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February 2010

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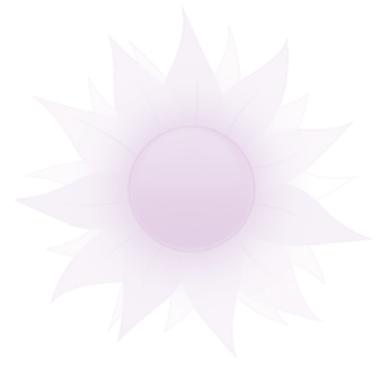
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Recommended Citation

Waqar, K., & Vazir, N. (2010, February). Understanding the nature of learning disorders in Pakistani classrooms. *Nurture*, (8), 32–36.



Understanding the Nature of Learning Disorders in Pakistani Classrooms

This article describes in detail the various implications that learning disorders can lead to in an educational setting. These manifestations are often misinterpreted and negatively responded in traditional classrooms. Dr. Kausar Waqar and Dr. Nilofer Vazir highlight the common practices, myths and beliefs, and recommend strategies which will help teachers in better understanding and addressing the problems of children with LD.



Walking briskly through the school corridor during break time, the teacher decides to take a short cut through a less frequented room, when she unexpectedly comes upon a student sitting there quietly. This is Faiq. Mohammad Faiq is 14 years old. He studies in class six in a local English medium school. He is a keen student and puts in a lot of effort in his work. He is mostly smiling and cheerful and interacts well with his classmates. Due to his mild articulation problems, he faces some difficulty answering oral questions during class, sometimes resulting in his becoming an object of derision by his class mates. He has difficulty in reading and comprehension at grade level. Although hard working, his pace of both oral and written work is very slow. He has a short attention span and has trouble sequencing

words, time, and order of sentences, events and alphabets.

Faiq has some significant areas of strength. Some like his positive approach have already been mentioned. In addition he has dexterous hands and an imaginative mind, helping him to come up with beautiful creations. He particularly excels during nature walks, where he is able to bring to his classmates' attention some facets of already familiar objects, which were hitherto hidden from them. His academic difficulties are a source of great concern for his parents and teachers. He is frequently reprimanded for his failures, which result in loss of confidence and good humor on Faiq's part. It is on such occasions, Faiq is found to be sitting in unfrequented corners at school and home. Faiq has a learning disability

(LD) and the degree of his problems is moderate.

The above description is very familiar to some teachers. Students like Faiq are found in the mainstream classrooms all over the country, but teachers have very little knowledge about their problems and also how to go about addressing them. Children with LD are variously described as slow learners, problem students, class clowns, backbenchers etc. In order to understand the problems being faced with these children it is important to gain more knowledge about Learning Disability.

According to the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, a learning disability is a “general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual, presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction and may occur across the life span. Problems in self-regulatory behaviours, social perception, and social interaction may exist with learning disabilities but do not by themselves constitute a learning disability. Although learning disabilities may occur concomitantly with other conditions (for example, sensory impairment, mental retardation, serious emotional disturbance) or with extrinsic influences (such as cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction), they are not the result of these conditions or influences.”

Although many definitions are in use by different organizations and individuals, the definition given above is sometimes preferred because it acknowledges the fact that learning disability is not a childhood specific phenomenon, it ramifies into adult life also. This definition also recognizes the concomitant presence of other conditions and tries to spell out the differences therein.

Reflecting on the definition further it is clear that this is not a single disorder, rather a group with wide range of possible difficulties in learning for a specific individual. Therefore learning disability may manifest in different individuals differently and all people with LD may not exhibit all the features/characteristics associated with it. Learning disability is not like other medical disorders with known causes and predictable set of symptoms. It is a broad term that covers a pool of possible causes, presentations, symptoms, treatments, managements, outcomes and effects on life. The effects of Learning Disability on an individual's life can be devastating and all encompassing.

Learning Difficulties– Common Features and Practices

Some of the more common features and life influencing effects are described below.

IQ Achievement Discrepancy:

A discrepancy between IQ of the child and their achievement is present in children with LD. Two years difference in them is taken to be significant and constitutes one of the criteria for LD. However the issues are far more complex and all focusing on it too much has the danger for other important considerations being ignored.

