The Dyslexia Debate: More heat than light?

Julian Elliott

Much recent discussion surrounding issues in my new book, The Dyslexia Debate, written with Elena Grigorenko, has been highly charged emotionally and has led to outrage in some quarters – even though the book had yet to appear in the public domain. Certainly, the fury of many respondents seemed inappropriate given my actual utterances on the topic in both print and in the media. Nevertheless, this reaction came as little surprise to me, as 40 years’ experience as a teacher of children with special educational needs, as a local authority educational psychologist, a trainer of teachers, and an academic researcher have provided me with some insight into the complexities involved. In this piece, I shall focus upon these phenomena and endeavour to explain the reasons for the storms of protest that have routinely followed my challenge to the use of the dyslexia label.

The research evidence for our claims about the problematic understandings of dyslexia is overwhelming so why the outrage when these points are made? To understand this, it is necessary to switch from a disinterested, scientific perspective to a consideration of how all of this looks to those with personal experience of such problems.

To experience severe difficulty with reading in school is typically to encounter many years of hurt and humiliation. Every lesson is a struggle. Your peers tease and torment you. Some teachers seem to believe that you are stupid (although, the present day teaching force is generally more enlightened in this respect than their predecessors). The struggle is such that you sometimes feel that it’s not worth making huge efforts so you start to ease off on your studies. Rather than run the risk of being perceived as stupid or incapable, you reduce your efforts in ways that are highly visible to all. Then, when you don’t perform well, others will put this down to a lack of effort, rather than inability. This strategy, known in the academic literature as self-worth protection, is one that I have witnessed countless times in my work with children who struggle at school. However, this is rarely a wise strategy and reduced effort can often result in charges that the child is lazy, a description that has a strong pejorative ring which, in my opinion, should never be applied to any child with learning difficulties.

Given this scenario, it is unsurprising that parents (and the child) are usually delighted to receive a diagnosis of dyslexia. This provides a quasi-medical explanation for a problem that is typically causing immense distress. It offers the hope that others will be less likely to make inappropriate attributions of stupidity or laziness. The individual often finds the diagnosis lifts a weight off their mind – “I always thought that I was stupid but now I realise that I’m not”. It is believed that the diagnosis has revealed the true nature of the problem and will surely point to the most effective forms of treatment – “Now they’ll know how best to help me”. It is a gateway to ensuring that the child receives the assistance, accommodations and resources that they need. The diagnosis is everything that one could want.

When someone challenges the scientific basis of the term, it is unsurprising that this elicits a strong reaction. On occasions, the response seems to be to challenge my integrity and motives, and some recent criticisms have taken the form of personal attacks such as, “You’re only saying such things so you can flog your book”. The fact that the book appeared after more than a decade of arguing this position in professional and academic journals is an inconvenient truth that, if known by the accuser, is still ignored. Of course, headlines in the parts of the media stating, “Professor states dyslexia is just a middle class way to hide stupidity” and newspaper columnists’ gibing about Robin or Poppy being “denser than a slab of uranium” represent a gross misrepresentation that doesn’t help to engender a serious and dispassionate consideration of the issues.

Perhaps such messages help to explain why staff from a special school for dyslexic children thought it appropriate to send me a letter from an 11-year-old pupil expressing her hurt that I had called her lazy. Did her teachers not think that it would have been wiser to reassure the child that this was not the case? Were they, supposedly specialists in the field caring for vulnerable youngsters, not willing or able to check things out more carefully? As many people have told me since the recent media storm, a few minutes searching the internet could quickly reveal my true position.

A few days ago, I was asked to write a piece on the dyslexia story...
for a very popular internet site designed for mothers. After a series of exchanges, mainly involving stylistic edits to fit the house style, a piece clarifying the more common misunderstandings of the book’s message, and the potential reasons for these, was accepted for the site. To my surprise, the article was pulled at the last minute on the grounds that many upset parents might be further discomfited by discussion of these issues. Thus, the managers of the site thought it preferable that misunderstandings resulting in anger and resentment went unchallenged rather than risk further outrage by providing a forum for me to clarify the message. Such behaviour illustrates the power of emotion over reason, and the fear of anything that might alienate visitors to the site.

However, it is not merely a case of media misinformation, as outraged responses to more reliable and valid reports are also common. Clearly, there are powerful psychological forces at work. Some years ago, after making a television program on this issue, I received messages from irate parents accusing me of claiming that their child was not dyslexic but stupid. At first, I was mystified by this as the programme had been at pains to state that intelligence and decoding ability were wholly independent and, therefore, it is impossible to make a judgement of an individual’s intelligence on the basis of their reading ability. Why the disconnect between the message I sought to communicate and the one that was seemingly perceived? Perhaps I was just not putting across my intended message very well? In my opinion, however, this phenomenon, equally evident these past weeks, reflects a form of projection whereby past humiliations caused by the insensitivities of others are grafted onto the understandings of what is being said. In essence, the anxious and angry parent is (understandably) antagonistic to anyone who appears to threaten their cherished belief that the label sustains the wellbeing of their child. The perceived opposition are seen to share common perspectives, all of which are insensitive to the needs of those who suffer from dyslexia. Although the reality is very different, it is easier to discount scientific research findings when these are blended with other less tenable assertions.

Ultimately, rational discussion based upon scientific evidence is the better way forward. I understand the anger; I just cannot accept this as the basis for considered action.

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Describing dyslexia as "a cruel fiction...no more real than the 19th century scientific construction of the æther to explain how light travels through a vacuum," he argued that the reason why so many children struggled with literacy was because they had been failed by the education establishment. Rather than admitting that poor instruction was at fault, he argued, a brain disorder called dyslexia had been invented. For Stringer, "to label children as dyslexic because they're confused by poor teaching methods is wicked. The sooner it is consigned to the same dustbin of history, the bette..."