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## **Teachers' Attitudes and Knowledge About Dyslexia : Are They Affecting Children Diagnosed with Dyslexia ?**

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### **Defining dyslexia?**

Fundamentally it is often thought to be a problem with the language processing area of the brain that in turn has an impact on reading and spelling. With approximately ten percent of the British population having dyslexia, there are still many barriers that people with dyslexia have to cross, one of them being that there is generally a poor understanding of dyslexia.

Orlando Bloom, Agatha Christie, Bill Gates and Richard Branson are, if you like, 'celebrity dyslexics', but a diagnosis of dyslexia for these celebrities (and there are many with dyslexia) has not stopped them succeeding as adults. Teachers often find themselves being told by their leadership team or SEND department that they have a child in their class with dyslexia and therefore must provide intervention strategies to differentiate their teaching and to facilitate learning: A child with a supportive network available is more likely to flourish and have confidence than if they feel inferior or inadequate to their peers. The feeling of inferiority or inadequacy however is often quite commonly felt by teachers themselves when faced with the task of teaching someone with dyslexia if they have no knowledge of how to.

Lots of research exists into the causes and interventions for dyslexia, ranging from how to deal with children who stutter to those children in inclusive education, but relatively little looks at teachers' attitudes and experiences. Very little can be found which looks specifically at the attitudes and knowledge qualified teachers hold about dyslexia and in general combined with their individual feeling towards how dyslexia is dealt with in education. The knowledge of dyslexia and the subsequent attitudes of dyslexia (the disorder) and the child with dyslexia held by a teacher does affect their ability to help a child in the classroom with Mills (2006) suggesting it is the commitment shown by teachers that has the strongest bearing for the learning of a child with a learning difficulty.

### **Perceptions of dyslexia**

Kerr (2001) found there was a variation in opinion and attitude of teachers in his questionnaire revealing uncertainty as to what dyslexia is, what might cause it, what to do about it and whether it exists at all. Seventy-five per cent of those questioned held common misconceptions of dyslexia such as, "odd spelling patterns reversals or inversions as indicative of dyslexia" (p.83). One alarming finding is almost half of the participants did not adapt their teaching style to suit someone with a diagnosis of dyslexia, and those that did usually simplified it.

The way in which a teacher displays his/her attitudes is affected by their personal belief(s) about how a child with dyslexia should be taught in conjunction with those of a senior leadership team or SENDCo. Ultimately, this impacts on the teacher's ability or competency to deal with a dyslexic child in mainstream education. Teachers must exercise caution as certain negative attitudes could be detrimental to the child's self-esteem.

The perception of attitudes about dyslexia of student teachers formed the central focus of research by Gwernan-Jones and Burden (2010), specifically choosing student teachers (PGCE students) about to enter the teaching

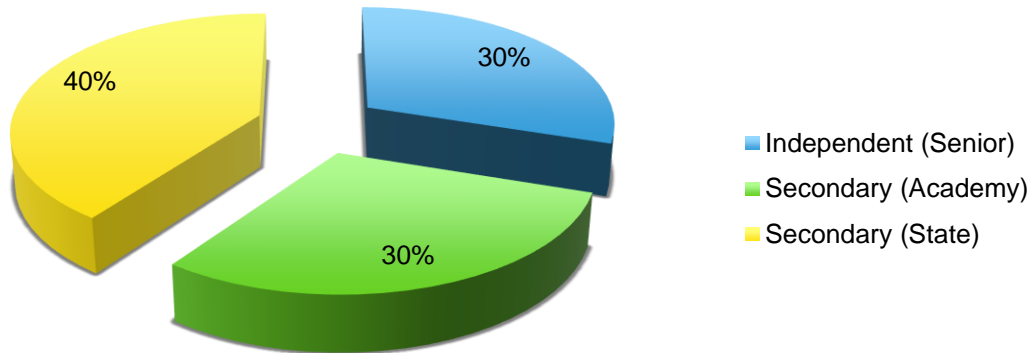
profession. Student teachers expressed positive attitudes toward the construct of dyslexia, many displaying confidence in their ability to support dyslexic pupils. Incidentally, females were more positive in their attitude toward dyslexia than males, but there was no difference in subject specialism.

