



Specific Learning Disabilities in India: Rights, Issues and Challenges

KEYWORDS

Specific Learning Disabilities, Dyslexia, Provisions, Rights in India

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ABSTRACT *Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced'.*

James Baldwin

Persons with Specific Learning Disability (SpLD) still struggle to get their full rights and provisions in India. SpLD is a hidden disability; it is a disorder or a retardation of development affecting specific academic area, such as reading, spelling, arithmetic, and writing as well as delays in language in general. Specific Learning Disability is not visible as other disabilities such as visually impaired, hearing impaired and mentally challenged. In India, it is estimated that approximately Specific Learning Disability (SpLD) affects almost 5-15% of school going children but there is a lack of awareness about specific learning disability among the teachers, parent's community and general public. Due to these reasons, they label the specific learning disabled students as lazy, not attentive in class, dull, etc.. In the developed countries like United States of America and Britain, already they have included specific learning disability category in the disability law. As in the case of India, Persons with Disability Act (PWD) is considered as one of the corner stone in the disability act but the specific learning disability category is not included in the Act. The recent Bill (Rights of the Persons with Disability Bill 2014) has included SpLD and recognized as a disability. Still the Bill is not yet passed. So far the rights of the specific learning disability students are hidden and forgotten by the Indian government like their disability. The teachers, parents community and the students should be properly educated about the rights of the learning disability students. This paper is an attempt to explain the rights, issues and problems of the specific learning disability students in India.

Introduction

Specific Learning disability (SpLD) is still remains as an unrecognized disability in various disability Acts in India. The enactment of the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Production of Rights and Full Participation Act, 1995 (referred as Persons with Disability Act) is a signal achievement of the Indian Disability Movements. The Act aims to protect and promote economic and social rights of people with disabilities. The act covers only seven disabilities such as:

blindness;
low vision;
leprosy-cured;
hearing impairment;
locomotor disability;
mental retardation;
mental illness;

It is noted that there is no attention is given to the Specific Learning Disability category in the most notable disability Act. The Specific Learning Disability is completely ignored in the Persons with Disability Act (PWD Act) like their hidden disability.

In the year 2011, the Indian government has taken first initiative steps to include different hidden disabilities and mental disorders in the draft disability bill in the replacement of Persons with Disability Act (1995). SpLD is a group of neurodevelopment disorders manifesting as persistent difficulties in learning to efficiently read (Dyslexia), Write (Dysgraphia) or perform mathematical calculation (Dyscalculia) despite normal intelligence, conventional schooling, intact hearing and vision, adequate motivation and socio-cultural opportunity (Lagae, 2008). Current literature indicates that 5-15% of the 416 million children in India have Specific Learning Disability (Krishnan, 2007; Krishna Kumar, 1999; Mehta, 2003) making it the most wide spread disability (Suresh and Sebastain, 2008; Tanton, 2007). It is reported that India has atleast five students with SpLD in every average-size classroom (Thomas, Bhanutej, and John, 2003). The incidents of dyslexia in primary school children in India have been reported to be 2-18% of

dyslexia, of dysgraphia 14%, of dyscalculia 5.5% (Shah, 1981; Khanna, 1981). The current Rights of Persons with Disability Bill 2014 defines "specific learning disabilities as a heterogeneous group of conditions wherein there is a deficit in processing language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself as a difficulty to comprehend, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations and includes such conditions as perceptual disabilities, dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia and developmental aphasia". The definition included in the Rights of Persons with Disability Bill 2014 for the specific learning disabilities is in the broader sense, no attempt has been taken to define the specific terms such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, etc.. There is no clear cut definition given in the proposed Rights of Persons with Disability Bill 2014 for the SpLD. This will definitely lead to the problems in identifying the persons with specific learning disabilities and certifying them to avail provision and concessions. In the educational context, the unidentified SpLD students in the classroom may be one of the causes for school dropouts. The undetected and unmanaged SpLDs results in chronic scholastic backwardness ensure school dropouts (Thacker, 2007). Thus, in order to achieve the goal of universalization of elementary education, the Government should take an initiative steps to clearly define the categories in the Specific Learning Disability and provide necessary and universal guidelines to identify the persons with Specific Learning Disability in the earlier stage itself.

