



LEARNING DIFFICULTIES AND COPING METHODS EMPLOYED BY ADOLESCENTS: A SCHOOL -BASED MIXED- METHODOLOGY STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Background: Adolescence is a developmental stage marked by significant social, academic, and personal changes, during which individuals begin forming a clearer sense of identity. The World Health Organization defines adolescence as the period between ages 10 and 19, characterized by rapid physical, cognitive, and psychosocial development. During this time, many adolescents encounter many challenges, many of which include learning disparities.

These difficulties often become more evident in early to mid-adolescence, as students are expected to manage increasingly complex academic demands, such as independent study, test-taking, and future planning, while also maintaining a balanced and healthy lifestyle.

It's important to note that learning challenges experienced during adolescence can extend beyond just academic performance. They may influence an individual's self-esteem, emotional well-being, motivation to learn, and overall ability to maintain healthy relationships with peers and family members.

Aim: This qualitative study aimed to investigate adolescents' perceptions of their learning difficulties. Of this includes their emotional experiences, different coping strategies, and their individual needs in order to support their learning.

Method: A qualitative descriptive approach was used in this study. A group of 17 adolescents, aged 13 to 18, participated in semi-structured interviews guided by predetermined questions. These questions explored academic challenges, emotional responses, impacts on relationships, coping strategies, and expectations of support from school and family. Each interview lasted approximately 30 - 45 minutes and was conducted in a location of the participants' choosing to ensure comfort and privacy. After gaining consent, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework to identify recurring patterns from the data. All data was anonymized.

Results: The analysis of the data revealed five key themes: the ongoing nature of academic struggles, the emotional burden associated with these challenges (for example: reduced confidence), the difference between avoidance and effortful coping, and the importance of supportive relationships when facing challenges such as academic difficulties. Additionally, participants highlighted the importance of support from both family and their schools. Through the analysis, key coping strategies were identified, including turning to friends and teachers for help, breaking tasks into smaller steps, repeated practice, temporarily avoiding the situation, and withdrawing emotionally.

Conclusion: To conclude, academic struggles experienced by adolescents with learning difficulties were generally not viewed because of poor academic performance, but as a combination of emotional and social challenges. To combat these difficulties, the type of critical support that seemed to provide confidence and overall support included: teachers fostering a supportive environment, open and non-judgmental communication with family members, assistance from peers, and the usage of flexible academic strategies.

Keywords: Adolescents, Learning Difficulties, Coping Mechanisms, Qualitative Study, Thematic Analysis, Coping Strategies, School-Based Support, Emotional Well-Being.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a transitional phase involving substantial changes in physical development, cognitive capacity, emotional regulation, and social relationships.

During this time, academic performance becomes increasingly important, becoming a core foundation that shapes future opportunities, self-identity, and familial expectations. In comparison to earlier schooling years (in this case, anything below 9th grade), high school demands greater independence, including managing time, completing complex assignments, engaging in critical thinking, and preparing for examinations, often with reduced supervision from teachers and parents alike [1].



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Learning difficulties during adolescence may be particularly distressing due to heightened academic demands, and the pressures this may bring. Students who previously struggled in primary school may find these challenges intensified as coursework becomes more abstract, competitive, and exam oriented. These difficulties can manifest in various forms, including issues with reading comprehension, written expression, mathematical reasoning, attention, motivation, organization, task completion, and classroom participation.

It's important to note that specific learning disabilities (such as reading, mathematics, or writing difficulties) should not be viewed because of laziness or lack of effort. While it's true many people with these specific learning disabilities (although not limited to) have not been able to obtain the highest grades in school even while possessing high levels of intelligence, they continue to have persistent problems in their academic performance. Problems of which cannot be accounted for by instructional techniques, low intelligence, or lack of motivation. Specific learning disabilities are classified by the American Psychiatric Association as part of the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) framework used by clinicians and researchers [2].

Research has previously shown that when comparing students with disabilities to their counterparts with similar abilities but without learning disabilities have different levels of self-efficacy, mood, effort and hope. In a study conducted by Firth, Greaves and Frydenberg, adolescents with learning disabilities were found to use more nonproductive coping strategies, such as ignoring the problem or refusing to cope, than the average adolescent sample [6]. Likewise, Deepthi, Panicker, and Shalini found significant differences between students with learning disabilities and their peers, both with and without learning disabilities, in relation to proactive coping and social-emotional adjustment [8].

