

THE KNOWLEDGE AND ATTITUDES OF TEACHERS REGARDING LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

Saranda Shabani*

Education Sciences

University St. Kliment Ohridski, Bitola

Email: sarandashabani@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the knowledge and attitudes of teachers regarding learning difficulties, with the objective of better understanding their impact on the educational process. The focus is on analyzing teachers' awareness of various forms of learning difficulties, as well as their pedagogical approaches to creating an inclusive and supportive environment for all students. This includes the use of multisensory strategies and individualized methods to improve the inclusion of students with special educational needs. The paper also examines the challenges teachers face in addressing these difficulties and the role of collaboration between families, specialists, and educational institutions. The results show that teachers' knowledge and positive attitudes play a crucial role in the successful development of students with learning difficulties and in fostering a culture of inclusion. The research suggests that continuous teacher training and the use of inclusive pedagogical practices are essential for optimizing educational outcomes.

Keywords: learning difficulties, teachers, pedagogical strategies, inclusion, knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

Learning difficulties are defined as disorders stemming from fundamental psychological processes that affect the ability to understand or use spoken or written language (Reynolds, 2001). These difficulties may manifest as deficiencies in listening, thinking, speaking, reading, writing, or performing mathematical operations, caused by factors such as perceptual challenges, mild brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and aphasia (Milsom, 2006). The term "learning difficulties" is used as a broad concept encompassing a range of challenges faced by individuals, thereby facilitating the identification and management of these issues (Wilmschurst & Brue, 2010, p. 127).

The term "learning difficulties" was first introduced by Dr. Samuel Kirk in 1970 to describe a group of children who faced significant challenges in learning and reading, exhibited hyperactivity, and struggled with solving mathematical problems. However, these children did not display intellectual disabilities or emotional disorders. According to Kirk, these difficulties were associated with disorders in the development of language, pronunciation, reading, and communication skills (Woolfolk, 2011).

Early explanations attributed learning difficulties to minor brain dysfunctions. Today, a wide range of factors complicate children's academic achievement. "It is true that many

challenges in language, mathematics, attention, or behavior may result from brain damage or disease. However, there is evidence that intensive interventions in the learning process can lead to significant improvements in brain function."(Soanes, 2005, fq 58). In the teaching process, we face many challenges, which include not only the development of new teaching practices but also addressing the issues that students face with various difficulties, especially those who suffer from learning difficulty(Both & Ainscow, 2001).The primary reason that motivated me to research this topic is the lack of information among teachers about these difficulties, as well as among parents, which leads to students withdrawing from educational activities, loss of motivation, demotivation, frustration, etc.

1. General knowledge about learning difficulties

During our practice, we often encounter various difficulties faced by students, which are not the same for everyone. Learning difficulties are disorders in brain function that cause barriers in understanding or processing information, and they can result from several different factors involving various cognitive and neurobiological processes (Dumont, 1994, fq 194).In some countries, the term "learning disability" is often used to describe an intellectual disorder, while difficulties such as dyslexia and dyspraxia are usually categorized as "learning difficulties." There is a noticeable difference in international terminology regarding this issue. These differences are evident both in the naming and the definition of the issue at hand (Popham, 2008).

In recent years, educational policies have undergone significant changes, including the integration of all students with special needs, who were previously in special schools, into regular classrooms. Today, classrooms consist of students with notable differences in learning abilities, social skills, and motivation to learn(Kitzman & Gunzenhauer, 2012). They also include students with various learning difficulties, students with hyperactivity and attention disorders, as well as students with autism. In this context, learning difficulties are generally classified into three main types (Pringle, M, 1975. fq 184): Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, Dyscalculia.

