

‘MAGIC IAN’: THE USE OF SUSTAINED SIMILE IN THE ALLEVIATION OF SERIOUS BEHAVIOURAL DISTURBANCE AND ACUTE DYSLEXIA IN A 7-YEAR-OLD BOY

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Abstract

This paper outlines the case of a 7-year-old boy with severe dyslexia and severe behavioural difficulties. Removed by his parents from two primary schools to avoid permanent exclusion, he was educated in a specialist facility that focused on his literacy and behavioural difficulties. The paper considers the use of story telling using simile rather than metaphor as a therapeutic medium and argues that, in many cases and in this case, the technique is as effective as using metaphor in therapy.

Key words: hypnosis, token economy, simile, introject, metaphor

Background

At the time the author became involved with Joe and his problems, Joe was 7½ years of age. All his milestones were normal: he said his first words at 6 months and was walking by 11 months. At playgroup he was said to have been sociable, happy and willing to conform and he exhibited no serious behavioural problems. There was, however, a family history of dyslexia: Joe’s father being barely literate.

At 4 years and 4 months of age, Joe started school. The first term revealed no problems. During the second term, his teacher took the first tentative steps towards teaching Joe and his classmates to read. Problems began very quickly and soon daily incidents of disruption were being reported. If the activities of the class were not to his liking Joe refused to participate in them. The chief focus of his refusal was any activity that involved reading, writing or spelling. The school’s log records that such activities resulted in Joe using ‘inappropriate violent gestures to other children accompanied by adult bad language . . .’. He was said to be unhappy, negative, both physically and verbally abusive and entering a ‘fantasy world’. Joe is reported to have said that the ‘anger just seemed to escape from my pocket into my mouth and made me hurt myself and others’.

In June 2000, Joe was sent home from school for ‘potentially damaging and violent behaviour’. At this point, the Behavioural Support Service, the Child and Family Therapeutic Service and the County Educational Psychology Service became involved. They concluded that it was unclear what triggered Joe’s ‘boil over’ behaviour but said that it seemed to cluster around his more academic activities suggesting that he was aware that he was not as advanced as some of his peers. In reality it seems likely that he was not as advanced as any of his peers and that he was very aware of this. The recommendations that were made to alleviate Joe’s ‘boil over’ behaviour were the setting up of a ‘sanction and reward system’, that his ‘emotional problems’ should ‘be addressed’ and that he should be allowed to ‘develop reading and related skills at his own pace without

additional pressure' (school's log). Inconsistent attitudes and approaches at home were addressed with good results in terms of Joe's behaviour at home but his problems in school persisted.

In September 2000, Joe, then 5½ years of age, refused to attend a PE lesson and said that he hated school and was going home. He ran out of class and school followed by four adults who searched and failed to find him. Joe's parents were contacted and the police informed. Eventually Joe was found out of school and brought back. He was subsequently excluded from school for three days. The local education authority agreed to additional funding for Joe's school to enable them to employ a learning support assistant (LSA) to work with him.

In December 2000, Joe punched a child on the head, swore repeatedly, threatened his teacher and other children, threw a chair across the classroom, hit another child with a chair and bit his teacher's arm. The 'school's log' records that 'it was beyond anyone in the school to control him'. Joe was sent home for the remaining ten days of the Christmas term. At this point, Joe's parents removed him from school to avoid his permanent exclusion.

In January 2001, Joe began a new primary school but brought his old behaviour with him. Despite the intervention and assistance of the aforementioned agencies, he continued to 'boil over'. Within a week he was reported to have punched his teacher and told his LSA 'I'm going to hurt you, punch you in the mouth, you f . . . ing stupid woman. I'll give you ten minutes to take me to the IT suite or else . . . I'm hard I am, I'm going to burn this f . . . ing school down' (school's log). Joe then left the classroom to await collection by his parents. Within days of starting his new school, he was on a one-day-a-week timetable. He was barely 6½ years of age.

It appears that Joe had learned the consequences of 'boil over' and how to use it to achieve what he wanted. He was told he would be sent home if he did not behave and, as this was exactly what he wanted if the choice was between this and reading, writing or spelling, he behaved accordingly.

