



# EMBRACE DYSLEXIA



# Embrace Dyslexia Commitment

Embrace Dyslexia intends to raise awareness of dyslexia in the Singaporean community with an aim to have as many people understand both the strengths and challenges that individuals with dyslexia face everyday.



## Raise awareness for Embrace Dyslexia by:

- Sharing information about dyslexia in your workplace
- Inviting DAS to conduct Awareness Talks
- Including information about dyslexia in the staff handbook



## Explore opportunities to work with DAS

- Workplace Giving or Volunteering Initiatives
- Mentoring DAS Alumni for internships or work experience



## Champion dyslexic individuals

- Recognising their strengths and understand their weaknesses
- Providing appropriate support and encouragement



## Donate to DAS Programmes

- Support low-income families by giving to the Bursary Fund



## Advocate for Embrace Dyslexia

Embrace Dyslexia with us. Sign your commitment today.

[www.das.org.sg/embrace-dyslexia](http://www.das.org.sg/embrace-dyslexia)



**DYSLEXIA ASSOCIATION  
OF SINGAPORE**  
HELPING DYSLEXIC PEOPLE ACHIEVE

The Dyslexia Association of Singapore (DAS) is a vibrant organisation serving the specialised educational needs of over 2,900 students with learning differences. DAS has over 240 professional staff offering a wide array of services and operates 13 learning centres across Singapore.

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# Why Should Singapore Embrace Dyslexia?

**Dr Jimmy Daruwalla**

*President of the Executive Committee*

*Dyslexia Association of Singapore*

*DAS President, Dr Jimmy Daruwalla shared his EMBRACE DYSLEXIA vision during his presentation speech at the Embrace Dyslexia Dinner held on 19 November 2014 at Hotel Jen, Singapore.*

As we all know, the only natural resource available to us in Singapore is human capital. We cannot afford to let even a single child fall by the wayside. This is not only because of an inability to read or write, but because dyslexia also has several positive aspects as well and we need to mine these qualities.

The incidence of dyslexia in the general population varies from 4-10% with at least 4% requiring remediation. Because of their extraordinary abilities people with dyslexia can contribute meaningfully to society. It has been known for some time that dyslexic business people are more likely to succeed as entrepreneurs and studies have confirmed why this is the case.

Professor Julie Logan of the Cass Business School in London found the incidence of dyslexia to be 20% in British entrepreneurs in 2001 and a "staggering" 35% of the 139 American entrepreneurs she studied in 2007. Perhaps such a study should be conducted in Singapore, and soon.

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Dyslexics are more likely to become self-made millionaires when compared to their non-dyslexic counterparts and more likely to own multiple business. It is also worth noting that successful SMEs are a great source of new job growth.

They have the ability to see the big picture, without being bogged down in the details. They have the drive and determination to succeed where others would give up having faced failure frequently in their earlier days and have developed creative solutions to deal with it.

While reading may slow them down, they do learn to read people and are good at choosing people who they can delegate these responsibilities to, be it a parent, sibling co-worker, etc. Whereas a non-dyslexic often believes in doing everything himself. They have mastered the art of verbal communication, which is so important in doing business - and in employee relations it was found that the turnover rate is lower in businesses run by dyslexics.

It is well known that a business succeeds or fails not because of the money that is put into it, but the ideas behind it. Professor Logan showed that those who have dyslexia are more creative than those who do not have dyslexia. They are creative thinkers, a skill they have mastered in order to cope with their personal struggles. They can come up quickly with the best solution to a problem, or the right words to say to customers and investors. It is very obvious that if 35% of all successful entrepreneurs never began their businesses, we would have missed out on many good technologies and ideas.

Is dyslexia an Asset or Handicap? Dr Sally Shaywitz, Pediatric Neurologist at Yale University, feels it should be evaluated as an asset, not just a handicap. She said, "I want people to wish they were dyslexic". Dyslexics are not able to achieve their true potential because they have to negotiate the education system. She is trying to change the way dyslexia is viewed in the educational system and the business world too.

Another person who has taken a keen interest in the education system is Sir Jackie Stewart, the famous three time Formula 1 champion. He was diagnosed as being dyslexic at age of 41! He dropped out of school because he was so humiliated when he was asked to read in front of the entire class and when he failed he thought he was dumb and stupid. But then he found something he was good at - race car driving. He became an activist for 'Dyslexia Scotland'. Thanks to this group, Scotland is now the first country in the world to demand training in learning disabilities as part of all new teacher training.

When Jackie visited us he mentioned that change in Scotland had taken a long time,

and admitted to knocking some heads together to get the changes in Scotland. To quote his own words – “Some people still don’t see the potential in learning disabled students and would just as soon write them off.” Would you believe it if I told you that besides being knighted he was the recipient of eight honorary doctorates and a professorship!

I am also of the opinion that dyslexia is a “hidden” asset and not a handicap. The difference between a child that goes undiagnosed, and another that is diagnosed and has specific remediation can be dramatic. We have witnessed this at the DAS annual graduation ceremony for our students.

Professor Logan’s study also showed the importance of a mentor and how important it had been for someone to “believe in you in school”. A few words of encouragement can sometimes tip the scales between failure and success. An excellent example is Dr Carol Greider. Out of 13 schools she applied to only two accepted her – Caltec and UC Berkeley. She selected Berkeley and in 2009 was one of three winners of the Nobel Prize in Physiology and Medicine.

Parents of dyslexic children still find this to be quite a burden to bear and this is compounded by the negative perception in Singapore. We are not asking our children to do their own best but to be THE best. The doctrine of education appears to compete. The majority of our children are being led to believe that they are doomed to failure in a world, which has room only for those at the top academically, in terms of marks.

Our children are subjected to tuitions at a very young age, which has led to a multi-million dollar industry in Singapore. Parents do not want their child to fail and want them to be perfect because of the “kiasuism” which is so prevalent in Singapore. I wonder why adults expect perfection from children. Few grownups themselves can get through a whole day without making a mistake.

DAS hopes to change the way Singaporeans look at dyslexia and highlight the potential hidden and extraordinary assets of someone with a learning difference. In my humble opinion, the aim of education should be to teach us how to think rather than what to think. Dr Sally Shaywitz emphasised that, “We need to train executives to recognise ‘Outside-the-Box’ thinkers who don’t perform well on standardised tests.”

“DAS hopes to change the way Singaporeans look at dyslexia and highlight the potential hidden and extraordinary assets of someone with a learning difference.”

There is a long list of successful dyslexics in every field. To name a few successful dyslexic entrepreneurs; Richard Branson, Henry Ford, Ingvar Kamprad (IKEA), Charles Schwab, Kerry Packer, William Hewlett (HP), Steve Jobs, Steven Spielberg, Craig McCaw (Cellular), Nelson Rockefeller, Paul Orfalea (FedexKinko), are proof of the hidden assets they possessed which made them millionaires. As Paul Orfalea mentions in his book, "I think everyone should have dyslexia and ADHD."

You may ask, "Why am I highlighting these entrepreneurs?" Singapore has been given the highest rating in the world for its business friendly environment.

