

READING BETWEEN THE LINES: THE CHILD'S FEAR OF MEANING*

MIA BEAUMONT

SUMMARY

This paper explores the emotional factors that lie behind a child's failure to read. My observations are based on work as an educational therapist employed in a child guidance unit. In trying to understand the reasons for the child's neurotic reluctance to learn, the following sources have proved helpful: Klein on envy; Bowlby on the effect on the child of a relationship with an untrustworthy adult; and Bettelheim's Learning to Read. In conclusion some ways are examined in which the child can be helped to overcome his fear of the meaning of words.

INTRODUCTION

The trouble with reading, said Jamie, is that I've never really got my mind to it. Where my brain's going right now is to inventing. I like to look at the pictures to understand and with the pictures I can make it up myself. I think it sounds interesting how I do it. If I looked at the writing it might say 'The valve is connected to the battery' and I might not like it because it would upset me. The wrong valve might be connected to the battery.

Educational therapy has helped Jamie to unravel his reasons for not reading, and has also enabled him to learn to read. His reasons could broadly be classified as internal and external. The ostensible cause is that Jamie's parents are divorced and have decided that Jamie should choose whom to live with. Jamie has been given the power to decide, and he realises that he will hurt one of his parents, whatever he decides to do. To him this means hurting half of himself. It is interesting that when Jamie starts to read he normally stops after reading a couple of words and complains that part of his body hurts. It is as though he is suggesting that reading for him represents a part of himself that is too painful to contemplate. The internal reasons seem to be related to Jamie's omnipotent view that his most acceptable creations come from inside himself. By not reading he also avoids the dilemma of being loyal to one parent at the expense of the other. Reading also faces him with the possibility of finding out something that he would rather not know.

'What really worried me', he said, 'is when my dad left my mum and took me with him - was it because he refused to let her have me, or was it that she didn't want me?' Somehow for Jamie the written word has become imbued with a quality that it does not possess. Reading for Jamie is not a symbolic representation of a story. It has another more powerful meaning.

Jamie cannot read because he is reluctant to recognise words as symbols. For him they are real. Bettelheim & Zelan (1981) suggest that:

The child, like primitive man, is convinced that words have magic power and that by manipulating words one can manipulate simultaneously whatever these words symbolise. The child about to learn to read is at a stage in his intellectual development where the separation between a symbol and what it symbolises is still a tenuous one that tends to break down in moments of emotional involvement.

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If a child cannot bear, or does not wish, to use words as symbols, if he cannot, or does not wish, to understand that words on a page are only words representing a story then he cannot begin to learn. The task of the educational therapist is to help the child realise that the written word is not a concealed weapon to be used for or against himself.

EDUCATIONAL THERAPY

Educational therapy makes use of psychoanalytic insights to help children like Jamie unravel their deep-seated reasons for not reading. It is a technique pioneered by Irene Caspari at the Tavistock Clinic in the early seventies. It is similar to psychotherapy in that a child is seen regularly over a period of time in a confidential setting, and the educational therapist will understand that everything that the child does and says during a session is a form of communication. It differs in that part of the session is normally taken up with some reading, writing, or maths. The educational therapist will use these tasks in two ways: first, as information about the child's underlying preoccupations, and secondly, as an indirect way of communicating with him. It is necessary to understand how a child sees the written word in order to disillusion him if necessary. Communicating through the educational task distinguishes this method from child psychotherapy.

EMOTIONAL FACTORS INHIBITING LEARNING

The way in which the child sees the written word, and his reluctance to recognise its symbolic representation, can be connected to a number of emotional factors. Frequently they are interrelated. However, for reasons of clarity it is helpful to itemise them and then elaborate on how each one of them affects the child's view of learning:

- (a) Anxieties about family relationships
- (b) Symbiotic relationship with parent
- (c) Lack of assertiveness
- (d) Lack of curiosity
- (e) Anxiety about discovering and finding out
- (f) Anxiety about being overwhelmingly greedy
- (g) Infantile omnipotence - self-idealisation
- (h) Worries about the danger of words
- (i) The Effect of loss on learning
- (j) Lack of boundaries and confusional states, such as those found in sexually abused children

Since they are closely connected, (a) and (b) will be considered together.

Anxieties about family relationships

Symbiotic relationship with parent

Possibly one of the most important factors is the part that the symptom of non-learning plays in the family. At Hornsey Rise Child Guidance Unit there was a weekly workshop specifically set up for families of children with learning difficulties.

Dr Peter Loader, who ran the workshop, developed the ideas of Britton (1989) and related them to non-learning as a family symptom.

