

12 The effectiveness of the Learning Difficulties Programme in Basic Education Cycle 1 schools

Sultan Hamed Al-Ghafri

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Aims

This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the special educational needs programme for students with learning difficulties in a region of Oman, with a view to providing insights into how the programme can be improved.

1.2 Background and rationale

The early years are increasingly recognized as crucial to students' physical, emotional and social development and later educational performance (Nutbrown & Clough, 2006). Accordingly, many countries have initiated programmes aimed at helping young learners with significant learning difficulties. In Oman, Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision has witnessed remarkable development in the last two decades. In 2000/2001 the Ministry of Education implemented a programme to provide appropriate education in Basic Education Cycle 1 schools for students with learning difficulties aged 6-10. This programme was gradually expanded to cover all 178 Basic Education Cycle 1 schools in the Sultanate by 2006/2007 and in 2007/2008 it was extended to Cycle 2 schools for children aged 11-16. Despite its importance, though, relatively little research has been conducted into the effectiveness of the programme; hence this study.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Defining Learning Difficulties

Learning difficulties (LDs) have been defined and categorized in various ways. Dockrell & McShane (1993) distinguish between specific learning difficulties (SPLDs), when the child experiences problems with particular tasks such as reading

and writing, and general learning difficulties, when the learner is slower than normal students across a range of tasks. Macintyre & Deponio (2003) define students with SPLDs as those who display clear discrepancies across their learning; they are good in some areas but face significant difficulties in others, for example they may face difficulties in reading and writing (dyslexia, dyspraxia) or maths (dyscalcula).

In Oman, the term 'Learning Difficulties' (LDs) is used to refer to students who have difficulties in particular tasks such as reading, writing and maths, but are assumed to be of average or above average ability overall and capable of coping with the mainstream curriculum with support. This is the meaning used in the present study and is similar to the use of the term SPLDs in the UK context. The main aims of the LDs Programme in Oman are:

- To provide support for students who cannot cope with normal school requirements
- To provide early diagnosis and intervention for students with LDs.
- To raise awareness of the importance of helping students with LDs across the community.

There are a number of other groups of children with special needs whose education is not considered here. Students with mental disabilities and hearing problems are looked after in their own classrooms in mainstream schools. They have their own teachers and study programmes, but share social activities, sports, arts, and social activities. Students with severe emotional / behavioural difficulties (EBD), such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) are looked after in mainstream schools, but under individual education plans developed by the Student Advisor. Those diagnosed as "slow learners", who experience difficulties in all school subjects and get low marks throughout, requiring a special curriculum, are not considered here. Nor are "under-achievers", whose difficulties arise primarily from environmental, rather than genetic, causes. Students with autism and other severe mental disorders are looked after by the Ministry of Social Affairs. My concern is with LDs, (SPLDs in the UK sense).

2.2 Assessment of children with learning difficulties

Macintyre & Deponio (2003) suggest three main approaches to assessing students who are suspected of having some kind of learning difficulties: communication, investigation, and speculation.

2.2.1 Communication

Macintyre & Deponio (2003) argue it is crucial that schools communicate with all who have an interest in the child, particularly parents, who may notice early signs of a learning disorder and can provide information about their child's health status, needs, strengths and difficulties. Klein (1993) suggests that before starting the diagnosis period, the class teacher should prepare the child for it. Telling a child that they may have some kind of difficulty, which makes them less able to cope, can help the child realize that with help, difficulties may be solved. It is also important to communicate with colleagues, other subject teachers who can provide information

about a student suspected of having LDs. Finally, it is important to communicate with other professionals outside the school. Psychiatrists, paediatricians, and medical practitioners should be involved at the assessment stage. Teachers, parents, the child and these professionals should collaborate (Munden & Arcelus, 1999).

2.2.2 Investigation

Assessing students with LDs is not easy and teachers who undertake this should be well trained to carry out such assessment. According to Macintyre & Deponio (2003), such investigations can take many forms, including observation in school. Observing children's behaviour and achievements at different times in different settings can reveal much about the strategies they use to tackle problems (Rief, 2005). Secondly, valuable information can be made available to the class teacher by the child's parents regarding difficulties faced by their child outside school and things they can and cannot do. Thirdly, a baseline assessment of reading, letter knowledge and writing can provide critical information about the child's progress and can pinpoint language difficulties.

