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## **“Listening to Students with Specific Learning Difficulties in Colleges of FE”**

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## Listening to students with specific learning difficulties in colleges of further education

by Howard Brayton

### Introduction

The British Dyslexia Association estimates that 10% of children have some degree of dyslexia, while about 4% will be effected severely. (Crisfield and Smythe, 1993). This latter figure represents some 350,000 children currently in British schools. Much has been written about the possible causes, inherited and family traits (Independent, 1996; BBC, 1995). The literature is full of research and advice on assessment, identification, programmes of intervention, alternative teaching methodologies, comparative studies, work with parents, medical studies, psychological perceptions and treatment. Yet still there would appear to be a general lack of either understanding on the part of teachers:

*Most of Dr. Brown's pupils have had a dismal experience of education . . . They have been dismissed by their teachers as stupid or lazy and ridiculed and bullied – often severely – by their classmates.*

(Clare, 1993)

or willingness on the part of local authorities, to appropriately address the issues of pupils with specific learning difficulties.

*Thousand of dyslexic children are being left behind in their studies by authorities who refuse to recognise their needs.*

(Daily Express, 1993)

There are also many examples of adults giving accounts of pupils' experiences of their schooling:

*She's been so distressed that she's made herself ill.*

(Daily Express, 1993)

*He's stupid, he can't do anything.*

(BBC, 1995)

*He was called lazy and careless in front of a science class.*

(Auger, 1988 reprint)

Few studies have sought to find out if such experiences are typical, by asking the students themselves. Hughes and Dawson (1995), in a study of 47 dyslexic adults with an average age of 31 years, did indeed find support for the view that the school experience for many, was one of:

*. . . failure, a lack of understanding by others; humiliation and bullying; more failure; and so on, the pattern repeating itself to create a cycle of misery.*

Sinclair (1995) interviewed students entering higher education and found similar stories of school experiences:

*All the students I spoke to, make reference to aggressive or violent incidents . . . . . sarcasm with their friends . . .*

So what is the current experience in, and what is being learned from, the research and the literature? Students who have recently embarked on programmes at colleges of further education, in the 16/17 year old range, are in a unique position to answer the questions.

### The survey

Oxfordshire has one sixth form college and five colleges of further education. These five cover a city and rural areas, are small, medium and large in terms of student numbers and include one specialist college with a national and international intake. Initially all the colleges agreed to take part in a survey. Subsequently, one of the colleges withdrew from the survey.

The survey involved study skills coordinators in the colleges, distributing questionnaires to all 75 students within the 16-19 age range who had been assessed as having specific learning difficulties either at school or at a college and who had been, or were receiving some form of support.

### The research

The survey was carried out between September 1996 and January 1997. Coordinators were asked to number the questionnaires and to keep an anonymous list of students so that possible follow-up interviews could be arranged at a later date. One college managed a 100% return by asking students to complete the questionnaire in a study session. Others had varying success rates. One follow up meeting with a group of students was arranged.

### The results

75 questionnaires representing the total number of students diagnosed and assessed as having specific learning difficulties in the five participating colleges of Oxfordshire were sent out. 41 were returned representing a return rate of 54.6% overall.

The overall number of returns was fairly evenly distributed between female and male students. One college, with an all male return was significantly different. However it is a specialist college with a largely male intake.

There was a reasonably even spread across the range and level of programmes of study, as shown by Table 1.

Whilst the sample of 41 students might be small, it is nevertheless representative of a shire county.

The first part of the questionnaire asked students about their experiences at school. The second part referred to experiences at college. Each part is supported by statistical analysis and students' personal comments.

**School experience** By far the largest group (80.5%) of the students who responded had attended local education authority (LEA) maintained schools. Of the six (14.6%) who had attended private schools, two males stated that these provisions had been specifically to help those with dyslexia.

Table 2 records students' responses to "At what age did YOU realise that you had a problem?" and should be compared with Table 3 which records when students' perceived problems were first diagnosed.

Table 1 Students' programmes of study

College	A/AS HND	GNVQ	GCSE	NVQ	Other	Totals
A	3	1	5	1	1	11
B	0	2	1	0	4	7
C	3	1	3	4	3	14
D	5	0	0	0	0	5
E	3	0	0	0	1	4
<b>Totals</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>41</b>



**Table 2 Recognition of students' own problems – by phase**

	Male	Female	Totals
Primary	14 (70%)	14 (66%)	28 (68%)
Secondary	5 (25%)	2 (10%)	7 (17%)
Further education	1 (5%)	5 (24%)	6 (15%)
Totals	20 (100%)	21 (100%)	41 (100%)

**Table 3 Phase of diagnosis of students' problems**

	Male	Female	Totals
Primary	11 (75%)	4 (19%)	15 (37%)
Secondary	2 (10%)	1 (5%)	3 (7%)
Further education	7 (5%)	5 (24%)	23 (58%)
Totals	20 (100%)	21 (100%)	41 (100%)

The largest group (68%) realised that they had problems whilst in the primary school. This figure is evenly divided between male and female students. However only 37% actually had their problems assessed at that phase of their education. More significantly, of the 37%, by far the larger group is the boys (55%), compared to the girls (19%). Indeed 76% of the female students did not have their problems assessed until they reached college. Adding on the male students gives a total of 58% left unassessed until the further education phase.

