

Suggest how the representations of developmental dyslexia reflect wider socio-cultural values in two periods: the 1800's and 1970-2000

Why is it if you spell words differently, cannot remember the spelling, or misread words you are assumed to be *unintelligent* or *lazy*? This essay explores how representations of developmental dyslexia (DD), in England, as 'laziness' and 'unintelligence', but also, contradictory, as 'innocence' and 'intelligence' are linked to capitalists' needs for an expanding literate work force at two points in history. Firstly, exploring the 1800s when DD was first identified and secondly, examining the neo-liberal period 1970-2000 when education reform was key for success.

Before this can be done it is important to understand the way DD is viewed in this essay. It is now generally agreed that DD is a neurological condition people are born with (Démonet, et.al 2009, Grigorenko 2001, Habib 2000, Hulme 1997 and Vasanta 2005). While it is highly individual, varying in both form and severity (Al-Wabil et al 2007), it is limited for the most part, to deficit in reading and spelling (Vasanta 2005). However the term *Dyslexiel*, as it was in German, was used as early as 1886 long before scientists understood the condition (Chambers 2008). The etymology of *dyslexia* is [then] perhaps more useful in understanding DD; it pulls from the Greek '*Dys*' meaning 'bad', '*léx*' a reference to reading aloud and '*íā*' which denotes condition or quality. Put simply Dyslexia means a condition of 'bad reading' (Chambers 2008). Therefore *dyslexia*, and by extension DD, refers not to the neurological condition itself so much as the resulting symptoms.

The need for understanding the focus on the characteristics, or symptoms, rather than the neurological source is further shown when examining the neurological processes used in speaking various languages. The parts of the brain engaged differs (Vasanta 2005). For instance, when comparing Italian to English, both of which use the Roman alphabet, greater levels of DD diagnosis occurs in the English population; 'the complexity of the mapping between orthography and phonology in English ... results in English speaking dyslexic children experiencing greater difficulty in naming and spelling than Italian children' (Vasante 2005:134). When looking at countries with pictorially based alphabets, for example Logographic, used in China or Syllabary, used in Korea, lower levels of DD diagnosis are seen (Grigorenko 2001). The same neurological variations may occur but the symptoms do not appear, as a result there is considered to be less DD.

When this is misunderstood it can result in the condition being considered 'made up' or as Graham Stringer, MP for Blackley deemed, an excuse for 'poor teaching':

'If dyslexia really existed then countries as diverse as Nicaragua and South Korea would not have been able to achieve literacy rates of nearly 100%...there can be no rational reason why this 'brain disorder' is of epidemic proportions in Britain but does not appear in South Korea or Nicaragua." (Graham Stringer in BBC 2009)

It seems basing an understanding of DD on the outcome of neuroscience is not only potentially misleading but can also lead to denial of the condition itself. The stance this essay will therefore take, while acknowledging there may be neurological variants in people with DD, is the idea that the social construction of written language and literacy, in a particular context, identifies DD.

For Marxists it is unsurprising DD, literacy and economics are linked. Education is seen as not only a form of control and training of a future work force but also as a temporal-spatial fix to the problems of over accumulation (Harvey 2003a), which is argued to be inherent in the capitalist system (see Harvey 1982). Schools provide a space to feed capital and potential labour by improving the potential value of that labour (Jessop 2006). So when re-entering the workforce the labour has added value and therefore can increase future profits giving the capitalists a competitive edge (Jessop 2006, Harvey 2003a). It is logical that in times of economic growth, education and literacy become key factors of policy and social attention. This simultaneously affects social attitudes towards judgments of a 'dutiful', literate citizen, and an 'undutiful' citizen or one that is illiterate.

The word *illiterate* appeared in the first English dictionary of 1755, being defined negatively as '[u]nlettered; untaught; unlearned; unenlightened by science' (Johnson 2004:257). The enlightenment period drew a strong link between education, social order and socio-economic function, believing 'properly educated people would understand' and so 'accept their place in society', causing them to work hard without questioning their social position within the rigid class structure of the time (Graff 1991:178). However reading and writing were not specifically valued until the 1800s.

