

Dyslexia

Dr Gavin Reid

gavinreid66@googlemail.com

www.drgavinreid.com

Dyslexia is perhaps the most common, but least understood of all the learning difficulties. It can be referred to as a 'hidden disability' as sometimes the characteristics and symptoms are not obvious. Some young people can in fact go all the way through school without dyslexia being identified – they struggle, they become frustrated and they often underachieve. This highlights one of the key issues regarding dyslexia – that of early identification. There are tests and screening procedures that can identify young children who may be at risk of dyslexia at the kindergarten and early years level and it is important that these are utilised.

It is crucial that all teachers have an awareness of dyslexia in order to identify those children who may have some of the characteristics of dyslexia and that they can be spotted early before the student starts to fail. The research clearly shows that once a child begins to fail it is extremely difficult to reverse that process and particularly the reverse the negative effects on self-esteem.

Definitions

Definitions can help to provide a label. For many parents and teachers a label is necessary as it can help to start the support process. For adults with dyslexia it can help them develop self-knowledge and eventually coping strategies. For teachers it can provide explanations as to why the child may not be responding to the intervention provided. A definition therefore can be an important catalyst in this process. The problem however lies in the lack of universally accepted definition of dyslexia.

There are many different dimensions to dyslexia – dyslexia is not represented by a single entity, or caused by a single gene. Dyslexia is multifaceted and that can explain why a single universally accepted definition has not yet been achieved. It can be argued however there is some agreement on the constellation of factors that can contribute to dyslexia but controversy surrounds the respective weighting of these

factors. Everett and Reid (2009) highlight the range of factors that are currently associated with dyslexia.

- Structural and functional brain-related factors (Galaburda and Rosen 2001, Hynd et al 1995)
- Genetic factors affecting the developmental migration of magnocells in utero and influencing their subsequent function (Stein 2008)
- Genetic correlations (Gilger 2008)
- Procedural timing of sequences in task accomplishment (Fawcett and Nicolson (2008)
- Processing speed (Wolf & Bowers 2000)
- Inter-hemisphere transfer (Breznitz 2007)
- Difficulty in automatising skills (Fawcett and Nicolson 1992)
- Working Memory difficulties (Jeffries and Everatt, 2004)
- Phonological deficit (Snowling, 2000)
- Language features – orthographic transparency (Wimmer 1993, Share 2008, Everett and Elbeheri (2008)
- Comorbidity between learning disabilities (Bishop and Snowling 2004, Visser 2003)
- Literacy achievement levels and the role of IQ in diagnosis (Siegel and Lipka 2008, Joshi and Aaron 2008, Wagner 2008).

These points above are some of the factors that can influence our understanding of dyslexia and each can have an impact on how dyslexia is perceived and how assessment and intervention are portrayed.

Purpose of Definitions

Definitions of dyslexia, particularly those used by education authorities, school districts voluntary organizations and associations are abundant and some will be shown here. Often they serve some purpose and it is possible to categorize the type of function they serve.

Allocation

Used to allocate resources and develop provision – these would usually focus on discrepancies and provide some discrepancy criteria in order that those who need additional support and special provision could be readily identified.

Explanation

Explain to teachers and professionals how they may identify and intervene - these definitions may have a list of statements and characteristics and can merge into operational definitions which provide explanations of the difficulty and how it can impact on practice.

Understanding

Help parents and indeed the person with dyslexia understand what it is. It is difficult for a definition to actually do this. Often parents want to know the cause of a difficulty as this helps them more fully understand the extent of the problem and how it might be tackled. It is difficult to do this in a definition.

Research

A research definition can help to provide a discrete and well defined sample for researchers. This might include set criteria that is easy to measure such as IQ scores and certain types of discrepancies.

The definition that has been developed by Gavin Reid is shown below.

“Dyslexia is a processing difference, often characterized by difficulties in literacy acquisition affecting reading, writing and spelling. It can also have an impact on cognitive processes such as memory, speed of processing, time management, co-ordination and automaticity. There may be visual and/or phonological difficulties and there is usually some discrepancies in educational performances.

There will individual differences and individual variation and it is therefore important to consider learning styles and the learning and work context when planning intervention and accommodations” (Reid, 2008).

