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# Dyslexia and Loss of the Learning Dialogue

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# Educational Psychology

Cognition and Learning,  
Individual Differences and Motivation



Jonathon E. Larson  
Editor

NOVA

# **EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY: COGNITION AND LEARNING, INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES AND MOTIVATION**

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**EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY:  
COGNITION AND LEARNING,  
INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES AND  
MOTIVATION**

**JONATHON E. LARSON**  
**EDITOR**

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*Chapter 7*

## **DYSLEXIA AND LOSS OF THE LEARNING DIALOGUE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS) (Endler & Parker, 1999) identifies three main behaviors in response to stress – trying hard to perform, blaming oneself or others for one’s failure, and avoiding exposure altogether.

It has been shown that, amongst pupils with dyslexia, these three behaviors are associated with different genders (Alexander-Passe, 2004a, 2006, in press) and different levels of self-esteem and depression (Alexander-Passe, 2004a, 2006) – in particular:

- Trying hard to perform – mainly males, gaining academic self-esteem from teacher approval
- Avoiding exposure – mainly females, shielding overall self-esteem
- Blaming – mainly females, losing personal self-esteem and showing depression.

As it happens, these three behaviors are opposites to the three that make up the simplest possible, basic learning dialogue (Zimmer, 2001; Zimmer & Chapman, 2004; Zimmer, 2008):

- Listening receptively rather than blaming, so as to invite thinking
- Showing comprehension rather than just trying hard, so as to invite listening in return, and
- Sharing one’s own thinking rather than avoiding exposure, so as to invite comprehension.

Evidence from the dyslexia literature shows that the three CISS behaviors are common amongst pupils with dyslexia, indicating that dyslexic pupils are often disengaged from the basic learning dialogue.

It was hypothesized that this non-engagement is due to teachers themselves not offering the basic learning dialogue.

Accordingly, the dyslexia literature was analyzed for reports of teachers' not offering receptive listening, or comprehension of pupils' thinking, or their own thinking in response.

Reports fitting this description were found in unfortunate abundance. In particular, teachers of dyslexic pupils were found often to impose:

- Rote teaching in place of their own thinking
- Judgmental discounting in place of receptive listening, and
- Humiliation for failure in place of comprehension.

It is concluded that learning by dyslexic pupils is at risk from teaching that does not support the basic learning dialogue.

An implication is that, for support of dyslexic pupils, care for the learning dialogue itself may be what matters most.

## **BACKGROUND**

The Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS) was designed by Norman Endler and James Parker (1999) to investigate three main types of coping – Task-oriented, Emotion-oriented, and Avoidance-oriented. The behaviors involved can be summarized respectively as:

- Trying hard to perform
- Blaming oneself or others for one's failure, or
- Avoiding exposure altogether.

Alexander-Passe (Alexander-Passe, 2004a, 2006, in press) used the CISS to investigate the responses of teenagers with dyslexia to the stress that it causes. It was found that the three CISS behaviors were associated with different genders (Alexander-Passe, 2006, in press), and with different levels of self-esteem and depression (Alexander-Passe, 2004a, 2006):

- Trying hard to perform – mainly males, gaining academic self-esteem from teacher approval
- Avoiding exposure – mainly females, shielding overall self-esteem
- Blaming – mainly females, losing personal self-esteem and showing depression.

As it happens, these three behaviors are direct opposites to the three responses that make up the basic learning dialogue. This dialogue consists of three exchanges, as shown in Figure 1, where the circles represent Person A in the dialogue and the squares represent Person B. In principle, either person can initiate the dialogue.

It can be shown that this basic learning dialogue is the simplest possible learning dialogue (Zimmer & Chapman, 2004). Its three components are essentially the three behaviors that Carl Rogers identified as the core components of supportive communication (Rogers, 1962).

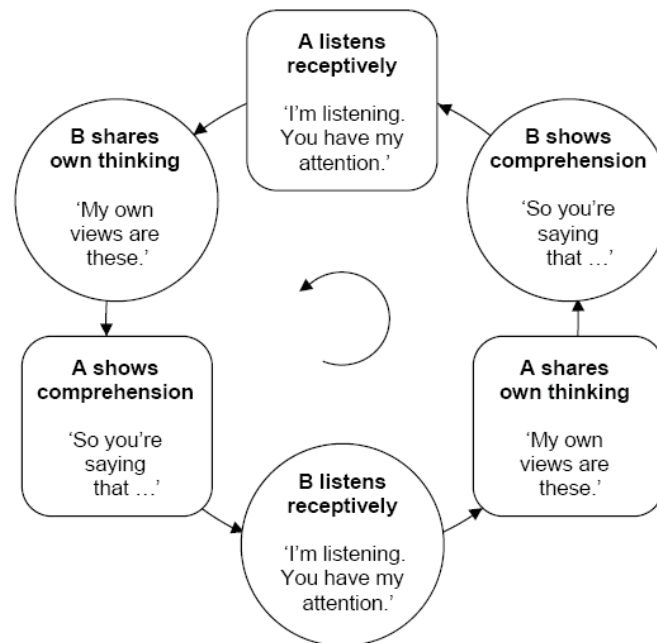


Figure 1. The basic learning dialogue between Persons A and B.

