

The Reality of Diagnosing Learning Difficulties in the Algerian Primary School

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate how primary school teachers in Algeria diagnose learning difficulties and examine the gap between classroom practices and opportunities for improvement. To address this research problem, the researchers adopted a descriptive approach to identify the phenomenon under study, monitor its manifestations, and predict its development among pupils with learning difficulties, drawing on both field research and documentary analysis. The findings of the study can be summarised as follows: the issue of learning difficulties does not receive sufficient attention within teacher training programs; the diagnosis of learning difficulties in Algerian primary schools relies largely on teachers' personal experience and is not guided by rigorous scientific standards; and teachers demonstrate limited familiarity with diagnostic tests and measurement tools for learning difficulties, which restricts their practical application with this group of pupils under appropriate conditions.

Keywords: learning difficulties, diagnosis, primary school, primary school teacher

1. Introduction:

Learning is considered one of the most important goals that human beings seek to achieve in their lives. It is a process that occurs continuously through interaction with and adaptation to the external environment, as well as through the acquisition of new behavioural patterns appropriate to individual needs. This is reflected in personal behaviour, daily life requirements, and family and social relationships.

When a child enters school, they are confronted with prepared programmes and curricula that they are required to study, through which they acquire knowledge and skills and develop inclinations and attitudes that contribute to the construction of their personality. However,

during their educational journey, children may encounter several obstacles and challenges that hinder their academic achievement, including learning difficulties. Addressing this concept is not a simple matter, as it is a complex topic that has witnessed rapid development and increasing attention from specialists, becoming the focus of numerous research studies and investigations.

Various disciplines have contributed to the study of this topic, including psychology, medicine, sociology, genetics, linguistics, and special education. These fields aim to identify factors that may impede the educational process and negatively affect learners' outcomes and academic achievement.

Learning difficulties are attributed to hidden causes that do not appear clearly to the teacher. Learners classified within this category do not exhibit any disability, psychological disorders, or social problems that can lead to learning difficulties. Such learners may be typical or even outstanding in another domain that is unrelated to difficulty, which prevents them from succeeding in a specific learning situation rather than in others.

2. Research Problem:

Learning difficulties are among the evident problems that learners face in their ability to achieve academically, as school success is linked to the extent to which learners acquire developmental skills related to the growth of the cognitive processes responsible for academic, personal, and social adjustment. Examples include difficulties in attention, perception, thinking, memory, or problem solving; academic skills related to performance difficulties, such as reading, arithmetic, expression, and writing; and subsequent problems in learning other school subjects. Hence, academic learning difficulties emerge as an inevitable result of developmental learning difficulties.

Learning difficulties are not local problems associated with a specific society, country, culture, or language. Instead, they are found among learners of different nationalities with diverse cultures and languages. Evidence of this is the accumulation of research and studies conducted worldwide on children who experience difficulties in reading, writing, or arithmetic. A study by Lyon (1995) indicated that dyslexia is the most prevalent type of academic learning difficulty, with 80% of learners with learning difficulties experiencing reading difficulties compared with those with writing or arithmetic difficulties (Merbah, 2014, p. 7).

Thus, the idea for this study emerged as a contribution by researchers to highlight some of the field-based problems that teachers experience daily in the classroom with learners who face learning difficulties that hinder their academic progress. Teachers often find themselves confronted with pedagogical challenges, for which they seek solutions. Therefore, they strive to support struggling learners on the basis of the outcomes of the training they have received, their scientific and practical experience, or through interaction with colleagues who have previously encountered similar situations. Such efforts may succeed at times and fail at others. Accordingly, this study seeks to provide answers to the following questions:

- What special education topics related to learning difficulties do teachers receive during their training?
- Are there tools and criteria that teachers use to diagnose learning difficulties?
- What is the nature of teachers' engagement with tests and scales that assist in diagnosing these difficulties?

