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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the social-emotional functioning of peer-accepted children with learning disabilities (LD) within the theoretical framework of the Vaughn and Hogan model of social competence. Holding peer acceptance constant within the model (i.e. only peer accepted children participated in the study), teacher and self-reported characteristics of socially accepted boys and girls with LD and normal achievement (NA) were evaluated and compared. The purpose of the study was to explore the characteristic features of socially accepted children with and without LD along the three domains of social skills, behavioral conduct, and nonacademic self-concept. Results suggest that having an LD predisposes boys to less favorable teacher ratings in social skills and problem behaviors than same-age peers. Despite these teacher-perceived differences, participants did not differ in self-perceptions of nonacademic competence. Links results to the Vaughn and Hogan social competency model. Implications for practice are discussed. (MKA)

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Social Competence in Peer-Accepted Children with and without Learning Disabilities

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Poster presentation at the 1998
National Association of School Psychologists' Annual Convention
Orlando, Florida

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Introduction

Extensive research in the past twenty years has investigated the social functioning of children with learning disabilities (LD). Results have consistently documented the difficulties children with LD have in forming and maintaining healthy social relationships (Wiener, 1987). More recently, however, researchers have identified within-group variability in children with LD suggesting that some youngsters with LD are socially accepted by their peers (LaGreca & Stone, 1990; Ochoa & Palmer, 1991; Stone & LaGreca & Stone, 1990). Despite this realization, very little is known about the social competency of peer-accepted children with LD who have overcome the odds of poor peer relations.

Social competency has been conceptualized by Gresham and Reschly (1988) as encompassing two fundamental components, each emphasizing different aspects of social behaviour: (a) adaptive behaviour and (b) social skills. Adaptive behaviour includes independent functioning skills, physical development, language development, and academic competencies. Social skills, on the other hand, include: (a) interpersonal behaviours (e.g., accepting authority, conversation skills, cooperative behaviours, play behaviours), (b) self-related behaviours (e.g., expressing feelings, ethical behaviour, positive attitudes towards self), and (c) task-related behaviours (e.g., attending behaviour, completing tasks, following directions, independent work). This model of social competence appears to be useful at a conceptual level because it distinguishes between tangible (i.e., adaptive, interpersonal, and task-related) and intangible (i.e., self-related) behaviours, yet it does not directly take into consideration the results of socially skilled behaviours, i.e., peer acceptance.

A second model of social competence has been advanced by Vaughn and Hogan (1990). The authors propose a similar, yet more comprehensive, model to that of Gresham and Reschly's (1988) in which they view social competence as a higher order construct (similar to intelligence) which includes the following four components: (a) positive relations with peers; b) accurate/age-appropriate social cognitions; c) absence of maladaptive behaviours; and (d) effective social skills. Positive relations with others can include general peer status, patterns of friendships and intimate relations, and family relations. Accurate and age-appropriate social cognitions can include interpersonal problem-solving, self-monitoring, and self-evaluations of competence. For the purposes of this study, Vaughn and Hogan's (1990) broad notion of social cognition will refer specifically to self-evaluations (i.e., self-perceptions). Absence of maladaptive behaviours includes the absence of serious behaviour or social problems. Finally, effective social behaviours include a variety of social skills frequently targeted for intervention within the social school context (e.g., sharing, cooperation).

According to the Vaughn and Hogan (1990) model, it is the interaction and interrelationship among the four components that yield socially competent behaviour. No single component in isolation can adequately define an individual's social competency and each person possesses a unique pattern of strengths and weaknesses within the four domains. Hence, social competence can be thought of as a multidimensional construct which may, for the purposes of research, be investigated unidimensionally via its components (Vaughn & Hogan, 1990).

This study examined the social-emotional functioning of peer-accepted children with LD within the theoretical framework of the Vaughn and Hogan model of social competence. Holding peer acceptance constant within the model (i.e., only peer accepted children participated in the study), teacher- and self-reported characteristics of socially accepted boys and girls with LD and normal achievement (NA) were evaluated and compared. The purpose of the study was to explore the characteristic features of socially accepted children with and without LD along the three domains of social skills, behavioral conduct, and nonacademic self-concept. Results are linked to the Vaughn and Hogan social competency model and implications for practice are discussed.

