

## ACADEMIC STRESS AND PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS WITH AND WITHOUT SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITIES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** This study investigated the relationship between perceived social support and academic stress among Children and Adolescents with and without Specific learning disabilities.

**Design of study:** Quantitative survey based approach, with comparative research design.

**Place of the study:** Karachi, Pakistan.

**Sample and method:** Purposive sampling technique was used to select N= 60 learning and non-learning disabled individuals between 6 to 17 years. Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support and Academic Stress Scale were used for data collection. Results were analysed using descriptive statistics and to find the difference between the two groups on academic stress and social support t test for independent sample was calculated. Correlation and linear regression were calculated to study the relationship and estimate the effects between variables academic stress and perceived social support.

**Results and Conclusion:** Significant differences on the levels of Perceived Social Support ( $p < 0.05$ ) and Academic Stress ( $p < 0.05$ ) between the two groups were observed. Furthermore, there was significant relationship ( $p < 0.01$ ) between perceived family support and academic stress in individuals with learning disabilities. In order to find the predictive role of the factors regression analysis was carried out.

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**Keywords:** Social Support; Academic Stress; Learning Disabilities; Family; Teachers; Friends

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## INTRODUCTION

Social support has long been considered as a predictor of student's academic success. It is positively linked with their stress-free academic pursuit and serves as a significant coping mechanism in challenging situations (Scanlon, et al., 2020). School-related stress is said to be the major cause of mental health concern leading to academic failure. Yoo et al. (2017) indicated that stress related to school settings may target six to ten million children per year.

Children with learning disabilities are more sensitive and predisposed to stress compared to their peer without learning concerns. This stress is often linked with performance, self-image or the relationship with significant people around. They are often less accepted and understood by the teachers, parents and peer group. This may ultimately lead to poor self- concept, confusion and labelling by others. Dues to this they may hesitate to interact and approach for help and assistance (Jansen-van, 2020).

Academic Stress along with disturbed relationships with family, friends and significant others has substantial impact on mental wellbeing of children and adolescent's particularly with learning concerns (Demaray & Maleck, 2002). Social support and guidance of parents, teachers/ significant others and peers is an essential factor for the smooth sailing of the academic process (Mishra, 2020).

Disabilities whether physical or mental can be reported anywhere throughout the world irrespective of cultural diversities, gender, age or socio economic background (Farooq, 2012). The difference falls in the rate of prevalence and quality of management. The United Nations in 2011 reported 10 % of the world population i.e. 650 million to be effected by disabilities of any sort including neurodevelopmental, physical or mental. Among this 10 % population with special needs 80 % belongs to underdeveloped countries (United Nations, 2011). Several studies highlight the alarming conditions in the academic setups in this part of the world. Geisthardt and Munsch (1996) in a study conducted in India investigated school stress and the level of student's involvement in school activities between learning and non- learning disabled individuals. Students with learning disabilities reported high stress level and low involvement in school activities. In Pakistan as in other underdeveloped countries, poverty, lack of resources and limited access to specialized training and remedial programs appear to be the core challenge in this regard. In countries with poor socioeconomic status, where people seems to be struggling for the

basic need such as food; education is considered a secondary concern and quality education is affordable by the privileged ones only. According to an estimate 22.8 million children aged 5-16 are out-of-school in Pakistan which is quite alarming (UNICEF, 2016).

In developing countries, like Pakistan, young people are more susceptible of having disabilities than the developed regions of world (Harland, 2002). The Express Tribune reported 1.8 million Pakistanis as having learning disabilities, of which 0.5 million lived in urban and 1.3 million in rural areas (Iqbal, 2013). Furthermore, lack of resources and training has doubled their difficulties (Ali, 2014).

The government of Pakistan has initiated several policy measures to address the difficulties of the individuals with learning and other disabilities (Government of Pakistan, 2017). The dearth of resources and research in this domain sustains and emphasizes the need to ascertain measures to uplift the living conditions of this deprived cluster and provide them with equal educational and socioeconomic opportunities (Hussain, et al., 2020).

Research in the field of learning disabilities is meagre in Pakistan; there is a need to address the concern holistically. To fulfil the missing gaps in literature and highlight the important role of social support network for individuals with learning and cognitive concerns, this study was executed. This study aimed to highlight the importance of psychological and emotional support for people with learning disabilities and how it can be linked to their successful academic endeavour.

