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Six myths about dyslexia

Think you know about dyslexia? Think again, says Susan Godsland

A s the parent of a once struggling reader, I have deep and personal experience of the frustration and anxiety which results from having a “dyslexic” in the family. Back then, I read all the dyslexia books and thought I knew a great deal about the subject. Now, as a seasoned reading tutor with a steady stream of struggling readers coming through my door (and having studied a different set of publications on reading difficulties, those whose authors are commonly ignored or derided by the dyslexia community), I know that all my previous learning amounted to little more than myths. Here, I will unravel some of the common ones.

Myth one: those diagnosed with dyslexia have a fault in the brain which manifests itself as an inability to hear and manipulate sounds at the level of the phoneme, causing serious problems with learning to read and spell.

This myth is surprisingly easy to challenge; one only needs to ask if these dyslexic students are able to speak normally. We know that babies learn to speak by listening for phonemes in the speech stream of the adults around them (McGuinness, 1997). Once they have learned to talk and no longer need to listen at this micro-level of sound, this wired-in phoneme sensitivity becomes biologically unnecessary and it disappears into the background of the brain.

In pre-literate times, this ability would never be needed again, but in order to learn to read and write using an alphabetic code, it becomes necessary to bring this facility once again to the fore. Children vary in the ease with which they can resurrect this now buried ability (McGuinness, 1997); a few children become phonologically aware almost effortlessly. They have inherited a great ear for sound and a good eye for patterns in words. In an environment full of books with helpful, literate adults on hand, they put the two together themselves and rapidly become readers. Most children aren’t so lucky and some find it very difficult indeed. Fortunately, all is not lost for those who have missed out in the nature and nurture stakes as all the necessary knowledge and skills for reading and writing can be simply taught through the use of systematic synthetic phonics.

The international dyslexia community has yet to produce a universally accepted, operational definition of the difficulty...