

## EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES, OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

**Abdulfettah Muzemil**

Lecturer, Department of Special Needs and Inclusive Education, Jimma University,  
ETHIOPIA.

abdu1222@yahoo.com,

### ABSTRACT

*This study was conducted to describe and analyze the educational practices, opportunities and challenges of the children with LD in particular mainstream school. Descriptive case study design was employed to achieve the objective of the study. The data have been collected through interview from two school principals, six teachers, and four parents of children with LD in Kember Shomo primary school, Southern Ethiopia. And, the collected data was qualitatively analyzed. The result of the study indicates that, with the available human and material resources Kember Shomo Primary School provides educational services regardless of the back ground of children. In addition, the finding of the study shows that to their knowledge teachers use various teaching strategies to equally benefit children with SEN, specifically with LD. Besides, the result of the study also investigated various school, teachers, and family related challenges and barriers in the education of students with LD.*

**Keywords:** Learning Disabilities, Mainstream School, Persons with Disabilities, Special Educational Needs.

### INTRODUCTION

After the enactment of 'Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975)' a number of dramatic changes have been seen in the course of education of Persons with Disabilities (PWD) in public schools. It contributed highly to the improvement and involvement of PWD in education and training. The main provision of the Public Law included the mandate for: (a) All children; regardless of the nature and severity of their disabilities (b) Each child with disabilities to have an Individualized Education Program based on his/her social needs and (c) All children with disabilities to be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (Ysseldyke, J. E., Algozzine, B., & Thurlow, M. L. 2000).

As a result of the policy of inclusive education, more children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are being educated in mainstream schools with their peers. The Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act provides for the education of all children, including those with SEN (Carey, 2005, p. 153). The EPSEN Act 2004 "imposes very specific obligations on principals and teachers in the area of special needs" (Meaney et al. 2005, p. 216). The school principal has the overall responsibility for providing for children with SEN and ensuring that their needs are met (Griffin and Shevlin, 2011, p. 61). Questions arise as to how the intake of children with SEN is being managed in primary schools and whether the participation of these children in primary schools has resulted in satisfactory outcomes. Many mainstream teachers lack experience in teaching children with SEN (Griffin and Shevlin, 2011, p. 61).

All children, including children with SEN have the right to education which is based on their specific needs. The aims of education for PWSNs should be the same as apply to all children. Thus, education should be about supporting children to develop in all aspects of

their lives spiritual, moral, cognitive, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, social and physical. In addition, it should also about enabling all children, in line with their abilities, to live full and independent lives so that they can contribute to their communities, cooperate with other people and continue to learn throughout their lives. Hence, this could happen through appropriate and need based education. Therefore, beside the curriculum and school environment the role of teachers would be much and more. Some researchers have said that students with LD should be called curriculum disabled because they have found that poor quality curriculum and instruction can be such an important cause of LD (Elliott & Garnett, 1994; cited in Westwood, 1997, p.9).

Children with LD constitute one of the most numerous groups of children with SEN. These are students who do not necessarily have any disability but, for some reason, have difficulty with learning. And usually, these students have difficulty in only some areas of their learning, such as literacy, mathematics, and receptive language (understanding instructions or directions, following stories, and so on). Put simply, students with LD are students who are experiencing significant difficulties with at least one area of their learning at school.

LD represent a heterogeneous set of neurobiological disorders that include difficulties in several academic and social domains. It has been recognized as a category of disability under federal law since 1975. Consequently, the current legal definition of LD is written into the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA); however, other organizations have also proposed their own definitions of LD that differ substantially, and exactly how to define LD has been and continues to be a controversial area. This is in part due to the highly heterogeneous nature of the students who are defined as LD. Specific Learning Disability- (A) In General- The term 'specific learning disability' means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations.

(B) Disorders Included- Such term includes such conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia.

(C) Disorders Not Included- Such term does not include a learning problem that is primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of intellectual disability, of emotional disturbances, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. (IDEA, 2007)

Part 'C' of the definition is its most important part ; LD cannot be attributed for a learning problem primarily the result is visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, is intellectual disability, is emotional disturbances, or is environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. Thus, the concept of LD focuses on the notion of a discrepancy between a child's academic achievement and his or her apparent capacity to learn.

