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Dyslexia — Based of Articles from the American Magazine “Scholastic Instructor”

Abstract

It's likely at least one in ten students in classroom has dyslexia. But thanks to advances in brain science, professional development, and educational technology over the past decade, a new era has dawned in understanding and educating dyslexic learners — one that places early childhood education teachers squarely on the front lines. The article by Anna Szkolak-Stępień *Dyslexia — Based of Articles from the American Magazine “Scholastic Instructor”* presents what early childhood education teachers need to know about it.

Keywords: dyslexia, early childhood education teachers

Dyslexia

Dyslexia is often misunderstood as simply bad spelling or reversing of letters, when, in fact, the language difficulties experienced by a student with dyslexia often go far deeper. Dyslexia is a learning disability that stymies the acquisition and processing of language, a condition that hinders not only reading and comprehension but also oral and written expression (Schachter, 2010, p. 49).

“It's a very serious problem because children are either not getting identified or — if they are identified — not getting effective instruction and accommodations. And it's a problem that's going to effect more children in the regular classroom than any other single learning disability,” says Sally Shaywitz (2003, p. 93). Together with her husband, Bennett, Shaywitz directs the Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity in New Haven, Connecticut. The two have revolutionized the study of dyslexia by using brain imagery to show that the part of the brain crucial to word formation and automatic reading operates in-

efficiently in dyslexia — and renders many of them tortuously slow readers. “If you’re dyslexic, it’s like you’re operating on manual instead of automatic,” Shaywitz explains (2003, p. 94).

Ten years ago, Shaywitz also served on the landmark National Reading Panel that stressed the need for dyslexia learners to develop phonological skills — the ability to distinguish and identify the sounds of words — before progressing to traditional reading instruction. That approach, carried out in structured phonics regimens such as the Orton-Gillingham (orton-gillingham.com) or Wilson Reading System (wilsonlanguage.com) programs, has become the gold standard for teaching dyslexia readers.

Classroom Teachers Are Critical

While the one-on-one instruction required in intensive phonics programs traditionally took place in the learning center or special education office, classroom teachers have become critical players in responding to the learning styles of dyslexia students and helping them succeed. That’s become especially true as “pull-out” times have decreased in many districts as the amount of content to cover in the classroom has increased, and the number of support staff outside of the classroom has dwindled. “We now know lots of things about neuroplasticity and that teachers rewire kids’ brains whether they are trying to or not,” says Steve Wilkins, head of the Carroll School (carrollschool.org), a nationally known school for dyslexic learners in Lincoln, Massachusetts. According to him, it makes a lot of sense to engage dyslexic students in lively, creative, and repetitive activities that help develop these neural pathways. The good news is that what works for dyslexics in the classroom can work well for all of your students, need not distract from your lesson plan, and can add to your store of best practices.

Reading with All the Senses

Since dyslexic learners have difficulty with the printed word, they benefit from multisensory approaches to reading, writing, and even arithmetic. Kelly Winn, a kindergarten teacher at the Winn Brook Elementary School in Belmont, Massachusetts, has her youngsters write letters in sand and construct word out of Wikki Stix. “I also do a lot with ‘glitter letters’ so that they can feel the bumpiness with their fingers,” says Winn. She often teaches spelling with mnemonic rhymes, as well, in order to better reach those of her students — dyslexics included — who are more auditory learners. One such couplet goes, *I spell ‘IS’*

I-S, I-S. It doesn't have a Z. I spell 'IS' I-S, I-S. There's no fooling me (Schachter, 2010, p. 51).

Even the mechanics of writing can bedevil a dyslexic learner, and many elementary teachers have had success with cursive writing, since each letter can begin on the same baseline. When she teaches vocabulary, fifth-grade teacher Kyle Redford encourages her students at Marin Country Day School outside of San Francisco to draw pictures and act out new words. She is equally at home with students submitting their work alternative. “When we finish a novel, everyone needs to write essays, but sometimes they’ll also do a skit or an art project, even an iMovie, which a lot of our struggling readers gravitate toward,” Redford says, nothing that these kinds of projects still require their creators to be thoughtful and intentional about the way they are conveying information (Schachter, 2010, p. 51).

Multisensory techniques are not confined to language arts. In introducing a math problem, suggests the Carroll School’s Wilkins, ask students to draw a model of the math problem before they try to solve it, rather than simply reading the question or having it read to them. For any technique that you use with dyslexic learners, be consistent, Wilkins adds. “Find out how students best hang on to information, and really support them in those techniques, whether it’s mnemonics (singing a song, learning a rhyme) or forming word pictures in their minds” (carrollschool.org).

Dyslexics Are Strong Learners

Above all, say those who works successfully with dyslexic children, don’t mistake their lack of reading prowess for a lack of ability or interest. Earlier this year, Yale’s Sally Shaywitz and her husband, Bennett, published the results of a long-term study of Connecticut school-children aimed at showing that dyslexic readers usually have above-average intelligence. “We assume if you’re smart you’ll be a good reader. Dyslexia violates that assumption,” she explains. “In typical readers, IQ and reading scores are dynamically linked. When one goes up, so does the other. We found that with dyslexics, IQ and reading went their separate ways and didn’t influence each other” (Shaywitz, 2003, p. 131).

