The Perceived Impact of Unstable Gaps between Academic Ability and Performance on the Self-Image of Students With Learning Disabilities

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Disparities among the different abilities of students with learning disabilities have attracted extensive research. The attention has largely focused on how low abilities mask good or high potential intellectual level, and the resulting frustration. Correspondingly, the literature has also concentrated on the methods of detection required to reveal such potential and strategic, therapeutic, and pedagogical strategies for realizing it. However, despite the large volume of research, there has been no examination to date of the emotional impact of the continual fluctuations between success and failure created by such gaps, and its implications for the development of self among these individuals. The purpose of the present research, which was based on a qualitative approach and semi-structured interviews with 22 adult art students with learning disabilities and high intellectual ability, was to examine the perceived relationship between this dissonance and the self-perception. Major findings include extreme fluctuations in the learning experience of the participants play a major role, such fluctuations have significant effects on participants' emotional and behavioral worlds, and fluctuations in the learning experience of students with learning disabilities and high intellectual ability have critical implications on their overall self-perceptions. The conclusions and implications are discussed extensively.

Keywords: *disparity, dissonance, unstable fluctuation, development of self*

Introduction

In the past two decades, extensive research has been conducted on how adults with learning disabilities cope with the challenges of the education system: cognitive assignments, disappointment of family and peers regarding their social competence, and disappointment with oneself, low self-image, and concealment of emotions (Faramarzi, Shamsi, Samadi, & Ahmadzade, 2015; Lorger, Shmidt, & Vukman, 2015; Shehu & Zhilla, 2015).

One of the main problems that arise from these studies as a characteristic of "learning disorders" is that the disparity between high academic abilities and poor performance in practice, and also among the different academic skills (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The higher the level of intellectual skill, curiosity, and ambition of the students with learning disabilities, the greater the disparities and more severe the problem their difficulties (Givon & Court, 2010).

Such individuals include, for example, children who are mentally gifted but incapable of reading and writing at the level of their age group and class, and those who excel in mathematical thinking but are unable to solve simple mathematics problems, as well as those who demonstrate random changes in their level of functioning in the same field. Many recent studies have dealt with the effect of these contrasting discrepancies on a sense of frustration among these students, particularly due to their unsatisfactory academic achievements. Furthermore, studies have shown that the failure to detect this special condition early has a significant impact on the self-image and social status of these individuals (Wellisch & Brown, 2012; Yessel, 2012).

Despite the extensive research on the subject of learning disabilities in general, and the subject of disparities among different abilities, in general, and between ability and performance, in particular, it seems that one subject has been totally overlooked: The emotional and behavioral implications of the constant vacillation among students with learning disabilities between experiences of success derived from their good abilities and of failures due to their specific disorders. This absence of literature is surprising, in light of the many studies that have indicated the harsh impact of unstable growth environments, such as changing caring figures, divorce, extreme transitions in the behavior of parents who are addicted, and the like, on the course of development of children and adolescents. Similarly, there is much evidence of the difficult behavioral and emotional implications of such dissonance, such as verbal and physical aggressiveness, asocial behavior, depression, poor self-image, lack of identity security, and others (Ayalon, 1983).

The question arises whether risks similar to those described also apply to students with learning disabilities who suffer vacillation in their academic and social achievements and if so, its role in their development of self-concept. The aim of the present research, then, was to examine such vacillation in ability levels and its impact on the development of self-concept of students with learning disabilities. For this purpose, I refer to two major theories in the field, Erikson's (1968) theory of identity development and Kohut's (2007) theory of coherent sense of self.

Review of the Literature

Theoretical Background

The main foundation for the present research was Erikson's theory of identity development. It focuses on the significance and importance of personal identity, which defines the individual's personality, as perceived by oneself and by others, and enables fulfillment of life tasks in all spheres at every age.

According to Erikson (1968), personal identity is the way that individuals define themselves, and their answer to the question, "Who am I?" This entails a synthesis of the past with the present and the future. Sense of continuity is related to the organization of one's past experiences with those of the present and the direction in which individuals define their future. Accordingly, identity is a coherent whole that amounts to more than the total of all the identities incorporated in it. Identity defines a person as a separate, unique entity. Part of this identity is determined by the individual's perceptions of his or her abilities and talents.

The decisions and actions of people, according to Erikson, are the product of a set of expectations that they hold. These allow individuals to define their perception of "I" and everything else, which is perceived as "not I." Individuals learn about themselves from their experiences. They examine and evaluate themselves, and discover their abilities and limitations. The evaluations of people and those around them lead individuals to conclusions about what they are and what they are not, leading to the development of an identity. An individual who does not develop an identity, experiences ambiguity, role confusion, and self-doubts and, consequently, does not know who he is, what suits him, or where he/she are headed.

