

The Teaching Tips and Tales Podcast Transcript

Episode TTT:017 Understanding Dyspraxia and how to better support dyspraxic individuals with Maxine Frances Roper

ADAM: Hello and welcome to episode 17.

ANNOUNCER: Welcome to “Teaching Tips and Tales” the podcast dedicated to promoting the art of teaching, the place where you can listen to stories from teachers around the world. Come and listen! Come and learn! Come and share! With your host Adam Samuel.

ADAM: This latest interview is with Maxine Frances Roper. Maxine is a freelance writer and speaker and I first came across her after having read an article she wrote in “The Guardian” about dyspraxia entitled: “I’m Dyspraxic, Not Useless.” The first line of the article jumped out at me: “I’m dyspraxic. I’ve always excelled in literacy, but struggled endlessly with maths.”

Having been diagnosed with dyspraxia as a child I could relate. I’d also excelled in literacy but struggled with maths and sciences. As I read on I could see that there were other similarities I shared with Maxine.

In today’s interview I wanted to find out what dyspraxia is, uncover some of the difficulties that people with dyspraxia have, as well as share some tips and advice for teachers. Stay tuned to the end of this interview where we recommend some useful resources both for those that wish to gain a better understanding of how to teach dyspraxic students as well as for those who struggle with dyspraxia. So here is Maxine!

MAXINE: Dyspraxia is a condition that affects coordination. It affects between 2 and 6 % of the population; 2 % severely. About two thirds of those diagnosed are male. As you can tell, females are also affected and a lot of girls go undiagnosed for a lot of cultural reasons around gender roles and how they present versus boys.

ADAM: How early were you diagnosed and how has that affected you personally?

MAXINE: I wasn’t actually diagnosed until my second year of university as an undergraduate. I was actually exceptionally premature as a baby and there was always kind of this idea in the background that there might be something amiss because of that but nobody knew what to call it. That it was a thing and I was just treated as normal throughout my school life.

My performance at school was very unusual. I had A’s in all my essay subjects and could barely manage C’s in the practical subjects and maths and science and especially maths. Not for lack of trying. I did a social sciences degree at Durham and there was a compulsory

statistics module in the second year. And when I told my tutors that I was concerned about this because of my history with maths and I thought there might be some kind of diagnosable learning difference going on. They suggested I go to the disability centre at the university and get checked out. And from there an educational psychologist diagnosed me with dyspraxia. It was a little bit like going in with a headache and being told I had a brain tumour. It quite overwhelmed me at first, but it showed me lots of problems that I had and never realized before were linked. It all fitted under this one umbrella.

ADAM: So at least you felt that these problems and struggles that you had could be explained.

MAXINE: Absolutely. Absolutely. I think particularly towards my late teens and early twenties there were just so many unanswered questions stacking up about why I seemed to find some things more difficult than other people, or worry about things more than other people did. And I just...it didn't occur to me that you could just go about things without overthinking them massively.

ADAM: I thought there were a lot of myths surrounding dyspraxia as well. What are some of the main ones that you've heard?

MAXINE: Oh yeah, absolutely. I mean probably the biggest myth, and this comes out people when the Dyspraxia Foundation do surveys with teachers is that children grow out of it. You might have heard the term "Clumsy Child Syndrome" banded around. And it's so untrue.

Yes children's skills do improve, obviously, with recognition and support and practice. People get better at stuff, but the underlying kind of profile is still going to be there throughout somebody's life and dyspraxic children will become dyspraxic adults. And I do a lot of speaking and training in the workplace on supporting people there. And so it's definitely not the case that children grow out of it.

ADAM: What are some of the main difficulties that they have? I know that dyspraxia can affect people in different ways.

MAXINE: Oh yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. No, no two dyspraxics are the same but there are some underlying themes that you tend to see most of the time. As I was saying before, you know dyspraxia does change as the person grows up. And you know, the challenges that someone will have in the early years than what they're going to have in the 6th form. But yeah there are some that can broadly present throughout the school years. And probably the classic one, if you like, is handwriting. And obviously with technology being now that it is, it's quite easy to disguise that. Children on their iPads and their computers from the age of 4, but they find handwriting particularly slow and difficult.

The other one as I've mentioned is difficulty with the more practical subjects like maths and science; especially arithmetic because that makes a lot of demands on your short-term memory which is one of the things that we would find particularly difficult. Concentration as well particularly - obviously, in the areas that you find more difficult because naturally if you find something difficult you're going to switch off.

