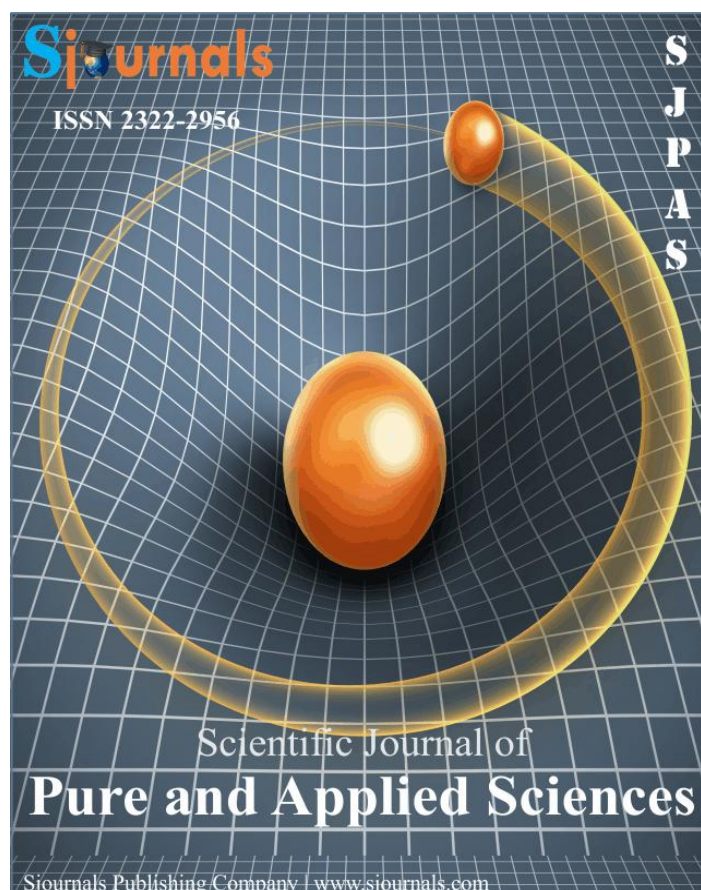


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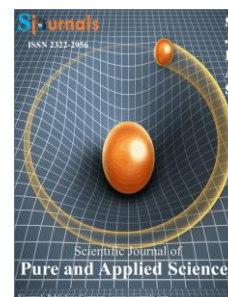
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Review article

Tracing the origins of learning difficulties

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on tracing the origins of learning difficulties with the view of laying a foundation for their mitigation. While learning difficulties are variously understood, this paper argues for a conceptualization that differentiates them from learning disabilities. Therefore, the endogenous and exogenous originating factors of learning difficulties that are examined in this paper are aligned to the conceptualization that learning difficulties are temporary and can therefore be minimized or eliminated as a function of usage of appropriate intervention. The paper, however, acknowledges that the major sources of learning difficulties are of organic origin and thus endogenous. For the exogenous originating factors, schools have a direct role to play but can only be effective if they forego the traditional practice of ignoring the fact that schools and teachers are in effect part of the originators of learning difficulties. Thus, it can be concluded from this paper that, awareness of the origins of learning difficulties is the first concrete step toward minimizing or eliminating them and that the school plays a central role in these regards. To achieve a meaningful central role in minimizing or eliminating learning difficulties however, schools must be conscious of internal variables that cause learning difficulties and deal with them decisively before blaming or attending to other originating factors. In addition, they should be aware of and always look out for the general indicators of learning difficulties.