Erikson's theory of identity emphasizes identity development in the social, psychoanalytic, and developmental contexts. It is comprised of eight stages of identity development; coping with each stage depends on how the previous stage was realized. According to Erickson (1968), the process of identity development occurs, among other things, by means of decisions and choices in situations of tension, conflict, and contradictions. Decisions and choices from among the different options presented to a person in the course of time create a life story.

In addition to Erikson's theory, the research is also based on Kohut's (2007) theory, which holds that the self is the core of personality, reflected in it structural characteristics and in the ability to adjust to life situations in the different stages of development. According to Kohut, the self is created and supported by continual interaction between the individual and the environment. One of the most significant elements of healthy development, then, is the experience that caring figures respond the individual based on true understanding of and adaptation to his or her needs. A developmental process that includes personal and environmental coherence and continuity in the space of life is important; it produces inner harmony, rather than a sense of chaos, and a sense of inner resilience rather than an experience of weakness.

Empirical Background

It was as late as the early 1980s that academic researchers recognized the phenomenon of a combination of high intellectual competence and learning disabilities. Until then, the underachievement of intellectually capable students was attributed to lack of motivation and low levels of self-confidence. The general tendency of society was to characterize students who displayed a contradiction between academic ability and performance either as suffering a disorder or as gifted (Silverman, 2003). McEachern and Bornot (2001) found that 41% of the talented students who suffered learning disabilities had not been diagnosed by the time they reached college. Rogers, Hwang, Toplak,

Weiss, and Tannock (2011) revealed that there were no reports of such cases in the United States before 2004.

More recently, Nicpon, Allmon, Sieck, and Stinson (2011), who reviewed 20 years of research on gifted children with learning disabilities, cited the pressing need for effective techniques for diagnosis and intervention in this field. Their review revealed the importance of understanding the need for adjustment, compensation, and enrichment strategies to provide these students with a learning experience suitable for them. Nielsen (2002) also claimed that the members of this unique population of students need a special program in order to fulfill their potential.

Thus, despite the general delay in attention to this subject, and contrary to the skepticism mentioned earlier, most researchers now agree that such a dichotomous condition exists, and that it warrants specific consideration (Nicpon et al., 2011; Rogers et al., 2011; Silverman, 2003).

One group of studies has concentrated on the difficulty of detecting such individuals, because the limitations associated with learning disabilities mask their high academic ability, thus preventing effective intervention. Assouline and associates (2010) examined the role of psychosocial components in identifying students with this dichotomous condition. The results of their retrospective interviews of 14 students revealed that their parents had noticed indications of the syndrome earlier than the teachers and the students themselves had. Hands (2011) found that a delay in detection resulted in their perception by others as lazy.

Crim, Hawkins, Ruban, and Johnson (2008) examined elementary school children who had been diagnosed for learning disabilities and high intelligence levels. Their findings indicated that these students were not referred to diagnosis for gifted children or to any special program. They concluded that teachers should broaden their knowledge and awareness of these students, in order to better identify their excellent intellectual abilities or strengths in extracurricular subjects. The job of teachers, they argued, was to provide these students with opportunities to express their high intellectual potential. Assouline, Nicpon, and Whiteman (2010) examined data on 14 gifted elementary school students with learning disabilities; they discovered that they had low achievements, despite their higher-than-average IQ scores.

A second group of studies has concentrated on the development of learning strategies adapted to people with learning disabilities. McKenzie (2010) argued that programs for evaluation and support should be individual and that screening tests should be repeated over time. Crepeau-Hobson and Bianco (2010) discussed the necessity of developing specific solutions for such students, who present special challenges to the school system. They advocated the development of models for detection as well as for work that would respond to the needs of these students, which differ from those of students with learning disabilities who do not have notably high intelligence. Wellisch and Brown (2012) suggested a program that differentiates between difficulties due to learning disabilities and potential intellectual abilities, and stressed the duty of schools to provide suitable solutions for these students by providing appropriate support.

A third group of studies has dealt with the importance of emotional therapy. Higgins (2005) described the school experience of talented children with learning disabilities as entering a storm in which they constantly encounter experiences of failure. They argued that teachers should constantly be in the eye of the storm, helping the students with their emotional needs, as well.

Betz, Barber, and Miller (2011) found that a potential outcome of the disparity between the high intellectual ability of these students and their low achievements was low self-esteem. Their research also highlighted the frustration that arises from the high expectations of them from both the schools and their families. Wellisch and Brown (2012) discussed the need for support to reduce the problems related to self-esteem. Yssel (2012) found that gifted students with learning disabilities need therapy to address their social and emotional needs.

In general, in the last few decades the research on gifted children who suffer learning disabilities has focused on the difficulty of detecting the abilities of these students, because the learning difficulties impair their use of formal learning skills, and, in turn, the difficulty of designing appropriate study programs for them. In addition to these two main issues, some attention has also been paid to the emotional aspects of the condition described—low self-esteem, lack of confidence, and deep frustration (Assouline, Nicpon, and Whiteman, 2010; Hands, 2011; Wellisch and Brown, 2012).