Social situations are another one. Obviously, if you're struggling with things like dexterity and coordination there's a lot of emphasis on imaginative play; particularly in the early years. If you're struggling with those kind of things, kind of visibly, obviously that's going to affect your friendships, your ability to relate to other people to some extent.

ADAM: When you mentioned before you mentioned handwriting. So for a teacher what they might notice in their student if they think they might have dyspraxia is that handwriting is quite childlike perhaps.

MAXINE: Yes quite slow and laborious.

ADAM: Yeah.

MAXINE: Yeah I mean I still, I wasn't diagnosed until University but when I was given the reasonable adjustments I, actually I was given extra time in exams because of my, in my final, because of my slow writing speed. I think the average writing speed for a student in higher education is something like 36 words a minute and I was at something like 33. I can't remember. Kind of, not drastic, but enough to make a difference.

ADAM: Whereas I suppose reading, on the other hand, depending on the type of dyspraxia, could be different. You know how...

MAXINE [overlapping]: Yeah.

ADAM: ...writing you struggle. It's very laborious whereas reading you might be able to read very quickly and assimilate information very quickly.

MAXINE: Absolutely. Absolutely, and this is one of the other problems why a lot of dyspraxics aren't identified. Obviously if you have dyspraxia and dyslexia that's different but for dyspraxia on its own, a lot of people slip under the radar because they're very good readers. And dyslexia's a lot more widely understood. I think myself 20 years behind, 15, 20 years behind with dyspraxia where we are with dyslexia in terms of awareness and understanding. And a lot of teachers will be looking for dyslexia. You know, the first sign of a reading difficulty: "Oh, dyslexia. Yeah that's it." And that just doesn't happen with dyspraxia. If you can read you know, not only functionally well but very well you know the idea that you have any sort of learning difference is just not, you know just not going to be there.

ADAM: And you mentioned before as well that one of the biggest myths is that people can grow out of it. But you also said that it changes throughout your life.

MAXINE: Yeah absolutely yeah. Yeah as I said the issues that you have in the early years as you face going into early adulthood, but there are going to be some similarities. But there's these kind of shape-shifting as you go through and just things that you never thought would present an issue suddenly do and vice versa. The things that bothered you a huge amount when you were younger maybe aren't an issue anymore.

ADAM: So for example new skills you get when you're older as an adult so perhaps driving for one.

MAXINE (overlapping): That...

ADAM: Something you wouldn't have done when you were younger of course.

MAXINE: Yeah. Exactly. Exactly. You don't go around before you start learning to drive worrying that you can't. But when people do start to learn to drive is one of the big, one of the foremost problems that dyspraxic adults have, almost universally.

ADAM: And what's some of the best ways that teachers can support students who have dyspraxia: both in primary and secondary?

MAXINE: I think, it sounds obvious, but the thing that, the first thing that leaps out at me is empathy, just that understanding that awareness that not everybody learns in the same way. And there's this wonderful quote that I always use and it's attributed to Albert Einstein and I don't know if he actually said it. And but "If you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will spend its life thinking that it's stupid." And I think that it sums it up so well. That if you, that there's a danger if you overvalue one particular skill or ability, obviously children that don't have that particular ability, but might be gifted in other ways are going to feel left behind by that. Just understanding that people who has wings can be that prime, as you said, a spiky profile.

ADAM: I think it's interesting that you mention Albert Einstein because I read that he had dyspraxia or had dyslexia.

MAXINE: He's had every label under the sun attributed to him. I mean he's been dyslexic. He's been dyspraxic. He's had Asperger's. You know, nobody's quite sure. Probably the consensus is he had a something. Obviously we can't know... [overlapping] (10:21)

ADAM: Obviously he's not here. We can't ask him either.

MAXINE: Yup! *[laughs]*

ADAM: It's good as well because it's a good idea for students, teenagers, to have role models and to be aware of adults who have dyspraxia but have managed to go on and achieve great things.

MAXINE: Yeah absolutely. And I think the problem is and this is possibly linked to the lack of awareness again relative to dyslexia...We have all these wonderful dyslexic entrepreneurs telling everyone how successful they can be with dyslexia. We don't have the same with dyspraxia. I think we're still at the stage where a lot of the people are dealing most successfully dyspraxia are those who don't have to...are those who feel they don't have to disclose. You know they're just getting on with things. They don't see it as an obligation to come out and speak about it. Whereas I feel quite strongly that it's...it's something that I have a duty to do as somebody with dyspraxia to... I have this ability to come out and talk to people about it; to express how I feel in writing and it helps not just me in terms of my own emotional well-being but other people and particularly people that might not have had the same opportunities in terms of education and, you know, all the usual advantages that go along with that, as I have.

