

THE PSYCHIC LIFE OF THE CHILD WITH SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITIES

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1. INTRODUCTORY ORIENTATION

For the aim of penetrating the psychic life of a child with specific learning difficulties, or handicaps, as advocated by other authors, the former label is chosen, with a few exceptions, which is indicated presently. This has to do with penetrating the psychic life of a child where there is a slower progression evident in the actualization of his/her learning, or, stated differently, the psychic life of the child where a gap is present between his/her attained level of learning, and his/her attainable level, which also can be eliminated by means of orthodidactic intervention.

As is indicated below, the psychopedagogical question in this connection is how the realization of the psychic life of a child with such a gap appears. Hopefully, the answer to this question will help teachers and others interested in these children be able to better understand the learning event, particularly the course of learning of these children.

However, it must be indicated that, where a handicap can be indicated or specified and, at the same time, these children show underachievement or the under actualization of learning, there also is mention of a learning disability. As is known, these children are referred to one or another division of special education, and clearly fall outside the scope of this argument. On occasion, and in due course, reference is made to these attenuated forms since the psychic life of such children gives evidence that their learning appears differently than that of children not burdened by such handicaps.

2. THE ACTUALIZATION OF THE PSYCHIC LIFE: CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Depending on the specific perspective or frame of reference taken, specific terminology is found in the literature on children with learning problems. Examples are various theories and explanatory models, such as those mentioned by Dumont, as well as those considered by William Rhodes and Michael Tracy. The latter authors also speak of various “developmental disturbances”, while Dumont speaks of “primary learning disturbances”, as dysfunctions in the “developmental process”, while he assumes, as a cause, a “psychoneurological dysfunction of a biological, hereditary, or developmental psychological nature”. Stander uses the term “clinical structural analysis of dispositions” and means by this that there must be a search for the “psychological characteristics” of the learning handicapped child. He also speaks of “patterns of functioning, behavioral styles, and psychodynamic descriptions” for these children. There is additional agreement with him when he asserts that most of the literature has to do with perception, cognition, motivation, the neurological, etc., when it concerns these children.

Strydom talks about the “ego-functioning” of children with learning handicaps as a syndrome, and analyzes various theories and models in her penetration of the ego-functioning of these children; finally, she then discusses a “model of disturbed ego-functioning”.

It is interesting to compare points of agreement of aspects of the work of Stander and Strydom; for example, the inclination to withdraw, as a disturbance in the normal contact relationships with one’s surroundings, a negative self-concept (Stander), and inadequate ego-functioning (Strydom).

An additional argument proceeds from a psychopedagogical perspective and aims at disclosing the psychic life of the child with learning handicaps, as already mentioned above. The following questions are successively dealt with:

- What is the meaning of the psychic life?
- How is the psychic life actualized?
- How is the psychic life of the child with specific learning handicaps actualized?

2.1 What is the meaning of the psychic life?

In clarifying the concept “psychic life”, the first focus is on “life”. Life (living) means that a person is being-in-the-world as a totality-in-function with and among people, and things. More specifically, for a child, life means to participate in a mutual dialogue or relationship with an adult. This dialogue occurs within a mutual appeal from both adult and child, and which takes place in terms of some content. Thus, the child is someone who has potentialities to learn and become to which an adult (educator) directs an appeal or invitation by unlocking or disclosing (teaching) life and learning contents. The child is confronted with a choice to answer this appeal from the adult, and his/her answer can be a “yes”, a “no”, a “hesitation, etc. In answering, the child gives sense and meaning to the contents which the adult is trying to unlock for him/her. Thus, the child lives in and through his/her participating, in the form of an answer to the appeal of the world around him/her, as giving sense and meaning to this appeal.

Secondly, this implies that through this life participation, the child actualizes his/her psychic life. Consequently, actualizing the psychic life implies ways of living as ways of answering or ways of behaving, as taking part in this dialogue. Now, it is emphasized that this situatedness of the child is always an educative one. The child is always in a relationship with an adult (parent or teacher) from whom the appeal comes, and to which the child answers by actualizing his/her own psychic life. This means that the child is always under the educative influence or accompaniment of an adult in actualizing his/her psychic life. Hence, it is imperative that the child not be viewed in isolation from his/her educative situatedness.

