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Social Barriers of Pupils and Students with Specific Learning Disabilities

Abstract

This literature review analyzes nine specialized papers which focus on issues of the social barriers of pupils and students with specific learning disabilities. In identifying the most important features and characteristics of pupils and students with specific learning disabilities, we need to recognize which areas have a significant impact on the learning process. At the forefront come the level of motor skills, the level of memory and intellectual abilities, laterality, perception, spatial orientation, learning strategies showing the competence of self-learning, communication, and social relations. The aim of the literature review was to analyze the research of foreign authors who primarily dealt with the issue of social relations and the abilities of pupils and students with specific learning disabilities. Based on the review, it was determined that the social barriers of pupils and students with specific learning disabilities extend throughout their entire education, from the beginning until the transition to higher education. Pupils and students with specific learning disabilities are most influenced by relationships to their immediate surroundings and to themselves.

Keywords: literature review, social barriers, specific learning disabilities, pupils, teachers, family

Introduction

Specific learning disabilities cover a very heterogeneous group of traits which present certain difficulties for their bearers in several areas, including the ability to acquire and apply speech as a means of communication and other difficulties in reading, writing, or mathematics. The nature of these problems is very individual, so they cannot be generalized for all individuals, but common ground remains the dysfunction of the central nervous system. However, this statement does not deny the possibility of other disabilities, such as various sensory disabilities, intellectual disabilities, etc. However, it is important to separate the causes of learning disabilities from other disabilities because the former do not arise from the latter and are not their result, even in the case of external influences, for example, cultural differences. The impact of learning disabilities needs to be considered beyond the educational process, as they affect the daily life of these individuals (Aro et al., 2019; Kormos & Smith, 2012). Knight and Scott (2004) point to the need to perceive learning disabilities in the context of their specific manifestations and to distinguish them from non-specific ones, which they describe as false learning disabilities. They find the causes of false learning disabilities to be a delay in the development of intellectual abilities, a lack of incentives from the social environment, or neglect of school attendance, etc. Hollar (2012) defines specific learning disabilities as a group of neurodevelopmental disorders that manifest in childhood as difficulties acquiring and using reading skills (dyslexia), writing ability (dysgraphia), or performing mathematical operations (dyscalculia) in situations with normal intellect, normal educational conditions, intact sensory functions, adequate motivation, and sociocultural conditions ensured and maintained. A Canadian study for learning disabilities defines them as several disorders that can affect the organization, acquisition, or understanding of nonverbal or verbal information. These disorders affect the learning process of pupils who otherwise have at least the appropriate skills necessary to acquire skills and knowledge (Grigorenko et al., 2020; Kendall & Samways, 2008).

The pitfall leading to school performance deficits in these pupils is the fixation of inappropriate work habits, which are often linked to behavior.

School failure, negative evaluations from the teachers, parental dissatisfaction, and many other negative factors contribute to the pupil's declining motivation and self-evaluation, in particular. This situation often results in inappropriate behavior, which is only a deviating maneuver, masking the pupil's real difficulties. Gradually, a negative attitude towards school and education develops, and psychosomatic problems can also appear, even phobias or a changed self-perception of the pupil can emerge (Hardman et al., 2016; Snowling et al., 2020). Henley, Ramsey, and Algozzine (2008) report an increased incidence of frustration and social immaturity leading to inappropriate behavior or anxiety attacks in pupils with specific learning disabilities. Depressive states can sometimes occur. It is therefore necessary to provide sufficient support and encouragement from the school and family. It is very traumatic for these pupils when they are unable to meet their parents' expectations, especially in the early school years. At a young age, the pupil easily adopts the attitudes and opinions of their social environment, which can have a negative impact on their self-confidence, self-esteem, and overall personal development. The pupil then logically responds to the situation with an attack or escape. Escape is accompanied by feelings of resignation, inferiority, and closure. On the contrary, conspicuous behavior and aggression are means of defense and attack (Agrawal et al., 2019; Fletcher et al., 2018). The first indications appear in the family, which may indicate an increased risk of learning difficulties in the pupil. The situation is greatly helped if the teacher can help not only the pupil, but also their family to overcome the initial shock of failure in education and to accept the fact that their child has difficulty learning and that even though they often make a considerable effort, it does not lead to the desired result. Educators' approaches to pupils with learning disabilities are addressed in Vaughn, Bos, and Say Schumm (2018), who also focus on the emotional and cognitive aspects of language learning and the use of appropriate methods. Because learning disabilities are so heterogeneous, it is certainly not possible to use only one approach or technique for all pupils with learning disabilities. It is important that the teacher perceives and works with each pupil individually. In addition to the above-mentioned actors in the education of pupils with