2.2.3 Speculation

After conducting the above forms of assessment, a decision has to be made as to what kind of LD the child has. Although it is difficult to find clear-cut differences between the symptoms of the different LDs such as dyslexia, dyspraxia and dyscalculia ADHD, there are certain clues which can be used to reach a decision. For example dyslexic children face difficulties in reading, writing, and spelling. They usually do not have difficulty in other learning skills such as listening and speaking, so it is possible to distinguish between dyslexic children and children who have difficulties in learning across a number of cognitive areas by focusing on discrepancies in classroom performance (Reid, 2005). Various tools have been created to help professionals decide what difficulties a child has. These include the Special Needs Assessment Profile, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder, Conners' Behavioural Rating Scale and the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire.

2.3 Intervention

Once a decision has been made about what LD a child faces, the question arises how to deal with the situation. An LD can be approached in many ways depending on the kind of difficulty and its severity, but any successful intervention will involve both school-based and home-based support. This section provides information about two main approaches relevant to this study; inclusion and partnership with parents.

2.3.1 Inclusion

Fletcher-Campbell (2000) reports there is no evidence that students with LDs require teaching approaches and strategies that are significantly different from other students. However, evidence suggests that, to enable students with LDs to be

successful, both differentiation and a supportive, inclusive school environment are needed for teachers and students. Rose & Howley (2007) define inclusion as helping those with LDs overcome their problems without excluding them from their original schools and classes. Dyson & Milward (2000) think of inclusion in terms of:

- Inclusive classrooms where all learners are taught together regardless of their level of difficulty.
- An inclusive curriculum, where all students study the same programme.
- Inclusive learning experiences, where all students work collaboratively and learn from each other.
- Inclusive outcomes, so all students can feel achievement but in different ways.

2.3.2 *Partnership with parents*

To achieve the purpose of inclusion, there should be an “open” and “free” dialogue between all those with an interest in the child's education, including teachers, parents and students, as Gibson (2006) argues. This partnership, based on a complete sharing of knowledge, experience and skills, should result in joint decision-making about the child's education from the beginning.

As Dowling & Pound (1994) argue, children need to see their teachers and parents in cooperation with each other. The better the interaction between school, family and child the better the partnership will be and the more positive the effect on the children's education.

Both an effective policy of inclusion and effective partnerships with parents could play key roles in helping children in Oman with LDs. I will now describe this programme in more detail.

2.4 An outline of the LDs programme in Oman

Each school forms an LDs committee at the beginning of the academic year, primarily to follow up the diagnosis and intervention phases for students with LDs. This committee consists of the Headmistress, Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO), Senior Teachers, the Student Advisor, the head of the school's women's council and anyone involved in a particular case, such as the class teacher (CT) and parents. Each Cycle 1 school has one SENCO. She is usually one of the CTs in the school, who has attended a two-week training course in Muscat before being made a SENCO.

The main responsibilities of the professionals directly involved in implementing the LDs programme in schools in Oman are detailed below:

The Headmistress

Chairs the school LDs committee.
Supervises the work of the SENCO and CT.
Ensures necessary equipment and facilities are available.

The SENCO

Conducts baseline assessments of students nominated by CTs to join the programme.
Organises the LDs programme.
Is responsible for the LDs resources room.
Follows up her students' performance in their original classes.
Helps CTs in dealing with difficulties in their classes if she is asked to.
Organises short courses and workshops for CTs and parents.

Senior Teachers

Are members of the school's LDs committee.
Are involved in the initial nomination of students.
Liaise between class teachers and the SENCO.

Class Teachers

Carry out initial nomination of students to join LDs programme.
Cooperate with the SENCO.
Report on the performance and achievement of students attending the LDs programme.

Student Advisor

Helps the SENCO and other teachers form partnerships with parents.
Deals with students with Emotional / Behavioural Difficulties.

At the beginning of the academic year, each CT is asked to nominate those from her class she considers to have LDs. She does so based on the previous academic year's formal and informal assessment results. Usually this means the SENCO finds herself with a large number of students identified by CTs as having LDs. She then conducts a baseline test for those students and, based on the results, takes a maximum of 25 students into the LDs programme. Others may replace any who leave the school when they are transferred to Cycle 2 schools or who show sufficient progress to be returned to their original classes. As the SENCO's timetable is not more than 15 periods a week, she normally withdraws her students from their original classes individually or in groups according to their difficulties. Each student has 2 to 3 lessons a week in the LDs room. They are withdrawn from the subjects they need help in, so if they need extra help in reading and writing in Arabic they are withdrawn from Arabic lessons. There is no specific syllabus; the SENCO develops her own.

