

# THE CHILD WITH LEARNING PROBLEMS IN PRACTICE: THE PEDAGOGICAL INVESTIGATION

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Learning difficulties are certainly as complex a phenomenon as is a person him/herself, and no one can make the claim that, in his/her evaluating, he/she can reveal all causative factors. If learning really is the point of culmination, where the totality of the child's involvement with reality becomes visible,<sup>(1)</sup> then an investigation of learning difficulties also must include the child in his/her totality. Hence, an investigation from a few perspectives hardly can expose all the causative factors, and a multidisciplinary approach obviously is called for.

The purpose of this paper is to give an exposition of a pedagogical investigation (pedo-evaluation). Interdisciplinary findings are eventually integrated, but the accent is on the pedagogical approach to a child with learning difficulties. The purpose is not to give a complete exposition of pedo-evaluation, but to show the essential moments of how a pedagogue acquires an insight into the experiential world of a child with learning difficulties.

Pedo-evaluation occurs in a pedagogical situation. This means that a pedagogical situation is purposefully established with the aim of pedo-evaluation. The investigator puts him/herself at the child's disposal who, as someone in distress, in collaboration with the investigator, actualizes pedagogical essentials such as authority, trust, and understanding. The pedagogue views such a situation as the point of departure for his/her investigation because a child's learning world can best be understood and fathomed when an intimate encounter exists between him/her and the investigator.

The pedagogue takes the position that learning is not an exclusively cognitive matter, but that it involves the child as a total person.

This requires that the whole range of child-being be searched for causative factors. The child is not confronted only with diagnostic and achievement tests, and then, from these findings, is "remediated". By using many exploratory media ("tests"), comparable situations are created such that an image of his/her learning world, as experiential world, can be acquired. Naturally, such a learning world includes an evaluation of cognitive potentialities, affective conditions, bodily modes of functioning, etc., which are the preconditions for adequate learning. However, under no circumstances should these aspects be evaluated as isolated quantities. In his/her evaluation, the pedagogue always takes the view that the data acquired from the different media be evaluated against the background of the child's already acquired learning world. The quantitative results from standardized tests are not sufficient for this; rather, pedo-evaluation is a matter of a qualitative analysis, which also includes a pedagogical evaluation. Briefly, the pedagogue is continually aware that he/she is in communication with a child in his/her being-a-person, as a child in distress, a "different" child, in so far as he/she has an obscure perspective<sup>(2)</sup>, is desperate<sup>(3)</sup>, is threatened<sup>(4)</sup>, and that the reasons for his/her problems can only be fathomed in this way.

Yet, the pedagogue finds him/herself in a dilemma concerning his/her investigation of children with learning difficulties, because the formal didactic situation(s) in which the child has become bogged down, is(are) not available for evaluation. Basically, a learning difficulty is nothing more than a disharmony between teaching and learning activities. Although the learning difficulty manifests itself in the child, the pedo-evaluator dares not lose sight of the fact that possibly the teacher also could have played a part in this learning difficulty. Thus, he/she should continually try to "read" the teaching effect from the learning effect.

## **2. THE COURSE OF A PEDAGOGICAL INVESTIGATION**

Pedo-evaluation involves the acquisition of as complete a person-image of the child as is possible, an image of the dialogue he/she conducts with his/her unique world<sup>(5)</sup>. The findings from other disciplines are integrated into this image by interpreting them pedagogically.

Pedagogical observation undoubtedly is an important initial aspect of evaluation which at no time during the investigation should be relaxed. Pedagogical observation in no sense assumes an objective outsider who, by preference, observes from behind a one-way mirror. Rather, it involves a co-responsible partnership regarding what takes place in the research situation <sup>(6)</sup>. Therefore, the pedo-evaluator must place him/herself in the situation, and enter into dialogue with the child he/she is observing; this is followed by a distancing aimed, at a true, understanding. One means of pedagogical observation is the conversation (interview). During the conversation, the child is **directly** at the center because he/she is conversing about his/her own situation. He/she continually thinks and formulates and because, in the first place, language is an affective-volitional matter before it is a rational one, on this level, the child makes his/her world available to the pedagogue for exploration <sup>(7)</sup>.