specific learning disabilities, it is necessary to also perceive the influence of classmates, who may engage in bullying due to misunderstanding. Pupils with specific learning disabilities can often be less popular in the classroom, which can create conflicts and worsen relationships (Sainio et al., 2019; Swanson et al., 2013).

Methodology

The literature review is a basic means or tool of research in the field of special education. It is described as a method that is essential for the further development of science in special and inclusive education. Another benefit of the literature review is the fact that no current research can be left without a detailed mapping and analysis of what has ever been found and how researchers proceeded in the past. Through overview studies, it is possible to become familiar with the research areas which have been noted for follow-up studies (Ridley, 2012). This literature review takes the form of a traditional (narrative) review, which summarizes a wider range of studies on a selected topic over a limited period. The established aspects or selected research questions are carefully followed during the design of the review. The literature review provides a description and summary of the findings of previous research and identifies differences in the views of previous researchers and published results. Literature reviews may thus contain recommendations and conclusions of a more general nature (Bearman et al., 2012).

This literature review addresses the issue of the social skills and relationships of pupils and students with specific learning disabilities. To select studies suitable for analysis, we established two basic thematic criteria: social skills/relationships and specific learning disabilities. We tried to approach the topic for the literature review comprehensively. By analyzing and then synthesizing the information, we tried to determine which areas of social skills and problems are addressed in the available research, which groups of individuals are mutually evaluated in this context, and what tools researchers use to collect data.

For this purpose, according to the selected parameters, we selected and subsequently analyzed nine professional articles that deal with our chosen topic. The collection and study of professional literature of foreign origin was carried out at the end of 2020. We searched for titles for the overview study in the Scopus, ERIH+, and Web of Science databases. The selection was limited to full-text resources available online. We chose thematically focused articles in the period from 2004 to 2019. Based on the analysis and according to the established criteria for the selection of suitable texts, we synthesized the findings from relevant studies into a literature review, while in a systematic review we tried to analyze individual selected articles, then briefly present their characteristics, distinguish and highlight their differences, evaluate their contribution to theory and practice, and generally integrate knowledge on the topic into the literature review. An overview of the studies which were analyzed is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Social barriers in pupils and students with specific learning disabilities

Title	Authors, year	Research strategy	Research sample	Research results
Psychosocial functioning of young children with learning problems	Gadeyne, E., Ghesquière, P., Onghena, P., 2004	quantitative	276 pupils (43 with specific learning disabilities, 233 intact pupils)	Pupils have a lower level of social well-being and self-confidence; parents perceive social relations in the family less well.
Sociometric status and self-image of children with specific and general learning disabilities in Dutch general and special education classes	Bakker, J. T. A., Denessen, E., Bosman, A. M. T., Krijger, E., Bouts, L., 2007	quantitative	1,300 pupils (439 from special schools, 861 from mainstream schools)	Pupils with specific learning disabilities in the team felt unpopular, rejected, and ignored in both types of schools. Girls felt much more rejected than boys.
Adaptive behaviour in children and adolescents with foetal alcohol spectrum disorders: A comparison with specific learning disability and typical development	Fagerlund, Å., Autti-Rämö, I., Kalland, M., Santtila, P., Hoyme, H., Mattson, S. N., Korkman, M., 2012	quantitative	143 pupils (30 with specific learning disabilities, 73 with reduced IQ-fetal alcohol spectrum disorders, 40 intact pupils)	Adaptive behavior was significantly different in each group. Pupils with specific learning disabilities showed worse results than intact pupils (socialization, communication), but even worse results were found in pupils with fetal alcohol spectrum disorders.