The prevalence of learning disability has increased dramatically in the recent years. The "real" prevalence of LD is subject to much dispute because of the lack of an agreed-upon definition of LD with objective identification criteria. According to the National Institutes of Health learning disabilities affect one in seven people. On the other hand, approximately 20% of 15-year-olds, many of whom have general LD and specific LD, failed to reach Step 2 in various fields of literacy that would enable their learning achievement (Srebotnik, 2013). 2.5 million Public school students or about 5% of all students in public schools were identified as having learning disabilities in 2009 and were eligible to receive educational assistance under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Children with specific LD are a very diverse group. Due to various reasons, they experience severe difficulties in reading, writing, spelling and arithmetic. Besides, they also have

difficulties in communication, coordination, social skills, attention, memory and thinking. Currently the mainstream education has been facilitated children's inclusion, participation and achievement of all children, including children with specific LD. The traditional education practice had been concerns of curriculum and instructional barriers for teaching people with SEN in mainstream classes. Barriers such as lack of well trained teachers and lack of instruction supportive materials could significantly influence the efficiency of the educational process provided for children with specific LD.

Education of people with SEN is addressed in several significant international declarations, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), the World Declaration for Education for All (UN, 1990), the UNESCO Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (1994), the Dakar Framework for Action (2000) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2008). Despite the international declarations on the rights of children with SEN, and efforts to find an international consensus on the educational practices agreed by all the countries who signed these conventions, data regarding the education of people with SEN are still being collected according to national practices.

Ethiopia has a long history on the education of PWD. In the early society, mosques and churches had played great role in the education of PWD. People with disabilities had been taught BIBLE AND KORAN in church and mosque schools respectively. With the introduction of Christianity to Ethiopia, therefore, church education took the role of cultivating children of nobility and with visual, physical and those who are gifted and talented. In this regard, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church had played a matchless position in enlightening government and church leaders of that time (Fikru, 2013).

In Ethiopia, the modern type of special education program was started in the first quarter of the twentieth century. This is when the first school for blind was opened at the town of Dembidolo in 1925. After this different foreign missionaries established schools for people with different types of disabilities. United Presbyterian Mission of North America, The Swedish Lutheran Mission and the Seven Day Adventist Mission were among the major organizations which introduced other learning alternative for PWD; and participated on training teachers and translators who had different disabilities particularly the blind. The history of Braille in Ethiopia therefore, is as old as the coming of Presbyterian missionaries of North America to Ethiopia (Bairu, 1967). It was the first to open a modern school for the blind in western part of the country, in 1925 (Teshome, 2006; Bairu, 1967).

The 1994 education and training policy of Ethiopia is the first in history to mention about the education of PWD. Article 2.2.3 of the policy stated the necessity of special units and class for students with special needs. However, most practices has been focused on visible types of disabilities such as visual impairment, physical impairment, hearing impairment, intellectual disability. On the other hand, people with non-visible types of disabilities namely with learning disabilities seem among the one who has not been got enough focus in mainstream classes. Thus, the clear implication of the inclusive education movement is that mainstream schools seek to restructure so as to provide for an increasing diversity of educational needs and eliminate the problem of students who fail to fulfill their learning potential (Avramidis *et al.*, 2000). However, despite the widespread advocacy of inclusion in educational discourse and policy guidance, the question of how children's divergent needs are best met within educational systems still remains a highly debatable and controversial issue (Dyson & Gallannaugh, 2007; Florian, 2005).

Students with SEN, specifically with LD have been challenged to benefit themselves from mainstream schools as a result of different factors such as education professionals' poor knowledge about the nature of LD, a lack of teamwork in schools, and a lack of partnership

between teachers, parents and children. To bring effective changes in the education of students with LD innovative works should be integrated in the curriculum and in the education as well as teachers' school practice. Though, it would positively affect the education and inclusion of children with LD in mainstream classes. Effective teachers make sure that they find out students who are having difficulties and they try to respond to their needs as early as possible. Effective teachers do all they can to stop small problems becoming very big problems that are much harder to address. The longer the time that students experience difficulties at school, the greater the effort that is required to eliminate or reduce the problem. Children with LD when early identified and got effective instruction and suitable assistance, most of them can adjust and be successful in the mainstream classes like their age and class mates.

Children with SEN that teachers are most likely to come across in their classes are students with LD. At the same time, it remains one of the least understood and most debated disabling conditions that affect children's learning. This is why the researcher interested to analyse particular school's practices such as opportunities for teaching and factors influencing teaching of children with LD. The research focused mainly on the analysis of teaching-learning practice, school-parent relation, and barriers and opportunities for the education of children with SPLD in the mainstream class.