3. Reasons for Choosing the Topic:

The reasons for selecting this study are as follows:

Subjective reasons: These factors are related to the researchers' extensive field experience in primary education, amounting to approximately thirty years of teaching and more than ten years of inspection, as well as their participation in several national, regional, and local conferences addressing learning difficulties from various perspectives. In addition, their interaction with teachers through school visits and district-level pedagogical seminars enabled them to document the challenges teachers face in diagnosing learning difficulties in practice.

Objective reasons: These include the following:

- Identifying the challenges teachers encounter in diagnosing learning difficulties and how they address them;
- Examine the methods adopted by teachers in the diagnostic process;
- Determining the tools and criteria used by teachers in diagnosing learning difficulties.

4. Research objectives:

The objectives of this research can be identified as follows:

- Identifying educational topics related to learning difficulties that teachers experience during training;
- The tools and criteria adopted by teachers in diagnosing learning difficulties should be determined to assess the scientific level of diagnosis.
- Linking the diagnosis of learning difficulties between classroom practice and the findings of academic research in the field.

5. Significance of the Research:

The significance of this research lies in critically examining the field reality of diagnosing learning difficulties by primary school teachers and in revealing the extent of their competence in carrying out the diagnostic process to identify the underlying causes of learning difficulties and to provide appropriate support to learners to overcome them.

This study can also bring this reality closer to that of academic researchers, enabling them to link the results of their research to classroom practice and to become acquainted with teachers' actual capacities and possibilities for diagnosing learning difficulties. In addition, it provides practitioners in the field with the findings of this study for their benefit and to help them apply

its results to the treatment of learning situations and the improvement of the educational process.

6. Research Terminology

6.1. Learning difficulties

Children with learning difficulties are defined as "that group of children who suffer from disorders in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using written or spoken language, which manifest in disorders of listening, thinking, speaking, reading, spelling, and arithmetic, and which are attributed to causes related to minimal brain dysfunction, but not to causes related to intellectual, auditory, visual, or other disabilities" (Messaad, 2012, p. 67).

A child may be identified as having a learning difficulty if:

- There is a significant discrepancy between intellectual ability and academic achievement in one or more of the following seven academic domains: oral expression, written expression, listening comprehension, reading comprehension, basic reading skills, mathematical operations, and mathematical reasoning.
- The child does not achieve a level appropriate to their age and abilities in one or more of the aforementioned academic domains when taught via appropriate methods (Jouaid, 2007, p. 12).

Children with learning difficulties are "those who display a clear discrepancy between their high intellectual abilities and low academic achievement, whose intelligence quotient reaches 90 or above. Excluded from this category are those with auditory, visual, intellectual, or motor disabilities, as well as those who are socially, culturally, and economically deprived, or emotionally disturbed" (Ibtissam, 2022, p. 3).

This is the operational definition adopted by the present study for children with learning difficulties.

6.2. Diagnosis

Diagnosis is defined as "the identification of a disorder through the symptoms observed in the examinee; thus, diagnosis can be classified on the basis of the traits and symptoms noted in the examinee" (H. B. English). It is also defined as the description of data or information via numerical values (Guilford). In this study, diagnosis refers to "the determination of the type of problem, disorder, illness, abnormality, or set of characteristics. Specifically, it refers to the extent to which symptoms of learning difficulties in attention, perception, memory, oral language, and thinking are present among pupils, as indicated in the scale" (Moujahidi & Jellab, 2015, pp. 136–145).

In other words, diagnosing or identifying learning difficulties in their various domains and manifestations requires the use of standardised scales or tests or previously prepared and validated criteria that have been tested under conditions similar to those in which they will later be applied to identify these symptoms with scientific accuracy.

6.3. Definition of the School

"The term school is used to denote first-level educational institutions, such as preschool education institutions (kindergartens) and primary education institutions (primary schools), whether they are public institutions affiliated with the Ministry of Education or institutions belonging to the private sector" (Barada, 2009, p. 45).

