TACKLING LEARNING DISABILITY: MORE THAN AN EDUCATIONAL ISSUE

Learning Disability: Is it the correct usage in India?

The expression "disability" has created a general opinion in the society that persons with disabilities are special and teachers with different skills are necessary to handle them. It is true to some extent as these teachers require special skills in braille, speech therapy, sign language, etc., which are not usually taught in regular teacher preparation courses. However, tagging the word "disability" to those children who experience learning difficulties has influenced the stereo type attitude that these children too are special and as a result, the general education tends to associate these children with specialists.

> **The terminology "learning disability" was used by Samuel Kirk for the first time in 1963**

The Persons with Disabilities Act 1995 included blindness, low vision, hearing impairment, mental retardation, locomotor disability, leprosy cured, and mental illness as the major disability categories. The National Trust Act 1999 added

Photo courtesy : Sightsavers

other categories such as children with cerebral palsy, autism, multiple disabilities, etc., but the "learning disability" is eluding despite sporadic efforts to identify this as a major disability. Why there is hesitation to include "learning difficulty" as one more disability category?, What impact such an identification will have on the disability sector, etc., are the lingering questions in the minds of many.

Studying many courses pertaining to "learning disability: theory and practices" from stalwarts such as James DeRuiter, Lee Swanson, etc., was a real experience to me in the late 1980s and as any other young professional, I was also bubbling with enthusiasm to identify children with learning disabilities from the community and school as well. One of the standard primary schools in India, to my astonishment, had more than 10% of the class that could be brought under the category of learning disability. Puzzling questions came across my mind. If 10% of the class could be classified under the category of learning disability in a standard school, what would happen in average schools? May be that is one of the fears why the legislation does not want to identify "learning difficulty" as a disability.

As I was involved in preparing both general teachers and special teachers, I could recognize clearly the tasks listed by special teachers as "intervention activities" for children with learning difficulties being treated as good "teaching strategies" by general teachers. For example, use of multi-sensory instruction was treated by general education as a comprehensive teaching strategy to assist all children, whereas the same was used by specialists to compensate the difficulty of the individual in one area by the other. Mnemonic strategies were used by specialists to help the child with learning difficulty to recall the missing information, whereas general educators used the same technique for storing more information in memory. The examples are plenty. Is it not true that applying good strategies in classrooms would address most of the problems of these children? May be using the terminology "learning difficulty" instead of "learning disability" would have made the general education to address this issue. May be we have to go back to the basics to impress upon the general system of education that it is its responsibility to address the diverse learning needs of all children, covering those with learning difficulties, which include dyslexia (language disorder), dyscalculia (arithmetic disorder), etc.

Where are these children?

These children are currently absorbed in the school system in India and generally unidentified. The regular classroom teachers may know those who have difficulties in learning in the classroom and assume them as poor performers or slow learners but they are not labeled as "disabled." Parents of these children too may not be fully aware of their learning difficulties. The cases are normally identified where parents are educated or when the child is not able to perform on par with his/her potential or upto the expectation of parents. These parents seek the guidance of counselors in education and realise that the child has a learning difficulty associated with the information processing.

In advanced countries, children are grouped on the basis of their intelligence level and abilities in order to make the learning groups cohesive. Generally the students below an Intelligence Quotient (IQ) of 70 are called children with mental retardation, children of IQ range 71-85 are treated as slow learners, those with an IQ between 86 and 115 are treated as the general group, those with an IQ between 116 and 130 are considered academically advanced learners, whereas children having an IQ of above 130 are classified under the category of gifted learners.

Though children with learning difficulties are considered as those with normal intelligence but

having problems in information processing, the crux of the problem is what range we consider as normal intelligence in the Indian context. In India the general classroom consists of a wide range, say from those having IQ from 70 to say 130, and therefore, about 96% of the school population is absorbed in the general system. When schools start discriminating children on the basis of their intelligence and performance levels, the children with learning difficulties get labeled. Instead, teachers can adopt better teaching-learning strategies to help these children cope with their learning difficulties without labelling them as "children with learning disabilities".

