

Application of Buddhist Doctrines in Caring for Children with Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

In the context of children with learning disabilities and their care, the author employed a literature review method to explore how Buddhist doctrines can lead a fulfilling life in society and contribute to a high quality of life. The study's findings indicated that learning disabilities are psychiatric disorders often identified in childhood. Beyond being classified as a psychiatric disorder, learning disabilities can also be categorized as the sixth type of disability that necessitates governmental provision of various welfare services. However, presently, there is a disproportionately low number of individuals applying for registration under the sixth category of disabilities compared to other types. Given these challenges, alongside governmental oversight, the application of Buddhist doctrines, for example, Brahmavihāra, which serve as fundamental guidelines for caring for children with learning disabilities, is proposed. This includes incorporating the four Brahmavihāra principles (Mettā, Karunā, Muditā, Upekkhā), which can inspire children with learning disabilities to lead contented lives, feel a sense of self-worth, integrate harmoniously into society, enjoy a high-quality of life, and potentially become valuable citizens of the country in the future.

Keywords: Learning Disabled Children; Care; Buddhist Doctrines

Introduction

Learning disabilities are typically categorized as 'Specific Learning Disorder' according to the DSM-5 criteria established by the American Psychiatric Association, or 'Specific developmental disorders of scholastic skills' according to the ICD-10 criteria outlined by the World Health Organization (Code F81). These learning difficulties in children can be medically diagnosed as child psychiatric disorders. Furthermore, they can also fall within the classification of the sixth category of disabilities, as defined in the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security's 'Categories and Criteria for Disabilities (2nd Edition), 2012' announcement (Announcement of the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security: Categories and Criteria for Disabilities (2nd Edition), 2012). According to the report on the status of persons with disabilities in Thailand, the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security's

Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities as of March 31, 2023, (Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, 2019) reported a total of 2,180,178 individuals with disabilities. The report, based on data from the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security's Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities in 2019, further categorized persons with disabilities who have been issued disability cards into specific types as follows:

Type 1: Kinesthetic or physical	number of 1,112,763 people
Type 2: Auditory or meaningful	number of 405,920 people
Type 3: Visual	number of 184,622 people
Type 4: Mental or behavioral	number of 168,291 people
Type 5: Intellectual	number of 147,137 people
Type 6: Learning	number of 15,126 people
Type 7: Autistic	number of 120,096 people
More than one type of disability	number of 124,430 people
Waiting for confirmation	number of 1,793 people
Total	number of 2,180,178 people

It is evident that historically, Thailand had the lowest number of registered individuals with learning disabilities falling under the sixth category of disabilities. The report highlights that children facing learning difficulties are distributed across classrooms in every school. For instance, in a classroom of 50 children, one can expect to find approximately 3 to 8 children experiencing learning challenges. Notably, it is revealed that 80 percent of these learning difficulties pertain to reading disabilities (Siriratrekha, 2018).

Children with learning disabilities exhibit various symptoms. They struggle with fluent reading, often making mistakes and reading slowly with difficulty. Some may stutter while reading or have trouble articulating words clearly or guessing unfamiliar words. Comprehension can be a challenge, leading to instances where they may not fully grasp the meaning of what they read. Spelling poses difficulties; they might skip words, encounter unfamiliar or unreadable terms, and substitute consonants or vowels. Vowel retention can be problematic, leading to confusion in spelling. Conjugating words proves challenging, resulting in incorrect spelling. Writing skills are affected, often resulting in sentences with improper grammar. Organizing written content in a logical sequence to effectively convey ideas proves to be a struggle. For some, mathematical disabilities are also present. They may struggle with understanding the value of different digits, face challenges in basic arithmetic operations, and have difficulty applying mathematical principles to problem-solving. Some may find math problems insurmountable due to a lack of proficiency in computation. These symptoms are notably distinct from peers of the same age and persistently impede their academic progress (Siriratrekha, 2018).

Children with learning disabilities are those who experience difficulties associated with fundamental neurological processes. These challenges can manifest in various areas, such as listening, thinking, speaking, reading, communicating, spelling, or mathematical calculations. It's important to note that this category does not encompass learning difficulties stemming from issues like visual impairment, hearing impairment, limited physical mobility, intellectual disabilities, emotional challenges, environmental factors, or cultural disparities. However, it is worth mentioning that children with learning disabilities typically exhibit intelligence levels within the normal or above-average range (Saksiriphol, 2012).