Ahmed Ali Al-Hajj Mohammed defines it as "a social and educational institution deliberately established by society to socialise and educate generations in a manner that enables them to become integrated members of their community's culture, capable of engaging in community activities and embracing its issues and concerns" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 141).

Through these definitions, the school is an integrated system with specific social functions within the framework of social life, in addition to the principal functions it performs. It is "a social organisation that derives its foundations from society, its philosophy, policies, and objectives, which it seeks to achieve through the functions and roles it undertakes."

6.4. The Primary School Teacher

"The primary school teacher is an employee of the Ministry of Education who works to develop pupils' abilities and skills by organising and regulating the educational and pedagogical process through the use of educational techniques and tools, and by understanding pupils' needs, methods of learning, and patterns of thinking" (Ben Attia & Tabouche, 2018, p. 8).

The primary school teacher is also defined as "the person who acts on behalf of the community in educating and teaching its children. They are employees of the state, which represents the interests of the community, and receive remuneration in return for carrying out this task. Therefore, the primary school teacher may be viewed as the individual who performs their role within the educational institution and bears responsibility for teaching pupils and guiding their behaviour to achieve the goals and aspirations of society, given that this stage is one of the most sensitive phases in the construction of learners' personalities and their socialisation." In addition, the teacher fulfils several pedagogical, psychological, social, and educational roles for the benefit of their learners (Salami, 2022, pp. 20–30).

This is the operational definition adopted by the study.

7. Methodology

This research adopted a descriptive method to identify the phenomenon under study, monitor it, and predict its development among pupils with learning difficulties in Algerian primary schools. This was achieved through field research conducted in District 35 of the municipality of Tébessa, documentary research on preparatory pedagogical training programme texts, and the analysis of visit reports and teachers' documents within the district.

8. Data collection instruments

8.1. Administrative Documents

These included ministerial decisions and circulars related to preparatory pedagogical training for primary school teachers, the preparatory pedagogical training package for primary school teachers, the preparatory training programme, records of pedagogical seminars and working groups, and teacher visit and inspection forms at the District 35 level. These documents were analysed in accordance with the research objectives and utilised in the discussion, drawing on the researchers' field experience, particularly the observations and recommendations directed to teachers during visits and inspections regarding the support of children with learning difficulties.

8.2. Teachers' Documents

These consisted of class notebooks, activity books, personal notes, and reports. They were analysed with a focus on teachers' observations and concerns regarding the diagnosis of learning difficulties and how they deal with their learners to overcome these difficulties. The available documents at the inspection district level were examined through careful reading and analysis, with particular attention given to teachers' recorded notes concerning learners' difficulties in reading, writing, or arithmetic.

8.3. Observation

Observation was considered one of the most important tools employed in this research, given the researchers' long-standing direct involvement in the field of study. This included direct interaction with teachers in the classroom and during training days, as well as engagement with parents whose children experienced learning difficulties, guiding and referring them to psychologists, speech and language therapists, and medical doctors through the screening and follow-up units affiliated with the Directorate of Education in the Province of Tébessa.

Discussion

9.1. Discussion of the First Question:

What special education topics related to learning difficulties do teachers receive during training?

For teachers to fulfil their role to the fullest extent, the Ministry of National Education has emphasised proper teacher preparation through two training pathways: preparatory training and in-service continuous training.

Preparatory training programmes aim to prepare and train prospective teachers pedagogically and professionally by providing them with educational, pedagogical, scientific, and legislative knowledge that qualifies them to perform their duties in a manner appropriate to the various teaching–learning situations they will encounter throughout their professional careers, in line with developments in the field of education.

The duration of preparatory pedagogical training during the probationary period for education staff is estimated at 6 weeks, totaling 180 hours, of which 20 hours are allocated equally to educational sciences and psychology (Ministry of National Education, 2018).

As shown in the table below, the topic of learning difficulties is not included in the training programme. If it is addressed, it is done so briefly, in a manner that cannot adequately do justice to the topic. Moreover, the trainers assigned to deliver these topics are not necessarily qualified to undertake specialised training.

