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Influence of Educational Measures on Emotional Adjustment in Students with and without Specific Learning Difficulties according to Gender

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Abstract: The prevalence of mental health problems in adolescence is high, and it would appear that certain conditioning factors such as having a Specific Learning Disability (SpLD), the application of educational measures (repeating a school year), or gender can have an impact on the socioemotional development of adolescents. However, we do not yet have a clear picture of the role played by each variable or whether there are interactions between them. Therefore, the objective of this study is to analyse the effect of these independent variables on internalising problems (anxiety and depression) and on personal resources (self-esteem, social competence, and awareness of the problem). The sample is composed of 80 students, 40 with SpLD and 40 control, aged between 12 and 17 years old, matched in terms of age and gender. The results indicate that the variables Specific Learning Disabilities and educational measures have a negative impact on internalising problems and personal resources of adolescents, while there is no significant effect with respect to gender. In addition, we identified interactions between having SpLD and being held back a year. We therefore call into question the negative impact of repeating a school year according to the condition.

Keywords: anxiety; depression; personal resources; repeating; gender; specific learning disabilities

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1. Introduction

Adolescence is a fundamental stage in a person's development and education. It is a time when people search for their personal identity, and it has a great influence on self-esteem and socio-emotional development). In this sense, adolescence is defined as the transitional stage between childhood and adulthood in which cognitive, biological, family, and social changes occur that can last from ten to nineteen years of age (Bailen et al. 2019). During this period, opportunities for learning, growth, and personality development emerge, and social and personal milestones such as identity formation, sexual maturity, or formal thinking occur (Filipiak and Łubianka 2021). Adolescence, therefore, has a functional and adaptive value that determines a person's development.

However, the biopsychosocial changes at this stage are rapid and constant, so they can cause stressful situations and be a source of emotional vulnerability (Bailen et al. 2019). In addition to these changes that can be stressful, the academic context also presents different potential stressors such as the pressure to perform well academically, an excessive volume of work, difficulties with certain contents or new subjects, changes in educational stage, and potential personal and social conflicts with peers and teachers.

Specifically, there is a high prevalence of mental disorders observed among adolescents, which can affect 20% of the population (Anglim et al. 2020). The most common socioemotional symptoms are internalising in nature (Achenbach 2019), such as anxiety

and depression problems, including low mood, withdrawn behaviours, worry, and somatic and anxious symptoms (World Health Organization 2019).

Therefore, it is important to consider some personal resources such as self-esteem, social competence, and awareness of problems. These protective factors help reduce the probability of developing a risk situation of socioemotional problems. Personal resources act as protective factors and help adolescents cope with their mental health positively (Aguilar 2020). These are the set of habits that allow people to feel good, achieve their goals, improve interpersonal relationships, and attain what they want. Thus, personal resources help to relate to the world, obtaining the greatest number of benefits and the fewest negative consequences. These can be concretised in terms of self-esteem, social competence, and awareness of one's own problems (Esteves Villanueva et al. 2020).

First, self-esteem refers to the subjective evaluation that a person has about himself (Hernández Prados et al. 2018), and it is particularly important during adolescence. It is the perception and assessment that a person has their own value, skills, competencies, and personal characteristics (Farías and Giniebra 2022). Self-esteem is based both on one's own ideal and on those of others, considering how the person would like to be and how others would like them to be. It is therefore essential in a person's social, personal, and school development since it is responsible for providing self-assurance and confidence (Hernández Prados et al. 2018; Hymel and Swearer 2015). Secondly, social competence, on the other hand, refers to the set of skills, attitudes, and knowledge necessary to perform an adequate social role and functions, presenting efficiency and good quality (Losada 2018). Thirdly, awareness of problems is a person's ability to recognise the problems they face in their day-to-day life. It allows people to be aware of what must change to solve their problems and whether they need to seek the help of others (Fernández-Pinto et al. 2015).

Certain situations or conditions can negatively affect socioemotional problems, such as presenting neurodevelopmental disorders, for example, Specific Learning Disabilities, repeating a school year, or gender, among others (Anglim et al. 2020, Filipiak and Łubianka 2021; González and Alvarez 2022). Research on Specific Learning Disabilities has traditionally focused on studying cognitive and neurobiological characteristics and their academic intervention (González-Valenzuela and Martín-Ruiz 2020). However, in recent years, the study of socioemotional development has become particularly relevant (Panadero 2019), focusing on how certain personal and educational circumstances may or may not increase the consequences and affect socioemotional aspects.

Specific Learning Disabilities (SpLD) are defined as a neurodevelopmental disorder originating in childhood, characterised by deficits in writing (written expression or spelling), reading (reading comprehension, accuracy or fluency), or mathematics (mathematical reasoning, sense of numbers, or calculation) (González-Valenzuela and Martín-Ruiz 2020; Piedra-Martìnez et al. 2017). SpLD manifest in terms of significant, specific, and persistent difficulties in the learning of certain academic competencies, which, based on age and level of intellectual ability, are not expected in the student, meaning that the student would present a discrepancy between academic performance and their intellectual capacity (American Psychiatric Association 2014). In the academic context, Specific Learning Disabilities usually become very evident in the early school years, with academic, cognitive–linguistic, and socioemotional manifestations (González-Valenzuela and Martín-Ruiz 2020).

Students with Specific Learning Disabilities present a greater risk of socioemotional imbalances, manifested in terms of deficits in social skills, anxiety, self-esteem, and peer acceptance. According to DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association 2014), Specific Learning Disabilities can have negative functional consequences throughout a person's life cycle, such as higher drop-out rates in secondary school, lower academic achievement, great psychological distress, and overall mental health problems. Specifically, Zuppardo et al. (2020) note that students with SpLD have higher levels of anxiety and depression, somatic complaints, and withdrawal than their peers. In addition, Donolato et al. (2022) found in their study, a meta-analysis of socioemotional adjustment in adolescents with and without

SpLD, that adolescents with Specific Learning Disabilities were 60% more likely to present internalising symptoms (anxiety and depression) than adolescents without this disorder.

