

DYSLEXIA

IN THE PRISON POPULATION

THE LIKELY INCIDENCE AND A PROPOSED STRATEGY

'A thing which has not been understood inevitably re-appears; like an unladen ghost, it cannot rest until the mystery has been solved and the spell broken.' Sigmund Freud.

Angela Stoddart, BA Hons,
PGCE; Education Co-
ordinator, HMP Elmley and
Associate Member of the
British Dyslexia Association.

There are certainly thousands of people with the hidden handicap of dyslexia in our prisons and most of them receive no recognition or remedial support. No accurate measurement of the numbers involved has been taken. In this paper I suggest that a whole institution approach to dyslexia could reduce the re-offending rate.

What is Dyslexia?

Dyslexia, sometimes called Specific Learning Difficulties, is a cognitive defect, usually genetic in origin, which occurs across the ability range and in varying degrees classified as mild, moderate or severe. Its effects are worse where, as is usually the case, both *appropriate* teaching and *informed* family support are not available. Dyslexia is a pattern of difficulties and the symptoms vary in clusters. It is generally agreed that dyslexia is a difficulty with processing information. In dyslexia the short term working memory becomes overloaded causing inefficiencies and deficiencies in the processing between auditory, visual and motor-kinaesthetic modalities. Thus the bus caught is the one going in the wrong direction, the spellings painfully learned are nearly all wrong when tested the next day, and the word on the board does not appear when it is supposed to be copied into the exercise book. Dyslexics are quick forgetters and from childhood are often in trouble. One 17 year old dyslexic wrote, before diagnosis, 'To use my brain, you just about need a crane'. Repeating a prison number, looking up entries in the telephone directory, learning mathematical tables, picking up body-language signals, accurate reading of a statement in a police station, all, some or none of these may be impossible for a dyslexic person. Although many dyslexic people never read for pleasure and avoid writing things down, one student at Elmley,

an articulate man who worked out for himself that he was dyslexic, and reads Graham Greene for pleasure, mis-spelt one word in four in a 'free writing' passage in which the vocabulary was much less sophisticated than in his conversation. He wrote, for example, tre for 'try', soona for 'sooner', keit for 'kite', wout for 'what', aquste for 'adjust', nage for 'sags', pinike for 'picnic', anst for 'exit', and 'relist' for 'restless'. Many dyslexics develop elaborate strategies for remembering phone numbers, procedures to be followed at work, even their own address. Another inmate who had served many years on several sentences, undiagnosed until recently, helped himself to spell over those years by creating a personal index of words he needed on Rizla papers and tear-out sections of the lids of Kleenex boxes. Openness about dyslexia and publicity to avoid its being associated with 'being thick' is needed to encourage inmates to drop denial or defence strategies (I've forgotten my glasses or not volunteering to be club secretary) and to adopt the coping strategies (learning to word process, preparing in advance) identified by David Gauntlet (Managing the Adult Dyslexic, paper read at the First International Conference of the British Dyslexia Association, 1989).

According to Beryl Wattles, the worst fate any dyslexic has to face is 'the destruction of self-confidence, not just in reading and spelling but in any task tackled.' (The Plain Teacher's Guide to the Dyslexic, CUP 1981). Dyslexia is 'a learning style which may become a living style' (Kronick. Social Development of Learning Disabled Persons. Toronto. UK edition - Sage Publications 1990).

Recognising Dyslexia

Leonardo, Churchill, Einstein, Susan

Hampshire and Duncan Goodhew are among famous and very able dyslexics. It is not a global learning difficulty. Formal assessment may need to be carried out by an educational psychologist. A teacher with appropriate training can undertake assessment and diagnosis depending on the purpose for which recognition is required. The principle behind assessment is:

'A person is dyslexic provided (a) that there is discrepancy between intellectual level and performance at reading or spelling and (b) that this discrepancy is accompanied by some of the supporting signs'.

(T. R. Miles. *Understanding Dyslexia*. Better Books 1987).

