

Supporting Learning-Disabled Adolescents' Transition to Junior High School

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Abstract

This study examined learning-disabled (LD) students' subjective interpretation of their socio-cultural reality during the transition periods into junior high school. LD students' tendencies to anxiety, depression, behavioral disorders, feelings of low self-esteem and social isolation may lead to genuine crisis during the already difficult transition from elementary school to junior high. Research in the form of in-depth interviews was conducted on a sample of 12 LD adolescent, junior-high students. The findings point to three main concerns of LD adolescents regarding their transition to junior-high: a sense of isolation, a lack of social and adaptation skills, and a poor relationship with teachers. The findings of this study may be useful for planning intervention and prevention programs that provide support and assistance for LD students' adaptation. It is crucial to assist LD students to develop and cultivate social and educational skills during the transition period, thus allowing them to learn how to cope, not only during this crisis period, but with other life situations.

Keywords: Learning-disabled; Junior high school; Low self-esteem; Social skills; Adolescent concerns.

Introduction

Various studies indicate that LD students may develop psychological, emotional and social problems: they are prone to anxiety, depression, and behavioral disorders, as well as feelings of low self-esteem and social isolation [1]. The transition from elementary school (grades 1-6) to junior high (grades 7-9) involves unique and complex coping mechanisms because the student is also going through the sweeping changes of puberty, taking their first steps toward maturity [2]. This transition is a particularly

difficult phase for LD students, one that can lead them to a genuine crisis. With this in mind, it is important to examine the subjective attitudes of LD students entering junior high regarding their emotional and social adaptation into the heterogeneous classroom.

While many studies have addressed the issues and difficulties that LD students experience during the transitional period from primary to junior high, there have not been many studies that have turned to the students themselves as a source of data regarding feelings and adjustment issues from their own subjective standpoint.

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to examine the socio-emotional adjustment of LD students who attend integrated junior high classes from the subjective perspective of the students themselves. This study is innovative and unique, particularly in the Arab sector, which has seen a development in the awareness of the needs of LD students only in recent years, with a growing realization that failure to satisfy them may harm the students' chances to realize their potential.

What is Learning Disability?

A review of the literature reveals various definitions for the term "learning disability," indicating the complex nature of the term, as well as the heterogeneous nature of learning disability [3, 4]. At present, the definition accepted by the Israeli Ministry of Education is based on "the gap model": (a) there is a significant gap between the student's academic achievements and those expected at his/her age level or of his/her class peers; and (b) there is a gap between academic achievement and intellectual skill.

A more up-to-date and accepted definition for LD was published in 2013 in the DSM-V Guide (American Psychiatric Association, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Ed.). It defines learning disability as a neuro-developmental disability with biological factors that lead to the cognitive difficulties experienced by the LD, causing significant impairment in learning or functioning. The DSM-V definition offers some significant innovations, inter alia, expanding the list of criteria for diagnosis, placing stronger focus on both the definition of the disability and on the definition of its severity, abandoning the gap model as the main model for diagnosing learning disorders (which was still adhered to in previous editions), and emphasizing that the disorder continues to affect the individual throughout his lifetime. In addition to these innovations, the latest edition refines exclusion criteria while simultaneously permitting determination of a learning disorder when achievement is observed to be at a lower level than expected, even among individuals with a borderline or elevated IQ.

Accepted estimates suggest that LD students constitute about 10%-20% of the population in Israel [6, 7]. Earlier reports by the Ministry of Education Margalit Commission [8] and the Office of the Comptroller [9] indicated that teachers and parents in the Arab sector were not well informed about the issue of learning disabilities. In recent years, the Margalit Commission's recommendations to assist teachers to successfully integrate LD students have led to increased LD awareness in Israeli Arab society, as is evidenced by the increased number of diagnosis referrals to determine eligibility for adjustments in matriculation exams. This increase reflects more focused attention on learning disabilities in Arab society [10].

