

## **Perceived Peer Relations, Social Competence in Children with Specific Disorders of Scholastic Skills**

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### ***Abstract***

The study aimed at examining perceived peer relations and social competence in children with specific developmental disorders of scholastic skills. A sample of twenty children with disorders of scholastic skills aged, seven to twelve years and twenty controls matched on age, class and IQ were taken. The two groups were assessed on (i) A semi-structured interview schedule (ii) Malin's Intelligence Scale for Indian Children (MISIC) (iii) NIMHANS Index for specific learning disabilities (iv) Perceived peer relations questionnaire (v) Interpersonal competence scale -Teacher version.

Results revealed that children with scholastic skill disorder perceived their relationship with peers as cordial. However teachers found these children as poorer in social competence and in dimensions of academics, popularity, affiliation and sportsmanship qualities.

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Key words -

**Scholastic skill disorders,  
Peer relations,  
Social competence**

Specific development disorders of scholastic skills refers of those conditions where patterns of skill acquisition are disturbed since early stages of development in spite of adequate opportunity to learn and in the absence of brain trauma or disease. This group of disorders has also been referred as dyslexia, scholastic under achievement, minimal brain dysfunction and mixed dominance. In the Indian context the prevalence rates of learning disabilities range from 9-39% [1], [2], [3].

Gresham and Reschly [4] found that the problems of children with scholastic skill disorders are not restricted to deficits in specific area of academic achievement but include deficiencies of positive social behaviour. Nabuzoka and Smith [5] found that these children are rejected and viewed negatively by their peers. According to Coleman and Minnett [6] teachers evaluated children with learning disability as socially incompetent and have more negative interactions with them. Present study is an attempt to examine perceived peer relations and social competence in children with scholastic

skill disorders.

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## Material and Methods

A sample of twenty children seven to twelve years from school and child guidance clinic were taken for the study group. A control group of twenty children with-out scholastic skill disorders were taken from nearby schools frequency matched on age, class and IQ with the study group.

The inclusion criteria for scholastic skill disorder were :

1. Children attending the clinic for the first time
2. Children identified as having reading, writing and arithmetic difficulties in school.
3. Children with a fullscale IQ of 80 and above on MISIC
4. Children diagnosed as having scholastic skill disorders according to the ICD-10 criteria [7] and confirmed on NIMHANS SLD index or Brigance diagnostic inventory for basic skills.
5. Children speaking English and receiving education at an English medium school.
6. Children where class teacher was available for interview/assessment.

Children with psychoses, hyperkinetic disorder and other psychiatric disorders were excluded.

The control group children fulfilled inclusion criteria [3], [5], and [6] and children with problems in reading, writing, spelling and arithmetic skills, and with any other problem requiring psychiatric help were excluded from the study.

The data was collected from the class teachers and from the child. The following tools were used:

1. Semistructured interview schedule to gather sociodemographic, personal and family history of the children.
2. Malin's Intelligence scale for Indian Children [8].
3. NIMHANS Index for specific learning disabilities [9].
4. Brigance diagnostic inventory of basic skills [10].
5. Perceived peer relations questionnaire (prepared by the investigator).
6. Interpersonal competence scale for assessment of teachers perception [11].

In addition to the Perceived Peer relations Questionnaire, an attempt was made to assess the peer perceptions by sociometric analysis. This was not in the original plan. But the investigator wanted to try out this method on a segment of the sample. The procedure involved peer nomination method described by Nabuzoka and Smith [5]. The peers were asked to nominate three liked and three disliked classmates. Since the procedure required entire class to be present, it could be done only for seven study group and seven control group children during the period of the study. The total class strength was 50-55 students. An initial pilot study was conducted on four children to assess time frame and applicability of the tools and to familiarise the investigator with the tools.

The period of the main study extended from December 1995 to April 1996. Before administering the tests, the parents and teachers were informed about the study. Following testing, the results were communicated to the parents and school authorities. For ethical reasons remediation counselling was carried out for children with scholastic skill disorder. This involved counselling the parents about the nature of the difficulties experienced by the children, to reduce their academic expectations, and to encourage the children to engage in other areas of interest so as to enhance self-esteem. Suggestions were also given to improve the areas of disability. The parents were told to bring the children regularly

for consultation with the clinical Psychology Consultant at the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Unit. Five children did come for four follow-up sessions. There was minimal improvement in their disabilities.

Analysis of the datum was done using frequencies, percentages, Pearson's product women correlation, Chi-Square test and 't' tests.

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## Results

### iDescription of study group

The study group consisted of 14 boys and 6 girls. All of them belonged to a nuclear family. All children had an axis II diagnosis of specific developmental disorders of scholastic skills with absence of diagnosis on axis I, III IV and V. The children had difficulties in reading, writing and arithmetic.

### iiPeer relations and scholastic skill difficulties

There was no significant difference between the study and control group on perceived peer relations. However, control group children were significantly perceived as a leader by their classmates in comparison to study group.

### iiiSocial competence and scholastic skill difficulties

The teachers perceived the study group children to be poorer in academics. They were perceived as being significantly less popular and having less friends. They were rated as significantly poorer in their involvement in sports and overall social competence (Table I).

*Table I - Mean scores of social competence in the study and control group*

*Table I - Mean scores of social competence in the study and control group*

n = 20 in each group, df = 38; \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01

Higher the score, higher the dimension measured.

Higher total score indicates better social competence.

### ivRelations of perceived peer relations and social competence

There was no significant difference in the relations of perceived peer relation and social competence in both the groups.

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## Discussion

The study indicates that the study group children perceived that the study group children perceived their peer relationship as cordial as was also observed in the control group. The children with scholastic skill difficulties reported having lot of close friends (55%) and liked by them (45%). This could be due to the likelihood that children with both academic skill difficulties and behavioral problems have problems with their peers. In the present study children were not reported to be aggressive by the teachers and parents. These findings are consistent with those of Priel and Lesham [12] who reported similarity in the perceptions of peer and maternal acceptance despite lower

socio-metric ratings and teacher evaluations in social domain. The results of a study by Coleman and Minnett [6] and Mukherjee [13] also support adequate self concept and social self esteem in children with scholastic skill difficulties. A more recent study [14] on the construction of a Developmental Psychopathology Checklist for children found that children with scholastic disabilities had good social support.

In the present study sociometric assessment done for a segment of the sample revealed that children with scholastic difficulties were nominated as the 'most disliked'. Out of seven study group children, all seven were nominated as 'most disliked' in comparison to three control group children nominated as 'most disliked'. However, these seven children (study group) themselves did not report peer relationship problems. Nabuzoka and Smith [5] have reported low socio-metric status for children with learning disabilities. Hence it is important to consider peer perceptions, attitudes, behaviours and actual interactions along with self perceptions.

The study group children were perceived as less socially competent by their teachers than were the control group children. However, they were not reported to be aggressive or internalizers. It is possible that the performance of the child in academics biases the perceptions of the teachers. It would be therefore of extreme importance to study the teachers attitude towards children with scholastic skill difficulties. The findings of the study are consistent with those by Coleman and Minnet [6] and Nabuzoka and Smith [5].

The study brings out the importance of involving teachers in the intervention programmes planned for children with scholastic skill difficulties. Both teachers and peers are made to be aware of the problems faced by a child with scholastic skill difficulties, and the support they can offer.

This study has been conducted on a small sample which limits the generalizability of the findings. Further research on larger sample with appropriate gender representations and use of sociometry procedures for the entire sample would be required for more valid conclusions.

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