

# THE PSYCHOSOCIAL OUTCOMES OF LEARNING DISABILITIES: IMPLICATIONS ON STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH AND NATIONAL SECURITY

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## Abstract

*Learning disabilities (LD) are a group of neurodevelopmental disorders that impair one or more specific learning skills in an individual such as skills of information acquisition, storage, processing, and execution and these manifest as significant difficulties in the affected learner's academic performance, social interactions, and behavioural adjustment. The presence of these disorders in learners often results in some negative psychosocial outcomes such as poor academic achievement, isolation, low self-esteem or self-worth, poor self-concept, depression, anxiety, behavioural maladjustment, and the manifestation of deviant behaviours which if not properly managed can put the learners at risk of more complicated mental health issues which might ultimately exacerbate the challenge of national security. This position paper explores relevant literature on the concept of learning disabilities, the psycho-social challenges faced by students with learning disabilities, and the implications of learning disabilities on the mental health of individuals with learning disabilities and ultimately its implications on national security. This study also highlights relevant recommendations for educational experts and national stakeholders such as policy formulation and implementation, early identification and assessment, provision of interventions, support, and adequate resources for learners with LD to mitigate the negative outcomes of the disorder and promote positive outcomes.*

**Keywords:** *Disorders, Learning disabilities, Mental health, National security, Psychosocial outcomes*

## Introduction

Learning disabilities (LDs) is a term coined by Samuel Kirk in 1963 to describe several learning problems whose root cause stems from a deficiency in the brain's ability to process and produce received information (Kirk, 1963, as cited in Muktamath, Hegde, and Chand, 2021). Learning disabilities manifest as significant difficulties in specific learning areas such as difficulties in reading and reading comprehension also known as dyslexia, writing difficulties also known as dysgraphia, difficulties in executing arithmetic operations also known as dyscalculia, visual processing disorders and auditory

processing disorders (Shukla, and Agrawal, 2015).

Numerous studies consistently demonstrates that the core deficits of learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia, translate directly into academic struggles, causing poor performance and chronic underachievement (Ahmad, 2015; Muktamath et al., 2021). The academic consequences are often compounded by psychosocial factors; for instance, students with LDs frequently face peer rejection and negative labeling, which further erodes their self-concept and academic

engagement (Hewitt & Clarke, 2016; Kabuto, 2020). Consequently, these students are prone to attributing their failures to a lack of inherent ability, reinforcing a cycle of low self-esteem and academic avoidance (Padeliadu, 2011; Hussain, 2020). These academic problems are not the only challenges faced by persons with LDs as studies have revealed that these students are vulnerable to other psychosocial problems like bullying, social alienation/marginalization, poor self-concept, and low self-esteem (Cavioni, Grazzani, and Ornaghi, 2017; Danopoulou, and Pittas, 2020). Examining these psycho-social outcomes is pertinent as they have broader implications for the individual's mental health.

The specific academic challenges faced by persons with LDs such as low academic performance, academic underachievement, and difficulties in comprehending and executing learning contents combined with their resultant psycho-social outcomes such as poor self-concept, low self-esteem, increased stress levels, bullying, and social alienation can result in more complex mental health problems such as frustration, depression, exhibiting deviant/maladaptive behaviours and suicidal ideations (National Guideline Alliance, 2016). These outcomes pose significant threats to national economic and social security (Amadioha and Akor, 2013). Poor educational achievement can lead to under-qualification of national human resources leading to national underproductivity and over-dependence on the nation's limited resources which can in turn limit the ability of the nation to meet its security demands.

In addition, the challenge of social alienation/marginalisation, frustration and depression faced by learners with LDs can predispose such individuals to radicalisation

which poses threats to national security. Also, other consequences of LDs such as limited access to educational opportunities and reduced workforce participation are potential hindrances to the ability of the nation to compete globally which can in turn negatively impact a nation's economic and social security (Wehbé, 2017).

### **Learning Disabilities: Historical perspectives, Definition and Prevalence**

The study of learning disabilities (LDs) dates to the late 19th century when various terms were used to describe specific learning difficulties. For instance, in 1877, Adolf Kussmaul described reading difficulties as "word blindness," and Alfred Strauss referred to children with significant learning challenges as "brain-injured children." The term "dyslexia" was coined in 1887 by Berlin to describe reading disabilities. However, it wasn't until 1963 that psychologist Samuel Kirk introduced the term "learning disabilities" during an education conference in Chicago (Muktamath, Hegde and Chand, 2021). LDs, as defined today, encompass ongoing difficulties in specific developmental areas such as reading, writing, calculations, language acquisition, auditory processing, and visual processing. These difficulties result from neurological deficits in receiving, processing, and executing learning information.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition (DSM-5) which was published in 2013 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), provides specific criteria for diagnosing LDs. One, the learning difficulty must persist for at least six months, irrespective of exposure to adequate teaching, resources, or interventions. Additionally, the learner's academic performance must be significantly