Their specific sequence results when the generic action-learning cycle is applied to interpersonal communication (Zimmer, 2001; 2008).

Starting at the top or the bottom, this diagram says that two people both need to listen receptively, show comprehension and share their own thinking, if a dialogue between them is to take place.

This is especially true for pupils, who have much less power to initiate such a dialogue than do their teachers. The diagram says that teachers really do need to listen receptively, show comprehension and share their own thinking, if their pupils are to be expected to do the same. In other words, pupils need to receive what their teachers should be providing.

What the teenaged dyslexic pupils in Alexander-Passe's study (2004a, 2006) were doing collectively, amounted to a direct opposite:

- Trying hard to perform – gaining academic self-esteem from teacher approval instead of showing real comprehension
- Avoiding exposure – shielding their self-esteem instead of sharing their thinking
- Blaming themselves or others – losing personal self-esteem and showing depression instead of receptively listening.

Although the last two of these opposites may be intuitively obvious, the first may be less so. It says that trying hard to perform – often encouraged by teachers – doesn't count as part of the learning dialogue. This is because actual comprehension makes hard trying unnecessary – task performance follows easily from comprehension, and does not involve the frustrations that continued hard trying can produce.

This may be easier to see if the entire reciprocal dynamic of the learning dialogue is included. The teenaged dyslexic pupils in the Alexander-Passe studies were found to be:



- Trying hard to perform, gaining academic self-esteem from teacher approval – instead of showing comprehension, which they can only do if they feel informed by their teachers’ thinking
- Avoiding exposure, shielding their self-esteem – instead of sharing their own thinking, which they can only do if they feel receptively listened to by their teachers
- Blaming themselves or others, losing personal self-esteem and showing depression – instead of receptively listening, which they can only do if they feel accurately comprehended by their teachers.

In other words, these dyslexic pupils collectively were trying, avoiding and blaming instead of engaging in the basic learning dialogue – which they can engage in only if they feel offered it by their teachers.

This result raised three questions:

- Is loss of the basic learning dialogue common for pupils with dyslexia?
- If so, are they being given something else instead?
- If so, how can the basic learning dialogue be restored?

This chapter offers answers to these three questions in turn.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW – IS LOSS OF THE BASIC LEARNING DIALOGUE COMMON FOR PUPILS WITH DYSLEXIA?**

The literature was examined for evidence of the three CISS behaviors amongst dyslexic pupils – trying, avoiding and blaming – which were identified as opposites to the basic learning dialogue. Considerable evidence was found.

### **Trying Hard Instead of Showing Comprehension**

The literature shows considerable evidence of dyslexic pupils trying hard to perform – gaining self-esteem from teacher approval – instead of showing comprehension. It can lead to frustration.

#### ***Trying Hard***

Some pupils ‘buckle down’ and work very hard to overcome their problems, especially by focusing their energies on subjects in which they can excel. This earns them teacher approval (Riddick, 1996).

There is a downside, however. Pupils who use hard trying to overcome their difficulties can sometimes do well enough to look as though they don’t need support in class. Their apparent success then works against them, since they can spend all night doing work that their peers need only a few hours to complete. Indeed, as found in an interview study by Alexander-Passe (2004a), they are likely to have had private tutoring for their dyslexia since primary school.

### ***Becoming Frustrated***

There is a further downside. It is common for this group to be highly intelligent, but to achieve only to the mid-level of their peers. This may look sufficient for their teachers, but they themselves can feel that they are not reaching their potential and can become frustrated in class (Alexander-Passe, in press)

Indeed, the children's frustration can become enormous. Thomson (1996) notes that it is important for teachers to recognize the frustration that dyslexics feel in classrooms, because of their difficulties in expressing their ideas in written form, and because of their having to work considerably harder than their peers to attain the same achievement level.

Ryan (1994) has commented that no one really knows how hard a dyslexic child is trying, and that each year their peers surpass them in reading skills, their frustration increases.

### **Avoiding Exposure Instead of Sharing Their Thinking**

The literature also shows considerable evidence of dyslexic pupils avoiding exposure – shielding their self-esteem – instead of sharing their thinking.

