

# Unlocking the potential of those with dyslexia

Julie Bennett

As professionals involved in developing, growing, thinking and learning, we may come across people, whether they are students, clients or colleagues, who are dyslexic. This article is written for those of us who have expertise in our own fields and may not be specialists in the field of dyslexia. It offers some insight into what dyslexia is and how best to enable the dyslexics we interact with.

## Dyslexia: The causes

There are a lot of theories about the causes and nature of dyslexia; many of them are soundly grounded in scientific research.

The main causal theories about dyslexia can be grouped into four categories – see table below.

## The dyslexia debate

There has been a lot of debate over many years about the definition, terminology, causes and nature of dyslexia. You may recall the Dispatches Programme, 'The Dyslexia Myth', which was aired

on the UK Channel 4 TV in 2005. In the programme, producer David Mills was said to be 'examining the chasm between evidence and educational practice'. Professor Julian Elliot of Durham University and Professor Maggie Snowling of the University of York appeared on the programme raising awareness of the discrepancy between definitions currently in use. They stated their concern about the mislabelling of poor readers (who had no specific learning difficulties) as dyslexic. This is a fair and valid concern. However the surrounding media hype diverted attention to the programme's title and the claims that 'dyslexia is a myth' and there ensued a heated debate which caught the attention of all involved in educating and nurturing dyslexic learners. Following the programme I had healthy and heated discussions with teachers and parents. One of their main concerns is that their grassroots evidence of dyslexia indicates that it is more than just a reading issue. The overriding concern from



**Julie Bennett** is a dyslexic herself with a background in education, including a Dip SpLD qualification. She works as a freelance dyslexia consultant and is the author of the *Dyslexia Pocketbook*

## Main causal theories about dyslexia

Theory	Phonological deficit	Auditory or visual processing deficits: Auditory rapid processing deficit / Visual magnocellular deficit	Speed of processing / Double Deficit hypothesis	Cerebellar deficit / Dyslexic automatization deficit
What does it mean?	Dyslexics have difficulties in linking sounds with symbols in reading and spelling	Dyslexics have difficulties in processing information coming in via ears or eyes	Dyslexics have difficulties in areas of both phonology and speed of processing	Dyslexics have difficulties with: balance, motor skills, phonological skills, rapid processing which are linked to central processing in the cerebellum
Names of some key researchers	Snowling NICHD Bradley & Bryant Galaburda Frith Gallagher et al Fisher et al	Stein Tallal Molfese Lovegrove Talcott et al Galaburda Menard & Rosen Livingstone, Rosen, Drislane & Galaburda Eden et al Stein & Walsh Tallal, Merzenich, Miller & Jenkins Van der Leij, Lyttinen & Zwarts	Wolf & Bowers Nicolson & Fawcett Van der Leij & van Daal Denckla & Rudel	Fawcett and Nicolson Fulbright et al Fawcett, Nicolson & Dean Finch et al

both teacher and parent groups is a desire to practically empower students to be more effective learners. Whatever the aetiology of dyslexia, the fact remains that there are still children in learning environments who are failing to learn effectively and this currently needs to be addressed.

My philosophy is that we should come to the issue of dyslexia using an 'inside out' and 'outside in' approach – taking into consideration both the research related to dyslexia and the practical difficulties dyslexics experience. The causes and definitions of dyslexia are important, and until we are working with a universal definition, we must not allow the debate to diminish good classroom practice.

We should rather take information from dyslexia research and the grassroots knowledge of dyslexic difficulties into consideration. These two important aspects, when set in the context of understanding about effective affective teaching and learning, should inform our practice. It is with this in mind that I have developed this working definition of dyslexia.

## A definition

Dyslexia can be seen as a learning difference which affects the acquisition of literacy skills in varying degrees. It is not a result of low intelligence. It is a combination of four key aspects: Differences, Weaknesses, Strengths and Self belief.

When we are making assessments of dyslexia we notice this combined pattern. Many 'compensated' dyslexics, have less of an issue with self belief.

## Differences

Dyslexia is a learning difference which may be caused by inherent deficits (see table opposite). In an educational setting it is called a 'specific learning difficulty'. I prefer the term 'specific learning difference'. This term embraces a learning styles/learning differences approach and lends itself to an inclusive view of equality and diversity.

## Weaknesses

Dyslexic weaknesses affect the acquisition of literacy and may include some or all of a combination of

difficulties with:

- Phonemic or Graphemic difficulty ie Dysphonetic / Dyseidetic
- Short-term memory
- Directionality difficulties
- Speed of processing
- Spoken language
- Word naming
- Visual perception and processing
- Visual disturbance
- Sequencing and automaticity
- Auditory perception and processing

## Strengths

In the dyslexic profile we do not just see weakness alone we also see strengths. Every person has strengths as well as weaknesses. Research points to the fact that in the dyslexic we see a pattern of certain types of strengths.

Awareness of these strengths will lead us towards ways of facilitating learning and growth for dyslexics.

## Self belief

Dyslexia is strongly connected to the element of self belief. Dyslexic people often have difficulty believing positive things about themselves as learners. This is related to the context that dyslexics function in and the patterns of belief that they develop. In some ways it would be easy to consider dyslexia as a social construct because if we all learned and worked and lived in a pre-literate or post-literate society there would be no need for us to read or write and no need for us to use the label 'dyslexia' (unless of course we wanted to identify the 'differently enabled'.) These difficulties also relate to the experience of a repeated failure cycle which is common in underachievers in academic settings, the sense of which can be carried beyond school.

## Empowering dyslexic learners

What to do when we don't know what to do.

If you consider someone might be dyslexic you can offer them connection!

