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**Learning Disabilities (LD) and
Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD):
Theory, Research and Policy**

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ABSTRACTS

Learning disabilities – A neurodevelopmental model: After 15 years

Malka Margalit, Ph.D., Professor and Dean, School of Behavioral Sciences, Peres Academic Center, and Prof. Emeritus Tel Aviv University

Recently the need has emerged for an updated survey which would present the integration of research on genetics and neurobiology with research on developmental and educational-psychology in learning disabilities' research. Since the publication of Margalit and Tur-Caspa's (1998) survey on "learning disabilities: A neurodevelopmental model", advancement has continued in research, educational policy and school realities. The current survey briefly presents conceptualization changes, updated definitions, and the validation of the neurodevelopmental model. The current survey focuses on two major domains: studies on executive functioning and studies on self-regulation. These studies reflect a dynamic, ecological, multidimensional model that recognizes the different severity levels of learning disabilities. This model integrates the observation of cognitive functioning with the observation of emotional and social aspects together with ongoing consideration of past experiences as well as future expectations in the different environments such as familial and educational. It emphasizes the importance of the quality of relations with significant adults in predicting adjustment and coping with various age-related challenges such as academic difficulties and interpersonal relationships. The summary of the study highlights the importance of the development of identification, assessment and intervention procedures, based on research and experimentation in order to provide meaningful solutions to the varied and dynamic needs of students with learning disabilities and students with ADHD.

Key words: learning disabilities, ADHD, executive functioning, self-regulation, interpersonal relations, coping, academic difficulties, hope theory, the salutogenic model

The nature of shared book reading interactions with preschoolers with and without ADHD

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The study compared the nature of parent-child shared book reading interactions with preschoolers with and without ADHD. Each of the 64 parent-child dyads (32 with ADHD) was videotaped at home while sharing a book. Videotapes were transcribed and analyzed for both parental mediation (behavioral and discourse measures) and children's participation (behavioral and discourse measures). Hypotheses were tested with hierarchical negative binomial regressions. Results showed that parents of children with ADHD touched their children and disciplined them more and reinforced them less than parents of children without ADHD. In their discourse, parents of children with ADHD used fewer questions and elaborations than parents of children without ADHD. As to the children's participation, those with ADHD moved more, had more attention breaks and contributed less to the conversation than children without ADHD. Nonetheless, when mother's education, child's age, and length of the interaction were controlled, fewer differences appeared and the most meaningful predictor of the interaction's nature was the length of the interaction. Specifically, longer shared book reading interactions predicted richer parent-child conversations regardless of ADHD. Our study shows that ADHD "colors" the nature of parent-child shared book reading interactions. Acknowledging the importance of shared book reading will lead to the development of ways to guide parents of children with ADHD to be aware of their behaviors and turn shared book reading into a positive, promoting experience.

Key words: book reading, parent-child interactions, preschool, parental mediation, ADHD

Reading and writing – what for? Literacy perceptions of children with learning disabilities

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The goal of the present study was to examine the perceptions of primary-school children with learning disabilities (LD) regarding the significance of reading and writing compared to those of children without learning disabilities (NLD).

The sample included 145 first to seventh graders: 98 LD and 47 NLD. The data were collected through semi-structured personal interviews in which the children were asked why people read and write. The responses were divided into seven perceptions taken from previous studies on NLD children (Peled, 2007, Avni-Schön, 2008).

The quantitative and qualitative findings show that, while the perceptions of NLD children expand dramatically between the first and seventh grades, students with LD continue to focus on concrete and immediate perceptions which do not expand throughout those years.

Encouraging perceptions of literacy may thus serve to improve literate functioning as well as academic success among LD children.

