

Head Teachers and Teachers as Pioneers in Facilitating Dyslexic Children in Primary Mainstream Schools

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Abstract

This study explores the perceptions of school heads and teachers in facilitating young dyslexic children in primary mainstream schools of Pakistan. Through purposive sampling, the researcher selected eight participants: Four primary school heads and four primary teachers from elite schools of Karachi. The research instrument selected for this study was in-depth interviews to get a deeper insight of school heads and teachers perceptions regarding the facilitation of dyslexic children. The findings revealed that children with dyslexia face many emotional and academic problems and only a few elite schools provide policy to facilitate them in mainstream education. Findings showed that some schools hired remedial teaching services or special education services and the school heads and primary teachers put in immense effort in preparing intervention plans and evaluation plans to suit individual and young dyslexic children needs. It was also suggested that positivity of the learning environment depends upon the teachers. The findings further disclosed that unlike the more developed nations, apart from a few elite schools in Pakistan, there is no importance paid to professional training related to dyslexia.

Keywords: emotional and academic problems, dyslexic children, intervention plans, mainstream schools, remedial teachers

Introduction

Learning difficulty encompasses a number of challenges in obtaining information and aptitude in accordance with the level

expected of those of the same age, particularly in view of level of mental ability or cognitive level. Children with learning difficulties are victims of education system as far as main stream schools are concerned. Dyslexia is a sub branch of learning difficulty, which came to be known towards the end of the eighteenth century. The term dyslexia is often overlooked, ignored, and misunderstood (William & Lynch, 2010). It has been observed by psychologists and psychiatrists, that children who possess dyslexia have late cerebellum development, which indicates dyslexia and as being neurological in nature (Blythe, 2006). It has been further explained that even though earlier it was treated as a medical terminology, yet children with dyslexia in early years often lacked ability to read and spell. In educational context, teachers along with the management and heads are now becoming aware of the term dyslexia as a learning difficulty.

According to Riddick (2001), children with dyslexia are bullied in schools and face numerous emotional and behavioral problems and as a result, they are not willing to attend schools. They feel frustrated, demotivated and their self-confidence is compromised and therefore they lose interest in everything. The reason why dyslexic children have difficulty in becoming a part of the conventional education system is either that the teachers are not willing to work with dyslexic children or the school policy creates a barrier for them and as a result they are deprived of mainstream education (Naem, Mahmood & Saleem, 2014).

Educators are accountable for analyzing, rationalizing, advocating, and judging students' capacity for learning. They are responsible for the holistic development of students and for nurturing them as responsible citizens of a society. Thus, just as a seed cannot grow into a tree by itself and needs water, air, and sunshine; similarly, in a teaching environment, teachers and heads are the main elements for nourishing students. Since instructors and heads are the principle components for sustaining understudies; therefore, children with dyslexia remain aloof as teachers lack empowerment in their lesson plans and heads are not permitted to facilitate lesson plans, which would ensure children with learning difficulties to be part of the mainstream school system. Teachers are not trusted to

develop and implement lesson plans which cater to each and every child's individual needs, and as a result, they are unable to provide as much care and growth for students as is required. Nevertheless, it has been suggested that if dyslexic children are given early professional help, they will not face the agony of academics and will excel quickly and may be retained in the mainstream schools (Razvi, 2008). It is a dilemma that young dyslexic children are often detached from the standard schools and treated as special children and as a result, they are deprived of basic education given in mainstream school system.

Pakistan, situated in South Asia is an underdeveloped country where acquiring the basic needs of life is a challenge and one of them includes getting education. Even though the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 2001 stress that acquiring basic education is the right of every human being, yet the education sector of Pakistan has its own drawbacks (Muzzaffar, 2010), resulting in low literacy rate. Though there are many causes for this inefficient education system, the two most significant causes are that firstly, the head teachers and teachers join the profession without any professional development, and secondly, the bureaucracy brings devastation for the education system. In such a situation it is a very difficult task to draw attention on children with learning difficulties. Thus, in a country like Pakistan, the awareness is limited to a few elite schools where parents can afford heavy tuition fees, yet the isolated effort of these schools has never been highlighted.

This qualitative research study identified the challenges faced by young dyslexic children in a third world country, Pakistan. Furthermore, this study explored how empowerment can help head teachers and teachers in fostering and retaining young dyslexic children in primary mainstream schooling. The following research questions were answered through this research.

1. What intervention plans are provided by school heads and teachers to overcome the challenges pertaining to young children with dyslexia in primary main stream schooling?

