

A Study on Perceived Social Support and Self- Esteem in Children with and without Learning Disability

Mrs. Supreeta

Rehabilitation Counselor

ABSTRACT

Learning disabilities, often termed invisible disabilities, significantly impact a child's development, with social support playing a crucial role. This study aimed to examine the perceived social support and self-esteem of children with and without learning disabilities. The study involved 100 children aged 10-14 years. Fifty children were diagnosed and certified with learning disabilities, while the other fifty had no such diagnosis. Participants were selected based on their diagnosis, verified through learning disability certificates, and their academic history, sourced from hospitals, schools and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Participation was voluntary, and informed consent forms were provided and signed by either the participants' parents or teachers. Data were collected using the Multidimensional Perceived Social Support Scale and Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale. Statistical analyses were conducted to interpret the data. The findings indicated that children with learning disabilities reported significantly lower perceived social support compared to their peers without learning disabilities. However, no significant difference was observed in self-esteem levels between the two groups. Additionally, gender differences were examined, revealing no significant interaction between gender and learning disability status on both perceived social support and self-esteem. Social support plays a vital role in the development of children with learning disabilities, while self-esteem appears less affected by the presence of a learning disability. These findings highlight the importance of fostering supportive environments for children with learning disabilities, warranting further research in this area.

Keywords: Learning Disability, Social Support, Self-Esteem, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, Perceived Social Support Scale.

INTRODUCTION

Learning Disability (LD): Learning disability (LD) is a broad classification encompassing individuals who face significant learning challenges, qualifying them for special education services (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). These individuals exhibit specific and severe impairments in areas such as comprehension, spelling, and articulation. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition (DSM-IV), learning disorders were categorized into Specific Reading Disorder, Specific Math Disorder, and Disorders of Written Expression (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). However, the DSM-5 has consolidated these into a single diagnosis, Specific Learning Disorder, which reflects generalized academic difficulties while allowing for specification of particular areas of impairment and severity (mild, moderate, or severe) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

LD typically occurs in individuals with average or above-average intelligence but can also manifest in gifted individuals. Regardless of cognitive capacity, affected individuals consistently struggle with academic skills and may face challenges in adaptive skills throughout their lives. These difficulties often extend beyond academics, impacting relationships, mental health, and employment opportunities (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

Learning Disability and Perceived Social Support: Perceived social support plays a pivotal role in the development of self-concept among students with learning disabilities. It refers to the individual's perception of being supported by significant others such as parents, teachers, peers, and friends (Zelege, 2004). Research has indicated that the global self-concept of students with LD is influenced by the level of perceived support from these key figures (Garnefski & Okma, 1996). Kashani et al. (1988) explored the relationship between two dimensions of social support: the number of supportive individuals and satisfaction with this support. Their findings demonstrated that children reporting lower satisfaction with their social support systems were more frequently described as withdrawn by teachers.

Learning Disability and Self-Esteem: Self-esteem refers to an individual's overall sense of self-worth or personal value (Rosenberg, 1965). It is a critical factor in a child's psychological development, influencing their motivation, behavior, and emotional well-being. Children with learning disabilities often encounter difficulties in maintaining high self-esteem due to persistent academic struggles and social challenges (Chapman, 1988). Low self-esteem may lead these children to believe they are unworthy of positive treatment, inhibiting their ability to seek help or advocate for

themselves, thus affecting the development of self-advocacy skills (Humphrey, 2002). Children with low self-esteem may also struggle to develop the confidence necessary to address their learning difficulties effectively. This lack of confidence can hinder their academic progress and social integration, contributing to feelings of isolation and frustration. While previous studies have examined the relationship between perceived social support and self-esteem in children with learning disabilities, there is a paucity of research focusing on these variables in the context of Indian children with LD.