ADAM: What about modern technology? Has that managed to help people with dyspraxia? Because when I was younger and diagnosed myself with dyspraxia, yes I suppose the Internet was around when I was at school, but it was in its very early stages.

MAXINE: Yeah, yeah same for me. Same for me but, you know, we can't possibly know the wonders that they've got now but, I see so many people that, at conferences, that are involved with accessible technology and I think it's done wonderful things, particularly for me as an adult with personal organization; things like reminders. I'm still a little bit old-school really in terms of my calendars and diaries. I like to have a physical diary there I think that might hark back to being at school. But I think I use apps for so many other things, I would be completely lost literally without google maps. *[laughs]* I need to use google maps to find my way to the bathroom. I use so many apps and I think there's a lot of technology yes that can be used in schools.

ADAM: And have you had the opportunity to go into different schools and talk to different teachers?

MAXINE: I haven't gone to schools as much, sadly, as many as I have workplaces or universities and colleges. But interestingly enough just this week I did probably my first or my second, I'm not sure...presentation to a group of trainee teachers. And I think that's fab. I think that's what we need lots more of, and I was very happy about that.

ADAM: What were some of the interesting questions that they put towards you?

MAXINE: Yeah they were interested in, obviously, strategies that they could use in the classroom to help somebody who has dyspraxia. One of the best...one of the best parts of the workshop was when we broke out into the discussion, obviously after I'd given my life experiences, and a kind of introduction to what dyspraxia is. I presented some typical classroom scenarios that they might come up against and put it to them how they might deal with that. And yeah, some of the thoughts they came out with were fantastic.

ADAM: One of the other things I was thinking about was that there's obviously going to be a lot of difficulties and subjects that students struggle with, particularly maths, like you mentioned before, more practical subjects, science, but then there are also going to be some secondary effects.

MAXINE: Emotional and social.

ADAM: Exactly. That's exactly what I mean so...

MAXINE: Yeah...

ADAM: So...frustration?

MAXINE: Yeah that really...particularly tends to come through as you go through the school as you get into early, later secondary school, perhaps. You know the teenage years are difficult for anyone, let alone if you have additional needs or challenges. I think I, yeah I came in, if you like, sort of by the back door a bit through the mental health system. I mean I was officially diagnosed because of the statistics module always said that before I went to University I actually had a Gap Year where I suffered from anxiety because I was... reached a point where I just had too many unanswered questions and it was really difficult to cope with. It was just like my mental health, my whole self-esteem at that time just deteriorated. So that's something that's likely to happen if you're not identified and supported. When you're sort of going into early adulthood and dealing with the...all the responsibilities that go along with that.

ADAM: Do you think sometimes that the emotional frustration of not being able to get to grips with a particular task can actually be in some ways more disabling than the actual problem that somebody with dyspraxia might have?

MAXINE: Oh yeah. Yeah I do. Absolutely. I mean I can just think of examples off the top of my head. I remember once when I couldn't get the top off the blender and I didn't even particularly want the thing that I was making and it wasn't even that important but just the fact that I could not do this and there was nobody in the house to help me...I just remember being in tears almost, as an adult, you know, so you can imagine how a child who has to go through that every day would feel.

ADAM: And of course they are less equipped to be able to deal with those emotions especially the teenage years.

MAXINE: Oh definitely and understand and label and articulate what's worrying them. This is what I said in the presentation to the teachers the other day. It's really important that you... you look for patterns because people aren't always, children aren't always able to...they haven't got the handle on those emotions. They can't say: "This is what's worrying me."

Whereas if you say to them: "You know. Look. I've noticed that you struggle for instance, when you don't know what's going to happen next or when there's uncertainty. You know, how can we deal with this?" That's...that's a lot more helpful.

ADAM: Do you think as well, though this is probably me more speaking more from my own personal experience as well, that it's better to, if you're struggling in a particular area, to just write it off and say "Well I'm not good at maths. And I'm just going to focus on my strengths."

MAXINE: I think that definitely gets easier as you get older. That sort of peace with yourself, if you like, kind of comes with age. I see a lot of dyspraxic dyslexics who older than me who just said, you know, "I can't do this. I'm not going to suffer guilt over this. You know, or get overwrought by this. I'm just going to accept my strength is here and I'm going to play to that."

It's just something that gets easier with age. I think when we're younger we condition into this, you know, now I have to try my best. Now I don't want to rock the boat or make a fuss. As you get more self-aware, as you get older, you just, and also, more aware of kind of time passing, you just think well life is too short, really, to be worrying about things that I can't do. And also you get more confident at delegating and I think this is what some of the most, the most successful, if you like, dyspraxics that I know have mastered the art of being able to say to people "I'm not good at this, but you know, but you are. And if you help me with this, I will help you with, you know, something that I'm good at." And that kind of skill swapping and delegating is something that you can really use to your advantage.