In addition to the conversation, specific media are used for pedagogical observation. For example, the **Guide It**, or the **Wiggly Blocks** are used for viewing the following: is the child calm, is he/she interested, does he/she readily accept help, how does he/she behave when he/she fails (apologetic, aggressive), what is the quality of his/her motor coordination, his/her perceptual keenness, how are his/her insights, what is the quality of his/her methods of solving problems, etc.

A second aspect of pedo-evaluation is the use of media for exploring the child's experiential world. Here, the aim is to verify and modify the pre-scientific, intuitive knowledge about the child already obtained, and to uncover specific facets or modes of his/her experiential world which lead to a better insight into his/her learning world.

Supplementing the pedagogical conversation (where a child can verbalize his/her situation), there are relatively unformed and unstructured materials presented to which he/she can give form from his/her experiential world. In this way, he/she manifests, in authentically personal ways, meanings and relationships which can be of fundamental importance to the pedo-evaluator for determining his/her learning relationships, and dispositions. For example, he/she is confronted with the well-known **Thematic Apperception Test** (T. A. T.), Langaveld's **Columbus Picture**

**Analysis of Growth Towards Maturity, the Four Picture Test of Van Lennep, the Incomplete Sentences of Rotter, the Rorschach Inkblot medium.**

The evaluation of intelligence is an important aspect, since it must be established, beyond doubt, that the child's learning problems do not stem from a qualitatively poor intellectual potential. Preferably, an individual scale is used, such as the NSAIS (**New South African Individual Scale**), but it is emphasized that acquiring an intelligence quotient is not sufficient. A qualitative analysis, against the background of the child's person-image, is necessary to prevent his/her intelligence from being viewed as a substance isolated from his/her experiential world. and to determine the degree to which he/she adequately actualizes his/her intellectual potential.

The proper functioning of bodily modes, such as motor functions and perception are incontestable preconditions for adequate learning. Therefore, the pedagogue should, at least, assess a child's perceiving, motor functions, and spatial orientation; if there is the slightest suspicion that he/she experiences problems in these respects, he/she should immediately undergo a thorough perceptual investigation. Once again, this does not mean that the pedagogue isolates and measures functions but rather that he/she evaluates these functional aspects against the background of the child's experiential world.

### **3. THE ORTHODIDACTIC INVESTIGATION**

Thus far it is repeatedly emphasized that the causes of learning difficulties can only become transparent if insight into the child's world of meaning is acquired by procedures, such as those mentioned above. Even so, these ways by which learning difficulties manifest themselves (which, in most cases are expressed in language and arithmetic), are not sufficient. That part of the pedagogical investigation, which is directed to this aspect, is called an orthodidactic investigation, during which the child is confronted with language and arithmetic tasks. By implementing only reading, spelling, dictation, composition tasks, comprehension tests, written work, scholastic and diagnostic tests, etc., the deficiencies in the subparts of the learning material cannot be ascertained. Fortunately, the investigator can relate the child's errors to his/her learning-image. In this way, he/she can "clarify" the language

deficiencies, in so far as they are determined to be symptoms of deeper-seated factors in the learning-image.

Should an investigation into learning difficulties be deemed sufficient with only scholastic and diagnostic tests, at best this will lead to a clarification of symptoms, and a subsequent treatment of them. An orthodidactic investigation is an integral part of a pedagogical investigation; otherwise, it would not be possible to understand why a child makes the errors (e.g., adding, spelling) he/she does.

#### **4. THE PEDAGOGICAL INVESTIGATION IN PRACTICE**

The following is a brief presentation of how the pedagogical investigation shows itself in practice. This is done with reference to Wilma, a young girl of 9-years-8-months, and now in grade 5.

The historicity interview with her parents is not reported here and, in this connection, it is sufficient to briefly indicate her problem: according to her parents, since grade 4 Wilma's achievement has steadily declined, so that now, in grade 5, she barely attains 55%. They also are worried about her awkwardness, and they mention the possibility of defective hand-eye coordination. Currently, reading and spelling are her greatest problems.

##### **4.1 Implementation of exploratory media**

###### **4.1.1 Pedagogical observation**

During the interview (and really throughout the investigation), but especially in her dealing with the **Guide It**, an uncomplicated and inviting medium, it became clear that she is high-strung and tense. Despite this, she directs herself well to the tasks presented; she experiences failures so intensely that her level of work suffers. Because of her labile emotionality, her work-tempo and work-level fluctuate. Also, she readily accepts help and, when she does, her level of work progressively increases. Apparently, this is because her emotionality becomes stabilized again. She is right-sided (handed, legged, eyed). The "Guide It" also indicates possible coordination problems and fine-motor instability.

