

Case Robin – Case study of a child with learning difficulties

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Summary

The case Robin is a realistic case study developed by experts in the field of special educational and inclusive practice. In particular, it may be used to train and upskill both teacher (training) students and active teachers of all disciplines.

As an additional instrument, the case-by-case framework for educational assessment (Lutz, 2023) may be utilized to illustrate protective and risk factors in a structured manner regarding the case and its setting.

The case Robin has been designed as an alterable work to be published Open Access and is available in both a German and an English version.

Keywords

case study, learning difficulties, case-by-case framework for educational assessment, protective factors, risk factors, special education, inclusive education, problem-based learning (PBL)

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Use of cases in seminars following the approach of problem-based learning (PBL) in combination with the case-by-case framework for educational assessment

Case-based approaches in teacher training have become established over the past two decades (Hmelo-Silver, 2004; Levin, 1995; Savery, 2006), because their positive effects have proven in the handling of fictitious cases to develop both patterns of action and attitudes of teacher training students (Jungjohann et al., 2020). For the case study book ([Fallbuch zum sonderpädagogischen Schwerpunkt Lernen](#), Lutz & Gebhardt, 2023), a multitude of fictitious cases were conceived providing exemplary, but realistic portrayals of children, adolescents and young adults with learning difficulties. In this follow-up work, another **single case titled Robin** is presented, which is also available [in German](#) (Lutz & Eckerlein, 2024).

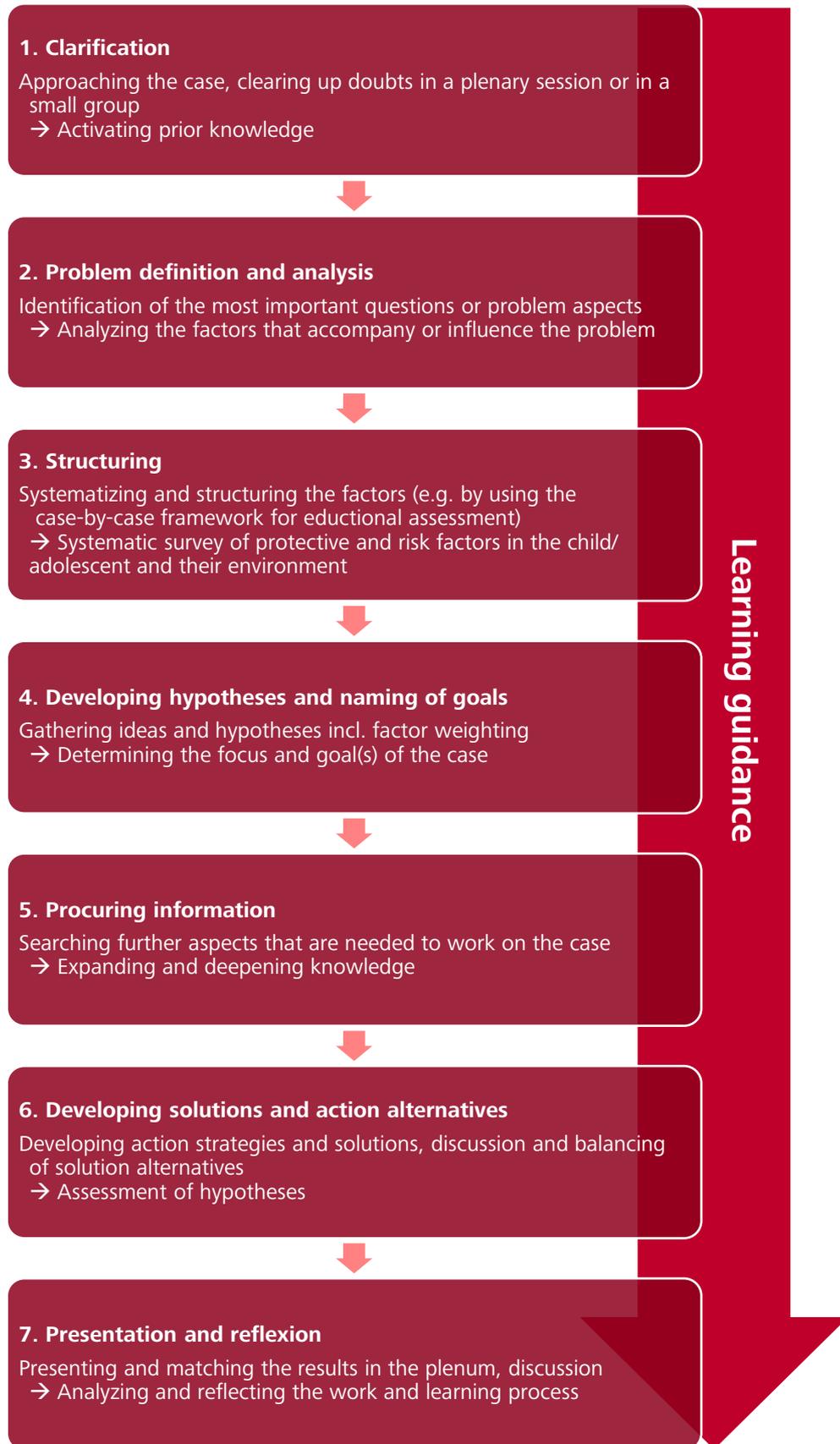
The case Robin is suited to be worked on using the **problem-based learning (PBL)** approach, which is a teaching-learning approach that is more and more employed in university teaching (Becker et al., 2010). PBL focuses on the learners, concentrates on the combination of knowledge transfer with application contexts from practice, ensures lasting learning success and enables the students to conduct an in-depth scientific analysis (Amerstorfer & Freiin von Münster-Kistner, 2021; Schmidt & Tippelt, 2005). PBL encourages learners to research, integrate theory and practice and to apply their knowledge and skills when developing feasible solutions and strategies for realistic, clearly defined problems (Savery, 2006). Complex problem scenarios with more than one right solution or answer (Hmelo-Silver, 2004) contribute to an intensive knowledge gain. Solutions are found in active, independent processes. The case Robin, too, does not aim at one solution, but on a choice of possible actions.

