CHAPTER – I : INTRODUCTION

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1.1 Special Education and Learning difficulties

All individuals are unique and hence, special. Education is bound to cater to the needs of all these individuals in compliance with the constitutional provision of equal opportunities. However, there are some individuals who, by virtue of their physical and mental abilities require a more relevant or appropriate instruction than is usually available within formal and informal educational structures. We call these people exceptional or special, and a domain of education has been constructed to satisfy their learning requirements (Laura and Ashman, 1985). This domain is called Special Education.

The field of special education encompasses heterogeneous groups who demand varied services: visually impaired, hearing impaired, mentally retarded, orthopaedically handicapped, children with behaviour disorders, gifted or talented and finally the learning disabled. The special needs children form the major category of whom the learning disabled form a sub group.

Special education is an interesting new field of professional activity in education. Special education is meant to provide specially designed instructional programme to compensate / overcome the disabilities in students. The scope of educational responsibility has gradually been delineated to include all types of special children. Learning disability is the most recent classification to be included as a category of disability. Since the term was introduced, its use has become widespread in education but still educators remain unsure about the nature of its category.

Currently, it also includes concepts such as perceptual - motor problems, hyperactivity, minimal brain damage, and psycho-neurological disorders that have their roots in the origin of the field.
Lerner (1981) and Widerholt (1974) divided the history of learning disabilities into four distinct phases:

1. **Foundation phase (about 1800 - 1930)**, was a period devoted to scientific investigation of brain function.

2. **Transition phase (about 1930 - 1960)**, was a period during which it was assigned that children who possessed brain function deficits have disordered behaviours. Professionals (Cruickshank, Bentzen, Razburg and Tannhauser(1961), Orton (1937), Strauss and Lehtinen (1947)) began to develop assessment and treatment methods for these children.

3. **Integration phase (about 1960 - 1980)**, was a period characterised by increased interest in learning disabilities with a subsequent increase in school programmes for the learning disabled and research into assessment practices and teaching methods.

4. **Contemporary phase (1980 to the present)**, is a period in which the direction is toward widening the definition of individuals served and the integration of services provided across school programmes.

Kirk (1963) coined the term 'learning disability' who used it to describe a group of children with specific learning deficits. He stated that a learning disability refers to a retardation, disorder, or delayed development in one or more of the processes of speech, language, reading, spelling, writing, or arithmetic. Kirk explains that learning disability results from a possible cerebral dysfunction, and / or emotional or behavioural disturbances, not from mental retardation, sensory deprivation, or cultural or instructional factors.

Ramaa (1992) explains that the term ‘Learning disability’ indicates limited ability in learning. When a person is having inadequacy or limited ability in learning a wide variety of tasks involving different levels of intellectual functioning he can be considered to have a general mental retardation. On the other hand, if the limitation is restricted to certain areas of learning, especially language and number related areas, he can be considered to have learning disability. In order to differentiate the two kinds of limitations, the term ‘General Learning disability’ is suggested as an
equivalent for mental retardation and the term 'Specific Learning disability' for
disabilities observed only in certain areas of learning. The specific learning
disabilities are usually indicated as reading disability, writing disability, spelling
disability and arithmetic disability etc.

1.2 Concept, Meaning and Definition of Learning difficulties

When a person is facing difficulty in learning it may be due to the physical
limitations / disabilities such as - impairment in hearing, visual, low intellectual
functioning and inappropriate motor co-ordination. These physical disabilities will
stand as obstacles in the path of learning. They limit the participation of the
individual in the learning process. This type of condition one can observe in any
Indian classroom situation where students are experiencing hearing, visual,
intellectual impairment (low I. Q.) and orthopaedically handicapped problems.
These children are considered as children with general learning disabilities.

Apart from the above, there are other categories of children who are facing
problems in reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic and organisational aspects. Such
children are labelled as children with specific learning disabilities.

