

# THE CHILD WITH LEARNING PROBLEMS IN PRACTICE: A MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

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## 1. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

### 1.1 Introduction

The general practice known as a multidisciplinary approach, or teamwork is generally well-known in contemporary psychodiagnostics, medical diagnosis, psychiatric diagnosis, and mental health care, as well as in most forms of assistance, such as psychotherapy, pastoral therapy, and marriage counseling. This approach has been motivated by **specialization**, a characteristic of the twentieth century, which was especially initiated by the natural sciences. Subject specialists concentrate only on increasingly smaller areas of reality and make highly specialized contributions to that area.

Similarly, as far as a child with learning problems is concerned, he/she is largely an object of specialization, and various disciplines have already entered the area known as "learning problems", and each has made meaningful contributions. In this connection, there is reference to the activities of the South African Association for Learning and Educational Difficulties, which has set for itself the goal of lacing together all disciplines which have an interest in children with learning problems, to make a collective contribution in the interest of the child with learning problems. Disciplines which have already come forward in this regard are education, psychology, medical and para-medical sciences, social work, psychiatry, etc.

The practice known as a "multidisciplinary approach" is also well-known in school clinics, child guidance clinics, clinics connected to

children's hospitals, psychiatric institutions, etc. Conspicuous is the absence of an educationist or, better stated, an orthopedagogue, or orthodidactician in many of these establishments, while clinical psychologists are mostly found there. A justification for the role of an orthopedagogue, and/or orthodidactician in such establishments us returned to later.

In this paper, attention is specifically given to the problem of a multidisciplinary approach to a child with learning problems in practice. Such a practice in most establishments is also familiar, where a team specialist discusses a "case" in detail after each of its "aspects" have been investigated. The aim of this discussion is to arrive at a synthesis, or a collective image, also known as a person image, of such a case, and on that basis to make recommendations for handling the case in the future.

Viewed against the background of these introductory thoughts, the question is, what is the nature of a multidisciplinary approach in the case of a child with learning problems?

## **1.2 Multidisciplinary approach as a compilation of subject specialist approaches to a child with learning problems**

My argument focuses on justifying a multidisciplinary approach in which the specialized contributions of each subject specialist is appreciated as a necessity. On the one hand, the justification for this standpoint lies in the possible diversity of causes for learning problems which are found in one or more areas and, on the other hand, in providing help to such a child where more than one discipline is necessary.

However, there is the danger of what Van Gelder calls a "compiled image", as subject specialist images of a child with learning problems, which means that a unitary or total image disappears, and is replaced by several labels, which do not indicate the life reality within which a child stands. For example, a child can be labeled as a "social misfit", or "emotionally disturbed", without understanding him/her as **situated** in life reality. Also, there is the danger of a diagnosis of symptoms, and their treatment based on the contributions of subject specialists. Extreme specialization, without a scientifically founded integration, holds equally serious dangers. Finally, the mentioned **totality image** of a child cannot be acquired by trying to synthesize the findings of various subject

specialists without a scientifically founded set of criteria. Consequently, there must be a search for guiding principles or yardsticks (criteria) by which subject specialists' conclusions can be interpreted to be able to synthesize them meaningfully. The question is, what is the nature of such criteria, and what ought to be the nature of such a case discussion?

Finally, in this context, it is emphasized that a totality image of a child with learning problems cannot be acquired merely by uniting, or "adding up" the contributions of subject specialists. Such an "adding up" means an image of the opinions of subject specialists, which often differ strikingly from each other, with the possible result of a further divided or splintered image. Thus, in this paper, clarity of the concept of a "total image" and what it includes, must be acquired.

