A LIFE MISREAD

As a child, Sian Jaquet was branded stupid, and she soon came to believe it herself. It would be years before her dyslexia was recognised and her potential fulfilled

I WAS SEVEN OR EIGHT when I began to think I wasn't like everybody else. I was clearly no teacher's pet as far as my academic ability. I was quiet and shy. My way of coping was to try to blend into the wallpaper. The way the other kids wrote things down was nowhere near how I did. I could write and it kind of made sense to me, but to anybody else reading it, it was just gobbledygook.

I was ashamed. I was secretive. I thought I was mad. And teachers were very cruel. One teacher would give spelling tests and it was a nightmare. I would practise for hours and hours but whatever I wrote didn't make any sense.

One day she wanted me to stand up and read out in class. I couldn't even get the first two words out. She verbally attacked me. I was so frightened, I sat down and didn't move. And at the end of the day we had to lift our chairs up and there was a pool of water underneath me. I went home, traumatised. I was terrified of going back to school the next day. The teacher pulled me to one side and had a real go at me, called me a dirty, horrible girl.

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You begin to believe those things after a while. I thought I was stupid, that I had nothing to contribute, and that went for friendships and everything else. I gravitated towards the lonely kids, the disaffected kids, and socially I became quite withdrawn.

When I was 10 my teacher told my parents they thought I was educationally subnormal and that I shouldn't be going on to secondary school. Their response was to not exactly ignore it, but they knew it wasn't true so they didn't dig any deeper. I was an aberration because verbally I had a very good command of English. I could think – I just couldn't read and write.

I came home one day and asked to go to boarding school. I knew I couldn't stay where I was. My parents thought it was a really good idea. So I did the common entrance test, which obviously I did not pass. But the headmistress said to my parents, "I don't think she'll ever get to Oxford or Cambridge, I doubt she'll ever get to university. However, there is something about her, and her view of the world would bring something to our school that we need. And I can promise you that she will leave here a good citizen." That's how my parents saw it too.

My first year at boarding school, I paid people to do my homework. At the end of my first year my teachers told my parents they knew but didn't say anything to me. I think they saw it as quite entrepreneurial. They were always fascinated with me because, again, my command of English was good, but ask me to write something down and it was nonsense.

Even in this new school I felt more than stupid, like I was from a different planet. I didn't fit in. I had no concept of how to behave or what was expected of me, or even what to take to class. The majority of teachers there were very judgemental and cruel. They would walk into the classroom and say, "Sit at the back there and don't speak. You have to be here but I have no interest in trying to educate you."

Toward the middle of my second year, I must have been 14, one of my teachers, a Miss Marsh, was invited to a dinner at Bangor University in North Wales. She had a big heart and she tried really hard with all her students. There was a gentleman there who'd just come back from America. His name was Professor Miles and he'd been studying dyslexia. Miss Marsh was fascinated; she knew I wasn't stupid. For the next two hours at this dining room table they discussed me in great detail. Miss Marsh came back to school and gave me a multiple choice test where she read out the questions. Lo and ➜

behold I passed, so they called my parents and explained what they thought I had.

This was in the mid-70s, when knowledge of dyslexia was in its very early stages. I was tested by educational people, psychologists, medical people – you name it, I had every kind of test.

I also had standard intelligence tests and scored incredibly high on them. That's all I came out of this whole experience with, this thought: *I'm not stupid.* I was relieved.

They put together a programme. One teacher would make me read from the front page of *The Times* newspaper. At the start it was so painful, but over time it did get better. Another teacher taught me to read in a new way. She explained that I needed to look at words as pictures, and not to get caught up in putting letters together or blending sounds.

She did amazing things. We studied *Jane Eyre* but she bought me the children's version. I had no concept of how powerful it was to be able to read; I had been so dissociated from it.

The person who was probably the most significant in my educational life was Wendy Grey Lloyd, a drama teacher. She knew it was about self-esteem, that I needed to find a way to feel successful. We started by improvising characters from Shakespeare even though I'd never read the plays. She told me the stories. Within two or three years I was so good at drama and poetry I went to festivals and entered competitions. I was doing drama exams and getting the highest grades. It changed my life – I was able to do something!

When it came time to sit my exams, I was patted on the head, patronised and told it would be too traumatic. I decided I didn't care. I worked incredibly hard and I passed – can you imagine, a dyslexic passing English literature! But it wasn't enough to give me choices. My peers were all heading off to university; nobody spoke about what I was going to do.

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What is dyslexia?

- Dyslexia is not a disease but an alternative way of thinking. While its most obvious manifestation is difficulty decoding words and meanings, it covers a much wider range of issues such as auditory and visual perception, planning and organising, motor skills, short-term memory and concentration. Dyslexics may find it hard to follow instructions, verbally express thoughts and finish work on time.
- The negative impacts of the condition are well known but studies have also shown that dyslexics often compensate for their difficulty with details by learning to grasp the bigger picture. The ability to view the world from a different perspective means they often excel in fields which involve coming up with original ideas. A study in Britain in 2003 found 40% of a group of 300 self-made millionaires had been diagnosed with dyslexia – four times the rate of the general population.
- An estimated one in 10 New Zealanders are affected by dyslexia. Famous Kiwi dyslexics include award-winning Weta Workshop creative director Richard Taylor and the late motorcyle designer John Britten. *Visit www.dyslexiafoundation.org.nz for more information.*

I went to drama school because I believed at the time it was the only thing I could do. I didn't have a burning passion to act but I did a drama degree and when I left, I was able to make a living as an actress. However, my parents wanted me to put something back into society. So I started working in social services with autistic children, difficult children, the elderly, the deaf, people with learning disabilities – you name it, I did it, and I absolutely loved it.

I realised it's all linked to self-esteem. If enough people treat you like you are completely stupid and of no value, that is how you begin to see yourself.

If I hadn't been dyslexic, maybe I would have done different things. But I'm not sure I would choose to. I'm happy with what I did. It's given me an understanding for people that I would never otherwise have had. N

Welsh-born Sian, 47, moved to New Zealand in 2001 and now works as a lifecoach. Last year she hosted TV3 makeover show The Big Stuff *and coached the* NZ Idol *contestants. She has stayed in close contact with her drama teacher Wendy Grey Lloyd, and Wendy, now 74, is travelling to New Zealand this year to spend Christmas with her.*

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