ARE ACADEMIC STRUGGLES THE CAUSE OF A LEARNING DISABILITY OR LAZINESS?

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This article explores the possible causes for students with learning disabilities being deemed “lazy,” and identifies potential positive approaches that may help students meet their academic goals. The article utilizes a hypothetical situation to show the contrasting opinions that people often have concerning the effects that a learning disability has on a student’s academic progress. We argue that when looking at the criteria to make a diagnosis of LD, the student’s academic shortcomings are not due to laziness, but are evidence of a learning disability. This article also explores specific characteristics that are common for these students and shows how these characteristics can be misconstrued as a lack of effort on the student’s part.

“He just needs to try harder...if his parents would just work with him...he is lazy...doesn’t care...can’t focus...won’t try” (Stansell, 2007, p. 7). This type of thinking is not uncommon, therefore, in order to fully analyze the controversy of misdiagnosing students with learning disabilities, this literature review will utilize a hypothetical case. In this case, the student Johnny appears to have poor academic motivation, which may inhibit him to perform well in school. His father believes this “laziness” is due to the lack of discipline within Johnny’s schooling and home life. Johnny’s father is not able to fully understand the discipline his son is receiving at school or at home due to his absence during a majority of this time in Johnny’s life. Even after being accepted into special education classes, his father would not allow Johnny to use his diagnosis as an excuse. His mother, on the other hand, has a better knowledge of the implications learning disabilities have on the ability to progress academically in school. She understands that Johnny is not lacking effort, but rather he has a cognitive condition in which he is not as able to function and learn as easily as the majority of his classmates. Misconceptions about why students with learning disabilities struggle academically can cause others to view these students as not putting forth the effort instead of taking into account the characteristics of their disability that make learning more difficult.

Learning disabilities are not likely to be due to lack of motivation. In fact, research indicates that students who have learning disabilities are a result of both biological and environmental factors. Learning disabilities are not something that are imagined or created as an excuse for low achievement; they are the result of brain and central nervous system malfunctioning (Elksnis, 2004). Neuroimaging has been able to show that students with a learning disability have brains that are structurally and functionally different from those without learning disabilities. Biological and environmental factors linked to the family also increase the risk of children developing learning disabilities. Studies have shown that when one or both parents have a learning disability, their children are at a higher risk of acquiring a learning disability themselves due to genetics (Hallahan, Kauffman, & Pullen, 2009).

Research shows that certain genes are linked to specific learning disabilities. For example, fetal alcohol syndrome and fetal alcohol spectrum disorders can cause the fetus to become malformed, resulting in the child developing a learning disability. Other medical factors that put children at risk for learning disabilities can include premature births and AIDS (Hallahan et al., 2009). In addition to biological factors, environmental factors such as poverty, drug abuse, and family instability can also increase the chances that children will develop some sort of learning disability (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1994). Scientific evidence can help reinforce the legitimacy of learning disabilities based on the risk factors’ and brain functioning’s correlation to an increase in the likelihood of a child developing a learning disability.

Social Interactions
Poor academic self-concept, learned helplessness, and lack of motivation can often develop when students with learning disabilities experience chronic failure. In the introduction of this review, Johnny’s father saw Johnny as being lazy since it appeared as if he had given up on school. What his father failed to realize was that Johnny may be showing signs of learned helplessness, a common characteristic of students with learning disabilities in which students have given up or do not believe that they have the ability to succeed in their academics. Learned helplessness, along with an external locus of control, negative attributions, and poor academic self-concept, are more common in students with learning disabilities and are characteristics that directly and negatively affect students’ motivation to work hard and ultimately achieve in school (Mamlin, Harris, & Semrud-Clikeman, 2004). Praising students for their efforts is one of many ways to empower students’ motivation to learn and positively affects their academic achievement.

Student with a learning disability can develop a poor self-concept when he or she compared performance to his or her peers’ success or the amount of rewards others receive from the teacher. When classmates are constantly being rewarded for their academic achievements and receiving high grades, a student with a disability may become discouraged, as
they do not receive similar social praise. If the teacher wants them to succeed and perform on-task, the student needs to have a high self-concept in order to stay motivated with their studies (Gadeyne, Ghesquiere, & Onghena, 2004). The students’ feelings of adequacy, developed by their self-worth and self-concept, with regards to intellectual ability are extremely important (Martinez & Semrud-Clikeman, 2004). Despite popular belief that a student’s IQ would be the best way to predict how well a student will perform in school, research has shown that social adjustment is the best indicator. Students with learning disabilities are more likely to experience social skill deficits, which can have an impact on the student’s social well-being and academic achievements. Approximately 75% of these students show signs of such deficits. Unfortunately, due to their poor social and emotional skills, it makes it harder for some students with learning disabilities to build meaningful relationships with others (Elksnin, 2004). In regards to becoming socially adjusted in a school, factors of attentional difficulties, rejection by peers, and social isolation are all characteristics that often encompass a student with a learning disability (Martinez & Semrud-Clikeman, 2004). These social skills become important in being able to succeed, feel accepted, and therefore work harder in school. Johnny’s father acknowledges that Johnny has a learning disability. Despite popular belief that a student’s IQ would be the best way to predict how well a student will perform in school, research has shown that social adjustment is the best indicator. Students with learning disabilities are more likely to experience social skill deficits, which can have an impact on the student’s social well-being and academic achievements. Approximately 75% of these students show signs of such deficits. Unfortunately, due to their poor social and emotional skills, it makes it harder for some students with learning disabilities to build meaningful relationships with others (Elksnin, 2004). In regards to becoming socially adjusted in a school, factors of attentional difficulties, rejection by peers, and social isolation are all characteristics that often encompass a student with a learning disability (Martinez & Semrud-Clikeman, 2004). These social skills become important in being able to succeed, feel accepted, and therefore work harder in school.

