

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN EDUCATIONAL AND LEARNING PROBLEMS AND THE ORTHOPEDAGOGIC TASK THIS ENTAILS

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1. THE PHENOMENON OF LEARNING PROBLEMS

In our contemporary society a child has no other choice than to be involved in teaching and in the school as a social institution and also of necessity he is confronted with demands that have to be satisfied. It is generally known that a number of children experience problems in satisfying these demands. Even a superficial reflection on learning problems makes it clear that they have a different configuration with each unique child and this underlines the necessity for a good understanding of **who** a child is, **how** he **learns**--more particularly how he learns **inadequately**-- in order to ascertain the essentials of **his** learning problems.

2. THE CHILD AS LEARNING PERSON

Each child is continually a **person-in-education**. As such, **he enters a dialogue** with the surrounding world. By experiencing, willing, lived-experiencing, knowing and behaving **he actively goes out** to the world because he **wants to know** it in order to discover its **meaning** since he **wants to be someone himself**. In terms of his particular **given potentialities** he, in **feeling, willing, behaving and knowing** ways, attributes **meaning** to life contents whenever he is **present** to them by **sensing, attending, perceiving, thinking**, etc. and he integrates what he discovers there into his unique experiential world or life world.

The entirety of such unlocked meanings constitutes his **life world**, that also is continually expanding and enlarging in proportion to new **possessed experiences**--as the personal meanings he attributes to the contents of reality--that thereby become integrated. As a **person** he thus is continually becoming **different**. This becoming different is **adequate** if the life contents **learned gradually** correlate with the meanings **adults** give them, of course, assuming that the child has at his disposal the necessary **learning potentialities**.

The learning difficulties are situated in his **psychic life** as a **totality**, which is all of his potentialities, namely all of his **potentialities for exploring, emancipating, distancing, differentiating and objectifying**; all of his **potentialities for experiencing, willing, lived-experiencing and behaving**; and all of his **potentialities for sensing, attending, perceiving, thinking imagining and fantasizing and remembering**⁽¹⁾. Should he **actualize** these potentialities, this is seen as an **event of becoming and learning** on the basis of which new **insights continually break through**⁽²⁾, **strong connections are formed**⁽³⁾, "yes" is said to values⁽⁴⁾ and the learner proceeds to an **acceptance of life**⁽⁵⁾.

Learning, thus, elevates the level on which a child **carries on a dialogue**, on which he **accepts responsibility**, on which he **makes choices** and on which he **actualizes values**. By seeking meaning by **experiencing, willing and lived-experiencing** and the different modes of learning, a child gives meaning to life contents. Thus, becoming adult gradually places his personal feelings, thoughts and meanings--his "**learned-ness**"-- at his disposal.

By means of lived-experience he **takes a position** with respect to the learning contents on an **emotional and knowing** level and attributes meaning to them. So, for example, on an emotional level by **sensing**, he **becomes aware** of the learning material as **something**. This sensing accompanies all **cognitive** learning and it can assume at least three qualities, namely, **impulsive, labile or stable**. To be open to the content, as a **readiness** to approach it via the cognitive modes of learning, lived-experiencing has to be emotionally **stable** since this is the basis for this readiness.

By means of his **willingness** he continually gives **direction** or a **course** to his learning initiative and he directs it to an **aim** whenever, by means of perceiving, etc., he takes a position, on a cognitive level, regarding the learning material. Then this involves the **what**, the **matter** itself, the **content** as such. For the child to experience learning as meaningful, this position taken has to be paired with the **logical, systematic and ordered**.

The **emotional life** of a child is closely integrated into his total being-a-person and, because of this, **educating** always has a particular effect.

3. THE ROLE OF EDUCATING IN ACTUALIZING LEARNING

Regarding the content a child has to **learn**, he is guided by the adult in terms of **teaching**, an activity that emanates only from the adult. The content the adult presents is carefully selected and ordered with the aim of the child becoming adult, as an ordered way of living.

