

How children perceive their disability in Learning?

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"A positive attitude, can turn a storm into a sprinkle." —Robert M. Hensel¹

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Date of Submission: 26-02-2019

Date of acceptance: 12-03-2019

Adolescence is a vital stage of human life. It is a period where individuals change both psychologically and physically to an adult. This phase is characterised by many dilemmas and crises. It is a period of confusion. As given by Erickson there are eight developmental stages and each stage is characterised by specific conflicts which are to be overcome. Successful negotiation of the stage leads to normal and healthy development of the individual. During the adolescent period individuals face issues based on identity conflict and it can affect the person's overall performance².

In the Indian scenario academic achievement is a major element that speaks of a person's potentialities and capabilities. Studies show that students belonging to classes five to nine reported exams were significant and were under pressure to perform well³. Hence it becomes too much important for a student to show a good level of academic performance. If a person performs less well than that is required, labels him/her as an underachiever. This group is identified based on performance discrepancy⁴. Learning Disability (LD) is a subgroup of low achievers who are identified to have specific cognitive deficits⁵. DSM IV-TR gives learning disorders as identified when individual's academic achievement, is lower than expected, that is not explained by low intelligence or inadequate schooling⁶. Learning disability is a broad term that includes difficulties in acquisition and use of different skills in learning process⁶.

The term Learning Disability which is used to address such identified students is believed to influence the behaviors and self-identity of students. This effect can be termed labelling. When any sort of deviancy is observed there is a tendency to generate a stigma or stereotype associated with it and is found to have more ill effects. Application of deviant label will have unfortunate results for the label bearer⁷.

All labels have the capacity to affect the labelled individuals positively and negatively. LD label is becoming common in education sector. Children try to perceive themselves based on the response they get from their significant others, which to an extent is governed by the label. When we have negative feelings associated with label it can in turn bring about negative self-image and negative self-perception about oneself⁸.

Man being a social being, how a society views, understands and responds to a deviancy is an important factor that affects a vulnerable group especially disabled group⁹. As years go by the number of students being labelled as LD is also increasing⁷. Even if this labelling has a positive side where such children are identified and given special care, the consequences of being labelled different from their peers is an area of interests to many researchers.

The idea that one has about one's nature is termed as self-perception. A person develops his or her attitude from evaluating one's own behaviour and its causes. In making self-perceptions, people consider one's behaviour and other environmental and social factors that are affecting the individual¹⁰.

Daryl J. Bem suggests that a person observes one's own behavior and situations that lead to a behavior and from this make inferences about their own attitudes, emotions and other internal states¹¹. People also rely on unobservable behavior, as in mind wandering, when making inferences about themselves¹². Theories also suggest that people also depend on or use a freely chosen behavior of others with whom they experience sense of merged identity, causes one to change their behaviors¹³.

Concepts like self-esteem, self-concept, self-image must do much with oneself and society. People evaluate oneself based on different constructs. Rosenberg (1979) suggests that one's perception of self on different aspects may be different¹⁴. Children right from their middle childhood have specific views about themselves on different areas. Self-perception in one domain do not predict or influence the overall picture the person has¹⁴.

Study by Gans, Kenny & Ghany (2003), tried to find out if any difference exists in the self-concept among children with learning disability as compared to that of children without learning disability. It was found that the children with LD had a lower self-concept about their intellectual abilities and behaviour as compared to

their 'normal' peers, while no difference was found in their self-concept in areas other than academic achievement. Also, no gender difference was seen in the self-concept for children with LD¹⁵.

Heath and Weiner (1996), aimed at finding out if any difference exists in non-academic self-perception of depressed and non-depressed children with and without Learning Disability. Wechsler's intelligence scale for children, Self-Perception Profile for Learning Disabled Children and Children's Depression Inventory were administered on the children. It was found that social competency rating was more in non-depressed children with LD than depressed children with LD¹⁶.

Effects of perception of students and teachers on the learning strategies used by students with and without LD was studied by Meltzer, Reddy, Pollica, Roditi, Sayer, and Theokas (2004). It was found that academic self-perception, hard work and willingness of students with LD were influenced by use of learning strategies. Also, it was found that students with LD who had positive academic self-perception were evaluated as more hard working and willing by teachers¹⁷.

In children with disability, the kind of disability do have a role. In a study assessing self-esteem in children with visual and physical disability, visually disabled children had higher self-esteem scores when compared with children with physical disability. The level of isolation in both the cases are different and that has reflected in the self-esteem scores¹⁸.