As already described in the preface of the case study book focusing on children and young people with learning difficulties, we recommend to **process** the cases **on a step-by-step basis** (Lutz & Gebhardt, 2023) and to incorporate the different characteristics of PBL (Barrows, 1996; Becker et al., 2010; Hmelo-Silver, 2004; McWilliam & Snyder, 1999; Savery, 2006; Schmidt, 1983).

Fig. 1 shows a summary of how to process cases on the basis of PBL (in-depth in Lutz & Gebhardt, 2023). During working on the cases, the instructor is intended to take a moderating, guiding and **accompanying role** (Barrows, 1996; Savery, 2006).

Fig.1

How to proceed when working on cases using the problem-based learning approach



Note. Created by author.

Figure 1, step 3, demands a factor systematization and structuring of relevant factors which can be easily implemented by means of the [case-by-case framework for educational assessment](#) (Lutz, 2023). The case-by-case framework was designed to present the information gathered in diagnostic processes in a structured and comprehensible way for all participants. It includes educational diagnostic models and approaches (Heimlich, 2012; Vernooij, 2013) as well as the fit with different curricula.

Following the model of resilience research (Masten & Powell, 2012; Petermann & Resch, 2013), different child- and environment-related factors can be included in the case-by-case framework, either as risk or protective factors. **Risk factors** are understood to be inhibiting factors and difficulties, while **protective factors** are understood to be beneficial aspects, strengths and resources that are supportive of a positive development despite high risk (Werner, 2020).

The case-by-case framework considers different **levels**, for instance the level of the **child or the adolescent**, the level of the **school environment**, the level of the **family environment** and the level of the **extracurricular environment** (Lutz, 2023), because there are, without exception, interactions and interconnectivities between the child/adolescent, the school and the wider environment (z. B. Ingenkamp & Lissmann, 2008; Lauth et al., 2014; Linderkamp, 2018; Nickel, 1990). Demographic data or data that concern the school career may also be included (Lutz, 2023).

The case Robin is concluded with **work tasks** that aim at dealing with the contents in-depth and supporting reasoning processes. The focus lies on linking existing with new acquired knowledge which supports the integration and transfer of both. Self-reflectivity is furthered when learners become aware of their own learning success.

Case Robin

Robin is a calm, reluctant boy who attends the second grade of a elementary school. The eight-year-old boy is the firstborn son of his parents Mary and Marcus Smith. His father is a qualified IT specialist. His mother has no school-leaving certificate, but has a temporary job every now and then. Robin has a younger brother, Freddy, who will be starting school in the next year.