When a child **learns** this content while the adult **teaches** it, this is nothing more than a **conversation**⁽⁶⁾ between learner and teacher that flourishes as the educative event flourishes on the basis of mutual **trust**, **understanding** and **obedience to authority**. The aim of this conversation is to allow the child to become capable of independently accomplishing his life tasks⁽⁷⁾; to help him with meanings⁽⁸⁾, with forming a conscience⁽⁹⁾; to activate himself morally⁽¹⁰⁾; and to allow him to acquire responsibility⁽¹¹⁾.

With regard to a child's role in this conversation, he always has to **feel ready** to participate in it, and this involves a **willful act** on his part. The strength or not of his **will-power** is continually determined by his **sensing** in terms of affective **stability** or **lability** that, as such, is of direct **educative importance**.

As an **emotional mode of learning**, sensing also qualifies as an **accompanying** mode of learning⁽¹²⁾, and it continually is the **preparation for** or the **beginning of** all cognitive learning. It is the first concerned involvement with things, a **becoming aware** of learning content. Now, when a child attends to what he has become aware of, he **opens himself to** and is **ready** to make the content part of his own experiential world by **learning** it via perceiving, thinking, etc.

Each sensing **intuitively** begins from a child's previous experiences or from any matter in his situation that directs an emotional appeal to him. Now, when a teacher confronts him with specific content, he becomes aware of it and, if his sensing is stable, he also assumes a position toward it on a cognitive level.

A child has a **hierarchy** of possessed experiences that refers back to the modes and qualities of lived-experiencing, e.g., labile or stable affective lived-experiences, ordered or unordered cognitive lived-experiences, etc. **Unassimilated** lived-experiences continually direct a strong appeal to him in terms of **anxiety, uncertainty, insecurity** as **moments** of his experiential world and the intensity of these feelings influences how readily he lived-experiences the learning-related problem in order to break through his subjective sensing and to remain with the learning content in ordered ways by perceiving, thinking, etc.

Then there is always the possibility of affective lability on the basis of which the learning-initiated sensing cannot accompany/guide the cognitive modes of learning. Consequently, he then also lived-experiences that he is not learning adequately and this leads to the further intensification of his feelings of anxiety and insecurity. Concretely, such a state of affairs can be represented as a "**wall**" between his **learning potential** and his **learning effect**, instead of a "**bridge**" when he lived-experiences security and feels ready and prepared to also actualize his cognitive learning potentialities. Then the educator sees that the information he wants to present to the child is not meaningfully received by him.

Because a child continually interprets the relationships with his parents, teachers and others, and each relationship does not allow him to escape, especially emotionally, care has to be taken that he always experiences and lived-experiences these relationships such that he also can learn, can achieve, is someone who gives meaning to something. In particular, this has to do with the **atmosphere** or **climate** between parent and child where mutual **trust** should be present. If this is lacking, the educator helps to build a "**wall**" between the child's learning potential and his learning effect.

4. THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PROBLEMS OF EDUCATING AND LEARNING

The educative dialogue always remains a point of intersection of the subjective interpretation of the adult and child where short-circuits can arise, says Vermeer⁽¹³⁾. Therefore, it also is clear that no child learns **automatically** because to be **able** to learn he has to go **actively** to the appealing content and become intellectually involved with it while the adult has to **actively teach** him.

However, in current teaching, the role of a child's **emotions** is still overlooked and the **cognitive** is especially concentrated on as well as the role of the teacher. When either one of the two parties in any way participates in this dialogue in half-hearted ways this means the educative relationship, course, aim and activity structures are not being properly actualized, says Landman⁽¹⁴⁾.

A child's inadequate participation often leads back to a **labile emotional life** that, as such, is a purely educative matter⁽¹⁵⁾, and it is evidence that the educator does not adequately trust and understand the child or confront him with sympathetic authority. Muller-Eckhard⁽¹⁶⁾ says when an adult's understanding and interest are lacking, "a disordered and confused lived-experience" arises and he emphasizes that this can have serious consequences because with deficient understanding, the child's "whole psychic development is disturbed"⁽¹⁷⁾.

