Adults with Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

In this literature review, I seek to shed light on the struggles faced by adults with learning disabilities in two particular areas: Employment and Stigma.
Keywords: Learning Disability; Employment; Stigma; Adults

Traditionally, people had largely focused on, and signified, one kind of education, known as pedagogy or child education. Ozuah (2005) defined pedagogy as "the art and science of teaching children" (p.83) and described it "as a teacher oriented approach", with the assumption that (a) learners possess dependent personalities, (b) learning is subject oriented, (c) extrinsic motivation is a crucial element in the learning process, and (d) what the learner holds in terms of past experience has no relevancy to learning.

Then, scholars and practitioners introduced andragogy. Alexander Kapp (1833) introduced Andragogy a concept of adult and lifelong learning. Malcolm Knowles (1980) defined andragogy "as the art and science of helping adults learn" (p. 43). According to Knowles, the concept of andragogy possesses six assumptions: "(a) self-directedness, (b) need to know, (c) use of experience in learning, (d) readiness to learn, (e) orientation to learning, and (f) internal motivation". Nowadays, adult learning has been given much prominence, with adults attaining access to learning about matters of interest to them, through courses, workshops, seminars, and online courses. These multiple resources have been designed to meet the various needs of adults and help them successfully partake in and benefit from the learning experience.

Despite the shifts and advancements in adult learning and the multitude of resources meant to adapt to and meet the various needs of adults learners, a segment of adults which may face additional struggles are adults who have learning disabilities (LD for short). The term LD was first coined by Samuel Kirk (1962). Kirk defined LD as " a retardation, disorder, or delayed development in one or more of the processes of speech, language, reading, spelling, writing, or arithmetic resulting from a possible cerebral dysfunction and not from mental retardation, sensory deprivation, or cultural or instructional factors" (p: 73).

Other scholars defined LD as the significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities (Kerka, 2002; Michaels, 1997; Ohler et al., 1996). While many studies focused on LD, much neglect has been placed on the struggles faced by adults in multiple areas as a result of those disabilities and the true causes of those struggles. Hence, the purpose of my study is to review the literature and explore the struggles of adults with LD. In particular, I will tackle two themes related to adults with LD: *Issues with employment* and *Issues with stigma.* This will shed light on the need to prioritize and make accommodations for individuals with LD and hopefully, this will provide more equality and a higher rate of self-efficacy for those adults.

Methodology

For this literature review, I conducted a search on google scholar and main library databases including ERIC, JSTOR, PubMed, and ProQuest. The keywords I used are "Adult

learners with disabilities", "Issues faced by adult learners with disabilities", "LD", "Solutions for adults with LD", and "Struggles with LD". For this paper I utilized Google Scholar and a plethora of databases.

Issues with Employment

The literature review showed that adults with LD face additional layers of challenges than those challenges facing every other person applying for jobs. Some of these challenges include issues faced by adults with LD include possible preconceived perceptions held by managers before even hiring the employee, difficulties in performing some certain tasks by the employee, and issues with attaining a high wage. Each of these issues are discussed below.

Obtaining Employment

Fafard and Haubrich (1981) studied 21 young adults who possessed LD and showed that with regards to acquiring employment, those individuals were in fact motivated to work, but struggled in actually obtaining said employment. Haring et al. (1990) found that the most success regarding employment was when a personal contact was helping out individuals with LD. Schwarz and Taymans (1991) found that 84% of the respondents acquired employment via their own networks as well as family and friend networks.

These results indicate how individuals with LD may require assistance or a referral to know about or procure a job compared to attaining a job as a result of their mere skills or their searching efforts. Many individuals would try to learn about or attain a job through the means of a network; a personal contact informing you about the job, knowing an employee or manager in the company who provides their recommendation to hire you, or a family member's help or recommendation. Not having these advantages would lead to an unfair work field for all individuals, specifically those with LD. It is equally important to educate adults with LD on how to search for occupations in areas where disability would not be an obstacle or point of conflict.

Effects of LD on work

Employees with LD face different conflicts. For example, those with hearing disability find it challenging when using their office phone or when trying to communicate within a noisy environment. Furthermore, individuals would also hand in incomplete assignments or projects as a result of insufficiency in memory and conflicts in organization. Adults at the job would also have disputes with one another as a result of inaccurate perception of non-verbal communication traits, such as facial expressions, body language, and the intonation (Brown, 1984).

Mathews et al. (1982) compared 13 skills related to the job, 10 related to social interaction, and 3 related to nonsocial interaction. Results indicated that individuals with no LD performed better on four particular social interaction skills (partaking in a job interview, being receptive to criticism from the employer, providing constructive feedback and critique to a fellow coworker, and explaining an issue to a supervisor). In addition, individuals with no LD performed better on all the non-social interaction skills compared to the students with LD. These skills include filling out and completing a federal tax form as well as writing letters.

Gerber et al. (1990) asked adults possessing LD to rank themselves with regards to 13 common traits linked and associated with LD. These traits included: listening, reading, visual perception, distractibility, and attention span. Respondents indicated that aptitudes needed for performance had generally declined. Adelman and Vogel (1990) reported that individuals' LD did impact their work. Some of the stated conflicts centered around processing, including inability to recollect or recall information and time spent to finish required tasks. Others stated conflicts were centered around perception, which included numerical and alphabetical reversals.

