Dyslexia

Who cares?

On the 10-11th June Luxembourg took its turn to host twenty European professionals specialised in dyslexia and related problems. Their work will culminate in a jointly edited book of recommendations for parents and teachers and will be shared at a symposium in Austria in October this year. It is somewhat frustrating to hear the other nations compare the rights of children with special educational needs while here in Luxembourg, dyslexia is still not officially recognised. There is simply no excuse for this state of affairs.

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Since the publication of the infamous PISA results, education has remained a highly- mediatized topic. It is now commonplace to admit that there are tremendous problems in the Luxembourgish school system, although the jury is still out on the cause. Suggested explanations have covered everything from the high level of immigration to the complex linguistic heritage and even a capitalist plot to ensure that only a small number of elite students will access choice areas of education.

There are many questions being asked and, it seems, little agreement. How important is it for later educational success that pre-school children consolidate their mother tongue? What linguistic profile should the Luxembourgish student of the future have? How should teacher training be restructured and what can be done to encourage practising qualified and non- qualified teachers to cooperate with change? In a system where monumental changes are urgently necessary and a large proportion of children are being marginalized , it may be appear pedantic to argue for the rights of the dyslexic child and, disappointingly, there has been very little concrete discussion of their plight. It should be considered a priority, however, because special needs affect about ten per cent of the population irrespective of their linguistic or socio-economic background, and the changes necessary to improve their performance are exactly those which benefit other learners too.

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Depending on where a country situates itself, dyslexia is variously called a handicap, a specific learning disability or simply a difference in learning style. In Luxembourg, it is rarely correctly diagnosed and the changes in teaching style which accommodate it are virtually unknown.

Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that has a neurobiological origin, recognized as such by international medical criteria set out by the WHO. It is best described as a combination of abilities and difficulties, which affects the learning process and influences the acquisition of language-based skills in the areas of fluent reading, spelling and writing. There is a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities. There may be accompanying weakness in short-term memory, speed of processing, visual and / or auditory perception and often there will be low self-esteem. We are talking about children with IQs of average or above. Some dyslexic children may have outstanding creative skills, be good at sports or maths and IT, while others have strong oral skills. Dyslexia occurs despite normal teaching and is a life-long condition. Students who become successful academically either intuitively develop alternative tools for learning, or need to be taught them.

The dyslexic's ability in other areas may well compensate for his literacy inadequacy but can leave teachers and parents perplexed. For instance, a child – let's call him Einstein, after that most famous of dyslexics - who demonstrates mathematical skills and scientific reasoning well above

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average may have the reading ability of a much younger child and rarely hand in homework on time. In the Luxembourgish primary school system, students must achieve an average in the three core subjects demonstrating literacy rather than oral skills and Einstein is therefore highly unlikely to complete the primary cycle without repeating at least a year. Since the methods and material used during this repeated year are identical, there is no logical reason to expect him to engage successfully with them second time round. We know of the negative psychological effects that accompany this culture of failure and must therefore reflect on how it will affect his subsequent academic development.

If Luxembourg is unlikely to become a leader in education in the near future, there is nothing to prevent it becoming a fast follower. To achieve this it needs to observe what is going on in other countries.

In their book entitled 'Rights of Dyslexic children in Europe', Marta Bogdanowicz and H. Alan Sayles compare the educational experiences of children from 19 European countries, Brazil and the USA (1). Luxembourg did not participate in the research, but it did sign the UNESCO Salamanca Statement in 1994 pertaining to the rights of all children to an appropriate education. These include:

a) Identifying difficulties and assisting pupils to overcome them

b) Adapting to the needs of the child

c) Providing additional assistance and support to children requiring it d) Appropriately training teachers. In so far as it relates to dyslexia, this blatantly is not the case.

