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## IDENTIFICATION OF LEARNING DIFFICULTIES AND SPECIFIC LEARNING DIFFICULTIES IN PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS

Sonja Angelova

Residential and Counselling Center Planina  
[sonja.angelova@guest.arnes.si](mailto:sonja.angelova@guest.arnes.si)

**Abstract.** In the paper, we describe the problem, purpose, goals and findings of our research. We focus on the two concepts of learning difficulties and specific learning difficulties.

In the empirical part, we present a case study of a student in which we attempt to identify learning difficulties using questionnaires designed by Dr. Skaler and Dr. Hannell.

At the end, we try to draw conclusions and find strategies for improvement, solutions or ways to mitigate certain problems.

A student with specific learning difficulties faces challenges in Slovenian and mathematics, as well as emotional-social difficulties. Although the student is not officially diagnosed, our research indicates deficits in specific areas, particularly in reading-writing and emotional-social skills. The questionnaires revealed a pronounced and significant deficit in the areas of dyslexia and dyscalculia.

The research was carried out in the school district. We had an expert interview with the 6th grade class teacher, an expert interview with the 3rd grade class teacher, and an expert interview with the pedagogue.

**Key words:** detection, guidance, identification, learning difficulties, specific learning difficulties

### Introduction

The constant changes of today's world lead to differences and the need to accept these differences in both our domestic and broader environments. We humans are born, grow, and live with our own expectations, good and bad habits, shortcomings, and peculiarities. Our task is to constantly follow these changes, know how to accept them, classify them, and seek ways to make improvements as necessary.

Changes in education also lead to understanding the different personalities of the people we meet and welcome into our environment every day. In this process, we help them accept their habits, norms, and expectations. If we can't, we try to adapt to them or help them adapt to us. Also in our case, in the contribution we write about how each individual is important for the school, for the school and home environment, how much each individual's special features need to be adapted, reinforced, in order to build the entire profile of a person who needs our attention, our adaptation and our help.

In the article, we describe a student who needs individualization, personalization, or constant observation, adaptation and acceptance of shortcomings or certain peculiarities and taking action as soon as possible and offering the necessary adaptation and assistance.

We describe a student who attends the 6th grade of primary school. The teacher recognizes learning difficulties in the field of Slovenian and mathematics and in the social field. The research was carried out by interviewing the class teacher and other professionals.

With two expert questionnaires, dr. Skalereva and dr. Hannell's attempts to discover in which segments the characteristics that we identify show up and in which deficits we classify them.

## **1. PROBLEM, PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES**

### **1.1 Definition and description of the problem**

The Elementary School Act (2016), in Article 12, states that "Students with special needs are students who require adapted implementation of elementary school programs with additional professional help or adapted elementary school programs or special education programs. These students are defined by the law, which regulates the guidance of children with special needs, according to the type and degree of deficit, obstacle, or disorder" (Primary School Act, 2016).

"The education of pupils with special needs from the first paragraph of this article is carried out in accordance with this law and other regulations" (Primary School Act, 2016).

Primary School Act (2016) in 12a. Article also states that "students with learning difficulties are students who, without adjustments to the methods and forms of work in class, find it difficult to achieve knowledge standards. Schools adapt the methods and forms of work in lessons to these students and enable them to be included in supplementary lessons and other forms of individual and group help". (Primary School Act, 2016).

From what has been written, we define the problem, namely, we conclude that the case that we discuss in the paper needs special consideration by the school or professional workers at the school.

Deficits should be recognized in time in students, the characteristics of a specific deficit should be identified, records should be kept and then dealt with, and certain adjustments should be made using special methods, forms of work and special work to improve the academic achievements of both students at school.

From the above also arises the problem that appears in the case of a student with specific learning difficulties, since it is this student who needs special attention and treatment from the teacher, the school counseling service and help in the home environment. Given that, in cases with specific learning difficulties, specific areas have been identified, it is also necessary to deal with them outside the institution.

