these children are sometimes denied admission in schools. Some of them are promoted and asked to leave. The reason behind these issues are mostly due to the lack of awareness of LD and untrained staff not capable of giving the individual attention such students need. There is still a general lack of awareness about SLD in a large majority of Indian schools (Karande, 2008). Learning Disability is still not considered as a disability by many state governments in India (Karande, 2008; Karande, Sawant, Kulkarni, Galvankar, & Sholapurwala, 2005).

This may be due to the teacher education curriculum where special education is included as an optional subject in the general education curriculum.

The government policy for an inclusive set up has led to many of the LD students being found in the mainstream schools. Research shows that inadequate knowledge about disabilities leads to negative attitudes toward persons with disabilities (Saravanabhavan & Saravanabhavan, 2001). Therefore, the prime necessity is to train the teachers in remedial education so as to enable them to teach these students in an inclusive school setup. Identification of these students must come first and remediation follow, with teaching strategies to learn the core academic skills, namely reading, writing, spelling, math and comprehension.

The 'Mainstreaming' policy makes it essential that the teachers must be sensitized to identify Learning Disability and trained to handle students with diverse needs in an inclusive set up. Where large class size makes this impossible, 'pull out' and transfer to alternate schools may be the only answer.

THE POSITIVE ASPECT...

The past decade has witnessed a sudden spurt in the recognition of learning difficulties in India. This sensitivity has benefited many children with learning disability. Among all form of disabilities, learning disability became the recent entrant only after the information of H'oble High Court of Delhi, took note of the fact that Central Board of Secondary Education (C.B.S.E.) has accepted dyslexia as impairment. This makes transfer to alternate schools easier.

The awareness of alternative schooling among the parents is gradually increasing as, the teaching methodology of most of alternative schools give importance to development of psychosocial skills, to deal with the demands and challenges of everyday life. Children with learning disability have low levels of self-esteem and have adjustment problems, thus affecting interpersonal relationship (Patil, G. Sarswathi and Padakannaya (2009).

The hard fact is that Learning Disability is real and a stumbling block for a nation's development process. The LD movement in India is of a recent origin and is today comparable with that of its western counterpart. The positive impact is that the Nalanda Institute's report has highlighted that in India during the last two-decade or so, there has been an increasing awareness and identification of children with dyslexia.

AIDS THAT CAN HELP STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITY AT COLLEGE LEVEL

Some of the services that can aid students with learning disability at college level are:

- i. Tape recorders, taped text –books, calculators and computers. In many colleges in the United States, note takers are provided who sit in during lectures and "take notes".
- ii. Alternative testing arrangements during examinations.
- iii. Extended time limit to write exams (which are provided by colleges)
- iv. For students who have difficulty reading, the teacher can read questions.
- v. In many countries, colleges or universities have well-staffed office for students with learning disabilities which handles all requests for special services. The office has a liaison between the staff and the student.

CONCLUSION

Thus there is a great need to provide college level services to learning disabled adults in India. Legislation and social awareness are helping them to address their issues but more awareness is required so as to empower them towards sustainable development. We must not forget the fact that great personalities like Albert Einstein, Thomas Alva Edison were scholastically backward, but that did not hinder them from achieving great things. One must understand that adults with learning disabilities are capable of professional development and deserve the same opportunities like others.

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