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Module 32: Dyslexia in the classroom

Confirming a dyslexia diagnosis is just the beginning. In order for a dyslexic student to reach their full potential, it requires teaching staff to have a full awareness of what it means to have dyslexia. It will be necessary for teachers to make modifications in their teaching techniques so as to fully include the student in class activities.

32.1 Awareness

32.2 Modifications

32.3 Inclusion

32.4 Differentiated Instruction

32.1 Awareness

32.1.1 Awareness: Imagine you are a dyslexic child.

You sit near the back in a noisy class. The teacher is strict and only gives instructions once. You catch a little of what she says, but not everything. While you are trying to work out what it was you did not hear, the bits you did hear slips out of your mind. The rest of the class gets on with their work.

You ask a friend for their help, but get a stern glare from the teacher.

If you say nothing, you will get into trouble for not doing the work. The teacher knows you have dyslexia. You raise your hand and ask her to repeat the instructions. However, now she accuses you of not listening, and berates you in front of the class. You feel frustrated and angry. You vow never to ask for help again.

While the scenario may be imaginary, it reflects the actual experiences of many dyslexic students. In this case, the teacher believes dyslexia only causes reading difficulties. The teacher has no perception of the additional problems of decoding speech and short term memory issues that a person with dyslexia struggles with.

However, there are many outstanding teachers who are well-informed and do appreciate the range of difficulties associated with dyslexia. These teachers have a superior awareness of the condition. They are prepared to make modifications to their teaching techniques in order



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to help the dyslexic student learn. These excellent teachers have a full awareness of what it means to be dyslexic.

32.1.2 Awareness -Access All Students

A teacher has a responsibility to provide the appropriate learning environment for ALL students in the class – this includes the students with dyslexia. This requires a full understanding of the condition, and an awareness of the effects it has.

This means differentiating true disruptive behavior, with certain behaviors resulting from the student's frustration with their dyslexia. In the example in 6.1.1, the teacher would have done better to understand that some students, with dyslexia, struggle not just with reading and writing but have:

Poor Auditory Short Term Memory: It takes the dyslexic student longer to match the spoken words (auditory cues) with what they mean, and thus understand an instruction. By the time the brain has made sense of one word, the teacher has already moved on, meaning the dyslexic student may only “decode” one word out of every five or six. They may struggle to:

- Make sense of what they are hearing

Poor Short Term Memory: The dyslexic student clings onto what they do understand, but as they attempt to decode the next piece of information, they forget what came before. They struggle to:

- Remember individual instructions
- Remember lists of instructions



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By making small adjustments in teaching techniques, the dyslexic student's ability to learn is dramatically enhanced. It does not cost extra money, and it is not technical. It is a simple matter of repetition and encouraging interaction.

The student with dyslexia needs the teacher to speak slower and repeat the instructions. This will allow them time to understand the task, and avoid those negative feelings of frustration.

32.1.3 Awareness - The Hallmarks of Awareness

Teachers and educational establishments that are truly aware of the needs of the dyslexic student can rightly be labeled as "dyslexia-friendly-schools". The staff identify and respond to those "unexpected demands" of individual students. In practical terms, this means encouraging interaction rather than discouraging it, and having teaching strategies in place to accommodate specific needs.



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The hallmarks of such awareness include:

- Different Needs: An ability to react positively and meet the respective educational needs of all individuals
- Expect the Unexpected: Rise to the challenge
- IEP: An awareness of the student's IEP, so you can encourage them to achieve their learning goals
- Actively Alert: The teacher is actively alert for indications the student may have educational needs beyond the norm
- Initiatives: Be aware of initiatives and trends in new teaching methods, especially with regards to dyslexia
- Flexible Approach: Have a flexible approach to teaching and learning, so that they encourage the best work out of each individual rather than a "one size fits all" approach.
- Demand Excellence: They encourage each student to work to the best of their ability, and do not accept excuses.
- Involve Parents: They expect parents to take an active role in their child's education and learning.
- Whole Staff Awareness: They encourage all the staff to be aware of the education ethos, and to be flexible and sensitive towards meeting individual needs.

An educator or educational establishment should teach in such a way that they adjust the curriculum to meet each child's ability. They do not force the child to conform to the curriculum. No square pegs in round holes here!