As shown below, when trying doesn't work, pupils ask for help. Some bypass trying and simply start with asking for help. Either way, they often are ignored. Some then try attention-seeking, but get reprimanded. Then they start to avoid specific tasks. Then they avoid school altogether.

### ***Asking for Help but Being Ignored***

Typically, dyslexic pupils are not identified as having dyslexia, so they don't receive the help that they need when they need it most (Riddick, 1996). Local educational authorities usually require a reading deficit of at least two years before assessment is even considered. OFSTED (1999) found that deficits of more than four years were not uncommon.

This frustrating delay can affect the children's relationships with their parents, their siblings and their peers (Riddick, 1996). Importantly, it can create disaffection towards learning, teachers and school.

### ***Seeking Attention but Being Reprimanded***

Nevertheless, most children with dyslexia don't give up. As a result of their parents' beliefs, they feel that they should go to school to learn (Edwards, 1994). Experience suggests that they want very much to learn, and that they will stay at school even in the face of adversity from teachers (Alexander-Passe, in press; Riddick, 1996; Edwards, 1994).

So when children with dyslexia can't get the help that they seek, they typically resort to seeking attention (Fontana, 1995). If attention isn't forthcoming from their teachers, then they seek it from their peers by clowning around in class (Edwards, 1994).

According to Fontana (1995), such attention-seeking is:

not a deliberate attempt to create problems for teachers ... but a conditioned response associated with the need for attention ... and is recognized as one of the major causes of classroom problems (Fontana, 1995, p. 358).

Molnar and Lindquist (1989) offer a complementary interpretation. They found that pupils also might disrupt a class because they interpret the class work as threatening and use attention-seeking to protect their self-esteem. This is an early form of avoidance.

### *Avoiding Specific Tasks*

When attention-seeking doesn't work, pupils often turn to avoidance. Indeed, some start there. These strategies deflect attention from low academic ability and under-performance. Ryan (1994) notes that these strategies are more related to anxiety and confusion than to apathy. They protect self-esteem.

Typically, dyslexic pupils start by avoiding specific words. For example, Pollock and Waller (1994) found that pupils with dyslexia were perceived as immature in their choice of words and mode of expression, since they preferred to stick to words that they knew how to spell. If they spelt a more complicated word wrong, they would be criticized as if careless. Being conscientious, they preferred to look immature (Alexander-Passe, 2004a, 2004b, in press).

Pupils with dyslexia also tend to write less. One parent noted, 'Mandy writes a lot less than other children, because she takes twice as long to write it' (Mosely, 1989).

Some pupils progress to avoiding starting work in the first place (Riddick, 1996).

Out of the 45 pupils studied by Riddick, avoidance in one or another of these three forms featured in the coping strategies of 35 of them (Riddick, 1996).

### *Avoiding School Altogether*

When avoiding specific tasks doesn't work, some pupils avoid school altogether. Dyslexia and truancy have been linked by Klein (1998), by Svensson, Jacobson & Lundberg (2001) and by Salford City Council (2004). Salford notes:

There are many reasons why young people play truant. Sometimes they are having difficulties with their school work and are feeling discouraged. In some cases a young person may have a learning difficulty (e.g. dyslexia) that has not been recognized.

The Audit Commission (2002a) were very concerned about the significant over-representation of these pupils in national non-attendance and exclusion statistics, noting the Social Exclusion Unit's (1999) findings of clear links between poor attendance and under-achievement. Looking for the cause, Gardner (1994) found that pupils with dyslexia are prone to withdraw from situations in which they perceive that they cannot cope (e.g. spelling tests). This withdrawal can be from specific lessons or for whole days.

As mentioned above, though, pupils with dyslexia often really want to be at school (Edwards, 1994). Either they want to be there to learn for themselves, or they feel that they ought to be there for others (social conscience). Then they find the frustration intolerable. From this conflict situation, they find ways out that involve personal cost.

Some dyslexic pupils deliberately create painful situations that get them out of school. They feign illness, or acquire deliberate injuries (Edwards, 1994). For example, one 12-year-old used to get into fights with larger kids or other dyslexic kids to get off school. The injuries were for mutual avoidance reasons, not anger, and usually meant two to three days off school.

Some especially conscientious pupils with dyslexia, who are not willing to truant, develop symptoms which then keep them out of school. 'I used to pretend I was sick, make

myself puke, and say I don't wanna go today', one dyslexic teenager commented (Edwards, 1994, p. 110).

Sometimes the symptoms are psychosomatic. One teenager developed a pain in his right leg requiring crutches. To him it felt like a rare disease. The hospital doctor concluded that he was dyslexic but intelligent, was therefore frustrated, and that the frustration was expressed as pain in the right thigh, which occurred about once every six months and could last 10 days at a time (p. 39).

