



# Dyslexia and prejudice

*We're systematically stigmatizing dyslexia, writes **Roger Broadbent***

## **Stigma and prejudice**

Not effectively evaluating the prevalence of dyslexia has left our education system in a perpetual state of trauma, and is a significant factor in explaining why nearly 50% of teachers leave the profession within 5 years of qualifying.

They enter schools where, for a whole host of reasons, the pupils are not diagnosed or supported for their dyslexia. This is evidenced by 80% of dyslexic children who leave education without a diagnosis (Source: British Dyslexia Association). This situation leads to discrimination against the 20% of pupils who are dyslexic, through no fault of their own. This is where the problem lies, not with the individuals with the difference, but rather those who refuse to recognise the condition.

As Albert Einstein said, "Everyone is a genius. But, if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid." Pupils with dyslexia find many educational tasks difficult for various reasons like issues with information processing, short term memory, being disorganized, and needing new information to be recapped, etc. Where a diagnosis has been carried out and an individual learning plan has been made (EHCP) then the pupil with dyslexia can thrive.

*"80% of dyslexic children leave school without a diagnosis"*

The repeated under-recognition of the scale of dyslexia, and its consequent under-resourcing, has led to a strategic shortfall in provision; allowing for the ideal conditions to perfectly propagate stigma and prejudice against dyslexia. Unfortunately, this result is costing so much for the dyslexic individual and the broader society.

## **The personal consequences of stigma**

The politicisation of education most recently by Michael Gove and Dominic Cummings has done nothing to improve the educational landscape for dyslexic learners. In fact the present antiquated 3 R's approach has added further barriers



*“High levels of anxiety, and a battered self esteem”*

to people with this learning difference. This governmental inertia towards dyslexia is unfortunately compounded by some Local Authorities who also do not prefer not to diagnose dyslexia using the following arguments: “We don’t want to label children”; “We use inclusivity practices in the classroom, and therefore, do not need diagnosis”; or simply, “We can’t afford to deal with it”.

What does all this mean for the dyslexic pupil? Generally, the person at the toe-end of this situation (undiagnosed/unsupported dyslexia), soon learns self doubt, gets used to high levels of anxiety, and a battered self esteem. Most of these children fall behind in class – struggling with the tasks their pals seem to do easily. Subliminally, these kids learn about the concept of stigma, which lasts a lifetime. Self Stigma, constantly undermines their self worth and value. This soon evolves into Enacted Stigma: “I’ve never been able to do that, why should I try?” Hence, dyslexics underachieve at school and then in the workplace. This unfortunate position is then compounded by Public Stigma. Teachers view dyslexic pupils as: lazy, stupid, problematic, or kids to be excluded.

Perhaps most disappointingly for dyslexia is Structural Stigma. This is where cultural norms and prejudice is embedded in institutional policy. This inhibits the schools ability to provide



■ We’re letting dyslexic pupils down

## About the author

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support. This can be demonstrated by schools not being able to assess children for dyslexia, or provide an EHCP. They are unable to give access to dyslexia technological support, or provide sufficient numbers of Teaching Assistants, especially where budgets are not commensurate to wholly support the need.

The personal consequence of this painful stigmatisation too often leads to negative behaviour patterns: tantrums, being bullied/being the bully, disrupting lessons, truancy, etc. This is a very well worn pathway resulting in a lifelong imprint with predictable psychological/emotional/physical outcomes for the person with dyslexia. So many of which are in no way positive for the individual or their community (drugs, depression, poverty, criminality, and poor health).

## Questioning our prejudices

The present management of dyslexia leaves millions of people without an assessment or understanding of this key difference within themselves. The manifestation of which was not their doing. In order to radically change the lived experience for a fifth of our community, we need to question our own prejudices towards difference. Frankly, we have to ask ourselves why we are prepared to tolerate the perpetuation of this unhelpful scenario.

Change will come with cost, but a much lower cost than constantly dealing with the negative ramifications of these unmet needs. In 2006, KPMG estimated the annual cost, to the government, of failing to educate basic learning skills at £2.5 billion per year. The option we have is to keep making the same prejudicial mistakes, a flawed situation where, “Every time we repeat the same mistake, the price goes up” (Paulo Coelho), or be brave and change what we do.

We need everyone to remember that we are all different, and agree that this is to be cherished. Our uniqueness, flaws an’ all, is who we are. **SEN**

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