Correspondence between a Child’s Speech Disorder and Psychological Health: An Appraisal of Vince Vawter’s *Paperboy*

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**Abstract**

Vince Vawter in his debut novel, *Paperboy*, delineates an eleven-year-old boy who stutters severely, cannot even utter his own name and substitutes his best friend on a certain vacation to deliver daily newspapers to the houses in the neighborhood of Memphis. From the moments he starts talking, he finds his speaking organs stutter, which makes him undergo weird circumstances and mental strains. Since he fails to talk normally and mispronounces words, many listeners, both children and aged ones show objectionable reactions toward him or at least give him a differently meaningful look that speaks loudly of his incapability of producing smooth speech. He can read vividly what other people regard him, which makes him feel lesser human. This exercises substantially poignant impacts on his psychic health. He suffers lower kind of self respect and nurtures a negative connotation of the outer world where people seem not to understand his inner-self and worth, and thus fail to esteem him duly. Accordingly, this article concentrates on the semblance of the difficulties the paperboy as a child goes through because of his speech disorder and the sort of psychological anomalies he suffers and fights with as a consequence. It thereby aims at illustrating the affiliation between a child’s speech impediment and his psychological fitness in the light of Vince Vawter’s novel, *Paperboy*.

**Keywords**

Correspondence; Child’s Speech Disorder; Psychological Health; Vince Vawter’s *Paperboy*

**Introduction**

Vawter [1] in his novel, *Paperboy* states, “Stuttering manifests itself most cruelly during childhood, creating a lonely and baffling existence just at a time when the world is beginning to open and expand” (223). The psychological constraints and harassments a child undergoes just because he suffers a speech anomaly that does not let him speak smoothly are amply presented in Vince Vawter’s novel, *Paperboy*, where the 11-year-old substituted paperboy is the narrator cum protagonist and goes on narrating what happens during his stuttering life and what he realizes in term of the connection among his speech impediment, reactions of people towards it and his own understanding of his surroundings and his psychic feelings. With regard to the mental anomalies a child with speech trouble goes through, Beitchman, et al. [2] opine that children with speech/language disorder are vulnerable to risks of many psychological problems. In a similar tone, Beilby [3] presents that stuttering disorder poses multidimensional experiences on the individual.
like behavioral and social difficulties, self-awareness, reactions to stuttering, everyday communication obstacles and overall standard of life. These same environmental and psychological strains the paperboy undergoes in his daily life. In the first place, he cannot produce normal words or sentences without pausing several times and exhaling extra amount of air as well as making additional s sound. He cannot share his ideas clearly and fails to ask questions fluently. He cannot pronounce his own name, which is why when anyone seeks to know his name, he faces the weirdest trouble. He does not feel good to talk to people unless they are his familiar ones, like his friends, caregiver or parents for he knows many people will not understand him and thereby an awkward situation will be created. He rather likes to walk on the street alone and loves to be in places where there is none to talk to. But deep in his mind and brain, he knows that he can think clearly and does not stutter inside.

The paperboy loves the job he does and can throw baseball faster than many of his peers, and throws the paper accurately. Nevertheless, he does not feel at ease while collecting paper bill at the end of every week since he cannot utter the amount unrestrictedly. But he does not cease to practice his speaking drills for the purpose of overcoming his speech disorder. His incessant attempts to beat stuttering make him fall into different unwanted circumstances where he just has to suffer humiliation or something. Moreover, many people, like Ara T., the garbage man, after discovering his stuttering, regard him to be an intellectually impaired boy, which he can read in other people’s countenance quite vividly, and that pains him greatly. In this regard, Beilby [3] presents that children suffering stuttering anomaly generally experience more negative attitudes towards speech than normally fluent ones. In addition, individuals’ mental health gets gravely affected by their speech disorder, for which they become fond of secrecy, not wanting to talk to adults, showing very strong emotional feelings and avoiding companies [3].