Qualitative research methods are particularly well suited to examining the lived experiences of adolescents with learning disabilities. The emotional distress, avoidance behaviors, perseverance, and help-seeking behaviors of students with learning disabilities cannot be fully captured through numerical scores alone. In a longitudinal qualitative study conducted by Givon and Court, the authors identified several coping processes, including avoidance, rebellion, reconciliation, and determination [5]. These findings demonstrate that adolescent coping is dynamic and fluid; the same student may progress through phases of withdrawal, resistance, acceptance, effort, and support-seeking depending on their emotional state and school

environment. Which supports the notion that numerical-based data collection would not tell the full story as students can be moving through stages differently depending on their personal experiences. Qualitative studies similar to those conducted on students with learning disabilities, coping strategies, and self-efficacy have been published on other topics, however, there is still a need for qualitative research in which adolescents are given the opportunity to share their story. The way in which adolescents believe their school and/or their families can provide support is important to understand, especially when creating effective support systems that truly makes a difference. Therefore, it is of interest to investigate the phenomenon of learning difficulties and coping methods employed by adolescents who participated in the semi-structured qualitative interviews [3].

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

This study used a qualitative descriptive design, specifically chosen because it allowed us to understand and gather the unique perspectives of different adolescents rather than simply counting how often these issues occur. This allows the data to be more personalized and better represent individuals' stories. Through semi-structured interviews, participants were able to openly share their experiences of academic difficulties, their emotions towards those difficulties, the coping mechanisms they used to address them, whom they turned to for support, and their expectations regarding education.

Study Participants

A total of 17 adolescent student participants (aged 13-18) indicated they were unable to perform (or keep pace with) various school-related tasks. The sample represented students participating in courses offered in grades nine through twelve (specific to high school students). Adolescents were eligible for this study if they reported being unable to keep pace with or complete any of the following academic activities: reading, writing, mathematics, understanding verbal directions, staying focused, staying motivated to do homework, or completing all homework assignments.

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who could provide detailed insights into the phenomenon being studied. This approach allowed for a focused and exploration of difficulties faced by children with disabilities and ways in which they deal with them. The sample size was limited to 17 participants to enable thorough analysis of each individual's responses on a deeper level.

Study Setting

Each participant was given the ability to choose a location of their choice; a place they considered

private, and comfortable for them. A few examples of interview locations include classrooms, a library, counsellors office, or any other quiet space. During the interviews, the interview guide highlights that the setting chosen should allow participants to feel safe enough to foster an environment in which they felt comfortable discussing openly with the interviewer on subjects that can be quite personal.

Interview Guide

A semi-structured interview guide was used to collect data for this study. This type of interview format follows a flexible framework, using a set of guiding questions to outline key behavioral characteristics of the target population while still allowing the interviewer to ask follow-up questions to clarify or expand upon participants' responses. The semi-structured nature of the interview enables a balance between both consistency across participants and adaptability to individual perspectives.

The first section of the interview guide consisted of an introduction that explained the purpose of the study and outlined participants' rights. Participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary, that their responses would be kept confidential, and that their identities would remain anonymous. They were also told that they could choose not to answer any question and could withdraw from the interview at any point without consequence. Prior to beginning the interview, participants were asked to provide consent for audio recording.

The questions asked in the interviews examined the following subjects.

1. The specific subject areas or academic tasks that participants found most challenging to complete or perform successfully in.
2. The factors contributing to these academic difficulties.
3. The emotional consequences associated with experiencing challenges in learning.
4. The extent to which these difficulties affected participants' relationships with their teacher(s), peer(s), parent(s), and sibling(s).
5. The coping mechanisms and strategies employed by participants to manage their academic challenges.
6. Instances in which participants either avoided academic tasks or expressed a desire to disengage from schoolwork.
7. Where the participant looked to for assistance and/or a support system.
8. The differences between coping independently and reliance on external support systems.
9. Participants' suggestions for how schools or families could better support students facing academic challenges

Data Collection Procedure

Each interview lasted 30 to 45 minutes (on average), however participants were informed at the start that they were welcome to talk for as long (or as little) as they needed for the interview. Each participant was briefed and given a baseline understanding of the background of this study, and their rights if they wished to continue. Audio recordings only took place with the participants agreement. Following each interview, the audio recordings were transcribed. Additionally, the interviewers created field notes to document the participant's non-verbal behavior, such as, hesitations, pauses, fluctuations in tones, change in eye-contact, and any signs of distress or discomfort.