Although all this avoiding shields pupils' self-esteem, it represents a sad loss of learners who begin with enthusiasm and end by turning away.

### **Blaming Instead of Listening Receptively**

The literature shows that many pupils who are unable to shield their self-esteem through avoiding, lose their self-esteem and sink into helpless blaming. Some start there. Then they go one of two ways. If they blame themselves, they turn their unhappiness inward, and withdraw and hide. If they blame others, they project their unhappiness outward, and become aggressive and turn to crime.

#### ***Blaming of Self – Withdrawing and Hiding***

In Butkowsky and Willows' study (1980), average to good readers attributed their success to their ability, but poor readers tended to blame themselves by attributing failure to their own incompetence (a low sense of approval of themselves), while attributing success to external factors such as luck.

In Butkowsky and Willows' study (1980), those who blamed themselves for their failure then gave up.

Nearly half of Riddick's sample (1996, p. 147) openly avoided telling their friends and other pupils that they had dyslexia. They had a low sense of approval from peers. Reasons for not telling included:

'I don't want to tell anyone, because I think they'll tell everyone else, and then everybody might tease me.... Some people I do tell, some I don't. Most of them would just make fun of me... Only my best friend knows.'

#### ***Blaming of Others – Becoming Aggressive and Turning to Crime***

Morgan and Klein (2001, p. 61) found that lack of understanding at school and at home (a low sense of approval from parents), and bullying by teachers and peers, can lead to violent reactions. One dyslexic tutor recalled her own experiences at school (as a dyslexic) – she actually stabbed a teacher's hand with the sharp end of a compass, because 'she called me stupid once too often'.

Van der Stoel (1990) likewise found links among dyslexics, between aggression in class and being mocked in class for having problems when reading out loud. Critchley (1968), Jorm, Share, Maclean & Matthews (1986), Rosenthal (1973), Rutter, Tizard & Whitmore (1970), and Pianta & Caldwell (1990) all found correlations between acted-out antisocial aggression and problems in reading. According to Van der Stoel (1990) one dyslexic commented about school:

‘I was forever being told off and was the laughing stock of the class. Turns at reading aloud were a disaster. ... I’m quite a spitfire and my self-control went completely.’

Edwards (1994, p. 139) noticed in a sample of severe dyslexics that they all exhibited behavioral manifestations from their experiences at school. Most in fact were hostile and disruptive towards teachers, and showed aggression and cheekiness as early as primary school. Examples of these acts ranged from ‘sabotaging the ladies loo as revenge on teachers and hitting other pupils’, through ‘destruction of school property’ to ‘fights with other pupils’.

Edwards also found that this behavior was often linked to dislike of the teacher’s methods, boredom with the subject being taught, inability to do the class task required and conflict with the class teacher.

Such aggression in turn can lead to delinquency and crime (Morgan, 1996). Alm & Andersson (1995), Antonoff (2000), Kirk & Reid (2001) and Morgan (1996) all have identified very high percentages of dyslexic adults and young people among offenders. These studies from England, the USA and Sweden suggest that 30%–50% of the prison population in their countries are dyslexic. By contrast with the general population, in England the British Dyslexia Association (2006) estimates that between 4% and 10% of the general population are dyslexic. In America the International Dyslexia Association (2000) estimates 15%.

There are suggestions that not only recognized dyslexics can feel devalued at school, but also unrecognized dyslexics who are receiving insufficient or inappropriate support, and that this is a major reason why they turn to deviant behavior. Peer & Reid (2001, p. 5) suggest that ‘frustration leads very often to antisocial or deviant behavior’ amongst dyslexics, especially amongst those with low self-esteem.

Morgan’s (1996) study of delinquent/criminal dyslexics found that, when pupils with dyslexia fail to keep up at school, their self-esteem drops as they begin to question their academic abilities, and they develop inferiority complexes. Nearly all of Morgan’s dyslexic (criminal) sample felt that they were not given appropriate remedial support at school. By the time they reached their teens they voted with their feet, played truant and mixed with delinquents. Similar findings concerning dyslexics and crime have been found by Devlin (1995). This would suggest that many young dyslexics could be prevented from drifting into crime by better support at school.

The Dyspel Pilot Project (Klein, 1998), which identified dyslexia among both young and old adult offenders, found that only 5% had been diagnosed as dyslexic at school. Many of the dyslexics were serious truants or had left school as early as 11 or 12 years old. Others had been excluded or sent to special schools for behavioral problems, without their specific learning difficulties being addressed. The Project found dyslexic offenders speaking of distressing memories of school, including frequent public humiliation in front of their peers, and including their violent outbursts in response to frustration at not learning and at being mocked or humiliated.