During the relationship between educator and child, what will be unlocked for a child has to be conveyed by means of a clear "message". Too often a child does not understand the message or understands it incorrectly.

It also is readily understood that it is a child with learning difficulties who acts incorrectly, fails and ultimately is a "failure". The parent's logic is that his child has to work harder and be more productive, which might be entirely correct from his point of view, but the **manner** in which this is communicated to the child usually fails when he is not taken into account as a lived-experiencing person.

Everything about himself and his educative relationships that he is unable to meaningfully assimilate into his experiential world leads to **anxiety**. Therefore, Lubbers also says "the communication between parents and children can occur such that the child yields in fear and withdraws into underhanded behavior."⁽¹⁸⁾ A child experiences and lived-experiences educative deficiencies on a vital, pathetic level, and **he feels** unsafe, insecure and uncertain, lonely, helpless, awkward, dependent and inadequate.

Without going into detail, it is only emphasized that errors in educating such as the following usually lead to learning problems: rejection, spoiling, over-protection, authoritarian exercise of authority, lack of restraint, inconsistency, indoctrination, lack of

love, over-estimating, rejection of order, demanding too much, permissiveness, exploitation. Then a child is **affectively, cognitively and normatively** neglected:

- he wants to become someone himself but is kept small;
- he is an initiative of relationships but is forced into a waiting attitude;
- he wants to be accepted but feels rejected;
- he wants to feel like someone of value but feels inferior;
- he seeks stability but lived experiences lability;
- he wants to be understood but feels he is not; etc.⁽¹⁹⁾

He is really abandoned to his anxiety and he feels that there is no one he "dare" share this feeling with.

As unassimilated experiences increase quantitatively, a child is gradually driven into an affective no-man's-land, and this deprives him of a readiness to also explore his world on a cognitive level as a willing, experiencing, and lived-experiencing learner because, as Noordam⁽²⁰⁾ says, it is only a non-anxious, non-neurotic child who can learn adequately. Because he cannot defend himself against the anxiety, he withdraws into the apparent security of his own world. Lubbers⁽²¹⁾ says this forces him to take a **defensive attitude**.

Such educative neglect also means essentially that the adults contribute to the child's "lack of readiness" as a consequence of dismantling his **learning preparedness and readiness**, and on this basis his **sensing** and **attending** are further labilized in the lesson situation and he is unable to learn adequately.

The pluriformed nature of **learning**, educating and teaching, on the one hand, and the complex nature of the child's psychic life (emotionality, intellectuality, etc.), on the other hand, gives rise to tensions by which a learning problem then shows itself in a number of possible symptoms. These symptoms are nothing more than an indication that there is a **gap** between the child's **attained** and his **attainable level of learning**. There is a difference between what he really **knows** and **understands** and what he ought to know and understand in accordance with his talents.

In the following, brief attention is give to the **handicapped** child with learning problems.

5. THE HANDICAPPED CHILD WITH LEARNING PROBLEMS

Learning problems mean there is a **disharmony** between a child's self-actualizing his learning intention, particularly regarding the **course of learning** which, as such, includes a **disharmonious** actualizing of experiencing, willing, lived-experiencing and behaving. The result is a **disharmony** regarding life demands, namely, a **labile** emotionality and an unordered cognitive attribution of meaning, as a defective foundation for integrating the newly possessed (learned) experiences.

It should be clear, however, that the onset of emotional lability should not be attributed merely to educative neglect, **as such**. **Preparedness and readiness to learn** also require the availability of cognitive potentialities and physical and sensory skills. In this connection, a **handicapped** child has to contend with particular problems. Thus, e.g., a weak-sighted child is **limited** in **exploring** the world and his **freedom** to adequately design his own world is hampered by his weak visual perception. He is limited in how he will explore his world.⁽²²⁾ In addition, he is also continually wrestling against his total physical handicap while his lived-experience of his eyes alone recedes from the foreground.⁽²³⁾

When on the basis of sensory or other defects a child lived-experiences that he does not cumulatively acquire a stronger grasp of life contents, gradually he **feels** and **believes** that he **is not able** and this quickly becomes a feeling of "I will not try because it doesn't make any difference." Indeed, he has to continually contend with an emotionally labilizing vicious circle.