It often seems that the child has difficulty with 'the initial recognition of the parental sexual relationship which involves relinquishing the idea of sole and permanent possession of mother' (Britton 1989). There may be external and internal factors that are making it hard for the child to recognise the parental couple. However, until he can tolerate the position of being 'a witness [of his parent's relationship] and not a participant' (Britton 1989) he is going to remain inextricably merged with his mother. For the non-learning child, this relationship often results in a lack of assertiveness and a lack of

curiosity, which may be due to complacency and satisfaction about the symbiotic relationship and a desire to remain in this position. On the other hand it may be caused by anxiety about the precariousness and quality of the maternal connection (as in the case of Jamie).

The child may feel that it is essential for the good of the family for him to remain a baby and to enjoy all that this entails - cuddles, kisses, and sharing mother's bed. This way he can keep daddy away from mummy, or he can stop mummy feeling depressed and lonely.

In this case, the child sees reading as a wrench, which forces him apart from his mother so that he has to individuate and grow up. In order to learn you have to risk taking a step forward on your own.

Many children seem to feel that they are being helpful to other members of the family by not reading. They see their continuing illiteracy as a way of keeping the family together. If parents are likely to split up, reading is seen as a way of avoiding the split. The child may also think that if he learns he will overtake either his mother or father and become cleverer than they are. If he overtakes his mother she may feel sad and depressed about being left behind. She presents as the least powerful member of the family, and the child may realize that the mother finds this particular position unbearable. If he overtakes his father all his Oedipal feelings and fantasies about ousting his father may be too powerful for him to cope with. He may imagine that overtaking his father is a way of killing him off.

Lack of assertiveness

Strongly connected to a symbiotic relationship with the parent is the child's lack of assertiveness. I would say, if I were to generalise, that most of the non-readers, who have been referred to me over the last twelve years have been unassertive, incurious boys who are heavily involved with their mothers. Assertiveness is very necessary for learning. In order to be able to digest words, the child, like the toddler, has to chew them, mull them over, and commit them to long-term memory, as opposed to the baby who spits out the lumps in the soup instead of chewing and digesting them.

Lack of curiosity

A lack of assertiveness is often combined with a lack of curiosity, which is related either to complacency and self-sufficiency about the symbiotic relationship, or to a fear of finding out about an event, which is supposed to be a secret.

Anxiety about discovering and finding out

Bowlby (1988) suggests that cognitive disturbance is formed by the child being told that what happened did not really happen - that what is true and real is untrue and unreal. He gives examples of a boy who saw his father kill himself with a shotgun but was later told that night that his father had died of a heart-attack. A girl who discovered her father's body hanging in a closet was told he had died in a car accident; and two brothers who had found their mother with her wrists slit were told she had drowned when swimming. When the children described what they had seen, the surviving parent had tried to discredit it, either by ridicule or by insisting that the child was confused.

Many people can remember occasions in their own childhood when their parents invalidated what their eyes and ears knew they had seen or heard. Parents often behave in the same way with their own children when a disturbing event takes place, which they wish the children had not seen. 'Daddy wasn't really angry when he threw the geranium-pot at me. It was only a joke.' The ensuing confusion for a child who has been violently assaulted or sexually-abused by a trusted parent can be imagined if he is then told that he dreamt it, or that it did not happen.

Bowlby suggests that the results for a child of being told that what happened did not happen, or being told to forget about what happened, are:

- a chronic distrust of other people;
- distrust of his own senses;

- a tendency to find everything unreal.

One of the main features for the child is the confusion that follows the result of not being able to trust his senses. If a child is told that he did not see, hear, feel, touch, or smell what he knows he did, then in one way he becomes 'blind, deaf, numbed, and unfeeling' (Sinason 1988). It is striking that children with learning difficulties often draw pictures of people with blind eyes, no ears, and no hands. A boy I used to see, who drew pictures of people with blank eyes, told me how his mother, disguised as a monster (so he said), came into his bedroom, pulled back the sheets, pulled off his pyjamas, and sucked his penis. 'But perhaps it was just a nightmare,' he added. For another child it was accepting the fact that his mother was having a relationship with 'a lady who lived downstairs'. For another it meant remembering his one assertive action as a toddler when he had defended his mother by banging his drunken father on the head with a toy train. His father had subsequently left the family. The boy's mother went into hospital suffering from a depressive illness, while the boy was taken into care for a few months.