However, there are studies where the relationship between presenting SpLD and socioemotional problems is not clear (Piedra-Martìnez et al. 2017), since researchers did not find differences in anxiety or depression between groups. The cause of these results may well be that the measures used in these studies are linked to more stable and general personality traits. Likewise, Ghisi et al. (2016) indicate that the results for anxiety and depression among adolescents with and without SpLD are not conclusive since the results change depending on the test used, finding differences between groups when using more specific tests but not with general personality tests.

Thus, Specific Learning Disabilities can be a personal condition that can affect socioemotional problems and interpersonal relationships (Panadero 2019; Zuppardo et al. 2020). In addition, constantly experiencing feelings of inferiority, frustration, shame, and inadequacy in school can weaken the motivation to learn in a student with SpLD (Martín et al. 2023). At the same time, the presence of difficulties in learning might not only be responsible for the failure and dropout of these students but could also feed into a negative construction of self-identity (Lithari 2019).

In addition, school dropout, along with confluent depressive symptoms, increases the risk of mental health problems (Horbach et al. 2020). Furthermore, Specific Learning Disabilities are often associated with other neurodevelopmental disorders (ADHD, communication disorders, autism spectrum disorders, and developmental coordination disorder) or other mental disorders, such as anxiety and depressive disorders (American Psychiatric Association 2014). Some authors (Fernández Guerrero 2011; Rimrodt and Lipkin 2011) point out that the most common cause of school failure is the presentation of SpLD since 80% of students with SpLD have low school performance, and 45% repeat at least one school year.

However, it is important to take into account the impact that some educational measures, such as being held back a school year, may have on socio-emotional development. According to Organic Law 3/2020 of 29 December, which modifies Organic Law 2/2006 of 3 May, governing Education in Spain (LOMLOE) (Ministry of Education 2020), the teaching teams may propose that the student is held back a year when the student does not achieve the objectives and the acquisition of the skills established for this educational level. The teaching team must take into account that promoting the student will not benefit his or her academic progress since it prevents him or her from successfully continuing the following course.

The law establishes that repetition is an exceptional measure and that a decision will be taken once all ordinary measures have been exhausted, such as educational support, reinforcement of basic language and mathematics teachings, non-significant curriculum adaptations, etc., especially for those with special educational support needs (SEN). Specifically, the law establishes that a student can be held back for one year (if they have already repeated a year in Primary) or two (if they have not previously repeated a year) at this stage. Exceptionally, a student who has already been held back one year can repeat the final year of compulsory secondary education to obtain their school leavers' certificate.

The educational measure of being held back for a school year can have various consequences, both positive and negative. In terms of the positive consequences, some research points out that this is an effective method to strengthen the maturity of students and helps them to advance successfully in the academic field (Mathys et al. 2019; Valbuena et al. 2021). In addition to this, it also gives them another opportunity to acquire basic competencies and skills that they did not acquire the previous year and that are necessary for academic success (González and Alvarez 2022). Furthermore, holding a student back a school year is used to recognise the value of those students who have been promoted and have worked hard throughout the year (González and Alvarez 2022). So, it reinforces a culture of hard work (Choi et al. 2018). The negative effects of repeating a year include difficulties adapting to a new group, leading to a breakdown between the student and their peer environment.

Also, it generates low self-esteem and a loss of motivation and future academic expectations since the student is forced to repeat previously studied content. So, on occasion, the results of repeating a year are students who are disconnected from the group and from the school. This diminishes their sense of belonging to the school and social integration, which can lead to school dropout in the long term (González and Alvarez 2022).

Moreover, it is interesting to note that students who are held back for a year have a lower academic self-concept compared to those who are not (Baltasar et al. 2016), understanding academic self-concept as the perception that a student has about their academic capacity that is formed based on their own experience and educational achievements. In addition, repeating a year is not only associated with a higher probability of academic failure (Choi et al. 2018) but is also linked to stigmatisation in their peer group and greater problems of socioemotional and behavioural adjustment (Méndez and Cerezo 2018). Therefore, since repeating a school year usually carries a negative connotation, it is important to assess the consequences of this educational measure in the student's social and academic environment. This is especially relevant in secondary education, as adolescents may feel stigmatised and suffer from socio-emotional problems and adjustment and behavioural difficulties (Rodríguez and Batista 2022).

However, other authors do not single out repeating a year as a purely negative measure. Using data from PISA reports, Marsh (2016) finds that being held back has a small but significant positive effect on mathematical academic self-concept among high school students. Similarly, Ehmke et al. (2010) note that secondary students who have repeated a year displayed a higher academic self-concept one year after this measure was applied. The explanation offered for these data is that repeating students are perceived within the average performance of the class when compared to a new reference group, in which there are younger classmates who have received less instruction.

The pubertal development of adolescence can also have a significant impact on behavioural and psychological processes, so gender can play a moderating role in the differences in internalising problems such as anxiety or depression between girls and boys in adolescence (Achenbach 2019; Carapeto et al. 2022). Boys tend to have lower scores on anxiety or depression and a greater tendency to develop behavioural problems such as aggression and anger. They also show better use of protection resources than girls, such as greater social competence and less awareness of their problems (Aguilar 2020; Gibby et al. 2021). Girls, on the other hand, obtained higher scores in internalising symptomatology (Mesurado et al. 2018; Rey Bruguera et al. 2023), showing higher levels of emotional problems of anxiety and depression. In addition, women and girls have greater difficulties in communicating and expressing their emotions in public, triggering a more negative social self-concept, as well as more unstable support networks. Likewise, they have a greater awareness of their problems. Therefore, women and girls may be more vulnerable to emotional imbalances since social competence acts as a protective factor against these problems and a greater awareness of problems is related to a greater risk of developing emotional problems (Gibby et al. 2021).

However, although some studies find differences between the two sexes (Achenbach 2019; Rey Bruguera et al. 2023), there are also studies that refute the aforementioned data, finding no differences between men and women in the variables of anxiety and depression (Carapeto et al. 2022), and social competence (Portela et al. 2021).

Thus, it seems that presenting a neurodevelopmental disorder such as SpLD (Panadero 2019; Donolato et al. 2022; Lithari 2019), educational decisions such as repeating a year (González and Alvarez 2022; Mathys et al. 2019; Baltasar et al. 2016; Rodríguez and Batista 2022), and gender (Gibby et al. 2021) may have a negative impact on the socioemotional development of adolescents. However, it appears that the individual role of each variable separately with regard to anxiety and depression and personal resources, or whether there are possible interactions between them, is still unclear (Achenbach 2019; Carapeto et al. 2022; Ehmke et al. 2010; González and Alvarez 2022; Mathys et al. 2019; Mesurado et al. 2018; Valbuena et al. 2021).