By the end of the summer term 2001, Joe was spending more time in school and in September 2001 he moved into the class of a male teacher. Hopes were high that the worse excesses of 'boil over' were behind him. By the end of the term, however, Joe was on the verge of permanent exclusion again for the same behaviour that his parents had pre-empted previously by removing him from school: he would run out of school followed by LSAs and teachers and by his head teacher. The 'softly softly' policy of attempting to reason with Joe and to counsel him as to the error of his ways had failed again. When he was in the middle of 'boil over', most out of control and in most need of adults being in control of him, he was in control of them. No one would confront him; no one would 'take him on'.

The last 20 years have seen the gradual abandonment of the Old Testament maxim 'spare the rod and spoil the child' and the corporal punishment which went with it. Many psychologists saw the principles of behavioural psychology as an enlightened alternative. More recently, some psychologists have expressed reservations about the use of these principles with children. The principles, they argue, can be abused. Cannot all principles? The author's view is that children should be encouraged to be increasingly in control of themselves. When this is impossible, adults need to be in control. It is part of their adult role of protecting children, keeping children safe. In these circumstances, if adults are not in control of children then children, all too often, are in control of adults. Worse, they are in control of each other.

Some psychologists argue that adults should never be in control of children and that reasoning with children is all that is acceptable. And, when reason fails? When a 7-year-old

child disagrees with the head teacher's reasons and insists on driving the head teacher's car into the local town centre, drinking whisky, snorting cocaine – what then? When the child takes charge of the classroom and insists that the teacher cannot tell him what to do – what then? The answer that the author is given repeatedly by those who advocate reasoning and not controlling children is that they would never get into this position!

Even assuming this to be true, training others to this utopian standard appears problematic. Certainly, in Joe's case, the best 'reasoning' efforts of all the professionals involved achieved very little. His 'boil over' behaviour at 7½ years old was habituated and automatic – more entrenched than it had been two years earlier and he was still effectively a non-reader.

In December 2001, the author carried out an intellectual, emotional and behavioural assessment of Joe. On the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (III), Joe obtained Verbal, Performance and Full-scale scores of 91, 82 and 86, respectively. The pattern of his scoring and the nature of his learning difficulties, however, suggested that these overall figures represented a falsely low estimate of his ability. For example, Joe obtained a scaled score of only 1 on the Coding subtest of the Performance Scale. Now there are many reasons why this might be so: inability is one, anxiety another and difficulty with writing is another. In Joe's case, he wrote slowly and with difficulty and his priority was to be as neat as possible. As the Coding subtest is timed, it is hardly surprising that he obtained the very low score that he did. If this score is removed from the calculation of his Performance and Full-scale IQs then these rise to 94 and 92, respectively. A detailed analysis of the nature of his scoring over the 11 subtests on which he was examined suggested that Joe was a boy of at least average intelligence.

Examined on the Wechsler Objective Reading Dimensions test, Joe obtained scores on the Basic Reading and Basic Spelling subtests consistent with Reading and Spelling Ages below the six years' measurable minimum. Examined on the Dyslexia Screening Test, Joe obtained subtest scores consistent with a 'Quantitative At Risk Quotient' of 1.6: well within the 'At Risk' category for dyslexia. Space does not permit a more detailed analysis of these results.

The emotional/behavioural assessment carried out by the author suggested that Joe was unlikely to be suffering from ADD/ADHD according to the Connor's Test and the criteria laid down in DSM(IV). The Bene Anthony Test of Family Relations, Repertory Grids and many lengthy interviews with Joe and his parents suggested that he was behaviourally rather than emotionally disturbed. Oppositional Defiant Disorder (according to the criteria laid down in DSM(IV)) seemed a probable, additional part of the diagnosis.

At 7½ years of age and with the likelihood of permanent exclusion once again hanging over him, Joe's parents sought the author's help with his future education. It was agreed that he should attend a specialist teaching and therapeutic consultancy run by the author. Here he would be taught by a specialist British Dyslexia Association-trained teacher who would focus on his difficulties with reading and spelling and he would receive a therapeutic input from the author. Joe attended the Consultancy for 12 hours per week for the two and a half months of the Easter school term 2002.

