

Special Education Support Service: Information on Dyslexia

Definition:

Educational systems often define dyslexia as a specific learning difficulty affecting reading, spelling or writing. In Ireland, the *Report of the Special Education Review Committee* (1993) indicated a preference for the term 'specific learning disability' over 'dyslexia' and defined such disability as "impairment in specific aspects of reading, writing and arithmetical notation, the primary cause of which is not attributable to assessed ability being below the average range, to defective sight or hearing, emotional factors, a physical condition, or to any extrinsic adverse circumstances". The Report of the Task Force on Dyslexia¹ proposes a somewhat broader conceptualisation of dyslexia that recognises the continuum of learning difficulties arising from dyslexia that students may experience, while also taking into account recent research findings on the etiology of dyslexia:

Dyslexia is manifested in a continuum of specific learning difficulties related to the acquisition of basic skills in reading, spelling and/or writing, such difficulties being unexpected in relation to an individual's other abilities and educational experiences. Dyslexia can be described at the neurological, cognitive and behavioural levels. It is typically characterized by inefficient information processing, including difficulties in phonological processing, working memory, rapid naming and automaticity of basic skills. Difficulties in organisation, sequencing, and motor skills may also be present.

It recognises that the learning difficulties arising from dyslexia:

- occur across the lifespan, and may manifest themselves in different ways at different ages;
- may co-exist with difficulties in the area of number;
- may be associated with early spoken language difficulties;
- may be alleviated by appropriate intervention;
- increase or reduce in severity depending on environmental factors;
- occur in all socio-economic circumstances;
- co-exist with other learning difficulties such as Attention Deficit Disorder,
- and may or may not represent a primary difficulty.

Finally, it is recognised that, since students' learning difficulties arising from dyslexia range along a continuum from mild to severe and are so diverse and varied that they require a continuum of interventions and other services.

Common Characteristics

A full list of possible indicators of dyslexia for four age groups, as documented by the 2001 Report of the Task Force on Dyslexia, is included in **Appendix 1** at the end of this document.

¹ The Task Force was established by the Minister for Education & Science and chaired by Dr. Peadar Cremin

What can I do as a teacher?

Addressing the Needs of Students with Learning Difficulties arising from Dyslexia

The Report of the Task Force on Dyslexia broadly endorses the approach to intervention outlined in the *Learning Support Guidelines* which provides for assessment and programme planning at the individual student level and involves class teachers, learning support teachers and parents working collaboratively to identify and meet agreed learning targets.

Should a student with learning difficulties arising from dyslexia not respond to provision in his/her own classroom, or in a learning support setting after a reasonable period of time, the Task Force proposes a multi-disciplinary review of the child's learning needs, in which the nature and severity of the child's learning difficulties are examined, and the most appropriate form of provision is identified. Such provision may be within the child's own school, or, where this is not possible, because of the need for very specialised support, in another school in the child's community.

Addressing the needs of students with learning difficulties arising from dyslexia has to be done within the whole-school context and individual class/subject situation. The principal, class/subject teacher and learning support teachers are instrumental in creating a 'dyslexic-friendly environment'.

(i) School Development Planning

The Education Act 1998 requires the Board of Management of each school to make arrangements for the development of a school plan, through a process of consultation involving parents, staff and students of the school. It is desirable that schools, in formulating the special educational needs aspect of their plan, take into account the needs of students with learning difficulties arising from dyslexia, including those with severe difficulties. The principal should ensure that all staff members are aware of the issues involved, and that effective use is made of the resources that are available to the school. In line with general guidelines issued by the Department of Education and Science for school development planning the plan should indicate short-term and medium-term goals for the school in relation to addressing the needs of students with dyslexia, and should indicate strategies and procedures for:

