

LD-Coordinator: the new role for dealing with students with learning disorders

La figura del referente per i D.S.A.:
un nuovo ruolo a supporto degli alunni
con disturbi specifici di apprendimento

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The article presents characteristics of the LD (Learning Disorder)¹ Coordinator and his role in supporting students with learning disorders. This role has emerged as a result of the growing need for sustaining the learning process in the presence of students having difficulties with reading, writing, comprehension and counting.

The teacher who assumes the role of LD-Coordinator should encompass different competencies including knowledge of relevant regulations, characteristics of the single disorders, skills in dealing both with families of LD children and with clinical professionals. The LD-Coordinator must also be well versed in methodologies, strategies and techniques available to utilize in supporting and enhancing the learning process.

The article suggests some ways to develop these competencies by uniting theoretical knowledge and practical experience to form teachers to carry out the role of LD-Coordinator.

The role of the LD-Coordinator described in the article has been defined by the author during the two editions of the Master's program in "Didactics and Psycho-Pedagogy for Learning Disorders" and has been experienced by the participants of the same Master.

Key-words: Learning disorders, School and University, LD tutor (Learning Disorder), LD-Coordinator's competencies, Inclusion

abstract

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- 1 The definition of LD abbreviation can be referred to Learning Disorder or Learning Disability. The correct meaning of the "D" is still frequently discussed in the English speaking countries. The "D" meaning depends on the different ways we can consider people with problems of dyslexia, misspelling, dysgraphia and mathematics difficulties. "D" can indicate the difficulties we observe as a manifestation of a disorder or a disability or it can also refer to the differences in the process of learning. The three concepts are not antithetical, but they express different aspects of the same situation; each of them constitutes a stimulus for a specific therapeutic or didactical action (PARCC, 2011).

Nowadays schools and universities are coping with the increasing presence of students with Learning Disorders. In order to satisfy these students' learning needs teachers must search for strategies and techniques suited to these students' specific problems in reading, reading and comprehension, writing and counting. While coping with these difficulties there needs to be a respect for one's individual style of learning and personalized method of study. In the last twenty years didactical research (Frith, 1995; Cornoldi, De Beni, Gruppo MT, 2001; Cadamuro, 2004; Morgan, Farkas, Wu, 2009; Pollak, 2009; Cornoldi, Tressoldi, Tretti, Vio, 2010; Stella 2001, 2007, 2010; Lucangeli, 2012) has dealt with the concept of diversity in learning. The findings of this research have suggested that every student may benefit from didactical strategies which support different cognitive and learning styles and that lead to the development of personalized methods of study. In order to help students to find the right method and to cope with their specific learning difficulties a teacher with a specific role within the school or university is needed. This person can be identified as a tutor/teacher, specialized in the didactics for students with learning disorders, but also prepared in clinical, psychological, legal and social aspects of learning disabilities. He will become a useful contact between the student and his teachers or professors, and an interface for clinical specialists and student's family.

We may put forth the hypothesis that a teacher prepared as described above can carry out a specific role within the school or university. In the last three years the Italian Ministry of Education has promoted, with the help of universities, the realization of a Master's program and qualification courses in order to prepare teachers to deal with all the aspects of learning disorders. The experiences matured during these courses have pointed to the need to create the specific role of the LD-Coordinator within the activity of teacher.

1. The role of “coordinator” for the students with Learning Disorders

The role of “coordinator” for the students with Learning Disorders (Italian abbreviation for Learning Disorders is DSA- Disturbi Specifici di Apprendimento) constitutes a valid support in the development of the learner's personality as well as in the design and planning of the curriculum. The presence of this new role in the school is regulated according to specific Guidelines set forth by the Ministry of Education Decree of 12th July 2011- Guidelines for the right of study for the students with specific learning disorders.

The research available in both clinical and pedagogical areas underlines the need for a valid link among the school, the family and health care specialists. The creation of this new professional figure has been made necessary to respond, in practice, to the following needs: the problems and anxiety that families with children with learning disabilities experience and the requirement of a personalized educational path to support each student's uniqueness. The LD-Coordinator is also important in supporting university students with learning disorders as they pursue their course of study.

The Guidelines set forth above (n.6.3), define this new role as follows : “ The



coordinator's responsibilities focus on awareness raising and the analysis of the problems connected with learning disabilities as well as providing support to fellow teachers directly involved in applying didactical strategies for these same students". If we consider the benefits that result from prevention and early observation of learning problems in young children, we should look to the first primary school years as an important period for observing eventual difficulties that the child can exhibit. The teacher, supported by the LD-Coordinator, has the preparation and competence to recognize problems which can lead to learning difficulties. Subsequently, both the teacher and the LD-Coordinator can notify the family of the results of their observation and help the family to find the appropriate health care professionals to deal with the problems.

