

A MIXED-METHOD STUDY ON PREVALENCE OF SPECIFIC LEARNING DIFFICULTIES IN SLOW LEARNERS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

Specific learning difficulties (SLDs) were the invisible cause of dropout from general education classroom because such students are not identified and suffer from pedagogical competence in general education classroom which affects the progress of these students badly. The present study aimed to investigate the prevalence of SLDs in slow learners and also brought to light on awareness and knowledge of a teacher in slow learner schools. The referral process of slow learner from regular to special centers has been explored as well. Mixed-method exploratory design was used to find out the prevalence of the students with SLDs and its implication in academic achievements in slow learner students. A data of 400 slow learner's students, 10 teachers of slow learners and 5 regular teachers was collected using purposive sampling technique. The quantitative data was analyzed by SPSS and for qualitative, thematic analysis was used. The mean analysis revealed that majority of slow learners have writing difficulties (M=18.6) followed by reading difficulties (M=17.9) and mathematical difficulties (M=7.3). The qualitative findings revealed that no assessment process was followed in slow learner schools to identify the SLDs. Mostly teachers were unaware and had no pedagogical competencies to identify and compensate the slow learner students. The study found that lack of teachers' training about SLDs and policy restrictions in general education was the biggest hurdle for referral process. Special trainings required for special education and general education teachers to improve the pedagogical competencies and classroom practices to handle the slow learner students. The hurdles in policy for the referral process and evaluation process must be encountered.

Keywords: Slow learners, Specific learning difficulties, Educational achievements.

INTRODUCTION

According to many experts, it has been difficult and problematic to identify slow learners over the last few decades since most of them are enrolled in general education classes, where they are not supported by teachers and are thus more likely to drop out (Khan, 2005; Shaw, 2010; Sing, 2004). Children who are below average in terms of overall mental capacity and academic accomplishment are classified as slow learners. They have intellectual quotients that vary from seventy to ninety according to tests. Many of them are constrained by their personalities, physical conditions, and other factors.

These students perform below average in school and require extra assistance in fundamental areas. Their intellectual quotients were between 75 and

90, and they had few chances of success (Kaznowski, 2004; Malik, Rahman & Hanif, 2012). Approximately 8 to 9 percent of primary school students, who are referred as slow learners, have IQs below average, according to different researches. The majority of them have failed tests and eventually quit school as a result of the instructors' and parents' neglect (Behnia, 2002; Akerdi, Sadati, Fereydooni & Moafi, 2014; Bhatti, Parveen, & Ali, 2017).

Slow learners are mostly shy and quiet; they have low self-esteem, lack of confidence, and problems with dressing and sports. They have problems with communication and socialization and therefore have less number of friends. They also have difficulty with abstract thinking and math word

problems along with math and reading. Therefore, they often find their schools difficult and drop out before reaching high school. The majority of the time slow learners are found doing office work and construction jobs. Short attention spans have also been linked to slow learners. These problems all contribute to low self-esteem and confidence among slow learners (Eastmead & Eastmead, 2004).

According to Aaron (1997), a contentious topic is connected to the assumption that learning difficulties occur in contrast to more common academic issues. It has long been assumed that there is a distinct bunch of children with at least average intellect who struggle with reading, as determined by reading achievement tests, in the distribution of reading ability. Given that this set of children's reading achievement scores is lower than would be predicted by their intelligence levels, it is claimed that their reading difficulties are unusual. These children have a diagnosis of learning disabilities, which sets them apart from slow learners (Birch, 2003). According to Shaw (2010), slow learners accumulated 14.1 percent of the total population which is a higher number as compared to mental retardation, learning disabilities, and autism combined. The WHO's World Disability Report from 2000 said that 10% of the population had a disability of some kind, such as emotional problems, hearing impairment, mental retardation, physical disability, visual impairment, learning disability, or multiple impairments. Only 2% of them have access to facilities for institutions. According to studies, 1-6 percent of people have mathematic disorders, 2-10 percent of children have reading disorders, and 10-20 percent of people overall have learning disorders (Eurostat, 2010).