Joe found reading and spelling extremely difficult and emotionally painful. He had learned to avoid the difficulty and the emotional pain associated with it by two types of behaviour: *acting in* – he fidgeted, was distractible and sought endlessly to change the subject and, if this did not work, *acting out* ('boil over') – he took on who ever was endeavouring to help him with his reading, threatened and use extreme verbal and physical violence and he did not back down. No teacher or head teacher had been prepared to confront Joe. They had consistently backed down and in so doing had

perfectly reinforced in his mind the connection between ‘boil over’ and the alleviation of the emotional pain he experienced when asked to do anything connected with reading.

After instructing Joe’s parents in the principles of behavioural psychology and after agreeing with them how we would deal with his *acting in* behaviour and with ‘boil over’, the term began. It was agreed that Joe would be rewarded by praise and by the use of a token economy for good behaviour. It was also agreed that we owed it to Joe to remain in role as adults and not let his out of control behaviour take control. In the event of ‘boil over’, we would not ‘back down’. The consequences of ‘boil over’ would be restraint. Verbal aggression would be ignored but would prevent Joe from gaining ‘award stamps’ leading to ‘stars’ for operationally defined appropriate behaviour and he would not be allowed to leave the Consultancy and go home until the end of his allotted time. One of Joe’s parents brought him to the Consultancy and stayed with him so that he or she was on hand to reinforce the procedures of reward and restraint as necessary. In the event, Joe went into ‘boil over’ only twice during the course of the term. On both occasions he was restrained and reminded that the rule was that he would not be released from restraint until he had been quiet for five minutes. Upon the utterance of an expletive, the ‘clock’ was restarted in his hearing. Joe’s parents both behaved perfectly in supporting this policy and Joe learned very quickly that ‘boil over’ no longer worked – at least not with his parents and not at the Consultancy.

Therapeutic background – metaphor or simile?

In therapy, it seemed necessary to address the more fundamental issue of Joe’s ‘boil over’ behaviour: to show him how self-defeating it was, causing him to avoid facing up to his difficulties with reading and their associated emotional pain and making these difficulties worse. This behaviour had become automatic and habituated. It was decided that Joe needed help to ‘rewrite the script’ and to substitute for ‘boil over’ alternative and more appropriate ways of feeling, thinking and behaving. It was also decided that little of this could profitably be discussed directly with Joe. He lacked the experience and the ability to understand the concepts involved.

The author’s more than 25 years’ experience of using hypnosis with children suggests that children of Joe’s age respond less well, for the most part, to the more formal procedures of hypnosis in therapy than to a more indirect approach. Packaging the child’s difficulties and how they might be overcome in a story written specifically for them often proves to be a powerful impetus for emotional, intellectual and behavioural change. This approach, often called metaphor therapy, can be traced back to the parables of Jesus, the fables of Aesop, the teaching of Taoist and Buddhist monks and, of course, fairy stories. Bettelheim (1976) thought that fairy tales showed children how to cope with their fears by giving them suggestions in symbolic form to illustrate how they could overcome the difficulties of existence and grow to maturity. The author has used the idea of ‘magic music’ within a metaphorical approach as an instrument of healing. This involves the making of an audiotape for the child with instructions that the tape should be played at the child’s bedtime. The therapeutic message is thus regularly reinforced over a period of time (Callow and Benson, 1990).

It has been argued that the more tenuous the association between the metaphor and the problem it is designed to address the more likely the person undergoing therapy is to embrace it. Berne (1964) suggested that the advantage of using metaphor in therapy was that it facilitated the bypassing of resistance: the ‘yes-but’ response to the therapist’s attempts to offer alternative and more constructive ways of feeling, thinking and

behaving. Erickson, in particular, appears to have employed quite tenuous metaphorical associations in his therapy work, especially with children. In working with one enuretic child, for example, he talked about the working of the muscles of the hand and suggested that generalization to the muscles of the bladder would occur outside of consciousness (Erickson and Rossi, 1976).

