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## **PEER EDUCATION: INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES**

Anandini Khanna

Vasant Valley School, New Delhi

### **ABSTRACT**

Teaching students with learning disabilities is particularly crucial in the path to accommodate differences, minority populations, and marginalized individuals for whom the environment in most educational institutions is least suited for. There are both generalized pedagogical changes that can be incorporated to be better inclusive to different learning disabilities, as well as disability-specific modifications to teaching and learning strategies that could ease the burden of such students. Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS) has shown great promise in this regard. This paper analyzes and reviews inclusive pedagogical approaches for students with learning disabilities, specifically considering key impediments to educational support for students with learning disabilities, particularly those from low income families, and ultimately provides sector-specific peer-mentoring policy recommendations.

**Keywords:** Peer Education, Learning disabilities, Education, Teaching, Students

### **INTRODUCTION**

In most educational institutes around the world, for both secondary and tertiary education, there is a unidirectional and centralized “stand-and-deliver” approach where a lecture is delivered and all students must keep up to the same pace and type of course load, the same textbooks, and the same assignments regardless of their abilities, disabilities, or skill-levels. Now, with the advancement of pluralistic pedagogies and innovative teaching methods, there is a large corpus of research that has pointed out the issues with such teaching and learning styles. While considering learning disabilities, which affect the analytical, speaking, writing, reading, and mathematical skills of most individuals (without affecting the motor abilities, senses, or emotional ability), there is a need to specifically tailor-make courses, teaching styles and learning methods to suit those with different disabilities.

Teaching students with learning disabilities is particularly crucial in the path to accommodate differences, minority populations, and marginalized individuals for whom the environment in most educational institutions is least suited for. There are both generalized pedagogical changes that can be incorporated to be better inclusive to different learning disabilities, as well as disability-specific modifications to teaching and learning strategies that could ease the burden of such students. PALS has shown great promise in this regard (Fuchs, 1996). This paper analyzes and reviews inclusive pedagogical approaches for students with learning disabilities, specifically considering key impediments to educational support for students with learning disabilities, particularly those from low income families, and ultimately provides sector-specific peer-mentoring policy recommendations.

## **BACKGROUND**

A 2018 study reported that 19 percent of school-going children in India suffer from learning disabilities (Kuriyan & Justine, 2018). This is large magnitude of students who are not receiving adequate disability support or care across various parts of India. Particularly with respect to learning disabilities, there is a variation in methods that are required both for diagnosis and learning across languages (Kuriyan & Justine, 2018).

Further, research has shown that "classroom teachers orient, both in terms of effort and positive affect, towards students whom they consider 'teachable' and away from students [who] are...difficult to teach" (Gerber & Semmel, 1984, p. 141). Further, common knowledge that teachers wait for less time when asking questions to students who are in the lower bracket of academic achievement (Allington, 1980), and that they are quick to provide them correct responses as opposed to helping them change their incorrect responses by means of understanding their mistakes (Brophy & Good, 1974). It is also seen that lower achieving students are criticized more, less interacted with, that teachers are less cordial with them, provide them less feedback, and that they receive "less instruction and practice than their more accomplished classmates (Brophy & Good, 1974; Babad, Inbar, & Rosenthal, 1982; Adams & Cohen, 1974; Durkin, 1990; L.S.Fuchs, Fuchs, & Bishop, 1992; McIntosh, Vaughn, Schumm, Haager, & Lee, 1993; Peterson & Clark, 1978; McLaughlin, 1995).

Students with learning disabilities, particularly undiagnosed ones, are most likely to be seen as underachieving students or "slow-learners". The etymology and usage of the "slow" and "fast" dichotomy is itself symptomatic of a culture that consists differences in learning, comprehension, and assimilation styles as a matter of magnitude and degree, as opposed to being a matter of diversity and difference. An inclusive and pluralistic education style is required, and with India's existing resources, shortages in teaching staff across levels, and various other structural and

systemic challenges that exist, the primary solution that can alleviate the harm caused to many students with learning disabilities is the usage of Peer Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS) (Fuchs, 1996).

## **DISCUSSION**

Paulo Freire in his 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' puts forth the need to move away from a banking concept of teaching, where knowledge arrives from a source (the teacher) on a pedestal and is deposited in students as one would do in a bank (Freire, Ramos & Macedo, 1993). As opposed to this, there is a need to invoke a more pluralistic and inclusive dialecticism that invokes an equality of student and teacher -- the teacher himself is a student who arrives at the point, through a process of argumentation, where thesis meets antithesis to create a synthesis of thought (Engels, 1976). This is not only an exercise in argumentation and logic, but a pedagogy that attempts to free the "oppressed", giving them the ability to question the teacher-figure and in essence question authority (Freire, Ramos & Macedo, 1993).

This is crucial for students with learning disabilities, as the processes of conversational and argumentational learning allows for a health discourse and space for disagreement. It also allows the teacher to gauge the levels of understanding of each student, since each of them will argue at different paces, and arrive at the end synthesis in different durations of time. Hence, this moves away from a universalized lecture-delivery model, to one that engages the intellect of each student and encourages them to compensate for their specific learning disability and catch up with the class at an average speed of learning and comprehension.

