

# **LEARNING SUPPORT NETWORK OF PARENTS WHO HAVE CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES**

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## **Abstract**

There is a need to develop learning support networks for special educators. A case study design was chosen in order to explore answers to the question of, what factors prevent parents from giving learning support networks for their children in the special education class? The purpose of using a case study was to gain an understanding of the research question from the participants' perspective. The case study was made up of sub-cases that were parents of children who all went to a particular school at the time of their referral for assessment of learning disabilities. The data collected through unstructured interviews were analysed using the constant comparative method. The finding that emerged as a major factor that prevented parents from seeking learning networks support when children started failing in the foundation phase was ignorance of the phenomenon of learning disabilities. The other factors that were identified related to parents' understanding of their children's learning disabilities; their being illiterate; and the belief in cultural issues. Recommendations were suggested for both the special educators and educational psychologist relating to the need for parent education on the learning and development of their children with specific emphasis on learning disabilities. The role parents can play to develop in learning support networks with educators was also highlighted.

**Keywords:** Intervention, Special education, Support, Learning networks

## **Introduction**

Learning disabilities is viewed with growing concern amongst educators. Nationwide, some 115, 000 school children have not mastered writing, reading and counting skills (Ministry of Education Malaysia – Education Development Masterplan 2006 – 2010). A few primary students ended up enrolling in special education classes.

The seriousness of the learning problems appeared to be realised when the child continues to experience failures (Ljusberg, 2011). Parents tended to seek intervention for their children's learning difficulties only after they (children) continued to have failures, even in primary school. It is this delay by parents to seek intervention that becomes of concern to the researcher. Were there any other factors which caused this delay?

The role of parents of children with learning disabilities is of paramount importance in facilitating their children's learning and development. Leyden (2002) hold that the best practice in early intervention is to use the systems approach to enable and empower families or parents in facilitating the development of their children with disabilities. This view is supported by Laszloffy (2002) who advocate involving parents in activities that can foster academic and social growth of their children.

It has been observed that even some regular class educators are not able to identify learning problems in time (Fabiano, Pelham, Waschbusch, Gnagy, Lahey, Chronis, *et al.* (2006). Hence learners experiencing these difficulties are not able to receive the support they need (Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB), 2012-13). One of the factors that appears to cause the delay in the identification of learning problems is that most schools still have a large enrolment, way beyond the recommended educator-learner ratio of 1:40. It is not easy for educators to pick up such difficulties, even if they were conversant with the identification process.

### **The Research Problem**

The purpose of this study is to explore and describe factors that prevent parents from seeking timeous intervention for their children's scholastic problems. The research question being investigated here is: "What prevents parents from seeking early intervention for their children with learning problems in the normal classes?" Other specific questions arising from this research problem are:

- a) What is the parents' understanding of their children's learning disabilities ?
- b) To what extent can parents be involved in the early intervention process of the learning disabilities of their children?

### **The Research Design**

This study will adopt the qualitative approach. This research approach has been chosen in this study because the researcher would like to find answers to the research question, as Bryman (1988:61) puts it, through the "eyes of the people" being studied. In qualitative research not everybody has an equal chance of being included in a study. The non-probabilistic method of sampling will be used in this study. Patton (in Merriam, 1998:61) states that the most common form of non-probabilistic sampling is purposive sampling.

### **Sampling**

The researcher decided to include parents of children from the same school, because the principal and her heads of departments take the initiative to alert parents to their children's learning problems.

The primary school these children went to is situated in a rural area in Kg. Sinulihan, Sook, Keningau. The villagers living in this area have limited access to running water and sanitation. The school draws its population from children living in the village, which is within walking distance from it, and serves about 150 families. Most of the families are self-employed. The few parents and guardians who are employed work in Sook and are as far away as Keningau. The school caters for Standard One up to Standard Six, and each grade has only one class. The Remedial Class caters for 18 children under the supervision of a Remedial Teacher. The enrolment of the school is made up of about 223 learners and 37 teachers. The educator-learner ratio in the normal class estimated at 1:35. The assumption that one would draw on the basis of this seemingly ideal educator-learner

ratio is that educators would be able to identify learners experiencing scholastic problems timeously.