Perceived Social Support: Social support refers to the perception that one is cared for, has access to assistance from others, and is part of a supportive social network (Cobb, 1976). Sources of social support can include family, friends, teachers, romantic partners, pets, community members, and coworkers. Martinez et al. (2011) investigated self-perception, social, and emotional functioning among middle school adolescents with and without learning disabilities. Their results indicated no significant difference in global self-worth between the two groups. However, girls reported lower global self-worth than boys. Students with LD rated their intellectual and academic self-worth lower than their peers without LD, and girls also reported lower intellectual self-concept than boys. No significant gender or group differences were found in non-academic self-concept. Additionally, students with LD reported lower levels of parental and peer support compared to their non-LD counterparts. Dyson (1997) conducted a study on parental stress and social support among parents of children with developmental disabilities. The study found no significant differences in parental stress or social support between fathers and mothers of children with or without disabilities. However, parents of children with disabilities reported higher stress levels related to their child's condition compared to parents of non-disabled children.

Self-Esteem: Self-esteem represents a positive or negative orientation toward oneself, reflecting an individual's overall evaluation of their worth or value (Rosenberg, 1965). It is a fundamental component of self-concept, which encompasses the totality of an individual's thoughts and feelings about themselves as an object (Rosenberg, 1979). Cosden et al. (1992) explored the relationship between self-understanding and self-esteem in children with learning disabilities. The study revealed that increased knowledge about one's learning disability was not directly associated with higher self-esteem. However, understanding one's learning disability was linked to actual and perceived scholastic competence. Global self-esteem, on the other hand, was more closely related to perceptions of competence in non-academic domains, suggesting that a child's broader sense of self-worth may be influenced by factors beyond academic performance.

Purpose of the Study: The primary purpose of this study is to investigate the perceived social support and self-esteem among children with learning disabilities and those without learning disabilities. By comparing these two groups, the study aims to identify any significant differences in how social support is perceived and how it influences the self-esteem of the children. Additionally, the study seeks to explore whether gender plays a moderating role in the levels of perceived social support and self-esteem among both groups. This will help in understanding if boys and girls experience and interpret social support differently, and how this, in turn, affects their self-esteem, especially in the context of learning disabilities. The findings from this research are expected to contribute valuable insights for educators, parents, and mental health professionals in developing tailored interventions to enhance social support systems and boost self-esteem in children, particularly those facing challenges due to learning disabilities.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the differences in perceived social support between children with learning disabilities and those without learning disabilities.
2. To evaluate self-esteem levels among children with learning disabilities compared to children without learning disabilities.
3. To investigate gender differences in perceived social support among children with learning disabilities, specifically comparing males and females.
4. To assess gender differences in self-esteem among children with learning disabilities, focusing on potential disparities between male and female students.
5. To explore the interaction effect of gender and learning disability status on perceived social support and self-esteem, determining whether the combination of these factors influences the outcomes differently.

Hypotheses of the Study

1. Children with learning disabilities will report lower levels of perceived social support compared to children without learning disabilities.
2. Children with learning disabilities will exhibit lower self-esteem compared to children without learning disabilities.

3. Male children with learning disabilities will have lower perceived social support compared to female children with learning disabilities.
4. Male children with learning disabilities will demonstrate lower self-esteem compared to female children with learning disabilities.

Sample and Procedure: The study collected self-report data from children aged 10 to 14 years, both with and without learning disabilities. Participants were selected based on their diagnosis, verified through learning disability certificates, and their academic history, sourced from hospitals, schools, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Participation was voluntary, and informed consent forms were provided and signed by either the participants' parents or teachers. Participants received clear instructions and a brief explanation of the study before completing the questionnaires. The research employed a 2 x 2 between-subjects factorial design. The independent variables were the type of children (with learning disability and without learning disability) and gender (male and female). All data were collected on the same day from the participants. Once data collection was complete, responses were coded and entered into an Excel sheet. Descriptive statistics were calculated, followed by tests for normality, correlation analysis, and Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA). These analyses focused on the scores obtained from measures of perceived social support and self-esteem.