In dyslexia there is a bizarre variation in achievements. Someone who can undertake computer programming but cannot repeat the months of the year, for example, might turn out to be dyslexic. In people of less than average ability the need for correct teaching is particularly important but the likelihood of their dyslexia being overlooked is greater even though the characteristic symptoms are still observable. In people who are dyslexic and who have endured emotional deprivation and trauma, the need to be taught basic education *in the way that they can learn* is often overlooked in dealing with the presenting challenging behaviour or depression. In people whose presenting behavioural difficulties are largely or in part caused by their dyslexia, no amount of treatment of the behaviour will be successful in the long term unless the dyslexia is also addressed. Recognition of dyslexia is therefore very important.

Teaching adult dyslexics

People with dyslexia need to be taught using phonic based multi-sensory methods, within a *cumulative individualised, flexible structure* that meets both their perceived needs and those perceived by the dyslexia specialist. There must be plenty of opportunity for over-learning and plenty of encouragement. They need to be shown the logic of language as they cannot automatically generalise, the penny doesn't just drop. They need specialised learning support for their individual needs in memory training and personal organisation. The teaching, whether it is in study skills or phonics for spelling, needs to be exaggerated. Dyslexic adults need tutors with a knowledge of both dyslexia and of

counselling skills. Dyslexic students need to be enabled towards self-management and of all students they need to be listened to perceptively and empathetically and given back their self-respect in the process. Dyslexic adults often appreciate the opportunity to share their experiences and pool their strategies; they gain confidence and knowledge from each other. They need to know what they are likely to find difficult in future training of any kind as forewarned is forearmed so far as both motivation to keep going and tactics for doing so are concerned.

Incidence in the prison population

In a prison population of 48,000 (31 March 1994) there will be at least 2000 and, according to one recent claim which I believe to be unlikely, up to 24,000 with moderate to severe dyslexia. In the Prison Service we do care about 'tackling criminal and anti-social behaviour through rigorous and effective work with prisoners, including anger management and offending behaviour courses' (HM Prison Service Corporate Plan 1994-1997). I suggest that if we are serious about this we need to take dyslexia seriously because:

1. There is likely to be a higher proportion of people who have the specific learning difficulties of dyslexia in prison than in the outside community.
2. There is likely to be an association in some people who are dyslexic between undiagnosed dyslexia and criminality.
3. Screening, diagnosis, appropriate tuition and training in self-management of dyslexia are feasible within prisons; such treatment could be an effective contribution to managing the frustration and associated anger which can be caused by unrecognised dyslexia.

Figures 1 and 2 provide an accumulation of pointers towards there being a high number of people with Specific Learning Difficulties in prisons. It is not my belief that during the 13 years I have been working in prisons half of the inmates I have met are dyslexic; I do believe, though, that the level is high enough for the classic symptoms of Specific Learning Difficulties to be so ordinary in the prison population

