



## WHAT DO ROMANIAN TEACHERS KNOW ABOUT LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

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**Abstract:** There is a growing concern for students with learning difficulties and teachers are responsible for identifying and helping these students. The present study aims to explore the teachers' knowledge of manifestations, causes and types of learning difficulties, necessary to diagnose, prevent or remedy learning difficulties. The participants involved in the research were 63 teachers from six counties of Romania. Their answers to the questionnaire items show that teachers are competent to identify their students with learning difficulties. At the same time, the respondents underline that they feel the need to be supported in order to provide the adequate assistance to this category of students. The main areas where they think they need help are: the elaboration of adapted requirements suitable for students with learning difficulties and the readjustment of the school curriculum.

**Key words:** learning difficulties, students, teachers, intervention

### 1. Introduction

#### Learning difficulties. Concept definition

Expressions as "*learning disabilities*" and "*students with learning difficulties*" are very general (Westwood, 2008:2) and were used as follows: the first one, for obstacles or problems that students may encounter in the learning process, actually for specific/particular learning disabilities or learning difficulties, and the last one was used as a label applied to the students who are not able to score the expected school progress.

Porter & Lacey (2005:1) show that the use of the expressions mentioned above in a way acceptable to all was a challenge. Westwood (2004:53) states that: "Over many years students with learning problems have been given a variety of labels, including 'dull', 'educationally subnormal', 'slow learners', 'low achievers', 'at risk', the 'hard-to-teach' and 'learning disabled'. After a period of time each label attracts its own odium and is replaced by another". Therefore, until the '60s, learning difficulties were associated with the intellectual deficiency or intellectual disability. Subsequently, it was introduced the syntagma "*learning disability*" that "encompasses a cluster of disorders, and no one individual will display all of them. For example some learning-disabled individuals have a mathematics difficulty whereas others excel in mathematics" Lerner (1989:13). Hallahan & Mock (2006:22) assigned to Kirk (1962) the first use of this syntagma, which was defined as follows: „a retardation, disorder, or delayed development in one or more of the processes of speech, language, reading, writing, arithmetic, or other school subject resulting from a psychological handicap caused by a possible cerebral dysfunction and/or emotional or behavioral disturbances. It is not the result of mental retardation, sensory deprivation, or cultural and instructional factors". They also mention (ibidem) the Bateman's characterization of students with learning difficulties: "Children who have learning disorders are those who manifest an educationally significant discrepancy between their estimated potential and actual level of performance related to basic disorders in the learning process, which may or may not be accompanied by demonstrable central nervous system dysfunction, and which are not secondary to generalized mental retardation, educational or cultural deprivation, severe emotional disturbance, or sensory loss".

Nowadays it is preferred the expression "*learning difficulty*". The motivation is suggested by Ungureanu (1998:19): "a disability is, in its essence, the functional structure, ordinarily and prior to a difficulty. A difficulty is, so many times, a consequence of a disability - in the performance plan, but it may also occur because of many other causes and circumstantial, incidental and random reasons.

Although obvious, disability is multiple factorial and therefore difficult to be studied and assessed, that is why that difficulty may be sometimes criticized and to the subject (to the student), especially when it comes to learning activities, while disabilities cannot incriminate *the convicted person* to wear them. Furthermore, Dubois & Roberge (2010:4) show that learning disabilities are permanent while learning difficulties are often temporary and can be corrected. Therefore, learning difficulties are defined by National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (2006:1) „as a heterogeneous group of disorders of presumed neurological origin manifested differently and to varying degrees during the life span of an individual. These disorders are developmental in nature, occur prior to kindergarten, and continue into adult life. Various manifestations of learning difficulties may be seen at different ages and as a result of varying learning demands.”

Learning difficulties may be specific or general. The first category includes: the Asperger syndrome, the hyperkinetic disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder; specific language impairment; dysgraphia; deficit of attention and motor perception (Farrell, 2006:6). In the second category there are: the difficulties in reading, language processing, written composition, memory, and visual spatial, etc. (INTEGRA, 2009:5).