2. In what ways can head teachers and teachers foster the retention of young dyslexic children in primary mainstream schools?

Literature Review

Dyslexia

Dyslexia is a learning disability in which individuals lack the understanding of written and spoken language. It is a disorder in which a student is deficient in the ability to write, speak, and listen or to perform calculations related to math. The British Psychological Society (BPS) Dyslexia Report (1999) explicitly states that instead of relying on tests or assessments that measure average learning ability of a child, a psychologist should first assess a child with learning disability for dyslexia. Furthermore, The International Dyslexia Association (1994) reinforced that dyslexia is a neurological disorder; it is pellucid by challenges in responses and expression of a language. The language includes lack of phonological awareness, which encompasses reading, spelling, and writing. The International Dyslexia Association (2004) explains that dyslexia is not an outcome of any negligence of opportunities provided due to an environment, sense of sensory impairment or motivation, rather The Education and Training Inspectorate define dyslexia as an amalgamation of difficulties to learn to read, write, and to spell. This impediment is not the crisis of cognitive disability, but due to lack of phonological processing (ETI, 2003). Thus, it can be suggested that the incapacity of brain to transform and process symbols which are graphical in nature is termed as dyslexia. Furthermore, dyslexia can be described as a particular dialect problem which is genetic in nature. It is portrayed by impediments that typically reflect deficiency in phonological handling capacities, in which a person is unable to read, write, and comprehend.

Emotional and behavioral problems of dyslexics

According to William and Lynch (2010), children who experience hindrance in reading and writing also experience emotional disturbance, which results in low self-esteem and academic achievement

and is directly related to self-efficacy beliefs, since this belief motivates a person's behavior leading to success (Nugent, 2008). A possible way to enroot effective learning in literacy is to believe in one's own ability to acquire knowledge and wisdom. Stowe (2000) suggests that children with dyslexia are often unable to follow multi- instruction and as a result they fail to keep track of time, and thus they have incompetent personalities. The other problem that children with dyslexia face is that they fail to provide proficiency in their verbal communication, which is due to poor word retrieval and as such are unable to express themselves with feelings or emotions (Stowe, 2000).

It can be further explained that children with dyslexia face difficulties in performing day to day classroom activities because they are deficit in reading and writing ability. They therefore, show agony by becoming restless and indicate less interest towards academics. They either become isolated from the class or become the bully of the class; however, such children deep down require care, love, and acceptance by peers, teachers, and the society.

Role of heads and teachers as facilitators

The Department of Education Northern Ireland (1998) recommends that educational programs which are formulated on individual needs should provide an arena where each individual is respected; the academic programs should include phonological awareness and teaching strategies, which surround multisensory activities. It was explored by Leadbetter (2001) that empowerment given by heads to their teachers play an important role to combat challenges faced by children with dyslexia. If teachers are willing to enroll themselves in remedial training programs or special education programs, they can bring a vital change in their students' performance. There should be acceptance by teachers that children with dyslexia have slow learning pace and their progress should be evaluated on individual basis. Stowe (2000) suggests that intervention is the key feature for students with dyslexia. A student with dyslexia can flourish well, if the right amount of intervention is demonstrated by teachers with special education training. Woolhouse (2012) opines

that schools should incorporate special professional development plans, which should be inclusive of special education and inclusive training, so that the teachers can reflect and improve their methodologies and pedagogies, thus facilitating dyslexic students in the mainstream setting. But in the case of Pakistan, primary teachers generally lack training in implementing various pedagogies (Razzak & Akhtar, 2014), hence it becomes vital to approach specialized teachers for special children.

It can be safely concluded that remedial teaching can be one solution towards inclusiveness of dyslexic children in mainstream schooling system and training teachers on remedial courses can help in fostering young dyslexic children needs and educators. This will help pioneers in inspiring youngsters with dyslexia in private schools by providing proper training and facilitation to teachers.

Interventions and role of inclusive education

Dyslexia was taken as a medical model and was not welcomed by educationalist and therefore it was suggested in the mid 1950s, that the problems related to reading and writing were due to physical incompetency. It only became a concern for educationists once it was declared a psychological problem rather than a physical one, thus the British Psychological Society (1999) proposed some intervention plans which involved phonological and reading recovery programs. The model of education should constitute cognitive impairment model that helps to formulate intervention plans and early detection among children with dyslexia (Riddick, 2001). Studies conducted by Snowing (2012) describes that an intervention plan should not only include difficulties related to academics, but should include societal norms and cultural values as well. Fisher (2012) suggests that interventions should not only include strategies which enable a student to read and write, but also make a child independent in his or her daily life functional activities. It is thus proposed that remedial programs should be inclusive of holistic development of a child, which evolves motivation and encourages the child to read and write and then proper assessment and evaluation should take place (Savage & Carless, 2005). As a result, the child reaches his or