## 2. THE EDUCATIVE REALITY AS THE POINT OF DEPARTURE FOR A MUTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO A CHILD WITH LEARNING PROBLEMS

In our search for the essentials of a totality image of a child with learning problems and, with this, for **criteria** in terms of which the conclusions of subject specialists can be accountably interpreted within a multidisciplinary approach, the question which first must be asked is what is the nature of the situatedness of such a child? That is, the situations in which a child finds him/herself must be explored and penetrated more closely. The answer to this question, without a doubt, is that any child always finds him/herself in an **educative situation**, irrespective of what his/her problem is. This means that he/she, as a not-yet adult, is in a relationship with adults with the expressed aim of guiding him/her to adulthood. Thus, a child is always on the way to adulthood, but for this, he/she is dependent on the help and support of adults. This help and support is known as **educating** (upbringing) and, hence, he/she is always involved in an educative situation. In other words, it is emphasized that a child is someone who eagerly wants to become an adult, but that he/she cannot do this alone and, therefore, he/she is dependent on the help and support of adults. A child is a potentiality for becoming adult. but must be guided by adults to self-actualize his/her given potentialities. This educative action is known as guiding to self-actualization. Second, such educating or guiding occurs in terms of **pedagogical** aims, the all encompassing

aim is the child's **adulthood**. Hence, each child must be educated to adulthood.

The essentials of this educative relationship, how it progresses, its various aims, the activities between educator and educand, and the actualization of the educative event cannot be gone into fully here, and the reader is referred to the literature (see references).

Regarding a **child with learning problems**, third, he/she also finds him/herself in an educative situation, known as a **problematic educative situation**. This means that, as a being on his way to adulthood under the guidance of an adult(s), he/she experiences problems which restrain his/her becoming adult. Various causes can be shown to contribute to this, such as in a multidisciplinary investigation and approach. However, the question is how do such causes exercise an influence on this child's becoming adult? At the same time, an immediate warning is that a child is not someone delivered to such causes, and that, despite them, he/she is dependent on him/herself to actualize his/her becoming adult, naturally under the guidance of the adult(s). The nature of a child's educating, particularly that of a restrained or also of a retarded child, is of the greatest importance, and such educating **can** take a distorted course. The question about each child with problems, thus, is **how far has this child, considering his/her problems, already progressed in his/her being-on-the-way-to-adulthood?** Van Gelder calls this all-embracing pedagogical criterion "determining the pedagogically attained level of adulthood". This means that his/her pedagogically attained level of becoming adult must be evaluated in relation to the potentialities at his/her disposal. Thus, for example, it is determined to what degree he/she has actualized his/her learning potentialities, in relation to his/her intellectual potentialities.

At this stage, in addition, with reference to a **child with learning problems**, his/her learning situation always means a didactic event, where he/she is guided or taught by a teacher to actualize his/her learning potentialities. The question then is, how far has this child come to a **learning effect** under the guidance of the teacher, as adult. The teaching effect must always be evaluated in terms of the learning effect achieved by this child.

To close this section, in a multidisciplinary approach to a child with learning problems, all contributions of subject specialists must be

interpreted within the whole, or context of this child's didactic-pedagogical situation. This means that all findings of subject specialists must be continually interpreted as contributory, or not, to a child's becoming adult. Thus, on the one hand, the question is to what degree certain factors have acted to restrain his/her becoming adult, i.e., to what extent do they co-define the actualization of the attained level of becoming an adult, in relation to the level attainable? On the other hand, the question regarding providing help, or therapy is, to what degree can such subject specialists' contributions promote repairing, or elevating the child's level of becoming adult?

At this stage, it ought to be clear that, with reference to subject specialist contributions, in the case of a child with learning problems, there is a search for a fundamental interpretation of such contributions, and that this is entirely different from diagnosing and treating symptoms. This matter is not dealt with further.

A more specific question is, in terms of what criteria, or yardsticks does a child's becoming adult have to be evaluated, and who is responsible for doing this?

### **3. THE APPLICATION OF (ORTHO-) PEDAGOGIC CRITERIA IN A MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO A CHILD WITH LEARNING PROBLEMS**

#### **3.1 Introductory remarks**

In reference to the above, a child with learning problems finds him/herself in a problematic educative situation, i.e., in a situation within which his/her being educated, as being guided to adulthood, has become problematic for him/her. Obviously, a variety of other factors can contribute to this problematic situation, among which is his/her body-ness, and everything related to it.

