

Knowledge of teachers and parents about Specific learning difficulties (SpLD) in Pakistan

Abstract

Introduction

Specific Learning difficulties (SpLD)

Historically learning disabilities were manifested by a discrepancy between achievements and intelligence. Often deficits occurred in particular academic areas and could not be explained by other factors. (Mellard, Deshler & Barth, 2004)

Difficulties with basic print reading and reading comprehensions are the most common problems associated with learning disabilities. (Gersten, Fuchs, Willims & Baker, 2001) due to the strong connection between spoken and written language, reading problems can often be traced to early delays in receptive and expressive language development (Catts & Kamhi, 2005). Among the students who are diagnosed with learning difficulties 80 % are diagnosed because they lag behind in their reading skills, 90 % of students with learning difficulties identify reading as their primary difficulty. But, many children who receive special education services are able to bridge the achievement gap and are able to read as their peers. (President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002).

Learning difficulties is a general term which refers to various groups of disorders which are manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning and mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction and may occur during the life time. Problems in behaviours, social perceptions and social interactions may exists with learning disabilities but do not by them constitute a learning disability. Although learning disability may occur with other problems like sensory impairment, mental retardation, social and emotional disturbance or environmental factors like cultural differences, insufficient, psychogenic factors; it is not the result of those conditions or influences. (1994, pp65-66)

Reading disabilities The abilities to read encompass two distinct abilities: identifying words or decoding and comprehending words, sentences and larger chunks of text. Many adults with learning difficulties can be considered to have a reading disability. Dyslexia is the term which is commonly used to explain specific reading disabilities (Catts and Kamhi, 1999). Dyslexia can be diagnosed by explaining an individual's phonological processing abilities, including the processing, storage, retrieval and use of phological codes in memory as well as phonological awareness and speech production. Phonological processing is based on an ability to identify,

think about and manipulate the forty four English phonemes as sounds in individual words (Torgesen & Wagner, 1998) they further say that dyslexia can present as a difficulty in learning to decode and spell printed words. This difficulty often leads to problem with reading comprehension and writing.

Pakistan

In Pakistan 19.521 million children of ages 5-9 are enrolled in 164,200 primary schools throughout the country. The student-teacher ratio is 48:1. The marginalized school age children are 34 % of the total school age population. Children with disabilities constitute a major segment of the population. The reason for such a marginalization includes from home to school, values of education perceived by the family, gender discrimination in which the son is preferred over the daughter in sending school, poverty, disabilities and lack of awareness of the parents about the disabilities and how to handle it properly. It is estimated that at least six million children have been left out from schools. (Pakistan Ministry of Finance, 2003).

Durkin (2001) conducted a survey in three developing countries i.e. Bangladesh, Jamaica and Pakistan. A two phase methodology for population bases studies of childhood disabilities was used. In phase I, a ten question screen was used to identify children with disabilities in the 2-9 age range. A comprehensive clinical assessment was then undertaken of the children identified. Based on a clinical assessment of more than 22,000 children, it was estimated that the prevalence of disability ranges from 1 % to 4.4 % for severe disabilities and up to 20 % for mild disabilities. The researchers reported that based on a sample of 6,365 children, ages 2-9 the prevalence of disability could climb up to 14.7 % in Pakistan.

A survey of the percentage of special needs children sponsored by the WHO indicated that 10 % of the population had some sort of disability such as an emotional disability, visual impairment, hearing impairment, mental retardation, physical disability, learning disability or multiple disabilities. Of these, only two % had access to institutional facilities (Shahzadi, 2000).

Of the total population with disability, 0.82 million 924.8 % are of the schooling going age (5-14 years in Pakistan). It is estimated that about 20,000 children with disability aged 5-20 (2.4%) of the total were enrolled in special schools (Bureau of Statistics, 1998).

Studies focusing on the perception of children with disabilities revealed that they like to study with other children but are unsure of their capabilities and fear the reaction of other children. Hayat (1994) found that most children who have disabilities were eager to attend ordinary schools as they found it pleasant to study and play with other children. They believed that this would improve their academic achievement and remove the stigma associated with disability. However, they feared that they might be teased or not be able to keep up with the class. Batool and Mehboob (2000) found that children with visual disability expressed similar views.

A study conducted by UNICEF focuses on policies and practices in education for children with disabilities in Pakistan. The work also documents the initiatives that are practicing inclusive education in Pakistan. Children with disabilities are often silent and invisible members of many communities. They can be at a risk of abuse, exploitation and neglect. The study concluded that the concept of inclusive education needs to be understood and conceptualized for changes to be

brought about in existing teaching methodologies to benefit all children including those with disabilities. The formulation of a national policy on inclusive education is essential to stable the system in the country. Planners need to realize that an inclusive education system benefits children from all groups in society, not just children with disabilities. Education policies addressing the needs of all marginalized groups in society are likely to be successful. Creating policies for separate categories of children is time consuming; expensive and divisive (Save the Children Pakistan, 2002)

However, concerted efforts are needed for putting policies into practice. The involvement of both groups of children and young adults in policy formulation and practice is crucial. It will be a long process to change society's mindset on education. The process that will produce a quality education system in the country needs to be planned with care. Mere formulation of policy on inclusive education is not enough to guarantee the well being and education of children with disabilities.(Miles 1983).

