

5 July 2005

Dear SENCO

I am a writer, dyslexia tutor (for Middlesex University), consultant and dyslexia diagnostician; I have also worked as a secondary school SENCO and with primary school dyslexics. My most recent part-time post (which ended a month ago) was as Locum Education Officer for Haringey (25% of my wages were paid by Haringey LEA, the other 75% by Youth Offending Services). In May, before I left, I sent out questionnaires to all secondary SENCOs and to 30% of primary SENCOs. I would like to take this opportunity of expressing my sincere appreciation to the busy SENCOs who patiently filled these out and posted them back to me. Those of you who wrote asking for help in identifying and treating dyslexia have inspired me to write something more than a report. Accordingly you will find, enclosed, recommendations for cash-strapped, busy teachers that will, I know from experience, make a significant difference to any pupil you teach with literacy problems, both dyslexic and non-dyslexic. My qualifications are listed at the end of the recommendations.

During my nine months as Locum Education Officer I acquired a new caseload of forty-four 14-17-year-olds (most aged 15), all of whom were known to the police. Thirteen of these tested as dyslexic. Not one dyslexic youngster had been acknowledged as such either by their school or by their educational psychologist (two had been statemented for emotional behavioural difficulties). A representative proportion of dyslexics would normally be 5% (2.2 of the youngsters from my sample instead of the 13 on my books) in this case, though it was 29.54% (thirteen out of forty-four). A related statistic was given by David Moore, HMI inspector at the October 1997 NASEN Conference which was that 75% of all prisoners in Great Britain had a reading age of under 10 years.

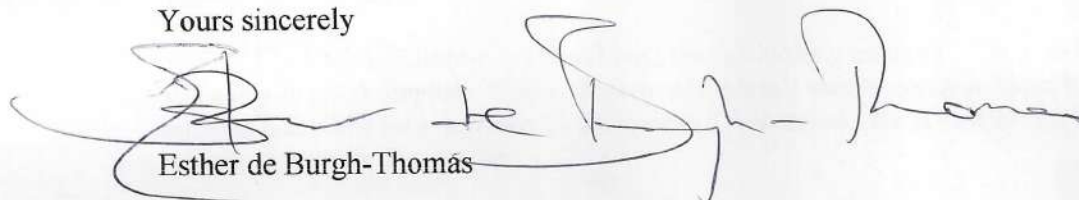
The image this brings to mind – because so many people (including myself) heard this speech eight years ago – is one of a train headed for a crash – a train filled with people babbling but with no driver. I was one of the babblers: on August 5, 2001 The Sunday Times News Review published a 2,000-word article I had written complaining about what children were suffering from at the Government's hands in the name of inclusion. That article later found its way (in subdued form) into Special Children magazine. Only one member of the public ever gave me a written response to these two articles. I now believe that writing articles (and reading them) carries the danger of providing only the illusion of change when the fact is that only workers like us, sweating at the chalk face, can effect change, sometimes with the help of counsellors and MPs, (the reason I've given you the email addresses for Haringey's education counsellors and its MP, Lyn Featherstone, at the end of "Recommendations"). By providing you directly with all the best information I can on how to cope with literacy difficulties on a shoestring, I hope I am doing something more useful than writing another article: I hope I am helping you to turn pupils into useful citizens rather than the thirteen amateur criminals I so recently met, details of whom are appended as a PS to this letter.

It is easy to forget that we have been classically conditioned to enjoy achieving in the school and work arena. Most of the dyslexics I met recently had lost interest in the kinds of opportunities offered by schools or colleges: talking to them felt a little like talking to the dying: they wanted to say the right things to me but they didn't care about succeeding in the usual ways any more. Without exception, they all smoked skunk (some were having waking hallucinations as a result) and many belonged to gangs: an expensive activity (in terms of uniform, travelling and drugs) which allows no time for gainful employment or attendance at educational institutions

It was as Locum Education Officer that I came to understand that even the qualifications such as NVQs we all once believed would solve the problems of non-readers have, today, too demanding a literacy component to be a realistic option for poor readers. Of the 44 youngsters I placed on courses or encouraged back to school, the drop-outs were most often the 13 dyslexics included in that group: they had learnt not to engage with organised rehabilitation and to expect repeated failure and humiliation in classroom situations. Today's computerised, paper-shuffling world is a more terrifying place for today's dyslexic than it's ever been: the non-readers have no choice but to turn to others for support: either their parents, a girlfriend or a gang. Many of the teenagers I met had already taken the only option they felt was available: crime and the chance to huddle together with other failures in gangs. Some dyslexics re-offended during the short time I knew them in spite of having social workers and chances of alternative education (see the PS for details). One re-offended while he was on a Princes Trust course: a course that would undoubtedly have provided him with vital work experience. Another failed to attend three interviews for the same Princes Trust course. Meanwhile a non-dyslexic on the Princes Trust course is now a Princes Trust mentor and rightly proud of herself.

