Selective Mutism – a Case Study

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Definition
‘Selective mutism is an anxiety disorder in which affected people speak fluently in some situations but remain silent in others. It was once considered rare but is now known to affect more than 6 in 1000 children. The condition is known to begin in early in life and can be transitory, such as on starting school or on being admitted to hospital, but in some cases it may persist and last right through a child's school life, possibly resulting in missed life chances and difficulties communicating in adult life. Early intervention is crucial to completely eradicating the condition in the first few years of a child's life.’ (see ref. 1)

Although by no means confined to a second or third language situation, selective mutism may occur as part of the reaction to a sudden change of language and culture.

The condition is not well understood in schools; indeed there are still people who believe these children ‘could speak if they wanted to’. In fact a child who is selectively mute usually has well developed speech and language skills but cannot speak due to anxiety in certain situations. They are not simply ‘shy’; they want to speak but don’t because of the distress it causes (or has caused) them. Although still comparatively rare there has been greater interest and understanding of selective mutism in recent years and fortunately two speech and language therapists, Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens have made it their particular study. (see ref. 2)

Introduction
The following is the story of a little Japanese girl, X, who arrived at Surrey prep school, Danes Hill, at the beginning of Year 3 with clear signs of selective mutism. Fortunately the school has a well established Learning Support Centre (LSC); the Director of the LSC, the school’s SENCo, met X the previous Spring Term and liaised with her school over her needs. Staff were given notes by the Director of LSC on how to handle her during the early days of her new school. Her form teacher attended a training course run by Maggie Johnson, in order to learn strategies to put into practice. With co-ordinated support from all teachers and X’s parents, X is now happily participating in lessons and taking a full part in school life.

Background and setting up support
X arrived at Danes Hill School in September 2009 with a history of not speaking at her previous schools. She could not speak in the classroom environment even to answer her name in the register. However she would read aloud to a reading assistant (VERY quietly) so long as no one else might overhear her. She would only read to her class teacher in the classroom if it was engineered that the other children were doing something quite noisy.
She could, just, say good afternoon to her teacher in the playground at the end of the day. However, when in the class reading area, with both her teacher and class assistant present, she seized up despite the fact that she could read to her class teacher or the assistant on their own.

At the parent-teacher conference in her first term X’s class teacher spoke to her parents and explained that she felt X was a ‘selective mute’; she asked their permission to get some help. Following contact with the LSC, X’s parents came up to school for a consultation to gain a full background history and to discuss the way forward. At this initial discussion, another teacher whose first language is Japanese came along to meet the parents and aid in interpretation; this was a great help to ensure that communication at this vital meeting was as full and clear as possible.

The family moved to the UK in 2006 when X had only a few words of English. She started education in a nursery for one term with a kindly teacher. At this time she explained to her parents that although she could understand English she was not confident enough to speak it. She often had difficulty speaking to ‘new’ people but later, when she got to know them a little, she was ‘OK’.

In Reception class X had a stricter teacher who tried, with parental agreement, to persuade X to speak. X responded by becoming even quieter and less happy. Her parents moved her to a different school in 2007 where there were smaller classes in an apparently warmer and more flexible school environment. By now she couldn’t speak in class, although she spoke to friends in the playground. Other parents were surprised when these friends went to play at X’s home and they heard her speaking excellent English! Teachers at school tried to help and it was suggested that X’s parents seek advice. X saw a psychologist who recommended that her parents be patient and not challenge her to speak. This ‘wait and see’ policy was adopted at school but insufficient progress was made.

By now X’s parents were seeking a change of school and were attracted by the reputation of the LSC at Danes Hill.

Following full investigation and discussion among SENCo, class teacher, LSC consultant, and parents, an agreed programme of support, led by the class teacher and supported by parents, the LSC and staff began in November 2009.

A lesson observation in late November noted that X was ‘alert throughout the lesson, smiling and enjoying the tasks. Using non-verbal communication she helped another child who did not press her for a reply. Her teacher was careful not to push for verbal responses and the lesson went well. Later, asking X to come over near me, there were signs of anxiety (tongue moving in her cheek, fingers in her mouth). X makes clicks but not vocalisations in class, although there have been a few occasions on which she has read aloud a few words or spoken in the playground.’
X’s ability to make a non-vocal click but not even a vocalised ‘hmm’ as a response to taking the register was an important indicator of her problems. At home with her family X had begun to speak aloud in front of others in English but was reluctant if there were more than, say, five people. For instance at a birthday party she would only speak to individuals. On Saturdays X was attending and enjoying Japanese school where she was speaking.

