



MDA Newsletter

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Madras Dyslexia Association

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Happy New Year

The counselling angle: Implications for the special educator

Many children with learning difficulties also have a lot of behavioural issues that need to be dealt with. They have to be referred to professional counsellors to address their problem behaviour. While this is imperative, the remedial teacher also needs to deal with it as she sees the child a few times a week and many LD children share a very good rapport with this teacher. They see this person as a supportive, 'significant other' in their life and are quite open to listening to him/her. So the remedial teacher needs to be a teacher and counsellor rolled into one though their primary focus is remediating the needs of the child.

We thought we should probe this angle and decided to get the views of teachers with experience to share their views with us. Our editorial team members, Mrs. Kamala Ramaraj and Mrs. Shanthi Gopalan interviewed the following : Mrs Nirmala Pandit (N.P) who has been teaching children with learning disabilities for more than 30 years and is one of the founding members of Madras Dyslexia Association. We also have Mrs Harini Mohan (HM) Head of Senior School, Ananya, Mrs Sujatha.R (SR) Head of Junior School and Mrs. Janaki Ramanathan (JR) Vice Principal and a teacher with several years of mainstream experience as well.

What are some behavioral problems that you have found among children with dyslexia?

N.P: Emotional outbursts, lack of attention , saturation, answering out of turn, non-stop talking.

H.M: According to me, the main problem of a purely dyslexic child is low self-esteem which manifests itself as aloofness, diffidence, and non-compliance to instructions in the classroom for sheer fear of failure.

J.R: Some of the behavioural problems are: restlessness, excessive talking, tendency to disturb others which is often due to the fact that they are in need of help.

S.R: Some of the behavioral problems I have observed in children with dyslexia are lack of proper attention and focus in classroom activities. Many of them come on empty stomachs and I have found that Hunger,

with a capital 'H' especially affects those who are already inattentive and distracted. It compounds the issue of lack of concentration. Many don't know how to express it. They skip their morning meals for various reasons like not having time or not liking what they are given or due to some mood upset because of what they were told or how they were told it. This leads to fidgeting, uneasiness, which thereby leads to lack of concentration. Other behaviour problems are due to lack of language, which is because of their family background like the first generation English learners who have to learn in a language they don't really understand or speak.

Do you feel remedial teachers should do something about these children or should refer them to counsellors?

N.P: It is not possible to send a child to the counsellor often. Day-to-day counselling is important. In fact, start the day with counselling I think counselling should be a part of a teacher's training so that a teacher understands each child holistically. It is important to know his/her diagnosis and the ramifications well. It is very important to tell the children what their difficulties are and how it affects their learning - but assure them that it can be overcome. Be sure to discuss how they can use their strengths to do so.

H.M: As behaviour in the learning setup affects learning, a remedial teacher has a role to play. She has to do her best to motivate (through various rewards) to make the child modify his behaviour and learn. In a group situation, she should be careful to assess whether she can handle the whole issue and give the student the desired skills without eating up the quality time for other students. She can make note of it and deal with it after class. Also she should carefully assess on a case-to-case basis whether they need the help of counsellors. When the child has the problem of underlying violence he needs to be immediately referred to a counsellor. If it is a question of low self-esteem leading to not working to their full potential then she can give some classroom accommodations such as extra time etc to enable the child to do better and to instill in the child the confidence needed.

J.R: The teacher should become his friend and confidante, understand his problems, help him in the best suited manner. Try to motivate him to the best of her ability to boost his self confidence. If all of this fails, he should be referred to the counsellor.

S.R: These children need a lot of guidance from the teachers initially before they are referred to the counsellors.

The remedial teacher unlike the mainstream teacher can check what is happening in the family when there's a sudden disruption of behaviour because a lot of their problems arise from their families. In many households, lack of discipline, ground rules, family support etc, are seen and need the direct intervention of the remedial teachers. A good and honest talk with the parents, mostly with the mothers throws a lot of light on the home situation and can solve a lot of problems. There's an example of a child, who had a working mother who was too busy to give quality time to her children. A routine, a time schedule was given which she followed and this resulted in a tremendous improvement in the behaviour of the children and now they follow the routine and enjoy school.

Do you think that there is a thin line between behaviour modification and punishment?

