

## Chapter 3

# THE PHENOMENON OF CHILD LEARNING: A PSYCHOPEDAGOGIC PERSPECTIVE

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## 1. CHILD LEARNING: AN AUTHENTIC HUMAN PHENOMENON

In a search for the basis and origin of the phenomenon of child learning, writers such as Guyer, Hillebrand, Bollinger, Sonnekus, and others show that learning is a human *mode* by which the child finds *himself in the world*. As an original human mode of living, it is a potentiality which is given with child-being. The child learns because he is *human* and he learns as a human. Therefore, the phenomenon of child learning cannot be reduced to anything other than the fact that the child is an *openness-for* and a *being-directed* to the world (intentionality).

Child learning is an *intentional* phenomenon which shows itself from the beginning as an authentic mode of living. In the original and everyday relationship of the child with the world, the child directs himself in his *openness* to fellow humans and to the things which surround him. In this way the child not only *discovers* himself in the world but he also undergoes or *experiences* something or someone which is not himself. Such "I-discovery" and "world-discovery", which already take place in the earliest moments of child existence, are an indication of the child's possibility or potential to learn.

Langeveld, who has done pioneering work with respect to achieving a "near-to life" anthropology of the child, shows that the child is *someone who himself will be and become*. The fact that the child will be and become someone is the basis on which the phenomenon of child learning rests as well as the driving force fundamental to his *will* to learn.

The origin of the phenomenon of learning is given with child-being as an initiative-of-relationships (Buytendijk). The child's learning initiative implies effort since the child wants to and ought to bring this initiative to actualization. Learning has a task charac-

ter and requires an active participation in that with which the child stands in a learning relationship. According to Langeveld, the child has the task of overcoming his given helplessness to arrive at security which provides him with an emotional readiness to take part in the world. The event of child becoming, as this is actualized by means of moments of helplessness, security, and exploration (Langeveld), is rooted in the fact of the child's wanting to become and learn as well as in the stable, trusting relationship of education which exists between child and adult. To be a child and to become an adult requires sustained educative support because the child cannot become or learn as he should without the accompaniment of the adult.

Even though the actualization of the learning event resides in the child's self initiative and is made possible by his given learning potential, it still prescribes the task of education. The educator, who can vary from the parent at home to the teacher at school, notices the child's will to learn and directs an appeal to the child to actualize his learning potential. By his educative instruction, the adult involves the child spontaneously, deliberately, or more formally (school) precisely because of the fact that the adult anticipates the child's becoming adult in his possibility to learn; thus, upbringing, becoming, and learning are basic givens in the life of the child and form the foundation for his becoming adult.

To further clarify the original phenomenon of child learning, it is necessary to direct attention to the fact that the child's involvement with the world always takes its course from a *situation*. A child learns because he takes part in a situation (Langeveld). In the words of Linschoten, a situation is a given whole of connected relations which must be dealt with. When the child learns, he acts by directing himself in his openness to the givens which make an appeal from the situation and by himself giving sense and meaning to them. This act of *giving meaning* to the *experienced* learning material in the situation confirms the child's *willingness* to learn and acquire a grasp of it. Learning is pre-eminently the taking of a personal position by the child, as a totality-in-function, directed to an exploring, conquering, and mastering of the life-world. It is aimed at the *discovery of meaning*, at the exposure of the meaning the life-world holds within itself, and by this, the life-world acquires *meaning-for-me*. Each child shows a given *intention to learn*. By this, the child proclaims his open possibility and



gives concrete form to the fact that he is on the way and is someone who accepts *joint-responsibility* for the actualization of his becoming and learning. Bollinger also characterizes the phenomenon of child learning as a *phenomenon of becoming* since the child can not *change* as he should if he doesn't *learn* (italics added). As already mentioned, it is an irrefutable fact that an *adequate* change by the child is only brought about by *upbringing*. Becoming, as a change which appears in the child's life, can only be understood if we interpret it within the context of an event of *double unlocking* (Klafki). To be able to become, the child must learn. To learn, the child must unlock reality for him, and the adult, in turn, must unlock reality for the child. In other words, a child actualizes his becoming to the extent that he learns to unlock reality, but this event can only be adequately actualized if the adult accompanies the child by his instruction. As the child succeeds in making the unlocked content his own, he is noticeably changed in that he progressively *behaves* as an adult.

