

# Theories of dyslexia and strategies for intervention



Drawing on current research, module content and your own professional practice critically consider dyslexia as a syndrome incorporating a spectrum of difficulties. Consider the implications of your theoretical understanding for policy, practice and provision within your school.

Over recent years there have been many different definitions of dyslexia. It seems that it is almost impossible to define a disability that affects individuals in so many different ways and to so many different degrees in one agreed definition. The republic of Ireland has adopted this definition for themselves which blatantly relates to the fact that this a disability which is part of a continuum of needs,

Dyslexia is manifested in a continuum of specific learning difficulties related to the acquisition of basic skills in reading, spelling, writing and/or number, such difficulties being unexpected in relation to an individual's other abilities.

The Adult Dyslexia Association has this as part of their definition -

Every dyslexic person is different and should be treated as an individual. Many show talents actively sought by employers and the same factors that cause literacy difficulties may also be responsible for highlighting positive attributes - such as problem solving which can tap resources which lead to more originality and creativity." ( Schloss 1999)

These definitions show the degree of individuality that is present amongst dyslexic learners. It also highlights the fact there are so many positive aspects to being dyslexic that are easily overlooked. The views held by these

definitions are implicit , dyslexia encompasses a whole range of difficulties along a spectrum of need.

Dyslexia is a very common disability. According to the British Dyslexia Association around 5 - 10% of the population are affected. Dyslexia impacts on a persons ability to read and wite, thus affecting all areas of education. The severity of dyslexia varies form person to person and ranges form mild to severe. There are many aspects of dyslexia and many other disorders that are co-morbid. According to the dyslexia Institute Dyslexia is,

“ Not related to intelligence, race or social background. Dyslexia varies in severity and often occurs alongside other Specific Learning Difficulties such as Dyspraxia, Attention Deficit Disorder, resulting in variation in the degree and nature of individuals strengths and weaknesses.”

To have any success in helping these learners to develop their literacy skills we must take full cognisance of their individual manner of working, Reid (2001) states:

Dyslexic children are first and foremost individuals and while they may share some common difficulties there are individual differences.

Many of the issues facing dyslexic pupils can be adequately remediated with the correct environment and specific teaching strategies. Dyslexia is not something to be cured but if these strategies are applied with recognition of individual differences in learning styles they can be effective as by pass strategies. There is no one definitive intervention as each dyslexic learner is an individual and has an individual need. It is about observing and assessing

the specific needs of a specific pupil and adapting an intervention that will address this particular need at this particular time. There are no two dyslexic persons with identical needs and dyslexia occurs across the range of learning abilities.

### **Theory of Dyslexia**

In order to understand dyslexia fully and to consider the implications for policy and practice it is imperative that the causes of dyslexia are investigated.

Frith (1995) views dyslexia as a causal model framework suggesting there are three levels of descriptions for better understanding dyslexia- biological, cognitive and behavioural. The biological description implies that dyslexia is hereditary,

“ Gene markers for dyslexia have been found in chromosome 15 (Smith, Kimberling, Pennington and Lubs 1983 as cited in Reid, G 2001)

If one parent is dyslexic there is a 50% chance that any of his/her children will inherit dyslexia” - Hull learning services

This could have a major impact for recognising “ at risk” dyslexics early on and putting measures in place to assist with learning difficulties or differences.

Frith also suggests that dyslexia has a cognitive basis and suggests that there is something different in the way dyslexic students process information (quote Fawcett, 2001 regarding metacognition and automaticity). Many dyslexic people have difficulties with short term memory, working memory,

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metacognition and automaticity. Others have problems with phonological processing and cannot process sounds easily and have problems in a range of areas requiring language skill. Sequencing can also be an issue for some dyslexics.

Frith believes there is interaction between these factors causing the behavioural issues of a dyslexic learner in terms of reading difficulties, spelling difficulties and often poor memory and organisational difficulties.

Some dyslexia appears to manifest itself or have its root in visual difficulties. In my experience many dyslexic students are helped greatly by the use of coloured paper and coloured overlay to avoid visual stress. Tinted glasses can be useful too in avoiding glare, movement in the text, headaches and eye strain.