Table 1

Illustration of the Topics in Educational Sciences and Psychology Scheduled in the Preparatory Training of Teachers

Total Hours	Educational Sciences and Psychology	Hours	Professional Commitment
h 6	Developmental Stages in Learning (Childhood) - Cognitive Processes	h 2	Personality / Leadership / Group Dynamics
h 6	Developmental Stages in Learning (Adolescence) - Educational Psychology	h 2	Educational Psychology
h 20	Psychological and Educational Problems of Childhood		
h 4	Psychological and Educational Problems of Childhood	h 2	End-of-Training Evaluation
h 4	Isolation / Disorders / Behaviour / Violence / Children's Fears	h 2	The Learning Activity / Motives / Disabilities / School Dropout)
h 4	Basics of Educational Psychology / Individual Differences / Learning Motivation / Evaluation	h 2	Causes of School Delay / School Fatigue / Best Practices in Learning
h 4	Basics of Educational Psychology / Individual Differences / Learning Motivation / Evaluation	h 2	Causes of School Delay / School Fatigue Best Practices in Learning

Accordingly, the Ministry of National Education has primarily placed responsibility for in-service training on national seminars for designated trainers, who are usually drawn from inspection corps. These trainers, in turn, disseminate the content to their colleagues through national seminars, then regional seminars, provincial seminars, and finally sector-based meetings organised for teachers. Over time, this approach has proven ineffective in achieving the set objectives to the desired extent for several reasons, including but not limited to the following:

- The lack of qualifications of some trainers, who are not specialists in disciplines concerned with learning difficulties, and the numerous commitments and responsibilities that prevent them from prioritising this issue. As a result, teachers benefit from an average of six training days per academic year, most of which are devoted to curricular and program updates.
- The distortion of concepts by the time they reach teachers due to the length of the dissemination chain ultimately results in the delivery of recycled presentations that often fail to offer teachers anything new.
- Time constraints, as a single school day, are insufficient to address all aspects of the topic.
- The inability to link the content of the presented sessions to classroom reality to train teachers to diagnose learning difficulties, with an overreliance on discussing specific classroom problems and proposing solutions derived from experience and practice, rather than adhering to the steps and conditions of rigorous scientific diagnosis.

2.9. Discussion of the Second Question:

Are there tools and criteria that teachers use to diagnose learning difficulties?

There is no doubt that the more capable teachers are of understanding their learners and identifying the difficulties and obstacles that hinder them from acquiring the planned learning outcomes, the more able they are to classify and distinguish between the different categories of learners in their classrooms and adapt teaching methods and learning situations in a manner appropriate to each category, within the framework of what is known as differentiated pedagogy.

Given that one of the most complex characteristics of learning difficulties is their "hidden" nature, learners who experience them are usually typical, possess relatively high intelligence, and may sometimes demonstrate outstanding skills. This makes it difficult for both teachers and parents to observe any abnormal manifestations that would require specific intervention. Consequently, teachers often find themselves unable to offer appropriate solutions, as low academic achievement, in their view, is attributed to sudden laziness or indifference on the part of these learners. This, in turn, leads to repeated failure and grade repetition and, ultimately, to school dropout.

During classroom visits, teachers rely on assessment results and direct observations based on personal experience rather than on precise scientific foundations to diagnose the difficulties that learners face in their academic achievement. This is further evidenced by documentary analysis of class notebooks and answer sheets from different assessments, as most of the recorded observations do not constitute accurate scientific diagnoses and do not fulfil the required purpose.

In addition, discussions following inspection visits, as well as those conducted during pedagogical seminars and study days, clearly reveal confusion regarding the causes of learners' low academic achievement. Teachers often fail to distinguish between academic delay, slow

learning, and exceptional cases, lumping them all under the umbrella of learning difficulties. This is due to the lack of scientific methods and criteria for accurately diagnosing the underlying causes of academic underachievement.