A recent study (Syed et al, 2007) was conducted in Pakistan to analysis teacher's pre and post knowledge and attitude regarding ADHD after a one week training programme. The aim of the study was the development and evaluation of an ADHD teacher group training programme. The programme was conducted in a 10 hour programme conducted through 5 days. The teachers were given a pre training questioner to find out the teachers knowledge regarding ADHD, the teachers were given the same questioner after the training and a follow up questioner was given after six months of the training. The result of the study showed that it is possible to provide an educational session about ADHD for teachers. The educational session was well received and was associated with an improved knowledge and awareness among primary school teachers of various sign and symptoms of ADHD which may lead to an increased rate of recognition of children with probable ADHD. This improvement in knowledge remained significant even after 6 months of workshop which is quite encouraging. Whether this knowledge results in increased referral of ADHD children to mental health professionals and better understanding and management of symptoms within the class room is yet to be seen. A larger study designed to assess the pattern of referral by the teachers for ADHD before and after an educational intervention, can guide us about real effectiveness of such a program.

A recent study (Jawaid et al, 2008) aimed to explore the abilities of general practitioners and paediatricians in Pakistan to screen for ADHD and SpLD based on their awareness regarding the risk factors and symptoms of SpLD and ADHD. The research was conducted in various hospitals and clinics throughout Karachi and the participants were given a general questioner asking them about information regarding ADHD and LD. The results showed only 13.7 % of GPs and 21.6 % of paediatricians had any knowledge sufficient to effectively screen for diagnoses and screening. Alarmingly, not a single GP or paediatrician was adequately familiar with the established risk factors and clinical symptoms of SpLD.

Methods

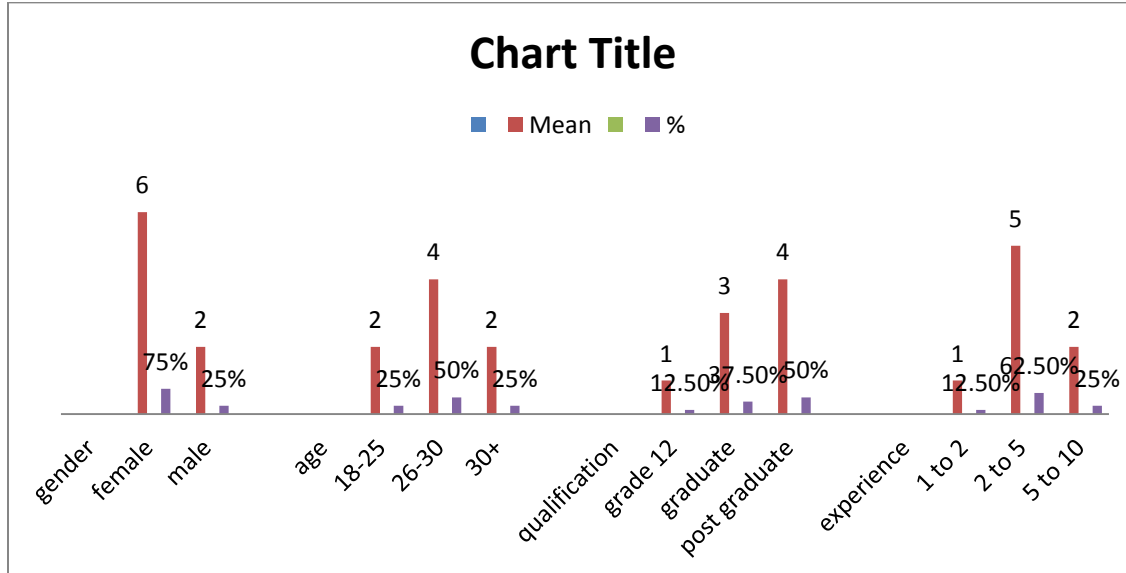
Data analysis of teacher questionnaire

The teacher questionnaire was distributed among various teachers from different schools who were teaching various classes from grade 1 to grade 5. All the teachers belonged to private schools in various districts of Karachi, Pakistan. The questionnaire was divided into five sections; they are discussed in detail below.

