

**MAGDOLNA ESTEFÁN VARGA–MÁRTA HÍDVÉGI–
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**METHODS FOR DIFFERENTIATING LEARNING
DIFFICULTIES AND LEARNING DISABILITIES:
DIFFERENTIAL-DIAGNOSTIC ASPECTS**

In special pedagogical complex diagnostics, clarification of basic concepts is very important.

In Hungary, the process has already started, but further clarification of matters is deemed necessary. Experts in the pedagogical professions and closely related sciences (medicine, sociology, law) use different terms and categories. We aim to dissolve this anomaly.

In educational law, the category of children with special educational needs is defined in respect of special provisions and benefits.

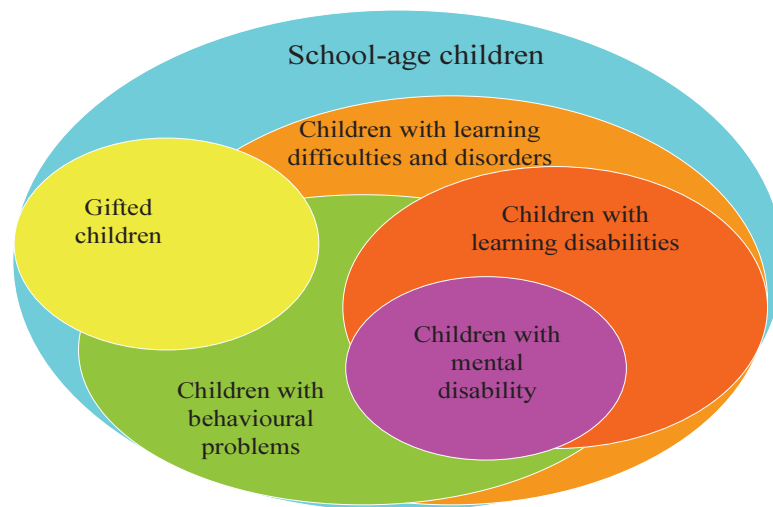
”Child or student with special needs: the child or student, who – according to the expert opinion of the expert and rehabilitation committee –

a) has a physical, sensory, mental, speech handicap, is autistic, in case of occurrence of more types of handicaps is cumulatively handicapped,

b) is permanently and seriously impeded in the teaching-learning process due to disturbances of psychic development (e.g. children with dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, mutism, hyperkinetic syndrome or activity disorder).”

Currently, in Hungary, in a statistical and provision sense, all children with classical types of handicaps and all students in the category of disturbed psychic development are labelled handicapped. Therefore, handicapped children show a high percentage of school age children in Hungarian educational statistics.

Children with special educational needs in school-age population



Children with special educational needs (Némethné 2000.)

More and more schools start the education of children with special educational needs inclusively, without any previous experience.

In the school year of 1998/99 there were 789 segregated classes with 8299 mentally handicapped children in 392 primary schools, and 848 integrated pupils in 159 schools (Némethné 1999). The number of integrated students doubled in two years. According to the survey in 1999/2000, 1999 mentally handicapped children were integrated in 267 primary schools (Némethné 2001). Two new expressions appeared in the special education literature— *integrative pedagogy* and *inclusive pedagogy*.

In integrative pedagogy, special needs and help based on learning disabilities are emphasized. In inclusive pedagogy, the approach is based on integration problems into the school of the majority, and in this aspect organizational and methodological elements are more emphasized.

“We speak about learning disorders – when we find lower achievement than expected according to the IQ, it can be explained often by neurological deficit or function disorder with special cognitive symptoms. These disorders make the reading and writing process or learning mathematics difficult. Failure in learning can produce subsidiary neurotisation. Learning disorders appear in a very young age, and its symptoms can be realized also

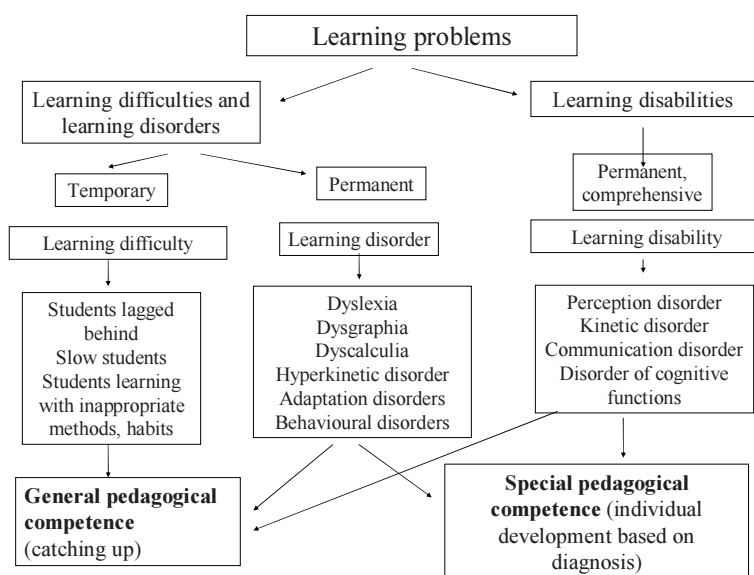
in adult age. Cognitive and learning therapy can be effective in this case. It can appear as a co-symptom of different mental disabilities.” (Zsoldos-Sarkadi 1991)

Pupils with learning disabilities according to the classification of traditional special education literature have disorders or injuries on a typical organic background. That can be unambiguously diagnosed as hearing handicap, visual handicap, severe or profound mental retardation, and cumulative handicap.

