

**DIFFERENCES IN SELF-CONCEPT AMONG STUDENT WITH AND WITHOUT LEARNING DISABILITIES IN AL KARAK DISTRICT IN JORDAN.****Mohammed AL Zyoudi***United Arab Emirates University*

*This study examined differences in self-concept among Jordanian students with and without learning disabilities. The sample of this study consisted of (124), (50) students with learning disabilities and (74) of their peers without learning disabilities. To achieve the objective of this study, the Jordanian adaptation of the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (PHCSCS) was used. Differences were found between the groups on the intellectual and school status and behavior subscales, students without learning disability scoring higher on both scales. There was also a significant difference between boys and girls. The directions for future research are provided.*

The inclusion of students with learning disabilities into inclusive schools is currently one of the foremost international education policy issues and has generated much debate. However, there has been very little systematic research conducted on the many facts of inclusion. School experiences are acknowledged to play a fundamental role in the development of self-perceptions, which can in turn affect the learner's self-esteem in the long term (Shaffer, 2006). The experiences of students with learning disabilities in mainstream and remedial schools can be multifaceted and complex and yet, as Prinsloo (2001) notes, the ways in which learners with learning disabilities experience inclusion or exclusion in education, as well as the effects of inclusion, has yet to be determined. It is thus vital for research to move beyond the exploration of the practices and impact of inclusion and study learners' understanding, experiences and perceptions of inclusion on such personality aspects such as self-worth, confidence and self-respect.

Learning disabilities have been found to affect self-esteem and social activities of children; those children are often described as depressed or withdrawn (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003; Al Far, 2003; Shaffer, 2005). Children, who have experienced rejection and failure as many children with learning disabilities have, generally have feelings of low self-worth and vulnerability (Gresham & MacMillan, 1997).

Many studies have examined differences between students with and without learning disability across multiple domains of functioning and, their academic failure may affect their global self-esteem, and adjustment (Dombrowski, et al., 2004; Elbaum & Vaughn, 2003; Heath & Wiener, 1996; Wiener, 2004; Pires, 2003). Results of these studies have shown that, when compared to peers without learning disabilities, students with learning disabilities have lower levels of academic achievement, as well as social-emotional difficulties. However, the research literature on self-concept in students with learning disabilities shows mixed findings and is often contradictory (Gresham & MacMillan, 1997; Melterz, et al., 1998; Stone & May, 2002; Stone, 2004), perhaps because most comparisons were based on means scores for heterogeneous groups of students with and without learning disabilities with different levels of academic performance.

The self-concept of students with learning disability has been widely documented using global measure (e.g. Piers & Harris, 1969). Multiple studies have shown that children with learning disability often report lower global self-concept and poor specific academic self-concept than their peers without learning disabilities. However, there have also been several studies that did not find significant differences from the comparison groups on measures of global self-concept (Reschly & Christenson, 2006; Chapman, et al., 2004; Frederickson & Jacobs, 2001; Stone, 2004; Gadeyne, et al., 2004)

A large body of research has described the academic self-perceptions of students with learning disabilities. Many studies have maintained that despite the learning disabilities label, those students have a positive self-concept about their academic skills. Melterz et al., (1998); Al-Far (2003); and Bataineh & Gwanmh (2005) found that students with learning disabilities considered themselves as using appropriate strategies in the areas of reading, writing, spelling and math as being competent in those domains, they also rated their academic performance as average to above average. Bear and Minke (2006); Al Azh (2002) found that children with learning disabilities did not perceive themselves to be less competent than their peers. Cosdon, et al., (2002) found that students with learning disabilities did not perceive themselves to be any less competent in their school work than their peers.

However, other research has found that children with learning disabilities have lower self-concept, particularly in regard to their academic achievement, for example, Harter, et al., (1998) found that 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade students with learning disabilities felt worse about their general intellectual ability and their self-esteem than did students without learning disabilities. In related research, Boetech, et al., (1996) reported that children aged 7 to 18 years with developmental dyslexia had lower self-worth and lower perceived competence in scholastic domains than students without disabilities. Valles (1999) found in comparative study that students with learning disabilities were less accepted by their peers, had lower self-esteem, and felt more lonely than students without learning disabilities.

Many studies have maintained that despite the lower self-concept in students with learning disabilities in the intellectual domain, the students maintain positive feelings of global self-worth, for example, Bear & Minke (2006) found no differences in global self-worth between students with and without learning disabilities. However, global self-worth among students with learning disabilities has not been adequately supported by research. Harter et al.'s (1998) study found that typically achieving students reported more positive global self-worth and positive evaluation of their self-worth than did students with learning disabilities.

