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Research paper

On the diagnosis of learning disabilities in the Austrian school system: Official directions and the diagnostic process in practice in Styria/Austria



Le diagnostic de trouble d'apprentissage dans le système scolaire Autrichien : des orientations officielles à la procédure diagnostique appliquée en pratique en Styrie/Autriche

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ABSTRACT

There is no international consensus concerning the diagnostic criteria used to diagnose a learning disability (LD). In fact, various diagnostic criteria are used and interpreted differently in different countries. A common denominator can only be found in the fact that intelligence quotient (IQ) is often seen as important in order to identify LD, either in the framework of discrepancy models between cognitive ability and achievement or in the context of models relating LD to below-average IQ (Grünke, 2004). The present paper examines the criteria that are used for the diagnosis of LD in Styria, a federal state of Austria. For this purpose, 25 special educational needs (SEN) reports of children identified as having learning disabilities were examined. In addition, three expert interviews with school administration authorities were conducted. The results

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provide a first indication that IQ scores are not important for the diagnosis of LD in Styria. In fact, the diagnostic procedure seems to be quite unregulated and standardized tests are hardly ever used in this context. Moreover, the results show that a diagnosis of LD in Styria is usually based on poor reading skills, poor basic arithmetic skills, deficits in German language, and/or behavioral problems.

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R É S U M É

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Il n'existe actuellement pas de consensus international sur les critères diagnostiques des troubles de l'apprentissage (TA). Non seulement une grande variété de critères diagnostiques sont utilisés, mais ceux-ci sont diversement interprétés selon les pays. Le seul dénominateur commun que l'on puisse relever est l'importance fréquemment attribuée au quotient intellectuel (QI) pour diagnostiquer des troubles de l'apprentissage, que ce soit dans le cadre de modèles insistant sur le décalage entre capacités cognitives et performances ou dans celui de modèles associant un trouble d'apprentissage et un QI en-dessous de la moyenne (Grünke, 2004). Le présent article examine les critères utilisés pour établir un diagnostic de troubles de l'apprentissage dans le Land autrichien de Styrie. L'étude porte sur l'analyse de 25 dossiers d'enfants à besoins éducatifs particuliers (BEP) identifiés comme ayant des troubles de l'apprentissage. En outre, trois entretiens ont été menés avec des responsables de l'administration scolaire. Les résultats montrent qu'en Styrie les scores obtenus aux tests QI ne sont pas un critère important dans l'établissement d'un diagnostic de TA. La procédure diagnostique ne semble en fait pas être très réglementée, et dans ce contexte les tests standardisés ne sont pratiquement jamais utilisés. De plus, les résultats montrent que le diagnostic de TA en Styrie se fonde généralement sur des critères de faible maîtrise des savoirs de base en lecture ou en arithmétique, de retards dans la maîtrise de la langue allemande et/ou de problèmes de comportement.

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1. Introduction

The specific concepts of learning disabilities (LD) and the ways of classifying children identified as having learning disabilities vary widely from country to country (Sideridis, 2007). The international classification systems, namely the International Classification of Diseases 10 (ICD henceforward) and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual IV (DSM henceforward), only employ the term learning disabilities usually to refer to a specific learning disorder, like dyslexia or dyscalculia. In Great Britain, for example, LD is often seen as a synonym for a mild mental retardation or an intellectual disability, which usually refers to people with an IQ below 70. In contrast, in Germany the construct of LD traditionally refers to students with an IQ between 55 and 85 (Kultusministerkonferenz, 1994).

However, the most common definition of the LD construct refers to children who have significant academic difficulties in school, caused neither by other disabilities (e.g. sensory impairment) nor by lack of schooling (Lloyd, Keller, & Hung, 2007). Moreover, LD is a "soft" disability for which no physical markers are currently known. Thus, the identification process is open to subjective interpretations (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2002). It is therefore not astonishing that concerns regarding the identification process of LD are frequently expressed and appear to be well founded (Specht, 2009).

One of the most common methods used to identify LD is based on different variations of the discrepancy model (Tung-Kuang, Shian-Chang, & Ying-Ru, 2008). In this approach, a standardized

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