Dorothy Smith (1996) shares her views that children with specific difficulties
are those who, in the absence of sensory defect or overt organic damage, have an
intractable learning problem in one or more of reading, writing, spelling and
mathematics and who don't respond to normal teaching (Tansley and Panckhurst,

Specific learning difficulties is one of the category in special education.
Difficulties with reading and spelling and associated problems are known as
'Specific Learning Disability' or dyslexia in the United States and occasionally in the
United Kingdom (Joy Pollock and Elizabeth Waller, 1997). In this thesis, learning
disabilities are referred as 'learning difficulties'. Although the concept covered
diversified learning deficits, definition gives clear picture about learning difficulties.
In 1969, The National Advisory Committee on Handicapped Children (NACHC)
developed an acceptable definition under Kirk's leadership. This definition was
incorporated into Public Law 91 - 230, the Specific Learning Disabilities Act of 1969.

'Children with special learning disabilities exhibit a disorder in one or more of
the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using spoken or
written languages. These may be manifested in disorders of listening, thinking, talking, reading, writing, spelling or arithmetic. They include conditions which have been referred to as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, developmental aphasia etc. They do not include learning problems which are due to primarily visual, hearing or motor handicaps, to mental retardation, emotional disturbance or environmental disadvantage (USOE, 1968, P. 34).

USOE released the 1977 Federal Register which included the revised definition almost identical to that of the NACHC.

'Specific learning disability' means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The term does not include children who have learning problems which are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, or mental retardation, or emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. (USOE,1977, p.65083)

In 1981, the National Joint Committee on Learning disabilities revised the definition and agreed on the following:

Learning disability is a generic term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual and presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction. Even though a learning disability may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (e.g., sensory impairment, mental retardation, social and emotional disturbance) or environmental influences (e.g., cultural differences, insufficient / inappropriate instruction, psychogenic factors), it is not the direct result of those conditions or influences (Hammill et al. 1981).

A child, thus can be considered as learning disabled if i) he has considerable difficulty in understanding or using spoken language, reading, writing, spelling and / or arithmetic during developmental period (before 16 years of age), ii) he is free from visual, hearing or motor activity, mental retardation, severe emotional problems, and
iii) he has adequate facilities, interest and motivation to learn. Such children experience difficulty in one or many area - i.e. reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic and organization. Learning difficulties are classified into various types for facilitating identification of area in which children are facing difficulty.

1.3 Types of Learning difficulties

Learning difficulties noticed among children can be broadly classified into various categories depending upon the major problem experienced by them. Learning difficulties exist in isolation rarely. Different types of learning difficulties are:

1. Oral language difficulties
2. Reading difficulties
3. Writing difficulties and
4. Arithmetic difficulties

Under oral language disabilities there are two types namely - dysphasia and aphasia. Dysphasia refers to the partial inability to comprehend the spoken word and to speak. Aphasia is the loss of ability to comprehend, manipulate or express words in speech, writing or gestures. Reading disabilities are further divided into dyslexia and alexia. Partial inability to read or to understand what one reads is known dyslexia. Alexia is the loss of ability to read, written or printed language. Writing disabilities are divided as dysgraphia and Agraphia.

Dysgraphia is the partial inability to write. Agraphia refers to total inability to write. Revisualisation problem refers to inability to revisualise the image of letters or words. Formulation and syntax disorder is the inability to organise the ideas into a clear, concise pattern of words. Spelling problem is the trouble in reading or writing. Arithmetic disability is the trouble in isolated numerals or a series of numerals. This is further divided into two types as dyscalculia and acalculia. Dyscalculia is the partial inability to perform calculations. Acalculia is the total inability to perform calculations.
1.4 Causes of Learning difficulties


a) Acquired Trauma

Injury to the central nervous system that originates outside the individual and results in learning disorders is called acquired trauma in the medical literature. Acquired central nervous system damage can occur during gestation (prenatal), at birth (perinatal) or after birth (postnatal).

i) Prenatal Causes

Complications during pregnancy have been linked empirically with a variety of learning problems. Maternal drug consumption is the most common cause associated with these complications and subsequent learning difficulties.

Gold and Sherry (1984) reviewed available literature and found a correlation between maternal alcohol consumption during pregnancy and later learning difficulties in the child.