The four major problem areas identified by students were fairly evenly divided between male and female students. Spelling, as might be expected, causes the

biggest problem for students (80%) followed by writing (61%) then reading and mathematics equally (49%). Clearly some of the students who took part in the survey, had problems in more than one, and often in all areas.

By far the largest number of students received help out of the classroom (55%). This figure is not further broken down, but comments later indicate that some of this support was in the form of extra tuition at home, arranged and funded by parents. 40% received extra time for public examinations, and in one case 'the services of a reader. (Table 5).

77% found the support they received useful. The reasons why the others did not find their support useful are not given.

**Table 4 Self-perceived problems**

	Male	Female	Totals
Reading	9 (45%)	11 (52%)	20 (49%)
Writing	12 (60%)	13 (62%)	25 (61%)
Spelling	15 (75%)	18 (86%)	33 (80%)
Mathematics	10 (50%)	10 (48%)	20 (49%)
Percentages	Out of 20	Out of 21	Out of 41

**Table 5 Types of support received**

	Male	Female	Totals
Support teacher	3	0	3
Support assistant	4	0	4
Professional	1 dyslexia support teachers	1 small group 1 speech therapist	3
Help out of class	7	4	11 (55%)
Extra time/work	2	1	3
Extra time/exams	5	3 (1 reader)	8 (40%)
Special equipment	2 computers	0	2
	Out of 13	Out of 7	Out of 20

**Students' comments on school experience** 25% of responses to the question concerning how respondents felt they had been treated by teachers, were positive. Teachers had been . . . *helpful . . . supportive . . . and understanding.*

Other comments were less favourable, referring to teachers' seeming indifference to students' problems: . . . *took no notice . . . left to get on . . . as if I didn't exist. . .*

One female student summed up *Because I conformed and did not cause trouble, nothing was done.*

Over half the students quoted comments made to them verbally or in reports. These included such disparaging remarks as . . . *lazy, stubborn, slow, backward, not listening properly, no concentration, not trying, could do better.*

12% said that they were made to feel that they were . . . *thick or stupid* and were told off for making mistakes. A similar number of students complained bitterly about the fact that they were . . . *never told that I had learning difficulties . . . stuck in classes too slow for me . . . given gardening work to do instead of classes. I wasn't taught properly.*

Students' peers appear to have been even less understanding and sympathetic than teachers. Only three said that . . . *there was no problem.* More than half responded that they had been . . . *bullied and teased* and were called . . . *thick and stupid, clumsy and dopey.* One male said he had been treated like a *time waster, or just thick.*

In complete contrast to their experience of school, the vast majority of parents were totally supportive of their children and their problems. Many paid for extra tuition. Some 12% of the students said that their problems ran in the family and that siblings suffered too. Where there were adverse comments, they often referred to parents' own non-understanding of the problems, . . . *they were angry they didn't understand . . . thought I was lazy . . . mother very concerned, thinks the school should have recognised the problems*

*. . . disappointed it wasn't picked up earlier. Felt they were to blame.*

Some however were not as understanding . . . *father was disappointed . . . dad thought it was a big problem . . . father told everyone how badly I did at school . . . they thought I was lazy, slow and immature.* The most extreme comment came from a female student . . . *parents didn't want to know me. Called me a Dumbo all the time.*

Brothers and sisters seemed universally to be oblivious of any problem or were understanding.

Most of the students used derogatory words about themselves. They felt . . . *frustrated, confused, angry, rejected, thick, idiot, dunce, . . . am I going mad? . . . worried and depressed . . . thought the future was bleak.*

There was confusion that *I did not know what was wrong with me. I just knew I was different from other people.* Some were upset that . . . *I am an inconvenience to others in the class . . . I feel I have let everyone down . . . I felt everyone looked at me . . . upset and lost that I am going to grow up stupid.*

There was anger . . . *at those teachers who said I wasn't trying . . . but I was trying as hard as I could. Angry . . . because I might have achieved more at GCSE.*

**Experiences at college** Since 65% of male students had been diagnosed at school, the largest group therefore referred themselves for assessment and support at college. Only 24% of female students had been assessed at school hence the larger number (67%) was referred by college lecturers, either tutors of subject staff.

