

DISABILITY DISCRIMINATION ACT INQUIRY PUBLIC HEARING SYDNEY

Submission from Maureen Mastellone, Dyslexic Consultant

I am questioning why students with Dyslexia, or Special Learning Difficulties as it is called in NSW, are rarely given help for their problem in schools in NSW, perhaps in other States too?

I understand Special Ed. Teachers are not given any training for Dyslexic difficulties, yet, according to statistics, it affects 10% of the population. These teachers also have so little time with students and often have to go to several schools.

Children and adults with Dyslexia have usually had a very difficult and painful time at school and, at times, home too. They are often called lazy and stupid and even though they are unable to read, they are often asked to read out loud in class. Why do some teachers denigrate their pupils in such a way? As these students have so much difficulty, they are then laughed and ridiculed by other students and suffer a complete loss of self-esteem. My students have told me of horrific tales at school. The children, at times, then become frustrated and their behaviour becomes much worse and, at times, are uncontrollable in class. They cannot understand why they are unable to read and yet can do some other subjects well - e.g. Maths. Other children daydream and switch off and eventually leave school unable to read, write or spell. Teachers cannot help the children because they are unaware of the possible problems of Dyslexia, and its remediation. My first Dyslexic student was expelled from many schools.

"For those to whom education has meant a string of defeats in nearly all areas, from academics to athletics, the prospect of adult work can be threatening in the extreme" (In the Mind's Eye ~ Thomas G. West -U.S. p. 54)

What a tragedy for Australia! It is said their brains are wired differently, and there are other theories, but these brains can create geniuses -Einstein, Edison, Tesla, Leonardo da Vinci, possibly Faraday, and Hans Christian Andersen, though all these people did not have the classic pattern of difficulties. It is also said that Dick Smith, Sir Richard Branson, the Packers, Susan Hampshire, Winston Churchill etc. have or had the difficulty/gift and they are special people.

On the 10th December, 2003, Sir Richard Branson, a Dyslexic, was given the Distinguished Fellow Medal 2003 from the Centre for the Mind, Sydney University, for the Corporate World's Most Original Thinker.

I repeat what a tragedy for NSW that we neglect these brilliant students.

"There have been in recent years an increasing number of studies that have pointed out that many dyslexics have superior talents in certain areas of non-verbal skill, such as art, architecture, engineering and athletics." (Norman Geschwind an author of many books on Dyslexia ("In the Minds's Eye -Thomas G. West -U.S. p. 20).

I'll tell you how I became aware of Dyslexia. I taught English as a Second Language for years at the Institute of Languages, University of New South Wales and then I became an Access English teacher helping students from the main Campus with Essay Writing, Listening Skills, Pronunciation, Presentation Skills etc. Then one day about 8 years ago, I was asked to help a student who had failed every subject in her first semester-4 subjects. I asked her why as she was obviously bright. She said she had difficulty with reading. I listened to her reading -stumbling and hesitating. She hardly knew any vowels or vowel sounds and we have 20 of them. I had never met anybody who couldn't read.

Somebody suggested Dyslexia, which I had never heard of, and I started looking for books to help her. I could find nothing for adults, so I wrote her a course on cassette practising the 20 vowel sounds, with phonetic symbols, with lists of words and sentences. I produced new weekly lessons on cassettes for her weekly lessons.

In addition, being a subscriber to Ecos -the CSIRO science magazine, I asked permission if I could use some of the articles for Read After Me lessons. I was given permission. My first student learnt how to read in 3 months and she never failed another exam. She graduated as a Systems Analyst. She was reading faster than her Peers within a year. She needed other help as well, but I built up a series of programmes to help all students~ who all had different needs.

I am also a teacher of Speech and Drama and Phonetics -my greatest help with the Dyslexic students

I continued helping students in this way, but I had one student who seemed to have more difficulty than the others. He was studying Science/Law. After 2 years, he eventually told me that he could only read up to 1 hour daily at night and then had to take Panadol and go to bed, as he soon developed headaches after reading. I remembered reading a book "Reading by the Colors" by Helen Irlen, which I thought quite bizarre, but I read it again and brought in some various coloured sheets of cellophane for this student. He chose yellow and practised for a week with this colour. I saw him the following week - his headaches had disappeared. I went to his graduation a few months ago.

They say that about 40% of Dyslexics have this Irlen syndrome, where the print is blurred, jumps around, disappears or readers have severe headaches etc.

The Irlen Dyslexic Centre in Burwood, and in various parts of Australia, test for this syndrome and, at times, suggest coloured lenses. I was invited to be a Screener.

An Oxford professor in the UK says the government may be wasting money on expensive tuition for dyslexic pupils when many of them could be helped by cheap coloured spectacles. Professor John Stein who runs free clinics for children in Oxford and Reading, says his latest research suggests that more than 30% of Dyslexics can improve

their reading with yellow glasses and still more could be helped with blue as well. (BBC NEWS/Education on the Net).

I recently spoke at Woollahra Council for the Woollahra Library about reading and spelling problems for adults and children and also for speakers of English as a second language.

A colleague, Marina Bridle, joined me and talked of her work with children. She talked of the importance of Phonics for Dyslexics.

I understand many of the problems with reading began with the introduction of the Look and Say programme from the U.S. and spread to the U.K. and Australia. The U.S. and the U.K. realized the drawbacks of the programme and returned to the phonic principles, using, at times, some of the Look and Say programme, which is necessary, as our language is not phonetic. I understand Australia, generally, continued with the Look and Say method. I could understand this as most of my students had difficulty with vowels.

At a later stage, my colleague found at the Early Learning Centre, Hornsby, NSW an excellent video programme entitled "Jolly Phonics" for children beginning to read or write. It's a charming puppet programme showing children how to write the alphabet; as Dyslexics have difficulty with spatial skills, and later how to read using phonics and making small sentences. We are informed that nearly 50% of all Primary schools in the UK use this video and it is also used in Australia and other countries. Email - admin@earlylearningcentre.com.au. My colleague also uses the Fitzroy programs (Phonics) 593 Brunswick Street, Nth. Fitzroy 3068 -(www.fitzprog.com.au).

Woollahra Library in Sydney is now improving the resources for students with Dyslexia -Specific Learning Difficulties -and will also be using the above material.

In England, a check list for Dyslexic students is sent to every Primary School from the British Dyslexic Association (www.bda-dyslexia.org.uk). Scotland have their own. If there is a problem, the children are helped. There are so many new programmes for Dyslexics and a great choice of software. See The British Dyslexic Association's Website above. See also Speld NSW Inc. (Specific Learning Difficulties Association of NSW) -Website - www.speldnsw.org.au

If Dyslexic students were diagnosed (see check list) and helped, preferably at an early age, they would regain their self-esteem and would not disrupt the classrooms. Dyslexics are usually very bright and with help they could become leaders in the community and not end up on the dole or in prison. I would also point out that diagnosis can be made from the age of 5 or earlier and then at any age.

Let us eradicate this extreme form of neglect of our students, which is a blot on the education system in NSW -maybe in other States too.

Maureen Mastellone