ADAM: 'Cause I imagine that once you get into your adult years as well, you start to notice that people, that other people, have difficulties as well, at different areas.

MAXINE: Yeah.

ADAM: So perhaps you feel at ease, like you said before.

MAXINE: Yeah.

ADAM: You feel at peace you don't feel so stupid or inferior.

MAXINE: Absolutely. Absolutely it's just awareness that everybody whatever they might be portraying on the surface, have some kind of vulnerability going on beneath. It doesn't matter. It may well not be dyspraxia. It could be something else. Or even a learning difference. But everybody's got their own...their own things going on beneath. And realizing that, and realizing that so much of what you see is a public face, a front, is very reassuring. It's something that I struggled with when I...when I first started in journalism because I started out very young doing some freelancing, when I was only in my late teens and still at school. And when I was interviewing people, I would feel very intimidated or very inadequate because of what they were presenting me. They just didn't want to be vulnerable. And it took me a certain amount of time and awareness to realize that you know, they were presenting that face for a reason. They just didn't want to be vulnerable in front of me for reasons and once you tap into that vulnerability you...you realize that actually a lot of people are going through...going through their own struggles.

ADAM: On the other hand as well I've come across people who have been diagnosed with learning difficulties with dyspraxia or with dyslexia and refuse to recognize that they have it. They think OK if I...if I admit to this then it's a sort of weakness.

MAXINE: That's common I think in certain occupational cultures I could say. Although I think that's changing slowly. It's certainly common across certain types of organization I would say. Also in the teenage years and, you know, early adolescence particularly. That's the sort of stage that finds...I've heard of a lot of people going through, I get kind of e-mails from parents or other halves, etc. Saying...I think this person has dyspraxia and just, they won't accept it. Well they, I've suggested it and they've done nothing about it.

ADAM: Or on the other hand, that they don't want to admit to it because they, you know, through sheer determination they...they say well OK I'm struggling with this but I'll keep going. But if...if I admit that I've got a problem...

MAXINE: Well yeah and I mean there's that fear of being treated differently. I can understand it. I mean sometimes when I...when I go into places, I do sort of sense that this sort of slightly altering tone with me because they know I have dyspraxia. Like when I'm going to an event, and I wonder, you know, whether they would treat me the same way if they didn't know. But, you know, obviously I'd rather that than I did something and they didn't have the empathy of that. So it swings and roundabouts really.

ADAM: So you said that empathy, at least for teachers in primary and secondary schools would be one of the most important skills to have.

MAXINE: Yeah absolutely I mean you mentioned the practical side. You were asking about books and resources for teachers. I mean there are hundreds of ideas out there. I

think **Amanda Kirby** does a lot on...on school age dyspraxia. She's got a book called "**101 Ideas For Supporting Children With ECD**". There's also "**How to Understand and Support Children With Dyspraxia**".

ADAM: "**Caged in Chaos**" I read was quite good as well.

MAXINE: Oh yes. *Victoria Biggs*. She fantastic. That's an excellent "from the horse's mouth" tale as well. That's fantastic. There's also a children's book called "**You're So Clumsy Charlie**" by **Jane Binion and Colin Shelbourn**. It's a children's book about dyspraxia. So it's telling children about dyspraxia. You know, dyspraxia as you would explain it to a child. They don't actually use the word "dyspraxia." They...they dedicate it to every child that is different. It's very important to them that people can relate to it and they weren't turned away by jargon or medical terminology. There's a note at the end that says "This book is about dyspraxia and it's about a boy called Charlie who finds various things very difficult at school and then he finds his strength in writing." I think his aunt sort of nurtures this ability in him and then encourages him to submit a story to the local paper or something like that and he...he does that and then he wins and then he is very happy. And suddenly being clumsy at school doesn't matter so much anymore. And it's...it's lovely...a lovely way of presenting it to a child.

ADAM: And I think that going back to technology that we were talking about earlier, I've also come across websites like the **Khan Academy** for things like maths.

MAXINE: Mm.

ADAM: And there's also lots of tutorials on...on **Youtube** whereby people explain things really well and...

MAXINE: Yeah.

ADAM: And I think sometimes if you're in a classroom you might get the fear as a student and not want to ask a teacher how you do something for fear of looking stupid.