Singapore has its share of local entrepreneurs but if we could only focus more on the strengths rather than the weaknesses of people with dyslexia, can you imagine how many more successful millionaire entrepreneurs we could have in this country, and perhaps someday even a recipient of the Nobel Prize, and let us not forget that the Father of this Nation, Mr Lee Kuan Yew was also mildly dyslexic.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



### DR JIMMY DARUWALLA

*Dr Jimmy Daruwalla was born and raised in Mumbai, India, where he completed his MBBS and Master's degree before going to Glasgow in 1969 to further his studies. After receiving his fellowship from Edinburgh, he came to Singapore in 1976 and worked as a senior lecturer and consultant at the National University Hospital.*

*Dr Daruwalla left the University as an Associate Professor to go into private practice in 1990. He first joined a group of Orthopedic Surgeons at Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre before setting up his own Daruwalla Orthopedic, Spine and Hand Surgery in 1994, also at the Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre.*

*Dr Daruwalla became a member of the Rotary Club of Raffles City in 1989 and headed its community service programme, which organised a forum on dyslexia to create awareness about the condition. After two public forums, he formed a protemp committee which in 1991 registered DAS as a Society. Dr Daruwalla has since served as President of the DAS Executive Committee. He also chairs the Board of DAS Academy and DAS International.*

*For his dedication and contributions to the dyslexic children of Singapore, Dr Daruwalla was presented with the inaugural Tabla! Community Champion award in 2011. The award is presented to a member of the Indian community who has a distinguished record of working with the less fortunate in Singapore.*

# Embrace a Different Kind of Mind

## Personal Stories of Dyslexia

**Deborah Hewes**

*Head of Publicity and Publications  
Dyslexia Association of Singapore*



EMBRACE DYSLEXIA, an initiative of the Dyslexia Association of Singapore (DAS), endeavours to foster greater public awareness about dyslexia with the aim of helping everyone to understand both the strengths and the challenges in the lives of individuals who have dyslexia.

One of the more engaging initiatives of EMBRACE DYSLEXIA was to encourage individuals with dyslexia to step forward and share their personal challenges with dyslexia so that they might become aspirational role models for DAS students, DAS ambassadors of achievement, as it were.

We sought out those people with dyslexia who have followed their passion and are succeeding despite any educational struggles they have encountered along the way. Our call to action has been met with great success and we are grateful to those individuals who have responded.

Many interesting and motivated people were willing to share their personal stories and we are pleased to have collected more than 50 for inclusion in the book. These are all individuals who have worked to make a difference in the fabric of Singapore and wish to instill in young students the desire to strive for equal if not greater success in their future careers.

This effort has been truly enlightening and inspirational for those of us at DAS. We have been humbled by the generosity of these individuals in sharing their personal

experiences and we hope that you feel the same.

We have selected a few of the stories to showcase in this Handbook. We were lucky to have a number of families participate and we have parents, their children as well as siblings contributing to the book. We also have stories from DAS parents and their point of view of parenting a child with dyslexia.

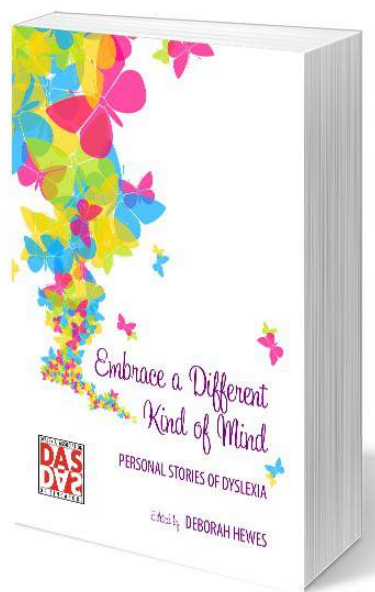
The first story we showcase in the Handbook is that of the late former Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr Lee Kuan Yew. Mr Lee revealed he had mild dyslexia in 1996 and his announcement helped remove the stigma of having a learning difference and paved the way to better public awareness and acceptance of dyslexia. Mr Lee is mentioned in so many of the personal stories as an inspiration to overcoming dyslexia.

Following is the Kwok family, Richard, Fuyu and Ting Yu. A family joined together in their dyslexic experience providing an inspiring and heartwarming read. Then we share the story of Jenny Khng. Jenny, a dyslexic herself with three dyslexic children, has been a stalwart supporter of DAS since its very early days and DAS has been grateful for her support over the years. And finally we have a story from a DAS parent, Zalina Zakariah-Ismael who shares what it is like to support her daughter, Deanna who has dyslexia.

As a dyslexic and a parent of three dyslexic children I found this project to be highly rewarding and inspiring. These stories provide hope to parents who have children with dyslexia. When the struggles and failure drags us down this book gives us the a light at the end of the tunnel. My friend and mentor said to me once when I was despairing over my children's progress at school, "The education journey is a long one, don't measure their success on one year, have faith that your children will make a valuable contribution to this world. Believe that they will be successful."

The Dyslexia Association of Singapore is privileged to be able to share their stories with you and hope in doing so provides greater public awareness of dyslexia.

Let's EMBRACE DYSLEXIA, despite the challenges we may have in learning, through determination, passion and willpower all of us can make a





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



### **DEBORAH HEWES**

*Head of Publicity and Publications  
Dyslexia Association of Singapore*

*Deborah has been with DAS since May 2011. Deborah is a dyslexic and passionate about raising awareness about learning differences. All three of her children have learning differences and as a result she has spent the majority of the last 17 years supporting her children's academic careers as well as helping other families with children who have learning differences. Deborah has lived in Singapore for 13 years and she has devoted the first 10 years working in an International School as a Learning Support Assistant and parent volunteer supporting students who learn differently with math, reading and literacy. She has also worked as a shadow assistant for students with behavioural issues and Asperger's Syndrome.*

*Deborah completed her Psychology honours degree at UNISIM in Singapore and her thesis was titled "Adolescents with learning disabilities: an investigation of academic self-concept, self-esteem and depression in International school students." Deborah is looking forward to starting her Masters Degree in Special Educational Needs in 2016.*

*Deborah is the Managing Editor of the Asia Pacific Journal of Developmental Differences and more recently has edited the first book of its kind in Singapore, "Embracing a Different Kind of Mind—Personal Stories of Dyslexia".*



*Embrace a Different Kind of Mind*

PERSONAL STORIES OF DYSLEXIA



## LEE KUAN YEW

Singapore's Founding Prime Minister  
Visionary, Leader, Father and Builder of a Nation  
1923 - 2015

It takes a great man to dispel prejudice. Lee Kuan Yew was a great man, and his example is a great step in the battle to fight bias against dyslexia. For Mr Lee was dyslexic too, only learning of this when he was an adult in his mid-fifties.

His daughter, Dr Lee Wei Ling, was at the time training to be a paediatric neurologist in Boston. She was sitting in on a test of a college student being tested for dyslexia when she realised she had difficulty with the words the student was being tested on.

Returning to Singapore, she noticed that her father was making the same mistakes, and suspected that he may have dyslexia as well. So she brought in a doctor to evaluate him.

"I had complained that I could not read fast without missing important items," said Mr Lee at the time. He was given a few words and asked to spell them out. He was eventually diagnosed with mild dyslexia.

Mr Lee revealed his condition to the world during a press conference at the Dyslexia Association of Singapore in 1996, when the then-Senior Minister announced his generous decision to donate to DAS royalties from the sale of the CD-ROM version of his book, 'Lee Kuan Yew: The Man and his Ideas'.

He explained that dyslexic people are as normal intellectually as non-dyslexics, but simply have trouble reading the letters of the alphabet and reproducing them correctly in a phonetic way.

Like Mr Lee, many people with dyslexia do not get diagnosed because they do not see that they are behind their peers in reading or spelling. They assume that the extra amount of effort they put into reading is the same as everyone else. So many dyslexics work harder than others without knowing it. That was the case with Mr. Lee

"I should have come to that conclusion that something was wrong when I did a course in speed reading and I did not succeed. And it was not because I was stupid, but because I have to run my eyes back to make sure that I got the right word, so I slow down," he had said of his condition. "But because I read it slowly, I read it only once and it sticks. So there are compensations."

The important thing, said Mr Lee, "is not to be discouraged and think that 'I am disabled'."

Citing the example of Leonardo da Vinci, who is also believed to be dyslexic, Mr Lee asked, "So what? He was a great artist, sculptor, thinker. I am not comparing myself to him, but if he can overcome dyslexia, [so can others]. Fortunately, I overcame it without my knowing it." He said that it proved that it is not impossible to overcome dyslexia through hard work.