Social support is defined as how a student evaluates and perceives others availability, care and warmth in times of stress particularly related to academics. Student's self-perception as well as perception of their relationship and support from parents, teachers, and peers predict their stress free academic progress (Malecki & Demaray, 2003, 2006).

The buffering theory of social support explains it with reference to the nature of interaction and cooperation of others in the social circle with the individual. How much the people in the social network play their role in providing assistance to the individual and moderating the stressful circumstances (Jolly, et al., 2021).

Social support facilitates and serves as a protective source against challenging situations and help to sustain mental and psychological health (Szkody & McKinney, 2019). Researchers theorised that this healthy relationship between the person and the available social supports serve as buffering factor between stressful life events and mental and emotional difficulties such as anxiety, depression etc. (Chew, et al., 2020).

Fiorillo and Sabatini (2011) conclude that the individuals who perceive little or no social support from others around are more prone towards having emotional or mental health abnormalities. Park and colleagues (2012) also parallels the opinion that perceived social support predicts the nature of relationship and perceived stress levels.

Martinez (2006) studied the variation in perceived social support in children with and without learning disabilities. It was observed that students with learning disabilities in multiple academic domains perceived parents, peers, and close friends and teachers to be less supportive than those students who had learning disability in single domain. The non-learning disabled group on the other hand perceived their support network to be more supportive and reliable. With reference to the gender differences (Demaray, & Malecki, 2006) concluded that males perceive social support to be less available as compared to females.

Martinez, et al. (2011), are of the view that reduced perception of social support from the significant people around becomes even more problematic during adolescence and puberty. Young people during this stage are undergoing major developmental changes. These changes influence them physically, emotionally, cognitively, environmentally as well as behaviourally (Jackson, & Goossens, 2007). They appear to be more stressed out and are prone towards getting emotionally disturbed which may intern adversely influence their academic performance and success (Baidoo-Anu, & Adomaa, 2021). They require guidance and support at this period of life more than in any other. Murray and Naranjo (2008) in a study done on children with learning disabilities concluded that for academic achievement and successful transition from adolescence to adulthood, it becomes even more important. Reduced social support decreases student's ability to cope with life challenges and hence lead them towards emotional and behavioural problems (Mieziene, et al., 2022).

Nonis, and Jernice, (2014) in a study indicated that student with learning disabilities appear to perform low on various skills as compared to their non-

learning disabled age mates. They are of the view that young people with learning disabilities perform approximately four years behind the normal developing peers. Their cognitive, emotional, social and fine and gross motor skills are also below average. Nonis and Jernice, (2014) further added that this slow development can also affect children's ability to understand social cues which might hamper their understanding and communication skills making it difficult for them to develop strong emotional and social bonds. The weak emotional and social bonds may also affect their perception about others in the social group resulting in avoidance behaviour.

Wendelborg and Kvello (2010) investigated that young people with disabilities have difficulty in making strong interpersonal relationships. There are several reasons for that, due to their limited abilities they lag behind their age mates in performing academic related as well as extra-curricular activities. Students with disabilities either cognitive or physical appear to be less involved in social interaction and activities that require group work. Even if they do participate, they feel less satisfied and may exhibit avoidant behaviour. Their non-proficiency may also make them less acceptable in their peer group hence resulting in low self-esteem and lack of motivation (Modi, et al., 2022).

In the light of the above literature review, the following hypotheses were framed to explore these issues in Pakistani students.

H1- There will be significant difference in the level of academic stress in children and adolescents with and without specific learning disabilities.

H2- there will be significant difference in perceived social support between children and adolescents with and without specific learning disabilities.

H3- There will be a significant predictive relationship between academic stress and perceived social support in children and adolescents with specific learning disabilities.

## METHOD

The study employs Quantitative Survey based approach, with comparative research design. The data was collected via Purposive sampling technique utilizing Structured Self -Report Questionnaires.

### *Participants*

A sample of 60 individuals, 30 with learning disabilities and 30 without learning disabilities between the age group of 6-17 years, (mean age 11.60;SD= 2.78) were selected through purposive sampling technique to participate in the study. The participants were approached from different mainstream, inclusive and special schools located in Karachi, Pakistan.