Therefore, the objective of this study is to analyse the effect of the presence of learning disorders (the presence or absence of SpLD), the application of educational measures such as repeating a school year (whether the student is held back for a year or not), and gender (male or female) in internalising problems (anxiety and depression) and in the personal resources of adolescents (internalising problems, externalising problems, and personal resources). In particular, we are exploring the following hypotheses:

Firstly, we propose four possible effects of the variables 'presenting SpLD', 'repeating a school year', and 'gender' in internalising problems.

1. The first hypothesis indicates that adolescents with SpLD will have higher scores on internalising problems (anxiety and depression) than adolescents without SpLD.
2. The second hypothesis indicates that adolescents who have been held back a year will have higher scores in internalising problems (anxiety and depression) than adolescents who have not repeated any years.
3. The third hypothesis indicates that girls will have higher scores in internalising problems (anxiety and depression) than boys.
4. The fourth hypothesis posits the existence of interactions between presenting SpLD, educational measures, and gender in internalising problems (anxiety and depression)

Secondly, we propose four possible effects about the effect of the variables 'presenting SpLD', 'repeating a school year', and 'gender' in personal resources.

5. The fifth hypothesis indicates that adolescents with SpLD will have lower scores in personal resources (self-esteem, social competence, and problem awareness) than adolescents without SpLD.
6. The sixth hypothesis indicates that adolescents who have been held back a year will have lower scores in personal resources (self-esteem, social competence, and awareness of problems) than adolescents who have not repeated any years.
7. The seventh hypothesis posits that girls will have lower scores in personal resources (self-esteem, social competence, and awareness of problems) than boys.
8. The eighth hypothesis proposes the existence of interactions between presenting SpLD, educational measures, and gender in personal resources (self-esteem, social competence, and awareness of problems).

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

This study was conducted with a sample of 80 students attending 4 schools in the province of Malaga, in Andalusia, Spain. All of them were studying Compulsory Secondary Education (ESO, to use the Spanish acronym). The education system in Spain is divided into three educational stages: preschool (3 to 5 years), primary (6 to 12 years), and secondary (12 to 16 years).

The sample is divided into two groups: one group of students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SpLD Group) and the other group without Specific Learning Disabilities (No SpLD Group). The SpLD group is made up of students diagnosed with dyslexia, dyscalculia, or dysgraphia, and difficulties due to ADHD, borderline intellectual functioning, or delays in language, according to the schools' guidance and counselling departments (Department for Education 2017). The No SpLD group encompasses students who do not present any specific need for educational support and were chosen at random among peers of the same age and sex.

According to age, the SpLD group is made up of 40 adolescents with an average of 14.3 (SD = 1.16). The No SpLD group consists of 40 adolescents of the same age (M = 14.40 and SD = 1.3), matched in age with the previous group, with no statistically significant differences [$t(78) = -0.14$ and $p = 0.879$)]. In terms of gender, the group of male participants constitutes 80% of the sample (32 students), while 20% (8 students) belong to the female group, with no statistically significant differences between the two groups [$\lambda^2(78) = 0.00$ and $p = 1$)]. As for the educational measures received, both groups (SpLD and No SpLD)

have the same proportion, with 24 pupils (60%) having repeated a school year during this stage of school and 16 (40%) having not repeated a school year.

The exclusion criteria used during the selection of participants were the presence of clinical depressive symptoms, neurodevelopmental disability, and students who are from disadvantaged socioeducational backgrounds or with high abilities.

2.2. Instruments

We evaluated internalising problems and the personal resources of the participants using the SENA test (Evaluation of Children and Adolescents System) developed by Fernández-Pinto et al. (2015). The questionnaire uses Likert items with scores ranging from 1 (never or almost never) to 5 (always or almost always) in each item. The SENA Test allows us to know the emotional and behavioural problems of adolescents, as well as the personal resources they possess.

Table 1 describes the scales used, the number of items, the reliability of each item, and the minimum and maximum scores for each factor.

Table 1. Description of the scales and reliability of the instrument.

Scales	N	P_{min}	P_{max}	α_t	α_e
ANX	10	10	50	0.87	0.898
DEP	14	14	70	0.91	0.942
SEL	7	7	35	0.93	0.95
SOC	9	9	45	0.93	0.87
AWE	7	7	35	0.93	0.88

Note: N (number of items), P_{min} (minimum score of the scale), P_{max} (maximum score of the scale), αt (theoretical reliability), αe (reliability found in the study), ANX (anxiety), DEP (depression), SEL (self-esteem), SOC (social competence and integration), and AWE (awareness of the problem).

Internalising problems refer to the variables anxiety (ANX) and depression (DEP). The anxiety (ANX) variable indicates the presence of anxious symptoms, namely, fears, constant worries, emotional tension, and nervousness or over-activation (Fernández-Pinto et al. 2015). The depression (DEP) variable refers to depressive symptomatology such as dysphoric mood, anergia and anhedonia, feelings of vulnerability, and thoughts related to death and suicide (Fernández-Pinto et al. 2015).

Personal resources are the set of habits that people use to feel good, achieve their goals, improve interpersonal relationships, and ensure that what surrounds them is not preventing them from obtaining what they want (Fernández-Pinto et al. 2015). Personal resources are concretised through the variables of self-esteem (SEL), social competence (SOC), and awareness of the problem (AWE). The variable self-esteem (SEL) refers to a person's assessment of themself based on attributed qualities (Fernández-Pinto et al. 2015). The social competence (SOC) variable indicates the ability to decipher, perceive, understand, and respond to the social stimuli that surround us, specifically those that come from other people (Fernández-Pinto et al. 2015). Finally, the variable awareness of the problem (AWE) reflects the ability of a person to perceive the problems that arise in their daily life, be aware of their origin, and whether they need to request external help to deal with them (Fernández-Pinto et al. 2015).