The present article, based on research conducted during the summer term of 2013, we focus on both the nature of the attitudes *and* the knowledge of dyslexia of qualified teachers with several years' teaching experience. This information may provide insight into what, if anything can be delivered in the initial stages of teacher training for potential NQTs to consider for the rest of their teaching career and how best to nurture those with years of experience.

### **Method**

Using a mixed-method approach of online questionnaires (30 respondents) and face-to-face interviews (3). Forty-three per cent of the participants were male. The mean age of participants was 40.5 years, the youngest being 25 and oldest 62 years. From the sample of teachers, 37% held their degree (style of degree) in either an Arts/Humanities area whilst 63% held their degree in a Science subject.

## Education sector of respondents



An online questionnaire (by Gwernan-Jones and Burden, 2010) and semi-structured interview was constructed.

The online questionnaire was in two sections, one relating to the teachers' attitude about dyslexia and the other to their knowledge of dyslexia. For example, 'The word dyslexia is really just an excuse for laziness' (Attitude) and; 'Multi-sensory teaching methods are considered to be particularly helpful to dyslexic pupils' (Knowledge).

Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were used, such as, 'How might a teacher's confidence in being able to support a dyslexic pupil's learning be affected in the school/college?'

### **Findings**

Three main findings were identified. First, female teacher attitudes were more positive than male teachers. Second, female teachers were more knowledgeable about dyslexia than male teachers. Finally, a general trend

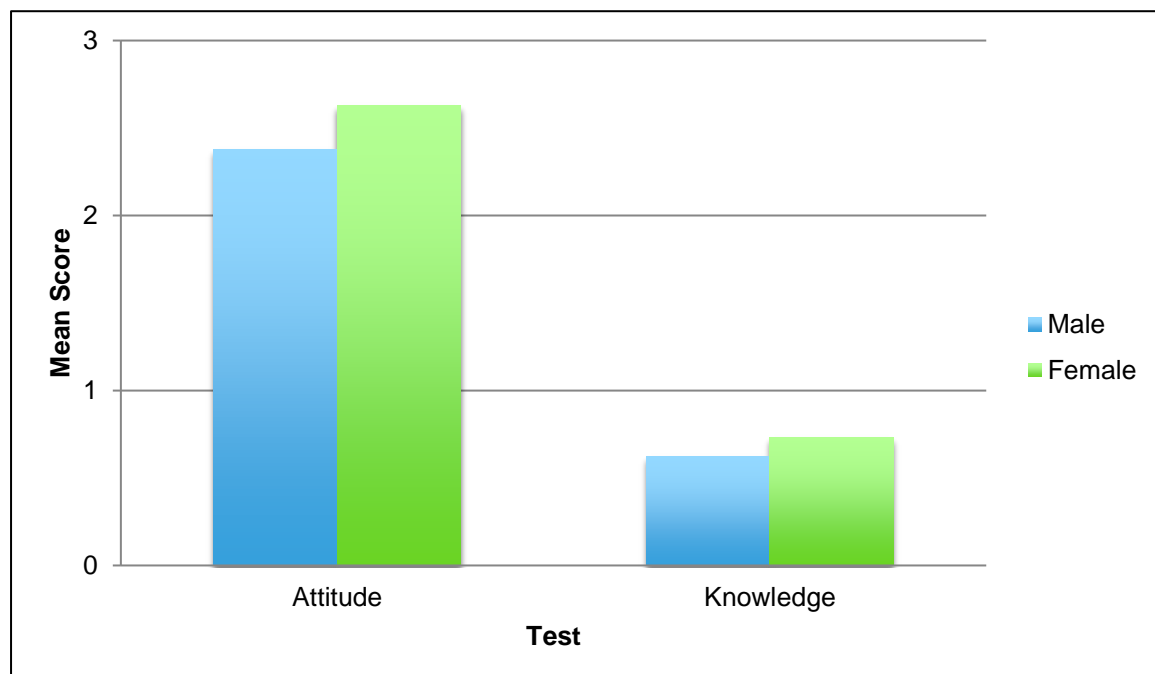
was shown that an individual teacher who had more knowledge of dyslexia displayed a much more positive attitude to a child diagnosed with dyslexia.