The nineteenth century was a period of rapid industrialisation, mechanisation, commodification and urbanisation which resulted in socio-cultural change (More 2000). The majority of surplus capital at this time was being invested by industries in raw materials and housing stocks. Towards the latter part of the century however the states' primary investment turned from transport and communication infrastructure to schools and education: 'by developing literacy, this would have enhanced human capital' (More 2000:30).

The states' interest in education reform started in 1833 when all children in employment were required to attend two hours of school a day, leading (in 1883) to compulsory education for all under-elevens (Directgov 2010). This was clearly a time in which reading and writing were becoming ever-more important and education was at the front of the agenda. By 1883 the effect of this emphasis could be seen elsewhere with *literacy* appearing alongside *illiteracy* in the dictionary (Chambers 2008). Eleven years on in 1894, the inability to *read* or *write* were mentioned in relation to illiteracy (Barton 2002), placing all the negative attributes already associated with illiteracy on to those with poor reading and writing (Cook-Gumperz 2006). Two years later DD or 'Congenital Word Blindness' appeared in the British Medical Journal (Clark et al, 2003:143, Shaywitz, 2003).

The socio-cultural and economic changes occurring within England may explain the sudden emphasis from a broader view of *illiterate* to one focussed on ability to read and write. The social change resulted in a fear particularly amongst the middle and upper classes that morality would be lost (Hunt 1999). The concern was that as young people moved to the cities they would leave the morals of their parents and churches behind (Hunt 1999). Simultaneously the economic move to a capitalist system resulted in a profit driven economy where, in order to stay competitive, investment was needed not just in mechanisation and improvement of machinery but also the work force (More 2000). Furthermore, the working population could not really 'bring an illiterate son up to a simple trade' as there was no work for illiterate people, instead they would have to 'save [a] small amount for his training' inadvertently supporting the commodification of education (Smelser 2006:361).

These ideas are not separate; the same members of the middle and upper classes who were concerned about the morality of society, would also come to benefit through the commodification of education and the expanding literate workforce for they owned the factories. The morals they were most concerned about were 'work ethic' and the maintenance of the family in order to continue reproducing productive labour (Holme 2004, Smelser 2006). There was a growing belief that individuals could use 'printed and written information in society to achieve' their 'goals' (OECD 1997). The emphasis was on the importance of having an educated work force as this would produce hard working future employees. In 1848 the Chief Superintendent of Education stated that education was 'designed to prepare us for the duties of life' (Graff 1981:232).

In the 1800's the ability to *read* and *write* was, for the first time, becoming key in accessing employment. Thus those who struggled or failed to achieve literacy were considered 'lazy' or 'stupid' as they could not become productive members of society. This attitude, which was perpetuated by the middle and upper classes, came out of rapid socio-economic

changes, in which an ever-increasing literate workforce was needed for success, and surplus capital existed for reinvestment in education of a future work force. The interest in improving the populations' literacy levels resulted in the identification of DD towards the end of this period. As attitudes often take decades to trickle down and become a dominant social discourse, few people were affected by this 'diagnosis' however, for the boy diagnosed in the study it was recognised that he 'would be the *smartest* lad in the school if the instruction were entirely oral' (Crisfield 1996:11-14 emphasis added) and thus did have potential (economic) value.

Little change occurred in attitudes towards illiteracy until the start of neo-liberalism in 1971 (when the Bretton Woods agreement collapsed). During this time economic change had been relatively slow with an emphasis on national, protectionist economic policies and government spending focusing on the war efforts and post/inter war rebuilding (Harvey 2003b). With the neo-liberal system came rapid change and globalisation, in particular the outsourcing of low skilled jobs. The new 'hi tech' industries that took over needed a large literate work force to succeed (Holme 2004). This new economic system was erecting evermore social barriers, particularly barriers to employment for illiterate people. The failure of the miners' strikes symbolised the breaking down of the school-employment link in communities and like in the 1800's '[b]asic education could not be seen as a gateway to employment when there were not visible employment prospects' (Holme 2004:18).

Furthermore the neo-liberal system focused on the individual; believing if you work hard you will achieve. This in turn implies if you do not work hard it is due to your own failings; blame is placed on the individual, rather than on a society based on literacy. With these attitudes in mind it is unsurprising that the general public, and many educationalists, believed DD was 'merely an indicator of low intellectual ability' and 'laziness' equating it to general *illiteracy* (West 1997:45).