Luckily X makes friends easily and, with gentle guidance from her teacher, other children have been very sensitive. Staff were given guidance too: X’s teacher encouraged them to ask her about any concerns and reinforced ideas from the following written information given at the beginning of term from the SENCo:

* X has a history of avoidance of spoken communication at school. This has meant that although she reportedly speaks fluent English at home, she can remain silent at school. Her first language is Japanese. This type of anxiety usually has early roots and in her case may relate to a difficulty acquiring English. She loves singing in the choir and is a good gymnast. She is a high achiever and reads fluently. She may not choose to talk to her teachers or peers, although she communicates non-verbally and makes friends.

Appropriate support includes:

- **X may find it difficult to look at you when she is anxious** – she may turn her head away and seemingly ignore you, but is probably listening and not consciously trying to be rude. Continue to talk to her without demanding that she ‘listens’ or ‘looks at you’.

- **She may not smile or show her true feelings and should not be asked whether she is happy.**

- **She may need support to answer to her name and be slow to respond.**

- **If she worries unnecessarily about work, please reassure her and help her to get any anxiety into proportion.**

- **She may be physically sensitive to noise, smells, touch and being too close to others. Please allow her to sit where she feels comfortable.**

- **When I spoke to X, I found she has a sense of humour and was able to say a few words. It was helpful to speak to her standing/ sitting by her side rather than as a direct confrontation demanding eye contact.**

*I am hoping that X will see her new school as a fresh start and allow herself to chat to her new friends who don’t know anything about her.*

*Please let me know how she settles and encourage her to join in activities.*

**Support Programme in action**

Over the final weeks of the autumn term 2009 and the early months of the new year 2010 a gradual and carefully graded programme of support was
carried out in class. Her class teacher is mindful that X remains in groups of children with whom she is familiar and comfortable. She continues to monitor X’s interactions, very gradually enlarging the range of situations in which X is expected to speak and the number of people involved, and slowly increasing the ‘communicative intent’ of what she has to say. Communicative intent is related to how close the speech is to real communication, e.g. counting has very low communicative intent; ringing a friend to ask her to play or explaining a task would be high. Another subject teacher began to work closely with X’s class teacher, and, taking tiny steps, X has ‘blossomed’.

2009/2010 Class Teacher’s Working Diary
Working notes from X’s class teacher show how she gradually increased the level of language and the communicative intent:

Start of the programme; mid-November 2009
I explained that I understood how she felt, that it would be fine and we would do some work together to help her. I said we would stay in the classroom for our work (a safe environment that she is relatively secure in) and gave her the choice of whether we would do her work before lunch – so she went into lunch a little late, or after she had had lunch. With some reluctance - once she had realised she had to work with me at some point – she chose before lunch.

As much as possible I allowed X to choose which days we worked together as I felt she needed some control over the situation.

25 November
X and I drew a talking map of where she felt comfortable talking in school; she was very uncomfortable with this but drew a face with an almost open mouth in the area just outside the classroom block but a silent face elsewhere. I showed her a ‘Do not disturb notice’ which I stuck on the outside of the classroom door. We sat alongside each other and took turns to count to 10 – ensuring at this stage that I was not looking at her at all as she spoke.
(This session introduced language at a very low level, i.e. counting)

27 November
We counted to 20 in turns. Then made shapes with different colour unifix and described them to each other and built the shape the other described. X was quite relaxed; I sat alongside her.
(A very small step from counting to describing the blocks)

1 December
Repeated the activity of making shapes with unifix.
Read and answered prewritten questions to each other.
Sitting opposite each other.
Discussed Mrs H (X’s set teacher for both English and maths) joining us next time – X happier with that than with a friend joining us.
(Reading out the questions minimised the language load – no thinking required)
3 December
Counted, made and described cubes, asked and answered the questions as above but with Mrs H in room with her back to us and behind X. X less relaxed with another adult in room but still was able to speak. (Introduction of another, trusted, adult who was not involved in the communication)

8 December
X and I asked and answered questions and after a while Mrs H came in, sat down at the table with us and joined in. X was able to ask and answer questions with her although did not look at her. (Simple answers only were required to basic questions such as ‘Where did you go on holiday?’ ‘Do you have a brother?’ ‘Where do you live?’)

