

Dyslexia - socially misunderstood

Richard Whitehead, Founder and Co-Director of The Learning People, explains how little understanding the general public has of dyslexia and how it should actually be seen as a gift.

This summer, The Learning People conducted a thorough piece of research into public attitudes towards dyslexia. We wanted to understand how open, interested and knowledgeable the British public is when it comes to a thinking style shared by ten per cent of us. I wish that I could paint a more encouraging picture, but I fear the following results speak for themselves:

- Three quarters of the British public admit to understanding little, or nothing at all, about how dyslexics think; yet two thirds cling to the view that it is a lifelong learning disability
- A fifth of people polled think dyslexics just need to work harder to keep up with non-dyslexics
- Over half of those polled think dyslexia is simply about getting letters back to front
- A quarter of Britons believe dyslexics are less able in the workplace – a worrying indictment of British working practices
- And most astonishingly of all, over two million adult dyslexics are not aware that they are dyslexic*

As public perceptions of dyslexia are so clichéd, it's no surprise that so many cases remain unidentified. We urgently need to educate people about the dyslexic thinking style, thereby empowering them to make educated decisions about whether they themselves, their child or their student has dyslexia and to take action.

In direct contrast to what it seems many people think, we see dyslexia as a gift: dyslexics' ability to think multi-dimensionally, and often visually, explains why so many are creative, offer unusual solutions to problems, are very intuitive, or have vivid imaginations. Dyslexia is not a lifelong disability, but a form of

intelligence that deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. Dyslexics struggle because of a mismatch between learning and teaching styles, not because they are innately incapable. It's like trying to run a Microsoft programme on an Apple machine. Get the programme right, and it all falls into place.

Our approach to dyslexia is to work *with* the dyslexic thinking style, not around it – when properly engaged, dyslexic intelligence is a powerful learning *tool*. For

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example, many dyslexics are imaginative visual or hands-on learners – that's what makes for so many successful dyslexics in fields such as architecture, engineering, graphic design and the performing arts. Typically, dyslexics struggle with spelling. And yet the spelling of a word can be mastered visually. Why shouldn't someone who can “see” the design of a future building or locomotive be able to learn to “see” a group of letters in sequence?

Time and time again we watch our clients, children and adults alike, build new skills in a matter of days that they had spent years vainly struggling to acquire. This in turn sends their confidence



through the roof, allowing them to tackle and achieve things they never thought possible. Among our clients we have documented cases of reading ages leapfrogging biological age, of huge surges in mathematical performance, of handwriting being transformed after one afternoon session. This is not because we have some magic wand. It is because, when properly stimulated, dyslexics have it within themselves to succeed.

Dyslexics learn fast when certain key principles are applied:

Ownership of learning. Dyslexics learn best what they have created for themselves. Creative media such as plasticene clay have been used sporadically in primary education over the years; when applied with a clear philosophy and direction, they constitute a powerful explorative learning medium.

Imaginative learning. To retain information, dyslexics have to “get the picture”. For example, dyslexics frequently stumble, seemingly inexplicably, on small abstract words such as *a*, *the*, *if* and *but*. Unlike *elephant* and *tyrannosaurus*, it is difficult to get a mental picture of what these words mean. Coaching dyslexics into recognising these words by their phonemes may not work. Targeted sessions in creating plasticene models around the definitions of these words engages curiosity, imagination and creativity – typical dyslexic strengths.

Learning through experience. Dyslexics respond far better to investigative approaches than to memorisation. They will not succeed in memorising the times tables until they have grasped why they are true.

Sequentially ordered learning. The gift of dyslexia is the gift of mastery. Dyslexics need to fully grasp a skill at base level before building more advanced skills on

top. They do not respond well to being rushed through a subject.

Relaxed focus. Dyslexics are particularly susceptible to stress. They will not learn if asked to “concentrate” – they will do wonders if trained to pace themselves and “go easy”.