Results

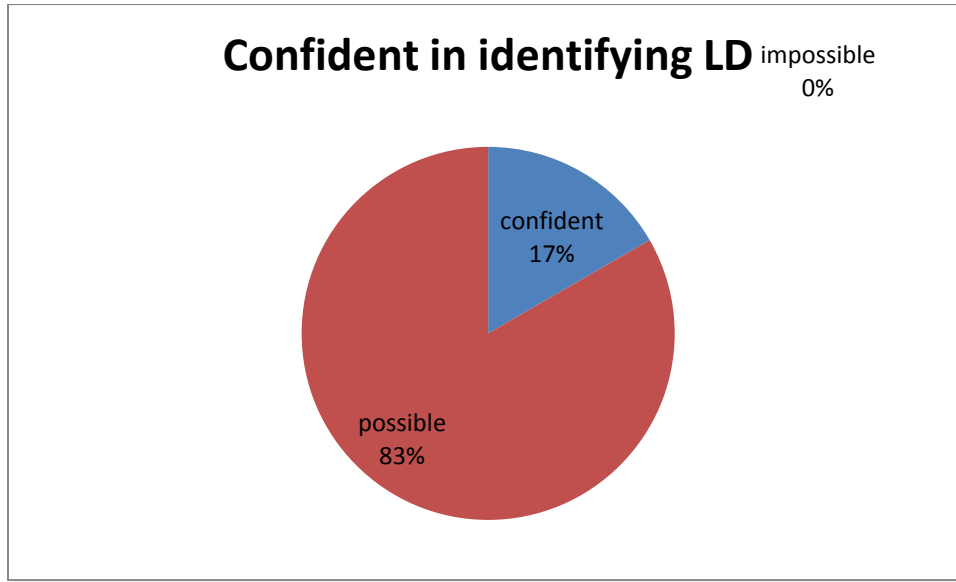
Demographic Details

Section 1 covered the basic information about the teacher, the factors were divided accordingly, and the first category was of gender i.e. male and female. The age range was divided into 4 parts, 18-25, 26-30, 31-35, above 35. The next category was about academic qualifications, the options were given of matric, intermediate, graduate, postgraduate (matric is equivalent to 12 grade according to British school system and intermediate is equivalent to O levels). Next option was about years in teaching experience the options were given of less than 1 yr, 1-2, 3-5, 5-10, above 10. Next was the teaching position the options were principal, head teacher, class teacher, teaching assistant. The next option was about the sector i.e. primary or secondary. The last information was about the commonly used source of knowledge update, the options were books, colleagues/seniors, media, seminars, and mass media, miscellaneous. The data analysis of the demographic details is shown in figure I



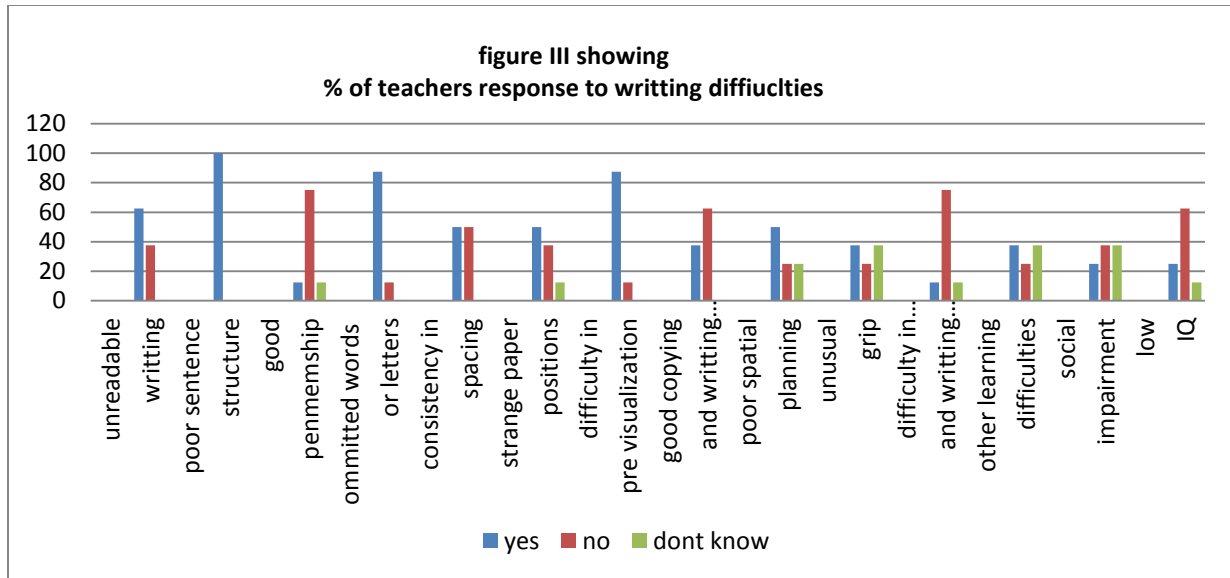
Section II Learning Disorders

The second section consists of 8 questions regarding learning difficulties. The teachers were asked to give general answers about their knowledge regard learning difficulties. The first three questions were general question about learning difficulties, question four asked if the teacher would be able to identify a student with LD, question five , six and seven asked about the what measures were taken by the school for LD. Question eight asked if the government should make a policy for LD. Data analysis is shown in figure II



