
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ADAPTABILITY SKILLS IN LEARNING AND NON LEARNING DISABLED CHILDREN: A CASE STUDY OF KARACHI*

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Abstract

The purpose of the research was to determine the effect of learning disabilities on adaptability skills. After a detailed literature review, it was hypothesized that the non learning disabled students will have higher adaptability skills than the learning disabled students. The sample comprised 80 learning disabled and 80 non learning disabled students. The learning disabled group included 51 boys and 29 girls. The non learning disabled group included 41 boys and 39 girls. The learning disabled group was conveniently selected from remedial schools and schools with screening psychologists. The non learning disabled group was randomly selected from normal schools of upper socioeconomic strata. In order to gain information regarding age, sex, qualification, parents, income and any other psychological problem Demographic Variable Form, and for measuring adaptability skills the adaptability subscale of the Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory, Youth Version was administered. For statistical analyses of the data, t-test was applied through SPSS10.0. Findings suggest significant difference in the level of adaptability skills between the two groups $p < 0.05$ level.

Key Words: Adaptability and Learning disabilities

JEL Classification: I20

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Introduction

This paper seeks to identify the effects of learning difficulties on adaptability skills. The hypothesis stating that learning disabled students have lower adaptability skills than non learning disabled students. The paper begins with the review of relevant literature. It then presents the methodology of the study and analyses of results obtained.

Literature Review

The human organism continues to learn since birth till the grave, formally and informally. This process of learning changes his behavior progressively, as learning has been defined by Hilgard (1964) "as a process which brings about a measurable change in behavior as a result of practice." Formal learning starts almost around four and extends till mid 20's. This process of formal learning is not equally smooth for all individuals, problems such as mental retardation, autism, Down's syndrome, hyperactively and attention deficit require special attention and education.

The problem of learning disability is different from the above mentioned cases since the child possesses average IQ and yet exhibits problems in reading and writing.

According to the research definition given by the National Institute of Health, the term learning disability means a disorder in one or more of the basic processes involved in understanding spoken or written language. It may show up as a problem in listening, thinking, speaking, reading, writing or spelling or in a person's ability to do maths, despite at least average intelligence. The term does not include children who have learning problems which are primarily the result of usual, hearing or physical handicaps, or mental retardation, or emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantages.

Any kind of disorder in the area of written or spoken language and speech are associated with communication skills

needed for social interaction. The IQ of such children has been diagnosed somewhere around average. Their people skills necessary for interaction on a healthy level are likely to be low.

Causes of learning disabilities have been identified by McGrady (1974) which are as follows :

(a) **Deficits in Psychological Processes:**

Input: The first problem in the input process is visual perception. They have difficulty in recognizing the position and shape of what they see. The other major input disability is in auditory perception. They do not distinguish differences in subtle sounds.

Integration: Integration disabilities may take several forms such as sequencing, abstraction and organization. A student with such problems might reverse the orders of the letters in words, of problems involving abstraction which consists of difficulty in inferring meaning and another difficulty revolves around making bits of information cohere into concepts.

Memory: Short term memory retains information briefly which we attend to or concentrate upon. Most memory disabilities affect short term memory only. Students with these disabilities need many more repetitions than usual.

Output: At the output stage, there are both language and motor disabilities. A child with a *language disability* may speak normally when initiating conversation but responds hesitantly in new situations, pauses, asks for the question to be repeated, gives a confused answer, or fails to find the right words.

Motor disabilities are of two types: poor coordination of large muscle groups. Gross motor disabilities make children clumsy. The most common type of fine motor disability is difficulty in coordinating the muscles needed for writing. Children with this problem write slowly and their handwriting is often unreadable. They may also make spelling, grammar and punctuation errors.

Genetic and Perinatal Factors:-

Bakwin (1973) studied reading disability in twins and found a 29% concordance in fraternal twins and an 84% concordance in identical twins.

According to Argyle (1972) and Davis (1973) all interactions within a culture fall within expected parameters of a scheme or organizations of experience within the extended culture. Johnson and Myklebust, (1967) and Lerner (1971) described the learning disabled deficient ability to process implicit social cues, which when combined with conceptual deficiencies and egocentricity, make role projection, prediction and accommodation exceedingly difficult.

Kronick (1974) has clearly indicated that deficit in temporal concepts is the most common disability in learning disabled children. These deficiencies have affected their judgment about how long to discuss a subject, their imagery of an interaction in advance, their prediction capabilities, their comprehension of the stages of life tasks, and their knowledge of one's past present and subsequent place in time. Similarly, linguistic/conceptual deficits can grossly distort comprehension of interactions.