2.3. Procedure

The process of selecting which schools would take part in the study was based on convenience sampling, recruiting schools among those selected from each area of Malaga that expressed interest in the study and volunteered to collaborate. Of these four schools, three are located in the capital, and one is in the wider province of Malaga. They are state-run and state-subsidised private schools located in average socio-cultural areas (Department for Education 2021).

Firstly, we obtained consent from the schools' leadership teams, parents or legal guardians, and the students themselves.

Tests were performed during school hours with each student in their respective school. The tests were conducted individually, and each session lasted approximately 45 min. All this was performed under the supervision of two psychology graduates, who had previously informed the participants of the instructions and confidentiality of their responses. In addition, the research team answered any questions as they arose and also made sure the students were given breaks if they needed them.

This research complies with the Helsinki Code of Ethics (World Medical Association 2015) and was evaluated by the Experimentation Ethics Committee of the University of Málaga, as part of the research project "Psychoeducational Evaluation of Socioemotional Adjustment in Adolescents".

2.4. Statistical Design and Analysis

The research followed a cross-cutting associative and comparative retrospective or ex post facto design, where the independent variables were not manipulated but rather occurred within a natural framework (Ato et al. 2013). The independent variables in the study are the presentation of Specific Learning Disabilities (SpLD or No SpLD), the application of educational measures (repeating the school year or not), and gender (male and female). The dependent variables of the study are internalising problems (anxiety and depression) and personal resources (self-esteem, social integration and competence, and awareness of the problem).

For the statistical analysis, we calculated the corresponding descriptive statistics of the study variables. Previously, we verified the assumptions of normality by means of the Shapiro–Wilk test and homogeneity of the variances by means of the Levene test. Then, we compared the means using 3 × 5 factorial ANOVA between the groups of Specific Learning Disabilities (SpLD and No SpLD), educational measure (repeaters and non-repeaters), and gender (male and female). If the assumption of homogeneity between the inter-group variances was not fulfilled, we applied Welch's test to correct the significance (Ruxton 2006).

If the differences between the means were significant, we calculated the effect size using McDonald's omega (ω) statistic for the main effects of F, where values of 0.01 are considered a small effect, 0.06 is a medium effect, and 0.14 is a large effect, as well as Cohen's *d* for the post hoc effects of Tukey's *t* test, considering the effect sizes as small (|0.10|) moderate (|0.30|), or strong (|0.50|), according to Cohen's (1992) criterion.

Statistical analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 29 (IBM 2021).

3. Results

3.1. Internalising Symptomatology

We first present the descriptive statistics of the factors for internalising variables (see Table 2). Regarding the main factors in anxiety, we see that students with SpLD (M = 25.30 and SD = 8.84) show a higher score than their No SpLD peers (M = 19.40 and SD = 6.55). Furthermore, adolescents who had to repeat a school year (M = 24.29 and SD = 6.44) had higher values in anxiety than those who were not held back a year (M = 20.57 and SD = 9.39). Finally, girls show higher values in anxiety (M = 24.50 and SD = 11.43) than boys (M = 21.80 and SD = 7.31).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of factors for internalising problems.

	SpLD				Educational Measure				Gender			
	SpLD		No SpLD		REP		No REP		Male		Female	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
ANX	25.30	8.84	19.4	6.55	24.29	6.44	20.57	9.39	21.80	7.31	24.50	11.43
DEP	31.20	15.34	20.90	8.96	27.68	10.70	24.57	15.62	25.66	11.88	27.62	19.13

Note: ANX (anxiety), DEP (depression).

Regarding the effect of the main factors on depression, we found that students with SpLD have higher scores (M = 31.20 and SD = 15.34) than their No SpLD peers (M = 20.90 and SD = 8.96). Furthermore, adolescents who had to repeat a school year have higher scores (M = 27.68 and SD = 10.70) than those who were not held back a year (M = 24.57 and SD = 15.62). Finally, the results indicate that girls obtain higher scores for depression (M = 27.62 and SD = 19.13) than boys (M = 25.66 and SD = 11.88).

As shown in Table 3, the Specific Learning Disabilities variable presents significant differences in anxiety [F (1, 72) = 9.03 and p = 0.004; t (1.72) = 3.01 and p = 0.004] and depression [F (1, 72) = 11.86 and p = 0.000; t (1.72) = 3.44 and p = 0.000], with a medium effect size for anxiety (ω = 0.078, and d = 0.695) and large for depression (ω = 0.115 and d = 0.795). The variable educational measures does not show significant differences in anxiety [F (1, 72) = 2.37 and p = 0.128] or depression [F (1, 72) = 0.07 and p = 0.792]. Similarly, the variable gender does not show statistically significant differences in anxiety [F (1, 72) = 2.79 and p = 0.099] or depression [F (1, 72) = 0.166 and p = 0.685].

Table 3. Results of the factorial ANOVA analysis of internalising behaviours.

		ANOVA			Post Hoc		
		F	***p***	**ω**	***t***	***p***	***d***
ANX	SpLD	9.03	0.004	0.078	3.01	0.004	0.695
	Rep	2.37	0.128				
	Gender	2.79	0.099				
	Int SpLD X Rep	14.09	0.000	0.128			
DEP	SpLD	11.86	0.000	0.115	3.44	0.000	0.797
	Rep	0.07	0.792				
	Gender	0.166	0.685				
	Int SpLD X Rep	5.88	0.018	0.051			

Note: ANX (anxiety), DEP (depression), F (Fisher-Snedecor's F), ω (McDonald's omega), t (Tukey's ŧ), p (significance level), and d (Cohen's d).

The results of the analysis of the interaction between the main factors (see Table 3) indicate that the interaction between anxiety and repeating a school year [F (1, 72) = 14.09 and p = 0.000] is statistically significant, with a medium effect size (ω = 0.128). Likewise, the interaction between depression and repeating a school year is significant [F (1, 72) = 5.88 and p = 0.018], with a medium effect size (ω = 0.051).

Next, we present the descriptive statistics and comparisons of means for the factors that present interaction, in other words, between Specific Learning Disabilities and educational measures (see Tables 4 and 5, respectively).

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of the interactions between main factors in internalising problems.

