

# Dyslexics as Library Users

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BARBARA A. BLISS

A DYSLEXIC IS A PERSON of average intelligence or better who has difficulty learning to read and/or spell. Sometimes this involves remembering how to pronounce words correctly and thus affects speech, but often the dyslexic is able to speak adequately. Until old enough to go to school, the potential dyslexic is often quite normal in development. Speech may be slower to develop and memory for sequential commands may be short, but in most ways the person is very much like others of the same age...until he or she fails to learn basic skills in school.<sup>1</sup>

Those of us who have learned to read and spell with little effort find it very difficult to understand why the dyslexic cannot learn in the same way. The first thought that comes to mind is that the dyslexic is not very "bright." When this does not seem to fit because the dyslexic is gifted in another area such as mathematics or mechanics, then the reason appears to be that he/she is "not trying" or is "lazy." Other common notions center on the psychological: there must be an "emotional block" due to problems within the family, a demanding mother, a domineering father, a divorce, or the death of a loved one.

## Research Efforts

Unfortunately these myths and erroneous diagnoses persist in spite of the fact that in 1925 Dr. Samuel T. Orton provided a physiological

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Barbara A. Bliss is an instructor, General Studies Department, Madison Area Technical College, Madison, Wisconsin and since retirement has worked with adult dyslexics as a counselor and Orton-Gillingham tutor.

reason for dyslexia. A bright, sixteen-year-old boy, reading at the first-grade level, became his first dyslexic patient.

Orton was a neurologist and psychiatrist at the Iowa Psychopathic Hospital. His training and experience with stroke patients who suffered language loss through injury to one side of the brain gave him a useful insight into language development. His belief in a physical basis for reading problems differed from the popular psychological theories of his day which leaned toward the emotional causation of school problems. Orton acknowledged that often there were emotional problems but that they were reactions to the frustrations of failure and defeat brought about by the primary cause—dyslexia. A grant from the Rockefeller Foundation enabled him to set up a research program first at the State University of Iowa, and then at Columbia University in New York City. He also directed other research projects in Connecticut and Pennsylvania during World War II.<sup>2</sup>

What was once considered merely a theory based on careful observation has recently proved to be correct. At the Beth Israel Hospital in Boston, Massachusetts, brain research has revealed specific differences between the structure of the brain of a dyslexic and that of persons without language deficits.<sup>3</sup> Dyslexics have trouble with words because their brains are formed differently in the areas most involved with language.

When Orton died in 1948, a group of his associates formed an Orton Society to keep in touch and to carry on his research into dyslexia. Membership was multidisciplinary and dedicated. Each year a professional journal, *The Bulletin of the Orton Dyslexia Society*, was published with articles on dyslexia. International meetings and conferences were held bringing together people interested in the phenomenon from all over the world. European and British researchers began to contribute to the journal. (In 1982 the name of the organization was changed to the Orton Dyslexia Society and the journal to *Annals of Dyslexia*.)

Strangely enough, paralleling this but showing very little interest in it was educational research by the International Reading Association made up primarily of reading teachers and those who trained them. The gulf between the organizations probably stemmed from the controversy over which was better, the phonic approach or the whole-word approach.<sup>4</sup>

In retrospect it seems now that probably 80 percent of the population is able to learn to read reasonably well by the whole-word approach, but many of these individuals experience difficulty with spelling because their visual memory for words is weak, and they do not know the sounds of letters and combinations of letters to use as a backup

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system when they cannot “see” how the word looks in order to spell it correctly.

What of the remaining 20 percent, the nonreaders? They fail in school: not once, but over and over again. This unexplained reading failure in otherwise capable students undermines self-confidence, causes unnecessary punishment and ridicule, and prevents learning by reading. Holding a child back to repeat a grade does not help if the method of instruction remains the same. Orton, with his neurological background and wide experience with dyslexics, together with Anna Gillingham, a psychologist and educator, devised a system of teaching phonics consistent with neurological understandings of the ways people learn. The Orton-Gillingham approach<sup>5</sup> utilizes a multisensory, sequential, systematic approach, with frequent drill, identification of sounds of letters, and application of generalizations regarding spelling and reading the English language. Over many years, dedicated and innovative teachers have refined and adapted the approach into a highly successful technique for teaching encoding and decoding.

