

Counting the cost of difficulty with numbers

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From Prof Brian Butterworth.

Sir, I was fascinated by William Leith's account of his difficulty with numbers ("Hopeless with numbers", May 8). He may be one of the 5 or 6 per cent of people who suffer from a condition now called "dyscalculia".

Summarising the UK government's "Foresight Report on Mental Capital and Wellbeing" in Nature, the chief scientific officer and colleagues write that "developmental dyscalculia is currently the poor relation of dyslexia, with a much lower public profile. But the consequences of dyscalculia are at least as severe as those for dyslexia".

The neural basis of this condition is beginning to be understood. The brain area specialised for numbers – part of the parietal lobe – is now known to be structurally and functionally abnormal in dyscalculics. Dyscalculia is heritable, and it persists into adulthood in many people. These sufferers, and they do really suffer, are labelled stupid by their peers, their teachers, their parents and themselves – just like dyslexics used to be.

The author of the "New Philanthropy Capital" report who Leith cites, says that it's okay to say you are bad at maths, and this is a cause for low attainment. For dyscalculics, it is not a matter of it being socially okay not to be good at maths. Nine-year-old dyscalculics who we interviewed were perfectly well aware that being bad at maths could condemn them to dull and low paid jobs. The NPC report says that "efforts should be focused on how to help those children who are falling behind, rather than trying to define or label them". That is to say, we should try to help them without asking why they are falling behind.

Dyslexics and their teachers are well aware that it is better to be labelled dyslexic than stupid. Being labelled dyslexic can mean, nowadays, that you get teaching appropriate to your condition. We know that dyscalculics need special help too, and without labelling they won't get it. If we are guided by the report, I am afraid that dyscalculics will continue to suffer.

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