Key words: literacy, literacy components, literacy perceptions, reflective abilities

A dialogue between mothers: Individual and systemic (family and educational) characteristics in a forum of mothers of adolescents with learning disabilities and behavior disorders

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The research aimed to evaluate the individual (sense of coherence, hope and effort), and systemic (family and educational) factors of adolescents with learning disabilities (LD) and/or behavior disorders, as described on an online forum by mothers of students with LD and/or behavior problems, and their contribution to the students' social adjustment (loneliness) and academic adjustment (achievements). The research hypotheses were that low levels of hope, effort and sense of coherence, as well as academic difficulties and loneliness would be reported by the mothers. In line with the research hypotheses, an analysis of 109 letters published during a 2 year period revealed the individual and systematic factors examined. The most frequent were hope, effort, teacher support and loneliness. The relations between the research factors were expressed by the mothers, such as relations between hope and effort, sense of coherence and loneliness, and teacher's support and loneliness. The mothers' letters revealed the stress experienced by mothers of adolescents with LD and/or behavior problems.

Key words: learning disabilities, behavioral disorders, effort, hope, sense of coherence loneliness, family functioning

Involvement in social networking and cyber victimization among students with and without attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and the relationships with perceived social self-efficacy, loneliness and social support

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Cyberbullying is defined as an intentional online act, via electronic media, to harm, embarrass or humiliate another person. As adolescents with ADHD are at higher risk to be involved in bullying behavior as perpetrators or victims, the purpose of this study was to examine the prevalence of their cyber experience and its impact on perceived self-efficacy, social support and loneliness. The study included 140 adolescent students with ADHD in general classes and 332 students without disabilities who completed four self-report questionnaires. Results revealed that students with ADHD were more cybervictims, were more involved in cyber perpetration and witnessed more cyberbullying acts. Results of multivariate tests revealed that students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder who were cybervictims reported more feelings of emotional loneliness and perception of lower social efficacy compared to students without disabilities. Similarly, students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder who witnessed cyberbullying, reported more feelings of social and emotional loneliness, and lower social self-efficacy compared to students without disabilities. Given the increased usage of peer group interactions on social networks, future studies should be conducted to examine the extent of involvement of adolescents with ADHD in cyberbullying within a larger sample.

Keywords: cyber victimization, students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, social self-efficacy, loneliness, social support

Creativity as a means of solving unique problems in mathematics and its relations to the motivation of students with learning disabilities in junior high schools in the Arab Sector in Israel

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This research study investigates the ability of students to tackle the task of solving unique mathematical problems in the domain of numerical series, verbal and formal, its relations with the motivation of junior high school students with learning disabilities in the Arab Sector in Israel. The hypothesis of the study was that studying challenging contents in mathematics which arouse creativity would be related to improvement of the learning motivation of students with learning disabilities.

Fifty students from 5 different classes that include students with learning disabilities in regular junior high classes from schools in the Arab Sector in Israel participated in the study. Two instruments were used to collect and check the data: the mathematical series were checked by "The Working Paper for Challenging Problem Solving in Mathematics" (Hakim & Gazit, 2011) and data on the motivation for learning was collected by the questionnaire entitled "The Student's Motivation for Learning" ((Roeser, Midgley & Urdan, 1996).

The research hypothesis that related to variances among the series of students' achievements was supported. The second hypothesis, which predicted a connection between the number of the uniquely challenging problems solved correctly and the level of motivation of the student was also supported.

It is recommended to use challenging mathematical tasks, verbal and formal, in light of the findings of our study, which show that such contents raise the level of motivation to learn. The benefits of such effects might lead to a variety of phenomena related to the pedagogical domain such as dropouts, inspiration of students to work toward achievements and improvement of social relations.

Key words: unique problems in mathematics, motivation to learn, students with learning disabilities, junior high schools, Arab Sector in Israel

At-risk girls and learning disabilities: Emotional-behavioral, social and motivational characteristics of at-risk girls with and without learning disabilities

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The study focuses on understanding learning disabilities (LD) as a non-specific risk factor for emotional-behavioral disorders (EBD) and cognitive and motivational disorders among at-risk adolescent girls. It examined the ability of LD to predict theories of mind (ToM) as a measure of social understanding, internalizing and externalizing problems, and anxiety among adolescent girls with and without LD in three educational settings: youth protection authority facilities (YPA), special education (SE) and general education (GE). The sample included 46 girls adjudicated in YPA facilities, 31 with LD, and 15 without LD, seven girls placed in SE settings due to their LD, 23 girls attending GE settings, 14 with LD, and nine without LD. YPA girls with LD expressed the most severe emotional-behavioral problems. LD predicted theories of mind ability and institution type predicted theory of mind ability and emotional-behavioral problems. The need for gendered treatment for LD in research and in practice is discussed.