Domestic situation and family situation

Three years ago, Robin's parents separated, after his father had committed a criminal offense and was sent to prison. He maintains sporadic contact with his two boys.

After separating from her husband, Mary has had changing partners. She has had difficulties in fulfilling her educational role adequately. When she did not pay her rent and neighbors complained about her, she lost her flat and sent her two sons to stay with Marcus's mother Josephine Smith. The boys' grandmother had not been informed about Mary's plan and was taken aback. Nonetheless she looked after the boys with great care, as far as her health and financial means permitted. She had, however, neither the right to determine the residence of the two boys nor did she have educational rights as to her grandsons.

Together with their grandma the two children lived in a small, old-fashioned two-bedroom apartment on the fifth floor of a multi-family house. Due to Josephine Smith's ongoing difficulty throwing away things and parting with possessions she did not need anymore, the boys lived in cramped, uninviting conditions and did not have their own room. They shared a pull-out sofa to sleep on in the living room. Robin did his homework at the kitchen table usually piled with stuff so that his exercise books and work sheets were often covered with grease stains. Josephine Smith saw to Robin attending school regularly, to the completeness of his school materials and kept in good contact with the school. She also paid for school trips on time and prepared a sandwich and a soft drink for Robin to take to school every day. He was dressed appropriately for the weather. His 80-year-old grandmother admitted that her tasks had often been too much for her. She described her parenting style as indulgent, but caring, and stated that the children were often quarrelling due to their difficult circumstances ("The two boys are too loud, they keep quarrelling because Freddy is constantly teasing Robin"). To make their growing up a pleasant experience it had been necessary for her to turn a blind eye on many occasions, and she had often lacked the necessary consistency, she said.

Robin did not mind the overall situation, even though he lived in constant fear that his grandmother could die without him knowing where to go. At that time, he only had sporadic contact with his mother. Mostly without announcement and sometimes under the influence of alcohol,

Mary came to her mother-in-law's flat to see her children and ask for money concealing that she did not have a fixed residence and was homeless.

After their mother had met a new partner, the boys and their mother moved into his flat. This sudden change of residence meant a huge change for both the boys and Josephine Smith. Robin became very withdrawn both emotionally and spatially. Involuntarily, the two boys lived ten weeks with their mother, until she separated from her new partner at Christmas time due to rows and physical violence. The mother's partner banished all three of them from the flat which they had to leave immediately after the row. Mary was so ashamed that she did not bring her sons back to Josephine Smith, instead they lived in temporary shelters and on the street for the rest of the Christmas holidays.

When Robin told his teacher of his new domestic environment after returning from the holidays, she contacted the authorities. They arranged for the boys to be consigned to their grandmother's care in the first instance. The right to determine her sons' residence was withdrawn from their mother.

After their grandmother's health deteriorated due to her advanced age and a stay in hospital after a serious fall, she was no longer able to fulfil the educational tasks she had been assigned before so that the boys had to change residence again: Robin and Freddy have been living in a children's home ever since. Contact to their mother is interrupted. The children's home is in the vicinity of the hospital and the grandmother's flat so that the boys visit her on a regular basis to keep in contact. In the children's home, the two boys live in a living group with four other children aged between four and eight years. The childcare worker John fulfils his tasks conscientiously. He is in regular contact with Robin's school, attends all appointments and is committed to good cooperation.

While Robin closes himself off again in the children's home and withdraws more and more, his younger brother Freddy's behavior is open and self-confident. Freddy loves taking the lead in discussions and usually wins against Robin in any kind of games. That is why Robin increasingly rejects his brother. He would prefer to just play on his own with his mobile phone or his game console in the group room.

As John has got the impression that Robin is under considerable strain, he has discussed with the management of the children's home whether it would be advisable to take psychological and occupational therapy measures to counteract his lack of motivation. However, the management has been informed in the meantime that Robin's mother lives in a flat again and has contacted a lawyer to help her get back the right to determine the boys' residence.

Preschool and school situation

Robin attended a kindergarten for two years. As his parents separated shortly before he started school and since it could not be foreseen at the time whether he would have to move and change school during his first year, he was deferred from school for a year.

