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Using observation to explore and think about the relationship between emotional experiences and the development of reading skills

WENDY LUKER

Abstract
In this paper I wish to give some examples of observation in practice in a teaching setting of pupils who experience difficulty in learning to read. In considering emotional factors which may contribute to reading difficulties I describe and discuss case studies of three boys at the outset of their secondary education. These examples illustrate categories of reading behaviour I have frequently encountered, namely: inability to concentrate, anger, projection and fear of finding out, and rejection of the printed word.

Keywords: Reading difficulties, emotional factors, observation, learning

In my role as Head of Learning Support in a large comprehensive school, I was charged with improving the literacy skills of many pupils in their first year at secondary school. My experience made me aware of the significance of emotional factors in delayed reading.

In this article I will show how I used observation to explore and think about the relationship between emotional experiences and the development of reading skills. I will also discuss how the observation experience impacted on teacher and pupil.

Educational theories of how children learn to read have focused largely on cognitive factors and on the significance of different teaching methods. Whilst acknowledging the importance of these elements I conducted a small-scale study of individual pupils who transferred from primary to secondary school with delayed reading skills in order to explore the emotional factors which may underlie reading difficulties.

Learning to read is one of the earliest challenges for the child starting school. It carries many anxieties for parents and children. For those who have not learnt to read by the time they transfer to secondary school, the level of anxiety will have risen considerably.

I must emphasise here that I am aware that many factors contribute to reading difficulties in a complex and accumulative way. However, I believe that the richness of psychodynamic thinking based on observation can throw light upon some of the patterns of reading difficulty which I encountered; patterns which will be familiar to many teachers. These patterns were not clear-cut as they frequently overlapped. I will try to illustrate three of the most common patterns by describing and discussing some of the observations I made in my role of providing support for eleven- and twelve-year-old pupils with reading difficulties. 

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three examples are of boys, and, although I also worked with girls, it seems important that boys seem to have some distinctive difficulties which I shall explore in presenting these examples.

The first pattern was the inability to concentrate on reading or writing tasks, a pattern of distractibility, often accompanied by attention-seeking behaviour.

**Inability to concentrate: Gary**

Gary was an 11-year-old who found transfer to secondary school fraught with anxiety, although he had strong defences against these anxieties. He was small and wiry in stature, with bright, alert eyes. He was restless and hyperactive; he talked incessantly and was hardly ever still. He was virtually a non-reader. His subject teachers found him difficult to manage in class, describing him as disruptive, argumentative, attention-seeking and unable to concentrate. Here is a classroom observation I made of an English lesson, after about three months of providing a support teacher for Gary:

Gary is leaning over another boy’s desk, trying to persuade the boy to give him one of his pens. He has been told twice by the teacher to sit down and get out his book. He says, ‘I need a pen, Miss.’ The teacher tells him that he does not need a pen at this stage; she raises her voice, telling him again to sit down. Gary responds, ‘Okay, okay, Miss, don’t get stressed.’ He belches and apologises, ‘Whoops, sorry Miss.’ He sits sideways in his seat, looking around for approval from others in the group. He does not get out his book but fiddles with some plastic pencil ends, attempting to stand them up on his desk. He glances at the door and touches the empty seat beside him. When told again to get out his book he rummages in his bag, sighing noisily. He calls out, ‘I can’t find it, Miss, I must have left it at home.’ The teacher takes a deep breath and lends him a copy of the book which the class is reading together. At this moment the door opens and Miss Grant, Gary’s support teacher, enters. The English teacher looks relieved. Gary jumps up and waves his arm to Miss Grant, beckoning. ‘Miss, Miss, come on Miss, you’re late. Sit here.’ He pats the empty seat. He looks very pleased to see Miss Grant but also needs to show his annoyance that she is late and says, ‘Sit here,’ quite sharply.

