Unrecognised Dyslexia and the Route to Offending

A project between the British Dyslexia Association and Bradford Youth Offending Team

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Foreword

In recent years a number of projects and studies has identified a link between dyslexia and offending. A much higher incidence of dyslexia, usually between 30% and 50% have been found amongst offenders compared with and incidence of 10% in the general population. Yet appropriate educational support of dyslexic offenders remains the exception rather than the rule.

As a result, the BDA recently established work with offenders as a key strategic theme and were delighted to be able to work alongside Bradford Youth Offending Team to examine the issue with young offenders. The establishment of the Youth Justice Board and YOTs and the added commitment to supporting the education of young offenders gives us a real opportunity to improve support for dyslexic offenders and reduce offending.

The BDA has gained from its partnership with Bradford YOT and developed a valuable insight to support the work of the YOT. Now we move forward to disseminate and further develop this work, this report is key to doing that.

Finally, I would like to thank the staff at Bradford YOT and many of their partner agencies, including Education Bradford, for their support with this work. I would also like to thank JJ Charitable Trust and Tudor Trust, whose funding made this project possible.

Steve Alexander Chief Executive British Dyslexia Association

Executive Summary

There is evidence of a "route to offending" among certain young people, which starts with difficulties in the classroom, moves through low self-esteem, poor behaviour and school exclusion, and ends in offending. Children and young people with dyslexia are more likely fall onto this route, because of the difficulties they face with learning.

The broad aim of this project is to examine the processes of the Youth Justice system and highlight the issues associated with dyslexia amongst young offenders. Whilst it was expected that the incidence of dyslexia amongst the sample of young people screened would be high, the real value of this work would be in the recommendations that would be made to identify and support dyslexic young offenders within the system.

The project found that there were particular 'hot spots' in the system at which knowledge of a young person's dyslexia was critical to the best action being taken. These included the support given by an Appropriate Adult, Presentence Reports and the use of *ASSET*. Also, a particularly difficult problem to solve is that so many young offenders are not formally excluded form school but do not attend. This leaves the funding for their education locked in the school system, while voluntary income is used to develop projects to engage them positively in the community.

A sample of 34 young offenders was screened for dyslexia and 19 were categorized as dyslexic, an incidence of 56%. The incidence of dyslexia appeared to increase with the severity of the offending. Reading ages were generally much lower than chronological ages and informal contact with the sample highlighted low self-esteem. Of the 19 young people in the dyslexic group, 7 had a statement of Special Educational Need, but they all related to behavioural problems, not dyslexia.

The project offered a number of interventions in addition to the screening. These included ICT based literacy support for individuals, training for staff at the YOT and partner agencies that work with the YOT.

This project adds weight to evidence that suggests that there is a much higher incidence of dyslexia amongst offenders. Appropriate screening, assessment and intervention will help these young people to build selfesteem and break out of the cycle of re-offending.

The BDA calls on all Youth Offending Teams to study its findings and implement the recommendations made.

1.0 Introduction

There is evidence of a "route to offending", among certain young people, which starts with difficulties in the classroom, moves through low self-esteem, poor behaviour and school exclusion, and ends in offending. Children and young people with dyslexia are more likely fall onto this route, because of the difficulties the face with learning. In recent years a number of studies have examined the incidence of dyslexia amongst offenders and found it to be much higher than 10%, acknowledged as the proportion of dyslexic people in the general population. Gavin Reid and Jane Kirk (2001) in their publication *Dyslexia in Adults: Education and Employment* give details of the following projects:

- STOP Project Shropshire Probation Service 1995/97 – 31% of offenders had positive indicators of dyslexia.
- Morgan/Dyspel Project London Probation Service – 1996 – 52% of offenders had strong indicators of dyslexia.
- Alm Project Upsala County, Sweden 1997 31% had significant difficulty with decoding and comprehension.
- Reid Scotland (young offenders) 1999 50% had indicators of dyslexia, 12% had strong indicators of dyslexia
- Dyslexia Institute Feltham (young offenders) 1997 – 17% had strong indicators of dyslexia.

Poor literacy amongst offenders is well documented; these studies indicate that dyslexia is a significant underlying cause of that poor literacy.

