



Highlights of Putting a Canadian Face on Learning Disabilities (PACFOLD)

Putting a Canadian Face on Learning Disabilities (PACFOLD) is a groundbreaking research study spearheaded by the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC), with funding from the Social Development Partnership Program - Disability Component.

The study was completed by a team of top Canadian researchers, headed by co-principal investigators, Dr. Alexander M. Wilson, Director of the Meighen Centre at Mount Allison University in New Brunswick, and Adele Furrie, an Ottawa-based expert in disability statistics. They were joined by researchers, Dr. Elizabeth Walcot-Gayda, Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Sherbrooke in Quebec, Dr. Catherine Deri Armstrong, Department of Economics of the University of Ottawa, and Andrew Archer, an information data retrieval expert. The goal of the research study was to find out what it means to be a child, youth or adult with learning disabilities in Canada.

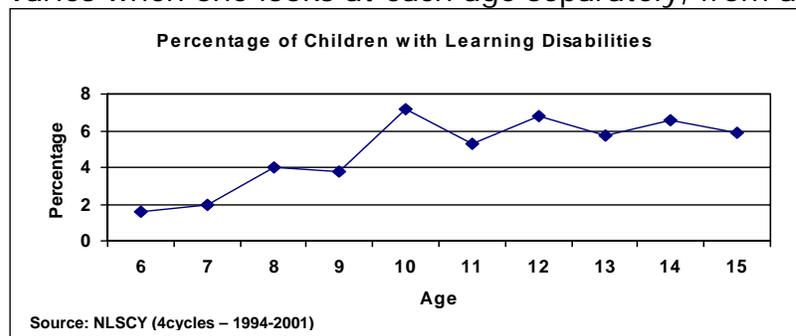
The PACFOLD study is unique, because it represents the first time any disability organization in Canada has requested access to Statistics Canada data surveys. Ten different data sets were examined, making it the most comprehensive look ever at the impact of living with a learning disability (LD) in Canada. The PACFOLD study found that Canadian governments can do more to enable people with learning disabilities. People with LD are often prevented from realizing success at school, at work, and in everyday activities. Achievements are often accomplished through factors outside government support, such as:

- Finding a teacher who is trained to work with a student with LD.
- Having family support that includes financial resources.
- Finding an employer that understands learning disabilities, and provides the necessary accommodations.

These findings clearly indicate that there are huge societal costs if learning disabilities are not addressed.

How many children in Canada have learning disabilities?

Of those children aged 6 to 15, slightly less than 5 in 100 (4.9%) have a learning disability according to the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY). However, this figure varies when one looks at each age separately, from a low of 1.6% for children aged 6, to a high of 7.2% for 10-year-olds. This peak confirms the findings in the initial examination of existing literature in the field of LD conducted by the research team as well as the anecdotal comments from the focus groups.



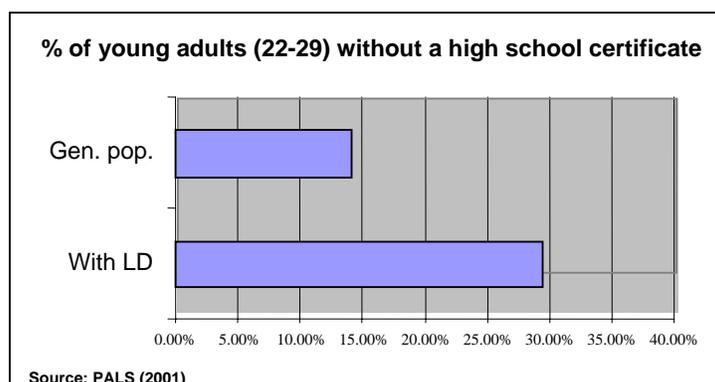
I was diagnosed when I was really young. I was ready to quit school when I was in grade three, then I got into a school for children with learning disabilities. That's what turned things around for me. That school helped give me the skills I need to manage things better, and to deal with the challenges I have.
– Winnipeg focus group participant

I started to get concerned when my child was in grade 1. He was finally diagnosed in grade 3.
– Saskatoon focus group participant

Canadians with learning disabilities are less likely to succeed in school.