*Participant "A"*

This participant (the guardian of the child in the Remedial Class) was the first one to be interviewed. She indicated that she was the elder sister to the biological mother of the child whom was brought for assessment, and therefore the aunt of the child. When his biological mother got married to another man, the child went to stay with her and his stepfather in another village. The child failed up to five subjects while staying with his mother and stepfather. He previously failed Bahasa Melayu (Malay Language) and other subjects (Bahasa Inggeris (English), Sains (Sciences) and Mathematics and Islamic Education). The participant later on asked the child's mother to let her stay with him at her place, and attend school in her village. When he went to live with the participant he subsequently failed twice. That was when the participant decided to seek help to address the problem of repeated failures at the advice of the then acting headmistress.

*Participant "B"*

The second interview was conducted with Participant "B", who is also a guardian of the child referred to the Remedial Class. She indicated that she was the maternal grandmother of the child, and had been staying with the grandson ever since he was born. His mother left him with her parents when she got married. Consequently, both the grandmother and grandfather have been full-time guardians from his time of birth up until the time the researcher conducted the interview with Participant "B". This participant lives in the same village as participant "A".

*Participant "C"*

Participant "C" was the last to be interviewed. She is the biological mother of one of the three children who were referred to the researcher for the assessment of learning difficulties from the same school. She indicated that her son had failed five subjects quite a number of times (could not remember exactly how many times). Participant "C" also lives in the same village as the other two participants. She is a single parent and consequently the sole breadwinner of her household. She acknowledged that she comes from a financially needy background as she struggles to make ends meet from the wages she earns from her part-time jobs.

## **Results**

*Transcript of Participant "A"*

When Participant "A" was asked about the factors that prevented her from seeking help for her nephew, before failing repeatedly, she initially indicated that she had financial constraints. She would have to incur extra costs for transport and school fees because the school in which the child would be given learning support is outside the village in which they are living.

When participant "A" was asked what she thought of the repeated failures of her nephew in the five subjects, she indicated that she "never thought of anything". She attributed her ignorance or lack of foresight to the fact that she was illiterate and had not been to school. She also mentioned that although she had realised that the child was a "block", she thought that his mind would "open up" as he grew up." She thought this would happen as time progressed, "not knowing there was somewhere he could be helped to improve".

She further explained that the child's mind had not developed enough to understand quickly what he was taught at school. She went on to explain that she understood that people do not develop at the same pace - some develop faster and others much slower. However, she never thought, "there was somewhere he could be „treated“, so that he can be able to understand quickly". She further indicated that if the school had not made her aware that the child needed to be given learning support, she would not have thought of it. She acknowledged that, "as for knowing where he could be taken to, we knew nothing" and that they had wasted the child's time by delaying to seek help for his learning problems.

*Transcript of Participant "B"*

The introductory questions of the interview included those referring to the grades which the grandson had failed, as well as the number of times he failed. She indicated that he failed the subjects many times, particularly Bahasa Melayu (Malaysia Language) with which he experienced the greatest difficulty and could not remember exactly how many times he had failed. (When the grandson was brought for assessment he had failed Bahasa Melayu.).

When asked about factors that prevented her from seeking learning support early, instead of waiting for the child to fail repeatedly, she indicated that she did not know that there was somewhere else the child could get help. She expressed being "puzzled and did not know what they could do". The researcher also asked about her understanding of the child's repeated failures and she indicated that she thought that as the child was still young, his mind would "open up" in time and he would be in a position to grasp a few things that he was taught at school. When the grandson kept on repeating, she thought that he was "very playful". She also indicated that his repeated failures were due to being "negligent" with regard to his schoolwork.

The participant also mentioned that she was beginning to think that if her grandson continued with repeated failures she would have thought that such religious rituals would have to be performed to help the grandson's mind to "open up", and remedy his learning problems.

*Transcript of Participant "C"*

When asked on whether there had been any factors that prevented her from seeking learning support for her son earlier, when he was still in the normal class, . she initially indicated that when the educators first sent a message to her so that they could discuss her son's learning problems, however she could not go to the school immediately as then she was working far away from home, and did not have time to go and see the educators. The question was asked again. This time the researcher specifically asked her, whether there were any factors that prevented her from seeking help for her son. In response to this question she said that she could not seek help then for her son's learning problems, because of financial constraints, as there were going to be transport costs and additional school fees involved.