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1. Introduction

Every child in school is likely to have a learning difficulty of one form or another and at one time or another. Some literature suggests that learning difficulties are the same as learning disabilities, but they are not. In the UK the term learning difficulty is preferred in place of learning disability, but for the purposes of this paper, learning difficulties are not learning disabilities. Unlike learning disabilities which often have a neurological origin and persist despite appropriate instruction and intervention, learning difficulties are more diverse, may be temporary and can be eliminated by means of appropriate support and evidence-based instruction (DSF Literacy and Clinical Services, 2014). Learning difficulties can be a result of both endogenous and exogenous factors. This paper sets out to explicate learning difficulties and examine their root causes. The endogenous and exogenous factors that precipitate and/or characterise learning difficulties are examined to expose the origins. The paper uses the terms learning difficulties and learning problems interchangeably. The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (1989) defines learning disabilities as a heterogeneous group of disorders which manifest in significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities. The disorders are intrinsic to the individual and are presumed to be caused by life-span central nervous system dysfunction and therefore continue to persist despite appropriate instruction and intervention (DSF Literacy and Clinical Services, 2014). On the contrary, learning difficulties or learning problems are broad and emanate from the teaching situation. They can be traced to the affective psychic or physical life of the child. By definition, learning difficulties refer to the child's inability to cope with normal school work (Ritney, 2003). Each time the child does not understand a learning concept, he/she experiences a learning difficulty. This maybe temporary or purely incidental or persistent to the extent that the child needs specialised attention. Nevertheless, inference can be made that learning disabilities are one of the many sources of learning difficulties (problems). Each child has unique learning difficulties and experiences them differently from any other child.

2. Indicators of learning difficulties

Drawing from the foregoing inference suggesting that learning disabilities are one of the major sources of learning difficulties, it can be concluded that most of the learning difficulties are of an organic origin. In effect, many of the learning difficulties therefore originate from various forms of disability including minimal brain damage. The problem is that many forms of minimal brain damage, for stance, may manifest themselves so subtly and indirectly that even specialists may make serious misjudgments of their manifestations (Van der Stoep and Louw, 2011). For example, there are a significant number of school children who have mild states of epileptic seizures, which may only surface in the image of depressed school performance (Ritney, 2003). These children have often been incorrectly interpreted as having mild mental retardation or just learning disabilities. In these regards, it is advisable that teachers be vigilant and lookout for the following possible indicators of learning difficulties (Institute of Mental Health, 2014; Van der Stoep and Louw, 2011):

- ✓ A child who is easily fatigable
- ✓ A child who is easily annoyed and becomes aggressive
- ✓ A child with attention which fluctuates greatly
- ✓ A child who has problems progressing from the concrete to the abstract level
- ✓ A child who is hyperactive and troublesome
- ✓ Trouble following classroom discussions and simple instructions
- ✓ Forgetfulness
- ✓ Difficulty completing exercises

In addition to these indicators, are disturbances to do with left to right orientation. Although disturbances with respect to the left to right dominance are not necessary indicators, they still can raise the teachers' suspicions (Van der Stoep and Louw, 2011). Further, during puberty, children experience intensive changes in their corporeality and this can disrupt their personality leading to loss of equilibrium in learning concentration. Van der Stoep and Louw comment that, while the effects of puberty are a temporary matter, they can exercise tremendous influence on the child's learning tempo particularly where final assessment is involved. This can lead to misclassification of the children as having learning disabilities or permanent learning difficulties. An awareness of the originating factors puts teachers at a position to better interpret these indicators. To clearly delineate these

indicators, it is therefore critical that this paper examines the endogenous and exogenous originating factors of learning difficulties.

3. Endogenous originating factors of learning difficulties

Endogenous factors are those that originate from within the child. These factors are so elusive and the teacher may not easily delimit and examine them. Some of them are so mysterious and concealed that they often result in errors of judgment in orthodidactics. Van der Stoep and Louw (2011) observe that endogenous originating factors of learning difficulties are often interpreted in the heat or crisis of the moment as personality and character weaknesses. The child with learning difficulties of endogenous nature is unable to exercise direct control over the actualisation of his/her learning (Du Toit, 1982). According to Broekaert, Van Hove and D'Oosterlinck (2004), therapeutic intervention used to mitigate the resultant learning difficulties often involves a total re-orientation or radical re-educating which takes a long period of time. These factors include problems of organic defects, problems of becoming, problems of emotionality or affectivity, problems of motivational disturbance and more conspicuous problems related to talent and temperament. In discussing these endogenous factors, the paper takes particular note of their most important and conspicuous aspects.