### **PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES**

The purposes of this study was to describe and analyze the educational practices, opportunities and challenges of the children with LD in mainstream school setting. Its objectives were to:

1. To investigate the conduciveness of the school to educate children with LD.
2. To identify the existed resources and the types of academic and social support provision for children with LD.
3. To find out the barriers to teach children with LD.
4. To suggest some relevant recommendations based on the findings in order to improve the educational practices of children with LD in mainstream classes.

### **METHODS AND PROCEDURES**

A descriptive case study was designed to effectively examine particular schools educational practices for children with LD. In addition, qualitative research design was employed to examine the educational practices, opportunities and challenges of the children with LD in mainstream school setting. The data have been collected from two school principals (director and vice director), six teachers, and four parents of children with LD in Kember Shomo primary school.

Geographically, the area of the study located to southern part of Ethiopia. Kember Shomo primary school was among the data sources when the researcher used to collect data for masters of degree thesis. It is a mainstream school with a total number of 339 students, 22 mainstream teachers, and two principals. It educate students from grade one to eight. Being familiar with the study site and population facilitated the process of data collection in terms of time and cost.

Data was collected through document analysis and interviews. A comprehensive review of relevant literature relating to the education of children with LD in mainstream schools was carried out, and semi-structured interview was conducted by the researcher with two principals, six teachers, and four parents.

Semi-structured interview was used to gather necessary data and information that helped to achieve the objectives of the study. It was reviewed and improved by experts. The interview was prepared in English language then translated to participants' mother tongue by appropriate language experts. The interview questions were piloted before actual use. Here vague items, unclear idea or ambiguous items were corrected based on the feedback. Moreover, the experts reviewed and evaluated the questions' validity for measuring the variables that seems appropriate for the study. Qualitative means of data analysis was employed. Specifically, thematic analysis used to report the results.

## **RESULTS**

The researcher conducted eight interviews throughout the course of data collection from Kember Shemo Primary School. There were three groups of people interviewed – the two principals, six teachers and four parents of children with LD. The interview questions were about the educational practices, opportunities and challenges of the children with LD. Questions of common interest were put to all three groups together and other questions were put to groups in which the issue concerned.

### **Category One: Concerning Kember Shemo Primary School Being Participatory and Welcoming**

Under the category concerning being participatory and welcoming: the extent of parents participation, being welcoming and conducive for educating children with LD at Kember Shemo Primary School were addressed.

The comments in this category were coded into three sub-themes: parent participation, and the school being welcoming, and favorable to educate children with SEN, specifically those with learning disabilities. All of the three groups of people were interviewed. The teachers' comments in this sub-theme included the following: "staff members are glad and happy in doing with children with LD", and "there is close relation and interaction among principals, teachers and parents," "the friendly approach of the teachers with students could helped students to enjoy the school environment." In addition, the principals also shared and supported the teachers' comments; by saying "the school door is open for everyone to attend and follow education on their own way." The vice director of the school also added that; "the school has been teaching children with other types of disabilities as well, e.g. there are students with physical disabilities."

Also under this sub-theme, the comments of interviewed parents is somewhat similar to that of the teachers and principals. All parents suggested as they have close relation and contact with the school principals and teachers. One parent suggested on the schools practice and relation with parents; "always the school principals and almost all teachers are ready and happy to communicate about my child's education." Two of the parents point out that how teacher continuously communicate them on the role they have to play in their children education. Generally, all parents suggested on, how there is welcoming learning environment is for their children, and good communication between the principals, teachers and parents in the school. In general, the given comments seemed to suggest that the participants of study believed that the school is welcoming, and favorable condition to educate children with SEN, specifically those with learning disabilities. As well as they believed that there is a close relation among school personals and parents.

### **Category Two: Teachers Role**

The strategies teachers have been using to minimize the effects of LD and improve academic achievement of children with LD, and the role of teachers' in the education of children with

LD were discussed under this category. Responses in this category were organized under three sub-themes: Teaching Methods, Instructional Aid Materials and the Nature of Student-Teacher Relationship.

Under the sub-theme, Teaching Methods, teachers responded on the way they try to address for specific needs of children with LD through instructional modifications. Teachers responded that they use different teaching methods which could benefit children with LD. Concerning this, one teacher said that “I have student who do not spell and write correctly. So that, most time I focus on group discussion and group assignment.” Other teacher also commented; he uses the parents to involve on the child’s education. Furthermore, “motivating students,” “reducing academic loads and tasks,” and “using praise and reinforcement” were among mentioned teaching methods and strategies that have been used by the teachers to address the needs of children with LD.