She was asked whether before she was advised by the educators on what could be done about her son's problems, she was aware that the child had to be taken elsewhere to get learning support for his learning problems. She mentioned that, "I had no such idea, I had never come across such an idea" that something else could be done to help her son. She

was also asked what she thought of her son's repeated failures. She said that she thought her son was a "block", meaning that he was unintelligent. Consequently, he was incapable of understanding what he was taught at school.

#### *Coding of data*

Base on the transcripts, the following straightforward category codes presented; **IG**: Ignorance, **PU**: Parental understanding of the child's learning difficulties and subsequent repeated failures; **CB**: Cultural belief; **IT**: Illiteracy; **FC**: Financial constraints; **TC**: Time constraints.

*Table 1 - Ignorance / Lack of awareness (IG)*

Subcategory	About learning difficulties	About what they could do
<b>Participant A</b>	"We were not aware of anything...had we been aware we would not have taken such a long time"...	"We did not know where he could be taken to..."  "I never thought that there was somewhere he could be „treated“ so that he could be able to understand quickly”.
<b>Participant B</b>	"we did not know"... "we were just puzzled" "it was just darkness"	"... did not know what to do"
<b>Participant C</b>		... "that we could take him to another school... "I never had that idea, I had never come across such an idea"

*Table 2 - Parents' understanding of their children's learning difficulties (PU)*

Subcategory	Developmental factors	Playful	Negligent	Lack of intelligence
<b>Participant A</b>	"We thought he would „open up“ as he grew up; "he had not developed a mind of understanding quickly ..."			"That was when I realised that he was a <i>block</i> ".
<b>Participant B</b>	"We thought that in time he would „open up“ where possible and then be in a	"We thought he was very „playful“, when his school report came and he	"He was negligent"	

	position to „see“ a bit and grasp a few things”	had failed, we would reprimand him saying to him he was „playful“	
<b>Participant C</b>			“We had seen that he is a <i>block</i> ”

*Table 3 - Illiteracy (IT)*

CATEGORY	PARTICIPANT A	PARTICIPANT B	PARTICIPANT C
<b>ILLITERACY</b>	... “because if you have not been to school yourself, you don’t have foresight”	“if one has been to school, one can have an idea as to how the child can be helped”; ... “we have not been to school .... we don’t know what to do academically ..... .....	

*Table 4 - Culture belief (CB)*

CATEGORY	PARTICIPANT A	PARTICIPANT B	PARTICIPANT C
<b>CULTURAL BELIEF</b>		... “people tend to trouble one another” ..... ... “would it be possible that they have „stepped ahead“ by himself.	

In the following section an overview of categories and sub-categories tabled in the above matrices will now be given:

*Ignorance: about learning difficulties and what could be done*

The theme of ignorance emerged from all the interviews that was conducted with the three participants. Parents either explicitly or implicitly reflected on their ignorance about the whole situation of not seeking learning support in time, when their children started failing in the lower grades of the foundation phase. Their ignorance involved not knowing what it was that led to their children’s repeated failures, as well as what could be done to address the learning difficulties that their children were experiencing.

*Parents’ understanding of the child’s learning difficulties and subsequent failures*

It was very clear from the views held by parents about their children’s repeated failures, that they were ignorant of the phenomenon of learning difficulties. Their understanding

of the repeated failures included playfulness, negligence, Developmental issues (that the child was still too young) and lack of intelligence on the part of the child.

#### *Illiteracy*

Two of the parents, i.e Participant “A” and “B” alluded to illiteracy as a reason for not realising what was happening with their children or what could be done to help them with their learning difficulties. They indicated that they had not been to school themselves and were still illiterate at the time of the interviews. Consequently, they could not understand the problems that their children were experiencing, hence did not know what to do in order to help them.

#### *Cultural belief*

Even though this category emerged from the interview with only one parent, I mention it because of its importance in reflecting some of the cultural beliefs of the family to which the participant belongs. She indicated that she was beginning to think that if the child’s school failure persisted, she was going to think that there could be a possibility of people trouble involved. The parent/guardian believed that such acts of people who like to trouble other people would have made her grandson unable to understand what he was taught at school.

