

Belgrave School

Vision and Strategy

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Belgrave School is a small independent co-ed school, specialising in students with dyslexia and associated issues. We cover KS2 to KS4, with about forty students arranged in five classes. The KS2 class have their class teacher and a Learning Mentor. The KS3 and KS4 classes have their various subject teachers coming to teach them according to the timetable, but also have a class Learning Mentor who is responsible for their pastoral care. This means that the normal teaching ratio is 1:5. However, as we have additional staff including an Occupational Therapist, Speech and Language Therapist and Teaching Assistants dedicated to certain pupils, the overall staff to pupil ratio is actually even better than this, nearer 1:4.

Dyslexia, Darkness and Despair

He had had enough! At lunchtime he walked out to the school field, took off his sweatshirt and tied it around a tree to hang himself.

Just in time a friend managed to stop him. Earlier in the week he had laid in the bottom of his bath at home, staring up through the water thinking about how he wanted to breathe in deeply – and drown. His progress at school was under scrutiny. He was told what “level” he was and he knew his friends were all leaving him behind. He knew he had not improved sufficiently. His teacher had given him targets to aim at, where he should get to in the next few months; he had been given support, but somehow even with all this he just could not do what was expected of him. And now he had finally drowned in despair and humiliation.

Like so many today, he was being pressurised by an educational system to be a government statistic of improvement. The stress was on; those in power had their objectives; the policies of the politicians were rolling out; there had to be measurable improvement – and this pressure was being passed down the line. More and more was being demanded from the leaders of schools; teachers were harassed to increasingly deliver – and at the bottom of all this crushing weight of expectation and stress was . . . a vulnerable child.

No individual is particularly to blame; all the way down most are well-meaning, kind, professional and conscientious. They want the best for our children. It is just that one size does not simply fit all. Children are different and show great variety. Whereas some, even many, thrive under continual pressure, others don't – they are crushed by it. Their emotional well-being suffers and the start of mental health problems begins to take form.

This boy was dyslexic, but his real problem was not so much his dyslexia as the emotional trauma experienced by continual failure. Many dyslexic children are emotionally battered and crushed by our schools.

Heading for Sunshine

Just what are we trying to do? Train children to read and write? Get them certificates? Make them employable? Help them survive adult life? Sure . . . but there must be something more, something bigger . . . and grander?

The philosopher Plato once wrote of a cave where people lived in the gloom of ignorance, not comprehending things as they really were. They existed in semi darkness, with only the flickering light of their own misunderstanding to guide them. Here the occupants stumbled and fell, bowed down by confusion, knowing nothing of the shining daylight of truth and knowledge.

The word education is made of two parts. There is “duc”, which comes from the root of our title “duke”, and so means “lead”, and then there is “e” from “ex”, as in “exit”, which means “out”. So what does education mean? It means “to lead out.” Education is taking a child by the hand and leading them out from the dark world of ignorance, gloom, suppression, delusion, unreality, misunderstanding and confusion. It is to bring them into the daylight of reality, perceiving things as they really are. It is to bring truth.

Whereas, before, these cave dwellers grew stooped and crooked, with eyes accustomed to dimness, now they learnt to stand upright and stare at a horizon filled with previously unimagined potential. Now they set out on an adventure to explore a world far beyond the shadowy ignorance of the cave, a universe filled with unutterable wonder and potential. Education aims to lead children out of the cave of ignorance and confusion into the exhilarating light of truth and understanding. It is to help them skilfully explore the landscape of knowledge.

However, education must not merely be conceived as filling a child with facts and concepts; nor is it simply a matter of preparing them for exams, or giving them certain vital skills. Although these may well be a legitimate *part* of education, its true meaning is far grander and awe inspiring; its real vision is utterly awesome. The dream of education has a far broader horizon. The dream is this: education is preparing people to flourish and thrive. Let me repeat that: The dream of education is preparing people to flourish and thrive. The philosopher Aristotle had a very special word for this flourishing or thriving; he called it eudemonia. This word is often translated into one plain simple English word; that word is happiness. Education aims at making people happy. It aims at helping people live fruitful and fulfilled lives; it aims at shaping people who will thrive and flourish. This is our dream.

This will affect every area of the development of the children that are placed in our hands. We want them to thrive physically, to develop mentally, to flourish emotionally, to become mature, caring and kind people that will be a blessing to all those around them. We want them to become true possessors of the title *Homo sapiens*, which literally means wise man, or woman.

Such a Tragedy . . .

Too often education closes the door of the mind. A small child bursts out on the journey of life filled with wonder and excitement; their moments are pregnant with the thrill of adventure and discovery. There are dinosaurs, and spaceships, and flowers, and stars, and seashores with shells, and there are whales and . . .