Figure 1
IN THE OUTSIDE COMMUNITY 4% : INDICATORS OF DYSPLEXIC POPULATION

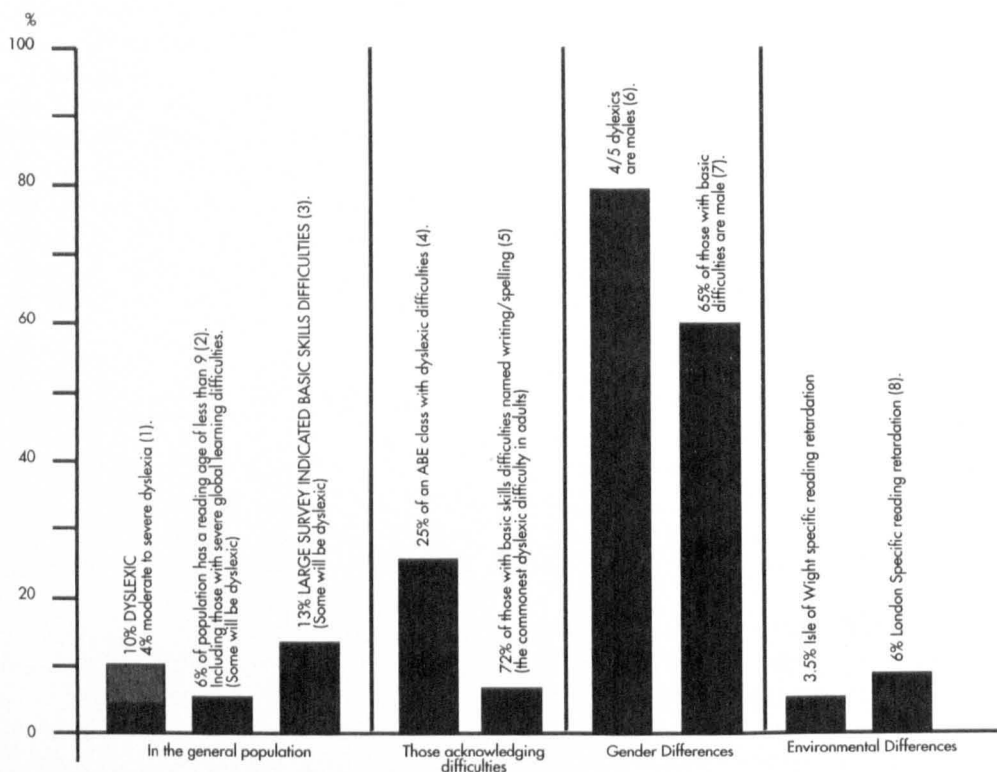


Figure 1: (1) Dyslexia Institute and British Dyslexia Association both use this figure; (2) Hornsby Overcoming Dyslexia Macdonald (1984); (3) Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit Literacy, Numeracy and Adults (1987) using evidence from National Child Development Study (1981); (4) Anderson and Diggle Cornwall Adult Education Service, Right to Read project - presented at BDA Conference on Adult Dyslexia, London 1989; (5) as (3) above; (6) Thomson Developmental Dyslexia Whurr Pubs 1990 referring to Chritchley (1970), nb, this figure long generally accepted, has been challenged on the grounds that females' failure to achieve is less often noticed but the figure has also been re-asserted as a constitutional gender difference; (7) as (3) above; (8) Rutter et al Education, Health and Behaviour Longman 1970 quoting Tandy, see Figure 3.

that we do not really notice them.

Equal Opportunities for prison staff.

Most convicted people are not dyslexic; most dyslexics do not have convictions. There are some people with these specific learning difficulties employed by the Prison Service. I have come across a number of staff, sometimes auxiliaries hoping to become prison officers and sometime officers preparing for the promotion examination, who have a spelling problem out of scale with the general ability they display in their work and which can make their essays difficult to read.

Job Centres recognise Dyslexia as a disability. Briefing No 71, March 1994, summarises the Annual Progress Report on Equal Opportunities and notes that the Prison Service falls short of the three per

cent target for employing staff with disabilities. Recruitment could be dyslexia-friendly and recognition of existing staff with dyslexia could help to meet the target. Permission to use an electronic spellchecker and extra time in the promotion examination for those assessed as dyslexic could help some officers gain the promotion they deserve. Home Office policy is that 'wherever possible, positive assistance will be given to develop the individual's full potential'. In this Year of the Adult Dyslexic it might be an apt application of Equal Opportunities if some training resources could be allocated to psychological assessment and educational support for prison staff. Although the proportion will be much smaller than in the inmate population, some may have been avoiding or failing the promotion exam for years because of their unacknowledged difficulties.