A significant number of youth and adults with learning disabilities drop out of the education system altogether, with over one-quarter of Canadians with LD aged 22 to 29 (28.3%) reporting less than a high school certificate as their highest academic achievement, compared to 14.9% with the general population.

I quit school in grade 7. I went back, but it was hard. I quit again in grade 10. I returned to school through the Bridges to Success Program at the Learning Disabilities Association of Saskatchewan. I just recently got my GED (General Education Development, a grade 12 equivalency). I'm 24 years old.
– Saskatoon focus group participant



Children with LD in Canada need aids, but cannot afford them.

In the 2001 Participation and Activities Limitations Survey (PALS), parents and guardians of children aged 6 to 14 with learning disabilities were asked about their child's use of aids, specialized equipment or services to help with their learning disability. Just over half (50.3%) of these children used these types of aids, equipment or services. However, almost 3 out of 10 (29.3%) parents said that their children needed these types of aids, equipment or services, but did not have them.

I paid a tutor to do extra work with my daughter, but I had to stop because I couldn't afford it. If you don't have the financial resources, your child has to do without.

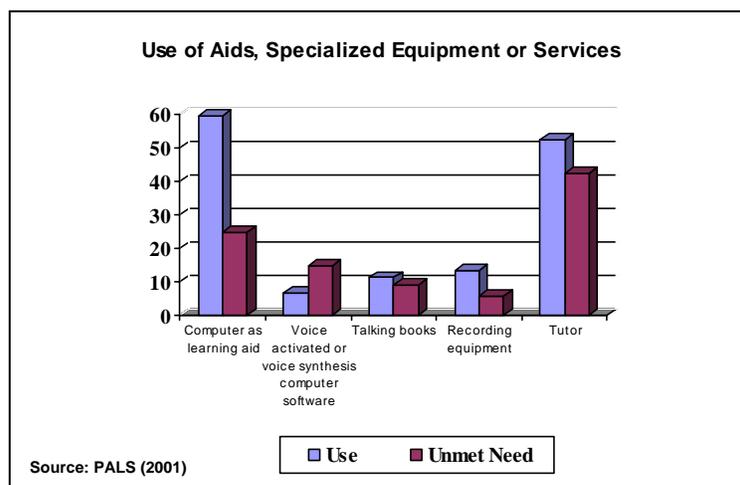
– Winnipeg focus group participant

Among those children aged 6 to 14 with learning disabilities **who use aids**, specialized equipment or services to help with their learning disability, 59.5% used a computer as a learning aid, 52.6% used a tutor, 13.3% used recording equipment, 11.2% used talking books, and 6.6% used voice activated or voice synthesis computer software.

I'm \$45,000 in debt, because I've had to pay for additional services for 10 years. We have to pay the equivalent of a year of university education each year our children are in school.
 – Halifax focus group participant

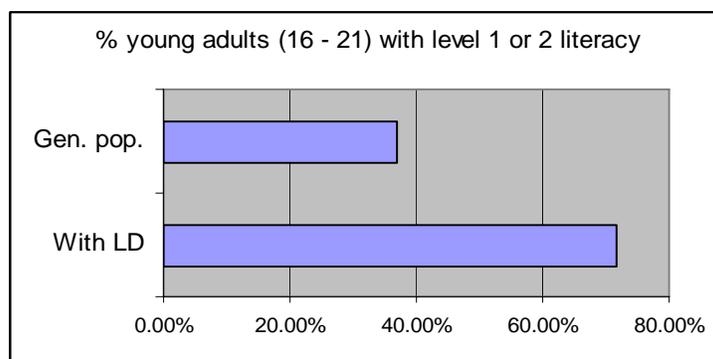
It costs \$500 per month for tutors for my two boys. Without tutoring, they would be struggling in school, so I work two jobs to make it happen.
 – Saskatoon focus group participant

Among those children aged 6 to 14 with learning disabilities who needed aids, equipment or services that they **did not have**, 42.3% needed a tutor, 24.7% needed a computer as a learning aid, 14.6% needed voice activated or voice synthesis computer software, 8.9% needed talking books, and 5.5% needed recording equipment.



