

Awareness about Dyslexia among Public School Teachers of Muzaffarabad

Maliha Nasir¹

Abstract

Teachers generally must deal with students who have various types of problems in learning. These problems may be symptoms of some specific learning disabilities like dyslexia that is a language-based disorder which involves difficulty in reading fluently, word recognition, decoding, spelling and sometime difficulty in speech. This study is designed to explore the understanding of public-school teachers regarding dyslexia and their strategies to deal with learning problems of students. The participants of the study were 20 schoolteachers. These participants were conveniently selected from 10 public schools in Muzaffarabad. Information was collected through semi structured interviews. Participants shared their views in a free and friendly environment. The interpretation of their views was verified through member check process. Findings of the study revealed that public school teachers in Muzaffarabad had minimal information regarding dyslexia. They did not have proper training of how to deal with learning difficulties and use various strategies which they think appropriate to overcome such problems. The study suggests that teachers need to be trained to deal with learning difficulties. For this purpose, specific courses may be offered in pre-service teacher education as well as through in-service refresher courses.

Keywords: dyslexia, learning disabilities, teachers' awareness, teaching strategies.

1. Institute of Education, University of Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Kashmir.
Email: malihanasir@hotmail.com

Introduction

It is a common practice of teachers to label a student as lazy, careless or even inefficient when he or she cannot keep pace with classroom activities. Teachers rarely take pains in identifying the real problem behind slow learning pace of students. Generally, such problems are attributed to students' lack of interest or naughty/restless behavior. A teacher who has enough knowledge of challenges faced by learner during the process of learning can identify the exact problem which keeps a learner at slow pace. Consequently, the teacher can adopt appropriate strategy to help learner deal with the problem. Such problems or challenges that hinder the process of learning are categorized as different learning disabilities in literature.

A learning disability is a neurobiological disorder which interferes with learning (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2008). The umbrella term of learning disabilities includes several specific learning disorders e.g. dyscalculia that is the difficulty in learning numeracy skill, dysgraphia that is the difficulty in learning writing and spatial concepts, and dyslexia that is the difficulty in learning reading skills.

The term dyslexia were coined by Rudolf Berlin in 1887 with two Greek words: dys, i.e. difficulty and lexia, I.e. reading (Rauf, Ismail, Balakrishnan and Haruna, 2018). Learning Disability Association of America defines dyslexia in terms of language-based disorder which involves difficulty in reading fluently, word recognition, decoding, spelling and sometime difficulty in speech (LDA, 2020). According to Alias and Dahlan (2015) these difficulties negatively affect academic performance and are misunderstood as laziness.

In the light of above definitions, we can say that dyslexia is a learning disability in which learners basic skills are affected such as difficulty in recognition of words structure, correct pronunciation, difficulty to read with fluency, difficulty to write words correctly and other language related difficulties. In this disorder learners' brain is not enough healthy and sharp to receive any piece of information (Fawcett & Nicolson, 2004).

Different types of Dyslexia have been identified in the literature related to learning disabilities (e.g. Alfonso & Flanagan, 2011; Wolf and Bowers, 1999; Temple & Marshall, 1983; etc.). Cicerchia (nd) contends that different schools of thought categorize subtypes of dyslexia taking different approaches, however, there is no formal categorization of Dyslexia. Moreover, the intensity and symptoms of the disability varies from person to person. She described some types of Dyslexia that are commonly found in learners which include following:

- I. Phonological dyslexia are the difficulty in identifying different individual sounds in a word.
- II. Visual dyslexia involve difficulty in seeing and remembering written material thus causing problem in reading. Defective visual processing results in lack of ability to learn forms of letters and their sequence in a word.
- III. Primary dyslexia are genetically inherited from a parent having dyslexia. A person with Primary Dyslexia has difficulties in dealing with sounds, letters and numbers, resulting in difficulty in spelling, reading and math.
- IV. Secondary/developmental dyslexia may be caused by development issues before birth. These developmental issues may be the result of infection or malnutrition.
- V. Trauma dyslexia or acquired dyslexia develops as a result of brain damage from shock or ailment.
 - a. The symptoms of dyslexia generally become noticeable and recognizable when children start schooling, however, Shaywitz (2005) described some signs that may appear before school. These signs include started speaking late, having difficulty in recognizing rhyming sounds, being slow in learning new words and family history with dyslexia. In school years these signs become more apparent. Children with dyslexia show reading level below their age level, have problem in processing and understanding sounds, have difficulty in finding proper words as answer to a question, show difficulty in identifying resembling letters.