Traditionally, there have been two main models of Dyslexia. One is that it is perceived to be a discrepancy model whereby a pupil appears to have a higher level of intelligence compared to their reading ability. Snowling, 2000 suggests that this may not hold true as many pupils may have a limited literacy experience at home and are therefore bound to have a lower than expected reading age. Conversely, A dyslexic child may have found their own coping strategies and so difficulties could be masked for a long time. A dyslexic child may come from a literacy rich background and the sheer immersion in this and hard work of parents may also compensate for the difficulties. This makes the diagnosis more difficult.

Dyslexia has also been viewed as a deficit model whereby a pupil is lacking in literacy skills and because of this is unlikely to succeed. Many would

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disagree and will argue that there are a great deal of successful dyslexics who have found a way to compensate for their difficulties and use their differences in learning style to their advantage. Being dyslexic simply means a different way of learning and therefore as educators we may need to find a different way of teaching. Some positive attributes often associated with dyslexia is good visual, spatial and lateral thinking skills.

The implications for these traditional views are that interventions currently taking place may not be any where near the solution for dyslexia difficulties. If we are to provide any kind of meaningful solution for these pupils we need to do a great deal more observation and analysis to uncover the specific difficulties. If we are ignoring strengths and concentrating on the weaknesses of these learners we are doing pupils an injustice and adding to the issues of self esteem and confidence. Therefore, there is a challenge for all teachers to actually understand dyslexia and meet the dyslexic learners need. These types of learners like any learner have their own individual needs and strengths. Nicholson and Fawcett -

In particular, if one can identify the underlying cause of a child's potential difficulties before they are manifested, it should be possible to give proactive support, to the extent that the child will not fail to learn to read, and will not suffer the comitant emotional and educational devastation.

### **Early Intervention**

If Dyslexia is caught early enough it may that there is less need for intervention. (Critical learning period)

Many would argue that it is too late to help pupils beyond the age of 6 , according to bodien 2007 intervention at 6 80% successful, 9 40%, 10-12, 10%.. Research as shown that by this time parts of the brain have shut down. Early and accurate diagnosis will ensure the best possible intervention for a pupil with this difficulty. Drawing on my own experience as a secondary school teacher there are some dyslexic learners that no matter what is put in place still do not make adequate progress in the area of literacy. These pupils need to be given a means of coping in school without having to rely on reading and writing. Continually teaching the same method of reading for the 10th or consecutive year or longer in a row is clearly not working. Some of the dyslexic learners at my school who have made the most progress with literacy have despite all the schools effort found their own way of unlocking words and becoming better readers. The fault of the school lies in insisting all pupils learn to read in the same manner. One particular severely dyslexic pupil I recall has become a fluent reader by devising his own syllable breaking rule which I find difficult to comprehend but has been a way of accessing materials previously incomprehensible. To have continued using phonics programme with this pupil would have been pointless and exasperating to this pupil. On the other hand this form of remediation has been extremely helpful to another pupil and has meant access to a range of learning opportunities.

Certain areas of education have recently been heavily backing linguistic phonics as the solution to all literacy difficulties as we can see according to., Nicholson and Fawcett,

“ It may also be true that appropriate treatment for a given child depends critically on the specific underlying cause(s) of their difficulties, rather than just the general reading symptoms displayed “ Fawcett, —Nicholson..... 200?  
P6 ( dyslexia, learning and the brain)

There are many differences between dyslexic pupils both in the manner in which problems arise and in the severity of the problems. Enrolled at any school there are pupils with dyslexia ranging from mild to moderate to severe. Each of these pupils may be affected by their dyslexia in very different ways. Schools need to be able to provide opportunities for dyslexic learners to learn in their own style. A certain degree of flexibility needs to be applied to the way in which notes are taken and homework submitted. Dyslexic learners also need to have plenty of opportunities to work to their own strengths and have adequate support for their own specific areas of weakness. Specialist one to one teaching needs to be put in place also. This is particularly helpful in specifically showing a pupil survival and bypassing techniques so that the pupil can be as fully included in the curriculum as the other non-dyslexic learners within the organisation.

Without support within an organisation dyslexic learners are at risk from a number of negative outcomes from being dyslexic. Some psychosocial factors may come into play to a greater or lesser extent depending on the individual. Thompson describes the daily public humiliation of dyslexic children at school and states “ failure is experienced every time dyslexics are asked to undertake any literacy, which happens many times at school”.