Figure 2
IN THE PRISON POPULATION (7-50%) : INDICATORS OF
HIGHER NUMBERS OF DYSLEXIA AMONG OFFENDERS

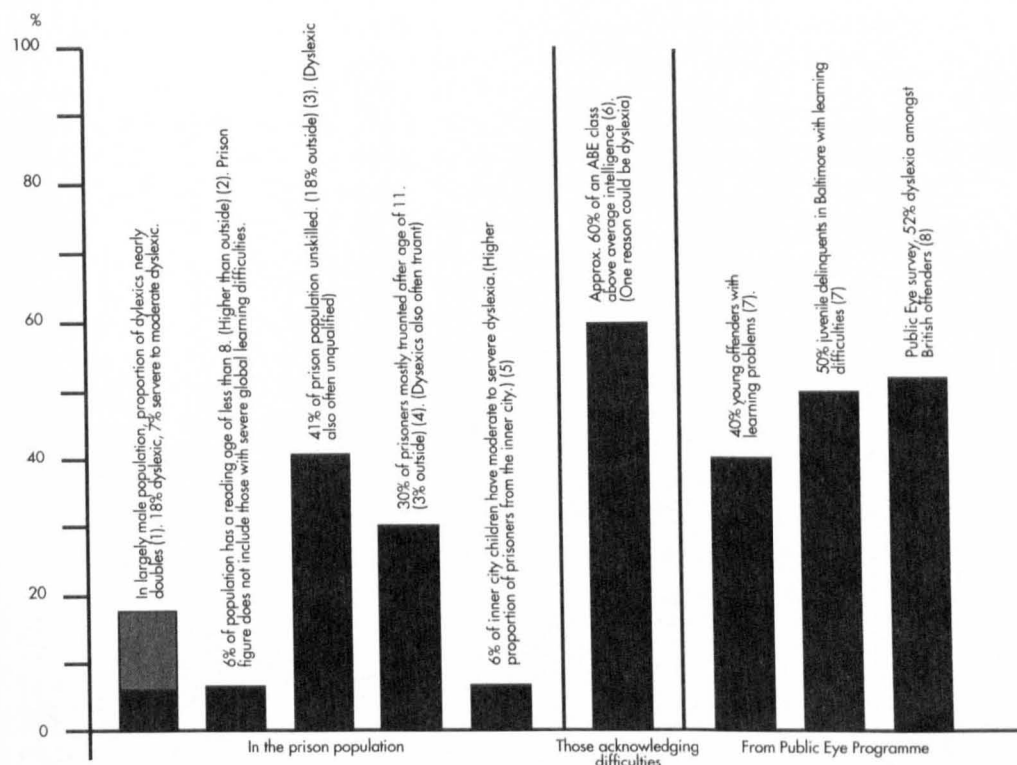


Figure 2: (1) in 1990, only 1,614 prisoners of 45,466 were female (NACRO Briefing No. 25 (1982) of 28,225 prisoners assessed in 1984-5, six per cent had a reading age of less than eight and 9.4 per cent of less than 10 - Home Office statistics provided by Prison Reform Trust; (2) National Prison Survey (1991); (3) Payne (1989), Saunders (1990) and Thomson (1990) all refer to truanting in dyslexics see references for Figure (3); (4) see reference (8) for Figure 1; (5) Cranfield School of Management Studies at Prison Education Officers' Conference, Blackpool, 1990 (7) Public Eye BBC2 TV June 1992; (8) as (7).

