Dyslexia, Genuine Classroom Strategies

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“He has been at school or under tutors since he was 7 years old, and the greatest efforts have been made to teach him to read, but, in spite of this laborious and persistent training, he can only with difficulty spell out words of one syllable.” — W. Pringle Morgan, M.B. (1896), “A Case of Congenital Word Blindness,” The British Medical Journal

T his 120-year-old quote may be the earliest record of a medical practitioner identifying the symptoms of a condition we now know as dyslexia. This also accurately describes our son who was born in Sydney just 15 years ago. Scott was diagnosed with dyslexia at six years of age.

Unfortunately, both of the schools he attended knew nothing about dyslexia. Nothing. We heard what many parents of dyslexics hear repeatedly, “Give him time, he’ll catch on in his own time...”

In the dyslexia community, we call this passive attitude “wait to fail.”

Wait to fail” is destroying lives. We were forced to explore alternatives ourselves. We were funnelled through tutors and programs, coloured paper and lenses, fail safe diets, paediatricians, ophthalmologists, behavioural optometrists, more non-evidence-based dyslexia “solutions,” and MRI scans. The list is bewildering and the costs have been astronomical. No standards or structure were available to help us filter out non-evidence-based interventions.

By the beginning of 2012 our son (aged 11) had been retained a year and probably should have been held back another (academically). He couldn’t read, he wasn’t learning, he was being teased and bullied, his confidence was in tatters, he had to leave school daily for external evidence-based tutoring adding to his peers noticing a difference. Teachers (we love them!) didn’t know what to do with him. He was taken out of the things he loved... drama, dance, art... for time extensions and testing.

To add insult to injury, the principal suddenly declared external instruction would no longer be allowed during school hours (without adopting any evidence-based strategies to compensate).

All the while, the school and community had no genuine awareness of the humiliation our son was experiencing on a daily basis. Mum had to drop off a distressed and crying boy most mornings, never a dry eye herself.

We researched and steadily, and accurately, came to the conclusion there were no genuinely sustainable education options for our son’s case in Australia. In 2012, we pulled the plug. We quit our jobs and moved to Austin, Texas so our son could attend a school calibrated for students with dyslexia. There he was guaranteed to be surrounded by trained experts in global best-practice.

Our son has flourished since. His reading has improved. He’s discovered a love for learning thanks to the unhesitating use of evidence-based classroom strategies and technologies. He has restored the energy and optimism of the humiliation our son was experiencing on a daily basis. Mum had to drop off a distressed and crying boy most mornings, never a dry eye herself.

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In 2015 Texas Representative Lamar Smith is the Chair of the US House of Representatives Committee on Science, Space and Technology. He sponsored the Research Excellence & Advancements for Dyslexia Act, recently passed by both houses of congress and just now, as I edit this, signed by President Obama! Yay! This has the potential to help globally.

We, personally, are indebted to the global community of scientists who have methodically identified best-practice literacy pedagogies for dyslexic students and the educators at his school who are dedicated to applying and advocating for them.

Begs the question, So why the lack of help in Australia?

Dyslexia in Australia

“Where words lose their meaning, people lose their lives.” – Confucius

“Dyslexia” is, in my practical experience, an utterly useless word in Australia. I think we collectively make it useless by refusing to standardise and adhere to a scientific, evidenced-based, definition that describes the very real learning challenges faced by 10% of Australians, 2.3 million of us.

Case in Point: In February 2015 and again in March 2015, Educational Technology Solutions Australia, contributed further to the perversion of the word “dyslexia” by publishing “10 Achievable Strategies to Tackle Dyslexia in Your Classroom and School” and “10 Achievable Strategies To Tackle Dyslexia”, both by Michael Guy Clark. The articles promote strategies for students with dyslexia that are not science, not evidence-based and not recommended by our world’s most educated, principled and ethical literacy experts.

In Australia we actually have some colossally fantastic experts to guide us.
including researchers who have advanced world knowledge in the fields of cognition and literacy and educators who tirelessly dedicate themselves to the adoption of best practice literacy pedagogies in a quest to maximise the number of literate Australians. These include:

- The Macquarie University Department of Cognitive Science — The entire team including Max Coltheart, Emeritus Professor, who kindly reviewed this article for accuracy.
- Learning Difficulties Australia, “LDA is an association of teachers and other professionals dedicated to assisting students with learning difficulties through effective teaching practices based on scientific research”. I invite you to visit their website and read their Code of Ethics
- The Specific Learning Difficulties Association (SPELD) state organisations federated under AUSPELD (SPELD South Wales, SPELD Queensland, SPELD Victoria, SPELD West Australia)
- Australia Dyslexia Association, official partner of the International Dyslexia Association
- Dyslexia Support Australia Facebook Group — “This group is EVIDENCE BASED and was founded on the principles of the promotion of EVIDENCE BASED practices for dyslexia.”
  Evidently, we are struggling to prioritise these good folks as our primary sources of knowledge, strategies, tools and technologies. Instead, we remain poorly informed and trained and continue to allow the term “dyslexia” and dyslexia interventions to be perverted by imitators.

Here are a few practical points to note:

- There is no mandatory dyslexia training in the required curriculum for our University graduates in Education.
- We’re not grounded in the facts & fundamentals.
- Whilst dyslexia is covered under the Disability Standards for Education, there is no specific legal definition and schools have no mandatory intervention standards (never mind best-practice) for students with dyslexia.
- The 2005 Report of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy was ignored.
- Best practice, evidence-based literacy pedagogies are currently not being employed.

