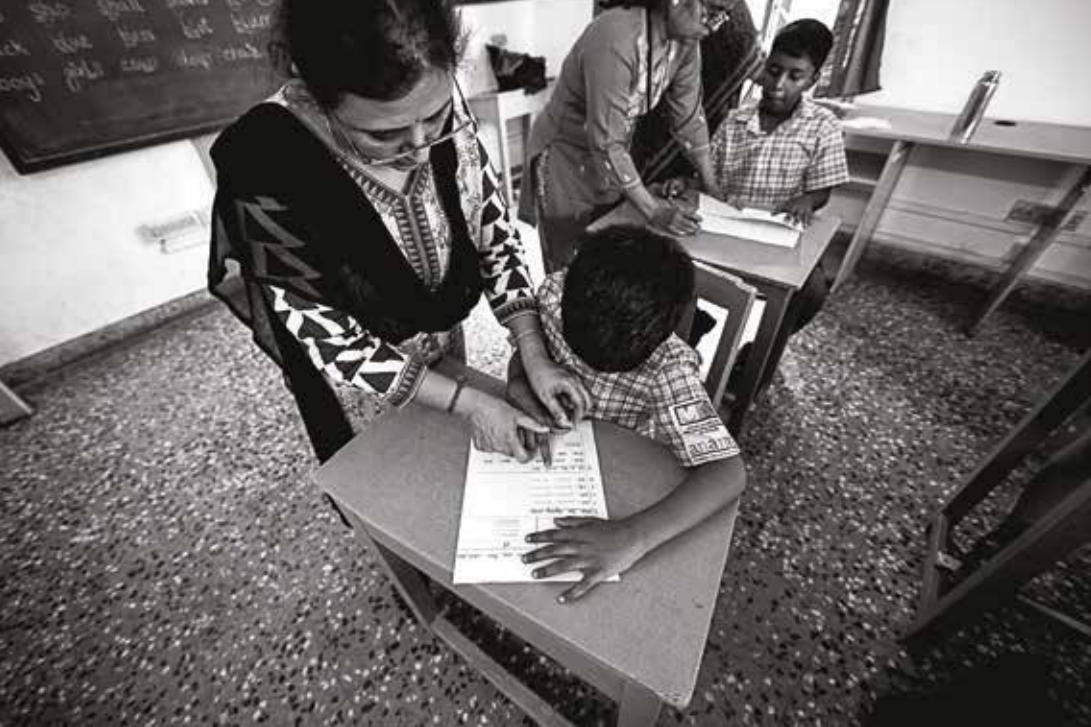


ABC Of Dyslexia

MADRAS DYSLEXIA ASSOCIATION

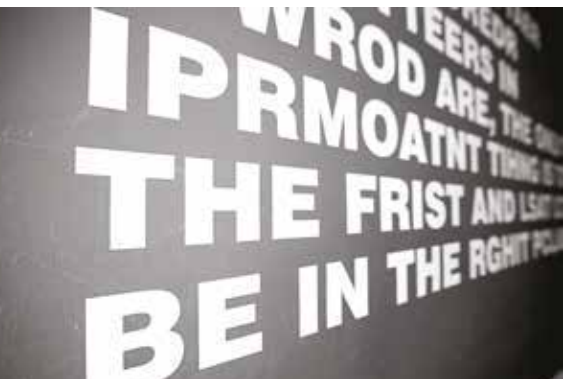


JOURNEY'S BEGINNING

Once in a great while, personal setbacks pave the way for sea changes in the way society perceives human conditions. What had so far been judged as an unsurmountable obstacle to worldly achievements is suddenly viewed in a different light altogether, creating conditions in which despair is replaced by hope; pessimism and negativity make room for optimism and positivity. Who are these people who are able to ring in this category of change? In this complete turnaround, old theories and postulations fly out of the window when the searchlight of right thinking shines on them.

Meet D Chandrasekhar, the Founder and current President of the Madras Dyslexia Association, popularly and fondly referred to as the MDA, the institution which has altered perceptions, understanding, systems of teaching, life choices, careers ultimately life itself for the staggering one-sixth of the world's population who have been identified as children with dyslexia.

It was in the year 1992 when MDA was founded. How the MDA came to be established began with the story of one young man and his far-seeing parents who walked a roundabout path in order to make him what he is today - a sought-after designer with an enviable cache of projects. Fortunately for everyone, it also includes the story of an organisation which has grown to include huge numbers of children (and their parents) who might have fallen through the cracks had it not been for the farsightedness of D Chandrasekhar and his wife Shanti who brought their learnings to create an awareness about a condition which is so general as to be a common place.



