

Dealing with 'Dysgraphia'

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A student of mine, who is 17 years of age scored much below expected level in class XII CBSE examination in 2020. I have taught him for two years and always faced problems in evaluating his answers. His handwriting was extremely illegible. The teachers would request him to read his answers aloud and marks were accordingly given. In every parent-teacher meeting, discussion on his handwriting was done but no further remedial steps were taken, neither by the parents nor by the teachers. His specific learning disorder was overshadowed by his otherwise high cognitive ability. On proper examination, he was diagnosed as facing the learning disorder 'dysgraphia'.

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual Disorders-5(DSM-5), 'dysgraphia' is a "specific learning disorder". It is an impairment in one's writing ability. Symptoms of 'dysgraphia' as mentioned by the National Centre for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) are specific to different age groups. At the preschool stage the child shows an awkward grip of pencil and faulty body posture while writing. With progression of age one may find difficulty in spelling, grammar and handwriting. Handwriting is illegible, words are improperly spaced and articulating thoughts into words becomes a difficult task. There is jumbling of upper and lower case and cursive and print words. Writing becomes a painful task and thereby there is a tendency of avoidance. Such pupils are not able to complete the writing task within a stipulated time.

The cause of 'dysgraphia' is associated with a disorder in the fine motor skills. People affected by this disorder are unable to reproduce automatically the motor sequence required for writing a letter or number. The consequences of 'dysgraphia' is far reaching. Inability to communicate with words is disabling in all stages of one's life. Poor academic performance in relation to their peers leads to a sense of frustration in students with 'dysgraphia'. Low self esteem and high level of anxiety are common psychological stresses.

In the academic and social world, people have limited knowledge of 'dysgraphia', as a learning disorder. As a school teacher, for long years, I have encountered several students who are affected by the learning disorder 'dysgraphia'. Most of these students are not able to achieve high scores in academics on account of this disability. Growing concern of the parents gets accentuated just prior to the Board Exams. Writers are arranged to help the students sail through the public Exams. Otherwise, teachers and the parents do not pay much attention to this issue nor consider it as an impairment.

To create awareness in masses around such issues, cinema is a powerful media. There are short films that present to us the challenges faced in school by children and adolescents who face learning difficulties. An attempt has been made to highlight this in this article by discussing three short films, namely *I'm possible* (2019), *Scribbling* (2014) and *Falling through the cracks: Ethan's story* (2014). All of these are on the theme of 'dysgraphia'. Each short film narrates the story of different individuals suffering from this disability, their inner conflicts and coping mechanisms. Cinema is a powerful medium of communication. The message that can be communicated through this platform is more relatable, intense and instant. These films can be employed to educate teachers on specific learning disorders. The nature of the disorder, conflicts arising out of it in the minds of the affected person and the caregivers, the dynamics of social relationships in dealing with such issues are portrayed through these films.

Mandala, Nandini (Director) (2019) Dysgraphia -I'm Possible (Short Film)

It is a short film of 5.33 minutes. The story unfolds the account of a day in the life of a teenage school child 'Aksha' suffering from 'dysgraphia'. The story is told in an unpretentious and realistic manner showcasing the struggles and conflicts that she faces on a daily basis.

The story revolves around two social spheres of Aksha's life – the school and the home. The film opens in a classroom scene, where Aksha is lost

in sketching her 'self image', while the other students are engaged in an open discussion about physical appearance, that they would like to be transformed. As the teacher enters and learning begins Aksha shows her competency in answering the question posed to her with all verbal fluency. However, Aksha, as always, is reprimanded for securing low marks in the written test.

The child's monologue is used as a means to spread awareness about this little known learning difficulty. Her self-talk reveals her feelings and anguishes, her sense of dejection and state of low self esteem. "I speak like an adult but my spellings are like a small child. I could tell wonderful stories." She is impaired in expressing her ideas into written words, comprehending simple instructions and understanding the logistics of directions. She feels misunderstood and perplexed at her poor academic performance. Her mother too rebukes her. Aksha's support from her father is the only ray of hope and possibility. The film is an attempt to sensitise the caregivers about this learning disorder. Empathy is the key virtue needed to pave the way, for those experiencing this difficulty towards the path to normalcy.

Interestingly, 'dysgraphia', as shown in the movie, gets overshadowed by verbal fluency and comprehension of academic facts. The film has skillfully brought this fact to the surface. This led to confusion in the minds of the teacher and the mother and no doubt conflict in the mind of the child was utmost. None made an attempt to address the issue of writing disorder. The story expressed the general behavioural pattern of parents and teachers that is prevalent in Indian societies in dealing with specific learning disorders. The audience thus can easily connect to the film.