Table 1. Vaughn & Hogan Model of Social Competence

| | | | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------|
| Domain: | Peer Status | Self-Concept | Behavioral Conduct | Social Skills |
| Description: | Positive relations with others | Self-cognitions | Absence of maladaptive behaviors | Social behaviors |
| Rater: | peer | self | teacher | teacher |
| Formal Measures: | sociometric techniques | SPPLD | SSRS-T | SSRS-T |

SPPLD: Self-Perception Profile for LD students⁶

SSRS-T: Social Skills Rating System - Teacher⁷

| | |
|---|---|
| Participants | 17 grade 4&5 public elementary students with LD (10m, 7f) and 17 NA (10m, 7f) matched for sociometric status, gender, IQ, and age |
| LD/NA Classification⁸ | LD: IQ estimate 85+; IQ-Ach discrepancy (18 pts); & Ach at or below 85 (1 SD) NA: Average or above IQ & Achievement |
| Sociometric Classification⁹ | Positive nominations and Peer ratings: Socially Accepted = (pop.,ave.,ave.+) |
| Procedure | Peers completed nominations & ratings; Children with LD and NA completed the SPPLD; and Teachers completed SSRS-T |

Results

Scores for the LD and NA group, broken down by gender, on the three dependent variables are found in Table 2. Scores for the Social Skills and Problem Behaviors domains are standard scores with a mean of 100 and a std. deviation of 15. Nonacademic domain scores are mean scores out of 4.00 (higher scores indicate positive self-concept). Five subdomains on the SPPLD were averaged to arrive at a Nonacademic Self-Concept score: i) Athletic Competence; ii) Behavioral Conduct; iii) Social Acceptance; iv) Physical Appearance; and v) Global Self-Worth.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations by Type (LD/NA) and Gender

| | | Social Skills | | Problem Behaviors | | Nonacademic Self-Concept | |
|--------|----|---------------|-------|-------------------|-------|--------------------------|------|
| | | LD | NA | LD | NA | LD | NA |
| Male | X | 84.9 | 100.9 | 118.7 | 102.3 | 3.13 | 3.18 |
| | SD | 15.7 | 15.9 | 16.7 | 11.3 | .75 | .56 |
| Female | X | 105.1 | 99.4 | 97.6 | 96.7 | 3.46 | 3.46 |
| | SD | 14.6 | 7.9 | 7.6 | 13.1 | .43 | .47 |
| Type | | ns | | p=.06 | | ns | |
| Gender | | p=.07 | | p=.01 | | ns | |
| T * G | | p=.04 | | p=.09 | | ns | |

Social Skills

- A significant interaction revealed that teachers rated males as less socially skilled than females only when they had LD, with no corresponding difference in the NA group.
 - Overall, children with LD didn't differ significantly from NA in social skills, but the trend was for LD to be rated lower than NA.
 - Overall, females were rated as more socially skilled than boys.
- * Boys with LD were 1 SD below the mean in teacher-rated Social Skills on SSRS-T.

Problem Behaviors

- A marginally significant interaction revealed that males with LD were rated higher in problem behaviors than females with LD, with no corresponding difference in the NA group.
 - Overall, children with LD were rated by teachers as higher in problem behaviors than the NA group.
 - Overall, males were rated by teachers as higher in problem behaviors than females.
- * Boys with LD were 1 SD above mean in teacher-rated Problem Behaviors on SSRS-T.

Nonacademic Self-Concept

- No significant interaction between LD/NA and Gender was found.
 - Overall, children with LD did not differ from children with NA in nonacademic self-concepts.
 - Likewise, females and males did not differ in their nonacademic self-concepts.
- * On average, all groups reported positive (i.e., above 3.00) self-perceptions in non-academic domains: global self-worth; social; behavior; athletics; and physical appearance.

Conclusion

Results suggest that having an LD selectively predisposes boys to less favourable teacher ratings in social skills and problem behaviors than same-age peers. Despite these teacher-perceived differences, participants did not differ in self-perceptions of nonacademic competence.