Then far too often a shadowy spectre in the shape of a classroom descends, wonder is replaced by worry, discovery with drudgery, anticipation with anxiety – certain skills, to be sure, are gained; but a lot is lost. What is lost is part of the essence of being a healthy human: fascination and wonder at the world around us, a sense that knowledge unlocks the universe.

Mental Meltdown

Even worse, the educational system, with its stresses and pressures, has sometimes caused many young people to psychologically struggle to the degree that the seeds of mental health problems develop. Self-esteem plummets; relationships degenerate with parents and peers, as well as with teachers. A sense of failure and isolation, and a build up of internal anger, can lead to panic attacks, depression, eating disorders, behaviour problems, as well as self-harming and possibly contribute to the onset of Chronic Fatigue – and sadly, sometimes even the ultimate act in self-hatred.

Hammering Square Pegs into Round Holes

Often children with a dyslexic profile, or with associated issues, struggle within the mainstream educational system, not because they are not supported, or intellectually unable, but because the whole system does not fit with the way they think and learn. Pupils with these issues often struggle with one or some of the following: written language skills, organising and ordering thoughts, telling the time, having a sense of time and timing, short term memory, working memory, coordination and grasping number concepts. Such people often need careful explanations given in small chunks along with over-learning, repetition and reinforcement of the material. More than this, they require the teaching to be multi-sensory, that is, not merely depending on speaking, reading and writing, but also using visual images, video clips, mind maps, practical hands-on physical experience, narrative and contextualising the material in its broader horizon. Careful monitoring of the learning process is essential, ensuring security of understanding of each concept, rather than moving rapidly over more and more material in a race for pre-set inappropriate goals that leads to a sense that nothing is known for sure.

Wanting to Discover

We long that our pupils will find their eyes popping, their ears tingling and their minds expanding at the anticipation of learning yet something more. This is our aim, for once they become intoxicated by the urge to discover, learning becomes a pleasure, and all the various skills they need in order to acquire that learning merely become a means to this great and all-encompassing end. Stephen Hawking once said, “Look up at the stars and not down at your feet. Try to make sense of what you see, and wonder about what makes the universe exist. Be curious.”

Knowing How to Discover

However, we not only aim at instilling, or re-awakening, enthusiasm and pleasure in discovery. We also desire something else, something that can make this a life-long experience. We wish our pupils to become what is sometimes called “autonomous learners.” This is the ability to take charge of one's learning, to have learnt how to learn. It means that throughout adult life, as new challenges are met and new skills and understanding are needed, they can be sought and learnt. Our world is a world of breath-taking change, and much of the knowledge received at school will become outdated and outmoded. However, the self-learner will be able to be flexible and adjust. The challenge is great: On average human knowledge is doubling every 13 months. According to IBM, the effect of the “internet of things” will lead to the doubling of knowledge every 12 hours. It is not a set of facts that we need, it is an approach, or strategy to learn that is vital.

Setting out on Unimagined Journeys

There is more. To be prepared for effective living in our changing society, it is not sufficient to be motivated and skilled; the rising generation will also need to be creative. Some will need to think the so-far un-thought. They will have to be ingenious. Creativity is vital and it is also an immense pleasure. The world famous dyslexic Steve Jobs once said, “Creativity is just connecting things. When you ask creative people how they did something, they feel a little guilty because they didn't

really do it, they just saw something. It seemed obvious to them after a while. That's because they were able to connect experiences they've had and synthesise new things . . . Innovation distinguishes between a leader and a follower." Dyslexics are often extremely creative people; we desire to encourage and facilitate this.

The Right Target

We want our pupils to experience excitement at the anticipation of discovery; to have an ability to know how to explore the unknown, and are stimulated by an explosive imagination. We want our pupils to absorb unbounded curiosity, unlimited flexibility and unrestrained creativity. More than this, we desire that the school experience of our pupils produces people who have not only avoided what causes poor mental health; we aim to provide a context and a community where they psychologically and emotionally thrive. And then, beyond these, we wish them to learn how to relate positively to those around them. Humans are social creatures; when our relationships are damaged we feel pain.

Belgrave's Big Strategies

At Belgrave School we have four essential priorities that colour all that we do. They are summarised by the nemonic "HAVE."