Adaptability Skills:

The adaptability realm involves our ability to be flexible and realistic, and to solve a range of problems as they arise. Its three scales are; Reality Testing - the ability to see things as they actually are - rather than the way you wish or fear they might be, Flexibility - the ability to adjust your feelings, thoughts and actions to changing conditions, and Problem Solving- the ability to define problems, move to generate and implement effective, appropriate solutions.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) in their seminal work delineated four modes of coping. The first is "information seeking", on which reappraisal of the threat or some form of later actions may depend. The second is "direct action" to change the environment. In the third mode, "inhibition of action", a person may not respond

because the response or the situation is too dangerous. Finally, there is a complex class of “intra psychic, forms of coping that contains mostly defense mechanisms that are designed to decrease the level of arousal.

Parril & Burnstein (1981) found that children with learning disability tended to produce less varied and more rigid coping strategies. These children were also unable to adapt appropriate cognitive strategies to different social situations (Gerber, 1983) or to organize spontaneously efficient strategies directed to the achievement of social goals (Oliva & La Greca, 1988).

In another study by **Sholomo et al. (1998)** found statistically significant difference between learning disabled and non learning disabled students in social adaptation scores. However, **Winter (1993)** found a wide variation in the social and emotional adaptation of individuals with learning disabilities.

The same has been stated by **Fuerst, Fisk & Rourke (1989)**. They used Q-factor analysis with the Personality Inventory for children to identify emotional subtypes of children with learning disabilities. They established three groups: one with normal psychosocial adjustment (approximately 55% of the sample), one with significant internalizing psychopathology (20% of the sample) and one group with externalizing psychopathology (24% of the sample).

Synatschk (1995) studied the life-event stressors of learning disabled children. The students in the study all viewed coming to the university as a significant life-event, and not as a normal event for their age groups. It represented various amounts of change from their high school environment and from little to a great deal of change. These changes were viewed by each of the students from their own particular life-stage and socio historical vantage points. For example, all of the students, in his sample at least for a time, had moved away from their parent’s homes and many experienced a different kind of community and cultural setting. All experienced a change in the amount and type of interaction with teachers than they had previously known. All experienced differences in their social environments and a

temporary feeling of isolation in a new environment filled with strangers. Among the negative social effects was, at least for a time, diminished self-esteem for the students. In discussing the stress of coming to college, the students linked their experiences to those of most new college students without learning disability believing that it was a difficult adjustment for everyone. They also reported that the life-events they experienced were compounded by numerous academic adjustments which produced more serious problems of adaptation. Noteworthy, about the life-event stressor that the students described, rather than the actual circumstances of the event, were their perception of things that seemed to impact on their adjustment.

Chandler (1994) suggested that some emotional adjustment disorders result from “attempts to cope with a difficult learning process and the resultant failure, frustration and feelings of incompetence which those attempts engender. For some, school achievement has become equated with self-competency, and the loss of competence has led to feelings of inadequacy, depression, withdrawal and an uncaring attitude”. For others, poor school performance leads to dependency and learned helplessness as a maladaptive style of coping.

In a study that compared the coping styles of learning disabled and non learning disabled adolescents, Shulman, Carlton-Ford, Levian & Hed (1995) found that adolescents with learning disability were less able to appraise a source of stress and seek information in the various domains with which they were expected to cope. Geisthardt & Munsch (1996) found that, whereas their sample of junior high school students with learning disability did not differ from non disabled students in their perceived levels of stress, students with learning disability reported relying on cognitive avoidance as a coping strategy more heavily than did their non disabled peers when coping with an academic stress event. Furthermore, adolescents with learning disability sought support from peers significantly less often when dealing with academic and interpersonal stressors. College students with learning disability have been found to generally have more difficulty adjusting to university life, which may be related to their

reported low self-esteem and mistrust of others (Wilchesky & Minden, 1998).

A study conducted by Mellard and Hazel (1992) found that students with learning disability enrolled in a community college, had more difficulty handling pressure, adjusting to changes in routine, and accepting criticism.

Weller et al. (1994) extends the construct of adaptability beyond social skills and competencies. They attempted to categorize the general competencies of adaptive or maladaptive behavior into specific adult subtypes of learning disabilities. A subtype might be best defined by shared underlying weaknesses that manifest in similar observable behaviors. They tried to identify which domains of adaptability were most problematic for several proposed subtypes of learning disabilities. There is a high level of variation in weaknesses that might exist among individuals with learning disabilities. In addition, the magnitude of those strengths and weaknesses, can all contribute to difficulties when attempting to slot individuals into predefined categories or subtypes. However, these subtypes may lend greater structure in the determinations of the manner in which underlying weaknesses might impact on the different aspects of social adaptability.

