

# Why US policies for dyslexia should be scrapped

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Many of the current US Federal and State dyslexia laws should be scrapped as they ignore scientific evidence and privilege some poor readers at the expense of huge numbers of others, according to a leading expert in reading disability.

Professor Julian Elliott from Durham University in the UK says valuable resources are put into expensive and time-consuming tests to diagnose children which are not only often highly questionable, but also do not point to forms of learning support that are different from what should be provided to any other poor reader.

He suggests that the priority for teaching professionals and others should be to identify [reading difficulties](#) early in any child and intervene as quickly as possible rather than pursue a questionable diagnosis of dyslexia with all the costs and time delays involved.

Professor Elliott, a former teacher of children with learning difficulties and educational (school) psychologist, and now professor of educational psychology at Durham University, will be speaking at the Everyone Reading Conference in New York City on Monday, 5 March, and at Cornell University on Thursday, 8 March.

He will argue that the current dyslexia policies in the US undermine the education and life chances of large numbers of children, particularly those from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

The Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) includes dyslexia as a specific learning disability that can make students eligible for special education. While political pressure has proven very successful in getting this term on the statute books - at least 33 states have passed dyslexia-related legislation since 2012 - it is not at all clear what criteria can, or should, be used to make such a diagnosis, says Professor Elliott. He argues that many of the symptoms listed for dyslexia are simply factors that are more prevalent in those who struggle to learn to read rather than a feature of so-called dyslexic readers.

Professor Elliott, who is author of the book 'The Dyslexia Debate', said: "The key problem stems from popular notions promulgated by powerful advocacy groups and vested professional interests that not all [poor readers](#) are dyslexic, and diagnostic testing using special psychological tests are necessary for identifying the dyslexic child.

"Parents are being totally misled about the importance of such a dyslexia diagnosis. They are often led to believe that dyslexic children have different brains to other poor readers and that this can result in them demonstrating special gifts and talents. Such assertions are not supported by the facts.

"Those children who are diagnosed with dyslexia, it is wrongly believed, need special forms of intervention that differ from those appropriate for other poor readers.

"What we need instead is for teachers to look at each child's educational needs and spot problems early on, without pursuing a scientifically dubious label or diagnosis. This alternative approach would then be helpful for all children who struggle to read, not just those with the means to get a diagnosis."

In his research, Professor Elliott has shown that teaching approaches to

help children who are deemed to be poor readers are no different from those who have been labelled dyslexic. Drawing upon his experience in the UK, he argues that myths around dyslexia persist despite overwhelming evidence against them and that the dyslexia industry privileges poor readers with a dyslexia diagnosis at the expense of large numbers of other poor readers.

Professor Elliott said: "This mythical distinction between a child with a dyslexia diagnosis and a child who is a poor reader but not diagnosed, increasingly prevalent in many areas of the United States, undermines the need to tackle reading problems in all [children](#) irrespective of their ability to gain the dyslexic label."

Although Professor Elliott does not question the existence of the very real underlying problems that those with complex reading difficulties typically experience, he is critical of dyslexia as a term often used to describe a wide range of problems, of varying degrees of severity, in a haphazard and imprecise fashion.

Research has shown that it has proven impossible to identify a dyslexic sub-group that is scientifically justifiable, and which has value for practitioners. Symptoms found in one person leading to a diagnosis of dyslexia may well be absent in another person similarly diagnosed, according to Professor Elliott.

To illustrate his argument, in his presentations Professor Elliott will report new research findings from his team's study of school psychologists and specialist teachers. Additionally, he will highlight conceptual and operational flaws in [dyslexia](#) legislation currently passing through the New York State Senate.

Provided by Durham University

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