The problem of dyslexia is commonly found in the whole world. The estimated worldwide population who suffers dyslexia is 5 to 10 percent (Dyslexia International, 2014). The situation is not

different in Pakistan. Research shows that about five percent students have problems related to dyslexia (Ashraf & Majeed, 2011) and a significant number is at the risk of learning disabilities (Malik, Mufti & Akhtar, 2013). However, Naeem, Mahmood & Saleem (2014) argued that many weaknesses in literacy skills of students in Pakistan are due to lack of proper teaching and not due to dyslexia.

- I. Individuals with dyslexia are not always a failure. There are many examples of successful persons who had dyslexia, but they did not make their difficulty a hindrance in getting their aims. However, in order to minimize the chances of dyslexic children to fail, it is recommended that such children should be given effective intervention by trained teachers very early in their academic career (Dyslexia International, 2014).
- II. Various researchers based on their studies assert that in order to provide early intervention to dyslexic children both parents and teachers should be aware of problems related to dyslexia. Abd Rauf, Ismail, Balakrishnan, & Haruna (2018) believed that awareness of parents regarding Dyslexia is necessary in order to provide early intervention for their children. Alias and Dahlan (2015) conducted research on the challenges faced by mothers in bringing up children having Dyslexia. They found that mothers perceive this task difficult but enduring; time constraints and lack of knowledge affect their efforts and they must make changes in their life pattern.
- III. Various studies are found in which researchers have examined teachers' awareness of Dyslexia (e.g. Khaliq, Ramzan & Aslam, 2017; Thompson, 2014; Gwernan Jones & Burden, 2010; Wadlington & Wadlington, 2005; Regan & Woods, 2000; etc.). Khaliq, Ramzan and Aslam (2017) studied the level of dyslexia awareness in elementary school teachers in Pakistan. They found that teachers of private schools have awareness of the term and can identify and manage students with dyslexia. However, the authorities in schools do not consider the need of trained teachers for dealing with dyslexic children and believe that such children are supposed to be given special education with experts rather than studying in mainstream schools.

- IV. In the light of above discussion, this study was designed to find out the awareness of teachers regarding dyslexia in public schools of Muzaffarabad city. This study will show the genuine picture of awareness in teachers and help to identify some weaknesses which can be improved by formulating better policies. The objective of the study is to find out awareness of public-school teachers about dyslexia and their strategies to deal with this problem. The study aimed to answer the following questions:
- a. Do teachers have awareness about dyslexia?
 - b. What are the strategies teachers use to deal with this problem?

Methodology

The study was conducted in the city of Muzaffarabad, Azad Jammu and Kashmir. The participants of the study were 20 teachers who were conveniently selected from 10 public schools. A semi-structured interview was used to get information from the participants regarding their knowledge of dyslexia and their strategies to deal with the problem.

This qualitative study was an attempt to explore the understanding of schoolteacher regarding the problem of Dyslexia. The participants were selected as convenient sample. Interviews were conducted in selected public schools with permission of the head of the school and consent of the participant.

Semi structured interviews were used as research instruments. Few questions were selected to get the main information, for example, “Do you have problematic children in your class?” “What type of problems they have?” “Can you tell some symptoms of Dyslexia?” These questions led to further questions in order to get deep understanding of the knowledge, attitude and behaviors of the teachers regarding Dyslexia.

All the interviews were carried out in a friendly environment and the participants shared their views freely. The language used for interview was Urdu. The interviews were recorded and afterward transcribed precisely. The transcribed information was analyzed by reading it repeatedly, writing remarks and examining

the relevant themes which arose from the data. The quotes given in the text were translated from Urdu to English as precisely as possible.

In order to establish the authenticity of interpretation of the data, member check process was used. The interpretation and findings of the data were shared with the participants so that they can reflect on their views and identify any incorrect interpretations.

