Remediation of Learning Disabilities

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A learning disability is a neurological disorder that affects a learner's ability to read, write, spell, reason, and organise information taught in conventional ways[1]Learning Disabilities Online. (2017). What is a learning disability? Retrieved from http://www.ldonline.org/ldbasics/whatisld. Those with learning disabilities often find learning a difficult and painful process. The presence of their learning disability can make learning to read, write, and do math an uphill task. However, when given the appropriate classroom support, learners with learning disabilities can be very successful[2] Bulat, J., Hayes, A.M., Macon, W., Tichá, R., & Abery, B.H. (2017). School and classroom disabilities inclusion guide for low- and middle-income countries. RTI Press Publication No. OP-0031-1701. Research Triangle Park, NC: RTI Press. Retrieved from https://www.rti.org/sites/default/files/resources/school_and_classroom_disabilities_inclusio_guide.pdf .

Children with learning disabilities generally respond well to a sensitive and appropriate assessment and treatment plan. This is particularly true if this plan is supportive, removes blame from both learner and parent, focuses on the present problems, attends to other associated concerns, allows the learner to achieve at a higher level than before, and results in his or her feeling more confident, self-reliant, and motivated.

An assessment is meant to identify or diagnose the cause of

the learner's learning challenges, determine the severity of the disability, and identify targeted interventions. Information obtained through these assessments should also be used to help develop an Individualised Education Programme (IEP) and set benchmarks for a learner's educational progress. Teachers can undertake several interventions to support learners with learning disabilities after assessment.

Once learners are assessed and their achievement levels are identified, teachers can differentiate instruction to provide additional support to those learners. There are several particularly effective strategies for learners with different types of learning disabilities. These include the following:

- *Systematic teaching of learning strategies.* Systematic instruction involves teaching learners how to learn by giving them the tools they need to understand and use new material and skills[3]Steedly, K., Dragoo, K., Arafeh, S., & Luke, S. D. (2008). Effective mathematics instruction. Evidence for Education, 3(1), 1–12.. These skills, such as self-monitoring of understanding, come naturally to many learners. However, research indicates that although learners with specific learning disabilities can learn these types of strategies, they typically do not use them spontaneously[4]Kauffman, J. M., & Hallahan, D. P. (2005). Special education: What it is and why we need it. New York, NY: Pearson.. Systematic instruction is particularly helpful in strengthening skills such as organisation and attention. There are various types of systematic instruction, including: (1) memory devices to help learners remember a strategy or concept (e.g., a first-letter mnemonic created by forming a word from the beginning letters of other words); (2) strategy steps phrased in informal language and beginning with action verbs (e.g., read the problem carefully); (3) strategy steps stated in the order in which they are to be used (e.g., learners are prompted

to read the question carefully before trying to answer it); and (4) strategy steps that prompt learners to use their reasoning abilities (e.g., the critical steps needed to solve a problem)[5]Steedly, K., Dragoo, K., Arafeh, S., & Luke, S. D. (2008). Effective mathematics instruction. Evidence for Education, 3(1), 1–12..

- Multiple learning modalities. Some learners learn best by hearing instructions, others by reading them, and yet others by physically completing a task. Many learners with learning disabilities find visual representations helpful, especially for mathematics instruction. One such approach is Concrete-Representational-Abstract, a three-part instructional strategy in which the teacher first uses concrete materials (such as stones or coins) to model the math concept to be learned, then demonstrates the concept in another visual form (such as drawing a picture). Finally, this strategy uses numbers or symbols (such as writing the numbers on the board)[6]Steedly, K., Dragoo, K., Arafeh, S., & Luke, S. D. (2008). Effective mathematics instruction. Evidence for Education, 3(1), 1–12.. Teachers should also use kinaesthetic (body movement) and tactile (touching items) teaching approaches. Examples of these modalities in practise include having learners trace letters in the air, acting out parts of the lesson, and using manipulatives to learn new concepts. Similarly, allowing learners to demonstrate their knowledge of a concept in a way that is comfortable for them can more effectively illustrate what they know than can forcing knowledge to be presented, for example, in written or oral form[7]Bulat, J., Hayes, A.M., Macon, W., Tichá, R., & Abery, B.H. (2017). School and classroom disabilities inclusion guide for low- and middle-income countries. RTI Press Publication No. OP-0031-1701. Research Triangle Park, NC: RTI Press. Retrieved from https://www.rti.org/sites/default/files/resources/school

_and_classroom_disabilities_inclusio_guide.pdf.