INSTRUMENTS/TOOLS

Perceived Social Support: The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) was used to assess perceived social support through a self-report technique (Zimet et al., 1988). The MSPSS evaluates three subscales representing different sources of support: (a) Family, (b) Friends, and (c) Significant Others. The scale has demonstrated strong factorial validity across various populations.

Self-Esteem: Self-esteem was measured using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), a widely used instrument consisting of ten items rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" (Rosenberg, 1965). The RSES assesses global self-worth and has shown high reliability and validity in diverse populations.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

All statistical analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 22.0). Descriptive statistics, including Mean, Standard Deviation, Skewness, and Kurtosis, were computed for Perceived Social Support (PSS) and Self-Esteem (SE).

Descriptive Statistics

In a sample of 100 students:

The mean score for Perceived Social Support (PSS) was 53.12 (SD = 15.340). The highest score recorded was 85, while the lowest score was 18.

The mean score for Self-Esteem (SE) was 15.45 (SD = 4.210). The maximum score was 27, and the minimum score was 10.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Perceived Social Support and Self-Esteem

Measure	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Perceived Social Support	53.12	15.340	18	85
Self-Esteem	15.45	4.210	10	27

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation was used to assess the relationship between Perceived Social Support (PSS) and Self-Esteem (SE).

Table 2: Correlation between Perceived Social Support and Self-Esteem

Measures	Score on PSS	Score on SE
PSS	-	.334**
SE	.334**	-

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The analysis revealed a significant positive correlation between Perceived Social Support and Self-Esteem ($r = .334$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that students with higher social support tend to have higher self-esteem.

Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA)

A Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was conducted to examine the effects of learning disability status (LD code) and gender on Perceived Social Support and Self-Esteem. Assumptions for MANOVA, including normality and homogeneity of variances, were verified before conducting the analysis.

Table 3: Multivariate Test Results

Effect	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Significance
Intercept	0.046	1245.218 ^b	2	114	0.000
LD_code	0.778	16.254 ^b	2	114	0.000
Gender	0.996	0.185 ^b	2	114	0.832
LD_code * Gender	0.984	0.812 ^b	2	114	0.449

a. Design: Intercept + LD_code + Gender + LD_code * Gender

b. Exact statistic

Interpretation of MANOVA Results:

As shown in Table 3, MANOVA revealed a significant effect of the LD code, comparing children with learning disabilities and those without, (Wilks' Lambda = 0.778) [$F(2, 114) = 16.254, p = 0.000$]. However, no significant multivariate effect was observed for gender [$F(2, 114) = 0.185, p = 0.832$]. Additionally, the interaction between LD code and gender was not statistically significant [$F(2, 114) = 0.812, p = 0.449$].

Univariate Analysis Results

To further examine the individual effects on Perceived Social Support and Self-Esteem, univariate analyses were conducted.

Table 4: Univariate Test Results

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Significance
Intercept	357295.12	1	357295.12	1648.67	0.000
	31942.75	1	31942.75	1817.21	0.000
LD_code	6225.34	1	6225.34	28.09	0.000
	0.28	1	0.28	0.018	0.892
Gender	83.15	1	83.15	0.392	0.532
	1.57	1	1.57	0.087	0.768
LD_code * Gender	149.28	1	149.28	0.70	0.404
	25.92	1	25.92	1.45	0.231
Error	25175.19	115	218.04		
	2028.34	115	17.64		
Total	389812.00	119			
	33971.00	119			
Corrected Total	31555.42	118			
	2061.34	118			

a. R Squared = .205 (Adjusted R Squared = .185)

b. R Squared = .015 (Adjusted R Squared = -.011)

Interpretation of Univariate Results:

Referring to Table 4, the univariate results showed a significant effect of LD code on Perceived Social Support [$F(1, 115) = 28.09, p = 0.000$]. However, there was no significant effect of LD code on Self-Esteem [$F(1, 115) = 0.018, p = 0.892$].