impaired, as confirmed by intelligence tests and assessment scales. Importantly, LDs should not be attributed to factors like intellectual impairment, sensory issues, neurological defects, medical conditions, inadequate instruction, or limited access to educational resources. Finally, LDs should have a significant impact on the individual's daily functioning, underscoring the need for comprehensive understanding and support for those affected by these disabilities (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Learning disabilities (LDs) have been a subject of research and conceptualization by various scholars. According to Muktamath et al. (2021), LDs are characterized as neurodevelopmental disorders with biological origins that affect the brain's ability to process information efficiently and accurately. These difficulties typically become evident in early childhood when children struggle to acquire specific learning skills expected for their age or developmental stage. Learners with LDs often exhibit academic skills significantly below the norm for their age and intelligence level, and if left untreated, these disabilities can persist into adulthood.

LDs are often referred to as "invisible disabilities" because they lack easily identifiable overt characteristics compared to other disabilities. Unlike conditions related to physical or sensory impairments, mental retardation, cultural differences, or insufficient instruction, LDs may coexist with these factors in learners. The severity of LDs can vary widely among individuals, making it challenging for them to meet environmental and societal demands. As a result, individuals with LDs often require substantial effort and targeted support to achieve and maintain optimal performance (Ahmad, 2015).

Learning disabilities cover a wide range of disorders including dyslexia (significant reading/reading comprehension disorder), dysgraphia (a disorder of written expression or significant handwriting difficulty leading to illegible handwriting, poor spelling and composition abilities), dyscalculia (difficulties in executing mathematical operations/calculations, computations, calculation of money, understanding the concept of time and memorizing mathematical operations), dyspraxia (difficulties in motor coordination and executing motor skills), auditory processing disorder (difficulty in interpreting auditory information affecting language development and reading), nonverbal learning disorder (problems with visual-spatial, intuitive, organizational, evaluative and holistic processing functions), language processing disorder (difficulties in the acquisition and development of language/communication skills and visual processing deficits(difficulty in interpreting auditory information affecting language development and reading) (Muktamath, et al., 2021, Ahmad, 2015, Shukla and Agrawal, 2015). The classification of these disorders is based on the symptoms manifested by the learner with LDs.

The World Health Organization (WHO) in 2015 asserted that 10 – 15% of school children have at least one form of learning disability and studies have reported that the number of children identified as having a form of LD has been on a steady increase thereby making this condition a significant educational and mental health concern (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014, Padeliadu, 2011). Although, the primary consequences of LDs are poor academic outcomes, but the impact of LDs extends beyond academic struggles as they encompass a wide range of psychosocial outcomes that negatively impact the students'

well-being which consequentially pose a threat to the student's mental stability and national security.

### **Psychosocial Impact of Learning Disabilities**

The presence of a learning disability predisposes students to heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and low self-esteem due to their persistent academic struggles. These difficulties may adversely affect social relationships, especially with peers leading to isolation and strained relationships as students with learning disabilities may experience significant challenges forming friendships, participating in group projects, and developing strong relationships due to peer rejection, bullying and stigmatization (Rose, Forber-Pratt, Espelage, and Aragon, 2013). Furthermore, learning disabilities may lead to the development of negative self-concepts due to feelings of inadequacy from being constantly compared to peers, mislabelling, repeated failures, and negative feedback (Pandy, 2012). When compared to their peers without LDs, students with LDs experience and exhibit more negative emotions (Danopoulou and Pittas, 2020).

Several studies have brought to light the extent to which learning disabilities affect the psychosocial well-being of students. Hewitt and Clarke (2016) carried out a study comparing the characteristics of those who had LDs and those without LDs and discovered that children with LDs admitted to experiencing stigmatization, bullying, social isolation, and emotional stress. In a similar study by Kabuto (2020) on parental perceptions of learning disabilities, 242 parents responded to a survey on the sociocultural impacts of learning disabilities on their children and the responses gotten revealed that children

with learning disabilities face challenges of being labelled as 'dumb' and 'unintelligent', negative interactions in school (being jeered at and picked on by peers), negative perception by peers and teachers, negative self-perception, exclusion, being treated differently and not given challenging classroom tasks like other peers and low self-esteem.

Padeliadu (2011) posited that 70% of students with learning difficulties have low self-perception and self-worth which may affected and be affected by academic underachievement. According to Padeliadu, the low academic performance of students with LDs leads them to doubt their abilities and potentialities thereby putting them in a state of constant fear and anxiety. Hussain (2020) explained this situation using the Weiner's theory of motivation which state that "individuals attribute failure or success to five variables: the ability of the individual, the efforts made, the ease or difficulty of the task, and the help or obstruction by others". Thus, students with LDs attribute their failures to their lack of potentials to carry out basic tasks hereby resulting in low self-worth and poor self-perceptions. Students with LDs often compare themselves with their peers without LDs and this results in a feeling of shame which makes them shun their peers, avoid social activities and competitions which if not detected and managed properly can result in more severe mental health challenges (Pandy, 2012).