In all the studies reviewed here, there has been no attention, as noted, to the responses of the students, their families and their schools to the constant state of being torn between a sense of ability and a feeling of incompetence, and its influence on the process of development of their inner world.

Method

The method chosen for this research was based on the principles of qualitative research, employing an interpretative-constructivist strategy (Creswell, 2007). According to the constructivist paradigm, people construct reality according to their cultural and personal lives. In this study, all the research participants were part of the same

reality; therefore it was constructed by means of each individual's interpretation and, of course, according to the interpretation of researcher (Silverman, 2003).

The Research Population

The research participants were 22 students. Eleven of them were men, and 11 were women; their ages ranged from 23 to 27. They were all studying in the second or third year at Bezalel Art Academy. All had undergone formal diagnoses for learning disabilities of the type used in Israel for adult students prior to beginning their academic studies, and IQ/Vexler test for adults. The formal diagnoses for learning disabilities includes 20 computerized tests in Hebrew, which examine cognitive functions (visual and spatial perception, grapho-motor efficiency, memory, linguistic information processing, attention, and executive functioning) and learning skills (reading, reading comprehension, writing, written expression, arithmetic and mathematical comprehension, and reading and listening comprehension in English). This set of computerized tests (known by the Hebrew acronym, MATAL) can be viewed at Israel's National Institute for Testing and Examination (https://nite.org.il/index.php/en/) and is available to the universities in Israel for evaluation. The IQ/Vexler test includes a set of sub-tests for adults assessing verbal comprehension (General knowledge, equal side and vocabulary), memory-assignment (mathematics and remembering of numbers), conceptual organization (ability to organize cubes and completion of pictures), and speed of process (coding ability and identification of signs). The total score of the test should indicate the individual's learning ability.

The results of these tests, as well as those administered to the participants in elementary and high school, indicated that they all had high levels of intelligence and creative skills, as well as medium-to-severe learning disabilities. Specifically, all research participants had a high IQ/Vexler scores of 13–16 (the average standard score is 10 (an average learning disabilities test scores placing them under the 16th percentile (significantly lower than the standard average (percentile of 24), and were acknowledged by 10 different artists in the fields of painting, sculpturing, illustration and video-taping, as having high creative abilities.

It was decided to suffice with a sample of 22 research participants (a relatively small number, representing only 6% of all students of the institution who had learning disabilities), for two reasons. First, the data analysis process included reflective thinking regarding the findings derived from the interviews, and content analysis of these findings confirmed the researcher's sense that the data had been exhausted (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Second, at the request of the researcher, the participants read and examined the transcripts of the interviews and the content analysis; they concluded that the findings matched the original content and did not suggest any additional issues they thought should be addressed.

Research Procedure

The researcher participated as a facilitator in group sessions of students with learning disabilities at the art academy, as part of a required theoretical course on this subject. The first stage of the project was to present the topics and aims of the research to representatives of the dean's office and to formally request permission to conduct the study and practical assistance.

Once the dean's office and the institutional ethics board approved the proposal, a call for participants was posted on the Internet on behalf of the dean's office. The post offered second- and third-year students who had learning disabilities the opportunity to participate in a study about this disorder. We included students in these two years of study alone, in order to control for the impact of the adjustment difficulties that all students encounter in the first year of academic studies and the effects of the external pressure associated with the final (fourth) year.

Of the 400 students in the academy who had been diagnosed as having both learning disabilities and high academic and creative ability (in accordance with the IQ/Vexler tests and the professional judgment of 10 different artists), 44 expressed willingness to participate in the research. The researcher divided the students into two groups—men and women—and from each group selected a random sample of 11 (altogether, 22 participants). Before beginning the individual interviews, the researcher held a preliminary meeting with the participants in one of the regular lecture halls, to present the topic of the upcoming interview—their attitude toward the disparity in their abilities—and ask for their written consent to participate. In addition, the researcher assured them that they would remain anonymous and could leave the interview at any time they wished and that I would conduct all the interviews.

The interviews were then conducted in one of the rooms in the dean's office that is used for one-on-one discussions with students. They lasted about one and a half hours each, which is considered the optimal period of time to reconstruct experiences and their meaning (Merriam, 2009). Each of the interviews was recorded and later transcribed, with the consent of the interviewee. In the final stage of the research, I analyzed the contents of the interviews using thematic analysis (Krippendorff, 2004).

The process of analysis consisted of four stages: (a) rereading the interviews; (b) identifying and categorizing the main topics that arose in the interviews; (c) categorizing

and analyzing the themes underlying the main topics; and (d) theoretical analysis of the thematic categories, based on the content of the interviews and the relevant theoretical and research literature (Silverman, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 2008).