Mr Lee's announcement helped remove the stigma of having a learning difference and paved the way to better public awareness and acceptance of dyslexia.

The Dyslexia Association of Singapore is grateful for Mr Lee's unwavering support since 1996. The proceeds from the sale of his book was a great help to DAS, and he continued to contribute regularly until his passing in 2015.

Many of the stories in this book mention Mr Lee as an inspiration to those trying to overcome dyslexia. His success gave them the impetus and determination to pursue their dreams and their passion. The Dyslexia Association of Singapore applauds the late Mr Lee, as well as our contributing authors, for their courage in proclaiming their dyslexia so that others can see that it does not hinder success in life.



## Embrace a Different Kind of Mind

### PERSONAL STORIES OF DYSLEXIA



## DR RICHARD KWOK

Chief Technology Officer, Singapore Technologies Kinetics Ltd  
Vice President, The Institution of Engineers, Singapore

*“From fighting dyslexia to designing Singapore’s first armoured fighting vehicle”*

Many may see dyslexia as a stumbling block, but it only causes difficulties when we try to see things the way everyone sees them. When given free rein, dyslexics shine because we see and think differently, and that creativity is a huge asset in a profession like engineering.

When my son was young, he told us that the words moved about when he tried to read them. We found a significant mismatch between my son’s intelligence and his ability to read and write. Our suspicion that he might have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) was ruled out after a test whereby he was diagnosed with dyslexia. After my son’s diagnosis at DAS, I realised that I face similar problems and found out that I am dyslexic too.

### **Growing Up with Learning Differences**

As a child, I was very curious and had a vivid imagination. To satisfy my curiosity on how things work, I would dismantle appliances and toys, even though I would be punished for spoiling them. At school, I had problems memorising words, texts, the multiplication table and names. Even when I was studying in the polytechnic, copying information from the board, which was a breeze to my peers, was a tedious exercise for me, as I was copying letter by letter instead of phrases. I remember overhearing a neighbour commenting that my future was bleak and that spurred me to work even harder.

Back then, learning facts and figures by rote was much more highly prized than thinking creatively and independently. I had to adjust by working harder and being

more disciplined, more systematic and more resourceful. Adjusting to the requirements of the educational system to perform well has helped me in life as I learned to adapt to different environments and circumstances.

As a visual learner, I think and learn in images rather than words. For tougher subjects, I sketched and drew pictures to illustrate what I wanted to show and I learned to use mind maps. I think my strong visualisation skills help me to think multi-dimensionally, which is important in engineering as it helps in designing, troubleshooting and the creation of new ideas.

From my younger days, I developed a passion for aero modelling and had the opportunity to become the chairman of the aero modelling club in school. As I also enjoyed designing, I naturally combined my two interests and designed hovercrafts and aircrafts. It was an expensive hobby, but I got creative and found ways to fund it, including hiring films to screen in the school hall. My club members and I sold tickets and even packet drinks to raise funds for club activities.

### **Fulfilling My Ambition**

Fuelled by passion and with a keen understanding of my strengths, I decided to pursue a career in engineering, where my creativity would be valued and where I could contribute to Singapore's development and improve the lives of others. Even though it was tough at the start as I had to attend night classes after working in the day, I think it was all worth it. My engineering education gave me a good grasp of the fundamentals, and sharpened my critical thinking, information management and problem-solving skills. These are all useful abilities even if I ventured to other fields eventually.

Ultimately, I chose to be a defence engineer, one who must remain at the top of the game to protect Singapore's interest and sovereignty, and strengthen peace and stability. As an engineer, I am always excited to learn about new technologies and feel an immense satisfaction when I see the difference that I have helped to make with my work.

I remember back in the 80s, many of my colleagues did not believe that we could develop an indigenous armour vehicle. With passion, a relentless spirit and my visualisation skills, I was very determined to push forward and finally, my team and I successfully developed the very first made-in-Singapore indigenous armour fighting vehicle, now known as BIONIX. Looking back, I am thankful for the opportunity and proud to have developed the indigenous vehicle, which provided a prototype for our team members to develop many more armour platforms such as the Bronco family of articulated all-terrain vehicles, TERREX 8x8 Armoured Personnel Carrier and the

### SPIDER Light Strike Vehicle.

I often share the mantra 'identify, act, become' with young people such as my son to encourage them to identify or envision what they want, to act on their passion and persevere until they become who they want to be and achieve their goal. Dyslexics may learn differently, but they have other strengths, such as visualisation skills and creativity, so I urge them to capitalise on those skills. For myself, I decided to pursue a career in an area where my strengths lie. I started work in 1973 and have been in the engineering field since then. In 1978, I joined ST Kinetics (formerly known as Singapore Automotive Engineering) as an engineering assistant and worked my way up over the years to my current role as a Chief Technology Officer.

As engineering is a field that I am strongly passionate about, I also became very active in The Institution of Engineers, Singapore (IES), and became the Fellow member and Vice President of IES. Amongst other activities, I lead the organising of the annual National Engineers' Day, when we let students experience the thrills of being an engineer.

### **My Son's Learning Journey**

As for my son, he took classes at DAS after his diagnosis. The Orton Gillingham pedagogy approach used by DAS has helped him to read and write better, although he continues to struggle with his studies.

Fortunately, he did reasonably well and was able to go to the express stream in secondary school, where he achieved commendable results with six distinctions and B's for his English and Literature subjects for his IGCSE examination. He has now secured a place for direct entry to second year at Monash University to study commerce after his National Service.

The diagnosis of my son's learning differences was important as it helped my wife and me, as his parents, to know how to help him deal it, how to provide him with relevant support and how to help him improve. It was also good for his self-confidence. The diagnosis was also important as it enabled him to obtain time accommodation and be excused for poor spelling for high-stake examinations.

### **My Daughter's Dream for Dyslexics**

Inspired by her brother's dyslexia, my daughter decided to pursue her studies in this field. Living with a sibling with dyslexia has helped her to understand the challenges faced by dyslexics and understand the potential that would be wasted if dyslexic children are not given the support that they need. She believes that dyslexics have unique talents and capabilities that should be tapped on and that society should

spend resources to support them to achieve their potential.

For her Masters dissertation, my daughter conducted a meta-analysis of neuroimaging studies of dyslexia in alphabetical words and Chinese characters. She is now doing her PhD, where she will focus on the use of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to examine the underlying brain network of dyslexic children for her thesis.

### **Uncover your Strengths and Persevere to Succeed**

Everyone is born with different strengths and weakness. I believe that if you capitalise on your strengths and change your perspective of dyslexia from a disability to a gift, you can harness your strengths and succeed in any field, such as in science, mathematics or the arts. Even if we have to take a longer time to read a book, write a good essay or comprehend a concept, once we take the learning journey positively, we will benefit from it. I always jokingly tell my colleagues that I was awarded the Lifelong Learner Award in 2006 by then President S R Nathan because I have taken longer to learn.

Dyslexics may take more time to learn but they often have higher-order thinking skills, such as logic and reasoning, multidimensional thinking skills, and they tend to be intuitive and insightful. These attributes or gifts are highly valued in a field like engineering, and will help them to excel in their chosen area if they are given the right opportunities, motivation and support. Dyslexic children could focus on their strength, persevere and aim to excel in any fields that they are passionate about. For young dyslexics who have an interest in engineering, they should learn to sketch, be more hands-on and most importantly, have the right attitude to learning and don't give up!

I am thankful to my mother who was always strict with us when we were young, as that bolsters discipline and self-reliance. I would also like to thank my long-time employer Singapore Automotive Engineering (SAE) the predecessor of ST Kinetics, who offered me a job meant for polytechnic graduates, when I was still studying for my part-time diploma and the Ministry of Defence for allowing to continue my part-time polytechnic course even during my national service. I am also grateful to SAE for providing me with the scholarships to pursue my master in Engineering, and subsequently, PhD in Technology Management. I am also appreciative that the organisation provided me many useful work opportunities for me to learn and develop. Last but not least, I am grateful to my wife who has guided me along and supported me along my learning journey.

