

# WHO IS A CHILD WITH LEARNING PROBLEMS?

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Today, perhaps more than ever before, the question of learning problems is considered from a variety of perspectives. Possibly the reasons for the awareness of this matter lie in the fact that, from various areas, there are increasingly intensive attempts to identify and disclose the origins of and ways these problems manifest themselves. Learning problems always are, and remain a harmful matter and, thus, they show an urgency in our own time.

For these reasons, the identification of these pupils remains one of the most important issues which the orthopedagogue had to, and still must deal. Also, there is no doubt that the variations in identification stem from a wide circle of areas outside the pedagogical, among which are the psychological, the medical, and the sociological, and too many others to mention.

## 2. THE CHILD WITH LEARNING PROBLEMS: AN EDUCATIVE MATTER

One must realize that who a child with learning problems is cannot be discussed fundamentally without asking what area of science, ultimately, is concerned with this question. The primary matter is and remains educating these children, and the consequences which their restraints hold for them. Also, level headedness about the whole matter is particularly important. After all, a child with learning problems is not a rare phenomenon. All pupils, at one time or another have learning problems, so they cannot be reduced to a fixed course of teaching and extraordinary efforts are justified.

This pronouncement, which is so general that no one views it as knowledge, is particularly of importance in discussing the problem at hand. All learning problems are discernible in and wreak their havoc with respect to the teaching a child must go through. It is an

equally well-known fact that teaching such children occurs within the framework of educating them. Setting aims, designing, functionalizing, and evaluating this teaching is an educative matter. It does not matter whether a child's general maturity, and/or vocational independence are the aims for which the educators organize their teaching for all children. Everyday experience always shows that children with learning problems receive attention because their future perspective is curtailed, threatened, or even obscured, as a result of what, in the teaching situation is conspicuous. If teaching is suspended, the learning problem disappears. But teaching is an imperative matter for all children because, without it, their future perspective will become obscure. For this reason, there is a great temptation to pair up the question of learning problems with remedial teaching, and to leave the matter there. It is doubtful that the delimitation of the terrain in which we seek our answer to the question is this simple. The most important reason for this doubt, perhaps is that the results of a learning problem are too multiple with respect to the **person** with learning difficulties. He/she never lived experiences his/her deficiencies in terms of an achievement score, or as a brain, eye, or ear. The disorientation he/she is subjected to cannot simply be reduced to one or another aspect of his/her involvement with the learning situation. No aspect of a matter is the matter itself.

In the same way, one must be careful to not explain the manifestation of a disturbance in terms of its total effect. Learning problems, indeed, are only so often the consequence or result of a causative disposition. A profile of under achievements can also so easily be only a symptom of the matter, as much as it can represent the matter itself.

Another well-known and simple fact of relevance is that all educating is realized or actualized by teaching. Similarly, the meaning of all teaching lies in the educative aims. Therefore, all forms of teaching are planned and executed in accordance with educative aims. In a historical sense, whatever contributions were made in identifying the origin of learning problems by neurology, psychology, psychiatry, or any other field of science, the tasks flowing from this identification eventually fell on educating (i.e., orthopedagogics) with the aim of designing a meaningful future for a child. This includes all variations of labels, or etiologies of learning problems. It really doesn't matter if, in this regard, one talks of restraints, retardations, rejections, low abilities, or under

achievements, or if there is an indication that the origin is physical (particularly neurological) in nature. The **consequences** remain an educative task, also when it is largely the result of teaching. This point of view is increasingly confirmed by contemporary studies which indicate that it is, indeed, possible to identify learning problems either by researching the pupil's situation, or the teacher's qualifications. The latter aspect, indeed, is an important factor in the etiology of learning problems, which increasingly casts important light on the issue of identification. In addition to the contributions and important information which the medical and social sciences have provided, orthopedagogics is increasingly compelled to interpret the findings of the other pedagogical disciplines regarding the educative and teaching competencies of the teaching these children are enmeshed in, with the aim of designing therapeutic programs.

### 3. TYPIFYING LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

In this light, it also is important to scrutinize some aspects of the typification of learning difficulties to try to better understand the identification of these children. Usually, the most prominent aim of any typification is to recognize, order, or classify; also it is to try to determine administrative aims. On the other hand, typifying can be compelled by a matter such as training or research. Typifying learning difficulties, therefore, is of great importance to orthopedagogic practice because it is directly relevant to matters which eventually will help establish a definitive orthopedagogic practice. In this regard, think of designing programs of assistance, organizing group work, curriculum planning, etc.

