

Review Article

Teachers empowerment: A transformative approach to mental health, learning disabilities, and inclusive education

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This comprehensive review article looks into teachers' transformative role in addressing the intersecting challenges of mental health, learning disabilities (LDs), and inclusive education. Recognizing the global prevalence and impact of these issues, the article emphasizes the crucial involvement point of the school environment. Despite teachers' potential, challenges such as a lack of knowledge and confidence in understanding and handling mental health conditions and LDs persist. The proposed solutions advocate for targeted training programs and collaboration with mental health professionals, backed up by a hybrid approach that combines in-person and online learning. The article also delves into the educational landscape, addressing issues such as learning difficulties, the prevalence of LDs, and the role of teachers as intermediaries in early identification and support. It concludes by emphasizing the importance of closing the gap between policy intent and practical implementation for every student's holistic well-being and academic success.

Keywords: Mental health literacy, Learning disabilities, Inclusive education, Primary school teachers, Empowerment

INTRODUCTION

India, a country rich in culture and history, faces many challenges in creating a welcoming and encouraging learning environment. A difficulty that requires our attention is hidden in the colorful fabric of India's cultural mosaic: the intricate system of education, especially about learning difficulties. The actual scope of learning difficulties in the nation is still unknown, despite admirable efforts and a boom in study over the previous 20 years. The ongoing effort to close this knowledge gap and promote a national understanding of learning disabilities (LDs) necessitates collective consciousness and action.^[1]

THE ROLE OF MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY (MHL) IN DEFINING MENTAL HEALTH: A HOLISTIC PERSPECTIVE

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as a condition of well-being that enables people to handle life's obstacles successfully, achieve their potential, engage in study and employment, and positively contribute to their communities. It is a foundation of relationship-building, societal advancement, and both individual and group decision-making. It is considered a fundamental

human right. In addition to diagnosable diseases and psychosocial disabilities, mental health issues can include additional mental states linked to severe distress, diminished functioning, or the possibility of self-harm.^[2,3]

Given the complexity of mental health, Australian researchers Jorm and associates presented the notion of MHL in the late 1990s. MHL refers to mental health knowledge and beliefs that aid in the detection, management, or prevention of mental illnesses. It highlights the significance of treating mental health as a crucial component of total wellness.^[4,5]

UNDERSTANDING LD

LD is a neurological condition that affects cognitive skills and can have an impact on mental health by affecting academic progress and producing emotional issues. It is marked by substantial barriers to the acquisition and use of basic skills such as speaking, listening, reading, writing, reasoning, and maths. This broad group includes specific disabilities that each provide particular challenges for individuals, including dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, dyspraxia, dysphasia/aphasia, auditory processing disorder, visual processing disorder, and non-verbal learning disorder. LDs include a complex etiology that includes genetics, prenatal and perinatal conditions, postnatal injuries, and environmental

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variables such as stress, parenting, hunger, premature birth, poor healthcare, and teaching methods.^[6]

UNDERSTANDING THE SCOPE AND IMPACT

Globally, studies consistently highlight the prevalence of mental health issues among children and adolescents. The impact on learning, development, and future well-being is significant, with estimates ranging from 10–20% in Spain to 10–14% globally.^[7] An estimated 5–15% of school children worldwide have learning issues, with reading difficulties affecting 80% of these youngsters.^[8]

In school, students with LDs frequently face rejection and become targets of bullying. Simultaneously, LDs pose a significant challenge, particularly in countries such as India, where an estimated 90 million people are affected. With approximately five students in a class identified as having LDs, the impact on mainstream education is profound. The prevalence of various types of LDs among the children population in India ranges from 3% to 10%.^[9]

LDs have consequences that go beyond the classroom and include problems with society. Due to neuropsychological differences, people with LDs may have trouble interpreting social cues, which can lead to discrimination. According to recent studies, children with LDs frequently perform worse academically, which can be partially attributed to teachers' lax expectations. The reported 15.17% prevalence of LDs in India highlights the critical need for appropriate care and education.^[10]

With the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act's 2016 revision, the field of LD received official recognition in India. This is an important first step toward recognizing and resolving LDs in the Indian context, highlighting the complexity of these conditions and the requirement for specialized support systems.^[11]

