CORRELATES OF PERSONAL VARIABLES OF TEACHERS AND THEIR KNOWLEDGE AND ATTITUDE TOWARDS LEARNING DISABLED CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND

Teaching the learning disabled entails more responsibility because decisions during early schooldays would influence the child's acquisition of life skills necessary for survival as an adult. Several child-oriented interventions have been found effective and carry lot of promise for future. Awareness about the nature of learning difficulties fostered positive attitudes and was inversely related to negative attitudes. Teachers differ widely in their preparedness to withstand stoically the often unrewarding and long-drawn teaching programmes.

Aim- To know the socioeconomic and professional variables of the teachers' awareness and attitudes towards learning disabled children.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In an ongoing study of teachers' awareness and attitudes towards learning disabled children, 233 teachers were tested using Schedule for Teachers' knowledge and attitudes towards learning disabled children. Their awareness about causes, symptoms, course and management and their attitudes along five different dimensions; hostility, criticality, rejection, warmth and overprotectiveness were measured. Their sociodemographic and professional measures such as age, sex, religion, domicile, marital status, mother tongue, educational attainments, teaching experience, responsibility as class teacher and classes handled were identified.

RESULTS

Using the heterogeneity of these profiles, it was found that awareness was associated with being a woman, semi-urban domicile, training, and personal variables. Positive attitudes were related to empathic exposure and negative attitude to frustration in handling the children.

CONCLUSION

Significance of the findings in choosing the right person and awareness programmes to mitigate negative feelings of the teachers are emphasised.

KEYWORDS

Teachers, Learning Disabled Children, Awareness.

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BACKGROUND

National policy on education of Govt. of India^[1] observes that the status of the teacher reflects the sociocultural ethos of the society. In India, though all children are expected to go to school, only about 50 - 70% of children attend school for more than five years (UNICEF 1991).^[2] After the family, the second major influence on the developing mind of the child comes from another social institution called school.^[3] Since a major portion of working hours of them is spent in school, it appears logical to utilise schools as a place for intervention.

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Schools contribute not only learning but also psychosocial development of children. Several mental health programmes can be carried out at school level. Schools and teachers can provide what is lacking at home, particularly for disadvantaged and learning disabled children. Schools can serve as a good entry point to mental health services and they are perceived as more accessible and used by more number of students than from distant services.^[4] Mental health teams can be constituted consisting of any combination of teachers, parents, student representatives, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, etc., depending upon their availability.

Adverse circumstances in the lives of children do not always lead to adversities since many children are resilient, according to many authors. Improving resilience can be achieved through Life Skills Training. Positive school environment with high expectations of teachers is one among the many protective factors which increases their resilience. Primary prevention of many psychological problems by cognitive problem solving skills, reduced aggression by

training teachers and parents, and preventing child maladjustments by children competence enhancement, and several such enrichment programmes have been reviewed and concluded to be effective and so carry a lot of promise to the future.

A teacher is recognised by many ingredient traits such as positiveness, energy, alertness, consistency, instructorship, organisation, resourcefulness and common sense.^[5] Teaching the learning disabled entails more responsibility because decisions during early schooldays would influence the child's acquisition of life skills necessary for survival as an adult. With the wide acceptance of inclusive education, these children need to be identified in the regular classroom, nature of their deficits provisionally made out and the secondary behavioural and social consequences managed at the earliest.^[3] The task entails an unenviable demand on the already overburdened primary school teacher who is often ill equipped to scientifically manage these children. Previous studies have used Anganwadi workers and rural school teachers in early detection of intellectual disability and its management.^[4,5]

Awareness of the nature of learning difficulties fostered positive attitudes towards disabled children and the same was inversely related to the intensity of negative attitudes.^[6,7] Apart from awareness, other factors such as teacher's preparedness to optimally manage these children, the available share of teacher's time for these children, the extra-curricular stresses and the ability to withstand stoically the often unrewarding and lengthy teaching programmes modulate the teacher's attitude towards these children.^[8,9] Their aptitudes and attitudes are variously influenced by sociodemographic and personal context. Teachers play a significant role in maintaining the much-needed warmth in the class and hence, their ability to introspect and feedback is a necessary pre-requisite.^[4,10,11]

Aim

The present study aims to know if the socioeconomic and professional variables of the teachers influence their awareness and attitudes towards learning disabled children in regular class room settings.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was a part of the ongoing research on emotional atmosphere at school through knowing the teacher's knowledge and attitude towards learning disabled children. In a previous study, it was contended that knowledge and attitudes of the teaching personnel left much to be desired and that awareness was positively correlated to healthy attitudes.^[12] The present study aimed at knowing the relevance of personal attributes of teachers on their knowledge and attitudes and to enable identification of the target population for awareness programmes.