He starts talking excitedly about a fight he has witnessed. Miss Grant tells him gently but firmly to be quiet as the English teacher is outlining the lesson. The teacher reads from the text while the pupils follow. Gary does not follow the text. Miss Grant runs her finger along the lines but Gary wants to show her his pencil ends. Some of the class take turns with the reading. When one boy reads hesitantly, Gary mutters, ‘What a div. He can’t even read.’ Some of the class stroke their chins and make mocking noises to signal to Gary their awareness of the irony of his remark in the light of his own difficulties. Gary flushes and lashes out verbally at a boy across the aisle, ‘And you can shut your mouth or else….’ The teacher calls the class to order. Gary’s attempt to project his own feelings of inadequacy onto the hesitant reader only serves to increase his discomfort on this occasion. I saw this pattern repeated many times.

The teacher sets a writing task, a response to the passage which has been read. Gary has no pen or pencil; he constantly loses things. Miss Grant lends him a pen and modifies the task set by the teacher. She asks Gary to copy the date. He drops his pen on the floor, then falls off his chair when picking it up. He sits down again and writes two letters slowly.
and laboriously, then stops, looks at Miss Grant, and says, ‘I like your earrings Miss.’ He leans forward and looks at them closely. ‘They don’t quite match.’

Another boy asks Miss Grant to spell a word for him. Gary catches her arm as she turns to help him. ‘Don’t help him Miss,’ he exclaims, ‘Help me.’

The ritual of avoiding was repeated whenever Gary was faced with reading and writing. He tried desperately to avoid the pain of failure as illustrated in this observation when he dropped his pencil and fell off his chair. During this observation, I attributed the comment on Miss Grant’s earrings to an attempt to flatter his teacher and to distract her from the task. Later I wondered if this also represented her dual role of supporting Gary in class and in a one-to-one withdrawal situation where she had more opportunity to listen to his concerns. The two roles did not ‘quite match’ and Gary found the adjustment difficult.

Gary is the eldest of five children, four boys and one girl. When he was eleven months old, his brother Steven was born. Gary’s mother told me that she was ill during the pregnancy and that Steven was a sickly baby. Gary had been very demanding and she was unable to look after him and care for Steven as well. She said that Gary wore her out. Her mother-in-law and sister-in-law took over the care of Gary. She finds the eleven-year-old Gary difficult and demanding at home. She says that she tries to give him responsibilities and he can be helpful but he is jealous of the attention she gives the younger children and she cannot depend on him.

Much of Gary’s behaviour reveals his infantile state crying out for a containing capacity, for someone to provide a space in her mind for the muddle of his emotions. He clings to his support teacher (literally holding her arm at one point) as a maternal substitute and cannot bear her to give any attention to other pupils, who are felt as rival siblings.

When he said to Miss Grant, ‘You’re late’, and ‘Sit here’, with a hint of reprimand, it is possible he is referring to more than her lateness to the lesson; he may have been feeling that she was late coming into his life as a maternal figure, offering hope. What impressed me about Gary was that he never seemed to give up hope of finding someone who would be strong enough to contain his muddle of feelings and help him to think about them rather than get rid of them.

Gary proved to be an enormous challenge to his teachers and especially to Miss Grant who became the recipient of many painful feelings. On occasions she became the mother who had been unable to contain Gary’s early anxieties. Miss Grant supported other pupils and sometimes needed to change her timetable. She soon discovered that Gary could not cope with changes. He became very angry and attacking. It was important to keep to allotted times and not create situations where Gary felt let down. Copley and Forryan (1987) point to the importance of a clearly bounded setting in time and space which parallels the containing space in the worker’s mind and her willingness to struggle with what comes. These conditions, they argue, are needed by the client to provide an opportunity for him to test out his experience of his internal world, including non-containing aspects, in relation to his current experiences with the worker. This is equally true of the relationship between many pupils and their support teachers. Gary had many unmet baby needs and at the same time was under pressure at home. As the eldest of five children, he was expected to take responsibilities for his siblings. He longed to be mothered but was expected to take on certain parenting roles himself.

Gary took a long time to become a reader. In defending against his pain he told lies and took other children’s possessions. He was aggressive and demanding in lessons. He came perilously close to permanent exclusion from school on several occasions. He continually
tried to get rid of bad feelings by splitting them off and disowning them (Klein 1946). In time, however, he became worried when he felt he had upset or disappointed Miss Grant, suggesting a real and meaningful increase in his depressive concern and a reduction in his dependence on massive splitting.