We are confronted with the issue of "what is ideal" and "what is possible." If we aim at the ideal condition to happen, the label "learning disability" may work to provide special attention to these large groups of children, but if we see the practical situation given the scanty resources of a country like India, it is desirable to make the general education system more sensitive to the educational needs of these children with occasional support from specialists in order to help maximum number of children with learning difficulties.

- Editor

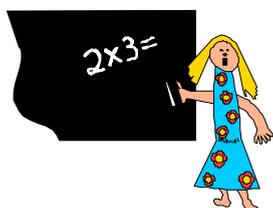## Approach of Computer Technology in handling Learning difficulties

The input, process, and output cycle followed in computer technology is applied in handling children with learning difficulties too. Though the input may be right, the output may become defective if something goes wrong in the central processing unit of the computer. Similarly, the learning disorder is something to do with the information processing ability of the individual though the input might be intact. Specific training and intervention in components such as attention, perception, cognition, memory, and encoding, which are considered to be the key elements of the information processing, would help reducing the learning difficulties of these children.

Metacognition as a Strategy to help

Metacognition is used as a strategy to help children with learning difficulties. It is nothing but thinking and the ability of knowing what we know and also what we do not know. Metacognition primarily refers to the awareness of the skills and strategies needed in the individual. It also provides emphasis on the ability to use self-regulative mechanisms (such as planning, evaluating effectiveness etc.,) of the individual. Knowledge about cognition and the regulation of cognition are the specifications of metacognition.

Learning difficulty is not mental retardation

Often learning difficulty is confused with mental retardation. Sub-average intelligence is one of the characteristics of mental retardation whereas children with learning difficulties usually have normal intelligence but experience problems in processing information. They may be slow learners but not mentally retarded.

UDIS Report Card for February 2008

- Placements were facilitated for 4 persons with disability during the month of February 2008.

- Sri Subramania Shiva, Retired Joint Deputy Director (IB), Ministry of Home Affairs, Mr. B. Balaji, Managing Director, AES Technologies India Private Limited, Mr. S.M.A. Jinnah, General Secretary, Indian Association for the Blind, and Mrs. Parvathy Viswanath, Member, State Disabled Welfare Board were inducted to the UDIS Forum as its new Trustees.

- 61 girls with visual impairment studying in 26 higher education institutions in South India were personally visited by the office bearers of the UDIS Forum and handed over scholarship worth of Rupees 3.2 lakh. With this the total scholarship given during the year 2007-08 stood at Rupees 8.51 lakh.

- A meeting with different associations of the Deaf was conducted on February 1st to formulate strategies to increase the job opportunities for persons with disabilities.

- The UDIS Forum wrote to the National Assessment and Accreditation Council to consider awarding more points to higher education institutions complying with the creation of disability friendly environment.

- A new administrative office of the UDIS Forum was inaugurated on February 17th.

- The UDIS Forum, in collaboration with Sri Krishna Arts and Science College, conducted awareness programme on disability management in 5 schools orienting 526 children. Additional 200 school children were given training through the CMS College of Science and Commerce.

- 28 girls with visual impairment underwent a practical examination on 18th and 19th at the Avinashilingam University for Women to demonstrate their skills in using computers. 12 students have been selected for awarding free laptops to enrich their educational experiences.

- The UDIS Forum, in collaboration with Dr. G.R. Damodharan College of Science, Coimbatore, facilitated the launch of a Youth Wing for disability services consisting of post-graduate students of colleges.

For more details on the activities of the UDIS Forum, log onto www.davo.in
We value your suggestions.

Do you want to write in the Enabling Voice?
Send your brief write-ups on issues relating to disability to udis@vsnl.net

For further contact :

(**You** and the **Dis**abled)

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