Make a connection with them by hearing what they have to say and allowing them to be who they are. Offer a sense of 'social fit' by taking the approach that dyslexia is a difference in processing style rather than a medical condition. I believe we should use social

language to describe the issue of dyslexia rather than medical terminology. Dyslexics (particularly people whose dyslexia is unaddressed) often feel isolated with a sense that they do not 'fit' and so by offering them this view of human diversity you are offering the opportunity of a social fit.

You can offer a connection with others who might assist them to get an assessment and help to develop strategies to compensate for their specific difficulties by using their strengths. The table on the next page indicates where you can refer people whom you suspect to be dyslexic.

## Addressing the priorities

The greatest thing that we can offer dyslexics is a sense of empowerment, a sense of control and one of the ways we can do this by enabling them to become strategic learners for themselves. Many of the accelerated learning techniques are suitable strategies for dyslexic learners - they need to be adapted to meet the specific needs of the individuals concerned.

For children and students in an educational setting, it is of great importance to improve literacy and numeracy skills. However the issues of paramount importance for adult dyslexics are not necessarily reading, writing, spelling or numeracy. When asked about what is the most important thing for them to 'improve', the consensus of answers seems to be "memory", "feeling good about myself" and "understanding about dyslexia".

## 8 tips for working with dyslexic people

- 1 Find out **how** they do something rather than just **that** they do something 'well' or 'badly'.
- 2 Appeal to the dyslexic pattern of **strengths** by employing creative skills in communication, eg using metaphor or visualisation will generally grab the attention of dyslexics.
- 3 Present written information in a **dyslexia accessible** way. To make text dyslexia inclusive ensure that you:
  - Choose fonts 'sans serif' (without the curly bits), eg ariel, comic sans, verdana
  - Use plain English with active, multi-

Referrals for assistance in assessment and special provision / reasonable adjustments

Group	Refer to	Contact details	Assessments
School children and Parents	<b>Class teacher</b> then <b>SENCO</b> (Special Educational Needs Coordinator – each school has one) then <b>Head teacher</b> and <b>Parent Partnership</b> and <b>Local Dyslexia Association</b>	School School  School  Find a local parent support service at <a href="http://www.parentpartnership.org.uk">www.parentpartnership.org.uk</a> Local dyslexia associations can be found at <a href="http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk">www.bdadyslexia.org.uk</a>	1. Via school with dyslexia specialist teacher and local education authority psychology services. 2. Via private assessment by specialist dyslexia assessor 3. Via private assessment with Educational Psychologist
Students FE / HE	<b>Learning support department / student support department</b>  <b>Local Dyslexia Association</b>	College / University – Full time students may be eligible for the DSA (disabled students allowance) Local dyslexia associations can be found at <a href="http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk">www.bdadyslexia.org.uk</a>	Via learning support or private assessment as above
Adults in work	<b>Line manager</b> and or <b>Equality and diversity team / HR manager</b> then <b>Access to work</b> and <b>Local Dyslexia Association</b>	Access to work ( AtW) centres offer assessments for a needs assessment to be carried out at work (although this normally requires an existing proven assessment of dyslexia first.) this may result in a grant to assist with special aids to assist the dyslexic person to achieve in the workplace. <a href="http://www.jobcentre.gov.uk">www.jobcentre.gov.uk</a>	Private assessment with Educational Psychologist or specialist assessor – possibly with work place funding? (Unusual, most often funded privately)
Adults out of work	<b>Jobcentre plus</b> and <b>Local Dyslexia Association</b>	Jobcentre plus <a href="http://www.jobcentre.gov.uk">www.jobcentre.gov.uk</a> New Deal Scheme	Sometimes it's possible to receive specialist tuition under the New Deal Scheme

sensory language  
- Print dark text on pale paper  
For more ideas on producing dyslexia friendly material see the Dyslexia Pocketbook chapter 6. 'The 6 L's' (listed below)

- Lend them your **belief** in their **potential** and **success**.
- Give Three Views:** Overview, Preview and Review
  - Give an **overview** of the lesson/ session – this helps dyslexics gain a sense of time and place in the lesson.
  - Preview** activities: "At the end of the lesson I will be asking everyone to tell me what they think is the most important aspect of the industrial revolution." Or "at the end of the session I will be asking what your most important goal is." This gives dyslexics extra time to process the information, reflect and avoid panic.
  - Review** activities: summarise or recap the information you have covered in the session. This helps to embed the learning in long term memory.  
(You will find that these 'three views' are good for all learners and

particularly help dyslexic learners with some of the memory issues they face.)

- Offer **emotionally safe** learning climate, opportunities and relationships. One aspect of being 'emotionally safe' for dyslexics is that there needs to be a sense that 'failure' is a natural and integral part of the learning cycle rather than an end product of ineffective learning.
- Offer **reflection** time. This assists the dyslexic learner in processing the information they are learning and aids transfer to long-term memory.
- Teach them ways to become **strategic learners**. The difference between ineffective learners and effective learners is that they have developed strategies to learn.

Two adult dyslexics sum up the impact of working on strategy development in a course of dyslexia awareness and personal development:

*"It feels like I've been in a dead end and now I realise there are loads of possibilities."*  
*"I feel like I've been in the desert for*

*years wandering around, this strategy stuff is great."*

My belief is that people with dyslexia have the ability to become resourceful, strategic and successful learners and that the key to this is with them. With skill and sensitivity we can assist in helping them to unlock their own potential.

*"In oneself lies the whole world and if you know how to look and learn then the door is there and the key is in your hand."*  
J Krishnamurti from 'You are the world': 4th talk at Stanford University 1973

Which statement is best?  
**I am dyslexic!**  
**I have dyslexia!**

Be open minded! Both statements may say something about identity and how dyslexia is viewed. The importance is in the meaning that the individual attaches to the words!

**See over for resources and references**