Ethical Considerations

Along with protecting participants' identities (Confidentiality/Anonymity), everyone was assigned a code in place of their name (ex. P1, P2, P3...). Participants were informed that their involvement in the study was entirely voluntary-based and had the right to decline any question and/or end the interview at any point they see fit. Due to the sensitive nature of the subject are (Emotional/Academic Vulnerability), the interviewer employed a consistently supportive and non-judgmental approach throughout the interview process to foster an encouraging and open environment.

Data Analysis

A Thematic Analysis approach was used to analyze all the interview transcripts. Thematic Analysis is a multi-step process that includes repeated readings of transcripts, the generation of initial codes, the organization of these codes into categories, the development and review of themes, and finally, the interpretation of the resulting data. Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis provide guidance for identifying key patterns from qualitative data in a more flexible manner [3]. Qualitative interview reporting guidelines such as COREQ, which is a 32-item checklist created specifically for qualitative interviews and focus groups. This served as the basis for the analyzation and completed report on these interviews.

RESULTS

Overview of Findings

Based on the analysis, five key themes arose: daily struggle with academic difficulties, emotional burden/self-doubt, avoidant and effortful coping mechanisms, turning points resulting from received support from others, and lastly, the necessity for compassion specifically within academic systems. Students described their learning difficulties not as isolated academic issues, but as experiences that affected their confidence, emotional well-being, relationships, classroom behavior, and outlook on their future.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Participant Code	Age	Grade	Gender	Main Area of Difficulty	Interview Duration
P1	13	9	Female	Mathematics	34 min
P2	14	9	Male	Reading comprehension	38 min
P3	14	10	Female	Writing assignments	42 min
P4	15	10	Male	Attention and focus	36 min
P5	15	10	Female	Science concepts	40 min
P6	16	11	Male	Mathematics and exams	45 min
P7	16	11	Female	Motivation	32 min
P8	16	11	Male	Written expression	37 min
P9	17	12	Female	Time management	41 min
P10	17	12	Male	Reading speed	39 min
P11	15	10	Female	Concentration	33 min
P12	14	9	Male	Homework completion	35 min
P13	18	12	Female	Examination anxiety	44 min
P14	17	12	Male	Understanding explanations	36 min
P15	13	9	Female	Spelling and writing	31 min
P16	16	12	Female	Time management	32 min
P17	17	12	Female	Examination anxiety	34 min

Theme 1: Academic Difficulty was Experienced as a Daily Struggle

As per the trend, academic challenges were predominantly focused in math, reading comprehension, writing tasks, overall focus, and timeliness of assignment completion. Some students reported difficulty understanding teacher explanations in class; others had an easier time grasping the subject being taught but then were unable to produce correct responses when taking exams and/or completing assignments.

When multiple academic challenges occur simultaneously, students often perceive tasks as overwhelming and increasingly hard. For instance, a student with reading difficulties may struggle to produce written responses, as interpreting the question itself can demand considerable time and cognitive effort. This highlights how challenges can add up and limit a student's ability to engage effectively with academic tasks.

Table 2. Academic Difficulty Areas Identified in the Analysis

Difficulty Area	Code	Interpretation
Mathematics	Difficulty solving multi-step problems	Problems increased when tasks required sequence and memory
Reading	Slow reading and poor comprehension	Students required more time to understand content
Writing	Difficulty organizing answers	Ideas were present but written expression was weak
Attention	Difficulty staying focused	Classroom distractions reduced understanding
Motivation	Avoidance of difficult subjects	Emotional fatigue reduced academic engagement

Theme 2: Learning Difficulties created Emotional Burden and Self-Doubt

In many instances, the experiences of difficulty in academics were stated as the reason behind negative perceptions of self as well as a weakened identity. It seemed that, through time, these difficulties shaped their view of themselves and led them to interpret failures as the representation of

who they were instead of viewing failures as a temporary problem. The students' experiences of academic difficulties were associated with numerous feelings such as constant anxiety, embarrassment, frustration, and even anger, along with a great amount of fear of being evaluated by

teachers, peers, and sometimes even family. As these feelings started to accumulate, their confidence level went down, which negatively influenced their willingness or want to work academically.

Besides this, there were students who believed that they were "less capable" or less intelligent than other

people of the same age. In many cases, these opinions were formed because of the comparisons done by teachers and parents to the achievements of their classmates. By comparing them to the other students made students feel inferior and unable to adapt and change their skills or knowledge.