2.2 How is the psychic life actualized?

2.2.1 Modes of actualizing the psychic life of the child

A psychopedagogical clarification of this question implies that specific essences in the psychic life of the child must be noticed. These essences are also called the modes of actualizing the psychic life, and they are: experiencing; willing; knowing; lived experiencing; and behaving. Thus, the child, in his/her world relationship, is an experiencing, willing, lived experiencing, etc. being. His/her psychic life is actualized by means of these modes, as a totality-in-function; thus, these different modes progress as a meaningful unity in which each is functionally dependent on the others. For example, a child experiences the contents of the world in which he/she moves, does this willingly, and learns to know it. Also, he/she lived experiences these contents affectively (in labile/stable ways) and cognitively (in diffuse/systematized/ordered ways). In this way, he/she gives affective/cognitive sense and meaning to the world around him/her, and makes it his/her own, and this personal meaning remains as his/her experiential residue or possessed experience. All actualizing of his/her psychic life eventually becomes evident in a qualitatively lower or higher level of behaving.

2.2.2 Learning and becoming as modes by which the child's psychic life is manifested

A psychopedagogical perspective on the psychic life of the child shows two modes in terms of which it manifests itself, i.e., learning and becoming, each of which, in its course, is differentiated into modes of learning and modes of becoming. Here these modes are only mentioned, but are explicated further, where applicable, in discussing the psychic life of the child with specific learning disabilities.

Learning

The modes of learning are sensing, attending, perceiving, thinking., and remembering.

Becoming

The modes of becoming are exploring, emancipating, distancing, differentiating, and objectifying.

Space does not allow for an explication of the meaningful coherence of learning and becoming, and the differentiated ways they are manifested. Suffice it to say that the course of learning and of becoming is a unitary event, and that actualizing the psychic life shows itself in learning and becoming. In addition, the child is primarily attuned to learning, and that child learning is the basis for his/her directedness to giving meaning to the content which is learned. What is more, becoming is possible through the child's learning and, to the extent that he/she gives meaning to what is learned, he/she becomes adult.

It also is mentioned that the courses of learning and becoming, psychopedagogically viewed, are, firstly, a pathic/affective event which, in ideal circumstances, are under the accompaniment of an adult who, by providing support, security, and a sense of trust, increases the stability of the lived experiencing actualized. Secondly, this is a gnostic/cognitive event in which the orderliness of its actualization is also increased under adult accompaniment. Altogether, this is a normative event, and the child gives affective and cognitive sense and meaning while learning and becoming.

3. HOW IS THE PSYCHIC LIFE OF THE CHILD WITH SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITIES ACTUALIZED?

3.1 Some modes of actualization in the world relation of the child with specific learning disabilities

3.1.1 The child with specific learning disabilities as an experiencing being

The essences looked for in evaluating childlike experiencing are found in experiencing as an activity by which the child goes out to the reality surrounding reality and becomes involved with it as contents.

- . That is, experiencing means to go out to the contents

through which reality appeals to the child. But experiencing also means to undergo; that is, the child is influenced by these contents.

Seen in its totality, experiencing means a first acquaintance with Reality, which also forms the basis for a later understanding of it. Experiencing is actualized on both a pre-conceptual and a conceptual level, i.e., on a level of intuitive exploration as well as of cognitive understanding.

It is emphasized that the child with specific learning disabilities experiences all restraining moments of his/her learning.

With reference to the above noted findings by Stander and Strydom, as well as those of other authors, this child is someone who will experience his/her whole existence, as realized in his/her learning and becoming, as different than children who are not restrained in learning. Particularly, this child's going out to the contents with which he/she is confronted, is

characterized as an inadequate turning to, exploring, and understanding those contents. He/she experiences him/herself as disabled,

as under achieving, as a slow learner who meets various obstacles during his/her learning, and whose actualization of his/her psychic life often fails. Consequently, he/she learns to know him/herself as a disabled child.