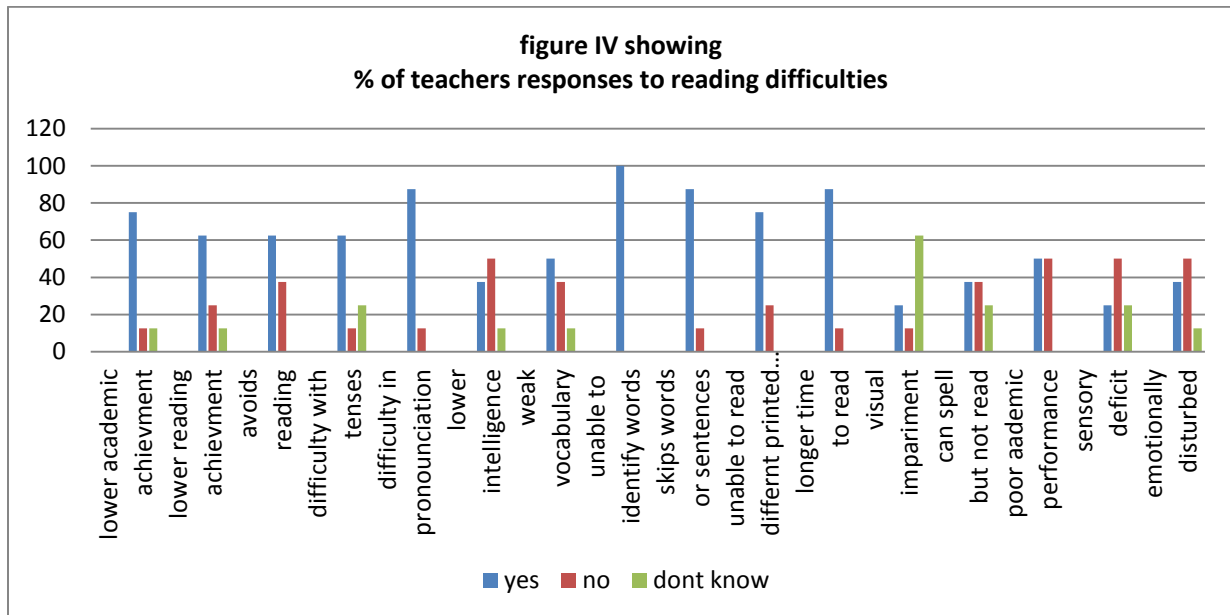
Section III LD of Written expression

The third section was regarding learning difficulties of written expression, it consists of 15 questions. Questions were based from the DSM IV on learning difficulties of written expression. The questions were based on whether a pupil can or cannot perform the stated task. The questions varied from whether a pupil has readable writing and good penmanship to students being able to have difficulty with sentence structure, spacing between words, copying skills and social impairment. The questions also asked if the pupils had weird hand and wrist positioning and weird griping styles. Data analysis is shown in figure III



Section IV Reading Disorders

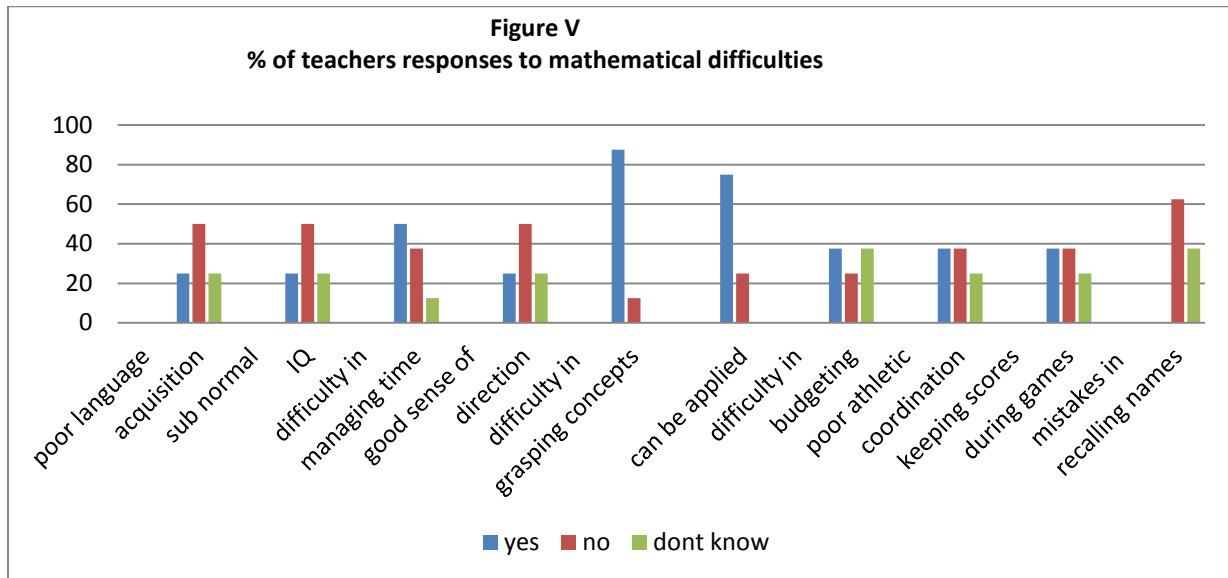
The fourth section was based on reading disorders of learning. The section had 17 questions which were based on the reading difficulties. The questions varied from pupil's achievement according to age and intelligence, pupil's difficulty with reading; differentiating between tenses, miss pronunciation, inability to identify words or phrases, skipping of sentences and paragraphs, etc. Data analysis is shown in figure IV.



Section V Mathematical learning disorder

The fifth section was regarding mathematical disorders. This section had 11 questions which were based on mathematical problems also covering problems with keeping time and calculations of money and

scores. Mathematical learning difficulties also give the person problems with recalling names and poor athletic coordination. Data analysis is shown in figure V