Already in the first grade, Robin was rather reluctant and insecure towards other children and hesitant to accept their invitations to play with them. During lessons, he often looked about in the classroom or looked out of the window. If he was asked to work on his tasks, he complied. He rarely started to work on tasks on his own initiative after the teacher had explained them in the plenum. On many occasions, he would wait for the teacher to pass his desk and encourage him to start working on his tasks. He would then work slowly so that he finished his tasks after his classmates.

As to his performance at school, differences to his classmates have become apparent. While he was able to fulfil all requirements during his first year, he has been facing more and more difficulties in the meantime so that the management of the children's home schedules an appointment to talk about his school career.

Robin is little interested in reading. Although he can name graphemes and blend sounds reliably and confidently, his reading skills strongly depend on his daily form. On days when he is motivated and can concentrate, he succeeds in reading sentences and short texts and grasping their meaning. On other days, he finds it difficult to decipher words correctly, even with the support of the teacher or a reading tandem partner. This is manifested in the omission of sounds, their replacement by other sounds, in swallowing endings or guessing the meaning or contents. Robin takes even less pleasure in writing. His handwriting is uneven and unclean. He lacks ideas for free writing.

He is more interested in mathematics than in reading and writing. He masters the traversing the tens boundary without the use of supplementary materials. He is able to perform arithmetic operations in the number range to one hundred if suitable illustrative material is at hand. As regards the solving of decomposition and completion tasks, Robin still shows some insecurity which can usually be overcome with illustrative material. He is able to recite the multiplication tables up to 10 x 10 in a fluent manner. In the science classroom, he seldom participates by raising his hand. However, it can be observed that he is now and then able to demonstrate his profound general knowledge as soon as he is picked by his teacher. Asked where his knowledge comes from, he answers that he finds it from the Internet. In addition, he is interested in experiments: he is able to describe his assumptions and findings when he is asked to do so.

In arts, his drawings are inaccurate, and he only uses few colors and details. In physical education, Robin only joins in if he is encouraged by his teacher. He is not very keen on climbing or running. In team sports, he often stands on the sidelines and only rarely joins in. He shows the same behavior during breaks when he does not join his schoolmates for football matches or for playing tag, but prefers to watch them from a bench.

In summary, Robin shows no joy in learning and lacks spontaneity. During lessons, he does not actively choose a partner for team and partner work, he rather waits and sees. Even though he is well integrated into the class, he has no firm friendships or lasting deep relationships. He does not take part in classroom quarrels, but prefers to stay observant when disputes arise. Even though he is willing to take over tasks such as hanging the day's agenda on the wall, watering flowers or distributing work material, it happens that he forgets about them.

His teacher reports: *"In school, Robin is often indifferent towards his classmates and myself. He is polite and follows the classroom rules that have been agreed upon. In class, he is unobtrusive so that he sometimes goes unnoticed. I have tried a lot of things to encourage him, but he remains listless. Sometimes he even seems lethargic, as if he didn't have any zest for life. I feel sorry for him, because I believe that he would be capable of better performances. I have always got the feeling that I don't do him justice, because I have so little time for him. As performance requirements rise in the third grade and since I will not teach his class any longer, Robin will experience once again that someone who cares about him has to leave. I am afraid that he will even more withdraw into himself and completely fall behind."*

Work Tasks

1. What may have a beneficial or inhibiting effect on learning?
Gather all aspects that have a beneficial effect on learning as protective factors.
Note down all inhibiting factors as risk factors in the [case-by-case framework](#).
2. Which areas do you consider to be particularly important?
Identify core areas and problem areas. Weigh individual factors.
3. Which additional information do you need?
Read up on further information and statutory regulations that you think necessary.
4. What kind of support do you think Robin needs? In which areas would you apply targeted support?
Develop action strategies and alternative support measures. Base your support concept on relevant theories.
5. Why choose elementary school as a place of support? Which aspects make it necessary to apply additional support measures?
Evaluate whether you consider elementary school as a place where Robin may be suitably supported.
6. Currently, Robin lives in a children's home. Analyze his domestic situation.
Gather background information on why a child may be living in residential care.
7. To what extent do you agree with the following statement?
"The boys have always lacked consistent educational behavior and people who continuously cared about them."
Give reasons for your opinion.
8. What other cooperation partners do you consider useful?
Collocate a multifunction team that could consult on Robin.
9. How do you rate your results regarding the case Robin?
Reflect on your learning experience.

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