	SpLD				No SpLD			
	REP		No REP		REP		No REP	
	M	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**
ANX	23.80	6.89	27.50	11.04	25.10	5.74	16.30	4.67
DEP	28.80	10.41	34.90	20.54	25.90	11.33	18.20	6.12

Note: ANX (anxiety), DEP (depression), REP (repeating a year), and no REP (not repeating a year).

For the anxiety variable, the comparisons between groups that are significant are shown in Table 5. Both the repeating SpLD group (M = 23.80 and SD = 6.89) and the non-repeating SpLD group (M = 27.50 and SD = 11.04) have significantly greater anxiety than the No SpLD group (M = 16.03 and SD = 4.67).

Table 5. Post hoc comparisons of the interactions between main factors in internalising problems.

	G1	G2	*t*	*p*	*d*
ANX	Non-Rep SpLD	Non-Rep No SpLD	4.92	0.000	1.564
	Rep SpLD	Non-Rep No SpLD	3.71	0.002	1.051
	Non-Rep No SpLD	Rep No SpLD	3.69	0.002	1.224
	Rep SpLD	Non-Rep No SpLD	4.27	0.000	1.358
DEP	Rep SpLD	Non-Rep No SpLD	3.03	0.017	0.858

Note: ANX (anxiety), DEP (depression), REP (repeating a year), and no REP (not repeating a year).

Likewise, for the depression variable, comparisons between groups are also significant (see Table 5). The repeating SpLD group obtained higher scores (M = 28.80 and SD = 10.41) than the non-repeating SpLD group (M = 25.90 and SD = 11.33) and the non-repeating No SpLD group (M = 18.20 and SD = 6.12). However, the group that obtained the highest scores for depression is the non-repeating SpLD group (M = 34.90 and SD = 20.54).

Finally, Figures 1 and 2 present an analysis of the interactions between the significant factors for the variables of anxiety and depression, respectively.

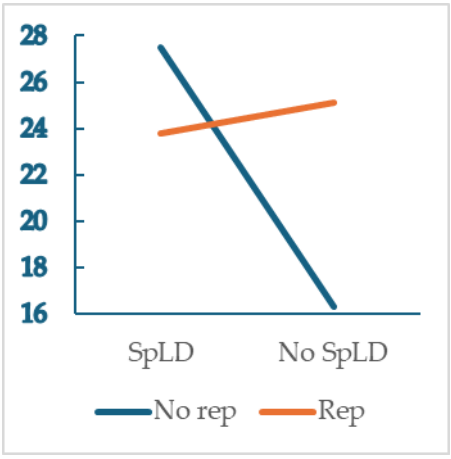


Figure 1. Interaction of SpLD and educational measures in anxiety.

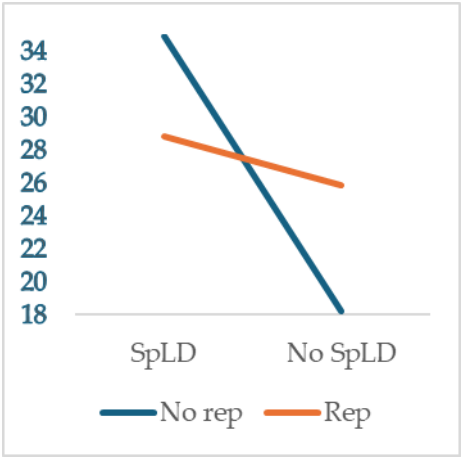


Figure 2. Interaction SpLD and educational measures in depression.

In terms of anxiety (see Figure 1), we see that the variable SpLD (SpLD or No SpLD) is significant because the slope of the line is relevant. Educational measures (repeating the school year or not) are not relevant since the line is almost horizontal. However, when the two factors are combined, a significant interaction appears, as both lines intersect,

indicating that non-repeating SpLD adolescents present greater anxiety than repeating SpLD adolescents.

In relation to depression (see Figure 2), on the other hand, the variable SpLD shows a significant effect, since the slope of the line is substantial. On the contrary, the educational measures variable is not seen to be significant, since the slope of the line is very slight. However, the two lines meet, which indicates that when SpLD and educational measures are combined, a significant interaction appears. Therefore, adolescents with SpLD who do not repeat the school year show higher levels of depression than their peers who do repeat.

3.2. Personal Resources

Below, we present the descriptive statistics for the factors of personal resources (see Table 6). With regard to the main factors of self-esteem, we found that students with SpLD have lower scores (M = 23.70 and SD = 8.97) than adolescents with no SpLD (M = 29.60 and SD = 5.01). Adolescents who have had to repeat a school year have lower scores (M = 25.79 and SD = 6.52) than their peers who have not been held back a year (M = 27.40 and SD = 8.81). Similarly, girls show lower scores (M = 24.50 and SD = 10.14) compared to boys (M = 27.17 and SD = 7.10).

Table 6. Descriptive statistics of personal resources.

	SpLD				**Educational Measures**				**Gender**			
	SpLD		**No SpLD**		**REP**		**No REP**		**Male**		**Female**	
	M	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**
SEL	23.70	8.97	29.60	5.01	25.79	6.52	27.40	8.81	27.17	7.10	24.50	10.14
SOC	31.80	8.31	36.90	5.02	34.24	7.07	34.38	5.57	34.38	7.19	34.06	7.91
AWE	18.00	7.08	14.30	5.15	17.39	5.88	15.05	6.76	15.94	6.21	17.06	7.38

Note: SEL (self-esteem); SOC (social competence); AWE (awareness of the problem); REP (repeat school year), no REP (no repeat of school year).

Conversely, regarding the main factors of social competence, students with SpLD have lower scores (M = 31.80 and SD = 8.31) than students without SpLD (M = 36.90 and SD = 5.02). Furthermore, adolescents who have never had to repeat a school year have slightly higher scores in social competence (M = 34.38 and SD = 5.57) than those who have been held back a year (M = 34.24 and SD = 7.07). Likewise, the group of boys presented higher levels of social competence (M = 34.38 and SD = 7.19) than the group of girls (M = 34.06 and SD = 7.91).

Finally, regarding the main factors of awareness of the problem, the No SpLD group presented lower scores (M = 14.30 and SD = 5.15) compared to the SpLD group (M = 18.00 and SD = 7.08). So, adolescents who have had to repeat a school year have higher scores (M = 17.39 and SD = 5.88) than their peers who have not been held back a year (M = 15.05 and SD = 6.76). Similarly, boys show lower scores (M = 15.94 and SD = 6.21) compared to girls (M = 17.06 and SD = 7.38).