Research on gender differences and self-concept has also yielded conflicting data. Kling, et al., (1999) conducted a meta-analysis involving thousands of participants and concluded that boys scored higher on standard measures of global self-esteem than girls, but the difference was small. Harter et al., (1998) reported that girls displayed much lower perceptions of their physical appearance than did boys. Contrary to these findings, Tillema, et al., (1998) found no significant difference between male and female high school general education.

Despite these findings, the literature lacks sufficient evidence examining the relationship between gender and self-concept in students with learning disabilities. One reason for the dearth of literature in this area may be the overrepresentation of boys in samples of children with learning disabilities (Meltzer, et al., 1998).

This study compares students with and without learning disabilities on self-concept and contributes to the literature by using a primarily Jordanian sample and by examining gender differences.

#### *Study hypotheses*

The current study aims at investigating the following hypotheses:

1. Students with learning disabilities would score lower in intellectual and school status scale than their peers without learning disabilities as measured by the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (PHCSCS),
2. Students with learning disabilities would not have lower global self-concept than their peers without learning disabilities in general education classes.
3. Girls with learning disabilities would have lower self-concept than boys with learning disabilities,

#### **Method**

##### *Participants*

One hundred twenty-four participants were selected randomly from 9 schools in Al Karak District in Jordan. The school was selected based on the large number of students who enrolled as students with learning disabilities. In each school, resource room teachers identified children in grades 5, 6 and 7 who were classified as having a learning disability. All students who were labeled had been evaluated prior to placement. The evaluation process consisted of a referral for assessment including vision, hearing, and achievement data were obtained. A resource room teacher in each school who

administrated intellectual and achievement tests individually to each student conducted the assessment. For all students with learning disabilities in this study, there was evidence that they exhibited a discrepancy of 1.5 SD between their intellectual standard score and achievement standard score in math, reading, or written expression.

The sample of this study consists of (124); (50) students with learning disabilities (29 boys and 21 girls); and (74) students without learning disabilities (33 boys and 41 girls) table 1 represent the demographic characteristics of the sample.

**Table 1**  
**Demographic characteristics of the sample**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Students Learning disabilities</b>	<b>Students without learning disabilities</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Boys	29	33
Girls	21	41
<b>Grade</b>		
5	27	24
6	18	32
7	5	18
<b>Age</b>		
M	12.5	12.53
SD	.91	.76

#### *Study procedures*

Children were given verbal instructions on how to complete the Piers-Harries Children's Self-concept Scale (PHCSS). The measure was group-administrated in a classroom by a colleague of the researcher, who read the items aloud and circulated in the classroom observing the children's understanding of the instrument and providing assistance where necessary. Demographic variables such as age, gender, and grade were obtained as well.

#### *Measure*

The Jordanian version of the Piers-Harries Children's Self-concept Scale (PHSCS) was used in this study as a measure of student's self-concept. The scale consists of 80 items; each item is measured by responding yes or no to the test statements. The instrument can be individually or group administrated. It has six sub scales: physical appearance and attributes (e.g. *I have a pleasant face*); intellectual and school status (e.g. *I am smart*); behavior (e.g. *I am obedient at home*); anxiety (e.g. *I am often afraid*); happiness and satisfaction (e.g. *I am a good person*); popularity (e.g. *I have many friends*).

Before the administration, the (PHSCS) was first translated into Arabic language, and then it was given to four specialists into English language to evaluate the validity of translation. Although, AL-Dawood (1982) has indicated that this scale was modified to suit the Jordanian environment, the content validity of the instrument was granted by giving it to six specialists in counseling and special education for review from Mutah University in Jordan. According to their suggestions and recommendations, some of the items were modified to suit the Jordanian environment.

To estimate the reliability of the adopted translation of the instrument, It was administered to a sample of (35) resource room teachers, and a split-half method was used to calculate the internal consistency coefficient for the clusters scales ranged from (0.70 to 0.82) and (0.85) for the total score, which exceeded the acceptable standard of reliability.

#### **Results**

To examine the first hypothesis of this study means and standard errors of (PHSCS) were obtained, and the results of this analysis were summarized in table (2). The results revealed a significant effect on the intellectual and school status subscales,  $F(1,16) = 6.13, P = .015$ , with students with learning disability ( $M=11.36, SE=.45$ ) scored lower than students without learning disability ( $M= 12.85, SE=.40$ ). None of the other subscales yielded significant differences between students with learning disability and their peers.

