

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 that the orthopedagogue has had to and still has to deal with. Also there is no doubt that the variations in identification stem from a wide circle of areas outside of 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 has to 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 that their restraints hold for them. Also, level headedness about the whole matter is of particular importance. 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 of particular importance in discussing the problem at hand. All learning problems are discernible in and wreak their havoc with respect to the teaching a child has to pass 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 particular 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 never lived-experiences his deficiencies in terms of a particular achievement score or as a brain, eye or ear. The disorientation he is subjected to cannot simply be reduced to one or another aspect of his involvement with the learning situation. No aspect of a matter is the matter itself.

In the same way, one has to be careful to not explain the manifestation of a particular disturbance in terms of its total effect. Learning problems indeed are only so often the consequence or result of a particular causative disposition. A profile of underachievements can likewise 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 an 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 education (namely 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 underachievements 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 that 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 that increasingly casts important light on the issue of identification. In addition to the contributions and important information that the medical and social sciences have provided, orthopedagogics is increasingly compelled to interpret the findings of the other pedagogic 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 carefully 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 that 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 more or less immediately implemented to get the program of assistance underway. In this regard, think of exercising functions that, 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 particular 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 that 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 that in almost all of the literature on designing therapy address in one way or another 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 typifications or types of identification really contains an educative task, i.e., a task that has almost no favorable prognosis outside of a planned educative practice. In other words, all typifications refer to a problematic educative situation regarding which the ultimate questions and answers have to 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 presents a general or representative graph of particular 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)