ROLE OF TEACHERS AND SCHOOLS IN IDENTIFYING LDS

While schools are an excellent setting for early detection and intervention, there is a significant gap in addressing mental health and LDs within educational systems. Despite the ease with which physical health disorders can be identified, mental health frequently takes a back seat. It becomes clear that a multi-disciplinary approach involving education, psychology, medicine, social work, public health, and community participation is required.^[7]

Teachers are crucial intermediaries between children with LDs and the interventions intended to support them, according to the National Centre for LD.^[12]

The general ignorance of primary school teachers regarding LDs frequently results in delayed or missed identification,

impeding the provision of essential care and support for impacted children. Knowledge gap highlights the need for focused programs on teacher awareness and education, which will enable teachers to identify and meet the particular needs of students with LDs.^[6,13-15] A systematic review found that teachers lacked knowledge and confidence in recognizing and managing mental disorders.^[7,16]

TEACHER EMPOWERMENT: THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF MHL

Apart from raising awareness regarding LDs, there is an increasing acknowledgment of the significance of MHL among teachers. For children experiencing mental health issues to be better identified, supported, and referred, teacher MHL must be improved. The development of teachers' MHL becomes extremely important in ensuring a positive and inclusive learning environment for all students, including those with specific LDs, as educational institutions offer the perfect setting for long-term observation and intervention. The inclusive education philosophy places a strong emphasis on the necessity of modifying teaching and learning strategies to accommodate students' varied needs and create a learning environment where everyone, regardless of ability level, can succeed together.^[17-20]

A large-scale study in Ontario, Canada, sheds light on teachers' knowledge and awareness levels in dealing with student mental health. This study advocates for tailored interventions that take into account geographical and school-level differences in mental health needs. It concludes with a call for more research and training to help teachers recognize and address student mental health issues. The findings of this study are intended to inform teacher education programs and contribute to a strategic plan that prioritizes mental health in the classroom.^[21]

IMPORTANCE OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

According to UNESCO, inclusive education is a high-quality education that recognizes and values each student's unique educational needs. The international human rights movement encourages mainstream schools to accept students with disabilities, allowing them to fully engage in society. The cognitive, social, and affective benefits of inclusive education have been the subject of numerous studies, which emphasize the beneficial effects on children with typical development as well as those who need extra support. Teachers stand out as crucial players in the effective execution of inclusive education, and their upbeat dispositions greatly aid in this change in the classroom. To implement an inclusive education system, regular schools must address the various needs of all students, encourage involvement, lessen exclusion, and remove obstacles from the learning process. It entails structural modifications to strategies, tactics, structures, and

content that demonstrate a commitment to inclusivity and a common goal of teaching all kids in the regular system.^[15]

India is dedicated to providing inclusive education for all students and is a signatory to the 2006 United Nations Convention on the RPWDs. In line with international commitments, the 2016 RPWDs Act includes provisions for inclusive education. According to their needs, students with disabilities can receive education in inclusive schools, special schools, or at home, thanks to the flexibility allowed by the National Education Policy of 2020.^[11,17]

The emphasis is on modifying educational institutions to satisfy the diverse needs that result from students' social and cultural backgrounds as well as from their unique learning motivations, skills, styles, and rhythms. The value of teachers having positive attitudes in fostering an inclusive classroom environment that benefits students' general mental health and well-being is especially important for students with specific LDs.^[15,22,23]

This challenging issue highlights how urgent it is to raise teachers' MHL, increase their knowledge of LDs, and promote inclusive teaching methods. To guarantee that every child in India receives the support and education they are entitled to, it is critical to close the gap between policy intent and practical implementation.

CONCLUSION

The transformative potential of empowering teachers in addressing mental health issues, and LDs, and fostering inclusive education is highlighted in this article. Collaboration across sectors is essential, from targeted training programs to collaborative efforts with mental health professionals. As teachers are at the forefront of creating a brighter, more inclusive future, closing the gap between policy intent and practical implementation becomes critical for every student's holistic well-being and academic success.

Ethical approval

Institutional Review Board approval is not required.

Declaration of patient consent

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Use of artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted technology for manuscript preparation

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