### **Libraries and the Dyslexic**

In order for libraries to reach this special population of handicapped learners, perhaps we should ask a number of questions.

- How much information does the library have on dyslexia? The Orton Dyslexia Society? The Orton-Gillingham approach?
- What materials are available for teachers, tutors, or parents to use in helping dyslexics learn to spell or read? Are these materials primarily visually oriented? If so, they may cause the dyslexic to experience yet another failure. The dyslexic can learn with a multisensory, sequential approach, individualized for his or her special needs.
- Is there a list available of tutors and teachers in the area trained in the Orton-Gillingham approach?
- Does the library publicize workshops for teachers interested in helping dyslexics learn to read? There are many potential library users among handicapped readers.
- Are taped articles about dyslexia available for adults to read and listen to? Imagine what it must be like to be diagnosed as “dyslexic” and not to know what this means, what can be done (if anything), and where to go for help.
- Does the library collect large-print books for dyslexics as well as for the sight impaired? It makes reading much less arduous.
- Are there some exciting books taped and packaged with a print copy?

When dyslexics read along with a recording, the experience is pleasurable rather than frustrating, and comprehension is greatly improved. While some are able to read as though they were translating a foreign language, there is no pleasure for them in reading—only pain, fatigue, and great embarrassment. How reassuring it would be to read and listen to one of the interesting autobiographies by a dyslexic (see additional references).

### **A Classroom of Adult Dyslexics**

For several years the author has been teaching a course for adult dyslexics at the Madison Area Technical College. The five-week course, "Living With Dyslexia," stresses receiving accurate information about the disability; learning coping skills for daily living; developing assets and abilities; improving basic skills of reading and spelling; learning to communicate with the boss, a professor, spouse, or children about one's disability; and helping other dyslexics.

The course is taught without a textbook, quizzes, or exams, or written papers. Students are urged to tape-record the lessons and listen as many times as necessary before the next class. Research articles are recorded and, together with a print copy, packaged in a manila envelope for students to borrow between classes. Articles vary in difficulty from newspaper and popular magazine articles to recent research found in current multidisciplinary journals. In this way the dyslexic student has access to complete data not just what the instructor deems important.

Dyslexics are like persons who are starving: they may know there is food available, but they are unable to obtain it. They know books contain information and ideas which they need and desire, but their inadequate reading skills keep them from getting it. Sometimes their first successful experience with reading occurs when they follow a script while listening to a tape recording of information on dyslexia. The librarian who makes audio-reading available to nonreaders is unlocking the contents of books for one-fifth of the population.

### **The Adult Dyslexic**

What has the instructor learned from listening to the dyslexic members of his classes that might interest librarians?

1. Most often expressed by individuals is the relief dyslexics feel when they meet others like themselves. No longer do they feel like freaks, loners.

