

Increasing Public Awareness of the Needs of Students with Learning Disabilities in the
Elementary Setting

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Signature Page

Abstract

Students with varying backgrounds and learning disabilities enter today's classrooms. Teachers may not be prepared to recognize and handle the needs of these students. The purpose of this study is to examine the research on teacher preparedness with the goal of increasing public awareness of the needs of this student population. A review of the literature revealed that the problems are as follows. General classroom teachers are not prepared to teach students with learning disabilities (LD). Students are either undiagnosed or misdiagnosed. Once students are identified, the service delivery process take time, leaving students without appropriate instruction tailored to their needs.

The present study is a qualitative design using interview protocol to collect data from several teachers who formed a sample of convenience. Participants were recruited from suburban areas north of San Francisco. Data were collected and analyzed by coding themes. Results indicated that teachers reported being drawn to the field of teaching. They confirmed the importance of lesson modification for students with learning disabilities. These students need to feel successful individually and in groups.

An expert in the field of special education was also interviewed. She indicated that teachers can learn from the experiences they have in the classroom. All participants noted that it is important for teachers to capitalize on the strengths students bring to the classroom.

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SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Students in elementary classrooms with learning disabilities (LD) are not receiving the help and resources that they need. Factors include issues of funding and problems with the process of evaluation. Additionally, students may have no motivation to help themselves. Educators need to provide these students appropriate education to enhance their future. Along with students, teachers need increased awareness as well as resources to help LD students.

Assessment practices are typically in place at schools in order to determine student eligibility for special resources. It is not only the students themselves, but the teachers and parents of these students who have to work together to find the best way to achieve goals. There are many aspects to the identification process. This process can be a long period of time.

A review of the literature is important in gaining the knowledge that informs teachers. In California over 670,000 children and adults ages 3 to 21 were diagnosed in 2009-2010 according to federal guidelines on people with disabilities. I want to be prepared and educated to help support and encourage special needs and LD students. By helping special needs students now; by getting them the resources that they need and the motivation, this will help them in the future to continue their education.

Significance of the Study

This paper is important because there are many students who do not receive services and may continue to experience difficulty in school and may be at risk as dropouts. Another problem is that it is hard to diagnose many of these LD, and this is one of the reasons that they do not get

the help they need. Money is, also, one of the problems. Limited funding in schools for testing and services are also factors that prevent students from getting assistance.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to identify strategies for general education teachers in assisting learning for LD students. Gathering information from academic sources and interviewing teaching professionals are important steps to take for educators to learn how to help these students further their education. Another purpose is to identify teaching techniques that can be used in an educational setting. Finally it is important for teachers to increase their awareness of the needs of students with LD. This information will help them serve students in the classroom.

Background Information

According to Reschly (1996) many regular classroom teachers report they were not prepared to address the individual learning differences in their classrooms. This was also found to be true for certain special education teachers. Problems in special education services include difficulty in diagnosing LD and limited school funding to support the assessment process.

Research Questions

This study addresses two research questions on LD, the different types of LD, and the process of identifying and assessing students. The research questions are as follows:

1. How do teachers support students with learning disabilities in the classroom?
2. How do teachers ensure students with learning disabilities stay connected to the classroom? Subject matter? Engagement with other students?

Definition of Terms

- Learning Disabilities (LD): any of various conditions (such as dyslexia) that interfere with an individual's ability to learn and so result in impaired functioning in language, reasoning, or academic skills and that are thought to be caused by difficulties in processing and integrating information (Merriam-Webster, 2013).
- Special Needs: the individual requirements of a person with a disadvantaged background or a mental, emotional, or physical disability or a high risk of developing one (Merriam-Webster, 2013).
- Assistive Technology: a manner of accomplishing a task especially using technical process, methods, or knowledge. (Adapted from Merriam Webster Dictionary Online, 2013).
- Students: scholar, learner, especially one who attends a school (Merriam-Webster, 2013).
- Motivation: a motivating force, stimulus, or influence, incentive or drive (Merriam-Webster, 2013).
- Well-Being: the state of being happy, healthy, or prosperous (Merriam-Webster, 2013).

SECTION II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This study identifies the different types of LD, diagnosis, influence of motivation and assistive technology for these students. The first section, Types and Aspects of Learning Disabilities, identifies the different types of learning disabilities, the methods used to identify students with LD and the process of identification, evaluation, program planning and implementation. The second section, Assistive Technology, discusses three types of assistive technology. The third section, Motivation, identifies ways that teachers can encourage children with LD, particularly those who may not have self-discipline or internal motivation to work through challenging situations. Finally, the review concludes with a summary of key findings.

Types and Aspects of Learning Disabilities

LD are frequently present in student populations. Increasingly, students are being diagnosed with a LD. Yet many students may not qualify for services under federal guidelines, but may need some level of special service to enhance their learning.