Faced at home with a child who was dyslexic, but undiagnosed, D Chandrasekhar and his wife sought admission in three different schools, faced exclusion because of the general ignorance of dyslexia as an impediment to academic learning. The child displayed reading and language acquisition difficulties which no one knew how to remediate. As can be expected the parents became anxious.

However, when it was evident that their had to be another way to face up to this challenge, growing anxiety gave way to determination. The time had come for introspection. A chance remark by a friend led the way to a trip to 'Alpha to Omega' a school run by Lalitha Ramanujam, a pioneer in addressing learning difficulties. Here, in a training session conducted by a group of experts, some of the fog began to lift. Parents and teachers got together to arrive at a definitive plan of action.

ORGANISATION - THE NEXT STEP

Soon after this, an encounter with another expert, Hazel MacKay, led to the next step. Her observation that, in a country as populous as India, the number of children with dyslexia would naturally be very large, brought the realisation that remediation could not stop with one or two concerned parents. It had to be done on a much larger scale.

Thus, the logical next step was getting organised. A few parents of children with learning difficulties, among them dyslexia, got together. A dozen total strangers were thrown in together at the deep end. Compounding the difficulties was the fact that they were not dealing merely with dyslexia. There were other accompanying issues to be addressed. So while it was evident that very few children have only dyslexia, which is usually part





of a larger cluster such as ADHD, it was decided that this new organisation, by now named the Madras Dyslexia Association, would concentrate only on dyslexia as the other conditions had already got organisations which addressed

them. MDA would concentrate its efforts in tackling dyslexia, so that learning difficulties would get ameliorated.

SPECIALISED TRAINING

Once there was consensus on this point,

training became the next big thing. Enter Dr. Sunita Sodhi, an educationist from Delhi, founder of Educare an organisation with interests in special education. Her programme in the MDA, their first, resulted in the establishment of Resource Rooms in certain well-known schools in Chennai. Nirmala Pandit, another pioneer in the field, was in charge of these 'Rooms', created within the school system itself in order to assess, intervene and remediate with least disruption in a child's school curriculum. Revolutionary as the concept was, however, its initial success was short-lived. Schools were still not ready for the changes children with special needs required.

ANANYA - THE UNIQUE SCHOOL

It was time for the MDA to have a school of its own. Named Ananya (meaning 'the unique'), it sought to shine the spotlight on the very special problems peculiar to children with dyslexia. Remediation was the focus and a pull-out system was put in place: a child could come to Ananya from school for an individual approach and then go back to school after a year. Sometimes though, one year could become two and parents were left in the lurch. Parents came back to Ananya for solutions. Necessity engendered a more structured approach and so Ananya became a school which evolved organically. The NIOS programme was adopted whereby children could finish their schooling.

GROWING APACE

By now, word had spread and the MDA had become the natural pioneers in this field. National and international fame had been achieved. In India itself, from Kolkata to Tirunelveli, recognition has come from all quarters, with participation from all manner of individuals and institutions. Teachers are drawn from everywhere, particularly from primary school level, in order to ensure early identification,

assessment and remediation. Training programmes are conducted in both English and Tamizh. Mindful of the fact that costs of intervention in single schools would be prohibitively high, MDA's model of training as many teachers as can be viably trained in a single location has been developed.

In a further attempt to benefit greatest numbers, MDA has used digitisation very nimbly. In collaboration with IIT Madras, training programmes are offered on the NPTEL platform wherein twenty five hours of content, followed by an exam, making training accessible to anyone interested in getting trained in this aspect of special education. The target is that a hundred thousand teachers would reach out to one million children.

The Tamil Nadu Government has been equally proactive. In the last year, two thousand teachers in eight districts have been trained in the threefold approach of identification, assessment and remediation, with a master training plan for twenty five more districts as the final goal.

CHAMPIONS OF CHENNAI

The MDA and its Founder, D Chandrasekhar, are Champions of Chennai by championing the cause of dyslexia that is so universal yet ill-understood. Spreading awareness is one thing, offering solutions is quite another. The MDA has done both and has taken thousands of children on their path to success and, with them, their parents, who may have started off in a state of denial, but are now able to accept and act on this acceptance.

Of all the ways in which human society changes, attitudinal change is perhaps the most difficult to achieve. MDA has done this and more. A whole generation of parents, teachers and children have been aided in accepting, understanding and challenging a universal condition.

A spectacular attainment indeed.

Prema Raghunath