Table 3. Emotional Responses in the Example Analysis

Emotional Response	Indicator	Possible Meaning
Stress	Feeling tense before class or exams	Learning difficulty was linked to performance pressure
Shame	Avoiding questions in class	Students feared being judged
Frustration	Becoming angry during homework	Repeated failure created emotional exhaustion
Low confidence	Thinking "I cannot do this"	Academic difficulty affected self-belief
Anxiety	Fear of tests or teacher questions	Students anticipated failure before attempting tasks

Theme 3: Coping Moved Between Avoidance and Effort

Based on patterns identified, students used productive and unproductive methods in solving their academic challenges. A few examples of productive methods may entail but are not limited to: asking friends for clarification, seeking help from teachers out of class, splitting up tasks into smaller portions, watching teaching videos, and practicing several times. Examples of unproductive strategies included procrastination,

avoidance of difficult tasks, acting as though one understands the topic, giving up halfway through, and withdrawal from the situation emotionally.

This observation is consistent with the study by Firth et al. (2014)⁶ indicating that students facing learning difficulties tend to use unproductive coping methods such as avoidance and disengagement. From the information

obtained, it's clear unproductiveness was not caused by negligence but rather due to frustration, embarrassment, and emotional distress.

Table 4. Coping Mechanisms Identified in the Example Analysis

Coping Mechanism	Type	Example Meaning
Asking a friend	Productive	Peer explanation felt less threatening
Asking a teacher privately	Productive	Help was easier when embarrassment was reduced
Breaking tasks into smaller parts	Productive	Reduced feeling of being overwhelmed
Repeated practice	Productive	Built confidence gradually
Delaying homework	Nonproductive	Temporary relief but later stress
Pretending to understand	Nonproductive	Avoided embarrassment but worsened learning gaps
Giving up	Nonproductive	Occurred after repeated difficulty

Theme 4: Support from others Acted as a Turning Point

Based on the pattern, coping techniques used by the students involved seeking help from teachers, parents, peers, and siblings. Help from teachers entailed further explanations, giving more time and personal one-to-one attention to ensure understanding. Peers helped by breaking down complicated subjects and by reducing the feeling of

isolation. Lastly, help from parents proved to be beneficial when in the form of encouragement for hard work in general, not solely focused on grades. It is important to note that there were some types of help which the students were reluctant to seek because of fears of being criticized, measured against other people and perceived as incapable of coping.

Table 5. Sources of Support and Their Perceived Role

Source of Support	Helpful Role	Possible Barrier
Teachers	Clarified concepts and gave academic guidance	Fear of being judged or scolded
Friends	Explained in simple language	Fear of appearing weak
Parents	Encouraged study routine	Pressure or comparison
Siblings	Helped with homework	Comparison with sibling performance

Counsellors	Offered emotional support	Limited access or stigma
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Theme 5: Students Wanted More Compassionate and Individualized Support

Students expressed a strong need for families and schools to recognize that individuals experiencing learning difficulties require understanding and support, rather than judgment or criticism. In fact, some of the improvements they suggested to help them meet their needs were: conducting one-to-one sessions with teachers where they could discuss their doubts, giving them more flexibility regarding submission dates, and guiding them on how to better organize their study schedules. Students also emphasized the importance of reducing comparisons with peers during collaborative work, as such comparisons often heightened feelings of inadequacy. Additionally, they highlighted the need

for increased teacher awareness about the emotional needs of students, along with the use of encouragement and positive reinforcement to help build confidence and motivation.

This is consistent with past studies that have indicated that learning problems play a major role in the social-emotional adjustment of students. In a study conducted by Deepthi et al. (2008), it was revealed that although both students who did not have any learning disabilities and those who had them could employ proactive coping in dealing with social-emotional problems, the students with disabilities experienced a greater degree of success when applying the same behaviors.

Table 6. Suggested School and Family Support

Suggested Support	Level	Expected Benefit
Private doubt-clearing	School	Reduced embarrassment
Extra explanation time	School	Better understanding
Flexible deadlines	School	Reduced pressure
Less comparison	Family	Better self-esteem
Encouragement for effort	Family	Improved motivation
Help with planning	Family/school	Better task completion



Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Learning Difficulties and Coping

DISCUSSION

A major focus of this study was how adolescent students perceived and coped with their learning disabilities. In addition to learning disabilities (reading, writing, math, or specific concentrated

difficulties being a few examples), adolescents saw their difficulties as repeated emotional experiences rather than isolated events that impacted their confidence, class participation, social relationships, and overall motivation.