When there are signs of the presence of specifiable handicaps, he/she

experiences such burdens or aggravations additionally, and the actualization of his/her psychic life can be strongly characterized by

an inadequate lived experiencing of his/her body, which can damage the entire course of his/her learning.

3.1.2 The child with specific learning disabilities as a willing being

The connection between childlike experiencing and willing is that willing guides the course, or direction of experiencing. To will means to make a personal choice or decision which, in essence, include normative deciding. As such, a willful decision is future-directed and anticipative with respect to the child's learning and becoming.

Willing is further qualified or modified by one's emotional life. A stable emotional/affective life determines the strength or quality of willing, while lability in the emotional life will weaken or even paralyzed the actualization of willing. In this regard, Olivier finds that because of lability in the emotional life of a child with learning disabilities, there is a lack in volitional tension, and will power to become involved with the learning contents. The child shows a weak venturing attitude, with feelings of anxiety, tension, insecurity, etc. Also, Stander indicates that excessive lability results in a restrained strength of willing.

With a labile emotional life, it appears as if the guiding function of willing (i.e., its indication of an anticipated normative course), which willing must provide the child's experiencing going out to reality, is largely absent. Such children will likely show a strong inclination toward a life disposition of indecision and uncertainty.

3.1.3 The child with specific learning disabilities as a lived experiencing being

A penetration of the actualization of the psychic life of the child shows that lived experiencing is an activity primarily attuned to a search for sense and meaning (Husserl). Thus, in essence, lived experiencing is normative and, as such, one speaks of lived experiencing meaning. Also, there is evidence of emotional lived experiencing, which can be impulsive, labile, or stable, as well as cognitive lived experiencing, which can change from being global-diffuse, to orderly. As indicated above, these emotional and cognitive lived experiences co-determine the child's actualization of willing, and they are the ways by which a child arrives at attributing sense and meaning.

It is also emphasized that the child's experiencing, as guided by his/her willing, proceeds to lived experiencing, via giving sense and meaning, and that these "meanings-for-me" congeal in the form of residues of experiencing, or possessed experience. The result of investing this content with meaning is the retained possessed experience of the child, and depending on the level (hierarchy) and quality of meanings (high, low, nonsensical, etc.) he/she has attributed, his/her future experiencing is co-defined by his/her resulting possessed experience.

These findings have significance for the child with specific learning disabilities: as a person, this child, with his/her different situatedness, is definitely in search of sense and meaning in his/her own existence. The different moments of restrained learning which he/she experiences (willingly or unwillingly) daily are invested with sense and meaning in his/her lived experiencing. Thus, this child is continually confronted with the task presented by the restraining moments of his/her learning to assimilate, i.e., to accept, question, overcome, or finally, to give sense and meaning for him/herself to the results from his/her restraining circumstance. Even here, the meaning invested experiencing congeals as a hierarchy of meanings in his/her possessed experience.

Olivier refers to the inadequate quality of the possessed experience of these children, while Stander speaks of a negative self-concept. A question here is to what extent this negative self-concept has its origin in meaningless possessed experience, which mean this child's historicity.

3.1.4 The child with specific learning disabilities as a knowing and behaving being

It is generally accepted that, in the life of a child, all experiencing leads to knowing. Knowing varies from an intuitive or feeling knowing to a structured knowing in the form of analyzing, schematizing, ordering, interpreting, synthesizing, understanding, gaining insight ("getting the idea"). Knowing, then, also leads to learning, and learning flows into the child's behaving which, at its highest level, essentially means normative

behaving. Eventually, behaving is also evident in the child's becoming.

As far as the child with specific learning difficulties is concerned, it is concluded from the many findings in the literature that, with respect to the restraining moments of his/her cognitive learning, his/her course of knowing and, with this, his/her knowing behaving, in the form of learning, is inadequate. This literature is replete with references to fluctuating achievements and concentration, all kinds of perceptual problems, a weak and deficient cognitive style, problems in reading, writing, arithmetic and language, perseverations, spatial disorientations, etc. (In this respect, see the studies of Dumont, Stander, and Strydom).