For example, Shaywitz et al. (1980) assessed 15 children of normal intelligence with foetal alcohol syndrome and found that all had been referred for special education services by the third grade. Among the characteristics observed in these youngsters were academic difficulties, hyperactivity and attention problems. It is also suggested that exposure to cocaine affects the development of neurotransmitters and results in a malfunctioning of central nervous system (Van Dyke and Fox, 1990). Maternal use of tobacco products also has been linked with various aspects of learning disabilities, especially academic problems and hyperactivity (Lovitt, 1989).

ii) Perinatal Causes

Colletti (1979) reports that children with learning disabilities had more problems at birth such as - prolonged labour, induced birth and forceps delivery than the natural form (i.e. 96% of the subjects with learning disabilities versus 10% of the normal subjects). Sell et al. (1985) found that 32 out of 74 children who received neonatal intensive care needed special education services in the elementary grades.
iii) Postnatal Causes

Accidents and diseases occurring after birth that are purported to lead to brain damage and concomitant learning problems include stroke, high fever, encephalitis, meningitis and head trauma.

b) Genetic / Hereditary Influences

Investigators examined the relationship between genetics and learning disabilities. Hallgren (1950) studied 276 individuals with dyslexia and their families. The prevalence of reading and language problems among the relatives led him to conclude that learning problems are inherited. Decker and Defries (1980, 1981) compared families of 125 children with disabilities and 125 children without disabilities and found greater rates of reading disabilities within the families of the group with disabilities.

Pennington (1995) notes that, in studies of familial recurrence of reading problems, sibling recurrence is high and consistent across studies (i.e., ranging from 38.5% to 43%) and parent recurrence is likewise high and generally consistent (i.e., ranging from 27% to 49%).

Results of a twin study conducted in London at the Institute of Psychiatry indicate significant hereditability for deficits in spelling. Two chromosomal abnormalities are linked with learning problems in females. When one X chromosome is missing (Turner Syndrome), characteristics such as - spatial deficits, problem in mathematics, attention deficits or hyperactivity, and poor handwriting often are exhibited. Males with the condition Klinefelter Syndrome, typically exhibit reading and language problems as well as poor motor co-ordination and a tendency to be withdrawn. Genetic / Hereditary factors thus influence the individual while learning.

b) Environmental Influences

Learning process is distracted by various factors in the environment. Allergic reactions to certain foods and food additives also have been linked to learning disabilities. Natural or synthetic compound called salicylate which is a chemical found in artificial colours and flavours as well as in certain foods (e.g., apples, tomatoes and berries) also cause hyperactivity and learning problems in some children (Feingold, 1976). Allergic reactions to other foods that do not contain
salicylate, such as milk, wheat, sugar and chocolate, also have been linked to learning disabilities (Crook, 1975., Rapp, 1978, 1986).

Learning environment also contributes to learning difficulties in children. Conducive learning environment enhances teaching - learning process. As a facilitator, the teacher has to provide suitable teaching - learning environment in the classroom. This is one of the important tasks to be carried over by the teacher. If environment is not conducive it will certainly result in learning difficulties.

Brophy and Good (1986) as well as Alderman (1990) reported that a positive learning environment and student learning are enhanced when teachers believe that all students can learn and that teachers can make a difference.

**d) Biochemical Abnormalities**

Some students with learning disabilities have not been diagnosed as having apparent neurological damage or a family history of learning problems. It has been hypothesised that the cause may be biochemical abnormalities at the cellular level. Imbalances in the production of neurotransmitters (e.g., serotonin, dopamine, norepinephrine, acetylcholine and other chemicals) are assumed to cause difficulties in neural impulse transmission and consequent learning and behavioural problems.

Cecil D. Mercer (1997) states that one area of research indirectly supports the existence of a chemical imbalance in some individuals with learning disabilities involves the use of psychoactive drugs (e.g., stimulant mediation) to improve attention and learning and to decrease hyperactivity. It means that there exists chemical imbalance and it can be corrected through administration of drugs.

**1.5 Characteristics of Children with Learning difficulties**

Based on the frequency of occurrence, the following ten characteristics have been identified as widely prevalent in individuals with learning disability (Clements, 1966).

