Chapter 2

Present Research
Chapter 2
THE PRESENT RESEARCH

There is strong evidence that individuals with learning disabilities (LD) experience more social, emotional, and motivational difficulties than those without LD (e.g., Ayres, Cooley, & Dunn, 1990; Chapman, 1988; Sridhar & Vaughn, 2001; Vaughn, Zaragoza, Hogan, & Walker, 1993). Adolescents with LD experience the same physical, educational, and social transitions as their peers, but with the added challenge of significant learning deficits in specific domains. In school, students with LD have academic difficulties coupled with lower academic self-concepts (Chapman, 1988; Gans, Kenny, & Ghany, 2003; Tabassam & Grainger, 2002) and lower self-perceptions and self-esteem (e.g., Grolnick & Ryan, 1990; Rosenthal, 1973). According to motivation researchers, failure and poor performance lead to doubts about general intellectual abilities, which in turn lead to reduced effort, further failure, and poor academic outcomes (Licht & Kirstner, 1986).

Teachers’ attitudes and expectations for children’s performance have long been of concern to educators (Brophy & Good, 1974; Finn 1976). Previous research has suggested that special education categories (e.g., mental retardation, emotional disturbance, learning disabilities) serve as labels and subsequently have significant impact on teacher expectations and teacher-child interactions. Children with lower academic performance continue to be the recipients of more negative interactions with teachers (Rist, 1970) and are provided with fewer response opportunities than their higher achieving peers (Brophy & Good, 1970). Bryan and Sharman (1980) report that children labeled learning disabled are held in relatively low esteem and are likely to be rejected by both their peers and adults who work with them in classrooms. Therefore, it becomes important to examine the nature of teachers’ attitudes towards the LD child and the performance expectations that may be generated by such attitudes. Teachers’ predictions of and expectations for the future performance of children have been shown to be influenced by a variety of factors (Algozzine and
Mercer, 1983). Brophy and Good (1974) report that the observation that a child is a low-achiever may result in different teacher-pupil interactions than the observation that a child is a high achiever. Such observations may result in biased interactions and subsequently result in different performance outcomes for some children (Willis & Brophy, 1974). Since teacher-student interactions are not only important determinants of a student’s performance, his/her level of academic achievement and self-esteem but also may influence teachers’ future interactions with other students, hence it is relevant to study teachers’ attitudes and attributions with regard to learning disabilities.

**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Attribution theorists study perceptions of causality in motivation and achievement. They argue that individuals engage in causal analyses after experiencing successes or failures, attempting to answer the question “why did I succeed or fail?” in finding a probable cause for his level of performance, one attributes his success or failure to that characteristic of himself, the task, or the situation. Attribution theorists further argue that the attributions people make can be classified into categories based on a number of salient characteristics.

Weiner (1986) gives a comprehensive overview of several classification systems for attributions in the contexts of motivation and achievement. His own system, like many of the others he discusses includes the dimensions of internality and stability. Internality refers to whether the cause within the actor (internal) or outside the actor (external). Stability refers to whether the cause is an enduring (stable) trait, which will likely affect the actor in a similar way in the future or is transient (unstable) and will not necessarily continue to affect the actor in the same way throughout the future. Ability is an example of an internal and table attribution while effort is an example of an internal but unstable attribution. Attributional theorists believe making different attributions for success and failure can lead to a variety of affective, motivational, and behavioral results.
According to Weiner (1986) attributing success to ability (Internal stable) increase one’s expectation of future success on a given task. Since, in this case, the actor considers the cause of his success to be a characteristic that will continue to affect his performance in the same way, his confidence in future task is high. For similar reasons, attributing failure to lack of ability lowers one’s confidence and expectations for success, since one then expects the failure – inducing cause to continue to have negative effects in future situations. Alternatively, he argues that attributing success to effort (internal unstable) does not increase one’s expectations for future successes. In this case, the actor considers the cause of his success to be a transient quality that may or may not affect him in the same way, i.e. that he will only do well in the future if puts enough effort into the task again. Similarly, attributing failure to lack of effort, does not lower one’s confidence or expectations for future success, since the cause of the negative results is not highly likely to present again in future situations. Consequently, Weiner argues that ability attributions for success generally increase task motivation and ability attributions for failure generally decrease task motivation but effort attributions for either success or failure have minimal motivational effects overall.

Theoretical Rationale

Teacher attribution research is supported by a wealth of empirical evidence, most of which has been generated in the United States. This knowledge base suggests that teachers, as naive scientists, seek to explain the negative or unexpected achievement outcomes of their students by intuitively examining such potential causes as students’ prior achievement, difficulty of the task assigned, or effort expended to predict the cause of an outcome (Weiner, 1986). These causal factors possess three underlying psychological properties, namely locus (whether the cause originates within the person or the environment), stability (whether the cause is stable or unstable), and controllability (whether the cause is under the volitional control of the person). Moreover, controllability is linked to responsibility. A controllable cause results in the perception that the student is responsible for the outcome; likewise uncontrollable cause
leads to the perception of no responsibility. Once teachers ascribe an outcome to a cause, social emotions (anger and pity) follow, which are shaped by the properties of that cause (Hunter & Barker, 1987; Rolison & Medway, 1985; Weiner, 1979, 1986).

These teacher emotions result in such behaviors as providing evaluative feedback (rewards or punishment), giving or withholding help, or offering praise or blame (Graham, 1990, 1991; Weiner, 1985, 1986). In a seminal study, Weiner and Kukla (1970) found that student ability and effort have causal properties that shape teacher affective responses and feedback to student outcomes. Weiner and Kukla found that psychology students acting as teachers rated as greatest their anger at high-ability students expending low effort, assigning them the greatest punishment, and their pity as greatest for low-ability students expending high effort, assigning them the greatest rewards following negative achievement outcomes.

