

---

## Learning Difficulties

Jana Zehle\*

*“Stupid, lazy, scatterbrained...”  
Do you think learning difficulties imply these stigmatizations?*

### Introduction

Nearly every child faces difficulties in school time to time, with orthography, numeric, any subject, with learning itself. If they are not temporary, but become established, they will be identified as extreme learning difficulties.

### What are Learning Difficulties?

There are two contradictory positions. The first position is speaking of learning disturbance, as a personal quality or disease. The other one is speaking of learning difficulties, a phenomenon that might occur in everybody's school career. The idea, 'learning disturbance', is not helpful. The conclusion is that a student who has a 'learning disturbance' is stigmatized this student, and does not offer any practical conclusion how to instruct and support the student. Learning difficulties denote that the individual learning preconditions are not or only partly developed so that the student is trying hard but finally he is not able to solve tasks or to solve them partly. The individual learning preconditions consist of individual knowledge, abilities and attitudes as well as self-esteem and social abilities. Although these are personal characteristics of the student, the choice of the expression of learning difficulties implies that external factors are involved, too. The student is not to be stigmatized; he should get support to overcome

---

\*Ph.D., Special Needs Expert, Addis Ababa University

his difficulties. The main question should not be whether a student has learning difficulties but what kind of difficulties they are and how can the student be helped. Causes for learning difficulties are located in a complex system of psychological, physical and social factors. There are the aims set through the curriculum; personal characteristics alone are not sufficient.

Learning difficulties appear in certain situations under certain conditions. Therefore, they have to be analyzed in these situations. Individual learning preconditions that do not match set learning and performing expectations, lead to learning difficulties.

A student who permanently experiences failure develops a low self-esteem. But increasing his self-esteem alone is not enough. The student needs support. Often tutorial classes are not too successful because the student's individual learning preconditions, his starting points are not considered.

Learning difficulties arise in school; therefore, they should be treated initially in school. The diagnostic abilities of the teachers must be improved, including knowledge of learning barriers and the awareness that the causes for the learning difficulties, are also to be sought within school as well as external environment, including the teacher's own lessons. If a student cannot be helped in school, external experts should be consulted.

### **Historical Overview of the Development of Special Needs Education**

This overview summarizes the development of special needs education and the construct of learning difficulties in the educational system countries which can look back on a nearly hundred year old tradition of special education. It should be remembered, here, that

---

every country follows its own educational paths influenced by cultural, political and social decision.

### **Foundation Phase (before 1930 G.C.)**

During the Foundation Phase is the aetiology of a suspected physical abnormality. Attention was given to children with obvious physical impairment, with sensory defeats and severe mental retardation.

### **Clinical Phase (1930s to 1960s G.C.)**

During the Clinical Phase the answer for all learning obstacles was to look somewhere in the brain and its neural pathways. Learning difficulties were regarded as a medical problem and educationists were still in the minority.

### **Integration Phase (1960s – 1970s E.C.)**

This phase was characterized by the cooperation between physicians, psychologists and educationists. Since medical knowledge was not able to solve the issue of learning problems, as they appear in the school context, the necessity for a cooperative and holistic approach was recognized.

### **Current Phase (after 1980s G.C.)**

In the Current Phase stronger pressures for equal opportunities as a moral necessity were placed upon the stakeholders. The reality of learning difficulties was recognised and identified to the relief of many students who were otherwise bound to fail. A great deal of criticism came from a sociological stance which castigated the 'defective' view of learners resulting from the medical model of diagnosis and treatment adopted by specialised education. Still, the absence of a holistic approach to the education of children with special educational

needs in ordinary classrooms has had serious consequences for their mainstream integration. Compared to the theory informing the educational practices and provisions for learners with auditory, visual or physical disabilities, research on adapting educational practices for main-streaming other children with learning difficulties has developed relatively slowly.

### **The Construct of Learning Difficulties - Terminological Reflection**

Why am I talking about Learning 'Difficulties' and not Learning 'Disabilities'? The following reflections attempt to give an explanation. "...When I use a word", said Humpty Dumpty in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I chose it to mean neither more nor less." "The question", said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things?" "The question is", stated Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master – that's all?" ...” (Carroll, Lewis: *Through the Looking Glass*, Chapter VI; [www.sabian.org/Alice/lgchap06htm](http://www.sabian.org/Alice/lgchap06htm), 19/03/2004, page 5). These thoughts prove that specific definition may have heuristic value but no objective validity. An operational definition of the expression 'learning difficulties' is problematic because learning difficulties could be observed and proved but a comparison or generalization of the observations and results has limited value. That is, a comparison or a generalization needs to be norm-referenced. A social norm means that a student is regarded as having learning difficulties in relation to the status of the learning group. A pertinent norm or a norm based on criteria means that there is a discrepancy between the demands of the institution school and the results of the student. An individual norm means that a single low achievement might be over-valued. Steinebach (2003) – a German Psychologist - describes learning difficulties, although he also has doubts about a clear definition as follows: If the results of a student are below the tolerable deviation or difference of binding institutional, social or individual norms or expectations or if the accessibility or the absence of these norms or expectations is related to unintended side

---

effects concerning the behaviour or the personal development of the student. The level of achievement can be low from the beginning; it can also be that the average or good results of a student fall.