Anxiety about being overwhelmingly greedy

In families where one or other of the parents is seen to suffer from a depressive illness, or there is a handicapped member of the family, children feel very anxious about taking in the written word because they imagine that their excessive demands may become insatiable. So they have to limit their learning. They must be parsimonious with themselves in case there is nothing left, and mother/teacher collapses. They see learning as represented by food that is about to run out. It is the one bag of food in the country of famine.

A 10-year-old boy, whom I saw for three years, apparently conceived after a violent argument between his parents, felt that he should not have been alive at all. His mother suffered from post-natal depression, closely followed by a hysterectomy. He saw his mother as old and depressed, with nothing left to give him. When reading a book entitled 'The Baked Bean Queen' he misread it as 'The Burnt-Out Queen', and instead of reading the word 'nobody' he replaced it with 'no baby'. His stories and drawings suggested that he was a lonely, despairing boy, who was unable to take in sustenance from anywhere. I think that in many ways the normal situation was reversed, and that he saw himself as providing food for his mother. He drew a terrifying picture of a female crab with a bleeding boy between her claws. The crab, he said, wanted to eat some body because she was too hungry. She had not had food for years because everyone got away from her.

Another picture was of a fish-tank where fish were being fed. They were fed too much food and grew so fat that they died because they burst. So, he added, it was better to let them starve to death. His stories repeated themes of boys and animals who were unable to have food because there was none there.

Another child from a large family with two handicapped brothers thought I would die if she came to see me too often. If she had a session where she felt metaphorically well-fed she would absent herself the following time because she thought she had taken too much from me. This is what she said in one of her stories:

A long time ago there was an old woman and she was beginning to die.
And she said to herself 'I will go into the kitchen and make dinner'. But she fell over on her way to the kitchen because she was too weak and ill, and she could not make dinner.

Another story of hers was about a puppy who was sad because he could not eat his banana. He had been naughty to me because he had not listened to me. And so he did not get a banana. He was so hungry that he could not listen.

Infantile omnipotence - self-idealisation

Another form of defence that causes difficulties in learning is that of self-idealisation or infantile omnipotence. Children using this defence know everything. They are stuck at the toddler 'I'm-the-King-of-the-Castle' stage. The defended part of them says they cannot learn because they already know everything and there is nothing left to learn. Reading and learning presents the child each time with what he does not know, and he finds this mortifying. Words are seen to be pins, which puncture his balloon of self-idealisation, and often this is so intolerable that he cannot bear to look at what he does not know.

In my experience, children who are put into the position of having to act as partners to their mothers or fathers often use this form of defence. I imagine that because it is so frightening to be treated as an adult when only a small child, it is necessary to adopt an omnipotent defence for survival.

Worries about the danger of words

Some children see the written word as dangerous. Taking in learning is like taking in food. The child who has rejected his mother's food will often reject the written word. He feels that they are both very poisonous. This may be due to excessive envy. Klein (1946) suggests that the child envies the mother's capacity to produce good milk (or the teacher's capacity to teach) and then becomes anxious about his envious, attacking feelings, and imagines that he has projected them into his mother. So now his mother is filled with rubbish rather than good milk. He therefore cannot take anything in from her because he believes that it has now become unpalatable and dangerous for him.

I would like to give an example of what a child I saw thought about words. Because of his extreme anxiety and fear of words he found it very difficult to hold any in his mind. The only words he could remember were 'the', 'Mummy', and 'Michael'. I had been reading *Fuzz Buzz*, a series from a phonic reading scheme, which tells the story of some little creatures. He had not read further than Book One when he stopped and said that he did not want to read any more because the Fuzz Buzz might jump out of the page and eat him up. He did not want to draw them because they might jump out of the page and the words might kill him.

MB: Has anything like that ever happened to you?

Michael: Yes, when I was a baby I came out of my mummy's tummy and I ate her up.

MB: When was that?

Michael: When I bit her I ate her all up.

MB: Yes, but she's still there now.

Michael: Yes, but she hits me when she's angry and she eats me up inside her tummy.

MB: It feels as though she's eating you up?

Michael: No [adamantly], she has eaten me up.

MB: How do you think you got into your mummy's tummy in the first place?

Michael: She must have eaten a big boy like me who turned into a little boy inside her tummy all chewed up.

MB: What about a daddy? Do you think a daddy could have put his seed inside the mummy?

Michael: If he had, it wouldn't be a seed, it would be a bomb.

MB: How is it that you are here with me now?

Michael: Oh, someone sewed me together, but I'm all empty inside.

The Effect of loss on learning

Loss, in my experience, is one of the most inhibiting factors in learning, particularly if the loss is that of a still-born sibling and it happened before the birth of the referred child. If the parents have failed to mourn that death then the effect on surviving and subsequent children can be catastrophic (Lewis & Page 1978).