- Preventing learning difficulties
- Identifying learning difficulties as early as possible
- Using teaching as a basis for initial assessment and intervention
- Maintaining school records on student learning outcomes
- Assessing and reporting on student learning outcomes
- Making reasonable accommodations for students with learning difficulties arising from dyslexia
- Accessing remedial/learning support services for students with learning difficulties arising from dyslexia who need such services
- Consulting and liaising with professionals outside the school (e.g., psychologists) on matters relating to the needs of students with learning difficulties arising from dyslexia

- Distributing responsibility among the staff for matters relating to students with learning difficulties arising from dyslexia, including assessment, record keeping, liaison with professionals outside of the school
- Involving parents in decisions relating to learning needs of students with learning difficulties arising from dyslexia
- Making arrangements for the professional development of staff members on matters relating to learning difficulties, including those arising from dyslexia

It is also recommended that each school identify in its school plan, a named teacher who would be responsible for co-ordinating services for students with special educational needs, including those whose learning difficulties arising from dyslexia are severe. The duties of this named teacher would be to co-ordinate the provision of services for students with special needs at the school level, to liaise with professionals outside of the school, and to establish links between primary and post-primary schools to ensure a smooth transition for students with learning difficulties between the two settings.

(ii) Role of the Principal Teacher

The principal teacher plays a key role in creating a learning environment in which students with learning difficulties arising from dyslexia can develop. This role includes advising the Board of Management and parents and encouraging the teaching staff. The principal teacher impacts at policy and practical levels throughout the school by:

- Promoting a 'dyslexia friendly' culture and ethos
- Disseminating inclusive principles
- Facilitating staff development
- Engaging parents in decision-making
- Advocating adequate resources
- Leading the development of a whole school plan
- Co-ordinating in-school resources
- Raising awareness of learning difficulties arising from dyslexia as a whole school issue
- Discussing provision for students with learning difficulties arising from dyslexia at staff meetings
- Allocating responsibility for co-ordinating the needs of students with learning difficulties arising from dyslexia to staff members with expertise in the area
- Ensuring that individual learning programmes are developed for all students with learning difficulties arising from dyslexia
- Ensuring co-ordination between teachers, where more than one teacher is responsible for meeting the needs of a student with learning difficulties arising from dyslexia
- Ensuring that, when a student with learning difficulties arising from dyslexia transfers to another school, appropriate information about the student's progress and learning needs is made available to the student's new school

(v) Providing an Effective Response to Dyslexia in the Classroom

Note: Please refer to **Appendix 2**, A Continuum of Interventions, from the Report of the Task Force on Dyslexia, included at the end of this document.

Class and subject teachers will need to provide a range of accommodations for students with learning difficulties arising from dyslexia, including those with severe difficulties. The particular accommodations that should be provided will depend on the needs of individuals and groups of students, taking into account the nature and severity of their learning difficulties. The teacher may need to:

- Provide individual and small-group teaching as needed
- Provide opportunities for the student for re-learn and over-learn rules and strategies
- Provide instruction in reading/spelling that is structured, sequential and cumulative
- Provide regular constructive feedback to maintain motivational levels and enhance self-esteem
- Identify how best the student learns, and adapt teaching methods to suit the student's learning style
- Where possible, use a multi-sensory approach to teaching word reading and spelling that involves listening, saying, looking at, and writing words in various combinations
- Ensure that learning materials are at the student's reading level, and that they also encourage discovery learning
- Evaluate the student's understanding of text using oral rather than written questions
- Provide a learning environment that is quiet and non-distracting
- Introduce cursive handwriting from as early a stage as possible to aid spelling, speed, neatness and continuity
- Focus on the nature of a student's writing errors (quality) rather than the number of errors (quantity)
- Expect the student's work to be erratic and inconsistent at times
- Encourage the student to repeat the directions for completing a task
- Provide assistance with elements of the writing process, such as the use of planning sheets and editing checklists
- Introduce and reinforce the use of meta-cognitive strategies (for example, cue cards) that enable the student to exercise control over his/her learning processes
- Provide support through the appropriate use of Information and Communication Technologies.