Nonetheless, there are more people who understand and support him, and help him to understand that his stuttering is not any problem to them as they consider him as good as a normal child. This motivates him to feel confident and go one step ahead to overcome his obstacle, and make others know that he does not stutter in his mind, which significantly demonstrates the magnitude of his psychological growth. As such, this cognition hinges upon exploring the psychic development that a speech-impaired child attains through the upheavals of his own experience in terms of the interactions with people.

### Literature Review

Hunsaker [4] defines stuttering to be signifying a kind of speech disorder that engenders disruption of speech with pauses, repetitions and other speech anomalies, which generally commences during the development of a child’s communication skills. Citing Linn, Hunsaker [4] again provides that stuttering to many may not directly mean disability but it is a phenomenon that limits speech smoothness which in turn impacts an individual’s work opportunities, perception by others, self image, relationship with peers and intimacies. Focusing the stuttering disorder in a child, Vince Vawter in his debut novel, Paperboy, depicts the “Little Man”, an eleven-year-old boy who stutters though he strives immensely to speak as normally as possible but to no purpose, his stuttering welds weighty impact on his mind and activities [5]. Regarding this, Bush [6] writes the eleven-year-old narrator takes the responsibility of delivering paper in place of his best friend on a certain vacation and completes his story of severely stuttering and related trepidation.

Bush [6] also states that exasperated with acute speech disability, the substituted paperboy is psychologically agonized and apprehends his confusion regarding if he will be normally communicating with the customers especially while doing the collection. According to Kirkus review [5], the novel possesses carefully crafted language, authentic setting and idiosyncratic characters that together contribute to making the narrative true and worthwhile, and through which we come to know the speech impairment-driven annoyance the child, Victor Vollmer undergoes and how he overcomes the stuttering obstacle. Beitchman, et al. [2] find that the affliction betwixt speech impairment and mental disorder has been well examined and researched though the factors responsible for language disability remain unsolved. However, Prizant, et al. concludes that children who are generally referred to speech and language therapy for communication disorders have been found to have a notable rate of psychological defects. Additionally, Prizant, et al. also point out that majority of the justified knowledge relating to the connection between language disability and mental irregularity has been dealt with in child psychiatric literature.

Moreover, Hunsaker [4] also cites Boyle to present that there prevails a misconception regarding the person who suffers speech disorder like stuttering, which means that a stuttering individual is less intelligent than
a normally fluent speaker, and this makes people show discriminatory behavior to someone who stutters. In addition, an individual who stutters is quite common to feel frustrated regarding his communication abilities and others’ reactions towards him, which compels him to be in less interaction with people [4]. Notwithstanding, depiction of a speech-disordered child protagonist is almost rare in literature although there are considerable number of researches on the stuttering disorder and the psychological troubles it engenders, which is why this study pays particular attention to delineating the speech-disorder-propelled mental strains and epiphanies a child experiences in Vince Vawter’s novel, Paperboy.

Discussion

“I’m typing about the stabbing for a good reason. I can’t talk. Without stuttering” [1]. Thus begins the novel, Paperboy that deals vividly with the significance of unrestrained speech ability that directly associates with human’s growth in thinking. The narrator and protagonist of the novel is an eleven-year-old boy named Victor Vollmer whose want of smooth speaking ability puts him in weird circumstances now and then, which he describes, The reason I hate talking to people who don’t know me because when they first see me I look like every other kid. Two eyes. Two arms. Two legs. Crew-cut hair. Nothing special. But when I open my mouth I turn into something else. Most people don’t take the time to try to understand what’s wrong with me and probably just figure I’m not right in the head. They try to get rid of me as fast as possible [1].

Victor Vollmer is scared of talking as it gets stuck and he stutters which gives him quite a great deal of trouble mentally, for which he loves streets because he thinks, “The streets are like friends that I don’t have to talk to” [1].