### *Inclusion criteria*

- Individuals ranging from 6 to 17 years of age.
- Individuals identified with learning disabilities
- School age individuals without learning disabilities

### *Exclusion criteria*

- Individuals with physical disabilities
- Individuals below age 6 or over age 17

### *Measures*

#### Demographic information

Demographic information was gathering via demographic sheet developed by the researcher, information regarding gender, age, educational level etc.

#### Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, (MSPSS)

The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al., 1988) is a 12-item scale that gauges the perceived adequacy of social support from three major sources including family, teachers or significant others and friends. It utilizes 5-point Likert scale (0 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). It displays Cronbach's alpha reliability index of 0.8 in non- clinical and 0.9 in clinical samples (Pedersen, et al., 2009; Zimet, 1988; Zimet, 1990).

Academic Stress Scale, (ASS; Kohn & Frazer, 1986)

The Academic Stress Scale constitutes 35 items which measures student's perceived academic stressors. Respondents rate their level of stress on 5 point likert scale (1=not at all stressful till 5=extremely stressful). High scores represent greater stress and vice versa. It has good internal consistency as measured by Cronbach's alpha and Split half reliability of 0.92 to 0.86 respectively (Kohn & Frazer, 1986).

Learning Disabilities Checklist (National Centre for Learning Disabilities, Inc. 2007)

For assessing participants with learning disabilities LDC was administered. LDC is a 91 items tool which gauges learning disabilities in six domains including language, reading, writing, mathematics, gross and fins motor skills, social emotional functioning and others. The participants are to respond to Yes or No format where Yes shows the presence of problem and No as absence. High scores indicate more learning problems. The scale has satisfactory alpha reliability index of 0.9 (NCLD, Inc. 2007). The scale was validated according to local norms by Ashraf and Najam (2014).

### *Procedure*

The procedure formally began after obtaining consent from the concerned parties. The individuals with learning disabilities were selected from inclusive and special education institutes on the bases of the evaluation by certified clinical psychologist. In case of mainstream schools, the resource teachers facilitated in identifying the students with learning disabilities. After the identification of students with learning disabilities a screening was done to fulfil the necessary requirements of inclusion and exclusion criteria. Individuals who satisfied the inclusion criteria were selected for the study.

The tools were administered individually with the facilitation of teachers in class and the researcher clarified any doubts and queries. Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, (MSPSS; Zimet, et. al., 1988) and Academic Stress Scale, (ASS; Kohn & Frazer, 1986) were administered. For the assessment of participants with learning disabilities, Learning Disabilities Checklist (National Centre for Learning Disabilities, Inc. 2007) was administered. Demographic information was gathering via demographic sheet developed by the researcher.

Statistical Package for Social Sciences, version 22 (SPSS V.22) was used to investigate the hypotheses. Results were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. T-test was calculated to find difference in the levels of Perceived Social Support and of Academic Stress in students with and without learning disabilities. Pearson's product moment coefficient of correlation ( $r$ ) was calculated to observe possible relationship between the two variables perceived social support and academic stress in children and adolescents with learning disabilities. Furthermore, regression analysis was conducted to investigate the impact of Perceived Social Support (Family, Teachers/significant others & Friend) on Academic Stress.

This study was executed taking into account all necessary ethical formalities. The tools were utilized with the author's consent. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study. Informed consent was obtained from the participants prior to initiating the study. The protection of the privacy of research participants was ensured and rights to withdraw were clarified. The confidentiality of the research data, anonymity of participants and the organizations was guaranteed.



**RESULTS****Table 1***Description of demographic variables (N=60)*

Characteristics	F	%
Groups		
LD	30	50.0
NLD	30	50.0
6.00	1	2.1
7.00	2	4.2
8.00	7	14.6
9.00	2	4.2
10.00	4	8.3
11.00	8	16.7
12.00	3	6.3
13.00	6	12.5
14.00	8	16.7
15.00	4	8.3
16.00	2	4.2
17.00	1	2.1
Educational level		
School	60	100

**Table 2**

*Mean and standard deviation and Independent sample t-test of the variable Academic Stress & Perceived Social Support between NLD and LD groups (N=60)*

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Groups</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
AS	NLD	91.70	19.45	2.01	.049*	0.51
	LD	102.76	23.03			
PSS	NLD	67.60	12.71	2.25	.028*	0.58
	LD	60.80	10.49			