The author's experience, however, suggests that a wholly metaphorical approach to story telling in therapy is not always necessary and is not always the most effective way of addressing the difficulties of younger children. In a wholly metaphorical approach, the identified character in the story is not human but a personified animal, plant or machine with 'whom' the child in therapy can identify. Moreover, in a wholly metaphorical approach, the child's difficulty is addressed obliquely. Examples of this approach can be found in the author's story 'Cheltenham Engine and the leak that wasn't that serious'. In this, the identified character is a little steam locomotive but his problem is not enuresis (as is the child's for whom the story was written) but a leak in his boiler (Callow, 1987). The second category of therapeutic story has a metaphor to represent either the identified character or the problem which the identified character has and overcomes – but not both. Whichever of these is not represented metaphorically is represented by a simile. An example of this is Benson's story 'The little space ship' in which the space ship is the metaphor but the space ship's problem with its colour is a simile for the problem of the black child in therapy (Benson, 1995). Another example is the author's 'Michael, the Truck Who Wouldn't Listen' in which the truck is a personified machine but the truck's problems with not listening closely parallel those of the boy in therapy.

The third category of therapeutic story has no metaphors: both the identified character and the problem that the identified character has and overcomes are represented by similes. An example of this type of story is the author's 'Cathy Chateau and the boy who played the flute like an angel' (Callow, 1986). Cathy in the story is a simile for the girl of the same age in therapy and both Cathy and the girl in therapy suffer from debilitating eczema. The girl in therapy for whom this story was written was desperate to overcome her problem and the extent of her identification with Cathy (despite the absence of metaphors) was overwhelming. The improvements in her eczema and the emotional and social ramifications of it were both considerable and permanent.

The rationale behind using similes to represent either or both the identified character in the story and the identified character's difficulty is the same as for metaphor: the identified character has a similar problem to the child in therapy, with all its associated difficulties – the emotional pain, the failures and the disappointments that go with it. In the story, the identified character faces up to and overcomes these difficulties and the story explains how. The child, using the identified character as a role model, is given a route to follow, a way out, a solution to their problem. This parallels Gordon's idea of 'isomorphism' in which the metaphor of the story mirrors significant experiences, events and difficulties which the child encounters, (Gordon, 1978). Mills and Crowley (1986) suggest that metaphors are artistic devices that stimulate imagination. In the author's story, 'Magic Ian', this can also be said of the magic wood, the magic water in the magic pool and the mysterious disappearance of Ian and his parents at the end of the story.

In Joe's case, his most and least favourite animals, colours, places, and so forth, were discussed with him as well as the particular nature of his difficulties with reading, writing and spelling. By weaving his most favourite things into his story, the likelihood of him making a positive cathexis between the Joe character in the story and himself was increased. Joe, having identified (in the Freudian sense of having become one in imagination) with the Joe character in the story, was invited by his own need for a solution to

his difficulties and to his emotional pain to form a positive cathexis between the events, experiences and difficulties of the Joe character and the events, experiences and difficulties of his own life. Thus, the story encouraged Joe in the belief that, like the Joe character, he could also feel, think and behave in the same, new and more appropriate ways depicted in the story. The stimuli to inappropriate behaviour remained the same; Joe's response to them, like the Joe character's response to them in the story, would (hopefully) be different. The theme of the story was discussed with Joe and his reactions to its various dimensions were taken into account when writing its final draft.

The story: 'Magic Ian'

Joe was looking forward to an early summer holiday with his family on the Isle of Wight so, in the story, the identified or Joe character, George, goes on holiday there with his father and mother and with his sister – the same family members as in Joe's family. While on the island, he meets a boy, Ian, slightly older than himself, who is kind to him. Ian's parents tell of a lovely beach they have discovered and offer to take George and his family to see it. On the beach, George and Ian explore rock pools and it is while engaged in this activity that George, failing to read a notice warning of quick sand, alerts Ian to his difficulty with reading. Ian tells George that he once had the same difficulty but that, in a dream that he had on this same beach the previous summer, he dreamt of a magic wood with a magic pool. The water in this pool is cool, clear as transparent silver and does not wet. If you bathe in this water you emerge from the pool – dry! Ian tells George that, when he was asked to read or to spell or to do anything in school associated with reading, he would become increasingly hot inside and would boil over just like George did. What he discovered was that, when this happened, if he imagined himself bathing in the magic pool, he would become cool and calm and quiet inside. Then he was able to listen to his teacher as she tried to teach him to read, write and spell and, after a little while, he found he was actually learning all of these things.