Although he can think clearly and has the ability to articulate the words inside his head over and over, the only incapability he suffers is his speech impediment that makes him suffer both psychologically and socially. Though he takes over the paper delivery job enthusiastically from his friend with a view to both helping him and socializing with people, he cannot help becoming nervous at the thought of talking to people specially while doing the collection. After delivering paper for the whole week, collection at the end of the week brings real difficulty for Victor Vollmer as he fears he will not be able to talk or maybe he will pronounce a wrong word, just like something that starts with b instead of something with p. He shares his apprehension, The first night of collecting was a few hours away. It was pushing down on me like a history test I hadn’t studied enough for. I didn’t know if I was going to have the guts to ring a doorbell and wait for somebody to come to the door and make the hard p sound that started paperboy [1].

To cover up for his stuttering, Victor Vollmer devises a plan to wear long pants instead of his regular shorts because he thinks, “If I started stuttering when people answered the doorbell at least I would look more grown-up doing it with my legs covered [1].

He has high esteem towards people’s speaking which is quite obvious when he states that he likes the way Mr. Spiro, one of the neighbors whom he supplies paper, talks. He says, “Not only did I like how he used words but I also liked how deep his voice was and how he made his words come out so even” [1]. If sometimes Victor Vollmer has a bad stuttering day, he starts thinking how good it would be if he just has a horn to honk like Clarabell, the Clown on the Howdy Doody Show, who tells everything through honking a horn. He wonders, “Me honking the horn all the time would look stupid but not as stupid as some of the things I did when I tried to say words” [1]. Similarly, just because he stutters, he does not feel at ease to be on the same spot where he stutters a lot, which he apprises, “Whenever I stuttered a lot in a certain spot I tried never to stand there again” [1]. However, he never leaves a stone unturned just with a view to speaking out a word correctly, which generally he cannot succeed in doing, which is why he resorts to some kind of a trick, like tossing up his pencil in the air so as to divert his concentration from stuttering and utter the desired word in the meantime. For talking to Mrs. Worthington, the lady who once heard him yelling “Bitch” instead of “Pitch”, Victor Vollmer remains prepared with a pencil in his hand, which he informs, “My pencil was in my hand in case I needed to make another emergency pencil toss to start a word” [1].

Though originally speech disorder moulds the psychological stature of the child in a sheer negative manner, others’ treatment towards him define considerably what he would feel about himself. On one Friday morning when the baseball coach treats Victor Vollmer as someone significant in the team, he feels not just a speech-troubled boy anymore, which he likes to share, “When the coach said things like that it made me feel like I was a somebody instead of just a kid who couldn’t talk right” [1]. He feels good at the manner he receives from Mr. Spiro who helps
him recover from his lip biting and bleeding and explains the cause of his fit to him, which Victor Vollmer later asks him about so as to know why he had taken the trouble to be so generous to him. To this Mr. Spiro explicated, “I wanted to make certain you knew that your verbal blocks were of no bother to me. I’m interested more in content rather than how well one might vocalize it” [1]. At the restaurant Victor Vollmer fails to pronounce the word, Spaghetti when the waiter stands over him with his pencil and pad, and the paperboy utters, “Siplinary” which makes the waiter smile as if he told some kind of a joke. The woman at the table sitting next to his mother says, “Your son is such a daw-w-w-w-ling” [1] which burns his face hot and makes him feel like Clarabell the Clown.

The boy finds comfort in being near Mr. Spiro who is quite child sensible and compassionate to him for the kind of feelings he undergoes due to his speech impairment. He likes to ask questions to Mr. Spiro for he finds the latter to answer him in the convincing manner which puts the paperboy in some sort of soothing ambience. Hence he prepares his questions, “1. Why do most grown-ups treat me like I’m not a real human being? 2. When does a kid become a grown-up? 3. What can I do to be smart like you” [1]? The trick through which Ara T., the garbage man pockets the paperboy’s knife and some fifty cents makes him feel lowly about himself. He states, What I hated was that Ara T. had tricked me out of the knife and my fifty cents because he probably thought I was just some kind of dummy who talked funny. The stuttering dummy with the shiny bicycles and a yellow-handle knife [1].