In a study by Bear, Clever and Proctor (1991), the academic competence, behaviour and global self-perception of children with LD and nonhandicapped children in an integrated classroom were compared. It was found that when compared to nonhandicapped students in an integrated classroom, students with LD had lower self-perception in the academic competency and conduct of behaviour. On comparing overall self-perception, it was found that nonhandicapped boys had higher scores than boys with LD, and no significant difference in scores were found among girls of both group¹⁹.

People try to perceive themselves, most of the time by the way their significant others or immediate society perceive them²⁰. As academics is a major concern for students, having to face severe learning difficulties and being identified as LD can cause such children to generalise their disability to more aspects of life²⁰. Meaning children give to their disability is important because it determines one's perception and performance²¹. If a person accepts the disability to be restricted to some aspects, they have less chances to do negative self-evaluations about oneself²⁰.

Most of the researches show that students with LD do not have a realistic perception about themselves. They tend to overestimate their efforts and abilities. They also show unrealistic positive self-ratings²⁰. Self-perception is found to have effect on many other domains especially self-esteem and self-concept. Studies show that self-perception is related to self-concept and self-esteem²⁰. Self-esteem is related to accepting their disability, recognising its existence and not overestimating its impact.

Researches could identify that self-perception of children with LD were much related to their perceived access to a social support²². Students compare themselves with the immediate people in their environment and thus comparison group can affect the formation of self-concept of the child²³. Consistent poor achievement and stigma associated with it, perceptions of significant others are important factors that contribute to develop negatives self-concepts⁸. Academic success is related to understanding of disability²¹. Academic self-concept and academic achievement are predictors of future achievement²⁰. Since Children with LD experience repeated failures and their self-image is at risk, they may become vulnerable to generalise their disability. So, the school environment and support is essential²⁰.

There are many results that suggests that self-concept of children with LD is not always negative²⁴. The study further suggests that it is important build realistic view in children with LD. Adding to this result we can see that Global self-concept is high in students with LD and is low in case of academic self-concept⁶. Studies also proves that there are variations in perceived intellectual abilities and there are no attempts to discount their academic weakness⁶.

The way in which children see their disability can affect their functioning. If they find their disability less global, less stigmatizing and more acceptable their non-academic functioning will be good²¹. Lower parental self-expectations can also the perception of children⁸.

Helplessness that students experience after continuous failures also adds to negative self-concepts about oneself⁸. Gender difference is also a major area of research. In relation with peers' girls identified with LD reported to have many issues especially of rejection. When it comes to teachers, teachers report Boys identified with LD has conduct or behavioural issues⁸.

Student engagement in school is a measure of one's attitude towards learning and being taught. The whole idea of student engagement is centred around motivation. How far a student is interested in school and learning activities and motivation for the same comes under student engagement²⁵. Willingness of the student to co-operate in learning procedure and school tasks is an important determinant of student wellbeing²⁵.

Student engagement is a multi-dimensional concept which explains one's involvement in school and attitude towards learning²⁶. This includes one's feeling of identification and acceptance of school, involvement as a student, use of cognitive processing in learning tasks²⁶, how constructively one uses what is being taught²⁷.

Student's engagement in educational procedures has relevant implications. Scholastic backwardness can be predicted from the investment that student makes in their learning process. On the other side student need reasons to have interest in learning tasks and commitment to school. Repeated exposure to negative experiences at school or academic difficulties puts students at risk to have low engagement²⁸. School failure is a major conflict that students with LD face. This makes this group especially vulnerable to emotional issues and school problems¹⁷.

Studies prove that students with LD can be compared with normal underachieving children⁵. Under achieving children and LD labelled students are found to have low cognitive competence and academic self-regulation. Under achieving Children tend to believe that their academics is beyond their control⁵. Adding to this concept studies suggest that experiencing Continuous failures brings up a belief in externality of academic success and this will increase the chances of school drop outs as children will be subject to give up⁶.

The investment of effort put in by students with learning disability is relatively low and has less hope for better future. This suggests that the student engagement can be predicted to be low. Investment of effort and its perception is similar in normal underachieving children and children with Learning Disability. Academic competence is also same for both groups. Self-efficacy scores tend to be low as they invest less than they believe they do²⁹. Self-concept and academic achievement are good predictors of each other²³.

Environment and the support system probably are factors that predicts student's performance. Inclusive school environment provides better academic optimism³⁰. In a family environment parents could identify their normal children and learning-disabled children to have similar levels global self-concept and academic self-perception. But children with LD exhibit less social competence and behavioural problems²³. Similarly factors like hope and loneliness is found to affect academic achievement in children with LD. Higher academic achievement is possible for children with hope and support³¹.