The LD-Coordinator becomes important both for the families with children suffering from learning difficulties and for the other teachers in the school. His presence in the school and his work with the families and colleagues can provide a positive learning atmosphere for these students. The LD-Coordinator knows many strategies, techniques, technologies and methods to utilize to facilitate learning. This specific preparation of the teacher-tutor is particularly useful when he deals with the LD students because he may choose the didactic solutions and tools to reduce the difficulties that these students face.

It is questionable if all teachers are able to put into effect this kind of competence strictly based on normal teacher preparation. The LD-Coordinator-teacher not only has experience in teaching, but also possesses certain competences that we will analyze now.

In Italy the Law October 8th 2010 n. 170- New rules on specific learning disorders in schools and the Guidelines of 2011 provide for a preventive evaluation by way of early identification of possible cases of learning disorders. As a result of this evaluation it is possible to work towards the correct development of pre-reading and pre- writing skills as well as the concept of number and the ability of calculation. This preventive evaluation is normally carried out by the teachers of the class. The LD-Coordinator can help his colleagues in this first stage of the evaluation and later he can support their efforts to find useful strategies to reduce the original problems. If these problems persist, the tutor can help the teacher of the class in communicating to the family the need for a professional diagnosis to pinpoint the specific aspects of the disorder. It is useful for the tutor to meet the student's family and to become for them a point of reference during the observation period that leads to the diagnosis. The LD-Coordinator can help medical professionals, families and teachers to work together. It can be said that this kind of competencies can be expressed by any teacher, but the LD-Coordinator should demonstrate specific abilities in teaching and in relating to others as a result of personal education, permanent formation and concrete experience in dealing with LD problems .

If we were to write a description of the LD-Coordinator for students with Learning disorders we would consider these characteristics:

- attention to observing the people whom he/she interacts with;
- complete knowledge of the laws and dispositions concerning people with learning disorders;
- social competencies to enter in relationship with children, boys and girls with learning disorders, with their families and with the school colleagues;

- knowledge of the learning process and of the mental virtues to sustain the growth and the development of each student;
- complete formation to become a trainer for the colleagues for the problem of the DSA;
- collaboration in the planning of the lifespan project, a project that considers the difficulties to overcome as well as the talents to empower for the success in life of each student.

We will analyze some of the above characteristics.

2. The LD-Coordinator as an observer

Pedagogical observation is part of every teacher's fundamental competence. The knowledge of the student is at the basis of any didactic planning and class realization. The teacher observes because he wants to understand how to help each student to reach his/her best in the learning process. It is a kind of research. The teacher who observes increases his/her attention and his/her competencies in favour of his/her students. Camaioni, Buscetta and Perucchini distinguish between "looking" and "seeing" as two different ways to obtain information about the boys and girls whom one works with (Camaioni, Buscetta, Perucchini, 2010, pag.12). Seeing a child during activity means paying attention to what he does and says, how he enters into relationships with adults and other children, and how he learns. Looking at a child involves observation. Observing a child means following a hypothesis arising from watching his actions and interactions, in other words, starting a pedagogical observation (Boncori, 2009). One observes because he is looking for something or he wants to discover something that is not yet known . The LD-Coordinator should be able to use observation in order to provide for a preventive evaluation or an early evaluation of possible learning disorders . The Guidelines affirm that learning disorders present some characteristics that can be easily recognized as risk factors by an experienced observer even when dealing with very young children in pre-primary school. There exists a set of tests called IPDA (Identificazione Precoce Difficoltà di Apprendimento-early identification of learning difficulties) which highlights possible risk factors in very young children. Test results can help teachers to plan strategies that reduce the effects of some learning difficulties. However, the diagnosis for learning disorders must not be made before the end of the second year of primary school and even then, it is the responsibility of health care specialists. The ability to observe belongs to each teacher, but the LD-Coordinator can unite this ability with that of recognizing the signs that indicate possible learning difficulties. The next step is to enact a series of activities that reinforce children's cognitive skills and reduce their learning difficulties. The introduction of psychomotricity in pre-primary school, for example, can be a valid prerequisite for a thorough development of pre- reading, pre-writing skills and visual-spatial orientation. The use of psychomotricity can help to pinpoint problems in learning and, thanks to the unique link existing among movement, emotions and thought development, it is possible to reduce the consequences of learning problems. An accurate observer is never superficial; he sees through appearances and tries to give a collocation to the



object, the subject and the situation that he sees. He looks for links among previous experiences, consequences and relationships.