The researches in the field of special education indicate that the teachers, parents and students community have lack of awareness about the rights of the disabled students. Paul (2000) stated that one of the barriers encountered by students with disabilities is the teacher's lack of knowledge about the disability and the types of services and accommodations available to them. The researchers have reported that there is an inadequate knowledge about disabilities leads to negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities (Saravana Bhavan and Saravana Bhavan, 2001). Peoples in India should be properly trained about the problems and rights of the disabled persons especially the parents and teacher community in order to support their learning disabled children.

Provisions for the Specific Learning Disabled Students

Even though the Specific Learning Disability category is not mentioned in the PWD Act, initiative steps have been taken up by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) to provide concession for the Learning Disability students. The rights of the learning disability students mentioned by CBSE are as follows:

1. Extra time is given to the students with Specific Learning Disabilities during examination (15 minutes extra time per hour).
2. For the students with Specific Learning Disabilities are exempted from studying second language and substituted with the work experience subject.
3. Permitted to use calculators for mathematics calculation during examination.
4. For the students with dyslexia, the question paper will be read out during examination.
5. Students with Specific Learning Disabilities are exempted from spelling errors.
6. For Students with Specific Learning Disabilities are exempted from drawing maps, graphs, figures, charts etc. in the written examination. They will be given supplementary questions to complement the marks.
7. Students with dysgraph are allowed to use writers during examination
8. Students with Specific Learning Disabilities studying in X standard are exempted from studying algebra and geometry and allowed to substitute with standard VII mathematics and work experience subject.
9. Grace mark of 20% should be given in one or two subjects for those students with Specific Learning Disabilities who have failed in the examination
10. Students with Specific Learning Disabilities are exempted from writing answers in detail during examination.
11. For students with Learning Disabilities of standard 1st to standard 9th and standard 11th, along with the written test, the students shall also have an oral test for unit and semester examinations.
12. Students with Learning Disabilities, for standard 10th and 12th examinations, can choose the centre close to their residence.

The above listed provisions are available to the students with specific learning disabilities in India. These provisions and concessions can be accessible to the students with specific learning disabilities only when they produce disability certificate in the prescribed form issued by the recognized people and institution.

Issues and Challenges for the Persons with Specific Learning Disabilities

Most of the persons with disabilities in India are unaware of their rights and provisions. If this is the fact of visible disabilities, then the condition of Persons with Specific Learning Disabilities are even worse because of their invisible nature of their disability condition. There is a lack of awareness about their rights and provisions among the differently abled persons, teachers and general public. First of all, there need to a sensitization programme about the rights of the students with specific learning disability among all the stakeholders of the society such as student community, parents, teachers and public. The other crucial challenge faced by the students with specific learning disability is getting a medical certificate from the concerned authorities in order to avail the provisions and concessions. In India, getting a medical certificate for specific learning disability is not an easy task; they have to undergo lots of hurdles because of the lack trained professionals to issue the certificate, lack of clear cut definition available for the specific learning disabilities and lack of standardized tools available to identify specific learning disabilities in the different languages.

Conclusion

Many specific learning disability students in the main stream education have been remaining unidentified; they are often termed as 'lazy, dull and inattentive. The problems of these students remain unnoticed by the teachers due to lack of awareness about learning disability. First of all, awareness of this hidden disability has to be increased and the topic of SpLD should be compulsorily taught to Doctors, School Teachers, Counselors and General Public (Karande, 2008). There is a dearth of standardized tools available in different languages to identify the specific learning disabilities. So the government should join hands together with different academic community members to develop standardized tools in all languages in India to identify specific learning disability, develop sensitization programme about the rights and provisions available to the persons with specific learning disability, and should release funds to achieve the goal. Therefore, the problems of the specific learning disability students should be brought to the lime light and their rights and issues regarding specific learning disability must be addressed at the national level, and they should be trained to demand for their Legal Rights in Education.

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