Reschly (1996) reports two problems with special education. First, students that are diagnosed with a disability may not be getting the help that they need, due to varying rules according to their geographic location. Second, is the lack of funding that is available for the students. While law may mandate services, funding for services is insufficient to meet the need. There is simply not enough to help all those that are in need.

Reschly (1996) suggests a need to revise the funding system to adequately support the specialized education of students in need. Reschly's evidence describes the identification and assessment of students with disabilities for the purpose of determining eligibility for special education services.

Reschly (1996) reports statistics on specialized education and disabilities that are recognized by the federal government. He describes the 10 stages of diagnosis, classification, and then finally treatment. There are 13 disabilities that are defined by the federal government in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The 13 disabilities are autism, deaf-blindness, deafness, hearing impairment, mental retardation, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, serious emotional disturbance, learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury and visual impairment. The 10 stages on diagnosis, classification and treatment are “pre-referral, referral, preplacement evaluation, eligibility determination, IEP development, determination of placement, provisions of services, annual evaluation of progress, and triennial reevaluation” (Reschly, 1996, p. 45).

Reschly (1996) states there are problems with these stages. Parents do not want their children stigmatized by a label. There is no clear understanding of the time frame that a child needs assistance. In terms of testing, many tools have limited reliability for assessment purposes. Additionally categorization and treatment options are inconsistent.

The broader educational issue is that children who are identified as LD may also have other disabilities that compromise their learning. When students are diagnosed early in their school experience, they may be eligible to receive services in time to avoid increasingly serious learning problems as they move through school.

Lyon (1996) states that there are different types of LD and a student may have multiple disabilities. Lyon states that LD is not a single disorder, but a general category for special education composed of disabilities in seven specific areas. The seven areas are receptive

language (listening), expressive language (speaking), basic reading skills, reading comprehension, written expression, mathematics calculation, and mathematical reasoning.

Lyons (1996) described a study indicating found that many regular classroom teachers believed that they were not prepared to address individual learning differences in the classroom. This was even found true for selected special education teachers. The author also reported the results of a study at the Yale Center for the Study of Learning and Attention. Over 200 children, identified as normal readers, ranging in age from 7.5 to 9.5 were categorized the following: “reading disabled, math disabled, both reading and math disabled, normal reading with ADD, and reading disabled with ADD” (Lyon, p. 65). Lyons reanalyzed the data and noted that “approximately one-half of all children receiving special education services nationally, or about 5% of the total public school population, are identified as having a learning disability” (Lyons, 1996, p. 56). He also stated that LD is one of the least understood and one of the most debatable disabling conditions that affect children. He discussed the identification process and how it is a problem, as a result of the lack of a clear definition and classification system.

Lyons (1996) argued that the term “learning disability” is too broad to be of any diagnostic value. Another argument is that a student identified with a LD, does not truly have one and was identified , not because of a learning problem, but because of limited educational opportunity and resources.

Lyons (1996) identified phonological awareness as critical when children are learning how to read. He argued that phonological awareness should be identified and taught in kindergarten and early in the first grade. “From this sample of children with a variety of learning disabilities, only 25 youngsters were reading at age-appropriate levels” (Lyon, 1996, p. 65). This

information is alarming, as it indicates early learning problems that are not addressed in school could lead to increasingly problematic learning in later grades.

Lyons concluded that educators need to look at the teachers and make sure they have the resources and training that is needed for them to best teach a student with LD.

Assistive Technology

Forgrave (2002) provided a classification system of the three types of assistive technology now becoming available to students with LD. This information helped increase public awareness in the use of assistive technology to enhance student learning. Positives and negatives were described as well, in an effort to offer support for teachers in making selections for classroom use. This issue is important because children with LD need access to resources that are available to them in the classroom. “Unfortunately, many teachers, special educators, and administrators do not realize how new technology can benefit their students” (Forgrave, 2002, p. 122). “Technology is not the answer to all the problems that students with learning disabilities face, but there are many reasons why its use should be considered for these students” (Forgrave, 2002, p. 126). “Educators need to understand how the increased use of assistive technology in the educational environment can empower students with learning disabilities to work more independently and to complete assignments that verify their true strengths and abilities” (Forgrave, 2002, p. 126). A variety of options exist, in terms of hardware and software selections that can be used in regular classrooms, to support reading efforts all children, particularly those identified as LD.

The participants in this study were 36 eighth grade students, eighteen identified as poor readers and eighteen identified as average readers. They all were observed using different

learning options; visual only, auditory only, or bimodal only tasks, meaning the text was shown on the screen and read out loud at the same time.