Some of the qualities for good pedagogical observation are:

- attention to the educative aspect of the observed situation;
- the research of the real meaning of what is observed;
- the knowledge of observation methods,
- the skills in using instruments to register observed data;
- the skill in reading what is observed with objectivity.

The results of the observation by the LD-Coordinator can be applied to:

- organizing activities to empower abilities or to make up for scholastic failure;
- advising the family to ask for a specialist to recognize possible learning problems in order to separate learning difficulties from specific learning disorders;
- individualizing the teaching process;
- personalizing the learning process;
- looking for valid strategies for the students with learning difficulties;
- constructing tests and evaluating the student's products with "authentic evaluation" techniques;
- promoting self-evaluation and meta-cognitive development.

A good observer in education can realize authentic relationships with students by promoting their full expression in humanity, even in the presence of disabilities or learning difficulties and disorders.

3. The LD-Coordinator as expert of the laws and legal dispositions concerning people with learning disorders

The LD-Coordinator is also requested to have a thorough knowledge of all the legal dispositions in favour of students with learning difficulties. In Italy these dispositions are specific for school-aged children and university students. The first note set forth by the Italian Ministry of Education was C.M. October 5th 2004 n.4099/A/4– Initiatives about Dyslexia which provide for compensative instruments such as personal computers, i-pads and calculators as well as dispensation measures for dyslexic students, e.g. not writing in a foreign language or not reading aloud. Other dispositions followed regarding the State Exam with the Note of the Ministry of Education March 1st 2005 n.1787 - State exam 2004-2005: Students suffering from dyslexia and with the Note May 28th 2009 n.57/44 - State Exams. Thanks to the Note of the Italian Ministry of Education July 27th 2005 n. 4798 - Family involvement : the parents of LD students were first involved in the process of learning especially in the early detection of learning problems. The first practical guidelines for the school were set by the Ministry of Education with the C.M. May 10th 2007 n. 4674 - Students with learning disorders: practical guidelines. A complete collection of all dispositions in favour of students with

learning difficulties attending school and university is stated in the above quoted Law n. 170/2010. This law was followed by the Ministry Decree of 12th July 2011- Guidelines for the right of study for the students with learning disorders.

This Decree suggests for those involved with students suffering from dyslexia and other learning disorders how to behave and organize personalised didactical plans, tests, exams, evaluation, considering the difficulties of the above students . The Ministry Disposition about students with special needs, promoted with the Ministry Directive December 27th 2012- Intervention tools for students with special needs and territory organization for scholastic inclusion: provides for additional dispositions set by the Law 170/2010 for the LD students to all the students with special needs. In this last disposition the LD students are considered part of those with special needs. Other two notes followed the Directive of December 27th 2012 : the C.M. n.8 of March 6th 2013- Students with learning disabilities : operative indications and the Note June 6th 2013 n. 1551 - Year plan for inclusion. Both extended to students with special needs some dispositions for the LD students.

A knowledge of scholastic laws about learning disorders is fundamental to help students and their families in the process of early recognition of the problems and to guarantee their rights.

4. The social competencies and the role of the LD-Coordinator

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In order to relate successfully with students suffering from learning disorders as well as with their families, the LD-Coordinator should have the same specific social competencies as does every teacher. Social competencies are fundamental, as they allow one to enter into a specific, educative relationship with the person following the growth process; these competencies are a basic part of the function of teaching. The LD- Coordinator should possess these competencies not only in function of being a teacher, but also as an actor in the complex interaction with people of different roles: teachers, students, parents, school administrators, health care professionals).

The LD-Coordinator ability to establish empathy with the students, especially with those affected by any kind of disability or difficulty, is fundamental for the student's future personal success in school and in life. A person's ability to enter a relationship with others determines for those others a confirmation of their existence and of our value, as Buber said (1993).

Among the social competencies of the LD-Coordinator the first should be the attitude of full acceptance of the student with learning problems without thinking that, because of these problems, the LD student is not at the same level as the other students in the class. Clinical studies demonstrate that some of the thinking skills of LD students are even higher than students without the same learning problems (Lucangeli, 2002)

Promotional interaction is another important social competency, a kind of encouragement that the LD-Coordinator provides the student even in failure. It is thanks to the confidence that the LD-Coordinator has in the LD student's abilities that the student's positive self- image is confirmed and his sense of self-efficacy increases. This positive self- image will encourage the student to go on in



his/her learning process despite the presence of learning difficulties. The development of a positive image of oneself confirms the sense of self-efficacy, which will increase a positive image of oneself (Bandura, 1997).