Similarly, gender did not have a significant effect on Perceived Social Support [$F(1, 115) = 0.392, p = 0.532$] or Self-Esteem [$F(1, 115) = 0.087, p = 0.768$].

The interaction effect of LD code and gender was also found to be non-significant for both Perceived Social Support [$F(1, 115) = 0.70, p = 0.404$] and Self-Esteem [$F(1, 115) = 1.45, p = 0.231$].

DISCUSSION

The primary objective of this study was to explore perceived social support and self-esteem among children with learning disabilities (LD) compared to their peers without learning disabilities. Although several studies have

investigated the cognitive and academic challenges faced by children with LD, limited research has focused on the psychosocial dimensions, specifically perceived social support and self-esteem.

Perceived Social Support in Children with Learning Disabilities: The first hypothesis proposed that children with learning disabilities would report lower levels of perceived social support compared to children without learning disabilities. The findings of this study support this hypothesis. Children with LD reported significantly lower perceived social support than their non-LD counterparts. This aligns with the findings of Martínez (2006), who concluded that children with learning disabilities often report lower levels of parental and peer support due to their perceived academic incompetence and social challenges. During data collection, it was observed that children without learning disabilities more frequently sought support from friends and family, while children with LD reported difficulties in sharing personal issues with both parents and peers. Some children with LD expressed that although they could confide in their parents, they struggled to connect with friends due to a perceived lack of competence, leading to a reduced sense of social support. These findings are consistent with Wiener and Tardif (2004), who noted that children with LD often face social isolation and peer rejection, further diminishing their perceived support networks.

Self-Esteem in Children with Learning Disabilities: The second hypothesis posited that children with learning disabilities would have lower self-esteem compared to those without learning disabilities. Contrary to expectations, the results indicated no significant difference in self-esteem between the two groups. This finding is in line with research by Gans, Kenny, and Ghany (2003), which found that individuals with learning disabilities can maintain a positive sense of global self-worth despite experiencing challenges in academic settings. Data revealed that children with LD rated their self-esteem as average, similar to their peers without LD. Interestingly, some children with low perceived social support still reported moderate or high self-esteem, suggesting that self-esteem may not be directly influenced by social support alone. This complex relationship mirrors the findings of Bear, Minke, and Manning (2002), who suggested that self-esteem in children is influenced by a combination of personal resilience and environmental factors, including school support and peer relationships. Additionally, children with LD in inclusive schools (mainstream settings) reported feeling less competent than their peers, while those attending specialized schools reported moderate self-esteem and felt equal in abilities to their classmates. This supports the findings of Lackaye and Margalit (2006), who highlighted that educational environments play a critical role in shaping the self-esteem of students with LD.

Gender Differences in Perceived Social Support: The third hypothesis suggested that males with learning disabilities would report lower perceived social support compared to females with learning disabilities. However, the results revealed no significant gender differences in perceived social support among children with LD. This outcome aligns with findings from Martínez (2006), who found that gender did not significantly affect perceived social support among adolescents with LD. Observations during data collection indicated that females reported more family support, while males relied more on peer support. Despite these differences in the sources of support, the total perceived social support scores were similar across genders. This suggests that while the type of support may vary between males and females, the overall perception of being supported remains consistent, a conclusion also supported by Nowicki (2003) in his research on gender and social support dynamics in children with LD.

Gender Differences in Self-Esteem: The fourth hypothesis proposed that males with learning disabilities would have lower self-esteem than females with learning disabilities. However, the results indicated no significant gender differences in self-esteem among children with LD. Both male and female students reported similar levels of self-esteem, regardless of their learning disability status. This finding is consistent with research by Zeleke (2004), who found no significant gender differences in self-esteem among children with learning disabilities. Observations from this study further suggested that self-esteem levels were stable across genders, with both males and females expressing confidence in their abilities despite their learning challenges.