The Ministry provides an LDs resource room / classroom in each school, equipped with facilities such as computers, overhead projector, TV, video, cards and posters, and sometimes the school administration helps by providing extra facilities.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

My main research question was: How effective is the learning difficulties programme in helping students with LDs in Basic Education Cycle 1 schools in Dhahira Region, Sultanate of Oman?

This was guided by a number of sub-questions:

1. How are students with LDs assessed and educated?
2. What are SENCOs' and CTs' opinions about the role of parents in the LDs Programme?
3. What are the opinions of SENCOs, CTs, parents and students about the LDs programme?

A range of participants was selected for this study. The sample consisted of 11 out of 15 SENCOs in Dhahira region, 30 class teachers out of 450 from the 15 Cycle 1 schools, 3 parents of students with LDs, and 6 students with LDs. All participants were keen to help.

Data were collected using two methods; a structured questionnaire for SENCOs, a shorter version of which was administered to CTs, and interviews with SENCOs, CTs, parents, and students.

The questionnaire for SENCOs was divided into four parts; diagnosis, education of students with LDs, the role of the SENCO, and partnership with parents. Participants responded to statements using a five-point Likert rating scale (strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree, strongly disagree). The CTs' questionnaire was the same, except that it did not include questions about the role of the SENCO. Of the 41 questionnaires distributed, all were returned. Since the two questionnaires were highly structured, frequency analysis was used. "Strongly agree" and "agree" responses were combined to make one category, "agree", as were "strongly disagree" and "disagree" responses (grouped as "disagree").

I also collected data by interviewing 9 SENCOs, 6 CTs, 6 students (2 girls & 4 boys from Grade 4, chosen because they would have some ability to express themselves) and 3 female parents (identified by school administrators). The interviews consisted of a series of open-ended questions. They were not recorded for several reasons; firstly, they were conducted in Arabic and it would have been difficult to transcribe and translate them into English. Secondly, it could have been considered socially unacceptable for me to record the interviews. Therefore written notes were taken, translated into English, grouped according to interviewees (SENCOs, CTs, parents, and students) and organized by theme.

4 FINDINGS

I first present an analysis of the SENCO and CT questionnaires in tabular form, followed by an analysis of the qualitative data (interviews with SENCOs, CTs, parents and students). This is presented in note form, organised into categories according to interviewees' responses.

4.1 Quantitative data from questionnaires

Table 1 (below) presents the views of SENCOs and SETs about diagnosis. It thus relates directly to my first sub-question.

Table 1: The diagnosis of students with LDs (11 SENCOs and 30 CTs)

No.	The diagnosis of students with LDs	Agree				Disagree				Unsure			
		SENCO		CT		SENCO		CT		SENCO		CT	
		No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
1	It is easy to identify students with LDs.	7	64	25	83	4	36	3	10	1	9	2	7
2	Students with LDs in the programme have the same difficulties.	0	0	7	23	11	100	20	67	0	0	3	10
3	Clear criteria are used to diagnose students with LDs.	9	82	25	83	1	9	3	10	1	9	2	7
4	The diagnosis used specifies the exact difficulty experienced by the child (e.g. dyslexia, EBDs, ADHD, autism, dyscalculia)	0	0	6	20	9	82	6	20	2	18	15	50
5	Different specialists such as medical practitioners, psychiatrists, paediatricians and teachers participate in the diagnosis stage	0	0	4	13	10	91	16	53	1	9	10	33
6	The diagnosis is done by the LDs committee (headteacher, students' adviser, senior teacher, and SENCO).	11	100	22	73	0	0	4	13	0	0	4	13
7	All students diagnosed with LDs in the school attend the LDs programme.	0	0	1	3	11	100	26	87	0	0	3	10
8	The programme cannot cater for all students with LDs in the school.	11	100	26	87	0	0	2	7	0	0	2	7
9	The programme helps only students who face difficulties in reading, writing (Arabic) and Maths.	11	100	28	93	0	0	2	7	0	0	0	0

As Table 1 shows, it is clear that a high percentage of SENCOs and CTs (64%, 83%, respectively) seemed to believe identifying students with LDs was easy, because clear criteria were available (82%, 88%), but the majority of SENCOs (82%) thought that the diagnostic tool did not enable the difficulties of students to be identified exactly enough, while 50% of CTs seemed uncertain. The great majority of participants agreed that the programme cannot cater for all students with LDs, while almost all agreed that the programme is only helpful for those with difficulties in Arabic and Maths.