1) Hyperactivity
2) Perceptual impairment
3) Emotional instability
4) General co-ordination deficits
5) Disorder of attention
6) Impulsivity
7) Disorder of memory and thinking
8) Specific learning disabilities in the areas of reading, writing, spelling and arithmetic
9) Disorder of speech and language
10) Equivocal neurological signs and electro encephalographic irregularities.

Research by Bryant and Pflaum (1978) reveals that learning disabled fail to read social cues, and may misinterpret the reactions of other people.

Pearl, L. Seidenberg (1997) list out nine characteristics of children with learning difficulty. They are:

1. **Hyperactivity** - inappropriate excessive motor activity such as tapping of finger or foot, jumping out of seat, or skipping from task to task.
2. **Attention deficits** - distracted by irrelevant stimuli or preservation, or attention becomes fixed upon a single task or behaviour that is repeated over and over.
3. **Motor deficits** - general co-ordination problems resulting in awkward or clumsy movements.
4. **Perceptual - motor deficits** - difficulty in integrating a visual or auditory stimulus with a motor response.
5. **Language deficits** - delays in speech and difficulty in understanding and / or formulating spoken language.
6. **Impulsivity** - lack of reflective behaviour.
7. **Cognitive deficits** - deficits in memory and concept formation.
8. **Orientation deficits** - poorly developed spatial or temporal concepts.
9. **Specific learning deficits** - problems in acquiring reading, writing, or arithmetic skills.

The USOE 1977 Federal Register provides framework for examining characteristics. The list of disability areas (oral expression, listening comprehension, written expression, basic reading skills, reading comprehension, mathematical calculation, and mathematics reasoning) shows that academic and language difficulties are primary characteristics. Apart from primary characteristics there are some specific characteristics - a) Discrepancy factor, b) Academic learning difficulty,

a) Discrepancy Factor

The discrepancy factor was originally popularised by Bateman (1964). It is an identification criteria and is present in most definitions (Hammill, 1990). Many authorities consider it to be the common denominator of learning disabilities. A discrepancy exists when the estimated ability and the academic performance of a student differ greatly.

b) Academic Learning Difficulty

Academic problems are the most widely accepted characteristics of individuals with learning disabilities.

c) Language Disabilities

Gibbs and Cooper (1989) found mild-to-moderate language deficits in 90% of 242 students with learning disabilities. Moreover, Mann (1991) notes the indication of research that many students who do not read well suffer from underlying language problems. As the language skills and academic functioning are closely related, sometimes it is difficult to determine the primary disability (i.e., reading or language).

d) Perceptual Disorders

Perceptual problems such as - inability to recognise, discriminate, and interpret sensation especially visual and auditory disabilities, traditionally have received much attention from several authorities on learning disabilities.

Garnett (1992) notes that spatial deficits are a factor in learning mathematics for students with learning disabilities.

e) Meta-cognitive Deficits

Hresko and Reid (1981) report that the study of meta-cognitive variables (e.g., predicting, planning, checking and monitoring) in students with learning difficulties may lead to a better understanding of how these variables function, and this may result in more productive educational interventions. Several researchers (Kulak, 1993; Montague & Applegate, 1993 and Swanson, 1990) claim that viewing students with learning disabilities as having meta-cognitive or cognitive deficits is
only partially accurate. They note that many of these students are not deficient in using cognitive strategies, instead they apply different strategies.

**f) Social and emotional Problems**

Learning disabled students act disruptively and acquire negative feelings of self-work because of their learning difficulties. They have poor self-concept and self-esteem. Montgomery (1994) found that some students with learning difficulties have a low self-concept regarding academics but do not differ from their high achieving peers and peers without disabilities on self concepts related to other areas (e.g., affect, family, physical and social). Researchers (Greshma & Elliott, 1989, McKinney, 1989) note that the youngsters with learning disabilities frequently experience problems in interacting with parents, teachers, peers or strangers. The definition of learning disabilities by Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities (ICLD, 1987, P. 22) include social skill deficits as a primary disability that has generated much discussion regarding whether social skill deficits are a primary or secondary disability in learning disabilities (Hammill, 1990).