3.9. Discussion of the Third Question:

What is the teacher's relationship with tests and scales that assist in diagnosing these difficulties?

An examination of the various legislative and regulatory texts issued by the Ministry of National Education reveals that its attention has been directed primarily towards special needs cases, such as individuals with autism spectrum disorder and Down syndrome. There are no explicit texts addressing learning difficulties or outlining methods for their diagnosis and intervention, except for the limited training initiatives organised by the Ministry. Consequently, the attempts of some education sector practitioners to adopt tests and scales for diagnosing learning difficulties remain individual initiatives that lack a legal framework and cannot be formally adopted or generalised to all teachers.

Even if such tests and scales were to be officially adopted by the supervisory ministry, the majority of teachers would not be qualified to apply or use them. This is because they are essentially the product of direct recruitment into primary education teaching corps, which are open to graduates from all disciplines within the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, technical fields, and literature and law. For example, 90% of teachers in District 35 of the municipality of Tébessa are the result of direct recruitment, most of whom did not study psychology or educational sciences during their university training. In comparison, only 10% are graduates of the Technological Institute, the last cohort of which graduated in 1996.

Given that the design of such tests and scales requires specialists who are not available within the Ministry of National Education, as they are based on the results of in-depth field studies conducted within the Algerian school context with its components, identity, characteristics, and diversity, these results have nevertheless not been utilised by teachers in practice to address the learning difficulties encountered by learners throughout their academic trajectory.

10. Results:

Therefore, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- The time allocated to educational sciences and psychology in the preparatory pedagogical training programme for primary school teachers is short and insufficient and does not address learning difficulties at all.
- Seminars and study days addressing this topic are rarely scheduled within in-service continuous professional development.
- Teacher training related to learning difficulties is generally superficial and does not involve specialists in the field.
- Teachers lack appropriate diagnostic criteria.

- Teachers rely on assessment results and nonsystematic observations to diagnose difficulties and interpret them on the basis of personal experience.
- There is a lack of legislative texts regulating the diagnosis of and interventions for learning difficulties.
- The Ministry of National Education personnel, including inspectors and teachers, are not qualified to design diagnostic tests and scales;
- Diagnostic tests and scales used for identifying learning difficulties are not available in primary schools.

11. Conclusion:

Learning difficulties constitute a complex and challenging issue that strongly manifests itself in primary school, particularly in the diagnostic process. They are often misclassified by teachers alongside special needs cases that do not concern mainstream classrooms. As a result, learners with learning difficulties become victims of misdiagnosis or are accused of negligence and laziness, which complicates their psychological, educational, and social situation and exacerbates their pedagogical difficulties in the classroom.

The causes of the misdiagnosis of learning difficulties by Algerian primary school teachers include the direct recruitment mechanism, which relies on short-term preparatory training that cannot meet all teachers' needs, particularly in the psychological and educational domains. Consequently, teachers lack the tools and criteria to diagnose these difficulties accurately. This is compounded by the failure of the Algerian school system to adopt standardised tests and scales that account for the specificity and diversity of the Algerian school across all its components.

To improve the diagnostic process, the study proposes the following:

- Integrating the topic of learning difficulties into teacher training programmes, whether preparatory or in-service, under the supervision of specialists;
- Reopening technological institutes for teacher training, given the inability of higher schools of education to cover all vacancies in primary education.
- Refraining from requiring teachers to diagnose learning difficulties under the current conditions, limiting their role to providing observations regarding learners' difficulties and referring them to the relevant authorities through school principals or inspectors for accurate diagnosis;
- Encouraging teachers to understand learners with learning difficulties and to respect the intervention plans developed by specialists, considering that teachers are key actors in implementing these plans;
- Training teachers to acquire diagnostic criteria for the early identification of learning difficulties;
- Working towards the provision of diagnostic tests and scales for use in primary schools in general.

- Promoting the application of the results of academic studies on learning difficulties can benefit teachers, parents, and learners with learning difficulties.

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