The following practices should be **avoided**:

- Asking the student to read aloud in class, unless s/he wishes to do so and s/he has practiced in advance
- Asking the student to copy large amounts of material from the blackboard
- Penalising the student for not completing tasks within strict time limits
- Marking or signalling too many obvious spelling errors in student's written work
- Asking the student to rewrite work because of spelling errors
- Comparing a student's written work unfavourably with that of other students
- Asking a student to copy out corrections several times rather than discussing with the student the nature of his/her errors, and providing an opportunity for memorising the correct word

The following strategies are recommended for supporting the **second-level student with dyslexia**:

- Use of non-printed learning materials, including taped books
- Compensatory strategies and/or assistance with note taking (for example, Providing another student's notes)
- Use of new media, including multi-media, to learn and review content
- Use of assistive technology, including use of a word processor with spellchecker
- Use of ICT resources- electronic dictionaries, tape recorders, dictaphones, books on tape, recorded classes, lectures and curriculum texts on tape, word processors (which enable editing etc.), reading programmes, (which allow texts to be read aloud), art programmes, (which may be helpful in developing hand-eye coordination), Voice recognition software, which allows for dictation of text directly to the computer and scanners, which allow printed/hand written texts to be scanned onto a computer so that the text is available for word processing or as part of a reading programme.
- Teaching of self-regulated learning skills, including study skills, to enable students to learn content independently.

Extra Resources / References

Books

1. Department of Education & Science (2001) *Report of the Task Force on Dyslexia*
2. Department of Education & Science (2000) *Learning Support Guidelines*
Both of these can be downloaded from the Special Education Support Service website
http://www.sess.ie/sess/Main/OfficialDocs_OtherDocuments.htm
3. Department of Education and Science (1993) *Report of the Special Education Review Committee*
Available from Government Publications 01-6476834 €12.70 Catalogue No. E/109
4. *Nearit: An Information Booklet for Resource/Special Needs Teachers* Available from Curriculum Development Unit, Mary Immaculate College of Education, Limerick 061-204366 Cost €8.00
5. Ott, P. (1997) *How to Detect and Manage Dyslexia* London: Heinemann ISBN: 0435104195 Cost: £22.00
6. Reason, R. & Boote, R. (1994) *Helping Children with Reading and Spelling – A Special Needs Manual*
London: Routledge Falmer ISBN: 0415107334 Cost: £22.50
7. Westwood, P. (2003) *Commonsense Methods for Children with Special Needs (4th edition)*
London: Routledge Falmer ISBN: 0415298490 Cost: €25.00
8. Winebrenner, S. (1996) *Teaching Kids with Learning Difficulties in the Regular Classroom*
Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing ISBN: 157542004X Cost: \$30.00 (Also in CD format)

Websites

The Special Education Support Service website www.sess.ie has listed a number of sites related to dyslexia.

The exact link is: http://www.sess.ie/sess/Main/Categories_SLD_links.htm

Table 3: Indicators of a Possible Learning Difficulty Arising from Dyslexia (Ages 7-12+)

- Has continued difficulty reading text aloud or silently
- Reading achievement is below expectation
- Still confuses letter sequences (e.g., *soiled* for *solid*; *left* for *felt*)
- Is slow at discerning and learning prefixes, suffixes, root words and other morphemes as part of reading and spelling strategies
- Poor reading accuracy, fluency, or speed interferes with reading comprehension
- Spelling is inappropriate for age and general ability (e.g., spelling the same word differently on the same page, use of bizarre spelling patterns, frequent letter omissions, additions and transposition)
- Poor spelling contributes to poor written expression (e.g., may avoid use of unfamiliar words)
- Uses avoidance tactics when asked to read orally or write
- Experiences language-related problems in maths (e.g., when reading word problems and directions, confuses numbers and symbols)
- Is unable to learn multiplication tables by rote
- Still confuses some directional words (e.g., left and right)
- Has slow or poor recall of facts
- Lacks understanding of other people's body language and facial expressions
- Has trouble with non-literal or figurative language (e.g., idioms, proverbs)
- Forgets to bring in or hand in homework
- Has difficulty remembering what day or month it is or his/her own telephone number or birthday
- Has poor planning and organisational skills
- Has poor time management
- Lacks self-confidence and has a poor self-image