Bion (1962) describes how primitive emotional sensations have to be retained in the mind before they can be thought about. Gary was fortunate that Miss Grant was strong enough to receive his painful feelings, and to think about them without being overwhelmed by them herself. During her turbulent times with Gary, when she was the recipient of many unbearable feelings, Miss Grant often needed the support of other teachers in the Learning Support Department. Others were willing to listen to her concerns and provide a containing function for her. I consider this type of support vital for teachers working with emotionally deprived children. There are parallels here with the mother who is struggling to meet the demands of her baby and needs the emotional support of her husband and wider family, often particularly from her own mother if she is available. In the case of Gary’s mother, the support she received took away her responsibility for containing Gary’s feelings rather than helping her to manage them. She told me that she does not know how to cope with Gary at times and feels he ‘had a rough time as a baby’.

Through Miss Grant’s thoughtful attention Gary began to be able to bear the frustration of not knowing. Little by little he acquired the skills of reading. Miss Grant tried many different approaches to help him to become literate and was always preparing new materials for him to help him to gain access to the curriculum. All this was important, but most important of all was the containing function she performed for him.

**Anger and projection and fear of finding out: Jeremy**

A second frequent pattern I observed was one of children who became angry and fearful about reading and displayed low self-esteem. These children regularly projected angry feelings into their teachers and made them feel inadequate and defeated in their teaching role.

Here is an account of an attempt to administer a diagnostic reading assessment to eleven-year old Jeremy who had recently transferred from primary school:

I explained the procedure in a positive, encouraging manner. I talked to Jeremy about his first few days in his new school in an attempt to help him to feel at ease. I told him that many new pupils had been reading to me individually, following group assessments, and that it was his turn today. I explained that I wanted Jeremy to read some passages to me, beginning with a very short one. I said, ‘I want to find out which words you know. It doesn’t matter if you make mistakes. Take your time and be as accurate as you can.’

As I spoke, Jeremy clenched his teeth and pressed his hands between his knees. He frowned and his jaw muscles tightened. He looked very pale. I asked him if he was all right and he nodded. He looked at the page but remained silent. I waited. After about thirty seconds I said, ‘Just try the first line.’ Jeremy opened and shut his mouth and at last managed to read, ‘Ted went up to the box. Then he took off the lid.’ Here he stopped, pushed the book away, leapt to his feet shouting, ‘I can’t do this!’ and rushed out of the room. I was left with feelings of shock and some panic. I felt as if I had done something terrible. The words ‘Then he took off the lid’ stayed in my mind.
On a later occasion, Jeremy was working with a support teacher, Mrs Harris, who had established a good relationship with him and enabled him to make progress. Through the use of games he had improved his reading skills. On this occasion Mrs Harris was encouraging Jeremy to read some instructions for a technology project but he was not responding.

Jeremy’s facial muscles were tense and he looked ashen. He said, ‘It’s no good, I can’t read and I shall never be able to read’. Mrs Harris spoke encouragingly, ‘You know some of these words Jeremy, just read the words you know’. Jeremy clenched his teeth and repeated, ‘I can’t read and I shall never read. It’s all been tried before and it doesn’t work’. He turned away from Mrs Harris and said angrily, ‘I can’t do it and you can’t make me.’

Mrs Harris said afterwards that she felt defeated and inadequate, as if Jeremy were saying to her, ‘Why do you think you can succeed where no one else could?’ At that moment she did not know how she could get through to Jeremy. This was one of many occasions when he projected his feelings of inadequacy and hopelessness into his teachers. When he said, ‘I can’t do it and you can’t make me’, he was revealing that he could not bear the pleasure that Mrs Harris might get from being able to teach him. Mrs Harris often spoke of her awareness of Jeremy’s feelings of frustration and the sense of frustration he aroused in her. However much he improved and she was able to praise him, he never seemed to believe in his ability to become a reader.