The most prevalent and well-studied specific learning difficulty is dyslexia. According to studies, dyslexia affects 4 to 7 percent of people, whereas dyscalculia affects about 6 percent. A percent of children with dyscalculia also have dyslexia, on average. Ten percent or so of schoolchildren struggle with reading comprehension. The prevalence of dyslexia varies with age and is affected by familial variables as well as growing age-related resistance to reading, particularly in boys. When compared to rural communities, the prevalence of specific learning difficulties is at least twice as high in urban settings

(Hall, 2008). According to studies, 5-8 percent of school-aged children have challenges that prevent them from learning mathematical ideas or methods (Geary, 2004). The lack of precise definitions of terminology has caused uncertainty regarding prevalence rates. The prevalence of learning difficulties varies geographically and ranges from 3 to 15 percent of people in school-age populations (Sixth Annual Report to Congress, 1984). Between 33 to 80 percent of people with learning difficulties have ADHD, which is the approximate prevalence of the condition (Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities, 1987). Although more recent research by Halpern, Gittleman, and Klein (1984) lowers the number to 10%, Safer and Allen (1976) reported that 30% of hyperactive children had learning difficulties.

Objectives of study

The present study intended to:

1. Identify the prevalence of specific learning difficulties in slow.
2. To know about the awareness of teachers regarding slow learners.
3. Identify the referral process schools used for slow learners.
4. Investigate the educational implications in slow learners due to specific learning difficulties.

Methodology

This research used mixed-method exploratory design to examine the prevalence of specific learning difficulties and how they may affect academic performance. According to Creswell (2003), mixed methods research is effective in overcoming the drawbacks of separately applied quantitative and qualitative research techniques, promoting the gathering of more thorough evidence for research problems, and helping in the resolution of issues that neither quantitative nor qualitative methods by themselves are able to address. The population for this study consisted of all primary students enrolled in slow learner centers of Punjab's special education department. Purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique, was used. Two research questionnaire were developed a checklis for studentst and open-ended qualitative questionnaire for the purpose of data collection.

Four phases made up the data collection processes. First, the preparation stage involves problem

identification, topic focus, participant selection, and research instrument creation. Second, during the implementation stage, the researcher examines slow learners' learning processes, the researcher conducts interviews with the slow learner teachers, and the researcher conducts an interview with

general education teachers. Thirdly, the analysis of the survey and interview data with instructors takes place in the last step. Last but not least, summarise the findings of the study of the observations and interviews in a report.

Results

Research Question 1: What is the Prevalence of specific learning difficulties in slow learners?

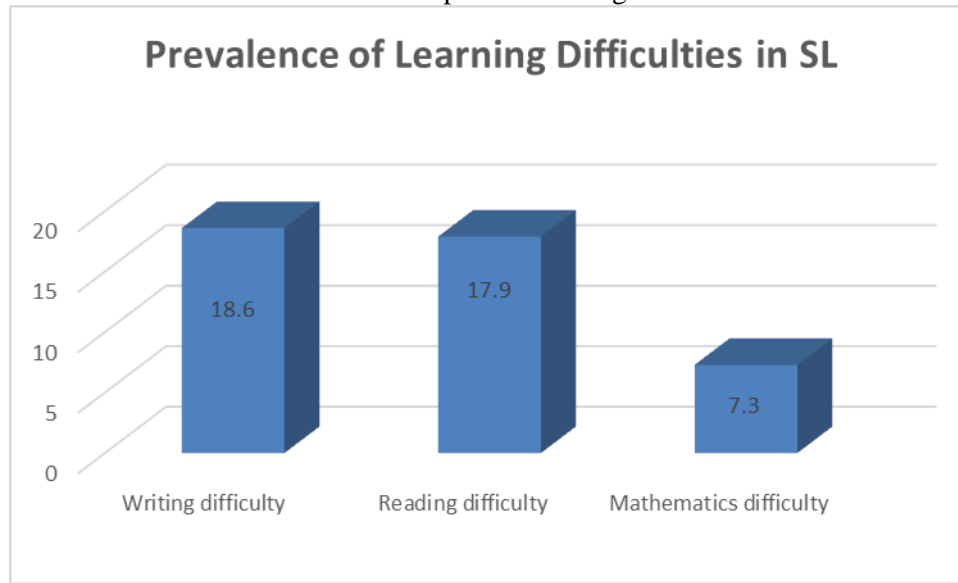


Figure 2: The mean analysis revealed that majority of slow learners have writing difficulties (M=18.6) followed by reading difficulties (M=17.9) and mathematical difficulties (M=7.3).