### **1.2 Purpose and goal of the master's thesis**

The purpose of the paper is to conduct research and identify, discover and show deficits in individual areas of learning and emotional-behavioral problems in certain students. In addition, after recognition with the help of literature, confirm the characteristics of learning difficulties or specific learning difficulties and analyze them with the help of two selected questionnaires, dr. Skalarjeva and dr. Hannell.

The aim of the contribution is:

- Recognize the characteristics of certain student's learning or of specific learning difficulties and make an analysis with the help of questionnaires Dr. Skalarjeva and dr. Hannell.

### **1.3 Research question**

In writing, we referred to the following research question.

- Do certain students have learning difficulties or specific learning difficulties and in which area do the characteristics of certain difficulties fall?

### **1.4 Assumptions or limitations of the research**

We assume that the student has deficits in the area of learning. Regardless of whether these are learning difficulties or specific learning difficulties need to be investigated with the help of the literature and the aforementioned research questionnaire, identify the characteristics of certain problems and try to identify a certain problem with the help of the characteristics and finally find certain strategies for improvement or alleviating these problems.

The limitation is manifested in the fact that we do not know the student personally and we cannot choose an institutional example, because the students who come from the institution in which we work have more complex problems, deficits and needs, which are not of educational origin. For this purpose, I chose a student with specific learning difficulties who is not from the institution, but attends a regular elementary school in Ljubljana.

## **2. THEORETICAL PART**

### **2.1 Understanding and classifying learning difficulties**

According to the economic definition of problems in the learning process, problems arise when at least one or more important elements of the ecosystem that somehow affect the learner are missing in the learning process. (Kavkler and Magajna, 2008, after Bartola, 1990 in Magajna, 2008).

According to Lerner (2003) in Magajna 2008, students with learning difficulties are a heterogeneous group of children with different characteristics in different areas, cognitive, social, emotional, etc. characteristics and these students have greater learning difficulties than most of their classmates.

"Learning difficulties as a phenomenon are spread on a continuum from mild to severe, from simple to complex, from short-term (transient) to those that are tied to the time of schooling or last a lifetime". (Kavkler and Magajna, 2008).

#### **2.1.1 General and specific learning difficulties**

Students with general learning difficulties belong to a heterogeneous group. These students have greater learning difficulties than their classmates and the difficulties show up in several subject areas. The problems may be internal to the student and may be the result of delayed development, delays in the abstract logical way of thinking, difficulty in learning certain material in certain subjects. They can be the result of emotional problems, being a foreign language or economic disadvantage (Pekljaj, 2016).

General learning difficulties can be an expression of some internal and external factors, such as: attention disorders and hyperactivity, below-average and borderline intellectual abilities, obstacles in the social-emotional field, lack of motivation, poorly developed self-regulation skills, foreign languages, social-cultural differences, etc. (Magajna, 2008a).

Specific learning difficulties are neurologically conditioned and are defined as a heterogeneous group of disorders that arise from the individual. Disabilities are manifested as delays in early development and problems in the areas of attention, thinking, memory, coordination, communication, reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic, social and emotional competence. These problems affect the individual's ability to receive, process, connect and interpret certain content and thus deprive the student of school skills in the field of reading, writing and calculation (Pekljaj, 2016 according to Magajna et al. 2008; Magajna, Kavkler, Košak Babuder, Zupančič Danko, Sršen Fras and Rošer Obretan, 2015).

Specific learning difficulties are divided into two groups (Magajna, 2008a):

- Specific deficits at the level of auditory-visual processes: dyslexia, dysortography, etc. learning difficulties related to language.
- Specific deficits at the level of visual-motor processes: dysgraphia, spatial dyscalculia, dyspraxia and problems in the field of social skills.

In the case of a student suspected to have specific learning difficulties, we identify specific issues related to reading and writing, such as dyslexia (reading problems), dysgraphia (writing problems), dysorthography (spelling problems), and specific deficits in academic skills. This student requires special attention, adaptations, and additional professional support.

According to the literature, dyslexia represents a significant challenge in this area, characterized by inherent difficulties in processing linguistic information. This condition results in problems recognizing individual sounds, synthesizing, analyzing, and manipulating sounds, among others.