A study for the Home Office (Davis, Caddick, Lyon, Doling, Hasler, Webster, Reed & Ford, 1997) on offenders under probation supervision found a common life story amongst those seeking literacy provision (N=12 male offenders). Most came from families where there was little encouragement to develop literacy, and in general there was poor quality family support. All left school before exams to avoid certain failure, ‘although in reality they had ceased participating much earlier’ (p. 28).

All this helpless blaming of self or others represents a depressing loss of personal self-esteem – the kind due to approval from self, parents and peers – amongst pupils who, if their disability had been recognized, might have done much better.

### SUMMARY OF LITERATURE REVIEW

This review of the literature has shown that pupils with dyslexia commonly display loss of the basic learning dialogue, and display instead the CISS stress-coping behaviors of trying hard, avoiding exposure and blaming.

In particular, they:

- Try hard to perform tasks – gaining academic self-esteem from teacher approval instead of showing real comprehension, so eventually become frustrated
- Avoid exposure – shielding their self-esteem instead of sharing their thinking, so effectively drop out
- Blame themselves or others – losing personal self-esteem and showing depression instead of receptively listening, so withdraw or turn to crime.

So the question arises, Why is this happening? What can explain this common loss of the basic learning dialogue? Are dyslexic pupils being given something else instead?

### QUESTION – IS IT COMMON FOR DYSLEXIC PUPILS TO BE GIVEN SOMETHING OTHER THAN THE BASIC LEARNING DIALOGUE?

An answer to the question of why the basic learning dialogue is being lost, can be sought by considering who initiates it. Although the dialogue is reciprocal, pupils have much less power to initiate it than do teachers.

When teachers initiate the basic learning dialogue with sharing of their own thinking (in order to set the topic), the dialogue looks like this:

- sharing of their own thinking, to invite pupils' comprehension
- listening receptively, to invite pupils' sharing of *their* own thinking
- showing comprehension of pupil's thinking, in order to invite pupils' receptive listening in return.

- 
- (more sharing of teachers' own thinking ....)

So the question becomes, Do pupils with dyslexia normally receive these three invitations to participate in the learning dialogue?

## METHOD – LITERATURE ANALYSIS

Analysis of the literature, as shown below, reveals that pupils with dyslexia often are given the very opposite of the basic learning dialogue. They are given:

- rote instruction, instead of the sharing of thinking that would invite their comprehension
- judgmental discounting, instead of the receptive listening that would invite their sharing of their own thinking
- humiliation for failure, instead of the comprehension of their thinking that would invite their receptive listening.

### **Rote Instruction Instead of Teachers Sharing Their Thinking**

Teachers often shunt dyslexic pupils into classes of mainly lower-ability non-dyslexics (Ireson, Hallam, Mortimore, Hack, Clark & Plewis, 1999). This in turn can affect the opportunities that they have within classrooms (Ireson *et al.*, 1999; Boaler, Dylan & Brown, 2000).

#### ***Literacy Difficulties Confused with Low Intellectual Ability***

According to OFSTED (2003), dyslexics are streamed into the lowest-ability classroom groups because of their literacy difficulties, not their intellectual abilities. There, they normally are taught with more repetition, less discussion, and more practical activities (Ireson *et al.*, 1999).

Fawcett (1995) has noted that such rote teaching is something that dyslexics find difficult to cope with. Riddick (1996, p. 44) has commented that:

... if teachers have little understanding of the learning problems involved in dyslexia, it will make it difficult for them to set appropriate goals.

Indeed, OFSTED (2003) has reported that:

... across the lessons seen in mainstream and special schools, too much learning was not as effective as it ought to be, mainly because pupils worked in ways that did not stimulate or challenge them, they were not given sufficient responsibility or there was not enough emphasis on study skills in the context of the course.

Worse, these pupils get weaker teachers – thus locking in their disadvantage. For example, Boaler *et al.* (2000) found that schools had a tendency to allocate teachers with less experience and fewer qualifications to lower sets, and that the best teachers continued to be allocated to the ablest pupils – despite evidence that high quality teaching is more beneficial to lower attaining pupils. Likewise, OFSTED (2003) reported teaching that suffered from low expectations, lack of pace and insufficient challenge.

A common consequence of such streaming is the development of disaffection. Studies of ability-grouped classrooms (Boaler *et al.*, 2000, p. 5) have found that students in the lowest

ability groups 'felt disaffected on account of low expectations of their capability and limited opportunity for attainment'. For example:

'Sir treats us like babies, puts us down, makes us copy stuff off the board, puts all the answers like we don't know anything. And we're not going to learn from that, 'cause we've got to think for ourselves' (Year 6) (Boaler *et al.*, 2000, p. 6).