The interview brought to light the fact that she has an average vocabulary, and that her use of language (her supple manipulation

of idiomatic language and sentence construction) is deficient. Further, she shows a mainly egocentric attitude. For example, in response to the question of why she has few friends, she said, "They will not play what I want to play. Therefore, I merely hang around the playground". This and other remarks led the pedagogue to conclude that, even though there is not yet a polarized egocentricity, there is inadequate socialization, and a negative self-concept.

#### 4.1.2 Intelligence

On the **New South African Individual Scale**, she obtained a verbal score of 118, a non-verbal score of 112 and a total score of 117. In addition, the quality of her intelligence appears to be good. Even so, there are definite indications that, because of emotional and other restraints, she does not adequately actualize her intellectual potentialities. For example, when she fails an item, there repeatedly is a decline in the level of her work; this is probably because of the intense experience of failing, especially while being viewed by the pedodiagnostician. Then, her work attitude became unordered, over-hasty, and she then used trial-and-error methods, which resulted in poor achievement. The **Block Design** and **Form Board** items especially reveal this emotional flooding. It is also important to note that her work-tempo is slow, and that there are relatively large variations in her level of achievement on the different subtests. For example, she attained a scale score of 16 [130] on the **Problems** subtest but only 9 [95] on **Vocabulary** and **Form Board**.

##### 4.1.2.1 The Rorschach Inkblot Medium

For various reasons, the Rorschach medium is used with children with learning difficulties. In addition to unraveling the close connection between the pathic (affective) and gnostic (cognitive) moments of lived experience in the child's person-structure, it is also used to search for deficiencies in the different modes of learning. Thus, the symptomatic values (e.g., determinants, location, etc.), as well as the content of the child's responses provide valuable information when interpreted against the background of his/her experiential world.

For Wilma, the Rorschach protocol corroborates her good quality of intelligence, but it also clearly shows that, because of her labile emotionality, she cannot adequately actualize her intellectual

potential. For example, strong feelings of anxiety and insecurity of a mostly uncontrolled nature are indicated. Considering her weak reality index, and the ambiequal experience type which, according to Loosli-Usteri<sup>(8)</sup>, usually indicate a neurotic tendency with children, it is not at all surprising that the protocol also shows weak interpersonal bonding.

The more than usual number of anatomic responses, together with blood-responses, indicate unfavorable bodily experiences. Viewed in this light, the interpretation of plate III also has significant meaning: "People who are **trying** to practice" (my emphasis). Of further interest, Wilma gave two "mask" responses. This seldom occurs with children and, if it does, according to Bohm<sup>(9)</sup>, it indicates a "narcissistic preoccupation with the body image", which really amounts to an undifferentiated self-awareness, and a labile self-concept<sup>(10)</sup>. Finally, her responses indicate "primitive" analyses resulting in global-diffuse responses. However, there also are indications of breaking through to a better quality of analyzing.

#### 4.1.2.2 The Columbus Picture Analysis of Growth to Maturity and the Incomplete Sentence Test of Rotter

Projective media, as screens onto which personal meanings can be projected, and by which authentic psychic content can be conveyed to other persons, often bring to light learning relationships, such as with teachers, parents, friends, which can be of great importance for the pedo-evaluator.

Regarding these media, it is sufficient to describe the interpretation given to a single plate from the Columbus series which, in the light of Wilma's experiential world, shows her general tendency toward infantility, and helplessness:

"A **small girl** stands at one side of a window and looks out. She sees friends playing and runs quickly to her mother and **asks her** to call her friends to her because she also wants to play" (Plate 3).

The deduction of a strong egocentric attitude and/or weak socialization appear to be warranted, especially considering the data obtained from the pedagogical observation and the Rorschach protocol.

#### 4.1.2.3 The tree and person drawings

Both drawings of a person indicate a deficient identity and identification, as reflected in the lack of details in the drawings. Mindful that the face is the "meeting surface" of an encounter, it is significant that Wilma has given no face to her drawings. Further, the figures attest to a very poor body-schema. In addition, it seems that the legs of especially the female figure are noticeably deformed. Initially, a female figure was drawn with three legs, where the middle leg is very deformed. However, this was erased.