On the other hand, typification usually implies **consolidating** information, with the aim of promoting situations or a series of situations in which tested therapies or procedures can be immediately implemented to get the program of assistance underway. In this regard, think of exercising functions which, as it were, are preconditions for a program concerning learning disturbances, and even some aspects of using standard medications.

Similarly, typifying learning difficulties provides direction for everyone involved in the sense that it brings conjectures to the foreground, especially in diagnostic work. In this regard, typification creates possible connections between a type of problem and a type of child which, in various ways, channelizes the

identification (of the problem) for the therapist, and saves much time in researching and designing the therapy. Compare the following particularities which, in almost all the literature on designing therapy, address in the identification of children with learning problems:

- Variations in physical conditions (i.e., from poor and fair to very good);
- Poor or very average motor skills;
- Social awkwardness;
- Shyness, loneliness, isolation;
- Obstinacy;
- Poor willingness;
- Negative and refusing, especially regarding teaching;
- Disturbed concentration;
- Labile emotional life;
- Poor interpersonal contact;
- Variations in abilities (from poor to particular abilities);
- Unfavorable family structure and circumstances;
- Unfavorable environmental factors.

It deserves mention that each of the above typification's, or types of identification really contains an educative task, i.e., a task which has almost no favorable prognosis outside a planned educative practice. In other words, all typification refers to a problematic educative situation regarding which the ultimate questions and answers must be provided by orthopedagogics.

In support of the above, some bi-polar profiles are offered in which these and other factors can possibly contribute to making observable a graphic image of the identification of these children. Figure I is a general or representative graph of characteristics manifested in the school situation by children with learning difficulties, especially with the aim of identifying the generally negative image they create. In this case, a 5-point negative and 5-point positive scale is used, and the extremely restrained factors are underlined to call attention to them. In figure II, in the same way, a profile is drawn depicting a comparison between boys and girls. Figure III makes use of the same technique of graphing, and presents a comparison of pupils in the primary and secondary school.

The interpretation of these graphs is left aside for the moment because their various aspects speak for themselves.

FIGURE 1  
POLARITY PROFILE OF CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES IN  
A SCHOOL SITUATION

[Hohn, E., Der schlechte Schuler, p 98]  
(General or representative graph)