**g) Memory Problems**

Hallahan and Kaufman (1988) note that students with learning disabilities usually have problems of remembering auditory and visual stimuli. Swanson, Cochran and Ewers (1990) and Gettinger (1991) found that measures of memory differentiate students with learning disabilities from other students in general classes. Students with learning disabilities exhibit distinct deficiencies in working memory. Torgesen and Kail (1980) provide the following conclusion:

1. Students with learning disabilities fail to use strategies that students without disabilities readily use. For example, in learning a list of words, students without disabilities rehearse the names to themselves or group the words in categories for studying. Generally, students with learning disabilities do not spontaneously use these strategies.

2. Students with learning disabilities may have difficulty in remembering because of their poor language skills. Thus, verbal material may be particularly difficult to remember.
h) Motor Disorders

Some students with learning difficulties exhibit motor disorders like walk with a clumsy gait or have difficulty in throwing or catching a ball, skipping or hopping. Others exhibit fine motor difficulties when cutting with scissors, putting buttons or zip.

i) Attention Problems and Hyperactivity

To excel in a classroom set up a student should possess good attention span. They must also be able to shift attention to new tasks. Students with attention problems are unable to screen out extraneous stimuli and are attracted by irrelevant stimuli. Hyperactivity is often accompanied by attention problem. Silver (1990) notes that the relationship between learning disabilities and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is becoming increasingly clear.

1.6 Role and Importance of Teacher in Overcoming Learning difficulties in Children

The teacher is playing a vital role in any educational system. This is more true with respect to primary education. At primary level the teacher may play a vital role in dealing children with learning difficulties. The right type of teacher with right type of knowledge and skills or competencies can do better justice to the children with learning difficulties than teachers with general pedagogy backgrounds. It is important that the teachers require specific abilities to identify the different types of learning difficulties, causative factors, development of instructional strategies, media and materials, adopting the developed remedial strategies, apart from giving guidance and counseling. The multidimensional roles to be played by the teachers warrant specific competencies in the teacher to make him / her to be a successful teacher in dealing children with learning difficulties.

As a teacher he / she has to play various roles like creative mediator, facilitator in learning process, disseminator of curriculum in the way the child understands, supervisor to assist the independent work activities of children and asses the child's abilities and disabilities.

The National Policy on Education (1986) emphasises the teacher's accountability to the pupils, their parents, the community and to their own profession. In specific terms, it emphasises, the following roles of the teachers
1. Teaching and guidance of pupils
2. Research, experimentation and innovation
3. Extension and social services
4. Management of a variety of services and activities that institutes undertake to implement as their programmes
5. Diagnoses children's needs and potentialities
6. Encouraging curiosity in students
7. Teaching by example as well as by percept.

Students with learning difficulties receive their instruction in general education classrooms. Many students do not have the ability to keep pace with the curriculum, the way it is structured and there by experience a different kind of segregation, the exclusion from the basic right of education (Schum et al., 1995).

Krishnamurthy (1994), Bhadramani and Rani (1993) report that of the 100 million children attending primary classes, 50 percent of them achieve only 30 percent scores.

Roquiya Zainuddin (1993) stressed the role of teacher in teaching children with learning problems. The importance of reinforcement, parent - teacher interaction and role playing was discussed in his paper. According to Bras (1980), Rajaiah (1990), Appasamy (1996) and Joshua (1996), the attitude of the teacher will make a world of difference to a child's progress.

Gautam (1991), Khan (1995) and Rao (1997) consider that teacher's role is to inspire students for learning and act as a guide to impart certain skills, attitudes and competencies.

The work of teachers is being acknowledged as one requiring cognitive processing. Teaching is not filling up of empty pails, but it is lighting of a fire (Vithachi 1989). Teaching should lead to problem solving (Gopal 1995) and the role of teacher is not being an instructor but be a facilitator (Bhasin, 1985, Gonasalvez 1994 and Gupta 1996).