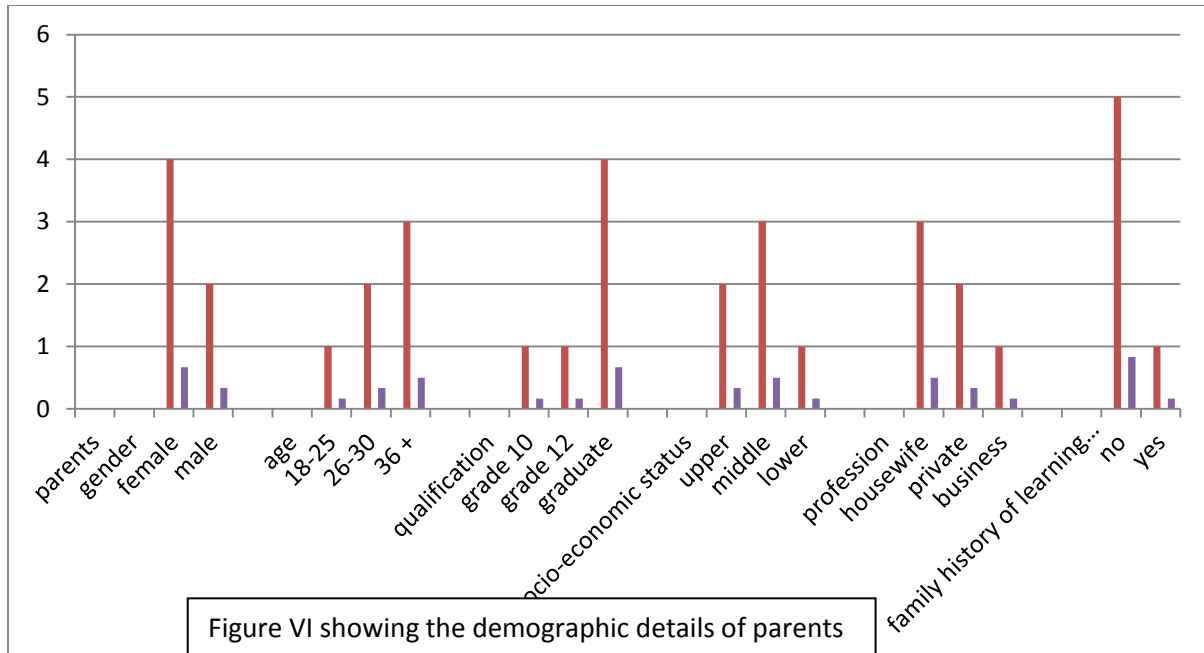


Data analysis of parent questionnaire

Parent questionnaire was sent online via emails and chat to parents whose child was in primary school i.e. grading 1 to 5. Most of the questionnaires were given to mothers as they are responsible for the teaching of the child in Pakistan. Fathers do not play a major part in the child education at home. Parents were given a brief introduction to learning difficulties. All parents were from different areas of Karachi Pakistan and from various social classes. The questionnaire was divided into five sections, which are discussed below.

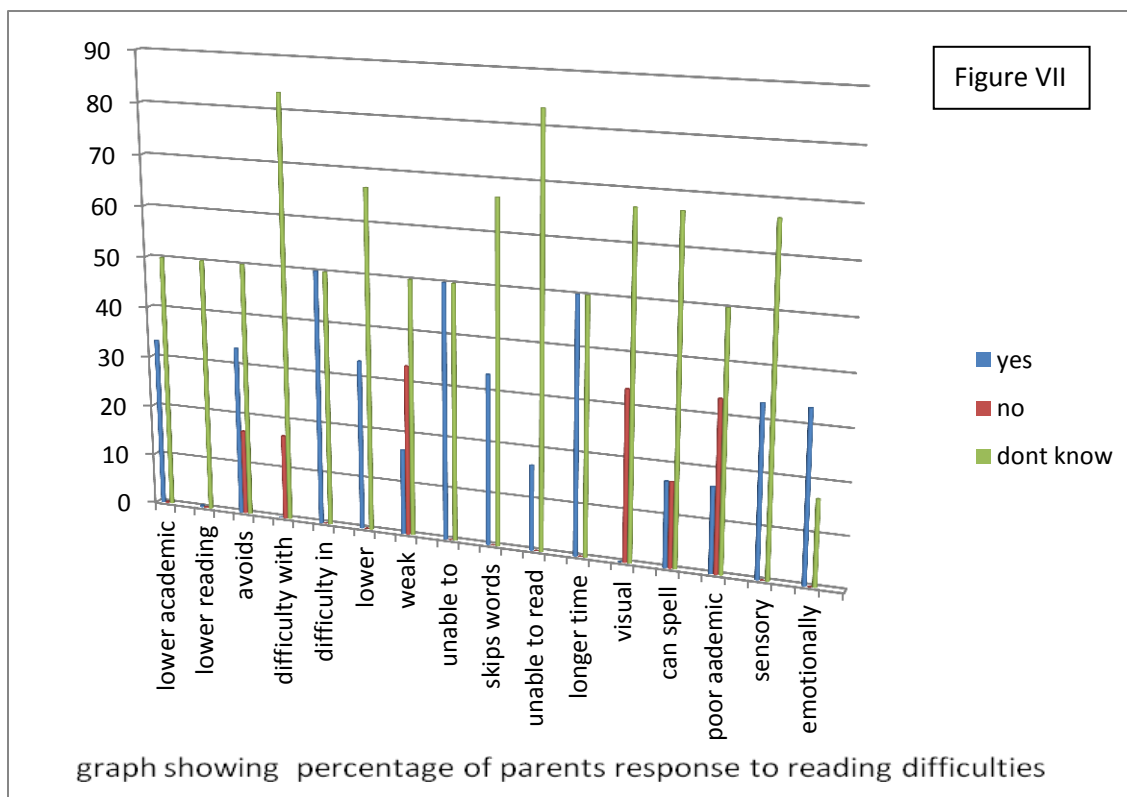
Section I demographic information

Section 1 covered the basic information about the parents, the factors were divided accordingly, and the first category was of gender i.e. male and female. The age range was divided into 4 parts, 18-25, 26-30, 31-35, above 35. The next category was about academic qualifications, the options were given of no formal education, less than 10 years, matric, intermediate, graduate, postgraduate (matric is equivalent to 12 grade according to British school system and intermediate is equivalent to O levels). Next option was about the parent's profession choices were given of housewife, government service, private service, business, high skilled professional. Next question was regarding the socio-economic status options were given of less than 13,000, 14,000-30,000 and above 30,000 PKR (Pakistani Rupees). The next question was regarding the child's physical health and if he suffered from any type of ailment which would disrupt regular schooling. The last question was regarding emotional, behavioural or learning problems found in any family member. Figure VI shows data analysis of the demographic details of parents.