Many 15-year-old dyslexics have too many gang-related new responsibilities to have time to learn anything else and, in any case, many lost the will to learn when they began to experience repeated failure in Y6 or 7 onwards. In their case, a residential literacy course (none exists) would do them more good than prison. The people we might still be able to reach, however, are the dyslexics and other poor readers who aren't yet truanting from school. The recommendations I attach are included because they are relatively cheap and easy and can be applied to groups (even ARROW can be done in groups – email me if you want to know more). I have attached my email address and phone numbers in case I can be of any further use. Although I will be away at times over the summer, I will reply to all emails.

Yours sincerely



Esther de Burgh-Thomas

PS Since completing this letter, a fellow teacher suggested I give you details of all thirteen dyslexics referred to me and a quick note on how they fared:

Note: many non-dyslexics are doing very well on the same courses some of these dyslexics have already lost interest in. One (doing Southgate's carpentry course)

actually made a point of asking his social worker to thank me for arranging for him to do a carpentry course which was not attended by a dyslexic. Dyslexics, as you will see, are less easy to rehabilitate...

A V - Y11 - his school sent him on a mechanics course. His attendance became sporadic before he stopped coming

C C - Y10 - given a place at Southgate college with plenty of literacy support. Stopped going.

C C Y10 - went back to his secondary school. Then his dyslexic brother (who was unable to proceed with his NVQ in mechanics due to his dyslexia), involved him in a crime for which he faces custody.

D M - Y10 - asked to go on a woodwork course. Accordingly, he was given a place to do woodwork and other qualifications at Southgate. He pretended, for some time, that he had no place. His parents offered to pay for a black cab but, to date, he has not attended.

H M - Y10 - at Haringey's tuition centre (very unhappy) awaiting a place at a new school.

J S - Y10 - a traveller on roll at the Pupil Referral Unit. Whereas some travellers can teach themselves to read using teletext 888, this boy lacks the ability to learn in this way because of his dyslexia. It is unlikely he will ever learn to read or gain any qualifications.

J G - Y12 - a bright, charming boy with a statement for behavioural difficulties. Still unable to read. Would love to be a graphic designer and was given a place on the Princes Trust course. Now in custody (and taken off the Princes Trust course as a result) because of further (exacerbated) street crimes he committed.

K M - Y10 - back at school after offending. He has asked the school to take his dyslexia into account. So far, nothing has happened. In the meantime, he has agreed to accept counselling for his feelings of anger.

L M - Y12 - Flatly refuses to attend any course (he would enjoy Breakfree). Has realised, though, that it is possible for him to learn to read and can now read simple words I have taught him on weekly sessions during compulsory attendance at Youth Offending Services.

M P - Y11 - This boy had an especially negative reaction to the skunk they all smoked. He occasionally had waking hallucinations, and was last mentioned as trying to defend himself and his mother against imaginary intruders carrying guns. His school had not realised he was dyslexic because he was able to spell most easy words. I arranged with his school that he would have an amanuensis for his GCSEs. He was not expecting to do well in any of them and planned to sit two.

R T - Y10 - I was not allowed to meet this boy. He was in custody and considered too dangerous even to be allowed to walk past a security man. I was told he was dyslexic with a reading age of 7 years.

S M - Y12 - back in custody. A sweet boy, always looking unhappy. Came to England aged 10 unable to speak English. This is the boy who wasn't able to organise himself on three separate occasions for interviews to the Princes Trust course. He is now in custody after mixing with the wrong people.

T O - Y10 - one of the brightest, nicest dyslexics I have ever met. Asked very intelligent questions. He was so tired and worn out with repeated failure (like the rest, he hadn't realised he was dyslexic) that, although he was prepared to go on to Y11 he was desperate to go to a place like KIS (Keep It Simple) once he realised the GCSEs there (AQUA awards) were not as demanding as the ones at his school.