Essentially, this means that such a child cannot come to a meaningful knowing, and to possessed knowledge, and is referred to specialized help. His/her entire course of learning and its results, as manifested in his/her behaving, will also be different.

Now, the specific question is what does the course of learning of this child look like?

3.2 THE COURSE OF LEARNING OF THE CHILD WITH SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITIES

To begin, we refer to section 2.2.2, where learning is described as one of the ways a child's psychic life shows itself via sensing, attending, perceiving, thinking, and remembering. In addition, the course of the modes of learning proceeds as a unity, which is an actualization of his/her learning potentialities, as his/her initiatives to learn. The various differentiated modes of learning take their course in relation to each other. As such, the modes of learning and behaving result from the child's actualizing his/her psychic life, via his/her experiencing, willing, lived experiencing, and knowing involvement in the learning content.

The course of learning of the child with specific learning difficulties is now discussed by using the above modes of learning.

3.2.1 Sensing and attending of the child with specific learning disabilities

These two modes are examined together because they are known as the accompanying modes of learning, in that they always accompany the other modes of learning, i.e., perceiving, thinking, and remembering, also known as cognitive modes of learning.

Sensing is the beginning of learning. Thus, it also initiates all learning, and its nature is affective and pre-cognitive. It is also known as the child's first seeing (Straus), or the first vague impressions which arise from a feeling or attunement which precedes to and accompanies all cognitive learning.

An important condition for this to occur is that sensing must be stabilized to make an adequate course of cognitive learning possible by means of perceiving, thinking and remembering. A stable sensing, as the result of a stable emotional life is, thus, a fundamental precondition for effective learning.

In contrast, a labile sensing is symptomatic of feelings of anxiety, tension, insecurity, frustration, etc., which result in ineffective learning.

The connection between sensing and attending, as modes of learning, is equally important: on the one hand, a stable sensing makes attending possible, which means a sharpened intention to learn by means of abiding at and staying with the learning content. It follows logically that a child can only learn cognitively if he/she can attend adequately. On the other hand, a labile sensing means an equally labile, changing, or fluctuating attending, which will unfavorably influence the course of cognitive learning. As a mode of learning, attending is supported by a stable sensing, and predisposes the child to learn cognitively.

In the vast literature on the restraining moments of the child with special learning disabilities, a lack of concentration and disturbed attending are very familiar. The distractibility of attending because of the hyperactivity shown by these children is

well known. This phenomenon should immediately direct the attention of experts to the emotional basis for the disturbed attending, but even more to labilized sensing as the initiating mode of learning of these children.

In summary, this means that these accompanying modes of learning (sensing and attending) in their being emotionally restrained and blocked, unfavorably predispose the very important cognitive course of learning, via the cognitive modes of learning (perceiving, thinking and remembering).

Because of his emotional lability, the child with specific learning disabilities is restrained from the very beginning in his/her cognitive learning activities. In this connection, Stander meaningfully refers to the “obviously emotionally based cognitive strategy of scholastic problem solving” as an “emotional lability which, in the course of time, develops an autonomy”.

3.2.2 Perceiving, thinking and remembering by the child with specific learning disabilities

Erwin Straus understands perceiving as the child’s second seeing. Perceiving is much more distanced [from reality] than is sensing (the first seeing), and embraces an objective view of reality as it is. In addition, the highest level of perceiving is a viewing of universal reality, in its general validity as it is given. This presupposes stability in both sensing and attending, as the accompanying modes of learning.

The modalities of perceiving, as a cognitive mode of learning, include global identifying, analyzing, synthesizing and ordering.

It is obvious from the literature that the child with specific learning disabilities, because of considerable cognitive loss and unfavorable emotional lability, will be predisposed to follow an inadequate course of perceiving.

Thinking, as a mode of learning, always implies the problematic, and Straus emphasizes further that it is the child’s questioning

attitude which is its origin. The questioning child is someone who experiences a problem, and who seeks an answer or solution.