The results are presented in two sections. First, the teachers' responses to each of the main attitude areas towards dyslexia was influenced by their level of knowledge of dyslexia. Second, interview transcripts were examined to assess whether there were any recurrent themes across all transcripts using thematic analysis.

### Differences in Teachers' attitude towards dyslexia and knowledge of dyslexia

The first analysis examined the responses of the attitude questions and knowledge questions by gender. The mean scores are summarised in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Mean Scores for Attitude and Knowledge Test by Gender**



More female teachers (82%) described their experiences as positive whereas males were indicating 54% positive responses. One teacher reported that knowing of students with dyslexia encouraged them to alter their pedagogy, however one male teacher (dyslexic) said he had an understanding of the difficulties that dyslexia can have but sometimes had difficulties supporting pupils. Another teacher reported, "I can't say I know enough about dyslexia or have had many students diagnosed with dyslexia to comment more than they have had additional help with work and time for examinations extended".

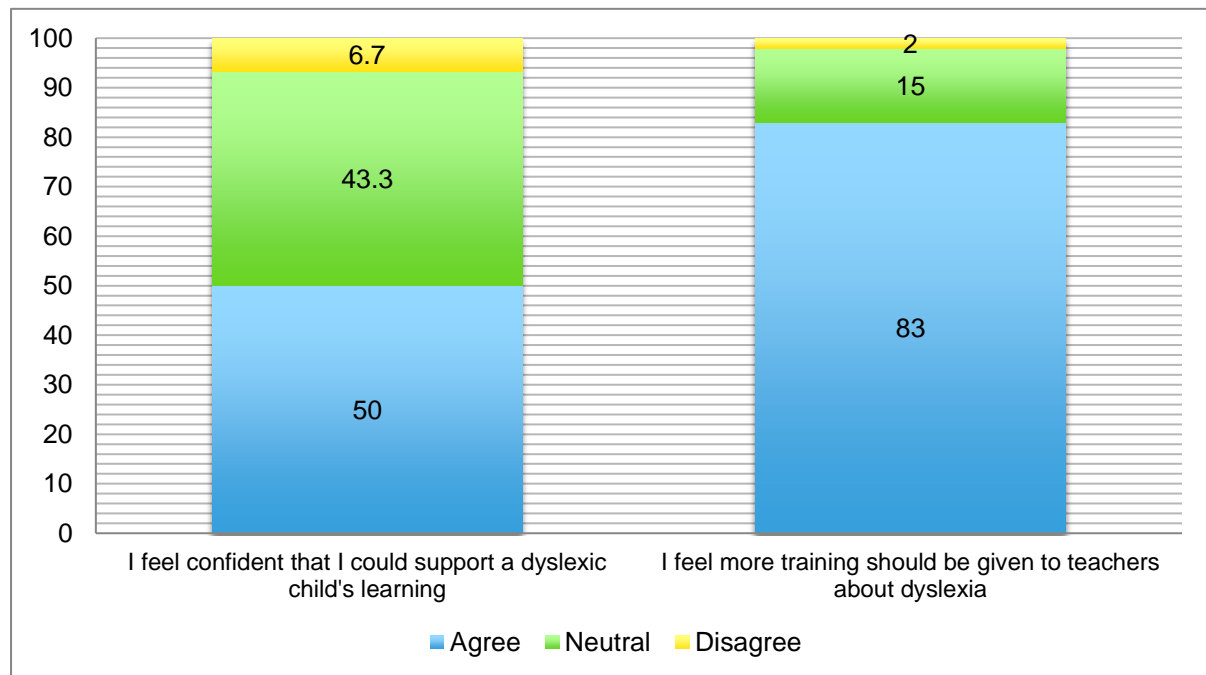
Thus qualified teachers know of the existence of dyslexia in its own right and that it should not be accepted or understood as sheer laziness.