Section II to V

Sections II to V were the same as the teacher’s questionnaire as they covered basic information regarding learning difficulties and the various problems in reading, writing and mathematics. Figure VII, VII, IX, show the results of parent analysis and figures X and XI show the comparison between the result of teachers and parents.



figuer VIII
graph showing percentage of parents response to mathematical difficulties

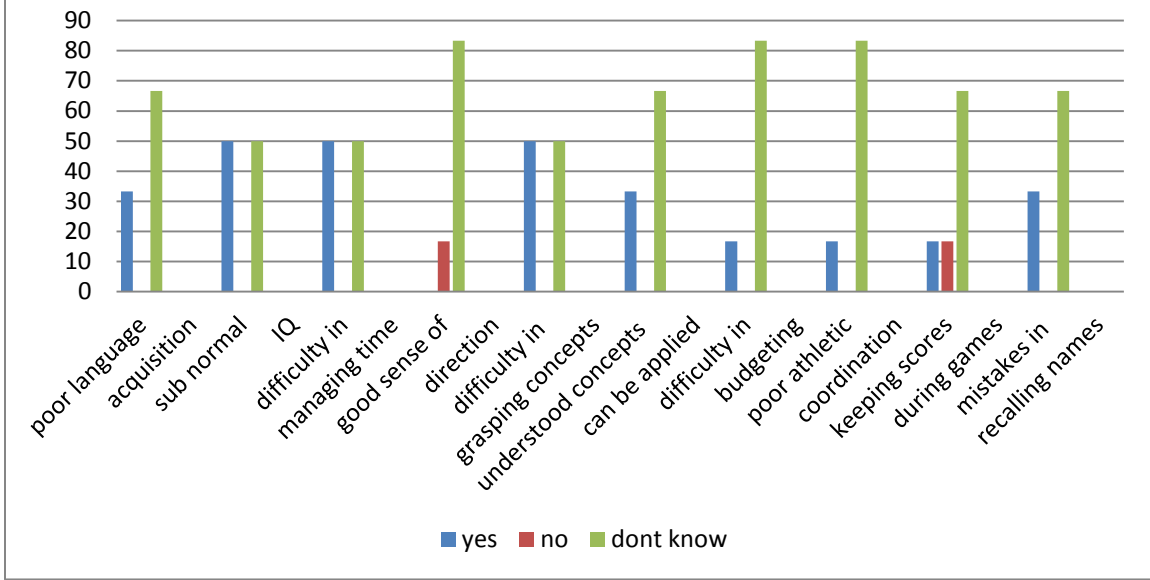
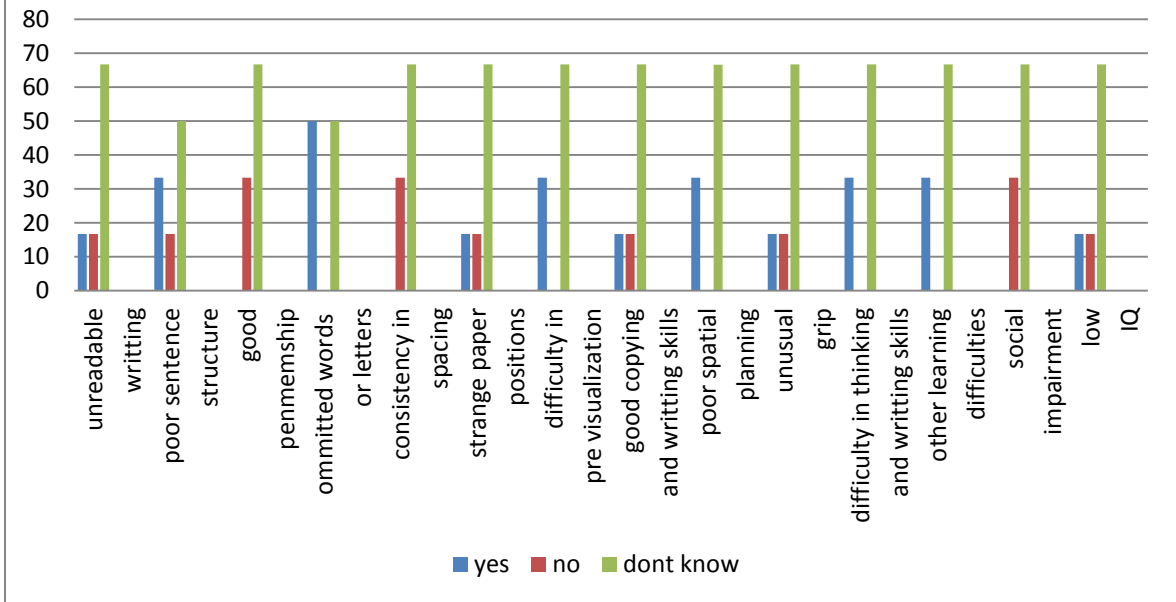
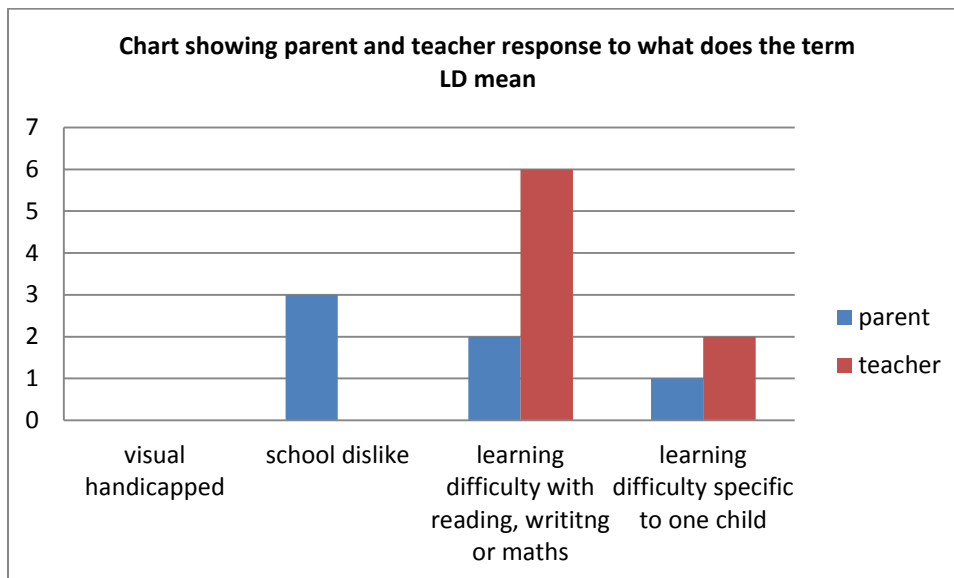
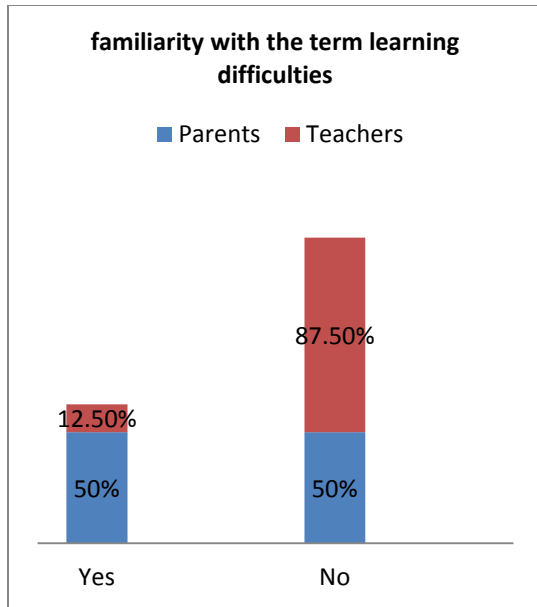