her hidden potentials and achieves a higher level of self-efficacy. Early interventions should be given to children with dyslexia to prevent them from the dilemma of early dropout from the mainstream schools and for that to happen, false beliefs related to dyslexia should be eradicated through educating educationists (Riddick, 2001). It is recommended that since dyslexic children have equal rights to acquire education; therefore, in order to provide this facility, it is the dire need of primary schools to introduce inclusive education to facilitate the needs of dyslexic children. Remedial teaching and transitional activities during the lesson develop cognitive skills of dyslexic children and it increases their learning ability. It can also be recommended that learning incapacity is not an ailment and educators should be prepared to offer resources to help in making the future of the children with dyslexia brighter. It should be remembered that remedial teaching or special education with a proper intervention plans and classes based on one-to-one basis help young dyslexic children to excel in academics and provide support to uplift their self-esteem and self-confidence.

Methodology

Qualitative research is known as the naturalistic inquiry or reflection on everyday life critical incidences (Berg, 2001). This research facilitates in-depth interviews which involve human experiences, feelings, and perceptions, which cannot be justified by quantitative research. Respondents' perspectives are much more visible and deeper insights are shown through qualitative research methods which is quite invisible in quantitative research (Berg, 2001). The design for this research was qualitative in nature where phenomenological approach was used. The data was collected in the form of individual interviews from primary mainstream private schools, which included heads and primary teachers. Thus, the phenomenological method helped to unleash the depth of crisis faced by dyslexic students and their teachers.

Sample size and characteristics

Purposive sampling gives an inductive approach where the sample size selected is usually on a small scale (Suri, 2011). For this

research, purposive sampling was deployed that included a diverse population of heads and primary teachers. There was no limitation on age, gender or education; however, the participants were identified from primary private mainstream schools and all had teaching experience of five to ten years. Four elite schools were considered for this particular research. Overall, eight participants were taken which included four head teachers, and four primary teachers.

Research instrument

Semi structured open ended interview questions were used to extract the required data. The in-depth interviews gave actual insight into how children with dyslexia were treated and accessed academically. This gave detailed information about the strategies and intervention programs formulated for students with dyslexia. The probing questions explored the perceptions of school heads and primary school teachers and gained insight on how they faced day to day challenges with young dyslexic children.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed and evaluated using thematic analysis technique by transcribing the responses and coding them. Then the themes that emerged were extracted from the responses provided.

Findings and Discussion

The interviews revealed that all participants agreed that dyslexia is a learning difficulty where students face difficulty in writing and reading, where the reading remained slow and laboured. They all believed that young children with dyslexia were unable to cope with the work load to excel in academics. The head teachers and teachers agreed that children with dyslexia were misunderstood before they were diagnosed and therefore, they suffered badly in their academics. The study findings corroborate with the findings of Kasselimis, Margarity and Vlachos (2008) that dyslexia can be characterized as a learning difficulty where the child faces difficulty in reading and processing

words. Four themes were extracted from the data: (a) policy, (b) academic and emotional challenges, (c) intervention plans.

Policy. The findings revealed from the schools researched that there was no school policy to support dyslexic children as compared to western world, where the schools have policies to retain dyslexic children in the mainstream schooling system. Davis and Watson (2001) believe that schools should include multi-level of inclusion policy so that diverse learners' needs are satisfied. One of the teachers reported:

“In my school there is no support as far as school policy is concerned, but we get support from our management in terms of resources provided by them.”

Another teacher explained:

“I believe that every child is precious and as educators, we work as a support unit which involves us (teachers), coordinators, and head teachers to support diversified learning needs; however, there is no school policy for dyslexic children we help them on our own.”

All the interviewees agreed that they were empowered to support problematic students in their school branches or classes assigned to them. All respondents asserted that they had made efforts on their own. Some of the respondents mentioned that their school hired the services of remedial teachers for helping students struggling in academics. Two head teachers shared that their school did not cater to special education services and they had to direct and instruct teachers on how to help children with learning disabilities. They therefore felt the need to hire special education teachers. According to the government of Greece policy (2008), special education needs children have equal rights, like an average child with normal intelligence. It should not be forgotten, that all special children have every right and opportunity to participate in the societal activities. In developed countries, children with dyslexia can attend normal mainstream schools and they have the right to participate in every

school activity. Yet, the findings from the schools researched for this study negate having a separate policy for dyslexic children to retain them. Nevertheless, some schools hire remedial teachers and individual lesson plans and intervention plans are designed for dyslexic children. They also believed that it depended on the teacher's belief how he/she wanted to proceed with problematic students. A head teacher pointed out:

“There should be special classes for dyslexic students. They are not socially involved. They should not face the consequence of repeating classes, otherwise they will have complexes.”

