A Link to the Clink: A Study Between Learning Disabilities and Juvenile Delinquency

Oklahoma Panhandle State University

Dr. Stewart

Introduction to Education

April 03, 2006
Learning disabilities, or LD, is a stigma that is attached to students in the educational setting. This group of students face many obstacles extending from this label and now there is one more, juvenile delinquency. Since the mid-1970’s, a large number of studies have demonstrated that a significant percentage of adjudicated youth and adults are learning disabled (Brier, 2001). Based upon studies conducted by the National Center for State Courts, 36% of incarcerated juveniles were found to have a learning disability (Brier, 2001). Educators, parents and law enforcement recognize the link between learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency and “suggest that the critical concern must be with identifying learning disabled delinquents so that appropriate remediation can be offered” (Wilgosh and Paitich, 2001, p. 278).

A group study designed to conduct an observation of the possible link between the learning disabled and juvenile delinquency, turned to the court system to research juvenile offenders. The research conducted by Bachara and Zaba (2001) was based on the following:

The research stemmed from 79 juvenile delinquents ranging from 14yrs. 10 mos. to 16yrs. 11 mos. composed of varying gender and ethnicity. The learning disabled subjects were at least two grades behind, of normal intelligence and participated in two groups: the control which received no primary attention to any particular learning problems and the other which received significant educational treatment in a private school setting. (p.244)

The researched concluded that without academic treatment of the learning disabilities in the juvenile delinquents, 80% of the LD-JD’s will return to the court system. This is support of the link between learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency. It asks us to question the explanation between learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency.

One hypothesis for this research is the School Failure hypothesis. Brier states that “school failure typically experienced by youngsters with LD is a first step in a sequence
that culminates in delinquency” (p.548). State law makers have passed recent legislation such as the No Child Left Behind Act. This has caused intense pressure for school teachers to prepare students for a more advanced academic curriculum and difficult state mandated testing leaving many teachers and districts scrambling for ways to reach all students. Learning-disabled students display striking similarities between the attitudes, self-concepts, and educational needs of delinquent youth (Lane, 2001).

The American Institute for Review conducted objective research for the National Institute for Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and reported that many LD students are perceived by adults as a disciplinary problem, often obtain poor academic achievement and are perceived as socially awkward and unattractive by other children (Lane, 2001, p. 426).

Lane stated that the behavior led to the formation of a negative self-image and the learning disabled students began to associate with peers who are hostile to schools and prone to delinquency. Subsequent behavior such as the need for compensating success, dropping out of school, suspension and opportunities to commit crimes led to juvenile delinquency. Other studies conducted by Wilgosh and Paitich as well as Brier supported this research and its snowball effect. Students that are unable to meet the demands in the classroom will look for praise and success through alternative means. Gang activity is becoming more prevalent in our public schools because it preys on troubled youth who are not having their needs met at home, socially or educationally to participate in delinquent activities. The primary treatment route for the School Failure rationale is prevention by early identification of learning disabilities and individualized education plans (IEP) to incorporate special academic curriculum and teaching methods to ensure student success (Wilgosh and Paitich, 2001). Realizing that the educational system can
only be held responsible to a certain extent, another hypothesis has developed as a possible explanation of the link.

A second hypothesis dubbed the Susceptibility Rationale proposes that the neurological and intellectual difficulties of youngsters who are learning disabled directly contribute to antisocial behavior (Brier, 2001). This hypothesis shifts the focus and blame from the school setting to a mental health approach. Brier stated that these difficulties include impulse control and attention problems; problems with conceptualization and judgement; and problems with social perception. These “socially troublesome personality characteristics” can develop a relationship, which could lead learning disabled to students to act in delinquent behavior (Larson, 1988, p. 359). Youth shape their self images based upon peer and social interactions that occur in both formal and informal situations. In this hypothesis, Larson states that youth with learning disabilities are seen as having an increased risk because they are “low” in social skillfulness. Non-LD peers are thought to be better in social settings at home and school by being better equipped to apply judgement and control. The lack of control often experienced in children labeled with ADHD, leads to even more troublesome data (Larson, 1988).