Another function that the LD-Coordinator has is to help the LD student to deal with issues arising during cooperative learning phases by suggesting strategies to overcome the problems. The negotiation of conflicts is one of the social abilities requested for the XXIst century. Cooperation enhances different points of looking at the same problem. While this can provoke conflicts, social abilities, such as active listening, making decisions, and comparing points of view can help to overcome conflict.

It is important for the LD-Coordinator to accept the student's world as "the third educator" would. (Pollo, 20024, pag. 271) . This complex expression describes the typical relationship between the young learner and the educator. The latter should accept the former with the same unconditional, but demanding, love typical of positive parenthood, from which it derives the name of "third educator."

The LD-Coordinator, like any educator, must be willing to consider each learner as a unique individual. This particular acceptance is recognized in pedagogy as a kind of "conversion"; it is not a didactical technique but a positive attitude towards the student, a sincere attitude of taking care of him. (Luft, 1975; Pollo, 20024) The word "acceptance" means recognizing the worth and dignity of a young person in a vision of complete inclusion .

5. The LD-Coordinator as a seeker and expert of metacognition and of habits of mind

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One of the main characteristics of the LD-Coordinator is to be a seeker, always in search of didactic innovation, ready to give importance to the student's needs and desires.

Recent research (Costa, Kallik, 2000; Perkins, Tishman, Ritchhart, Donis, Andrade, 2000; Costa, Garmston, 2002; Comoglio 2007) has focused on the habits of mind ("mental virtues") and their influence on scholastic learning. Learning is not only a question of acquiring knowledge or skills. What can move a person to learn is a personal attitude to act, which has been defined as "the fourth level of mind." These habits of mind can be positive or negative, productive or unproductive. Here are some examples:

- persistence
- control over impulsiveness
- empathy when listening
- thinking about thinking (or metacognition)
- accuracy
- asking questions
- presenting problems
- applying previous knowledge to new situations
- communicating clearly.

The habits of mind have a fundamental value in developing abilities and cog-

nitive skills, which are not exclusively linked to scholastic learning, but they become part of the person as a whole.

The acquisition of the habits of mind depends on various factors, such as the family environment, the surrounding culture and the school. School can do a lot to facilitate the development of these habits, which are important to build knowledge, to cope with complex problems and to achieve a deep comprehension of what is learned.

Using the habits of mind with a student affected by learning problems allows for a personalized learning style, which can make up for the student's difficulties. The habits of mind also contribute to the development of a positive image of oneself. In fact, when a student has developed attitudes such as curiosity, persistence, the ability to ask questions or for help and the ability to cope with problems, he can overcome his difficulties and decide to continue his studies.

The habits of mind can be the goal of education, as Costa and Kallik suggest (2000) To achieve this goal the school must be organized as a learning community, a "house of the mind" where students learn to reflect on what happens, develop learning strategies, and use dialogue as a means to measure themselves with others. All these behaviours produce a typical learning style which can be adapted to other personal learning styles from which the LD student can benefit.

The search for a personal method of study involves all the students in the same scholastic framework. In this situation, the students with learning difficulties can share equally in the same experience as their other classmates. Furthermore, the use of technological means can reduce learning difficulties and allow for all the students to work together without problems.

It is important to note that by using vocal synthesis, the student with dyslexia can read a text in almost the same time as his classmates, and the same student can prepare a synthesis to share with the members of his cooperative learning group. Thanks to the use of a simple calculator, the student can participate in solving mathematical problems in cooperation with his classmates.

The opportunity of putting into practice the habits of mind reinforces the positive sense of self-efficacy and encourage working in groups even in the presence of learning disorders. In particular, the habit of mind called "thinking on thinking," which is a metacognitive ability, is fundamental in the presence of learning difficulties. As Cornoldi states (2013) metacognitive ability helps to develop self confidence in LD students and leads them towards learner autonomy.

Metacognition allows the learner to build awareness of the learning process; metacognition helps the learner to understand the reasons for his success and the factors that have contributed to the process. As the LD student becomes aware of these reasons and factors, he can apply these winning strategies in future learning situations. In short, the LD student is enabled to process information and avoid obstacles presented by his difficulties. The use of metacognition strategies enhances inclusion in the class, even in the presence of students with special needs. Metacognition stimulates reflection and dialogue; it helps to compare different experiences and to create cooperative situations where each person feels accepted and ready to work with the other classmates.

For the above mentioned reasons, another characteristic of the LD-Coordinator is to have a thorough knowledge of the didactic strategies that can support students with special needs including LD students.



