



FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION ON CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES: TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES

Azhagannan. K*

Assistant Professor of Psychology cum Clinical Psychologist, Department of Psychiatry, Govt Villupuram Medical College Hospital, Villupuram. Tamil Nadu.
*Corresponding Author

Dr. Rajakumari

Professor & Head, Department of Psychology, Central University of Tamil Nadu.

ABSTRACT Learning difficulties among school-aged children are a significant challenge to academic achievement, which leads to multiple problems, such as socio-emotional development. Teachers play an important role in early identification, classroom management, and referral for assessment and intervention. The present paper explores teachers' perspectives on children with learning difficulties through a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) approach. The study aims to understand teachers' perceptions of learning difficulties, observed classroom challenges, existing support mechanisms, and perceived gaps in training and resources. A qualitative methodology was adopted, involving structured FGDs with school teachers. Thematic analysis revealed key themes, including difficulties with academic skills constraints in classroom settings, limited support, and the need for professional development. The findings highlight the importance of teacher training, collaborative practices, and systemic support to address learning difficulties in school settings effectively.

KEYWORDS : Learning Difficulties, Teachers' Perspectives, Focus Group Discussion, Inclusive Education, Qualitative Research

INTRODUCTION

Learning difficulties refer to persistent problems in acquiring and using academic skills such as reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematics, despite adequate intelligence and educational opportunities. These difficulties often manifest during the early school years and can significantly affect a child's academic performance, self-esteem, and social adjustment. In inclusive educational systems, teachers are often the first professionals to notice these difficulties due to their continuous interaction with students.

Teachers' perceptions and experiences are crucial in understanding how learning difficulties are identified and managed within classrooms. However, their voices are often underrepresented in empirical research. Focus Group Discussion (FGD) is a qualitative method that allows for in-depth exploration of shared experiences, beliefs, and challenges among participants. By facilitating interaction among teachers who are the first front-line source to monitor the child's learning development, FGDs provide rich insights into practical classroom realities.

The present study aims to explore teachers' viewpoints on children with learning difficulties in the Tamil language using FGDs, focusing on the identification of early signs, classroom challenges, coping strategies, and perceived needs for support.

Review of Literature

Previous research indicates that teachers play a central role in the early identification of learning difficulties (Snowling & Hulme, 2012). Studies have shown that inadequate training and a lack of awareness can delay identification and referral (Kumar & Prakash, 2018). Teachers often report challenges such as large class sizes, time constraints, and insufficient institutional support while addressing diverse learning needs (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Qualitative studies using FGDs have highlighted that teachers perceive learning difficulties not only as academic issues but also as concerns related to attention, motivation, and behavior (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). There is consistent evidence emphasizing the need for continuous professional development, collaboration with special educators, and parental involvement to improve outcomes for children with learning difficulties.

Objectives of the Study

1. To explore teachers' understanding of learning difficulties in children.
2. To identify classroom challenges faced by teachers while teaching children with learning difficulties.
3. To examine strategies currently used by teachers to support such children.
4. To identify perceived gaps in training, resources, and institutional support.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The present study adopted a qualitative research design using Focus Group Discussion (FGD) to explore teachers' lived experiences and perceptions regarding children with learning difficulties. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate as it allows for an in-depth understanding of subjective experiences, meanings, and contextual realities within classroom settings.

Participants

The participants comprised school teachers teaching the Tamil language at the primary and middle school levels. Teachers with a minimum of two years of teaching experience were included to ensure sufficient exposure to children with learning difficulties. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, based on their willingness to participate and experience in handling learning needs in classrooms.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of the Teacher Participants (N = 20)

1.	Variable	Category / Description
2.	Gender	Female (n = 18); Male (n = 2)
3.	Age (years)	27–50
4.	Teaching experience (years)	3–22
5.	Type of school	Government; Private
6.	Level of school	Elementary; Primary
7.	Medium of instruction	Tamil

Note. Prior permission was obtained from the respective school authorities before data collection. Written informed consent was obtained from all participating teachers.