### **Discussion**

The categories and sub-categories that have emerged from the interviews conducted with the participants constitute the findings of this research study. Those categories and sub-categories, which directly answer the research question are discussed and supported by relevant quotes from the interviews.

#### *Ignorance/Lack of awareness*

Participants revealed the category of “ignorance” or “lack of awareness” in various ways. They indicated that they did not know or were not aware of anything. This category was expressed in the following two sub-categories:

##### *i. Ignorance or lack of awareness about learning disabilities*

The sub-category of ignorance or lack of awareness was revealed as not knowing what was happening with the child. Parents said that they were “puzzled” by the repeated failures or simply that they “did not know” what was happening with the children. One of the parents got her husband to teach the child with learning problems, together with her own children, who were not experiencing any problems. However, she was surprised when her children could remember what they had been taught the previous day, while the child with learning problems remembered nothing.

As parents found themselves in the state of confusion and ignorance about what was happening with the children, they thought that going to another grades in the following year would ultimately help the children gradually understand what they were taught at school. They thought that “as months went by” in the year, things could improve. However, when this did not happen all they could do was to wait for the following year, so that the children could go to another grade in the normal class.

##### *ii Ignorance or lack of awareness about what could be done*

Parents were not aware that something could be done to address their children’s repeated failures that were the result of learning difficulties. It was established from the

psychoeducational assessment results that these children had learning problems. Their problems presented primarily as non-acquisition of basic scholastic skills of reading, spelling and mathematics, in spite of having repeated failures several times.

One of the parents indicated that she thought the child's performance might improve after going automatically to the next grade in the following year, and never thought that there was "somewhere the child could be treated" to address his learning difficulties, and consequently be in a position to understand quickly when he was taught. This parent acknowledged that she "in fact wasted the child's time by allowing him to follow normal curriculum". However, without the educator's advice she would not have been aware of what support could be offered to the child.

Another parent said that, "we did not know what to do" and it was "just darkness" to them. The child was still too young to leave school, hence the only option she had was to have the child remain at school in spite of repeated failure. She expressed a concern that it looked like the child was going to follow in the footsteps of his uncle as he had experienced the same problem of not progressing scholastically. The third parent indicated that had it not been for the educator's idea to have the child assessed and subsequently placed at a remedial school, she would never have thought of that. She said that she had "never come across such an idea before".

The parents who participated in this study would not have been in a position to take the initiative to approach the school, without the knowledge of what they could do. They had to depend on the educators who themselves had waited for the children to fail repeatedly before they advised the parents on the measures they could take in order to get learning support for the children.

#### *Parents' understanding of the children's learning disabilities*

Each of the parents expressed their own understanding of the child's learning disabilities. There were certain views that were common to the three parents, and others that were unique. The views they expressed on their children's learning disabilities were seen against the backdrop of repeated failure. As parents had no knowledge of the concept of learning difficulties, the phenomenon that they could relate to was that of repeated failure. The following views were revealed which represented the parents' own understanding of the children's learning disabilities.

##### *i. Developmental factors*

Two of the parents referred to developmental factors in expressing their understanding of the children's repeated failure. When one of the children started failing, the parent attributed that to his being too young to understand what was being taught at school. She regarded school failure as the result of a mind that had not „opened up“, to enable the child to "understand quickly". The parent further indicated that she understood that people develop at different rates, some develop at a faster pace, while others develop at a much slower pace. According to her understanding, she saw the child as falling into the latter category. She hoped that the child's mind would "open up" as he grew up, and would subsequently be able to understand what he was taught at school. This means that delaying to seek learning support was influenced by this understanding, as it never occurred to her that in spite of the child's developmental stage, he could still benefit from learning support.



The second parent, who also brought up the issue of the developmental stage of the child, thought that the child was still too young and his mind would “open up” as he repeated the grades. She indicated that she thought that repeating would afford him the opportunity to gradually grasp what he was taught at school. She said that she was just “confused” and did not know what to do, except to let him remain at school and repeat grades. In recent years significant efforts have been made to identify subgroups of students with learning disabilities. Kirk and Gallagher (in Ysseldyke, Algozzine & Thurlow, 2000:76) differentiate between developmental and academic learning disabilities. The former subgroup of disabilities consists of attention, memory, perceptual, perceptual motor, thinking and language disorders. The latter subgroup is characterised by disorders in reading, spelling, written expression, handwriting and arithmetic.