Teachers’ emotional and behavioral reactions to their students’ academic outcomes have a direct impact on the behavior of their students, influencing children’s future actions and self-perceptions (Graham, 1990). For example, the pity felt by a teacher might prompt his or her offering of a reward or unsolicited help, even when a student is engaged in an easy task. These teacher reactions might send low-ability cues to the student, which may result in the child forming a negative view of his or her own competence as a student. Conversely, teacher anger and subsequent punishment following a negative outcome may be interpreted by the child as cues that he or she is in control of the academic outcome and, thereby, a competent student.

**ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL RELEVANCE**

In Iran, although a significant percentage of students in special education programs have a learning disability (LD) label, and general education teachers are asked increasingly to teach students with LD, little research has been conducted on teacher attributional responses to this group of students. Interestingly, there is evidence that LD may have causal properties (Clark, 1997, 1998). Clark (1997) found that general education teachers (a) tended to reward boys with LD more than their non-LD peers
following failure, (b) expressed less anger and more pity toward the boys with LD, and (c) held higher expectations that boys with LD will fail in the future. Student effort mediated this pattern of responses (i.e., students with and without LD expending high effort were evaluated more highly than their low-effort peers). Moreover, on a rating scales task, teachers rated LD as internal to the child, stable, and uncontrollable (Clark, 1998). Note that the dimensions of LD are consistent with a medical (disease) view of disability and the same as the properties of student ability.

In sum, research conducted in the United States suggests that (a) teachers make attributions based on the locus, stability, and controllability of perceived causes of an outcome; (b) student ability, effort, and LD designation seem to have causal properties; and (c) perceived causal factors influence teacher emotional and behavioral responses to student performance, and these responses may have an effect on future student behaviors and self-perceptions. Many researchers have assumed that these attributional principles and the linkage between perceived stability of causes and the formation of expectancies are consistent across cultures (i.e., if a cause is perceived as stable, it is expected the outcome will be stable; Betancourt & Weiner, 1982; Fletcher & Ward, 1988; Weiner, 1985). However, despite a scarcity of cross-cultural work, evidence is emerging that questions the universality assumption.

The present research has academic as well as social relevance. In the researcher’s experience as a lecturer in the area of learning disability, on her various visits to regular as well as special schools, she has observed that learning disability is a big problem for parents and teachers alike. Most of them do not know the specific problems of their children or the students or what’s their duty or responsibility is for such children. It is important to note that a child with learning disability is not necessarily a special child. Other than the difficulties in learning, children with LD are just like their peers without LD. These students write ‘bread’ instead of ‘milk’ or if someone makes a noise they cannot concentrate (Panda, 1997). For this reason, it becomes difficult for the teachers to identify the difference between a normal student and a learning disabled student. It is important for teachers to make inference at the
right time and give special care. Teachers usually are not able to identify these problems and because of the difference between the normal and the LD students, the students are neglected in the class. This is one of the reasons why the students with LD live alone, think alone and learn alone in the classroom and everywhere. The students comprehend their disability status by the teachers action. Sandra Graham (1990) says that praise and blame from teachers send counter – intuitive ability messages to students. School children also gain information about personal competence, in part from classroom cues. Most of the time they base their attributions for success and failure on those cues (Clark, 1997).

Such a student continues studying as long as he/she can comprehend and then becomes a drop out. They become more shy and isolated as they go to the middle school and have to struggle in a school system where language competence is strongly related to academic success (Hatzichristou & Hopf, 1993). It is sad to note that nobody ask the students who dropped out about their reason for leaving studies, rather, almost everybody easily presume that perhaps they do not have the ability. Everything starts and ends in this presumption. The student then comes to self-acceptance rather than to the (social) acceptance of a person with a condition by others (Klass, 1981). Acceptance of learning disability comes to a student when he/she refers to himself as learning disabled. This is also known as “learned helplessness.” These students as compared to the normal students are denied rights and privileges through stigmatization by the larger culture (Higgins, 1980). School children gain information about personal competence in part; from classroom cues and they often base their attributions for success and failure on those cues (Graham 1990).

As the movement toward more inclusive settings for children with disabilities gains strength, it becomes increasingly important to understand how general education teachers perceive the academic outcomes of these children. Teachers’ perceptions of the properties of their students academic outcomes result in emotions, such as anger and pity (Weiner, 1996; Graham & Weiner 1986) which in turn lead to action such as reward or punishment and expectation of future failure (Clark, 1997). The purpose of
the present study was to test basic attributional principles as applied to children with learning disabilities.

The present study had the following objectives and hypotheses:

**Objectives**

To study as to what degree teachers’ knowledge of the presence or absence of a learning disability would influence:

(a) The level of feedback (reward or punishment) they gave to a hypothetical student based on his/her ability and effort expended;

(b) The level of anger felt by teachers toward the hypothetical student based on his/her ability and effort expended;

(c) The level of pity felt by teachers toward the hypothetical student based on his/her ability and effort expended;

(d) The expectations the teachers held for the student’s future failure based on his/her ability and effort expended.

**Hypotheses**

(a) Teachers will assign significantly greater reward to students with learning disabilities than to nondisabled students.

(b) Teachers will assign significantly less punishment to students with learning disabilities than to nondisabled students.

(c) Teachers will feel significantly less anger towards students with learning disabilities than towards nondisabled students.

(d) Teachers will feel significantly greater pity towards students with learning disabilities than towards nondisabled students.

(e) Teachers will hold significantly higher expectations for future failure for students with learning disabilities than for nondisabled students.