Tool: Focus Group Discussion Guide

A semi-structured Focus Group Discussion guide was developed by the researcher based on a review of the literature and study objectives. The guide included open-ended questions related to:

- Teachers' understanding of learning difficulties
- Signs of early classroom identification and observation of learning problems
- Classroom strategies and adaptations used by teachers
- Support systems, referral practices, and training needs

Procedure

After obtaining informed consent, the Focus Group Discussions were conducted in a quiet and comfortable setting within the school premises. Each FGD consisted of 20 teachers and lasted approximately 60–90 minutes. The discussions were moderated by the researcher to facilitate active participation and ensure coverage of all domains. The sessions were audio-recorded with permission and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Ethical considerations such as confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation were strictly maintained.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve familiarization. Initial codes were generated, which were then organized into categories and broader themes. Themes were reviewed and refined to ensure consistency and credibility. Verbatim statements from participants were used to support the identified themes.

RESULTS

The qualitative data obtained through Focus Group Discussions were analysed using thematic analysis. Seven major themes emerged, reflecting teachers' shared experiences and perceptions regarding children's early signs of learning in reading, writing, and comprehending Tamil. Verbatim excerpts are presented to enhance credibility and to ground the findings in participants' narratives.

Theme 1: Persistent Errors in Basic Literacy Skills

Teachers consistently reported that children with learning difficulties exhibited recurring errors in foundational literacy skills. These included confusion between similar-looking letters, difficulty differentiating sounds, and frequent omissions or substitutions during reading and writing tasks. Such errors were reported to persist despite repeated instruction.

"Even after many repetitions, some children continue to confuse letters and sounds."

Theme 2: Reading Difficulties and Reduced Fluency

Participants observed that affected children demonstrated slow reading speed, frequent pauses, guessing of words, and difficulty blending letters into words. Avoidance of reading aloud when there are long words with tough letters was also commonly reported.

"They hesitate to read in front of others and take a long time to complete even small passages."

Theme 3: Writing Difficulties and Poor Written Expression

Writing-related challenges were frequently highlighted. Teachers reported poor letter formation, spelling errors, difficulty copying from the board, slow writing speed, and incomplete written work. In many cases, children were able to respond orally but struggled to express the same content in written form.

"They know the answer when asked orally, but they are unable to write it correctly."

Theme 4: Comprehension Difficulties Despite Adequate Oral Understanding

Teachers noted a clear discrepancy between oral comprehension and reading comprehension. While children were able to understand when you read for them or explained verbally, they experienced difficulty comprehending written text independently.

"When we explain, they understand, but when they read on their own, they get confused."

Theme 5: Emotional and Behavioral Reactions to Academic Difficulties

Academic struggles were often accompanied by emotional and behavioral responses such as low confidence, fear of making mistakes, withdrawal, and reduced classroom participation. Teachers perceived these behaviors as secondary consequences of repeated academic failure.

"They become very quiet and avoid answering because they are afraid of being wrong."

Theme 6: Informal Classroom Coping Strategies

Teachers reported using informal strategies, including repetition, peer assistance, simplified instructions, and additional practice. These approaches were based on individual experience rather than formal training or structured intervention models.

"We try different methods on our own, but there is no fixed strategy given to us."

Theme 7: Need for Professional Training and Institutional Support

A strong need for systematic training, early screening tools, and access to special educators and mental health professionals was expressed across all focus groups. Teachers emphasized that adequate institutional support would enable early identification and effective intervention, which might impact the children's learning well.

"If we receive proper training and expert guidance, we can support these children much better."

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study highlight that teachers are able to identify key indicators of learning difficulties early through classroom observation, particularly in the areas of reading, writing, and comprehension. Consistent with previous literature, teachers associated learning difficulties with both academic and emotional challenges. However, the reliance on informal coping strategies and the expressed need for training indicate a gap between inclusive education policies and practical classroom support systems. Making this early screening part of the curriculum will help strengthen teacher capacity through professional development and institutional collaborations, such as referring students for formal assessment and early intervention, which would be a better way to effectively manage learning difficulties.

Implications of the Study

The study underscores the need for:

- Regular teacher training programs on learning difficulties
- Importance of regularising early screening and referral systems
- Collaborative approaches involving teachers, parents, and mental health professionals
- Flexible curricula and classroom accommodations

Limitations of the Study

The study involved a limited number of teachers, which may restrict generalizability. The findings are based on self-reported perceptions and may be influenced by social desirability bias.

CONCLUSION

Focus Group Discussions provided valuable insights into teachers' perspectives on children with learning difficulties. Teachers demonstrated awareness of academic challenges but reported significant constraints in addressing these difficulties in early class effectively, which includes adequate training in screening, intervention, and regularising proper referral systems with mental health professionals. Strengthening teacher capacity through training and improving institutional support systems is essential for promoting inclusive and effective education for children with learning difficulties.

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