Self-perceived health-related quality of life of Indian children with specific learning disability	Karande, S., Venkataraman, R., 2012	quantitative	150 pupils with average intelligence	These pupils felt socially excluded, lonely, and separated from their classmates. They felt psychological limits stemming from lower health status and stigmatization from teachers.
Quality of life in newly diagnosed children with specific learning disabilities (SpLD) and differences from typically developing children: A study of child and parent reports	Ginieri-Coccosis, M., Rotsika, V., Skevington, S., Papaevangelou, S., Malliori, M., Tomaras, V., Kokkevi, A., 2013	quantitative	139 pupils (70 with newly diagnosed specific learning disabilities, 69 intact pupils)	Significant differences in the perception of defined areas of quality of life between pupils with specific learning disabilities and intact pupils. Parents of intact pupils had a much higher score on social relationships. However, there were no major differences in the perception of mental and physical health.
Bullying and middle school students with and without specific learning disabilities: An examination of social-ecological predictors	Rose, C. A., Espelage, D. L., Monda-Amaya, L. E., Shogren, K. A., Aragon, S. R., 2013	quantitative	443 pupils (83 with specific learning disabilities, 360 intact pupils)	Boys with specific learning disabilities were more prone to lower levels of social support and, conversely, more prone to aggression and bullying. Pupils involved in extracurricular activities had a higher degree of social support and a lower risk of aggression, violence, or bullying. Pupils with specific learning disabilities using special support had a much higher ability to acquire social acceptance.
Extracurricular activities and the development of social skills in children with intellectual and specific learning disabilities	Brooks, B. A., Floyd, F., Robins, D. L., Chan, W. Y., 2015	quantitative	117 pupils (53 with specific learning disabilities, 40 with intellectual disabilities, 24 intact pupils)	Equal quality of structured and unorganized activities. The positive impact of participating in activities due to better social competencies and greater success among peers was confirmed. Unstructured activities improved pupil's cooperation and social competence. However, the same was not confirmed for structured activities.

Postsecondary education persistence of adolescents with specific learning disabilities or emotional/behavioral disorders	Lee, I. H., Rojewski, J. W., Gregg, N., Jeong, S.-O., 2015	quantitative	10,760 students (770 with specific learning disabilities or emotional and behavioral disorders, 9,900 intact students)	Work aspirations and mutual communication about school with parents and their expectations as well as the number of friends excluded and studying had the greatest influence. Two thirds of students with specific learning disabilities were nstable in education. No clear differences were found between groups with specific learning disabilities and emotional and behavioral disorders.
Family-peer linkages for children with intellectual disability and children with learning disabilities	Floyd, F. J., Olsen, D. L., 2017	qualitative	107 families of children (48 with specific learning disabilities, 37 with intellectual disabilities, 22 families of intact children)	For children, greater engagement, easier behavior, and less negativity with their families were associated with greater acceptance of their peers, which encouraged family ties in children at risk of peer rejection.

Results of the Review

Gadeyne et al. (2004) addressed the psychosocial functioning of first-grade pupils with specific learning disabilities compared to intact pupils. They selected 276 pupils aged 6 to 7 years for the research, of whom 233 had no specific learning disabilities and 43 had specific learning disabilities. Several areas were examined: school evaluation, behavioral problems, self-perception, cognitive ability, sociometry, and the concept of motivation. Several tests were used for this purpose and administered to pupils or their mothers. The tests taken by the pupils were administered by the teacher in order to evaluate, for example, classroom relationships or self-perception. The mothers answered questions about their children's behavior. The findings of the research were that the pupils with specific learning disabilities had more problems with socialization and behavior towards their teachers than the intact pupils. These pupils

also had greater difficulties with social preferences and a significantly higher risk of problems in social integration. Pupils had a lower degree of social well-being and self-confidence; the parents perceived social relationships in the family less well.