*Teachers' feelings of competence in supporting dyslexic children*

- 1. I feel confident that I could support a dyslexic child's learning.*
- 2. I feel more training should be given to teachers about dyslexia.*

These items were included insofar as being able to detect a relationship between the two comments.

**Figure 2: Percentage of teachers' feelings of competence in supporting dyslexic children**



Just under 7% of teachers, all of who were male disagreed with the statement about 'confidence'. To the statement, "I feel more training should be given", 70.6% of females compared with 46.2% of males agreed with the statement and fewer than 50% of the male participants remained 'neutral' on this statement, compared to only three of female participants. The perceived need for further training is recognised by the majority of the group.

## Findings from the Interviews

Teachers' mainly focused on communication, listening, understanding and action during their interview. The ability of the teacher to help a child with dyslexia after diagnosis was common problem throughout, together with the time pressures of dealing with dyslexia in the classroom. Many teachers would prefer common strategies in the classroom to facilitate learning. All the teachers had experienced 'dyslexia' within the classroom, particularly in relation to literacy.

"Listening" is a prominent feature; the views of the student are fundamental to encouraging and improving their attainment and self-esteem. There are constraints on some teachers' understanding that relate to the type of subject taught. For example, a basic assumption is that if someone writes neatly and spells everything correctly then that is in some way indicative of their level of intelligence.

*"Dyslexia isn't a blanket term... that just manifests in people who aren't bright', there are members of staff who see that it manifests itself in people with lower intelligence." (1)*

*"I've learnt a lot from talking to specific students about how their dyslexia affects them and what coping strategies help them." (2)*

## Fear of the Unknown

Teachers show awareness of the difficulties faced by others who are unsure of what dyslexia entails and this can sometimes lead to many not knowing how to manage the situation in a careful way. Building positive relationships with pupils, irrespective of age, became apparent through interview so that they don't feel threatened. If a teacher believes they have little knowledge then it may be the case they just follow the recommendations of the SENDCo *"use the right coloured paper and pens"*.



*"It does seem to be a bridging term that I just don't know enough about to support effectively." (2)*

### High Expectations of Pupils

Teachers emphasised that the expectations of all pupils or students should be high and often mentioned that sometimes they had noticed other colleagues did have higher expectations of those students without dyslexia.

*"If you've got a member of staff with high expectations then they will expect that child to do well and think they will side-line the fact that the child is dyslexic or may not be dyslexic" (1)*

Teachers also pointed out that once they knew of a diagnosis they would endeavour to adapt their teaching.

A lack of understanding in how best to deal with a student who has dyslexia leads to potential stereotyping of these students. Some teachers do understand that 'dyslexia' encompasses many facets of academia and could relate to similar and different difficulties across the curriculum. Teachers do show understanding, even if not from their own perspective, that negative stereotypes have been linked with difficulty in writing and spelling and intelligence. Teachers talked about wanting to provide help in any way that it would be of benefit to each student, but do not feel empowered.

*"When I first started teaching it wasn't something that was recognised at all. It was something that has become gradually more recognised since I've been teaching." (1)*

*"The drive to have more literacy in all lessons has brought this to my attention, particularly where students make common mistakes." (3)*

The tendency for male teachers to appear abrupt in their approach to a child with dyslexia has been observed on occasions and it is apparent that differences exist in the way dyslexia is managed by teachers.

*"Women have slightly more empathy. That is a broad generalisation that doesn't include everyone, but I think looking as a gender group, women have much more empathy whereas men are much more 'come on... get on with it'." (1)*

*"I think if you're going to say 'I'm going to run a voluntary session on helping dyslexic pupils', then a higher percentage of women would turn up rather than men." (2)*

*"Blokes don't tend to use words and value words as much as women do. The woman tends to be more interested in teaching the child. There are huge gender differences in how teachers teach and also how children learn. Men are men and women are women. Never the twain shall meet. Very different." (3)*

The final theme highlighted several aspects, some negative, relating to teaching those children with dyslexia in the classroom: Time, support and strategies. Each of these sub-themes plays an integral role in assisting a child to deal with dyslexia effectively in the classroom by boosting an individual's self-esteem.