I hope that parents who see their child struggling academically due to learning

differences can help them get diagnosed as early as possible, as these challenges, unlike physical ones, are frustrating when you do not know what you are dealing with. I also advocate improvements in teaching methodologies in school, such as multisensory teaching that is beneficial for both dyslexic and non-dyslexic children. I believe there should be classroom and examination accommodations for children with different learning challenges.

I hope that as a society we support and help recognise and foster the natural gifts and abilities of children with dyslexia, as their potential can be limitless! Just look at Sir Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein and Thomas Edison, three dyslexic heroes who are celebrated around the world for their ingenuity in science and engineering.





## Embrace a Different Kind of Mind

### PERSONAL STORIES OF DYSLEXIA



# KWOK TING YU

National Serviceman  
 Future Actuarial Science & Econometrics Undergraduate  
 Monash University  
*Dr Richard Kwok's Son*

Kwok Ting Yu is a quiet boy of 19. He shyly sits in the interview room at DAS Jurong Point, answering our questions to the point without giving much description. His elder sister Fuyu, who joined us to share more about her brother's story, fills in the details.

Because he was diagnosed and provided with intervention early, Ting Yu does not consciously remember much of his life before dyslexia. Fuyu, who has a better memory of what happened in her brother's life, provided most details.

Understandably, dyslexia (and knowing that he has dyslexia) has been a very big part of his life. Lower primary is the age when students learn the basics of literacy, which is the foundation of further knowledge.

Ting Yu seemed to have a short attention span, did things slowly and got easily distracted so his teachers tend to get him to sit in front of the class so that they can keep an eye on him. He was sent to Singapore General Hospital to be assessed but it was confirmed that he did not suffer from attention deficiency.

He first underwent an assessment at Camden Medical Centre when he was in kindergarten because his parents were worried, as their son do not have sight memory of his own surname but needed to pronounce it using phonetics.

"... dyslexics shine because we see and think differently, and that creativity is a huge asset in a profession like engineering."

In Primary 1, Ting Yu came to the Dyslexia Association of Singapore (DAS) for another assessment and received a formal diagnosis that enabled him to take literacy classes at DAS.

He had classes at DAS Queenstown for more than 6 years. "It was just like school, just more fun and everything was about English," laughs Ting Yu. He learnt phonics, which gave him a lot of help. The exam accommodation was useful as it provided longer time to translate the words on the pages, reread questions and make sure that what was written was the same as the thought translated into English.

Studying at Nanhua Primary meant that there was a strong focus on the Chinese language. The students took Higher Chinese from Primary 1 onwards, unlike the majority of neighbourhood schools where Higher Chinese is usually offered in upper primary. Ting Yu scored very well in Higher Chinese, acing his test and exams without any apparent effort. When it came to English, however, he either failed or achieved borderline passing grades.

In a bid to let their son concentrate on English, his parents wrote to the school and asked for a total exemption from Chinese. They wished that Ting Yu could revise for his English during Chinese lessons time so that he would be able to absorb it slowly.

The school disagreed. "It was a long battle between my parents, the school and MOE," recalls Fuyu, "almost a year to settle on a solution." Ting Yu was eventually exempted from Chinese exams but was required to sit through Chinese classes. He was also exempted from PSLE Chinese, taking exams for only 3 subjects.

Although his PSLE results made him eligible for express stream at local secondary schools, Ting Yu's mother chose to let him study in Anglo-Chinese School (ACS) International, as the class size was smaller. The teachers were able to give more attention to the students, which would be beneficial. ACS International also had an Educational Psychologist, which their mother felt was a plus point in giving support to her son.

He has always been independent studying Maths, never needing much help from his parents or sister. "The answers just comes to me," he said. Not understanding why his peers just could not see the answer when it was "right there", Ting Yu experienced a lot of frustration in having to do the 'workings' for maths.

Fuyu shared an anecdote about Ting Yu when he was taking a Maths class in primary school. As he gave the answer to a math question without providing the 'working', the teacher presumed that he was cheating. Ting Yu insisted that the teacher put him into a corner alone, and he would be able to prove that he could

solve the question. Their mother spent a lot of time to convince him that yes, the answer is correct but writing down the steps is important because it earns him the marks.

Even though he took both Science and Maths subjects for his International Baccalaureate diploma, Ting Yu ultimately decided to further his studies in Commerce majoring in Actuarial Science & Econometrics, which is perfect for his talent in maths. He will be studying at Monash University in Australia after completing National Service.

Although he has a lot of fun in the Army, it is also very tiring. "I have to memorise so many Malay commands," he sighs. It is difficult for him as he confuses the commands and the actions. If he remembers the commands, he would forget the action and vice versa. His mother helps by guiding him at home and helping him remember. He trains himself at home by memorising the commands and tagging it to an action.

Even at this age, Ting Yu avoids reading unless it is absolutely necessary. He spends his time watching videos online from video-sharing sites such as YouTube. "A lot of documentaries," he says, telling us where he gets most of his knowledge.

Ting Yu has his mum to thank for helping him to learn the spelling of scientific terms. He is able to read and spell them out with apparent ease because his mother spent so much time with him to help him memorise them so he could spell the words during exams.

Ting Yu wanted to thank his parents when we asked, saying quietly that they were very supportive and he would not have studied so well without their support at every step. Looking embarrassed, he also nodded when we asked if his sister has helped him. Fuyu playfully punched him in the arm.

From her brother's experience in rising above dyslexia, Fuyu has charted her path. She is on route to a PhD in researching the effects of dyslexia on brainwaves. "Do you know how much your sister has done, all coming from your dyslexia?" we asked. "That I know," Ting Yu answered without a hint of hesitation.

"Ting Yu has his mum to thank for helping him to learn the spelling of scientific terms. ... because his mother spent so much time with him to help him memorise them so he could spell the words during exams."



## Embrace a Different Kind of Mind

### PERSONAL STORIES OF DYSLEXIA



# KWOK FUYU

PhD Candidate (Psychology)  
Nanyang Technological University

*Dr Richard Kwok's Daughter*

Having a younger sibling with dyslexia teaches the elder sibling patience and understanding. Kwok Fuyu, built her life around dyslexia, researching on the neural network of individuals with dyslexia. She is currently pursuing a PhD in psychology, focusing on dyslexia.

Her brother was too young to remember the details, but Fuyu recalls them clearly. She shared with us her perspective on Ting Yu's journey and how this has shaped her passion and career path.

Being 5 years older than her brother, she helped tutor him and gave him emotional support when he needed it. "Both my mum and I have helped him when he needs it, but it is mum that spends the most time coaching him," she laughed.

"Even though Ting Yu was struggling with schoolwork, he was very good with Maths from the very start. He couldn't recognise his own surname, forget words one day after we taught him, but when it came to maths he was so quick!" she said.

Ting Yu was diagnosed with dyslexia. He very active and could not sit still. He would get distracted and run around before finishing his homework. Their mother made him stay within 4 floor tiles to finish his work, and would punish him if he went out of the designated area. "It definitely taught him discipline!" she said as both siblings

"Fuyu was mature at a young age and helped her brother with everything, from copying down the list of homework to finding lost schoolwork for him."

laughed out loud.

Their mother was very open about dyslexia, and sat the siblings down to explain it to them even when they were very young. She told Ting Yu “not to be afraid of it, because the family would help.” The young Fuyu, at the tender age of 10, understood that her younger brother has trouble reading and that she had to help him whenever she could.

The family adjusted their expectation to reduce stress on Ting Yu. “Many mothers want their child to go into the EM1 stream, or get into Express stream; my mother just wanted him to pass each year.”

