



Teaching Children with Learning Disabilities through Cooperative Learning

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ABSTRACT

The category of 'children with learning disabilities' is now the largest in special education. Learning Disability refers to retardation, disorder or delayed development in any one or more of the process of speech, language, reading, spelling, writing or arithmetic. The heterogeneous nature of the population of children with learning disabilities puts great challenges in front of special educators, particularly in choosing suitable teaching methods. However, researches reveal that adapting peer-mediated instruction is helpful in developing various psychological constructs among these children. Present paper advocates 'cooperative learning', a method based on peer mediated instruction approach, as a suitable method to teach children with learning disabilities.

Key word : Learning Disability, Educational Approaches, Cooperative Learning

The Background

Children who experience difficulties in learning have undoubtedly existed throughout the history of formal education. It has only been recently, however, that children who appear to have average intellectual abilities but fail to learn have been assigned diagnostic labels (Kauffman & Hallahan, 1978; Sattler, 1981). This group of children, generally reported to as having "learning disabilities", pose an important challenge for researchers and represent a significant risk to physical and psychological health as well as to personal life fulfillment.

The definitions given by various authors suggest that "Learning Disability" refers to retardation, disorder or delayed development in any one or more of the process of speech, language, reading, spelling, writing or arithmetic. These problems are due to disorder or deficiency in any one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using spoken or written language. They do not include learning problems which are primarily due to visual, hearing or motor handicaps, mental retardation or emotional disturbance or due to adverse environmental factors.

The most widely used definition is the one incorporated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of the United States. The definition says that, "the term 'specific learning disability' means those children who have 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 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 a learning problem which is primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of

environmental, or economic disadvantage."

The second part (the operational part) of federal definition states that a student has a specific learning disability if (1) the student does not achieve at the proper age and ability levels in one or more several specific areas when provided with appropriate learning experiences and (2) the student has a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability in one or more of these seven areas: (a) oral expression, (b) listening comprehension, (c) written expression, (d) basic reading skill, (e) reading comprehension, (f) mathematics calculation, and (g) mathematics reasoning.

Characteristics of LD Children

Individuals with learning disabilities are a heterogeneous population. They exhibit a variety of learning and behavioral traits, and no individual displays all of them. Some students have disabilities in mathematics, whereas others excel in mathematics. Attention and processing problems are symptomatic problems for many students with learning disabilities but not for all. Young children are more likely to be hyperactive than adolescents.

The characteristics of learning disabilities include disorders of attention, poor motor abilities, perceptual and information-processing problems, failures to develop and mobilize cognitive strategies for learning, oral language difficulties, reading difficulties, written language difficulties, mathematics difficulties, and/or inappropriate social behaviour. Difficulty with reading is by far the most common characteristic of students with learning disability (Richek, Caldwell, Jennings, & Lerner, 1996).

Educational Approaches for LD Children

Learning disabilities cannot be corrected or "cured" by a specific teaching method or training technique. There is no magic formula for teaching children with these problems. Effective instruction utilizes a continuum of methods to serve diverse student populations (Tucker, Singelton, & Weaver, 2002).

Not long ago, instruction of students with learning disabilities emphasized the remediation of basic skill deficits, often at the expense of providing opportunities for students to express themselves, to learn problem solving skills, or to contact the general education curriculum in a meaningful way (Gersten, 1998). In recent years, however, the field has begun to shift its focus from a remediation-only mode to an approach designed to give students with learning disabilities meaningful access to the core curriculum. Thus, contemporary best practice in educating these children is characterized by explicit instruction (involves carefully designed materials and activities that enable students to make sense of new information and concepts), content enhancement (techniques to help students organize, comprehend, and retain critical curriculum content), and learning strategies (Gersten, 1998).

As per the above discussion, to fulfill the educational needs of LD children a suitable alternative to traditional teaching method is 'cooperative learning'. It is a method of promoting learning through students' cooperation. Cooperative learning exists when students work together to achieve joint learning goals (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1992, 1993). It is an approach to instruction in which students work in small groups to help one another learn (Johnson & Johnson, 1987; Slavin, 1983). Students in 'cooperative learning' work together to achieve common successes. Johnson and Johnson (1987) suggest that in order for cooperative learning approach to be successful, one must structure the classroom in such a way that cooperation is not only helpful for academic success, but, in fact, necessary for it. Simply putting students in groups and setting them loose to work on a topic together is not cooperative learning. Rather, they are encouraged to work in groups on academic tasks with a common goal. The members of the groups swim or sink together.

However, to become cooperative, a group should have some basic elements. Researchers have identified five essential elements of cooperative learning as positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face interaction, use of interpersonal and small-group skills, and group processing skills (Johnson & Johnson, 1987).

According to Kagan (1992), there are over fifty forms of cooperative learning. Though, all methods of cooperative learning have the idea in common that students work in groups to attain a common goal yet they are quite different from one another in other aspects. Out of various methods of cooperative learning - Student Teams Achievement Divisions (STAD), Teams-Games-Tournaments (TGT),

Team Accelerated Instruction or Team Assisted Individualization (TAI), Jigsaw, Jigsaw II, Learning Together (LT), Group Investigation (GI), Constructive Controversy (CC), Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC) etc. have received more empirical attention.

Conclusion

Hallahan (1998) points out, the tendency of many educators to think of learning disabilities as a mild disability detracts from the real needs of these students. Such a nonchalant attitude toward learning disabilities, coupled with the slogan, "all children can learn" used by so many reformers has lulled many into thinking that students with learning disabilities will respond to a quick fix. Yes, all children can learn, but some do not learn as well as others, and some require intensive instruction to learn even the most basic skills.

Cooperative learning maximizes a student's intellectual activity producing more learning gains and, simultaneously, it improves social relations. Cooperative learning strategies are very different in mainstreaming of the academically handicapped students and their non-mainstream classmates in which cooperation may overcome substantial differences. Students of different abilities are placed into cooperative groups and each member is given an equal role in helping the group to achieve its goal. Several researchers have found that cooperative learning improves relationships between mainstream and non-mainstream students. Research work by Sahni (2011) supports using cooperative learning as a suitable approach to enhance various psychological constructs of LD children.

Several studies have examined the social and academic impact of placing students with disabilities in heterogeneous cooperative learning groups in general education classrooms (Armstrong, Johnson, & Balow, 1981; Johnson & Johnson, 1983; Madden & Slavin, 1983). Although some of the results are mixed, these studies are often cited as supporting the use of cooperative learning to facilitate mainstreaming or inclusion (Johnson & Johnson, 1986, 1994; Slavin, Stevens, & Madden, 1988; Sapon-Shevin, Ayres, & Duncan, 1994; O'Neil, 1995). Furthermore, cooperative learning positively affects the social acceptance of children with disabilities by their nondisabled peers (Madden & Slavin, 1983).

'Learning Disability' is one area that is treated with much contempt in India. It is looked down upon and for many people it is not an 'area' at all. People in higher echelons and of higher intellect too, refuse to acknowledge learning disability as a disability field. However, things are now changing at a gradual pace and this field is also gaining recognition in our country. More researches in this direction will be helpful in putting a clearer picture.

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