The first type of assistive technology is Speech Synthesis, a program that takes the text and translates the words that appear on the computer screen as computerized speech. The second type is Voice Recognition Software, a program that students verbally provide commands for the actions that they want to complete, such as speaking into a microphone. During this process the students use headphones, to avoid disrupting others. Problems with this software include accurately recognizing speech patterns of different students, managing the software itself, and competing classroom noise. The last type is Organizational Software, which helps students to organize their thoughts, putting them in chronological order, and displaying their thoughts on the screen.

The results showed that bimodal tasks, where the text and words were simultaneously displayed using auditory and visual modalities, were successful for a certain group of students. When the students who normally had difficulty reading used the bimodal approach, they were able to improve their reading level to an average for their age. Forgive concludes that the bimodal, approach has the ability to benefit a student with LD.

Motivation

Kunnen and Steenbeek (1999) documented ways that teachers can help to motivate children with LD, particularly those that may not have the motivation and self-discipline to persist a task independently. This is becoming an educational issue in many classrooms.

The authors point out that children who have special needs have below average motivation compared to their peers. They discuss two different types of motivation, low

motivation and perceived control. They state that these different motivations are aligned with different strategies, to help motivate students and keep them focused on the task at hand. The authors suggest that discussions with parents and teachers faced with this type of situation in a classroom or at home, can work together.

The participants in this study were 284 Dutch students from the ages of 9-10, and thirty-five teachers from twenty-one schools that the students attended. Kunnen and Steenbeek (1999) asked teachers to rate their students as well as their pupils, on a behavioral checklist, which consisted of 16 questions.

They used feedback from teachers as a part of the research for the article and documented what happened in classrooms. The results indicated that students with physical impairments had a lower contingency score compared to students in the other groups. This research is important because it allows parents and teachers who are new to taking an active role in working together, with some options or strategies that may be useful in school and home settings. They can gain the knowledge that is needed and become more aware of what is happening in other classrooms.

Summary

All four studies had one common goal, helping students with LD. Researchers all wanted to increase public awareness around these issues, and to document ways to help these children, for improving the quality of their education.

Reschly (1996) concluded that children and families go through this process together. He discussed the need for increased government funding. He articulated the importance of helping those who need services, arguing that students receive the resources available. Even

though mistakes are made, educators need to carefully assess the progress of all students. Children have a right to an appropriate education that meets their needs, and serves to enhance their future.

Lyons (1996) concluded with articulating that more students with LD need access to services. He also advocated that teachers have the resources and training that is required for them to best teach students with LD. Helping children begins with helping strengthen their education. Public awareness needs to improve in order for children to receive services and parents and teachers receive the support they need in order to support children.

Forgave (2002) concluded the important outcomes are that teachers and other officials know that there are computer-based technologies that can help students with LD. This is crucial because there are many students with LD that do not have the confidence and that, in turn, makes them avoid schoolwork. If there is anything that can help these students to be more confident, to work and to be able to participate in their education, educators need to put effective practices in place, and find new technologies for students in the future.

Kunnen and Steenbeck (1999) concluded to be cautious when generalizing information from small studies. In other words, they found that each group of children was different. Educators cannot expect similar results as documented by the researchers on different student populations.

SECTION III: METHODS

Research Design

This research takes qualitative design using interview protocol. This study focused on two research issues. The first question asks, *How do teachers support students with learning disabilities in their classroom?* The second question asks, *How do teachers insure students with learning disabilities stay connected to the classroom? Subject matter? Engagement with other students?*

Over the past 5 years, I have been working in classrooms that are both public and private institutions. In my work with students I noticed that there is a number of them are struggling, barely getting through their schooling. It appears that more students have the diagnosis of LD, and many students, while not diagnosed, may still need special instructional services. My experience in working with these children led me to focus on ways to assist them in school, to provide opportunities for success through the use of resources and teaching practices that promote learning. I want to be able to help them learn and to succeed.

To obtain answers and insight on these questions, I interviewed three primary grade teachers in both public and private schools north of San Francisco and one Associate Professor of Special Education. Participants formed a sample of convenience. (See Appendix for Interview Protocol)

Participants

Teacher 1: Is a 2nd grade teacher at a private Catholic School in the San Francisco Bay Area. She has been teaching for 15 years. Her experience includes teaching kindergarten and helping to assess children to see if they are ready to enter school. *“Be open to all the children in your class. You will learn skills that will help you down the road. These skills will take you anywhere. Do not resent any child, give into them, they will teach you something.”*

Teacher 2: Is a special resource teacher at a Private Catholic School in the San Francisco Bay Area. She has been teaching for 44 years. Her experience includes working for Teach for America and working with handicapped children in a hospital setting, She taught as a homeroom teacher as well as working as a special education resource teacher. *“Empower student, do not enable them. Catch them doing something right and not just them doing something wrong.”*

