

## Write and Wrong

New research into young offenders suggests that screening for dyslexia would be beneficial in identifying sufferers and providing the support they need to stay out of trouble. Juliet Rix reports.

Juliet Rix  
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There is a sad air of inevitability about Roy's progress. Aged 13, and disruptive and aggressive in school, his behavioural problems led to a psychological assessment and a medical check. These resulted in a diagnosis of ADHD (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder) and a prescription for Ritalin.

He received no educational support and, already in the lowest groups for everything, soon dropped out of school. With time on his hands, Roy (not his real name), fell in with the wrong crowd and started a career of petty crime - shoplifting and vandalism.

As he got older he moved on to stealing cars and thrill seeking crimes such as joy-riding. Having breached various court orders and community sentences, by the age of 17 he was in custody, with a list of convictions "as long as your arm".

Roy is dyslexic, but his condition was not identified until this year, when he took part in a study carried out by the British Dyslexia Association with the Youth Offending Team (YOT) in Bradford. Their research published today, suggests that over half of young offenders are dyslexic (as opposed to 10% of the general population). And the more serious the offence, or the greater the number of offences, the higher the likelihood that the offender is dyslexic.

"It breaks your heart," says Helen Boden, BDA project worker on the study, "These kids do not have low IQs. They are quite intelligent enough to know how they are failing. A lot of them have been identified in school as having behavioural difficulties but there has rarely been any attempt to look behind the behaviour and see if there is a specific learning difficulty."

And dyslexia does seem to be relevant; the study found that in non-dyslexic offenders there is a strong correlation between poor social circumstances and low reading and spelling scores. For dyslexic offenders the correlation was not significant. "For young people with dyslexia the significance of these social factors is dwarfed by the much greater disadvantage factor of being dyslexic," the BDA reports.

It has long been known that most young offenders have problems with literacy. "Among our 15 and 16 year olds," says Paul O'Hara, Bradford YOT manager, "a reading age of eight or nine is normal; even seven is not uncommon. Many are not in school, because they have been excluded or have dropped out. They are not part of mainstream society. They see themselves as outsiders and one thing leads to another."

This "route to offending" - failure in school, departure from mainstream education, hanging out on the streets and falling into offending - has been recognised for some time. But the

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BDA's research highlights an area that, though suspected has so far been ignored. "There have recently been considerable efforts to improve basic skills education for young offenders, but they haven't had the expected success," says Boden, "Now dyslexia is coming onto the radar." The aim of the BDA in carrying out this research was not only to produce statistics and highlight the problem, but also to work within the Youth Justice System to find practical ways to improve the situation.

Every time an intervention is planned for a young offender, a structured assessment, called an ASSET, is carried out. This looks at 13 areas of the young person's life, including social and emotional factors, mental health, education and motivation to change. "We are recommending that dyslexia screening should be embedded in this process," says David Pruden, campaign co-ordinator for the BDA's work on dyslexia and offending. "Identification of dyslexia needs to be mainstreamed within the system and dyslexic offenders identified as early as possible so that appropriate support can be put in place."

A reading age of seven, the BDA report points out, does not enable you to navigate your way through the Youth Justice System, especially if you also have issues with personal organisation and time (which dyslexics often do). "A letter to these kids telling them to be in a particular place, at a particular time, is neither use nor ornament," says Boden, "so they are especially exposed to breaching court orders and landing themselves on the next stage towards custody."

As well as providing practical support through the legal process, the BDA project trained YOT staff in dyslexia awareness, helped them create and strengthen links with the Local Education Authority and Youth Service, and introduced educational tools - many of them computer based - that are known to work for both dyslexics and non dyslexics. "This project has been very useful," says O'Hara, "and has resulted in other projects."

At Wetherby Young Offenders Institution, a larger scale study (also with the BDA) has already established that 78 of the 113 inmates tested (nearly 70%) are probably dyslexic. And there is the Dyslexia Visions Project which has just begun in partnership with the Bradford Police Club for Young People - a day time youth club for disaffected out of school teenagers.

The chair of the Youth Justice Board, Rod Morgan, has welcomed the projects, and Bradford YOT has announced that it will implement all recommendations made in the BDA report. Pruden says that he will now be talking to YOTs around the country to try to get them to do the same. He will also be adding the results of this study to the BDA's armoury in its long-running campaign to get schools to be more aware of the possibility of dyslexia among their pupils.

"Dyslexia is not a reason nor an excuse for offending," says Boden, "but it is apart of the big picture. Schools must look more closely at the children that they are about to write off as disruptive or low ability so that those with dyslexia are identified and supported properly and don't fall into failure and offending."

The British Dyslexia Association report is available in full at [www.bda-dyslexia.org.uk](http://www.bda-dyslexia.org.uk)  
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