N.P: A lot of talking is necessary - keep the communication channels open. The students will understand that it is alright to talk to the teacher. Behaviour modification will not be mistaken for punishment if the modification exercises have some connection with the behaviour. For example, if homework is not done make sure the child finishes it during lunch hour or stays back after class.

H.M: I do agree that most of the time, there is a very thin line between both behaviour modification and punishment. If behaviour modification is misconstrued as punishment it will only aggravate the problem. A balanced approach is needed to deal with the needs of a child. Each child's need should be analysed and assessed independent of the other children and the course of action explained to them so they don't wonder why something is happening only to them. .

J.R: There is a very thin line between punishment and behaviour modification and the warning signs are when the child feels he is victimized. Behaviour modification causes only momentary hurt depending on how it is handled by the special educator. Once the child understands that the teacher is his friend and guide, he will accept the behaviour modification whole-heartedly and put in his best efforts to change to please the teacher. But the teacher must be honestly convinced that it is necessary and will work and only then it can be made to work.

S.R: Our goal should always be to reach out to the child, comprehend his problems and offer solutions to the same with a positive reinforcement in its enforcement. Very often the lines can blur, but the intention is giving our best to the child to help him/her to change. As long as the child is made to understand in advance what will be done and why, behavioural change will definitely happen.

Is it right to allot some part of 'remedial class' to talking to the student or should it be done outside the class room?

N.P : It is absolutely necessary to talk to the students in class. As the students enter, watch their body language. Tell them - today you seem worried - may I help you? This way, we are providing strategies to the students to help themselves. For example - a severely dyslexic child was very worried about his spelling. I told him "I know you find spelling difficult - but you will overcome it like you did with reading. Today I will not mark you- I will just show you where you have gone wrong".

Hence it is very important for the teacher to know the diagnosis and its effects. Teachers also need to know the situation at home. First talk about their strengths and then tell them, "But you need help, that's why you are here." Issues -not too personal can be discussed. The other students may have suggestions about a similar problem they had overcome.

H.M: Sometimes we need to do it in the class if it helps his output as some problems have to be dealt with immediately. But the special educator has to keep in mind that they have only a short time of 45 minutes to an hour to teach and need to balance between the two, weighing the situation.

J.R: It is essential that there should be a smooth flow of teaching and behaviour modification in the class room. Care should be taken to see there are no personal attacks, especially in sensitive issues. I personally feel that behaviour modification issues should be camouflaged as common issues and discussed in groups in a positive manner, without any direct reference to any particular student. This won't damage their self-esteem. Group counselling and discussions are always better, so that no student feels singled out and left to feel ashamed, embarrassed before his friends, and are possible in our small classrooms.

S.R: Talking to the child should be done along with the remedial classes as rectifying the mistakes and problems is a part of the remedial program. But if the child is highly sensitive or the issue is sensitive then it is better to take time outside the class to deal with it.

Can you please share some instances when you had to intervene during your remedial class?

N.P: A boy was misdiagnosed as having a very low IQ. I assessed him and found that he had dyspraxia and was dyslexic in spelling. He also had sensory integration issues so I suggested occupational therapy. He was in a mainstream school till the 10th std and is now in the first year of college. There have been several instances when I had to intervene. He got into a fight with a boy who had just brushed past him at school. Due to his difficulty connected with tactile defensiveness, he thought the boy had hit him, so he had retaliated.

When I heard his version, I was able to explain to his teachers at school why he had reacted so aggressively.

He would also talk non-stop, especially when he was anxious, I asked him, at such times, to hold a piece of sponge in his palm and squeeze it with his fingers. This activity helped in relieving the anxiety. He also had to be taught social skills such as how to hold a conversation, how to keep friends, when to talk, when not to talk etc.

A girl would cry when the book was opened. I would tell her, "I know it is difficult, I will read with you." She stopped crying and said, "Yes , I have a problem reading." This kind of interaction creates empathy and the child is reassured. Many times the students do not know that it's alright to express their fears and doubts openly.

Building up of language is very important. A student did not want to write. He told me, " I think I did too much copying from the board today." He was not only able to verbalise the fact that he did not want to write but also explain the reason why he felt so. Give them the language to express themselves, this will give them control over their feelings. Children with learning difficulties can reach saturation point quickly as they have to concentrate very hard throughout the day. We as teachers must understand this.