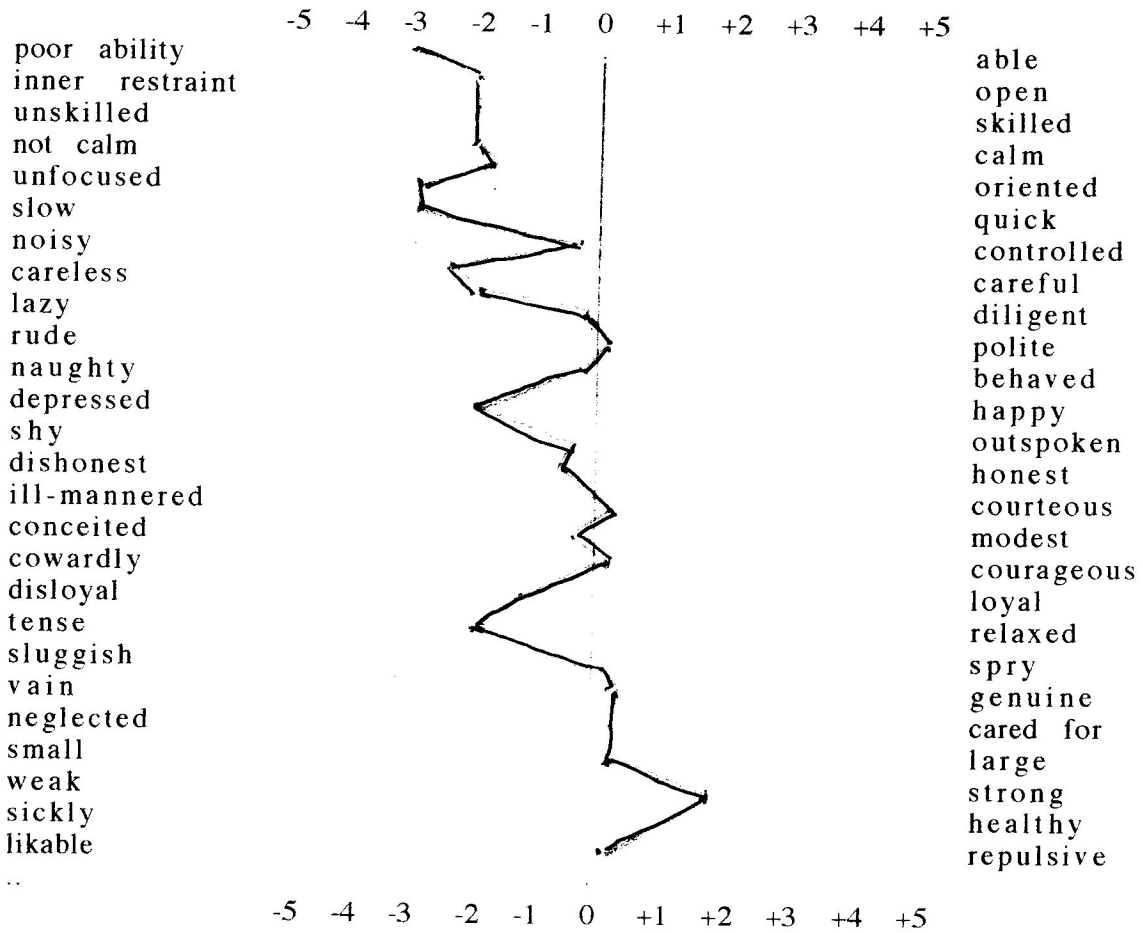


FIGURE II  
POLARITY PROFILE OF CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES IN  
A SCHOOL SITUATION

[Hohn, E., Der schlechte Schuler, p 99]  
(Boys X-X and girls O-O)