The fact that parents attributed their children’s learning problems to developmental factors is consistent with Funkhouser and Gonzales (1998) view of developmental and academic learning difficulties. One of the parents indicated that her child’s mind had not developed enough to enable him to understand what he was taught at school. By this she referred to mainly, the academic tasks of reading, spelling, writing and arithmetic. She hoped that the child could perhaps be able to master such tasks after the mind had “opened up”. This parent also mentioned that there was a time when her husband tried to teach the child experiencing learning difficulties, together with her children, every evening at home. She noted that the child would not remember any of the things he was taught the previous evening. In terms of the developmental learning disabilities mentioned above, this would have implied that the child had poor memory or a memory disorder.

The second parent expressed her understanding of her child’s learning problems in terms of developmental factors, in a very much similar manner to the one mentioned above. This parent also hoped that in time the child’s mind would “open up” and consequently be in a position to gradually grasp what he was taught at school. In view of Funkhouser and Gonzales (1998) understanding of both developmental and academic learning disabilities the parents’ understanding was also sound. However, they delayed seeking learning support for the children, hoping that the learning problems will sort themselves out in time. The parents thought that as the children repeat failures, they would still be growing up as well, both physically and mentally.

*ii. The child perceived as “playful”*

Only one parent attributed the child’s repeated failure to being “playful”. She mentioned that each time the child brought his report home, and he had failed, she would reprimand him that he was “playing.” By this she implied that he did not take his schoolwork in a more serious light, hence, if he was not „playful“ he would have been able to pass. This was the parent’s own understanding of the child’s learning difficulties, which is supported by Stewart (1990) when he maintains that... “every parent is an individual, with his concerns and ideas about his child, the school, educators and the world. At any given moment, the way a parent sees things represents reality to them at that point and time”. However, the same parent who saw her child as being “playful”, observed that the child seemed to like school. She also mentioned that her child’s school attendance was very regular, a fact she could not reconcile with his being “playful”.

*iii. The child perceived as “negligent”*

The parent, who thought that the child was “playful”, also indicated that she thought that the repeated school failure was the result of being “negligent”. The manner in which this

parent reacted to the child's learning problems concurs with what Stewart (1978) thinks - "a parent who is uninformed and bewildered by it all is unlikely to keep his own perspective where it should be, and certainly will be unable to help his child to recognise when the problem lies not in himself, but in others". He adds that parents further make life difficult for children with learning problems by not appreciating individual differences. The parent could have said that the child was "negligent" not realising that the problem did not lie in the child only, but in others as well, who due to lack of appreciation of diversity could not give the relevant support that the child needed. A comment such as the one made by this parent, is according to Stewart (1990) not made out of malice, but may seem malicious, hence has to be viewed against the backdrop of being uninformed and lacking in the understanding of the problem at hand.

#### *iv. Lack of intelligence*

Lack of intelligence in the child was described with a derogatory term, i.e. "the child is a block". Two parents used this term to indicate that their children were unintelligent and could not master their scholastic tasks. The implied meaning of the term "block" was that the child's head was so hard that nothing academic could penetrate it (Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB), 2012-13). Parents who understood their children's repeated failures as a result of lack of intelligence seem to concur with Quay's (in Ysseldyke et al., 2000:176) view that there are several educators who believe that the causes of failure reside within the student. Leyden (2002) acknowledges that a parent who understands his child's abilities and disabilities, is in a better position to help him function in whatever conditions life imposes on him. He further added that a parent who fully comprehends his child's complex situation is able to give him a lot of support in the event of being called "stupid" or "dumb" when "he is not running as fast... intellectually,... as the others". As the two parents viewed their children as being unintelligent, they therefore concluded that, that was the cause for their repeated failure. They delayed seeking learning support for the children, because they thought their condition was to stay and nothing could be done about it. If these parents fully understood their children's problems, they would have been the ones who offered them support, instead of them associating their condition with a "block".