Evaluated against the background of Wilma's experiential world, the person drawings are evidence of a particularly unfavorable bodily experience, more specifically, a lived experience of her deformed foot (see figure 1). The drawing of the male figure indicates the same unfavorable bodily experiences. Besides this, there is mention of a deficient body-schema and body-image (see figure 2). Furthermore, taking into consideration that the tree drawing represents a projection of a person's own attitudes and relations toward life<sup>(11)</sup>, her tree drawing also shows an experiential world in which negative bodily experiences are prominent (see figure 3).

#### 4.1.3 Investigation of Bodily Modes of Functioning

An exploratory investigation of the bodily modes of functioning indicates possible perceptual-motor problems. Although her form perception appears to be reasonably good, the **Vedder Figure** and the **Ellis Visual Design** media indicate that she experiences possible problems of eye-hand coordination, inserting the figures into the spaces, and fine-motor dexterity. Her continual referring



to the figure she has to copy suggests poor visual memory. Considering these data, Wilma was referred to an occupational therapist whose investigation is presented later in the paper by Kellerman.

#### 4.1.4 The orthodidactic investigation

The orthodidactic investigation indicates a clear deficiency in Wilma's language structure. During the investigation, she was noticeably more tense, and she tried to hide her written work from view with her hands--all unquestionable evidence that she now is confronted with her "errors". Wilma's reading-image shows a great many mis-readings, such as (in Afrikaans), e.g., **voel** for **loer**, **vrugte** for **vlugtige**, **dogters** for **droogtes**, **hoenders** for **honderde**, a number of substitutions and letter confusions such as **bamwil** for **damwal**, **bame** for **dame**. Wilma reads almost word-for-word, but if the reading rate is increased at all, she is prone to anticipations such as **saam krale toe** for **saans kraal toe**, **wilde bos** for **wildsbokke**. The spelling-image also shows substitutions such as **omdlik** for **oomblik**, **beur** for **deur**, **skinkdord** for **skinkbord**; problems with open and closed syllables such as **miner** for **mineer**; diphthongs such as **noe** for **nou**, **koul** for **koel**, **duur** for **deur**; but especially also a phonetic way of spelling such as **keting/ketand** for **ketting**, **sunkie/sientjie** for **seuntjie**, **biekie/bikkie** for **bietjie**. Moreover, she has problems recognizing the correct word on the flashcard subtest of the Diagnostic test used.

Fig 1

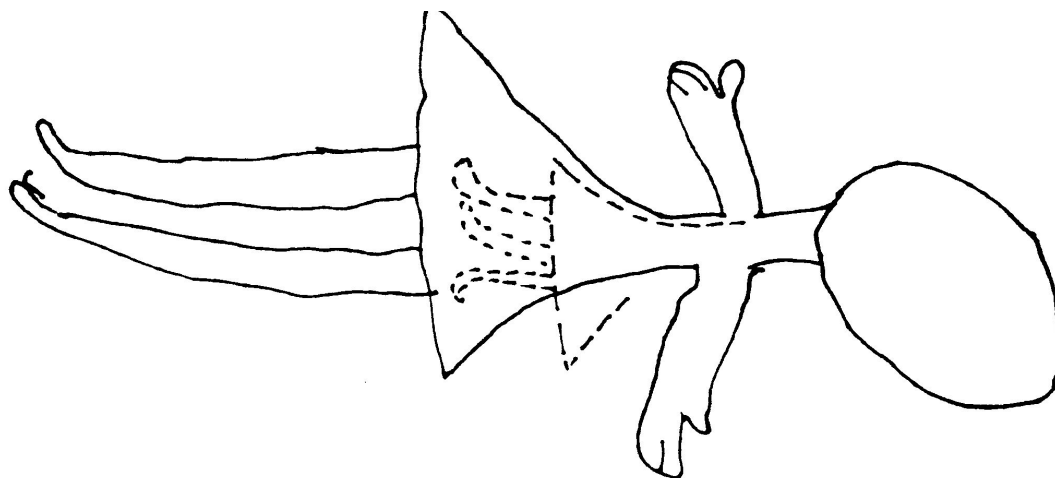
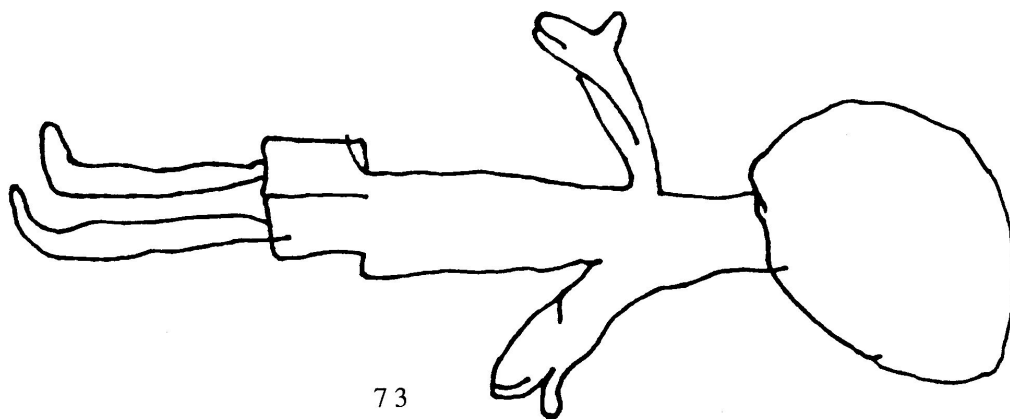