Thinking is also characterized by its modalities of ordering, abstracting, conceptualizing, and solution-directedness.

On a certain level, perceiving melds into thinking, especially when the child confronts a problem while perceiving the content to be learned. Also, the important role which language plays, as a medium of thinking, is well known.

The child with specific learning disabilities is, thus, also restrained in his/her thinking, as a distanced mode and course of learning. He/she already stagnates on the level of sensing, attending and perceiving, and when he/she is confronted with a problem to be solved, the actualization of the course of the modalities of thinking is also inadequate. His/her language deficiencies, as manifested in his/her reading, writing, and spelling activities, place additional restraints on his/her thinking as a distanced mode of learning.

Remembering, as a mode of learning, is an activity which is entirely different from the imprinted retentions advocated by the old psychology of memory. Memory is a mode of learning by which the child now places his/her past in the present. This past is an experienced, willed, known, and lived experienced past, which the child has made his/her own with the help of meaning-invested experienced and lived experienced content (learning material). As such, his/her remembering calls on his/her hierarchy of meaning invested possessed experience which has resulted from the actualization of his/her psychic life.

From the above, it is concluded that his/her remembering, as a mode of learning, is dependent on qualitatively attenuated possessed experience, qualified by a hierarchy of distorted (inadequate) meanings. Once again, this emphasizes the problematic, and inadequate course of learning of these children. This also means an equally inadequate future course of learning because his/her existing possessed experience is a co-determinant of all his/her future learning.

3.2.3 The course of becoming of the child with special learning disabilities

It is stated that the course of learning and becoming is a unitary event. However, the child primarily learns, and because of this, he/she becomes adult. Consequently, learning is also observable in the child's becoming and, indeed, on the following levels of behaving:

- a senso-pathic and senso-gnostic level of behaving, which means that the child still greatly realizes his/her becoming in bodily-pathic, bodily-gnostic and, indeed, in global diffuse ways;
- a pathic, as well as gnostic level of behaving, meaning that the child, to the extent that his/her becoming progresses, also actualizes his/her becoming on a higher level. Preconditions for this elevation in the level of the course of his/her becoming are increased stabilization in his/her pathic-affective becoming, as well as an increase in order of his/her gnostic-cognitive becoming;
- also possible is an affective, as well as cognitive level of behaving characterized by a higher degree of affective stability and a higher degree of cognitive order.

In section 2.2.2, the following modes of becoming are distinguished: exploring, emancipating, distancing, differentiating, and objectifying. These modes are known through their own essences even though, at the same time, they progress in a meaningfully coherent way, and one cannot be thought of as occurring without the others.

The course of becoming of the child with specific learning disabilities is now discussed in terms of the above modes. It must be understood that each of these modes of becoming can be actualized on one or more of the mentioned levels of behaving. Further, a relapse or inadequacy in actualizing is possible because of the specific circumstances of the child.

A child whose course of becoming is adequate will show that he/she increasingly explores, i.e., that he/she takes initiative, wants to explore, discover, etc. To the extent that he/she explores, he/she also becomes increasingly emancipated. In other words, he/she will increasingly strive to be someone him/herself, act independently, take the lead, etc.

The child who distances him/herself will, because of his/her exploring, and emancipating, gradually detaches him/herself from the influence of his/her parents to be able to stand more on his/her own two feet.

Differentiating is actualized to the extent that the child can and will distinguish among various matters, choices, and decisions on an emotional, cognitive, and normative basis.

Objectifying is a higher degree of differentiating and means that the child also takes the initiative to step out of him/herself and assume an objective position, while not wanting to be subjectively involved. Thus, objectifying also is established at a distance from him/herself.