In addition to the issues mentioned, children may exhibit indifference towards studying, work slowly, and struggle to complete tasks. They find it challenging to focus on their studies, avoid reading and writing, and become easily irritated. Moreover, they lack confidence in their reading and writing abilities. Often, they respond with statements like 'I don't know' or 'I can't do it,' and feel highly stressed when faced with homework. This behavior might lead adults to perceive them as lazy, inattentive in school, naughty, or misbehaved. These children tend to experience various emotional and adjustment difficulties, including irritability, discouragement, boredom, sadness, and a lack of self-confidence. They may also feel inferior to their peers due to their perceived inability to perform tasks independently. In some cases, they may even resist or express reluctance towards attending school.

Some children may receive assistance in accessing medical and welfare rights, ultimately leading to a diagnosis. This allows doctors to issue a disability certificate, enabling them to register as a disabled person. It's important to note that learning disabilities differ from empirical disabilities and represent a distinct category separate from intellectual disability, which encompasses learning difficulties. Unfortunately, many parents or caregivers may not readily recognize learning disabilities. Some parents may even resist accepting it, believing that once a certain age is reached, the child should be capable of functioning in society without additional support. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that children with learning disabilities require appropriate care and support. Failure to provide this can potentially lead to future social problems. These may include an increased risk of child labor due to children leaving the education system prematurely, facing challenges in continuing their studies, encountering difficulties in social integration, and being susceptible to negative influences due to a lack of knowledge in various fields.

Therefore, identifying and assisting children with learning disabilities is of utmost importance. This relies on understanding and support from parents or caregivers. Children must receive comprehensive care within nurturing families and be provided with specific educational resources tailored to their disabilities. Additionally, incorporating Buddhist doctrines, which are essential for the holistic development of children with learning disabilities, can serve as a vital anchor in their lives. This not only fosters self-worth but also cultivates responsible and well-adjusted citizens.

Definition of Learning Disabilities

Learning disabilities are typically classified as 'Specific Learning Disorder' according to the DSM-5 criteria established by the American Psychiatric Association or as 'Specific developmental disorders of scholastic skills' according to the ICD-10 criteria outlined by the World Health Organization (Code F81). These terms may carry different nuances in various organizations and countries.

In the realm of education, the concept is derived from the English term 'Learning Disabilities.' In United States education law, a disabled person is defined as having an 'impairment of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding, using language, speaking or writing.' This manifests as difficulties in listening, thinking, speaking, reading, writing, spelling, and performing mathematical calculations. It is important to note that this definition excludes conditions resulting from factors such as blindness, hearing impairment, physical movement issues, intellectual disabilities, emotional problems, or disadvantages related to economics, culture, or environment. The definition encompasses perceptual limitations, brain injuries, and minor abnormalities in brain function and nerves, as seen in conditions like Dyslexia and Aphasia.

In some European countries, such as the United Kingdom, the term "Learning Disabilities" has a broader meaning, including groups with intellectual disabilities and functional disabilities, too. They have different meanings in the United States, while in Canada, it is used in the same sense as in the United States (Siriratrekha, 2018).

The Cybernetics model is used to explain the learning process of children who have learning disabilities divided into four steps as follows: (Act on Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, 2012)

1. Input process: Information from the senses enters the brain.
2. Integration process: Data are interpreted.
3. Memory process: Data are saved and can be retrieved and used.
4. Output process: Data will be used in the form of language and movement.

When reading a book, looking at a picture, listening to a sound, or touching something, the data received is sent to the brain. It is then interpreted, stored in memory, and can be retrieved for use when needed. This may take the form of thinking, speaking, reading, writing, or moving, much like the processing of a computer. For instance, when viewing a picture or reading a book, we are normally able to distinguish images or letters from the background, understand their location and orientation, and estimate the depth of a 3D image. Similarly, in listening, we must discern the sound we intend to hear from other noises or natural sounds. Subsequently, both visual and auditory information is encoded in the brain through a signal coding process, and data stored in memory are utilized in writing and reading through a decoding process. However, children with learning disabilities may encounter difficulties at

some point within these four steps outlined above. These difficulties can result from a combination of factors, often making it challenging to pinpoint the exact cause.

Children with learning disabilities can lead normal lives as they grow up. With proper support and care, they can socialize with friends and pursue careers just like anyone else. Some individuals may face challenges in specific skills, such as reading, writing, or mathematics.

Children with untreated learning disabilities often struggle in their studies and may receive little praise, which can lead to a loss of confidence and pride. As a result, they may seek validation in other areas. If a child excels in music, sports, or art, they may find acceptance. However, if these skills don't meet the mark, and no other creative outlets are available, a child might resort to negative behaviors. This could manifest in rule-breaking, truancy, conflict, developing addictions to games or drugs, and so on.