Overall Findings

The overall findings of this study suggest that while learning disabilities negatively impact perceived social support, they do not significantly affect self-esteem. Gender did not appear to influence either perceived social support or self-esteem in this sample. It was observed that children without LD rated their friends as their primary source of social support, particularly in households where both parents were working. This trend was also present among children with LD, but those with working parents reported lower perceived social support and self-esteem compared to children with LD from households with one non-working parent. This finding aligns with the research by Margalit (2004), which emphasized the importance of family involvement in fostering the emotional well-being of children with learning disabilities.

Implications for Practice: Based on the findings of this study, it can be inferred that children with learning disabilities exhibit levels of perceived social support and self-esteem that are comparable to those of children without learning disabilities. However, additional observations suggest that children with learning disabilities may still experience lower levels of perceived social support and self-esteem relative to their non-LD peers. This discrepancy highlights the complex nature of psychosocial functioning in children with learning disabilities, which may not be fully captured through quantitative measures alone. Given that learning disabilities play a significant role in the school experiences of

affected children and adolescents, it is crucial to examine how these students perceive themselves, their social support systems, and their overall psychological well-being. Understanding these aspects is essential to recognizing how learning disabilities influence the emotional and psychological development of children, potentially acting as a catalyst for emotional challenges. This study reinforces the idea that students with specific learning disabilities may face unique psychosocial challenges that differ from their peers without LD. These challenges could stem from difficulties in social interactions, academic struggles, or feelings of inadequacy compared to classmates. Therefore, it is important for educators, counselors, and psychologists to develop targeted interventions and support systems that address not only academic needs but also the emotional and social well-being of these students. The present research aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on learning disabilities by emphasizing the importance of holistic approaches that consider both academic and psychosocial needs. Furthermore, it encourages continued dialogue on the development of support services tailored to the specific emotional and psychological requirements of children with different subtypes of learning disabilities.

Limitations of the Study: The study was conducted with a relatively small sample size, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. A larger, more diverse sample could provide more robust and representative results. The research employed cross-sectional design, capturing data at a single point in time. This limits the ability to establish causal relationships between learning disabilities, perceived social support, and self-esteem. Longitudinal studies would provide deeper insights into how these variables evolve over time. Data on perceived social support and self-esteem were collected using self-reported questionnaires, which may be subject to social desirability bias or inaccurate self-perception. Participants might have overestimated or underestimated their levels of support and self-esteem. The study did not extensively consider other external factors such as socioeconomic status, family dynamics, or school environment, all of which could significantly influence perceived social support and self-esteem. The research focused primarily on a specific age group of children. The findings might not be applicable to older adolescents or younger children, who may experience different psychosocial challenges related to learning disabilities. The study treated learning disabilities as a homogeneous group, without distinguishing between different types (e.g., dyslexia, ADHD, dyscalculia). Different subtypes of learning disabilities may impact perceived social support and self-esteem in unique ways.

Future Directions and Suggestions: Future studies should aim to include larger and more diverse populations across different geographical regions, socioeconomic backgrounds, and cultural contexts to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Implementing longitudinal studies would allow researchers to examine how perceived social support and self-esteem develop over time in children with learning disabilities. Combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the psychosocial experiences of children with learning disabilities. Interviews and focus groups could offer deeper insights into the personal experiences behind the data. Future research should incorporate variables such as family environment, peer relationships, school climate, and teacher support to better understand the factors influencing perceived social support and self-esteem in children with LD. It is essential to differentiate between various types of learning disabilities to explore how specific challenges (e.g., reading difficulties vs. attention deficits) may affect social support and self-esteem differently. This will allow for more targeted interventions. Although this study found no significant gender differences, future research could delve deeper into age-specific and gender-specific experiences, considering how developmental stages might influence psychosocial outcomes in children with LD. Conducting cross-cultural studies could provide insights into how cultural norms and societal attitudes toward learning disabilities influence perceived social support and self-esteem in different contexts.

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