In short, the overall aim of this project is to improve the way in which the dyslexic young people who come into contact with the criminal justice system are supported and managed to reduce re-offending.

Practical recommendations to support front line practitioners, rather than academic debate are the desired outcome. This document will produce those recommendations; a separate paper will be produced to consider the implications of this project from a dyslexia research viewpoint.

2.0 Objectives

 Map all elements of the youth criminal justice system, observe current working practices of the system, observe and evaluate the extent to which it makes particular provision for dyslexic young people.

- Complete an analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities inherent in the system and, working with partners and statutory authorities, determine best practice and high standards of support based on findings of workbased observations.
- Screen a sample of young offenders using *Lucid* computer based screening tools to identify probability of dyslexia and *Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT)* to identify current levels of achievement in the areas of reading and spelling.
- Trial recommended interventions and procedures within the youth criminal justice system and educational provision.
- Make recommendations for best practice in supporting young people with dyslexia.
- Evaluate the project, agree and implement a mainstreaming and dissemination action plan.

3.0 Approach

A steering group managed the project with representation from the main agencies involved, Bradford YOT, Education Bradford, the Local Dyslexia Association and the BDA. A project worker, with teaching experience and a post graduate qualification in dyslexia, worked closely with the staff at the YOT and partner agencies, to complete the work on the ground.

4.0 Findings and commentary

4.1 Mapping

The objective here is not to describe the working of the Youth Justice System with its different levels of operation, processes and sanctions. This information is available from many other sources. Rather the objective is to observe it and identify 'hot spots' for dyslexia. These are critical points in the system at which dyslexic young offenders may be put at a particular disadvantage because of their dyslexia. The main 'hot spots' identified are:

a) Appropriate Adult

During contact with the police, the support of an appropriate adult is critical and their knowledge, or the lack of it, with regard to dyslexia is very important. For example, when issued with a Police Reprimand or Final Warning, the young offender will see a great deal of paperwork and receive extensive verbal explanations about the process. However if that young person is dyslexic, with difficulties around literacy, memory or organisation, and under stress, it may be very difficult for that person to absorb the information.

b) Pre-sentence and Stand-down Report

The pre-sentence report is a critical document and information about whether a young person is dyslexic or not could be critical at this point. For example, a young person with organisation difficulties could be put at added risk of 'breach' if their difficulty is not properly understood. It can be difficult to get this information into the presentence report. The use of stand-down reports to speed processes creates additional risk of sentences, particularly the educational element, not being informed by the fact that the young person is dyslexic.

c) ASSET

The ASSET assessment report could and should carry information about dyslexia. Such information could then be used to inform other areas such as sentencing, education, training or reparation activities. This would ensure that support strategies could be put in place to reduce the incidence of orders being breached and of re-offending. There is a need for dyslexia screening to be introduced at the earliest possible stage within the process and integrated into normal working practices. *ASSET* would be the obvious place to position processes for identifying dyslexia.

d) Referral Orders

When the Referral Panel draws up the contract for the young person to sign and agree, they should be aware of any learning difficulty, including dyslexia that the young person may have. Not only is it an important factor to take into account in the Panel procedures, but also it should be considered in determining the activities to be undertaken by the young offender.

e) Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programme (ISSP)

This programme can create not only difficulties for dyslexic young people but also opportunities. For those with problems around organisation and time, the danger of beach is heightened. But the requirement that the programme include 15 hours education work each week creates an opportunity for the provision of dyslexia friendly tuition. Growing use of this programme should go hand in hand with dyslexia identification and support.

f) School attendance and post 16 training

Many young offenders, including dyslexic young offenders, stop going to school but are not formally excluded. In an effort to engage these young people the YOT has developed bridging provision in partnership with a number of external agencies, many of them voluntary. Examples of these include Police Club, Youth TV and Justart. The difficulty is that funding for these programmes is often insecure but funding for the education of these young people is locked into the school system. Dyslexic children, who have low self esteem and have already 'failed' in the school system are determined not to return and are therefore not able to use the resources available for their education. The policy issue here is a very serious one.