Table 2 (below) summarises the views of SENCOs and CTs regarding the education of students with LDs. This also relates to my first sub-question.

Table 2: *The education of students with LDs, (11 SENCOs, 30 CTs)*

No.	The education of students with LDs	Agree		Disagree				Unsure					
		SENCO		CT		SENCO		CT		SENCO		CT	
		No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
10	Segregating students with LDs in a special class even for a while is better for them academically.	6	55	24	80	3	28	2	7	2	18	4	13
11	Segregating students with LDs in a special class helps provide them with more services and support.	10	91	23	77	1	9	3	10	0	0	4	13
12	Segregating students with LDs encourages educators to search for more effective approaches to help them.	3	28	20	67	1	9	7	23	7	64	3	10
13	Segregating students with LDs encourages them to achieve better.	11	100	21	70	0	0	5	17	0	0	3	10
14	Providing students with help which suits their individuals' needs and interests in their original classes is more effective.	7	64	14	44	2	18	13	43	2	18	3	10
15	Segregating students with LDs affects their self esteem negatively.	4	36	12	40	6	55	10	33	1	9	8	27
16	The LDs programme has nothing to do with inclusion	8	73	16	53	3	28	5	17	0	0	9	30
17	The LDs programme promotes exclusion.	1	9	8	27	2	18	1	3	8	73	21	70
18	It is better to help students with LDs in their original classes by differentiation of instruction and curriculum modification rather than in the programme.	6	55	13	43	3	28	6	20	3	28	10	33
19	The programme does not suit all students with LDs.	9	82	20	67	1	9	4	13	1	9	6	20
20	More resources should be provided to meet all students' needs and interests.	11	100	27	90	0	0	2	7	0	0	1	3
21	Students feel ashamed because they are labelled as students with LDs.	2	18	20	67	7	64	7	23	2	18	3	10
22	Students feel happy to get special care in a special room.	6	55	4	13	1	9	12	40	4	36	14	44
23	LDs students miss important lessons in their classes while attending LDs classes.	10	91	22	73	0	0	8	27	1	9	0	0

Clearly, SENCOs and CTs believe helping students with LDs in special classes is effective (Statements 10, 11, 12, and 13). However, they also believe helping them in their original classes by differentiation of instruction and curriculum modification could be even more effective (Statements 14, 18 and 19). Regarding the inclusiveness of the programme, there is a degree of confusion (Statements 16 and 17). Responses to statements 20 and 23 indicate a high level of agreement on two main difficulties in the programme; firstly, that students miss important lessons while attending classes in the programme; secondly, that not all the resources needed are available.

SENCOs and CTs expressed different views about students' feelings towards the programme. Two thirds of CTs think children feel ashamed to join the programme (Statement 21) and nearly half feel they are unhappy to be taught in a special room (Statement 22), while nearly two thirds of SENCOs think children do not feel ashamed and over half think they do feel happy to get special care.

Table 3, below, summarises participants' responses to statements about parents' attitudes towards the LDs programme. This relates to my second sub-question.

Table 3: The parents' role in the LDs programme (11 SENCOs and 30 CTs)

No.	The role of parents in the LDs programme	Agree				Disagree				Unsure			
		SENCO		CT		SENCO		CT		SENCO		CT	
		NO	%	NO	%	NO	%	NO	%	NO	%	NO	%
37	Parents are aware of the LDs programme.	2	18	6	20	8	73	21	70	1	9	3	10
38	Parents do not like their children being labelled as students with LDs.	7	64	20	67	1	9	4	13	3	28	6	20
39	Parents show a lot of interest in cooperating with me.	8	73	4	13	3	28	21	70	0	0	5	17
40	Parents show a lot of interest in their children's difficulties.	3	28	4	13	8	73	18	60	0	0	8	27
41	Some parents are incapable of fully cooperating with me.	10	91	21	70	0	0	4	13	1	9	5	17
42	Parents feel embarrassed when their child is labelled as a special educational needs' student.	6	55	13	43	5	45	6	20	0	0	11	37

Clearly, a high percentage of SENCOs and CTs felt parents were not aware of the LDs programme and did not show much interest in their children's difficulties (Statements 37 & 40). Most SENCOs (73%) believed parents had a positive attitude towards forming partnerships with them, while most CTs (70%) considered that parents did not have such an attitude. SENCOs and CTs agreed that some parents were unable to form positive partnerships with them (Statement 41). There were mixed opinions about how parents felt about having their children labelled as students with LDs (Statements 38 & 42). A slim majority of SENCOs and CTs felt parents were uncomfortable, because they felt embarrassed, but a significant minority considered parents did not feel embarrassed. Just over one third of CTs were unsure.