H.M: A child from Class 7 came to us as a dropout because of his very low Math marks. He refused to do any tests/exams in Math due to the lack of self-confidence. We adopted a different approach towards him and instead of calling it a test, we just gave him a work sheet and he did not sit in the classroom while he did it. This simple act relaxed him and he went on to get 70% in the

examination. This is what I call a positive intervention where you understand the needs of the child and work around them.

J.R: When a child constantly forgot to bring his books, I told him that I would give him 10 rupees for the transport for him to go home and pick up his books. That became an important reminder for him and waving a ten rupee note at the end of the day was enough to jog his memory to bring his books to school without fail.

Another instance of intervention was when a particular student refused to complete any of his work. This behaviour was more because he didn't know how. Sitting next to him and gently insisting on his completing his work helped. When he struggled to answer giving him the answer to make it easy for him and gentle handholding were necessary but worth it. It was tough for both of us as this went on for almost a whole term till he realised he could work independently

S.R: One instance was when there were two brothers who were very inattentive in the class. I talked to their mother and guided her to have some ground rules and discipline at home. There was a change as they became self-confident and focused. The other one was a fatherless child, whose mother's idea of remarriage depressed the child. This had to be brought to the notice of the other family members who then understood and were in a better position to help the child at home and she became more focused in her studies.

Some dos:

N.P: In a class room have specific rules. Put up a chart with do's and don'ts. Provide structure - both in learning and in behaviour. Certain behaviours are not allowed - like scribbling in the notebooks, taking away another child's book, shouting out an answer out of turn.

A chart providing rules of good manners in the classroom helps children to understand that it is not polite to interrupt

when others are talking, to listen when other students talk in class, raise their hands to ask a question, wait for their turn to get a reply from the teacher etc.

A child who lacks organizational skills - who misplaces things, forgets to bring his books to school, forgets to do his homework, can be asked to pin a note (written by him) in his bag as a reminder.

A break is very important, but it should not be misused. When I was teaching in a special class I had a small corner at the back of the class with some simple games and story-books and other enrichment material. The students would spend some time at the corner when they felt the work was too much. Sometimes we have to ask a child who is restless to change his position. Allow the students to drink water whenever they need to.

H.M: Monitoring the home programme is the difficult part. Managing the behaviour at school is easier. So have a system so that you set aside time to review the home charts.

J.R: Lay very firm ground rules regarding homework submission, talking in class etc. Without calling it a commitment from them, pin them down to it.

At the same time make sure their homework is enjoyable to motivate them to do it. If they are distracted due to boredom get into a discussion to perk them up and then get back to teaching.

S.R: Whether it is not doing the homework, or too much TV or computer time or coming to school without having their breakfast, the best is to draw up a home schedule for the student. We then have a follow-up or feedback on a regular basis with the parents or the student himself.

Correction

We would like to bring to your notice the article titled "Strategies for educators: extract from Inclusive Education in India: How to make it a reality in your school" By Mindy Eichorn featured in the September 2010 issue of our newsletter was not authored by Mindy Eichorn. Excerpts from her Presentation at Samyukth 09 were edited and authored by our editorial team.

Alumni corner

Meet Swathi, a 1st-year college student from the U.S. doing an undergraduate course majoring in Political History of South Asia and making media for democracy at New Hampshire, USA. Swathi is a cheerful, vocal and articulate young girl brimming with confidence and full of dreams. She dreams of making films, and many other things which we are sure she will achieve.

We first met Swathi as an eight-year-old when her mother brought her in for testing and subsequent admission to Ananya as she wasn't able to cope with the Montessori school where she was studying. It took several years for Swathi to accept her learning difficulties. Now, as a college student, she tells us about her emotional journey as a dyslexic.

Most children (and more so the struggling dyslexic child) are caught up in the daily rut of coping with tests, exams, parental pressures, etc, and few have the time, energy or maturity to introspect. The natural recourse for a child may be to bottle up these emotions and cry in private, not even letting their parents know their innermost feelings.

Swathi explained to us the importance of personal space for her. In her life she felt that her personal space was of utmost importance to be able to cope with what was going on within her. A private haven where she could shed those silent tears when she was down.