More than 78% of students with learning difficulties spend most of their time in general education classes (U. S. Department of Education, 1994). Jain (1993)
states that learning disabilities is a dynamic and expanding field. Learning disabled individuals are found across all ages, socio-economic levels, races, and their problems range from mild to severe. He points out that to meet challenge effectively, the teacher should have a thorough understanding of the nature of the learning disabilities and the process of diagnosis of academic and non-academic problems emanating from them. So it is essential that the teacher has to possess positive attitude towards students with special needs in the classroom. Teachers who are most successful with special needs students are those who realise that all students are special, that they have both strengths and weaknesses and that their individuality is to be valued. Thus, a teacher has a vital role to handle children with learning difficulties. To perform his / her job effectively a teacher has to play the activities related to planning, teaching, guidance & counseling roles.

Planning Role

Planning educational programme for a learning difficulty children starts with identification and assessment. Assessment of young children is difficult. Other than tests of developmental progress which usually compare the child to other children of the same age, there are very few standardised tests - Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children – Third Edition (Wechsler, 1991), Stanford – Binet Intelligence Scale : Fourth Edition (Thorndike, Hagen, and Sattler, 1986 a-c), Kaufman Assessment Battery for Children (Kaufman & Kaufman, 1983), Peabody Individual Achievement Test – Revised (PIAT – R) (Markwardt, 1989), Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement (Kaufman & Kaufman, 1985) etc. that are reliable for very young children. It is also difficult for teachers to distinguish between developmental lag and retardation. Through observation and evaluation of intra-individual strengths and weaknesses, the teacher can usually determine whether or not the child has a specific learning disorder. The teacher's role is to make sure that the child has an opportunity to learn the skill, and to determine if he has mastered all prerequisite skills.

A good teacher has the ability to develop and conduct informal test to assess the learning disabled children. Effective placement helps to plan remedial strategies based on the child's level. If this important task is rightly carried out by a teacher, pitfalls in the educational programmes can be avoided. Ability to plan individualised instructional programmes by setting long term and short term goals. For each level or sub task the teacher must be able to plan activities that will allow for rehearsal,
practice, transfer and generalisation. These are the various activities of a teacher to carry out planning role effectively.

**Teaching Role**

Sequence of instructional objectives enables the teacher to achieve the goal. Good communication skill and providing conducive learning environment enrich teaching-learning process.

A good teacher promotes group instruction to improve social and interactional skills. Independent work activities, self-learning methods should be encouraged by the teacher to promote self-confidence. Periodic assessment and record keeping is an important task that has to be done by an effective teacher. Developing interest, motivation and promoting learning is done effectively by the teacher. Creating an awareness about cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies when instructing these students gives a progressive result. Skill in developing and using appropriate material is an important task that has to be carried out. Ability to avoid outside noise and environmental disturbances, skill in developing flash cards, low cost aids, score cards, word mazes, dot pattern etc., are some of the abilities to enrich learning process in educating children with learning difficulties.

**Guidance & Counseling Role**

Effective guidance to peer group by teachers will promote peer acceptance. This in turn, facilitates the children with learning difficulties to develop self-confidence, self-esteem and self-realisation. Peer tutoring will enhance the learning process of children with learning difficulties. The children can be introduced to similar learning environment at home and parents too can continue to contribute to his/her learning. When a teacher is able to involve parents in the educational programme, it will help the child to progress in a better way. Unless, there is some relationship between what takes place at school and home, instruction will be only marginally successful. Communication between teacher and parents is essential to facilitate co-ordination in identifying objectives and consistency in handling the child. Talking with parents often reduces the anxieties and feelings of guilt experienced by almost all parents of children with learning difficulties. Arranging for parent's meetings and discussion by the teacher helps parents to interact with other parents. As a teacher he has to encourage real co-operation from the parents by allowing them to know more about their child and child-rearing practices, the ways to assist in
homework activities, in the development of social and emotional maturity, providing experiences that enhance language and cognitive growth and to locate and use community resources. Last but not the least, a teacher should effectively work with other professionals namely psychologists, audiologists, speech therapists, paediatric etc. Their decisions and suggestions can be effectively incorporated in the educational programme by a competent teacher to attain a greater success in the education of children with learning difficulties. These are some of the important roles a teacher has to play effectively when dealing children with learning difficulties.