Research Instruments

A semi-structured in-depth interview was employed in order to direct the respondents to the research question while also providing an opportunity for free personal expression regarding the overall subject (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Flick, 2009). The greatest advantage of this research instrument is the opportunity it creates to capture a broad range of meanings that the interviewees associate with the research subject (Rossman & Rallis, 2012; White, Oelke, & Friesen, 2010). Moreover, it enables homogenous identification and extensive analysis of major themes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and included the following questions:

- Based on your knowledge, what learning disabilities do you suffer?
- What are the strengths that characterize you?
- In your opinion, what does the disparity between these mean?
- How do you cope with these disparities?
- Have you, by means of coping strategies, reached a satisfactory resolution of the problems that arise from this situation?

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings (Golafshani, 2003), three methods were implemented: (a) Professional data collection—the researcher, who personally conducted and recorded all interviews, is an expert in the field of learning disabilities among adults, with particular specialization in the area of emotional reactions of students with learning disabilities and their familial and educational surroundings, to these disabilities; (b) Peer/Expert validation—data were interpreted and analyzed by one external reader; and (c) Data were transcribed word for word, with full transparency and open, inclusive presentation of the perceptions and opinions of the interviewees (Merrick, 1999; Miles, & Huberman, 1994).

Findings

The findings of this study reveal five major themes that relate to (a) lack of harmony between the various ability components, (b) societal reactions, (c) emotional reactions to the gaps between their intellectual abilities and their actual scholastic achievement, (d) behavioral Reactions, and (e) cognitive reactions. Each of these themes incorporates few sub-themes as described below.

a. Lack of Harmony Between the Various

Ability Components

One of the main problems associated with learning disabilities is the lack of systematic organization of the individual's cognitive, behavioral, and social functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Individuals with such difficulties appear to have average or above-average social and academic abilities, and both they and those around them expect them to achieve accordingly. However, throughout life they experience relative or total failure when it comes to learning skills, basic social behavior, and coherent verbal communication with others (Margalit & Turkaspa, 1998).

The vacillation between what is expected of them and what they achieve in practice recurs at random, with no logical sequence, creating an experience of instability between extreme situations that are difficult to understood and impossible to control. The interviewees described such experiences in detail and demonstrated a constant search for some rational explanation. Specifically, they related to the gap between their high intellectual and analytical abilities and their low technical memory, their good mathematical comprehension as opposed to their low basic mathematical skills:

> Everything is unstable and changing. It's all dissonances . . . I constantly vacillate between yes and no. Am I good at what I do? Am I not good? Is this right or not? I am simultaneously both good and not good, and I never know when this is going to happen and why. It's all complex; it's all complicated. It's unsystematic, as though I have lots of drawers inside my head instead of one. One drawer inside the other, which is also inside another. (L)

> If I'm so talented then why am I such a failure? There's a real chasm between omnipotence. (A)

An additional gap that was discussed by all research participants related to disparity between their normal/high levels of creative and cognitive skills and their low cognitive skills with regard to learning techniques (Dehan & Tsadok, 2012; Einat, 2000).Such gaps become significantly more embarrassing and disruptive to the students' emotional state and their social and scholastic functioning, in cases where their creative and intellectual abilities are excessive whereas their weaknesses that are related to their learning

disabilities:

> The ability to grasp the aforementioned deep contradictions in almost every field is impossible. There were things in which I reached a very high level, and there are also things in which I function like a 5-year-old also to this day. It's all huge gaps between the good and the not good, between what I can do and what I can't. (M)

> I live in dissonance all the time. On the one hand, according to the tests I took, I'm gifted. I'm an excellent software developer. On the other hand, any person you compare me with, who has no academic—or even high-school—education, who doesn't understand anything about what I do, is capable of filling in a form, reading, and writing. And I [have difficulty with] the simplest things… it's a terrible dissonance. (A)

In addition, many of the interviewees related to the disproportionate gap that exists between many of their everyday scholastic assignments:

> There are enormous gaps inside of me between everything and anything—between grades, between the simplicity of some of the duties I have to do and the amount of energy I have to invest in them. Sometimes, I can't understand what they ask me to do at all (D).

> The gaps are constant and extreme. The gap between me and the world is constantly present. I am different. I am irregular. I do not belong to the places that I'm supposedly belonging to. It's all in the gaps in each and every situation (E).

> The gaps between me and me and me and the others constantly exist. There is a huge gap between what genuinely interests me and between what I can do with it. I want so many things so much but can't reach them (I).

Interestingly, some of the interviewees used the term "crash" in order to illustrate the tragic encounter between their opposing ability edges, which paralyzes their high expression and performance qualifications

> Everything in unsystematic, changing really every few minutes, without any logic. It drives you crazy. Everyone has such high expectations, and I do, too, and it all crashes. (D)

> I constantly experience 'crashes' between my abilities and my weaknesses. A good example is my experience with the Flamenco dance: I quit dancing because in the Flamenco dance you need to separate the upper part of your body and your hand—that express the unique talent of each dancer—from the lower part of your body and your legs—which represent a technical practice that each dancer can perform. My body was divided between the upper part—that was excellent—and the lower part—that was poor, so I quit dancing. And that's how everything is in my life—divided, 'crashing.' Nothing in my life is complete (G).

