

The Invisible Enemy

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I am not a teacher. I have not stood at the front of a classroom with the unenviable responsibility of educating in my hands and looked out at a class and wondered "How am I going to teach them to read". But I have been there to help pick up the pieces when things go wrong, when a child for some reason, after years of trying and failing, years of remediation, and the best resources money can buy, still can't read above age 6 books at the age of 14.

I have had to look him in the eye when he struggled to complete his English SAT paper, when he begged me to read it to him so that he could at least have a chance to answer the questions. I had to refuse, tears and anger welling in me from the sight of his pain, as he struggled to maintain what little dignity he had left. Watching his confidence slip away a little more, as the feelings of worthlessness grew inside him, compounding his belief that he would never amount to anything so what was the use of trying any more. I hated myself for having to do that to him and also the system that had failed him. An extreme example you may think, but one of the growing numbers of pupils entering our secondary schools with painfully poor reading, spelling and comprehension skills.

That is a situation no-one should ever have to suffer. These children are the ones that provide the statistics that balance out the excellent readers and make a decent average, the thin end of the wedge, the victims of the invisible enemy. What is the invisible enemy you may ask, the answer is simply any disability or condition that prevents a person from learning, like Dyslexia, Auditory Processing Disorder, Semantic Pragmatic Disorder, Dyspraxia, Autistic Spectrum Disorders, Sensory Integration Dysfunction, or Nonverbal Learning Disorders.

I have worked as a special needs support assistant, supporting secondary school pupils with severe dyslexia and I have seen wonderful results, achieved by an individually tailored, multi-sensory remediation plan that focuses on their strengths to help remediate their weaknesses. It works for one simple reason, because it takes a person as an individual and teaches to them in the way that they learn, using their own strengths as weapons against their own invisible enemy. But for many this approach comes too late.

It may seem to be a revolutionary, time-consuming way to do it, but it works. Instead of one route into the brain there are several, thus reinforcing the information. Repetition makes the information stick in the long-term memory, so for those with short-term memory problems it is a double-edged sword. The three Rs should now represent Reinforcement and Repetition get Results.

The world is not two dimensional, so why teach children in a two dimensional way? Let them live what they learn and in doing so bring enjoyment back into learning, then they will remember it. Make it personal to them, let them explore. Make their learning environment colourful, full of sound and materials to feel and enjoy and they will remember. A battle is never won using one type of weapon at a time but a multi-faceted attack, and the invisible enemy we face is no different to any other.

Why do children spend the first years of their education being taught through multi-sensory methods, only to be told at five years old they cannot do that any more? Young children are natural explorers, they see, hear, feel, move, smell and taste their way through life, but as soon as they get into a formal classroom they are expected to concentrate only on what they hear or see. Those with auditory and/or visual processing difficulties are put at an immediate disadvantage. This leads to panic, poor self-esteem, work avoidance and often disruptive behaviour. Playing the clown or getting into trouble is easier than admitting they cannot even begin the task in hand, preferable to the embarrassment of failure. If work is not done then they cannot be judged by it.

How much better it would be for them if they had never had to go through that, had they been taught in a multi-sensory way from the start, so that no child is ever put in a position of failure, given a sentence of exile and isolation from the rest of the world. Make no mistake, being unable to read is not just something that affects children at school. Without that skill there are implications for qualifications and therefore employment, shopping, paying bills, in fact all areas of life are affected. Being unable to read or spell is also mistakenly seen as an indicator of poor intelligence, so the stigma of illiteracy is so much more than just not reading.

Why then are all children being taught the same way, setting some up to fail while others soar to giddy heights just because they were lucky enough to be born with the right weapons against the invisible enemy, the right learning style to suit the one-size-fits-all teaching method? Is it too much to ask to give every child the chance to soar, by simply allowing them the right to learn in the way they learn and not the way the powers-that-be decide they should learn, leaving many to struggle simply because they do not learn by the modern method of teaching in an auditory sequential fashion?

The answer is simple, it is deemed too expensive to use but for the severest of cases, the ones who have already had to suffer pain and humiliation, failure and ridicule. When the cost is balanced with the benefits it would be much more economical to get it right first time, because remediation does not come cheap, but the cost to our children is even greater. The right to learn should not be measured by the pain they have suffered.

We need a system where children are taught from the beginning using visual, auditory and kinaesthetic cues to reinforce the information we want them to remember, using their strengths to remediate their weaknesses. Compensating and supporting at the same time, and not just for reading. Steps have been made in certain areas, e.g. teaching mathematics using counters and building blocks is now commonplace in primary schools, but by the time the pupils get to comprehensive schools this is frowned upon. So why not replace them with something more age-appropriate and just as effective, those who learn this way do not suddenly change their learning style when they reach the age of 11. Science is taught by doing experiments, why then is reading not the same? So why then are we not routinely using extremely successful phonics programs that employ a multi-sensory approach? Children learn about music and art by doing it, not just reading about it or being told, why then can we not teach reading that way?

Language is multi-sensory. It is a collection of written symbols that represent the sounds we hear, and these symbols make words, which in turn make pictures in our mind. Words give names to things we can touch, taste and smell. The sounds are represented by letters that have shapes we can feel. Let the children see the words, hear the sounds, feel the shape of letters in their hands as they recite the phonemes and look at pictures of the nouns they learn, or write them out saying the letters as they write. Give them all the weapons they need. Let them live the language we are trying to teach them.

There will always be those that need extra help, the ones who have been born with the weakest weapons against the invisible enemy or maybe with none at all. But with the right approach we can fight this enemy, and with time, patience and hope it can be beaten, so that our children will be able to read, write and spell sufficiently well to make a life for themselves, instead of being the casualties of a war they have no place in.

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