Table 4 shows SENCOs' perceptions of their role in the LDs programme, which relates to my third sub-question.

Table 4: SENCOs' views of their role in the LDs programme (11 SENCO participants)

No.	SENCOs' views of their role in the LDs programme	Agree		disagree		Unsure	
		No	%	No	%	No	%
24	I am fully able to deal with students with LDs.	6	55	5	45	0	0
25	I am trained well to deal with students with LDs.	4	36	6	55	1	9
26	Having students with LDs together in one room is an effective way of helping them learn.	8	73	2	18	1	9
27	Having students from different stages in the same class (2-4) makes my job more difficult.	9	82	0	0	2	18
28	Helping these students in their original classes alongside their teacher will be more effective than teaching them in a separate room.	7	64	2	18	2	18
29	I think the programme is very helpful for students with LDs.	9	82	0	0	2	18
30	I think the programme does not achieve its objectives.	1	9	8	73	2	18
31	I think the programme should be amended or changed.	8	72	0	0	3	28
32	All the needed resources are provided.	0	0	10	91	1	9
33	The school administration helps me to do my job properly.	11	100	0	0	0	0
34	The class teachers always cooperate and communicate with me.	7	64	3	28	1	9
35	The supervisors (inspectors) are always helpful.	7	64	1	9	3	28
36	The LDs committee is efficient and helpful.	8	73	2	18	1	9

The most significant finding is that a majority of SENCOs (55%) did not consider themselves fully capable of dealing with students with LDs, because they were not well-enough trained (Statements 24 & 25). However, most SENCOs were satisfied with the effectiveness of the LDs programme (Statements 26, 29 and 30), though 64% suggested that helping such students in their original classes could be more effective (Statement 28). In agreeing with Statements 27 (82%) and 32 (91%), SENCOs referred to two major difficulties they face in the programme, firstly, dealing simultaneously with students from different grades (2-4) and secondly, lack of resources. A majority of SENCOs felt changes were needed for the programme to be better implemented (Statement 31), but were satisfied with the help provided by their school administrations, supervisors, CTs and LDs' committees.

I now turn to qualitative data from interviews. This will further help me answer my research sub-questions.

4.2 Qualitative data from interviews

The following summary is based on written notes taken during interviews:

SENCO (9 SENCOs)

- The programme is effective and all the children who joined it have improved (9)
- A lot of unnecessary paperwork is required, which makes our job more difficult. (9)

- The term “Learning Difficulties Room” makes student feel embarrassed, so we use other terms such as; ‘Life Boat’, ‘Success Room’, Knowledge Programme’.
- SENCOs are asked to help students who have difficulties with Maths and Arabic. Unfortunately some of them are specialists in Arabic, Social studies, and Islamic studies, but not Maths, so they face problems in supporting children with Maths difficulties. Maths and Science teachers generally do not have problems in supporting children with reading and writing difficulties, such as dyslexia (7).
- We lack resources (9).
- We face difficulties in distinguishing between students with LDs and slow learners (8).
- We need proper guidelines for the SENCO’s work responsibilities (9).
- We need more training (9).

CT (6 CTs)

- Students miss important lessons when they are withdrawn to attend classes in the LDs room (6).
- Many students with LDs do not get the chance to join the programme (6).
- Each school needs more than one SENCO, to enable all students with LDs to be helped, and to support other subjects, particularly English (4).
- Students with LDs could be helped in their original classes IF the following points were accepted by the Ministry of Education: no more than 25 students in the class; no administrative work for CTs; maximum 25 lessons a week; training programme for all CTs for dealing with different LDs; all the necessary resources provided in all schools; more flexibility in dealing with the syllabus. (5)

Parents of students with LDs (3 Females)

- We are happy that our children get extra help (3).
- We do not like the idea of our children having the label ‘Students with LDs’ (2).
- Fathers do not have time to help their children at home or to visit the school (3).
- We are incapable of helping our children at home with their LDs (3).
- We want more workshops to help us learn how to deal with our children’s LDs (3).