According to Johnson (1995) introducing these individuals to the fact that they have a learning disability marks the first step in the process towards their assuming greater control over their lives. By realizing that they are not stupid, unworthy and alone they find relief and they develop a need to apply strategies in order to get the results they want. Also with the realization that a learning disability means having both strengths and weaknesses comes a greater openness and desire to discover, for themselves, where their own strengths and weaknesses lie. This then leads to their becoming more alert to the specific situations or tasks that are most frustrating for them. Blending problem solving steps with their increased self-knowledge, they consider what it is that they normally do when faced with a particular task or situation. Since they have identified the situation as problematic, it is reasonable to conclude that their current strategy is not working. The question of how the

individual might approach the same situation or task in a different way so that it fits with his strengths and weaknesses, is then asked and alternatives of action generated.

Methodology

It was hypothesized that non learning disabled students would have higher mean scores on the variable of adaptability as compared to learning disabled students.

Sample:

The sample consisted of two groups (80 learning disabled and 80 non learning disabled students) selected in Karachi in 2006. Their socioeconomic status ranged from the upper middle and upper socioeconomic class i.e. the students belonging to the families who could provide remedial education besides basic necessities of life and normal schooling. The ages of the participants of both the groups ranged from 8 to 18 years with a mean age of (LD students=12.45, NLD students=11.6). They were randomly selected from special schools, psychological clinics and normal schools. The non learning disabled group was selected from fifth, sixth and seventh graders of normal schools.

Demographic Variable Form: Demographic information regarding their age, birth order, sex, number of siblings, parental occupation, and socioeconomic status was obtained through the administration of demographic variable form.

Adaptability subscale of Bar-On EQ-i-YV: Adaptability subscale of Bar-On EQ-i-YV was administered in order to assess adaptability skills of learning and non learning disabled students.

A letter from the Director of the Institute of Clinical Psychology, describing the purpose of the research was provided to the concerned schools and also a letter from the researcher to the parents of the participants was also provided with the assurance of confidentiality regarding the identity of the participants and the use of data. Those who agreed to, were tested. The other group of NLD students was drawn after taking the consent from the principals and participants.

After completion of data collection, all test protocols were scored according to the instructions given in the manual. The response inventory was scored in such a direction that high scores are indicative of higher adaptability skills. For mean comparison between groups the t-test for independent sample was applied.

The data was analyzed using the Statistical Program, for Social Sciences (SPSS version 10.0). A significance level of 0.05 was used for the analysis i.e., to see the difference in the adaptability skills of learning and non learning disabled groups.

Table No1 showing research design

A D A P T A B I L I T Y S K I L L S	Total Sample N=160	
	Learning Disabled students N = 80	Non Learning Disabled students N = 80
	Learning Disabled Male students N = 51	Non Learning Disabled Male students N = 39
	Learning Disabled Female students N = 29	Non Learning Disabled Female students N = 41

Operational Definition:
Adaptability Dimension:
consists of three related abilities.

a. Reality testing:

The ability to validate one's emotions.

b. Flexibility:

The ability to adjust one's emotions, thoughts and behavior to changing situations and conditions.

c. Problem solving:

The ability to identify and define problems as well as to generate and implement potentially effective solutions.

2. Learning Disabilities:

Variable	Group	N	Mean	Std Deviation	df	t	Sig	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Upper	lower
Adaptability	NLD	80	27.71	6.69	158	3.265	0.001	5.02	1.23
	LD	80	24.59	5.33					

Learning disabilities mean a disorder in one or more of the basic processes involved in understanding spoken or written language. It may show up as a problem in listening, thinking, speaking, reading, writing, spelling or in a person's ability to do mathematics, despite at least, average intelligence. The term does not include children who have learning problems. These problems are primarily the result of visual, hearing or physical handicaps, or emotional disturbance of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.

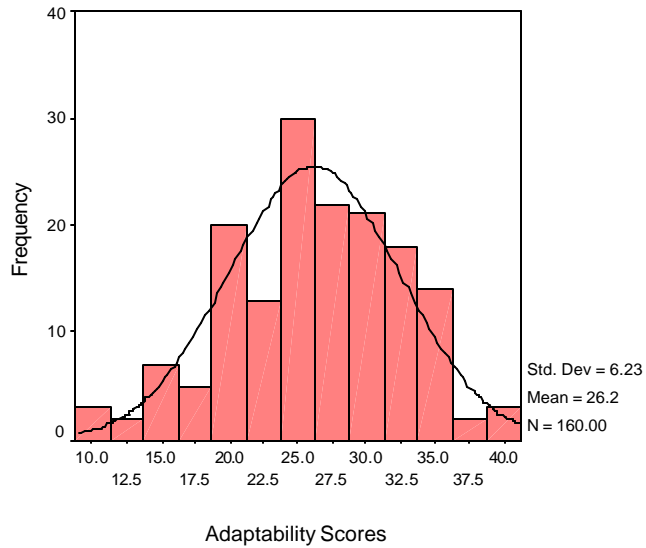
Results and Analyses

Table No2 Showing descriptive statistics of the total sample

Variable	N	Mean	Maximum score	Minimum score
Adaptability skills	160	26.15	39	10

Table No 1 shows mean scores of respondents on adaptability skills which is 26.15 which means that a majority of the respondents score around 26 and 27 as it is evident from figure No 1 below. Table No.1 also shows that the minimum score is 10 and the maximum score on the same variable is 40.