Second, orthopedagogics, as a part-science of pedagogics, has proclaimed this problematic educative situation as its area of study. This is a recent branching of pedagogics, which has attained great prominence over the past two to three decades on the European continent and in South Africa. To this paper, orthopedagogics, as such, is not elaborated on. However, it is mentioned briefly that orthopedagogics, as is pedagogics, is a science of educating; it is not a separate, independent discipline, and its autonomy resides in

pedagogics. At the same time, it is true that educating a child can fail and, according to Van Niekerk, orthopedagogics studies this "phenomenon of educative failure and the phenomenon of re-educating as well". Van Gelder has stated the task of orthopedagogics in terms of the question of "what must I now do further with this child?" Thus, the aim of orthopedagogics is to reflect on what kind of additional **action** must be taken to help and support a child who finds him/herself in a problematic educative situation to **re-define** his/her unique situatedness. In other words, orthopedagogics is focused on correctively educating a child with problems.

With reference to part 2 of this paper, where the educative reality, as a point of departure for a multidisciplinary approach is reflected on, it is now added that, for the orthopedagogue, the first core question regarding a child with problems is to what extent has adult guiding (educating), on the one hand, and the child's self-actualizing, on the other hand, failed? The second question is what measures can be taken by both adult and child to eliminate the problematic event? This always has to do with the role a child takes, under the adult's guidance. As such, orthopedagogics also is practically directed, and the orthopedagogue, as someone schooled in orthopedagogics, is the person who must make decisions regarding a child's re-educating.

### **3.2 Some (ortho-) pedagogic criteria for evaluating a child with learning problems**

To this paper, and with an eye to application in a multidisciplinary approach, the following structure is offered for applying some (ortho-) pedagogic criteria:

#### **Criteria for guiding**

- Criteria for affective guiding
- Criteria for cognitive guiding
- Criteria for normative guiding

#### **Criteria for self-actualizing**

- Criteria for affective self-actualizing
- Criteria for cognitive self-actualizing
- Criteria for normative self-actualizing

Before mentioning some specialized criteria within the above framework, it is indicated briefly that, in the case of a child with

learning problems, the concern is with two possible activities which, for various reasons, have failed or are threatening to fail. On the one hand, this has to do with the guidance (educating, teaching) by adults where three ways of guiding are distinguished, i.e., affective, cognitive, and normative. For details, the reader is referred to the references below. The fact is, the adult's educative activities speak to a child affectively, or emotionally, e.g., in awakening trust, coddling, in one form or another, giving support or assistance, etc. But a child is also cognitively guided by the adult, e.g., explaining or educating with understanding, but also by bringing forth knowledge, e.g., in a didactic situation in school. A child also is normatively guided daily by the adult presenting and exemplifying norms. Also, the question about what each of these ways of guiding, as well as of self-actualizing, essentially mean, have been expressed by the different part-disciplines of pedagogics. Thus, fundamental pedagogics has discussed the question of fundamental pedagogical categories and criteria, didactic pedagogics has considered didactic categories and criteria, and psychopedagogics has dealt with psychopedagogic categories and criteria. In this paper, it is not possible to go into these matters in detail, and the reader is again referred to the references for details. The fact is that pedagogics has already expressed itself comprehensively regarding what guiding, as educating and teaching means, as well as regarding the essentials of a child's self-actualizing.

In a problematic educative situation of a child with learning problems, it is enough to briefly mention some examples of (ortho-) pedagogic criteria, within the above structure, as they have been made available by the different pedagogical disciplines. The aim is not that all these criteria must be applied in each case. A selection of some, depending on the specific child, is sufficient.

In addition to the above, the particularized criteria always have to do with the question of the degree of **inadequateness**, which is realized by the adult's guidance, and/or by a child's self-actualization.

On the other hand, this has to do with a child's role, and various criteria are particularized regarding the question of his/her affective, cognitive, and normative self-actualization. Examples and details follow below. As far as the contributions of other subject specialists are concerned, it is the task of the orthopedagogue to continually interpret each of their contributions in terms of the

stated criteria, as shedding light on **inadequate guidance** (educating or teaching), and/or **inadequate self-actualization** by a child.