Bogdanowicz and Sayles focused on two areas, the rights of dyslexic children as stipulated by law and the rights of dyslexic children in the school in the participant countries. The majority (73%), including the UK, USA, Sweden and the Czech Republic, has special legislation relating to dyslexia. Others, such as Belgium and Ireland, do not. At the level of day-to-day educational practice, the authors compared the accommodative strategies put into place to prevent discrimination between dyslexic and non-dyslexic students. These include the following classroom practices

a) Not having to read aloud

b) Not being penalized for poor handwriting

c) Not being penalized for poor spelling

d) Being allowed to start an additional language later or not at all

And the following moderations in the examination/evaluation process;

a) The right to use a keyboard

b) The right to answer certain questions, for example in additional languages, orally

c) The right to 'hear' questions read aloud by the examiner before preparing a written response

d) Additional time to allow for slow speed reading and writing.

Although many of these are easy to implement and inexpensive, dyslexic children in Luxembourgish schools currently receive none of them.

There are two potential approaches to educating those with special needs. One is including them in the Luxembourg national curriculum and providing them with the support needed to aid their success in the form of adequately trained teachers, specialized help and differentiated evaluation. The second is to concentrate resources in specialized schools specifically catering to children with educational learning differences. These schools would not lead to lower academic qualifications but would prepare the children for exams of the same standard as the national curriculum. Both systems are currently operating in various countries and it is possible to have informed discussion about their relative merits. Whatever the approach, there is ample evidence that these students can succeed.

While the education system is currently obsessed with weekly and primitive evaluation of students, it is ironic that teachers, once employed, are not evaluated in terms of the number of children who 'fail' in their classes. 'Teaching' the curriculum seems to mean covering it. It does not relate to the effective transmission of knowledge from the teacher to the student. It does not mean teaching the student to become an independent learner or apply knowledge. Since the evaluation of teachers is not correlated with the percentage of students failing in their classes, the teacher is encouraged to 'sort' the children into potential successes and failures, and there is currently little incentive for giving time and attention to the lower- performing group. Indeed, throughout the profession there is little reward for initiative, and it is therefore the minority of teachers who undertake an apparently optional workload for which they are unrewarded.

Elsewhere, teachers usually become familiar with the application of the primary national curriculum during the first two years of teacher-training, and progress towards a specialization, either subject- specific or in special needs. For example, in Britain, in the third year of study, a teacher becomes specialized in one academic and one non-academic subject such as Geography and Art. When a cohesive 'whole school' policy is developed, these specializations can be shared through co-operative work with others and a school can logically build up a staff with a broad range of competencies. In the same way that we cannot rationally expect all children to perform equally in all subjects, so we must expect teachers to have

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different strengths and weaknesses. It is important for a good school system to identify these, use the strengths and compensate for the weaknesses. Again, in Britain, teachers are encouraged to combine their experience with further study and subsequently complete higher degrees and become more specialized.

As the bickering over homework or no homework follows that of Saturday morning school or not, one fears that the larger and more urgent themes such as overhauling the entire curriculum, research and development and the all- important teacher training remain obscured. Indeed, change promises to come so slowly that parents with children currently experiencing difficulty must either accept the probability of failure or join the hemorrhage across the borders and into private schools.

Luxembourg needs to look beyond its borders and observe practices elsewhere, reaping the benefits of research carried out abroad, and then tailoring them to fit its unique needs. It needs to take an innovative attitude towards educational solutions. It needs to encourage diverse educational practices and pass through a critical period of metamorphosis.

It is unacceptable that education, a subject which affects all our futures, be mired down in political debate. The current state of affairs is a national catastrophe and it will require the innovation and cooperation of all parties to get the job done efficiently and fast. For our part, we will continue to highlight the plight of those ten per cent of children who are currently and will continue to be at risk during this crucial time. We can continue to do this with a clear conscience, since we know that it will be beneficial to the other ninety per cent too.

It is time our potential Einsteins stop failing dictations and be allowed to develop in ways which will make them successful adults contributing to Luxembourg's future.

(1) Bogdanowicz, M., and Sayle H.A.(2004) Rights of Dyslexic Children in Europe Harmonia, Gdansk