Figure No 1 showing distribution of scores on Adaptability



Analysis of Figure No 1 shows that the scores on adaptability skills are evenly distributed on the normal curve and high scores cluster in the middle. The x axis shows frequency of scores along the normal curve. Figure No 1 reveals the curve to be symmetrically skewed.

Table No 2 showing difference in the level of Adaptability of Learning and Non Learning Disabled Groups

Variable	Group	N	Mean	Std Deviation	df	t	Sig	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Upper	lower
Adaptability	NLD	80	27.71	6.69	158	3.265	0.001	5.02	1.23
	LD	80	24.59	5.33					

$t = 3.265$, $df = 158$, $p < 0.05$ indicating significant difference between learning and non learning disabled students on the variable of adaptability.

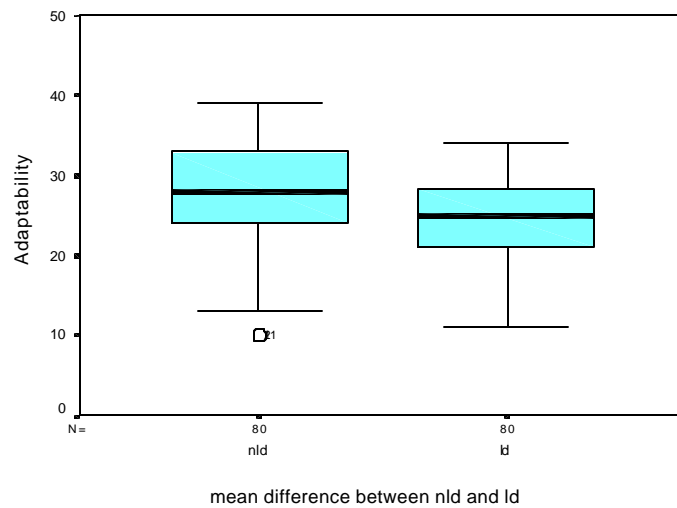
Analysis of Table No 2 reveals that mean scores of non learning disabled students on adaptability skills is 27.71 and the mean scores of learning disabled students is 24.59 which appears to be significant at 0.001 level. The results are consistent with available literature. As reported by Bender, 1987; Pihi & Mc Larnon, 1984 that many students with learning disabilities have difficulties with being flexible, being willing to change and develop a large repertoire of behavioral responses.

Adaptability skills involve flexible application of available resources within realistic limits. Perception of these limits sets the stage for defining the problem, generating alternatives and implementing the appropriate solution.

Results show that learning disabled students have low scores on adaptability skills as compared to non learning disabled students. A learning disabled student when faced with learning difficulties in the class, generally fails to understand the nature of the problem, which leads him to be identified as a problem case. Identified by teachers and parents, they are recommended for professional help.

The non learning disabled group seems better on the adaptability dimension because daily class work, word problems or numerical problems are part of their routine activities. They do not have to make active shifts for solutions. Daily class work under a teacher’s supervision and daily homework under parental and tutors’ supervision is sufficient for them to meet their academic requirements.

Figure No 2 showing difference in the mean scores on Adaptability of Learning and Non Learning Disabled



Analysis of Figure No 2 shows that even though two groups differ in their adaptability skills, the difference is not pronounced. Reasons for not prominent difference may be traced back to Garmazy 1983, where he identified A few protective factors such as personal factors, family factors and school factors when operating together provide the basis for interdependent culture, which consists of parental and academic collaboration which in turn gives rise to feelings of acceptance in the child thereby promoting resiliency which plays pivotal a role in protecting them from falling back in face of adversity(Garmazy & Mastin(1984).

Conclusion:

The study attempts to find the difference between the adaptability skills of learning and non learning disabled students. 80 learning and 80 non learning disabled students rated themselves on the adaptability dimension. Results showed statistically significant differences between the two groups on the variable of adaptability. The results are consistent with Schulman et al. (1995) that learning disabled students were identified as less adept at appraising stress provoking sources as well as information seeking to find alternative solutions for their problems, whereas, considerable research has been identified which provides an explanation for not finding considerable differences between the mean scores of both the groups. The concepts of resiliency, protective factors and interdependent culture serve as a strong supportive system for the student with learning disabilities. The learning disabled students of the present sample belong to the upper socioeconomic group where the literacy rate is high as compared to the rest of society, sound financial resources to access professional assistance also help them overcome their deficiency in this skill.

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