Learning difficulties are common in early childhood. They appear in the activity of solving learning tasks and assign an inappropriate and ineffective behavior with a low yield. Even students performing in various fields may have learning difficulties, according to Westwood (2008:4) quoting Liddle and Porath (2002:13) which states: ‘The idea that a child can be both gifted and learning disabled strikes some as a paradox’. Therefore, concludes the source cited: „it is clear that some students with high intellectual potential do experience significant problems with learning basic academic skills, and can be said to have ‘dual exceptionalities’ (giftedness and learning disability)”.

At school, students with learning difficulties/special needs are often rejected by their peers or are victims of various forms of bullying (Westwood, 2008:42-43; Frederickson, 2010:4). Even if they are accepted, students with learning difficulties register delays of more than one year (mild difficulties) and more than two years (serious difficulties).

### **Sources and manifestations of specific learning difficulties**

Habitually teachers identify learning difficulties using summative evaluation based on programs which include learning objectives and performance standards.

Learning difficulties are caused by a combination of factors. The most common reasons that determine learning deficiencies are: poor quality training, inadequate school curriculum, overuse school, inappropriate school environment, family’s cultural and socio-economic status, family's indifference to school learning, lack of cooperation or reduced collaboration teacher-student, lack of family cooperation with school, the precariousness of the student's prior learning experiences, gaps in student’s knowledge, lack of learning techniques; ailments and diseases, the intellectual level located in the intellectual level limit, general mental immaturity with extended infantilism tendencies, excessive shyness, school phobia, lack of models and support in difficult learning situations etc. (Bălaș-Baconschi, 2008; Westwood, 2004:54; Westwood, 2006:2,3; Westwood, 2008:2-4).

The characteristic manifestations of students with learning disabilities include: less attention paid to the instructions provided by the teacher and the task (and therefore reduced learning engagement); low self-esteem; dysfunctional attitude; negative behavior; lack of cognitive and metacognitive strategies; lack of organization and low efficiency; passivity; not taking risks; frustration; lack of motivation; depressive tendencies (Pelletier & Leger, 2008; Westwood, 2008:4).

### **Specific educational interventions for students with learning difficulties**

Addressing to students with learning difficulties in schools is a complex issue (the variety of types, grades and peculiarities of manifestation of difficulties from a student to another), which does not allow a general approach to the phenomenon. As a result, there are three possible approaches (Ștefănescu, 2010): *the procedural approach* involving action-stimulating and therapeutic-recuperative interventions, *the direct approach* which refers to the construction of individualized educational programs focused on developing tools in the areas of language, reading and writing, and

arithmetic calculation; *the pragmatic-behavioral approach* based on behavior analysis and develop a new behavior learning, valuing the students' previous acquisitions.

Whatever the chosen approach, it is important to identify and consider the school factors which are independent and dependent on the teacher, to exert control and influence where circumstances allow (ibidem). The first category includes low level of intelligence, minimal brain dysfunction issues related to family environment, etc. Among the factors the educator can control are (Westwood, 2008:56-58): early identification of predispositions and learning difficulties, adaptation strategies and methods used, modeling the effective ways of response and achievement of tasks, immediate feedback (frequently followed by correction and reinforcement), interactive teaching, group work; additional/extra homework support, gradual and progressive selection and presentation of learning tasks, rigorous organization of learning environment, efficient use of learning time, etc.

Taking into account the domain searches, Westwood (2008:56) pleads for using the direct, explicit and well-structured methods, showing that student centered approaches require too much initiative, persistence in the task and independent work skills, more than the potential of those students with learning difficulties allows.

Preventing learning difficulties, as shown by Bălaș-Baconschi (2008) is often a difficult process, but it doesn't mean that it should be the basis of some arguments in favor of indifference or neglecting that reality. Prevention, as intervention in the case of learning difficulties is both conditioned by teachers' knowledge with respect to learning difficulties. This study focused on the examination of teachers' knowledge of learning difficulties. The research was carried out during March-May 2013.