As in school, students in college received support in a variety of ways, but the largest percentage received help out of the class. This was usually in workshops and drop-in centres in college.

**Students' comments** Students were invited to make additional comments about their experiences which might help professionals and others to understand their problems. These might be summed up as:

Table 6 Support at college

	Male	Female	Totals
Support teacher	0	0	0
Support assistant	3	0	3
Professional	5 dyslexia teachers	4	9 (15.5%)
Help out of class	10	20	30 (51.7%)
Extra time/exams	6	8*	14 (24.1%)
Special equipment	1 computer	1 spell checker	2
Totals	25	33	58

\* 1 amanuensis



- *Lessons on dyslexia for teachers, because lots of my teachers didn't understand what dyslexia is (10 students)*
- *Society needs to realise that having learning problems doesn't mean that the person isn't intelligent*
- *Assessment early in the primary school (7 students)*
- *Everyone who needs support should get it*  
Support with: time, short-term memory, routine and organisation, taking notes whilst listening and answering questions, building self-confidence.
- *Put more money into dyslexia*
- *Why don't schools recognise dyslexia? I think the help around college is brilliant.*

One student provided a statement that summarised many others:

*My problem affects my whole life, normal conversation, dressing myself, getting money out from a cash dispenser, due to condition problems. The authorities have acted like a comedy of errors and because no-one understands the problem, I have had to give up every activity that means something to me – drama and singing and piano because I cannot read the script/words and notes + geography because I cannot read/write or do statistics well enough. Self-confidence is little so I am constantly acting and not being myself because no-one ever believes or has been willing to help and I have always been treated as thick. How would you feel?*

(Corrected for spelling)

### Students' meeting

The Study Skills Coordinator at the college with 100% response to the questionnaire, agreed to arrange a follow-up meeting with a group of volunteer respondees. In the event only one presented himself, together with a 47 year old man whose experiences clearly paralleled those of Hughes and Dawson's adults.

The 17 year old studying 'A' level mathematics, biology and chemistry said his problem had been diagnosed and supported at secondary phase when he was at a school in Scotland. No such recognition was made when he came to England. With the support he was received at college – ... *an hour or so a week of one-to-one maths help*, he was now feeling more secure. *All teachers know and are supportive.*

He loved history, ... *but my English let me down.* In one essay, he had family help in how to use a spell checker and grammar checker, but the ideas were his. *I*

*was given the fourth degree and accused of plagiarism. Teachers in secondary school don't seem to understand.*

As with many of the respondees, this young man too had experienced bullying at school. As he was not the only one to be subjected, his defence mechanism was to report the bullying being done to others, and so indirectly benefited from a clamp down, without personally becoming involved. His feeling was that schools ... *should tackle bullying* and that ... *bullies and those perceived as stupid should not be dumped in the same class ... and given six English teachers.*

### Conclusions and questions

It seems, unfortunately, that there has been no real change since Hughes and Dawson's students were at school. There remains a large number of children who are being failed by the system.

Some of the issues raised by the survey are worthy of further investigation:

- The plea for early diagnosis and assessment was raised by many. Why do so many children have to wait for so many years for an accurate diagnosis?
- The number of girls undiagnosed until they attend a further education college raises questions:-
  - Is it, as one student suggested, because they conform and do not make a fuss?
  - Is it because the different funding methodology adopted by the Further Education Funding Council which recognises additional funding units for students with learning difficulties and disabilities, enables students need to be recognised?
- There is clearly a need for awareness raising amongst subject teachers, of the nature of specific learning difficulties, and alternative strategies to support learning.
- There is equally a need to help tutors with a pastoral role, so that they are better able to support students with difficulties.
- There is a specific need for teachers of English and maths to work with the Special Needs Coordinator (SENCO) and the learning support staff; who themselves may need more training in teaching students with specific learning difficulties. Advice may be needed with drawing up individual education plans (IEPs).
- Students need to be listened to.
- Parents need to be listened to.

- There is a need for student and parental counselling.
- There is a need to educate other students about the problems encountered by those with specific learning difficulties, so that they are encouraged to be more understanding, tolerant and supportive of their peers.
- There is a need for full cooperation between schools, students, parents and professionals.

Continued disregard of the problems encountered by such a significant percentage of British school children, is to deny them their right to a broad, balanced and relevant curriculum. This in turn denies them their rightful place in employment and a full recreational life.

*Low expectations, inadequate teaching strategies and a failure to identify and build on children's strengths, can end in widespread underachievement.*

(Klein, 1996).

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