A great deal of work is undertaken by the Youth Offending Team to encourage and support young people to take up training and employment opportunities. There is a strong relationship with the Connexions service. If an individual has an understanding of their dyslexia, and their particular profile of strengths, weaknesses and learning style, then they will be much better placed to take up these opportunities. Similarly those supporting them will be better able to manage their progress.

A dyslexic individual is at risk within many parts of the judicial system, particularly if they have a reading age around 7 years, as indicated in the screening of some of these young people. The 'hot spots' identified here indicate that identification of dyslexia at the earliest possible point is critical to ensure that the Youth Justice System deals most effectively with dyslexic offenders

4.2 SWOT Analysis

Strengths

A particular strength of all the contact that the project has had with the YOT has been the positive attitudes displayed towards these young people and a real commitment to getting them back on track within society. The commitment to supporting young people and reducing offending is very strong, both in terms of the structure of the YOT and its prevailing culture.

A further strength is the wide range of bridging provision utilised by the education team. The creativity and 'can do' attitude demonstrated in developing these arrangements to support young people, is impressive. The YOT demonstrates creativity and commitment in trying to get young people back into education, training and employment.

There is also a significant commitment by the YOT to assisting these young people to improve their basic skills. Several basic skills tutors operate across the YOT and a large basic skills project was delivered in parallel with this project.

Weaknesses

At the start of the project there is very little recognition of dyslexia or support for dyslexic learners. The education team had organised dyslexia awareness training, indeed it was through that training that this project was developed, but work practices did not take significant account of the issue of dyslexia.

An initial weakness is at the point of first contact with the police. Given the potentially low level of literacy of the young person who is also dyslexic, he or she may be significantly more vulnerable and the role of the appropriate adult takes on particular significance. During this time the young person is required to read and understand a variety of significant documentation, e.g. custody records, interviews etc. They are given important information, which raises issues around memory and organisation e.g. times, dates, notices of rights etc.

A key weakness in the system is that many young offenders are very reluctant to return to traditional education but for a variety of reasons have not been formally excluded. This means that funding for their education sits in the school system, though they are unlikely to benefit from it, while funding for bridging provision in the community, which they are more likely to benefit from, is uncertain.

Opportunities

There is a clear opportunity to develop dyslexia awareness amongst those working within the judicial system. By developing such awareness, a young person who is dyslexic could become less vulnerable.

Equally, screening for dyslexia at the earliest stage could be beneficial. For example embedding it within the processes of *ASSET* assessments to provide a more detailed profile of an individual's strengths and weaknesses could then inform future actions and ensure access to appropriate interventions and support.

The YOT spends considerable time on prevention/early intervention programmes. The value and strength of such activities is great. However, if dyslexia were a factor within the profile of a young person, it would make sense to identify it at the earliest possible point. If identification took place at this level then practical steps could be taken to ensure that the individual could access appropriate intervention.

Although some of the basic skills provision might give cause for concern, given that many of the individuals accessing this provision have very low levels of attainment, it does also represent a significant opportunity. Further skill development of basic skills teaching staff could improve the delivery of this provision to dyslexic individuals.

Threats

Whilst there is provision for a young person to have an appropriate adult with them during their interaction with the legal process, unless it is someone they know and trust, they are unlikely to disclose their literacy difficulties. If this appropriate adult is also their parent, then there is the possibility that they might also have a difficulty with literacy.

Working with many partners it is difficult for the YOT to manage closely the quality of the service delivered to young offenders. For example individual learning outcomes in respect of literacy could be built into much of the partnership activity but persuading partners to do this can be problematic.

4.3 Screening Results

The tools identified for this purpose were the *Lucid* software. The rationale for this choice was:

- It is a computer-based tool and it was felt that the young person would engage more readily with such an activity.
- A non-specialist can administer it; therefore, it would provide a sustainable tool for members of the YOT after the completion of the project.