MAXINE: Absolutely. Absolutely. And that's the other thing teachers can do is really encouraging and atmosphere that...where...where people feel able to ask for help and it sounds so obvious but so many don't. And, you know, there's so much emphasis on protocol and doing things by the book and doing things quickly that people...you know...children don't feel that often. I think the other important point here is that things like maths, you know, teaching methods that might be recommended with somebody with dyspraxia are really best practice for everybody even if they don't have dyspraxia. As we've said with reading and dyslexia for years the phonics method that's recommended for dyslexics, it's also recommended for all children. And it's just that they need that help in particular.

ADAM: You mentioned as well before that there, there still is a lack of awareness in comparison to dyslexia. Why do you think that is? That it's about 20 years behind?

MAXINE: That's a really interesting question. I'm not sure, to be honest with you. I'm always particularly baffled by the lack of awareness over in the States because the emphasis that they place on, you know, sport and physical activity and being active in the school years. You would really have thought they would be a lot more aware of something like dyspraxia that would affect them so profoundly but there really isn't. It's...it's just not there in comparison to things like dyslexia, ADHD, autism, it's just not. I think possibly one of the reasons is possibly some of the terms we've used for dyspraxia in the past are inaccurate and quite offensive. Things like, as I've said, "Clumsy Child Syndrome"; also, "Minimal Brain Damage." You know, who wants that label? What good is that for anybody?

I spoke to a parent at a conference recently, an educational psychologist who had a son in his forties and he said oh his son wanted to know why he wasn't diagnosed when he was younger. And he said "Well you know the labels that were used when he was younger wouldn't have been helpful for him at all. And yeah I think up until quite recently there's just been this reluctance to label children because there's this idea that it limited you. And that's so sad because you know as we know now that's just not...not the case but I think that was...that was the belief.

ADAM: That's much more positive and it's better to carry the belief that people just learn in different ways then.

MAXINE: Yeah. Exactly. And I think how a diagnosis is communicated is so important as well. I...I've known people who were diagnosed early; my sort of age who were diagnosed at 5 or 6 and literally what they were told is: "You can't play football." I mean again what good is that to anyone? What does that explain? Nothing at all, really. And so, you know, it's just about communicating that in a positive, obviously age-appropriate, but positive way, and constructive way. And if you do that there's no reason at all why it should be limiting. Yeah overlapping conditions as we've mentioned: dyslexia, ADHD, autism...if there's a primary or a secondary diagnosis when there's other conditions it's going to, that's going to impact on...on your symptoms. So it very much depends on also on things like background, upbringing and environment. You know, they all influence how we deal with things.

ADAM: And is there also a type of dyspraxia, a certain profile where you get dyspraxics who suffer more, struggle more, I think with...communication and speaking.

MAXINE: Yes so there's a separate diagnosis called "verbal dyspraxia"...

ADAM: That's it, yeah.

MAXINE: Which is to do with...which is known in the speech therapy community which is to do with being able to produce and replicate speech sounds and all about the production of

speech and vocal cords and... You know that's a separate diagnosis and obviously I don't suffer from that. You probably noticed. Speaking f is not a problem for me at all. I don't know too much about it, but I am aware of it and I have come across people, obviously, in conferences and discussions who do have that side of it.

ADAM: So the...there's overlapping symptoms like you said. And just to close up is there a twitter handle that you can be contacted on or a website?

MAXINE: Oh yes. I have two twitter accounts: @maxinefrances with an "e" is for people who are specifically interested in the dyspraxia work that I do. I'm a trustee at the Dyspraxia Foundation as well and it's all about kind of my speaking and training and any writing I do on dyspraxia. I have another account called "shakeandcrawl" which is more about my writing and a more personal approach. A lot of personal ranting and tweeting about rubbish and swearing and you know...if you can handle that then just go ahead. I just like to kind of have a separation of the two. So yeah, choose your poison. You can also find out a bit more about me and my work on my website which is www.maxinefrancesroper.co.uk

ADAM: Brilliant. OK. Thank you so much, Maxine.

MAXINE: OK, thank you.

ADAM: So thank you for listening to the latest episode on dyspraxia. If you're a teacher and would like some specific strategies to use in the classroom, please have a look at the Dyspraxia Foundation website at www.dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk.

Underneath the heading "Classroom Guidelines for Schools and Teachers" you'll find a list of common difficulties that you may encounter in the classroom, as well as a strategy for each difficulty. I'll also be including a link in the show notes. Cheers! Thanks for listening and make sure you stay tuned for the next episode.

ANNOUNCER: Thank you so much for joining us on this episode. Please subscribe to get instant access to new episodes.