- Practise and repetition. All learners, including those with specific learning disabilities, benefit from multiple exposures to a new concept and the ability to practise it repeatedly for full mastery. Initial opportunities for practise should be carefully supervised, and immediate feedback about the accuracy of responses should be provided. The teacher should also provide learners, especially those with learning disabilities, multiple practise opportunities by repeating tasks in a variety of ways. Learners who are struggling to learn often need more repetitions of instruction — repetitions of different ways to accomplish the task — and practise to master a concept or skill. This is true not only for initial learning but also over time[8]Bulat, J., Hayes, A.M., Macon, W., Tichá, R., & Abery, B.H. (2017). School and classroom disabilities inclusion guide for low- and middle-income countries. RTI Press Publication No. OP-0031-1701. Research Triangle Park, NC: RTI Press. Retrieved from https://www.rti.org/sites/default/files/resources/school _and_classroom_disabilities_inclusio_guide.pdf.

- Supporting individualised learning. Teachers can individualise a learner's learning experience by producing an IEP. An IEP is a written plan/programme designed to meet a learner's individualised education needs to improve academic performance. It is a very useful way to articulate and record the learner's strengths and weaknesses, reasonable individualised accommodations that should be provided to a learner, and progress toward goals. The IEP should be developed after a multidisciplinary team conducts a comprehensive assessment and once it is determined that a learner would benefit from special education services. Individual needs, learning goals, and objectives of learners with disabilities and the appropriate teaching

strategies and required classroom accommodations can be identified throughout this process. IEPs should not focus only on learner's weaknesses in the classroom but also address their individual strengths and how those strengths can be built upon to improve academic achievement. Ideally, IEPs should be developed annually and continually monitored with regular reports on progress toward goals. Families must be engaged as part of the IEP development and monitoring process and, whenever feasible, the learner with the learning disability should be included as part of the IEP team. Involving learners in the IEP process is important to help them understand their difficulties and the accommodations that they need to be successful. For example, the more that learners are involved in the process to select possible reasonable accommodations, the more likely the accommodations will be used. Learner's involvement is also useful in gaining more independence as they reach adolescence[9]Thompson, S. J., Morse, A. B., Sharpe, M., & Hall, S. (2005). Accommodations manual: How to select, administer, and evaluate use of accommodations for instruction and assessment of students with disabilities. Washington, DC: Council of Chief State School Officers. Retrieved from https://osepideasthatwork.org/node/109. IEPs are a useful tool for all learners who are receiving any form of additional support or special education services.

- Ensuring appropriate tests are being provided to learners to gauge their progress accurately. Assessments should be individualised so that learners are given tests that can gauge their progress over time. For example, a learner who struggles with reading should be given an assessment specific enough to identify gains in certain areas of reading. Most learners with learning disabilities can achieve grade-level standards with accommodations and support, and must be assessed

appropriately. Even though testing to assess progress is needed, learners with disabilities should not be overtested.

- *Remedial methods.* Using specific teaching strategies and teaching material, the special educator formulates an IEP to reduce, eliminate, or preclude the child's deficiencies in specific learning areas, such as reading, writing and mathematics, identified during the child's educational assessment [10]Karande S. (2008). Current challenges in managing specific learning disability in Indian children. Journal of postgraduate medicine, 54(2), 75–77. https://doi.org/10.4103/00223859.40765. Multisensory instruction involves using all pathways to the brain simultaneously, particularly the visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic-tactile[11]McInerny, T. K., Adam, H. M., Campbell, D., DeWitt, T. G., Foy, J. M., & Kamat, D. M. (2017). *American Academy of Pediatrics textbook of pediatric care*.. Multisensory approaches to teaching learners with learning/reading disabilities have been advocated[12]Fernald, 1943; Gillingham & Stillman, 1969. *Learning modality approach.* Learning styles play a significant role in learning. The learning modality approach to instruction is based on the assumption that learners have preferred modalities for learning, and teaching that is redesigned to rely more directly on this preferred modality will help learners learn more readily and rapidly. *Direct instruction.* The lessons are typically fast-paced and follow a prescribed lesson plan involving systematic instruction[13]Engelmann et.al., 1978. *Strategies Instruction.* Poor academic performance across all ages in learners with learning difficulties have been seen as a problem caused by the use of inefficient strategies[14]Swanson, 1999. *Cooperative learning.* Cooperative learning refers to "the instructional use of

small groups so that learners work together to maximise their own and each other's learning"[15]Johnson et al., 1993.

Conclusion

With the appropriate tools and supports, learners with learning disabilities can be highly successful academically and go on to become effective, engaged, and active citizens. The first step in providing tailored supports is to determine if a learner indeed has a learning disability or may be struggling with school for other reasons. This identification process is not always simple or straightforward, but a few concerted efforts by an assessment team can make this goal achievable. Although effort and time are needed, the alternative of permitting a percentage of learners to fall behind academically and fail to achieve their full potential is not acceptable.

Rather, countries should look to building a system that supports and enables learners with learning disabilities to succeed academically. A comprehensive system should include developing screening and assessment measures using international best practises, and then providing individualised supports and accommodations. Such systems and supports will benefit learners with learning disabilities and will also strengthen learning opportunities for all learners.

References

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