Fig 2



73

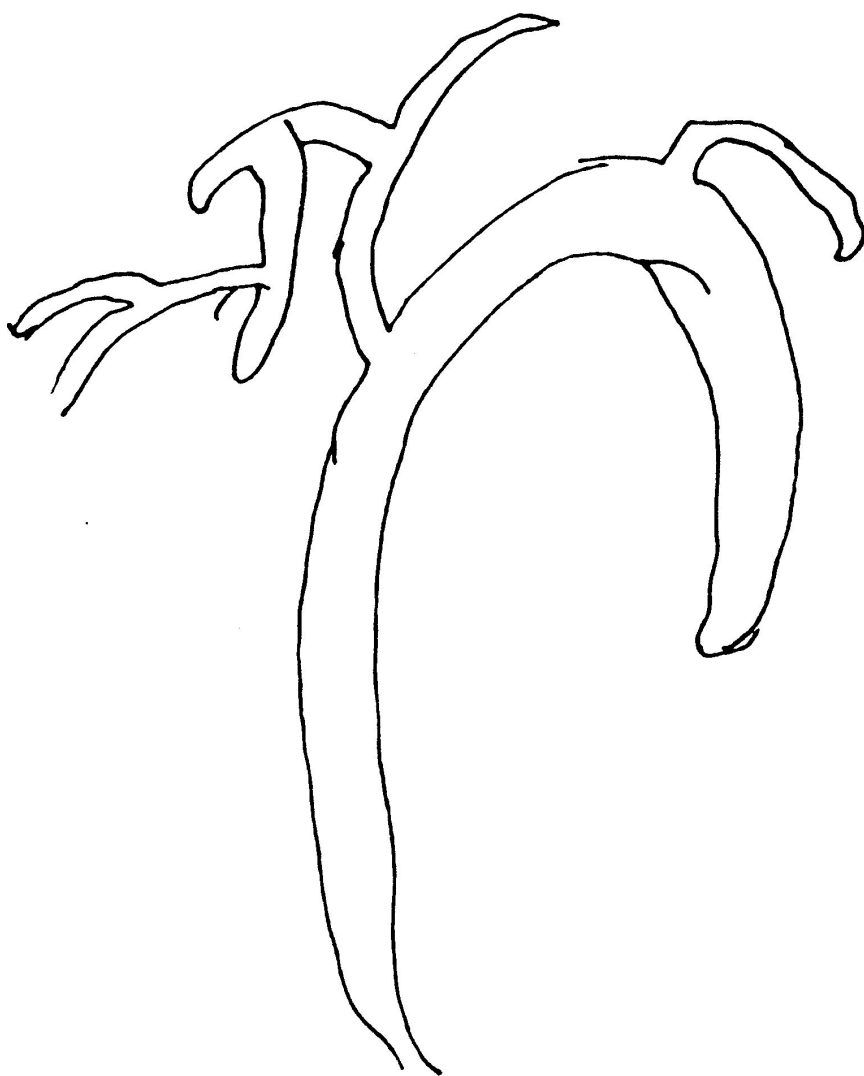


Fig. 3

It is worth mentioning that on the transcription task, Wilma did not make any errors. However, she copied word-for-word (with one syllable words), and letter-for-letter (with words of more than one syllable). Her dictation was relatively poor, but she remembered and wrote down every phrase she heard. In contrast to this, in her composition, her words were not articulated. Wilma's handwriting once again underlines a possible fine-motor weakness, while, at the same time, this indicates a spatial disorientation, specifically with inserting figures in the spaces.

