



MGIEP's Difference Learning Programme

Feature by Karanpreet Kaur and Aditi Pathak



Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations (UN) in 1948, is enshrined the right to *free and compulsory education for all*, at least at elementary level and fundamental stages of learning. The 4th Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) binds Member States to “ensur[ing] inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” by 2030. Still, today nearly 17 per cent of the world’s adult population, and an estimated 122 million young people, are illiterate. Literacy is in most circumstances worldwide a fundamental element to leading a happy, healthy and successful life. Governments, together with a range of actors such as the United Nations, multilateral development agencies, NGOs and others, are working to reduce gender disparities in access to education. Efforts are also being made to ensure equal learning opportunities to the less-privileged, as well as to people with disabilities. However, a significant, yet often unidentified, community remains left out – difference learners.



Few countries in the world recognize and devote adequate resources to diagnosing early and effectively treating children with LDs, leaving a precipitous population of young people (and future generations) to fend for themselves.

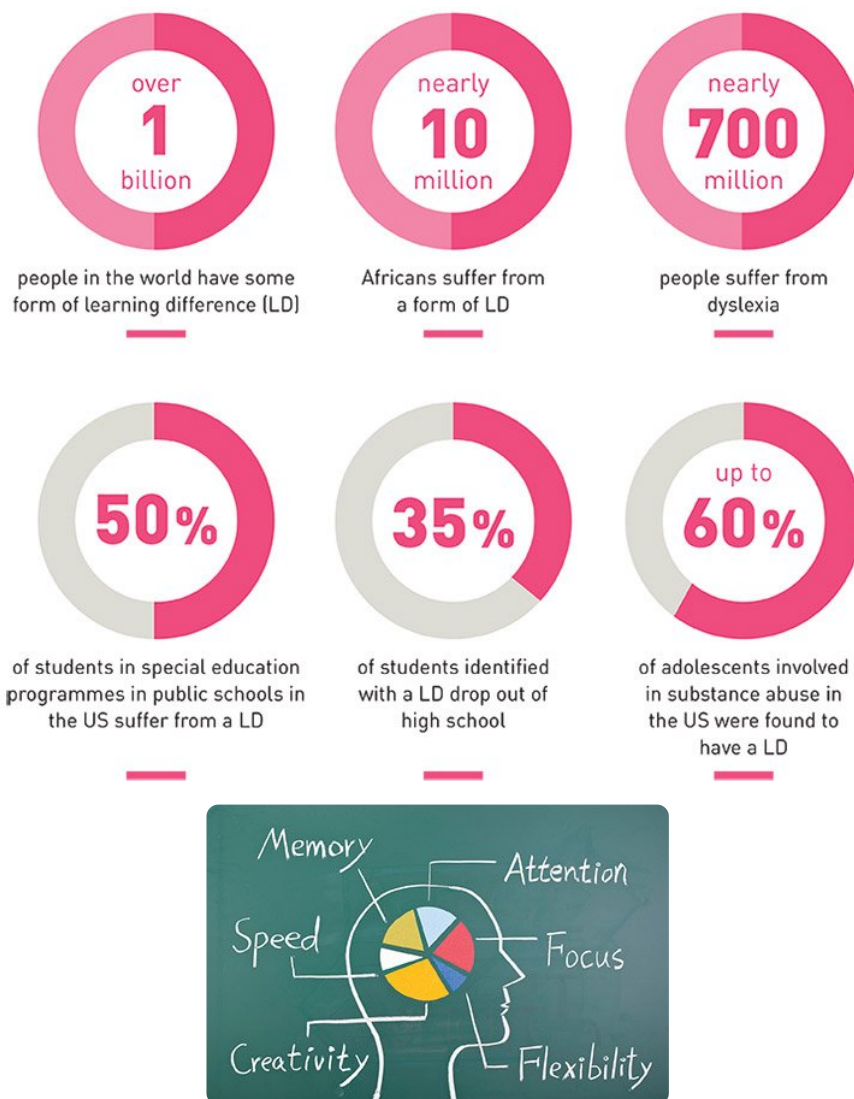


Difference learners, who make up 5 to 15 per cent of the world's total population, suffer from one or more neuro-developmental disorders characterized by severe and persistent difficulties in learning. These difficulties may be limited to reading, writing or performing mathematical calculations, or they may include all three; they are present despite exposure to conventional instruction, intact hearing and vision, adequate motivation and sufficient socio-economic and cultural opportunity.

There are four main types of learning differences (or LD):

1. Dyslexia
2. Dyspraxia
3. Dysgraphia
4. Dyscalculia

The causes of LD are neurobiological and genetic, and as such may be transferred from one generation to the next.



Persons living with learning differences often have average to above-average IQ levels and excel in creative endeavours.

However, despite these large numbers, few countries in the world recognize and devote adequate resources to diagnosing early and effectively treating children with LDs, leaving a propitious population of young people (and future generations) to fend for themselves. An alarming number of those students receiving conventional education in regular schools actually face tremendous pathological difficulties in reading and writing. Children with a LD are twice as likely to drop out of school than their peers. Children who are unable to cope with the stress are extremely vulnerable to negative consequences of under education, such as un-employability, substance abuse and criminal activities.

Yet most school teachers do not receive formal training in identifying, understanding and teaching students with LDs. They are unable to recognize early symptoms and indicators or provide timely intervention. Students often fall prey to myths related to LDs, which can result in needlessly losing out on years of education. Further challenging to many is

the fact that most diagnosis and treatment toolkits for LDs are available only in English or another major language, leaving out many children whose first language is not covered.