32.1.4 Awareness - Making Accommodations

If all this seems unrealistic in the modern teaching environment, it may not be as unattainable as you think. By identifying a child that has a genuine need, and responding accordingly, an improved learning atmosphere will be created.

In addition, that awareness allows the teacher to make small adjustments that will make a positive impact on the individual student. Examples of these accommodations include:



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- Not humiliating a student by forcing them to read in front of the class.
- Giving the student a chance to prepare for public reading by giving the text the week before, which allows them to prepare and practice.
- Giving untimed tests.
- Giving oral comprehension tests instead of written tests.
- Grading homework based on the content and ideas expressed, rather than grading the quality of the handwriting or spelling.

We will now take a detailed look at accommodations and modifications in Module 6.2: Modifications.

32.2 Modifications



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An awareness of what it means to be dyslexic, allows the teacher to make modifications that will help the student to learn more effectively. As a popular saying goes: “It’s not rocket science.” It boils down to simple considerations and adaptations of the way lessons are taught, so the dyslexic student is included.

32.2.1 Modifications - Simple Modifications to Aid Learning

The key points that hinder a dyslexic student’s ability to learn are:

- Making sense of spoken instructions
- Short term memory issues
- Problems multi-tasking, such as listening and taking notes at the same time
- Slower reading pace
- Difficulty spelling
- Difficulty with handwriting
- Problems with writing cohesive arguments.

Simple modifications to classroom instruction can make a great deal of difference to the dyslexic student.

32.2.2 Modifications - Simple Modifications to Class

A) Where the student sits: Seating the dyslexic student closer to the teacher means they can hear the teacher more clearly, without the distractions of the rest of the class. It also enables the teacher to easily see the dyslexic student’s work, so they know if he is keeping up or not.

B) Repeat instructions: Do not give instructions only once. Repeat the instructions at least twice, if not more, for maximum comprehension.

C) Buddy system: Pair the student with dyslexia up with a responsible classmate. Have them sit next to someone who has permission to speak quietly to the dyslexic student and repeat instructions as necessary. Many students are hesitant to ask the teacher to keep repeating instructions, but providing a learning buddy overcomes this reluctance.

32.2.3: Modifications - Teaching the Dyslexic Student to Learn



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Learning is a skill. Unfortunately, teaching methods are geared towards non-dyslexic students. Here is a list of a few simple modifications that can make learning more accessible for the student with dyslexia:

A) Provide a summary: At the beginning and end of each lesson provide a summary outline of what the class discussed. This gives the dyslexic student a feel for the structure of the session, and helps him to know what to expect. By repeating it at the end, he is more likely to retain the information, transferring it from that faulty short term memory bank to the long term memory.

B) Phone numbers: The dyslexic student may well forget detailed instructions for homework assignments. Have the dyslexic student write the phone number for a couple of friends in the same class, on the inside of their exercise book. This allows the student to be able to call them if he is unsure as to what work has been assigned.

C) Messages for parents: Be it messages about PE or music lessons, make sure they are written down to be sure the message is passed on. Consider a separate notebook where messages, or what the parents can help the child with, are recorded.

D) Check list: Help the dyslexic student to learn self-reliance. Encourage them to keep a daily checklist of tasks to be done, from homework to attending band practice, so they begin to organize themselves.

E) Teach Organization: A jumble of notes from assorted lessons can seem an impenetrable mass of paper to the student with dyslexia. Suggest ways of organizing their notes so they are arranged in an easy to find way. Ideas include using different box files or boxes to put work to be done, and work completed in, plus organizing subjects by using different colored files or stickers.

F) Setting tasks: When setting tasks, divide them into small parts to help the dyslexic student spot the structure within the larger task. Present the project in different ways such as telling the class, and writing it down on the blackboard – making sure to leave it up for as long as possible.

G) Handouts: If the information is crucial, put the notes in a handout. In addition, make the notes easier for the dyslexic student to read by using different colored text, and pictures as much as possible.



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D) Using color to write on blackboards or whiteboards: When writing on blackboards or whiteboards, consider writing alternate words or sentences in different colors. This helps the dyslexic student distinguish the individual words and helps them with their reading.