*P<.05\**

In table 2 the scores of the Non-Learning disabled and Learning Disabled groups were analysed. The mean score of the Learning Disabled group on the variable of Academic Stress (AS) was significantly higher (M= 102.76, SD= 23.03) than the non-learning disabled group (M= 91.70, SD= 19.45), t-test indicates significant differences in the level of academic stress (AS) ( $t = -2.01$ ,  $df = 58$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) between learning and non-learning disabled groups. Further, Cohen's effect size value ( $d = .51$ ) suggested a moderate to high practical significance. With regard to Perceived Social Support(PSS) the scores of the Learning Disabled group were low (M=60.80, SD=10.49) compared to the No Learning disabled group (M=67.60, SD=12.71), t test indicates significant differences in the level of Perceived Social Support ( $t = 2.25$ ,  $df = 58$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) in learning and non-learning disabled groups. Further, Cohen's effect size value ( $d = .58$ ) suggested a moderate practical significance.

**Table 3**

*Correlation between perceived social support and academic stress in children and adolescents with learning disabilities.*

Perceived SS	Academic Stress	
	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Family support	.60**	.000
Teacher support	.07	.67
Friend support	-.02	.91

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Perceived Social support (PSS); Academic Stress (AS)

The results of correlation between perceived social support including family, teacher, friend support as shown in Table 5, suggest significant correlations between family support and academic stress variables.

**Table 4**

*Simple linear regression between academic stress and perceived social support (N=60)*

Model	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>Adj R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>F</i>	<i>sig.</i>
1	.612 <sup>a</sup>	.37	.30	5.19	.006

**Table 5**

*Regression coefficients of Perceived Social Support of Family, Friends and Teachers/Significant Others on Academic Stress*

variables	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i> <i>β</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Constant	41.20	21.81	1.88	.070	(-3.62, 86.03)
family's Support	2.87	.73 .62	3.90	.001	(1.360, 4.381)
Teacher's support	-.27	.67 .06	- .41	.684	(-1.662, 1.107)
Friend's support	.13	.65 .033	.20	.838	(-1.210, 1.481)

Note. CI= Confidence interval

Tables 3, 4 & 5 show the impact of Perceived Social Support of Family, Friends and Teachers/Significant Others on Academic Stress. The  $R^2$  value of .37 revealed that the predictors explained 37% variance in the outcome variable with  $F(3, 26) = 5.2, p < .05$ . The findings revealed that family support predicted academic stress ( $\beta = .62, p < .05$ ) whereas Teacher's and Friend's Support has non-significant effect on Academic Stress ( $\beta = -.067, p > .05$ ) and ( $\beta = .033, p > .05$ ).

## DISCUSSION

Academic experience may not be pleasant and enjoyable for some individuals particularly with learning disabilities. It may become a source of tension and confusion for them resulting in stress and uncertainty (Van, et al., 2009). In such consequences the importance of social support cannot be ignored. Support from one's family, teachers and friends serve as a buffer while facing challenges particularly when considering the academic scenario. The presence of supporting network does not always guarantees success in some cases. Here the role of perception intervenes. The manner in which individual perceives the social support from significant people around directly effects their coping mechanism and level of adaptability (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). Child's experiences with the significant people around, the nature of care, nurturance and

respect he/she receives in the early stage of life generate their perception of social support of significant others around (Hu, et al., 2022; Malik, & Rafiq, 2022).

Academics is one of the area where children faces more challenges so there are more chances of mental and emotional disturbances due to stress. Here the need of social support becomes even more important as it helps to reduce stress and augment educational achievements (Mackinnon, 2012).