Key words: learning disabilities, gender, risk

The role of executive functions in handwriting of higher-education students?

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Despite the growing use of computers as an alternative means of writing, handwriting is still an essential tool for performing academic work such as taking exams and notes. Although many students in higher education have handwriting difficulties (dysgraphia), research on this subject is scarce, in particular with regards to executive functions related to handwriting. The current study included 182 students of whom 144 were diagnosed with dysgraphia. This group included 3 sub-groups: students with only dysgraphia, students with dysgraphia and attention deficits and students with dysgraphia and language difficulties. The other students did not have learning disabilities. Using a convenience sampling method, the students were recruited from a University setting and several colleges in Israel. The students were administered a handwriting assessment test and questionnaires to assess their executive functions. The results showed that in most of the executive functions, there were no significant differences between the students with only dysgraphia and the students without dysgraphia. Yet the executive functions of these two groups were significantly better than those of the other two groups with dysgraphia (with comorbidity). These findings are in congruence with previous studies indicating that the population with dysgraphia is heterogeneous. In part of this population, the difficulties can also be due to deficiencies in language or cognitive difficulties such as executive functions. However, handwriting difficulties can also be due to deficits in other skills, such as spatial-motor organization or sensorimotor deficits. These findings may contribute to the assessment, accommodations and intervention among students with dysgraphia.

Key words: dysgraphia, students in higher education, executive functions, working memory

Learning strategies and academic achievement: A comparison between college students with and without attention deficit disorder

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Over the past decade, the demand for access to higher education has emerged for those with learning disabilities. The prevalence of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) has steadily increased among young people, and institutions of higher education are observing a growing number of students with ADD. This disorder places restraints on the student by affecting the behavior that supports and enables learning – focus, single-mindedness, self-organization, and time management.

This combined research study examined differences in academic achievement and learning strategy among ADD and non-ADD college students. The study population included 151 students, 41 of whom had been ADD-diagnosed. The study participants completed a demographic questionnaire, responded to an open question, and completed the LASSI questionnaire, which examines the level of learning strategies.

Current research findings show that the ‘ability to study’ and the ‘willingness to use learning strategy’ components are lower in ADD than in non-ADD students. No difference was found between the two groups for the ‘self-regulation in studying’ component. The study’s qualitative findings support this tendency: ADD students reported that personal resources – desire, determination, motivation and hard work, are the key to their success in academic learning. They expressed the desire to improve their academic abilities. The research study found that the ‘willingness to use a learning strategy’ component positively and significantly predicted academic achievement among ADD college students.

Key words: learning strategies, academic achievement, attention deficit disorder in higher education

Learning disabilities among adults: Application of the ICF model as a key to understanding individual needs – A position paper

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This position paper includes a brief presentation of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) model. This model relates to the individual's health condition with respect to personal and environmental factors and their relationships with the characteristics of the individual's daily activity and participation. It is suggested that using the ICF model to understand characteristics of daily functioning may help in improving services for the various needs of adults coping with learning disabilities (LD). Different definitions of LD and co-morbidity of LD with other health conditions are described. The paper also includes literature combined with interview segments concerning adults with LD who cope with daily functioning in various life areas. Finally, application of the ICF model concepts is demonstrated via a case study of a female adult with LD. The ICF concepts may contribute to the individual's understanding of her strengths and weaknesses in daily activities and participation and to multidisciplinary professionals working with adults with LD in creating a common language. This terminology will enable the development of assessment procedures, strategies and environmental accommodations needed to improve the daily participation and quality of life of adults with LD, both at the individual and at the policy levels.