Table 7 shows that the variable Specific Learning Disabilities shows significant differences in self-esteem [F (1, 72) = 11.73 and $p = 0.000$; t (1.72) = 3.43 and $p = 0.000$], social competence [F (1, 72) = 11.50 and $p = 0.001$; t (1.72) = 3.39 and $p = 0.001$] and awareness of the problem [F (1, 72) = 4.99 and $p = 0.028$; t (1.72) = 2.23 and $p = 0.028$], with a large effect size for self-esteem ($\omega = 0.113$, and $d = -0.792$) and social competence ($\omega = 0.109$ and $d = -0.785$) and medium for awareness of the problem ($\omega = 0.046$ and $d = 0.517$).

On the contrary, the variable of educational measures is not statistically significant with respect to the variables of self-esteem [F (1, 72) = 0.03; $p = 0.873$], social competence [F (1, 72) = 0.52; $p = 0.472$], and awareness of the problem [F (1, 72) = 3.73; $p = 0.050$]. Likewise, the variable gender is not significant in any of the variables of self-esteem [F (1, 72) = 2.91 and $p = 0.092$], social competence [F (1, 72) = 0.08 and $p = 0.778$], and awareness of the problem [F (1, 72) = 1.15 and $p = 0.287$].

Table 7. Results of factorial ANOVA analysis for personal resources.

		ANOVA			Post Hoc		
		F	*p*	ω	*t*	*p*	*d*
SEL	SpLD	11.73	0.000	0.113	3.43	0.000	−0.792
	Rep	0.03	0.873				
	Gender	2.91	0.092				
	Int SpLD X Rep	6.40	0.013	0.057			
SOC	SpLD	11.50	0.001	0.109	3.39	0.001	−0.785
	Rep	0.52	0.472				
	Gender	0.08	0.778				
	Int SpLD X Rep	7.17	0.009	0.064			
AWE	SpLD	4.99	0.028	0.046	2.23	0.028	0.517
	Rep	3.73	0.050				
	Gender	1.15	0.287				
	Int SpLD X Rep	4.12	0.046	0.036			

Note: ANX (anxiety), SOC (social competence), AWE (awareness of the problem), F (Fisher–Snedecor's F), ω (McDonald's omega), *t* (Tukey's t), *p* (significance level), and *d* (Cohen's d).

Next, we present the descriptive statistics and comparisons of means for the factors that show some interaction, in other words, between Specific Learning Disabilities and educational measures (see Tables 8 and 9, respectively).

Table 8. Descriptive statistics of the interactions between the main factors of personal resources.

	SpLD				No SpLD			
	REP		No REP		REP		No REP	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
SEL	25.30	7.25	21.40	10.92	26.70	5.17	31.10	4.27
SOC	33.80	7.79	28.60	8.31	34.90	5.85	37.90	4.28
AWE	17.50	6.36	18.80	8.21	17.20	5.18	12.80	4.50

Note: SEL (self-esteem); SOC (social competence); AWE (awareness of the problem); REP (repeat school year), and no REP (not repeat school year).

Table 9. Post hoc comparisons of the interactions between the main factors of personal resources.

	G1	G2	*t*	*p*	*d*
SEL	Rep SpLD	Non-Rep No SpLD	2.93	0.023	0.830
SOC	Non-Rep SpLD	Non-Rep No SpLD	4.42	0.000	1.404
AWE	Rep SpLD	Non-Rep No SpLD	2.76	0.036	0.780
	Non-Rep SpLD	Non-Rep No SpLD	4.34	0.000	1.378

Note: SEL (self-esteem); SOC (social competence); AWE (awareness of the problem); REP (repeat school year), and no REP (not repeat school year).

For the variable of self-esteem, the comparisons between groups that are significant are shown in Table 9. The group with the lowest self-esteem is composed of students with SpLD who have not repeated a school year (M = 21.40 and SD = 10.92), followed by the repeating SpLD group (M = 5.30 and SD = 7.25), the repeating No SpLD group (M = 26.70 and SD = 5.17), and the non-repeating no SpLD group (M = 31.10 and SD = 4.27), the latter being the one with the highest self-esteem.

Significant contrasts between groups were also found for the variable of social competence (see Table 9). Again, the non-repeating SpLD group presents significantly lower scores (M = 28.60 and SD = 8.31) compared to both their peers who have been held back a year at some point (M = 33.80 and SD = 7.79) and the repeating No SpLD group (M = 34.90 and SD = 5.85) and non-repeating No SpLD group (M = 37.90 and SD = 4.28).

Finally, the contrasts between groups that are significant in the variable awareness of the problem are shown in Table 9. The non-repeating No SpLD group obtained lower scores (M = 12.80 and SD = 4.50) than the repeating No SpLD group (M = 17.20 and SD = 5.18) and the repeating SpLD group (M = 17.50 and SD = 6.36). However, the group that obtained the highest scores for awareness of the problem is the non-repeating SpLD group (M = 18.80 and SD = 8.21).

Finally, Figures 3–5 present an analysis of the interactions between the significant factors for the variables of self-esteem, social competence, and awareness of the problem, respectively.

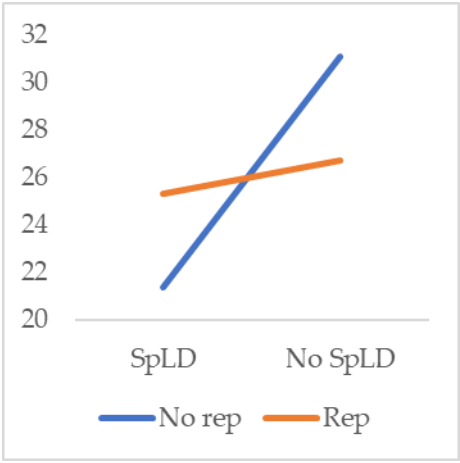


Figure 3. Interaction of SpLD and educational measures in self-esteem.