The fact that a blind child cannot **read visually** does not qualify as a **learning problem** but also when he cannot do this by **touching** or **hearing**. His blindness at most is a "learning defect" that can **aggravate** his learning. However, this does not **force** him to not use the learning potentialities he does have at his disposal. An unwillingness to **listen, think, read, play**, etc. is not attributable to his specific handicap as such.

Regarding the learning problems of a handicapped child, it is, however, not always possible to distinguish whether the affective problem is primarily brought about by the handicap, as such, or by educative neglect. For this reason, it is disturbing that there still is so much consensus regarding the origin of the learning problems of handicapped children. Too readily, the handicap is viewed as the

only cause and then there is not enough consideration given to the role of inadequate educating and teaching.

Viewed essentially, a handicapped child's learning is no different from that of a child not handicapped. However, because of his experiential and lived-experienced deficiencies--as moments of limited freedom--he very easily shows a **different** profile in actualizing the various modes of learning, and it is necessary that he be given "**extraordinary**" help. Then there is an accounting of his **limitations** but also of his **potentialities** with the aim of **preventing learning problems from arising**.

The "**extraordinary**" help involves the teacher finding "special" ways for making the contents most effectively communicable to the child. In this connection, he makes use of a wide variety of aids and techniques from which he selects the most appropriate for teaching a particular child. Thus, the child is helped with respect to his **permanent** defect and with the most effective ways of communicating with life.

However, these children also have to be continually supported emotionally. To be able to do this successfully it is necessary that the child continually be explored in his **educative situation** with the aim of determining as early as possible the underactualization of his **learning** and the **teaching** and **educating** he is receiving.

Thus, a "**continuous diagnosis**" is necessary to be able to link up with available potentialities and skills and to make sure that there are no "**gaps**" between a child's learning potential and learning effect: if there are such gaps the handicapped child has to also become involved in **orthopedagogic** intervention.

Therefore, the teacher in Special Education not only has to be prepared regarding "special" techniques for improving the child's communicating, as such, but he also should be a schooled **orthopedagogue**.

6. ORTHOPEDAGOGIC ASSISTANCE FOR A CHILD WITH LEARNING PROBLEMS

6.1 Introduction

If a child is identified as someone with a learning problem then the immediate question is **how** this problem can be abolished and with this question **orthopedagogic practice**⁽²³⁾ is entered. The cardinal question that the orthopedagogue has to answer is **what aspects of the learning problem are controllable and correctable and how this can be done**. Therefore, in the first place, a child is involved in an **orthopedagogic diagnostic investigation**.

6.2 Orthopedagogic diagnosis (evaluation)

Because a learning problem is observable, certainly the appropriate way to begin is with a diagnosis. However, the **nuanced** nature of the problem requires nuanced **diagnosing and helping**.

For this reason the orthopedagogue also interprets the findings of other disciplines with the aim of designing a program of assistance--a task that only an **orthopedagogue** can do because his **practice** is based on knowledge of the results of the various pedagogic disciplines that are integrated into a comprehensive perspective.⁽²⁵⁾

By an intra- and inter-disciplinary approach and after the orthopedagogue has interpreted the findings, an insight is obtained into the "different" meanings a unique child with learning problems attributes to things, and the **nature, circumstances and underlying causes** of his **learning** problem are disclosed.

The **nature** is determined in terms of the **quality** of his **actualizing** the different **modes of learning** in his educative situation. This occurs in terms of a comprehensive image of his life world as an experienced, willed, lived-experienced and behavioral world on the basis of which is also acquired an indication of his achieved level of learning with the use of **pedagogic criteria** and **learning norms** derived from the learning plans.

The **nature** of the learning problem is then knowable in terms of the gap between a child's **achieved** and **achievable learning** with reference to his current level of becoming.