1.7 Characteristics and Competencies of Teachers to deal Children with Learning difficulties

A teacher should possess certain professional characteristics to perform the assigned work successfully. He should have a thorough knowledge about the curriculum specified for teaching. Once he / she attains mastery over the subject, he / she automatically develops confidence to deal any problem. Teaching provides a way of national development. A good teacher inculcates good character and personality in their students who work for the progress of a nation. This is achieved only if a teacher possesses some necessary characteristics and competencies to deal children with learning difficulties.

The ability to judge the students’ capacity to make progress, ability to deal with peer acceptance problems, skill in dealing with the emotional behaviour and learning problems that results from the student’s ability to compete academically with other students, are some of the competencies that the teacher should possess.

Mike Turner and Leslie Bash (1999) have listed the characteristics of a competent teacher. In their opinion: a competent teacher is one who is:

- professionally committed to promote education and well being of all children regardless of their cultural, ethnic or religious backgrounds;
- knows their special subject or curriculum area well enough to teach it and informs less knowledgeable colleagues on what and how to teach in that subject;
- can teach the key ideas and content of their subject in a variety of ways which meet the learning styles of the children with different ability and interest groups;
- can manage children in a quiet and ordered manner in and out of the classroom;
- can work equitably with children, colleagues, parents, governors and administrators;
- can encourage the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of children;
- is committed to the idea of lifetime professional development for the sake of their students, their school and themselves; and
- can accept the need for continuous change in order to meet the needs of their clients and employers.

Regional Institute of Education, Mysore (1998) identified a list of 51 essential competencies and classified them under 12 areas:

1. Development, preparation and utilisation of instructional materials
2. Motivation of children
3. Communication in classroom
4. Methods of instruction
5. Evaluation of learning
6. Diagnosis and remediation
7. Classroom management
8. Co-curricular activities
9. Community participation
10. Special education
11. Institutional planning
12. Classroom instruction

To handle children with learning difficulties, he / she should possess some specific competencies other than the competencies possessed by a normal teacher. Under special education, learning difficulties in children is the major aspect. In any classroom, one can find children with specific learning difficulties like - difficulties in reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic, reasoning and organisation. And such children are generally the dropouts from the educational system. Even if they continue, their achievement level is mostly below that of a normal student. In advanced countries, much attention is paid to take care of these children. Whereas in India, the stress is on Universalisation of Primary Education but not on the learning difficulties
experienced by the students in the process of learning. In other words, there is a stress on quantity but not on the quality of education. Recently, attempts are made to identify the learning difficulties of children particularly in the subjects like mathematics (Kamini Devi, 1999) and English (Sivakami, 2000 and Kusuma Harinath, 2000). What is needed at the present context is to assess what extent the teachers possess competency in dealing children with learning difficulties. Thereby, one can think of the development of the required competencies specifically needed for the primary school teachers.

To deal children with learning difficulties, the primary school teacher should perform various activities other than the regular activities in normal classroom. These activities include identifying the nature of learning difficulties, their causes and characteristics, assessment procedures, development and use of instructional strategies development and use of instructional materials apart from giving guidance & counseling to the students as well as the parents of students with learning difficulties.

Infact, a competent teacher should exhibit knowledge and understanding about the different aspects of child development, and developmental delays in relation to learning. He / she should be able to understand and differentiate the terms like reading, writing, spelling and arithmetic difficulties in children. As we know, there are children who exhibit difficulties in organisation and reasoning apart from language difficulties, particularly at primary stage. The teacher should possess adequate knowledge and understanding in these aspects.

