

# THE CHILD WITH LEARNING PROBLEMS IN PRACTICE: THE PEDAGOGIC CONVERSATION WITH THE PARENTS

G. V. Ferreira

University of Pretoria

## 1. INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

It is a well-known, and generally accepted fact that human life is not characterized only by success, but that there also are failures. Just as success, achievement, prosperity, and progress are familiar to human existence, so also is the fact that we can experience failure, under achievement, and adversity.

During the life of each person and child, successes and failures are experienced depending on one's life circumstances. Thus, it is not at all surprising that children on the long and difficult road to adulthood often are faced with problems which impede their becoming adult. A child's becoming adult requires that he/she learn a great deal to give form to the notion of a person, and it is not strange that children, in addition to the successes they achieve in numerous learning situations, also sometimes experience learning problems.

The question of a child with learning problems has long enjoyed the attention of experts such as physicians, psychologists, psychiatrists, and educators. Each approaches the problem from the perspective of his/her own domain. The contemporary view is that learning problems, because of their complex nature, are clearly a multidisciplinary issue. In this connection, it is said that the results of the different experts involved with this child must be more effectively coordinated to really help him/her in his/her distress. Indeed, this is a step in the right direction, and has decided advantages for the child experiencing learning problems, as well as for those on whom research is done, and for trying to prevent and effectively correct the problem.

Viewed from a pedagogical perspective, such a team effort is acceptable, **provided** the undeniable fact is taken into consideration that a child who experiences learning problems should never be viewed apart from his/her **world**. This implies that it is not possible to understand a child with learning problems [or any child, human being] if his/her total situation is not looked at. When it is looked at, there is reflection on who the child really is, and where he/she is going, and it is stated beyond any doubt that each child is someone who must become adult and that, for this to occur, he/she is dependent on the help and support of an adult(s). To become adult, i.e., to be able to lead an independent and responsible life, a child must be educated. Educating, occurring between an adult and a child, a parent and child, a teacher and child, can correctly be described as assisting the child to be able to gradually meet the demands of adulthood. However, it must be clearly understood that a child can only be educated, can be taught, because he/she can learn. If he/she does not learn effectively, then his/her educating, and with this teaching him/her, cannot take the most favorable course and then his/her becoming is retarded.

A child takes an active part in his/her own becoming adult, first, because he/she can learn and, second, because an adult teaches him/her in an educative manner. Hence, a child who learns, and yet still has learning problems, should never be reflected on apart from his/her educative situation. When there is talk of an educative situation, what is first meant is the primary situation or the family situation, and second the school situation, as a formally established educative situation. Within this educative framework, a child will, in accordance with his/her learning potential will learn effectively. Hence, a child with learning problems, irrespective of his/her nature, is someone whose educating (teaching) has become problematic for some reason, and any intervention should thoroughly consider the quality of his/her educating.

Projected against the above introductory thoughts, to grasp and understand (via orthopedagogic diagnostics), the child with learning problems, and help him/her (via pedotherapy, as well as orthodidactic assistance), it is necessary to first explore his/her pedagogical situation. This includes fathoming his/her personal historicity in terms of the educative relationships established between parents and child over the course of time, as well as the quality of his/her becoming, in which he/she him/herself has actively cooperated.

## **2. THE PEDAGOGICAL CONVERSATION WITH THE PARENTS**

The pedagogical conversation with the parents is the first phase of investigating a child with learning problems, and it also serves as a basis, and precondition for assisting him/her, be it pedodiagnostic, pedotherapeutic [or orthodidactic]. As the primary educators and "teachers" of their child, they are the persons who, because of their personal educative experiences with their child, can provide the researcher with essential information.

As an exploratory conversation about the child's course of educating and becoming, for practical considerations, the pedagogical conversation is divided into the following facets:

### **2.1 Identifying particulars**

With reference to the child, his/her parents, his/her school, etc.

### **2.2 Stating the problem**

During this phase of the conversation, the parents are given the opportunity to tell the orthopedagogue what is problematic about their child's learning activities. Here, the parents are invited to speak not only about and make known the child's learning problems but about their own distressful situation regarding their educating their child. The child with learning problems is a child-in-distress, and this distressful situation compels the parents to seek the expert help and support of the orthopedagogue and others, if necessary, so that the problem can be eliminated.

