



# The contribution of untreated learning disabilities to the development of juvenile delinquency

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## Introduction

- ◆ The prevalence of learning disabilities among juvenile delinquents is higher compared to the general population (Skaret & Wilgosh, 1989) and adolescents with learning disabilities are at relatively high risk for delinquency (Keilitz & Dunivant, 1986).
- ◆ Although these estimates have raised the question about a possible link between learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency, the exact nature of this link remains unknown, as research has focused on isolated learning domains like reading or writing.
- ◆ An important issue is to establish the extent to which learning disabilities are associated with a specific disorder, such as Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), rather than being the consequence of poor schooling and low attendance due to psychosocial adversity.
- ◆ ADHD is associated with neuropsychological deficits, poor cognitive skills, impulsivity, low tolerance to frustration, difficulties with self-regulation and other traits which may lead *both* to learning disabilities and delinquency (Barkley, 1998).
- ◆ Therefore, it is possible that cognitive and behavioural correlates of ADHD might account for the development of both learning disabilities and antisocial behaviour in a significant number of cases among delinquent youth.

## Aim and Method

### Aim

- ◆ To investigate schooling history, attention problems and self-perception regarding scholastic competence in a sample of juveniles and young adults in detention in Greece.

### Participants

- ◆ Ninety three males, aged 13-24 years (mean age=19.29; sd=2.83), recruited from three Correctional Centers for Minors in Greece

### Measures

- ◆ A questionnaire constructed by the authors regarding demographic characteristics and schooling history.
- ◆ The Greek version of the Youth Self Report (YSR; Achenbach, 1991), for the investigation of mental health problems. Only data concerning 'attention problems' will be reported here.
- ◆ The Self-Perception Profile for children (Harter, 1985) for the assessment of perceived scholastic competence.

### Procedure

- ◆ The self-report measures were completed by the participants themselves, on an individual basis, in the presence of one of the researchers and the social worker who read aloud and explained the questions whenever needed.

## Results

### Demographic and family characteristics

- ◆ The majority of the participants were Greeks and the remaining 28% were immigrants, mainly Albanians.
- ◆ Most of the participants came from large families with more than three siblings.
- ◆ The one third of the families faced serious financial problems.
- ◆ More than half of the participants' parents were totally illiterate or of very low educational level.
- ◆ Parental offending history was reported in the 39.9% of the cases.

### Schooling history

- ◆ Half of the participants had given up school, 29% had never attended school and 12.9% had just finished primary school.
- ◆ Of those who had attended school, the majority reported bad or very bad grades.
- ◆ Forty percent of the participants had repeated class. However, only one of our participants had been referred to special class.
- ◆ Almost half of the participants reported that school attendance was not systematic.

### Mental health problems

- ◆ Several externalizing and internalizing problems were reported to the 79.6 %of the participants (Kakourou & Maniadaki, 2007, September).
- ◆ Attention problems were reported to the 25.8% and to the 18.3% of the participants (abnormal and borderline range respectively), which is disproportionately high, compared to the general population.