In conclusion, children with learning disabilities are those who exhibit abnormalities in certain brain functions, leading to difficulties in language usage, listening, speaking, reading, writing, spelling, and numeracy. These challenges are not attributed to other disabilities, nor are they a consequence of cultural or educational disadvantages. The academic achievement of these children falls below the level expected based on their actual intellectual capacity.

Causes of Learning Disabilities

Learning disabilities: The exact cause of learning disabilities remains uncertain, but researchers have proposed several theories, which can be summarized as follows (Itthianankul, 2023):

1. Genetics: Some researchers have observed that learning difficulties tend to run in families, suggesting that genetics may play a role. However, this remains a topic of debate. While certain traits related to learning difficulties may be inherited, they could also be attributed to consistent parenting styles passed down through generations.

2. Brain development: Another theory posited by researchers is that learning disabilities may stem from factors related to brain development, both prenatally and postnatally. For instance, issues like low birth weight, lack of oxygen during birth, or prenatal environmental conditions may contribute to learning problems in children. Additionally, young children who have experienced head injuries or trauma affecting their cognitive functions may be at risk for learning difficulties.

3. Environmental effects: Infants and young children are highly susceptible to their environment, making them particularly sensitive to toxins or pollutants. For example, there is often concern about the impact of lead exposure (commonly found in older houses or specific environments) on child development, potentially exerting a significant influence on their overall growth.

Impact of Learning Disabilities

The impact of learning disabilities, specifically Specific Learning Disorders, can have enduring effects throughout an individual's life (Piyasilp, 2023).

1. Self: Children with learning disabilities often view themselves negatively, perceiving differences from their peers as flaws. They may struggle with feelings of inadequacy, seeing themselves as unintelligent, harboring inferiority complexes, feeling like failures, believing they can't learn or don't know how to learn, and being perplexed about why they learn differently from their friends. Despite observations that the child is facing challenges, those around them may not explicitly communicate the nature of the problem or guide how to address it.

2. Tension: Children with learning disabilities often face high expectations both at home and in school. They may encounter criticism, which can lead to feelings of sadness and behavioral reactions such as resistance, aggression, and even a desire to avoid school.

3. Power: Children with learning disabilities may experience teasing or exclusion from activities they struggle with, leading to a sense of isolation from their peers. The necessity to devote more time to studying can sometimes limit their opportunities for recreational activities. If they leave the education system prematurely, they may find it challenging to maintain social connections. A life without understanding friends can lead to feelings of loneliness and unhappiness.

4. Emotion & Personality: Learning disabilities can give rise to a range of emotional and personality traits, including stress, high anxiety, lack of confidence, emotional sensitivity, introversion, isolation, loneliness, discontentment, determination, defiance, aggression, truancy, and increased susceptibility to substance abuse, including drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes.

5. Social Relationship: Children with learning disabilities may struggle to establish positive relationships with both parents and teachers. In some cases, teachers may lack the understanding or acceptance of these disabilities, leading them to employ conventional teaching methods. When a child's performance, learning style, comprehension, and exam results deviate from expectations, this can result in negative reactions from teachers, including scolding, reprimanding, indifference, neglect, limited learning opportunities, and the potential for early exclusion from the education system.

6. Knowledge & Competence: Children with learning disabilities often struggle academically, leading to a deficiency in knowledge and skills. Parents may intensify pressure on special education, leaving limited room for developing other abilities. In some cases, these children may prematurely leave the school system. This can lead to heightened psychological distress, challenges in mental health, early entry into the workforce, often in roles below their potential, typically at a manual level, and ultimately, lower income levels.

Application of Buddhist doctrines in caring for children with learning disabilities

Training in ethics, morality, and morality will protect children from danger. without blocking the learning development process Make your child see their own value, think, know good and bad, be able to differentiate, and solve problems creatively. Live happily with others, be satisfied with what you have (solitude), be patient (viriya), and always develop. Therefore, children will not be able to grow up with quality if their parents are not aware of it. Adjust yourself and develop yourself to be a role model and have a good and quality approach to raising children. (Child Rights Protection Center Foundation, 2019)

Buddhism teaches that 'Parents are the Brahmā of their children,' which is a profoundly fitting and comprehensive statement. The Buddha expounded on the principles of the four Brahmavihāras (Mettā, Karunā, Muditā, Upekkhā), which serve as fundamental guidelines for parents in nurturing children to have a high quality of life and attain happiness. These principles are elucidated as follows (Wewiree Itthianankul, 2023):

Mettā (loving-kindness) and **Karunā** (compassion): It is of paramount importance to raise children well and ensure their happiness. This process begins with showing genuine kindness to one's child, wishing for their happiness, encouraging them to be good individuals, succeed, and engage in positive endeavors. When parents embody benevolence at their core, they naturally refrain from causing harm to their children. This leads to the prevention of domestic violence and the absence of abuse. Through this compassion, parents recognize their responsibility to provide their children with the essential elements of a fulfilling life.

