

WORKING WITH THE METAPHOR: EDUCATIONAL THERAPY AS A
MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

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Educational Therapy was developed as a discipline by people who were very interested in children who had difficulties in learning, particularly in learning literacy and numeracy skills, and who then found themselves working in clinics where the theoretical orientation was a psychodynamic one. It is a therapeutic approach which takes into account the emotional, as well as the cognitive aspects of the learning process and the possible effect of the family dynamic on the child's capacity to learn, at all stages of development (Caspari, 1986). Educational Therapy focuses on the exploration (through the use of the metaphor) of feelings about learning, seeking to discover the nature of the link between the child's unconscious preoccupations and the learning difficulty and to provide a means of resolving the conflict.

It was in the 1950's that Anne-Marit Sletton Duvc went as a teacher to the Child Psychiatric Unit founded by Nic Waal in Oslo. She found that the thinking there was dominated by psychodynamic theory and that other members of the team had assessment methods from their own disciplines to help them approach an understanding of the children's problems and to devise a way of working with them. So she began to develop her own method of assessment of children who presented learning difficulties. She used a psychoanalytic personality-structure model, relating the child's ego strength to its ability to function as a learner. She understood that metaphor was a very useful tool which could link reality with the unconscious. She became a psychologist and continued to develop this approach and to teach it to others so that Educational Therapy is now widely used in clinics and hospitals in Norway.

It was not until many years later that she learned that also in the 1950's, Irene Caspari had joined the Tavistock Clinic to train as an Educational Psychologist. At that time, most of the remedial work with children with reading difficulties used an approach based on phonics. Irene Caspari was very receptive to the psychoanalytic theory and techniques which were an important influence at the Tavistock and she related the ideas of Winnicott, Klein, Bowlby and others to her thinking about children's learning and failure to learn. She recognised that, whatever other factors might contribute to these difficulties, feelings would also be involved and, because they were not fully understood and acknowledged, would be contributing to the child's being in a state of non-learning. The approach to working with these children would, therefore, recognise this fact and work with it, rather than deny it.

Irene Caspari eventually devised an approach which she termed Educational Therapy. It drew on educational techniques and combined them with certain therapeutic practices. For example, in order for difficult feelings to be thought about, the therapist has to create a safe space. This is usually done by offering a regular time and space and often by using a container such as a box for the materials used or the work produced in the session, as a psychotherapist might do. The therapeutic principles upon which Caspari based her ideas can be found in her collected papers (Caspari, 1986). In a more recent book which links attachment behaviour with learning, Barrett and Trevitt (1991) present a systematic introduction to the process of Educational Therapy.

The child's feelings are often communicated unconsciously and it is the task of the educational therapist to understand these communications and respond to them, indirectly. For example, a child's anxiety about the impending break in treatment sessions may be addressed by reading a story about two animals who have to part, and in which the feelings around this are explored. The therapist also uses drawing, painting and modelling to help the child express some of the feelings which may be inhibiting learning. These are then commented upon, but the comments are related to the expression work, rather than being a direct reference to the feelings involved. Similarly, the relationship between the child and the therapist is understood as being an important one to which feelings from other relationships may be transferred, but, generally, neither the transference nor family relationships are referred to directly.

The educational tasks are carefully chosen to provide structured learning opportunities but they can also be very important for their symbolic value. In one of her papers entitled "Anxiety about Learning", Irene Caspari (1986) gives an example of a boy who was able to express, safely, his aggressive feelings when deconstructing three letter words and was then able to reconstruct the words. This was a task he had previously been unable to do because the healthy aggression needed for learning tasks had been overwhelmed by the child's destructive phantasies. So, with the gradual change in the child's view of the self and the other, there develops the capacity to learn.

Children whose emotional problems are most evident in their learning difficulties are likely to benefit greatly from the Educational Therapy approach. There are other children whose emotional problems do not appear to inhibit their learning because they use the structure of learning to support their fragile egos. They may be academically quite successful but in great need of help with their emotional problems and unable to deal with them directly. The approach of dealing with them "at one remove" as in Educational Therapy, can be most appropriate.

But this does not only have relevance in a clinical setting. The insights we can gain from understanding more about the relationship between emotional development and the capacity to learn have an enormous relevance to the work of the classroom teacher. Irene Caspari also suggested that if teachers in school were more aware of the link between the content of their lessons and the child's behaviour, (they might give more thought to the content of their lessons. She suggested that a class of rebellious teenagers might more appropriately study "Julius Caesar" than "A Midsummer Night's Dream". She ran courses for teachers and it has always been one of the aims of those who carried on her work to promote the insight of teachers into emotional factors in learning and failure to learn. Interesting discussions on the application of therapeutic approaches to classroom teaching, are presented in a book edited by Barrett and Varma (1996). The teacher who can use many of the techniques of Educational Therapy, who can create a safe space for the exploration of difficult feelings, who can use the curriculum to explore ideas about relationships and who can understand the child's words, work and behaviour as important communications will be able to offer a wonderful learning environment.

References

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