A penetration of the becoming of the child with specific learning disabilities shows restraints in his/her becoming: on the one hand, this flows from the restraints in learning, in actualizing his/her psychic life, as discussed above. Thus, this restrained actualization of learning results in a restrained becoming. On the other hand, the affective, cognitive and, thus, normative giving of sense and meaning in the psychic life of these children influences the different modes of becoming: for example, these children are apathetic and unwilling to explore, and if they do, it occurs mostly on a senso-pathic, senso-gnostic level or, at most, on a pathic-gnostic level where there is lability and disorder. Exploration on a distanced affective and cognitive level is unlikely. Similarly, their emancipating, distancing, differentiating, and objectifying are restrained. To a large extent, these children are imprisoned in their vital-pathic bodiliness, and all this entails.

To end this section about the course of becoming of these children, attention is called to the very important fact that, because of the disability in the actualization of their psychic life, they are also restrained in their total becoming adult. Consequently, their future perspective will be weaker than that of non-disabled children, and with all the related complications.

4. SOME IMPLICATIONS OF A RESTRAINED ACTUALIZATION OF THE PSYCHIC LIFE AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 An understanding of the situatedness and, especially, of the actualization of the psychic life of the child with specific learning disabilities compels educationists to move away from the well-known symptomatologic approach, with the application of correlated remedial techniques, and direct themselves to the teaching situation, i.e., the teaching, learning, lesson event in which these children find themselves. There is a need to explore and investigate the disharmony of the course of teaching and learning in these children and, particularly, into how this disharmony is related to the actualization of their psychic life. Thus, there must be a search for a possible “lesson structure” or “program” in which lesson aims, learning aims, curriculum planning and, especially evaluation, are clearly specified.
- 4.2 The assistance given to these children should link up with the nature of the disharmonious course of the lesson and learning and, thus, must be orthopedagogically, and orthodidactically grounded—rather than being a symptom-directed program.
- 4.3 The training of teachers for these children must be pedagogically, and didactically accountable in that they should be well-grounded in fundamental-, didactic-, psycho- and ortho-pedagogics, in addition to orthodidactics.
- 4.4 Educational institutions responsible for training teachers for these children must engage in much more educatively

directed research on the course of their teaching and learning.

5. RECOMMENDED READINGS

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AUTHOR'S ENGLISH SYNOPSIS

[Slightly edited]

The problem dealt with in this lecture is the psychic life of the child whose level of achievement falls short of the level he/she is capable of, and where the gap can be closed by means of orthodidactic intervention. More particularly, it is concerned with the question of how the child who is an under achiever actualizes his/her psychic life.

In the current literature, the child with learning disabilities is usually typified in terms of a long list of symptoms varying from neuro-physiological symptoms to so-called developmental disturbances; these descriptions are paired with the presentation of a series of remedial techniques, which are largely symptom-oriented, such as different types of perceptual training techniques.

Psychopedagogical insight into the actualization of the psychic life of these children is indicative, in general, of several factors which impede the child's learning and which leave him/her with an inadequate, meaningless experiential residue. These children are affectively and cognitively and, therefore, also normatively blocked in actualizing their psychic life, and this is observable in his/her inadequate learning, and progress. All the child's ways of leaning and becoming are curbed, resulting in a lower level of behaving, i.e., the child's progress to adulthood has been impeded.

The most important implications and recommendations are:

1. Educationists are advised to move away from the symptomatologic approach, and the application of remedial techniques which go with it, and to direct their attention to the educative situation of these children instead, i.e., teaching

and learning as it affects and involves them. There is need for investigation and research into the disharmony between the acts of teaching and learning and, particularly, the relationship of this disharmony to the disharmonious actualization of the psychic life by the child. A possible lesson structure or program should be sought in which teaching and learning aims, curriculum content and, especially the relationship between lesson and learning progression, should be clearly defined.

2. The assistance given to these children should relate to the nature of the disharmony between the progression of the lesson and learning and should, therefore, have an orthopedagogic and orthodidactic basis rather than take the form of a program directed to the remediation of symptoms.
3. The training of teachers who will deal with these children with specific learning disabilities should be pedagogically and didactically answerable, in that such teachers should have a sound foundation in fundamental, didactical, psycho- and orthopedagogics, as well as orthodidactics.
4. Educational institutions responsible for the training of teachers for these children should do more educatively directed research related to the teaching and learning progression of these children.