### **Mental Health Implications**

According to the WHO (2014) possession of good mental health is vital for the overall wellbeing of humans, however, individual's mental health is shaped by surrounding economic, social, and environmental factors while social inequalities

pose a great risk for mental health. Learning disabilities are a major cause of social inequality among students as these disabilities drive a wedge between students with LDs and peers without this condition. Studies have established that the psychosocial outcomes of learning disabilities increase the susceptibility of students to mental health challenges (Sofologi, Kougioumtzis, Efstratopoulou, Skoura, Sagia, Karvela, Salli, Makri, and Bonti, 2022). This has been discovered to be due to certain factors such as genetics, prevalence of negative events/reactions towards them, accessibility to fewer resources and coping skills and the attitudes of others towards them. Studies have revealed a higher prevalence of depression, anxiety disorders, suicidal ideations, and behavioural maladjustment among students with LDs. The constant psychological stress and frustration experienced by students with LDs can result in the adoption of calamitous coping mechanisms such as avoidance, withdrawal, violence or engaging in delinquent behaviours (Cavioni, Grazzani, and Ornaghi, 2017).

The mental health challenges that Students with LDs are vulnerable to can be categorized into internalized problems and externalized problems (Sofologi, et al., 2022). According to Danopoulou et Pittas (2020) “Internalized problems cause difficulties to each learner who faces them, without knowing the effects of comorbidity and the bio-pathological causes” several studies have linked the psychosocial outcomes of learning disabilities with mental health challenges such as depression, withdrawal, anxiety, phobias, mood disorders, sleep disorders and disordered eating behavior (Danopoulou et Pittas, 2020; Harding and Cockerill, 2015; Franklin, Giachet, da Silva, Campos, and Pinato, 2017; Sofologi, et al., 2022).

More specifically depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation, low self-esteem, and guilt have been recorded in students with reading, writing and arithmetic problems with severity rates ranging from 16-50% (Alesi, Gaetano, and Pepi, 2014). These problems can be detected through observation, self-report assessments, counselling, and the use of psychological tests. Early intervention is the key for management and remediation because if left unattended over a continuous period, these challenges may persist into adulthood hereby creating greater problems not just for the individual learner but by extension the nation’s security and stability.

### **National Security Implications**

National security encompasses the safeguarding of citizens' lives and property within a nation (Ibrahim, Ibrahim, and Goni-Issa, 2015). National security takes various forms, such as job security, food security, political security, health security, environmental security, religious/moral security, and economic security (Udeh, Okoroafor, and Ihezie, 2013). Amadioha and Akor (2020) emphasize that these aspects of national security are closely tied to the stability and psychosocial well-being of society members.

Students with LDs often struggle academically, leading to underqualification, limited job opportunities, reduced earning potential, and increased dependence on limited national resources. This strain on the nation's economic stability can hinder its ability to allocate sufficient resources for security and sustainable development. Additionally, the negative psychosocial and academic outcomes of individuals with disabilities can make them susceptible to radicalization, potentially involving them in antisocial and criminal activities that threaten national security. Experts

have identified factors like frustration, anxiety, and isolation as predictors and contributors to national violence (Wehbé, 2017).

Realizing national security is closely linked to educational outcomes, as society and its curriculum are interconnected (Onwuka, 2002). Speier (2005) underscores the importance of providing supportive services to individuals experiencing psychosocial maladjustment, enabling them to overcome these challenges. Addressing psychosocial factors and providing proper support for individuals with LDs is essential for maintaining national security and societal well-being.

## Conclusion

This study concludes that learning disabilities (LDs) initiate a detrimental sequence, where academic struggles lead to profound psychosocial challenges and increased vulnerability to mental health disorders, which in turn pose a significant threat to national security. The resulting academic underachievement creates an underqualified workforce that strains economic productivity, while the associated experiences of alienation and frustration can predispose individuals to radicalization. Therefore, addressing LDs through proactive educational and mental health interventions is not merely an educational priority, but a critical strategy for safeguarding both individual well-being and national stability.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings from the review of relevant literature, the study provides these recommendations for educational experts and national stakeholders to address the psychosocial challenges faced by students with learning disabilities.

- Early screening and assessment procedures should be systematically implemented to enable the timely identification of learning disabilities, thereby mitigating associated academic and psychosocial difficulties.
- Teachers should receive comprehensive training in inclusive pedagogical strategies to better recognise and address the diverse needs of students with learning disabilities.
- The development and consistent implementation of collaborative, individualized education plans (IEPs) are essential to address the unique learning profiles of students with learning disabilities and maximise their academic potential.
- Accessible, integrated mental health services within schools are crucial to address the heightened risks of anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem observed in students with learning disabilities.
- National policy formulations must strategically allocate funding to mandate and sustain support services for individuals with learning disabilities, ensuring consistent resources from childhood through adulthood.
- Public awareness campaigns should be launched to facilitate an inclusive school climate, directly countering the stigmatization and social alienation that exacerbate mental health challenges among affected students.

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