In addition to this the *Wide Range Achievement Test* (*WRAT*) was also used to identify current attainment levels in the areas of reading and spelling. In terms of the screening sample itself, it was decided to screen up to 40 individuals spread equally across the different offending levels, identified by their current orders;

- In detention at Wetherby Secure College
- On Intensive Supervision and Surveillance programmes (ISSP)
- On Referral Orders
- On Final Warnings

The aim was to identify current attainment levels in literacy and incidence of dyslexia and to identify if there was any correlation between levels of offending and literacy skill and dyslexia.

a) Dyslexia screening

The 34 subjects for whom either *LADS* or *LASS* Secondary data were available were categorised as either dyslexic or non-dyslexic. The criteria for and incidence of these categories are shown in Table 1 below. 56% of those screened fell into the dyslexic group and 44% into the non-dyslexic group. So the incidence of dyslexia amongst our group is 56%

Table 1

Categorisation of the sample into dyslexic and nondyslexic groups

Category	Number	Criteria
Dyslexic	19	<i>LADS</i> : 'High' or 'Moderate' probability of dyslexia, or 'Borderline' where there is evidence of a range of difficulties across the dyslexia sensitive tests.
		OR
		LASS Secondary: Significant discrepancy between reasoning score and literacy score, with depressed cognitive scores (phonological and working memory)
Non- dyslexic	15	<i>LADS</i> : 'Low' probability of dyslexia, or 'Borderline' where difficulties are just in one area (e.g. word recognition).
		LASS Secondary: No significant discrepancy between reasoning score and literacy score, and normal cognitive scores (phonological and working memory)

b) Reading and spelling

Mean *WRAT* reading and spelling scores are shown in Table 2 below. It can be seen that the dyslexic group had particularly poor mean reading and spelling scores, while the non-dyslexic group had a mean reading score that just tipped into the bottom of the average range. However, the mean spelling score of the non-dyslexic group was still somewhat below average. Statistical analysis shows that for both reading and spelling the dyslexic group are significantly poorer than the non-dyslexic group (t tests; p<0.001 in both cases).

Table 2

WRAT reading and spelling scores for the dyslexic and non-dyslexic groups

Category		N	Mean	SD
All subjects	Reading	36	76.86	19.04
	Spelling	37	74.68	16.45
Dyslexic	Reading	19	69.18	16.36
Dysiexic	Spelling	19	67.50	15.35
Non-dyslexic	Reading	14	90.40	18.86
	Spelling	15	86.06	14.30

c) Social Factors

ASSET provides ratings for social, emotional and background factors in a total of 13 categories, ranging from living arrangements and lifestyle, to emotional and mental health and motivation to change. The more adverse factors the higher the score. The scores from the categories can be summed to give an overall ASSET score. The results for the three groups are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Category	N	Range	Mean	SD
All subjects	32	0-34	10.27	9.52
Dyslexic	18	0-34	13.06	10.28
Non-dyslexic	14	0-25	6.08	8.26

ASSET scores for the dyslexic and non-dyslexic groups

It is apparent from these scores that the dyslexic group appear to be at a greater social disadvantage than the non-dyslexic group. Inspection of the *ASSET* category scores suggest that the problems for the dyslexic group tend to lie in the following areas:

- Education (e.g. history of educational difficulties)
- Employment training and further education (e.g. lack of qualifications)
- Thinking and behaviour (e.g. impulsiveness)
- Attitudes to offending (e.g. lack of understanding of the effects of their behaviour)
- Motivation to change (e.g. lack of understanding of their own problems in life)

Unfortunately the size of the data set was insufficient to permit more detailed analysis of these effects.

However, despite the fact that the dyslexic group had more social, emotional and background problems, this was not such a significant factor in their literacy skills as it was for the non-dyslexic group. To analyse this, Pearson Product Moment Correlations (r) were computed between *WRAT* Reading and Spelling Scores for the two groups. The results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Correlations between *ASSET* scores a *WRAT* reading and spelling scores for the dyslexic and non-dyslexic groups.

	All subjects	Dyslexic group	Non-dyslexic Group	
Reading	-0.38 *	–0.21 ns	-0.43 *	
Spelling	-0.34 *	–0.16 ns	-0.46 *	

* p < 0.05; ns = not significant

It can be seen that the correlations are negative in all cases. This indicates that as reading and spelling scores increase, then *ASSET* scores decrease. The greater the *ASSET* score, the greater the number of social problems experienced by the subject. This is to be expected. The results of the correlational analysis indicate a significant

negative relationship between both reading and spelling for the whole sample. However, when separated into groups it can be seen that this relationship is not significant for the dyslexic group, whereas it is significant for the non-dyslexic group.