I have already highlighted that impairment is one of the ways in which problems of becoming arise. In effect, a large percentage of learning problems are rooted in organic or physical causes (Van der Stoep and Louw, 2011). Conspicuous or inconspicuous physical retardation of one form or another is one of the major causes of learning problems. By physical retardation we mean any organic defect of nervous, skeletal, muscular or sensory nature. Effectively, all children with disabilities have a higher propensity for learning difficulties than their normal peers. Problems of becoming relate to the level of becoming, that is, readiness of a child to learn. These have far reaching implications for the child's learning achievements. They manifest in the child's failure to cope with the demands of the learning situation. This occurs because the child is not ready or mature enough to handle the learning environment. Problems of becoming, in effect, manifest in two different ways. Firstly, they may be due to impairment and secondly they may be caused by readiness factors on psychic puberty among other similar factors (Pretorious, 1999). As an example, problems that are caused by impairment maybe due to brain underdevelopment or dysfunction resulting in such disorders as poor perception, motoric speech or language lag, impaired mobility and weak psychic and physical stamina (Van Niekerk et al., 1999). Problems of this nature are extremely complex and require greatest circumspection on the part of the teacher. These should be dealt with in consultation with other specialised areas such as medicine. These problems are of a multi-disciplinary concern and require urgent referral and intervention in consultation with the family. Appropriate and judicious diagnosis cannot be overemphasized. Related to the problems of becoming are the problems of emotionality or affectivity.

Emotionality or affectivity is closely connected with the innermost being of the child (Pretorious, 1999). When there is an imbalance in the emotionality or affectivity component of learning, the child experiences feelings of anxiety, tension, aggression and isolation which bring about learning problems. However, for children with sufficient intellectual control, these feelings can be managed and contained. These are the kind of learning difficulties that fluctuate according to the learner's ability to contain emotional or affective strain. Children respond differently to the same emotional or affective situation and for that matter, the same child may react differently to a recurrence of a similar emotionally or affectively straining event. For the child, or any other person for that matter, a healthy emotional or affective state is a matter of security, exploratory ability, emancipation and self-confidence (De Fever, 2006). Thus its disruption may cause severe learning difficulties. This may also depend on the learner's ability to sustain motivation to learn in spite of the emotionally disruptive event. However, erosion of this motivation becomes a source of learning difficulty in its own right.

Motivational disturbances are strongly correlated to the child's emotionality and affectivity. Disturbed motives can reflect on incongruities in the child's intentionality (Du Toit, 1978). The result of this is a weak spiritual will to learn, deficient readiness skills of achievement and lack of will power to compete with others in class. In addition, the child manifests unhealthy, unjustifiable and naively aggressive resistance at the slightest reason (Van Niekerk et al., 1999). The child appears aimless and flits around to the dismay of both teachers and parents. Like problems of becoming, motivational disturbances intensify during puberty. According to Van der Stoep and Louw (2011) "Such ... uncertainty, hesitancy and especially rejection of authority must also be seen... as an attempt to flee from and to conceal own deficiencies." In otherwords, the child reacts as such to conceal a looming learning difficulty. The child reacts like is experiencing an inferiority complex. Motivational disturbances may stem from a

disharmonious family climate particularly during puberty when parents, at times understandably, impose greater demand for adherence to societal norms and values. Often the child would reorient him/herself within a course of two or three years after puberty and begin to achieve in the normal range (Van der Merwe, 1999). Studies show that boys may experience the reorientation much later than girls. In some cases, they only experience the reorientation at tertiary level (Van der Stoep and Louw, 2011). This further suggests that poor learning achievement at school is often a mere symptom of subtler motivational factors. Related to affectivity or emotionality and motivational factor are the even more conspicuous factors of talent and temperament.

However, connecting talent and temperament to the issue of learning difficulties is a complex and comprehensive task. With respect to talent, this is because talent is an indication of a particular noticeable potentiality while learning difficulty is associated with weakness and failure. Talent is not a fixed or constant quantity of some sort, but depends on the extent it is or is not utilized and therefore a child may have a learning difficulty as a result of failure to utilise his/her talent. Because a child with a particular talent may not exceed certain boundaries, it is possible that when stretched beyond these boundaries, the child can be seen to experience learning problems similar to those of becoming. That is, the child may not be ready for learning matter beyond his/her talent. Conservation and utilization of the talent can be ensured through continuous performance evaluation. Continuous evaluation of the child's achievement would give a definite identity to the talent. Examples of such identities include art, language, science, engineering, information technology, etc. Temperament on the other hand is closely correlated to talent and to the child's affective attunement. Temperamental fluctuations and affective imbalances contribute tremendously to learning difficulties (Pretorius, 1999). This is often due to a mismatch between the child's actual talent and that perceived by the parents and the teacher. The mismatch ultimately leads to conflicts with and within the child when the parents and the teacher decide to impose what they feel is best for the child-which in some cases may not be the case.