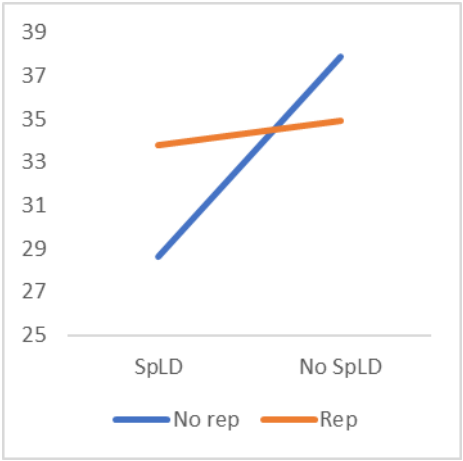


Figure 4. Interaction of SpLD and educational measures in social competence.

Regarding the variable of self-esteem (see Figure 3), we see that SpLD has a significant effect, since the slope of the resulting line is notable. However, educational measures are not as relevant, presenting a practically horizontal line. Nonetheless, since the two lines intersect, a significant interaction appears when both factors combine. This indicates that students with SpLD who are not held back a school year have lower self-esteem than those with SpLD who do repeat a year.

In the variable of social competence (see Figure 4), the slope of the line for SpLD is notable, meaning that this variable has a significant effect. Likewise, a prominent slope can be seen for the variable educational measures, again indicating a significant effect. In addition, the lines of the two factors intersect, demonstrating that a significant interaction appears when the variables SpLD and educational measures are combined. Therefore,

adolescents with SpLD who do not repeat the school year show higher levels of social competence than their peers who do repeat.

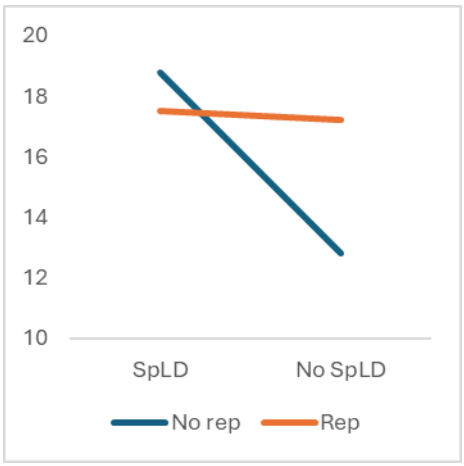


Figure 5. Interaction of SpLD and educational measures in awareness of the problem.

Finally, in relation to the variable of awareness of the problem (see Figure 5), again, both the variable SpLD and the variable educational measures have a significant effect, resulting in two lines with a substantial slope. Likewise, we see a point where these lines meet, indicating that the combination of both factors results in a significant interaction. This indicates that students with SpLD who are held back a school year have a lower awareness of the problem than those with SpLD who repeat a year.

4. Discussion

The primary objective of this study is to analyse the effect of specific learning disabilities (the presence or absence of SpLD), the application of educational measures such as repeating a school year (whether the student is held back for a year or not), and gender (male or female) on internalising problems (anxiety and depression) and the personal resources of adolescents (self-esteem, social competence, and awareness of the problem).

Firstly, regarding the hypotheses about the effect of the variables 'presenting SpLD', 'repeating a year', and 'gender' in internalising symptomatology, we found that students with SpLD have greater anxiety and depression problems than their peers (hypothesis one). We also found that adolescents who have been held back a year at some point have more internalising problems than their peers who have not repeated a year (hypothesis two). However, the results do not indicate significant differences between girls and boys in internalising problems (hypothesis three), so we cannot maintain this hypothesis. Finally, regarding the interactions between variables (hypothesis four), we found interactions between repeating a school year and presenting SpLD, so adolescents with this disorder who repeat a year have lower levels of anxiety and depression than adolescents with SpLD who are not held back a year. In contrast, no interaction was found for the variable of gender.

Other studies also indicate that students with SpLD are at greater risk of socioemotional imbalances, specifically anxiety and depression (Donolato et al. 2022; Marchesi et al. 2018; Zuppardo et al. 2020). Thus, internalising symptoms are more prevalent among students with SpLD than in the rest of the population.

With regard to the effect of repeating a school year on internalising problems, several studies indicate the negative effect of being held back a year during this stage of school (Choi et al. 2018; González and Alvarez 2022; Méndez and Cerezo 2018; Baltasar et al. 2016; Rodríguez and Batista 2022). In this sense, the results obtained in the present study generally support the findings of previous studies.

However, regarding gender, the results obtained do not bear out the hypothesis, since there are no significant differences between girls and boys for internalising symptoms. In this aspect, findings vary, with some studies supporting the results obtained in this research (Carapeto et al. 2022) and others indicating a clear gender gap in the variables of anxiety and depression (Achenbach 2019; Mesurado et al. 2018; Rey Bruguera et al. 2023). Thus, this study indicates that internalising symptoms occur equally in both sexes, with no significant distinction between them. It seems that gender is not as relevant a variable as the presence or absence of emotional problems in students with SpLD.

Finally, the interactions found between the variable of Specific Learning Disabilities and the variable educational measures indicate that students with SpLD who repeat a school year have lower levels of anxiety and depression than their peers who do not repeat the year. Therefore, the present study points out the benefits of holding students back with SpLD, unlike students who do not have SpLD, for whom repetition has mainly negative consequences. The discrepancy between the SpLD and No SpLD groups in the effect of repeating a year may be due to the fact that, having been held back, students with Specific Learning Disabilities have the opportunity to face the same academic demands again, this time with more time to complete their learning and acquire basic skills and abilities that they did not have the previous year. This would make it easier for them to move forward successfully in academia (González and Alvarez 2022; Mathys et al. 2019; Valbuena et al. 2021). In this same regard, the negative consequences of being held back that are observed in students without SpLD may be due to the fact that they do not need one more year to acquire the necessary skills to advance successfully in the academic field, so we would not only be halting the school development of these students, but forcing them to repeat learning that they already acquired the previous year.

