Richard Shircore is a Professional Development Manager with Berkshire Health Promotion.

Richard Shircore

Dyslexia: schools are not doing enough

Question. If the Government is so keen to reduce social exclusion originating from school expulsions, why is it so difficult to get schools, local education authorities and teachers to take dyslexia seriously? It is a handicap to children in the classroom, and may also be an important reason for their absence in the first place.

Schools are in a good position to diagnose dyslexia by studying a child's behaviour, actions and reactions.

Part of the answer lies in the 'traits' that are suggestive of dyslexia. The ones presented in the box are taken from a list published by the British Dyslexia Association (BDA). At least some of these disorders are to do with social functioning, and I suggest that without recognising these problems, the muddle and confusion between the teacher and the pupil will undermine the learning process. Failure to recognise the 'learning difficulty' could mean that the pupil is branded as bad, naughty, lazy, or handicapped by its family background.

It is not surprising, given these examples, that dyslexic children fare badly within the confines of any educational system that puts a premium on conformity, not standing out, docility, and a prodigious capacity to follow orders.

Early recognition

Yet schools are in a good position to diagnose the condition, for the signs of dyslexia can be only too apparent if the child's behaviour, actions and reactions to situations and stimuli are objectively studied over a period of time. Typically, the most striking feature of the dyslexic pupil is the imbalance between social and

Identifying the dyslexic pupil

Here is a checklist of potential weaknesses. Pupils exhibiting a cluster of these should be investigated further.

Reading

Hesitant and laboured

Adding or repeating words

Failing to recognise familiar words

Missing out a line, or reading the same line twice

Losing their place, or following the words with a finger

Writing

Spelling the same word differently in the same sentence

Poor handwriting, with badly-formed letters

Very neat handwriting, but painfully slow

Difficulty with punctuation

Poor standards of written work compared with oral ability

Messy written work — e.g., words crossed out several times

Badly set-out written work

Organisation

Writing or talking a lot and losing the point of the question asked

Difficulty in note-taking

Difficulty in carrying out several instructions at one time

Difficulty in pinpointing the main ideas in a passage

Difficulty in using dictionaries, directories and encyclopædias.

Disorganisation of school materials

Difficulty in finding the name for an object

Inability to complete assignments on time

Forgetfulness — sports equipment, lessons, homework, apppointments

Confusion with finances

Execution

Confusion between left and right

Indeterminate hand preference

Difficulty in learning foreign languages

Excessive tiredness due to the amount of concentration and effort expended

Slowness in answering questions

Appearing to know much more than they can commit to paper

Other

Difficulty in relating to others; inability to read body language

Immaturity

Physical clumsiness

educational performance, where, for example, an apparently clever child refuses to commit anything substantial to paper, or is good at mental arithmetic but unable to set out a mathematical formula.

Unfortunately, within the current educational climate, no active analysis of the child's needs is likely to be carried out unless the disabilities are gross. Such children will be removed from normal class activities because of the distraction they cause, leading to personal humiliation, further confrontation and possibly total withdrawal.

The failure to address specific learning difficulties is an institutional and professional problem, not a resource-allocation one.

The tragedy is that these children are, for the most part, able, intelligent, keen to learn, and have great potential. Most dyslexics have an above-average IQ, yet studies in both the US and in Britain consistently show that between 25% and 50% of all people on probation are undiagnosed dyslexics.

Picking up the pieces

The failure of schools to diagnose dyslexia has resulted in the Home Office becoming much more involved in this issue. The Probation Service in various parts of the country has made great strides in successfully intervening with probation offenders, assessing their cognitive and perceptual skills and putting them on remedial and supportive literacy and numeracy programmes. For the first time in their lives, these people have been given the objective assessments of learning difficulties, understanding, help, skills and acceptance that were not available at school. Even more striking, the reconviction rates for such schemes are minimal, being of the order of 10-15%.

Schools need to grasp this nettle. To begin with, they need actively to seek out who might be at risk. For example, 4% of pupils will be liable for statementing, but up to 10% will have a disabling trait. Thus, within a school of 500 pupils, about 50 are likely to have a discernible cognitive weakness. These are high-risk pupils. In areas still practising selection, the concentrations in lower-ability secondary schools will be even higher!

Are these children being actively sought out? It is essential that they are identified early and their parents made aware of the situation, as dyslexic children will have different personal needs both at home and at school. I do not accept the view, stated by some, that all would be well if they had more resources, in other words more money. My experience leads me to believe that the failure to address specific learning difficulties is an institutional and professional problem, not a resource-allocation one:

- Schools operating to a set curriculum via set books and methods need to be able to accommodate pupils that have cognitive weaknesses; dyslexics are such pupils.
- They need to recognise that disruptive pupils are not necessarily challenging the school's values, but simply saying "I can't do it", and that enforcing sanctions may be unfair, educationally questionable, and in the long run socially irresponsible.

Challenging the moral imperative

Schools do not have to feel isolated with respect to this problem. As stated earlier, dyslexia should be looked upon as a social, not educational, problem. The initiation of the Government's 'Sure Start' schemes give the opportunity for Health Visitors and GPs to become more interested in the early recognition of dyslexia and to support affected families.

However, schools will need to give up the idea that children's behaviour is primarily based upon moral imperatives, and that their role is therefore to instil morally-acceptable behaviour. One thing that dyslexia has taught us is that a child's behaviour is the product of many things, but moral weakness is rarely one of them. Before we condemn a child for being 'bad' or 'naughty' we had better be sure that its actions were wilfully so.

In his accompanying notes, Richard Shircore comments that he asked an LEA, with which he had worked for some time, what plans were in place to support the approximately 750 dyslexic children that were likely to be found among the 19,000 in their care. 'I never received a reply, or an invitation to attend another planning meeting.'

He may be contacted on 0118 987 8175.