

THE UK DYSLEXIA ARCHIVE

Why a UK Dyslexia Archive?

A swinging pendulum from acceptance to denial of dyslexia has characterised the history of dyslexia for more than a hundred years.

Since dyslexia was first described in the *British Medical Journal* in 1896, there has been debate about the definitions (and diagnostic procedures) used, with some casting doubt on its very existence. There is now though a considerable body of research regarding the nature and characteristics of this relatively common learning disorder and scientific understanding of its core features, and the risk factors that surround it. The contemporary view of dyslexia has emerged from a century of research in medicine, psychology and more recently neuroscience and is sufficiently well advanced to guide policy and practice. An argument can be made, however, that it has been the efforts of people, primarily the families of people with dyslexia, who have kept the debate regarding its biological bases and cognitive consequences alive. Arguably, in so doing, they have influenced the direction not only of research but also of education policy.

The history of dyslexia is important. It has brought together scientists from medical and neuropsychological backgrounds with educationists, social scientists and practitioners to engage in a debate that has profound social consequences – whether or not to provide special education for children with the ‘disability’ of dyslexia. In spite of this, there is a dearth of research on the history of dyslexia.

Dr Elaine Miles and Professor Tim Miles, Bangor University – founder member of BDA in 1972; creator of the Bangor Dyslexia Test



What is the UK Dyslexia Archive?

The UK Dyslexia Archive aims to assemble a collection of material pertaining to the history of dyslexia in Britain, bringing together scientific papers, medical and educational records, biographies of key figures in the field, diaries and personal recollections, teaching materials, and policy documents. The Archive is intended to be available to scholars and practitioners and ultimately to build a social and medical history of dyslexia.

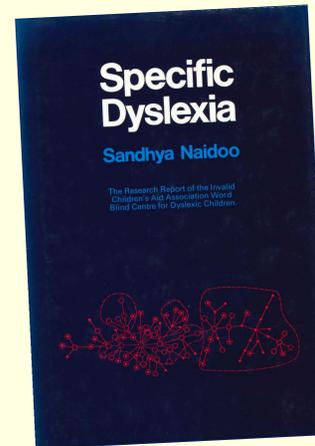
The UK Dyslexia Archive will contain a range of material including:

- Seminal scientific papers and classic books
- Records from key centres (e.g. Word-Blind Centre)
- Biographies of key figures
- Education policy documents

So far interviews have been conducted with a number of people involved in the early history of dyslexia, including **Baroness Warnock**, **Jocelyn Hardwick** (Somerset Dyslexia Association), **Dr Elaine Miles** (Co-Founder, Miles Dyslexia Centre, Bangor); **Dr Michael Thomson** (former Principal of East Court, a school for dyslexic children) and **Sandhya Naidoo** (Psychologist, Word-Blind Centre).



Dr. Sylvia Onesti Richardson (Eighth President of the Orton Dyslexia Society, now the International Dyslexia Association) with Rt. Hon. Lord Harry Renwick (BDA Chairman 1977–82, BDA Vice President 1982–, Chairman Dyslexia Educational Trust 1986–2002), keynote speakers at the first BDA International Conference in Bath in 1989



Sandhya Naidoo's ground-breaking book on dyslexia, Specific Dyslexia, was published in 1972.

The author (below left, c. 1971) when she worked at the Word-Blind Centre for Dyslexic Children and (below right) on her 90th birthday in 2012.



Marion Welchman, Founder of BDA (centre) at a conference in 1985 in Baltimore with (right to left) Margaret Newton, Tim Miles, Regina Ciccì, Maggie Snowling, Dorota Zdzienski and Harry Chasty

The Warnock Report (1978)

The Warnock Report on the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People (1978) is widely, and rightly, seen as the foundational text for contemporary special needs education in the UK. It was a remarkably wide-ranging investigation which helped to establish the current system and even to popularise the term ‘special needs’. Yet its treatment of dyslexia has seemed puzzlingly brief and inadequate, noting the significant interest in the subject from charities and voluntary bodies, but concluding that the committee ‘generally’ concurred with existing government policy.

In discussion with Mary Warnock, the report’s author, it became clear that this apparent ambiguity was the product of external pressure brought to bear by civil servants unwilling or unable to change policy on dyslexia. The report thus speaks of an important moment in history: one in which the issue of dyslexia was being forced into public debate by campaigners; yet one in which policy-makers were still fighting off demands for greater support for dyslexics. Further interviews with those policy-makers and campaigners, and with the clinicians, researchers, and educationalists whose expertise they drew on, will enable us to trace the story further, exploring how the treatment of dyslexia became a matter of public concern and government priority.

Next steps

- A group of researchers including Maggie Snowling, Kate Nation and William Whyte (University of Oxford), with dyslexia expert Steve Chinn will take forward the project.
- If you have material that could be included in the UK Dyslexia Archive or would like to suggest people who might offer (or offer yourself) an oral history, please contact Maggie Snowling (maggie.snowling@sjc.ox.ac.uk).
- The UK Dyslexia Archive will be kept at St John’s College, Oxford.