It was not easy for Fuyu to accept that the expectations of her brother were lower. Her achievements were not praised as much as her brother’s borderline passing grades. She once asked her mother, “Why is everything he does, good enough?”

Fortunately, Fuyu was mature at a young age and helped her brother with everything, from copying down the list of homework to finding lost schoolwork for him.

Their mother frequently took courses and workshops at DAS Academy, the training arm of DAS that provides training for educators, parents and caregivers. She went for classes that would enable her to teach her son effectively, learning practical strategies that would make learning a lot more fun for him. “She would come home and tell me about the interesting things she learnt. It piqued my interest,” Fuyu shared.

After her O-Levels, she knew that she wanted to study psychology. Learning behaviour, in particular, was a special interest of hers. As she had her heart set on studying psychology, her father advised her to enter university straight after O-Levels. As psychology is a long academic path, she decided not to enter junior college or polytechnic and to go right into university.

“Because I was going in after O-Levels, my classmates would be older and more mature than me. If I could not cope with the coursework, it would be my own problem that I had to solve. Dad warned me about all these, so I took extra effort to work hard and keep up,” said Fuyu. She studied at SIM, earning a bachelor’s degree from the University of Buffalo.

She pursued her Honours Degree in Australia and then she went on to take her Masters at Nanyang Technological University, where she was researching on the neural activity during English and Chinese language processing and examining the

effect of dyslexia on language processing. She looked at the difference between brain activation areas when people used English or Chinese. The study of bilingualism in relation to dyslexia is extremely interesting, with Singapore a good ground for doing research.

Fuyu is currently researching on the network connectivity during verbal working memory (a core deficit of individuals with dyslexia) in children with dyslexia. The study is funded by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Lee Foundation. Her findings could potentially lead on to the improvement of intervention methodologies for children with dyslexia.



# UNDERSTANDING DYSLEXIA

THE CLINICAL BRAIN LAB @ NTU PSYCHOLOGY

## WE ARE LOOKING FOR CHILDREN WITH DYSLEXIA TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS BRAIN RESEARCH

### ABOUT OUR STUDY:

- ✓ The prevalence of Dyslexia is higher than any other learning disability
- ✓ Verbal working memory and the cerebellum (the little brain underneath our big brain) have been found to be affected in dyslexia
- ✓ The study helps to understand how these brain networks contributes to difficulties seen in Dyslexia
- ✓ The study will also help us make the MRI experience more comfortable for children
- ✓ The findings of our study will provide information to develop better ways to treat Dyslexia



*This research study is conducted by collaboration labs at the Nanyang Technological University (The Clinical Brain Lab @ NTU Psychology), National University Health Systems (NUHS), and the National Institute of Education (NIE). This study is funded by the Lee Foundation and Ministry of Education (AcRF Tier 1 grant). The study protocol is approved by the NTU and NUS Institutional Review Board.*

For more information please contact:

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clinicalbrainlab@gmail.com

**CHILDREN  
AGED 7 TO 10  
WITH &  
WITHOUT  
DYSLEXIA  
NEEDED**

<b>WHO:</b>	<b>Children with and without Dyslexia with the following criteria:</b> 1. 7 to 10 years old 2. Right-handed 3. Attending mainstream schools	<b>4. No History of neurological/psychiatric illness or chronic medical condition</b>
<b>WHAT:</b>	<b>Phase 1: At NTU &amp; DAS</b> 1. Paper-&-pencil and computerised task 2. Questionnaire about attitudes towards MRI scanning <i>(Both tasks take approx. 30 mins each)</i>	<b>Phase 2: At CIRC, NUS &amp; CLS</b> 1. Paper-&-pencil and computerised task 2. Questionnaire about attitudes towards MRI scanning <i>(Both tasks take approx. 1 hour each)</i>
<b>WHERE:</b>	Nanyang Technological University (NTU) & Dyslexia Association of Singapore (DAS)	Clinical Imaging Research Centre (CIRC), NUS & Centre for Life Sciences (CLS)





## Embrace a Different Kind of Mind

### PERSONAL STORIES OF DYSLEXIA



# JENNY KHNG

Mother, Wife, Daughter and Entrepreneur  
Co-founder of Trust Recycling

Jenny's extraordinary story of rising above her challenges is an inspiration to individuals with dyslexia. The happy-go-lucky 53-year-old, who failed her PSLE twice and did not qualify to enter ITE, is a mother to three children with dyslexia.

Diagnosed with severe dyslexia in her 30's, Jenny was interviewed for her personal story and she hopes that her journey will let people know that failing the PSLE is not the end of the world, as she demonstrates with her story.

Her boisterous laughter was audible even before she reached the room. She came in laughing about her pronunciation of 'Deborah'. She said, "I asked for There-boh-lah and was told there was no such person at DAS! Isn't it pronounced that way in Chinese?"

Seating herself down comfortably, Jenny said that she did not like talking about her childhood years as it was traumatising to recall the facts. She hated school as it was very difficult for her; she explained that even private tutors could not help improve her grades.

"I hate talking about school; it was a torture! Not because I was bullied, but because I could not communicate or explain myself," she said.

It was compulsory to take English and her mother

"...talkative students would always be picked out by teachers to read out loud, she stayed quiet so that "nobody would ask me to read because it was embarrassing to read out aloud."



tongue language, and Jenny decided to take Malay as an additional subject because "it was fun". Jenny is fluent in all three languages verbally but is unable to express herself well on paper.

Maths was a subject which was absolute pain for her. Even till now, she mixes up numbers such as 26 and reads it as 59. A point of contention for her is the digit '7'. "My teacher used to write 7 with a horizontal line in the middle to differentiate it from the number '1'; it was horrible I always read it as '4' instead of '7'" said Jenny.

"I had a wonderful teacher, Mr Steven Tan, who taught history and geography. Those were subjects because I liked learning about Singapore but when it came to exams it's a different story. Science was very fun; it was the only subject where we could learn by playing," reminisced Jenny.

The exuberant Jenny learnt to become quiet and low-profile during class. Explaining that talkative students would always be picked out by teachers to read out loud, she stayed quiet so that "nobody would ask me to read because it was embarrassing to read out aloud".

To prove that she was capable of understanding the lessons, Jenny made it a point to write down anything the teacher said verbally. She would write or draw it on paper to make sure she understood the point.

She immersed herself in sports to divert her thoughts from her bad grades. Nicknamed "Xiao Fei Yu" (Little Flying Fish in Chinese), she was indeed the best swimmer in school, Jenny spent most of her time doing sports where she could excel and feel motivated to work hard.

### **Starting an Early Career**

Jenny failed her PSLE twice and decided not to go for it a third time. She begged her mother to let her get a job and she wanted to try her hand at hairdressing, something she has always wanted to learn. Jenny then went to her aunt, who was a hairdresser, to be her apprentice.

"It was my dream; I wanted to work with people's hair," said Jenny wistfully.

At the age of 16, Jenny signed up for night classes in a bid to take her PSLE again. Imagine her shock when she met her primary school teacher Mr Steven Tan teaching the mature students. The memories of failing PSLE twice flooded back and she dropped out of the class to avoid meeting him.

Jenny was unable to undertake further studies in ITE as she did not meet the minimum criteria for entry, she didn't have her PSLE qualification. The next step for her was to go to London to take a hairdressing certificate course. She saved up enough to take a 3-month course in London and Paris. By then, Jenny was 22 and a mother of one.

"I left my baby daughter with my family and nanny for 3 months to study overseas," said Jenny.

In Paris, there was a colouring course where the students learnt to work with hair dyes. As she could not spell the colours properly, Jenny often mixed up the colours especially light and dark browns. Her solution was to take out individual strands of hair, dye them the correct colours and paste them on paper after labelling them carefully.

"I worked very hard to pass the hairdressing exam because I paid money to study. How could I fail when I paid so much money?" laughed Jenny.