Dyslexics should HAVE a successful education

Happiness

As many dyslexic children often have an ingrained sense of failure, producing a poor self-esteem that is highly detrimental to their ongoing learning, a primary priority must be to provide the environment and emotional support that begins to alleviate this. Often hearts have to be opened before minds will feel confident enough to engage. Children who have experienced repeated failure often feel threatened and intimidated by the prospect of future failure, tending to remain in a protective cocoon, never imagining they might actually have intellectual ability. Expectations have to be carefully thought through and a sense of success has to be built into the learning experience so that confidence can be regained.

More than this, our students often express that they feel so much more included due to the fact that their peers experience the same difficulties as them, and that all their lessons are adapted to their needs. Before they had been physically included in the educational system, but felt emotionally excluded. Now they feel emotionally included. So often we hear parents say that "they have got their child back" once their child begins to emotionally recover.

Access to knowledge and skills

Many dyslexic pupils have been left behind across the spectrum of subjects, not because they are incapable of engaging, but rather because the subjects have been delivered in a way that demands quick reading from whiteboards, the fast writing of notes and often working from text books in a way which leans heavily on reading and writing skills. The result of this is that they become frustrated and soon cease to engage, declining into a vortex of despair and anxiety. If teaching methods are heavily reliant on literacy, then dyslexic students can be excluded from large areas of the curriculum. The cry of many dyslexic pupils is "If I can't learn in the way you teach me, then please teach me in the way I can learn."

It is essential that dyslexic children are taught the curriculum in a way that aims to minimise the negative effects of dyslexia and other issues as far as possible, so that it does not act as a barrier to effective and exciting learning. Dyslexia friendly teaching must use a variety of methods to communicate ideas. These methods should be wide ranging, harnessing all the senses - carrying out physical activities, employing visual images, graphics, animations and employing the power of narrative. Lessons should be interactive, using dialogue, educational software, video clips, audio clips, and so on. As some dyslexics sometimes have problems remembering knowledge and skills, concepts must be systematically revisited and ideas recapped. There has to be a clear realistic understanding of the level the individual has achieved, what they should aim for and how this should be realised.

Vision to succeed

Dyslexia is obviously a learning difficulty, but it also has to be said that an extremely high percentage of dyslexics are amazingly successful. They are the Steve Jobs, Winston Churchills, Chers, Albert Einsteins, Thomas Eddidons, Walt Disneys, Whoopi Goldburgs, Richard Bransons, Keira Knightleys, Steve Speilbergs, Agatha Christies, Pablo Picassos, Jennifer Anistons, Cath Kidstons and Jamie Olivers of this world! This list is phenomenal! There are many famous dyslexics.

Pupils need to see dyslexia as a learning difference and not just a learning disability. There may well be weaknesses with being dyslexic, but there are also often strengths. Dyslexics are often imaginative and creative, seeing things in ways others cannot. They think differently, the very fact that is the cause of their problems; but this difference in thinking is also their advantage - they see what others can't. This is why they often break new ground in whatever area they work. This creativity must be encouraged. Students must learn not only to cope with the disadvantages of dyslexia, but also see and capitalise on the advantages. We desire that they appreciate their strengths and gifts, and then develop these to become creative, fulfilled and supremely useful members of society. We want their ability to see things in ways that others can't become a blessing to them and to those around them.

Engaging with areas of difficulty

On top of all this, the specific problems that come with dyslexia must be addressed directly. They may never be cured, but with the right help at the right time the negative effects can be significantly alleviated. Using a variety of means there must be intervention in the weaknesses in literacy. One particularly useful software resource is called Nessy Reading, which can be used in school and at home. Children will need daily input to help them become increasingly confident in the building blocks of literacy.

On top of this, we make available specific therapies for those who need them. Some of the children who come to us have needs that might require specific therapies to help them develop to their full potential. To enable this we offer onsite Occupational, Drama and Speech and Language Therapies by qualified and experienced specialists. More specifically:

- One member of staff is an experienced Occupational Therapist available for those who require this on their EHC Plan, or if specifically paid for by parents.
- A Speech and Language therapist comes in each week for those who require this input.
- We have the availability of a Drama Therapist.

It is greatly advantageous to have various therapists on site. At the simplest level it means that the pupil does not have to travel across the city for a therapy session, which with travelling time can write off a whole morning at school. Instead, they simply walk into the therapy room at the allotted time and then return to their class. For younger children, travelling away for therapy is exhausting. Another advantage is that as the therapists are in constant contact with the teaching staff their advice can be easily absorbed and embedded across the curriculum and school life.

In Summary

Our aim is to facilitate pupils to thrive, actively engage and profit from the whole curriculum, gain a vision of their own gifts and how to use them, as well receive skilled intervention to help them overcome their weaker areas. We desire that all our pupils ultimately become fulfilled, happy and useful members of society, achieving their potential.