

Teachers' perspectives on learning difficulties

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Adapted from the paper 'Teachers' beliefs and expectations concerning students with learning difficulties' in the Australian Journal of Remedial Education, 27, 2: 19-21 (1995).

Introduction

According to Jordan et al. (1993) teachers' traditional beliefs regarding students with learning difficulties and disabilities tend to attribute the cause of the problem to factors within the learner (for example, low ability, poor motivation, dyslexia, perceptual difficulties) or in the learner's background (for example, lack of parental support, stress in the home, poverty). This perspective gives rise to the well known 'deficit model' – a model with a very long history in the literature of both education and sociology. The major problem with the deficit model is that it causes some teachers to accept too readily that students with learning problems are 'beyond fixing' (Bartolome, 1994).

A more current perspective on the cause of learning difficulty considers the problem to be due not so much to innate factors within the learner but rather to an extremely inefficient approach to learning exhibited by some students. Many students with learning difficulties are observed to lack appropriate strategies for use when approaching learning tasks such as writing a story, solving a mathematics problem, or spelling an unfamiliar word. They tend to employ a hit-or-miss approach that results in high failure rates and undermines their confidence and motivation.

Support for this perspective has come from the fairly promising results of intervention procedures used in recent years with learning disabled students. This form of intervention includes such ingredients as direct instruction in metacognition, explicit training in task-approach strategies and the teaching of self-instruction and self-monitoring techniques. Using these approaches, it has been found that students with learning difficulties can be helped to achieve at a higher than expected level, with concomitant increases in confidence and self-esteem (Chan, 1991; Deshler 2005; Lerner and Kline, 2006).

Other possible causes of learning difficulty that have been recognised recently include the use of inappropriate teaching methods or the selection of unsuitable curriculum content (Ellis, 2005; Westwood, 2006). It is now believed that some students experience problems in learning due to a lack of direct and explicit teaching of essential knowledge and skills. Not all students can cope with teaching methods that require them to learn independently without teacher direction. Some students also seem to encounter difficulties because the content of the curriculum does not match their existing cognitive level, is not real to them, or is not relevant for their current needs and interests.

Given the positive outcomes from many recent intervention programs, together with a changing perspective on the causes of learning difficulty, it is pertinent to ask if teachers' beliefs have shifted away from the deficit model. Do they now subscribe to the more optimistic belief that students can be helped to become more successful by 'teaching them how to learn' and by attending to matters of instruction and curriculum content?

The following study explored teachers' current beliefs concerning possible causes of learning difficulty in their classrooms. In particular, an answer was sought to the question, 'Do teachers still tend to blame the child when learning problems arise?'

METHOD

Participants

The subjects in this study comprised 311 teachers working in government, independent or catholic schools in South Australia. The total sample contained 104 junior-primary teachers, 118 primary teachers and 89 secondary school teachers.

Procedure

Information was collected from teachers attending various in-service staff development and training seminars and summer schools on the topic of students with learning difficulties. Prior to the commencement of each seminar or course the teachers were asked to write down a list of all the factors which they believed caused students to have difficulties in learning. Later their responses were analysed and classified into categories reflecting the major domains of influence both within and outside the student.

RESULTS

Table 1 indicates the way in which the teachers perceived the possible causes of learning difficulty in their students. It is clear that teachers still attribute most learning problems to factors within the student, with 62 percent of the teachers' total responses falling in this category.

Table 1. Teachers' beliefs concerning the causes of students' learning problems

Factors within the student 62%	Factors within family background or culture 14%	Influences within the peer group 3%
The school curriculum 8%	The teaching approach 2%	The student-teacher relationship 4%
Factors with the school or classroom environment 6%	Other factors 1%	

Note: Figures refer to the percentage of total responses obtained from the 311 teachers

When asked 'What factors do you think cause certain students in your classes to have learning problems?' the teachers very frequently identified factors as students' limited intellectual ability, poor concentration span, deficient memory processes, restricted vocabulary and poor language skills, reading difficulties, sensory impairments, lack of interest, poor motivation, negative attitude, bad behaviour, laziness, hyperactivity, learned helplessness.

Another 14 percent of the responses could be classified as 'within the family background or culture' and included factors such as non-English speaking background, recent arrival in Australia, low educational standard in parents, no books in the home, single parent family, stress in the home, lack of parental support, poor home management, poor behaviour control at home, poor nutrition, lack of sleep.

Only 10 percent of the responses made by the teachers reflected any awareness that curriculum content (8 percent) and teaching methods (2 percent) may cause some students to

have learning problems, with a further 6 percent of comments identifying classroom environment factors such as overcrowding, large classes, noise, seating arrangements, and lack of resources.

The 3 percent of 'peer group' factors identified by teachers tended to cover such influences as peer-group pressure not to conform, the desire to gain status in the peer group by defiant and naughty behaviour, reluctance to ask for or respond to help during class time.

The quality of the relationship between teacher and student was mentioned in 4 percent of the responses. Issues emerged such as the student not liking the teacher, an unwillingness to ask for help when confused, a reluctance to accept help from the teacher, and the failure of some teachers to recognise and take into account the personal, social and emotional undercurrents in the lives of some students.

Discussion

Obviously the deficit model is still alive and well, as reflected in the perceptions of the South Australian teachers in this study. In cases of learning difficulty, teachers are still tending to over estimate greatly the contribution of factors within the learner, and they are under estimating the powerful influences of factors within their teaching methods and within the school curriculum.

The belief that most learning problems can be blamed on the students militates strongly against students' best interests ('blame the victim'). If teachers believe that innate characteristics of learners, together with outside influences from the home and culture, cause problems in learning there will be a general reluctance to review teaching methods or to revise curriculum content. More than twenty-five years ago Fields (1980, p.17) remarked: "It is difficult to see any improvement in the prognosis for low performers when so little importance is attached to the variables over which teachers have most control (i.e. how they teach)".

It is essential that teachers be helped to understand that many very important attributes and aptitudes of students can be modified by skilled teaching, and that students can be helped to become more successful in their approach to learning. Rather than seeking to explain learning difficulties by reference to innate and unalterable features of the learner, or negative influences in the learner's background, teachers should be encouraged to focus attention much more on appropriate teaching methods, curriculum content and the classroom environment since these variables are more easily modified and improved. All teachers should heed Ginsburg's (1989, p.237) advice that:

"The most effective strategy for dealing with learning problems is to improve the quality of instruction".

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