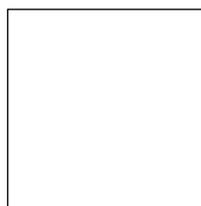


# Dyslexia – Seeking help to negotiate the maze

**H**AVING watched the educational progress of my dyslexic stepson over a long period, and having come into contact with others who also suffer at the hands of the ‘educational establishment’, I thought my experiences might be of interest to educational psychologists from whom parents seek help. I also write to seek views of those educational psychologists on whether they think the provision for dyslexics is adequate.

In dealing with schools (whether state or independent), colleges and universities, parents must be prepared for a situation where there is a great reluctance even to consider the problem as valid. Apparent willingness to help can be followed by lethargy, misunderstanding, obfuscation, stonewalling, and aggressive attitudes to the student.

The newcomer to the world of dyslexia will wonder why these difficulties arise. The attitude of the educational establishment to dyslexia has, in the past, been a manifestation of the ‘not invented here’ syndrome once rife in industry. The recognition of dyslexia as an identifiable disability, the development of diagnostic techniques and subsequent learning



**PETER FAIRE** describes his experiences as the parent of a dyslexic child.

strategies, were not something in which the educational establishment played a significant part.

There remains a lack of real knowledge, although a superficial use of jargon is all too apparent. This misleads parents, giving a false sense of security. Many teachers readily agree that they know nothing about dyslexia. Usually they say that it was not covered in their training.

## Psychologists – An unenviable role?

When psychologists began to recognise dyslexia as a genuine developmental syndrome, many within education still took the view that this was a parental fad to excuse the idle and the underachiever. I have heard that within the last 10 years a senior official in a county education authority asked a senior educational psychologist ‘When will this fad dry up?’

Educational psychologists in local authority service have an unenviable role – most do recognise dyslexia, but they can do little to help. A year’s ration of an educational psychologist’s time to a school may be insufficient for a single thorough assessment. Educational psychologists do not occupy the top posts in the Education Department; though they can be quite senior, they really have little influence on overall policy, which is determined by the administrative elite.

A further complication is a minority of psychologists who do not believe in the reliability and validity of IQ testing, or even the existence of ‘intelligence’ as a useful concept at all. With this view it becomes impossible to ascertain the ‘discrepancy’ between measures of ability and attainment. There are also those who still do not acknowledge dyslexia as a valid syndrome.

LEAs forbid their staff to criticise them publicly, thus limiting their ability to act on behalf of a child. Experience, also informed anecdote, shows that comments and criticisms made internally are simply ignored or regarded as troublemaking. The LEA educational psychologist may not contribute to an open debate that would help inform parents.

## Continuing difficulties

Through much of my stepson’s secondary education he was known by staff as ‘The Wrecker’. Unable to keep up with classwork he developed strategies to cope, engaging his teachers in unplanned discussions, thereby ‘wrecking’ their lessons. It is to his credit that despite the animosity he continued trying to learn by discussion.

After continuing difficulties in his mid-teens his mother decided to have him fully assessed and approached Dr David Cowell, a Chartered Psychologist, privately. At this stage he was taking GCSEs. We were amazed at Dr Cowell’s diagnosis – a very high IQ combined with a low level of literacy: a ‘classic’ dyslexic.

On enquiry, the original LEA Educational Psychology Department admitted to the existence of a file but despite it having been seen by his former LEA remedial unit teacher (we had kept in touch) only a few weeks previously, we were advised that ‘unfortunately’ it had been ‘lost in a move to new premises’.

The same teacher, after retirement, told us that ‘no child was ever referred for assessment by the head of his middle school unless their parents made a fuss’. The headteacher did not acknowledge the existence of learning difficulties and the LEA did not acknowledge the term ‘dyslexia’. (At this time, the 1981 Education Act had not been fully

## TYPICAL VIEWS?

‘He is a procrastinator. I acknowledge he has a problem – he is socially deprived, coming from a single parent family’ (a middle school headteacher).