4. Exogenous originating factors of learning difficulties

Unlike endogenous factors, exogenous factors are those that give rise to the learning problems from the external milieu of the child. These environmental factors affect children differently and are experienced and assimilated by children variously despite that some children may be in similar circumstances. The list of exogenous factors is long and this paper only addresses the factors of over-expectancy, over-indulgence or negligence, poor identification, skepticism and negative school and teacher variables. Over-expectancy amounts to asking too much of the child. Parental pressure, for example, at times overwhelms the child to the extent of confusion, frustration and devastation leading to learning difficulties. Family demands may emanate from high expectations about the child's talent or about the child's ability to maintain a prestigious profile of academic achievement of the family in the community. The teacher may also ask too much of the child in his/her efforts to keep up with the demands of the school or ministry's minimum expected pass rates. When the child fails to cope with the demands he/she withdraws into isolation. Another child may try to throw everything into the school demands, but later carry the frustrations and burdens of failure. In both cases, the child may then become aggressive, indifferent, and nonchalant in class or choose to excessively participate in extra-curricular activities as defense mechanisms against the pressure from the parents and teachers. The ultimate effect is total rejection of the learning situation, stagnation and eventual school dropout. The flip side of over-expectancy is to some extent over-indulgence or negligence.

When the home neglects its duty of disciplining and teaching the child the necessary societal norms and values. This is damaging to the child's self-censure and learning intentionality. Although teachers do act in loco parentis, it is impossible for the school to totally take the place of the home. A child who is neglected is necessarily ignored or given a cold shoulder all the time. Nothing is expected of the child. The child is not encouraged, given love or discipline. In the same vein, it is an extremely difficult task for the teacher to make up for the family's negligence of the child's future. It would take a long time and enormous effort for the teacher to possibly replenish the deficiencies caused by the negligence at home. The same goes for over-indulgence. Van der Stoep and Louw (2011) explain that an over indulged child makes little effort or has no resolve for self-censure, self-judgment and self-discipline. The child is evasive. Such factors counter the teacher's pedagogic authority to stagnation. De Fever (2006) implies that over-protection (over-indulgence) is one of the most important environmental factors that contribute to learning problems. Clearly, over-indulgence or negligence can result defective identification due to lack of modelling.

One of the fundamental stepping stone of becoming an adult (education) is identification with an adult. The child continually searches for someone to imitate. Thus the child looks for a model to imitate. The model is often someone of authority, someone who behaves elegantly and someone who awakens in the child, the will to do things that imitate adult activity (Du Toit, 1982). Children often want to identify with parents, relatives, teachers or powerful community personalities or leaders. Absence of such a model in the child's life causes defective identification which may lead to life uncertainty and hesitation in the learning situation. Think of orphans, children from disrupted families, children of single parents, children from child-headed families, etc. and imagine the learning difficulties they are likely to experience due to lack of models. Imagine the level of skepticism these children are likely to experience in the absence of parental guidance.

Due to dynamic changes in philosophical thought and technological revolution, it has become apparent in today's world that nothing can merely be accepted. Today's children do not just accept school knowledge as it is due to overwhelming information they gain from other sources such as newspapers, magazines, television and more importantly from the internet. Such information often creates contrasts and clashes with scholastic knowledge. Conservative as schools have always been, they do not want to be influenced by quick changes in society. This has often resulted in a discernible distance between the school and society. The case in point is the use of cell-phones and tablets in schools. Under pressure, the South African education system has since embraced this, but in Zimbabwe there is still debate with some ministry authorities arguing that it is a productive move while school authorities and some parents think otherwise. Teaching of sex education in primary schools and distributing contraceptives in secondary schools are the other examples. Children are caught in such contrasts leading to some developing negative attitudes, indifference or aggressive characters towards school which ultimately lead to learning problems. This can affect the child's positive learning disposition and intentionality adding to the learning problems. In effect, children may see school activities as laughable and boring for example, when they compare the quality of learning aids used at school and the models that they view on TV advertisements or when they compare traditional leisure activities of the school and those that are offered by the modern day community. Certainly, the children would view the school as deficient and they would become skeptical about what it has to offer. In this way, some children reject the learning situation in search of more excitement in the outside world. Linked to this are the school and teacher variables that act as sources of learning difficulties among children. Because of the conservative nature of the school, education systems are often defensive of this revelation.