The following criteria for evaluating a child with learning problems are recommended:

### 3.2.1 Fundamental- (ortho-) pedagogic criteria

To begin, this mainly involves the criteria of **adulthood** and **normativity**, as indicated by Landman and his co-workers, and as laid down by Van Niekerk. The intent is that the criteria mentioned below can be stated as **questions** regarding the degree of becoming adult that has already been attained by a child, i.e., becoming adult, as this arises from his/her self-actualization under the guidance of adults. The criteria are first listed, after which brief commentary is given regarding a multidisciplinary group discussion:

3.2.1.1 Giving inadequate meaning to one's own existence.

3.2.1.2 Inadequate self-judgment and self-understanding.

3.2.1.3 Inadequate meaning of human dignity.

3.2.1.4 Inadequate forming of moral choices.

3.2.1.5 Inadequate identification with norms.

3.2.1.6 Inadequate appropriation of an outlook on life.

In a multidisciplinary approach, all contributions by subject specialists must be continually interpreted in terms of the above criteria to gauge the level of becoming adult achieved by a child, viewed against the background of his/her potentialities. Details to this effect cannot be considered now, except to mention that different **questions** can be asked in terms of these criteria. For example, what is the state of the child's attributing meaning, are the school and learning still meaningful for him/her, etc.? How responsible is he/she in approaching his/her studies?

### 3.2.2 Didactic- (ortho-) pedagogic criteria

Didactic pedagogics directs itself mainly to studying the phenomenon of **teaching** a child within a lesson situation, details of which can be acquired in the works of Van der Stoep and his co-workers. Thus, for example, **teaching** via a lesson must culminate in a **learning effect** which a child has actualized. Teaching and learning are not separable from each other, and in terms of the above-mentioned structure, in a search for criteria this means that a



child is guided by an adult (teacher, parent) via a lesson (contents) to self-actualize his/her learning (learning effect).

In the case of a child with learning problems, the question should and can be rightly asked about the possible role of both adult and child in the teaching and learning which have failed. Learning problems can continually lead back to the ways of guiding by adults, on the one hand, and to the ways of self-actualizing (learning) by a child, on the other hand. The didactic- (ortho-) pedagogic criteria to follow are directed mainly to the possibility of inadequate teaching by an adult.

In this connection, according to Van der Stoep, reference is made especially to the question of the **quality** of teaching and, thus, to the quality of unlocking reality (contents) reached with the teaching. The various criteria, as particularized by Van der Stoep and Louw, are only mentioned with the previously stated question about the quality of the teaching. Where these authors postulate the criteria as didactic, in the context of this paper, they are labeled didactic- (ortho-) pedagogic criteria by the overarching question stated above about the **inadequacy** of teaching. Thus, the question is, to what extent, in terms of the following criteria, can the **results** of the teaching-as-guiding be labeled as inadequate?

In a multidisciplinary approach, the orthopedagogue-orthodidactician must similarly interpret all subject specialist contributions in terms of the following didactic- (ortho-) pedagogic criteria, and the question must be asked about further light on the failed learning event.

3.2.2.1 Inadequate perspective on reality.

3.2.2.2 Inadequate constitution of a new reality.

3.2.2.3 Inadequate establishment of relations with reality.

3.2.2.4 Inadequate self-discovery of reality.

3.2.2.5 Inadequate emancipation.

3.2.2.6 Inadequate expectation regarding contents.

3.2.2.7 Inadequate rationalizing of reality.

3.2.2.8 Inadequate actualization of security regarding reality.

3.2.2.9 Inadequate transcending (giving meaning to) of reality.

For the detailed meaning of the didactic criteria distinguished, the reader is referred to the work of Van der Stoep and Louw. Viewed

as a whole, it is added that, for the aim of a multidisciplinary approach in terms of the above didactic- (ortho-) pedagogic criteria, the overarching question is asked about the **meaningfulness** of the results of the **teaching**, or then of the unlocking of the contents for a child. This offers the orthopedagogue-orthodidactician the possibility of trying to form a perspective on the degree of adequate progress of the teaching, as reflected in the child's learning effect.

