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# Organising chaos

**Bernadette McLean** explains how to help dyslexic students manage the increased demands and potential overload of secondary school

*“What sensible organization would forbid its workers to ask their colleagues for help, would expect them to carry all relevant facts in their heads, would require them to work in 35-minute spells and then move to a different site, would work them in groups of thirty or over and prohibit any social interaction except at official break time. The typical secondary school...”*

**Charles Handy: The Age of Unreason**

**T**he transition to secondary school can be difficult for many children but particularly so for those with dyslexia.

Children encounter a greater number of teachers and subjects, placing a higher demand on organisational skills. There is an increased need for speed of processing and multi-tasking. Higher reading and writing skills are expected, as is the ability to cope with revision and exams.

The changing nature of dyslexia definitions suggests that not just literacy problems are indicated. More recent definitions pinpoint difficulties with organisation, memory, word retrieval, lack of automaticity and speed of processing. Furthermore, it is

encouraging that most recent definitions emphasise the abilities and strengths of dyslexic profiles.

## Signs of dyslexia

Teachers will be aware of known dyslexics in the classroom but others may not have been picked up earlier in the system. It is therefore a good idea to look out for signs of difficulty with literacy based activities, particularly relating to:

- reading speed, accuracy, comprehension and recall
- written output, which may be scant and poorly proofread, often with basic but easy to spell words.

*Dyslexic pupils need to know that it is not stupidity that is causing their problems*

Beyond this, there may be problems in acquiring topic words which can change in meaning from one context to another, such as “bug” and “scale”. The learning of a foreign language can be challenging. Listening attentively and recalling information may also present difficulties.

These pupils’ difficulties may perplex teachers because, in many ways, they are bright and can often contribute orally very well in the classroom.

Other signs of dyslexia may include an attitude of negativity, loss of self-esteem and motivation, and problems with behaviour. Avoidance of public humiliation may be at the root of this, so questioning why these signs are present is crucial.

### Helping dyslexic learners

There are a number of things that can help dyslexic students:

#### Self understanding

Dyslexic pupils need to know that it is not stupidity that is causing their problems, it is simply a difference in the way they learn. They also need to understand their specific areas of difficulty and the impact these may have on their studies. As one student noted, "I have a poor memory so if you tell me more than three things I won't remember them – I need to see them written down."

Self-understanding and self-advocacy are promoted by the demystification of specific learning problems.

#### Study skills

Tasks need to be broken down into small steps so that these children know how to proceed at all stages of the task – be they flexible strategies for reading, or stages in writing an essay, revising or doing examinations. Metacognitive approaches encourage reflection on these strategies.

Explicit help may be needed with organising time and equipment. Having the right items in the right place at the right time might be too much to manage independently. It is worth remembering that many dyslexic children have dyslexic parents who may have similar organisational difficulties.

#### Extra time

Poor processing speeds for verbal and written information mean that extra time is the most common of reasonable adjustments applied for dyslexic learners. This can involve formal

## *Dyslexia friendly classrooms are those with less auditory input and more visual prompts*

arrangements – such as allowing 25 per cent extra time in public examinations – or simply giving extra thinking time when asking questions in the classroom or giving advanced warning of deadlines. Dyslexia friendly classrooms are those with less auditory input and more visual prompts to help with difficulties with working memory.

#### Alternative means of input and output

Difficulties with speeds of processing mean that these children listen more slowly and take longer to process auditory inputs. A fast paced delivery and complex language can lead to overload and shut-down.

The insistence on written output might be rethought. Is it always necessary to have understanding checked through writing? Perhaps students could watch a video or hear an audio version of the Shakespearean play before they read it. Maybe they could produce a PowerPoint presentation or a mind map rather than a lengthy essay.

#### Using feedback

In *Accelerated Learning in the Classroom*, Alistair Smith writes that self-esteem "can be built and developed with interventions that disrupt the downward cycle of limiting beliefs and negative self-talk". One way that teachers can do this is by providing constructive feedback. Feedback is more useful if we consider it as a feed-forward to future activities. Neurolinguistic programming (NLP) teaches us how to use language in a way that will enhance learning and maybe even alter teachers' expectations of learners. An elegant reframe from Paul

Ginnis's *Teachers Toolkit* is to convert a thought like "he cannot do such and such because...of his SpLD" into "he can if..."

This allows us to explore possible solutions rather than accept the limiting belief. When giving feedback, it helps if we can formulate it in terms of how work can be even better next time. Acknowledge the effort made and compare only with previous work and not with that of peers. Showcase what these learners can do. Encouraging resilience and persistence is vitally important, as they are the ingredients that will lead to success.

It is noteworthy that at a conference on adult dyslexia many years ago, a panel of highly successful adults were all asked the same two questions: "What helped the least in your education?" and "What helped the most?" Their answers were unanimous. What had helped the least had been placement in a remedial group, being treated like a slow learner and being given more of the kind of teaching that had not worked in the classroom; this compounded their feelings of failure. What had helped the most were not expensive solutions, either professional or technological, but simply being believed in long enough by another person that they began to believe in themselves. This is something that any secondary teacher is capable of doing.

If you esteem these pupils they will learn to esteem themselves. This will lead to the development of those skills of resilience and persistence that in time may be the envy of non-dyslexics. **SEN**

### Further information

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