Returning from her overseas studies, Jenny found work in a hair salon and worked as a hairdresser for 25 years. Although she thoroughly enjoyed her job, the demands of bringing up three children with dyslexia caught up with her. All three of her children turned out to have dyslexia; which meant that she had to balance their schedules with her own.

Hairdressers were required to work many days with long hours and she could not commit to the schedules. "Being a mother meant that you have to be available to look after your children and family, the working hours were just too long," sighed Jenny. She eventually gave up her job and became a stay-at-home mother to help them with schoolwork.

Without any other qualifications, Jenny had no choice but to apply for a night job as a toilet cleaner to supplement the family income. She was promoted to a supervisor and looked after the toilets in Changi Airport for 2 years.

She first sensed trouble when her eldest daughter Denise faced trouble in schoolwork. "She is very smart; she learnt the alphabets when she was 1-year-old," said Jenny proudly, never expecting Denise to have trouble with schoolwork at all.

The popular children's show Sesame Street started when Denise was young, and she learnt English through the show. Issues only surfaced when Denise tried to do composition in school; the marks she received were not matching up to her obvious intelligence. She also faced difficulties with algebra in Maths.

Jenny described an incident when her daughter was slapped by a teacher for being slow in her schoolwork. She was shocked by the attack on her daughter. "It was a wake-up call for me, no matter how bad I was in school I had never been slapped by a teacher," said Jenny.

She saw her own academic troubles being reflected in her daughter and decided to go for counselling. "I went for counselling because I did not understand why it was so hard for me to learn. My mother was supportive and I had the right environment for learning, I also had a private tutor after school for a long time, but why was it so difficult for me?"

Fighting hard to hold back her tears, Jenny said it was like living in a silent world where people thought she was stupid. "I know I am smart enough to achieve something, but I can't complete something as simple as a report. People expect me to do more work if I show my intelligence, so I have to hide it. Therefore they just think I am dumb, year after year after year."

The counsellor recommended a psychologist for Jenny. She sat through some tests and was diagnosed with severe dyslexia. Although she was an adult by then, the diagnosis came as a relief to her.

"They told me, Jenny there is nothing wrong with you. You have a perfectly normal life," recounted Jenny. The psychologist showed her a thick book of different handwritings and she saw that she was not alone in having dyslexia. From there, she was reassured that there was nothing wrong with her and she believed in herself ever since.

### **Finding the Dyslexia Association of Singapore**

Jenny often went to book fairs to buy books at discounted prices to read. One day, she chanced upon a forum where they talked about dyslexia. The room was filled with professionals and Jenny sat awkwardly at the back of the forum to listen to the topics. The more she listened, the more she felt struck with the symptoms they described, the more she recognised her symptoms.

After the forum, she approached a lady to ask if there was any support for dyslexics in Singapore. "The lady

"I went for counselling because I did not understand why it was so hard for me to learn. My mother was supportive and I had the right environment for learning, I also had a private tutor after school for a long time, but why was it so difficult for me?"

said yes, we have an Association in Singapore, you can call them for help! She gave me a telephone number and a name, Dawn Brockett," said Jenny, describing the point in which her life changed.

Dawn Brockett was the first teacher hired by the Dyslexia Association of Singapore after it was officially registered in 1991. Jenny met with Dawn where she learnt how to read all over again in the first classroom of the DAS at the Peoples' Association at Kallang.

Dawn was doing a research on adults with dyslexia at the time and she taught Jenny some strategies on reading and writing. Both Jenny and Dawn got along very well and Jenny remembers her fondly today as the first person to be able to make a difference to her learning, teaching her in a multisensory way and giving her strategies to remember spelling and reading rules.

Jenny's relationship with DAS has continued till this day and she fondly remembers the teachers and educational therapists who she has worked with especially while her own children, Tess and Kinson, received therapy at DAS.

One such teacher, Diane Spindle taught her children and together Jenny and Diane formed a life-long friendship which still remains even though Diane now lives in Hawaii.

Both Dawn and Diane have had a strong influence on Jenny and have helped her to find her voice to advocate for her children when it came to their school experiences and talking to teachers about dyslexia and how it affects their learning.

### **The challenges of dyslexia**

Having dyslexia has affected Jenny deeply in many ways. When she was younger, she thought she had Down Syndrome or a mental disorder as she couldn't learn normally like her peers. She could not even write her name and had to think of creative ways to help her remember it. "Kangaroo, Horse, Nose, Giraffe!" Jenny recited happily, "This is how I remember how to spell my surname 'Khng'."

Jenny also uses gestures and rhythm beats to help her remember words with multiple syllables and spellings.

The resourceful Jenny would find a solution to her problems if she is unable to solve them the first time round. When Jenny took lessons at the driving centre, she failed the theory test as she could not read the questions quickly enough. She then found out that there was an option to take the test verbally, without writing

down the answers and having someone read the questions to her. At the time, she could not remember the word "oral" so she used a gesture to tell the examiner that she wanted to take the test verbally. "You know that hand gesture you make to describe a very talkative person? I did that gesture to the examiner and he understood me immediately!" said Jenny. She passed the driving test with flying colours after taking the oral theory test.

"Of course, I now know that the word is O-R-A-L," she said.

Jenny explained that she had passed many tests in her life, and explained that she is a qualified open water diver. When Jenny went for her open water divers test Jenny was allowed to have a 'reader' for test. The reader was her daughter, Denise. Denise was able to support her mother by reading the multiple choice questions for her and then Jenny was able to tick the correct answers after 'hearing' the questions. Jenny was very grateful of the support that the Social worker from the Social Care Service at the Peoples' Association was able to provide to her family and to her personally.

She also holds a prime mover licence and can drive 55 ft. prime movers, something she is quite proud of. "You don't see too many Singaporean women driving trucks these days!" she said. She needed this qualification as part of her job that helps to keep Singapore clean, a role that she is quite passionate about.

Recently, Jenny also had to take a forklift licence test for her work. She passed the theory portion of her test but was unable to pass the practical portion due to the time limit placed on the driving practical test. In the practical driving test she had to take items down from shelves in a certain sequence and put them back onto the shelves in the reverse sequence. As she could not complete the task in the allocated time, she failed the test.

"They sent a letter saying that I was not competent. I was so appalled." Jenny said, enunciating each word carefully.

Jenny approached DAS for help with the authority. Deborah worked with Jenny at the time to write a letter to request a retest. The letter explained to the authority that sequencing was an issue with dyslexics, and Jenny would be unable to complete the task safely if she were to do the task quickly. As the most important factor in forklift operations is safety, speeding was not desired. The training school then granted her a retest allowing her extra time. This time she passed with flying colours and received her license.

### **All three children have dyslexia**

Her three children all have dyslexia as well, albeit not as severe as Jenny. They attended classes at DAS for the entirety of their primary school years. Jenny also tried her best to teach them at home, through a variety of learning strategies she learned from her schooling days and from working with Dawn Brockett. Similar to herself, she found that they learnt best via audio and kinaesthetic teaching so she incorporated playtime into their study time to ensure that they enjoyed their learning.

Her three children have successfully completed their tertiary education. Denise overcame her learning difference to become an English teacher in a MOE school. Tess, who graduated from a nursing course at Nanyang Polytechnic, is now working in hospitality as a Director of Programme Development at an award winning Eco Resort to get more experience in the wider world before going fully into the healthcare industry. Kinson, with relatively the worst dyslexia out of Jenny's three children, has completed his polytechnic diploma and is now working in the micro and nano technology field.

### **Technology is her saviour**

The advent of technology has unfolded a myriad of possibilities for Jenny. She has an Apple computer at home, and carries an iPad and iPhone everywhere she goes. Heavily reliant on her iPhone, Jenny proclaimed it as her best friend. She uses voice recording during meetings so that she could review them when she is home. The automated voice 'Siri' as well as the text-to-speech feature, are life-savers for Jenny; she dictates messages to her phone and triple-checks the correct spelling before sending it out.