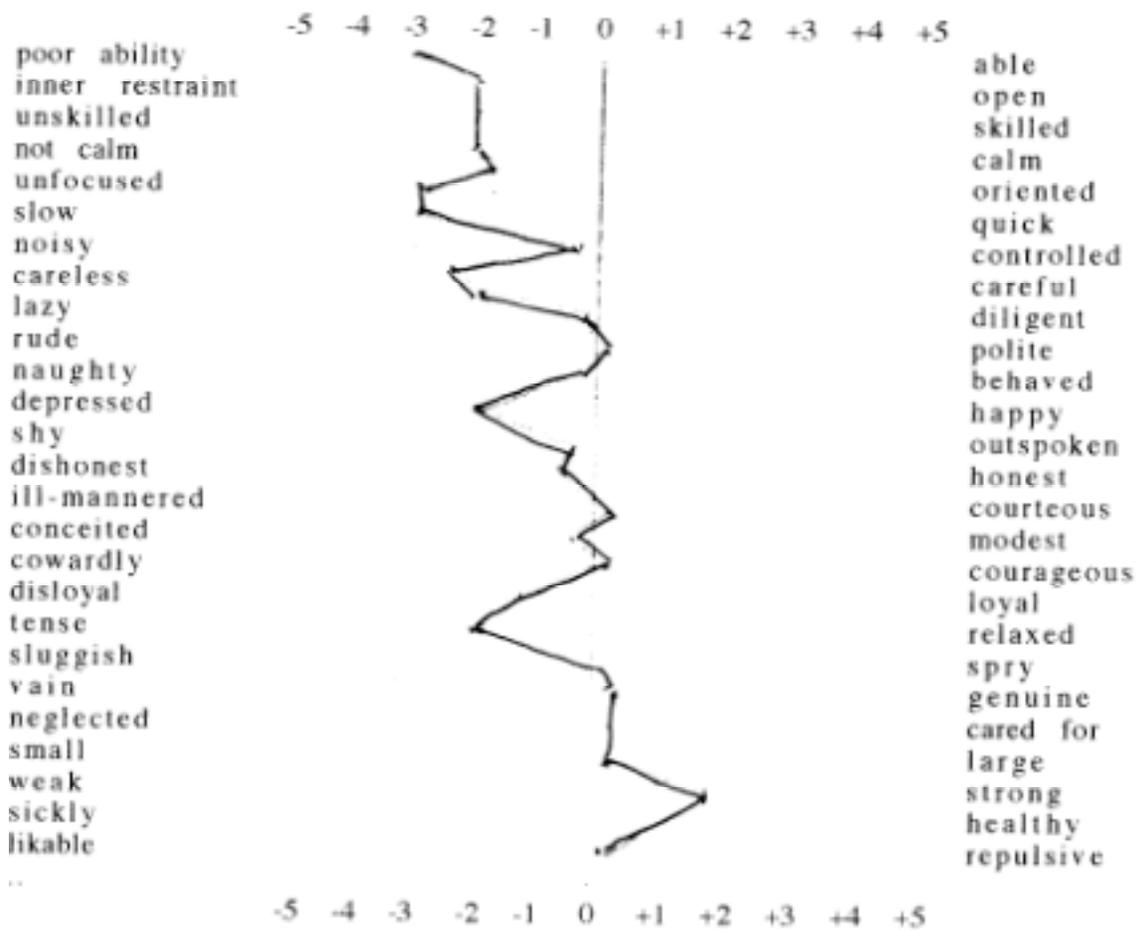


FIGURE II
POLARITY PROFILE OF CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES IN
A SCHOOL SITUATION