The student's difficulties manifest in various ways including challenges in reading, writing, letter substitutions, omissions, additions, number reversals, poor reading comprehension, inaccurate grammar usage, and more (Magajna, 2008a).

A student in whom we predict specific learning difficulties also shows recognized characteristics in the field of dyscalculia, which is part of a brain defect.

The student does not have numerical ideas up to 100 and more, does not understand the sentence, has problems with sequences and pdb (Magajna, 2008a).

### **2.1.2 Recognition, detection and characteristics of specific learning difficulties in a student with specific learning difficulties**

The student I analyze in the paper is 12 years old and comes from Slovenia. He attends a regular elementary school in Ljubljana and attends the 6th grade. He is the only one in the family. The student likes animals, he likes to help his classmates, the teacher, he really likes to draw and create. In his school work, he has learning difficulties in the field of Slovenian and mathematics. The student is often sleepy, dreamy and I have the feeling that he is not listening to the teacher's explanation. In fact, I feel like he lives in his own world. He also has problems choosing friends, because it is difficult for him to get along with everyone. He is very careful in choosing his friends, I have a feeling that he wants the company of students who come from a prestigious family (perhaps because of his parents' appeal).

It is not officially diagnosed and does not have an expert opinion and decision, but the deficits that I recognize in the student are shown and expressed on a specific level.

The biggest deficits can be seen in the field of Slovenian. From the 3rd grade onwards, records are kept by teachers and the counseling service. Additional professional help and supplementary lessons are also provided to the student, which motivate him more, but they did not succeed in helping the student at a higher level to start learning certain strategies to improve his deficits on his own.

Deficits are manifested in the areas of spelling, writing words, writing and forming sentences, reading difficulties and pdb. In addition to reading and writing deficits, the student has problems in the field of mathematics. The student has no idea of numbers, the student cannot continue the sequence of certain numbers, cannot tell the preceding and succeeding numbers, cannot add and subtract up to 100 with a one-digit number without the hundredth place. The student has problems with the interviewer. Does not understand numbers up to 1000, 10000 and more. In the social field, the student is very limited. He gets along very well with one or two classmates, he is very closed. During the break, he does not play with his friends, but sits and thinks in his own world. His classmates love him, but he won't let them get close.

The student is provided with supplementary lessons, one hour of additional professional assistance from the school teacher and teaching assistance from the language teacher.

The parents are aware of certain observations made by the teacher. Several counseling sessions were held with him. They were informed about the guidance process by the counseling service. They were told that the recognized deficits can also escalate in the future and that it is necessary to help the student in a different way, because with the diagnosis that the student will receive, he will receive a professional opinion, a decision and also adjustments that teachers must take into account when work with him to make his learning easier.

The student's mother herself said at the meeting that the recognizable signs point to dyslexia and that most successful people in the world have this type of deficit and that she herself has the same problems. At the meetings, the mother said that she too has most of the problems that the teacher recognizes in the student and that these problems did not hinder her. After talking with the teacher, the mother said that this year they will go ahead to have the student analyzed and tested by experts.

## **2.2 Presentation of the questionnaire by dr. Skalarjeve - Characteristics of the behavior of students with SLD**

Questionnaire of dr. Marije Skaler consists of twelve sets through which the identified student deficits can be confirmed by the teacher with the help of the questionnaire of the expert dr. Scaler. With the help of the questionnaire, we discover the characteristics of the behavior of students with specific learning difficulties.

In the first part of the questionnaire, we analyze characteristics in the area of memorization, memorization, and concentration.

In the second part of the questionnaire, the teacher discovers the student's fine motor skills based on his observations.

In the third set, the visually perceptible and broken down, visual-motor coordination are engaged and connected, where we can discover how the student draws, what he pays attention to, what he omits and what problems arise when drawing, redrawing, and whether he separates characters and bodies.

The fourth group deals with problems in the field of auditory skills, which reveals how the student discovers the source of the sound, how he listens to the speaker, whether he is ready to ask the teacher to repeat the learning material, pay attention to the teacher's movements, etc.

