

DYSLEXIA : A PATTERN OF STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

It is well known that despite regular teaching and good support from their parents a significant number of children of at least normal and often high general intelligence still experience great difficulty in mastering spelling, writing and reading. Such children have been referred to as 'dyslexic' or as is currently fashionable children with specific learning difficulties in literacy skills. Numerous surveys both in this country and abroad have established that, depending on the area, something between 9 and 12 per cent of all children suffer from a degree of dyslexia and at least 2 per cent experience a serious degree of the problem.

Over the years many claims and counter claims have been made about the subject of dyslexia. Among the most damaging and misleading has been that it is primarily a condition of the middle class, the assumption being that upward aspiring middle class parents are unwilling to accept that their children's short comings are due to low intelligence and therefore they must invent some other reason. Fortunately this myth has now been laid to rest. A survey on specific learning difficulties carried out in the Inner London Education Authority indicated that children experiencing the problem were as likely to come from working class backgrounds as from middle class ones. This has been supported by a more recent finding of the National Cohort Study of over 12,000 children based at Bristol University. The present writer, working in a former government designated priority area, has identified a high proportion of children (8 to 10%) suffering from a degree of specific learning difficulty. Other surveys carried out in this country and abroad have similarly failed to discover an association between class and dyslexia.

Some have claimed that dyslexic children are not being identified simply because there are not enough educational psychologists or other experts to conduct large scale surveys. Whilst such a claim may have some credibility it also requires qualification. There is little evidence at present to suggest that the number of educational psychologists working in a particular local authority area has a significant relationship to the number of 'dyslexic' children being identified. The present writer knows of at least one local authority where the number of educational psychologists has in fact been trebled in recent years and yet the number of 'dyslexic' children identified has not increased significantly. Why is this? The reasons are not hard to find.

First to conduct an identification survey of any particular group a certain amount of will and commitment are required on the part of those organising the investigation. If this is lacking then the exercise may be largely fruitless. However in relating to the present subject what should be examined more closely is the undoubted influence which local education authorities have on their psychological services. Educational psychologists

are not as independent as they either claim to be or in some cases believe themselves to be. They are appointed by local educational authorities, receive their salaries from those authorities and very much depend on their employers both for conditions of work and future prospects. Being human those who have their eyes on promotion or higher salaries or improvements in working conditions are hardly likely to conduct systematic surveys of children with severe learning difficulties if this is likely to embarrass their employers by pressurizing them to spend more money for making appropriate educational provision for such children. In such circumstances it is, therefore, in the interests of both educational psychologists and local authority administrators to adopt a policy of 'quieta non movere' (let sleeping dogs lie) and to busy themselves in other areas. However such an attitude is in direct conflict with both the spirit and the word of the 1981 Education Act which states clearly in Section 4 of the Statute that a local education authority has a duty to identify children with special education needs. Should anyone suggest that the above sentiments are merely those of the present author then it will be necessary to combat findings of a growing number of other investigations. For instance among the findings of the House of Commons 1987 Report on the Implementation of the Education Act 1981 we read: "Statements of needs and provision are vague and it is said that many statements of need are tailored to fit existing provision" (Page XV). The National Association of Head Teachers gave an indication of the scale of this problem during its oral submission to the House of Commons Select Committee which produced the Report. Mr. D. Williams told the committee that the N.A.H.T. had surveyed 400 special school headteachers and "... something like 80 per cent . . . felt that in fact the statements of need were being prepared directly in keeping with what was available rather than in terms of specific need of the particular child".

In a published study entitled "Statementing and the 1981 Education Act" (Cranfield Press) Nicki Cornwell found clear evidence that recommendations made by educational psychologists were influenced by what is available locally. In short they did not always specify a child's special educational needs without regard to local provision.

It would appear that children who suffer from severe and complex learning difficulties in the organisation of literacy skills are not only not being diagnosed by local education authorities but in cases where they have been identified they are not necessarily being provided with appropriate help. The present study is concerned with these children. It involves a comprehensive analysis of 160 clinical cases of dyslexia or specific learning difficulties. The investigation outlines the nature of the group diagnosed, the tests employed in making the diagnosis, an analysis of the results and recommendations made as a result of the findings. A survey involving a questionnaire completed by the parents is also included.