Findings

The responses given by the participants show that almost all teachers have a few children in their classes who have problems in reading, writing, speaking or listening. As one respondent said:

“There is a student in my class who do not respond whenever asked a question. I think he has problem in listening, so I make him sit close to me and speak to him in a loud voice.”

Another respondent said:

“Some students are not able to write in the given time, they have excuses like broken pencils, missing erasers, etc. and make other students distracted.”

Some respondents described problems which can be related to dyslexia. For example, a teacher of class three stated:

“Some students get confused in distinguishing similar alphabets like b and d.”

However, the respondents generally linked these problems with students’ social background, like socioeconomic status or parents’ education. For example, a respondent said:

“Students in public schools are usually from underprivileged families, and some students even work in afternoon for supporting their families.”

Another respondent said:

“Mostly student’s parents are uneducated, so they do not pay any attention towards what their children are doing in school. Even, they never visit school to get report of students learning”.

Though, mostly teachers have such students in their classes who have learning problems but very few teachers had any knowledge of specific learning disabilities like dyslexia. Some of them even do not know the term. One teacher said:

“I have listened this word (Dyslexia) for the very first time in my life.”

Another teacher responded as follows:

"I think it is related with difficulty in learning. I don't have much knowledge of this term".

As most of the teachers are unaware of the term, they do not have knowledge of specific strategies to deal with dyslexic students. However, they try to adopt some strategies for dealing with problematic students. One strategy that teachers generally told was making mixed ability groups as illustrated by following quote:

“I divide students into groups. The groups include some good students and some weak students so that good students may help weak students”.

Some teachers used teaching aids to help overcome the reading problem, as one respondent said:

“I provide colorful reading material with some pictures in order to overcome students reading issues”

The respondents were academically and professionally qualified but none of them has enough knowledge of learning disabilities. Teachers adopted various strategies which they think

appropriate, however, they did not have any training of dealing with children having learning difficulties. As one of the respondents said:

“I have B.Ed. degree but don’t have any special training for dealing with problematic students”.

Another respondent said:

“Teachers are seldom provided such trainings; I don’t have any such training”.

When asked if there is a need of training teachers for dealing with students having learning difficulties, all the respondents asserted that this type of training may bring improvement in teachers’ strategies of dealing with learning difficulties of students. For example, one teacher responded:

“Yes, such training should be provided. It may bring improvement in teaching”.

Another respondent said:

“I have M.Ed. Degree, but the courses offered in this degree program provided only superficial information about learning difficulties. I think there should be a proper training course for dealing with learning difficulties”.

Discussion

In the light of the responses given by the participants of the study it was found that there are at least few students in almost every class who have learning difficulties. Previous studies showed an alarming situation of students in Pakistan being suffered with dyslexia (Ashraf & Majeed, 2011) or being at risk of developing learning disabilities (Malik, Mufti & Akhtar, 2013). Though, Naem, Mahmood & Saleem (2014) asserted that weaknesses of students are due to lack of proper teaching rather than their

disabilities, this study found that teachers must deal with at least few students who face problems in learning.

Another finding of this study indicates that teacher identify learning problems of their students and try to deal with these problems, however, they are unable to relate these problems with specific learning disabilities like Dyslexia. The reason is that they do not have enough knowledge of learning disabilities and do not get proper training for dealing with these problems.

Gwernan-Jones & Burden (2010) argue that, even though, teachers have positive attitude towards Dyslexic students, they rarely have “any clear ideas as to exactly how to provide help and support to dyslexic pupils.”

Pre-service teacher education programs do not offer comprehensive courses or training on learning disabilities. Generally, this type of training is thought to be related with special education (Khaliq, Ramzan and Aslam, 2017).

Conclusions

The results of the study showed that teachers in the public schools of Muzaffarabad have minimal knowledge of specific learning disabilities, especially dyslexia. They do not get proper training for dealing with learning difficulties; however, they try to overcome these problems by using strategies which they think appropriate. In the light of the findings of this study, it is suggested that teachers should be provided enough knowledge of learning disabilities in preservice education. The serving teachers may be provided training through refresher courses and workshops. In order to minimize the chances of failure for children with learning difficulties, especially Dyslexia, it is necessary to increase the awareness in teachers and enable them to help problematic students.

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