After a year I arranged another assessment of Jeremy. He had grown a little in confidence but still lacked belief in himself. I wanted to show him the extent of his progress, in the hope that it would raise his self-esteem.

He read confidently at first but on reaching a more difficult passage he started to gulp and swallow as if unable to take in the words. I noticed his fists were clenched under the table. He began to mis-read and omit words. I felt uneasy and worried that I was making a mistake in putting him in a situation where he was obviously uncomfortable so I stopped the assessment. Jeremy was quite pale and looked miserable. I felt angry with myself. I had set out to boost Jeremy’s confidence and had caused him pain instead.

I looked back later at Jeremy’s ‘miscues’ (Goodman 1965). The ideas of Bettelheim and Zelan (1982) on unconscious mistakes in reading are helpful in understanding these miscues. For ‘She could hardly believe her eyes’, Jeremy read, ‘She could hardly breathe.’ His swallowing and gulping suggested that he could hardly breathe and was choking on the words. He substituted ‘terrible’ for ‘tremendous’. This could be interpreted as simply guessing, or over reliance on the initial letter ‘t’ but I think it was an indication of how he was feeling. For ‘crucial letter’ he read ‘cruel letter’. Perhaps, in his unconscious, he thought me cruel to test him. Certainly at the time I began to feel uneasy about what I had instigated. He substituted ‘worry’ for ‘wrought’ and ‘angered’ for ‘enquired’. Perhaps it is significant that these substitutes matched the feelings of anxiety and anger towards myself which I felt at the time, in the transference.

Jeremy was often angry with his teachers and had no trust in his ability to overcome his difficulties. I began to understand these feelings better when I learnt something of his background. His father had been involved in a serious road accident when Jeremy was five. His father’s business partner and family friend, known as ‘uncle’, had been killed in the accident. Jeremy’s father was ill and depressed for a year afterwards. Jeremy and his two
brothers were not told of the death until a year after the accident when the father was sufficiently recovered for the family to take a holiday abroad.

When recalling Jeremy at nursery school, his mother described him as lively, outgoing and intelligent. She said he changed when he started at primary school. He lost confidence, became forgetful and failed to learn. She believed Jeremy was dyslexic. She blamed the primary school for not identifying his problems and for not teaching him properly.

I do not know what explanation was given to Jeremy and his brothers for the sudden disappearance of their ‘uncle’ but the shock of finding out the truth probably contributed to Jeremy’s learning difficulties. Reading is about finding meaning and truth (Beaumont 1991). Jeremy must have been very frightened about what terrible things he might discover if he became a reader. During the first reading assessment, when he read the sentence, ‘Then he took off the lid’ and reacted so strongly, it is possible he was experiencing something much more frightening than the distress of finding the reading test difficult.

Rejection of the printed word: Kevin

A third pattern of response to reading which I observed was one of fear of books and the symbols within them. Words on the page seemed fraught with danger for these children.

Though Kevin, a well built, rather shambling, overweight eleven-year-old, was well able to express himself orally, he was virtually unable to read. He looked dishevelled, his shirt hung out and his school blazer often appeared to be falling off. He always had a plentiful supply of ‘junk food’ about his person, crisps and sweets etc., as if he constantly needed oral gratification and to fill an empty space inside himself. He never sat upright in a chair but slouched in a lifeless manner. He had a world-weary, cynical air about him, as if nothing in life was worth effort. Kevin was regularly in trouble in lessons for lack of concentration and effort, for his hostile and supercilious manner towards teachers and for outbursts of aggression towards other pupils.

Following the separation of his parents when Kevin was five, he had lived with his mother and her partner until the age of ten. His mother and partner had a baby daughter. Kevin did not get on with his mother’s partner and had become ‘difficult’ so she had sent him to live with his father with whom he had had little contact since the age of five. In his new home, Kevin had to take responsibility for himself. His father was not unkind to him but appeared to treat him as an unexpected lodger rather than a child. He set no boundaries, allowing Kevin to decide when he ate and slept. Sometimes he took him to his ‘club’ for a drink where Kevin enjoyed talking to his father’s acquaintances and seemed to be accepted as a member of the group. Kevin was often late for school because he overslept and I think it was largely due to the intervention of the Educational Welfare Officer that he attended at all.