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2. Dyslexics are eager to learn but are afraid to try because of repeated failure experiences.
3. They can operate AV equipment with ease *unless given written instructions*.
4. They remember verbal instructions when not too many are given at one time. (If instructions are too lengthy, a tape recorder should be used so the dyslexic can listen more than once or stop the machine at intervals while responding. Better still would be to *demonstrate* the process because dyslexics usually learn best this way.)
5. A card catalog is very confusing to dyslexics, but they are very appreciative when librarians understand their plight and take the time to assist them.
6. Many dyslexics have learned to use the word processor and it has freed them from embarrassment of depending on others to write letters for them or check their spelling. However, owning a computer and printer is beyond the financial capability of many who are underemployed due to their dyslexia. Reading the instruction manuals seems next to impossible, but they are capable of learning through active participation. Word processors should be made available and demonstrations provided (preferably by another dyslexic).
7. Dyslexia is an invisible handicap. One cannot tell a dyslexic from a good reader by sight, and many are too embarrassed to admit to their problem because people still equate being unable to read, spell, and write with mental retardation.
8. Dyslexics are eligible for Talking Books for the Blind, but consider what it must be like to be required to ask a physician (who may know very little about dyslexia) for a signature on an application for services. The doubt and suspicion which implies that the dyslexic individual is trying to put something over on the public or else is too lazy to read is painful to endure. Dyslexics often suffer one such embarrassment after another all day long because people do not understand.
9. Dyslexics want to learn to read and spell adequately. They hate to be handicapped and excluded from what others are able to do. A surprising number of them keep trying (and failing) over and over again. Too many others give up. Research indicates a strong relation between school failure and delinquency.<sup>6</sup> It is painful to remember that between 70 and 80 percent of federal prisoners are functionally illiterate.
10. One common reason why dyslexics seek help with reading and spelling is because they cannot read to their small children or help them with their homework.

### **A Library Response**

Now libraries are beginning to respond to the needs of this special nonreading population. The question is: Will those library personnel who have no problem reading and spelling offer the same solutions that have failed the dyslexic in the past? Let us hope not. New answers must be found based on what has worked. One way to ensure this is to cooperate with other agencies and organizations that are searching for alternative approaches.

In a valiant attempt to find alternatives, the Dane County (Wisconsin) Library System in July 1984 entered into a contractual agreement with the Madison (Wisconsin) Literacy Council to open Literacy Outreach Centers in four libraries in Dane County, outside Madison, Wisconsin. The libraries chosen were Middleton, Verona, Stoughton, and Sun Prairie. An application for an LSCA grant was made and obtained through the Department of Public Instruction of the State of Wisconsin. Mention was made in the grant of the importance of recognizing and serving dyslexic adults.

Three main forces and developments in the community converged to bring about this program: (1) the Madison Literacy Council (MLC), (2) the Wisconsin Branch of the Orton Dyslexia Society, and (3) Madison Area Technical College. On the Board of Directors of the Madison Literacy Council were people of diverse backgrounds deeply concerned with literacy. Two of these were librarians acquainted with the Library Services and Construction Act, which focused on the need for libraries to reach out to populations not already served. Frances de Usabel, consultant with the Division for Library Services, Department of Public Instruction, did some brainstorming with Don Lamb, administrator of the Dane County Library Service. He recalled that Julie Chase of the Middleton Library had recently talked with him about this same subject. Joan Sullivan, outreach librarian with Dane County Library Service, joined the group bringing with her an interest in learning-disabled readers as well as knowledge about the Library Literacy Project in progress in Janesville, Wisconsin under Deb Johnson. Lamb and Sullivan contacted the Madison Literacy Council.

At approximately the same time, a group of adults were forming the Wisconsin Branch of the Orton Dyslexia Society. This brought together people whose interests were concerned with language-disabled children and adults. The author, who was president of the Madison Literacy Council, was one of these. A Dyslexia Support Group that met each month was formed and was made up of adult dyslexics, teachers, parents of dyslexic children, and others interested in specific language

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disabilities. A strong interest in the Orton-Gillingham approach to teaching phonics was expressed, but in the Madison area there were only a very few people trained in this method. Where would nonreaders and poor spellers get the instruction they needed?

Madison Area Technical College showed an interest in helping dyslexics. Sara Sherkow of the General Studies Department encouraged the author to start a class for people who had a problem with words. "Living With Dyslexia" drew thirty adults on the first evening of the class and was repeated six weeks later and every semester since then. Many of these adults wanted help with reading and spelling. Something had to be done about providing trained tutors. While many of these adults were handicapped in language skills, most were functioning at a higher level than the Laubach materials of the Madison Literacy Council.