Despite the belief by the majority that DD did not exist, the capitalist class still needed increasing numbers of capable employees (West 1997). Two events occurred that showed people believed there was some value in researching and identifying those with DD, effectively those who were illiterate but could potentially still be of value to the new economy due to other areas of intelligence.

The first, in 1968, was the Research Group of Developmental Dyslexia of the World Federation of Neurology's meeting, out of which came a new definition for DD:

"A disorder manifested by a difficulty in learning to read despite conventional instruction, adequate intelligence and socio-cultural

opportunity. It is dependent upon fundamental cognitive difficulties which are frequently of a constitutional character" (BDA 2010: unpagged).

This provided an agreed-upon definition amongst the majority of the scientific and medical community. Through including the phrase '*cognitive difficulties*' it opened up the door to medical and scientific understanding of the disorder (BDA 2010:unpagged). Out of this came a sudden surge in books and articles that demonstrate the increased availability of funding for research. As previously discussed, a neurological focus is not necessarily useful in understanding DD, however, it effected a wider socio-cultural interest and acceptance of DD at the time. This informs us that the dominant ideas in 1970's England were the objective and quantifiable approaches used in scientific and medical research.

The second event, which may have occurred as a result of the first, was the mention of DD in the law. *Dyslexia* appeared in the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act of 1970 registering DD as a disability; the state, through schools, now actively supported the development of people with DD into potentially economically active citizens by providing 'for the special educational treatment of children suffering from acute dyslexia ..., so far as is practicable' (CSDP Act 1970 section 44, part 27:2).

The election of the Conservative party on May 4th 1979 saw England fully adopt neo-liberal values. Throughout the Thatcherite period of the 1980's DD continued to be understood in scientific communities as a neurological disorder. This viewed the individual as 'physically dysfunctional' in some way and in need of being 'cured', and secondly, placed the emphasis on the neo-liberal idea; 'work hard and succeed'. This resulted in the attitude that the person with DD must overcome their 'dis'ability ('bad' ability) themselves rather than society changing in such a way they are no longer 'disabled or disadvantaged (Hughes and Paterson 1997).

As a backlash to this, the social model of disability was developed which argued 'that people with impairments were disabled by a social system which erected barriers to their participation' (Hughes and Paterson 1997:149). However while the social model did shift the focus from bio-medics to citizenship and politics it failed to tackle the neo-liberal idea that the individual not society was to blame (Hughes and Paterson 1997). By the end of the 1980's 'illiterate' people, had become associated with 'poorer health, higher rates of criminality and re-offending by convicted criminals, younger parenthood and an increased likelihood of having children with learning problems' (Dalglish 1982 in Holme 2004:19, also see Bynner 2001, Barton 2002). All of which can be linked to poorer employment prospects and therefore less economic value (Barton 2002)

The media played its part in supporting these popular ideas playing on peoples' fears particularly using *disease* and the *military* metaphors when writing about illiteracy:

'Like a *germ* that learns to *enjoy penicillin*, illiteracy consumes all the *armies sent to fight it*. No matter what we do about it-and we do a good deal, contrary to complaints from the literacy lobby-the *condition persists*...We have no reason to think it is shrinking and some reason to fear that it is growing...' (Fulford 1988 in Barton 2002 *emphases added*)

In 1991, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, said 'a matrix of illiteracy and delinquency and other wrongdoing' were the cause of the inner city riots (Barton 2002:11). The Archbishop's link between 'illiteracy' and 'wrongdoing' is significant as he would have been revered as a 'moral' voice. His attitude reflects the earlier view of the late 1800's where illiteracy and immorality were linked, pulling these negative connotations into a new decade.

The capitalist class stood most to benefit from these negative views of illiteracy however, for those with children who did not (and could not) attain high levels of literacy, an 'excuse' for their inability to learn was needed; DD provided this. The above definition of DD (put forward by professionals and academics rather than the working class) created the situation where only children who had the '*socio-cultural opportunit[ies]*' (BDA 2010:unpaged) to develop good literacy, could be diagnosed. The middle and upper class children could then be excused as the 'innocent' and 'intelligent' illiterate, whilst allowing working class children to be 'blamed'. It is then unsurprising that it was often the parents rather than the professionals who identified their children's DD and realised what needed to be done (Mills 2000).