In their research, Bakker et al. (2007) focused on the social status of pupils with specific learning disabilities and pupils with general learning disabilities. A total of 1,300 pupils took part in their survey. Part of the research took place in mainstream schools (861 pupils) and part in schools set up for pupils with special educational needs (439 pupils). The age limits were set at 9 to 12 years in the mainstream schools and 9 to 16 years in the special schools. The pupils' IQ scores were not given. During the research, two questionnaires were administered to pupils and two to teachers. The questionnaires for the pupils focused on sociometric status and ideas about themselves. Six questions regarding the preference of classmates comprised the sociometric status. The second questionnaire contained 23 questions focused on the emotions of regarding their abilities, the perception of their values, relationships in the classroom, etc. The questionnaires distributed to the teachers were aimed at the overall evaluation of the pupils and distributing them according to their diagnosis. Based on the research, it was concluded that the pupils with specific learning disabilities in both types of schools in the research group felt unpopular, rejected, and ignored. More obvious differences were seen between boys and girls. Girls felt much more rejected than boys. In their conclusion, the authors proposed a discussion in which they find out that pupils with specific learning disabilities feel equally rejected in mainstream schools and special schools.

Fagerlund et al. (2012) examined the adaptive abilities of pupils with fetal alcohol spectrum disorders, which affect intellectual abilities. The research compared three groups of pupils, the first group consisting of 30 children with specific learning disabilities, the second group of 73 pupils with reduced IQ (fetal alcohol spectrum disorders), and the third group comprised of 40 intact pupils. Thus, 143 pupils took part in the study. The researchers used Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales (VABS) in a semi-structured interview with the children's parents and, where appropriate,

caregivers. Three domains – everyday skills, socialization, and communication – were included in the evaluation. Adaptive behavior was significantly different in each group. The pupils with specific learning disabilities performed worse than the intact pupils, but even worse were those with fetal alcohol spectrum disorders. The social skills of the pupils with specific learning disabilities improved with age.

In their research, Karande and Venkataraman (2012) analyzed their own perception of quality of life in newly diagnosed pupils with specific learning disabilities. The hypothesis of this research was that the perception of these pupils would be significantly affected at the psychological and psychosocial levels. The research sample consisted of 150 pupils with average intelligence between the ages of 8 and 16 years. They were selected based on visits to the clinic where the research was conducted and where specific learning disabilities were diagnosed in these pupils. The English Self-report Long-version DISABKIDS test (DCGM-37-S) was used to determine the perception of quality of life by these pupils; it contains subtests focused on independence, emotions, social inclusion and exclusion, limitations, and the impact of set measures (treatments). The test contained 37 questions answered with five-point scales. The results of the study show that these pupils feel socially excluded, lonely, and separated from their classmates. They perceived stigmatization from the school and their peers. They felt psychological limits stemming from their lower health status. In the research sample, the feeling of stigmatization from teachers was significant.

Ginieri-Coccosis et al. (2013) also focused on pupils' self-assessment. For their research, they created a control group of completely healthy pupils. Questionnaires were also directed at the pupils' parents. The secondary goal was then to explain the relationships and perceptions of quality of life by pupils and their parents. The 70 pupils in whom specific learning disabilities were newly diagnosed had an average age of 10.1 years; the control group of 69 pupils had an average age of 10.6 years. Pupils were examined using the German standardized KINDL questionnaire, which assesses quality of life using 24 scaling questions with a scale of 1 to 5. The questionnaire included areas such as mental and emotional well-being, self-confidence,

family, friends, and daily functioning in the school environment. From a comparison of the two groups, the researchers concluded that there were significant differences in the perception of the areas of the questionnaire. The Quality-of-Life Brief Questionnaire was administered to the parents, revealing that the parents of intact pupils had a much higher score on social relationships. However, there were no major differences in the perception of mental and physical health.

