



Research Article

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Friendship Skills among Students with Learning Disabilities in Jordan

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Abstract

This study examined the friendship skills for students with learning disabilities from the perspectives of their resource room teachers. Data were collected using a checklist of friendship skills for students with learning disabilities by 20 female teachers. A total of 140 students with learning disabilities were randomly selected from Karak city in the south of Jordan for this study. The findings indicated that friendship skills among students with learning disabilities were low. However, there were no statistically significant differences in the level of friendship skills among students with learning disabilities based on gender or grade.

Keywords: Friendship Skills, Learning Disabilities, Jordan

1. Introduction

One of the most important characteristics of students with learning disabilities (SLD) in primary classes is social challenges and problems (Almakanin et al., 2014; Almeqdad et al., 2011; Tarawneh, 2017). Approximately 75% of SLD have social skill challenges (Kavale & Forness, 1996; Wight & Chapparo, 2008), which may be caused by poor communication skills and difficulty understanding and perceiving the feelings and emotions of others. In addition, academic problems may lead to low achievement, self-concept, and weak social skills (Khazaleh & Alkhateeb, 2011). Social challenges among SLD include difficulty interacting with others, including peers and teachers, and making and keeping friendships (Lerner & Johns, 2012; Tarawneh, 2017). Social interactions between SLD and their peers in regular classes are rare and tend to be negative (Flicek, 1992, Tarawneh, 2017). Consequently, SLD face rejection from their peers and a low level of popularity at school (Dudley-Marling & Edmiaston, 1985; Kavale & Forness, 1996; Kuhne, 1999; Ochoa & Olivarez, 1995; Stone & La Greca, 1990; Swanson & Malone, 1992; Vandell & Hembree, 1994; Vaughn, Elmbaum & Schumm, 1996; Vaughn et al., 1993). Moreover, SLD interact with teachers less than peers without learning disabilities (McIntosh et al., 1993).

Friendship is a social skill, including a set of skills that help an individual establish reciprocal social relationships and maintain positive relationships (Juais et al., 2019). Friendship skills among SLD contribute to improving social skills, psychosocial development, academic skills, and self-concept (Hoosen-Shakeel, 1997; Vandell & Hembree, 1994; Wine, 1999). Understanding the social performance of SLD is required, as it affects learning and class participation (Wight & Chapparo,

2008). Despite the importance of friendship skills among children with disabilities, many face problems in this area (Nunkoosing & John, 1997; Tarawneh, 2017), including difficulty in making and keeping friends, conversing with friends, offering help, playing with friends, and keeping friends' secrets (Juais et al., 2019). Some SLD have few friends (Moore & Carey, 2005; Kuhne, 1999, Tarawneh, 2017), whereas some are unable to form friendships due to a lack of social skills (Wiener, 2004) and feel lonely and isolated (Chappell, 1994; Estell et al., 2009; Wiener et al., 1990; Yu et al., 2005). Evaluation of friendship skills among SLD includes the number of friends, the quality of friendships, friendship stability, popularity, and peer rejection in school.

Number of Friends: Social isolation among SLD may result from low achievement, behavioral problems, low self-concept, unpleasant school experiences, rejection by peers, and bullying by peers (Tarawneh, 2017).

Quality of Friendships: Friendship quality among SLD is a concern (Wiener, 2004), as some SLD tend to make friends with people with behavioral problems (Tarawneh, 2017), which may be due to fear (Bruininks, 1978), low achieving students, people with similar learning disabilities (Estell et al., 2009; Tarawneh, 2017; Wiener, 2004; Wiener & Schneider, 2002), their relatives (Tarawneh, 2017), or younger people due to their social immaturity (Wiener, 2004; Wiener & Schneider, 2002). In addition, some SLD tend to befriend school dropouts (Wiener, 2004; Wiener & Schneider, 2002). Generally, friends of SLD are less quality and less popular than children without learning disabilities (Wiener, 2004; Wiener & Schneider, 2002).

Friendship Stability: Over time, SLD have few friends (Estell et al., 2009). Friendships of children with learning disabilities in grades fourth to sixth are less stable compared to children without learning disabilities (Wiener & Schneider, 2002). However, there is an indication that friendships among SLD in adolescence are more stable compared to childhood (Kuhne, 1999). At the university level, friendships of SLD are more stable than those of students without learning disabilities (Shany et al., 2012). Boys' friendships are more stable than those of girls (Hoosen- Shakeel, 1997). Generally, people with learning disabilities keep fewer friends over time (Estell et al., 2009), and their friendship improves with age and become more stable (Kuhne, 1999; Shany et al., 2012).