figure IX
graph showing percentage of parents response to writting difficulties





Discussion

Introduction

The research focuses on knowledge of parents and teachers about specific learning difficulties in Pakistan. SpLD is greatly neglected in Pakistan and there is a major lack of awareness among parents and teachers. The research focused on finding out the general information which parents and educational

authorities (teachers, head teachers, principals) had regarding learning difficulties and whether they would be able to identify pupils with learning difficulties. The research was conducted by contacting schools who gave permission to give the research questionnaire to the teachers. The teachers were provided with a brief guideline about learning difficulties, as most of them were unaware of the terminology, after receiving basic information most of the teachers said they did not know there was a term for such a problem and they would just label the child as being below average. The parents were also selected randomly, most of the parents were mothers and a few fathers also participated. The parents were also given a little guideline towards learning difficulties. The views and the response of the parents were very different compared to the teachers; most of the parents had never heard the term and had no idea about learning difficulties (especially dyslexia and dyscalculia).

I also conducted some interviews with a few educational authorities and psychologists. The view of the psychologists on learning difficulties was very appalling as it showed the major lack of awareness among the general population. The psychologist also discussed the reactions of parents when they are informed of their child having learning difficulties. One response which was noted amongst all the teachers, parents, educationalists and psychologists was the role of the government in not providing appropriate information and awareness regarding learning difficulties.

in Pakistan. There has hardly been any research done on this topic in the recent years, the few researches which I found were regarding special education and unfortunately learning difficulties has not been identified as a special educational need. The government's statistical analysis from the 1998 census shows the percentage of disabilities found in Pakistan, unfortunately the data has no mention of learning difficulties in it, it just covers mental, physical and visual disabilities.