Academic and emotional challenges. It has been observed that children with dyslexia have immense negative influence on their academics and they face behavioral difficulties (Gash, 2006). This study reflects the same findings that it is important to identify the academic needs of student with dyslexia. One of the teachers pointed out:

“Students agitate as they struggle competing with other students. They encounter many emotional problems like anxiety, frustration, fear, anger, and depression.”

Bennett (2011) highlights that students who have weak phonological awareness may raise problems related to reading and comprehension skills. It has been observed that children with dyslexia, who attend mainstream schools if not handled with care, have a negative impact on their behavior (Dahle & Knisvsberg, 2014). This study is similar to the findings derived from the respondents that when children with dyslexia are unable to respond to academic programs, they show emotional and behavioral problems and show indifferent attitude towards their environment. According to Bailey, Nomanbhoy and Tupbun (2015) children with dyslexia have a huge burden and social pressure in school life, thus it can be suggested that they require special education needs and assistance, special curriculum, and special rewards to boost their morale. Taking this concept further, a teacher expressed her view:

“By giving special rewards it really boosts their morale. I feel these behavioural elements do have a long lasting impact for such children, which can keep them motivated.”

Intervention plans. According to Snowling (2012), it is an important need to provide and design such intervention plans which support special needs of dyslexic children. It is very beneficial for a classroom where students and teachers voices are heard. Teachers play a crucial role in supporting children with dyslexia. Studies have proved that the quality time provided by teachers to dyslexics is crucial as it can lead to successive academic outcomes, student motivation, and better reading and speaking opportunities if the teacher provides extra effort (Casserly & Gildea, 2015). According to Bennett (2011), dyslexic children can be provided with various methodologies and pedagogies so that they can overcome the issues and challenges faced by them in their daily school life. A head teacher said:

“As far as my understanding is concerned, dyslexia is not a disease, but it is a type of learning difficulty where a student struggles with reading and writing. Children with dyslexia should be properly diagnosed and then aid should be provided to them.”

Another head teacher explained:

“There is unfortunately no curriculum designed for dyslexic children in my school and they follow the common one; however, as the head, I try to make the exam paper easy, with larger font size and instruct teachers to take tests and exams in oral form or on computers, so that the children face less difficulty in reading and writing.”

Findings also indicated that in some elite private schools of Pakistan, teachers and head teachers make sure that children with dyslexia are provided with separate assessment papers and activities designed for them which help them to understand and comprehend text, but it should be kept in mind that this advantage is only restricted to elite

school systems. As one of the teachers informed:

“As a teacher I make sure to incorporate such lesson plans which support different learning styles.”

Another teacher pointed out:

“Spelling mistakes are ignored as long as the child writes the word correctly.”

All respondents stressed upon the importance of constructing lesson plans that gauge students' academic performance. A separate theme was extracted from the findings, which answered the second research question: In what ways can head teachers and teachers foster the retention of young dyslexic children in primary mainstream schools?

Retention of dyslexic children. It was evident from the findings of the present study that remedial teaching is a tool which can help young dyslexic children foster and retain them in primary mainstream schools. Bennett (2011) is of the view that improvement is shown when dyslexic children are given special reading support in classes. It can be furthermore explained that children with dyslexia when provided a forum, where special education or remedial teacher is present, show positive behavior in their day to day classroom activities (Moats, 2014). The findings validate that children sent for remedial teaching showed a positive attitude towards academics and it improved their behavioral and social problems. A head teacher explained:

“My school does not have any policy or training programs for learning difficulties, but we do hire remedial teaching services to aid dyslexic students”

The need for the schools is to focus on dyslexic children's academics as well as socio emotional needs. According to the Government of Ireland (2004), children with dyslexia when provided remedial teaching classes with curriculum which is enriched according to their needs, had a positive impact on students. It has been observed by Nugent (2008) that children who attend

remedial classes apart from their routine class enjoy a secure environment, which motivates and encourages self-belief in students and in their own abilities and capacities. Children attending remedial classes are less bullied by their fellow peers and classroom teachers make sure that students with dyslexia are motivated and encouraged at every point (Nugent, 2008). This is similar to the findings highlighted by the researcher that teachers make sure that children with dyslexia are prevented from bullying and they make every effort to encourage and motivate them, hence it was reported by a teacher:

“I strive to instil values of acceptance, love, helpfulness in my students. I constantly remind them that everybody is different and that is always a good thing.”