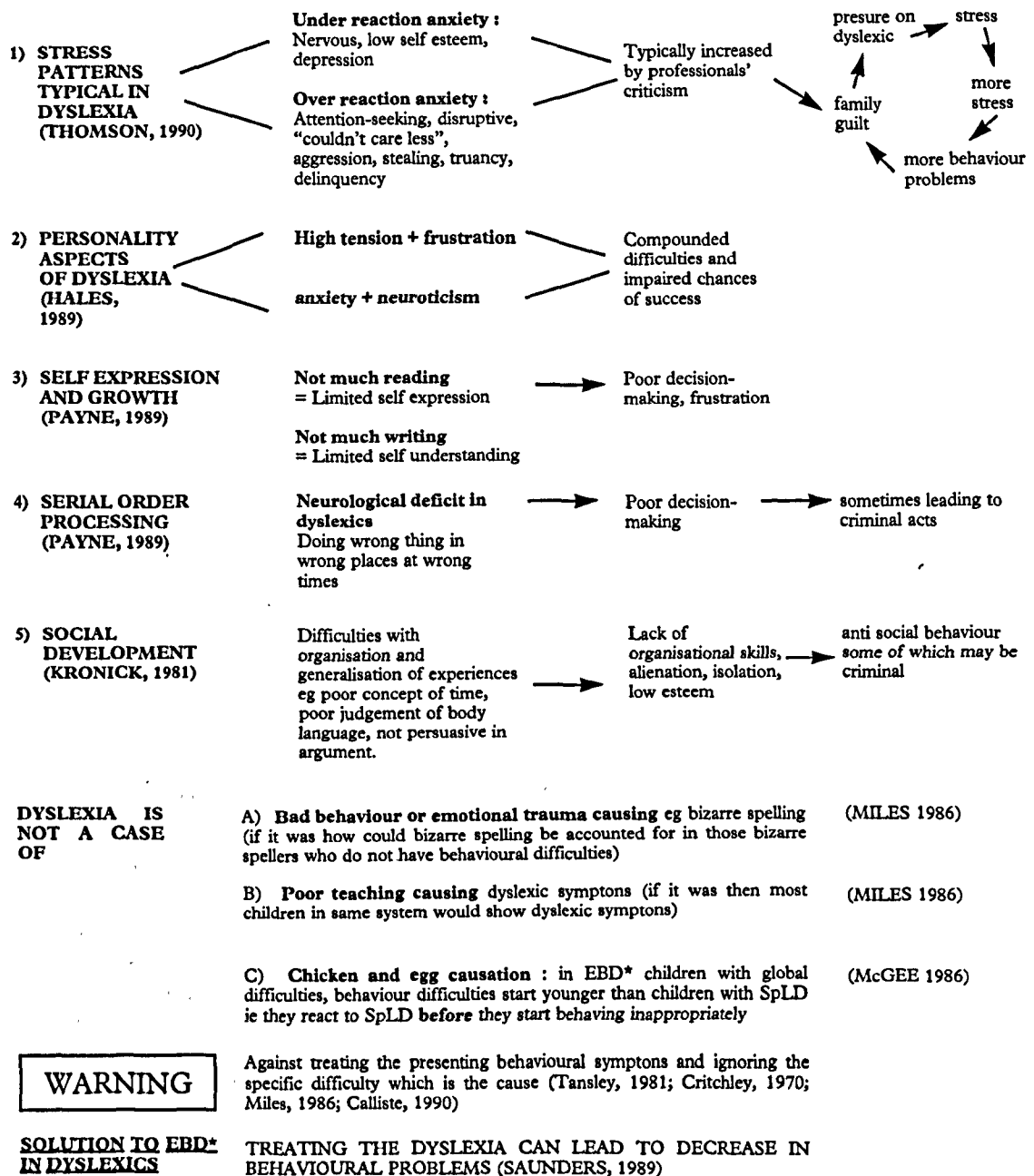
Current high profile of dyslexia

In the wider community, prospects are improving for people with dyslexia. Dyslexia, despite being discovered towards the end of the last century and recognised by what is now the Department for Education since 1978, is in most cases still not picked up in school. However, recently, Cambridge County Council were successfully sued for failing to provide for the needs of one dyslexic teenager. Interest in the needs of adult dyslexics is growing. In 1993, Contact, the British Dyslexia Association Journal, published a paper comparing two methods of teaching for dyslexic adults. This year has seen the publication of *Adult Dyslexia: Assessment, Counselling and Training*: by McLoughlin, Fitzgibbon and Young (Whurr Publishers). Adult support groups are springing up around the country (for example one was

founded in 1992 under the auspices of the Medway Dyslexia Association in Kent) and there is now a Helpline run by the Adult Dyslexia Organisation in London.

Currently too concern is growing for offenders who are dyslexic. A meeting in the House of Lords attended by Home Office personnel among others, was a forerunner of a 1993 conference sponsored by the British Dyslexia Association in association with Bridgebuilders (the National Association for the Education and Guidance of Offenders); the Inner London Probation Service and the Institute for the Study and Treatment of Delinquency called 'Dyslexia - A Sentence?' There are smaller, local initiatives too. For example, Mid-Kent College, who then managed education in eight prisons, through staff development funding enabled me to put on a short course for prison teachers in awareness of and teaching for dyslexia. One of the course aims, so far unfulfilled, was to

Figure 3
SOME EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIOURAL CORRELATES OF DYSLEXIA IN SOME DYSLEXICS MAY ALSO BE RELATED TO THE DISPROPORTIONATELY HIGH NUMBER OF OFFENDERS WITH DYSLEXIA..