Dyslexia: some key points

1. Dyslexia can be seen within a continuum from mild to severe.
2. It is important to identify and recognise the strengths shown by children with dyslexia and to attempt to incorporate these strengths into a teaching programme.
3. The degree, and the impact of dyslexia on the child can vary according to the nature of the task and the nature of the learning context.
4. Early identification is important for effective intervention.
5. Children with dyslexia can show different characteristics and therefore their needs should be addressed on an individual basis.
6. Although the principal difficulties associated with dyslexia relate to literacy - reading, writing and spelling, children with dyslexia can also show other difficulties relating to memory, co-ordination and organisation.
7. Knowledge on how children learn, and how to make learning more effective through for example, study skills, can be extremely beneficial for children with dyslexia.
8. It is important also to consider the curriculum, differentiation and learning styles as these can help children with dyslexia understand the task more clearly and undertake learning more effectively.
9. The impact of dyslexia can be minimised with effective teaching intervention and adaptations to tasks, through differentiation in the curriculum and accommodations in the workplace.
10. The dyslexic person may have many strengths and these strengths may be used to compensate for his/her difficulties.

11. It is important to recognise the need to boost the self-esteem of children with dyslexia as it is too easy for them to become discouraged and lose interest in learning.

Characteristics of Dyslexia

There are a number of characteristics that the class teacher can observe at various stages within the classroom. These are detailed below:

Pre- school and Early years:

Concern may be raised if the child shows some or all of the following:

- Forgetfulness,
- speech difficulty,
- reversal of letters,
- difficulty remembering letters of the alphabet,
- difficulty remembering the sequence of letters of the alphabet,
- if there is a history of dyslexia in the family,
- co-ordination difficulties e.g. bumping into tables and chairs,
- tasks which require fine motor skills such as tying shoelaces,
- slow at reacting to some tasks,
- reluctance to concentrate on a task for a reasonable period of time,
- confusing words which sound similar,
- reluctance to go to school,
- signs of not enjoying school,
- reluctance to read,
- difficulty learning words and letters,
- difficulty with phonics (sounds),
- poor memory,
- co-ordination difficulties,
- losing items,
- difficulty forming letters,
- difficulty copying,
- difficulty colouring,
- poor organisation of materials.

Elementary school

After around 2 years at school

- hesitant at reading therefore has poor reading fluency,
- poor word attack skills –difficulty decoding new words and breaking these words down into syllables,
- poor knowledge of the sounds of words,
- difficulty recognising where in words particular sounds come,
- spelling difficulty,
- substitution of words when reading for example ‘bus’ for ‘car.’

Middle school

As above, but also:

- behaviour difficulties,
- frustration,
- may show abilities in other areas of the curriculum apart from reading,
- attention and concentration difficulties.

Secondary/ high school

As above and also:

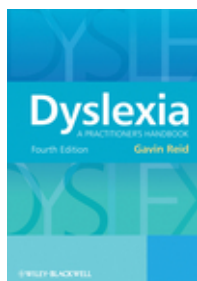
- takes a long time over homework,
- misreads words,
- relies on others to tell him/her information,
- poor general knowledge,
- takes longer than others in most in the class on written tasks,
- may not write a lot in comparison to his/her knowledge on the subject,
- difficulty copying from books,
- may spend a great deal of time studying with little obvious benefit,
- may not finish class work or examinations because runs out of time,
- there may be a degree of unhappiness because of difficulties in school that may manifest itself in other areas.

It is widely accepted that multisensory strategies are the most successful for students with dyslexia. There are a significant amount of resources and ‘off the shelf’ teaching

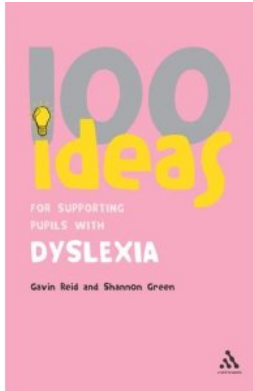
packages specifically aimed at children with dyslexia and these can make a difference. It is important however that these should not replace the need for an understanding of the characteristics of the student with dyslexia, differentiation of the task, and the need for interaction between the teacher and the learner. It is important to appreciate that any intervention should take the learning process and learning style into account and that teaching needs to be within a positive and carefully planned learning environment.

References

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Dyslexia: A Practitioners Handbook 4th edition 2009 Gavin Reid published by Wiley-Blackwell Foreword by Sir Jackie Stewart
“ This book will benefit a multitude of people” Sir Jackie Stewart, President of Dyslexia Scotland



100+ Ideas for Supporting Pupils with Dyslexia Gavin Reid and Shannon Green (2nd edition) Continuum Books (also available in French)