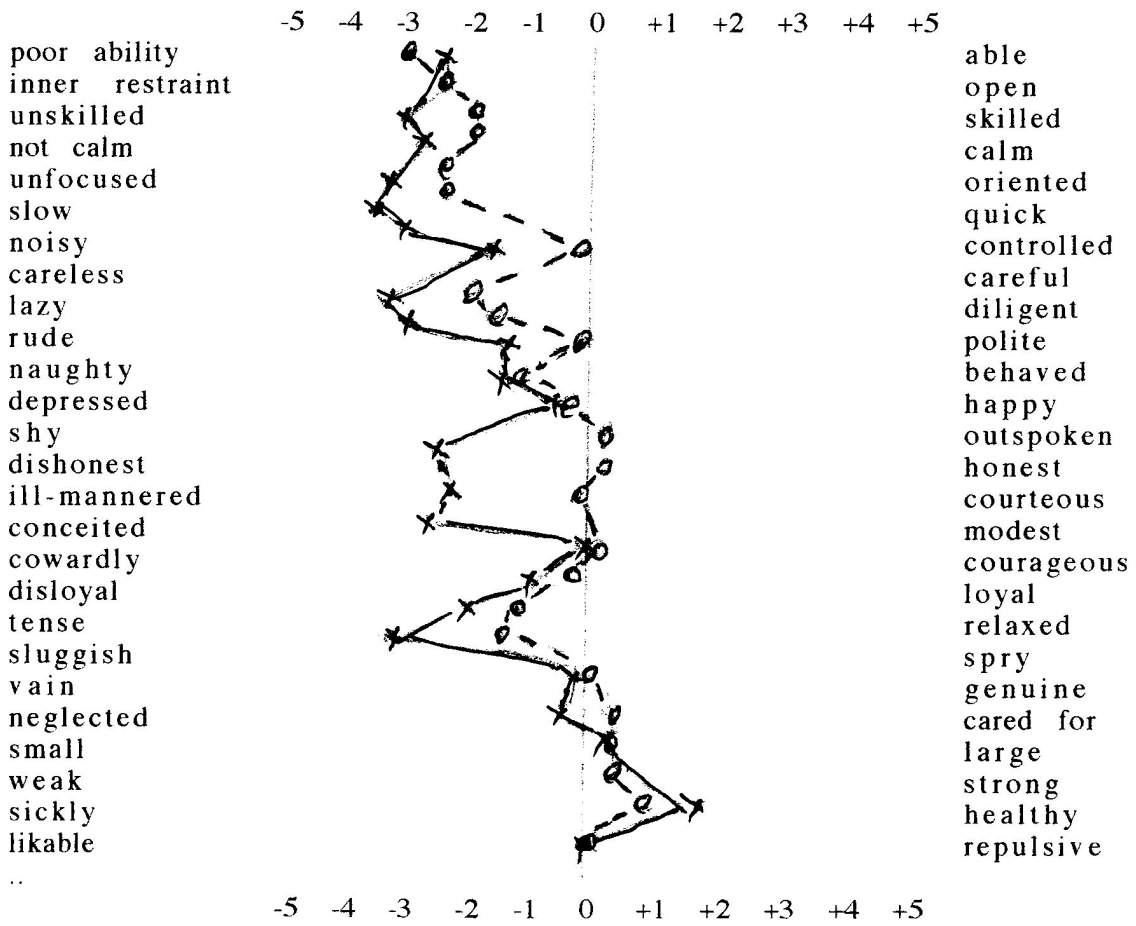
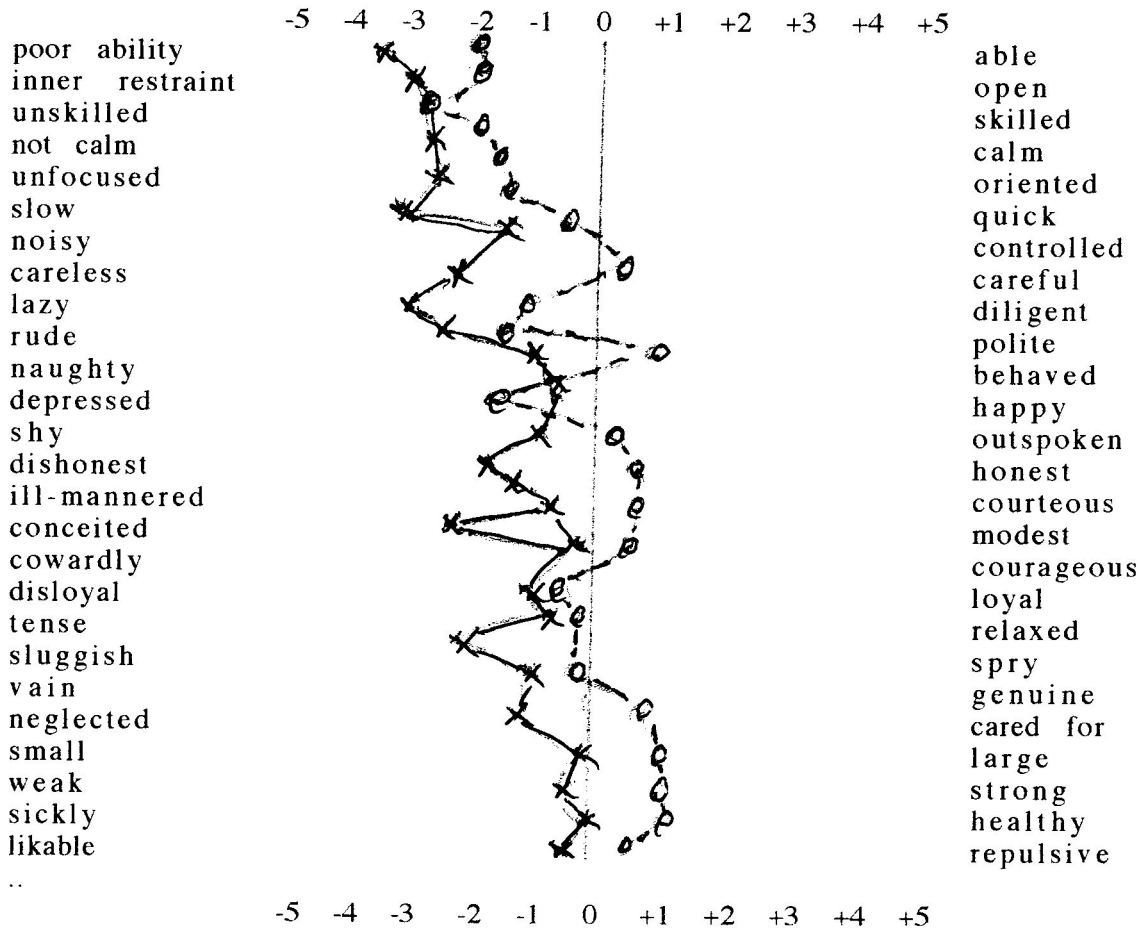


FIGURE III  
POLARITY PROFILE OF CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES IN  
A SCHOOL SITUATION

[Hohn, E., Der schlechte Schuler, p. 102]  
(Primary school  $\times$  and secondary school  $\circ$ )





#### 4. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCHOOL FAILURES AND LEARNING PROBLEMS

To further emphasize the educative problems of children with learning problems, Table I presents the results which failed school achievements have on them. Also, in this case, the most important effects are emphasized to call attention to them.