This study was conducted to investigate the association between Perceived Social Support and Academic Stress. The differences in the level of Academic Stress and Perceived Social Support in students with and without learning disabilities was also the subject of study. For this purpose the level of Academic Stress in both the groups was studied firstly. It was hypothesized that there will be significant difference in the level of academic stress in children and adolescents with and without specific learning disabilities. The results (table 3) displayed elevated level of Academic Stress in students with learning disabilities compared to the non- learning disabled ones. Hakkim, and Konantambigi, (2022) worked on similar variables and found learning disabled children to be more susceptible of having academic related stress compared to the regular peers, he further pointed out multiple psychological and emotional weaknesses such as low self -concept, fear of criticism, rejection etc. to be the underlying cause of their academic stress leading to academic under achievement (Hakkim, & Konantambigi, 2022). Moreover, in another study children with learning disabilities have been observed to perform better when they were stress free (Grigorenko, et. al., 2020). Sarid, et al. (2020) also found similar results observing students with learning disabilities to be less active in school and manifested high academic stress compared to the non- learning disabled students. Contrary to the above findings insignificant difference in the level of academic related stress in students with and without learning disabilities were observed in other studies. (Rothman & Cosden ,1995).

Analysis of the second assumption provided parallel findings it was hypothesized that there will be significant difference in perceived social support between children and adolescents with and without specific learning disabilities. Significant difference on the level of Perceive Social Support was noted between students with and without learning disabilities. Students with learning disabilities scored low on Perceived Social Support compared to the regular counterparts (Table 4). These findings were aligned with Martinez (2006) who reported significantly low level of Perceived Social Support from parents, class mates and

friends in students with learning disabilities. Heiervang, et al. (2007) observed similar results. They reported individuals with learning disabilities to score low on Perceived Social Support and high on stress and anxiety compared to the non-learning disabled participants.

The third assumptions explored the direct impact of perceived social support on academic stress in students with learning disabilities. It was hypothesised that there will be a significant correlation between academic stress and perceived social support in children and adolescents with specific learning disabilities.

The three major sources of social support i.e. family, friends and teachers/ significant others were investigated While studying the association between academic stress and the three sources of support that is family, friends and teachers/ significant others independently; this study revealed family support to have significant association with student's academic stress. (Table 5). The other two i.e. teacher's and friend's support demonstrated insignificant relationship with academic stress. It was observed that the perception of social support from family served as a moderating force in reducing academic stress in students with and without learning disabilities. This significant relationship between perceived social support from family and student's academic stress commemorate the preceding studies, in one of the study Banstola, et al. (2020) also reported family support contrary to teacher's or peer support to have significant relationship with student's academic stress. Leonard, et al. (2015) highlighted friend's support along with family in lowering stress.

### *Conclusion*

The current study intended to explore the differences in the degree of Academic related Stress in children with and without learning disabilities. The level of Academic Stress in both the groups was investigated in relation with their perception of Social Support from significant ones around including family, friends and teachers/significant others. Analysis highlighted statistically significant intergroup differences on the two variables Academic Stress and Perceived Social Support. Students with learning disabilities demonstrated low Perceived Social Support and high Academic Stress compared to the non-learning disabled counterparts.

Additionally, this study highlighted the key role of family support in preserving student's from academic related stress in educational setup. It was

evident that students with learning disabilities perceived family support to be vital for their smooth academic sail. On the bases of the above finding it could be concluded that along with school based interventions, the significant role of family support may help students in performing better in their academics while staying safe from unnecessary stress. Furthermore, students would be able to face challenges more adequately when they feel themselves stress free and perceive support of their family and other important people available whenever they require.

This study holds strong implicative value for the school personals, including the school staff, administration, teachers, and school counselors as well as parents to work in cooperation with each other and devise mechanism and treatment interventions for students who face emotional or mental health concerns in school setup or at home. This would help to identify sources of stress in school as well as at home and students would get more opportunities to seek support and assistance from the significant ones around in order to stay free from unnecessary stress that could impact their intellectual potentials leading to low educational success.

#### *Limitations and Recommendations*

The results of this study provide valuable insight in terms of dealing with young people (children and adolescents) with academic difficulties and learning related issues. It highlights the important preventive factors that may reduce student's stress in the academic setups. The results provide understanding regarding stress buffering mechanisms such as the role of social support mainly the family in preventing students from academic stress and sustaining their mental health. In addition to the strong points, the scope of this study could be enhanced by incorporating other socioeconomic, cultural and ethnic variables such gender, parental education, their marital status, economic and religious background etc. along with the present ones in order to investigate their diverse effects on students' academic success. Moreover, as the sample representation was limited to private school of Karachi, Pakistan therefore, the findings could not be generalized to other educational setups such as government and religious school, etc. increasing the sample size as well as incorporating other educational setups would provide rich information about the variables.

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