There are good things too that people do to the paperboy who remembers, “If there was anything good about being a kid who stutters it’s that sometimes people felt sorry for me because they thought I had a simple mind and they did things for me they wouldn’t do for somebody else” [1]. When Mrs. Spiro gets ready to leave Memphis for an excursion towards Mississippi and Wisconsin, and when Mrs. Worthington leaves a note for the paperboy, he feels utterly forsaken by the couple of people he loves to be with and talk to. He objects, “All the grown-ups around me were making things hard for me all at once like they gotten together and planned it” [1].

Vince Vawter presents another spectacular observation regarding speech pathology in Paperboy when Mr. Spiro exposes to Victor Vollmer, “My guess is that you are also in control of your speech when you sing” [1]. This signifies that someone with speech disorder faces trouble speaking normally but can utter smoothly while singing, which the substitute paperboy nods to.

Anyway, the paperboy observes intently how the grown-ups around him react when he stutters and shapes his personal sense of honor as such. Some people show expected sympathy towards him, some try to finish sentences for him which is in most cases wrong, some just smile a fake smile and some get confused. He understands all sorts of treatments to be logical as he thinks, “If the way I talked was confusing for me it was bound to be confusing listening to me” [1].

Accordingly, each time Victor Vollmer attempts to speak, the first thing he dies trying is not to stutter at the least, and probably due to this extra-trying he happens to stutter more, which he comes to know from his teacher who says that “stuttering was what happened when a person tried extra hard not to stutter” [1]. The earnestness of being able to talk smoothly remains in his head always, for which when he first meets his teacher he asks how long would it take for her to teach him talk like a regular kid because there are the sense of being less and the urgency of being equal. Consequently, he again asks the similar question to Mr. Spiro, “Why s-s-s-s-can most kids talk without any s-s-s-s-trouble and not s-s-s-s-me” [1].

Nevertheless, he loves and aspires after speech capability very much and he confirms that he would simply spend words very scrupulously if he could speak normally. As such, he wonders why so many people with perfect speech ability squander so many words for some simple or silly issues every now and then, which is why he asks Mr. Spiro, “Why do s-s-s-s-people who can talk right waste so s-s-s-s-many words saying s-s-s-s-nothing” [1]?

For he strongly wills to get rid of this stuttering complication and attain a normal speaking ability, he tries almost every possible means, from hurting himself to resorting to a pencil throw or something. But, what he receives is more suffering and humiliation than success. Every time Victor Vollmer ventures hard for talking, he either makes a blunder or suffers at length for some sort of unbecoming outcomes. At the restaurant, due to miss pronunciation of Spaghetti, and its consequent burning feeling, the paperboy cannot afford to keep the food down for much longer and it starts coming out which eventually puts his parents, their acquaintances and the waiters in a rushing situation. This makes his parents apologize to everybody and say that they need to take him home because he probably is “Coming Down With Something” which
However, thinking hard about something else helps him forget that he cannot help stuttering and makes him pronounce words normally due to which he can one day say, “Ninety-five Cents” without any problem and that gives him quite a great deal of pleasure though he regrets, “But I always remembered it again soon enough” [1].

The paperboy’s biggest hurdle is to pronounce his own name which he hasn’t so far been able to do and which has given him troubles on many occasions when people have asked him his name. When Mrs. Worthington asks, “What’s my sweetie’s n-a-m-e?” [1], he falls into a labyrinth that he recounts, “A pencil toss was no good. I was too nervous to find it in my pocket. Gentle air was a waste of time because I could never make air gentle enough when it came to saying my name” [1]. To him, “A kid should be able to choose what he thinks about and to say any word he wants” [1].