Peer-assisted learning assists with the dialectical discussion-based model of equal participatory learning, by reversing the removing the role of an authoritative figure entirely. The student turns teacher, and is tasked with specific roles including helping their peers, correcting their errors, evaluating their progress, and teaching them through the same model. The peer-tutor has a greater understanding of the difficulties faced by those with sensory disabilities than a teacher who has never experienced it, and also as a student in general, understands struggles of learning that a teacher is many times unaware of. Hence, the peer-tutor must also reinforce their own conceptual understanding of subjects before they are able to confidently tutor another student. This adds as an added incentive and drive to push oneself to learn concepts using learning methods best suited for them.

With respect to learning disabilities, there is a requirement in particular to decenter the teaching from a single individual and add cooperative learning methods into the classroom space. This allows an accommodation of differences alongside community-building, where each one is allowed specific instruction based on their personal learning struggles and disabilities and have

time to adjust themselves to fit into such community learning situations. This highlights the need to attend to individual student differences while “planning and implementing changes in instruction” (Mulryan, 1995, p. 298).

There are a variety of other methods of assisting those with learning disabilities under the “special education” umbrella including longer class timings, technology assisted learning (of various kinds), simplified curriculums, and reduced class sizes. However, studies have shown that peer-assisted learning strategies have been most effective compared to the others (Levin & Meister, 1986).

Of the different types of PALS, a few elements are common. Firstly, students are paired and partnered based on learning disabilities that can best complement another and aren't too similar. In this manner, partners are aware of each others' difficulties and issues and are able to cater to helping them as opposed to a centralized teacher who cannot uniformly and easily cater to the various learning differences of students. Further, there is verbal reading of topics and paragraphs out loud, stimulating auditory factors which assist those with reading disabilities and also help with memory retention and cognition through the repeating reading out loud of particular paragraphs. This is coupled with making either written or verbal summaries of each paragraph, which allows for further comprehension capacity building.

In PALS applied environments, there is further an aspect of teamwork that provides both incentive and drive for students to work alongside other individuals with their own disabilities (or not) and assist each other in the learning of concepts. This, in many ways, fills up the roles that other technological or classroom accommodations make for “special” education. Repetition and reading out loud plays the role of auditory stimulation which for a majority of learning disabilities including dyslexia helps substitute the difficulty of reading with audio information transmission that reduces their cognitive load and increases their cognitive gain, which technological or audio-visual aids usually fulfil. Aside from this, other computer-assisted technologies and the role they play in simplifying class content is played by summaries and peer interaction and discussion, which results in an average comprehension that is both individually suited and universally valid. Further, the role played by smaller class sizes and longer classroom timings is fulfilled by partnering individuals and splitting them into smaller groups with peer tutors, and giving them longer time to learn their portion of classwork.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

The notion of inclusion is in most cases theoretical and policy-wise well considered in India, yet insufficiently implemented at the State and District levels due to a primary lack of coordination between the Central and State governments. Language-specific learning disability resources are

not made available amply and disability support in private and public schools both are of limited capacity. Further, children with LD are discriminated from children without, and doctors including paediatrician Samir Dalwai have stated that these children particularly have a high likelihood of dropout prior to their 9th grade middle-school education. This is particularly due to existing schemes and directives which mandate that all children must be promoted till the 8th grade, from the National Council of Education Research and Training (NCERT). After 8th grade, students with LDs usually drop out due to poor performance or asked to leave the school (Times of India, 2019). Thus, a primary policy change could be the introduction of mandatory screening camps at all schools at the conclusion of grade 8 in India to test for learning disabilities, including indicators developed in various languages including Hindi, Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu, and Bengali.

Further, the integration of Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies as a part of the CBSE and State Board curriculums would assist students both diagnosed and undiagnosed with learning disabilities, allowing them to progress as their scale and reach higher grades and also allow for the quick identification of such learning disabilities at younger ages, after which management strategies can be worked out. There is also a need for greater schemes for access to mental health and disability-support for individuals and students from low-income backgrounds for whom access to such services may be out of reach. This will universalize the access to an education and must be treated as a part of the education-for-all mandate. The incorporation and highlighting of minority concerns alongside the majority are crucial for an inclusive environment, and from an objective economic perspective, not doing so causes the country to lose key skilled workforce and individuals who could contribute to the economy in various way in the future. Besides this, there is a need to stress upon appropriate resources, funding and manpower being dedicated to the implementation of existing support systems and schemes through the Ministry for Health and Family Welfare and the Ministry for Social Justice and Empowerment.

## **CONCLUSION**

A study in 2013 by the University of Melbourne revealed that every classroom is likely to have about 3 students with learning disabilities (Times of India, 2019). This, in itself, is a large number of people. In the world's largest democracy, efforts need to be sufficiently taken to empower individuals with learning disabilities to function sufficiently, gain access to education, employment and a livelihood. For this, support services and systems are essential -- systems that are not properly in place in India. Peer Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS) is an effective methodology that if applied in a mandatory fashion to schools across the country can help perform the role that more expensive and difficult to implement strategies such as computer-assisted learning and disability tailored curriculums sought to play. Through a simple and age-

old methodology of community-building within the classroom, we see effective methods of improvement in young children with learning disabilities. Thus, this paper through the review of PALS strategies and policy recommendations for the improvement of education quality for those with learning disabilities in India looks to inform future academics, teachers, schools and policymakers into employing both PALS as well as screening tests prior to grade 9, to have early diagnoses and early treatment, as well as accessible forms of treatment and support systems for the same.

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