**Table 2**  
**Demonstrates the means and standard errors of PHCSCS\***

PHCSS subscales	LD** (N=50)		Non-LD(74)***	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Behavior	11.35****	.438	12.90* ***	.382
Physical appearance	9.65	.384	9.68	.334
Anxiety	10.16	.388	10.11	.339
Intellectual and school status	11.36****	.452	12.85****	.395
Happiness and satisfaction	8.10	.276	8.53	.241
Popularity	8.41	.346	8.76	.302
Total score	58.66	1.70	62.95	.148

\* PHCSCS: the Piers-Harries Children's Self-concept Scale

\*\* Students with Learning disabilities

\*\*\* Students without learning disabilities

\*\*\*\*  $P < .05$

Regarding the second hypothesis, the correlation of happiness with behavior was significantly higher for the students with learning disability than for the students without learning disability in general education classes; no other subscales correlations were significantly different. Table (3) presents differences in correlations of PHSCS subscales between groups.

**Table (3)**  
**Differences in correlations of PHSCS subscales between groups**

Subscale	Correlation			
	LD*	Non-LD**	<i>Z</i>	<i>P</i>
Happiness and satisfaction x behavior	.72****	.31	3.98	.001
Happiness and satisfaction x intellectual and school status	.51	.25	1.68	.09
Happiness and satisfaction x physical appearance	.62	.57	.40	.69
Happiness and satisfaction x anxiety	.41	.66	-1.91	.06
Happiness and satisfaction x popularity	.36	.47	-.69	.49
Popularity x behavior	.12	.17	-.26	.79
Popularity x intellectual and school status	.35	.41	-.36	.72
Popularity x physical appearance	.58	.67	-.79	.43
Popularity x anxiety	.49	.61	-.91	.36
Anxiety x behavior	.02	.28	-1.43	.15
Anxiety x intellectual and school status	.39	.48	-.54	.59
Anxiety x physical appearance	.53	.61	-.62	.54
physical appearance x behavior	.26	.20	.38	.71
physical appearance x intellectual and school status	.54	.45	.70	.48
intellectual and school status x behavior	.57	.70	-1.09	.27

\*LD: Students with learning disabilities

\*\* Non-LD: Students without learning disability

\*\*\*  $P < .001$ .

Concerning the third hypothesis, a main effect of gender on behavior,  $F(1,116) = 6.42$ ,  $P = .013$ , with girls ( $M = 12.90$ ,  $SD = .38$ ) scoring significantly higher than boys ( $M = 11.35$ ,  $SE = .44$ ).

### Discussion

The first hypothesis of this study was supported; children with learning disability scored significantly lower on the PHCSCS subscales of intellectual and school status. This finding is consistent with previous research (Dombrowski, et al., 2004; Elbaum & Vaughn, 2003; and Harter et al., 1998). Given that children with learning disability are by definition somewhat cognitively challenged and experience academic difficulties, it is understandable that they would evaluate their own intellectual ability unfavorably. (Chapman, 2004). These findings support the notion that children with learning disabilities have a negative self-concept of their abilities and academic skills and one that is lower than that of their peers.

Regarding the second hypothesis, the students with learning disability would not have a lower global self-concept than their peers, was also confirmed. Thus, the students in the learning disabled group did not generalize their feelings of academic weakness to more generalized self-concept perceptions. This may be attributed to their perceived self-concept in areas other than academic skills (e.g. physical appearance). A non-predicted finding was that the children with learning disability scored lower than peers without learning disability on self-concept subscales of behavior. Thus children with learning disability either were more willing to acknowledge their behavioral difficulties than the children without learning disability. This confirms the findings of previous research (Valles, 1999; Elbaum & Vaughn, 2003; Wiener, 2004) and might explain why students with learning disabilities may not have ability to do their school work alone and become frustrated and act out as a result,

Contrary to the last hypothesis of this study, there was a significant difference between boys and girls with learning disabilities on self-concept. This finding suggests that gender may play a role in the development of self-concept in children with learning disabilities. This confirms the findings made by previous research (Reschly & Christenson, 2006; Stone, 2004; Nowicki, 2003; Frederickson & Jacobs, 2001).

The finding that students with learning disabilities have a lower self-concept with regard to their intellectual ability than their peers without can provide direction for educators. Some researchers have suggested that educators be aware of the potential stigmatizing effects of the selection process for special education on children with learning disabilities (Stone, 2004). Individuals who work with students with learning disabilities need to know how to prevent low self-concept in children with learning disabilities and be aware of the interventions available to help them. These findings can help educators develop programs and strategies to assist students with learning disabilities to gain a sense of success in their lives. Teachers and parents can have a significant impact on helping students build their self-concept by providing positive feedback

Continued research in this area could include studies illuminating the conflicting data on self-concept and classroom settings. It would be helpful to compare students with learning disabilities in self-contained settings to those who are mainstreamed. Students' rating of their self-concept may vary depending on whom they use as their reference group. Also, longitudinal research would provide more information on the developmental changes that affect individuals and their self-concept, with special attention to gender issues.

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