6. The LD-Coordinator as “trainer” inside the school and outside the school

The LD-Coordinator has acquired a specific competence regarding the problems faced by LD students and, thanks to his on-the-field training, he has developed the ability to recognize learning styles and difficulties in young students. This particular formation which combines theory and practice allows the LD-Coordinator to be an important resource for the institute in which he works as well as for other people working outside the school with children with learning disorders. We can assume that in light of Directive December 27th 2012- Intervention tools for students with special needs and territory organization for scholastic inclusion the LD-Coordinator can represent a valid example of an expert in special needs. His specific knowledge of learning problems and pedagogical preparation can help the students towards complete scholastic inclusion. The special role that the LD-Coordinator has contributed to creating an interface with colleagues, families, students, specialists, social service workers, and local organizations with the aim of a synergy. This synergy should encourage the complete realization of inclusion for all the students with learning difficulties. The function of the LD-Coordinator is made up of a series of competencies, such as his university preparation on learning problems, his ability in communicating with different specialists, and his didactics knowledge of the tools and strategies to teach LD students.

The LD-Coordinator can offer another service within the school, that of meeting with the families of the LD students in order to help the parents to deal with their own anxiety and fears regarding their children’s future learning and scholastic success. The coordinator can also explain to the parents and /or to the other teachers how to manage the additional tools and the dispensation from studying certain subjects or engaging in certain activities. The coordinator can provide parents and teachers with further specific information about how learning disorders can be addressed at school through the use of innovative strategies and tools.

The tutor should maintain an updated bibliography of current literature on the topic as well as a catalogue or a portfolio of the tools available to work with the LD students. The LD-Coordinator should participate in an on- line forum which will provide additional ideas and didactical solutions based on the experience other teachers have had with their LD students. He can also adopt successful strategies that he can apply to his students and communicate the best practices found in other schools to his colleagues. By providing all his colleagues with this information, the tutor will encourage colleagues to become more willing and able to take on the responsibility of educating the LD students.

The LD-Coordinator can be important even for the new teachers entering the school who have to cope with the learning problems of students for the first time. Seminars or courses can be organized by the LD-Coordinator as a form of training for new teachers and as a kind of updating for the other colleagues in the school. These seminars and courses can be open to all who are interested in these problems and make others aware of the presence of learning problems in the community. The LD-Coordinator can provide informative meetings with par-

ents whose children are attending the school. During these meetings he can discuss learning problems, show the warning signs to look for and recommend centres where specialists can test and diagnose eventual learning problems. The importance of these meetings is also based on the help and support that the LD-Coordinator gives the parents to show them that learning disorders can be overcome. In this way, parents of LD children will feel more positive and more confident in themselves and in their children's future. In addition to the above mentioned meetings, the LD-Coordinator can arrange to meet individually with parents to discuss the process of re-education for their children. He can cooperate with the specialists and the family in the planning of a life span project that will enable the child or the young person to have the necessary support for scholastic success and access to university. The life span project should be the result of combined efforts among specialists, teachers and family members. The LD-Coordinator acts as an educator and a point of reference. As he gathers the different proposals, he finds the common points of these proposals from which he creates a new strategy to provide the child with a balanced development from both the social and the psychological points of view. Thanks to the LD-Coordinator, the life span project will present an integration of different interventions for rehabilitation and re-education, for health care and scholastic welfare, for cognitive development and for social and relational abilities. The function of the LD-Coordinator as an interface for the different actors in the life span project has been tried in some schools in Rome, in the last four years. Ten secondary schools in different Districts in Rome and a group of pre-primary schools in the 9th School District took part in a project where a LD-Coordinator was working in the schools with teachers and parents with the above-mentioned functions. In the secondary schools, the LD-Coordinator was a teacher who used part of his teaching hours to take on the role of LD-Coordinator. In the pre-primary schools, this role was held by administrators of the Municipality of Rome who had pedagogical qualification. Other teachers in pre-primary and primary schools have carried out the role of LD-Coordinator without reducing their teaching hours, and in addition to their daily work. Teachers and Rome Municipal administrators attended a Master's course in Didactics and Psycho-Pedagogy for Learning Disorders and received a specific qualification. During the course, participants made up research groups in order to experience the different functions of the LD-Coordinator and how these functions can be applied in Italian schools and in collaboration with health care specialists. Some of results of this research have been validated by the Ministry of Education through the representatives of the Regional Educational Office of Lazio. This research is still in progress.

The role of the LD-Coordinator can open the way towards a different concept of the teaching function based on disciplined knowledge, curriculum planning abilities and didactical competences, as well as on social abilities and specific relational competencies to interact with LD children, their families and members of the medical profession.

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