

Journey Into Dyslexia: A Review

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Raymond, Alan & Raymond, Susan (Producer) Raymond, Susan (Director). 2011. Journey into dyslexia. English. HBO original documentary. 75 mins.

The film, Journey into Dyslexia, is about the journeys of people with Special Learning Disability, specifically dyslexia. It includes diverse and unique standpoints shared by both dyslexics and non-dyslexics ranging from school children to a Nobel Laureate Dr Carol Greider.

The film renders several examples showing that people tagged or labelled as disabled are sometimes even more able, competent, and successful than their peers. It includes interviews of experts and specialists in the domain of education and medicine. Thereby attempting to address the beliefs and myths associated with Dyslexia. Further, the film questions the education system in providing attitudinal assistance and resources for helping students with SLD.

The documentary begins with the speech by Jonathan Mooney, a dyslexic. According to him, terms like 'a special child' and 'at-risk learner' disdain dyslexics. They learn differently, so euphemistically, calling them 'stupid, crazy and lazy' is wrong. He also asserted that traditional schools transmit a problematic message that there is only one way to be smart. He problematizes our attitudes that ab-normalise disability and argues, "There is no normal. There is only your strengths, gifts and talents, interwoven with our struggles. Normal is a dead-end".

Several dyslexics speak about their experiences of struggles in meeting academic standards. They didn't receive individual instructions and personal assistance from their teachers in regular schools. They shared their feelings of loneliness as no one understood them. It was very excruciating, frustrating and depressing for them to confront all this. Sometimes, they ended up fighting with their teachers. They were working so hard to keep up but failed again and again. They internalized that they were dumb and began to look for ways to avoid being picked up for reading.

In some cases, schools asked them to leave as they were far behind the others. It assumed that these students can never catch up with the others. Teachers made absurd remarks like, 'you pretend to be learning disabled to get my attention', made them upset, to the extent that they had suicidal thoughts. On one hand, some of them didn't know that there is something which is preventing them from learning, and on the other, they knew that something was wrong with them and their academic performance, but no one was helping them. One of them even stated, 'It kills when you try to read but you can't'. They were losing their faith. They knew there was something better for them, but they didn't know how to arrive at that.

An educator explains in the film that dyslexia has to do with reading, writing and spelling, but nothing to do with intelligence. He explains the differences in the areas of the brain of people with dyslexia and without dyslexia, and sheds light on the function of angular gyrus, which does the work of turning symbols into sounds. According to the educator, Dyslexia is very poorly understood by society. The most serious issue is emotional distress experience by children with SLD as they fear that the school system will alienate them or abuse them. They can manage in an academic learning environment with success, without someone constantly telling them that what they are doing isn't right.

An author, David J. Connor also shares his opinions about SLD. He perceives dyslexia as a human variation, not as a disorder, deficit or dysfunction. As per him, people with dyslexia have been treated as second class citizens. Over time, they have internalized that they are not normal. Psychologically, it is cruel on the children.

Marianne Wolf is the next speaker on the film. She takes up a biological and cognitive approach to shed light on the creation of new brain

circuitries, which transforms our minds. According to her, “Every reader had to have a brain that created a whole new circuitry for that reading process. In the case of dyslexia, we have a differently acquired circuit that is new to the species. So, people with dyslexia have a very important role to play that brain, in our design, in our art, in our building and in our thinking”. She also argued that some people with dyslexia are most intellectually blessed humans. This creative capacity the people with dyslexia can be deployed to change and transform the structured ways of being in the world.

Successful people with dyslexia like Willard Wigan, Dr Carol Greider, Erin Brockovich and Ben Foss are featured in the film. They share about their journey into dyslexia and define dyslexia as a unique gift.

Micro-artist Willard Wigan shares his story. He is famous for constructing beautiful microscopic sculptures that are unnoticeable to the naked eye. His dyslexia was undiagnosed during his school years and so he was nastily criticized and emotionally destroyed by teachers. ‘Children, here we have an exhibition of failure. This is what not to become’, is how her teacher talked about him to other children. He is something that others must never become. But Wigan didn't let his dyslexia prevent him from unearthing his strengths. He found his interest in sculpting and aimed to make smaller artworks and turn nonentity into beauty. Now he is flourishing and has proven his teacher's assumptions wrong.

Carol W. Greider, who earned a Nobel Prize in Medicine, also spoke about her and her child's dyslexia. She had a lot of hardships in school and was rejected from many institutions because of poor scores in a standardized test like GREs.

An entrepreneur, Steve Walker, explains the problems in our education system. According to him, we have a learning spectrum depicting different ways of learning but our education system has picked a very narrow window. So, if one is lucky, they fall in that window and if not, they are considered disabled. Another problem he mentions is that the system tries to fix the effect, not the cause. The root cause of the problem is ‘how we teach’, not ‘how we learn’. He has shared his story of how his dyslexia went from a massive burden to a gift.

Erin Brockovich also enunciated she wouldn't be who she is if she hadn't had dyslexia. It

challenged her; it got her outside of that box; it taught her to stand up and fight from that label and stigma. She is proud of who she is. She says, ‘dyslexia is a wonderful form of intelligence and a gift. There is not just one way that works’.

Ben Foss is dyslexic and invented the Intel Reader, a kind of device that converts printed text to digital text and then reads it aloud to the user. (Point, Shoot and Listen). He believes computers are doubling in their capability in every two years, so soon he will be able to put it all together in one box. He further asserted, “I was not afflicted with dyslexia, I was afflicted by a poorly designed system. They expected me to be something I am not and those expectations and my reality did not go together”.

The documentary also shows a school having a curriculum designed for people with dyslexia. Such schools provided an individual daily tutorial for reading and addressing the strengths of each student. According to one of the tutors of this school, the level of difference can vary from person to person. They differ in processing information, verbal expression, long & short-term working memories. A learner studying in this school, compared it with his old regular school and exclaimed that studying in this school makes him happy. It is so as all the kids have something which is different about them, and it makes him feel comfortable. The Old school did not help him the way it should have. Lastly, he said, ‘different is good... it's an instinct he has’.

The film also gives a brief description of American with Disabilities Act, which ensures learners receive the accommodation needed to succeed with college-level work.

Albert Einstein said, “Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid”. Similarly dyslexics are not meant for reading. Equating being smart with being able to read is an absurd and ludicrous idea. This documentary gives hope to other dyslexics that a journey into dyslexia can be converted into a journey into success. They can develop skills and abilities, which will facilitate their success. It's a ‘gift’, not a burden.

The film brings home the message of celebrating dyslexia as difference, as a creative capacity, a wonderment, a way of life, a gift and not something that crushes the spirit of learning. It is a must-watch for any teacher or preparing

teacher, as it not only explains the neurological developmental condition but also questions the education system on its premises, assumptions and beliefs.