Aside from her iPhone, her former boss, and now business partner, Mr Tan has been a great help in her life.

She first met him when she applied for a position in a waste management company. He recognised her difficulty with administrative tasks and volunteered to help her with them.

One of her main job scopes was bag collection; she had to drive around and pick up filled trash bags left on roadsides by the cleaners. The job is not as easy as it seems, Jenny explained, there was a need to come up with a plan to do her job effectively and efficiently. Already having trouble with recognising directions and road names, she also had to pick up the bags by a certain time. Mr Tan came to her rescue by helping her to calculate distances and planning out a feasible route with her.

He helps by summarising large chunks of information into bite-sized pieces that are easier for her to digest. On numerous occasions, he has tried to send Jenny to take courses to upgrade her but she refused to go for them. "I could have been promoted many times!" exclaimed Jenny, "but with promotion comes more administration responsibility such as writing reports. I stayed in my position because I am happy here and didn't have to do the report. At times I am very disappointed about that because I am unable to go for courses since I cannot write basic reports. Although, Mr Tan is still very supportive and helps me whenever he can," said Jenny.

After a 10-year stint at that company, Jenny has ventured into a recycling business with Mr Tan. Combining her passion for a clean and green Singapore with the desire to learn new ropes, she started a recycling business so that she would not have to go for interviews. "I hate going for interviews; filling in the forms are so difficult. So many things need paperwork, need to write and it is not easy for me to write. Thank god, Mr Tan will help with paperwork, so I can focus on the other aspects of the work," said Jenny.

Mr Tan is a very patient man of 62. He is in charge of handling all administrative tasks for their business and valiantly tries to teach Jenny despite her lack of interest and aptitude in writing reports and financial statements.

To not rely too completely on Mr Tan, she makes sure that she carries around dollar notes in her bag so that she can write cheques. The portion of the cheque where the amount has to be written out is always challenging, Jenny said, adding that she is learning to spell the numbers out well.

### **Lifelong learner**

Jenny is a lifelong learner, believing deeply in making up for the opportunities she lost by not furthering her education. As much as she could, she watches television channels such as BBC and listens to the radio to improve her English and Chinese. She also reads the newspapers every day to learn new vocabulary and uses her trusty iPhone as a dictionary.

"When I was younger, it is okay if I didn't know English, because we could communicate in Chinese or Cantonese. When I grew up, I learned English by watching BBC and listening to the radio. It is brain torture when I know how to say out the word but

"Heavily reliant on her iPhone, Jenny proclaimed it as her best friend. She uses voice recording during meetings so that she could review them when she is home. The automated voice 'Siri' as well as the text-to-speech feature, are life-savers for Jenny.."

cannot spell it out on paper," she laughed.

To practice, Jenny uses as much new words in her conversation as possible. Her speech is peppered with words that she enunciates carefully, repeated to ensure that she gets the pronunciation and meaning correct. Even if the word is rarely used verbally such as "appalled", she still uses it to build up her vocabulary bank.

"I learnt how to write in cursive; now I can sign my name easily!" bubbled Jenny happily.

Jenny has been grateful to DAS for helping her learn to read, therefore she volunteers and raises funds for DAS whenever there is an event. Aside from volunteering with DAS, she is interested in fauna and hopes to work with DAS and National Parks one day and conduct trips to Pulau Ubin for fauna-observing for the children at DAS. "Children can touch the plants and feel the different textures, good for sensory issues. That is how I taught my children when they were younger," she said.

Jenny said "Today I am here to tell people; what happens if you really cannot pass your PSLE? Never give up learning. Even if you learn one new sentence a day, it will help you to communicate better."

"It is okay to not know how to spell, technology can help you! It can make you successful. It doesn't matter that you don't know how to spell K-I-T-E. One day you can make your own kites your learning will fly like a kite. Play games and use your imagination to de-stress. It is better to learn slowly than never to learn at all."

When talking about her family she is very thankful for their support over the years. Initially her husband, Keith Wong, didn't understand why Jenny needed to be so involved and focused on finding out what dyslexia was all about. He also found it difficult to understand why she was so vocal about dyslexia. Jenny says, "He couldn't understand why I had to be so outspoken about my learning problems, but when he found out about dyslexia and saw the problems his children were having he started to understand. Now he knows why I am so loud about this—I need to be an advocate for my children."

Keith has come a long way to understand Jenny's life struggles and now through his children's experiences he understands her better now.

When asked for a message for parents that have children with dyslexia, she said that they have to find the correct time and appropriate materials to help their children. Many parents want quick solutions to solve their children's learning issues,



but each child is different, which makes it a learning journey for the parent themselves. "Some children learn when they are being punished in a corner and forced to learn. Some children learn by playing games by themselves. Do not pressure them too much, let them learn at their own pace so they can enjoy learning," said Jenny.



## Embrace a Different Kind of Mind

### PERSONAL STORIES OF DYSLEXIA



# ZALINA ZAKARIAH-ISMAEL

## My Daughter—“Deanna in Wonderland” DAS Parent

Deanna is the middle child between two brothers. Being the only girl, she has always found it difficult to get her brothers to join her in the games that she would prefer to play. However, being blessed with the gift of the gab, she would usually manage to convince them to join her in a short stint of make-believe; baking, cooking, teaching and role-playing. Still, many a times she would lament on how lonely she was, not having other girls to play with.

As such, Deanna was elated when she went to school when she was almost five. She was Miss-Goody-two-shoes, trying hard to do everything right; and Miss Eager-beaver, always excited and wanting to please everyone around her; especially her teachers. Deanna was confident and chatty and very happy in school until her late nursery years. She became less chatty and not as eager to go to school. I did not worry too much about it then, as I had assumed that the rigour of a Montessori syllabus was taking its toll on her, especially since she was also trying to cope with Mandarin as a second language.

On days that I am home late from work, I would find Deanna fast asleep with her spelling list as her constant companion. She would try really hard to remember the words and would get them right when tested right after. However, she would not be able to get them correct after a short time lapse of about an hour. She would ‘forget’ everything that she had tried to remember just the hour before, resulting in her usually failing her

“She would ‘forget’ everything that she had tried to remember just the hour before, resulting in her usually failing her weekly spelling exercise.”

weekly spelling exercise. This discouraged her greatly and she became more reserved and hesitant as the days passed. I highlighted these changes in Deanna to her teachers but was informed that there was nothing amiss. The teachers commended her conscientious attitude towards her school work and advised me not to worry unnecessarily and to let things be. Although, it troubled me, there was nothing else I could do besides supporting her in her spelling, reading and writing.

As the days passed, Deanna became less confident and would usually keep to herself. Gone was the chatty, bubbly girl I knew. We tried sending her to numerous enrichment centres to assist in her reading but her development was still way behind her peers. The last straw was when Deanna came up to me one day, when she was in kindergarten. She asked me why she was so stupid. I fought hard to hold back my tears and valiantly espoused her merits and intelligence but to no avail. I could see in her eyes that she did not believe me. She commented on how all her classmates had moved on to the higher colour scheme in reading while she was the only one still stuck in the lower level. She informed me of how hard she tried but was always dumfounded by how she was always unable to get it together. Things just would not click. They did not fit and she did not know why.

I decided to take things into my own hands and got her an appointment at the Specialist Clinic at the Kangar Kerbau Women's and Children's Hospital. Every step forward, brought us two steps back. After assessing Deanna, the consultant told me that she could be a 'late-bloomer' and that I should just let her be so that she could develop at her own pace. I disagreed. I know my daughter better. I could sense her frustration. It felt like she had so much inside that was just dying to be set free. Something was preventing her from reaching her full potential.