Memory Deficits
Memory difficulties associated with learning disabilities can cause parents to view their child as lazy, not trying, and therefore consider their forgetfulness. Students may forget tasks they were asked to do almost immediately following their instruction due to short-term memory problems. This behavior may cause some to believe that they are simply not trying, when in reality the student is not able to retain the information as well as their peers without learning disabilities. Such problems can lead to trouble completing academic work because the working memory affects the child’s ability to carry out multiple cognitive tasks at the same time or complete multi-stepped math problems (Hallahan et al., 2009). It can result in students taking twice as long as their peers to finish homework assignments because they have to consciously go through more steps in order to complete the homework (Sze, 2009). Consequently, memory deficits can lead to slow progress on homework and make the child appear to lack motivation even though it is due to deficiencies in their short-term memory and working memory.

Labeling and Expectations
Labeling students as having a disability can influence the teachers’ perceptions of a student. The stigma associated with a disability gives the mindset of a deficit, something to be “fixed,” rather than human variation. Special education teachers tend to then focus on specialized instruction to “normalize” their students. Setting unrealistically high or exceedingly low expectations set by teachers, parents, and students themselves, may lead students with learning disabilities to experience learned helplessness and have a poor self-concept. The desire of many teachers and parents to have all students, regardless of having a learning disability, not to deviate from normalized classroom expectations can sometimes lead to students whom learning disabilities feeling helpless due to their cognitive inability to meet such high standards (Connor, 2005). Kauffman (1999) states that if special education were to achieve the same level of academic standards as the general education, the curriculum and program of general education would need to be changed. In fact, in the case of Sherman v. Mamaroneck Union Free School District (2003), the child was not given all of the accommodations being sought out because the court determined that the student’s bad grade was a result of a lack of effort instead of from the disability (Hultt, 2009). Most teachers realize that students with disabilities will be unable to meet the average standards set by their non-disabled peers which may lead to setting lower standards for their students with disabilities. Unfortunately, some teachers set their expectations so low for their students that they will receive exactly what they ask of students: low academic performance (Connor, 2005). Essentially, teachers have set their students on a negative, self-fulfilling prophecy where the students do poorly because the teacher believes their students are only capable of minimal academic achievements. Furthermore, some teachers may fail to realize that students with learning disabilities may be working harder than they realized since the academic achievement can be relatively modest (Martinez & Semrud-Clikeman, 2004). While some teachers have difficulties setting challenging, yet obtainable goals for students, others have found that students with learning disabilities can achieve the average standards when faced with greater demands. If the goals are too challenging the child may give up and develop learned helplessness. However, the teacher can recognize this path before learned helplessness occurs and prevent any negative behaviors. While the students may come off as lacking desire since their academic achievements are not always as impressive, it is important that parents and teachers alike recognize the amount of effort needed to meet varying expectations. Essentially, all of the various psychological and behavioral characteristics that were discussed can result in the child appearing unmotivated due to their inactive learning style. This learning style incorporates the fact that students with a learning disability often demonstrate learned helplessness and that they are likely to display memory recall deficiencies. Consequently, these students may have homework troubles since they often have difficulties working on their own, getting started, and
staying focused (Hallahan et al., 2009). Once again, these typical attributes associated with learning disabilities can come across as the student being unwilling or as if the student is not even trying (Stansell, 2007). In reality, the characteristics of the disability are what make it difficult for them to finish schoolwork in a timely fashion like their peers.

**Diagnosis**

Diagnosis of a child with a learning disability require more than just one assessment to assure that the child has a learning disability. Many people also have a hard time accepting an intangible diagnosis that is not easily proven since it can be difficult to determine if the child is an under-achiever or if the child has a learning disability. However, diagnosis is completed with extensive evidence. Multiple assessments of a child are performed because the law requires that one assessment is not enough to identify a child. The assessments usually evaluate the intelligence of the child, how information is processed, and what has been achieved academically. The evaluation process and causes of learning disabilities to change social misperceptions of people with learning disabilities. Children with learning disabilities are not lacking motivation and cannot cure a neurological disability by working harder, however the academic struggles can improve with proper assistance. The academic process of a child with a learning disability is more challenging than that of a child without a disability. The evaluation process and causes of a learning disability make it apparent to others that there is a struggle for the child. Many characteristics can arise in academic failure and behavioral problems. While there are more difficulties for a child with a learning disability and their parents, there are also several approaches to avoid frustrations. Children with learning disabilities are not lacking effort; they just need support.

**References**


