

# THE PSYCHIC LIFE OF THE CHILD WITH SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITIES

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## 1. INTRODUCTORY ORIENTATION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 2.1 What is the meaning of the psychic life?

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

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

## 2.2 How is the psychic life actualized?

### **2.2.1 Modes of actualization in the psychic life of the child**

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

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

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

#### **Learning**

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

## **Becoming**

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

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

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

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

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

##### **3.1.1 The child with specific learning disabilities as an experiencing being**

The essences looked for in evaluating childlike experiencing is that to experience includes a movement to and entering into; thus it is an activity by which the child goes out to the reality around him. That is, experiencing means to go out to the contents

through which reality appeals to the child. But experiencing also means to undergo; that is, the child is influenced by the contents he comes into contact with.

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

It must be emphasized that the child with specific learning disabilities experiences all restraining moments of his learning. With reference to the above noted findings by Stander and Strydom as well as those of other authors, it is clear that this child is someone who will experience his whole existence, as also realized in his learning and becoming, as different than those children who are not restrained in learning. In particular, this child's going out to the contents with which he is confronted is characterized as an inadequate turning to, exploring and understanding those contents. He experiences himself as disabled, as under-achieving, as a slow learner who meets various obstacles in the course of his learning and whose actualization of his psychic life often fails. Consequently, he learns to know himself as a disabled child.

When there are signs of the presence of specifiable handicaps he experiences such burdens or aggravations additionally and the actualization of his psychic life can be strongly characterized by an inadequate lived experiencing of his body that can damage the entire course of his learning.

### **3.1.2 The child with specific learning disabilities as a willing being**

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

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

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

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

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

It must also be emphasized that the child's experiencing, as guided by his willing, proceeds to lived-experiencing via giving sense and meaning and that these "meanings-for-me" congeal in the form of residues of experiencing or possessed experiences. The result of investing this content with meaning is the retained possessed experiences of the child and depending on the level

(hierarchy) and quality of meanings (high, low, nonsensical, etc.) that he has attributed, his future experiencing will be co-defined by his resulting possessed experiences.

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

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

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

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

As far as the child with specific learning difficulties is concerned, it can definitely be concluded from the many findings in the literature that, with respect to the restraining moments of his

cognitive learning, his course of knowing, and with this his knowing behaving in the form of learning is inadequate. This literature is replete with references to fluctuating achievements and concentration, all kinds of perceptual problems, a weak and deficient cognitive style, problems in reading, writing, arithmetic and language, perseverations, spatial disorientations, etc. (In this respect, see the studies of Dumont, Stander and Strydom).

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

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

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

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

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

#### **3.2.1 Sensing and attending of the child with specific learning disabilities**

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

and remembering, also known as cognitive modes of learning.

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

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

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

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

In the vast literature on the restraining moments of the child with special learning disabilities, a lack of concentration and disturbed attending are very familiar. The distractibility of attending because of the hyperactivity shown by these children is well known. This phenomenon should immediately direct the attention of experts to the emotional basis for the disturbed attending but even more to labilized sensing as the initiating mode of learning of these children.

In summary, this means that both of these accompanying modes of learning (sensing and attending) in their being emotionally

restrained and blocked unfavorable predispose the very important cognitive course of learning via the cognitive modes of learning (perceiving, thinking and remembering).

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

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

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

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

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

Thinking as a mode of learning always implies the problematic, and Straus emphasizes further that it is the child’s questioning attitude that is its origin. The questioning child is someone who experiences a problem and who seeks an answer or solution.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It has already been stated that the course of learning and becoming is a unitary event. However, the child primarily learns

and because of this he becomes adult. Consequently, learning is also observable in the child's becoming and, indeed, on the following levels of behaving:

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

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

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

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

The child who distantiates himself will, on the basis of his exploring and emancipating, gradually detach himself from the influence of his parents in order to be able to stand more on his own two feet.

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 5. RECOMMENDED READINGS

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## AUTHOR'S ENGLISH SYNOPSIS [Slightly edited]

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

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

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

The most important implications and recommendations are:

1. Educationists are advised to move away from the symptomatological approach and the application of remedial techniques that go with it, and to direct their attention to the educational situation of these children instead, i.e., teaching and learning as it affects and involves them. There is need for investigation and research into the disharmony between the acts of teaching and learning, and particularly the relationship of this disharmony to the disharmonious actualization of the psychic life by the child. A possible lesson structure or program should be sought in which teaching and learning goals, curriculum content, and especially the relationship

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