The pressure constraints placed upon teachers do have a negative impact on those in their classroom with dyslexia. The syllabus a child must follow does not necessarily take into consideration the amount of time it may take an individual to process the information. It was apparent that extra time is made available to a child with dyslexia in an examination hall, but there is not the extra time provided for them in the classroom, which ultimately places the child with dyslexia at a disadvantage. Inclusive education in this sense is not providing what it is supposed to.

*"We're dealing with humans... not robots. Every single person is different. We are all unique!" (1)*

*"We're under so much pressure to get x-amount of written work as evidence of progress and all the rest of it, when you've got a girl who's compliant and will do as she's told and you watch her struggling like mad with it, I feel so much more given to helping her than sorting out 'J' who's sitting there playing with the blinds taking his pen to bits. I just think, 'Oh god, I can't be dealing with him.' When you've only got an hour and you're under all this pressure..." (3)*

### Teacher Strategies

Different strategies adopted by teachers to support students with spelling difficulties included using spell check software on computers or laptops. Teachers were proactive to using a variety of techniques in different situations and displayed the concept that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' method when dealing with a student who has dyslexia.

*"I have taught students with mild dyslexia and a few who have stronger features. In all cases the determination of the pupil to find solutions to the issues they face has been the most important factor in achieving success. Those that see it as an excuse, and there are some, make less progress than those who see it as a challenge to be faced and overcome." (2)*

*"Coloured paper. It was easier to read on cream paper. I fed that back to Head of Learning Support who put it in her [student] profile." (1)*

*"Every child I've ever taught with the label 'dyslexia' appears to present in a different manner and needs different types of support and intervention." (2)*

### Support

Teachers highlighted that the type of establishment taught in, either State or Independent, had varying amounts of support. Staff can find teaching to be quite isolating without the correct support. Perhaps, surprisingly, it State sector schools have far more provisions available than the Independent sector.

*"A strength of the state system [is] they have more LSA's [learning support assistants] whereas you don't seem to have them in the Independent schools I've come across." (1)*

*"It's something the staff, [in an Independent school] at the front of the class, have to manage." (1)*

*"As a teacher, you've been monumentally abandoned because no-one is actually helping you. They are telling you what to do, but no-one is actually helping you." (2)*

## **The future?**

First, 'communication' is important in identifying fear together with expectations that some teachers experienced when teaching a child with dyslexia; talking with a child diagnosed as having dyslexia allays concerns a teacher may have over their individual fear and the expectations of that teacher. There are high expectations of all students, not just those with dyslexia. Rather than having the feeling of 'abandonment' due to lack of help, help must be offered in a way in which it is not seen as 'failure'.

Secondly, 'listening', the teacher or staff may feel in their particular school environment that they are not listened to as effectively as they would hope.

*"What they [Ofsted] want to see is me sitting, working side-by-side with a kid in the classroom. That's the only vision they got which doesn't work." (3)*

A lack of true understanding of dyslexia is a barrier to teachers' attitudes. More training for staff is essential. There is disparity in relation to the level of support shown in the different types of school whether it is state or independent. This may actually be to the detriment of the child, but just as important to the teacher. Teachers show a variety of different teaching strategies towards those with dyslexia and acknowledge that a lack of knowledge might bias their attitude towards a less positive one. An overarching topic of "Lack of Training" however is consistent and the importance of training in schools to qualified teachers about children with dyslexia is paramount; teacher training is based on a necessity for the child rather than a general interest of the classroom teacher.

If given support, teachers in most cases will do their best to support a child with any difficulty but having more training gives them the confidence to effectively manage the situation.

An effect of gender was found with female teachers having higher mean scores than male teachers. However, an apparent lack of confidence in perceived ability to support a child with dyslexia was expressed and therefore it is imperative that further training must be provided for existing teachers who lack current knowledge.

Teachers who have the correct knowledge (information) about children with dyslexia does without doubt influence their attitude in a more positive way when teaching a child with a diagnosis of dyslexia. This study has shown how having up-to-date training for teachers about dyslexia and more specifically how to deal with children with dyslexia remains an important feature which can improve a child's development thus ensuring that the best, academically, socially and psychologically is achieved for that child.

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