In a longitudinal study of individuals who had Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder followed from childhood through young adulthood, about 50% of the individuals became delinquent and/or abused drugs (Brier, 2001). The lack of impulse control exhibited by LD students with ADHD coupled with language deficits provides a tumultuous educational setting. Brier further stated that in studies conducted with ADHD and learning disabled youth, more than half displayed antisocial behavior. The primary
treatment of juveniles in the Susceptibility Rationale is the prevention through early identification, counseling and teaching the child to self-monitor behavior that results in personality attributes that cause difficulty (Wilgosh and Paitich, 2001). The end goal of the above hypothesis is to teach the child to self-monitor.

The third hypothesis, the Differential Treatment rationale, focuses on the education of those around the delinquent youth. This hypothesis is attempting to describe the relationship between learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency. According to this position, Larson (2001) states that youth with learning disabilities and non-handicapped peers engage in the same rate and kind of delinquent behaviors; however, police, social workers, and other officials treat LD youth differently so as to increase incidence of arrest and/or adjudication. Brier cited research from Dunivant (1982) concerning the Differential Treatment hypothesis and the three questions it is based upon:

Are individuals who are learning disabled more likely to be picked up by the police than non-learning disabled individuals for comparable levels of delinquent activity? Are individuals with LD who are charged with a violation at greater risk of adjudication than non-learning disabled individuals? Are individuals who are learning disabled more likely to receive a severe disposition from juvenile court than non-learning disabled youngster (p.549)?

Brier (2001) also cited the National Center for State Courts data that stated “Youth who were learning disabled were about 200% more likely to be arrested for committing offenses of equal frequency and seriousness than their non-learning disabled counterparts, and had a higher probability of being officially adjudicated delinquent than did non-learning disabled peers. However, there was no evidence that delinquents received more severe punishments for comparable offenses” (p.550). Brier contends that LD individuals may lack the strategies to avoid detection as well as their weakness in language development, they might behave more socially inappropriate in an abrasive
manner to justice personnel. Brier cites Dunivant (1982) stating that an individual’s
demeanor in a routine police encounter has been shown to be an extremely important
factor in determining whether an arrest will be made (p. 550). It seems likely that social
skill deficiencies could possibly contribute to the LD-JD link. The key treatment through
the Differential Treatment rationale is to inform school personnel, parents and
community agencies of the subtle personality characteristics leading to discrimination
against the learning disabled student (Larson, 1988). While all three hypotheses include
supportive data, they do not recognize that the link between learning disabilities and
juvenile delinquency cannot be limited to these three hypotheses.

Numerous factors contribute to youth engaging in delinquency. While the
previous three hypotheses contain valid ideas and data, they fail to factor in the learning
disabled students’ parental influence and socioeconomic status which can be a predictor
of future delinquent activity. In an attempt to divert juveniles from delinquent activity,
one must consider not only what cause the juvenile to become delinquent but also what
causes the juvenile to continue to be delinquent (Wilgosh and Paitich, 2001). School
personnel recognize At-Risk behavior and work cooperatively to stop the behavior.

Wilgosh and Paitich stated the following:

“Working with juvenile justice personnel, together they must closely evaluate the
growing interdisciplinary ties that have been created from the issue…and
foremost consider prevention through early identification of juveniles with
learning problems and create innovative delinquency prevention programs within
the school” (p. 278).

According to Brier (2001), learning disabilities are present in offender
populations at a rate well beyond that which would be expected in non-offender
populations and the probability of becoming delinquent increases as the number and
degree of the multiple factors increase. In conclusion educators must remain conscientious of the students in their classroom and the impact that the daily interactions play in shaping the minds and futures of tomorrow.
References