Students with Learning disability experience much academic difficulty and that may lead to maladaptive academic behaviours. Students may develop a kind of learned helplessness, lower academic expectation and negative affect³². Studies suggest that in adolescence with LD, students' engagement in school is related to their self-perception. No gender difference was found in self-perception and student Engagement in adolescence with LD³³.

This conflicts that is discussed, points to a concept that it will affect the student's attitude to learning and the way in which they handle their emotions.

Different studies suggests in contrary to the above mentioned conclusions on effort investment that teachers found students with learning disability dedicated to learning tasks¹⁷. Adolescents with multiple LD reported poorer functioning on many domains, when compared to typically achieving children but not when compared to children with single LD³⁴.

A comparison was made between Adolescent students with LD and adolescent children with emotional disturbance. Study found that social competence was high and Behavioral problems was low in adolescents with LD³⁵. In many significant domains of psychological functioning, children with LD showed better scores when they had less negative perceptions of LD. Parental and peer support was acknowledged²¹.

Students with learning disability is found to have low academic self-efficacy, believe intelligence remains fixed, they prefer performance over learning goals³⁶. In students with LD self-determination self-concept and academic achievement was found to be correlated. Self-determination was found to be the better predictor for academic achievement³⁷.

Competence is a concept that buds in an individual right in the childhood. Emotions are a good predictor of one's behaviour³⁸. In a person's daily life situations how one handle his emotions are important. One's efficiency to deal with effectively with emotional situations is one's emotional competence³⁹. Coleman explained emotional competencies as a cluster of five competencies lie realistic feelings, appropriate reactions, adequate functioning in midst of emotional stressors, cope with negative emotions and emphasise and improvement of positive emotions³⁸.

Significant adult figures such as parents and teachers have important role in socio emotional and behavioral adjustment in children especially for adolescents. The father child interaction is more sensitive than mother child interaction. The role of teacher is important in understanding child's adjustment. The chance for being vulnerable and morbid is high in the case of adolescence. Research on this area by Al-Yagon .M, found that along with academic difficulties children with LD have socio emotional problems mainly because of difficulty in social information processing, loneliness due to peer rejection, low self-concept, elevated levels of depression and anxiety. There is a high chance that adolescents with LD will internalize such difficulties in the form of stress, loneliness and anxiety. Some may externalize leading to aggression, risk-taking behaviors and

delinquency. Interestingly it is found that there exist a difference in most of the socio emotional measures among adolescents who have LD and who do not have LD⁴⁰.

Kataria. S., (2016), conducted a study in a general population and concluded that there exists no significant difference in Emotional Competence between boys and girls⁴¹. Experiencing emotional problems is quite common for students who are diagnosed with LD. This is especially true in the case of boys. Research by Handwerk et.al found that even though there is difference in severity in terms of emotional problems, the children diagnosed with LD faces the similar kind of problems compared to children diagnosed with serious emotional disturbance⁴². Another study by Lawrence. S & Sathiyaseelan. A(2019), suggested that in adolescence with LD, their emotional competence was related to self- perception. No gender difference was found in terms of emotional competence in students with LD³³.

Children diagnosed with learning disability will have behavioral as well as emotional problems along with academic and cognitive deficits. Research by Judith et.al found that most of the emotional and behavior problems are the result of difficulties that they face in the academics⁴³.

It is evident from researches that children diagnosed with LD have emotional problems and school maladjustment along with academic difficulties especially in the case of adolescents. Even if they do experience these problems at the same time they are aware of the role of academic tasks making them work hard. Also, for the ones who have impairment in one or more academic areas are more vulnerable to emotional and social problems. Psychological difficulties which lead to academic failure, and loneliness resulting from negative experiences with peers which in turn leading to low academic self-evaluation contribute to the occurrence of emotional problems for children with LD. Research by Martinez R.S et.al found that adolescents having multiple LD have low functioning on school adjustment and emotional symptoms index than with children having a single LD. Also, the scores for emotional symptoms index, social stress and depression were high for girls whereas school adjustment and sensation seeking was high for boys³⁴.

Psychological disturbances are good predictor of academic difficulties. This can also lead to developing negative school attitudes. Academic failures can cause difficulties in psychosocial and emotional aspects³⁴. Early interventions can help support and boost the child's development. This include provide support to the families on the first hand such that, the child can be more productive, use one's potentials and be independent⁴⁴.

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IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) is UGC approved Journal with Sl. No. 5070, Journal no. 49323.

Sheethal Lawrence. ” "How children perceive their disability in Learning?". ” *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*. vol. 24 no. 03, 2019, pp. 55-60.