Societal Reactions

One of the most significant aspects of normative development is the experience of children that their caregivers truly understand their needs and respond accordingly (Kohut, 2007). Goffman (1959) argued that the individual creates a definition of his or her situation when appearing before other people, but those people, whatever their roles may be, also create a definition of that individual, based on their own reactions to his or her presence.

These theories have been confirmed in many studies, indicating the important role of the reactions of the environment in the emotional and behavioral developmental of students with learning disabilities (Heiman et al., 2008; Shehu & Zhilla, 2015). In the present research, the participants described their perceptions of the responses of the environment—their parents and teachers. In general, these reactions reflected a failure to understand the situation of the student with learning disabilities, which exacerbated the students' own lack of understanding.

Parents' attitude. Nearly all research participants maintained that their parents' lack of ability to understand the aforementioned gaps and disparities and the conflict between their fathers and mothers regarding their origins, heightened their lack of understanding as to their situation:

> Occasionally, my parents thought and told me that I do have a potential, but they couldn't understand how this potential changes every time (D).

> My dad could not understand what's going on with me and related everything to my character. My mother constantly tried to emphasize my good parts and totally suppress my weaknesses. The conflict between them caused me to not knowing what's with me. Who I am? (H).

It was also difficult for my father to accept it. He didn't understand these gaps that I have, even within the same subject—'you're so bright—how can you suddenly not understand something so simple?' (N)

On the one hand, my parents said, 'Wow!' and on the other hand they said, 'What's going on with this child?' (S)

At home they couldn't understand what I was going through. (L)

Teachers' attitude. In resemblance to the attitudes of their parents, nearly all interviewees asserted that their teachers had major difficulties in understanding the gaps between their high intellectual abilities and their poor scholastic achievements. Such lack of understanding worsened their confusion and frustration:

Some teachers frequently mention my high potential, whereas other teachers maintain that nothing good will come out of me. None of them understands what is going on with me and I guess none of them will ever be able to understand (A).

Some of the lecturers tell me that 'they cannot understand how a clever girl like me can't understand simple things'. Often, they laugh at me, and often they feel very angry. (H)

The lecturers here tell me they can't understand the contradictions within me. They don't understand anything. (D)

The reactions of the teachers were harsh: 'You're great at this' … and then suddenly, you have to read aloud to me again and again and I don't understand anything. I had brilliant ideas in technology. They said, 'He's a genius.' Everyone was confused. My parents were totally lost. They suffered terribly. (S)

Look, a student who gets zero in reading and writing, but writes beautiful ballads. The whole time there was a vacillation between the compliments I received and the harsh, frustrating comments. (C)

Emotional Reactions of the Research Participants to the Gaps Between Their Intellectual Abilities and Their Actual Scholastic Achievement

In this research on acquired hopelessness, Seligman (1967) found that depression and similar mental illnesses are the outcome of perceived lack of control over a situation. Thus, he argued, people with learning disabilities or attention deficit are likely to experience repeated failures at school, despite the investment of extensive efforts in an attempt to improve the situation. As a result, they consider academic success as an event beyond their control, as well.

Unlike some of the aforementioned motifs that can be categorized into several themes, the emotional reaction is characterized by continuous blending and mixing of nuances. Tiredness, sadness, frustration, restlessness, fear, loneliness, strangeness, confusion, sorrow, depression, internal detachment, and suicidality, are expressed in repeated and intensive sequences among all research participants:

I sense the clash between my abilities and my feelings regarding them all the time. It's as though two personalities are inside me constantly. It strangles me…for years I have had anxiety attacks. For me, it's all no more than one big confusion. It makes me feel pressured and often leads me to suicidal thoughts…I'm constantly torn inside. I always feel a separation between all the different things. I'm constantly undecided. I don't know where to go in life, what lies ahead for me? I don't have a moment's rest, even when I sleep. My feelings are heavy and torn, to the point that I am constantly choking on tears. This is true now, too. (H)

I often feel as though I'm abnormal. It makes me despair. I'm on guard all the time. I'm afraid all the time. Anxious about everything. Everything hurts me. It makes me despair. I am terribly confused. It's so embarrassing. I can't live with this anymore. (N)

It's terribly difficult to live like this. It makes me feel alienated. I am a foreigner wherever I go, whatever the situation. I'm alone. I have always been confused by the gaps. (M)

I have a sort of inner screaming inside of me —Enough! Enough! Enough of this being torn inside. (A)

Sometimes I feel as though I'm not there at all. As though I don't exist, I don't feel. I'm afraid of falling apart. I always felt as though something was wrong with me. It's a terrible feeling. Very bad. All the frustrations, the anger that comes out of the inner rending, it's all sad. (K)

Behavioral Reactions

According to Anna Freud (1960), instead of perceiving the physical and emotional pain and then removing it, the self may turn to flight, thus avoiding, in the full sense of the word, opportunities of sadness.

