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Education: The art of being dyslexic

More and more research seems to point to a link between artistic talent and difficulties in reading and writing. Diana Appleyard looks at the latest evidence

DIANA APPLEYARD | THURSDAY 27 FEBRUARY 1997

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"The biggest surprise for me walking round this exhibition is seeing the names of the students I know from testing them on paper in spelling and reading, and seeing the same names underneath these wonderful works of art, their colour, their imagery - it's just a completely different language."

Dr Beverley Steffart, a psychologist who works in dyslexic assessment, is at an exhibition of the work of the foundation year at Central St Martin's College of Art and Design. A year ago she was brought in to carry out one of the first studies in this country into the link between dyslexia and creative ability.

She was called in because the college authorities were concerned about high levels of dyslexia among students. Her remarkable findings so far are that up to three-quarters of the 360 foundation-year students assessed have a form of dyslexia.

For the project Dr Steffart designed a series of six tests of verbal, written and spatial ability for the foundation course students. What she found was that the typical student was intellectually gifted - most of them doing well enough to put them in the top 10 per cent of the population. Their visual spatial skills were also at a superior level - but they had many problems with reading, writing and spelling.

"My research so far seems to show that there does seem to be a 'trade-off' between being able to see the world in this wonderfully vivid and three-dimensional way, and an inability to cope with the written word either through reading or writing," she says.

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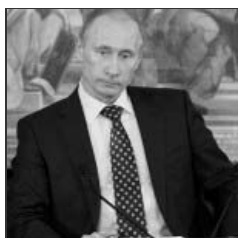
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The college has taken a pioneering stance. With a small grant from the Higher Education Funding Council, it has both funded both Dr Steffart's research and trained six specialist dyslexia tutors for the college of 2,500 students.

A conference organised by the college to discuss the interim findings of the dyslexia project was over-subscribed by 100 per cent.

This is the first such research project of its kind in this country, but there is a great deal of authoritative research being carried out in America which is discovering links between dyslexia, and heightened visual and spatial ability.

A team at the Harvard Medical Centre has shown that dyslexics' brains are "wired" differently from other people's. "There is definite proof of a link between dyslexia and visual spatial ability," says Thomas West, author of *In The Mind's Eye*, who will be in Glasgow to deliver lectures on the subject tomorrow and on Sunday.

West, who is the head of the Visualisation Research Institute in Washington, is a dyslexic, and the son of two artists. "Close analysis carried out by the team at the Harvard Medical School's Dyslexic Research Laboratory shows there are genetic traits of dyslexics evident in the brain even before birth," he says. "Micro-anatomy of the brains of dead dyslexics show that the 'wiring' of the brain is different - they seem to lack efficiency in the left brain hemisphere which relates to language ability. But there is increased efficiency in the side of the brain which dictates spatial ability.

"One of the extraordinary things some dyslexics have said to me is that they can rotate an image in three dimensions in their minds. Our educational system at the moment is based on words, books and lectures - and this has shaped our whole idea of intelligence. There is a whole new field of intelligence we just haven't discovered among dyslexics who see the world visually - who will lead the field in areas such as art, computer graphics and design."

Jane Graves, one of the college's specialist dyslexia tutors, has put together a list of guidelines on dyslexia for the staff and students. At the top, she says, "most people suffering from dyslexia have been called stupid or lazy - often. They are frequently very angry about the way they have been treated, and with good cause."

She says one of the first questions she asks dyslexic students is: "Do you see in three dimensions?" She says: "Of the 72 students I've assessed in the last year, only three didn't understand what I meant. For the others it triggered off a flood of descriptions such as: 'From the first moment, I see every detail of the final product'; 'I don't see words as "words" but as symbols of what they mean. It conjures up an image immediately, and that is very distracting when you're writing.'"

As a result of Jane Graves' and Dr Steffart's research, the way that dyslexic students are being taught at the college has now dramatically changed.

Concrete and visual ways of explaining are used wherever possible. For example, instructions are presented in the form of diagrams, or lecture notes and essay plans are laid out as patterns. Many of the students are now encouraged to use word processors to present their work, and tape-recorders

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are used to record tutorials and lectures. Students also use speech-driven computers to write essays. Blow-up photocopies using short sentences are handed out to students who need them.

Dr Steffart fears that there are many dyslexics whose talents have never been discovered. The students here are the lucky ones.

"It's like a dam bursting," she says. "Finally it's an acceptance that 'I have something to say' and 'I am going to be recognised'"

For further information contact Ian Padgett, dyslexia project director at Central St Martin's College (0171-514 7000); Dr Beverley Steffart (01284 724301); Jane Graves, who runs Art-Design-Dyslexia Workshops (01728 602577); The British Dyslexia Association (0118 9668271); The Arts Dyslexia Trust (01303181322). Thomas West's book 'In the Mind's Eye' is published by Prometheus. He will be lecturing tomorrow at Glasgow School of Art and on Sunday 1 March at St Andrew's College, Glasgow. Details from Thomas West's English agent, Mike Hutchins (0181-508-2989).

'I needed to be given the time to understand'

Joseph Burrin is dyslexic, and is taking an MA in textiles at Central St Martin's College.

"I was always in trouble at school," he says. "I'm not a strong reader, I'm bad at spelling, I mix my words and I jumble my sentences so it sounds like eccentric waffle. I avoided any serious academic work at all at school, and I came out with just a few

O-levels."

Joseph is one of the brightest and most promising students at the college, yet he remembers having been written off as a school failure because of his dyslexia. "What I needed was someone to give me the time to understand - sometimes I have to read a page five times to make sense of it.

"I often need to visualise what a word means before I can write it down. As a word it doesn't mean very much, until I make a picture out of it."

He felt frustration and anger that his talents were not recognised before, and that this made his school-days hell. He was 19 before he stopped "giving people lip", as he says, and realised that he could make a success of his life.

He is articulate, funny and confident - but some of the rage still bubbles underneath. "There is one teacher who would eat his words if he knew I was doing an MA. He'd never believe it"

'My mother was just told not to worry'

Diane Hall is studying for a research degree at the college, and is involved with sculpture and fashion design.

"As a child I found it very difficult at school. I remember my mother going along to a parents' evening very concerned about my reading and my grammar. She was just told not to worry, and that it would come naturally - but it didn't."

Diane passed her A-levels in art and design and history of art before she passed her O-level English. She failed this five

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times, before a successful sixth attempt. Her dyslexia-based problem was never diagnosed at school.

"When I look at a page of writing, it's the white space around the black word which stands out most clearly, not the other way round. Also I have a problem with remembering words - when I'm reading a page, by the time I've got to the bottom I've usually forgotten what the first paragraph says."

She puts this down to a heightened visual and spatial awareness. "I see things in three dimensions - I have an aptitude towards space and sculpture.

"I use a word processor now for my written work, and that has helped immensely because I can see by looking at the whole word that the spelling is wrong - and often I get very distracted by my own handwriting.

"I feel I'm expressing my abilities when I make a sculpture, and when people admire it I think, 'I'm not so thick after all'"n

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