To what extent are we as educators succeeding at applying these principles? Interestingly, Channel 4 News Online recently revealed that the number of children being schooled at home has risen by more than 60 per cent in the past five years. In fact, more than 80 per cent of education authorities also recognise this trend, according to the Freedom of Information probe. In one area the increase was as big as 800 per cent; with campaigners blaming bullying, special needs provision and too many school tests as reasons for the national increase. It seems more and more parents are “voting with their feet”, taking their children out of formal education in favour of a more bespoke approach. This is especially true

for parents of children with dyslexic tendencies.

Many of our clients have opted to educate their children at home owing to the stress they suffer at school, often caused by being expected to learn in a way that feels alien to them or by being treated with a lack of understanding. Some of our clients have even spoken of other children thinking they can ‘catch’ dyslexia from them, as if it were a disease.

Dyslexics are still often tarnished with the ‘stupid’ brush, when in fact they can be the gems of any organisation thanks to their often extraordinary gifts. A BBC documentary entitled “The Mind of a Millionaire” found that 40% of British millionaires had dyslexia, and there are many dyslexics who have reached extraordinary heights in the fields of science (Thomas Edison and Albert Einstein), politics (Winston Churchill and Michael Heseltine), business (Richard Branson), art (Pablo Picasso), and music (John Lennon) to name a few. Tom Cruise,

Jamie Oliver, Jerry Hall and Keira Knightley are other examples of present-day celebrities who have proved that having dyslexia can actually assist you to succeed in your chosen field.

My personal appeal to educators and parents everywhere is: become curious about the dyslexic thinking style. We have much to learn from it.

The Learning People is a national network of Davis Dyslexia Programme Providers, an approach which works with the dyslexic thinking style to overcome difficulties with literacy, numeracy, handwriting, coordination and ADD. After the main programme, teachers and parents are frequently involved in a supporting role. Go to www.learningpeople.co.uk for more information.

* The 1000-strong poll highlights that only 5.8% of British adults are aware they have dyslexia, which is 4.2% under the widely accepted national average of 10%.

Primary review

We report on the interim findings of the Primary Review, based at Cambridge University, which seeks to examine the current system of education and assess the impact of government primary education initiatives of the last 20 years.

The Primary Review, funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and led by Professor Robin Alexander of Cambridge University, aims to gather evidence and stimulate debate about the future of primary education. Grounded in both national and international evidence, the first year of the Primary Review also included submissions and oral soundings from individuals and groups – including parents and children – and comprehensive surveys of published research, commissioned from leading national experts.

Shared concerns

On 12 October the review released Community Soundings, the first in a series of 32 interim publications, which reported on meetings with community representatives, employers, religious leaders, parents, governors, heads, teachers and children in different parts of England. It found a striking measure of agreement

on the main educational and social issues, with the majority of witnesses strongly supporting the work of primary schools and the *Every Child Matters* agenda. But it also identified ambivalence about the national literacy, numeracy and primary strategies. There was deep concern about the stress on young children, teachers and families caused by the national tests at ages seven and 11, and the resulting distortion of the primary curriculum. They were also worried about the condition of family life, the decline in mutual respect and social cohesion, the dominance of anti-social behaviour and materialism.

Following the release of Community Soundings, the review released three further reports from its research survey strand: *Standards and Quality in English Primary Schools Over Time: The national evidence*, by Peter Tymms and Christine Merrell of Durham University, *Quality and Standards in English Primary Education: The international evidence* by Chris Whetton,

Graham Ruddock and Liz Twist of NFER and *The Quality of Learning: Assessment alternatives for primary education*, by Wynne Harlen of Bristol University.

The reports argued that the national strategies have had a limited impact on reading standards, with gains in reading skills coming at the expense of pupils’ enjoyment. It found that primary education in England had seen large improvements in science, modest improvements in maths, and high standards in reading skills compared with other countries. But it had also seen an increase in test-induced stress among primary pupils, pressure on their teachers, and a narrowing of the primary curriculum in response to the perceived demands of the testing regime.

The next stage of the Primary Review is the *National Soundings*, where emerging issues from the different evidential strands will be explored at meetings with national organisations, both statutory and voluntary, and with teachers.