- Our community of experts made recommendations 10 years ago that would have improved (and still will improve) literacy outcomes for all Australians, including students with dyslexia.
  We are a free society and we tolerate alternative philosophies. But in the field of medical practice, we enforce rigorous standards of practice that promote genuine evidence and efficacy above mere research and/or anecdote. Unfortunately, we’ve refused to adopt and enforce similar standards of practice for interventions in the dyslexia community. Students, parents, teachers and other professionals (e.g. optometrists) struggle to discern the difference between evidence-based interventions and the imitators. Given our less than ideal state of affairs, here are some classroom strategies to get us back on an evidence-based footing and genuinely improve the situation for students with learning difficulties including dyslexia.

Strategy #1: Complete Best-Practice Professional Development Training And Apply It

“I want to lift the barrier of ignorance surrounding dyslexia and replace it with the wonderful comfort of knowledge.” — Sally Shaywitz, M.D., Professor of Paediatrics at Yale, “Overcoming Dyslexia”, October 2002.

To best serve students, teachers must have ready access to knowledge about dyslexia that is evidence-based and best-practice. We all should benefit from the comfort and efficacy of genuine knowledge and be able to apply it confidently. The good news is there is dyslexia training available to teachers that is recognised as best-practice amongst our experts, fulfills professional development requirements and, in many cases, is free. Teachers in a number of states can enrol in the BOSTES accredited online course Understanding Dyslexia and Significant Difficulties in Reading through their departments of education. Try a web search for availability in your area.

Of the Understanding Dyslexia and Significant Difficulties in Reading course, a North Queensland speech-language pathologist noted: ‘It has confirmed my current practice and extended my knowledge in the area of adolescents with reading difficulties. It has focused my attention on the Big 6 of reading and that gathering data on all aspects is vital in building a comprehensive profile of students with reading difficulties. I have learned so much from the group sessions and from reading contributions from the group members.’ Overall, 90 per cent of participants reported a high level of confidence in meeting the educational needs of students with dyslexia and significant difficulties in reading. Before starting the training, 38 per cent of participants reported having limited confidence.”

Queensland Department of Education and Training Website.

If, for any reason, you don’t have access to this particular training course, here are some other low cost resources your school should consider investing in immediately:

1. Understanding Learning Difficulties, A Practical Guide from AUSPELD
2. Outside The Square Video Series

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“Educational neglect: characterised by a caregiver’s failure to provide an education and the tools required to participate in the education system;” “What is child abuse and neglect?”

CFCA Resource Sheet, September 2015.

Schools have a duty of care to all students and must “provide an education and the tools required to participate in the education system.” Legislation also continues to tighten. For example, on 22 December 2015, Victorian Ministerial Order 870 was signed which explicitly binds “children with a disability” to a principle of inclusion. (The government also knows it has insufficient data on students with disabilities so ensure your school is actively participating in the mandated Nationally Consistent Collection of Data).

Children with learning disabilities are frequently at risk of unnecessary humiliation in traditional classroom situations. Furthermore, children who are well behind their peers in literacy skills cannot be expected to “read to learn”. Some students who struggle to read are, nevertheless, bright learners.

Teachers need to decouple the old adage “Learn to Read, Read to Learn”. Susan Barton suggests classroom strategies to deal with these two challenges in an excerpt from the freely available video Embracing Dyslexia.

(Indeed, this video is an example of how we can deliver valuable educational content in formats other than the written
word.) The entire *Embracing Dyslexia* video is a fantastic resource.

**Strategy #3: Don’t Introduce Imitations**

“Let’s solve the problem but let’s not make it any worse by guessin’” – Gene Cranz, Flight Director, Apollo 13

We personally wasted a lot of time and money on interventions that were not evidence-based. The imitations we tried cost our son years we will never get back. They were all no better than guesses and by wasting our time on them we made our situation worse.

“Children with reading problems can overcome their difficulties only if they are identified early and provided with systematic, explicit, and intensive instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary and reading comprehension strategies. Early identification, coupled with comprehensive early reading interventions can reduce the percentage of children reading below basic level in fourth grade from the current national average of 38% to less than 6%.”

- Dr. Reid Lyon, Chief of the Child Development and Behavior Branch within the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) testified before the subcommittee on Education Reform, Washington, DC on March 8, 2001.

If you have students with dyslexia in your classroom, it is likely their parents are being funnelled through imitators just like we were. I wish we would have had teachers and schools reinforcing expert knowledge. Sadly, some schools are working with imitators. Here is a report that identifies some imitators: *Behavioural Interventions to Remediate Learning Disorders: A Technical Report.* Please avoid them.

**Strategy #4: Don’t Bring Headline Controversy Into Your Classroom**

**“Dyslexia may not exist, warn academics.”** — The Telegraph

This headline is a shocker and there have been many like it. In this case, the media misrepresented Professor Julian Elliot who is challenging best-practice based on his own genuine scientific enquiry.

Professor Elliot is attempting to advance our knowledge of learning difficulties. Reading the full article reveals what is genuinely going on:

“...While the researchers do not question the existence of the real, sometimes complex, problems some people have with reading, they are critical of the term “dyslexia” because it is too imprecise.”

The global scientific community has not yet come to this conclusion and they may not. Here is a more nuanced introduction from Sir Jim Rose: ...............

I do hope we can all dedicate ourselves to learning from and deferring to our best and brightest.

**Resources referred to in this article**


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