Her parents have been very supportive and appreciative of her through all this, giving her the space she needed just as they themselves were coming to terms with her condition. As a young child in class 1 and 2 she could not understand what was happening to her. She only knew that she was lagging behind in class. Her perception of what she considered rejection by her teachers, was hard on her. What is interesting is that Swathi says that she could not accept even friendly teachers who would take extra care to spend time with her to help her. She'd think, "It is only because I am lagging behind that they are helping me." Accepting help was also a cause for depression. Accepting her problem seemed to be bigger than the problem itself. When pulled out

of mainstream school and put in Ananya as a full-time student, she loved her teachers there and understood she was getting a lot of help and found life at school easier, she still wanted to get back to mainstream school as quickly as possible as this was a "special" school, not a regular one.

In college, Swathi says she still has issues with reading and spelling but has developed some strategies which she uses for dealing with the vast amounts of reading she has to do. She feels the Internet is a very useful tool for getting a lot of information. She also likes to read the summaries and reviews of the matter that she needs at college in order to get a background of what she needs to work on.

Swathi is a girl of many interests and can easily enthuse others also into participating. An avid organic gardener and a samba dancer she has got her parents interested in both of these. Her parents are very happy that Swathi has introduced these wonderful things to them.

After chatting with us, Swathi came in to talk to our NIOS students one day. The clear message from her was "follow your passion and do what you are interested in. Don't get forced into doing something you don't want to pursue." She also told them about the two sides of examinations. On the one hand, exams used to irritate her but later realized the need for them and the positives got from them. What she learnt earlier in Physics is coming in useful for her photography now and she really appreciates her early learning.

On learning she said that one can go deeper and deeper on any topic/subject they would love to know about and also that learning becomes easier once you start liking what you want to learn.

Working at the Media Centre at college after her classes, Swathi has earned about 150 dollars which she has very generously donated to MDA. What a philanthropic attitude at this young age! Thank You, Swathi. We appreciate it and wish you all the best.

NEWS AT MDA/ ANANYA

New admissions

8 children were admitted in the 2nd term taking the total strength to 114. These children were struggling in school and if they weren't helped now surely their gaps would become bigger by June.

Junior Project Day: a learning experience for all

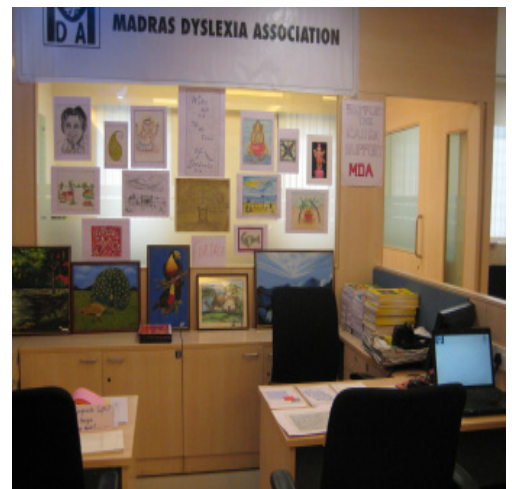
What was the Junior project day all about? The students taught the parents and visitors the various remedial methods that they use at Ananya to learn their lessons. The visitors not only learnt a lot of techniques to learn spellings, to read better and to write better but also got many stickers from the students. One visitor remarked "I think I have really done well, I never received so many stickers even when I was in school". The Chief Guest of the day was Dr. Mrs. Rekha Ramachandran of Mathru Mandir. She spent a lot of time with the children ensuring that they explained all the methods.



Art

Exhibition

As the aim to spread awareness of Dyslexia went full steam, Ananya students had the opportunity to exhibit their talent during the anniversary celebration at the HDFC Bank, Mount Road Branch. Visitors to the bank on those days were treated to a feast for the eyes, as the display of the students' paintings covered the entrance and reception area. There was also a powerpoint presentation giving some information about dyslexia and the work done by MDA for the visitors to see. MDA staff was on hand to explain and clarify any doubts. The Chief Guest for the occasion was Ms. Gowthami. The display was truly awesome and the children's paintings were sought after as many visitors to the bank on those days purchased some of the best pieces. This exhibition has become a starting point for us to showcase talent and spread awareness often in the future to encourage Ananya students to pursue their hobby more passionately. MDA plans to hold more such exhibitions in the future.



