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Emotional Maladjustment and Reading Disability

by Janis M. Quarles

Plant or the seed. Chicken or the egg. Is the glass half full or half empty? These parallels can be applied to the controversy of emotional maladjustment and its relation to reading disability, a child who is reading one year or more below the level he is supposed to be — according to his chronological age. (Stullken, 1939) It is recognized from evaluating studies (Witty, 1950 & Gates, 1941) that there could be and are multiple causations in reading problems. Each cause feeds upon the other to create retardation in reading, and sometimes emotions tend to play an important part in reading retardation.

Research studies (Boise, 1955 & Dolan, 1964) show that emotional maladjustment is definitely related to reading disability in some way. The degree of relationship is not quite clear because emotional maladjustment is pointed out as a cause, as an effect, and as a simultaneous cause and effect of reading disability.

Causes

Some studies show that emotional maladjustment is a cause of reading disability. Take for example, the neurotic or psychopathic child who has flashes of genius, but is unable to learn as other children. This

fact applies to reading as well. Robinson (1946) states that the mechanics of reading require cooperation, following directions, and sustaining effort. Neurotic children are inferior in these areas and are characterized as negative, unstable, and have illusions that interfere with learning the reading process. Krippner (1966) in his study of neurotic children states that the reading process is difficult for these children because they are so involved with fantasies that they are unable to attend to outside stimuli or perceptions provided by the reading experience. Their perceptions are usually clouded by misrepresentations. His results also give evidence of high degrees of hostility and anxiety in the neurotic child. Krippner concludes with the necessity of psychotherapy before proceeding with any type of remedial reading as the children would be unlikely to profit from such treatment. This fact emphasizes the importance of emotional adjustment in reading rehabilitation and improvement.

Young and Gaier (1951), Gellerman (1949), and Gates (1941) postulate the role of emotional factors as a possible cause of reading disability. They list such factors as sibling rivalry, over-indulgence/rejection of parents, social class, feeling and

attitudes of inadequacy, instability of parents, poor teacher planning as possible components in the child's emotional maladjustment that might give way to reading failure. These situations lead to emotional tension, anxiety, and fear which in turn can interfere with learning to read. What appears in certain cases as a reading disability may be caused by emotional maladjustment.

Wattenberg (1964) in his study of self-concept and reading ability attempted to show a direction of causality in relation to these two factors. He reports that a good self-concept involving feelings of competence and personal worth is antecedent to and predictive of reading accomplishment.

In the actual learning situation, Gates (1941) and Allebrandt assert that the lack of an emotional, motivational, and dynamic pattern of the individual is a partial cause of reading difficulty. His pattern of conduct and purposes may produce emotional resistance in learning to read. Sherman (1939) at a reading conference states that emotional balance or imbalance has a definite effect on retention of material a child has learned and upon his ability to recall and put into use that which he may have learned well previously.

Dolan (1964) investigated the emotional aspects of an individual towards skills in reading. He reports that the emotional state of an individual at the time he is learning a task has a definite influence upon his efficiency as well as the mechanical processes

involved. The learning process of reading can be limited by any unfavorable attitude towards it. Dolan also points out that these unfavorable attitudes can be altered in a favorable direction through a program of efficient counseling before any significant changes occur.

Effects

In the school situation, also, other emotional problems arise that can have an effect on the child's reading success. Learning to get along with other children, establishing membership in a new group, learning to accept one's own peculiarities, adopting to new group standards of behavior, developing a secure relationship with the teacher all press upon the child and may occupy his mind so he has no time to attend to learning other things such as reading, (Robinson, 1946) quotes a study done by Bird involving one hundred children who were retarded readers. Thirty of these children had personality handicaps involving emotional immaturity such as excessive timidity and failure in social adjustment. failure in social adjustment.

Two case studies can further emphasize emotional maladjustment as the underlying cause of reading disability. Carter and McGinnis (1955) report on a boy who was at first an only child. He developed an illness and much attention was paid to him. Later, a sibling was added to the family. The boy reverted to enuresis and thumb sucking. In school, he lacked social intergration as noted by teachers, (the emotional maladjustment, however, will be dis-

cussed later in this same situation as a reciprocal factor.) The point is, though, that even with the boy's high degree of mental maturity, he could not make satisfactory gains in reading because of his lack of emotional adjustment due to home experiences. His poor emotional state was increased because the teacher failed to recognize the boy's lack of reading readiness in all its phases and tried to begin formal instruction that ended in failure. In the other case study by Schwartzberg (1964), the same family background of unstable, unaccepting parents affected the boy emotionally which impeded his learning ability.