Students (6 LDs students from grade 4)

- We like our SENCO, because she likes us, plays with us and sings songs with us (6).
- We like attending the programme, because we like our SENCO and her teaching methods. We wish we could attend all the lessons with her (6).
- We do not like some of our CTs, because they treat us very strictly, tell us off when we cannot carry out class work and sometimes embarrass us in front of our classmates (4).
- We sometimes get taunted by classmates about being in the LDs programme (4).

5 DISCUSSION

I organize this section around research questions, relating findings back to the literature.

5.1 The assessment of students with LDs

Although questionnaire findings initially suggested SENCOs and CTs thought assessing students with LDs was an easy task (Table 1), in interviews SENCOs clarified this view. All nine referred to the unsuitability of the baseline test for the Omani context. This was unable to specify clearly the LDs experienced by the child. As Klein (1993) argues, identifying the exact difficulty of the child is crucial to providing appropriate support.

A related problem is that CTs diagnose LDs in about 10% of their students, and send all these to the SENCO. Sometimes, more than 120 students have to be reduced to 25 through the baseline test, which SENCOs recognized they lack training in carrying out. It seems, therefore, that when SENCOs and CTs responded to statements 1 & 3 (Table 1), they were thinking of the ease of identifying students with LDs on the basis of normal classroom assessment. Students with low marks in Arabic and/or Maths were often labelled 'LDs students'.

A further cause for concern was that responses indicated academic performance was the only source referred to in the assessment/diagnosis stage; other important factors such as family, health, school environment, curriculum and teaching methods, were not considered. Yet these elements are known to have a great influence on the child's education (Dockrell & McShane, 1993; Roffey & O'Reirdan, 1997; Lindsay & Dockrell, 2002) and should be investigated as well (Fontana, 1992). Macintyre & Deponio (2003) emphasise the importance of open and free communication between the teacher and the parents during the assessment stage. Yet, findings from both questionnaires and interviews revealed parents only participate in the programme by signing a letter giving the school permission to enrol their child. This is not encouraging.

5.2 The education of students with LDs

There was strong agreement amongst participants, as indicated by both questionnaire and interview data, that students attending classes with the SENCO did improve. Yet, both SENCOs and CTs also believed that helping those students in their original classes would be better (see Table 2, above). The literature supports this view (Rose & Howley, 2007). However, for this to happen, firstly schools need to be inclusive, in the sense of being able to meet all their students' needs and interests (Fletcher-Campbell, 2000); secondly, the curriculum needs to be inclusive, in other words, it must help students with LDs achieve as well as other students (Rose, 2007). Finally, teachers need to be well-equipped and well-trained to implement differentiation of teaching and task in order to meet all students' needs and interests (Rose & Howley, 2007).

The findings reveal that SENCOs and CTs are aware of the needs of students with LDs. They are keen to do their best to help them, but in a situation where CTs often have 30 lessons per week, more than 35 students in the class, many

administrative duties, a fixed curriculum, insufficient training and resources and difficulties in forming real partnerships with parents. They are thus limited in how they can apply what they recognize is best for their students. The LDs programme can at least provide help for some students with LDs in the school, so logically it is an effective programme. However, given that a SENCO is herself a former CT with 2 weeks' training, all CTs could support students with LDs in their original classes, given some changes to the conditions they work in.

In response to Statement 21, SENCOs and CTs expressed different views about the feelings of students who are asked to join the programme. Most SENCOs (64%) thought that the programme does not affect their self-esteem, but a similar percentage of CTs (67%) considered that students did feel ashamed, especially Grade 4 students. Perhaps students do not exhibit embarrassment while in the LDs room, but CTs can notice the effect on their self-esteem when they are ridiculed in their original classes.