Again the Madison Area Technical College responded, this time by offering a summer workshop/practicum for teachers or tutors. Arlene Sunday, a nationally known reading teacher and skilled Orton-Gillingham trainer, was brought from St. Paul, Minnesota to demonstrate and explain the approach as well as supervise the practicum experience for workshop participants. There are now over fifty newly trained tutors in the Dane County area with some training in the method who are ready and eager to assist nonreaders.

These three forces, independent of each other yet closely connected in their aims and aspirations, managed to converge much as planets moving in space. This is reflected in the goals that follow, taken from the application for a second year of the LSCA grant:

1. To increase the library staff awareness of the literacy problem and of their role in providing assistance to persons of special need.
2. To maintain and improve the newly established literacy training centers in four Dane County libraries geographically distributed around the county to provide volunteer tutor recruitment and training, individual student placement and instruction, and collections of supplementary literacy materials for circulation.
3. To add computer software programs to the literacy materials available to tutors and students because of the importance of multisensory learning.
4. To promote general awareness of public libraries in Dane County as providers of literacy resources.
5. To make literacy materials available to all Dane County residents through collections of print and audiocassette materials as well as through interlibrary loan from the literacy centers.

6. To increase the number of literacy tutors in Dane County, outside of Madison, by providing eight tutor training classes of twelve hours each, these classes to be in basic literacy instruction with an added component in working with learning difficulties.
7. To establish ESL (English as a second language) classes of twelve hours each.
8. To place each trained tutor with a client for individual instruction.
9. To train Madison Literacy Council tutor trainers in the Orton-Gillingham approach so that this skill in diagnosis and teaching can be added to the tutor-training program, and follow-up assistance will be available to tutors as needed.
10. To develop and publish materials adapting the Orton-Gillingham teaching approach to each level of Laubach instruction.
11. To disseminate information about the program and its results as requested.

### **The Role of the Libraries**

The role played by the libraries in this joint venture consists of providing space for teacher-training sessions, setting up major collections of supplementary literacy materials, becoming involved in information and referral roles, and taking part in in-service training programs set up by the MLC.

Joan Sullivan, as project administrator, is responsible for coordinating the program, ordering and distributing the materials, completing evaluations and reports, maintaining financial records, and assisting in developing a set of manuals to blend the Orton-Gillingham approach with the Laubach materials.

To coordinate the combined effort, the MLC employed Kay Bradley, whose responsibility it was to meet with librarians, plan publicity, set up training sessions, interview prospective tutors, match up tutors and clients, facilitate communication, recommend materials, plan in-service meetings, and keep the board of directors informed of all details of the program.

Bradley has taken courses in understanding dyslexia, and workshops in the Orton-Gillingham approach in order to assist new tutors who find themselves tutoring people with language handicaps. She also arranges for follow-up training sessions as requested by new tutors. (This year the program is responding to the increased numbers of people who are immigrants and have moved into Dane County. English as a second language has been added to the basic tutoring courses of the first year.)

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In summary, dyslexics are potential users of libraries. They are intelligent people who are eager to learn, yet experience great difficulty in learning by reading. Ignorance by the general public surrounds and compounds their problems. As one victim phrases it, dyslexics are imprisoned by their handicap. They need help in opening doors and providing keys to our literary heritage.