Schmetz also maintains, "Learning difficulties manifest themselves not only in the learning behaviour but also in sensory, motor, cognitive, language, emotional and social behaviour" (Schmetz 1999:136). Another scholar, Sander, a German Special Needs Expert asserts:

- ... organic conditions of learning difficulties (impairment of senses dysfunction of ZNS),
  - cognitive conditions of learning difficulties
  - non-cognitive conditions of learning difficulties...
- (Sander 2000:693)

For example, low motivation, negative emotional status, socio-cultural background, defects in methodology and didactic, general provision of medical and pedagogical care can be considered. Therefore, it is not sufficient to concentrate on cognitive aspects. Concerning the cognitive conditions, referring to cognition psychology, learning is based on the processing of information, and learning difficulties might be characterized by an inefficient use or a lack of use of strategies (meta cognition - knowledge of one's own abilities and their use). Students with learning difficulties have a limited repertoire of strategies, do not know how to use them effectively and are hardly able to generate own strategies. Therefore, learning difficulties can be named as a "deficit in using" (Tusch 2002:186).

The expression 'difficulties' comprises a wide spectrum of differences, is less hurtful, stigmatizing or defect-orientated than other termini such as learning disability, deficiency, mental retardation, learning handicap, learning disorders, learning disturbance. According to Hallahan learning difficulties refer to "...children who were having difficulties in school, but who were not considered disabled by mental

retardation or mental disturbance....” (Hallahan 2004:9). Another scholar, Kavale defines learning difficulties as “...students who do not meet the criteria for other special education but still need special education service...” Kavale (1995:337).

In my opinion, people using the expression ‘disability’ or ‘impairment’ show primarily their moral concept. In 1997 the WHO already replaced the expressions ‘disability’ and ‘handicap’ in the management of ‘Dimension of Disability and Health’ through ‘activity’ and ‘participation’.

Alban-Metcalfe (1998) distinguishes three factors leading to learning difficulties:

A) Within child characteristics or endogen factors:

- physical domain
- cognitive domain ( perception, cognition, memorization, motor ability, communication)
- dispositional domain: self-awareness, personality, emotion, motivation, problem solving strategies

B) Physical-socio-educational environment or external factors:

- home
- family
- school ....

C) Degree of match or mismatch between A & B

- interaction and communication between student and teacher, and among students
- curriculum...

The above factors prove that a holistic approach to the phenomenon of learning difficulties is necessary. Furthermore, focussing on the weakness within the learners means separating them from remediation. To offer the appropriate remediation, support and learning opportunities, learning difficulties must be detected.

---

## Assessment of Learning Difficulties

The origin of the psychometric assessment of school-relevant abilities is linked to Binet, the founder of the intelligence tests (test diagnosis). Nowadays, the purpose and process of assessment have changed. Dynamic assessment implies a longitudinal section and not only a cross-section assessment. For instance, the socio-familial background of the student is included aiming not only in diagnosing the students' deficits and weaknesses but also in deducing well-directed support from the assessment. "The assessment of deficits in performance or in abilities per se does not give an answer how to support the child...therefore actual research tries to assess cognitive functions out of which well-directed support can be deduced..." according to Hasselhorn et al (2003:227).

Purposes and processes of assessment have changed. Nevertheless, assessment is indispensable in particular to decide about the well directed support for the child. Assessment and its results are related to classifications and categories. It is sometimes claimed that classification encourages a focus on "within-child" attributes. But categories and labels may also be useful if they promote understanding. A label can reduce anxiety - the relief of having discovered the source e.g. for low achievement. On the other hand, it can produce stigmatization; there is always the risk that categories in common use will develop a life of their own, a sense of reality which obscures the fact that they are 'constructed' rather than 'natural'. This can result in self-fulfilling prophecies and influence negatively the self-esteem of the student. It can, however, be argued that a classification system may also protect the rights of pupils with learning difficulties by ensuring that appropriate resources are allocated to meeting their needs. A formal system with well-defined criteria and the prevention of their escalation has a clarifying and supporting function. The rhetoric against classification tends to overlook the fact that a recognised classification system may, at times, protect the dignity of those with learning difficulties by preventing informal classification based on bias and ignorance as mentioned in the title of this article.

**References**

- Alban-Metcalf, John(1998). *School Failure in the United Kingdom*. **European Journal of Teacher Education**, 21 (2/3).
- Archer, M. and Green, L. (1996). *Classification of Learning Difficulties*. In Engelbrecht, P., Kriegler, S.M., and Booysen, M.I. (Eds.) **Perspectives on Learning Difficulties**, Pretoria.
- Carroll, L. *Through the Looking Glass*.  
[www.sabian.org/Alice/lgchap06htm](http://www.sabian.org/Alice/lgchap06htm), 19/03/2004.
- Hallahan, D. P. et al. (2004). **Learning Disabilities – Foundations, Characteristics, and Effective Teaching**, Boston.
- Hasselhorn, M. Et al (2003). *Differentialdiagnostik Basaler Funktionen des Arbeitsgedächtnisses*. In: Ricken, Gabi, Fritz, Annemarie, and Hofmann, Christiane (Ed.). **Diagnose: Sonderpädagogischer Förderbedarf**. Göttingen.
- Kavale, K.A. (1995). **The Nature of Learning Disabilities: Critical Elements of Diagnosis and Classification**. New Jersey.
- Sander, Elisabeth(2000). *Lernschwierigkeiten*. In Borchert, Johan (Ed.). **Handbuch der Sonderpädagogischen Psychologi**. Göttingen.
- Schmetz, Dietmar (1999). *Förderschwerpunkt Lernen*. In Zeitschrift für (Ed.). **Heilpädagogik** 4/99. Würzburg.
- Steinebach, Christoph (2003). **Pädagogische Psychologie**. Stuttgart
- Tusch, Manuel, Hussy, Walter, and Fritz, Annemarie(2002). *Ausmaß und Förderbarkeit der Planungsfähigkeit Lernbehinderter:Ein Prozessorientierter Ansatz im Sinne des Metakognitionskonzeptes*. In Heilpädagogische Forschung, **Band XXVIII Heft 4**, Potsdam.