Adolescence and its Implications

G. Stanley Hall, a pioneer in the field of adolescent development, was the first to suggest that adolescence is a major stage in development and that the individual's sense of identity, which began developing previously, reaches maturation during adolescence. This is the stage where character, talent, predispositions, and opinions are defined. Teenagers find themselves in a constant quest to discover themselves, to define themselves in relation to others, and to define and organize a new self-identity which includes not only familial elements but also new and original components as a result of the influence of interdependent interactions between them and society [11]. While parents have the main role in defining the identity of pre-adolescents, during adolescence, teenagers evolve from being dependent on their parents to being independent.

Socially, the peer group exerts the greatest influence on the adolescent who seeks to disconnect from their parents yet remain dependent upon them financially and emotionally [12]. While childhood friendships are usually a result of geographic proximity and mutual playtime, adolescent friendships are based on intimacy, trust and sharing feelings, thoughts, and interests with a close friend [13].

Emotionally, the adolescent period is one of stress and turmoil, mainly due to the physical changes associated with puberty [14]. Adolescent psychological maturation naturally includes rebelliousness against parental authority and unpredictable mood swings, leading often to parent-teenager conflict. During late adolescence, the teenager affirms his independence [15].

According to Solberg [16], adolescence has numerous ramifications on the behavioral, emotional, cognitive, psychological, and social levels. Sex hormones secreted during adolescence affect human behavior both directly and indirectly, and studies have shown testosterone to be linked to violent expression, which explains the increase in violence amongst teenage boys, to some extent. Emotional problems have also been shown to be due to the physical and sexual changes during puberty. Studies have shown that during early adolescence (concurrent to the transition to junior high) teenagers tend to show displeasure with their appearance, leading to a distorted self-image.

Cognitive changes stem from the significant changes that take place in adolescent thought processes and moral judgment. Adolescent reasoning is considerably different than a child's. Two subtypes of formal thinking that develop in the adolescent can be distinguished: the preparatory subtype (11-14 years) in which formal function is almost complete – the adolescent displays rational-formal thinking but still struggles to systematically explain, express, or defend their decisions; and full formal function (14 years and up) in which the teenager is able to systematically explain, express, and defend their assertions in a more abstract and sophisticated fashion [17].

At this stage, teenagers are developing the ability to solve problems more effectively, not just in school but in everyday life. They are also developing the ability to relate to others' points of view, something that will improve interpersonal relationships with key people in their lives. Cognitive changes have important implications on adolescent behavior and their adjustment to their surroundings. Flexible objective-systematic thinking allows adolescents to better cope with stress.

Adolescent LD Students

The number of students diagnosed as LD in high school is significantly higher than the number so diagnosed at younger ages [18], due to the biological, cognitive, and social changes that occur at puberty [19]. Studies have shown that some LD students with distinct patterns of neurocognitive learning impairment also show distinctly different patterns of psychosocial functioning. LD students have difficulty adjusting to social frameworks, functioning in various social situations, dealing with feelings of failure, and delaying gratification. A significant number of LD students' exhibit low self-esteem, feelings of isolation, and a tendency toward mood swings [20, 21]. Children with learning disabilities often hear words and phrases such as lazy, spoiled, stubborn, distracted, irresponsible, inattentive, etc. His self-image is damaged, so he develops negative feelings of frustration, sadness, rage and helplessness expressed in defensive patterns of behavior and angry outbursts [22]. The decrease in self-image puts LD adolescents at a high risk for feelings of loneliness, depression, victimization, and chronic shame [23, 24].

LD adolescents tend to have a lower self-image than other teenagers as they sense that they do not meet others' expectations of them, and they find they are unable to meet their objectives [25] their low self-image may also be affected by the attitude of those around them. A study by Clark [26] showed that teachers tend to exhibit less anger and more sympathy for LD children because they did not expect these children to perform as well in school as the non-LD students. Such attitudes and lack of confidence on the part of a teacher can damage the LD-adolescents' self-esteem and motivation to learn. It may also influence the other students' attitude towards the LD student.