Rose et al. (2013) examined bullying in secondary schools in terms of predictors that were identified as demographic variables (gender and race) and socio-environmental predictors (family support, need for belonging, school support, etc.). Two groups of pupils were created: those with specific learning disabilities and intact pupils. The final research sample consisted of 360 intact pupils and 83 pupils with specific learning disabilities, aged 11–15 years. The schools that the pupils attended did not have bullying prevention programs. Standardized scales from the University of Illinois were used to obtain demographic information. Questionnaires were distributed to the pupils. The structural equation modelling which was used to identify socio-environmental predictors covered eight areas: anger, militancy, bullying, discrimination, peer social support, the need for belonging, family social support, and school social support. It was found that the boys were more prone to lower levels of social support and, conversely, more prone to aggression and bullying. Furthermore, it was revealed that the pupils who were involved in extracurricular activities had a higher degree of social support and a lower risk of aggression, violence, or bullying. It was also revealed that the pupils with specific learning disabilities who benefited from special support had a much higher ability to acquire social acceptance.

Brooks et al. (2015) investigated the impact of extracurricular activities on pupils' social skills. The study group included 53 pupils with specific learning disabilities, 40 pupils with intellectual disabilities, and 24 intact pupils. The aim of the research was to determine the relationship between the frequency and type of social activity towards social competences. The research was based on the hypothesis that social activities outside of school would have a positive impact on pupils' social skills.

They also predicted that unorganized and structured activities had an equally positive impact. They used the Activities Questionnaire, which they distributed to the pupils' parents. Parents recorded their children's activities for six months. Another questionnaire was the Peer Social Task Rating Scales, which focus on pupils' social competencies during activities with their peers. The questions dealt with conversation, engagement, helping others, etc. The latest Adaptive Behavior Scale-Caregiver Report covered the area from social behavior to language development. The survey confirmed the hypothesis of equal value of structured and unorganized activities. The positive impact of participating in activities was also confirmed due to better social competences and greater success among peers. Unstructured activities improved pupils' cooperation and social competence. Interestingly, however, the same was not confirmed for structured activities.

Lee et al. (2015) examined the factors that influenced the persistence of students with specific learning disabilities and emotional and behavioral disorders in post-secondary education. The results of the National Center for Education Statistics questionnaire (ELS: 2002 database) were analyzed, focusing on the transition from secondary to post-secondary education. The survey was repeatedly applied in 2002, 2004, and 2006. A total of 10,760 individuals made up the final sample, of which 9,900 were intact and 770 had specific learning or emotional and behavioral disorders. The evaluated factors were: individual, school, family, community, and peer factors. According to the results so far, these factors are decisive in the retention of students in education. Of all the factors, the most important were individual factors (gender and work aspirations), mutual communication about the school with parents and their expectations. Another important factor is the number of friends who are students and of those excluded from the school system. The study also confirmed the influence of socialization and the social environment on the successful education of individuals with specific learning disabilities. The research also revealed that two thirds of students with specific learning disabilities are unstable in education. This result is up to double that of intact students. However, no clear differences were found between the groups with specific learning disabilities and with emotional and behavioral disorders.

Floyd and Olsen (2017) examined the interactions of problem-solving in the families of school-age children (7–11 years) with intellectual disabilities ($N=37$), with specific learning disabilities ($N=48$), and without disabilities ($N=22$). First, all family members took part in a ten-minute discussion about their family's current problem (cooperation between children, family rules, etc.). The records of the family discussions were then coded in a system consisting of 38 specific behavioral codes that assessed interpersonal communication skills, problem-solving skills, and other behaviors that either facilitated family discussion and successfully solved the problem or disrupted the process by withdrawal, hostility, or aversion. The last part consisted of an evaluation of the target child's experience of receiving peers through a set of parental reports (usually the mothers) and teacher report items derived from scales of peer relationships and teacher measures. The analysis of group differences in the children's behavior and peer acceptance in all groups revealed that the behavior of mothers – which encouraged egalitarian problem-solving – predicted a more involved and skillful solution to the children's problems. However, controlling mothers, who controlled behavior, indicated fewer of these behaviors in the children. Fathers' behavior had mixed connections with children's actions, probably because they responded to children's uncontrolled and negative behavior. For the children, greater engagement, easier behavior, and less negativity with their families were associated with greater acceptance of their peers, which encouraged family ties in children at risk of peer rejection.