The fifth group includes problems with the perception of time, namely, whether the student can tell and explain when a certain thing happened in time, whether he can determine certain dates in the morning, noon and evening, etc.

In the sixth group, verbal expression is used, or how the child expresses himself verbally.

In the seventh part, we discover how the child finds himself in the school and home environment and how critical he is of himself and his products.

In the eighth group, there are spatial-positional orientations, where we find out how the student finds himself when writing letters, numbers, etc., and when writing, drawing, replacing, turning letters and numbers.

The ninth group deals with social and emotional maturity, with which we can determine whether the student is socially mature and involved in the school and home environment, as well as how much he pays attention to certain segments of his life and knows how to express his emotions.

In the tenth group, there are questions with which we strengthen the student's fatigue.

In the eleventh set, questions are asked whether the student has good and bad days, and how this affects his performance or school performance.

In the twelfth group, restlessness and spatial impermanence are taken up, with which we determine how the student behaves in the classroom, whether he moves, moves and walks around the classroom, various finger movements, etc.

The questionnaire is designed in such a way that each question is evaluated as not like this (0 points), like this (several, sometimes, 1 point) and like this (strongly, often, 2 points).

## **2.3 Presentation of the questionnaire by dr. Hannell - Specific Learning Disabilities Checklist**

Questionnaire or check sheet dr. Hannell's consists of eight sets of recognizable deficits in individual areas of learning.

In the first group, the student's below-average productivity is taken into account, from the recognition of certain problems in the reading and writing field, school achievements, the student's effort and progress step by step.

The second group includes memory problems. With them, we discover what his memory capacity is, the sequence, the spelling, the writing of letters, words, numbers, what are the transcriptions, the omission of letters when writing.

In the third group, speech, phonological and language problems are classified, with which we discover what problems are manifested in speaking, spelling, parsing, recognizing

and producing rhythms, rhymes, alliteration and how he speaks and how he expresses himself in his written and oral language.

Problems with combining spoken and written language are classified in the fourth group. We find out what problems the student has in learning letters and words, verbal and written, in writing down thoughts on paper, omitting and adding words when writing and reading, problems with reading technique.

The fifth group includes visual-motor problems, which reveal whether the student is slow in writing, whether he has an organized notebook, what kind of reading and writing problems he has, how he coordinates and what kind of attitude he has in the school room.

The sixth set of problems includes problems with concentration, which reveal whether the student is paying attention, daydreaming, distracted by stimuli, has attention deficit disorder, is restless, impulsive, superficial, gets tired quickly when reading, is poorly organized.

In the seventh group, there are social-emotional problems, with which we discover whether the student has a bad, weak self-image, avoids tasks, loses certain things, forgets homework, is upset, does not expect success, is disappointed and upset, and whether he is different.

In the eighth group, the family history is taken, in fact, whether someone from the family has related problems.

## **2.4 ANALYSIS**

### **2.4.1 Procedure for collecting data on a student with a specific learning disability**

In order to collect data, we first met the class teacher of the selected student, and had a few conversations with the class teacher and the pedagogue. We also got to know the child and, with the teacher's and the student's permission, examined some of the student's products from previous classes. We could not get the products of the current year, where we had to have a conversation with the subject teachers of each subject and obtain permission from the parents. All we saw were the saved documents of teachers and pedagogues. After the professional discussion with the class teacher and the teacher, we learned a lot about the student. We wrote down many key issues in the upper part of the seminar paper.

In addition to the collection and recording of data, based on what was recorded, we searched and studied some literature related to a certain student's deficit.

Then the class teacher and I solved both of the questionnaires mentioned above.

With the two questionnaires, we wanted to find and confirm the identified deficits already recorded, which are manifested by the student in the school field. All the time we followed the research question that we wrote down at the beginning.

### **2.4.2 Results and interpretation**

On the basis of what has been written, we have discovered that the student has deficits in the field of Slovenian and mathematics. In addition, these problems are also reflected in other subjects, such as English, geography, history, etc.