Key words: learning disabilities, ICF model, adults, evaluation, intervention, health, activity, participation.

The experience and meaning of work through the eyes of women with ADHD

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At least 4% of adults have been diagnosed with ADHD and are at risk of developing many personal and inter-personal difficulties. The existing literature focusing on women is limited and is based on clinical experience and self-help books. The aim of this study was to understand the way women with ADHD experience their work and its meaning to them as well as shed light on this issue and deepen the knowledge in this field.

The research approach enables a deep and detailed description of women with ADHD in the workplace. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 women with ADHD, aged 27–45, who have been professionally trained and are currently working.

An analysis of the interviews revealed three main themes. One deals with their self-perception of being different from other people. The second deals with an imbalance in the interviewees’ experience in their inner systems and with their environment. The third deals with their difficulties in coping with the workplace experiences.

The hardships can be seen in two dimensions: horizontally, where interactions between the women and their environments occur, and chronologically-developmental. The interviewees described confusing and overwhelming experiences which posed challenges of coping, adapting and developing their self-perception and self-image especially at work.

The study findings deepen the knowledge of how ADHD affects work and daily functioning, and contribute to understanding the attitudes towards sensory processing disorders and the gender aspect.

Key words: executive functions, sensory processing, phenomenological research, gender

To be a parent with learning disabilities – Challenges, support and coping

Revital Gantz, Director of “Nitzan Parents”, Centers for Counseling and Empowering Parents with Learning Disabilities and Adaptive Challenges

This paper discusses the unique needs of the population of parents with learning disabilities. There are many research papers which deal with the obligations of parents to children with learning disabilities. However, few advanced studies focus on the needs of parents with learning disabilities. Parents with learning disabilities have to cope with challenges related to adapting and functioning amidst the implications and daily demands of transitioning to becoming parents. There is increasing importance placed on expanding research on this population, with the aim of developing customized support and intervention to meet the unique needs of this population.

This paper highlights the main challenges parents with learning disabilities face: communication, daily roles as parents, difficulty utilizing community supports, organizing daily schedules, coping with married life, a sense of social isolation.

In light of the functional characteristics of parents with learning disabilities, the ‘Nitzan Parents’ Center has created a unique model that offers a solution through empowerment combined with attention to social and emotional needs. The model highlights the collaboration between a multidisciplinary team and family activities to form a professional and social network directed to the continuous advancement of parental and personal development of these parents.

Key Words: parents with learning disabilities, parental counseling, couples and family challenges, three generations, customized support, accessibility, ‘Nitzan Parents’

Learning Disabilities: The Ministry of Education's policy – In light of the past and facing the future

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Pupils with learning disabilities cope with difficulties during their developmental process and throughout their period of studying in school. The difficulties are exposed in learning aspects alongside difficulties in their social, emotional and behavioral performance.

Learning disability influences their normal development and the fulfillment of the potential of their varied abilities, as early as their first educational stages. During those stages they tend to absorb a wider range of difficulties which turn the problem into a multi-dimensional one influencing every aspect of their life.

Consequently, the educational system's role is to ensure that optimal conditions exist for the normal development of pupils with learning disabilities, with the belief in variance, and with the aspiration to enable an equal opportunity for every child to fulfill his or her potential.

Based on this belief, the policy of the Ministry of Education is directed toward creating practical responses to meet the pupils' needs in learning as well as emotional – social needs.

The article sketches the current state of the Ministry of Education's policy, in view of the research and practical knowledge accumulated the last ten years concerning learning disabilities. The Ministry of Education outlines the policy guidelines that will be needed over the next decade in light of the law which establishes the learning disabilities' rights in high schools (2008), and in accordance with the professional modifications published by the American Psychiatric Association in May 2013 on DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

These outlines have become the basis of the work of a professional committee, appointed by the Minister and the managing director of the Ministry of Education to determine basic principles as an infrastructure of future policy in the area of learning disabilities.

Key Words: accommodations, coping strategies, well-being, psycho-education diagnosis, socio-emotional intervention, educational policy, learning disabilities