### **2.3 The child's physical development**

It is of essential importance that the orthopedagogue take note of everything discussed about facets of the child's becoming. Information obtained from the parents regarding the pregnancy, the child's birth, as well as milestones (sitting, crawling, walking, talking, etc.) reached by the child, and at what age they were reached are important. This information is of importance since, e.g., a physical trauma before, during, or after birth can have a great influence on the child's course of becoming, as well as on the educating he/she receives. If the orthopedagogue suspects that this facet of the child's becoming is problematically affected, help and

advice can be solicited from experts, such as a physician, speech therapist, occupational therapist, and others. Such advice is then eventually integrated into the results of the orthopedagogue's investigation to obtain as complete a person image, as learning image, of the child as possible.

## **2.4 The quality of the child's educating**

To judge the quality of the child's becoming, it is necessary to analyze his/her pedagogical situation, and particularly the different educative relationships founding it.

Educating is adequately actualized in those situations where there is mutual trust between adults (parents) and child, where the child feels accepted, where he/she feels understood in his/her child-being, and where he/she is certain about what is proper. An educative climate which is characterized by positive emotional bonding, consistent authority, mutual understanding, and an experience of belongingness are a solid basis and secure place from which he/she can explore his/her world and, thus, learn. Such an educative milieu fosters in the child a feeling of security, willingness, and enthusiasm to broaden and enlarge his/her experiential and knowing horizons. Should he/she fail or partly fail, e.g., as far as his/her learning activities are concerned, he/she has a firm understanding that his/her home is still a safe "haven" to which he/she can return to become reinvigorated, and to overcome his/her failures.

However, if educating is inadequately actualized in terms of the few aspects mentioned, it can happen that the child becomes derailed, which is observable in a negative learning attitude, a lived experiencing of all learning and learning activities as meaningless, behavior problems, and more. The implication is that if educating miscarries, the child can become so emotionally labilized (anxious, tense, frustrated, uncertain, aggressive, feel inferior, etc.) that his/her readiness and willingness to learn become subdued, even "smothered". Thus, educating, as it is actualized in and through the different educative relationships [trust, understanding, authority], can either promote or impede the child's learning attitude.

From the above few brief remarks, during the pedagogical conversation it is necessary for the orthopedagogue to make a penetrating enquiry into the nature and quality of the educative

relationships existing between the parents and their child. In this way, the orthopedagogue can determine the quality of the child's educating and becoming, as well as obtain detailed information about:

1. The nature and scope of his/her learning problems
2. Readiness to learn
3. How he/she learns
4. The nature of his/her study methods
5. Skillfulness, sense of duty, and sense of responsibility with respect to his/her work
6. The homework situation, and the parents' availability, and readiness to help
7. Achievement, in general, and specifically
8. Expectations held by parents and teachers
9. Inclusion at school, and in school activities
10. Relationships with teachers and fellow students
11. Teaching problems
12. Possible behavior problems
13. Personality problems, etc.

All the data obtained from the exploratory conversation with the parents provide the researcher with the first basis for constructing a preliminary person-image, now also viewed as a learning-image of the unique child with a unique learning problem. This learning-image provides, first, an image of the child's educating and becoming, especially as this concerns the history of his/her learning relationships (learning historicity) with his/her parents, teachers, fellow students, the learning material, etc. Second, it provides an image of the child's unique learning experience, and the meanings he/she has given them over time. Last, it throws light on his/her possessed experience, as the totality of meanings he/she attributes and has attributed to all his/her experiences in terms of his/her educating, teaching, learning, interpersonal relationships, and more.

## **2.5 Synthesis**

In conclusion, a scientific understanding of a child with learning problems, and the task(s) which arise from this are not possible without considering a discussion of the child's pedagogical situation.

## **3. REFERENCES**

Sonnekus, M. C. H., Die ervaringswereld van die kind met leerprobleme as beleweniswereld.

**Suid-Afrikaanse Tydskrif vir die Pedagogiek**, 1976, Vol. 10, no. 1.

Gouws, S. J. L., **Pedagogiese diagnostisering van kinders met leermoeilikhede.**

Cape Town: H. A. U. M., 1966.

Stander, G., Leergestremdhede: 'n Algemene probleemstelling.

**SAVLOM Bulletin**, no. 1,

1974.

Sonnekus, M. C. H., et al., **Die leermoeilike kind.** Stellenbosch: Universiteitsuitgewers,

1971.

1971.