Ian tells George that he can share his dream. George is doubtful. How can you dream another's dream?

'Look,' said Ian. 'Can you imagine it? Can you picture the magic pool in your mind?'

'Yes, I can do that,' said George.

'And can you say the magic words?'

'Magic words. What magic words?' asked George.

'Cool water, clear as transparent glass which does not wet,' said Ian.

'Oh yes, I can do that,' said George.

'Do it then,' said Ian . . . 'Bring all the quiet feelings of the magic water into your life, at home and in school, into your classroom and at playtime – wherever you are and whatever you're doing.'

'But,' said George, 'will it . . .?'

'It will,' said Ian. 'Just do it.'

The two families return to their respective boarding houses and that evening George's father tells their landlady, Mrs Wizzer, about the lovely beach they had visited that afternoon. Mrs Wizzer expresses surprise saying that there are no beaches, only high cliffs on that side of the island.

The next day, the family catches the same bus to the same stop as on the day before. There is no wood, through which they had walked the previous day, no beach and, despite their searching, they never see Ian or his parents again.

Only later, after George had returned home and gone to school; after he had dreamt the dream and practised saying the magic words, 'cool water, clear as transparent silver which does not wet', and after he had learnt to read, write and spell much better, just like Ian had promised, did the meaning of the dream become clear. Only then did George put the words 'magic' and 'Ian' together to make a new word: magician!

Results

Joe started school when he was 4½ years old, with a congenital predisposition to dyslexia and not having attained 'reading readiness'. Within weeks (probably days) of his teacher beginning to teach his class to read, he began to exhibit signs of disturbed behaviour. By his second term in school and in the absence of any consistently firm restraints, his behaviour had become refined into 'boil over'. By the age of 7½, when Joe started working at the Consultancy, he had a reading vocabulary of 16 words. This equates with the acquisition of approximately one new word every two and a half months since he began school. By the end of his two and a half month term at the consultancy, he had a reading vocabulary of 48 words. This equates with the acquisition of one new word every 2.3 days or 32 new words in the same two and a half month period that he had previously needed to acquire one new word. At the beginning of the term, he would avoid reading and reading related tasks at all costs and would 'boil over' if attempts to focus his attention on these persisted. By the end of the term, he would look at a page of just words (no pictures – the nightmare of every dyslexic) and would pick out the words he could read with enthusiasm.

Furthermore, he asked his teacher about the other 'naughty boys' she was seeing and said, 'I was once like them. I used to get all hot inside. You tell them boys they need to stay cool inside like me.' Joe's use of the past tense and his reference to staying 'cool inside' was heartening. It suggested that the message of 'Magic Ian' had been introduced, had become part of his consciousness, part of his perception of himself.

It is, of course, impossible to know exactly which cause produced which effect: good teaching, good behavioural psychology, the support of insightful and loving parents. However, the improvement in Joe's behaviour and his spontaneous credit for this to 'staying cool inside', which is the message of 'Magic Ian', suggests that the use of simile in this story also played a significant part, not only in improving Joe's behaviour but also in facilitating the improvements in his reading.

Final words

At the end of Joe's term at the Consultancy, there was a speech day and prize giving. Among other awards, Joe received a 'Magic Ian Certificate' in recognition of the fact that he had listened to the story, practised saying the 'magic words', dreamed the dream of 'Magic Ian' and had worked to make the dream come true. Perhaps the best testimony to the efficacy of the use of simile in therapy, however, lay in Joe's parting words: 'I'll never forget you' and, to his mother on their way home, 'I'm so happy, I could cry!'.

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