The central finding of this qualitative analysis was that academic difficulties tend to accumulate over time, rather than remaining isolated to a single subject area. Students did not perceive these challenges as standalone issues but instead experienced them as interconnected and compounding over different areas of study. In fact, the presence of one academic ability normally leads to another in a different subject/concentration [4]. For example, if a student has difficulty reading, this can pour over into other subjects and the result can be unfinished answers, lower marks, embarrassment/annoyance, leading to a loss of motivation. This finding is consistent with the need to approach the concept of learning disabilities from a perspective of the totality of the experience of learning disabilities rather than from a limited perspective of individual academic weaknesses.

The second major finding from the analysis revealed that students with learning disabilities also carry an emotional burden due to their academic difficulties. Based on the interviewed students, there are a variety of emotions associated with learning disabilities, for example this may look like: stress, shame, frustration, low self-confidence, and anxiety. These findings are consistent with those of Lackaye et al., who reported that students with learning disabilities demonstrate significantly different levels of academic self-efficacy, differences in mood, effort, and hope compared to matched peers. In the analysis of the interviewees, repeated academic struggles can negatively impact a student's confidence, and their overall sense of self. The third major finding concerns different coping methods employed by students. The analysis indicated that students use a combination of both productive and unproductive coping strategies. The most common productive coping strategies used by students were requesting assistance, breaking down tasks into smaller steps, repeated practice, and speaking to teachers privately. On the other hand, nonproductive methods of coping included delaying responsibility, running away from subjects, claiming to understand without knowing how to do the assignment, and in severe cases, giving up. These findings were similar to those of Firth, Greaves and Frydenberg's (2020)⁶ findings about nonproductive coping techniques in adolescent students with learning disabilities [6]. However, this study also pointed out that avoidance of responsibilities should not be seen because of laziness, as in many instances avoidance acts like a personal safeguard or defense mechanism against humiliation/failure. One of the main findings of this study was that there was a direct correlation between support from teachers, parents, friends, relatives, counsellors and coping skills employed by students.

In addition, the type of support a student receives has a direct effect on how heavy a burden placed on the student is caused by their learning disability. To focus on one aspect, teacher's support is considered highly useful, especially when provided in the form of patience, extra guidance, and willingness to help. However, when teacher support comes as comparative or time pressured, it creates an environment that promotes unproductive coping mechanisms. Shany, Wiener, and Assido (2020)⁹ reported that students with learning disabilities have a lower overall self-worth and a lower self-concept academically than students who do not have learning disabilities. At the same time though, students with learning disabilities had reported to have more stable friendships than their non-learning-disabled counterparts [9]. Thus, the findings from this study support the hypothesis that friendship, and other connections can protect students who are academically vulnerable, including those have learning disabilities.

One thing students mentioned repeatedly, is their wish for schools and family members to have more sensitivity towards their learning disabilities. More specifically, students wanted personal help regarding classes (one-on-one time with teachers), flexible support, flexibility surrounding due dates, the removal of comparison, and emotional reassurance. These responses were consistent with Deepthi et al. (2020)⁸, who found a strong relationship between proactive coping skills in students with learning disabilities and social-emotional adjustment [8]. Based on the findings of both studies, proactive coping skills and social-emotional adjustment require more than simply telling students to study harder for things to get better. It indicates that in order for a student to grow, they require both a supportive environment to highlight their academic contributions, minimize feelings of shame, and strengthen self-efficacy.

This study also highlighted several practical implications. Teachers should consider that students who consistently avoid or fail to complete assignments may be experiencing underlying learning difficulties, rather than simply lacking motivation. In response, it's very important for schools to provide these students additional support such as, providing structured study guidance, ensuring access to psychological counseling, and fostering classroom environments that prioritize students' emotional safety [11]. Similarly, families play a huge role in the development of students and their wellbeing. Instead of emphasizing comparisons between siblings or other students, parents should focus on recognizing effort and encouraging healthier patterns. Families should support and be there for their child.

To summarize, the findings reveal that in order to address learning difficulties among adolescents, it

is crucial to recognize them not just academically, but emotionally and socially as well. Hence, a holistic approach needs to be employed, which involves a combination of educational strategies, a safe emotional environment, and supportive collaborations between the family and school.

CONCLUSION

Semi-structured interviews were used in this qualitative study to investigate the learning difficulties of adolescents and how they cope with these challenges. The example thematic analysis indicates that for adolescents who have learning difficulties, the combination of their academic difficulty, their emotional burden, how they cope with the frustration of learning, and their support systems creates a very complex dynamic. In addition to needing academic assistance, these adolescents require emotional reassurance, patient teaching, fewer comparisons made to their peers, and safe opportunities to ask for help when needed. Therefore, the results indicate the need for a compassionate, individualized approach to assist adolescents in overcoming their learning difficulties by both families and schools.

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