The following summary of some essential aspects of child learning, as an authentic human phenomenon, is presented:

- 1.1 Child learning is an original mode of living by which the child finds him<sup>self</sup> as a human being in the world;
- 1.2 Learning is a phenomenon which is a confirmation of the child's openness-for and being-directed-to reality (intentionality);
- 1.3 The child's learning act is rooted in the child's wanting to be and become someone himself;
- 1.4 Learning is a given human potentiality which the child must continually actualize;
- 1.5 Child learning is a taking of a personal position by the child as a totality-in-function;
- 1.6 As it is actualized by the child, learning is a matter of meaning-discovery and the giving of meaning to reality;
- 1.7 Learning is basically a phenomenon of becoming since the child, because of his will to learn, is also someone who will become;
- 1.8 Learning has its origin in the child's own initiative but the child is always dependent on upbringing for its proper actualization. Without upbringing, the child cannot learn as he should and also cannot become a proper adult. The meaning (sense)

of the actualization of the learning event is thus found in the child's becoming a proper adult.

In light of the above brief grounding of child learning, the question now arises, what is the psychopedagogic meaning of the above?

## 2. LEARNING AS A MODE OF MANIFESTATION OF THE PSYCHIC LIFE OF THE CHILD-IN-EDUCATION

It has already been stressed that becoming and learning are the ways in which the psychic life of the child in the situation of upbringing is manifested, that they are equally primordial given with the psychic life, and that the child becomes as he learns and learns as he becomes. Thus, to become an adult, the child must learn, and the child's initiative to learn is seated in his wanting to be grown-up.

Although a distinction is made between becoming and learning for the purpose of scientific description, it must be constantly held in view that, in their origin and actualization, both form a unity in the psychic life. Therefore, during the following explanation of learning, its meaningful connection with becoming will necessarily be mentioned.

### 2.1 The child himself learns:

Learning, as a particular *mode of living* of the child-in-education, is observable in the fact that it is a *potentiality* which is given with the psychic life. For this reason, learning is qualified as a manifestation of the psychic life. This potentiality, however, involves the task of actualization. To be able to learn, the child must *actualize* his learning potentialities. This includes an active participation in the learning event by the child himself which is the concrete manifestation of his *initiative to learn*. On the other hand, the child is dependent on the educative assistance of the adult for the *adequate* actualization of his learning potentialities. The adult appeals to the child to learn and also accompanies him in its actualization. That is, effective learning rests on the child's participation and on the support-giving instruction received from the adult (parent or teacher).



The child's openness and directedness to the world find confirmation in the original learning relationship with reality. But, on what foundation does this original learning activity of the child lie? That is, what carries the learning activity of the child in the actualization of his initiative to learn? From a psychopedagogic perspective, the child learns from the beginning on the basis of the actualization of the different essences of his psychic life, namely, *experiencing, willing, lived-experiencing, knowing, and behaving*. To the extent that these essences are actualized, it is said that the learning activity of the child comes into motion and is actualized.

To first take a closer look at the actualization of the learning event by the child, it is important to keep in mind the following meaningfully connected aspects of the *course of learning*: when the child learns, he *experiences* reality in the sense that he is involved with the learning material, etc. By experiencing, the child is not only *aware* of himself but especially of that with which he stands in a (learning) relationship. This occasions several *modes* in the psychic life, such as sensing, attending, perceiving, thinking, etc., to come actively into *motion*.

To experience reality means, in the first place, to be or to become aware of that with which I am in contact. Such a being-aware of the learning content is, indeed a *sensing* of it. The sensing of *something*, such as learning content, a definite object, or a fellow person appearing in the child's field of vision, can sharpen *attending* whereby the child purposefully perceives, thinks, remembers, etc. — depending on the extent to which the child's emotional life is stable (feelings of security, safety, self-confidence, etc.) That is, a stable sensing, which is strongly *emotional* in nature, primarily makes it possible for the child to give *attention* to. This enables the child to know and eventually possess the learning content on a *knowing* or cognitive level by means of perceiving, thinking, remembering, etc.

However, the child in his experiencing of reality, especially while learning, also is propelled by his *willing* to learn. A child only learns adequately if he discloses a willingness to that end. This *will-power* or strength of will supports the child in effectively experiencing and this implies that the child's willing determines the quality of his experiencing of the learning material.

If the child's willing is weak, his readiness to stay concerned with the learning content, thus the adequacy of attending, is also

weakened. Such a weak willing leads the child's emotions to stagnate on the level of sensing so that attending fluctuates, interests fade, concentration is inadequate, etc. In this connection, there is mention of *emotional lability* in the child's sensing which leads to ineffective learning. A stable sensing, the outcome of which is stability in the emotional life (free of tension, certainty, self-confidence, peacefulness, control, etc.) is the basis on which effective learning rests. Thus, the child's willing to learn is defined by his emotional (affective) life and so is how the child *lived-experiences* the learning situation and all that it encompasses. Stability in the emotional life of the child means a lived-experiencing of security, certainty, trust, etc. and this forms the basis for a stable sensing and thus for effective learning. In contrast to this, a labile sensing is characterized by "unrest" or problems in the emotional life of the child by which the course of learning is obstructed or even miscarries.