It should be noticed that the majority of teachers are untrained and it is quite evident that there is no major role played by schools in developing their teachers professionally, apart from some elite schools in Pakistan. Teachers are willing to work and retain dyslexic children in mainstream classes as far as they can. One of the teachers stated:

“Schools do not provide any training for helping children with learning difficulties. I feel teachers play an important role and as twenty first century, teachers we should be provided with training which helps in facilitating young dyslexic children.”

Another teacher explained:

“We teachers usually search on the net and try to facilitate dyslexic children. The school does not bother to spend money on teacher training programs. Parents are urged to send their children to private remedial institutions where dyslexic children are given special education.”

One way to retain such students is by taking the services of educational psychologists, who can play a positive role in identifying dyslexia because it is the result of multiple definitions. Naem, Mahmood and Saleem (2014) state that it is very crucial and important for

schools in Pakistan to monitor psychological tests to diagnose dyslexic children. They suggest that schools in the early years of the student's schooling should conduct various diagnostic tests, so that teaching aids can be provided to the children with learning difficulty in order to achieve academic accomplishments for all children.

According to Niazi (2015), Remedial Education and Assessment for Dyslexics (READ) institute provides not only training sessions for teachers, but also remedial classes or special education classes for young dyslexic children so that they can be retained in mainstream schooling. In Pakistan there are various private institutes such as READ, CARE, and Institute of Psychology, which provide special education classes for students. It has been observed that many elite schools in Pakistan also hire the services of special education teachers and primary school teachers trained by these institutes, to make a positive learning environment for dyslexic children (Ahmad, 2013). Rehman (2011) explains how READ institute plays a pivotal role in helping young dyslexic children. The institute offers special classes for young dyslexic children and addresses teachers and parents about early symptoms, and guides how early intervention programs can help young dyslexic children in primary mainstream schooling. Jumani, Rahman, Dilpazir, Chisti, Chaudry and Malik (2011) conducted a study in Pakistani private schools, in which teachers were first trained for remedial techniques and then they applied them on students by giving them classes on one-to-one basis, providing lesson plans in classrooms which were designed on individual needs and small transitional activities, which involved electronic resources to keep students engaged in learning. It was observed by Jumani, Rahman, Dilpazir, Chisti, Chaudry and Malik (2011) that children responded well and showed massive improvement in their academics; therefore, to retain dyslexic children, trained teachers are fundamental. Although school administration and teachers are very well aware of the needs of dyslexic children, yet only few schools are equipped to handle them.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Thus, it can be concluded that dyslexia which is a form of learning difficulty cannot be treated as a medical ailment as it is neurological in nature. Young children who are diagnosed with dyslexia face predicaments in mainstream schools. They have to go through multiple emotional and behavioral challenges, which affect their personality and holistic development and as a result they suffer in their academic activities. Due to lack of resources and awareness, young children with dyslexia are not diagnosed at an early age, which makes their life difficult socially and academically. In such a case, teachers can play a very important and nurturing role in making the learning environment conducive for dyslexic children, through intervention and assessment plans. The heads can facilitate teachers by providing them with necessary support and by formulating policies that foster inclusion of dyslexic students.

According to Mann, McCartney and Park (2007), dyslexic children can be prevented from adverse effects if early diagnostic tests and interventions are provided. This could help in motivating and encouraging their self-esteem and self-confidence. It can be observed that when children with dyslexia are provided proper monitoring and evaluation, which are designed according to their own needs, can bring about a positive impact. Many parents and elite schools who can afford remedial teachers hire their services. Nevertheless, in order to bring about a positive change and make inclusion of dyslexic children more effective, the following steps should be taken:

- 1) Schools should be asked to make inclusion policies to cater to the needs of children with learning difficulties.
- 2) In the Pakistani context, the core need of education system is to assign a quota for dyslexic children in every primary public and private school.
- 3) Psychological testing at an early stage of schooling should be available in all schools.
- 4) Intervention plans should be supported in schools.
- 5) Remedial teaching should be opted for, as a remedial teacher not only aids the child academically, but makes him or her more confident with his fellow peers (Niazi, 2015).
- 6) Teachers should be trained in handling dyslexic children.

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