Regarding the question of the **ways** a child self-actualizes learning adequately under the guidance of adults, an attempt is made to attain more clarity in terms of psychopedagogical criteria.

### 3.2.3 Psyco- (ortho-) pedagogic criteria

The author and co-workers have shown in several publications that the area of focus of psychopedagogics is the study of the psychic life of a child-in-educating, and more particularly, the actualization of the potentialities of his/her psychic life by means of his/her becoming and learning. Since a child is always a child-in-educating, actualizing his/her psychic life occurs by means of an adult guiding him/her to self-actualization. More specifically, psychopedagogics directs itself to the **ways** and **forms** of self-actualization. In the publications mentioned, the **ways** of self-actualizing are typified as experiencing, willing, lived experiencing, knowing, and behaving, categories by which a child creates for him/herself an **experiential world**, as a lived experienced world with meaning-invested possessed experience as the result.

In the mentioned publications, characteristic of this actualization of the psychic life is a continual elevation in level, as an increasing level of becoming, which is typified in the **forms** of actualization called exploring, emancipating, distancing, differentiating, and objectifying. Also, regarding the actualization of learning, various modes are distinguished, i.e., sensing, attending, perceiving, thinking, imagining and fantasizing, as well as remembering.\*

As far as a **child with learning problems** is concerned, particularly with reference to a multidisciplinary approach, and with reference to the above fundamental pedagogic and didactic pedagogic criteria,

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\* At the time of this publication, the modes of learning were considered to be sensing, attending, imagining, fantasizing, thinking, actualizing intelligence and observing.

it now follows that, where the fundamental- (ortho-) pedagogic criteria stated above are mainly focused on the criteria of **adulthood** and, with this, on guiding or educating to adulthood, and the didactic- (ortho-) pedagogic criteria attend to **teaching as unlocking reality**, now there is a search for criteria in terms of which the actualization of the psychic life of children with learning problems can be evaluated. This, then, has to do with criteria for evaluating this child's becoming adult and the actualization of his/her learning on his/her way to adulthood.

The following few psycho- (ortho-) pedagogic criteria for evaluating the actualization of the psychic life of a child with learning problems are aimed at evaluating the **inadequate ways of guiding** by the adults, on the one hand, and the **inadequate ways of self-actualizing** his/her psychic life by a child, on the other hand. As far as the possibility of inadequate guiding by the adults is concerned, the psycho- (ortho-) pedagogic criteria are especially focused on **inadequate affective and cognitive guidance**. As far as a child's possible inadequate self-actualization is concerned, their focus is particularly on **inadequate affective and cognitive self-actualization**. In these ways, one also arrives at a judgment of the **ways** of normative guiding meaning, and self-actualizing, which cannot be discussed here, and the details of which can be found in the literature cited. Against this background, the following psycho- (ortho-) pedagogic criteria are postulated for use in a multidisciplinary approach to a **child with learning problems**. After they are postulated, by means of a synthesis, a total image is offered from an integration of the above-mentioned orthopedagogic criteria, and other subject specialist contributions.

### 3.2.3.1 Possessed experience invested with inadequate meaning

With reference to the psychopedagogic literature mentioned (see also the recommended references), the above criterion is postulated as an overarching one in evaluating the experiential world of a child with learning problems. The question is, what does the possessed experience of a child with learning problems look like? Within the aim of this paper, the meaning of this evaluative criterion cannot be elaborated on, except to stress that possessed experience is the result of a child's entire learning activities which, from the beginning, he/she has invested with meaning for him/herself as an activity of self-actualization under the guidance (teaching,

educating, unlocking) of adults. This embraces the following criteria, among others:

**3.2.3.1.1 How does the child now experience the actualization of his/her given potentialities for becoming and learning?**