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

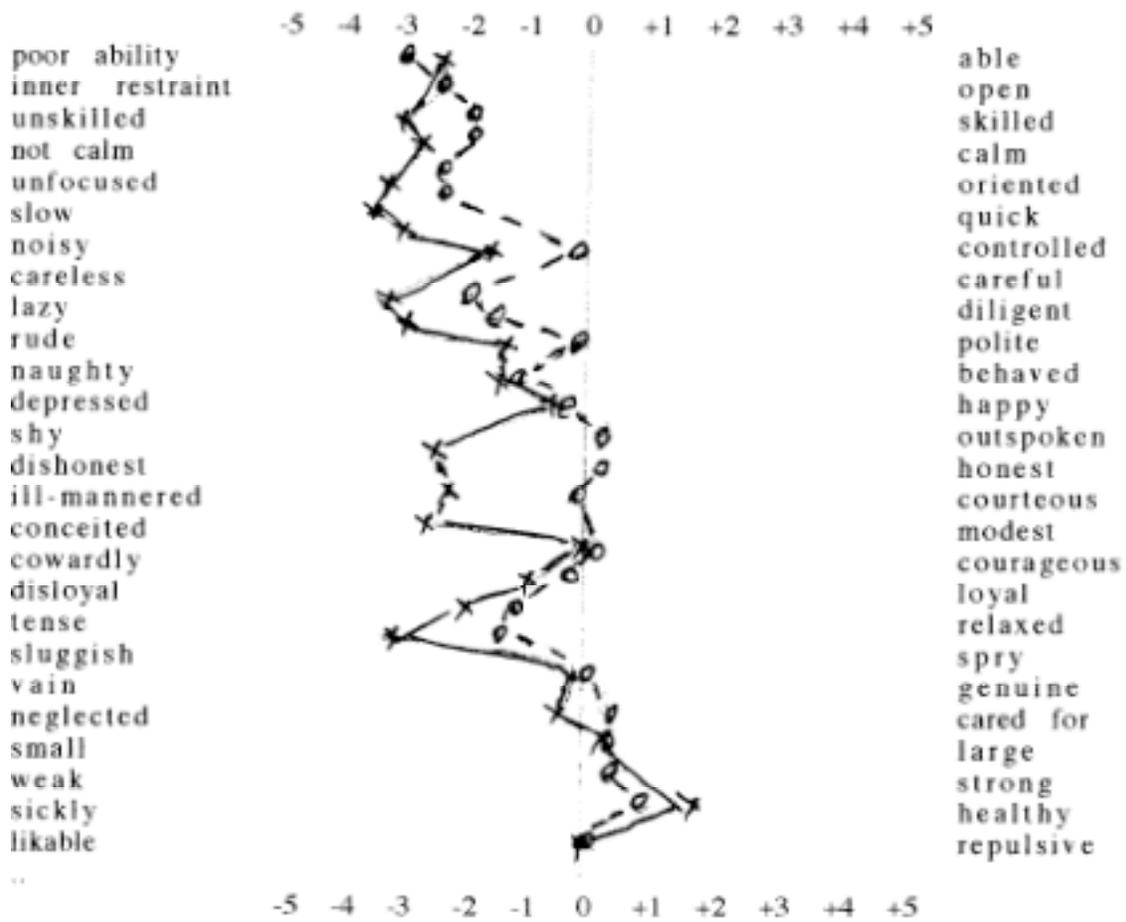
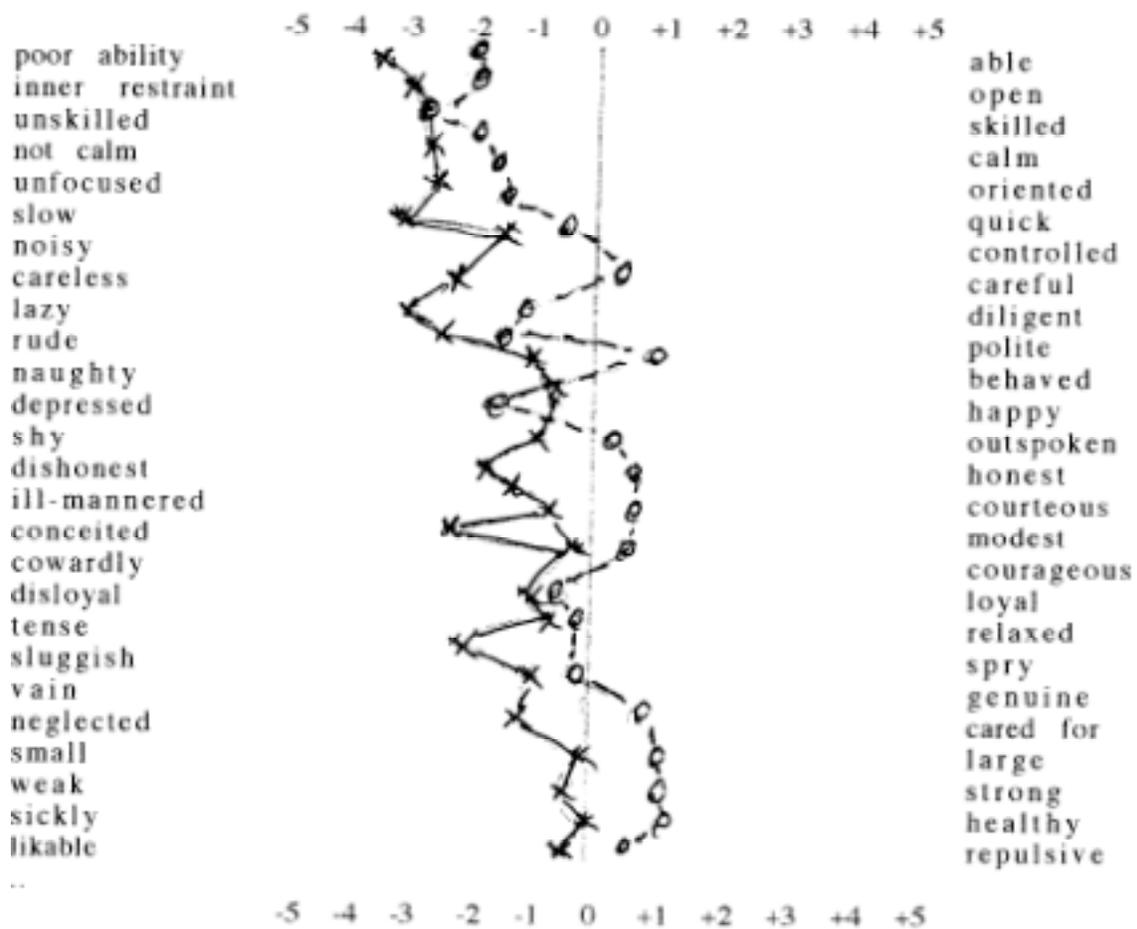