Hyperactivity and Disorders of Attention

Hyperactivity manifests itself as inability to sit still in the class. Unfortunately this is an ability most sought after in students by most teachers. “Sit still and pay attention” is the mantra for them. Without realizing the implications teachers discuss these children in staffrooms with the result the child soon gets a label and all teachers deal with the child as ‘hyper’ a word seldom understood; hence, misused. Children with LD face various problems like they cannot sit in one place for long periods mainly because they have a limited attention span and not for lack of trying. People with LD may also have difficulty following instructions and staying on task, completing work, controlling impulses, keeping their hands to themselves. All this contributes towards their troubles in keeping work materials organized, and finishing assignments on time. Short attention span and distractibility are the other compounding problems.

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Impulsivity:

Children with LD are inclined to act on impulse rather than thought. They seem unable to curb their immediate reactions or think before they act. As a result, they may blurt out answers to questions or inappropriate comments, or run into the street without looking. Their impulsivity may make it hard for them to wait for things they want or to take their turn in games. They may grab



a toy from another child or hit when they are upset.

Recognizing, Processing and Interpreting Information through Sensory Channels:

The process of recognizing, processing and interpreting information through sensory channels- visual and auditory may present problems for children with LD. This proves to be especially limiting since the majority of information in the classrooms is presented through these two sensory channels. The problems in learning that arise due to these two features are many and all encompassing.

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Visual discrimination is the ability to differentiate objects based on their individual characteristics. Visual discrimination is vital in the recognition of common objects and symbols because these are the attributes which children use to identify different objects including color, form, shape, pattern, size, and position. In Pakistani classroom visual problem is generally associated as not being able to read the

blackboard or text, and the teacher's solution is to make the child sit in the first row assuming all will get well and the child's grades will improve once he/she can see. However, this is not the case as problems in visual discrimination can lead to difficulties in accurately identifying symbols- reading and gaining information from pictures, charts, or graphs. Educationally, this can interfere with the child's ability to consistently recognize letters, numbers, symbols, words, or pictures and lead to confusion of similarly shaped letters, such as b/d and p/q. This can obviously frustrate the teacher and parents as what is learned on one day may not be there, the next day.

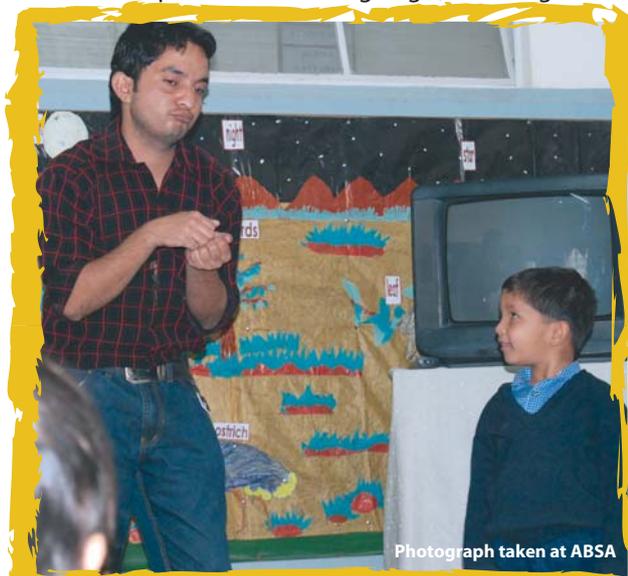
Auditory perception is the ability to interpret the information gained through the ears. There are no problems in the ability to hear; only how what is heard is interpreted may have a problem. This can directly interfere with speech and language, reading and

writing, spelling. Phonological awareness, auditory discrimination problems lead to problems in the ability to recognize differences in phonemes (sounds). This includes the ability to identify words and sounds that are similar and those which are different. Similar to the visual discrimination problems in letters for example b/d etc.,



auditory discrimination can present problems for children. For example they can always hear "day" when people say "bay". This can cause tremendous confusion in the way instructions are followed or are expected to be followed. The child can be labeled disrespectful and mischievous. In addition, problems in auditory memory are also present. The child may not be able to recall accurately what he/she has heard leading to problems in the ability to follow instructions given verbally or may have trouble recalling information from a story read aloud. For example the teacher may say " call your dad." The child in his/her confused state of hearing may hear 'mad' or 'bad' and subsequently, tries to get something bad. The child is not only unable to identify the word but also has a lapse in memory of what the teacher has asked him to bring to school. Quickly, these children are punished and labeled as disobedient or trying to play smart. Auditory sequencing and auditory blending are other important skills, deficits of which may lead to many problems in classroom.