**3.2.3.1.2 What are his/her willful actions like regarding the actualization of his/her becoming and learning?**

**3.2.3.1.3 What are his lived experiences like, particularly his/her affective, cognitive, and normative lived experiences and, with this, his/her entire lived experiencing of, and attribution of meaning to his/her learning?**

**3.2.3.1.4 What is his/her anticipated future self-actualization of his/her becoming and learning potentialities like?**

**3.2.3.2 Particularized criteria of becoming**

**3.2.3.2.1 Inadequate exploration**

**3.2.3.2.2 Inadequate emancipation**

**3.2.3.2.3 Inadequate distancing**

**3.2.3.2.4 Inadequate differentiation**

**3.2.3.2.5 Inadequate objectifying**

Briefly, this has to do with judging a child's self-actualizing to adulthood, viewed within his/her situatedness, where he/she must actualize his/her becoming and learning, under adult guidance. Basically, the question is whether a child will still become adult in terms of the above-mentioned norms of actualization with which, particularly, there is a search for actions which elevate his/her level of becoming. These particularized criteria are then continually viewed in terms of a child's experiential world within which, in addition to moments of experiencing, moments of willing, lived experiencing, and possessed experience are kept in view. Educating-as-guiding, paired with teaching-as-guiding, are always kept in mind in evaluating the actualization of becoming of this child with learning problems. The above fundamental- (ortho-) pedagogic criteria also must be considered here.

**3.2.3.3 Particularized criteria for learning\***

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\* In the original article the particular modes of learning listed are sensing, attending, thinking, actualizing intelligence and remembering. The modes of learning listed as particular criteria reflect more recent psychopedagogic thought. (G.D.Y.)

When these following particularized criteria of learning are mentioned briefly, they also must be viewed as evaluative questions regarding a child with learning problems, within his/her educative and teaching situatedness. Thus, a child must always be viewed as a child-in-educating but now, particularly, in a didactic situation in the midst of the teaching he/she receives in terms of **lesson content**. Thus, this basically has to do with gauging a **disharmonious lesson situation**, including all its components; particularly, it has to do with a child's experiencing the teacher's **teaching**, the **lesson content**, and his/her own self-actualizing his/her learning, as a response to the appeal which goes out to him/her. Obviously, the above didactic- (ortho-) pedagogic criteria also must be implemented here and there is no mention here of boundaries. Also, it must be continually kept in mind that a child's learning problems occur with respect to a **subject**, and all criteria must be carried back to gauging the subject.

**3.2.3.3.1 Inadequate sensing**

**3.2.3.3.2 Inadequate attending**

**3.2.3.3.3 Inadequate perceiving**

**3.2.3.3.4 Inadequate thinking**

**3.2.3.3.5 Inadequate imagining and fantasizing**

**3.2.3.3.6 Inadequate remembering**

The following concluding section is a synthesis of the above orthopedagogic insights, and other subject specialist contributions in a multidisciplinary approach.

#### **4. AN ORTHOPEDAGOGIC PERSPECTIVE ON TEAMWORK**

At this stage, it is hoped that the reader has arrived at the insight that, in this paper an orthopedagogic perspective is maintained on a multidisciplinary approach. Essentially, this means that a child with learning problems is viewed as a child-in-educating, but that this educating has become problematic, for whatever reasons. With this, the entire actualization of his/her psychic life, more particularly of his/her becoming and learning, has become problematic, a situation in which the child him/herself has a personal role, but also a situation in which he/she is guided by adults. Any other factors, e.g., his/her body-ness, traumatic experiences, etc. must always be looked at within this framework.

The orthopedagogic perspective which is focused on teamwork implies that the orthopedagogue, as an educator schooled in orthopedagogics, has the task of evaluating all subject specialist contributions in terms of the orthopedagogic criteria posited above, with the aim of first acquiring an orthopedagogic diagnostic image (person image) of a child, and then to provide help or pedotherapy, including orthopedagogic assistance, which is going to be offered to this child in the future. The reason for this ought to be clear, i.e., the field of study of pedagogics and orthopedagogics is the pedagogic situatedness of a child on the way to adulthood.

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