The conclusion to be drawn from these findings is that social factors have much less impact on the literacy skills of youth offenders who have dyslexia, than they do on youth offenders who not have dyslexia. Social factors have a general impact on educational attainment. For young people with dyslexia the significance of these social factors is dwarfed by the much greater disadvantaging factor of dyslexia, which has a relatively more powerful impact.

d) Intelligence

Intelligence of the subjects may be estimated from the non-verbal Reasoning test scores in the *LADS* and *LASS* Secondary tests. These are shown in table 5 below.

Table 5

Category	Ν	Mean	SD
All subjects	34	95.71	9.81
Dyslexic	22	95.68	8.32
Non-dyslexic	12	96.00	11.40

IQ estimates for the dyslexic and non-dyslexic groups

For the sample as a whole, no correlation was found between IQ and *ASSET* score (r = 0.05, not significant), but for the dyslexic group there was a small (but not significant) negative correlation between IQ and *ASSET* score (r = -0.27, not significant), while for the non-dyslexic group the correlation is positive and almost reaches significance (r = 0.35). This suggests that in the dyslexic group the brighter ones had fewer social and emotional disadvantages (perhaps they were able to reason more clearly about their situation, for example), while in the nondyslexic group, greater intelligence seemed to be associated with more social and emotional disadvantages.

A tentative conclusion that might be drawn from this is that in the non-dyslexic group, social and emotional disadvantage is a prime cause of their offending, and that intelligence does not protect them against this. In the dyslexic group, however, it is their dyslexia that is the primary factor in the equation, rather than intelligence or social and emotional factors.

e) General observations

There are a number of general observations that can be made about the screening. Firstly the incidence of dyslexia appeared to increase with the severity of the offending. For example of the 10 young men screened at Wetherby Secure College of Learning eight fell into the dyslexic group, whereas 30% of those on Referral Orders fell into the dyslexic group.

Secondly, as discussed above, the average reading and spelling ages of the whole group fall some way behind the average chronological age of the group. For example, the average chronological age of the 10 young people at Wetherby is 16 years but the average reading age of the group is 9 years.

Thirdly, many of the individuals screened identified prior to the activity that they couldn't read, several also indicated that they would very much like to improve their literacy, particularly reading skills, but they felt that they could not learn to read. Many expressed feelings that they were "thick at school". Individuals were asked if they had been tested previously for dyslexia. Some thought that they had been through some sort of testing process, particularly the older individuals, but all were unsure of what that process was and what the results had been.

The majority of them had experienced negative experiences at school and had a significant history of nonattendance. One individual identified that he had been given *Ritalin* to control his behaviour, following an Educational Psychologist assessment when he had been identified as having dyslexia and ADHD. However, he had no recollection of any support for his dyslexia, and had ceased attending school on a regular basis.

Finally the results of the screening were shared with Education Bradford to examine what was know of the young people who screened positively for dyslexia. Seven young people in the group had a Statement of Special Educational Needs, and none of those were for dyslexia. They were all for emotional and behavioral difficulties. It is therefore likely that the dyslexia in the dyslexic group was largely unrecognised and unsupported. Indeed it could be argued that the Statement of SEN focused on the presenting issues, rather than a possible significant underlying cause.

4.4 Interventions

The principle reasons for trailing a small number of interventions are two-fold. Firstly there is a desire to demonstrate to practitioners, both teaching and nonteaching, that there are a number of simple things that can be done to support dyslexic learners. Secondly it was important to offer support to those young people that were screened and found to be dyslexic.

In broad terms the interventions were as follows:

a) Dyslexia screening and assessment

There has been a great deal of interest in the screening mechanisms used for this project and discussions with various case workers and others involved with these young people have clearly identified for themselves the value of undertaking such activities. The choice of methodology for these activities has also been significant in that they are simple and quick to administer, whilst at the same time giving relatively accurate and useful information.