1.1. Students with Learning Difficulties

Previous explanations linked learning difficulties to a minor defect in brain function. However, today there is a wide range of factors that influence the challenges children face in achieving academic success. "Although it is true that many limitations in the areas of language, mathematics, attention, and behavior may result from brain damage or illness, there is also evidence showing that intensive interventions in the learning process can lead to positive changes in brain function."(Callahan, 2006).An important category of difficulties in these children appears in the use of information accumulated in long-term memory. They experience challenges in retaining momentary information, as well as in processing and transforming it in a synchronized manner. For the first time, the term "learning disability" was used by Dr. Samuel Kirk in 1970 to describe a group of children who experienced significant difficulties in the learning process, exhibited hyperactivity, and had trouble solving mathematical problems, but did not suffer from mental retardation or emotional disorders. Dr. Kirk emphasized that these children had disorders in the development of language, articulation, reading, and communicative skills (Gardner, 2003). "A disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes that affect the understanding or use of spoken and written language, which may manifest as difficulties in listening, thinking, speaking, reading, writing, or performing mathematical calculations (Woolfolk, 2011).

1.2. Clinical and Educational Classification of Children's Difficulties

The classification of learning difficulties in the field of education focuses on the impact of these difficulties on a child's ability to learn, with the goal of developing a personalized program that addresses specific learning needs (Gross, 1991). On the other hand, mental health professionals classify these difficulties according to the clinical criteria outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR), developed by the American Psychiatric Association, and are more focused on using diagnosis as a tool for identifying and planning appropriate treatments to address mental health issues (Wilmshurst & Brue, 2010, fq 127). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2006), approximately 5% of schoolchildren are affected by some form of Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD). PDD may have a genetic origin or may arise due to complications during pregnancy or birth (such as oxygen deprivation or premature birth), as well as from accidents (brain injuries) or exposure to toxins (e.g., lead-based paints). The following tables present three types of difficulties and their impact on the learning process.

Table 1. Three Types of Specific Learning Difficulties

Specific Learning Disabilities	Problematic Subject	Areas of Difficulty	Examples of Difficulty
Dyscalculia (difficulty with arithmetic)	Mathematics	Remembering mathematical rules, mathematical concepts	Difficulty in counting, not understanding if information is necessary for a problem described in words.
Dysgraphia (difficulty with handwriting)	Composition	Calligraphy, pronunciation, organization of expression in writing	Illegible handwriting due to irregular letter and number shapes, and disorganized spacing between letters.
Dyslexia	Reading Pronunciation	Sequencing letters, sounds, and words. Confusion in the direction of words (left and right)	Issues with reversed letters (p/d), Swapped letters (b/d), Letter transpositions (sos/tos).

2. Purpose of the research

The main purpose of this research is to understand and determine the knowledge and attitudes of teachers regarding students' learning difficulties, such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia.

2.1. Research Questions

The research questions are:

- What knowledge do teachers have about learning difficulties?
- What attitudes do teachers have towards students with learning difficulties?
- What approaches do teachers use with students who have learning difficulties?

2.2. Research Hypotheses

Based on the research questions, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- Teachers lack sufficient knowledge about learning difficulties.
- Teachers believe that learning difficulties are surmountable and not serious.
- Teachers' approach to students with learning difficulties is superficial and not individualized.

2.3. Research Sample

The research focused on teachers in the city of Mitrovica. The respondents for this study were teachers from schools in both urban and rural areas. The selected sample for this research consists of 200 teachers, and the online platform was used to conduct the study.

2.4. Research Instrument

The instrument used for this research is a questionnaire implemented online Forms.Google.Com. This instrument is divided mainly into three sections: the demographic section, the second section on knowledge, and the third section with questions measuring teachers' attitudes regarding difficulties in learning. After completing the questionnaires, the data were entered into a database, which was then imported into SPSS for analysis. The data were analyzed using the statistical software for social sciences - SPSS 23, and were presented through the relevant tables.

2.5. Pearson Correlation Analysis

To analyze the data more deeply regarding the dependency of variables, a correlation is also performed between several questions and teachers' responses.