Kevin would have nothing to do with books. He made it clear that he regarded them with contempt. Whenever I tried to interest him in a book, he refused to look at the page. He would turn his back towards me and hum or drum his fingers on the table. I sensed at the time that there was more to this behaviour than fear of failure or simply a desire to annoy me. Thinking now about the unconscious meanings which books and their contents held for Kevin, I believe issues of loss and separation were paramount. He found the sudden separation from his mother hard to bear and the books may well have been symbols for the mother who had rejected him (Shaw 1995). He was struggling to adjust to being alone a great deal and to the world of adult masculinity which his father and his father’s friends at the ‘club’ represented. It is hardly surprising that he rejected books; he needed to denigrate what he had been denied.
It was a long time before I could get him to talk about reading, which he dismissed as boring. He said to me on one occasion,

‘It’s not there in front of you is it? It’s sort of just . . . there . . . and you’ve got to believe it.’ Kevin felt safer watching television. He said, ‘It’s there on the screen . . . but with reading, it’s not there in front of you, is it? It’s as simple as that. You’ve just got to believe what’s written.’ When I asked him if it was important to see things, to have pictures, he replied, ‘Yes, well, like . . . if you read a newspaper, you’ve got this and that happen, and on television you’re actually seeing it. Like them riots, that could be written in the paper and it never happened but on television you can see the reporter. In the paper, well they can write anything.’

Kevin said that he liked to see things to believe them. He said, ‘If you see something you know it’s real.’

Kevin mistrusted others, whom he felt could lie to him if he did not himself have the evidence. Pictures can’t lie. This was a serious problem in terms of his imagination, which seemed frightening, associated with painful thoughts and feelings.

I learnt that Kevin spent much of his time at home, alone in his room, watching films on television. It seemed that he felt that only television could fill up his sense of emptiness. He preferred films based on real-life stories as if reassured that they were not the products of someone’s imagination. He told me,

‘I like it when they say, ‘This is a real story’ at the beginning. There’s this film about a geezer who loses his legs in a plane crash in the war. I’ve seen that three times and it’s really good. But every time, they tell you it’s a true story. I like that.’

‘I don’t like books,’ said Kevin. There’s nothing to listen to. It’s like . . . it’s all roaring around in your head but you’re only looking, that’s all you’re doing. I just look at the words. It’s not real.’ At this point Kevin rubbed his eyes and looked away from me.

I felt a painful sense of emptiness as Kevin talked.

Thinking about his comments later, and how he made me feel, it seemed unlikely that Kevin had experience of containment, of someone who could receive into herself his chaotic feelings and process them before handing them back in a more digestible form. The ‘roaring around in his head’ were anxieties about not knowing, of not understanding. Kevin’s outward appearance suggested lack of containment. His clothes were awry and ill-fitting as if he was spilling out of them. He did not feel like a child who had had the experience of being understood; he seemed neither held together physically nor emotionally. Although he was so dismissive of reading, I felt at the time that he was aware of what he was missing, of a sense of loss generally, when he rubbed his eyes and looked away from me. When he said, ‘I just look at the words. It’s not real’, he conveyed a terrible feeling of exclusion, of being on the outside of relationships.

Kevin is an example of ‘double deprivation’ (Williams 1997). In addition to the loss of external care, an experience of abandonment by his mother and what appeared to be minimal attention from his father, Kevin defended against his anxieties with cynicism, denigration and aggression and internal objects provided him with little support. Imagination appeared frightening and he lacked vitality and the capacity to think and learn.
At times Kevin stirred up in me feelings of anger towards his mother and exasperation with his father. I had to remind myself that colluding with Kevin in blaming would not help him. My role was to try to teach him to read.

I tried to discover whether he had ever heard a story he had enjoyed. He told me about a story that had been read to him by a teacher at his primary school. From what he said, it appears he was part of a group identified for ‘special’ help at the time.