Connie Bagley, the dyslexia specialist for Crockett Elementary School in San Marcos, Texas, notes that her students often need to go their information through other channels, sometimes literally. “Most of my kids love the Discovery and National Geographic cable channels,” she says. “They’re little sponges, and reading to get that much information is so much more difficult for them to do. They can tell me about a movie they saw four years ago and can’t tell me about a story they read yesterday” (tcta.org).

A Model State

While individual districts, schools, and teachers have often been left to figure out solutions for dyslexic readers, Texas has made a statewide effort for decades and has become a model for other states. Texas law mandates extensive programs for dyslexic learners, and all schools are required to have a dyslexia specialist.

Teacher can refer to a 95 — page Dyslexia Handbook (tea.texas.gov) to identify, assess, and instruct affected students, but they also get plenty of professional development.

The Wylie Independent Schools District Near Dallas, Texas, started its dyslexia program 20 years ago. “Teachers have been partners in this journey and that does impact the students,” says Lexie Barefoot, the dyslexia coordinator for one 18 schools in her district. “We are planning and building together with classroom teachers, and they’ve seen that what we do works — and works for their non — dyslexic students as well” (tea.texas.gov).

Tech to the Rescue

Advances in educational technology have also had a positive effect on reaching dyslexic students. For starters, writing on a computer can eliminate the difficulties many dyslexic students have using longhand, and the spell-check feature helps with the frequent spelling mistakes that dyslexics are prone to make.

Software programs such as Kurzweil (kurzweiledu.com) meanwhile, can read back electronic or scanned-in texts, using an assortment of natural voices. This approach allows students to read along with the spoken words. “All of our third graders and above know how to make text on the computer talk to them,” says Diane Snelling, the director of student support services at Marin Country Day School. Teachers at the school also rely on Lexia reading software (lexia-earning.com) to reinforce phonological awareness and increase reading fluency. The program allows for the repetition that dyslexic readers need. To improve reading comprehension, teachers at the Carroll School use Thinking Reader (tomsnyder.com) which embeds prompts, hints, and feedback in the assortment of literature it contains. Carroll’s Steve Wilkins notes that teachers can also create their own questions to insert. “You might say, ‘What do you think the major character is saying at the time?’ Because the task of pulling all these little squiggles off the page takes so much energy, many dyslexics don’t have the brain space to do the comprehension piece” (hnhco.com).

Classroom Culture Shift

While multisensory instruction and the latest software can make a big impact, teachers also need to make accommodations for dyslexic students in the classroom. “I’ve seen a real change as we’ve educated teachers,” observes Crockett’s dyslexia specialist, Connie Bagley. “The days of saying, ‘I’m not going to give you extra time, I’m not going to read out loud to you’re over’” (tcta.org).

“The biggest thing is giving extra time for core subjects, in which the content can become overwhelming, especially to a student with processing issues,” Bagley continues, noting that she meets with all of her school’s teachers at the beginning of the year classes fits that description (tcta.org).

Teachers encourage dyslexic students to complete their summer reading assignments by listening to books on tape or have books read to them; back in school, it’s a common practice to have peers read to their dyslexic counterparts.

Another accommodation you can make — and one frequently overlooked, experts point out — is to place less importance on rote memorization in such areas as spelling and math facts. The processing and retrieval problems of dyslexic learners make that approach largely futile. Instead, you can limit the number of words you expect them to study and provide mathematics tables on which they can find the necessary answers.

“What’s the big deal about retrieving a math fact when it’s only a part of what you’re trying to solve?” says Marin Country Day’s Snelling. “We’re deemphasizing automatic rote skills.” She also warns about penalizing dyslexic students unnecessarily on tests. “Teachers need to be really clear about what they’re trying to measure. Don’t have a math or history test turn into a spelling test” (mcds.org).

“I’ve seen too many people get back papers graded A-for imagination, F for spelling, and D+ as the final grade,” adds Yale’s Sally Shaywitz (2003, p. 261).

“They just learn differently”, notes Bagley of her dyslexic students. “Give them a different approach to what you’re trying to teach them, and they can be really successful” (tcta.org).

Quick Facts about Dyslexia — Instead of Ending

The International Dyslexia Association (IDA) provides fact sheets, resources, and recommendations. Here are a few common questions and answer about dyslexia.

What is dyslexia? Dyslexia is a language — based learning disability. It refers to a cluster of symptoms that result in difficulties with specific language skills, especially reading, but also spelling, writing, and pronouncing words.

How common is dyslexia? As much as 15–20% of the U.S. population has some symptoms of dyslexia, including slow or inaccurate reading, poor spelling, poor writing, or mixing up words.

What are the signs to watch for? The problems displayed by individuals with dyslexia involve difficulties in acquiring and using written language. Spelling can look quite jumbled at times because students have trouble remembering letter symbols for sounds and forming memories for words. Other problems include: organizing written and spoken language; memorizing number facts; and reading fluency and comprehension.

What causes dyslexia? The exact causes are unclear, but brain imagery studies show differences in the way the brain of a dyslexic person develops and functions. Dyslexia does run in families. Dyslexics are very likely to have children who are dyslexic.

Do dyslexic students qualify for special education? Not all children with dyslexia qualify for special ed, but all are likely to struggle with some aspects of academic learning and are likely to benefit from systematic, explicit instruction in reading, writing, and language.

What teaching methods should I use? A multisensory, structured language approach that involves several senses (hearing, seeing, touching) is best. “Many individuals with dyslexia need one-on-one help so that they can move forward at their own pace” (Schachter, 2010, p. 55).

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