5.3 SENCOs' and CTs' opinions about the role of parents in the LDs Programme

There was strong agreement between SENCOs and CTs that parents are insufficiently aware of the LDs programme and many feel unwilling to form positive partnerships. It appears from the findings that there are four main reasons for this: Firstly, schools do not make enough effort to approach families and encourage them to form parent-school relationships for the benefit of their children's education, as Dowling & Pound (1994) argue should be the case. According to interview data, some teachers give parents the impression that their child's case is hopeless, instead of demonstrating they are trying to help the child improve. Secondly, many parents are not well educated, which limits the extent to which they can help their children study, or fathers work in distant places. This is a concern as, due to gender-related issues, mothers often find it difficult to foster relationships with the child's school. Thirdly, many parents think they are only invited to the school when their child faces difficulties. Such an unfortunate perception builds up negative feelings about school visits. It would be preferable if parents were informed of the positive aspects of their child's progress. Finally, parents are not always made to feel welcome at the school. For example, they may face difficulties in making contact with the CT responsible for their child's education, or they may feel school staff are not always happy to spend time with them discussing their child's progress and problems.

5.4 SENCOs' opinions about the LDs Programme

SENCOs believe the programme helps students improve, but could be more effective if modified. Firstly, they suggest each school could have more than one SENCO, one for each of the three main subjects that students experience difficulties in, namely Arabic, Maths, and English. SENCOs who were formerly Arabic, Islamic studies or Social Studies teachers referred to difficulties in dealing with students with dyspraxia and related Maths difficulties. SENCOs who were formerly Maths or Science teachers consider themselves able to deal with dyslexic children but not

as well as former Arabic teachers. They also identified a need for a SENCO with English teaching experience. Secondly, SENCOs asked for a set of guidelines for them to follow. Thirdly, although they expressed widely differing views in the questionnaire about the need for more training (Table 4, Statements 24 & 25), all nine SENCOs interviewed requested more training, saying there was still much to learn about LDs. This is an encouraging finding, showing they were well aware of their role and enthusiastic to learn more. Possibly those who disagreed with Statements 24 & 25 interpreted the statement personally, thinking that selecting 'agree' might suggest they lacked faith in their own teaching abilities. Fourthly, SENCOs identified the need for a reliable, valid and practical assessment tool for diagnosing learning difficulties, suited to the Omani context. Fifthly, they indicated time spent on paperwork should be reduced, so that their efforts could be more fully deployed in helping students with LDs. I was very impressed by the way they talked about helping students overcome embarrassment about being asked to attend classes in the LDs room. They gave these rooms very positive names, such as 'Life Boat', 'Success Room', 'Knowledge Programme'. Fortunately the term 'LDs' is not widespread in schools. All SENCOs referred to the need for more resources.

5.5 CTs' opinions about the LDs Programme

Most CTs are satisfied that the LD programme helps students who join (Statements 10 & 11, above), but dissatisfied that it cannot cater for all students with LDs (Statements 7, 8 & 9).

There was an apparent contradiction in CTs' responses regarding the effectiveness of educating students with LDs in special classrooms. Responses to Statements 10, 11 & 12 (Table 1) suggested most CTs agree that educating students separately for some classes is valuable. However, responses to Statement 18 indicate a significant minority feel helping those students in their original classes would give all real opportunities to achieve success according to their own abilities, interests and style, as Broderick, Mehta-Parekh & Reid (2005) and Rose (2007) argue. Five out of six CTs interviewed similarly believed that teaching in the LDs room could be carried out in the original classes if certain important points were considered by the Ministry. On the one hand, CTs seemed to recognize that the support students get in the LDs room helps them achieve more. On the other, they seemed ready to include students with LDs in their classes, given reduced class sizes, reduced workloads, suitable training, necessary resources and greater flexibility in dealing with the syllabus.

5.6 Parents' opinions on the LDs Programme

The three female parents interviewed had generally positive opinions about the LDs programme. They thought it was helping their children academically as well as socially. These parents had already shown a positive attitude towards forming an effective partnership with their child's school by asking the SENCO to conduct workshops to help them learn how to extend the SENCOs' work at home. Such workshops could develop and facilitate the concept of forming free and open dialogues between teachers and parents to achieve real partnerships (Gibson, 2006).

However, these three parents were not a representative sample as they had been chosen by the school administration, were educated and already supportive of the programme. My plan had been to interview a random sample of parents, but this was not feasible because of lack of time and the difficulty of convincing parents to participate in interviews.