Examination of the research on the behavioral reactions of adults with learning disabilities (Einat & Einat, 2007) reveals a prominent theme of physical flight from different educational frameworks. In the present research, too, this element of actual abandonment of educational or social systems appears. However, the expression here is mainly emotional, in the form of fleeing to fantasy and sometimes, emotional detachment from the confusing, painful reality:

I fled to a sort of disconnected place between my detached world and the external world that I found hard to understand, that I never felt I belonged to. I ran away and managed not to deal with the gaps and the dissonance that I didn't understand which made me ask myself endlessly whether something was wrong with me. After all, everyone around me said something was wrong with me…so I pushed everyone away from me. (L)

I want to run as far as possible from all the vacillations. To get on a plane and disappear. This happens to me constantly. Sometimes I just get up and run away from home. (S)

An additional expression of the behavioral reactions, caused by the constant, unexplained and nonsystematic fluctuation in the scholastic experiences, concerns the development of both hesitative behavior and profound difficulty in decision-making, in all aspects of life.

I always hesitate. I can never decide unequivocally about anything (Nili).

I can't decide what to do. Actually, I can't decide anything (Lior).

A third kind of behavioral reaction, which stems from the participants' internal embarrassment, frustration, and continuing mental pressure due to their inability to find an effective solution to their scholastic problem, involves severe aggressive incidents.

I used to have a lot of aggressive 'explosions' for many years. It's all out of embarrassment and frustration. I was very wild…a real psycho. (Rami).

I would get annoyed, yell, break things…I also cry a lot…I suffer outbreaks of constant sobbing. (G)

I liked fighting. I waited for fights in karate. For the yell beforehand. I would attack until the rival fainted. I would do it in one blow. All the frustration, all the being torn inside. Everything would be channeled into that blow. (K)

Cognitive Reactions

Personal identity, according to Erikson (1968, in Flum, 1995) is the individual's answer to the question, "Who am I?" It includes the past, present, and future. Identity, according to Erikson, is a coherent whole that has a unique set of characteristics.

The cognitive conclusions that the participants drew from the unstable situation that they could neither understand nor control referred (not surprisingly) to difficulties in producing coherence in light of the contradictions that prevailed in their daily lives. One of the feelings emphasized in the interviews was an inner split and resulting confusion about the question "who am I?"

Why do I have such disparities? I can't bridge this gap—nothing is clear to me, stable or logical, and I ask myself, 'Who am I?' (N)

I had great frustration, mainly because I didn't understand these gaps, I couldn't explain what was going on to myself…I sought a clear-cut answer—not some general concept like 'learning disabilities,' but an answer that would prove this wasn't madness, that I wasn't crazy. It's like that now, too. I see the facts and don't understand them. (L)

I never understand why I succeed and also don't succeed. Who am I anyway? Who am I? (M)

Ultimately, nothing comes together for me. Taking all of this together, I don't know who I am. I'm neither this nor that nor that. So what

am I? It's difficult to put your finger on it. And the contradictions are not only two parallel lines that never meet; for me, in my three-dimensional experience, they actually meet a lot, bend, cut across each other, and clash with one another. (A)

One moment I'm a failure, and the next moment I get 100. Who am I? Everything changes in me. Everything is temporary. (K)

I'm incapable of coming to terms with anything. I can't find myself. (S)

The constant confrontation with opposite ends of success and failure shaped among some of the research participants a dichotomous view of the world, thus preventing them from facing and accepting intermediate situations and blocking them from experiencing gradual transitional processes that enable normative coping with various life tasks:

This fluid state totally affects my personality. I see the world as a dichotomy. I don't have any grey colors. Everything is black and white. Good or not good. Everything is decisive and seen in terms of extremes—either I succeeded or I didn't succeed, either they hate me or love me. I don't experience any process. Everything is divided into success and failure. I can't accept that part is successful and part not. Rationally, I understand that this is possible, but it doesn't exist in my emotions. Everything is either bad or good. There's nothing in between. (M)

There are all sorts of theories about consistency of identity. How everything has inner connections. I don't buy it…the closest I can come to ideas like that is that they refer to a prototype that includes all identities. It's never coherent. For example, every time I paint, it is different. I never know what is right. I don't know what will come out when I begin, where it's going. In general, I have a deep belief that I am on a certain correct path. We have to give expression to every path that exists in us, make room for every way, because that's the only way it's possible to find a place for me, as well. (A)