These findings have direct implications for the practice of school psychology. Practitioners often rely on teacher reports for information regarding children's social functioning and peer relations. This study shows that when used in isolation, teacher-reports may provide misleading information concerning a student's peer and social functioning, especially if the student has a learning disability. All of the children in the study were rated by peers as preferred playmates, yet despite these social successes, boys with LD were rated unfavourably by teachers in social skills and adaptive behaviors. An item analysis of the teacher-rating instrument (i.e., SSRS-T) may help to explain these results. Many of the items on the social skills and problem behavior scales relate to "teacher-pleasing" behaviors (e.g., attending instructions, finishing school work). Bryan (1997) points out that teachers are often more likely to attend to behaviors that interfere with a child's academic progress than to social interactions between peers. As such, it is feasible that boys with LD are more likely to engage in "academic-interfering" (i.e., non-teacher-pleasing) behaviors within the classroom setting than other children with or without LD. Further, it is possible that boys with LD also have difficulty realizing that different contexts and situations require different ways of behaving (e.g., playground versus classroom). Future research may wish to examine these issues.

Bryan (1997) also reminds us that multiple measures of social functioning are needed before making conclusions regarding a child's social functioning. The present study promotes this idea and further suggests the use of both peer- and teacher-rated instruments when assessing children's social functioning. The Vaughn & Hogan (1990) model of social competence provides a useful framework within which a thorough assessment and understanding of a child's social functioning may be measured. School Psychologists may wish to incorporate the theoretical and/or practical aspects of this model into their daily practice.

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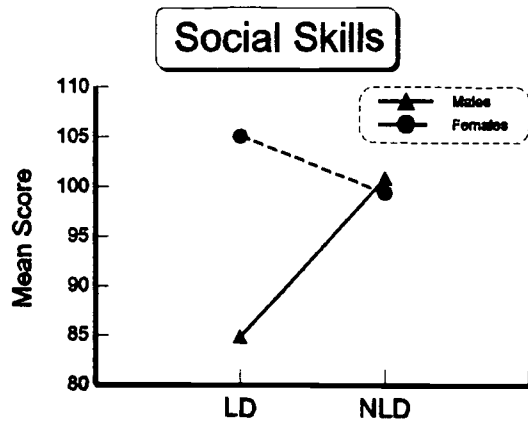


Figure 1. LD/NLD by Gender ANOVA for Social Skills

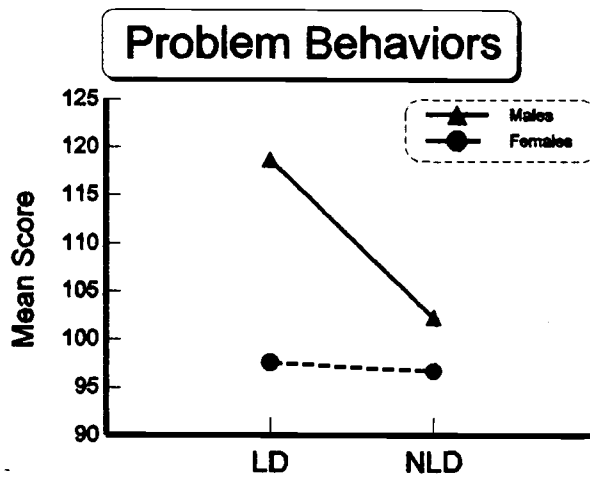


Figure 2. LD/NLD by Gender ANOVA for Problem Behaviors

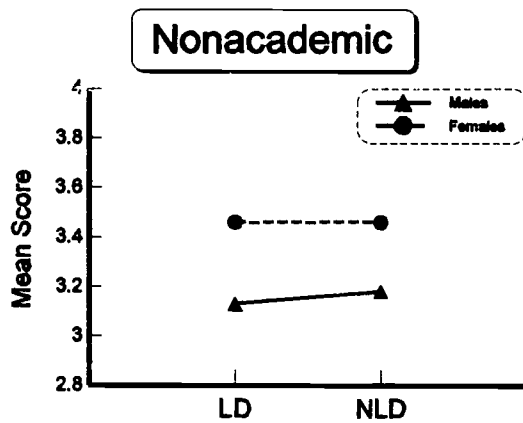


Figure 3. LD/NLD by Gender ANOVA for Nonacademic Self-Concept



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