10 December
C (one of the other girls from the class) joined us today and X was able to count, describe the cube shapes and read and answer questions. I explained to C, in front of X, that this did not mean X would talk to her in other places so not to be worried about that. (Later questions were at a slightly higher level, e.g. ‘What is your favourite lunch?’ ‘Which lesson do you find easiest?’)

14 December
Played ‘Guess Who’ with C in the classroom at the start of lunch break. Walking to lunch I counted with C and X down the (empty) corridor. After lunch played another game at the front of the room during reading period, then A (another of the girls) joined in and finally C (another C). Walking to P.E. I counted with the 4 girls and then slowly encouraged others from the class to join in.

(‘Guess Who?’ is an enjoyable game with pictures of characters. Each player asks simple questions, such as ‘Does your person have a beard?’ which are quite low level but, as with the questions on 10 December, involved the beginning of turn taking similar to a conversation.)

15 December
Played ‘Guess Who’ with the girls again, counted in the classroom with some of the boys joining in. Used counting to take the register at the end of the day and X was able to join in and say 11 (her number in the register).

16 December
Used calling our number for register again. X joined in again so I will use that for the time being and hopefully she will gain in confidence and maybe volume.

Today we went to the pantomime and I made every excuse I could to count the children getting them to call their numbers – leaving the classroom, getting onto the coach, lining up, getting off the coach etc and X was able to join in. On the way home on the coach I noticed that X was being asked by her friends to tell them expressions and words in Japanese (the dark in the coach
and the fact that they had all now heard her voice seemed to be the break through for her)

**Term ended on Dec 18**
I spoke to X’s mum and said how pleased I was with her progress and that it would be useful if X could have play dates over the holidays to maintain her confidence with her friends.

**Spring term 2010**
First morning back I risked saying ‘Good Morning’ followed by each child’s name and when it was her turn X answered ‘Good morning Mrs S’ with no problem at all. Fortunately the rest of the class were so absorbed with the new pupils that they didn’t really comment. Her friends tell me that during the holidays X rang them to ask them to play so her parents obviously had reinforced the work done at school. Over the next few days she initiated conversations with me – asking simple questions about where she should be now and so on.

**15 January**
Today was a break through X arrived in school and initiated a conversation about her reading book which she felt was too easy. Then in humanities put up her hand to tell me that she had been to Egypt in the holidays and then agreed to tell the class about it!

**March**
X can talk to most of her teachers to answer questions, she initiates conversations with Mrs H and last week agreed to take a message to Mrs H which she delivered standing at the door across the classroom. However when a member of staff from her old school attended a fund raising event it was noticeable that X found it very hard to speak to her – although she did just about manage to say ‘Yes’. Unfortunately the opportunity to give X a few minutes in a safe environment to help her with this was not available.

*We are monitoring X. carefully and will be trying to ensure that she meets next year’s teachers frequently in a very casual way over the next term so that her movement into year 4 goes smoothly.*

**Progress**
X’s parents came to another meeting at school to review her progress. X had recently spoken in a year assembly in front of parents, staff and children – a major step forward! The assembly was carefully planned so that the speaking load increased very gradually; initially the whole class sang a song, then small groups spoke together and finally individual children had their own lines. Parents and teachers were thrilled.
X now puts up her hand and volunteers information in class and is participating verbally in many situations. X’s parents have been pleased with reports from play dates that X has been a ‘chatterbox’! X’s social and emotional life have clearly benefited as well as her education.
X has made excellent progress and now needs gentle, careful handling so that she continues to gain in confidence. She is not quite there yet, and needs continued discreet help to become as confident with English as she is with Japanese. Transition at the end of the summer term will need particular care. The plan is to introduce X to her new teacher very slowly throughout the summer term, gradually increasing the ‘structure’ of each meeting so that X is able to communicate well with him/her. Sensitive, low key support will still be essential to maintain progress. As before this will be given by her class teacher with back up from subject teachers and her family.

X is an able child and is fast becoming a success story!

2011 Update
X’s summer report notes that she has had a most successful year, ‘reading fluently and with expression’; ‘always participates fully in class’; ‘participating with enthusiasm when called upon’; ‘a real asset to have in any class’; and ‘a delightful child with a cheerful disposition’.

References:

(2) Selective Mutism Information and Research Association
SMIRATALK: http://www.groups.yahoo.com/group/smiratalk/join

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