Peer Rejection and Popularity: Popularity is formed in adolescence, and SLD generally face rejection from peers, especially if they have behavioral problems, such as attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Flicek, 1992; Hoyle & Serafica, 1988). Understanding the relationship between SLD and their peers is important, as relationships with peers contribute to the development of social skills, sense of psychological security, and self-concept and self-confidence (Wine, 1999). Several studies have indicated that SLD are rejected by their peers (Bryan, 1974; Stone & La Greca, 1990; Swanson & Malone, 1992; Tarawneh, 2017; Vandell & Hembree, 1994; Vaughn et al., 1996; Vaughn et al., 1993; Wiener, 1987). There is a correlation between peer acceptance, psychological loneliness, and the style of family upbringing (Yu et al., 2005). SLD are usually less popular than their peers (Bryan, 1974; Bruininks, 1978; Gresham & Reschly, 1986; Hoyle & Serafica, 1988; Kuhne, 1999; Swanson & Malone, 1992; Stone & La Greca, 1990; Vandell & Hembree, 1994; Vaughn et al., 1996; Vaughn et al., 1993; Wiener et al., 1990). Women with learning disabilities are less popular than men (Juvonen & Bear, 1992). The social status of SLD among their peers is low (Dudley-Marling & Edmiston, 1985; Kuhne, 1999; Ochoa & Olivarez, 1995).

Friendship skills help improve psychological security, form a positive self-concept, improve academic performance, and facilitate psychological and social development. SLD face challenges with friendship skills, and it is necessary to measure these skills. One method to measure these skills is teachers' ratings (Tarawneh, 2017).

Research Questions:

What is the level of friendship skills among SLD from the perspectives of resource room teachers?

Are there differences in friendship skills among SLD based on gender and grade?

2. Methods

2.1 Study Sample

The sample included 140 SLD from the second and third grades who were randomly selected from Karak city in southern Jordan (Table 1). Their friendship skills were measured by 20 female resource room teachers.

Table 1: Participant characteristics

Gender	Grade	Number	Percentage (%)
Male	Second grade	35	25%
	Third grade	35	25%
	Total	70	50%
Female	Second grade	35	25%
	Third grade	35	25%
	Total	70	50%

2.2 Study Instrument

2.2.1 Checklist of Friendship Skills for SLD

The researchers prepared a checklist to assess the level of friendship skills for SLD, which consisted of 13 negative items and 1 positive item with “yes” or “no” answers (Appendix 1). The content validity and reliability of the questionnaire were assessed using Cronbach’s alpha, and the resultant value was 0.70, which was acceptable for this study.

The items were corrected as follows: positive item (yes = 2, no = 1) and negative items (yes = 1, no = 2). Scores of 1-1.5 indicated low friendship skills and scores of 1.6-2 indicated high friendship skills.

2.3 Data Collection

The researcher distributed the checklist to resource room teachers who evaluated students in resource rooms.

3. Findings and Discussion

To address the first research question, the researcher calculated the mean and standard deviations of the checklist scores (Table 2).

Table 2: The Mean and Standard Deviations of the Scores in the Checklist of Friendship Skills for SLD

#	Item	Mean	Standard Deviations	Level
1	Has no friends in regular classes.	1.26	0.44	Low
2	Does not participate in social activities.	1.18	0.4	Low
3	Has isolation and social withdrawal.	1.45	0.5	Low
4	Rejected by peers in class.	1.4	0.5	Low
5	Sits next to certain people in class.	1.17	0.4	Low
6	Only has friends in the resource room.	1.30	0.5	Low
7	Has younger friends.	1.4	0.5	Low
8	Is popular in school.	1.47	0.5	Low
9	Is friends with their relatives.	1.34	0.5	Low

#	Item	Mean	Standard Deviations	Level
10	Sensitive in dealing with others.	1.24	0.4	Low
11	Tends to befriend brawlers at school.	1.46	0.5	Low
12	Tends to befriend those who have low achievement.	1.24	0.5	Low
13	Unpopular in their class.	1.34	0.47	Low
14	No one sits next to them unless they must.	1.48	0.5	Low
	Total	1.32	0.2	Low

Friendship skills among SLD in the second and third grades were low, which was in line with previous studies (Estell et al., 2009; Chappell, 1994; Morre & Carey; Tarawneh, 2017; Tur-Kaspa et al., 1999; Wiener, 2004), including a study in Jordan (Tarawneh, 2017). However, the present findings contradicted several studies (Wenz-Gross & Siperstein, 1997; Wiener & Schneider, 2002; Wine, 1993), which indicated no difference in the number of friends between SLD and students without learning disabilities. The causes for the difference may be the difference in samples and instruments in each study and the different places in which the studies were conducted.

For more information on the characteristics of friendship skills among SLD, the researcher calculated the frequencies and percentages of the items on the checklist (Table 3).

