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A Paradigm of Learning: What Teachers Should Know about Students

Larry Martin

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Teachers have to be able to answer *why* a child is having learning problems before they can decide *how* they can help. Project HELP, an in-service teacher training program, was designed to aid teachers in their search for the reason why children have learning problems.

a paradigm of learning: what teachers should know about students

Larry Martin



Larry L. Martin is the coordinator of the special education component of the Department of Administration and Foundations at Kansas State University. He taught six years in the public schools, was a visiting lecturer at Purdue University, taught in the field of learning disabilities for two years at Western State College in Gunnison, Colorado, and has been at KSU for two years. He received his bachelor's, master's, and Ph.D. in special education from Purdue University.

You are a fourth grade teacher. In your class Bob can't read; Sally has no friends; Jim performs well in school one day and poorly the next; Susan is very creative and gifted but seems frustrated with school; and Tom never attends to his work.

Bob, Sally, Jim, Susan, and Tom all have problems in some phase of school performance. You want to help these five students. You want to help Bob learn how to read; Sally make friends; Jim even out his performance; Susan like school and utilize her talents; and Tom attend to his work. The first question that pops into your mind is, "How can I help them?" You make plans and try to carry them out. With one or two you *might* experience some success. With the others, nothing seems to work. You might even say, "I have tried everything and nothing seems to help."

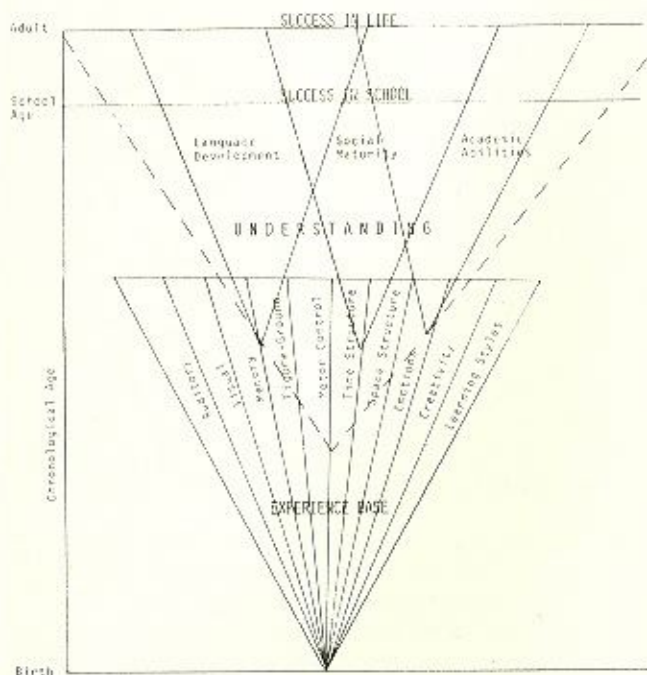
Every teacher can identify to some degree with the above statements. Every teacher whether in kindergarten or high school has had similar experiences. In an effort to aid classroom teachers in their efforts to help children with learning problems, project HELP* was created. It was designed to aid, through in-service training, regular classroom teachers in identifying and effectively educating children with learning problems.

Project HELP starts by forcing teachers to ask one additional short question: "Why?" (*Why* can't Bob read; *why* doesn't Sally have friends; *why* does Jim have uneven performance; *why* is gifted Susan frustrated with school; and *why* can't Tom attend to his work?) The answers to these questions are not readily available to most teachers. The reason for this is not because of lack of teaching experience, but rather, this because of a lack of training in actually looking for the "whys."

The 250-page HELP learning packet is designed to instruct the teacher in understanding the possible "whys" behind learning problems. The Paradigm of Learning (see Figure 1) is a graphic representation of the rationale upon which project

* *HELP for Teachers in Educating Exceptional Children in the Classroom* Project HELP is a pilot in-service package designed to help regular classroom teachers. Through the use of a 250-page learning packet, 18 hours of in-service training, and problem-solving assignments, the regular classroom teacher learns to identify and educate exceptional children in the classroom. The Project Staff includes Dr. Larry Martin, Dr. C. Kent Garhart, Mrs. Lois Cox, and Mrs. Myrliss Hershey.

Figure 1
Paradigm of Learning



HELP is based. By looking at the paradigm, one can see that the end goal of learning is success in school and life. By experience and instruction, one achieves these successes by first developing the underlying "processes" (large inverted triangle at bottom) and then the three "school-life related areas of language development, social maturity, and academic abilities" (3 smaller inverted triangles at top). When a child has mastered this level, he has developed "understanding" (the largest inverted triangle). A child must reach this final level of understanding before success in school and life can be achieved.

When a child is not achieving in one or more of the three school-life related areas, we as teachers must try to find out why. Utilizing standardized tests, checklists, and teacher-made tests, it is fairly easy to pinpoint what a student can and cannot do in these areas. Once these weak areas are identified, the usual strategy is to launch an academic remediation program to strengthen the weaknesses. Unfortunately, all too often, this strategy is unsuccessful when used alone. It is unsuccessful because we did not ask *why* he is having these difficulties.

At this point you must go one step lower in the paradigm to begin to see the *whys* of many learning problems. By the time most children reach school they have developed a highly sophisticated base for formal school learning. This base is developed through experience. Usually, the better and more diverse the pre-school experience, the more developed this base becomes. The base is composed of ten processes. These processes are called process abilities. When a child has problems in one or more of these abilities, he is said to have process deficits. Many times a child has trouble in school because the underlying processes for success in school have

not been developed. These processes then become the *whys* of faulty school performance.