Data was collected during the awareness programmes, conducted by the Institute of Rehabilitation Sciences, a voluntary organisation doing rehabilitation services. The teachers were drawn from in and around the rural penumbra for these programmes. They were introduced to these topics through discourses and interactive sessions. Roughly about 20 to 25 teachers were included in each course. Before the start of each session, the participant teachers were

approached and informed about the nature of the study. Consenting teachers were alone included in the study.

There were no other Selection Criteria. Data was collected with the help of the following Tools-

1. Proforma: This included details regarding the sociodemographic variables and teaching experiences of the teachers.
2. Schedule for Teachers' knowledge and attitudes towards learning disabled children: The schedule was formulated as per the details given in the study.^[12] It contains the following domains: Knowledge domain included items to explore their awareness about the causes, symptoms, course and management of the problem. The attitude domain measured criticality, hostility, rejection, warmth and overprotectiveness dimensions. Criticality, hostility and rejection were clubbed together as negative attitudes and the other two as positive attitudes.

The factions within each variable were regrouped if the numbers in the cells were found to be small. Statistical verification of the significance was done using Student's 't', ANOVA and Schiff's test.

RESULTS

A total of 233 teachers participated in the study. Heterogeneity of the sample was evident in their sociodemographic details. The variables included age, sex, religion, domicile, marital status, mother tongue, level of education, teaching experience, their responsibility in the class, and the classes handled. The disparate groups were retained separately, but when the number was very small (E.g.: non-Tamil mother-tongue groups), they were clubbed together. Most of them were below 40 years and women outnumbered men. More than two fifths of them were postgraduates and one fourth had qualified in teaching. About three fifths of the group had more than five years of teaching experience. Majority of them handled classes in primary schools and some of them were former teachers, interchangeably employed at present in administrative work (Table 1).

Comparison of scores in knowledge domain for various groups revealed that age, religion, marital status, mother tongue, teaching experience and being the class teacher were not discriminatory. Women knew more than men and urban/semiurban teachers were better than their counterparts in rural schools. Postgraduates with B.Ed. scored poorest and those in pre-primary and primary schools fared better than those from secondary schools.

There was a distinct heterogeneity in their healthy acceptance of learning disabled children. Men were significantly more positive than women and those with common mother tongue had a more conducive attitude. Those with the highest and lowest educational qualifications had a significantly positive attitude. Years of teaching, responsibility as the class teacher and handling lower classes were associated with the warmth of their attitude. Other variables such as age, religion, domicile or marital status did not influence positive attitude.

Sex, religion and mother tongue did not significantly influence the negative attitude. Increasing age, rural domicile,

being unmarried, low educational attainments, long years of teaching, being the class teacher and handling lower classes were associated with significantly more unhealthy attitudes (Table 2).

DISCUSSION

The index population in the study has been chosen without stringent selection criteria and included all those teachers who were willing to participate. The element of randomness, heterogeneity of the group and their representativeness enabled a meaningful universalisation of the findings. Their personal variables showed that most of them were women, were married, hailed from rural areas, and were below 40 years of age. Level of educational qualification was high, with two-thirds being graduates and one third further qualified in teaching. A young, qualified, married, rural woman was the prototype of the available teaching force.

Knowledge about learning disabilities was not influenced by most of the variables. Being men and hailing from rural domicile were significantly associated with lower awareness. Those with highest qualification (P.G. with B.Ed.) scored the lowest, indicating higher qualified teachers were not sufficiently motivated in active primary school teaching. Similarly, those in secondary school level were not as much exposed as pre-primary and primary level teachers to the problem which manifests during the early educational years. More disadvantaged children usually do not reach the secondary level.

Age, religion, domicile and marital status were not significant discriminates of positive attitudes. Men were more positive than women. Teachers who spoke the same mother tongue evinced a better acceptance because the impaired communication from the disabled children was better understood by them. Increasing experience, exposure as a primary school teacher and responsibilities as the class teacher were associated with better understanding of the difficulties of these children. Most qualified teachers had the least degree of positive acceptance and the least educated were more positively inclined, showing that empathy was more often a reflection of involvement than of knowing.