Canadians with LD are less likely to achieve high levels of literacy.

Canadians with learning disabilities overwhelmingly achieve lower levels (Level 1 to 2)¹ of prose, document and quantitative literacy, and are far less likely to test at higher levels. 71.6% of young adults with LD aged 16 to 21 tested at Level 1 to 2 for prose literacy compared to 36.9% of the general population.



Source: International Adult Literacy Survey (1994)

I couldn't believe they let me graduate from high school, because I didn't know how to read or spell. I was only able to learn later when I was taught one-on-one.

– Saskatoon focus group participant

I have four children. I didn't use to be able to help them with their homework. Now, through the Bridges to Success Program at the Learning Disabilities Association of Saskatchewan, I can. My children understand that mommy has learning disabilities.

– Saskatoon focus group participant

In the North, there is always work you can get. You don't have to fill out an application form like you do in the city. I drove a semi. I had trouble filling out the paperwork that I had to do, so I got other people to do it for me.

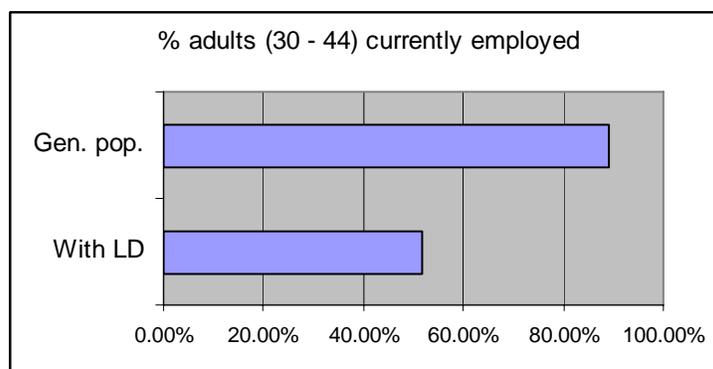
– Saskatoon focus group participant

¹ The 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) measures proficiency at five different levels: 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest in each of three literacy types: prose, document, and quantitative literacy.

Level 1 – Difficulty reading and have few basic skills or strategies for decoding and working with text.
 Level 2 – Have limited reading skills, but do not read well. Can deal with material that is simple and clearly laid out.

Canadians with learning disabilities are less likely to succeed at work.

Learning disabilities also have an impact on employment opportunities. In a pattern that remains constant throughout their lifetimes, just over half of adults with LD aged 30 to 44 (51%) reported being employed the week prior to the 2001 census, compared to 89.1% of the total population in the same age group.



Source: PALS (2001)

I quit school and worked as a waitress, but the cook couldn't read my orders, so they let me go. I had to find a job that didn't require reading. I worked as a banquet server. I tried to take a course to become a bricklayer, but there was too much math involved. Through the Bridges to Success Program at the Learning Disabilities Association of Saskatchewan, I took basic upgrading and improved my literacy skills. Now, I'm working as a cook at a very nice bistro.

– Saskatoon focus group participant

I can never move up the ladder at work. I have trouble expressing myself verbally.

– Saskatoon focus group participant

It was devastating for me to have to walk away from my dream job, because of my learning disability. Everything that I did well wasn't recognized, while the things I had difficulty with were always being emphasized. It's so important that employers be educated about learning disabilities.

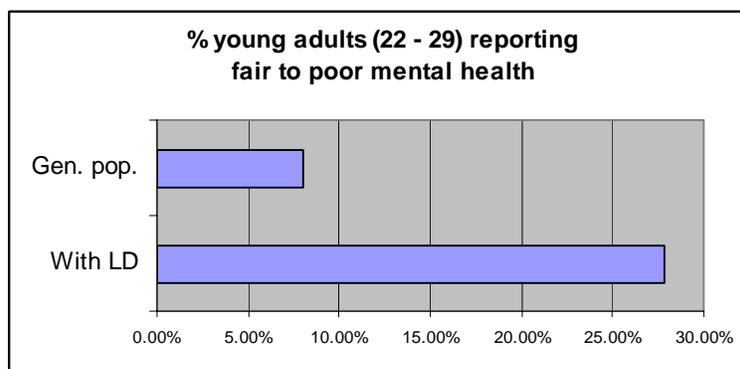
– Winnipeg focus group participant

Through my assessment, I have learned what my strengths are, so I know what careers are definitely not for me. I'm not setting myself up for failure again.