Spatial relationship refers to the position of objects in space. It also refers to the ability to accurately perceive objects in space with reference to other objects. This has implications not only for reading and writing but also how the children orient themselves in space, especially in relation to other people and objects and how they make movements. This leads to them bumping into things or other children, putting things on edges of tables etc leading them to fall off. A quick and sharp rejoinder comes from peers, 'Are you blind?', 'Look where you are going,' or teachers term children as 'clumsy' and 'not paying attention' to the task. This obviously also leads to social problems and fights among children, problems in play and virtually all areas of a child's life. These children are often isolated, "nobody wants to be my friend." Traditionally, cleverness, correctness in academic tasks,



Photograph taken at ABSA

and winning at games are seen as essential traits for including children in educational process. Often these children are labeled as gauche, careless and awkward. As a result, a child with learning disability is usually the last one to be picked as playmate, ridiculed for being clumsy and an easy target for bantering by class fellows and playmates.

Fine and Gross Motor Integration and General Coordination Defects:

The effects of the above problems are manifested in academic as well as social areas of the child's life. In the academic area, writing skills and eye hand coordination are affected, coupled with problems in fine and gross motor integration and general coordination defects. In early years classroom, one of the requirements is neat handwriting with correct script. This expectation is seldom addressed by all children. Some children who are unable to grasp the pencil or chalk with a firm grip constantly drop or loose their pencils. These result in many embarrassing moments and situations for the child. The teacher's frustration leads to beating on the knuckles, with the affirmation that the child will be more careful next time. Another misuse on the part of the teacher is



Photograph taken at ABSA

her/his lack of understanding why children are unable to do writing with precision as they require. In order to get perfect script and develop the skill teachers move around the classroom with an eraser, rubbing out children's effort in the hope of improving their writing and maintaining immaculate and neat work. On the other hand some children have a very heavy grip, often which leads them to write hard on the paper or slate, with the result that either the paper tears or the chalk and pencil breaks. Either way children are not sure what and why this is happening with them, why do things fall from their hands, why they press and write, or why their writing is so illegible? They continue to remain frustrated and soon lose self-esteem and confidence in themselves and acquire a defeatist attitude, "I cannot do it; it is so hard." The teacher on her/his part depends on the traditional mode of giving the child repetitive writing practice to do to improve the script. This defeats the purpose and as research demonstrates no change can come after three attempts; this also is a lost cause.

Language

Language is considered to be a system of communicating with other people using sounds, symbols and words in expressing a meaning, idea or thought. It is a system for encoding and decoding information. In linguistics the term is extended to refer to the human cognitive facility of creating and using language. All languages must define the structural relationships between these signs in a system of grammar, the context wherein the signs are used (pragmatics) and dependent on their context the content specificity, i.e. its meaning (semantics). Children with LD may present problems in all areas of acquisition and use of language in expressive as well as receptive areas.

Learning disability is not a childhood specific phenomenon; it usually ramifies into adult life also.

Problems in "phonology" are also manifested as problems in mechanics of language. Production of sounds and how different individual sounds make up the words are areas of difficulty. Coupled with mild coordination problems, slurring of speech is the result. Teachers have to realize that stammering or stuttering does not improve with repetition and recall.

