18. PERSPECTIVES IN LEARNING POTENTIAL ASSESSMENT: CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

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It is not easy for me to formulate conclusive remarks for this volume. One of the reasons is that its contributions are very diverse. Different topics, in the theoretical as well as the methodological and empirical sphere, come to the fore. I do nevertheless hope that my reflections may contribute to this research domain's further development and may stimulate researchers to take further innovative steps on the road they have taken. I have preferred not to fill this final chapter with technical observations and/or remarks with respect to the content of the diverse chapters; for this would involve the risk of getting lost in details and loosing a clear view of the whole. I shall rather try to give an outline and to roughly draft a few global perspectives.

When reading the different chapters I wondered again and again what 'learning potential' exactly meant. I notice that there is no agreement on this matter. A number of authors try to define the concept, but the definitions and descriptions are very diverse. In this respect this research tradition does not escape the difficulties faced by psychology when defining the concept 'intelligence', which also resulted in the introduction of this new concept.

We might remark, albeit ironically, that learning potential is what is assessed by learning potential tests. It is even more confusing when concepts related to learning potential are implicated. We tend to think more specifically of 'learning potential assessment', 'dynamic assessment' and 'cognitive education'. There is even more diversity here, if possible. The authors give different

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interpretations of the same concepts and use different concepts for the same content.

The confusion is, I think, to a great extent related to the fact that the object of this research tradition is not clear enough. What is the focus of this research? For a number of authors it is very clearly a child feature. Dissatisfaction with the traditional intelligence tests made them choose a different method of charting children's ability to learn new things. It is not the product of past learning but the process of new learning that puts us on the track of learning potential. For some researchers learning potential's nature is relatively permanent, even biologically based, whereas others emphasise that it is rather dynamic. Research that investigates the predictive validity of learning potential, assessment often is situated in this child-oriented approach. One wants to track child features that might predict future learning success. Learning potential assessment must then allow us to do this more adequately than does the current intelligence test. Its limitation however is that the predictive validity turns out to be very domain-specific. We therefore observe an evolution from relatively general to curriculum-bound tests. The question, however, remains whether this is a solution for the problem that started it all. 'Leaning potential' as a child feature in the sense of curriculum-bound predictive skills is actually a non-essential concept. It may be much better to call the skills in question (such as phonological awareness or early numeracy) by their name. What makes this approach specific is the fact that learning or training specific skills are part of the assessment procedure. In this way we are approaching an alternative way of describing the object of this research tradition.

For a group of authors the research objective is the teaching process. For them it is primarily (the quality of) teaching that must advance the child's learning process. Developing good mediation strategies is their basic concern. It is not so much that learning potential assessment is essential, but rather the promotion of cognitive development or learning. The question, however, remains of how the quality of teaching is to be assessed. It is obvious that child features too must be included, even in the sense of learning products. The paradox is that it is precisely dissatisfaction with this product approach that jointly initiated the learning potential research tradition.

I think there is a way out of this impasse: it is to regard the research object as an interaction between on the one hand the learning child and on the other hand the educational system. It is then not the learning process in se, or the separate practice of teaching or mediating that are research objects, but their interaction. A number of authors in this book are very close to this approach. Emphasising reciprocity, for example presupposes that there is an interaction in the process of learning. In my opinion it is important to analyse this learning/

teaching process as a 'circular' or mutually influencing process. System theories indicate that comparable circular processes cannot in the first instance, be depicted in their complex totality. Circular processes must be studied with the help of several intersections. There is no one truth about the learning/ teaching process. This process can and must be studied from different points of view using different research methods: objective and subjective, quantitative and qualitative, cognitive, metacognitive and affective/motivational, via tests and via observation, based on product and process scores, etc.. It is therefore inevitable that research in that field will always remain diverse. It is only by confronting the diverse intersections of this complex reality that we can get an adequate view.

This interactional approach is very close to trends in educating children with academic learning problems. The United Nations has internationally stimulated the incorporation of 'inclusive education' as an essential topic in educational policy. Respect for the diversity of pupils is indispensable. From this educational perspective children are no longer approached as inadequate, disordered or handicapped; rather education should be geared to their (specific) educational needs so that they can participate fully in regular education. These specific educational needs are defined in interactional terms. They are specifications in the educational system that should allow the personality to develop optimally. High-quality education is education that manages to adapt to the child's own nature. It is clear that the term 'responsive education' belongs here. The objectives of dynamic assessment, which are discussed in several chapters of this book, fit in fluently. The issue is rather to optimise the process of interaction between teacher and learner to such an extent that real learning becomes possible in all aspects of development (cognitive, metacognitive, psychosocial, motivational-affective). Reciprocity, responsiveness, etc. are the parameters of quality.

This approach to learning potential assessment and cognitive training implies in my opinion that research in this field cannot be context-free, culture-free or content-free. This interactional attitude requires that attention be given to research's ecological validity, since educational interactions always have a concrete setting. They take place in a specific context and in a particular culture. The specifications of the educational system that enable us to promote and optimise the learning process (may) differ according to the learning process's content. Cognitive, metacognitive, psychosocial and motivational-affective processes are to a large extent also domain-specific.

This interactional method also involves shifts of emphasis with regard to the objectives of learning potential assessment. In the past, occasional attempts have been made to optimise special education placements through learning

potential assessment, among others by improving the prediction of success in a specific educational form and the classification of pupils. From this new point of view it would be better to reverse the questions of how to classify pupils and whether they match certain educational forms. We might then wonder whether that educational form is good for the pupil. The proof is the extent to which it is geared to his specific educational needs. Learning potential assessment should enable teachers to better gear educational forms to specific educational needs. This consequently cannot be a matter for experts outside the school but rather one that concerns specialists in assessment, who discuss such matters with the teachers in order to give an adequate description of the complex reality of the learning/teaching process by exchanging their expertise. This is only possible on the basis of equality and not starting from an expert-layman model.

From this point of view the issue of learning potential assessment is not only one of methods or techniques, but also of attitude. It is about the determination and the enthusiasm to exercise one's knowledge and skills to gear the educational system to the educational needs of the various pupils, to such an extent that they all get equal opportunities to complete the diverse aspects of their developmental process in a proper way. I think that the techniques, tests and programs that will be developed in the future, must in the first place be directed towards this objective. They must be instruments that serve the goals and objectives of high-quality education.