FIGURE III
POLARITY PROFILE OF CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES IN
A SCHOOL SITUATION

[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 briefly presents the results that 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
Sad, cries	424	42
Desperate	92	9
Ashamed of himself	55	6
Anxious	293	29
Isolates himself	100	10
Ignores it	53	5
Turns inward	361	36
Indifferent	107	11
Rejecting	105	11
Aggressive	34	3
Evasive	170	17
Puts off	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 of 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 take into account two simple questions:

1. To what extent should the pedagogic 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 problems in many respects is really the simplest aspect with which an orthopedagogue has to 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 that more or less 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 have to be clarified in their didactic consequences. The question, who is a child with learning problems, necessarily has to 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 that 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 that orthopedagogics shows serious limitations in its research as well as practice.

Basically the matter results in research on particularizing existing and authentic pedagogic theory for orthopedagogics as an applied area in more or less the same way that subject didactics is an applied area of general pedagogic (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 particular problem and its possible solution, or at least providing help in order 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 need 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 mentioned tasks are related in particular 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 that 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 particular 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 on the basis of 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 that have to be met before a particular learning problem can be sketched out in its individual respects and a therapy designed. In this connection, for example, consider particular functional disturbances that 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 that was previously closed to him. However, designing the didactic task can only follow this because the gap in the cognitive understanding of, e.g., the symbol system has to be described systematically and deliberately in order 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 that 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 that have to arise from the above within the framework and tasks of learning disturbances, however, are out and out orthodidactic matters that 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 that they express. As in the case of subject didactics, orthodidactics has to eliminate this vagueness in its own particularizations. It is conspicuous that the important distinction that 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 that 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 that can be quietly deduced from this amounts to the fact that authentic macrostructures that arises 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 of fundamental orthopedagogic schooling. Such an infiltration is only logical within current plans of action and also 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 particular tasks within the limits of the macrostructure that is relevant. 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, that indeed it also is but it is more than that.

6.3.5 Postulating microstructures

Therefore, the nuanced nature of learning problems compel a nuancing from within the framework of the diagnosis and program that arise in 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 on the basis of which orthopedagogics has to arrive at a micro or aim structure, **and that has to be in accord with the particularities of the specific problem.** The consequence of this for a matter such as diagnosis actually 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 also 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 that show **distinct**, i.e., **discriminable** nuances with different children regarding, e.g.,:

- (a) The problem itself.
- (b) The degree of learning disturbance as a consequence 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 really only offer orthopedagogics particular 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 particular problem

In light of the above, in orthodidactics there can be mention of polarizing that 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 particular problem. Also, for orthodidactics, this is a particularizing matter because the particularities of a problem show a unique relief that is described in therapy and whose correlates have to be found. These correlates can become observable on a relatively wide level, e.g., in particular aims, functions and designs (situations) that obviously place newer and higher demands on the analytic and discriminatory abilities of

the orthodidactician. In concluding the matter, his problem always is really in relation to a particular and even enveloping piece of content. Without this content there really 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 particular sense of the word, it therefore is a school's and at once also a didactic and subject didactic problem that in one way or another seeks a return from the extraordinary to the ordinary 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 situation really only lies in the nuanced nature of his task, namely, the appearance of a learning disturbance of one or another nature.

6.4 Orthodidactic tasks

It seems unavoidable that orthodidactics has to immediately search for the nuances of its practice within the limits of available macrostructures in order to come to its own particularizations regarding matters such as aims, functions, situations, variations in design in order, e.g., to be able to make its own authoritative pronouncements about important didactic matters such as the modalities. But still more: correspondingly he has to give the closest attention to the question of content in order to more closely define the balance between the teaching and learning tasks. Finally, the question of content appears in the orthodidactic situation in an entirely particular way on the basis the mediating character that it shows in therapy. In this connection, one can refer directly to a child's acquisition of language that normally is a matter of course but in the case of learning disturbances it usually is a task in 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 really 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 that cannot be listed by any teacher with fairly 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 similar to 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 particular contents is not a matter of a few devices, isolated function-exercises or didactic recipes. Regarding this, orthopedagogics has a fundamental task that also requires that the outcomes of its research have to be placed within reach of practicing teachers.

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