From the written data, we discovered that the student also has social-emotional problems, which manifest themselves during breaks, as well as during lessons.

With the help of both questionnaires, we made an analysis of each individual group and found out how much the deficit is or the problem is pronounced.

In the following, we describe how the problems were expressed when solving the two questionnaires.

According to the checklist of specific learning difficulties, dr. According to Hannelli, the student's below-average performance is strongly expressed, which indicates that the problems in reading, spelling and writing are at a high level according to the teacher's observation. The student's results and achievements do not show the real state of his capabilities and abilities. His progress is at a very low level, as his results do not show an improvement in relation to the effort put in by the professionals.

The problems with memory are strongly expressed, as the teacher has repeatedly evaluated him with a score of 3, which indicates strongly expressed problems with memory. The student cannot retain certain content for a long time and thus makes mistakes in several areas (spelling, writing sequences, retaining information, copying from the blackboard). Speech, phonological and language problems are moderate, as the teacher notes minor errors in spoken or phonemic language types.

The student finds significant problems in the field of combining speech and written language, as the student orally knows and is able to compose simple sentences related to a certain content. However, he cannot write down what was said correctly. When writing down some grammatical errors, he omits letters, words, incorrectly writes down the order of words in a sentence. Creating simple and short sentences is complicated for him.

In the visual group, problems are strongly expressed when changing small and capital letters, as the teacher says, the student never uses a capital letter or he cannot place it correctly, when reading he uses his finger to trace and turn the letters b and p, d and t, problems with naughty letters (e, d, t, b, lj, nj, etc.). In a moderate form, problems with the untidiness of the notebook appear, as the student never has correct notes, orientation is very weak, especially in the math notebook, he gets tired quickly when writing, where he is too fast and the writing technique is not adopted. During lessons and breaks, he has a particularly lazy attitude and quickly wobbles on the table or on a chair. The student is very dreamy and sleepy.

Problems with concentration are clearly manifested by the fact that the student does not pay attention to the teacher's explanations, often daydreams and lives in his own world, is very quickly distracted by stimuli in and outside the class, and makes many mistakes due to superficiality. In addition, in a moderate form, problems of minor restlessness are manifested, because when the student is bored, he becomes disruptive, rummages in his bag, plays with crayons, etc., and even when reading, he gets tired very quickly, the longer he reads, the more mistakes he makes. The student is mildly impulsive and mildly disorganized.

In the social-emotional area, the teacher notes marked disappointment when the student achieves a bad result and in the area when the student does not want to be different from the others and does not accept the diagnosis.

As I wrote above, the mother confirmed several times in meetings with the teacher and the counseling service that her son has similar problems to hers, thereby confirming that the issues are repeated in the family circle.

According to the questionnaire on the characteristics of the behavior of students with specific learning difficulties according to dr. Skalarjeve we made recognition or by identifying deficits in twelve areas.

In the first group, the teacher identifies frequent problems in the area of renewing material, distracting attention due to distracting factors in the classroom and problems with concentration, sometimes it also happens to the student that he forgets things at school, at home, forgets homework, gives the impression that he knows how to tell a good story, however, he is not collected and makes mistakes and quickly goes off topic, he only remembers some events that he cannot accurately describe.

Motor-wise, the student is fine, but there are still problems with fine motor skills, where the student cannot accurately form letters, numbers, straight lines, characters and bodies.

In the field of visual perception and parsing and visual-motor coordination, pronounced problems are recognizable in the field of image recognition and description and in the separation of characters and bodies. Sometimes there are problems with drawing and paying attention to some details.

The perception of auditory features is not pronounced and the teacher did not find any particularity, but still often gives the impression that he is listening and following the teacher, but in fact this is not the case, because the student cannot repeat what he heard.

The student also has problems with the perception of time, since the student asks the teacher several times in one day what time it is, when will be snack, when will be lunch, etc.

Even when determining units of measurement, it has problems with recognition and conversion.