Under the sub-theme, Instructional Aid Materials, interviewees’ comments indicated that teachers may not use appropriate teaching aid materials. The summarized response of teachers includes; “children with LD may not need much teaching materials,” “children with LD are not like other students such as students with blindness and the deaf who requires various teaching aid materials,” and “it seems easy to address the needs of children with LD with little instructional modifications.” The last sub-theme, concerning the Nature of Student-Teacher Relationship, one teacher commented “there is not close relation between teachers and students. This might be due to the trend that most students have fear to relate with their respective teacher. Moreover, it is worse if the student have some type of academic or other related problems.” Other teacher commented “being looked shy, not asking questions and not responding is thought by students as a means of showing respect for their teachers.” other teachers also supported their colleagues’ comment by saying: “obviously, I feel that there is some gap in interacting with students’,” “most students afraid to closely interact with their teachers,” and “the school norm that have been developed restricted the teacher-student interaction.”

### **Category 3: Academic and School Barriers**

In this category the major challenges that teachers and the school face in educating children with LD were addressed. It was divided into two sub-themes: Academic/ Teachers Related Barriers and Administrative/ School Related Barriers. Under Academic/ Teachers Related Barriers sub-theme; teachers had point out the core challenges they have faced in teaching children with LD. All teachers have mentioned that, lack of knowledge and experience to teach children with SEN, specifically with LD as a primary threat in classroom education. The reason behind the threat to teach children with LD might be due to the absence of having university or college courses about education of children with SEN. All of the interviewed teachers commented that; they did not take any course which is related with education of children with SEN. Three of the teachers mentioned they had participated on pedagogy courses training in two summer program; however the time assigned for the courses was very short, as a result it failed to help them in developing good teaching methods of people with SEN. Furthermore, all teachers believed that lack of necessary teaching aid materials, absence of well-equipped resource room, and the enrollment of much number of students in a class room made their efforts to teach students with LD more difficult.

The principals’ response emerged in the sub-theme Administrative/ School Related Barriers. First of all, it also showed that the principals held similar beliefs about lack of knowledge and experience have been the major challenge of the school in the education of children with SEN. Specifically the school director commented lack of learning class rooms: “obviously, there is a shortage of learning classes in the school; due to this more students have been in

rolled in a class that made the teaching, assistance and support of students with SEN difficult.” He also added that, “unfortunately, the school has no special needs education expert who work in collaboration with mainstream teachers; as well as to provide them some professional insights regarding the special academic and social needs of students with SEN.” Adding that, the vice director of the school stated that the absence of resources rooms and well equipped laboratory classes are among the major challenges for education of students with SEN in the school.

#### **Category 4: Home/Parental barriers and challenges**

Comments under this category were divided in to two sub-themes: Family Status and Childs Home Behavior. The sub-theme Family Status have comments related to the parents’ educational background, home academic support, parents health, family structure, and certain family events which may affect the children’s academic performance. All respondents’ suggested that, parents’ involvement and help play crucial role to improve the academic achievement of children with LD. One parent commented the problems in line with lack of expected progress on her child “I have close relation with teachers as well as principals; mostly I get similar and repetitive advice and commands about my child. I thought, this might be due to lack of teachers’ knowledge regarding support provision, so my child failed to bring satisfactory progress on his academic development.” Other parent also commented that, his child has problems in doing with maths “I have been discussed with the school persons about my students problem in working with numbers again and again; however, the measures that taken by teachers is not much different from parents and other non-teachers can do.” Furthermore, participants described additional home and family related challenges such as: “parents health history,” “unrest family and parents’ separation,” “not giving enough time,” “lack of proper follow-up,” “lack of guidance and know-how to help children in home,” “school personnel’s failure on providing guide line on the role of parents in their children’s education,” “parental poor academic background,” “being busy by other business activities,” and “lack of close discussion on academic improvement among parents and children”.

The sub-theme Childs Home Behavior, discussed the parents’ belief about children with LD home behaviors that they thought might affect the academic development and achievement. Comments in this subtheme described behaviors such as giving much attention for play, spending much time on TV screen, poor study habit, loss of motivation for home work activity, unwillingness for academic related activities with parents and seeking means to be absent from school.

## **DISCUSSIONS**

This study aimed to examine the educational practices, opportunities and challenges of children with LD in Kember Shomo Primary School. Data obtained through semi-structured interview. And, the participants of the study were; two principals, six teachers and four parents.

The research questions were designed to collect information regarding favorability and welcoming of Kember Shomo Primary School for children with LD; the different teaching strategies teachers have been used to respond for the specific needs of children with LD and the major challenges parents, the school and teachers have been faced when teaching children with LD in Kember Shomo Primary School.

