

PERCEPTIONS OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE SHORT COURSE ON 'TEACHING CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES (LD)'

K. A. C. Alwis and T. D. T. L. Dhanapala

Department of Special Needs Education, Faculty of Education, The Open University of Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

The term Learning Disabilities (LD) refers to a neurobiological disorder in one or more of the basic processes involved in understanding someone's spoken or written language. This brain variance may influence a person's ability to speak, listen, read, write, spell, reason out, organise information, or do mathematical calculations (Lerner & Kline, 2006). At least one in every ten children of school age do have difficulties with one or more areas of the school curriculum, most commonly reading, writing, spelling and mathematics. Parents and teachers usually discover the problem when the children fail to cope with their school work. They may notice a great difference between the child's oral performance, which is fairly good, and the written work. Karanth & Rozario (2003) pointed out that specific remediation for children with LD is often in the form of individual literacy tutoring, training in language and meta-linguistic awareness of comprehensive literacy-oriented efforts in small groups of children. Intervention for LD is generally carried out on a daily basis throughout the school years with extra time allocated for reading, writing and mathematics. The remedial activities include decoding, word study and comprehension of continuous text with writing support, calculation etc. This necessitates a substantial amount of teacher preparation and continuing professional development. However, teachers face tremendous challenges in their regular classrooms as there are many children with LD in today's classrooms. The conditions in classrooms, even in the popular schools, are far from ideal. More often than not, a single teacher, inadequately trained and equipped, has to handle between 40-50 children in a single classroom. However, there are no recognised courses or programmes that teachers can follow to acquire knowledge and competencies to deal with these children. Therefore the Department of Special Needs Education developed and offered a short course on 'Teaching Children with Learning Disabilities' which was concluded in September 2010. Through this study the Department wished to obtain the perceptions of the participants of the first course, and share their views for further revision of the course if any such revisions are required.

The research questions were as follows.

1. What were the factors that motivated participants to follow this course?
2. How do participants perceive the course content, instructional procedures and the evaluation system?
3. What benefits have been gained by the participants as a result of following the course?
4. What problems did the participants encounter in following the course?
5. How can the above problems be overcome in the future?

METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. A questionnaire survey of all participants (41 English medium, 10 Sinhala medium and 10 Tamil medium students) and interviews of randomly selected participants were conducted. Data analyses used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

10 questions were included in the questionnaire to find out the perceptions of students. The summary of their responses are as follows.

- A predominant majority (61.4 %) considered content as very relevant and that the course content had helped to achieve the goals of the course to a large extent (47.7 %) or to some extent (52.3 %).
- The majority (54.5 %) felt the quality of instruction was good and the others had rated it as satisfactory.
- The quality of course in general was considered as good by 50.0 % and as satisfactory by 47.5 %.
- Assignments had provided experiences (50.0 %) and had helped to understand course content better (50 %).
- Workload for the course was considered as 'matching learning outcomes' by 34.1 % as 'satisfactory' by 59.1 %.
- Activities in the course were evaluated as very practical by 50.0 %, and as practical to some extent by 45.5 %.
- With regard to the performance of instructors, the perceptions were extremely positive: 81.8 % considered they were conversant with the subject matter; another 86.4 % that they were well prepared for the workshops, and 90.09 % that they were concerned about facilitating student participation.

At the interview most participants suggested to expand the duration of the course and, to restructure it as a Diploma programme.

“it should have been a lengthy course to gain more knowledge”

“should extend the duration of the course at least six months”

“introduce as a Diploma course”

They also suggested adding more videos to clarify some areas and behaviours of children with LD.

“it is better if you could show real situation”

“if you could get any video”

Students had concerns about the certificate and they expected a more valid one rather than getting only a participation certificate.

“this course could be conducted for a longer duration which would enable us to receive a valid certificate”

They also mentioned some problems. The course was too cramped, most of them were unable to gain all the points, and the duration of the course was not sufficient to get a satisfactory knowledge of LD were some of these concerns.

“the course was very good but since it was too cramped with regard to the course content”

Students also mentioned that there was a lack of opportunity to learn about LD in Sri Lanka, and that they were highly motivated to follow even a short course. Some children with LD are currently studying in their own classrooms, and they felt they can now support them to overcome their problems.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The overall perceptions of the students were very positive towards the short course on 'Teaching Children with LD'. Video programmes should be developed for use during course delivery especially for teaching strategies for different Specific Learning Disabilities as suggested by the participants. However, many participants were pre-school teachers, and therefore the course should be revised to include different strategies which can address the needs of pre school children.

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