The link between literacy and its economic function during the time was also stressed. The Gallup survey's findings confirmed the ideas and fears that had come to dominate over the previous decade (Holme 2004). It estimated economic losses of £4.8 billion to the UK economy (Holme 2004:19), which were as a result of educational under-achievement, particularly in reading, writing and arithmetic, resulting in a work force that lost orders, had poor communication and problems with quality control (Kempa 1993). Following this further, government Acts were passed not only focusing on education but also on the work place: The Education Act (1993) where DD became a 'special educational need' and the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) which made it unlawful to 'treat a disabled application or employee less favourably because of their disability without justification' (Directgov 2010).

The improvement this made to those people with DD should not be ignored; it further separated them from the general illiterate population and pushed educationalists and employers to acknowledge their potential value. For many people, whilst school was 'difficult, painful, and often humiliating' it still provided some sense of protection, whereas work often caused 'despair and even terror' (West 1997:54). This had two effects: whilst it provided those with DD the opportunity to become economically active citizens and therefore break out, at least in part, from the stereotypes of other illiterate people, it also meant that they could be exploited by the capitalist system.

This Act may also have provided a long term spatial temporal fix for capital. A vast amount of money would have been needed in order to bring schools and businesses up to this new standard. The legislation included the terms 'practicable' and 'reasonable adjustment', regular investments were therefore needed due to the technological advancement in the 1980's and 1990's: in audio books, videotaping and educational television (West 1997:52).

What is more, as discussed above, the new hi-tech industries needed ever-growing numbers of highly literate and skilled workers. However at this time the majority of the population who were literate, were already being used. These technologies meant it was now relatively cheap and easy to identify and educate those of 'normal' intelligence but were illiterate (the symptoms of DD) from other illiterate students (Casale 2002). Economically, only educated people could be of value and more educated people were needed so it made sense to identify and invest in the education of those with DD. In the long term, this investment in the education of people with DD would benefit the English economy, or more specifically the capitalist class.

The period from 1970-2000 is more complex than the 1800s; while the negative attitudes towards illiteracy were generally re-enforced, there were simultaneous efforts to identify and utilise some illiterate people who could potentially still be of value. DD became not only an excuse for some (primarily middle and upper class) people but also allowed them to be identified as 'intelligent' (or at least 'innocent') illiterates. Through technological changes and economic demand it was now feasible to educate those with DD so as they became potential (economically) valuable citizens. However as Appendix 1 shows, the change in attitude should not be overestimated with many people believing DD was simply a middle class excuse for 'laziness'.

It has been argued that DD was identified as a disability as a result of economic periods of growth in which an expanding literate workforce was essential. This caused literacy to be valued highly while illiteracy was associated with 'laziness' and 'unintelligence'. In the 1800's the focus, due to urbanisation and mechanisation, was on reading and writing within

educational reform. This caused an interest in why some people could not attain basic literacy, identifying DD as a reason. In the 1970-2000 period, outsourcing and technological changes made it not only economically viable but also necessary to identify and educate those who were illiterate but otherwise intelligent. The change can be seen in the shift of opinion from 'laziness' and 'unintelligence' to 'innocent' and 'intelligent'; from a hindrance to the country's economy to having potential economic value.

Is it then possible that in the future the neurological variation that causes DD could be considered an irrelevance? Will there be another *ability* that will have *Dis* (bad) impacts on the economic capabilities of the country and thus be considered a *disability*? Or has reading and writing simply become too integral to our society and economy for variations in reading (*lexisa*) and writing to ever be considered anything other than bad (*dis*)? Through continuing to monitor the representations of DD we will reveal changes in the wider socio-cultural values (which up till now appear to have been based on economic needs) and thus, in time, we may be able to answer these questions. What we do know however, is since the economic recession in 2008 there has not been the need for new sources of literate employees, there has been a trend of education cuts (see Conway 2009, Curtis 2009) and no legislation passed or effort made to put DD (or any other learning difficulties) on the political agenda.

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