Verbal expression is not an obstacle for the student, but it is often incorrectly accented or spoken, he repeatedly uses verbal expression in the dialect from which he comes. The sentences are not set correctly. He often makes mistakes in expressing himself, writing and forming sentences and preparing texts in Slovenian. He often needs additional explanations of the texts.

The student needs a lot of help and the use of various strategies and tools in the mental area in order to be able to motivate him and encourage him to work. The student needs a hundred meter for calculating with numbers, a square of 1000 and also other aids, fingers, for example. He is sometimes critical of his products, but not overly so.

We detect problems with spatial-positional orientation in the student when writing and drawing. The student finds it difficult to find his way when writing in a notebook, often does not know how to point the direction of the sky, does not find his way in space, has problems changing letters, syllables, etc.

Social-emotional deficits are pronounced in the student and are repeated often. The student is often dreamy, thinks in vain, lives in his own world, is almost often sleepy in the morning. Theses or questionnaires are to a lesser extent related to my case. Maybe we could take a bigger part of the social area and connection and work in a group. There is too much emphasis on behavior, impulsiveness, reaction.

Regarding fatigue, we can say that the student gets tired quickly and shows his fatigue with boredom, lack of interest, etc.

A student has good days and bad days. He often has good days when he comes to class smiling and ready to work. Every time he has a good day, he starts a conversation about his pet Vili. Even the writing of all scriptures is connected with it. The student talks to him like a friend. When a student has bad days, it is difficult for him to gather himself, he makes major mistakes in writing, expressing himself and connecting with friends.

Restlessness shows in writing, as the student would like to do quickly and get rid of this burden, but the products are sloppy and imprecisely made. He is warned during class for improper posture during class, for being sleepy and not sociable, for not accepting certain classmates as friends.

## **CONCLUSION WITH REFLECTION**

We conclude that we have chosen a case that provides adequate research, because with the research we have done, we have established that we have identified and discovered learning difficulties and specific learning difficulties in the selected student with the help of characteristics.

From the conducted research, we conclude that pupils with specific learning difficulties show difficulties in the fields of Slovenian and mathematics, as well as in the social-emotional field.

We conclude that we have identified and discovered dyslexia and dyscalculia in a student with specific learning difficulties. On the basis of the research carried out, we learned and identified the following characteristics:

- the student shows reading and writing problems, incorrect notations, unacquired reading technique, omission of letters, incorrect word order in a sentence, incorrect declensions,
- problems with numerical representations, problems with writing numbers, sequence, finding the predecessor and successor of a number, problems with measurement units, recognizing, drawing and writing letters, numbers, characters and bodies.
- the student finds it difficult to integrate into society with all his classmates. The student chooses only successful or prestigious classmates.



From the analysis of both questionnaires, we conclude that they cover similar or nearly identical areas, and both have revealed almost identical results. Dr. Hannell's questionnaire is structured more systematically and addresses multiple areas within a single framework, unlike Dr. Skaler's questionnaire, which we were unable to verify. Some sections in the second questionnaire are tailored specifically to certain deficits and pose questions in a direct manner, sometimes overlooking positive aspects, a contrast noticeable with Dr. Hannell's approach. Despite covering fewer sections, Hannell's questionnaire is broader in scope, encompassing a wider range of deficits under each category.

In summary, the results from both questionnaires confirm the teacher's observations regarding memory problems, issues with visual perception, social-emotional difficulties, verbal perception challenges, fine motor skills, and cognitive processing. Dyslexia emerges as the most prominent concern. We conclude and also advise the student's treatment by experts outside the institution as soon as possible, as well as adjustments by teachers, counselors, etc.

Based on the decision, we provide adjustments that will help the student with schoolwork:

- writing written products outside the classroom,
- enlarged font (at least 14),
- use of colored sheets (green, yellow or blue),
- extended time for writing written products,
- use of pictorial material,
- multiple interpretations of a certain substance,
- help from the teacher,
- the student sits next to the teacher,
- the student is assigned a tutor, etc.

We conclude that we have done a detailed research that has confirmed our research and interpretation. We supported all this with professional literature.

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