**TABLE I**  
**BEHAVIORS OF CHILDREN WITH LEARNING PROBLEMS**  
**RELATED TO THEIR SCHOOL FAILURES**

	Frequency of mention in 1000 cases	Percent
Alarmed	64	6
<b>Sad, cries</b>	424	42
Desperate	92	9
Ashamed of himself	55	6
<b>Anxious</b>	293	29
<b>Isolates himself</b>	100	10
Ignores it	53	5
<b>Turns inward</b>	361	36
<b>Indifferent</b>	107	11
<b>Rejecting</b>	105	11
Aggressive	34	3
<b>Evasive</b>	170	17
<b>Puts off</b>	122	12
Seeks compensation	14	1
Other behaviors	93	9

#### 5. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INTELLIGENCE AND SCHOOL SUCCESS

To emphasize the educative tasks regarding identifying and helping children with learning problems, Table II presents exemplary details regarding the connection between intelligence and school success.

The last four examples show conspicuous contrasts with the first five even though the range of intelligence and age are comparable for the most part.

**TABLE II**  
**RELATIONSHIP OF IQ AND SCHOOL SUCCESS**  
 (Van Gelder, L.: Ontsporing en Correctie, p. 112)

No.	Age	IQ	School observations and achievement
1	16,6	127	Unsuitable respect for ordinary academic teaching. Placed in practical, vocationally oriented course.
2	15,1	131	Unsuitable for teaching. Going to work.
3	16,0	134	Well disposed to academic teaching. Poor prognosis because of undisciplined thinking.
4	15,3	154	Good pupil but doesn't excel. Little interest in school.
5	15,2	139	Failed once. Shows potential.
6	15,6	141	Good pupil. Teacher notes he is not very intelligent and is miserable enough.
7	15,7	140	Excels, high intelligence.
8	15,9	119	Good pupil; strong emotional attunement.
9	15,4	148	Very good pupil who is far above average.

## 6. THE ORTHOPEDAGOGIC TASK REGARDING A CHILD WITH LEARNING PROBLEMS

### 6.1 The role of teaching in the origin and elimination of learning problems

All the research from the various areas of science regarding the identification of learning problems shows that there are few meaningful differences in the nature or origin of such problems. The most important factor in the information available is that few if any systematic studies have dealt with how the quality of teaching contributes to the origin and prevalence of this phenomenon. For this reason, it is meaningful for all identifying and typifying attempts to consider two simple questions:

1. To what extent should the pedagogical immediately apply itself to more carefully identifying and describing problematic teaching when there are learning difficulties?
2. If one accepts that the identification of children with learning problems does not contain insurmountable stumbling blocks for the orthopedagogue, that is, that existing identification procedures make it possible to correctly identify certain disturbances, e.g., of a neurological origin, then does teaching, as a fundamental matter of a program of therapy still remain relevant?

## **6.2 The didactic consequences of intervening with the child with learning problems**

It is alleged that the search for an answer to the question of who a child with learning difficulties is, exceeds the identification aspect. Indeed, identifying the problem, in many respects, is really the simplest aspect with which an orthopedagogue must deal. This identification really compels the orthopedagogue to investigate and be proficient in the various aspects implied. Consequently, the identification of a child with learning problems leads to practical alternatives which are not explored as intensively as the diagnostic aspect. For example, compare the following aspects:

1. Interpreting existing pedagogic (particularly didactic) theory for orthopedagogic practice.
2. Training teachers.
3. A system for special education in all of its facets.
4. Financing special education.
5. Implementing teaching technology in orthopedagogic practice.
6. The possibility of general curricular research with the aim of establishing "remedial" programs.

Functionalizing any orthopedagogic (more accurately, orthodidactic) insights means designing a teaching practice by which all particulars must be clarified in their didactic consequences. The question, who is a child with learning problems, necessarily must be supplemented with the additional question of who must I teach?