Overall, the results of the study indicates that with the available human and material resources, Kember Shomo Primary School provides education regardless of the back ground of children. To their knowledge, teachers use various teaching strategies to equally benefit

children with SEN, specifically with LD. However, there are various school, teachers, and family related challenges and barriers in the education of students with LD in Kember Shomo Primary School. In the following paragraphs the results of the study discussed with other research findings in detail.

The first aim of the study was to investigate the extent to which Kember Shomo Primary School is conducive for educating children with LD. The result showed that teachers' readiness and positive attitude for children with SEN, particularly for those with LD, parental involvement and the school principals' effort have played great role on facilitating the education of children with LD in the School with their peers in the mainstream class. The study also investigated that the School seems welcoming, and favorable to educating children with SEN, specifically those with learning disabilities. In addition, there is a close relation and contact among school personals and parents. The results of the study are in line with some earlier research findings; Harding & Darling (2003), investigated that the successful implementation of inclusive education also depends on teachers' attitudes and knowledge. Similarly, Nowicki (2007) on his study in Canada discovered that teachers play a critical role in helping students overcome learning difficulties and are seen as a part of the solution rather than contributing to the problem. In the same study Nowicki's (2007), study with 100 children ages 4 to 11 years, participants suggested that parents' help is a way to overcome learning difficulties.

In addition, the researcher also assessed the instructional support provided by teachers for students with LD. The result showed that depending on the nature of the difficulty with limited and available resources, and to their knowledge teachers were able to apply various instructional strategies that seemed them appropriate for typical student. The result of the study supported by researcher's previous study; Pupils with special needs require education by methods suitable for themselves based on the natures of the conditions (Abdulfettah M., and Jaffer L., 2016). The results further showed that teachers' knowledge on application of teaching aid materials for students with LD is very limited. This result indicates that using different types of teaching methods may not necessarily assure the teachers application of appropriate instructional aid materials in teaching children with LD. However, this might be due to lack of getting appropriate pre or post college/university training on SEN education. This is further explored in the following paragraphs in discussing barriers. Moreover, the study investigated the extent of student-teacher interaction and it indicated that the interaction of teachers and students is not satisfactory. This result may not come as a surprise for local teachers and pupils; this is the fact that the norm of students' interaction with teachers on academic and non-academic activity is very restricted. Research shows that the quality of teacher-student relationship can influence students' achievement (Hughes, 2007).

A further aim of the present study was to investigate the barriers for teaching students with LD. Abdulfettah M., and. Jaffer L.,(2016) stated that without being equipped with the basic knowledge and skills on supporting students with special needs, it would be hard and difficult for the regular class teacher to accommodate the needs of all learners including children with disabilities. Thomas (1985) identified lack of support and training as an important factor in teachers' lack of confidence to teach pupils with SEN. King-Sears (2005) reported that being taught by underqualified teachers can affect students' outcomes. According to Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996), in order to teach pupils with SEN, teachers need systematic, intensive training in the form of:

- a) Courses related to SEN as a requirement of pre-service certification;
- b) In-service programs and;
- c) On-going consultancy.



Similarly, the current study investigated that, lack of teaching aid materials, absence of well trained professionals, lack of training program for teachers in the area of SEN, lack of knowledge and experience to teach children with SEN, absence of well-equipped resource room, and shortage of learning classrooms were the core problem that teachers and the school face. Moreover, the study also investigated the parents' educational background, home academic support, parents' health history, family structure, and certain family events affect children with LD academic performance. This finding is similar from those that have been found previously. For example, Berliner (2009) found that children born to mothers who smoked and/or consumed alcohol during pregnancy are more likely to experience learning difficulties.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study has some limitations that need to be taken in to account. First, the data was collected through interview only, in which participants explained what they thought. Besides, participants mainly teachers might be biased when providing responses on their educational practices. They could also differ in their skill of evaluating their own behavior (Pianta et.al., 2014). Future studies could benefit from including other data collecting methods (e.g. observations and questionnaires) besides interview. Second, the finding of the study was limited for the principals, teachers and parents view. In the future, students could be included as source of information. The third limitation of the study is the small number of participants in a school. Due to financial constraints the researcher felt to conduct the study with large number of participants in more schools. So, the finding of the study might not be generalized for other settings. In the future, further investigation with large participants in more school settings should be carried out to generalize the findings. Finally, the cultural context of the study should also be taken in to consideration when referring the findings. The study was conducted in Ethiopia, the country of multi nations and nationalities where most culture appreciate children to be quite and silent.

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