Learning difficulties may be due to hereditary and environmental factors. A clear understanding of these factors along with the characteristics of children with specific learning difficulties generally enhance the competency of the teacher in teaching - learning process. By understanding the sensori - motor and perceptual problems, cognitive deficits and meta-cognitive deficits, the teacher can structure his / her teaching strategy suitable to these children. Knowledge about the identification and assessment of children with learning difficulties is one of the major aspects the teacher is supposed to do for effective educational programme. For this, a teacher should possess knowledge about the different formal and informal assessment tests one can use in different settings.
Based on assessment, one should be able to develop and use instructional strategies to overcome learning difficulties in children. In this context, the teacher should be able to structure individualised educational programme based on child’s needs and abilities, by setting long term and short term objectives and goals for each child. The teacher should be able to cognisize the conditions under which children with learning difficulties are most likely to learn and applies the knowledge. Sequencing the instruction by task analysis, use of creative techniques in teaching to avoid boredom, use of multi sensory approaches, linking learned materials with unlearned information, linking the learning content with the real life situations, use of techniques like prompting, modeling and cueing in learning are some of the competencies the normal school teacher requires to deal children with learning difficulties. It is natural that active involvement of students in teaching - learning process paves way for better learning. So the teacher should involve students as active respondents in the learning task rather than passive recipients of instruction. For this, one can use the techniques like peer tutoring, co-operative learning and involving students in setting instructional goals and performance in terms of goal. To develop higher order thinking, he / she should encourage questions from students that promote application, analysis and evaluation.

To do the above activities one should be competent in development and use of materials, media and devices. A teacher should be competent in the development of innovative teaching materials by using locally available materials. For example, use of picture cards, letter cards, flash cards, to promote sentence building to children with reading difficulties, use of simple mazes and dot-to-dot patterns to overcome writing difficulties, use of picture materials, to overcome reading and language difficulties, etc. are helpful to enrich the learning process.

Guidance & counseling is an integral part of any educational system. Involvement of parents of learning difficulty children is an indispensable part to overcome learning difficulties in children. The competent teacher should be able to create awareness and understanding among the parents on different aspects of learning difficulties in children. An effective teacher must train the parents how to tutor their child, and direct parents to speech and language pathologist for language development. He / she must be able to appraise periodically about child’s strengths and weaknesses to overcome learning difficulties. The teacher should be proficient in helping family to establish positive home conditions that support school learning.
and appropriate behaviour. In short, a competent teacher will establish good relationship with the parents of children with learning difficulties, thereby, paving way for effective identification and assessment, continuous monitoring, and use of remedial procedures to overcome learning difficulties in children.

From the above discussion, it is clear that a competent teacher whether he / she is working in general education classroom or special education classroom, requires certain specific competencies to handle children with learning difficulties. A close look at the discussion also reveals that these competencies even to a greater extent enhance the teaching efficiency of the normal school teacher. One can safely conclude that for better inclusive education the above stated competencies should be the integral part of any inservice and pre-service teacher training programmes. As such, listing out the competencies to identify the existing and required competencies of primary school teachers is a preliminary step for any training programme.

1.8 Need for Identifying the Possessed and Required Competencies of primary School Teachers to handle Learning difficulties in Children

Special educational needs of most children can be met effectively in mainstream schools. Successful provision for children with learning difficulties require a whole school approach in which teachers play a major role. Teacher has the responsibility for overall curricular experiences of children with learning difficulties in their classes. Co-operative working with support teachers and assistants is also required by a teacher. As already stated, the teacher should possess some specific competencies in assessment, planning and intervention programmes. A good number of researches has been conducted on different aspects of teachers (attitude of teachers, teaching success, role performance, teacher competencies, etc.) in India and Abroad.


From the above studies it is clear that most of the studies are concentrated on identification and providing remedial instruction. But effective remedial instruction can be planned, developed and implemented only by a competent teacher. So more number of studies are warranted to assess the existing competencies and to identify the required competencies of teachers to deal children with learning difficulties. Moreover, studies which probe into the influence of certain personal variables of the teachers on their existing competencies and required competencies go a long way to structure the need based inservice training programmes to the teachers already working in schools. On the other hand, the curriculum of the pre-service training programmes can be enriched by incorporating the appropriate components of the concepts of learning difficulties in children. An intensive study is required to list out the various competencies needed for primary school teachers to deal children with learning difficulties. Such an attempt facilitate for assessing the possessed competencies and identifying the required competencies by the primary school teachers to handle learning difficulties in children. The present study is an attempt in this direction.

The review of related literature is presented in the next chapter.