Kanagarajan, Athithya (Director), (2014). Scribbling (Short Film).

It is a short Tamil film on 'dysgraphia'. The story narrates the struggling tale of a mother and her five year old daughter Anju, who is suffering from 'dysgraphia'.

The little girl could not write alphabets like all others in the class. The teacher identified the disorder and counselled the mother to work on the child. The film highlights the persistent and tireless efforts of the mother in teaching the child to write the alphabets. There are shedding of

silent tears by the mother, uncontrolled scribbles by the child. Through numerous rounds of trial and error little Anju finally succeeds in forming the structure of the alphabets. The film sensitively shows the techniques that can be adopted in overcoming the learning disorder like joining dots, using a paint brush and holding the hand to assist in forming the desired lines. The film conveys a simple message that persistent efforts on the part of the parents, identification in early childhood and timely intervention can do wonders in completely doing away with this learning disorder.

The film was awarded first place in the Frame of Mind International Film Festival on Mental Health 2014. The film primarily focussed on the area of treatment and correction of the disorder. It is no doubt extremely educational for teacher educators and parents. Providing a secured writing environment, eliminating the stress factor and continued practice in writing words can bring about a positive change in the child is sensitively shown in the film. The mother in Indian society also happens to be the first teacher. In this film, she accepts the problem and constantly works on the child without blaming her destiny. This story could evoke empathy among the viewers as it resonates with the Indian sentiments. The film thus can be used as an effective tool in spreading awareness among parents and early childhood educators.

Woolston, Ethan (Director) (2014). Falling through the Cracks: Ethan Story (Short Film).

The film is an autobiographical account of Ethan who had 'dysgraphia'. He candidly narrates the tale of his life, his conflicts and strives, coping mechanism and the success story. His journey through the elementary, middle and high school years had been dismal. He was unable to remember facts while his classmates were able to reproduce answers at ease. The school teachers never devoted time to understand him nor could they identify his disorder. The fifth grade teacher, Ethan recalls, labelled him as a mentally retarded child. He felt demotivated and stopped trying. The teachers thought him lazy. He felt excluded in the school.

However, this period of inner conflict did not last long. His admission to a new alternative school played a role in transforming the design of his life. The faculty could identify his

learning disorder, worked on his motor skills with the help of innovative strategies. Ethan successfully graduated with a 3.5 GPA.

Ethan, a good Samaritan, used the film as a medium to educate the audience about 'dysgraphia'. A child's inability to write legible words and to colour within a designated boundary, using capital letters in wrong context are early signs of 'dysgraphia'.

The film sends a bold message and a first hand account which could be used to spread sensitivity and awareness amongst the teachers. Mentors especially at the school level can help a young learner in overcoming this learning disorder. A touch of empathy, patience and keen observation of the faculty, can transform the downward learning curve into an upward trend.

This film depicts the reality that exists in schools when a child is found performing below the desired level owing to illegible handwriting. Children with poor handwriting are often labelled as being lazy. Poor academic performance is described as 'mental retardation'. The film particularly highlights the significant role of the teachers in dealing with the issue of 'dysgraphia'. Any insensitive behaviour can lead to a devastating impact on the affected child. The agony of the child with 'dysgraphia' while remembering her school days and the mistreatment was showcased in the movie very sensitively. This film can be used as a teaching aid to sensitise teachers about dealing with this disorder.

Conclusion

References:

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'Dysgraphia' can be identified in the school or at home when the child begins to write or draw. According to ----(IDEA), the school should play an active role in assessing and providing the desired support to the child with the disorder. Three intervening strategies can be followed:

- *Accommodation*- The child follows the mainstream curriculum but the stress associated with writing will be removed. Extra time can be provided to the child. Writing accessories like pencil with better grip can be used for writing. Alternative methods of evaluation -oral answers, keyboard for writing and the like.
- *Modification*- The writing task can be modified to suit the needs of the child. A larger portion of the writing work can be divided into smaller segments, multiple choice questions. The teachers can overlook spelling errors.
- *Ramification*- The school can adopt specific intervention strategies to reduce the severity of the problem. At the elementary level emphasis on improving fine motor skill can be undertaken. Working with clay, exercising and playing with fingers. Beringer suggested that cues can be provided in visualising the way the letter has to be constructed.

'Dysgraphia' is a common problem among school students but it often gets untreated due to limited knowledge among the teaching fraternity. Intervention at the early stage can work wonders. Spreading awareness through literature and films among teachers is imperative. Writing will remain as a gratifying mode of expression and communication. Any disorder in this context has to be removed for a meaningful existence.

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