Social skills reflect the capability of teenagers to use social behaviors such as sharing, cooperation, reciprocity, and understanding the other's point of view in a way that is appropriate to a given social situation. Social skills are important for social development, and are an important contribution to an individual's adjustment not only in junior high, but also later in high school, in institutions of higher education, and in the working environment [27].

Studies in the field of socio-emotional functioning have found that students who report feeling lonely also tend

to report shyness, low social skills, a lack of mental stability, and a lack of self-confidence. In contrast, those who have some close relationship and thus feel a sense of intimacy, or are part of a coherent social group are less likely to feel lonely [28].

Many studies have examined the difficulties that LD students have in developing social skills. While learning disability is primarily associated with a decline in academic achievement, up to 75% of LD children also exhibit underdeveloped social skills compared to their counterparts [29, 30].

Pragmatic communication embraces a broad area that includes knowing when to speak, with whom, for what purpose, and in what manner, and is paramount to social skills and function. Investigators studying learning disabilities have reported that LD adolescents have difficulty with pragmatic communication [31]. LD adolescents have difficulty taking verbal initiative (joining a conversation, greeting peers, or introducing them), describing situations and objects, or providing instructions. LD adolescents tend to ask few questions, especially open questions, and they are less responsive to requests for help or clarification from those around them. The LD adolescent also does not know how to adapt his manner of speaking to suit his conversation partner coming across as rude and contemptuous to an educator. Conversation partners may tend to snub or dismiss them because of their negativity or antagonism [3].

The difficulties that LD adolescents have in developing social skills can be divided into three key areas [30]:

- a. **Poor interpersonal communication and behavioral problems:** Interpersonal communication is a basic, vital component in cognitive development and friendship. Interaction with peer groups requires selective attention, high levels of memory organization and cognition, social initiative, and active involvement in diverse interpersonal situations [32]. LD students, in contrast to other students, exhibit passive communication patterns, low initiative when it comes to interaction peers, and a tendency to avoid social interaction out of fear of failure [33].
- b. **Inefficient social cognition:** Social cognition refers to the knowledge and cognitive processes that an individual uses to interact and relate to others. LD students do not process and interpret information correctly. They have difficulty in properly interpreting social signals such as tone of voice, facial expression and body language, and in comprehending their place in relation to others. Their planning strategies are faulty and therefore forming interpersonal relationships becomes problematic [34].

- c. **Emotional and motivational problems:** Mood is an important element of the individual's emotional realm. It affects behavior and the acquisition of social skills. LD adolescents tend to exhibit emotional issues that include extreme mood swings, difficulty expressing feelings, anxiety, and anger. They also have difficulty empathizing with others and often misjudge the mood and emotions of others [35].

Bruck [36] described the emotional and motivational difficulties from two different perspectives: in one, emotional difficulties can be considered one of the primary issues of the learning disabled and come about as a result of academic failure; in the other, emotional difficulties are a result of the secondary issues – frustration, lack of self-confidence, aggressiveness, and depression – that arise from social and academic failure. Fear of failure leads to avoiding communication, which generates feelings of helplessness arising from the inability (or lack of confidence) to influence social conditions. The emotional distress prohibits acquisition of social skills, further leading to social withdrawal and reduced motivation to communicate, as well as reinforcing a passive coping pattern and exacerbated feelings of loneliness and depression [37, 38].

LD adolescents more often reported being in a bad mood and/or feeling depressed [20]. Amongst the LD, symptoms of depression were displayed more often among adolescents compared to children, and among girls than boys [39].

In conclusion, lack of social skills has a profound influence on the functioning of the LD student because they are missing the abilities and skills required for adaptive behavior and appropriate social interaction. Difficulties in any of the three key areas that affect these skills – interpersonal, cognitive-social, and emotional – are equally associated in influencing an individual's behavior and ability to cope in a social system. The cognitive struggle affects the collection of behaviors appropriate for understanding the social situation. Any failing in any one of the components affects adaptation, especially during adolescence, when developing social ties is crucial and significant.