In this regard, it is difficult to justify the position that teaching children with learning problems is something different from ordinary teaching. The fact of the matter is that, in the experiential world there is only one teaching which, in various respects, and in accordance with different aims on differentiated bases, is put into practice. These differences in flavor of teaching make no differences in the basic didactic facts. It is especially regarding this aspect which orthopedagogics shows serious limitations in its research, as well as practice.

Basically, the matter results in research on particularizing existing and authentic pedagogical theory for orthopedagogics, as an applied area in the same way that subject didactics is an applied area of general pedagogical (i.e., didactic) theory. It is doubtful that orthopedagogics could arrive at a comprehensive response to the question of identifying a child with learning difficulties if the matter of particularization is not also extended to its own domain of diagnostic procedures. In conclusion, there is an enormous field between the identification of a problem, and its possible solution or, at least, providing help to progressively neutralize its effects as far as possible.

There is little doubt that identification and therapy have a very strong, even predominant didactic ring. The aims of both aspects unquestioningly attest to an ultimate teaching task, irrespective of what has led to such a problem. To corroborate this view, one must only page through any of the great diversity of works available on learning disturbances.

### **6.3 Didactic considerations regarding the identification of the child with learning problems**

The above tasks are particularly related to the following didactic considerations, without which the matter of learning problems, and the identification of a child who is going to be burdened by this disturbance cannot be placed in sharp relief. The explanation of

what follows can only be introductory or orienting considerations because the particulars which flow from them have already had a widely accepted scope in the didactic literature. Naturally, these are not the only considerations of relevance.

### **6.3.1 Postulating macrostructures**

All general theories focus on the nature of a matter, on the general or macrostructure. Indeed, this macrostructure offers guidelines for a practice such as, e.g., the orthopedagogic, in the sense that it indicates definite tendencies for planning. This means that a macrostructure contributes to one's insight regarding a problem, because it draws the limits within which it ought to be dealt with. The fact of the matter remains, however, that the orthopedagogic, more precisely the orthodidactic, cannot remain bogged down in the limits of problems, in general guidelines or tendencies in implementing its practice. Orthopedagogics is a functionalizing area of the problematic educative (and, thus, teaching) situation by which other demands are placed on it than are placed on a theoretical discipline, such as general didactics.

### **6.3.2 A particularizing task**

This particularizing does not deny that macrostructures contribute to one's insights into a matter such as learning problems. Since they indicate guidelines or tendencies, they also contribute significantly to an understanding of the preconditions which must be met before a learning problem can be sketched out in its individual respects, and a therapy designed. In this connection, for example, consider a functional disturbance which can precipitate, or even directly cause a specific problem. The recognition of such a problem (in this case, a functional disturbance), gives a provisional solution to the disturbance, in the sense that it completely or partially neutralizes a resistance or being bogged down, by which the learning disturbed child again can have access to a terrain which was previously closed to him/her. However, designing the didactic task can only follow this because the gap in the cognitive understanding of, e.g., the symbol system must be described systematically, and deliberately so that the effect of the disturbance can be remedied when and if the cause is entirely or partially neutralized. This implies that therapy involves a didactic design, which undoubtedly is a question of particularizing, i.e., of at least designing general didactic structures in accordance with subject didactic conclusions within the same

contexts. The explanation and interpretation, practice and evaluating, which must arise from the above, within the framework and tasks of learning disturbances, however, are out and out orthodidactic matters which can be judged didactically only in the general sense of the word.

### **6.3.3 Avoiding vagueness**

It follows that the macrostructures mentioned above are often conceptually vague in terms of the generalized insights which they express. As in the case of subject didactics, orthodidactics must eliminate this vagueness in its own particularizations. It is conspicuous that the important distinction, which so often is made in orthodidactics between theory and practice, is evident precisely within the framework of this particularizing. That is, in so far as practicing orthopedagogues pursue their practice, they really require themselves to particularize macrostructures in one way or another, which also might be the nature or origin of such macrostructures. That this particularizing often is a matter of recipes, devices, and such can be well understood. The complaint which can be quietly deduced from these amounts to the fact that authentic macrostructures which arise in an orthodidactic situation as general guidelines or tendencies, today are still not interpreted for and carried out in practice. For this reason, today, there is still considerable mention of haphazard successes or haphazard standards in orthopedagogics, as a practical science. For the same reason, there are many claims made of various areas of science having orthodidactic status outside fundamental orthopedagogic schooling. Such an infiltration is only logical within current plans of action and concerning the identification of learning problems.