The **learning results** always show his **successes and failures**. The **achievable learning** that **now** can be expected of **this** child is determined with the help of available evaluative media and by

taking into account what can be expected of a child of his particular age with more or less the same talents or deficiencies. For example, if it is found that he does not **read, spell, write, or figure**, his history of knowing is not **what** it is for other children with approximately similar talents.

Regarding the underlying **causes** of the problem, the directly relevant causes are indicated, e.g., a particular loss of function, motor problems, poor muscle coordination, problems of eye-hand coordination, laterality problems, uncertainty about direction, poor spatial orientation, neurological dysfunctions, sensory loss and more.

However, this is not sufficient and **aspects of learning restraints**, as such, also have to be disclosed in terms of the child **inadequately actualizing** his various **modes of learning-in-education**.

The connection between underactualizing the modes of learning, of functional and other losses and the quality of the educative and teaching structures that are at the foundation of the inadequate learning are thus indicated.

Thus, the **causes** can be shown in their **essentials** only by means of an **experiential image** of a child with learning problems. An image is acquired of his **possessed experiences**, as his **personally** coherent meanings, that also refer back to the **modes of learning** that he **had actualized** while acquiring these experiences and that also give an indication of the current level and quality of actualization of the non-effective learning in terms of the various emotional and cognitive modes of learning.

Thus, this image involves determining **what** a child **knows**, what he has **learned**, **what meanings** he gives to the learning tasks, and **how** he has arrived at such meanings. On the one hand, it shows **what** constitutes his experiential world and, on the other hand, **how** he himself gradually establishes this experiential world under the guidance of his educators.

Now the orthopedagogue knows **how** the manifested **learning problems** and the **restrained aspects of learning** show themselves and are integrated into the child's total **personal actualization** in his educative situation, with the help also, e.g., of

a **medical, occupational therapeutic, language- and arithmetic investigation**, and he also knows **where** and **how** either the child, the adult or both participate inadequately in the event of teaching and educating.

Indeed, now he has determined why this particular child is not **now prepared and ready to learn** and can proceed to plan a program of assisting him.

6.3 Orthopedagogic assistance

Teaching children with learning problems is not different from teaching children not experiencing them. What is "different" is that there is a "wall" that hinders the former child in learning as he is able to, and he also has to be supported to a "new" **readiness to explore**, as a purposeful resolve to enter the lesson situation and be **willing** and **wanting** to master **alternative meanings** of the contents until the meanings he gives the contents correspond with his learning potential.

Since a child with learning problems really is being "incorrectly" educated, it also is necessary that his parents and teachers continually be given guidance so that their errors of educating can be eliminated.

Consequently, orthodidactic assistance, as such, includes much more than a mere "**remediation**" of specific learning failures. These "failures" have to be given thorough attention, and particular functions decidedly have to be "practiced" so a child can also have at his disposal **skills** and **proficiencies** that continually are required; **practicing** and **exercising** the maturing potentialities at his disposal are necessary. A child has to be guided to **listen**, to **attend**, to discriminate well between foreground and background, etc.

However, clearly confronting the orthopedagogue is an **educative task** and it is more than mere remediation. Initially, a safe space has to always be created for a child within which he can conquer his feelings of insecurity and affective lability along with the adult guiding him more cognitively.

What has to be given specific attention is sketched out in the diagnostic results that are the basis of the orthopedagogue knowing,

among other things, the nature of the unique child's learning problems, what the real structure of his psychic life is, which different modes of learning are most and least prominent, which modes of learning are actualized inadequately and what their relationship is with the psychic life as a functioning totality, what the state is of his emotional foundation, what the state is of the guidance by the adults to the child inadequately actualizing his learning potentialities, and to what degree the learning problems possibly contribute to further underactualizing learning.

In light of the above, it is clear that a particular stereotypic method--even with children who superficially manifest similar restraints or learning problems--cannot be followed but an adaptation of method to each individual child is required.

By means of orthodidactic help, a child is supported to a **preparedness and readiness to learn** as well as to a "**learning acceleration**" by which is meant that he will master those **skills and contents** he had been obliged to master but didn't.

As soon as this has happened **orthodidactic guidance** proceeds to an **ordinary** or a **special education**.

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