E) Leave written instructions up: Do not be too hasty to wipe away writing on blackboards or whiteboards. Be sure to give the dyslexic student plenty of time to copy down instructions without feeling rushed.

F) Reading aloud in class: Avoid asking the student with dyslexia to read aloud in class. Give them advance warning and a chance to prepare. This means alerting them to the selected passage the week before, so that they can practice ahead of time.

32.2.4: Modifications - Testing the Dyslexic Student

We live in a results-driven society. Tests are part of our culture, and the dyslexic student is required to take exams along with the other students. In the class situation, the teacher can take the initiative by using simple modifications. Through other means, the teacher can better assess the dyslexic student's level of learning. These include:

- For a comprehension test, accept verbal answers rather than written ones. You are needing to assess the child's understanding, and this is not primarily a test of writing and spelling.
- Where written tests are mandatory, allow the dyslexic student extra time to complete the task.



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- In spelling tests, give the dyslexic student structure-based words – so they can use phonics to decode them – with just one or two irregular spellings thrown in.

32.2.5: Modifications - Modifications for Math Teaching

The student with dyslexia also has difficulty in the area of math. The dyslexic student's inability to retain short term information is a handicap when it comes to math functions. Addition and subtraction requires a degree of short term memory in order to carry numbers over. This is often an area of weakness for the student with dyslexia.

Teaching math to a student with dyslexia can be a challenge. A sensible place to start is with the following modifications:

- Instructions: Make sure the instructions are clear, and the dyslexic student understands the nature of the task.
- A Sensible Answer: When doing calculations, suggest the dyslexic student learn to “quality control” their work. They do this by doing a rough sum afterwards to check if their answer seems likely or possible.
- Mental Arithmetic: This is an especially troublesome area for the dyslexic student. Allow them to “back up” key numbers by jotting them down while they work out the remainder of the sum mentally.
- Verbalize: Encourage the dyslexic student to verbalize the sum. The added sensory input of speaking the calculation can help clarify their thinking.
- Calculator: Encourage the use of calculators, with the student doing a long hand sum to check the answer.

32.3 Inclusion

In Module 6.1, we touched on “Dyslexia-friendly-schools”. These schools aim to integrate students of varying aptitudes, so they are able to learn to the best of their ability. These schools aim to “empower” the student, to unlock their individual potential, and to not judge or exclude students because they do not fit into the perceived norm. In other words, “Dyslexia-friendly-schools” are inclusive.

“There is nothing so unfair as the equal treatment of unequal people.” Thomas Jefferson.

It is worth taking a moment to reflect on this quote from Jefferson. It touches on some of the limitations of schooling when students are expected to fit in and follow the curriculum, rather than the curriculum adapting to meet the individual's ability to learn.



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32.3.1 Inclusion - What is Inclusion?

Inclusion is the determination to help students access areas of learning that they struggle with. Inclusion does NOT label a child as a poor reader or disruptive student. Inclusion looks for the underlying reasons for their learning difficulties. It seeks a way to integrate struggling students into the classroom environment, so that they are able to learn.

Inclusion is about identifying the needs of the individual, and equipping them with the skills to learn. It fosters a “feel good factor” in the student, which focuses on their strengths, and celebrates their achievements.



Traditional learning celebrates passing exams and attaining high grades. Whereas, inclusivity celebrates an individual’s achievements in spelling words correctly or their improvements in handwriting. It is a “can do” culture rather than being grades-based.

32.3.2 Inclusion - Characteristics of Inclusion

Inclusivity sets high standards and demands excellence from each individual. It sets certain expectations including:

- High Expectations: The dyslexic student is expected to achieve their goals – as set according to their need and ability.
- Effort: The student is expected to work hard in both class and private study, in order to strive towards those goals.



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- Work Ethic: A positive attitude is fostered where the student is encouraged to stretch themselves in those areas in which they excel.
- Top Sets: Weak basic skills are not a deterrent to joining top set programs for the intellectually gifted.
- No Excuses: The dyslexic student does not use their dyslexia as an excuse for under achievement.