Table 2. Teachers' Perceptions Regarding Learning Difficulties

Correlation			
		1. How much work experience do you have?	2. How much do you know about learning difficulties?
1. How much work experience do you have?	Pearson Correlation	1	.729*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.019
	N	200	200
1. How much do you know about learning difficulties?	Pearson Correlation	.729*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.019	
	N	200	200
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).			

The data obtained from the teachers' responses show that based on Pearson's correlation coefficient ($r=0.729$) and according to the results in Table 2, it is evident that the teachers' work experience and their knowledge about students with learning difficulties have a positive correlation with each other. This result supports the first hypothesis, which indicates that teachers possess knowledge about students with learning difficulties. However, more effort is needed in this area through training and other engagements for teachers, as their current knowledge on this issue is not sufficient for the adequate treatment of students with learning difficulties.

Table 3. How teachers think that learning difficulties are overcome is shown by the following result.

Correlation			
		1. What do you think are the factors that cause difficulties in learning?	2. I believe that learning difficulties are overcomeable.
1. What do you think are the factors that cause difficulties in learning?	Pearson Correlation	1	.635*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.015
	N	200	200
2. I believe that learning difficulties are overcomeable.	Pearson Correlation	.635*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.015	
	N	200	200
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).			

Referring to the average values in the correlation established between the question for teachers about what they believe are the factors causing learning difficulties and the question of whether the surveyed teachers in our study believe that learning difficulties are surmountable, it results that: there is a correlation ($r=0.635$) between these two variables, which confirms our second hypothesis. This result indicates that there is a high possibility that with adequate training, the problems of students with learning difficulties can also be overcome.

Table 4. Correlation between Teachers' Attitudes Towards Students with Learning Difficulties and the Difference Between Teachers from Rural and Urban Areas Regarding Learning Difficulties

Correlation			
		1. What are the best methods for managing learning difficulties?	2. Where do you work?
1. What are the best methods for managing learning difficulties?"	Pearson Correlation	1	.682*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.017
	N	200	200
2. Where do you work?	Pearson Correlation	.682*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.017	
	N	200	200
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).			

From the results of the table, we observe a positive correlation between these two variables ($r=0.682$). This correlation indicates that students with learning difficulties have an impact on teachers' work because they require more time to work with them. There is not a significant difference between the locations where the surveyed teachers in our study work. From the respondents' answers, we have concluded that there are major issues related to the approach towards students with learning difficulties. To improve this situation, significant effort is needed in training teachers, as we increasingly observe a higher number of students with learning difficulties each day.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

According to this research, we understand that teachers have knowledge about learning difficulties but not to the extent we had expected based on the responses from our respondents. The research highlights that teachers' perceptions of learning difficulties in Table 2., based on Pearson's correlation ($r=0.729$), indicate that teachers' work experience and their knowledge about students with learning difficulties have a positive correlation. This result supports our first hypothesis, showing that teachers have knowledge about students with learning difficulties but more work is needed in this area with additional training and engagement for teachers, as their current knowledge is insufficient for the adequate treatment of students who have learning difficulties. Referring to the average values in the correlation between the question regarding what teachers think are the factors causing learning difficulties and whether teachers surveyed in our research believe that learning difficulties are surmountable, it is evident that there is a correlation ($r=0.635$) between these two variables, which validates our second hypothesis and suggests that with appropriate training, the problems faced by students with learning difficulties can be overcome. The correlation between teachers' attitudes towards students with learning difficulties and the difference between teachers from rural and urban areas concerning learning difficulties shows a positive correlation between these two variables ($r=0.682$). This correlation indicates that students with learning difficulties impact teachers' work because they require more time to work with them, and there is not a significant difference in the location where the surveyed teachers work. From the respondents' answers, we conclude that there are significant problems concerning the approach to students with learning difficulties, and to improve this situation, extensive training for teachers is necessary, as we are increasingly observing a higher number of students with learning difficulties. This research highlights that, despite efforts to make schools as friendly as possible for everyone, the inclusion of students with learning difficulties in regular classes has encountered various barriers due to the lack of professional preparation of teachers, the untimely information provided to teachers who work closely with these students, and especially due to the incomplete integration of inclusiveness with the current education system.