Another shocking thing that I discovered about learning difficulties in Pakistan was the major lack of awareness in the general public, this even included that elite class. A recent study (Syed E U, et al, 2008) aimed to explore the abilities of general practitioners and paediatricians in Pakistan to screen for ADHD and SpLD based on their awareness regarding the risk factors and symptoms of SpLD and ADHD. The research was conducted in various hospitals and clinics throughout Karachi and the participants were given a general questionnaire asking them about information regarding ADHD and LD. The results showed only 13.7 % of GPs and 21.6 % of paediatricians had any knowledge sufficient to effectively screen for diagnoses and screening. Alarmingly, not a single GP or paediatrician was adequately familiar with the established risk factors and clinical symptoms of SpLD. Most of the hospitals in this study are considered the elite and reputed hospitals of the city and some of the most famous and experienced practitioners and paediatricians work in these hospitals. Impact of my discoveries

A research conducted on training teachers for inclusion: initiatives taken by a university department (B.Ruhsana, 2005) emphasised the challenges and opportunities for inclusive education in Pakistan, she states that the majority of school teachers in Pakistan show a willingness to include students with special needs in the classroom. They also believe that proper training and teaching resources should be provided by the government. Some teachers from private schools are not sufficiently trained to create inclusive classroom and the teaching and

learning resources required for inclusive education are not available at federal, provincial or district levels (Hammed, 2003). This has also been shown in my data analysis in which all the participants have said that the government needs to take measures to setup policies and guidelines for teachers on how to teach students with various special needs. All the teachers even agreed that proper training and resources will help them teach students with learning difficulties in a more appropriate manner. Another study showed that teachers have a positive attitude towards inclusive education and they agree that it enhances social interaction which minimises negative attitude towards students with special needs. It also shows that collaboration between the mainstream and the special education teachers is important and that there should be more guidelines on the implementation of inclusive education. (Haider SI, 2008)

As discussed previously in the last unit, the involvement of both groups of children and young adults in policy formulation and practice is crucial. It will be a long process to change society's mindset on education. The process that will produce a quality education system in the country needs to be planned with care. Mere formulation of policy on inclusive education is not enough to guarantee the well being and education of children with disabilities. (Miles 1983). As shown in our research parent's knowledge regarding Spld was very low and till there is no proper awareness the mindset of the society will take a long time to change. The parents all agreed that the government should take measures to form a policy but they even need to play a crucial role and create awareness amongst themselves. The interview with the educationalists also showed that they wanted the parents to also play a part in the role of special educational needs specially learning difficulties as it is the most neglected area of special education in Pakistan. They all agreed that the mere formulation of a policy is not enough until proper steps are not taken to create awareness and remove the negative stigma attached to students with learning difficulties.

My new insight into Spld

Over the last century special education schools have been evolving around Pakistan. Separate special schools were initially introduced to help children with special needs like visual, mental and physical disabilities. Then gradually in the last decade integrated system of education further modified special education by putting special children into the regular classroom for subjects that they could learn together and also separate classes to deal with specific disabilities. Today in Pakistan many schools are incorporating inclusive education for children with learning difficulties; some schools are incorporating all categories of special needs students so they can attend regular schools. Inclusive education is very successful when the regular schools teachers in cooperation with special teachers develop an individual education plan for students with special needs. This enables the child to work at its own pace and benefit from all the social and interactivity activities. A new insight for me regarding specific learning difficulties was the role of inclusive education in providing appropriate setting for a child with any type of disability.

New factors about Spld

Some new factors which I was introduced to in specific learning difficulties were through the DSM IV, as I prepared my questionnaire in light with the symptoms discussed in the DSM IV I found that an individual can have more than one of the learning difficulties at a time. This can be due to the co-occurrence of learning difficulties. The most common type is the reading difficulty commonly known as “*dyslexia*” this is found in more than 80 % of students. This difficulty includes difficulty with accurate or fluent word recognitions, word decoding and reading comprehension. The second disability is the writing disability it includes impairment in handwriting, spelling, organization and composition, it is commonly known as “*dysgraphia*”. The third disability which I focused on was the mathematical disability called “*dyscalculia*” which causes difficulty in learning mathematical concepts, memorization of facts, and organization of numbers and understanding problems.

Conclusion

The research concluded that the knowledge of parents and educational authorities regarding specific learning difficulties was very limited. After analyzing the data, it was concluded that the knowledge of educational authorities was higher in some areas of learning difficulties. The most neglected area in learning disorders was mathematical as most of the teachers were unaware about this disorder and had never thought about the child suffering from a learning disability. Furthermore results also showed that the number of years in experience of the teachers had a great impact of the teachers knowledge about learning difficulties, most of them had come across pupils with learning disorders and even though they did not have any proper training on how to deal with students with learning difficulties most of the teachers prepared their own coping strategies to help the pupils excel. The results for teachers who had less number of teaching experiences were vastly different as compared to the experienced teachers. The data analysis for parents survey showed that majority of the parents had no idea about learning difficulties and had never heard the term earlier. A couple of parents who knew about learning difficulties had a child or someone from the family who had been diagnosed as have learning difficulties. The data proved the major lack of awareness which is found amongst the general population. The data was mostly taken from parents who belonged to the middle socioeconomic class and were mostly from the private business or working for general services. One thing which was found similar in the results of parents and teachers survey was the need for the government to take steps to create awareness about learning difficulties.

Conclusion

Students with learning difficulties are gifted and have needs which differ from other students. Teachers and teaching authorities should take proper measures to reach to the needs of these children. Children with LD should be given an equal opportunity just like other students so that they have the full ability to explore their potentials and find their hidden talents; this can only be possible with the help of parents and teachers. The government play a very vital role in the education of student in a country and this includes students with LD. The Pakistani government should take proper steps to help students with LD as they have been deprived of their proper rights and teachers and parents are usually not aware of how to teach students with LD.