– Winnipeg focus group participant

Canadians with LD are more likely to report lower overall mental health.

Canadians with learning disabilities were found to be 2 to 3 times more likely to report fair to poor physical, general, and mental health than the total population. In mental health alone, more than 3 times the number (27.8%) of adults with learning disabilities aged 22 to 29 years, said their mental health was fair to poor compared to only 8% of the total population.



Source: CCHS (2002 Cycle 1.2)

Persons with Learning Disabilities were more than twice as likely to report high levels of distress, depression, anxiety disorders, suicidal thoughts, and visits to a mental health professional and poorer overall mental health compared to persons without disabilities.

Differences found in the adolescent group (ages 15 – 21) were even larger than in the older adults (ages 30-44) for suicidal thoughts, depression and distress.

Males with LD were more likely to report depressive episodes, anxiety disorders, consultations with a health professional and poor general mental health.

Females with LD were more likely to report high distress and suicidal thoughts relative to person without disabilities.

On balance, LD was not found to be more detrimental to mental health for one sex or the other.

When my son got overwhelmed at school, we would have a family mental health day. I'd buy him some Lego, so he could focus on something he was good at.

– Winnipeg focus group participant

Not having an early diagnosis meant that I needed to have a plan A, B and C at all times. There is a tremendous amount of effort needed to stay on track, and energy needed to organize myself, let alone a family or a home. This caused me many anxieties.

– Toronto focus group participant

Public school was very difficult for me. I had to repeat grade 3 twice. If you're the dumb kid in the classroom, then you're the dumb kid on the playground. Your self-esteem is low, you have no friends, you're lonely. You get depressed. You go through life thinking that it's all your fault and that you're no good.

– Ottawa focus group participant

My child wrote her first suicide note in grade 4. She was self-mutilating at 13. She was never invited to go anywhere. The phone never rang for her. She was very lonely.

– Saskatchewan focus group participant

I have tried to change my internal dialogue from ‘should’ to ‘could.’ I have forced myself to use the strategy of not making a decision right away. This has helped a great deal.

Negative self-talk is a huge problem for LD individuals, because we already doubt our skills, and many of us think of ourselves as failures.

– Toronto focus group participant

I think my success is due to perseverance, support from friends and family, and knowing what works for me.

– Toronto focus group participant

My learning disability was devastating to every intimate relationship I had, because I didn’t know about it. I became the black sheep of the family. I got involved with alcohol and drugs, and hit rock bottom. It was only when I was finally diagnosed at the age of 39, and began to understand my strengths, learned strategies and coping skills, that my life turned around.

– Toronto focus group participant

Summary

This study has uncovered compelling evidence of what our national network has witnessed anecdotally for decades—left undiagnosed, untreated and/or not accommodated, Canadians with LD are unable to reach their potential, resulting in high costs to the Canadian economy.²

Putting a Canadian Face on Learning Disabilities demonstrates how the issues Canadians with LD face are both linear and cyclical. They are linear, in that there is a direct correlation between the problems not identified in school, and/or not accommodated in school, with the end result of low literacy levels. This, in turn, impacts the employment opportunities and the financial situations of people with learning disabilities. The issues are cyclical, because these challenges feed into one another. Low literacy levels, higher rates of unemployment, lack of independence, and lower incomes contribute to higher rates of poor to fair mental and physical health, and impact the relationships of people with LD.

The solution does not rest solely with the education system. While recognizing that educational institutions have been the place where many Canadians with LD discover their disability and hope to find appropriate interventions and accommodations, it is necessary to look at other public policy areas for remedies to the lifelong challenges people with learning disabilities face. The solutions should be systemic, and involve publicly funded programs, such as social services, health, employment, literacy programs, federal income tax programs, and other areas.