Secondly, with regard to the hypotheses about the effect of the variables 'presenting SpLD', 'repeating a school year', and 'gender' on personal resources, we found that students with SpLD have lower self-esteem and social competence and greater awareness of the problem than their peers without SpLD (hypothesis 5). In addition, students who have been held back a year present a poorer use of personal resources than students who have not repeated a year (hypothesis 6). However, the seventh hypothesis cannot be accepted because there are no significant differences between girls and boys in the use of personal resources. It may also be that this beneficial character is transitory and temporary but not noticeable in the long term, so the effect of repeating a year fades away. Some studies (López Rupérez et al. 2021; Martín 2007) indicate that repetition has an effect in the short term but is not noticeable throughout the student's school life and in adult life. In this sense, students who repeat a year describe their experience in a qualitative way in a negative way, even despite later being successful in their studies. Conversely, regarding the interactions between factors (hypothesis eight), the results show an interaction between the variables 'presenting SpLD' and 'Educational measures', but not in the variable 'gender'. This indicates that the repeating SpLD group has greater self-esteem and social competence and less awareness of the problem than the non-repeating SpLD group.

These data coincide with other research that argues that students with SpLD are more vulnerable to affective-motivational problems due to the impact of school failure on the construction of positive self-identity (Lithari 2019; Swanson and Vaughn 2016). In addition, the presence of earning disabilities is proposed as a predictor of problems in interpersonal relationships (Panadero 2019; Zuppardo et al. 2020) because students with such disabilities constantly experience feelings of inferiority, frustration, shame, and insufficiency in the academic environment.

Likewise, students who are held back during this stage of education have more damaging scores in self-esteem, social competence, and awareness of the problem than those who move on to the next year. Again, the research highlights the negative consequences of repeating a school year on the students' personal lives, since repeating a school year involves adapting to a new group of peers, which can cause a breakdown between the student and their environment of peers, the loss of a feeling of belonging to the school,

and dropout (González and Alvarez 2022). In addition, repeating students have a lower academic self-concept compared to non-repeating students (Baltasar et al. 2016).

Regarding the impact of gender on personal resources, the present study found no significant differences between girls and boys. Similarly, Portela et al. (2021) indicate the similarity between both groups in the use of personal resources, specifically social competence. However, other research points to the moderating role of gender on personal resources (Aguilar 2020; Gibby et al. 2021), noting that women have a worse self-concept and social skills and a greater awareness of the problem compared to men.

Finally, the interactions found between having SpLD and having been held back a year at some point, on the one hand, rule out the interaction of the variable gender and also indicate that students with Specific Learning Disabilities show a better use of personal resources after repeating a year. The fact that adolescents with SpLD who repeat a year have greater self-esteem and social competence and less awareness of the problem than their peers who do not repeat may be because this educational measure is an effective method to strengthen students' learning, and this helps them to advance successfully in the academic field and to present higher levels of self-efficacy (Mathys et al. 2019; Valbuena et al. 2021). Leaving behind feelings of school failure and inferiority with classmates has a positive impact on the student's self-concept (Marsh 2016) and on their integration with peers (Ehmke et al. 2010).

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the present study found that adolescents with Specific Learning Disabilities have greater anxiety and depression problems and ineffective use of personal resources than adolescents without such disabilities. In addition, it indicates that students who are held back at some point during this stage of education display more internalising problems and fewer personal resources than their peers who move up a year. However, there are no significant differences between girls and boys, either in internalising symptomatology or in the use of personal resources. Likewise, the results show that there is interaction between having SpLD and repeating a school year, indicating that students with SpLD who are held back a year have lower levels of anxiety and depression, greater self-esteem and social competence, and less awareness of the problem than their peers who do not repeat a year.

Finally, regarding the educational implications of this study, it seems that students with SpLD could benefit from repeating a year in specific situations by reducing their internalising problems and improving the use of their personal resources in the short term. The research highlights the impact of repeating a school year, as there may be possible reasons why being held back a year favours students with learning disabilities compared to their peers. These particular situations must be assessed by the teaching staff, since it is not an ordinary measure, such as school support or reinforcement. After repeating, students with SpLD have the opportunity to once again face certain academic demands after having acquired basic competencies and skills, facilitating successful progress in the academic field (González and Alvarez 2022; Mathys et al. 2019; Valbuena et al. 2021). Similarly, the academic self-concept of these students increases (Ehmke et al. 2010), as repeating SpLD students are perceived within the average level of academic achievement of the class (Marsh 2016). Likewise, no longer continuously facing experiences of school failure, having a better academic self-concept, and perceiving themselves within the peer group means that the maladaptive attributional patterns that students with SpLD usually present decrease, no longer attributing failures to internal and stable causes (such as capacity) and successes to external and unstable causes (such as luck or help of the teacher) compared to their peers (Martín et al. 2023). Therefore, students with SpLD who repeat a year may see their maturity strengthened in the short term, having one more year to acquire the necessary skills to tackle content and academic requirements. This increases their academic performance and self-concept in the school environment, perceived within the group of peers, modifying their attributional patterns and favouring their social integration. This diminishes their awareness of the problem and favours the extinction of behavioural or

externalising problems. Similarly, their levels of anxiety and depression may decrease, as they do not repeatedly face experiences of failure.

Finally, this investigation calls into question whether repetition is oversimplified as a measure that is only harmful or beneficial in itself. This is an exceptional educational measure and students who repeat a year often describe their experience in a negative way. Furthermore, its long-term effect is questionable, since it turns out to be insignificant throughout the student's life. Thus, we propose studying with greater rigour the profile of each student when deciding whether to apply some form of educational measure because, as pointed out. While students with SpLD might benefit in certain situations from the consequences of having an additional year to tackle the same academic content, those who do not have such learning disabilities are negatively influenced.

Finally, we must indicate the limitations and future lines of research emanating from this study. On the one hand, the proportion of students is unevenly distributed between the two sexes, since SpLD is more present among boys. This may have led to a statistical artefact whereby the gender differences in the dependent variables have not been statistically significant. On the other hand, the study sample is small, since it is a question of studying a specific population with a neurobiological disorder that represents between 5 and 17% of the population and which has been further reduced by the criteria of selection and exclusion, since accessing the sample is complex. Therefore, research could be carried out in collaboration with other regional public bodies and with access to a larger sample. A possible limitation could be given by the age range studied, since there are some studies that indicate that the differences may be negligible between groups as adolescents advance in maturational development in more advanced adolescence, so the age of this study could be extended. In addition, internalising emotional problems improves their diagnosis when there are external informants for the student, so it would be interesting to include measures from peers, teachers, and family.

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