

The race to spot dyslexia

Jackie Stewart knows what it's like to be unable to read. Now he's committed to helping others. By John Crace

As Jackie Stewart eases himself back into the leather seat of his private jet for an early morning flight to Aberdeen, Saydul Miah is about to begin his journey through a sprawl of south London council estates to the Oliver Goldsmith primary school in Peckham. The contrast is stark, but the former Formula 1 world champion turned multi-millionaire businessman and the 10-year-old son of a financially strapped Bangladeshi immigrant family have more in common than you might think. They are both severely dyslexic.

You might also imagine that Stewart was the one who had it made, but Saydul has the one thing that Stewart really wants and will never have. He can read. "I can remember every gear shift and every braking distance for the 187 corners of the Nurburgring," he says, "but I can't even read or remember the National Anthem or the Lord's Prayer."

Stewart's dyslexia was not diagnosed until he was 42, when he was told that his sons were experiencing difficulties at school and that they would have to leave if they failed to keep up. "I took them both to see a specialist in London, who said they were both dyslexic," he says. "I argued with the diagnosis, pointing out that I had been bad at school but had turned out OK."

"The specialist then suggested I might be dyslexic, too. I took a 20-minute test and the diagnosis was confirmed. Far from it being a crushing blow, I felt as if I had been saved from drowning. All my life I had been told I was stupid and that's what I had come to believe."

Stewart had grown up just outside Glasgow and went to Dumbarton Academy, having inevitably failed his 11-plus. "I never passed a single exam throughout my school years," he says, "and left as soon as I could at 15. But I can still remember the shame and humiliation of being laughed at in class for being unable to read."

"I was lucky enough to be good at sport so I got some self-respect through that, but I inevitably ended up falling in with the wrong crowd. The clever kids didn't want to know me, so I just hung around

with the kids like me who didn't want to or couldn't learn. Most people assume that I got my broken nose from a driving accident. In fact it happened because I was in the wrong place, at the wrong time, with the wrong people, getting the shit kicked out of me on Dumbarton high street. I ended up in hospital with a dislocated shoulder, several broken ribs and a broken nose."

This wasn't the life Stewart wanted, but it was the only one he was comfortable with. On leaving school he had no expectations of doing anything other than working at his local garage filling petrol tanks and mending punctures, while earning more in tips than he did as a weekly wage.

The move from the forecourt to the racetrack changed his life, but he never quite came to terms with his inability to read. Like most drivers competing in the 1960s, he became accustomed to blanking out the loss he felt at attending funeral after funeral of close friends, and he put up an equally good show of concealing the pain of his learning disability. But he minds a great deal that the only access he has to literature is through talking books, and when his two sons were diagnosed with dyslexia, Stewart was determined they weren't going to suffer in the same way.

"I was extremely lucky to have money," he acknowledges. "It cost me £42,000 to hire a specialist dyslexia teacher to give them extra tuition for a year." His efforts paid off. Neither son became a fluent reader but they learned to be good enough. "It wasn't just a case of them be-

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ing allowed to stay on at their school," he says. "It was about giving them self-respect."

This kind of intervention is normally the preserve of the well-off. Normally, but not always. Two years ago, Saydul used to cut classes by hiding among the coats in the cloakroom. "He was hard to find," laughs Kate Hadley, a trained volunteer with the literacy charity Springboard, "because he used to drape his arms over the hooks so we couldn't see his feet."

But find him she did, and for two years Saydul spent a couple of lessons a week having one-to-one reading tuition in Springboard's eyrie on the fourth floor of Oliver Goldsmith school. His progress has been so remarkable that he recently won a learning award from Southwark local education authority.

Saydul is by no means a one-off. For the past 14 years, Springboard has been working in a small number of schools in south London and has recently expanded into schools in Manchester and Birmingham. But as the chief executive, Adrian Pritchard, admits, the charity is battling against the odds.

"There are huge arguments among academics about whether dyslexia actually exists," he says. "Unsurprisingly, we happen to believe that it does. But whether it does or doesn't, the bare facts are that roughly 10% of the population has great difficulties learning to read and if we fail to address that problem then not only are we letting these kids down, we are also failing those kids who can read because

— more often than not — the ones who can't are the ones who are disruptive in lessons.

"We have built a good relationship with our partner schools because we have shown we can deliver a service that works and is cost-effective. Within two years, we hope to have all children up to a standard where they can work alongside their peers in the classroom."

Pritchard believes the Springboard system, of building up children's reading ability by systematically working through individual vowel and consonant sounds before moving on to different letter pairs, has been proven to be successful. Even so, it's often tough getting more schools on board. "We don't offer any quick and easy answers," he says. "Short-term interventions may give you a quick uplift in attainment but the progress is rarely sustained. Likewise, much as it might be more convenient to teach in groups, we have found that children's progress is so individual that one-to-one tuition is the most appropriate."

"This all has cost implications. Although we subsidise a great deal of our work through fundraising and donations, schools still have to pay for our service, and many primary schools are still desperately short of cash. Our education system works on the basis that a child's schooling costs more the older he or she gets; this means there is rarely much extra cash in the kitty for problems such as dyslexia that need sorting out early on."

Pritchard goes on to argue that diverting more cash to early years is actually cost-effective, as many of the later problems in secondary schools of underachievement and disengagement would be mitigated if the root cause were to be addressed early on. But identification is as big a problem as money. In a four-year teacher training course, most students will be lucky if they spend an hour on learning disabilities and differences.

This is the reason Stewart is winging his way up to Aberdeen. After using his contacts to twist the arm of Jack McConnell, the first minister, the Scottish Parliament has agreed to stump up £1.5m to fund a chair of inclusive studies at Aberdeen University that promises to transform teacher

education for children with dyslexia and other learning difficulties. And as head of the Scottish Dyslexia Association, Stewart will be there in person when the announcement is made to give the award his seal of approval.

"It's all got off the ground so quickly," says Stewart. "I met Jack in August and he came back with an offer in four weeks. It's a fantastic opportunity for everyone in Scotland but the most remarkable thing is really that it hasn't happened earlier, as it's such an obvious thing to do. In the commercial world, you'd do something really quickly if 10% of your workforce wasn't operating to its full potential, because if you didn't, you'd be out of business."

"But we've been happy in the UK, by and large, to ignore the problems of the 10% who can't read properly. It's actually quite scandalous, because I believe that many of the adults with low self-esteem who turn to crime, drink and drugs are those with some form of learning difficulty. Our prisons are full of people with low literacy skills."

Cathy Macaslan, vice-principal for learning and teaching at Aberdeen, is also excited by the possibilities. "There's been a lot of research, but little evidence of how effective we are at spotting and helping children with dyslexia," she says, and we've got to change the way teachers respond in the classroom.

"The teacher education curriculum is extremely crowded and we want to make more space for the understanding of learning difficulties and differences. The new chair is just the first step on a journey that we hope will go on to include other teacher training institutions, headteachers and LEAs in both Scotland and the rest of the UK."

If so, it's a journey that Springboard will be pleased to be part of. "So much of the work in helping people with dyslexia is a lottery," says Pritchard. "Statementing and support vary hugely from one LEA to another and many parents are left tearing their hair out trying to get help for their kids. If more teachers were able to identify the problems for themselves, then children would get the right support much earlier and a great deal of anguish — not to mention cash — could be saved."