On the last evening of her "Living with Dyslexia" class a young lady handed her instructor the following poem:

### A Dyslexic We May Be by Judy K. Schara

The problems of a dyslexic are as big as an elephant,  
But with work, care and love they'll become as small as an ant.  
We have our ups and downs,  
But, really, we're not a bunch of clowns.  
The words get all mixed up and jumbled,  
And some letters even upside-down-tumbled.  
North, South, East, or West...Which is which?  
If we're not careful, we'll end up in a ditch.  
All jumbled and jived our words do come out,  
And to straighten them out can be quite a bout.  
Panic was our middle name, when asked to read aloud,  
For the words often seemed to be in a cloud.  
As readers we are very slow,  
For many of the words we don't know.  
In some things we're beyond the diploma we hold,  
But in others we're in the dark like a mole.  
We have no real limitations,  
For we have no boundaries on our imaginations.  
We are fighters from the word "go,"  
Just try to box us in and you'll find out...so.  
Slow, lazy, retarded, non-achievers, and emotionally disturbed are a  
few of our mis-labels,  
We're really just mis-wired, but quite stable.  
You'll find us in every walk of life, from doctor, lawyer, to Indian  
chief,  
All we ask of you is to have in us faith, confidence, trust and belief.  
We are in very good company...Rockefeller, Edison, DaVinci, Ein-  
stein and Yeats,  
Just to name a few...Now if that list won't do,  
Add Mary, Anna, Ed and John, Judy, Claudia, Debbie, and Ron,  
And I could go on, and on, and on.  
Like snowflakes, no two of us are alike, but take a chance,  
Get to know us...We can be quite a delight.

## References

1. The Orton Dyslexia Society (ODS), 724 York Road, Baltimore, Md. 21204. Best resource for information on dyslexia. Request publications list for books, monographs, pamphlets, and reprints of research and major addresses. Cumulative indexes for annual *Bulletins* since 1950. Name changed to *Annals of Dyslexia* in 1982.
2. Orton, June L. "The Orton-Gillingham Approach." In *The Disabled Reader: Education of the Dyslexic Child*, edited by John Money, pp. , Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1966.
3. Galaburda, Albert. "Developmental Dyslexia: Current Research" (ODS Reprint No. 99). *Annals*, 1983.
4. Chall, Jeanne. *Learning to Read, the Great Debate*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967.
5. Gillingham, Anna, and Stillman, Bessie. *Remedial Training for Children with Specific Disability in Reading, Spelling, and Penmanship*, (seven editions, basic text). Cambridge, Mass.: Educators Publishing Service, Inc., 1940. See also ODS Reprint No. 11, June L. Orton.
6. Murray, C.A. "The Link Between Learning Disabilities and Juvenile Delinquency: Current Theory and Knowledge." Rockville, Md.: National Criminal Justice Reference Service, 1981. (The booklet is available free by writing to the National Criminal Justice Reference Service, Box 6000, Rockville, MD 20850 or phone 608/238-4343.)

## Additional References

For autobiographical books by dyslexics see:

- Fleming, Elizabeth H. *Believe the Heart: Our Dyslexic Days*. San Francisco, Calif.: Strawberry Hill Press, 1984.
- Hampshire, Susan. *Susan's Story: An Autobiographical Account of My Struggle with Words*. London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1981.
- Simpson, Eileen. *Reversals: A Personal Account of Victory Over Dyslexia*. Boston, Mass.: Houghton-Mifflin, 1979.

For publication lists of books, monographs, pamphlets, and reprints of research and major addresses of dyslexia, the following address is the best resource:

- The Orton Dyslexia Society (ODS), 724 York Road, Baltimore, MD 21204. Also available are the annual *Bulletins*—now named *Annals of Dyslexia* since changed in 1982—from 1950.
- Doehring, Donald G. "What Do We Know About Reading Disabilities? Closing the Gap Between Research and Practice." *Annals of Dyslexia* 33(1984):175-83.
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- Long, Kate. *Johnny's Such a Bright Boy, What a Shame He's Retarded*. Boston, Mass.: Houghton-Mifflin, 1977.
- Masland, Richard L. "Brain Mechanisms Underlying the Language Function" (ODS Reprint No. 18). Baltimore, Md.: Orton Dyslexia Society.
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- Rome, Howard D. "The Psychiatric Aspect of Dysteria" (ODS Reprint No. 38). Baltimore, Md.: Orton Dyslexia Society.