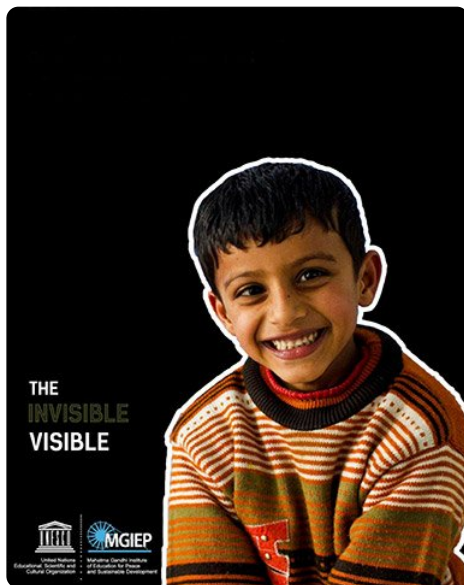
LDs are in no way a reflection of cognitive capacity or intelligence. In fact, people with LDs are known to have typically average to above-average intelligence quotient (IQ) levels. People with LDs tend to think in visual-spatial terms, following a three-dimensional “global logic”, as opposed to the two-dimensional sequential thought processes typical of people without LDs. This unique ability enables them to excel in various creative endeavours, and to be able to think critically, solving problems before they arise. As a result of this creative ability, many people with LDs find a home in a wide range of creative careers: architects, entrepreneurs, artists, sculptors, medical doctors, astronomers, astrophysicists, motivational speakers, politicians, teachers, project managers, spies, mathematicians, musicians, producers and designers, among others. Given the right conditioning and a conducive environment, they are invaluable members of society.



New research and science have transformed how we understand learning and learning difficulties. Treating dyslexia, for instance, requires both effective instruction and powerful intervention support. Teachers and educators need scientifically-accredited training in fields relating to how children learn and develop, including learning difficulties.

Difference Learning Programme

A step toward inclusive education



Most laws do not recognize learning differences; thus, there are few policies and legislations to support people with LDs. Although the United Nations are working on a wider disability paradigm under the *UN Partnership to Promote the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (UNPRPD) programme, not much work has been done in this niche field. The UNESCO Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace, Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (MGIEP), as a research institute working towards inclusive and quality education, aims to contribute towards SDG 4.7 by focussing on this significant – yet often ignored – community of children with difference learning. UNESCO-MGIEP's Difference Learning programme aims to implement screening and assessment of students in the regional languages of India and the Asia Pacific region, so as to enable early remedial learning and improve the functional literacy rate of all students, especially those with LDs.

In April 2016, UNESCO MGIEP, in partnership with the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi (IIT-D), organized the UNLEARN workshop for teachers in New Delhi. The aim of the workshop was to build awareness about difference learning, and to encourage more

inclusive educational opportunity in classrooms and beyond. Nearly 400 teachers, special educators and administrators from schools in and around Delhi participated and contributed to discussions in the 2-day workshop.



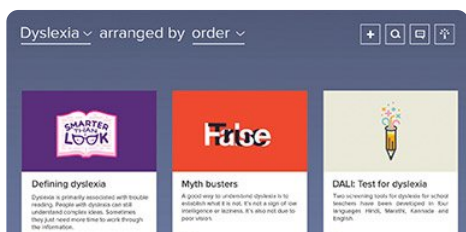
UNESCO MGIEP has also partnered with the National Brain Research Centre (NBRC) in India to expand the reach of the *Dyslexia Assessment in Languages of India* (or DALI) test. DALI is a package of screening and assessment tools to help schoolteachers and psychologists identify dyslexia across a multitude of languages. The tools are available in Hindi, Marathi, Kannada and English. UNESCO MGIEP aims to extend the DALI test to include other regional languages in India and the Asia Pacific region. In addition, the Institute is developing a free online resource portal called SixthSpace (www.sixthspace.org), which will provide parents, teachers and students with crucial information, tools and advice related to learning differences.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities came into existence in 2006. In February 2016, 161 out of 193 member states ratified the treaty. It is important to note that SDG 4 on Quality Education clearly describes an objective to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education, and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. Target 4.5 recognizes all forms of disabilities, and focuses on eliminating gender disparities in education, and ensuring equal access to levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disability, indigenous people and children in vulnerable situations. Target 4.A focuses on building and upgrading facilities that are child-, disability- and gender sensitive and providing safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all. UNESCO MGIEP has a global mandate to help countries achieve Goal 4.7, which seeks to ensure learners are provided with knowledge and skills to promote sustainable development. This should be achieved through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, the provision and protection of human rights, through gender equality and the promotion of cultural diversity and cultural contribution to sustainable development.



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Many countries are already making significant strides toward achieving SDG 4 through national measures. For example, the Indian Parliament passed in 2014 the Right to Disability Bill, which codifies in law the right of persons with disabilities to equality and nondiscrimination. The bill is a huge step toward equal rights for students with learning differences, as for the first time LDs are acknowledged as a disability cluster (along with 18 other conditions). The law empowers millions of students suffering from LDs; at the same time, it presents a herculean challenge in mandating a conducive environment to students with LD, at a time when most educators and school systems in the country are ill-equipped to identify LD students. Current data suggests that the less than one per cent of students with LDs are successfully screened and diagnosed in schools. Contributing to this challenge is a lack of awareness about LDs among parents, which is likely the biggest roadblock to successful screening, assessment and support to students with LD.





The Sixth Space online platform developed by UNESCO MGIEP offers research based content related to learning differences.

To achieve SDG 4 and fully realize the potential of populations worldwide, we need better and more comprehensive strategies and approaches to address the needs of students with LDs. There is an immediate and urgent need to engage with educators, parents and policy makers to work toward crafting and mainstreaming these approaches. MGIEP's Difference Learning Programme aims to both facilitate this engagement, as well as contribute to practical tools that will help those who suffer from LDs gain the recognition and support they need to thrive.

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