Negative attitudes were related to increasing age and experience. Ability to identify the defect and the ineffectiveness of their routine teaching methods marked their frustration. Teachers from rural background with an already strained time factor and the need to handle more than one class at a time were expectedly more negative towards these children. Unmarried teachers were less negative because they were not pre-occupied with other stresses. Regular class teachers with their 'felt-responsibility' had experienced the constraints and were more negative.

Analysis of the dynamics of the observations reflected that awareness reflected more of their involvement and exposure than of their age, experience or educational levels. Positive attitude was related to exposure and continued and meaningful exposure enhanced their empathic understanding.^[6] Communicability in the same language and not the level of education enhanced their understanding. Unexpectedly, postgraduates with B.Ed. qualification evinced the least positive attitude. Negative attitudes reflected their frustration in using methods ineffective for these children.

Increasing age, long years of experience and responsibility as a class teacher reflected the longevity and intensity of their exposure and the resultant frustration. Education did not lessen the negative attitude, and additional stresses on the individual augmented the frustration and the negative attitudes.

Both positive and negative attitudes originate from different perspectives of the teacher-student relations. Often, both of them simultaneously coexist as may be observed with increasing experience and being the class teacher. Positive attitudes were related to empathic exposure and negative attitudes to frustration in handling these children. Other factors such as marital status or rural background act as confounding variables. Increasing educational levels did not evince any welcome changes on either the cognitive appraisal or their affective relations. Being qualified for senior classes, their motivation to involve in primary level teaching and in maintaining a good working relation with the disabled children was poor.

Behaviour in school is often different from behaviour from home. Since teachers have considerable experience of what to expect of children of any given age, their views are generally accurate but they miss or misconstrue some symptoms. Whereas parents' answers to questionnaires often need to be explored through semi-structured interviewing, it is usually appropriate to take teachers' answers at face value.^[8]

The findings in the study showed that negative attitudes prevailed against the learning disabled and the reason behind is unawareness of teachers about the nature and management of these difficulties and the finding is in line with previous studies.^[12] More than cognitive rehabilitation, dignified restoration of concept of self and social cum peer acceptance are crucial dimensions.^[12]

The results of the present study indicate the lack of awareness of the teachers in the various facets of learning disabilities and improving the awareness correlate to healthier attitudes as found in previous studies.^[5, 12] The study implies the importance of various awareness training programs to impart thorough knowledge about the symptoms of learning disability to the teachers and practical training in identifying them will reduce their unhealthy attitudes and also helps in detecting the variations at the earliest.

CONCLUSION

With emphasis on inclusive educational programmes, the need for increasing the teachers' exposure in theory and in practice to specific learning difficulties is evident.^[3] The present system should be made more responsive to such difficulties of the less endowed. Though attitudes are described as enduring, addressing their cognitive component would help in achieving better strategies of coping and a more appropriate and optimal teacher-student relation.^[5,6] An emphasis on attitudinal changes through awareness programmes could be a simple step and yet, a meaningful leap in right direction.

	Variables	No.	% (N=233)
1.	Age: Below 30 years	85	36.5
	30 to 40 years	85	36.5
	41 to 50 years	30	12.9
	More than 50 years	33	14.2
2.	Sex: Men	58	24.9
	Women	175	75.1
3.	Religion: Hindus	186	79.8
	Non-Hindus	47	20.2
4.	Domicile: Rural	142	60.9
	Semi urban	50	21.5
	Urban	41	17.6
5.	Marital Status: Unmarried	62	26.6
	Married	159	68.2
	Others	12	05.2
6.	Mother tongue: Tamil	219	94.0
	Others	14	06.0
7.	Education: Non-graduate – no teacher training	59	25.3
	Non-graduate with teacher training	21	09.0
	Graduate without B.Ed.	56	24.0
	Graduate with B.Ed.	30	12.9
	Postgraduate without B.Ed.	40	17.2
	Postgraduate with B.Ed.	12	05.2
	M.Ed.	15	06.4
8.	Teaching experience: Below 5 years	100	42.7
	6 to 15 years	78	33.9
	16 to 25 years	26	11.2
	More than 25 years	29	12.4
9.	Responsibility: Class teacher	150	64.4
	Others	83	35.6
10.	Class handled: Not applicable	20	08.6
	Pre-Primary	27	11.6
	Primary	162	69.5
	Secondary	24	10.3