Transitional Periods during Adolescence

During puberty, students undergo two major transitions within the educational framework: from elementary school to junior high (sixth grade to seventh grade), and then from junior high to high school (ninth grade to tenth grade). The transition from one educational environment to another engenders a feeling of loss in most students since they leave an environment which they have

grown accustomed to and must adapt to new norms and procedures. This generates dread, curiosity, and anxiety which may lead to crisis [40]. However, the move from one class to another may have an especially profound impact on LD adolescents, accompanied by behavioral problems, a decline in academic achievement, and an increase in anxiety, especially with respect to social issues (acceptance in a peer group) and the need to meet new academic expectations. Such problems may lead the individual to a decrease in self-esteem and an increase in psychological distress [41].

Several factors may have an impact on the transition and students' capacity to cope, and can determine how students adapt to their new academic situation. These factors include the student's psychological characteristics (individual capability, coping patterns, individual autonomy level); the student's family situation (economic level, parenting style); and the policies of the new school (requirement levels, amount of social and emotional support) [41].

Research has shown that the transition to junior high affects the psychosocial attitude of students and may lead to undesirable feelings, such as stress, helplessness, and lack of satisfaction, along with increased symptoms of ADHD, such as lack of concentration, hyperactivity, impulsivity, and decreased self-esteem [42, 43]. An adolescent's frustration threshold is low, leading to anxiety and confusion that may result in extreme outbursts of aggression, emotional upheavals, defiance, and a tendency to exaggerate conflicts. All this occurs alongside the transition to junior high, which begs the opposite: good adaptation skills to be able to conform to the educational framework.

The Ministry of Education and Culture [44] recognizes the challenges that are inherent in the transfer from elementary school to junior high and high schools with their significantly different systems. Students must cope psychologically, socially, and emotionally with a myriad of changes: the transition from being "minors" in primary school to being "young people and adolescents" in junior high and high; the change from a relatively intimate system to a large one that includes a much larger student body; a different method of instruction, wherein students move from teacher to teacher every day, each of whom specializes in a specific subject area and has his or her own teaching style. In addition, junior high is usually more achievement-oriented than primary school and requires coping with a curriculum that is higher in standard and broader in content. To exacerbate the trauma, students moving from elementary to junior high are often forced to leave old friends and are faced with having to form new relationships in a heterogeneous classroom. Thus, coping with transition also involves socio-emotional coping.

All the changes described above present even more of a challenge for LD adolescents, who, as stipulated above, are deficient in social skills, have difficulty developing and acquiring skills, find it hard to adjust, and who also may find that, in relation to that of their peers, their puberty is delayed [45]. These gaps may embarrass the LD adolescent and accentuate problems [46]. Also, such youth experience the world differently from their non-LD peers, and events that occur around them are perceived as less predictable. LD adolescents may invent stories to explain their reality, and these will dictate how they interpret present events and how they respond to future ones [22].

This may result in the breakdown of dialogue between LD adolescents and guidance counselors or other contact person who may try to communicate with the student. The contact person may have difficulty understanding them and will not supply the acceptance and emotional support needed to produce a safe base for the student.

Method

In order to examine LD students' subjective interpretation of their socio-cultural reality during the transition periods into junior high school, a sample set was chosen that comprised 12 adolescent students (7 boys, 5 girls) who had been diagnosed as LD and were attending regular classes in a State-run Arab junior high (grades 7, 8 and 9) in one of the largest cities in northern Israel.

After receiving approval from the school, the school counselor located the LD students to participate in the study and then coordinated the time and venue for the interviews. Each student received an explanation of the purpose and procedure of the study: they were informed that data collection was for research purposes only; that their anonymity would be maintained to ensure maximum privacy and confidentiality, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. The students were asked to confirm their agreement in writing. The students' parents received an information sheet explaining the goals and process of the study. They were requested to consent in writing to their children's participation.

Face-to-face, in-depth interviews of approximately 45 minutes each were conducted in Arabic with each student individually in the student counselor's office. The interview was semi-structured, and included 7 open questions (see Appendix 1). The content was recorded for later transcription.