This is a tragedy, since dyslexics are cognitively better served by sharing of thinking by both teachers and other pupils, especially in oral discussions (Riddick, 1996). Since dyslexics commonly excel orally, removing intelligent discussion from the classroom limits their ability to show their intelligence.

For higher IQ dyslexics, this means that they are not being stretched academically, and so are not being given the 'access to the whole curriculum' that is their legal due.

### ***Access to the Wider Curriculum Denied***

According to the Code of Practice (Department for Education and Employment, 2001, p. 13):

Children with special educational needs should be offered full access to a broad, balanced and relevant education.

Yet, according to the Audit Commission (2002a, p. 26):

Some children with special educational needs are regularly excluded from aspects of the curriculum, usually as a result of judgments made by teaching staff about the suitability of certain lessons.

Likewise, Ireson *et al.* (1999, p. 10) report that:

In structured ability classes ... teachers reported a tendency for lower ability classes to have less access to the curriculum ....

Indeed, there is strong evidence that pupils with special educational needs miss national curriculum and non-national curriculum subjects, though not necessarily the same subjects consistently (Porter and Lacey, 1999). Exclusion from trips (63% of cases, as noted by teachers) also seems to be a common experience for pupils with learning difficulties (Porter and Lacey, 1999).

In short, pupils with dyslexia are routinely given rote instruction, instead of the sharing of thinking that would invite their comprehension.

Worse, being treated as if they are intellectually inadequate, leads to their being labeled as such and judgmentally discounted.

### **Judgmental Discounting Instead of Receptive Listening**

Teachers make judgments about their pupils' abilities. In many cases (Hargreaves, Hester & Mellor, 1975; Cooper, 1993), such judgments are made on the basis of feedback from other teachers, and of opinions about the pupil's parents and siblings – e.g. troublesome older



siblings. A common basis for such judgments is denial of the existence of dyslexia, which leads to labeling of dyslexic pupils as inadequate, which in turn can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy – as described below.

### ***The Existence of Dyslexia Denied***

A major form of judgmental discounting of pupils with dyslexia, starts with denial of the existence of dyslexia itself. Peer and Reid (2001) have noted that there is an issue about this, causing much difficulty for all concerned (dyslexic pupil, parent and teacher).

Some teachers are overtly unreceptive to requests for help from parents who are concerned about their child possibly having dyslexia. Dewhirst's (1995) study of teachers' perceptions of dyslexia, frequently revealed conversations like the one in Box 1.

Similarly, a head teacher responded to the question 'Is my child dyslexic?' with:

He's not dyslexic – he's just a silly little boy who won't concentrate for more than ten seconds. What he needs is a good kick up the backside! (Fawcett, 1995, p. 10).

#### **Box 1. Excerpt from Dewhirst's study of teachers' perceptions of dyslexia**

Interviewer:	Have you done any specialist training in the area of dyslexia?
Teacher:	Oh God, that! No, no I haven't (pulls a face). Why?
Interviewer:	Why did you pull a face when I asked you that?
Teacher:	Well...I mean, it's one of those things that has been conjured up by 'pushy parents' for their thick or lazy children; quite often both ...
Interviewer:	What exactly do you know about dyslexia?
Teacher:	Well, basically they can't read or write. It is supposed to be about problems in communication, isn't it? Generally it's children who are either too lazy or haven't got the brains and their parents can't hack it.
<i>Later on...</i>	
Interviewer:	If you haven't any training in the field of dyslexia, do you think really that you should be making judgements about it?
Teacher:	Yeah, it's a gut feeling you know, when you have been teaching as long as I have, you get to know which kids have problems and which kids are pulling the wool over your eyes.

### ***A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy***

Cohen & Manion (1995) note that it is natural for teachers to form different attitudes and expectations of their pupils in this way, but also that these expectations need to be assessed regularly. If not, then the pupil may get caught in a 'vicious circle of failure' (p. 269), i.e. a self-fulfilling prophecy. Good & Brophy (1974) have spelt out this self-fulfilling prophecy, and how it affects the interactions of teachers and pupils in the classroom, as in Box 2.

The result is that pupils with dyslexia aren't listened to receptively, because the teacher doesn't expect to hear intelligent thinking.

It might be hoped that dynamics like those above would be a thing of the past, but the evidence suggests otherwise. In a respected teacher-training manual, Fontana (1995) suggests that dyslexic pupils starting school may find that they receive less teacher approval and praise than other pupils. The Audit Commission (2002a) noted unwelcoming attitudes of some

**Box 2. Good & Brophy's self-fulfilling prophecy**

The teacher expects specific behaviour from particular children.

Because of his different expectations, he behaves differently towards these different children.