‘The teacher said she would read a story and she read this one. She read it to us three times, in a line, sort o’ thing. She said, “Look, I’ll tell you again,” until we understood it in our heads. It was about this girl, she was deaf, dumb and blind wasn’t she? She would kick and cry all day long, just kicking on the walls and that because nobody understood her. If she wanted something she couldn’t just walk up and say, “Can I have an apple?” or something, right? It had gone. It didn’t exist. She just had to keep kicking and kicking. This lady who was partly deaf came down and she was teaching her all sorts of things. She was going round like, picking her hand up and going up to water and putting it in, then spelling it, like “w” and whatever.’

Kevin became very animated while telling this story. He spoke rapidly and with excitement, in marked contrast to his earlier comments. He made almost continual eye contact. When he had finished he slumped back in his chair and looked tired. When I asked him if he remembered the name of the story he said it was something like ‘Joan Ellen’.

I felt at the time that the telling of this story was an important breakthrough in my relationship with Kevin. Although he slumped afterwards and soon resumed his defensive cynicism, I felt very hopeful about the possibility of helping him. The story was undoubtedly the story of Helen Keller and how she was helped by the perseverance of an insightful teacher. Kevin appeared to identify with Helen who was kicking because no one understood her. Helen was unable to ask for the apple she wanted and similarly Kevin was unable to ask for the help he needed to overcome his feelings of emptiness and his fears of the unknown. The primary teacher persevered with her group in helping them to understand the story by reading it to them three times and Helen's teacher persevered in her attempts to communicate with Helen. Looking back, I think Kevin was hoping I might stay with him in spite of the resistances he had presented me with, that I might be capable of taking in some of his pain and holding it without disintegrating. It was the first sign he gave of recognition that we need others in order to think and learn.

It seems significant that both the film story Kevin had found so satisfying (which was, I assumed, the story of Douglas Bader) and the story he remembered of Helen Keller, were about characters who overcame terrible deprivations through the loving attention of others allied to their own courage and perseverance. I now think that Kevin identified with both these characters in hoping that he might himself be helped to overcome his losses and deprivations.

Kevin once described watching his mother read,

‘My mum sits on the settee with her legs up and reads. She takes no notice of anyone. She gets this mug and fills it up with black coffee: it’s about a pint. She drinks that and just reads her book. She reads all day long. She’ll read a book about that thick [indicates] in a day. I dunno why.’
I asked Kevin if he had ever asked his mother to read to him. He replied, ‘No, she wouldn’t have. She was too busy.’

It is not surprising that Kevin rejected books. In addition to being symbols of loss and separation, they must at times have seemed like rivals, powerfully associated with his mother’s rejection of him. His mother was preoccupied with her own internal world which allowed no space for Kevin. Like Helen in the story, she was ‘deaf, dumb and blind’.

It was a struggle to help Kevin to become a reader. I started by setting regular time aside for him when we would play games on the computer, which he loved. I read stories to him, during which he often drew cartoons on scraps of paper. I listened to his accounts of films he had watched. Sometimes, particularly at the end of a story, he became angry with me and said he was wasting his time in my stupid room full of stupid books. I thought at the time it was because the story had ended but using Klein’s model I now believe his outbursts were manifestations of envy. He was envious of my ability to translate the printed texts into stories so he needed to devalue and denigrate what he knew I valued. He might have been identifying me with his mother who read for long periods, and excluded him. I tried to encourage Kevin to tell me stories about the cartoons he drew but he said, ‘They’re just pictures.’ The combination of intolerance of dependency and envy, which he probably experienced, must have made it difficult for him to accept that I had anything good to offer him. (Shaw 1995).

Next, I introduced picture books, taking care at first to use only books with little or no text such as *The Snowman* by Raymond Briggs and *Rosie’s Walk* by Pat Hutchins. Gradually Kevin was persuaded to verbalise what was happening in the pictures. He felt comfortable with visual images and seemed to have a strong feel for narrative. Following this technique and gradually introducing picture books with more and more text, particularly books which used rhyme and repetition, Kevin began to read. I cannot report here all the stages we worked through. There were many setbacks but through a process of shared reading he did become a reader. At the time, I attributed his success wholly to aspects of the books, the visual appeal, the humour, the rhyming and story content from which many children acquire a love of books through early, shared experiences with their parents. I still believe these were important factors but the presence of an adult who thought about him was very important too. I often felt I was not succeeding with him but perhaps just by ‘holding him in my mind’ I was able to be a container and thus help him face difficult situations.