After further consultation with the child specialist, she suggested we go for an assessment at DAS. At our wits' end, we decided to give it a try. That decision changed Deanna's life forever. Reading the psychological report after Deanna's assessment made me cry. The memory of what her psychologist, S.B Maheswari said will forever be etched in my mind. She explained that although Deanna functions at a high range of intellectual ability, her reading and spelling attainments were discrepant to what was expected of her, given her intellectual functioning. Thus, although she has the ability, she is unable to express all that is going on in her mind well, leaving her frustrated and feeling incompetent, ravaging her self-esteem and confidence along the way.

I cried as I felt guilty over the days I spent reprimanding her and not understanding how disheartened and embittered she must have felt. I cried over the nights she spent trying to learn her spelling words, albeit in vain.

Every cloud has a silver lining. To appreciate the rainbow, one must first go through the rain. After falling through the rabbit hole and coming out stronger on the other side, Deanna has grown so much under the guidance of DAS, especially under the tutelage of Miss Tuty Elfira; without who Deanna will not be the eloquent and confident person that she is today.

After learning of her dyslexia, my husband and I vowed to do all we could to pick up the pieces of what was left of her esteem and to slowly but surely build it up again. We learnt that she had an affinity for dance and spared no expense in allowing her to develop her talent in that area. With God's grace and a lot of hard work and sacrifices, Deanna has achieved numerous awards and recognition both at the national and international level for dance; the most recent being the inaugural Asia's Got Talent Competition on the AXN channel.

Every parent wants the best for her child. To me, the development of character takes precedence over academic excellence. Deanna has a passion for dance and is amazingly blessed with the talent for it. Nevertheless, the choice of allowing her to participate in the Asia's Got Talent and missing a month of school in her PSLE year was not an easy one. However, she has gained so much from the experience and has developed to be a more disciplined and determined individual.

Deanna said of her Asia's Got Talent experience, "I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to participate in the inaugural Asia's Got Talent competition. Being the only act representing Singapore on the Grand Finals, I was both elated and humbled. I enjoyed the camaraderie amongst the participants most as although we were competitors, we were also friends, motivating one another through the daily rigour of our training sessions."

She has also received the DAS OCBC-GTIB Scholarship in recognition of her holistic achievements. As icing on the cake, Deanna has recently received offers from the School of the Arts and Tanjong Katong Girls' School through Direct School Admissions-Dance category. She is indeed blessed and will not be where she is now without all the support given to her through her journey in Wonderland.

"Every parent wants the best for her child. To me, the development of character takes precedence over academic excellence. Deanna has a passion for dance and is amazingly blessed with the talent for it."

# Embrace Dyslexia Update: Matthew Fawcett

Angela Fawcett

*Research Consultant*

*Dyslexia Association of Singapore*

Matthew Fawcett, aged 40, and now known as Matt, is the son of Professor Angela Fawcett, and the driving force behind her passion for dyslexia at every age. Following an unusually early diagnosis of dyslexia, at age 5, Matthew worked hard to achieve his potential, despite the difficulties he experienced. These led to a proposed placement in special school, the development of a stutter in junior school, placement in the special needs class in secondary, and grades lower than predicted at 'A' Levels in secondary school because he was not awarded extra time. Despite these difficulties, Matthew achieved a good 2.1 in politics at the University of Leeds, with Angela frantically reading up on Chairman Mao for his specialist subject and making notes to help him with the vast quantity of reading involved. A critical factor in his success was the support of his family, but more importantly at age 6 Matt had made a conscious decision that he would carry on taking extra lessons, for 2 hours weekly, and completing the homework he was set, although he found it a constant struggle.

Matt then worked for some years as a researcher for the Ethical Consumer journal, using his academic skills while taking advantage of the long lead time for publication. Although he had not taken languages in school, because he was taken out of French to do extra English, he set out to work for the Peace Brigade

“A critical factor in his success was the support of his family, but more importantly at age 6 Matt had made a conscious decision that he would carry on taking extra lessons...”

International, but first needed to learn Spanish. He was able to obtain a 3-month placement with a local Guatemalan woman to learn Spanish, and fortunately enough, his hostess was passionately obsessed with politics, whereas his girlfriend, who had accompanied him, learnt only the vocabulary for romance and boyfriends from her hostess! Together, they worked as international mediators in Guatemala for 18 months. His work there included accompanying people under death threat, and the widows of Guatemala while they buried their husbands who had been 'disappeared' and were found in mass unmarked graves. In liaising with ambassadors here he needed to be so proficient in Spanish that he could read legal documents, and eventually he even dreamed in Spanish. Matt gave Angela a book on the work of the Peace Brigade in Guatemala when he left for his placement there, but she was unable to deal with it, because 4 people were killed in the very first chapter, and she was frightened for his life. However, the whole family went back to tour Guatemala and visit Matt's many friends there, once he had safely returned home. It was sad to hear that some of his friends, a young couple just married who also worked for the Peace Brigade, were killed in an explosion there shortly after.

On his return to the UK, Matt became a founding member of the Kindling Trust, <http://kindling.org.uk/> igniting passion and fuelling action for social change. Their successes include setting up locally sourced food in schools, hospitals and universities in Manchester. More recently he has been involved in the Manchester carbon co-op, which was shortlisted for a major award by energysave for a proposal to empower people to take control of their own energy needs. During the course of this work, Matthew was invited to present to Prince Charles on environmental issues, not bad for a boy with a stutter who ran away from verbal presentations at university because he was so stressed, and who needed to be hypnotised by his support worker to overcome his anxiety! He was invited to present a lecture at the launch of the environmental film 'The Tipping Point' in the Natural History Museum, surrounded by dinosaurs as a reminder of the fragility of life.

Matt is an activist for peace and sustainability and he has trained colleagues in the CND and in the Peace Brigade in peaceful resistance. He was arrested for his role in the Drax 29 as part of a group who stopped a train taking coal to a highly polluting power station, in order to highlight the damage this inflicted on the environment. So on her 60th birthday, Angela attended court to witness Matt and his friends being convicted, although without any sentence or fine attached to this conviction, not even community service. It was one of the most stressful days of her life, and Matt and his friends were disillusioned by the negative attitude of the jury. The conviction was later overturned, and so, much to Angela's relief, Matt no longer has a criminal record for following his beliefs. Matt continues to be an advocate for a lifestyle based on non-consumption, he does not fly and rides a bike to protect the

environment as best as he can. Up until this stage, Matt had never earned more than £6000 a year, (\$12000 Singapore dollars), working for charities setting them up with freeware for their computers, and earning just enough to maintain his voluntary work, and he was content with this income, attaching more importance to the continued freedom to work in his areas of passion.

Most recently, Matt has been appointed as Northern director for the campaign for Nuclear disarmament (CND) against renewal of the Trident submarine. This is a nuclear submarine that patrols UK waters, and will cost many millions of pounds to upgrade. He has taken this appointment at 50%, sharing the role with a colleague and friend with greater expertise in administration, leaving Matt to deal with the public face of the campaign. This is the fulfilment of a lifetime's ambition! He also plays a leading role in a series of International workshops that are trying to harness the output more effectively from alternative energy such as wind and tidal barriers. He continues to adopt an ethical approach to flying, and travels across Europe by train to attend these workshops. The combination of these two roles adds up to far more than a full time job, and is not something he can sustain for much more than the next 2 years. He then plans to move to Spain with his partner to reclaim an abandoned village, repairing the properties and leading a life of sustainability, growing their own food, and carrying on his projects by Internet.

Overall, Matt's success represents a major triumph in overcoming dyslexia, difficulties in learning languages, and a stutter, to become a force for ongoing change. Matt is living his dream, embracing his strengths, and with support from others, has developed strategies to overcome his weaknesses. In his mother's eyes, no-one could be more successful than Matt! He is a charming, personable and ethical man, tolerant of the weaknesses of others and a support to his whole family, who are so proud of his ongoing success.



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CPE Registration No.: 201003689Z | Validity: 30 December 2013 - 29 December 2017  
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