Research Question 2: To what extent the teacher aware about slow learners?

Sr. #	Theme
1	Cognitive dysfunction was a key indicator of slow learners
2	Inevitability of IEP to cater to individual needs
3	Reluctant learner

Theme 1: Cognitive dysfunction was a key indicator of Slow learners

Nine teachers reported that slow learners were cognitively impaired children who displayed traits such as a low IQ, trouble conceptualizing, memory challenges, concentration problems, and problems with writing and reading that had an impact on their academic achievement. According to two teachers with psychology degrees, these children had learning difficulties like dysgraphia, dyslexia, and dyscalculia.

Theme 2: Inevitability of IEP to cater to individual needs

Ten teachers reported that IEP was necessary for the student and students need proper assessment to identify their IQ and other reading, writing problem but psychologists do not use any assessment tool to assess their children and enroll many students who were not lying in the slow learner category only general observation is to be used and no written description provided.

Theme 3: Reluctant learner

Six teachers claim that these students were unwilling to participate in studies. When asked about their methods for raising student performance, the majority of teachers stated that they lacked any formal training and had no educational background. They used IEPs, more attention, repetition, charts, and models. However, upon closer observation, it was discovered that neither a local nor global IEP had been created for these students. Approaches for slow learners include differentiated content, method, and product as well as universal design for learning, which had been reviewed in the literature not utilized. Teachers were also ignorant of such strategies.

Research Question 3: What is the referral processes for slow learners in regular school and slow learner centers?

Sr. #	Theme
4	Absence of mechanism
5	Repeated failure
6	Socio-economic factors are major impetus behind enrollments
7	Inappropriate transitions
8	Policy limitations is a significant barrier to referral and academic achievements

Theme 4: Absence of mechanism

Eight special education teachers reported the absence of referral mechanism in education policy. The students were enrolled through different methods including door to door admission campaign, advertisement through panaflex, print and electronic media.

Theme 5: Repeated failure

According to seven teachers, children who repeatedly failed in the general education system were enrolled in the slow learner center, and the reasons for these recurrent failures were incompetent teachers, unfavorable environmental conditions, and abnormal IQs. Children who are below average but were not in the mentally challenged children group and were between the ages of five and ten have at least two or three instances of general education failure, according to five teachers, which were the minimum prerequisites for admission.

Theme 6: Socio-economic factors are major impetus behind enrollments

Six teachers informed that Socio-economic factors were major impetus behind enrollments. The government offers stipends, free uniforms, and pick-up and drop-off services at slow learner centers to attract poor families to enroll their children there. The majority of students in these centers fall into the normal category and are capable of impressive performance in general education.

Theme 7: Inappropriate transitions

Seven teachers reported that 90% of slow learner students were drop out of general education after the transition from 5th to 6th grade because of lack of follow-up and due to pedagogical incompetence of general education teachers only 10% of students received higher education and these all were belong to normal categories of student which were enrolled in slow learner centers due to lack of assessment process.

Theme 8: Policy limitations is a significant barrier to referral and academic achievements

Ten special education and five general education teacher reported that policy restriction was a great hurdle for the referral of slow learner's students in general education to slow learner centers. The general education teachers were unable to recognize the student's specific learning difficulties and slow learners. Teachers are overburdened due to other activities like dengue, election and census etc. Children and quality education were not the priorities of department policy. According to general and special education teachers the curriculum, evaluation process of the curriculum is also a great hurdle for the educational achievement of this student.

Research Question 4: What are the academic implications of learning difficulties in slow learners?

Sr. #	Theme
9	Identification challenges
10	Pose significant educational difficulties
11	Defiant learning outcomes

Theme 9: Identification challenges

Eight teachers informed that most of these children aren't initially identified as slow learners. This is mainly due to the fact that these children function regularly and have physical agility and adeptness in a variety of settings, as well as the fact that they can grasp concepts to a certain extent and do not exhibit major issues in their functioning abilities. Additionally, they show common sense and seem to have a good memory.