These various studies and reported results shed light on the struggles an adult may face within the workplace, further stressing on the need to provide accommodations. The accommodations at the workplace can ensure that the employee would work at his optimal level with no barriers preventing him from doing so. In addition, educating managers regarding conducting job interviews in a manner that would not place the disability that potential employee has as an obstacle in his chances of employment. With the employee performing more efficiently, he might be looked at equally similar to his coworkers with no LD by his superiors in terms of delivering high quality input, thus having an equal chance at opportunities for promotion and advancements as a result.

Issues with Stigma

The term stigma has been a central aspect in the concept of LD. Goffman (1963) defined stigma as: "a situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance". Dovidio et al. (2000) believe that stigmatization occurs due to a negative attitude assumed regarding a group on a general sense instead of basing the judgments on the different traits possessed by each individual. Hence, a preconceived thought placed on the concept of a particular minority group, such as LD, would overshadow any factors or traits possessed by the members of that minority group, which would label them as outcasts more than equals as a result.

According to Lisle (2011), there are several reasons why the negative stigma toward LD exists. First, there is the lack of knowledge about LD, which leads to wrongly defining the term. For example, Duchane et al. (2008) research showed that teachers with less of a favorable attitude towards students with LD was due to a result of a misunderstanding or absence of knowledge regarding LD. Such attitude of teachers to students with LD may lead to a societal bias. This societal bias was shown in a study conducted by Hornstra et al. (2010), directed at students who possessed the learning disability dyslexia. They indicated that when teachers possessed a "negative implicit attitude" towards dyslexia, they tended to give dyslexic students lower ratings on writing achievements. The importance of knowing about laws related to LD would impact the attitude placed by teachers on individuals possessing those disabilities. Rao (2004) indicated that faculty members who had more knowledge of LD related laws, they presented a more positive attitude towards students with LD as a result.

A second reason for the presence of stigma is due to the invisibility of disability cues. According to Lisle (2011), LD are "characterized as being invisible disabilities". The influences of LD often appear in select environments such as educational environments. As a result of this "invisible nature" of LD, people with said disabilities are met with ignorance and differential treatment. A study conducted by Upton et al. (2005) revealed that perceiving accommodations as deserving was vaster for "disabilities that are more visible and have more obvious educational implications. Moreover, according to Upton et al. (2005), whether a disability is visible or not will impact the formation of perceptions regarding that disability. As a result, when a disability is invisible, it will prevent individuals with no LD from comprehending "the respective educational impact of the disabling conditions". This lack of comprehension would play a big role in the almost commonly made assumption that a person's mistakes or failures are due to his lack of intelligence, rather than a disability worsened by an "incorrect learning environment".

While students revealing their disability to the instructor and to other students can help to better negotiate accommodations, for many of those students with LD, this decision comes with its own set of issues. One issue involves revealing a negative aspect of the student's personality to an individual who will be critiquing their performance as well as their contribution in the classroom. According to Frymier and Wanzer (2003), many students with LD would feel

awkward when engaging in such conversations, fearing being stereotypically labeled as "dumb" as a result. A study by Denhart (2008) showed that college students would refrain from resorting to accommodations, fearing that this will lead to a misunderstanding by their professors and ultimately resulting in them being "stigmatized due to the LD Label".

A second issue lies in faculty members looking at allowing such accommodations for students with LD as approval of utilizing an unfair advantage (Hill, 1994). This was highlighted in a study conducted by Elaqua et al. (1996) which reported that professors repeatedly felt that students were attempting to "take advantage of the situation" or "pull a fast one on them".

Connecting this to adult education, adults with LD may similarly be labeled under the same stereotypes and thought processes as the younger students were before them. That label would impact the self-esteem of those adults, making them feel unwelcome, unmotivated, and unwilling to engage and benefit from that learning process. With adults primarily learning what they are interested in and what they feel connected to, having such a stereotypical learning environment will hinder those interests and aspirations.

The findings generated from this literature review on issues with employment and issues with stigma, indicated that adults with LD require accommodations to support them in those different areas. Having these accommodations will minimize the impact and perception of said disabilities and shift the focus to the adult's skills, talent, and performance just like everybody else and motivate the adult to learn (in school), work hard (at employment) In addition, adults must be educated in the early days at school, during college, or even as adults on effective career searching to find careers that can empathize less on the learning disability, as well as how to strengthen their skills that can help them excel in their careers.

The research also showed the lack of knowledge possessed by instructors at the place of education regarding LD. This has manifested in developing bias and negative attitudes by those instructors towards those students in terms of unfair grading, negative perception of disabilities for laziness or unfair advantages, and anxiety development from being singled out due to that disability. I believe that Instructors must be educated on LD, their invisible impact, the nature of accommodations, and the impact of such public differentiation and stigmatization on the self-esteem and productivity of that student. Creating an environment of mutual understanding can help the individual feel like less of an outcast as he tries to fit in despite the disability and to progress with his life. Similarly, managers must be educated on focusing less on the disabilities and more on the skills of the prospect employees when interviewing them and finding accommodations for their workplace issues to benefit from what they have to offer.

Conclusion

In conclusion, adults possessing LD encounter multiple issues in employment, attaining equal wages, being treated differently, being wrongly misunderstood as well as struggling with social interactions in school, work, or society. Adult learners need to find means to best interact with individuals with lesser resulting strain (moving from people who they consider like them in terms of disabilities to non-disability individuals gradually), best develop their skills to cover up their disabilities or have focus shifted from them, and finding a clear common ground of understanding with their respective instructor or superior to prevent negative perceptions from developing by said instructor or superior. Similarly, managers must be educated on focusing less on the disabilities and more on the skills of the prospect employees when interviewing them and finding accommodations for their workplace issues to benefit from what they have to offer.

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