Findings

For the purpose of data analysis, all the statements and descriptions that were deemed pertinent to the topic of the study were extracted from the interviews and given an initial coding whereby all statements pertaining to one topic

were gathered together into one category. This initial classification suggested three main characteristics that pertain to LD students that have transferred from primary school to junior high: (a) a sense of loneliness and isolation; (b) a lack social skills and ability to adapt; (c) their relationship with their teachers.

Isolation

The respondents described the transition into junior high as a stressful and daunting process that disrupted any order they had already created in their lives. They stressed how difficult it is for them to find their place in their new school and described feelings of loneliness and isolation, not fitting in, socio-emotional detachment, rejection by their counterparts, and difficulty meeting and bonding with their peers. Some students have one friend from elementary school, but they all spend most of their time isolated, without friends. Most of the students expressed feelings of despair, helplessness, and even hatred toward their class and the school. A large proportion of them noted that the new school environment was neither welcoming nor supportive, providing a possible explanation for the students' sense of loneliness [47]. Their statements clearly revealed feelings of solitude, social isolation, and also feelings of boredom that arose directly from their isolation, both in class and during breaks. These findings agree with the relevant literature, which indicates that LD students experience higher levels of solitude than their non-LD peers in all developmental stages from kindergarten until high school graduation [18, 48, 49].

Social Skills

All the students described going through a long, difficult, anxious period of adjustment following the move to the new school. Students reported feelings of low efficacy in creating social bonds and a tendency toward passivity. Some clearly expressed that they did not know how to approach classmates to initiate friendship with them; others did not state this directly, but expressed a desire for their fellow classmates to initiate contact. This information is consistent with the findings of Pearl [30].

They expressed the need to have some person to rely on, such as a friend from grade school or a caring relative who could act as an anchor during this period. Some of the students stated that, after a period of adjustment, they now have a good relationship with their peers and feel accepted socially. Nevertheless, the findings show that LD students do indeed have difficulty making new friends in junior high, and their few social ties are based on socialization schemas more appropriate for children, such as those based on location (neighbors), family relationship, or on friendships formed earlier in elementary school, with only a few new friends in junior high. This contrasts with close friendships usually formed in adolescence, which are based on intimacy, trust, and shared interests [13].

Teacher-Student Relations

The third characteristic was the relationship between the teachers and the LD students, and their teachers' perception of their social and emotional condition. All students seemed to feel that their teachers ignored them and treated them differently and less sympathetically than they treated students who performed better academically. Students are not getting their academic needs met by their teachers – they tend to explain the material in a manner that LD students find too difficult and rapid, and the students, on their part, refrain from expressing their difficulties during the lessons. The students feel that they are misunderstood at school and have no one to talk to. They reported feeling that their teachers did not understand or support them and even belittled them.

This finding is somewhat in conflict with Clark's findings [26]. It is possible that this difference lies in the differences between the studies: our study examined only the students' (subjective) perceptions, without any regard to those of the teachers, while Clark's research examined the teachers' perceptions, without regard to those of students. The findings of each study may, in fact, be independent of each other. In other words, students might feel a negative attitude on the part of the teachers and a feeling of rejection compared to other, more successful students, while teachers, for their part, may feel that they tend to ease their expectations of LD students and be more forgiving toward them.

In summary, it is apparent that LD students have an especially difficult time adjusting to a new school, with emphasis on the social-emotional adjustment. Most of the respondents seemed to experience similar negative feelings of loneliness, alienation, helplessness, being misunderstood and not accepted, all of which influenced them emotionally and socially. These difficulties induced them to keep quiet in class: they did not participate in socially, but even more important, avoided asking questions about difficult educational content.

Discussion

In the current study, we examined the socio-emotional adjustment of LD students who had undergone the transition from primary to junior high school, from the subjective perspective of the students themselves.