Muditā (sympathetic joy): As children grow, it's crucial for them to feel that their efforts lead to success and that when they turn to their parents, their accomplishments will be acknowledged and appreciated. Parents should consistently express their joy to their children. This includes celebrating every step, progress, success, and display of good qualities such as patience, kindness, and helping others. Parents must not only show this but also embody it themselves. Encouraging a child to rejoice in the success of others and to appreciate their accomplishments can serve as a powerful defense against feelings of jealousy. This practice is especially beneficial within the family, fostering a sense of shared happiness. Cultivating such an environment starts with parents coming together in unity. They should avoid arguments in front of their child. If disagreements arise, parents can exemplify forgiveness and effectively resolve the issue. Children will witness that conflicts can occur, even in a family, but through reason, reconciliation, and forgiveness, peace and harmony can be restored.

Upekkhā (equanimity): Parents should understand the importance of being equanimous when their children attempt to do something. They should observe from a distance and step in only when their children ask for help or truly need it. When a child makes a mistake, it's the moment for parents to offer comfort and encouragement. This reassurance serves as a source of motivation for the child. In the initial stages, when a child is still learning, parents must guide them by offering assistance. Afterward, the child should be allowed to try

on their own, learning through trial and error as appropriate. When the child becomes capable, parents should take a step back, observing and admiring their progress. However, if the child still struggles, parents may gradually step in to provide the necessary support. Equanimity is crucial to prevent parents from being overly controlling, which could erode a child's confidence. Simultaneously, children bear responsibility for their own growth, especially when they are alone, requiring inner strength and stability. It's important to note that equanimity doesn't imply indifference or permissive love. Love for children knows no bounds, but how we guide and interact with them must be balanced and grounded in moral and ethical principles. Effective guidance and training are paramount. If children receive insufficient guidance and witness poor examples lacking in moral values, they may struggle to differentiate right from wrong, posing a significant danger as they mature.

Furthermore, it's crucial to strike a balance with supervision, avoiding excessive strictness that could potentially lead to problems in the future or the development of immoral behavior in adulthood. Therefore, when caring for children under Buddhist doctrines, it's essential to impart the values of 'Hiri Otappa' to instill a sense of conscience and moral dread in them. Caregivers should also apply Dhamma principles, such as the four Iddhipāda principles (Chanda, Viriya, Citta, and Viṁmansā), to nurture a sense of pride and self-respect in children as they grow and strive for success in life. In the care of children, it's equally important to consider the four Saṅgahavatthu principles (Dāna, Piyavācā, Atthacariyā, Samānatta), which can benefit both caregivers and children, fostering a mutually enriching relationship.

Under Buddhist doctrines, Phra Dhammapitaka emphasizes the pivotal role of 'Sammāditthi' or 'right view' as the cornerstone, source, and anchor of the entire educational process. It represents the profound wisdom attained through instruction and mental cultivation, allowing one to discern all truths about what merits attention and what should be set aside. Structuring education to cultivate the wisdom encapsulated in Sammāditthi forms the bedrock of correctness for all fields of study, constituting knowledge rooted in the right perspective. Importantly, this knowledge is not detrimental to anyone but rather fosters unidirectional benefits. Thus, Sammāditthi serves as a fundamental basis for teaching various subjects (Nanmuang, 2012).

Conclusion

Children with learning disabilities are those who have received a disability identification card due to their learning challenges. Alongside the legal rights they are entitled to, caring for these children under Buddhist doctrines can have profound effects. It enables them to nurture ethics and morality, foster their learning capabilities, and remove barriers to their education. This approach helps children recognize their inherent value, practice self-love without veering into narcissism, think critically, discern right from wrong, make positive outlooks, and approach problem-solving with creativity. They learn to coexist harmoniously with others, contributing

not only to society but also to their nation. Additionally, it instills a sense of self-awareness and contentment (Santosa), coupled with virtues like patience and diligence (Viriya), encouraging constant progress and development. Consequently, these children can grow into individuals of high quality and become valuable members of society in the years to come.

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