The teacher's treatment tells each child what behaviours and achievements the teacher expects, and this in turn affects the child's self-concept, achievement motivation and level of aspiration.

If the teacher's treatment is consistent over time, and if the child does not actively resist it or change in some way, it will tend to shape the child's achievements and behaviour.

With time, the child's achievements and behaviour will conform more and more closely to what the teacher originally expected.

schools towards pupils with special educational needs – which includes dyslexic pupils – and their exclusion from aspects of school life. Outright hostility was encountered by parents in some schools (even in the school's special educational needs department), to getting their child assessed in order to obtain specialist tuition (Audit Commission, 2002b).

Riddick (1996) suggests that the teachers who are most hostile or critical of the concept of dyslexia are the ones who are least likely to read about it or get training about it. In other words, they don't know that they don't know. Indeed, many think that dyslexia is just a figment of the imagination of ambitious, unrealistic middle-class parents.

It might be hoped, with dyslexia now formally recognized in the special educational needs Code of Practice (DfEE, 2001) and a mandatory element of teacher training, that more of the teaching profession will gain the knowledge necessary in order to assist parents and their children in getting specialist assistance when and where needed. However, a study by one of the authors indicates that this is happening only slowly, if at all (Alexander-Passe, 2004b).

In other words, pupils with dyslexia are routinely given judgmental discounting, instead of the receptive listening that would invite their sharing of their thinking.

Worse, many are not just discounted, but are actually humiliated.

**Humiliation for Failure Instead of Comprehension of Pupils' Thinking**

According to Edwards (1994) and Eade (1999), evidence suggests that pupils with dyslexia at mainstream schools often experience humiliation and censure from teachers and peers. This can shut down their receptiveness not only toward their teachers, but toward school entirely.

### ***Humiliation from Teachers***

Riddick (1996) notes that pupils with dyslexia – and their mothers – have been ignored in schools, shown insensitivity and non-understanding, branded as useless and generally humiliated.

She notes that there is particular concern amongst dyslexic pupils, about public indicators of their difficulties, e.g. finishing last or being required to read aloud. In particular, cases are numerous of pupils with dyslexia being given reading books set by their reading age rather than by their actual chronological age (Edwards, 1994). This causes not only great embarrassment to pupils in front of their peers, but also denigrates their maturity. Examples include giving a ten year old pupil a ‘Thomas the Tank Engine’ book to read out loud in class (Osmond, 1994, p. 21).

### ***Censure from Teachers***

A worse form of humiliation is actual censuring by teachers, which involves attributing negligence to pupils who are doing their best. One pupil with dyslexia said:

‘My history teacher is horrible, I got spellings wrong and I now have to write them out ten times, 200 words – and I am dyslexic! I spoke to Mrs [SENCO] and she is trying to sort this out’ (Audit Commission, 2002a, p. 38).

Worse still is censuring that involves attributing not just negligence but malice to pupils who are doing their best. As one parent put it:

‘Sometimes they say he is naughty and send him home, but he is not – there is a lack of awareness’ (Audit Commission, 2002a, p. 38).

Such negative attributions typically are followed by punishment. The teacher or school punishes the pupil for what the teacher or school has attributed to the pupil – in total ignorance of what is actually going on in the pupil.

A common punishment is exclusion – not just for a day, but for good. According to the Audit Commission (2002a, p. 28):

Local Educational Authorities special educational needs [pupils] (including those without statements) account for the vast majority of permanent exclusions (87% from primary and 60% from secondary schools).

Edwards (1994) found that the negative experiences of school for dyslexic teenagers consist not only of neglect or inadequate help from teachers and unfair treatment or other discrimination, but also humiliation, persecution, and even violence. Dockrell, Peacey & Lunt (2002, p. 33) have noted that this happens especially for pupils without statutory statements.

The reactions of pupils to such negative experiences have been – not surprisingly – lack of confidence, self-doubt / self-denigration and sensitivity to criticism, behavioral problems, truancy / school refusal and competitiveness disorders (Edwards, 1994).

### ***Humiliation from Peers***

As Edwards (1994) found, if pupils with dyslexia are treated as different, inferior, stupid, or less valuable by teachers, then the rest of the class will pick up on it in the playground. As

Osmond (1994, p. 21) noted regarding the boy who was given a 'Thomas the Tank Engine' book to read out loud in class:

Henceforth he was called Thomas by the other pupils, who made 'choo choo' sounds whenever they saw him in the playground.

In the playground, peers will also belittle and humiliate dyslexics by excluding them from social activities, since they are perceived as 'broken machines' (Hales, 1995) – a perception that is reinforced by their attendance in lower stream classrooms.