‘He is only here under sufferance because you [his mother] made such a nuisance of yourself’ (the headteacher of an LEA remedial unit).

‘He has reached a safe level’ (an LEA educational psychologist after three terms part-time attendance at the remedial unit. When asked what this meant, his mother was told that there was no requirement to divulge that information to a parent. No further help was provided).

‘We have never had a dyslexic in the school before’ (the headteacher of an independent boarding school in the mid-1990s).

implemented.) His mother was advised only that he 'lacked confidence', exacerbated by her being an 'over-anxious mother'.

Subsequently his mother had a chance meeting with the teacher from his last year in first school. This teacher had also retired but remembered my stepson very well. His mother was aghast to learn that the teacher was very much aware that he had learning problems. 'It was not policy for assessment to be carried out in first school. However, a full report was sent with him to middle school advising assessment for reading and writing difficulties.' Presumably because of the attitude of the head at middle school, nothing was done.

A requirement to acknowledge the existence of the disability has been forced on the educational establishment by the 1981 Education Act and the activity of pressure groups. However, acceptance is slow and grudging. Throughout the education system there is a determined resistance to change. For example, an examination board, having granted concessions for A-levels, changed its rules in the middle of the two-year course and some concessions were withdrawn. The response from the college was that 'they had a good relationship with the examination board and were not prepared to jeopardise it by contesting the decision'. Which raised the question: Whose interest were they serving? The board would not communicate with us, only the college; the college was not prepared to communicate with the board. Stalemate.

With the full support of Dr Cowell we sought a judicial review. The day before the hearing the board yielded and paid our costs. Had we to rely on an LEA psychologist, in the light of the stance taken by the college we doubt whether that support would have been forthcoming.

Problems remained later on in the educational system. Before arriving at university my stepson completed a questionnaire that included a space to alert them to his dyslexia. There was no attempt to follow up the information they had requested, and when difficulties became evident he was castigated for not having alerted them.

Dr Cowell subsequently provided the university with a fresh assessment. He visited my stepson's tutor on campus to offer assistance. Nothing was done, the assessment ignored. Nine months and a great deal of correspondence later, the university declared that Dr Cowell's views were immaterial because he was not on

their approved list of educational psychologists – even though it was known to them that he was a highly qualified Chartered Psychologist from whom they had received a valid report provided at our expense.

Eventually the university had my stepson assessed by a much less qualified person (on their list as 'approved') who had never heard of the Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT), didn't believe in IQ testing and used a test designed for children up to 16 years of age as part of the assessment. My stepson was by now 23. Dr Cowell's assessment had been carried out on an adult scale.

### **Postscript**

You may think that my stepson has been very unlucky. However, I know of many similar cases. I believe that the satisfactory end to this particular saga – a second class BSc honours degree for my stepson – was due in no small way to the help of an experienced educational psychologist over a period of nearly eight years, especially so since we were fortunate in having the same person throughout.

Few parents realise that they can retain their own Chartered Psychologist: I believe this option should be made clear to them, the LEA refunding the fee. Given the average daily rate of an LEA educational psychologist it is not impossible that the LEA would save money. A more enlightened and less obstructive attitude on the part of the educational establishment could have resulted in professional help from the outset and would certainly have alleviated much of the stress on both child and parents.

I am well aware that funding for special teaching is an issue. However, the difficulties I have recounted here relate largely to attitude. The educational establishment can appear arrogant, and parents and their children are exposed to a lottery. My experience highlights the paramount importance of continuity and my contention that by the time the parent has reached the top of the learning curve, education is almost over. Parents are at the mercy of the establishment and need the help of psychologists in negotiating the maze.

### **Acknowledgement**

I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Dr David Cowell, Chartered Psychologist, who has made many helpful suggestions and has himself contributed to the text.

■ *Peter Faire lives in Taunton, Somerset.  
Tel/fax: 01823 288182.*