Theme 10: Pose significant educational difficulties

Ten special education reported that academically slow learners have significant educational and behavioral challenges in the classroom because to their cognitive and social skills deficits. They learn at a rate that is slower than the normal student and require a lot of outside stimulus and encouragement to complete even the most basic tasks. The fact that slow learners do work at their ability level but below grades level, which in turn causes them adjustment issues in regular classrooms, is also widely known. Their deficiencies in reading comprehension, writing abilities, poor self-esteem, immature interpersonal relationship, poor communications, and inadequate social roles all contribute to this.

Theme 11: Defiant learning outcomes

Seven special education and four general education teachers stated that slow learners' learning abilities differ slightly from those of typical students and that they are unable to maintain annual academic standards. Academically slow learners are also described as below-average students who are on the edge of mental retardation. They often take longer to learn when given tasks, and experience problems learning abstract symbolic and conceptual skills, which causes them to drop out.

Discussion

This study found that the prevalence of SLDs among slow learner's majority of slow suffered from writing difficulties (M=18.6), followed by reading difficulties (M=17.9) and mathematical difficulties (M=7.3) in line with earlier studies. SLDs were frequent among school-aged children, with dyslexia being the most prevalent and well-studied SLD. According to studies, dyslexia affects

4 to 7 per cent of people, whereas dyscalculia affects about 6 per cent. According to Shaw (2010), slow learners made up 14.1% of the population, which is more than those with mental retardation, learning difficulties, and autism altogether. The ineffective curriculum, poor quality teaching, and inadequate instructional procedure are to cause the student's learning difficulties (Shashikala Devi,1987).

According to research, slow learners often struggle in the classroom because their teachers had less knowledge and expertise. Teachers' pedagogical skills are crucial to students' learning. Teachers are failing to diversify lessons, use practical materials, or use visual aids to help students understand concepts (Mishra, 1998). In courses with slow learners, a range of activities must be employed, according to Manichander (2018), who characterized a free and open classroom climate that allows the ejection of concepts and ideas that should be fostered. Reading and Writing abilities are produced by class discussions, contextual analyses, imaginative and reproducible activities, visitors and field excursions, multimedia presentations, small group activities, bloom objectives, customized activities, rubrics, tic tac toe, tiered assignments, and practice. The multiple-choice questions and other activities based on research should be included in the broad multiple-choice evaluation. To enhance the learning of slow learners, audio-visual aids, displays, aids, graphical organizers, reference books, handouts, worksheets, and internet content must be developed (Manichander, 2018; Muppudathi, 2014; Sadiq, 2018).

The identification and referral of slow learners and other learning issues had been a challenging task for general and special education teachers, according to the research which is supported by literature review. According to many studies, it has been difficult to identify slow learners during the last few decades since most of them are enrolled in general education classes, where they are not supported by teachers and are thus more likely to drop out (Khan, 2005; Shaw, 2010; Sing, 2004).

Conclusion

On the basic of the study it is concluded that the term "slow learner" is frequently used in a pejorative manner. Slow learners frequently had specific learning difficulties that have a negative

impact on academic achievement and provide serious obstacles. In special education centers, there is no assessment procedure used to identify SLDs. Teachers have almost no knowledge of or training in SLDs. In normal and special schools, there is no referral procedure for slow learners. Barriers to policy and evaluation are also significant obstacles to educational progress. The basis of above facts special education centers need to implement assessment process and trained teacher regarding slow learners to get benefit of special education. Policy gaps in referral and evaluation need to reduce for remedial and quality education.

Recommendations

Implementation of assessment and diagnostic procedure

To improve the educational achievement of slow learners and children with SLDs, slow learner centers need to use appropriate assessment procedures for diagnosing SLDs.

Teachers training required

Special trainings should be included in general and special education to identify the slow learners, implement academic interventional, teaching plan, and worldwide used pedagogical strategies to improve the abilities of teachers.

Aware the society

Educate society and teachers about slow learners' admittance requirements through legislation and other sources of information including syllabus.

Reduce the policy gaps in referral and evaluation

Remove the obstacles in referral and evaluation process to focus on quality education.

Follow up

After transition to six grade or in general education follow up to prevent dropouts the students because the general education teacher had not trained to work with slow learners or upgrade the slow learner centers for these students.

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