Riddick (1996, p. 149) found that half of her dyslexic school-aged study sample had been teased specifically about school difficulties related to dyslexia. One commented:

'She (member of her peer group) kept saying I was thick because I was always last on our table (to copy things down).'

Another reported:

'They said I was dumb and a nerd because, like, I couldn't spell things.'

The children then submerge into themselves, never to be seen again – basically outcast from their peer groups.

All of this happens because dyslexic pupils too often are seen as inherently lazy or malicious, rather than as showing evidence of stress. As one head teacher of an emotional and behavioral disabilities school has said (Dockrell *et al.*, 2002, p. 34):

'I find it devastating that in a special school, an emotional and behavioral disabilities (EBD) special school, we get children coming to us because of behaviors they have demonstrated in mainstream school and nobody has tried to identify the cause of that behavior.'

In short, pupils with dyslexia routinely receive humiliation, instead of the comprehension that would invite their receptive listening.

## RESULT – CORROBORATION OF THE HYPOTHESIS

The analysis of the literature has shown that a major reason why pupils with dyslexia engage in opposites to the learning dialogue, is that they are not being invited into it. They routinely receive a complete opposite:

- rote instruction, instead of the sharing of thinking that would invite their comprehension
- judgmental discounting, instead of the receptive listening that would invite their sharing of their own thinking, and
- humiliation for failure, instead of the comprehension of their thinking that would invite their receptive listening in return.

In short, if teachers assume that pupils who can't read or write therefore can't learn, they then give the pupils rote instruction in place of conceptual thinking. Pupils respond by trying hard to perform instead of showing comprehension – and often fail. If teachers then judgmentally discount the pupils as 'thick' or the like, the pupils begin to avoid exposure instead of sharing their own thinking. If teachers then humiliate or censure the pupils, the pupils begin to blame themselves for their failure – or else blame and attack someone else and get themselves excluded.

### **CONCLUSION – FOR DYSLEXIC PUPILS THE BASIC LEARNING DIALOGUE IS ITSELF AT RISK**

This result raises the possibility that the difficulties experienced in school by pupils with dyslexia, are due mainly to loss of the learning dialogue itself – and that for support of these pupils, safeguarding the learning dialogue itself may be what matters most.

### **IMPLICATIONS – THREE KINDS OF TEACHING CAN PROTECT THE BASIC LEARNING DIALOGUE**

The structure of the basic learning dialogue shows what is needed in order to restore it – three key kinds of teaching. Pupils need:

- to be shown thinking – not rote-taught, if they are to show comprehension – not just try hard
- to be shown receptiveness – not judgmentally discounted, if they are to share their own thinking – not simply avoid exposure
- to be shown comprehension of their thinking – not humiliated for failure, if they are to listen receptively in return – not sink into blame.

Why don't all teachers do this? The answer appears to lie in false assumptions about pupils with dyslexia – false assumptions summarized above. If these false assumptions can be addressed, progress may be possible.

### **FURTHER RESEARCH**

The prevalence of the distressed behaviors of trying hard, avoiding exposure and blaming of self or others raises at least three questions for further research.

### **Q1. Can the Distressed Behaviors that a Dyslexic Pupil Displays Be Identified Soon Enough to Help?**

A further paper (Alexander-Passe, in press) reports the design and testing of an experimental parental questionnaire, to help identify which pupils with dyslexia require which of the kinds of support identified above.

This questionnaire has been shown to be capable of identifying those pupils who are trying hard to perform, and those who are blaming themselves or others – but not those who are avoiding exposure, since parents often don't see that.

Further research is needed, to enable parents to identify whether their children are avoiding exposure.

### **Q2. Can a Way Be Found to Distinguish between Pupils Who Are Blaming Themselves and Pupils Who Are Blaming Others?**

The distinction might seem easy to make, in that pupils blaming themselves might seem likely to sink into depression, whereas pupils blaming others might seem likely to erupt into aggression.

However, both forms of blaming are forms of helplessness, and the instruments used in the present study do not distinguish between them.

Further research is needed, to enable parents of children who are blaming, to identify reliably which form of blaming is in operation. Research based on the idea of 'locus of control' may provide a way forward (Alexander-Passe, 2008a, 2008b, in press).

### **Q3. What Happens If These Identifications Are Not Made?**

Alexander-Passe (2004a, 2006, in press) takes a deep view of the situation that pupils with dyslexia currently face. In this qualitative study of teenagers 15-18 years old at school, they were asked whether they cope, how they cope, and what frustrates them about being a dyslexic at school. The situations that they report could be described as nightmares.

This suggests a need for further research, toward ways to enable pupils with dyslexia to take more control themselves of their learning experiences. Again, research based on the idea of 'locus of control' may provide a way forward (Alexander-Passe, 2008b, 2008c).

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