All the LD students in the study reported having significant academic difficulty. It is possible that this is due to impaired cognitive processes, which not only create problems in social cognition and the acquisition of social skills, but also in acquiring academic skills [50] because the manner of processing and analyzing information is flawed. The findings show how the social skills of LD adolescents of junior-high age affect their emotional and social adjustment. The students reported that it took them a long time to understand their classmates and their teachers, and to understand what is expected from them. Our findings support the conjecture that students who lack social skills

will tend to avoid social interactions, resulting in fewer opportunities to form friendships or to improve social skills. This sets up a vicious cycle that prevents them from acquiring appropriate skills and behavior patterns [51].

All the participants reported negative attention from their teachers. In this context, it should be noted that LD students often suffer from low self-esteem, and therefore are more likely than others to attribute responsibility for their failures and successes to a third party [25]; they also tend to incorrectly interpret the attitude and behavior of teachers as a result of their deficiency in social skills and pragmatism [50].

Notwithstanding these possible explanations, importance must still be placed on the feelings that LD students have regarding their teachers' attitude toward them, as they create a sense of alienation that may undermine the school experience. If the school is perceived as a hostile, critical place, and the adolescent fears that he is not being listened to or understood, the result is that he finds no outlet for the deep frustration stemming from his learning disability. This further intensifies the feelings of isolation that the student must deal with, and because they find it hard to share their sense of loneliness, they are brought to a point of anxiety that can produce paralyzing feelings of helplessness. These factors further affect the social and emotional adjustment of LD adolescents in their new educational framework.

Many studies emphasize the importance that a strong teacher-student relationship has on a student's self-esteem, motivation for learning, and social and academic success [52], and even the extent of love and respect toward teachers, school, and the education system as a whole. Teachers' attitudes towards students, the degree of trust in them, and the relationship that is woven between them significantly influence the students' emotional, academic, and social development. This relationship is even more important in the case of LD students, who may vent their feelings of frustration through behaviors that are unacceptable in school. In fact, a study that examined discipline problems and behavior of students in school found that an attentive, loving and caring teacher who can listen to and is aware of his students' personal problems, can bond with his students and prevent them from misbehaving [53].

Limitations & Recommendations

This study has a number of methodological limitations, mainly due to the homogenous sample set. This study involved a very small number of respondents (12 LD students) who live in the same area, go to the same school, come from the same ethnic sector, and have a similar socio-economic status. This precludes the formation of any significant conclusions that may pertain to the entire adolescent LD student population.

To formulate more sweeping conclusions requires a randomized study among a larger number of participants of different groups of students at different stages of adolescence, in different schools and in different areas. In addition, a longitudinal study following the students throughout the period of their acclimation and adjustment to junior high may provide more varied, in-depth information, and provide insight into the adjustment process over a time period, and not only the retrospective view of the student.

Conclusions

The study helps to understand in depth the emotional and social difficulties in LD adolescents in integrated junior-high classrooms and the effects that this transitional period may have on LD students, emotionally, academically, and in terms of student-teacher relations. By thoroughly understanding them, educational counseling can support the student and help him cope.

It is clear that the transition from elementary school to junior high is a complex time and is considered one of the most significant periods in a person's psychosocial and

socio-emotional development. It challenges every adolescent at an age when he or she is vulnerable to begin with, and presents even more of a challenge to LD teenagers, who are even more sensitive to such challenge.

The findings emphasize the influence that the teacher can have on the students' transition to junior high and their adaptation to their new educational environment. They may be put to practical use by education professionals – principals, teachers, educators, and educational advisors – while planning the various intervention and prevention programs to provide support and assistance for LD students. The professional can thus help both the individual students and the school (as a social-organizational system) to maximize students' inner strengths in a supportive, accepting atmosphere, based on the rights of the child.

Successful adaptation not only means academic achievement, but the development of resilience and appropriate understanding of social situations that will help them to cope in other life situations, too. The education system must do its best to assist LD students in this crucial adjustment to junior high in order to provide them with basic adaptation and coping skills that will prove vital throughout their lifetime.

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