It seems that the child regards the mother's body as the container of all knowledge and learning. On the other hand, it can also be dreaded as a place of destruction, which could be a basic factor in inhibiting the desire for knowledge.

It is essential for a favourable development of the desire for knowledge that the mother's body should be felt to be well and unharmed. It represents in the unconscious the treasure-house of everything desirable which can only be got from there; therefore, if it is not destroyed, not so much in danger and therefore not so dangerous itself, the wish to take in food for the mind from it can more easily be carried out (Klein 1931, p.241).

If the mother's body is proved to be 'a place full of destruction', because it produces still-born infants, rather than live, healthy ones, or that it appears too fragile to withstand phantasied attacks from other born or unborn siblings, or the unborn foetus, then the wish to take in food for the mind must surely be imbued with all sorts of dreads and inhibitions (Beaumont 1988).

Children in this position often dread learning to read because in their minds knowledge comes from the dreaded, but also envied, place where the dead babies rest. So, to them, learning belongs to the dead babies. One girl I used to see would often begin the session by turning her face to the wall, away from me, and say 'All books is baby's stuff.'

Lack of boundaries and confusional states, such as those found in sexually-abused children

In families where there are too few boundaries it seems that the children feel at the mercy of their own violent and greedy impulses. They feel that their parents are too weak to say no to their excessive demands. This appears to provoke such panic and overwhelming fear that it is impossible to learn. If a child is allowed to be as demanding and aggressive, or as seductive as he likes, then he also feels open to attack from the uncontrollable impulses and desires of adults, either real or imagined. It is often as though the child has an internal text that is so exciting and preoccupying that he cannot see the words on the page for what they are.

I believe many other factors need to be taken into account when looking at a child who has been sexually-abused, such as self-disgust, guilt, triumph, anxiety about the mother's disgust, and very poor self-esteem. However, the confusion over boundaries is probably the factor that will most affect his learning. It is as though the child who has been abused, particularly within the family, does not know where he begins or ends. He sees himself as an object attached to an adult for the gratification of that adult, and therefore learning for himself as a separate person does not make sense.

A 10-year-old boy I saw who was allowed to do exactly as he liked gave me a vivid description of his psychological state. 'My brain is like a hotel full of different rooms. One is full of willies, and one is full of bums; one full of snot, and one full of shit. And they all run into each other, so I can't tell what is what.'

DISCUSSION

The importance of the inhibiting emotional factor has to be understood before any change in the child's learning can take place. This will normally entail working with him over a length of time within a confidential setting so that a trusting relationship can be built up.

In many instances, inability to symbolise words is caused by the child's intolerance or fear of the parental, sexual couple. For some children the physical gaps between the printed word can signify loss and separation from the mother. This in turn is due to 'prior failure of maternal containment' (Britton 1989). In educational therapy the child has the opportunity to explore symbolically what that means to him.

Close attention has to be paid to the way the child uses print, the way that he copes with the gaps between the words, to his miscues, his hesitations, his comments about the vocabulary, pictures, and characters in the story. As in psychotherapy, it is also important to be aware of the transference and counter-transference.

One has to see the world from the child's point of view without being judgmental or moralising. Many children find it easier to communicate through metaphor, either in the form of a story, through drawings, or in their play. The child has to be shown that he is understood by staying with the metaphor.

A 4-year-old girl told me a story whilst playing with a toy crocodile. The story was about a crocodile, who stole a baby kangaroo from its mother and ate the baby kangaroo all up. The mother kangaroo was so angry that she beat up the crocodile, whereupon the baby kangaroo pissed on the mother kangaroo's head. I said that I expected the baby kangaroo was angry with the mother kangaroo for allowing the crocodile to eat her in the first place. The little girl agreed, and placed the baby safely back in the mother kangaroo's pouch. She then disarmed the crocodile by clamping plasticine in its jaws and on its legs. This is a child whose father has been issued with a court-order forbidding him entry to the house after assaulting his daughter.

Conclusion

At the outset of this paper it was suggested that a child's reading difficulties could be seen as a neurotic symptom. In order to understand the precise nature of the child's problems, it is often appropriate to offer individual educational therapy. This form of treatment enables the child to discover that his view of the printed word is askew. It helps him to learn that words will not literally attack and kill him. Letters are symbols, not weapons. In understanding the child's world his misconceptions can be changed to more realistic conceptions, and the process of reading and learning can begin.

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Mrs Mia Beaumont
13 Highbury Terrace
London N5 1UP