### **6.3.4 Avoiding one-sidedness**

A learning problem is always nuanced, i.e., it always places a person before certain tasks within the limits of the relevant macrostructure. These tasks can be a question of emphasis, focus, or even fallacies. There can always be mention of fallacies, in the sense that part of a macrostructure is interpreted as if it were the whole, which easily leads to a one-sidedness in the therapy. It is within this framework that an orthopedagogic practice is reduced to a matter such as remedial teaching, which, indeed, it also is, but it is more than that.

### **6.3.5 Postulating microstructures**

Therefore, the nuanced nature of learning problems compels a nuancing from within the framework of the diagnosis and program which arise in the light of them. This statement makes a very important difference in perspective on learning problems because the general or macrostructure, within which the learning problem appears, only brings to the fore the accompanying skills, by which orthodidactics must arrive at a micro- or part- structure, **and which must be brought into accord with the particularities of the specific problem.** The consequence of this for a matter such as diagnosis speaks for itself. The time has long passed when a general explanation is interpretable as a matter of particularizing. The direction in which this points can never simultaneously be the end point to which a person must arrive. For example, in this respect, compare the discriminations possible in an investigation of **visual** and of **auditory** dyslexia which show **distinct**, i.e., **discriminable** nuances with different children regarding, e.g.,:

- (a) The problem itself.
- (b) The degree of learning disturbance because of the problem as it can be manifested in the cognitive grasp of language, the affective blockage of experiencing language, and expression in language. General guidelines regarding phenomena such as visual and auditory dyslexia only offer orthopedagogics boundary lines within which the didactic and even subject didactic macrostructures can be brought to the fore with the aim of particularizing within the orthodidactic context.

### 6.3.6 Clear outlining of the particularized problem

Considering the above, in orthodidactics there can be mention of polarizing, which creates a sharper focus on the nuances of its practice in so far as diagnosis as a therapeutic matter is needed. I propose that especially sharper naming in diagnosis can result in a clearer outline of the nature, i.e., the nuances of a problem. Also, for orthodidactics, this is a particularizing matter because the particularities of a problem show a unique relief which is described in therapy, and whose correlates must be found. These correlates can become observable on a relatively wide level, e.g., specific aims, functions, and designs (situations) which obviously place newer and higher demands on the analytic and discriminative abilities of the orthodidactician. In concluding the matter, his/her problem is always in relation to a specific, and even enveloping piece of

content. Without this content, there is no mention of a learning problem. The relation between the learning disturbed child and the content brings the learning problem to the surface. In a particularized sense of the learning problem, therefore, it is a school's and, at once, a didactic and subject didactic problem which seeks a return from the extraordinary to the ordinary [educative] situation. For the same reason, the program the orthodidactician writes is a matter of curricular transfer, with respect to setting aims, selecting and ordering contents, and evaluating. The otherness of his/her situation only lies in the nuanced nature of his/her task, i.e., the appearance of a learning disturbance of one or another nature.

#### **6.4 Orthodidactic tasks**

It seems unavoidable that orthodidactics must immediately search for the nuances of its practice within the limits of available macrostructures to come to its own particularizations regarding matters such as aims, functions, situations, variations in design, e.g., to be able to make its own authoritative pronouncements about important didactic matters, such as the modalities. But still more: correspondingly, he/she must give the closest attention to the question of content to define the balance more closely between the teaching and learning tasks. Finally, the question of content appears in the orthodidactic situation in an entirely particularized way, based on the mediating character which it shows in therapy. In this connection, one can refer directly to a child's acquisition of language, which normally is a matter of course, but in the case of learning disturbances, it usually is a task itself. To the best of my knowledge, a careful orthopedagogic study of this extremely important matter falls beyond our existing knowledge.

### **7. CONCLUSION**

To consider the question of the identification of a child with learning disturbances without trying to determine the nature of the disturbances means to try to remove them from the terrain of the particular to that of the general. To return to the profile polarization: The particulars contained in the profile are those which cannot be listed by any teacher with infallible accuracy. By studying the profile, students in training probably learn a thing or two about the identification of these pupils. Such an identification is like a teacher who identifies that a child cannot read. To do this, one does not need to be an authority. The question about the origin



and the possibility of trying to implement this functionally, with the greatest effect and least time possible in terms of specific contents is not a matter of a few devices, isolated function-exercises, or didactic recipes. Regarding this, orthopedagogics has a fundamental task which also requires that the outcomes of its research must be placed within reach of practicing teachers.

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