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The study of ‘reading difficulties’ as a phenotype of psychology

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I suspect that for some observers Julian Elliott has been mistaken for an academic Don Quixote. Here he is forever tilting at the windmills of injustice and the epiphenomenon of ‘dyslexia’. I do not think the evidence justifies the charge and am certain he shows no signs of delusional behaviour! However, what does his (and others’) work reveal?

a) Reading is a puzzle. In the beginning is the word and the word is spoken (not written nor read). Over time, writing and reading (symbols and then much later words) have developed and enabled us to communicate over great distances and across time. Precisely how these skills develop (when they do) for each individual in her or his host culture remains a puzzle. As Mattingly (1972) noted ‘Reading is parasitic on language’. On that basis the relationship between spoken language and the written representation of that language is at the heart of the puzzle. To complicate matters this relationship is not universally consistent - nor necessarily 1:1. The evolution of the relationship is also not necessarily linear and, without arbitrary human intervention the relationship continues to change. (Thus, for example, ‘texting’ and other recent developments in poetic communication provide new written forms of English as s/he is spoken.) The currency of the puzzle becomes apparent when the biological / neurological bundle that is a child (who, all being well, learns to stand up-right and discovers how the vocal tract can articulate sound) is confronted with the social artefact of writing and the consequently assumed need for ‘reading’.

b) Reading is power. Prior to the invention of printing (and, compared to the time taken for humane evolution, so far, this happened ‘yesterday’) written communication lay in the hands of a powerful elite. With the advent of mechanised printing the distribution of textual messages became a much easier proposition. However, it soon became obvious that those who control the printing presses exercise great power. Thus, press barons can ‘call the shots’ and tell us what to think and how to say it. “Gotcha” said the Sun in May 1982, thereby not only legitimising a variant spelling and vaunting the success of ‘the leader’, but also simultaneously (paradoxically, such is the power of the medium) espousing most unchristian attitudes with quasi-religious fervour. None-the-less, it probably remains true that being able to read and write gives people power. I would like to suggest this reveals the study of reading is a prototype for psychology as phenotype: a science of the patterns in the interface between emotions, motivations and (possibly) higher order cognitions. In that context Julian’s work in studying the power entrenched in debates about dyslexia is entirely valid.

Concerns about reading can also exercise power over us – and this is central to Julian’s thesis. What do we call those who can’t read? Is it possible to dichotomise literacy skills? We are learning that the terminology (‘labels’) used to categorise and objectify difficulties are not always neutral in effect for the labeller or the labelled (Ahn, Taylor, Kato, Marsh, & Bloom, 2012). However, the effects of labels may also be subtle. For instance, we have recently found evidence that suggests the use of the term ‘dyslexia’ may adversely affect teachers’ beliefs in their efficacy in helping children with literacy in ways that the term ‘reading difficulties’ does not (Gibbs & Elliott, 2014).

c) Reading is a miracle. How so many children achieve competence in reading and writing may be seen as little short of a miracle. Reading is an unnatural act. Given the trajectory of
evolution it is incredible that we could have developed primary neurological structures that would enable us to read print. Any mechanisms that do help us in that respect are, at least as far as we know at present, secondary to (parasitic on) neurological structures that process oral language. The fascination with such phenomena and the determination to problematize and demystify apparent ‘miracles’ is a hallmark of scholarship. The intention to seek ways of overcoming social disadvantage and injustice is not a characteristic of all scientists. In setting out to explore the tensions that exist around and within the difficulties with literacy that so many people (children and adults) encounter, Julian demonstrates scholarship, scientific integrity and moral courage. Literacy as an artefact of social and communicative development is a legitimate target of curiosity. I respect and admire Julian’s courage and determination to challenge the hegemony of (to date) unjustified assumptions about the discriminations that are applied to children. Given curiosity, inevitably we will study, investigate and communicate what we find. In that respect alone ‘The Dyslexia Debate’ is inevitable, necessary and justified. Sadly, although necessary it is not sufficient – as Julian all too clearly recognises.

**d) Unfinished business.** We do not (yet) have a full and complete theory of how, amazingly, so many children do achieve fluency in literacy (reading and writing); we have not (yet) found a clearly defined discontinuity in a line joining those who can and those who cannot read and write. While the study of genetics undoubtedly fascinates many, so far we don’t have (and won’t have any time soon) a solution to the riddle of what we might do to help children make better progress with literacy. We have, as Julian has said, a vast array of notional definitions / deficits / descriptions associated with the difficulties with literacy so many people experience (both first hand and vicariously). Of course the scale of the enterprise is huge. It is highly unlikely that there is a simple ‘line’ in two-dimensional space on which we might plot a child’s progress toward competence in literacy. There is a large number of variables that have so far been proposed as affecting the chances of success (or otherwise) in becoming literate. These include factors related to language, cognition, affect, instruction and socio-economics. The line of progress is, therefore, in reality much more likely to be a surface in hyper-space (for another perspective on this see Muter, 2014). Anyone venturing into this domain must, therefore, have both diligence and patience. ‘The Dyslexia Debate’ certainly demonstrates those qualities. The debate also calls on all parties to be patient. It seems to me that nothing is gained from polarisation, misunderstanding and anger (and it is clear that Julian has provoked both of the latter) except if we accept these as part of dialectics. It has to be said, however, that given the (wholly unjustified) stigma and social disability that can still be associated with a lack of proficiency in literacy, and the ‘punishment’ that is meted out to those who fail to inculcate adequate literacy in their charges, anger and resentment are inevitable. So, while scientific curiosity is associated with difficulties and justified, it may be asked if we are right to devote so much of our energy, time and resources to these perennial attempts to grapple with this mir – age /acle? Is it possible that an equally if not more important endeavour is to develop alternate means of accessing and communicating knowledge? The work of Sugata Mitra and the development of ‘Self Organised Learning Environments’ may, for instance, provide clues to alternative paradigms (Mitra & Dangwal, 2010; Mitra et al., 2005). Although access to knowledge is currently still powerfully determined by access to the printed word, in the future and with hindsight this may be seen as outdated as quills, parchment and stagecoach delivery. As Sugata and his colleagues are showing, children with no access to books (or even teachers) are able to discover how to use a computer to learn how the world works - and, thereby, to change it. People in areas of extreme socio-economic disadvantage are thus gaining power without the need for print. If books become redundant, what of the ‘dyslexia debate’?
Perhaps we can learn and recognise that we don’t need to discriminate and disadvantage children on the basis of a lack of literacy (aka ‘dyslexia’). Maybe we will realise that there are viable alternatives that do not do not necessitate the frustration that may still follow from any label such as ‘dyslexia’. Let us journey hopefully.

References