Conclusions and Discussion

The purpose of this research was to examine the inner processes that adults with learning disabilities and high-levels of academic and creative ability experience, due to instability and fluctuation between their strengths and weaknesses, or their achievements and failures. For this purpose, we interviewed a group of 22 students (11 men and 11 women) at the Bezalel Art Academy, who were found to meet the research criteria based on formal diagnostic tests used in Israel. The finding that that emerged from the interviews with the greatest intensity was the interviewees' descriptions of extreme situations they had experienced. They indicated rapid, sharp transitions between feelings of capability and incapability, which influenced their emotional world dramatically. In comparison with many other studies on this subject, which deal with the relationship between academic and/or social failures of people with learning disabilities and their characteristic sense of frustration (Baumeister, Storch, & Geffken, 2008; Gallegos, 2012; Givon & Court, 2010; Renee, 2012), the present research revealed other serious difficulties, which arise from extreme and constant vacillation between different levels of achievement. Perhaps, then, the practical conclusions indicated by previous research in the field, which have focused on the development of adaptive learning strategies and emotional support of existing abilities, do not respond adequately to the special needs of these students. Indeed, such individuals have been found to suffer deep emotional scars throughout their lives, despite the support the received during studies (Einat, 2009). Another prominent finding was the reaction of the environment—parents and the educational system—to the predicament of the research participants. The interviewees reported that their parents demonstrated a lack of understanding and confusion about their extreme transitions between capability and incapability. Much research on the critical impact of parents' views on their children's self-image (Heiman et al., 2008; Shehu & Zhilla, 2015), it is reasonable to assume that this lack of understanding and confusion expressed by the parents intensified and deepened the feelings of distress among their children.

The teachers and lecturers also expressed confusion about the contradictions in the achievements of these students. In previous studies of teachers' attitudes towards students with learning disabilities (Elbaum, 2002; Margalit, 2000; Stone, 2002) the students have cited disappointment, anger, and refusal to take responsibility as characterizing their teachers' approach to them. In the present research, the interviewees emphasized that their teachers' total lack of understanding of their characteristic problem of gaps in achievements intensified the students' feelings of embarrassment and confusion. As the research participants put it, the reactions of their parents and teachers "infiltrated" them, creating a confused mixture of

voices that barred them, their feelings, and any possibility of practical or emotional coping with the problematic situation in which they were trapped.

A third finding of the present research concentrated on the difficulty of the participants in understanding the causes of the vacillations they experienced. "For to every matter there is a time and judgement; for the evil of man is great upon him. For he knoweth not that which shall be; for even when it cometh to pass, who shall declare it unto him?" (Ecclesiastes 8: 6-7). Encountering things that cannot be understood or predicted is one of most threatening human experiences. It results in a sense of tension, anxiety, and powerlessness (Carleton, 2012; Gallegos, 2012; McEvoy & Mahoney, 2012). These experiences arise in any situation that involves a threat, but the intensity increases when they are part of an individual's ongoing daily experience. Indeed, the results of the present research highlighted this subject of the participants' constant effort to find a rational explanation for the dissonance that troubled them in order to cope with it. Correspondingly, they also described an overwhelming sense of existential anxiety as a result of the failure to do so. This experience was expressed in three main motifs: the emotional motif, the behaviorial motif, and the cognitive motif.

Emotional Motif

Emotional reactions to the lack of understanding and, in turn, the inability to predict or control one's daily life as a student were found in the interviewees' descriptions of intense pain, feelings of depression, fear to the point of inner paralysis, anxieties, emotional detachment, and a sense of being abnormal.

The subject of emotional injury is prominent in much of the research on learning disabilities (Renee, 2012). However, it has usually been associated with frustration due to experiences of repeated failure, low self-esteem, and a sense of desperation regarding the possibility of future success. The findings of the present research indicated another crucial factor, which was has not yet been addressed: a constant contradiction between a sense of being capable of success and recurring unexpected and inexplicable failures. The lack of a rational system in the generalized existential human experience, coupled with limited ability to direct and control a large portion of what happens in our lives is shared by all people; in certain cases and in certain times of life, these deficits and limitations become particularly dominant. Accordingly, it may be possible to address with these characteristic difficulties of students with learning disabilities at the cognitive-philosophical level. However, it is pertinent the findings suggest that the situation among this group of people is particularly severe relative to the norm, both because they encounter it daily, and because of its extreme vacillation involved.

Behavioral Motif

According to the findings, the behavioral, concrete responses to the fear and anxiety about encountering problematic, unpredictable situations centered on fleeing. Such a response has also been reported among students with learning disabilities who are not gifted with notably high levels of academic ability and creativity (Einat, 2000). However, the flight of those individuals was usually physical; they distanced themselves from the source of the fear. The participants of the present research, in contrast, exhibited a form of mental flight; they fled to diffused fantasy, lacking any direction and aim. It might be argued that this character of flight was associated with their high level of creative talent, developed imagination, and hypersensitivity (Einat, 2000). However, that would suggest the possibility of successful coping with the situation by channeling the same mechanisms in other creative directions (Einat, 2015).