Besides being a distinct cause of reading disability, emotional maladjustment can be viewed as an effort of reading disability. From causes other than emotional maladjustment, a child may not be able to read effectively. Robinson (1949) claims that continued failure might create emotional tension and result in social maladjustment and loss of adequate self-concept. The following examples will help clarify the above point. Wiksell (1948) in reporting on college students who could not read well, states that this failure continued throughout years of schooling without correction caused feeling of frustration. These findings suggest that a child with retarded reading habits might be in line for a potentially maladjusted personality.

Robinson (1946) thinks that a failure in learning to read what is expected may lead to frustration. The very sight of the

reading material may cause a disorganized emotional response which further inhibits motivation. The child comes to associate an unpleasant response with each intinial presentation. Dolch as reported by Robinson (1946) comments that young children will also hate the reading lesson because it compels them to exhibit their ignorance and lack of skill before companions. The child will never want to look at books with this type of an attitude and when forced to do so will act with aversion.

Stullken (1937) in his study of boys in a Chicago reformatory reports that ninety percent of all boys there were retarded in reading. One group of retarded readers who were classified as being of low intelligence, had learned to read but were detained because they had to reach a certain level of individual and social maturity. (this fact was due to their low intelligence level.) These boys, however, had faced discouragement from years of failure. A study of this group emphasizes the fact that the reading disability was already present, due to low intelligence level. But, because of failure and delayed satisfaction of the need to read, they were beset with continual discouragement. Stullken (1937) suggest that a restoration of self-confidence is the remedy. Then the boys will not have to resort to undesirable forms of behavior to prove their self worth.

Cause and Effect

If reading failure can cause emotional maladjustment, then

it has been proven by researchers that maladjustment inhibits further learning which in turn creates more emotional difficulty. These two factors, reading disability and emotional maladjustment are intertwined and are involved in a reciprocal relationship, each making the other more intense. The general nature of the difficulty is similar: learning to read is inhibited whether emotional maladjustment is the cause or the effect. (Robinson, 1946)

Robinson (1949), in reviewing a private study (in his book) performed with twenty-eight retarded readers, states that twelve of them exhibited emotional problems. Nine out of the twelve were reported to have emotional maladjustment as both cause and effect of their reading difficulty. In a study of retarded readers by Gates (1941), where seventy-five percent (of those tested) had a personality maladjustment, three-fourths of this personality group were shown to have emotional problems as accompanying or a result of reading disability. He also reported that it is not possible to tell by personality symptoms such as nervousness, withdrawal tendencies, chronic worrying whether they are causes or effects per se, because they are so intertwined. (He reported in the same study that the other one-fourth of the personality group had emotional problems as the primary cause). Even in the previously mentioned case study reported by Carter (1955), the emotional problem of the boy started off as a cause of his reading problem. As his reading

problem grew, so did his lack of emotional adjustment to the situation which further emphasizes the reciprocal relation between emotional maladjustment and reading disability. Bouise (1955), in her study of emotional problems and retarded readers, hypothesized that there is a cause-effect relationship between the two factors. She could not, however, come to a conclusion as to which is the most primary.

It can be concluded, then, that no definitive statement, as of now, can be made as to whether or not emotional maladjustment is a cause only, is an effect only, or is only part of the reciprocal relationship with reading retardation. Bouise (1955) points out that further investigation is needed to determine the exact extent of relationship.

Whether or not reading disability is a cause, result, or concomitant of emotional maladjustment, the fact still remains that adequate self-adjustment and success in school is impaired. Studies have revealed that in order for a child who is handicapped in reading to improve, he must overcome his sense of insecurity, hopelessness, and discouragement. The teacher can function as the necessary catalyst to bring about the desired change in the child's attitudes by providing the child with therapeutic techniques and reading instruction geared to the child's emotional, social intellectual level.

The teacher and other people involved in the child's welfare, should seek to root out the cause of the emotional or read-

ing disability be it the home, school, or personal. Just attacking the problem or the symptoms often does not alleviate the cause of the trouble which persists to harm the child. In attacking cau-

sality, many obstacles will be removed which will allow the child to become adjusted in life, to seek and accomplish goals that are real instead of reverting to unacceptable forms of behavior.

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