Thompson, p 214. The effects of this are far reaching and potentially disastrous for any student, causing daily stress, anxiety and can also be the

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victims of bullying by other students and indeed by teachers in their “ lack of understand and inappropriate labelling” Thompson p216

In order to be fully included within the curriculum there are devices which could be vital to some dyslexic learners. The use of ICT has proven to be very effective in providing the kind of support necessary to access the curriculum. On the market nowadays are a variety of technical aids. Some pupils are greatly helped by the use of voice activated software and can produce work more in line with their academic ability when the need for written accuracy is removed. At the other end of the extreme from this is the use of hand held spell-checkers which can be an unobtrusive way of removing the problem of poor spelling. All of these devices have their downside also and require expert use and the acquisition of particular skills such as keyboarding. and practice by the dyslexic learner and the compatibility with the kinds of work and arrangements in schools.

Being diagnosed with dyslexia is a long and difficult process. There are so many factors in place.

Certainly the intervention and amount of intervention varies from school to school and indeed even from pupil to pupil depending on parental pressure and even finance. It has been argued by Wise, Ring and Olsen (1999) as cited in Reid G 2001 that the actual type of phonological awareness training was less important than the need to actually embed the training within a well structured and balanced approach to reading. Many schools now in Northern Ireland are adopting the Linguistic Phonics approach to teaching reading and remediating reading. It could be argued that this is a useful beginning

strategy for many people with literacy needs but for many dyslexic pupils it could add to the confusion and is not an adequate intervention for all dyslexic learners.

Fawcett 2002, argues that difficulties often arise from confusion between cause, symptom and treatment and that grouping symptoms without understanding cause can lead to inappropriate treatment.

Another important implication here is the fact that a dyslexic pupil's needs will change over time and will schools be ready to change the intervention. If we are not constantly assessing these needs we could be seriously letting our pupils down.

The implications for this are far reaching. The amount and quality of help is inequitable. As a practitioner I realise there are a great deal of areas within my organisation that need to be upturned, examined and seriously modified. There are some pupils in my school who receive specialist help from a dyslexic tutor. Someone who is qualified to get to the real heart of problems and devise a programme that will be meaningful to dyslexic children. There are others who fall below the threshold for this help and their interventions can be hit and miss at best. This has to be examined. Ofsted doc 2006 promotes..... We are left with the question. How good will provision be if a specialist teacher is not available for all?

The Department of Education is promoting the idea of a dyslexia friendly school. The emphasis being placed on every teacher to deal with Dyslexia and not the role specifically of a specialist teacher. The British Psychological

Society came up with a definition in 1999 which has major implications for the manner in which we address dyslexia in schools,

“ implies that the problem is severe and persistent despite appropriate learning opportunities. It provides the basis for a staged process of assessment through teaching”.

The first major implication of this sometimes contested definition is that the ultimate responsibility for assessment lies within schools themselves. This places the responsibility upon teachers to address these persistent and severe issues and provide the appropriate remediation.

Every school should have procedures and structures in place to deal with the issue of dyslexia. A programme of assistance should be in place for all dyslexic learners to help overcome difficulties faced and in the long term to prevent the negative psycho-social aspects to this different approach to learning. To cover all aspects of difficulties the programmes should incorporate phonics, reading and spelling. It should be in line with the developmental stage of the learner and constantly reassessed and reviewed to ensure that it is effective. Above all it should be set up to provide dyslexic learners with a degree of success to compensate for the low self esteem often experienced by trying to access materials and learners presented in a manner that it is inaccessible to them.

The Dyslexia Friendly School guidelines are a useful framework for Dealing with dyslexia. The success of the schools programme will be down to how individual teachers plan their lessons, how well the school is resourced and

the quality of the teaching. The question remains - will this be sufficient. The British Dyslexia association in its article —states

“ Dyslexia friendly schools are able to identify and respond to the unexpected difficulties that a dyslexic learner may encounter”

Intervention requires - precision teaching, specialist intervention one to one.

In reality we require materials that will support differentiation to facilitate access to the full curriculum. ( Reid, 2003).

All dyslexic learners like any learner has unique needs, strengths and areas that need to be supported.

Brooks ( 2000, p19 ) children should “ begin to perceive the world as a place where their strengths rather than their weaknesses are spotlighted. If this shift in perception occurs, then when they are expected to assume the tasks of adulthood, they will do so with increased comfort, confidence and success”

Cultural context and assessment Thompson p209

Stackhouse and wells - continuum of needs

Students with SpLDs will often present with significant and persistent difficulties despite appropriate learning opportunities even when additional educational provision has been made available. Dfes 2005