* EBD - Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties

Figures 1-3 originally produced by students attending HMP Elmley Desktop Publishing Vocational Training Course

Figure 3: Thomson, M. Developmental Dyslexia. Whurr 3rd edition (1990); Hales, G. Personality Aspects of Dyslexia. First International Conference of British Dyslexia Association 1989; Payne, J. Behavioural Difficulties and Specific Underachievement in Literacy. British Psychological Service Review. Vol. 13, No 1-2 1989; Kronick, D. The Social Development of Learning Disabled Persons (UK edition Sage Publications 1990); Miles, T. Understanding Dyslexia. Better Books 1986; McGee, R., Williams, S., Share, D. L., Anderson, J. and Silva, P. A. The relationship between specific reading retardation, general reading backwardness and behavioural problems in a large sample of Dunedin boys. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry 27, 567-611 1986 quoted in Thomson as above; Tansley and Pankhurst. Children with Specific Learning Difficulties. NFER Nelson 1981; Critchley, M. The Dyslexic Child. Heinemann 1970; Calliste, J. Adults and Dyslexia. BDA Conference London 1990; Saunders, R. Dyslexia as a factor in the young Adult Offender. First International Conference of BDA 1989.

establish networking for prison teachers interested in dyslexia. Informally, I know of about 30 prison education departments where this interest exists. Policy decisions are needed to make this interest effective. I know of two prisons whose Education Order for Service include Dyslexia Support Groups. The Core Curriculum, for which the tender has been won by a consortium (Bristol University, Amersham and Wycombe College and City College Manchester) is to establish consistency of provision in the new contracted out prison education system. It would be an excellent vehicle for ensuring provision for dyslexic students is made possible.

Towards a Strategy

I estimate that it would cost less than £30 per subject to screen 300 prisoners under the supervision of an educational psychologist. As there is no screening instrument which does the whole job, the sum includes follow up diagnosis and essential counselling for those showing positive indicators. Screening could establish the level of dyslexia among offenders.

Meanwhile, most cases of dyslexia are not picked up even in those few prisons where a member of the education staff is qualified to do so because there is no structure and no general awareness.

A structure which I believe would work would consist of groups of prisons sharing a fully trained peripatetic dyslexia specialist teacher who could act as practitioner/adviser and cascade their training to all prison basic and academic education tutors. Even if all basic education teachers taught as though all their students might be dyslexic, which would help those who are and do no harm to those who are not, many dyslexics still would not be reached. Very many people who are dyslexic avoid any sort of academic learning. They quite often join art, woodwork, computers or motor mechanics courses as they are often talented in these subjects. All prison teachers and instructors need 1-2 hour awareness training. Many inmates with dyslexia will not come into contact with Education Departments at all. Landing officers, probation officers, hospital officers, PEIs, in fact all who come into contact with inmates could encourage referral if they were themselves aware of the likely characteristics and many misunderstandings could be avoided. For example, prisoners who are

dyslexic may have difficulty in remembering instructions for long enough to carry them out. When landing officers are informed about dyslexia, dynamic security may be enhanced. Prison Governors' interest would be crucial here: for only under their direction could the necessary operational arrangements be set up and the Education Contractors directed to provide the service.

Laying the ghost

It is neither too late, too difficult nor too expensive to confront what may be underlying offending behaviour in a not inconsiderable proportion of the prison population; it is not enough for prisoners who are dyslexic to take part in an offending behaviour programme " their 'unlaid ghosts' will not rest until they feel 'forgiven' by the solving of the private mystery (whether perceived by them or not) of why their brains work differently. My experience as a prison educator convinces me that supportive diagnosis and access to practical assistance can motivate the desire for positive change. Once people know how to manage their dyslexia they can find they no longer need to develop 'elaborate stratagems a kind of espionage of everyday living' (Osmond. *The Reality of Dyslexia*. p. 119, 1993). The cause of a negative tangle of life events may be due only partly to the dyslexia. The breaking of the spell can be facilitated by teachers with appropriate skills, the effect can be far greater than educational achievement. A whole institution approach could be the catalyst for exorcism.

We have the vision of the Corporate Plan and Equal Opportunites. The body of knowledge is approved by the Department for Education and the Department of Employment. The Core Curriculum and the Education Contracts have presented themselves as strategic opportunities for framing the objectives necessary to tackle this troublesome disability. Just as the prison service a few years ago set up a successful mechanism for improving Race Relations so it could make a commitment to laying the ghost of untreated dyslexia among offenders ■