Table 3: The Characteristics of Friendship Skills for SLD

#	Item	Yes		No	
		Frequencies	Percentage	Frequencies	Percentage
1	Has no friends in a regular class.	103	73.6%	37	26.4%
2	Does not participate in social activities.	115	82.1	25	17.9%
3	Has isolation and social withdrawal.	76	54.3%	64	45.7%
4	Rejected by peers in class.	80	57.1%	60	42.9%
5	Sits next to certain people in class.	116	82.9%	24	17.1%
6	Only has friends in the resource room.	97	69.3%	43	30.7%
7	Has younger friends.	83	59.3%	57	40.7%
8	Is popular in school.	74	52.9%	66	47.1%
9	Is friends with their relatives.	92	65.7%	48	34.3%
10	Sensitive in dealing with others.	105	75%	35	25%
11	Tends to befriend brawlers at school.	74	52.9%	66	47.1%
12	Tends to befriend those who have low achievement.	107	76.4%	33	23.6%
13	Unpopular in their class.	93	66.4%	47	33.6%
14	No one sits next to them unless they have to.	73	52.1	67	47.9

More than half of the sample had no friends in normal classes, did not participate in social activities, exhibited isolation and social withdrawal, and experienced peer rejection. This was in line with previous studies (Bear et al., 1993; Gregg et al., 1992; Whitehouse et al., 2001; Wiener et al., 1990; Yu et al., 2005). However, these findings contradicted Vaughn et al. (1996), who found no psychological loneliness among SLD in the second, third, and fourth grades. In addition, more than half of the sample had low-achieving friends or friends with learning disabilities in the resource room, which was in line with previous studies (Estell et al., 2009; Wiener & Schneider, 2002). More than half of the sample had friends younger than themselves, which agreed with several studies (Tarawneh, 2017; Wiener, 2004; Wiener & Schneider, 2002). More than half of the sample were popular in school, which may be negative, as they were underachievers and in the resource room, which caused stigma. According to teachers' estimates, more than half of the sample were sensitive in their dealings with others, which may lead to problems with social skills and the stability of friendship skills. This was in line with Estell et al. (2009). More than half of the sample tended to befriend brawlers in school, which agreed with Tarawneh (2017). More than half of the sample were unpopular in their classes, which agreed with several studies (Bryan, 1974; Bruininks, 1976; Kuhne, 1999; Stone & Greaca, 1990;

Wiener et al., 1990). More than half of the sample were avoided by other students in seating arrangements, which reflected peer rejection. This was in line with several studies (Bryan, 1974; Tarawneh, 2017; Wine, 1999; Yu et al., 2005).

To address the second research question, researcher calculated the mean and standard deviations of the scores based on and grade (Table 4).

Table 4: The mean and standard deviations of the scores on the checklist of friendship skills for SLD

Gender	Grade	Mean	Standard Deviation	Level
Male	Second grade	1.36	0.23	Low
	Third grade	1.30	0.21	Low
	Total	1.34	0.22	Low
Female	Second grade	1.30	0.16	Low
	Third grade	1.34	0.20	Low
	Total	1.32	0.18	Low

A two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted (Table 5).

Table 5: Result of two-way ANOVA

Source	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Gender	1	0.007	0.16	0.692
Grade	1	0.004	0.103	0.749
Error	137	0.041		
Total	140			

No statistically significant differences were found in friendship skills between men and women or between the second and third grades. These findings disagreed with previous studies (Aukett et al., 1988; Elkins & Peterson, 1993; Tarawneh, 2017), which indicated statistically significant differences in friendship skills among SLD based on gender. This may be due to differences in samples and instruments used in the studies. The findings were in line with Hoosen-Shakeel (1997), who demonstrated no statistically significant differences in friendship skills among SLD based on gender. Furthermore, the present findings disagreed with several studies (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987; Estell et al., 2009; Fox et al., 1985; Kuhne, 1999; Shany et al., 2013), which revealed statistically significant differences in friendship skills by grade. This may be due to difference in the samples and instruments used in the studies. The present findings agreed with Tarawneh (2017), who found no statistically significant difference in the friendship skills of SLD by grade.

4. Conclusions

Previous studies have indicated a deficit in social skills in children with learning difficulties, which leads to a lack of friends. Moreover, underachievement causes peer rejection of SLD and creates challenges in social and friendship skills. This study revealed that the friendship skills of SLD in the second and third grades were low. These skills can be improved through teaching strategies, such as cooperative learning and peer teaching (Wiener, 2004). In addition, inclusion enhances social and friendship skills for SLD (Klingner et al., 1998; Madge et al., 1990; Whitehouse et al., 2001; Wiener & Tardif, 2004). Social and friendship skills can be improved within the family by providing opportunities for SLD to participate in social activities (Kuhne, 1999). Understanding the social performance of SLD is required, as it affects learning and class participation.

Future studies should examine the effect of other variables on teacher assessments of friendship skills of SLD, such as teachers' gender and years of experience.

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Appendix A: Checklist of Friendship Skills for Students with Learning Disabilities

A: Information about Students

Sex: Male / Female

Grade: Second Grade / Third Grade

B: Items of Checklist

#	Item	Yes	No
1	Has no friends in regular classes.		
2	Does not participate in social activities.		
3	Has isolation and social withdrawal.		
4	Rejected by peers in class.		
5	Sits next to certain people in class.		
6	Only has friends in the resource room.		
7	Has younger friends.		
8	Is popular in school.		
9	Is friends with their relatives.		
10	Sensitive in dealing with others.		
11	Tends to befriend brawlers at school.		
12	Tends to befriend those who have low achievement.		
13	Unpopular in their class.		
14	No one sits next to them unless they have to.		

Notes: Positive item: 8; Negative items: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14