32.3.3: Inclusion - Fostering Inclusion

Inclusion is partially an attitude, and partially about fundamentals. Examples of such practical aspects include:

- Where appropriate, teach in small groups.
- Use areas such as the student's hobbies and interests, and suggest they give an oral presentation to the class.
- Use multi-sensory learning techniques to facilitate the student making progress.
- Encourage the dyslexic student's participation in class by giving them advance warning and more time to prepare.
- Notice when the student is having problems, and encourage them to recognize this for themselves.
- Give the student with dyslexia more time to complete tasks.
- Assure the student that questions will be treated with respect and patience, rather than being dismissed.

In short, inclusion involves strategies to involve the student as an individual within the group learning experience. It uses methods to maximize the student's ability to learn, and celebrates progress and achievements rather than focusing exclusively on grades.

This attitude is fostered through differentiated instruction, which we look at in Module 6.4.

32.4 Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction is flexible teaching. It means adjusting instructional methods in order to meet the individual's needs. It also embraces the environment to make it conducive to learning by utilizing different teaching tools, and ways of assessing the student's progress.



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“Differentiation is changing the pace, level, or kind of instruction you provide in response to the individual learner needs, styles, or interest.” Heacox



32.4.1: Differentiated Instruction - The Benefits of Differentiation

If the student with dyslexia is faced with work that is consistently too hard, there is a real risk that they may become demoralized, frustrated, and turned off by learning. If the work is too easy, then the student may get bored, stop paying attention, and underachieve. The aim of differentiated learning is to match the work level to the student’s ability. The goal is to challenge them slightly; but not overwhelm.

Differentiated Instruction Provides...

- Adjustments to course content.
- Activities suited to different levels of ability.
- Adjustments to the complexity of course material.
- Give students options about how they learn.



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- Assesses student progress and resets goals as needed.

Be aware that differentiated learning is an integrated approach, and an inclusive method of teaching. The aim is not to remove the student from class, and give them a separate curriculum. It is to enable them to work with their peers, to the best of their ability, in an inclusive way.

32.4.2: Differentiated Instruction - Areas of Differentiation (1 of 2)

Within the classroom, the teacher has four areas that are amenable to differentiation. These are:

Content: This is the material the students need to learn. It may be presented as a lecture or in written form. Differentiated learning allows for alternatives, such as using audio tapes for those that struggle to listen and take notes at the same time. Other adaptations includes using a reading buddy, or providing books at different levels of readability.

Process: This is the method by which the students learn. Areas of differentiation might include giving the dyslexic learner additional time to complete a project, or encouraging the exceptional student to investigate a subject in greater depth. It might incorporate different methods of learning such as the use of color or repetition. You may also encourage a dyslexic student to draw letters in the air while saying the letter sound. For example, the child with mild dyslexia might need extra work on hearing vowel sounds, while the severe dyslexic student may need to concentrate on strengthening their hands and practice drawing letter shapes.

Products: From colored letter tiles to colored acetate overlays (to put over a page of black and white text), there are products which can be used to help the students learn. For example, one student may find that the stark contrast of black print on a white page jumps around, thereby using a colored overlay may help. Moreover, his neighbor has trouble with spelling so he finds colored letter tiles help him make sense of individual letters.

Environment: This is about creating an environment that is conducive to learning. There are practical solutions you can introduce, such as making sure there is little or no background noise, and fostering a space that excites curiosity and a willingness to learn. In terms of differentiation, this might mean providing a screened corner where the students can act out a piece of learning in the form of a puppet show. You may provide a place where students can draw in the sand or wave their hands in the air to draw letters.



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32.4.2: Differentiated Instruction - Areas of Differentiation (2 of 2)

Differentiated learning is about flexible learning. It identifies the areas that the student struggles with, and seeks an appropriate method of teaching in order to overcome this difficulty.



If we think back to earlier modules, and recall that dyslexia is a syndrome with many facets to it, the importance of differentiated learning becomes clearer. If the dyslexic student struggles with one skill, such as hearing vowel sounds, it would be inappropriate to teach him a technique designed to correct a different area, such as spelling by phonics. That student needs to learn to recognize vowels first, and therefore forcing him to understand phonics is the learning equivalent of banging his head against a wall.

Think of this like learning a foreign language. If the student is struggling to learn French, it is pointless to teach him German because it is also a foreign language, and therefore close enough. The decision to give instruction in French, rather than German, is differentiated learning in its simplest terms.



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