The function disorders of children with learning disorders have long-lasting and wide-ranging effects on the development of the personality, despite possible changes, because the causes can be not only the pupils’ biological / psychological capacities. Very often, they appear with the negative effects of the family, school, social and cultural background. 15% of school-children belong to a group of children with learning problems, and a quarter of them are children with learning disorders (Mesterházi 1995).

Current terminology often prefers to use the expression “handicapped” to express the idea that the person is not responsible for his/her situation. In the case of children with learning disorders, problems in the development of learning skills cause difficulties in their independent life.

Types of learning problems



Némethné Tóth Ágnes (2004.)

We speak about adaptation and behavioural disorders if the child cannot adopt, or only with difficulties, to group norms and values.

According to Ranschburg (1998), negative influences in the womb, or from the environment and education may account for these phenomena. Adaptation and behavioural disorders in children with function disorders (learning disorders) appear as learning problems.

The most frequently diagnosed adaptation and behavioural disorder is hyperactivity. Hyperactive children very often have average or even higher than average IQs, nevertheless, they have plenty of negative school experience, because they often have attention problems.

The place for diagnosis of special educational needs is the special educational expert committee. Its accurate name is: Expert and rehabilitation committee examining learning abilities. There is a committee in every county and in some towns. Examination of sensory and kinetic handicap, just as speech handicap is going on in national committees. The process of examination and diagnosis is controlled by strict legal regulations.

High professional standard of the examinations is guaranteed by under- and postgraduate education at Eötvös Loránd University, Bárczi Gusztáv Faculty of Special Pedagogical College.

In this institution, fundamental and complementary examinations and control examinations are conducted, and parents have the right of appeal for re-examination at every stage. There are diagnostical, psychological, special educational and social examinations. Teacher for backward children, psychologist, paediatrician and/or children's neurologist, in some instances children's psychiatrist attend the child in team work. After establishing the diagnosis, they may suggest integrative or segregative development for the child. Follow-up is performed by means of control examinations.

Diagnoses of children with special educational needs in Hungary

- Place for diagnosis: special educational expert committee (according to the type of disability)
- The process of examination and diagnosis is controlled by strict legal regulations
- Types of examination: diagnostical, psychological, special educational and social examinations
- Staff conditions: Team-work (specialists; children's neurologist, in some instances children's psychiatrist, psychologist, special educator, social worker)

- Expert opinion contains: diagnosis, suggestion of integrative or segregative development for the child, time of control examinations

There are institutions with higher normative financing, which may provide extra service for children.

Segregated, as well as integrated and inclusive institutions are found in the system. The law specifies that in integration pupils should be supported by special developmental conditions. An expert committee examines the work and conditions of schools.

Extra supplies for children with special educational needs

- higher normative financing
- when organizing a group, each counts as 2 or 3 persons
- rehabilitation lessons
- development in small groups or individually, outside school lessons
- providing professionals
- assessment and qualification regarding individual development
- exemption from subjects or parts of subjects
- giving preference to oral or written recitation
- providing therapeutic treatments and locations
- they can take the final exam in another subject
- they have recourse to certain devices in the lesson and in the final examination (e.g. lap-top, calculator, etc.).

Diagnostical differentiation of learning difficulties and learning disabilities is difficult in many cases. Settling the future of a child requires comprehensive, thorough examinations and measures. There is a possibility to continuously follow the child in their own class and family for a year, in the case of some uncertainty. Experts set up observation viewpoints for the teacher, and after the one-year observation period, a team comes to a decision concerning the child's condition. Then the child is appropriately attend to according to the developmental needs of the child.

Successful integrative education requires changes in attitudes, and commitment on the part of the management and teaching staff. A key aspect is to find those people who can manage the innovation necessary for the integrative education and can establish the circumstances and requirements necessary for cooperation. Continuous support of best practices can result in motivation and improvement.

New competences of teachers

According to previous studies, we can summarize the competence of teachers (important according to the actors) successful in the learning development of pupils with special education needs.

Important tasks for teachers in integrative education:

- To have a motivational basis necessary for education and improvement (individual, community)
- To find individual methods for differentiated education and development
- To plan and manage activities with handicapped children
- To understand the pupils' diagnoses from a teacher's point of view, and find the appropriate development methods.
- To find alternative solutions to an educational problem, and manage the lessons successfully. To stay in the background and emphasize pupils' activity.
- To cooperate with parents, social partners and specialists

Kópalakiné (2003)

Future role of teachers for backward children

- Teachers for backward children in regional and local professional centres
- Shift from medical and pathological approaches to pedagogical perspectives
- Shift from assimilative integration to inclusion based on cooperation
- Switch from direction to counselling provided for parents and students
- Shift from passive students to active students – prevalence of the constructivist approach
- Shift from individual expert to counselling team

In inclusive pedagogy, the approach is based on the integration problems of the school of the majority, and in this approach organizational and methodological elements receive more emphasis.

The integration method must be learnt by special and normal educators and specialists. It is important to know the criteria of successful integration of children with learning disabilities. A child-centred approach should be dominant among the educators, this way the approach can be acquired by the society. Curriculum development of higher educational institutions can be a

good occasion to introduce subjects in teacher education related to interdisciplinary theory and practice of integration of children with learning disabilities.

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