One series of books held particular appeal for Kevin, the ‘Church Mice’ books by Graham Oakley. These books contain sophisticated, adult language which proved challenging but there is great humour in the writing and hilarious details in the pictures. Kevin spent hours reading them and poring over the illustrations, identifying the many characters and sharing his discoveries with me. ‘I love these pictures,’ he once said, ‘there’s so much in them, you keep finding things. These mice do crazy things. It’s never what you expect.’

The books themselves began to fulfil a containing function. Rustin and Rustin (1987) argue that fiction is important to the developing child,

‘...for beginning the more obvious development of an inner identity independent of and sometimes hidden away from parents; the in-between space between family and the social world which children begin to negotiate in these years is vitally connected with their developing sense of personal self.’ (Rustin and Rustin 1987).

I was gradually able to introduce stories about people and animals who experienced feelings of anger, sadness and loss which helped Kevin to be in touch with his own feelings and the
reality of his external world. Kevin rarely spoke to me about his mother but some of the miscues I recorded at the time suggest unconscious references to her. For both ‘enquired’ and ‘arrived’ he read ‘angered’. For ‘could hardly’ he substituted ‘clouded her’ suggesting his mother’s distance from him, both physically and mentally. For ‘describe’ he read ‘deserted’, revealing perhaps his unconscious feeling of having been deserted, first by his father and then by his mother.

As Kevin improved his skills, he grew in independence and vitality and began to relate to other pupils. He began to make the transition from shared reading to lone reading. He began to separate, to become self-reliant, as the baby who has repeated experiences of a containing mother moves away from the need for an external container towards becoming self-contained. He said to me after a year, ‘I can manage now. I’m not brilliant and I still don’t like long books, but I can manage.’ Kevin was learning to ‘manage’ his sadness and anxiety and this helped him to manage the task of reading.

Bettelheim and Zelan (1982) claim that children respond to their parents’ emotional absorption in reading. They assert that what makes it attractive to the child is that it seems to fascinate his parents. It is their secret knowledge that the child wants to be able to share. The opposite occurred for Kevin. His mother had not shared reading with him, she read to meet her own internal needs, shutting Kevin out and ignoring his needs. He had no internalisation of his mother’s voice (Rustin and Rustin 1987). Experience of a relationship with an adult who was capable of thinking about him and of being in touch with his feelings, someone who shared books with him rather than excluding him, perhaps helped Kevin to want to share the ‘secret knowledge’ instead of feeling threatened by it.

Conclusion

By observing the attitudes and approaches to reading of these pupils, I have illustrated how observation and reflection can help in understanding some of the obstacles which prevent some children from learning to read. In the cases I described there is evidence that unconscious preoccupations were very near the surface and got in the way of learning but at the same time were available for thought. The unconscious agenda trips children up and interferes with learning. This creates great problems in the classroom situation unless there is an insightful observer who is able to think about unconscious meanings, to pick up the cues and work with them.

In presenting three examples from my study of struggling readers at secondary school I have sought to illustrate how children with reading difficulties improve when they have a place in the teacher’s mind where they are held and remembered.

What has emerged from my reflections upon these particular children is the critical influence of the infant’s early relationship with the mother or carer and her capacity to contain the infant’s projections. In the cases I described the reading difficulties experienced by the child had their roots in early relationships. Unresolved conflicts made learning to read very difficult for these children.

Notes

1 The study arose from my participation on the Tavistock/University of East London MA course Emotional Factors in Learning and Teaching: Counselling Aspects in Education. The course enables practising teachers to gain insight into the unconscious worlds of children by observing and thinking about them.

2 All names have been changed to preserve anonymity and confidentiality.
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