Other extreme behavioral reactions reported were outbreaks of sobbing, verbal and physical aggression, eating disorders, and other psychosomatic disorders. The interviewees described such episodes as temporary breaks from the noise of the constant internal tearing that enveloped their lives.

Cognitive Motif

Finally, the findings also indicated cognitive responses to the situation of the participants. Previous research on this subject has concentrated on the sense of worthlessness and, sometimes, self-blame reported by people with learnings disabilities (Dahan & Tzadok, 2012). In the present study, in contrast, the most common cognitive responses were severe uneasiness with the sense of being torn between opposites, the apparent lack of a logical explanation, and, consequently, the inability to direct oneself to a clear path toward the future. All of the research participants questioned, "Who am I?"; they all reported experiences of dissonance and lack of logic throughout their studies that prevented their construction of inner coherence. This difficult situation might be seen as a reflection and confirmation of Erikson's theory of identity and Kohut's theory of sense of coherence, which emphasize the importance of continuity and coherence in order to create mental harmony and develop the ability to cope with social tasks. These theories served as the basis for the research question of the present study: Is it possible to develop coherent self-awareness among people whose experiences are generally characterized by instability and the absence of clear system of past and present experiences?

The abovementioned motifs, namely agony and frustration caused by the repeated, nonsystematic, unexplained, and constant encountering to contradicted scholastic experiences and, as a result, the inability to control them or prepare for them, were mentioned by all research participants. Interestingly, in spite of the emotional and scholastic support given to them by the Learning Disabled Student Support Center personnel, none of the interviewees mentioned or described a cognitive, emotional, or behavioral strategy of confronting this situation and its implications in a positive manner.

Numerous studies dealing with cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspect of individuals with learning disabilities, revealed significant gaps between many of their cognitive functioning levels. Such gaps were found to have a significant impact on their insufficient scholastic achievements, levels of frustration and low self-esteem. Nonetheless, none of these studies focused, as previously mentioned, on the perceived impact of the fast transition between scholastic successes and failures on the ability of intelligent students with learning disabilities to establish a coherent identity. An overall analysis of the research findings indicated deep causes of the unique situation of students who have high academic ability coupled with learning disabilities, unlike people who have other sensory and mental disabilities. An overview of the different causes and outcomes described here suggests that an internal, dynamic, multilayered process of many years, including the critical years of personality development, leads to far-reaching emotional injury. This process, which arises mainly from the contradictions that flood the daily experience, has not been addressed in research or therapy to date. Without coherent definition of identity, according to Erikson, people experience ambiguity and confusion. They do not know who they are and where they are headed. There is no doubt that this theoretical statement is true for every person who experiences numerous contradicting, uncontrollable transitions in life; such vacillation arouses a sense of identity confusion, insecurity, and despondency. For people with learning disabilities, the number of such transitions and the pace and intensity of the vacillation are especially dramatic. Thus it seems that ignoring this situation is a grave oversight, from the perspective of research as well as practice. Any attempt to resolve the problems of these students by cognitive and emotional strategies alone, without addressing this issue, is doomed to failure.

Limitations of the Research

The present study had two main limitations. The first was the nonrandom initial sampling. The dean's office of the institution presented the possibility of participating in the research process to the population of students with learning disabilities in the institution. Only 10% of them responded. The fact that 90% of the relevant students did not consent raises concern that those who did respond positively did so for motives of social desirability.

The second limitation was the low percentage (just 6%) of the students with learning disabilities enrolled in the institution. The small sample size may limit the ability to generalize the findings to the general population of students characterized by the syndrome discussed here.

Nevertheless, after conducting and transcribing the interviews, and in light of the recurring themes in the different interviewees, two steps were taken:

1. The content analyses of the interviews were sent to the respective interviewees to check that they fit the recorded texts, and, if they wished, to suggest additional themes.
2. The analyses were sent to an external expert, who read and examined the degree of saturation, and considered whether it was necessary to conduct additional interviews.

Only after the interviewees confirmed that they found the analyses complete and the external expert found sufficient repetition and saturation, was it decided not to interview additional students. In spite of the limitation of the sampling method (for which there was no alternative under the given conditions), the impressive coherence of the central motifs that appeared in the interviews was notable.

Recommendations for Further Research

In light of the critical importance of the subject of this study, and considering the small and nonrandom sample, it would be interesting to conduct similar research with a larger and more diverse population of students, sampled randomly from the start. This would enable greater accuracy regarding the development of personality, which is particularly important regarding the population of students with high academic ability and learning disabilities, which has not been adequately studied to date.

It is also important to conduct further theoretical and applied research on methods of cognitive and emotional coping for this unique population, with a focus on developing didactic and therapeutic approaches for raising awareness of this subject.

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