## 2. Method

### Participants

The respondents' sample involved in the research consisted of 63 teachers of which 3% male and 97% female. The average age of participants was 38. The age distribution of respondents was as follows: 19% aged 20-25 years old; 28% aged 26-34 years old; 24% aged 35-44, 13% aged 45-54; 16% aged 55-64 years old.

In terms of teaching experience, about 35% of the respondents have under 5 years of experience, 25% between 6-15 years or 26-38 years, and 15% have 15-25 years of experience. Many of the respondents teach at pre-primary level (60.32%), 28.57% at primary level and the others at secondary or high school level. Once again, the majority of the respondents (69.84%) work in urban areas and only a subject teaches in a private institution. The respondents come from several counties: Cluj, Hunedoara, Sălaj, Maramureș, Satu Mare and Neamț.

### Measures

The questionnaire was applied online. It assesses knowledge about learning difficulties (their definition, typology, diagnosis and directions of intervention) and the participants' opinion about the necessary support for the students with learning difficulties. The questionnaire (mentioned in the references list) was adapted from an instrument proposed by the Ministry of National Education, the Ministry of Higher Education and Research from France – the Assessment, Surveying and Performance Department. The original form of the questionnaire included more items and more choices, which were removed in order to decrease the degree of difficulty of the questionnaire. As a result, the questionnaire included demographic applied once and only 9 items from the 29 items of the questionnaire. The items of the questionnaire assumed closed, semi-closed and open responses.

### Results

When the respondents were asked to define openly the learning difficulties, they identified mainly the related events: the significant difficulties in the acquisition and the use of reception and understanding of language, speech, writing, reading, reasoning, math skills and social skills, as well (20 respondents); a retardation, a disorder, a slow development of the emotional or behavioral level (9 respondents), problems of attention and concentration (7 respondents); a reduced capacity of learning the concepts and skills training (7 respondents); an inability to solve tasks and school requirements,

manifested by a longer period of schooling (5 respondents); a misunderstanding of the work tasks (4 respondents); 4 respondents gave other answers and 7 respondents gave no answer.

Being asked to identify, on the basis of some lists the causes of learning disabilities, the respondents think that *the reduced ability of concentration* is *always* (23.81%) or *often* (52.38%) a cause attributed/assigned to the student. The most common causes assigned to the school system and which determine the learning deficiencies are: the gap between program requirements and student's abilities (68.25% of respondents); lack of concern for students with difficulties (52.38% respondents); the insufficient relationship between school and family (52.38% of respondents). The environmental causes are: lack of family interest in student's work (85.71% of respondents); family problems (55.56% respondents); unfavorable socio-economic conditions (52.38% of respondents); poor family involvement in the relationship with the student's school (41.27% of respondents).

Regarding the stage of schooling when learning difficulties arise, 73.02% of respondents consider that learning difficulties appear in primary school, 20.63% in middle school, 4.76% in high school and 7.94% in kindergarten.

Most respondents consider that learning difficulties are an acceptable phenomenon (63.49%) and normal (26.98%) while only 3.17% of respondents consider them an unacceptable phenomenon. The most effective teachers' regulatory interventions in the lesson are according to the respondents: customized programs for educational success (85.71% respondents); providing support for individual work (82.54% respondents); early orientation of students with learning difficulties (68.25% respondents); enhancing knowledge (63.49% respondents); repetition (63.49% of respondents); or other things (3.17 % of respondents). It is also showed by the respondents, that students with learning difficulties can be supported, too, by involving in various learning activities, by restoring their school confidence or enrolling in a project.

Excepting the school aid, as respondents showed, these students would need to regain their self-esteem (66.67% respondents), to feel responsible (63.49 % of respondents), to be more listened (49.21% of respondents) and to learn to live with the others (34.92% of respondents). Respondents indicate that they value the collaboration between teachers, students, parents and experts in the field (counselor/adviser, support teacher, speech therapist, doctor, etc.) (82.54 % of respondents) and immediate and gradual intervention (44.44% of respondents).