Nevertheless, while there is a way in which the school is a passive party when it comes to negligence, over indulgence and skepticism, there is equally a way in which it contributes to the creation of learning problems. These problems often follow from poor or controversial policies, shortage of teachers, poor conditions of service for teachers, poor material and infrastructural provisions and an international hesitation to convene a meeting on orthodidactics. As an institution, at times the school can do little to resolve such kind of problems. However, there are some factors about which the school can do something. Some such factors are catering for individual differences, meticulous deployment of available teachers, equitable distribution of resources and efficient enforcement of school wide policies. Staff development, parental involvement and multi-stakeholder engagement are also other ways in which a school can protect itself from becoming a source of learning problems. On catering for individual differences, Van der Stoep and Louw (2011) however, argue that the perception that a school framework can entirely cater for individual differences is mere wishful thinking. This is understandable particularly where large classes exist. But unless the school admits that it is possible for it to contribute to the emergence and perpetuation of learning difficulties, introspects accordingly and takes necessary action, this paradox will continue unabated.

Similarly, rarely do teachers want to discuss or even accept that their teaching does contribute to the creation of learning problems. Because in the past, this aspect was ignored, there seems to be lack of far-reaching, comprehensive research on the matter. However, there is no doubt that weak inappropriate planning or preparation on the part of the teacher does contribute significantly to the emergence of learning problems. Du Toit (1978); Du Toit (1982) and Van Niekerk et al. (1999) all concur that, many learning problems are not resident in the child's learning activities but in the teaching. However, Van der Stoep and Louw (2011) are quick to argue that it is difficult to clearly determine a synoptic image of the contribution of teaching to the etiology of learning difficulties.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This paper was aimed at tracing the origins of learning difficulties with the view of gaining an insightful understanding of the nature of the difficulties. As a result, the paper has demonstrated that the conceptualization of learning difficulties and therefore their origins is complex and relative. While the term is in some cases loosely used interchangeably with learning disabilities, this paper has argued that the two terms are technically different. This has implications for the nature of origins of learning difficulties. A commonality that emerged from this paper however, is that, whether learning difficulties are viewed as similar to or different from learning disabilities, they mainly originate from organic factors. In a way, most learning difficulties are caused by disabilities (learning disabilities included). This suggests that endogenous originating factors of learning difficulties are more significant than exogenous originating factors. In a similar vein, endogenous originating factors of learning difficulties are more conspicuous than exogenous factors. This has occasionally lead to misclassification and hence misplacement of some children with learning difficulties.

For the exogenous factors, while many need to be dealt with at a macro level, schools have ways in which they can improve on conditions that favour elimination of learning difficulties at the micro level. On this basis, this paper implores schools and teachers in particular, to admit that they too can be originators of learning difficulties and therefore introspect and take responsibility for their inadequacies. Consequently, this paper assumes that in-depth understanding of the origins of learning difficulties could lessen such malpractices that disadvantage or exclude children with learning difficulties and that predispose children in general to learning difficulties for that matter. This paper takes the view that, unlike learning disabilities, learning difficulties are not permanent and therefore can be minimized or eliminated through appropriate intervention. Thus, understanding their origins is critical in these regards. It can be concluded from this paper that, awareness of the origins of learning difficulties is the first concrete step toward minimizing or eliminating them and that the school plays a central role in these regards. To achieve a meaningful central role in minimizing or eliminating learning difficulties, schools must however be conscious of those school and teacher variables that cause learning difficulties and deal with them decisively before blaming or attending to external originating factors. In addition, they should be aware of and always look out for the general indicators of learning difficulties.

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