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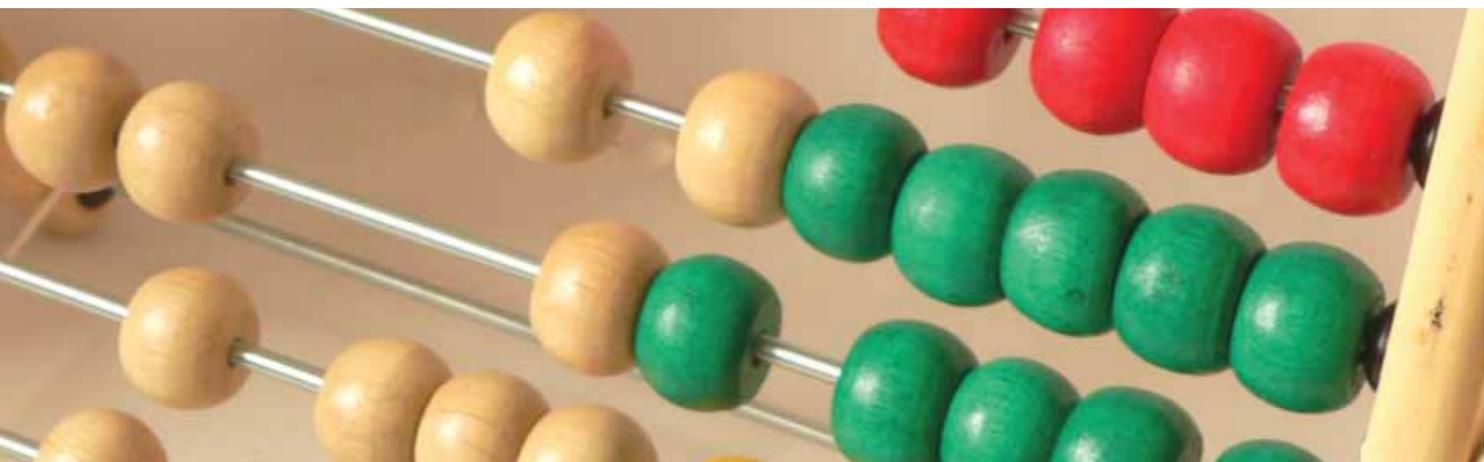
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Dyscalculia minus understanding equals problem

Tony Attwood calls for all teachers to stand up and be counted

Soon after I started publishing books on dyscalculia, I began to get invitations to go to schools and talk on the subject. In my sessions, I would talk about the causes of dyscalculia, the need for everyone in the school to understand dyscalculia, and the ways in which pupils and students with dyscalculia could be helped to overcome their problems.

Although it is hard to judge how one performs on such occasions, the fact that I tended to get referred on from one school to the next made me think I was doing OK. However, four years later, I suddenly changed my policy and stopped accepting all invitations. Two issues arose, and they disturbed me deeply.

First, I was invited back to a school that I had been to three years before. I was delighted to accept the invitation and proposed that teachers could tell me how they had got on with the approach I had suggested three years

previously. But then it became clear that the SENCO who was inviting me had no idea that I had been there before.

Her predecessor had indeed taken on board the notion of dyscalculia after my talk, and had given great support to

international research is now suggesting that around one in eight children suffer from dyscalculia

a number of children who suffered from the problem. But she had left eighteen months before the second invitation, and it was clear that the school had failed to embed the understanding of what dyscalculia is. The new SENCO had arrived and was picking up the story of dyscalculia from scratch.

I was shocked and upset, and I took it upon myself to contact some of the schools where I had given talks. The results were patchy, but, in some cases, I seemed to have made no difference at all. I was told on several occasions that “we have your notes in case we come across anyone with the problem”. This was particularly concerning since international research is now suggesting that around one in eight children suffer from dyscalculia. The notion that a school would not have had anyone in attendance over the last couple of years with dyscalculia, was unbelievable.

Second, my office received a call from a parent worried about her son. “I’ve told them that I thought he might have dyscalculia,” she said, “but I was told that they had never heard of it.” I have to add that we get calls like this on an almost daily basis, and I don’t take them all too seriously, for it is clear that sometimes there has been no real attempt by a parent to engage with the

school. But this case was a worry. The school in question was one of the first ones I had visited to deliver my talk on the subject.

It was clear; as a visiting speaker preaching about the need for an awareness of dyscalculia to be embedded in the school, I had often failed to make any sort of long-term impact. Now it is quite possible that this is because of me. Just because one knows about a subject it does not mean that one can talk about the subject in a way that enthruses others. And yet, before turning to this area of research, I had been what I believe was a fairly successful class teacher and lecturer. I might not have been the best in the country, but I’m reasonably confident that I wasn’t a total disaster.

So, although I was prepared to take much of the blame, I was uneasy. My message was simple: you need to embed the awareness of what dyscalculia is across the whole school, so that even those people whose working lives rarely tackle maths directly will know that dyscalculia is real, has a huge impact, and that the people who suffer from it can be helped through a very particular approach – the approach which I have explored in my various articles in this magazine over the past year or so. Why had I made so little impact?

Since the experience described above, I have devised an utterly different approach and, I am pleased to say, it seems to work. I now propose the following to educators: take a simple introductory book on dyscalculia and get an understanding of dyscalculia yourself. This shouldn’t take you more than a few hours. Then hold your own in-service session for a small group, in which you hand out materials and explain the basics.

If you are in a large primary school, then bring in the maths co-ordinator, the SENCO and maybe one or two class teachers who think they might have a dyscalculic pupil in the class, along with one senior manager. If you are in a small primary school, then the whole staff or

half the staff could get together. In a secondary school, one might start with the head of maths, the SENCO and a senior manager, plus one subject teacher from outside of maths.

Once this group has had their session, I suggest they try the multi-sensory approach, which most experts on dyscalculia propose, with one or two pupils and then meet to discuss where they have got to, the problems that have arisen and the solutions found.

After that, I suggest that one member of this group then sets up a second group, perhaps involving other class teachers, and repeats the process. A little later, a different member of the first group might do it with another group. Eventually, when everyone in the school has experienced the approach, the first group might get back together for a short session to review dyscalculia in the school. If everything is fine, the series of sessions might stop, but a new session might be written into the INSET programme for the start of the new academic year.

But, I am often asked, does every teacher really need to know about dyscalculia? For me, the answer to this question is yes, and I would cite these examples:

- in history, it is impossible for a dyscalculic child to grasp chronology without special help
- in geography, if you are teaching the relationship between the earth spinning and relative amounts of sunlight in different areas, you are again talking about the passage of time and ratios, and dyscalculic students find this hard
- in music, dyscalculic students tend to find grasping notions of eight and sixteen bar phrases hard.

I offer those three simple examples as an introduction to the notion that everyone should know about dyscalculia. Even subjects that seem to have nothing to do with maths, do use maths somewhere, and an awareness of how dyscalculia affects a child, and what we can do about it, can be very helpful indeed. **SEN**

you need to embed the awareness of what dyscalculia is across the whole school



Further information

Tony Attwood is a director of the Dyscalculia Centre. His book, *Dyscalculia in Schools, what it is and what you can do*, is described at:

www.dyscalculia.me.uk/teacher.html