According to teachers, learning difficulties can be effectively treated in primary school (74.60 % of respondents). Respondents identify the areas where they consider that they need support in order to be more effective in their activity with students with learning disabilities: the development of requirements adapted to the level of students (74.60% of respondents); adapting the curricula/syllabus (71.43% of respondents); improving the teaching/learning methods (34.92 % respondents); interpreting/ analyzing the students' results of their school assessments (12.70% of respondents).

### 3. Discussions, limits and conclusion

#### Discussion

Analyzing the answers provided by the respondents when they were asked to define learning difficulties, it is obvious that, although, they cannot provide a definition, they were able to identify correctly the manifestations and causes of learning difficulties (but mixing them). That knowledge about learning difficulty can offer the teachers the opportunity of providing effective assistance to their students having learning difficulties. They can also be offered the chance of an immediate interference. Ordinarily, the lack of knowledge, even if teachers can observe the students during the classroom activities, enable teachers identify the learning difficulties only when these students' academic performances have already decreased significantly.

Most of the surveyed teachers considered learning difficulties an acceptable phenomenon when they occur in one area, such as for example, reading or writing problems. What they find difficult to be accepted is the emergence of problems in several areas, namely: reading, written and oral language and mathematics problems. When they have to face with such situations, the collaboration between:

teachers, students, parents, and experts in the field (counselor, support teacher, speech therapist, doctor, etc.) is very important.

Those teachers who consider that learning difficulties are an unacceptable phenomenon can not remain passive and wait to solve that problem by itself, but trying to work with these students differently, to prepare them sheets of paper/tests to match their development level. Unlike teachers who consider learning difficulties an unacceptable phenomenon, those who consider it acceptable, think that they do not have to do anything, for it is not their competence and believe that working more with those children is a waste of time.

Given the fact that there are no educational programs for students with learning difficulties, collaborating with specialists (in the field) is beneficial because they adapt curricula and develop individualized and customized programs, while working with parents makes their school activity have continuity at home, so teachers and parents become active partners in their students' education. The responses show that teachers realize that learning difficulties can be treated effectively in primary school, where students receive support services (adaptation of learning material). It is therefore extremely important the finding of students with learning difficulties when starting to read and write, as intervention at this age may prevent failure.

### **Limits**

In this study, it was sought to identify the set of knowledge that the participating teachers possess regarding the students with learning difficulties and learning disabilities. The source of that knowledge was not our point of investigation, omitting this aspect, being in fact a limitation of this research. As a result, we cannot say exactly whether the respondents have acquired that knowledge by initial training, by teaching experience, by participating in training programs or by individual study. Other limitations of this study are:

- The questionnaire included in addition to the development of response items, multiple choice items, too. Therefore, the right answers checked by chance cannot be excluded. This could be prevented if all the items should have required the development of responses, in case that it would have taken too much time.
- It is not possible to determine whether and how teachers use their knowledge of learning difficulties in teaching practice. So, there is the possibility that some respondents may try to answer the researcher's expectations;
- Some respondents reported in writing dissatisfaction with the system, parents etc., regarding the lack of the necessary support for the proper development of the teaching process. Some of the received responses seem to reflect the dissatisfaction of the respondents (being cryptic or off topic).

### **Conclusions**

"When considering the history of the field of learning disabilities, it is helpful from the outset to make a distinction between learning disabilities as an applied field of special education and learning disabilities as an area of research on individual differences in learning and performance", considers Torgesen (2004, 7). Our study, referring to teachers' knowledge about learning disabilities, covers the second field mentioned by Torgesen.

The present research has been found that teachers, who do not have students with learning disabilities in their class, do not know too much about the topic, in contrast to the teachers who face with such situations in their class. This second category of teachers are directly interested to know more about learning disabilities, in order to provide students with the necessary support by preparing personalized and individualized programs (PIP) or adapted syllabus.

Teachers should be supported in order to identify correctly and in time the existence of some learning difficulties, and they should be also trained to ask immediately for specialized help, respectively to inform the students' parents.

Likewise, the parents should be educated or not to treat with indifference those situations when they notice that their children experience or have difficulty in some areas/domains, but to be actively involved in their education.

The revaluation of the teachers' responses guides us regarding the necessary themes that should be developed in the context of the training programs about learning difficulties.

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