Disorders of Memory and Thinking

Thinking or cognition involves the ability to solve problems and to conceptualize, among other things. Meta-cognition is an extremely important aspect of thinking. Simply stated meta-cognition is thinking about thinking. This involves awareness of skills, strategies and resources needed to perform a task effectively, and the ability to use self regulatory mechanisms to ensure successful planning, evaluating and checking outcomes of any proposed task. Children with LD exhibit problems in both areas of cognition and meta-cognition. For example during reading, sometimes the readers realize that their mind had wandered off and in fact they could not comprehend any thing for the last several minutes of reading. Good readers realize this earlier than others and start using strategies to remediate. The selection of strategies depends on the dominant learning style of the reader. So if the reader has an "auditory Learning style" they will start to read the passage aloud, if they have "Kinesthetic Learning style" they will start to pace around etc. The selection and application of similar strategies on their own presents a problem for children with LD. However they can apply the strategies if prompted. Seldom lessons are planned incorporating attributes of effective teaching and learning. Either teachers are untrained, they feel threatened from the other who knows more than them or they lack the political will to ask those who have the knowledge and skills to guide them. The trained teachers can develop some strategies for children with LD and provide ample opportunities for rehearsing them. After sufficient practice and prompting, children are able to use these strategies on their own. Teachers who seldom give children pauses and wait-time, and shoot questions at children make it difficult for children to respond, this attitude generally for all children and



particularly for children with special needs leaves them disenfranchised and disinterested in accomplishing tasks. Simple to complex tasks are very often not planned resulting in low level questioning or very high level questioning in which children are unable to give responses.

Social Cognition:

Concerns about children's general well-being, in addition to a critical consideration for accomplishing academic aspirations for children, their social relationships deserve attention. Children with learning disabilities (LD) have been shown to have difficulties with social relationships and social interaction, to have a low academic self-concept, and to have a variety of emotional difficulties. Children with LD are not only less popular than other children, but their communicative environment with typical non-LD peers is also more hostile. The low social competence of children with LD results in their unpopularity in their social circle.

Strategies for helping children with LD should have a simultaneous focus on the family. Family dynamics constitute an essential backdrop against which to view educational issues. The role of routine parent-child interactions in the child's development of strategic behaviours such as planning, remembering, and categorizing and in the development of coping behaviours such as delay of gratification and attributions for success and failure is very important.

Locus of Control:

Children with an internal locus of control believe that their own actions determine the rewards that they obtain, while those with an external locus of control believe that their own behaviour doesn't matter much and that rewards in life are generally outside of their control. They sense that fate, in the form of chance events outside their control, or powerful people, has a dominating influence over their lives. Children with LD often have external locus of control. This also has the effect of absolving them of any responsibility of consequences of their actions. Research has further indicated an association between students who are at high risk for failure and who exhibit an external locus of control.

Myths

As the issues around LD are so complex and little understood many myths have appeared about LD.

Hyperactivity is quite common in children with LD. It is assumed that children's most important problem is muscle activity. If you as a teacher are able to control the hyperactivity, you will be able to control the fall outs of hyperactivity, like problems in learning. This is a myth. While hyperactivity needs to be controlled for children, it is the inattention actually that affects learning much more, and therefore it is that which needs to be addressed. This has implications for the teachers, as they need to devise strategies to garner the student's attention. Many strategies can work.

Another popular belief among teachers and parents is that academic problems are the most important. If these are sorted out then your biggest worries are over. What is most often overlooked is the social and emotional problems that accompany LD. Peer problems lead to maladjustments. These problems have the potential to leave the child friendless and alone and lonely and later to anti-social behaviour on the part of child with LD.

Another common misperception among parents and teachers is that children with learning disability out grow their difficulties in adult life. Although many people with LD manage to have successful and fulfilling lives, their struggle with many aspects of learning continues.

The nature and features of LD is complex and little understood at this time in mainstream schools in Pakistan. The children with LD lead a life full of difficulties. However most possess a positive disposition which can help them overcome some of these difficulties. However a great responsibility lies on teachers, parents and community to help these children in their endeavour. Making proper provisions to address the needs of these children in mainstream classrooms will make them more inclusive and student friendly.

About the Writers:

Dr. Kausar Waqar is a Senior Instructor & Faculty Chair at the Aga Khan University-Institute for Educational Development. Dr Nilofar Vazir joined AKU-IED in 1994 as an Academic Consultant. She has served the Institution as Coordinator of Certificate in Education (Cert.Ed) and Masters in Education (M.Ed) Programs at IED. Currently she is an Assistant Professor and Coordinator of the Early Childhood Education and Development (ECED) Programs at the Institute.