When the child's emotions are stable, he can attend and direct himself knowingly (cognitively) to the learning material by perceiving it, thinking about it, analysing it, ordering it, and finally integrating (remembering) it into his existing knowledge or *possessed-experience*. Such "making one's own" of the learning content by the child means that he not only lived-experiences this as meaningful but that he invests it with meaning. It follows logically that if the child's emotional lived-experiencing is stable, his knowing lived-experiencing by perceiving, thinking, etc. is *ordered* and he lived-experiences meaning in the totality of the learning event; it also means that the child's willing to get the learning content under control will be continually strengthened.

When experiencing the learning content from the level of sensing via attending to the actualization of the cognitive modes of learning, there is mention that the child *lived-experiences* the *experienced content*. The child gives *meaning* to what is experienced as learning content on an emotional as well as a knowing level. He lived-experiences meaning in the experienced learning content and is emotionally prepared by that to venture, to explore, and to learn to *know*, and is busy remaining knowingly or cognitively with the content. This meaning experienced in the learning content "congeals", as it were, in the child's lived-experiencing on the basis of the personal meaning he gives to it. The child lived-experiences the content as valuable, useful, serviceable, interest-



ing, or as senseless (e.g., too difficult, above my ability, of little meaning, etc.) and the sedimentation of this, with its positive or negative meaning, becomes integrated into his existing possessed experience. The child's possessed experience, in so far as these meanings apply to the learning, include both the *positive* and *negative* lived-experienced meaning of the learning event. Thus, we can see that a child who achieves adequately in school has generally invested his learning activities (experiences) with positive meaning, although it can happen that he periodically lived-experiences certain learning situations (content) as less meaningful. In contrast, a child with learning problems is someone who experiences problems in the learning situation, these experiences are invested with negative meaning (negative lived-experiences), and he gets stuck in the learning situation. As a child's sensing is labilized, he finds it difficult effectively to attend, and he is unable to adequately perceive, think, and remember in his directedness to the learning material. Thus, a child really learns to the extent that he succeeds in learning to *know* the learning material on a cognitive level.

To *know* the learning material assumes that the child actualizes his knowing modes of learning in ordered ways. The actualization of the knowing modes of learning (e.g., perceiving, thinking, etc.) makes it possible for the child, in an ordered way, to analyse, to think about, to systematize, to structure, and eventually to integrate the meaningful learning content into his existing possessed experience. Such *knowledge* of the content, however, always rests on a stable sensing and adequate attending, both of which accompany the effective learning of the child.

If the child knows the learning content, he not only possesses the specific piece of material, but he is in a position to use and employ the knowledge or skills in other learning (life) situations. Because of the newly acquired knowledge, which becomes meaningfully integrated into the child's existing possessed experience, he has the power to continually behave differently. As the child learns more, his possessed experience is broadened, and there is mention that his *behaviours* in school, at home, or wherever he might be found, are more autonomous, responsible, and of greater mobility in different spheres.

By learning, the child continually changes his *behaviours* in the direction of a more adult way of life. However, the total of the

learning activity is carried by the fact that the child *experiences*, *wills*, *lived-experiences*, and learns to *know*, each of which, separately and in unity, are discernible in the ways he behaves in the learning situation. The actualization of the above essences of the psychic life, seen in their particular meaningful connections, is visible as particular *behaviours* and this actualization forms the basis for changing his behaviour to a more adult way of life. The *course of learning* is made possible by the fact that the child is experiencing, willingly, lived-experiencing, and knowingly in the learning situation. It is actualized by the modes of learning (sensing, attending, perceiving, etc.), and it finds concrete form in the child's behaviours now and in the future. Thus, by learning, the child changes his behaviours. This means that the child's modes of living *change* such that he becomes more and more *adult*. One speaks of the child's behaviours as showing a progressive obedience to the requirements of *propriety* peculiar to the world of the human adult.

Since we have only considered how learning, as a mode of manifestation of the psychic life of the child-in-education, is actualized and takes its course, especially in the terms of the child's share in this, it is necessary to give attention to the accompaniment of the child by the adult.

## 2.2 The adult accompanies the child while learning

Education, as an interhuman event between an adult and a child becoming adult, reveals itself essentially as accompaniment. The grown-up's task of upbringing is to accompany the child from the beginning of his life to adulthood. This accompaniment received by the child while learning is recognisable in the fact that the adult instructs the child. Van der Stoep says, "Upbringing is actualized in instruction and the meaning of instruction is rooted in upbringing." The statement by Langeveld that a child only becomes properly human if he is brought up means, in the light of Van der Stoep's statement, that the child's becoming properly adult is now intertwined with the instruction he receives from the beginning.

Upbringing is actualized hand-in-hand with content, and it is the adult's task to place this life content within the reach of the child by his instruction. To become adult, the child must learn this content and make it a part of his possessed experience.