## 5. SUMMARIZED PERSON-IMAGE

When an attempt is made to construct a person-image from a large amount of data, it is stressed emphatically that this is never a "final" image but, at most, it can lay claim to being a person-image which is as "complete as possible".

In contemplating the data, it seems that Wilma's body-ness should be given prominent consideration. The fact of two operations, a leg which is slightly shorter and thinner than the other, her noticeable clumsiness, etc. cannot leave her unharmed. Considering that she is continually unsuccessful in physical activities and skills, and that she is mocked by her classmates, it is understandable that she experiences her body so unfavorably that she even feels it to be a personal injustice. She experiences her body as a factor of helplessness, or an obstacle to such a degree that she even projects this in her drawings of legs. Of necessity, these factors have contributed to her labile and, in some respects, impulsive affective life. Since it is known that a stable emotional life is a precondition for adequate learning, these factors are assumed to be contributing aspects to Wilma's impeded learning.

A second factor, which cannot be overlooked, is Wilma's slight spatial disorientation. Proper spatial orientation is brought about by adequate perceptual-motor functioning. And beyond a doubt, the investigation showed that Wilma's motor functioning is unstable (see the **Guide It**, writing, drawings, the fact that she continually

spills the contents when handling a cup of liquid, etc.). Further, the investigation of Wilma's perception by the occupational therapist revealed deficiencies such as problems with eye-hand coordination, an inadequately differentiated laterality, and a lack of confidence regarding direction. Considering these problems, it is almost inevitable that she has a poor body-schema (or body-image), as well as a deficient spatial orientation.

A poor body-schema was clearly revealed in the **Rorschach** protocol, and in the person drawings, as well as in the investigation of her perception. The role of unfavorable bodily experience, in this respect, cannot be lost sight of, since a deficient body-image can contribute to the unfavorable bodily experience.

The two factors mentioned above, however, gave rise to an exceedingly defective self-concept, i.e., a deficient self-understanding, which is on a noticeably higher level of abstraction than is the body-schema because it lies primarily within the sphere of the personal-social<sup>(12)</sup>. Throughout the investigation, Wilma gave evidence of either an egocentric attitude, or a deficient degree of socialization. In this regard, see the **Rorschach** protocol (weak reality index, ambiequal experience type, "mask" responses), the person drawings which lack identity, the **Columbus** stories, the interview with Wilma, the fact that she has no friends, etc.

However, the impression should not be given that Wilma is surrendered to all these factors. Authentic intervention certainly will be able to greatly temper them. Unfortunately, her parents have greatly overprotected her and, in doing so, the badly needed support in accepting her own body with its defects is restrained, and she is not supported to affective stabilization. Also, her parents must be seen as an additional stabilizing factor in her emotional life because they have restrained her adequate exploration, emancipation and more.

Considering the factors mentioned above, it is understandable that Wilma cannot read and spell properly. Notwithstanding the perceptual-motor problems which, among other ways, are manifested in her propensity to add and reverse letters, and her problem with diphthongs, her affective lability has a restraining influence on her cognitive modes of learning such as perceiving, thinking (see the composition task), actualizing intelligence, remembering. The fact that she is inclined to spell phonetically can

be interpreted as a deficient visual and auditory memory. When Wilma hears a word, she is not able to make visual and/or auditory associations with it. The consequence is that she constructs the word in terms of its sound without complying with any rules of spelling. Her many mis-readings also can be clarified in terms of the above. Although she is able to analyze words, she experiences problems in synthesizing because the sound does not necessarily correspond to the correct way of spelling. She occupies herself, as it were, with a bare sound-image without observing the ordering of the symbols (i.e., the rules of spelling). In this connection, it should be remembered that perceptual-motor factors, such as figure-ground confusions, play an important role in her mis-readings.

Taking everything into consideration, it appears that Wilma had not been ready for school, and that she, thus, also experienced instructional problems because her teachers did not consider the different aspects of her restrained learning when presenting the learning material. In the light of her experiential world, hopefully it will be clear that the "remediation" of her language errors (as symptoms) cannot have much success unless it is paired with real attempts at abolishing the indicated factors restraining her learning.

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