Table 4: Indicators of a Possible Learning Difficulty Arising from Dyslexia (12 Years+)

- Is still reading slowly and without fluency, with many inaccuracies
- Misreads words (e.g., *hysterical* for *historical*) or information
- Has difficulty modifying reading rate
- Has an inadequate store of knowledge due to lack of reading experience
- Continues to experience serious spelling difficulties
- Has slow, dysfluent and/or illegible handwriting
- Has better oral skills than written skills
- Has difficulty planning, sequencing and organising written text
- Has difficulty with written syntax or punctuation
- Has difficulty skimming, scanning and/or proof-reading written text
- Has trouble summarising or outlining
- Has problems in taking notes and copying from the board
- Procrastinates and/or avoids reading and writing tasks
- Does not complete assignments or class work or does not hand them in
- Is slow in answering questions, especially open-ended ones
- Has poor memorisation skills
- Still mispronounces or misuses some words
- Has problems recalling the names of some words or objects
- Has poor planning and organisational skills
- Has poor time-management skills
- Has more difficulty in language-based subjects (e.g., English, Irish, History) than in non-language based subjects (e.g., mathematics, technical graphics)
- Lacks self-confidence and has a poor self-image

APPENDIX 2

A Continuum of Interventions - taken from 2001 Task Force Report

| Phase | Examples of Educational Content |
|---|---|
| 1. Initial Identification of a Learning Difference (3 – 5 years) <i>Prevention</i> | Activities designed to develop: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ auditory skills ▶ visual skills ▶ communication skills ▶ memory strategies ▶ language skills ▶ concepts about print ▶ phonological awareness ▶ letter name knowledge ▶ sequencing skills ▶ cognitive and perceptual processing ▶ co-ordination of sensory inputs |
| 2. Identification of a Possible Learning Difficulty Arising from Dyslexia (5 - 7 years+) | A focus on <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ segmenting spoken words into phonemes ▶ identifying letter-sound correspondences and blending sounds ▶ developing a basic sight vocabulary ▶ developing word recognition skills ▶ spelling ▶ developing vocabulary ▶ developing syntax ▶ handwriting ▶ developing an enjoyment of books and reading ▶ all elements of encoding and decoding written words |
| 3. Formal Identification of Dyslexia and Analysis of Learning Needs (7 – 12 years+) | In addition to the above interventions, which focus on extending word recognition, spelling and punctuation, intervention programmes should where necessary focus a range of text level skills including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ fluency ▶ speed (reading rate) ▶ comprehension ▶ flexible reading approaches ▶ composing ▶ editing and revising. At this stage the concepts of <i>reading to learn</i> and inclusive compensatory strategies should be introduced. |
| 4. Annual Review of Learning Needs (12-18 years+) | The focus of interventions at this phase of development should continue to focus on decoding, spelling/punctuation and writing but should be extended to include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ self-regulated learning skills ▶ study skills ▶ note taking ▶ exam strategies ▶ occupational exploration (career guidance) ▶ accessing subject knowledge/skills ▶ reasonable accommodation in class and in exams In some cases strategies designed to encourage and assist the student in staying at school will be required. |
| Non-school Interventions (e.g., early school leavers) | In the event that persons with dyslexia have opted to move from the formal education system into informal networks or alternative options provided by the other Government Departments, interventions need to focus on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ socially important literacy and numeracy skills ▶ occupationally relevant reading and writing ▶ occupational exploration ▶ lifestyle restructuring |