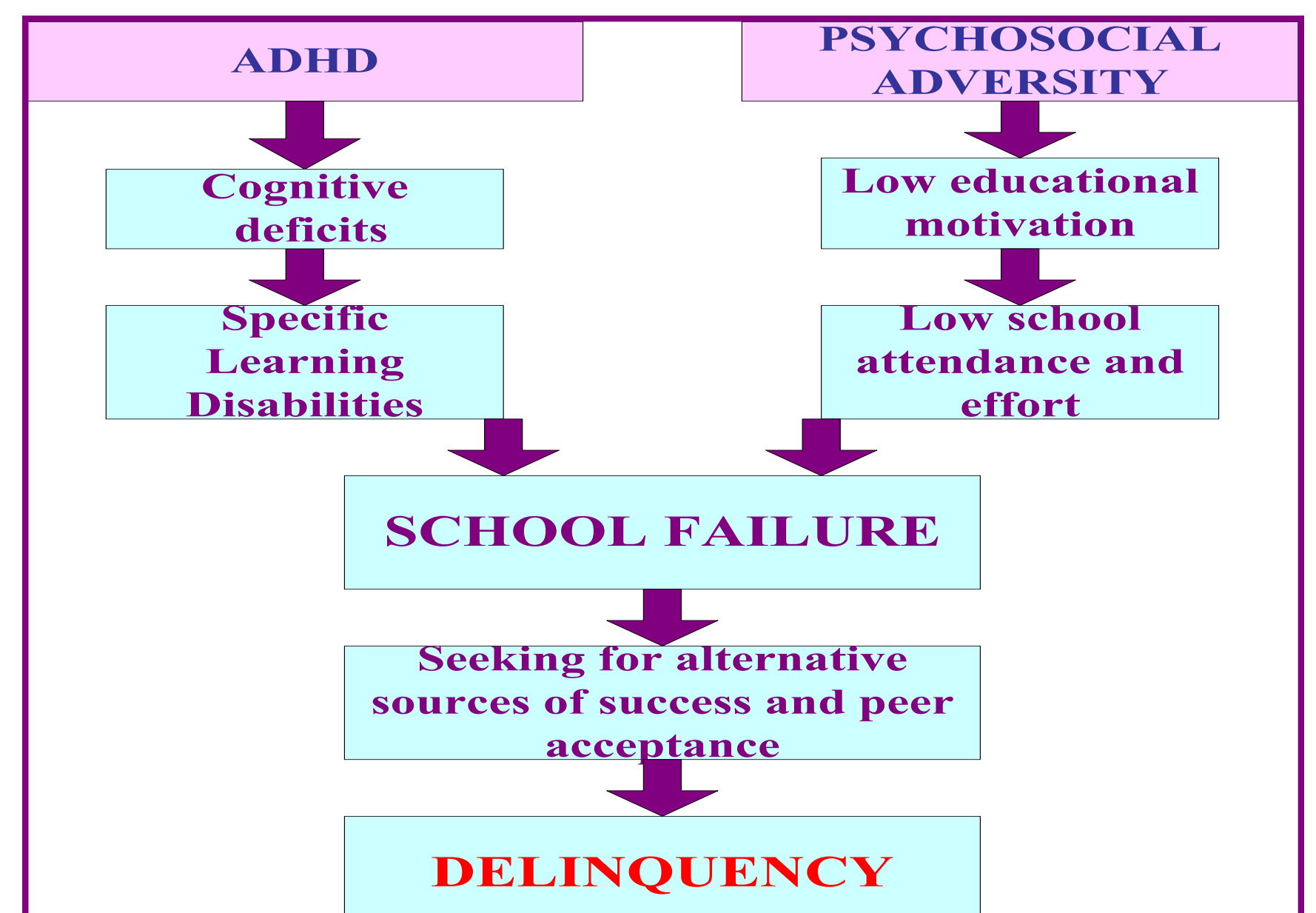
### Perceived scholastic competence

- ◆ Almost half of the participants reported very low perceived scholastic competence whereas the other half reported normal perceived scholastic competence.
- ◆ Only 2.8% of the participants had high perceived scholastic competence, indicating that a great number of our sample perceived their academic abilities as reduced.

## Discussion

- ◆ High levels of psychosocial adversity existed in our sample as indicated by the large family size, low parental educational level, bad financial situation and parental offending history in a great number of cases.
- ◆ Schooling history of the participants revealed high numbers of drop-outs, low school attendance, bad grades and frequent class retention, indicating a high prevalence of learning disabilities, defined broadly as "a discrepancy between student performance and his / her academic age level" (Skaret & Wilgosh, 1989).
- ◆ However, in addition to psychosocial adversity, a high number of participants also faced attentional problems, indicating that the presence of ADHD was very possible for many of them.
- ◆ It seems that, for a number of young delinquents, a combination of individual and environmental risk factors, such as the presence of ADHD in children who are raised up in deprived environments might explain antisocial behaviour as shown in Diagram 1.
- ◆ :

## Diagram 1



## References

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