Conclusion

Based on the literature review, it can be stated that the issue of specific learning disabilities brings with it a significant risk of social barriers and difficulties in relationships. A characteristic feature of these barriers is their impact, which affects not only individuals with specific learning disabilities, but also their families, teachers, classmates, and the wider social environment. It is also possible to confirm the impact of specific learning

disabilities on the education of these pupils, which is clear from the beginning of education through secondary school to higher education. These individuals are mainly influenced by their social environment and the personality factors that surround them.

The studies selected for this review can be defined using three categories: the quality of life, education, and behavior of pupils. The first category is based on the results of standardized tests from two surveys. Karande and Venkataraman (2011) addressed a group of pupils with specific learning disabilities with average intellect. Ginieri-Coccosis et al. (2013) examined not only the pupils, but also their parents. Pupils with specific learning disabilities and intact pupils took part in the survey. The conclusions of both studies yielded similar findings, which demonstrate that pupils with specific learning disabilities experience social exclusion, lower self-esteem, greater stigma, and difficulties with their immediate social environment.

Two other studies were compared in the education category. Both surveys compared the results of pupils with specific learning disabilities and pupils with intellectual disabilities. The first was a survey ($N=1,300$) that dealt mainly with social status and was conducted in both mainstream schools and schools for pupils with special educational needs. The questionnaires were administered to pupils and teachers. The results show that pupils with special educational needs felt rejected and unpopular in both types of schools (Bakker et al., 2007). The second survey examined pupils with specific learning disabilities and intellectual disabilities as well as intact pupils as a control group. The research dealt with the relationship between frequency and type of social activity towards social competencies. The total number of pupils was only 117, so it is not possible to compare the conclusions with the previous sample, which was many times higher (Brooks et al., 2015).

The last category is research on student behavior. Gadeyne et al. (2004) examined problems in behavior and self-perception, school evaluation, and other areas in pupils aged 6–7 years. They concluded that pupils with specific learning disabilities addressed more of the behavioral problems highlighted by their teachers, as well as difficulties with

social preference and social integration. The study by Rose et al. (2013), which dealt with the issue of bullying in secondary school, drew a similar conclusion and stated that the prevention of socially pathological phenomena is very important for the inclusion of students. From the very beginning of schooling, it is necessary to focus on inclusion and thus prevent much greater problems in the form of bullying. Lee et al. (2015) used previously published information from databases for their research and worked with it further. Their sample was substantially larger, encompassing 10,760 individuals. This survey also worked with two groups of pupils, the first being pupils with specific learning disabilities or emotional and behavioral disorders and the second one being intact pupils. The research examines the factors that influence the persistence of pupils with specific learning disabilities and with emotional and behavioral disorders in post-secondary education. The main factors were individual factors (gender and work aspirations) and mutual communication about the school with parents and their expectations. Another important factor is the number of friends who study or are excluded – in other words, socialization – and the influence of the social environment on the success of individuals with specific learning disabilities. The latest research in this category compared three groups of individuals: those with fetal alcohol spectrum disorders, those with specific learning disabilities, and intact individuals. The pupils with specific learning disabilities performed worse than the intact pupils, but even worse were those with fetal alcohol spectrum disorders. Pupils with specific learning disabilities showed worse results in the areas of communication, socialization, and everyday activities. The social skills of pupils with specific learning disabilities improved with age (Fagerlund et al., 2012).

Pupils and students with specific learning disabilities often have striking features that may be misunderstood by those around them. They also very often do not realize how their behavior is perceived by other people. The constant failures and possible misunderstandings of a person with specific learning disabilities with of his immediate surroundings, whether they are a family member or a teacher, play a significant role in shaping the person's personality. Unpleasant experiences, mainly from

the period of schooling – which people with specific learning disabilities experience more often than people without such disorders – have an unavoidable influence in the social and emotional spheres throughout the individual's life.

Comprehensive support for pupils and students with specific learning disabilities should include three basic components: adjusting the conditions of school work so that pupils and students can work at the level of their school year, possibly with the use of various support aids; their own reeducation of specific learning disabilities; and giving encouragement to pupils, students, and parents so that they can endure and manage long and difficult struggles with specific learning disabilities.

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