#### *Illiteracy*

The parents who mentioned that they were illiterate, thought this factor also contributed to the delay in seeking learning support for their children. The one parent hinted that ... "we have not been to school, if we knew, we would have perhaps thought of what was happening scholastically". She indicated that she was completely illiterate. She believed that "if one has been to school, one can have an idea as to how the child could be helped". The second parent who said, "we never thought of anything" when her child kept on failing, alluded to the fact that, "if you have not been to school yourself, you do not have foresight". These parents appear to have experienced underlying feelings of frustration and being unhelpful in preventing the delay in seeking learning support for their children, as a result of being illiterate.

Anastopoulos and Farley (2003) acknowledge that illiterate parents may be unable to give support to their children in literacy and numeracy tasks. However, this does not mean that the potential contribution of illiterate parents in the education of their children should be overlooked. These authors argue that, the fact that parents of learners with special educational needs (including those with learning disabilities) may be illiterate, should not deny them the opportunity to offer support in other areas of functioning- such as physical

care, life skills education, musical enrichment, cultural and recreational activities. They further maintain that involving parents with no formal education in such school matters will encourage them to be more committed to their children's education.

#### *Cultural belief*

Various beliefs and views held by parents on "disability" are likely to influence the way they react to the child. Such beliefs are closely related with the manner in which, the wider society or the minority ethnic group to which, the parent belongs views "disability" (Dale, 1996:48). As the researcher listened to the interview and read through the interview transcript from which the category, "cultural belief" emerged, the researcher initially thought that it would fall under the category, "parents' understanding of their children's learning difficulties" as discussed above. However, it emerged as a category on its own because of its cultural, ethnic context.

The parent who brought up the issue relating to "cultural belief" indicated that it does happen that some people in their community practise acts of troubling other people. In relating this belief to her child's learning problems, she mentioned that when some people had "stepped ahead" of him, meaning when such acts had been performed, the child would be unable to understand what he was taught at school. She indicated that as time went by, she would have thought of seeking advice from her "ustaz" (religious teacher), in order to help her son's mind "open up". Such advice involve the use of water that has been blessed by the "ustaz", and has to be used as directed by him. However, that belief was dispelled after the then headmaster advised her to take her child for assessment and the child was subsequently placed in the Remedial Class.

The participant who attributed the child's repeated failures to a cultural belief, adopted her own individual view. She thought that performing religious practices could help address the scholastic difficulties that the child was experiencing. However, her cultural and religious beliefs changed when the headmistress advised her to take the child for assessment. This is consistent with Dale's (1996:49) view that such beliefs may change in response to "different events and demands that the family... may face" from time to time.

#### **Limitations Of The Study**

This being a case study, the selection of sub-cases was limited to only those parents and guardians whose children went to the same school. These parents happened to be the only ones who were available for participation in this study, and whose children went to the same school at the time of their referral for assessment. As indicated in chapter one, when I first noted this problem there had been an influx of learners who were referred for assessment, after they had failed repeatedly. A variety of factors could have been unearthed if parents of learners from the various schools were involved as well. A limitation was noted, particularly in the interviewing process. Conducting an unstructured interview turned out to be a somewhat difficult exercise to handle for the researcher. Limited experience in this type of interviewing resulted in much information that was not really relevant to the purpose of the study and perhaps, provided fewer answers to the research question.

## **Conclusion**

Further research into factors that cause educators to delay in initiating the process of seeking learning support, would be necessary. This could perhaps give a much broader picture of this practice of not seeking help for learners in time.

In addition, General Systems Theory (von Bertalanffy, 1968) is of relevance to this study - the interaction between the subsystem within the family, i.e. the parents, and the subsystem made up of the teaching staff in the school, is important in providing holistic knowledge of the development and learning of the child. The child experiencing learning problems also forms a subsystem that belongs to both the school and the family. In order for the intervention process to be set in motion, educators need to communicate and collaborate with parents.

To conclude, it does appear that the main purpose of the research has been realised with the uncovering of factors that prevented parents from seeking learning support for their children in time. The factors that emerged from the interviews are, “ignorance about what was happening to the children” and “what they could do to address the problem; parents understanding of the children’s learning difficulties”, “illiteracy” and “cultural belief”. The findings made give a clear indication that there is a need for parent education.

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