Let's take a brief look at these process deficits and how they are related to learning and success in school and life.

Auditory

Auditory deficits can be divided into the two major headings of acuity and perception. Auditory acuity refers to the auditory input system, that is, can the child actually hear the sounds in his environment or does he have a hearing problem.

On the other hand, auditory perception refers to central processing abilities, the ability to deal with sounds after they reach the central nervous system. Here, the child attaches meaning to the sounds that he hears. He discriminates among all the sounds he hears and attaches meaning to them by utilizing his past, learned knowledge of sounds, words, and meaning.

If a child has an auditory deficit, he will have trouble understanding any directions given verbally, following class discussions, and with language development. Because of this he is also likely to have some social problems.

Visual

Visual deficits are divided into the two major headings of acuity and perception. Visual acuity refers to the basic ability of the student to see stimuli. In other words, can the student see that which he is expected to see.

Visual form perception is the ability of the student to visually differentiate the forms and/or symbols in his environment. As such it is involved in nearly every action a student may take, i.e. dressing, walking, recognizing objects or people, reading, writing, etc.

This ability to see and to differentiate forms greatly affects his overall school performance and his success in school and life.

Memory

Memory deficits occur in the major areas of long and short term, auditory, visual, and tactual-kinesthetic memories. In general, short term memory refers to the ability to remember things accurately over a short period of time such as directions for assignments, words to a poem or song, questions asked by the teacher, and class discussions. All motor movement is also learned and must be remembered for efficient performance and movement. Long term memory deals with the same kinds of things, but refers to retaining the information over a long period of time.

The whole area of memory deficits is one of the biggest "headaches" for teachers. Things like the following happen:

1. You teach it—he's got it perfectly. You review it—it's *like* a new subject to him.
2. On weekly tests, performance is okay—on unit or semester tests, performance is terrible.
3. The student knows it now, forgets it tomorrow, and remembers it later in an off-and-on fashion.

Auditory memory deals with the ability, or lack of it, to remember things that one has learned with the ears.

Visual memory deals with the ability to remember things that one has learned with the eyes.

In order for a child to have effective fine and gross motor movements, he must be able to remember what it feels like to make learned movements. If a child cannot remember these things he will probably have awkward and clumsy movements, and poor handwriting.

Memory deficits, depending upon which areas they occur in, can greatly affect success in school and life.

Figure-ground

Figure-ground deficits can be divided into the two major headings of auditory figure-ground and visual figure-ground. Both refer to the ability of a child to pick out and pay attention to specific verbal or visual stimuli (figure) from the myriad of verbal and visual stimuli present within each learning situation (ground).

A child with figure-ground problems will be easily distracted and will have problems following class discussions or doing the tasks of reading, writing, or arithmetic.

Motor Control

Motor development can be divided into two major areas of gross motor development and fine motor development. It is essential that a child develops both if he is to succeed in school. The gross motor abilities are essential for the development of all movement, game, and sports skills. If a child cannot attain these gross motor skills, his peer acceptance is greatly reduced. Many theorists, in addition, feel that higher levels of learning are based upon the effective learning of basic motor movements. Some theorists also believe that gross motor development is a precursor to the development of laterality, directionality, rhythm, sequence, space structure, and time structure.

Time Structure

Time structure deficits within school age children generally manifest themselves in one or a combination of the following three areas; rhythm, sequence, and/or time (clock minutes). In this context rhythm refers to the ability of the student to maintain a sustained unit of measure, beat, over a given unit of time. Sequence skills reflect upon the student's ability to reproduce a given sequence of stimuli received auditorily, visually, and/or physically. Time skills, per se, pertain to the student's skill in reflecting with relative accuracy how long it takes or would take to do something or to have done something.

Space Structure

Generally space structure deficits may be thought of as occupying two arenas, internal and/or external. Internalized spatial structure would refer to a person's recognition of the fact that he has two sides to his body, separated by a

theoretical midline. Externalized spatial relationships are more observable phenomena relative to a person's skill or ability to know where he is in relation to other people, places, or things. In the classroom we would see skill in this area demonstrated as the child deals with concepts such as up, down, forward, back, various paper-pencil tasks, artwork, writing (especially numerals), and the broad spectrum of movement within and without the classroom, school, block, or city.

Emotions

The emotional development of a person begins at birth and continues to grow and change throughout one's lifetime. It is essential teachers try to nurture and maintain a feeling of self-worth and a positive self-image within each child. Success is the key to good emotional development. A deficit in this area can permeate all areas that lead to success in school and life.

Creativity

It is believed that everyone is creative in some way. The challenge is to raise and teach children in such a way as to nurture creativity. The development of creativity enhances a person's problem-solving abilities which, in turn, increases the chances for success in school and life.

Learning Styles

Different people learn in different ways. Some learn better visually and others auditorily. Some learn better independently and others in small groups or by discussion. One must learn what the learning styles of a student are and use them to help the child learn more efficiently.

The above descriptions of process deficits and how they are related to school performance should help teachers begin to see some of the "whys" behind failure to succeed in school. It is certain that not all the reasons for failure in school and life have been covered or discovered. Deficits in the above processes do account for some of the reasons why Bob can't read; Sally has no friends; Jim has uneven performance; gifted Susan doesn't like school; and Tom doesn't attend to his work. Only after teachers ask the right question (why?) and get the answer, can they begin to help children overcome learning problems.

Project HELP is designed to help teachers arrive at the answers behind why a child has problems learning and how they can work on each of these problems that arise in the classroom. The how part of project HELP covers subjects like: remediation of process deficits, effective use of teacher time and space, individualizing instruction, and effectively handling behavior.