

Specific Language Disability

By Margaret Lowenfeld

SIR,—The annotation on specific language disability brings up a subject of considerable importance. Apart from the question of a possible neurological disorder, there are a number of interesting points about children suffering from this disorder which may throw light upon its nature. The first of these is the concreteness of their imagery.

I have had the opportunity to use non-verbal techniques in the study and treatment of a number of these children, and the improvement that has followed, both in writing and reading, suggests that it is unlikely that a fundamental neurological defect should be present in them, though there is nothing in what I have observed to militate against a possible familial grouping. The question, it seems to me, that arises is whether the condition is an exaggeration of the normal tendency to “concretize” perceptions, or whether the disability arises, as is suggested in your annotation, from some new factor.

Language, whether written or read, is basically a procession of abstract symbols to which we have agreed to attribute certain fluid meanings. I say fluid because it is the fluidity of significances of the same forms, in the English language particularly which constitutes part at least of the difficulty of these children. To some children shapes drawn on paper or printed in a book have an exclusively concrete significance (as was beautifully illustrated in ‘The Wallypug of Why’, by G. E. Farrow, where the heroine goes for an excursion to the sea with the alphabet). No concrete objects have the same significance in all positions—when upright with a loop at the end is p in one, but becomes b in another, or even d if turned over. This is clear to us, but completely confusing to this type of child.

A second source of difficulty is the inability some children have of recognizing on their own initiative that the same sound, or same shape of letters in a word, can have two (or more) entirely separated and different meanings. Most children grasp this spontaneously, but some do not, and the various meanings they hear attached to the sound or shape run together into a blurred confusion which makes it impossible for them either to recognize when printed, or to reproduce in writing, that word or phrase.

Considering how serious an effect this disability, if it persists, can have upon a child’s practical future, it might not be well worth while to set afoot some research on this point. Research in this case should be directed not so much to investigation of the efficacy of remedial teaching as towards study of the imagery of these children. If a child’s imagery is very vivid and concrete, and his interest in the benefits of understanding abstractions is not aroused, my experience goes to show that a certain number of these children do not emerge spontaneously from this stage to develop a capacity for abstract thought; instead they become increasingly hopeless about their failure to grasp what is so obvious to their neighbours, and the help given them in remedial teaching, by its further emphasis upon abstract thinking, only increases their confusion.

Opportunity to express their ideas in concrete material can both give the observer information about the processes going on in the children's heads and give the children a possibility of sorting out their ideas without the, to them, puzzling intervention of abstract symbols. In my experience, when the confusion and hopelessness are lessened, appreciation of the meaning and use of symbols begins to dawn upon the children, and, if at this point good remedial teaching is given, in many cases normal reading and writing can follow.—I am, etc.,

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