Teacher 3: Is a 1st grade teacher at a public school in Sonoma County. She has been teaching for 28 years. Her experience includes working with new teachers and helping them for the first 2 years of teaching, and working with Schools of Hope. She also started out her teaching career working with severely disable students. *“Special Education training is very important and it is all valuable information. If you are given the time to do it, then do it.”*

Teacher 4: Dr. X is an Associate Professor of Special Education, in a Teaching Credential and Masters Program. Dr. X is at a Private University in Northern California. Dr. X’s experience includes teaching students with special needs, and working with students with special needs. *“Teaching and learning should be fun. Be flexible and open to change in the classroom, be accepting to all students. Help them find their passion.”*

SECTION IV: FINDINGS

Introduction

The common themes that emerged included the commitment from the teachers that teaching was a calling for them. They all decided at a young age that they wanted to work with children. These teachers all talked about the importance of modification in their classrooms for students with learning disabilities and special needs. They talked about having students capable of working along with other students in the class, to make sure that there is a cohesive classroom dynamic.

Finding 1:

All of the teachers decide at a young age they wanted to work with children. They all found teaching as a calling. In some way or another, they were all drawn to teaching children with special needs. There was one exception. This teacher would work with children with special needs and LD when a student was part of her class.

Finding 2:

All teachers talked about modification of lessons for children with LD. They all talked about the importance of working with the special resource teachers to find the best way to help the student with LD.

Finding 3:

The teachers talked about the importance of having students with LD feel that they were part of the whole class. They talked about pairing a child with another student, someone who could be sensitive to individual needs.

Finding 4

The interview with Dr. X took place in her office. Dr. X provided an abundance of information about special needs and learning disabilities. Dr.X states that it is important for LD students to know the schedule of the day, so by putting it on the board it will help them to understand and stay in their routine. Dr. X states you should know students IEP, so that you can help them achieve their goals. Dr. X feels that it is important to get to know your students first hand and not worry about what is said about them in their files. After interviewing Dr. X, I feel much more aware of the importance of helping to find the best way to teach children with learning disabilities and special needs. Dr. X brought up a valid point and stated, *‘Think outside the box, if it is boring to you, it is boring to them.’*

Summary of Findings

In conclusion, the three main findings are as follows. All teachers felt as if working with children was a calling to them. Modifying lessons is an important aspect they consider for their classroom. An effective teaching strategy is partnering students with LD with a classmate who can be caring, supportive, and still allow the student to complete school work independently. Dr. X allowed me to get a greater knowledge on what is it like in a classroom with LD students.

SECTION V: DISCUSSION

Limitations

Only three teachers were interviewed and one professor at a private university with a background in special education. There were difficulties trying to coordinate times where the teachers and I could meet and talk to conduct the interview.

Implications

Practical Implications

Teachers need to gain more knowledge about how to work with students with LD in a classroom setting. They need to talk to specialists and schools should be able to provide this instruction to teachers as a part of professional development.

Research Implications

One of the research implications was that teacher education programs needs to provide more training to general education teachers. There needs to be more information in preservice education, in order for new teachers to feel confident in working with students with LD in their class. They must be equipped with knowledgeable strategies and skills to teach in a diversified classroom setting.

The research literature indicated that many students are misdiagnosed and finding a diagnosis can take a very long time. Further research is needed in the area of assessment. Educators need more sensitive tools and a process to help identify students quickly.

Conclusions

In conclusion, I have found that there is a great need for teachers to be educated in the areas of LD. There should be a greater importance placed in education on the best way to teach these students. In classroom observations I noticed that more children, in general, are dealing with learning problems. This interferes with their ability to have an enriched education. The situation is not diminishing, it is increasing. Increasing public awareness across educational settings to help deflect it from being perceived as negative situation, will help expand the importance of education for all children.

About the Author

I felt the calling to become a teacher at a young age. As a young student I myself struggled with reading, writing and math. In second grade my teacher soon realized that I was verbal learner and she helped me find techniques to help me succeed. She was a great inspiration and influence to me. During the past five years, I have worked in classrooms, first as a volunteer, then as a teachers' aide and I am currently working in an after school care setting. I have seen many students struggle with their work. I began to notice an increase in students that would later become diagnosed with a learning disability, such as dyslexia. I became very interested in what these students went through. I want to learn more in order to help to benefit myself and my students in my future classrooms.

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Appendix

Interview Protocol

1. How did you come about deciding to be a teacher/working with children?
2. Describe how you support students with learning disabilities in the classroom.
3. Describe how you insure that students with learning disabilities stay connected to the classroom? Subject matter? Engagement with other students?
4. Tell me how you prepare to work with students with learning disabilities.
5. Describe the nature an extent of your teacher preparation program in preparing you to work with students with learning disabilities.
6. In thinking back over our conversation today, what are the key points you wish to emphasize?