CONCLUSIONS

Below is a summary of some of the conclusions drawn from the data of this research: Schools lack supportive services for both teachers and students. Often, teachers, feeling isolated when faced with various problems, experience failure, lack of motivation, and devaluation. There are numerous cases of passionate teachers who, despite the lack of organized support, manage to achieve quite good results in their classrooms, even with students who have learning difficulties, due to their interest and efforts. For the realization of

inclusive processes, raising awareness and changing people's attitudes, especially those of teachers, is of great importance. Compared to a few years ago, we can affirm that positive changes have been made in this regard. However, it should not be forgotten that changing ideas, viewpoints, and practices involves a long and complex process related to changing not only the school but also the entire society. Schools themselves lack a clear policy for implementing inclusive processes. Current public education regulations do not provide clear directions for action. These often create confusion. The law acknowledges everyone's right to education in accordance with individual abilities and needs but does not explain or guarantee how this process will be realized.

REFERENCES

1. Both, T., & Ainscow, M. (2001). *The index for inculsion: Developing learning and participation in school*. Bristol: CSIE.
2. <https://www.eenet.org.uk/resources/docs/Index%20English.pdf> ; Last retrieved: 09.11.2024
3. Callahan, C. M. (2006). *Assessment in the Classroom; The Key to Good Instruction*. . USA; Profruck Press.
4. Dumont, J. (1994). *Leertoornissen, Deel 1: theorie en model learning disabilities. Part 1: theory and model*. Rotterdam: Leminiscaat, pp. 194-202
5. Gross, J. (1991). *SpecialNeeds in the Primary School; A School Development Programme. bristol*. Redland Centre for Primary Education, Bristol Polytechnic. Retrieved from <https://www.nasuwt.org.uk/static/uploaded/ddacdcb2-3cba-4791-850f32216246966e.pdf> ;Last retrieved: 12.11.2024
6. Kitzman, D., & Gunzenhauer, K. (2012). *Teaching Tips for Challenging Behaviors*.
7. Greensboro-North Carolina: Carson-Dellosa Publishing Company LLC.
8. https://books.google.com/books/about/Teaching_Tips_for_Challenging_Behaviors.html?id=b2pIWyMcX6wC ; Last retrieved: 26.10.2024
9. Milsom, A. (2006). Creating PositivenSchool Experiences for Students with Disabilites. *Professional School Counseling*. doi:10.5330/prsc.10.1.ek6317552h2kh4m6
10. Popham, W. J. (2008). *Transformative Assessment*. USA; Alexandria.
11. <https://www.scirp.org/reference/referencespapers?referenceid=2800635> ;
12. Last retrieved: 18.10.2024
13. Pringle, M. (1975). *The needs of Children*. London: Hutchinson of London, pp. 184-191
14. Reynolds, E. (2001). *Guiding Young Children A Problem-Solving Aproach*. Usa; Boston: MC Graw Hill.
15. <https://www.amazon.com/Guiding-Young-Children-Problem-Solving-Approach/0767417968> ; Last retrieved: 04.10.2024
16. Soanes, C. &. (2005). *Oxford Dicionary of English*. USA, pp. 58-62
17. Waldron, N, L & McLeskey, J,. (2010). *Establishing a collaborative school culture through comprehensive school reform. Journal Of Educational and Psychological Consulation, 20 (1), 58-74*. Oxford University. doi:10.1080/10474410903535364
18. Wilmshurst, L. &Alan W. Brue. (2010). *The Complete Guide to Special Education*. San Francisco; Jossey-Bass, pp. 127-132
19. Woolfolk, A. (2011). *Psikologji edukimi*. Tirane. CDE.