One day while moving for collecting, Victor Volmer discovers something that he has so far been regarding otherwise and preserving a wrong conception of. He reaches the TV boy’s house for collection, he finds him before the TV set which makes him wonder what the little boy watches all the time and bores him too. He discovers that the TV boy does not have the ability to literally hear and talk, he becomes surprised and realizes his wrong conviction. He receives an amicable gesture from the TV boy that helps him understand that even except talking, there are other modes that help communicate more deeply. He reveals, “When he (TV boy) stepped through the door he turned around and smiled at me. I smiled back. Two kids don’t have to say words because they can say all they need to sometimes with their smiles” [1]. In the same manner, he discovers the elevator man at his father’s office to be looking at his father, saying nothing and smiling at him. Subsequently, his father apprises him that the man is “Deaf Mute” meaning he cannot hear or talk. He also advises him no to call any such person “Deaf” or “Dumb” for they are not always as smart as anybody else and not being able to hear or talk does not make them less-abled.

In his almost lonely and unspoken journey, he observes the society around him quite closely and comes to understand things, which proves the developed stature of his psyche. He can watch as well as read the racist mindset prevalent among the people in the society that puts people with white complexion in better amenities than those with dark complexion. He reaches the TV boy’s house for collection, he finds him regarding otherwise and preserving a wrong conception of.
will be full of only white kids, he cannot help wondering, “I still don’t see why it’s such a big deal to have everybody going to the same school. You can’t tell what a kid is like just by how he looks. Or how he talks” [1].

For his whole past life, the paperboy has been terribly at fear, worry and hesitation with regard to his name which he cannot pronounce and stutters the most while attempting to utter. On an occasion at length, the homeroom teacher proposes the kids to sit in alphabetical order only to introduce themselves, and the paperboy gets to sit at the end to be one of the last participants in the row. His turn arrives and he succeeds, “My name is Victor Vollmer the Third. I stutter when I talk but I like word anyway. I also like to play baseball” [1]. Regarding this amazing success, he clarifies, I stuttered about the same as always with all the gigantic pauses and funny sounds coming out around the words but I didn’t pay any attention to how my classmates looked at me and didn’t try to figure out what they were thinking. And I said exactly what I wanted to [1].

Reaching home when Mam, his caregiver whom he esteems as his mother, asks him, “How’s school today?” He replies and asks, “s-s-s-s- Good. Want to s-s-s- know what I learned?” She says, “Sure do” “s-s-s-s- It’s more important what I say than how s-s-s-s I say it” and he emphasizes, “s-s-s-s- And my soul doesn’t s-s-s-s- stutter” [1]. Accentuating this, Victor Vollmer expresses an epiphany that resonates, “Words in the air blow away as soon as you say them but words on paper lasts forever” [1].

Conclusion
Kasbi, et al. [7] mention American Speech and Hearing Association (ASHA) as believing that one of the core duties of the language and speech pathologists is to develop the quality of life of the individuals with speech disorders by decreasing functional and structural deficits to one’s physique through reducing limitations in activities and communications. This signifies that people undergoing speech impediment of any kind suffer many sorts of unacceptable circumstances and feelings that exercise anomalies on their body and mind, and if the sufferer are children, their psychological trouble stands out. Things like these happen in Victor Volmer, the eleven-year-old child and protagonist of Vince Vawter’s Paperboy, who experiences severe stuttering in his speech, which makes him suffer mainly mentally every now and then in his everyday life. In fact, the novelist elucidates almost all sorts of senses a stuttering child generally experiences and the sorts of psychological development he achieves thereby. Through the child protagonist with a speech disorder the novel establishes and exposes a close link between speech impairment and its impacts on one’s psychic growth. It also amply presents how the child perceives the world around him and its feedback towards a stuttering individual. Nevertheless, as the child never gives up in his venture to overcome his speech complication as well as its outcome on the mind, he learns to articulate his mental proceedings in a non-stuttering manner, which lets the people in and around the child’s world understand that only stuttering or any such encumbrance cannot limit an individual to perennial physical and intellectual handicap.

References