Information around areas such as memory difficulties is regarded as being particularly helpful in terms of providing pointers about an individual who may require additional or a greater level of support. For example to help them avoid breaching orders due to a failure to attend appointments. Similarly information that gives an accurate reading age is helpful in identifying those individuals who may be at an additional risk within the criminal justice system and can trigger intervention in terms of appropriate support being in place.

b) Teaching and support

Throughout this project it has always been identified that screening on its own is not enough. The final stage of this process will be to introduce some specific literacy programmes that are suitable for those individuals who are dyslexic and also provide a useful resource for others who need to improve their basic skills levels. To this end the project will be utilising a variety of approaches.

Use of computer based literacy programme, *Touch Type Read and Spell*. This programme is appropriate for both those individuals who are dyslexic and those who need to improve literacy skills. The programme follows a structured literacy programme *Alpha to Omega* that was designed for the dyslexic learner. It is cumulative, starting from single sound symbol (letter) links and building through more complicated letter patterns and rules, syllable division patterns, suffixing/prefixing, and high frequency words.

Success is achieved virtually immediately in very small increments. It is multi-sensory. By using the media of teaching touch typing it allows the learners fingers to make links between the sounds of symbols (letters) and words rather than relying on potential areas of weakness such as visual or auditory perception/discrimination. Because it is computer based it is more acceptable to the learner as there is no indication to a casual observer that they are learning anything more than touch-typing skills. In fact the development of computer and keyboard skills are an added bonus. It also gets away from the inherent fears that many dyslexic individuals feel about teachers, pen and paper.

In order to further support this programme use will also be made of another computer based teaching tool, *Word Shark*. Following on from the activity outlined above, Word Shark also follows the *Alpha to Omega* structure. It helps individuals to develop and practice their literacy skills by playing a variety of computer games. Again it is computer based and therefore has far greater appeal to individuals than pen and paper activities.

The rationale for the programme outlined above is that for this particular group of young people the learning process has to be made interesting and success has to more or less instant. Given previous histories of repeated failure to develop literacy skills, the approach has to be new and innovative, as attempting to repeat previously failed teaching methods sets up the potential for failure again.

c) Staff training

Dyslexia awareness training has been delivered to staff throughout the YOT and partner agencies. This includes, for example, members of the education team and members of the ISSP team. In order to understand fully the screening methodologies and results of screenings these individuals have also developed, through training, a greater understanding of dyslexia, particularly in relation to the young people who come into contact with the youth justice system.

5.0 Recommendations

- 1. All client-facing staff and volunteers in the YOT should undertake dyslexia awareness training.
- 2. New staff should receive dyslexia awareness training as part of their induction
- 3. More advanced dyslexia training in identification and intervention should be undertaken by key members of staff such as those in the education team.
- 4. Young people who come into contact with the YOT should have a dyslexia screening. This will sit alongside the *ASSET* assessment as standard practice.
- 5. The British Dyslexia Association will develop a dialogue at a national level with Department for Education and Skills and the Youth Justice Board to address the issue of education funding being 'locked' in the school system when there is very little probability of a return to school.
- 6. Information will be produced by the British Dyslexia Association to inform staff and workers in the Youth Criminal Justice System of the issues around dyslexia. This would include information for Magistrates and others.
- 7. Young people on ISSP who are dyslexic will have access to a dyslexia friendly programme of learning as part of their education work. The YOT will implement this locally and the BDA will approach the YJB to about a national initiative.
- Basic skills and key skills work with young offenders delivered by the YOT or partner organisations will ensure that learners are screened for dyslexia and supported with dyslexia friendly teaching approaches.

6.0 Conclusion

This project adds weight to evidence that there is a much higher incidence of dyslexia amongst offenders than in the general population. Appropriate screening, assessment and intervention will help these young people to build selfesteem and break out of the cycle of re-offending.

Further work is in progress with a much larger sample at Wetherby Secure College of Learning. Some 120 young offenders have been screened and initial indications are that the incidence of dyslexia amongst that sample is in excess of 70%. A separate report will be produced for this piece of work.

Also, further analysis will be undertaken of the results detailed here to examine the correlations between *ASSET* and the dyslexia screening data. This analysis, which takes into account a range of factors that impact on offending, will shed more light on the relationship between undiagnosed dyslexia and youth offending.

British Dyslexia Association 16 June 2004