5.7 Students' opinions on the LDs Programme

The six students I interviewed were from Grade 4 from 3 different schools. Unexpectedly, five of the six said that they did not like some of their teachers because they were strict, sometimes made them feel stupid and told them off in class. In contrast, they all said they liked their SENCOs and the way they treated them. Two even said that attending the LDs programme made them like school more. I concluded there are four main differences between what happens in these students' original classes and the LDs room. Firstly, SENCOs always have a positive attitude and desire to help their students and expect them to achieve regardless of their LDs. Secondly, the SENCO can choose topics, tasks and techniques which suit her students; she is not restricted to an assigned syllabus. Thirdly, the SENCO deals with a small number of students (not more than five at the same time). Finally, the SENCO makes sure that every one of her students experiences a sense of achievement, which gives them a more positive motivation to learn, as Dyson & Millward (2000) say happens.

6 IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

6.1 Implications

From the above discussion a number of recommendations can be made:

- The development of a suitable diagnostic/assessment instrument is clearly an urgent priority to enable SENCOs and CTs to identify the exact LDs of each child, because providing a successful education for students with LDs starts by conducting a successful and accurate assessment (Klein, 1993).
- A set of guidelines is urgently needed, stating the aims of the Ministry of Education in assessing and educating students with LDs, and the role of the SENCO and CT in this.
- Although some SENCOs suggested a need for two or three SENCOs per school, one well trained SENCO in each school is enough, if her main job is to help CTs and parents deal appropriately with students. She can do this by arranging training workshops in the school and dealing with the most difficult cases.
- A majority of CTs seemed to feel they could support children with LDs in their own classes if the proper conditions were provided. The Ministry could consider acting on this view, which would require a move towards an inclusive curriculum and differentiated instruction, allowing students to work on different outcomes according to their abilities.
- School administrators should pay more attention to developing real partnerships with parents and educating them on how to help their children at home.

- Other professionals, such as psychiatrists, paediatricians, and medical practitioners, should be involved in the assessment stage where they are available.
- A regular programme of in-service training for SENCOs and CTs should be started to keep them informed of new methods for assessing and educating students with LDs.
- A module concerning LDs should be introduced into pre-service training programmes to prepare future teachers.

6.2 Limitations

However, these recommendations need to be put in context, considering the limitations of the study. Firstly, since this used limited data collected from only one region of Oman, it cannot claim to represent the views of all SENCOs and CTs, parents and students in the Sultanate, so the findings do not support broad generalisations. Secondly, additional data could have been obtained through observations of the LDs room and of original classes. Thirdly, while findings were obtained from SENCOs, CTs, parents, and LDs students, other professionals could have been included such as Senior Teachers, Student Advisors, Headteachers, and LDs Supervisors. Fourthly, more parents could have been interviewed, based on random selection, which would have provided more reliable data about parents' perceptions of the LDs programme.

Further research is needed to gain a better understanding of the most effective strategies for helping students with LDs in Oman. Issues that would merit attention include the causes of LDs, their diagnosis, the role of the SENCO, and the hindrances that prevent effective partnerships between schools and parents.

6.3 Conclusions

The results of this study into the perceptions of SENCOs, CTs, parents and students with LDs indicate broad agreement that the programme in Dhahira is effective in helping students with LDs. SENCOs and CTs were positive, while parents think the programme helps children overcome LDs. Students like the SENCOs' methodology, which helps them experience success.

However, the study also identified certain areas that need attention. Firstly, it suggests that a new assessment/diagnostic tool needs to be developed to identify those who need the LDs programme. Secondly, closer collaboration between teachers, parents, the child and other professionals, could strengthen the assessment/diagnosis process, which could see a more structured use of observations. Thirdly, SENCOs would benefit from a set of guidelines for their work, also more resources for LDs rooms, more in-service training and less paperwork. Furthermore, teachers, parents and students themselves should be more systematically involved in sharing knowledge, experience and skills in order to help students with LDs progress in their education. Finally, the study suggests a strategy needs to be developed that will enable support to be provided for all students with LDs. CTs suggested that all students with LDs could be helped in their original classes if the conditions provided to the SENCO in the LDs room were

provided for each CT in their classrooms. The SENCO would then work as a coordinator, adviser and trainer in the school.

This last view suggests the Ministry could consider moving away from a curriculum where teachers are expected to work with all students at one pace in order to 'finish the syllabus' to one where different outcomes are expected from different students in any particular lesson or semester, depending on individuals' abilities and interests. It suggests a move towards inclusive classrooms and inclusive teaching, and the use of differentiated instruction and differentiated tasks that give all the opportunity to achieve.

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