Canadian governments, education and labour sectors can do more to enable people with learning disabilities to realize success at school, at work and in everyday activities. Affordable and available solutions can be put in place immediately to help break the cycle of failure, and provide opportunities for success.

² Learning Disabilities in Canada: Economic Costs to Individuals, Families and Society, Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, January 2001

Public Policy Recommendations:

- Invest in a universal research-based, mandated early screening and intervention model for children 4 to 8 years of age that is designed to identify and assist children at risk for school failure. This would increase Canadian literacy rates, reduce health care costs, increase employment and income potential, and improve family life among Canadians with learning disabilities.
- Negotiate with the federal Council of Ministers of Health on the costs of the primary diagnosis of learning disabilities for Canadians with LD of all ages (children, youth, and adults), and to have support for people with LD publicly funded through provincial and territorial health insurance plans or some other public funding mechanism, as is the case for other disabilities.
- Implement national incentives for people with learning disabilities to access affordable assistive technology and increase the list of adaptive technology eligible under the Medical Expense Tax Credit of the Income Tax Act to include: computers, voice activated software, scanners and readers.
- Build awareness and training among medical, mental health and educational professionals of the coexistence of mental health disorders and learning disabilities in both children and adults. This would facilitate quicker identification and diagnosis of LD, and provide families with early support, understanding and resources to reduce the likelihood of developing more serious mental health disorders.
- Increase funding for programs that support improving literacy skills, and enhancing paid on-the-job learning opportunities.
- Endorse a consistent definition and a comprehensive diagnostic assessment protocol for learning disabilities to be used in all publicly funded programs such as education, social service, health and other service areas.
- Build awareness and provide training among health practitioners of the coexistence of conditions with learning disabilities like low-birth weights, ear infections, allergies, asthma, depression, etc. This would facilitate quicker identification and diagnosis of LD, and provide families with early support, understanding and resources.
- Advocate for further statistical data research with a consistent definition of "disability," and specifically, "learning disability," coordinated across all future Statistics Canada surveys, with the most appropriate ways of wording screening questions to ensure that respondents with LD are neither screened out, nor so ill-defined that clear data cannot be garnered.
- Increase the sample size on future Statistics Canada surveys, in order to further understand the barriers and impact that living with learning disabilities has on various aspects of an individual's life.

For Educational Institutions:

- Include **compulsory** courses in teacher training programs on students with special needs at both the elementary and secondary school levels.
 - A portion of the compulsory course content on students with special needs should be devoted to the education of students with learning disabilities at the elementary and secondary levels in the areas of: characteristics, diagnosis, impact, and implementation of appropriate research-based reading programs, strategies, interventions and accommodations.
- Enhance professional development for teachers on learning disabilities in all provincial and territorial school districts/boards to ensure fewer students fall through the cracks in Canadian classrooms. All teachers must know:
 - What the 'signs' are of a student at risk
 - The needs and entitlements of students with learning disabilities.
 - How students with LD learn.
 - How to adapt and differentiate their teaching methods.
 - How to utilize the principles of Universal Instructional Design.
 - How to implement appropriate accommodations to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities.

For Labour:

- Increase staff and human resource personnel's knowledge of learning disabilities, and implementing appropriate accommodations for individuals with LD.

Overall, these recommendations will provide equitable access for all Canadians to affordable, appropriate services early enough to make a difference in their lifelong outcomes, and will reduce the short- and long-term economic costs of failure (special education, unemployment, health, welfare, and corrections).

The Learning Disabilities Association of Canada

Since 1963, the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC) has provided support to people with learning disabilities, their families, teachers and other professionals who help them. LDAC is a volunteer-led association representing a network of 10 provincial and two territorial Learning Disabilities Associations. From these extends a network of chapters in some 55 communities across the country with more than 7,000 members across Canada. Our role is to help provide a level playing field of opportunities and services for children, youth and adults with LD. At the national, provincial/territorial and local levels, Learning Disabilities Associations provide cutting-edge information on LD, practical solutions, and a comprehensive network of programs and resources. These services make LDAC the Canadian leader in the area of learning disabilities.

For further information, please visit www.pacfold.ca