

## Why Behaviour Is Often Misunderstood

What we see in classrooms is rarely the full story.



# When behaviour is misread: What dyslexia teaches us about understanding pupils

How misinterpreting behaviour can lead to missed needs and what dyslexia reveals about seeing pupils more accurately.

One of the most important lessons specialist dyslexia schools teach the wider education system is simple but profound:

**behaviour is often misunderstood when we only look at the surface.**

In many classrooms certain behaviours are interpreted in familiar ways.

A pupil avoids writing tasks. A pupil becomes frustrated or disengaged. A pupil appears reluctant to attempt work independently. A pupil begins to withdraw from participation.

These behaviours are often interpreted as issues of effort, attitude or motivation.

Yet in specialist dyslexia settings, those same behaviours are frequently understood very differently.

They are often **signals of cognitive strain, repeated difficulty and eroding confidence.**

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## **The confidence gap**

For many pupils with dyslexia, the experience of learning in a traditional classroom can be profoundly challenging.

Tasks that appear straightforward to others may involve:

- slower processing
- greater working memory demand
- increased cognitive load
- repeated comparison with peers.

Over time, this can produce a pattern that psychologists have recognised for decades.

When learners repeatedly encounter difficulty in areas where success is expected, they often develop **protective behaviours.**

These might include:

- avoiding certain tasks
- reluctance to attempt work publicly
- perfectionism or fear of mistakes
- withdrawal from participation.

From the outside, these behaviours can look like disengagement.

From the inside, they are often **self-protective responses to repeated academic strain.**

## Behaviour before identification

One striking pattern appears again and again across schools.

**Behavioural signals often emerge before formal identification of learning differences.**

Pupils may begin to show patterns of:

• frustration • declining effort • loss of confidence • increasing avoidance

long before dyslexia or other learning differences are formally recognised.

This creates a difficult challenge for schools.

Without deeper insight into the drivers behind behaviour, responses can unintentionally focus on **managing behaviour itself rather than understanding its cause.**

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## What dyslexia schools understand

Specialist dyslexia schools often approach behaviour differently.

Instead of asking:

*“Why is this pupil behaving this way?”*

They ask a deeper question:

**“What might this behaviour be telling us about the learner’s experience?”**

This shift changes everything.

Behaviour becomes **information rather than simply a problem to solve.**

Once the underlying difficulty is understood, responses focus on:

• building confidence • adapting instruction • reducing cognitive barriers • restoring a sense of competence.

## **A wider lesson for education**

The insights developed in dyslexia education extend far beyond specialist settings.

Across many classrooms, behaviour may be influenced by factors such as:

- self-efficacy • fear of failure • working memory limitations • processing differences • social comparison.

If schools can develop ways to interpret these underlying drivers earlier, responses become far more precise.

Behaviour stops being something we simply react to.

Instead, it becomes **a signal that helps us understand the learner more deeply.**

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## **The opportunity ahead**

Education systems today are increasingly data-rich.

Schools can record behaviour, attendance, attainment and safeguarding information in extraordinary detail.

Yet many leaders are still left asking the same question:

### **What does this behaviour actually mean?**

The next opportunity for education may lie not in collecting more behavioural data, but in developing deeper insight into what behavioural patterns may be signalling about pupil experience.

When behaviour is understood in context, schools are far better positioned to:

- intervene earlier • support confidence and resilience • strengthen inclusion • design learning environments where more pupils can succeed.

Specialist dyslexia education has been demonstrating this principle for decades.

Perhaps the wider system is now beginning to catch up.

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**Understanding behaviour more deeply may be one of the most important steps education can take toward building genuinely inclusive schools.**