Table 1. Sociodemographic and Personal Details of the Teachers

Variables	Knowledge Mean S.D. Significance.			Positive Attitude Mean S.D. Significance.			Negative Attitude Mean S.D. Significance		
Age: Below 30 years 30 to 40 years 41 to 50 years More than 50 years	40.85 40.68 40.33 39.18	4.5 3.8 3.7 4.3	F= 1.39 P < 0.05	7.05 6.92 7.03 7.33	1.0 0.8 0.9 0.7	F= 1.76 P < 0.05	43.99 44.16 44.70 46.70	2.6 2.8 3.4 3.6	F=8.20 P > 0.05
Sex: Men Women	39.55 40.81	4.1 4.1	t= 2.03 P > 0.05	7.33 6.94	0.8 0.9	t= 2.91 P > 0.05	44.73 44.30	3.6 2.9	t= 1.36 P < 0.05
Religion: Hindus Non-Hindus	40.37 41.00	3.9 5.0	t= 0.94 P < 0.05	7.09 6.86	0.9 0.9	t= 1.63 P < 0.05	44.62 43.81	3.0 3.1	t= 1.62 P < 0.05
Domicile: Rural Semi urban Urban	39.96 41.98 40.56	3.9 3.7 5.0	F= 4.60 P > 0.05	7.01 7.22 6.93	0.9 0.8 0.9	F= 1.47 P < 0.05	45.08 43.46 43.49	3.3 2.0 2.9	F=8.09 P > 0.05
Marital Status: Unmarried Married Others	41.37 40.14 40.75	4.0 4.1 4.4	F= 2.04 P < 0.05	7.10 7.04 6.75	0.9 0.9 1.1	F= 0.77 P < 0.05	43.52 44.79 44.83	2.5 3.3 2.2	F=4.05 P > 0.05

Mother tongue: Tamil Others	40.52 40.14	4.1 4.1	t= 0.38 P < 0.05	7.08 6.36	0.9 0.8	t= 3.02 P > 0.05	44.55 43.09	3.1 3.1	t= 1.84 P < 0.05
Education: Non-graduate – no training Non-graduate with training Graduate without B.Ed. Graduate with B.Ed. Postgraduate without B.Ed. Postgraduate with B.Ed. M.Ed.	40.00 40.05 41.33 40.33 41.40 37.08 40.61	3.8 4.3 4.4 3.3 3.9 5.0 3.5	F= 2.36 P > 0.05	7.41 7.00 6.95 7.00 6.75 6.58 7.20	0.6 0.6 1.0 0.8 1.0 1.2 0.8	F= 3.31 P > 0.05	45.85 44.19 43.95 43.23 44.53 44.25 43.33	3.1 2.1 2.9 2.5 3.0 2.8 3.3	F=3.15 P > 0.05
Experience: Below 5 years 6 to 15 years 16 to 25 years More than 25 years	40.79 40.74 37.32 39.34	4.5 3.8 4.0 3.5	F= 1.19 P < 0.05	6.99 6.94 7.08 7.45	1.0 0.8 0.7 0.6	F= 2.58 P > 0.05	43.83 44.32 44.38 47.03	2.8 2.6 3.2 3.8	F=9.10 P > 0.05
Responsibility: Class teacher Others	40.35 40.80	3.9 4.5	t= 0.82 P < 0.05	7.16 6.82	0.8 1.0	t= 2.85 P > 0.05	44.84 43.76	2.9 3.3	t= 2.60 P > 0.05
Class handled: Not applicable Pre-Primary Primary Secondary	43.50 41.15 40.14 39.17	4.0 4.4 4.0 3.6	F= 4.72 P > 0.05	7.35 7.30 7.02 6.63	0.9 0.7 0.9 1.0	F= 3.45 P > 0.05	43.10 44.85 44.63 44.00	2.4 2.7 3.1 3.3	F= 1.80 P < 0.05

Table 2. Analysis of Knowledge and Attitude Variables between the Groups

Statistical significance was fixed at the probability level of 5%. Values given in bold print are statistically significant.

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