Accolades

Bhavani CDC of Jaipur had their annual art competition and again this year our artists bagged many prizes. While all the 22 entrants received certificates of participation, Renuka and Amrutha got prizes for excellent art work. Sai Narayanan got a special prize for Environmental Awareness. Hemanth Raj got a merit prize. All four got cash prizes too.

An art competition was also held by V-Excel Education Trust as part of World Disability Day. About 15 students of Ananya participated. R.N.Karthik of Junior School and Vishnu of Senior School won Rs.1000 each. All received certificates.

NEWS AT MDA/ ANANYA

Yuva

Are you reading the Ananya newsletter Yuva which is part of the Papyrus Clubs initiative? Do visit <http://www.papyrusclubs.com/> and type in Yuva and see what our children have been doing.

Podhigai: Hello ungaludan

2 programmes one in remedial methods in Maths and one about how to teach Tamil better were done. Our resource persons Sujatha and Priya did the former and Sujatha and Meenatchi did the latter. There were a lot of questions during the phone in sessions. We are sure many parents benefited from these sessions.

Karadi Path introduced

Mr. Vishwanathan and Mrs. Nusrath Sulthana of Karadi Tales conducted a workshop for the Karadi path programme and our young ones are dancing and singing on their learning journey.

Children's day celebrations:

On November 14th there were Oratorical and Recitation competitions where the Seniors and Juniors took part with great gusto. Our judges too came with great enthusiasm and of course were in a fix when it came to the judging.

Address Book

The much awaited address book is out.

It all started when a young artist, Vasundhara Sellamuthu an Art student from the U.K visited us in August 2009 and wanted to work with our children. During the 3 weeks that she was here, the children enjoyed exploring charcoals, pencils and paints. A lot of hard work was put in towards the endeavour by our young artists as well as the address book committee of Geetha Raghavan, Indu Ramesh, with guidance from Lakshmi Radhakrishnan. Our objectives were showcasing the talents of our children and fund raising along with creating awareness about dyslexia.

The Netlink Technologies team helped with the design and art work and the wonderful effort of Prism Art saw it to completion. The rough cut was ready in January 2010 and a copy of it was presented by our President D.Chandrasekar to the chief guest Mr. Kiran Shankar of R.R.Donnelly at the Annual Day function. Many copies have been taken already and you can book yours by sending a mail to our office or calling our office.



Announcement

Teacher Training Course conducted by MDA commences on January 31st 2011.

- 03/09/2010 Awareness programme at the Rotary Club Industrial City : by Vilasini Diwakar.
- 01/10/2010 Sports day at RKM grounds:Mrs and Mr .Shingala our school parents took the salute and distributed the prizes to the winners.
- 05/10/2010 & 6/10/2010 Special Exhibition hosted by HDFC Bank, as part of their 15th Anniversary celebrations at ITC Centre, Mount Road.
- 09/10/2010 Project day – Junior school “This is the way we learn” Inaugurated by Dr.Rekha Ramachandran, Director, Mathru Mandir.
- 09/10/2010 One day workshop at Peepal Grove Residential School, Chittoor Dist., by Vilasini Diwakar, Harini Mohan.
- 24/10/2010 Awareness at the joint meeting of Rotary Club of Chennai and Golden Star Club : by Vilasini Diwakar and Harini Mohan.
- 13/11/2010 Presented a capsule on spelling and writing at the Dyslexia programme – a 2 day workshop conducted by the department of Clinical Psychology at the SRMC campus- by Subha V.
- 20/11/2010 Presented a capsule on dyslexia to a select group of teachers from the P.S.B.B group of schools who are doing their advanced training at P.S.B.B. Millenium School campus on GST Rd- by Subha Vaidyanathan.
- 04/12/2010 A 1 day workshop conducted at Primrose school by Sujatha R and Gowri Ramnathan.
- 08/12/2010 Sessions on dyslexia conducted for the trainees of Vidya Sagar by Harini Mohan and Gowri Ramnathan.
- 13/12/2010 Awareness programme at RKM School, Bazullah Road, by Geetha Raghavan.
- 17/12/2010 Dyslexia awareness at Anjuman School, Vijayaraghava Road, by Geetha Raghavan.

Our editorial team - Indu Ramesh, Kamala Ramaraj, Shanthi Gopalan

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