

Literacy Difficulties and Dyslexia: Educational Psychology Service Guidance for Schools in Haringey



The purpose of this document is to:

- clarify the EPS position on dyslexia, reading difficulties and specific literacy difficulties
- provide clear guidance to schools on best practice around assessment of and intervention for literacy
- provide evidence-based resources for teachers, parents, children and young people

This guidance was produced by the Haringey Educational Psychology Service following consultation with a small working party which included SENDCos. It is based on research evidence, experience of assessment and intervention and information from other services. We would also like to acknowledge information in the appendices from Greg Brookes, Aberdeen EPS and Staffordshire EPS.

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1. General principles

1.1 Assessment of Oral Language and Literacy Skills

Children start school with very different language skills and varying levels of literacy (Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) 2018).

After a period of teaching, some children demonstrate difficulty learning to read and write. Over time, these difficulties can persist, lead to considerable distress and, in some cases, lead to academic disengagement. It is important that both oral language and literacy needs are identified as soon as possible, as the two are closely connected (Hulme et al 2015). Early identification and intervention for literacy difficulties will not be as effective if underlying language difficulties are not addressed. As with language, earlier intervention for literacy difficulties has been shown to be more effective than late interventions for older children.

1.2 School-based assessment

When a child/young person is not making expected progress in their literacy skills, trained teachers are well placed to complete an accurate school-based assessment in order to inform an appropriate intervention. These assessments may include evaluations of phonological skills (for pre and early readers), sound letter associations, decoding, blending and synthesising, and word and pseudo word reading plus assessments of spelling and reading comprehension (Siegel & Hurford 2019) and will identify the specific areas of literacy that need improving. A consistent whole school approach to the assessment and teaching of literacy skills and appropriate staff training are crucial (EEF 2018).

1.3 Cognitive assessments

Additional assessments are sometimes completed by specialist teachers and/or educational psychologists, who may also use tests of cognitive functioning including general intelligence, or IQ. Cognitive assessment for children/ young people with literacy difficulties was in the past regarded as necessary to identify children with dyslexia. This is no longer seen as necessary or appropriate (Siegel & Hurford 2019). Instead of using cognitive assessment to identify a discrepancy between cognitive skills and literacy skills, the primary use of these assessments should be to explore and identify strengths and needs, thereby ensuring that schools provide tailored activities (Vellutino, Fletcher, Snowling & Scanlon 2004).

Intellectual assessment may occasionally have a valuable role in providing teachers with a broader picture of a struggling reader (JG Elliott & Resing 2015) and can help ensure appropriate challenge in all lessons (Gerber & Raskind 2013).

However, cognitive assessments do not provide the information needed to plan detailed literacy interventions and they should not be used to predict progress in literacy. Furthermore, the information derived from individual one-off assessments in isolation is rarely sufficient to draw any reliable conclusions.

Cognitive tests sometimes show that children/ young people with literacy difficulties also have difficulties with cognitive processes such as memory, processing and language and may indicate areas that need to be considered when making reasonable adjustments. They can be useful for overall educational planning and ensuring that there is the appropriate level of intellectual challenge in lessons.

1.4 Assessment over time

Assessment over time and monitoring of the child/young person's response to teaching is now accepted as the most effective way of identifying literacy difficulties, informing intervention and determining the rate of progress (EEF 2017, 2020).

1.5 Sharing information

It has been our experience that sharing information with the child/young person, parents and staff is crucial, particularly at transition points, both within and between schools. This is particularly important during transition to secondary school.

It is very important that the secondary school is clear about the history of concerns and previous strategies and interventions used, together with evaluations of outcomes and success, in order to help plan effectively for how they will support each pupil.

NB Such records should go directly to the SENCo in order to ensure that they reach the Learning Support Department.

1.6 Definitions of Dyslexia

The term dyslexia has been used in various ways: to describe anyone who struggles with accurate reading; to indicate a sub-group of poor readers whose reading difficulties are in contrast to their cognitive strengths in other areas; to highlight those with a much wider collection of cognitive strengths and difficulties, where literacy is only one feature. Although research in the field of dyslexia lacks consensus, there is growing agreement that the term dyslexia should be used to refer to a difficulty with decoding and spelling fluency, which is evident from the early school years and persistent over time; and which affects academic functioning such that progress is less good in literacy-based areas of the curriculum compared with peers in a similar setting (Snowling et al 2020). This ensures that all those who struggle to learn to read are identified and provided with appropriate forms and levels of intervention.

1.6.1 In Haringey, we advocate the definition proposed by The Rose Report (2009) which states that:

*“Dyslexia is best thought of as a **continuum**, not a **distinct category**, and there are no clear cut-off points. Until recently, a child was deemed to either have or not have dyslexia. It is now recognised that there is no sharp dividing line between having a learning difficulty such as dyslexia and not having it.”*

The continuum that is referred to - from mild to severe - helps to account for the differences in how pupils respond to support and intervention.

1.6.2 The Rose Report (2009) also provides a working definition of dyslexia:

- Dyslexia is a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling.
- Characteristic features of dyslexia may be difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed.
- Dyslexia occurs across a range of intellectual abilities.

- It is best thought of as a continuum, not a distinct category, and there are no clear cut-off points.
- Co-occurring difficulties may be seen in aspects of language, motor coordination, mental calculation, concentration and personal organisation, but these are not, by themselves, markers of dyslexia.
- A good indication of the severity and persistence of dyslexic difficulties can be gained by examining how the individual responds or has responded to well-founded interventions over time.

1.6.3 EPs may also refer to The British Psychological Society's definition of dyslexia (1999):

'Dyslexia is evident when accurate and fluent reading and /or spelling develops very incompletely or with great difficulty. This focuses on literacy learning at the 'word level' and implies that the problem is severe and persistent despite appropriate learning opportunities. It provides the basis for a staged process of assessment through teaching'. (BPS, 1999, p. 5)

1.7 Intervention and support

It is important that both the individual literacy skills causing concern and the child/young person's ability to understand the content of lessons are considered when planning a support package.

1.8 Curriculum access

Accurate assessment will determine whether the child/young person needs support in all areas of the curriculum or only in the areas that have a high written component. Cognitive assessment for children/ young people with literacy difficulties, whilst no longer necessary (Siegel & Hurford 2019), may sometimes show that children/ young people with literacy difficulties also have difficulties with cognitive processes such as memory, processing and language and may indicate what the reasonable adjustments need to be to compensate. Examples of reasonable adjustments in lessons include alternative methods of reading (e.g. reading pens, readers) and alternative methods of recording (e.g. scribes, touch typing, dictaphones, voice-activated software).

1.9 Dyslexia Friendly schools *See Appendix 3 for further guidance.*

In Haringey, schools are encouraged to develop an overall approach to supporting children/ young people with literacy needs. The term 'Dyslexia Friendly' schools is a useful one.

In Dyslexia Friendly schools, the focus is changed from establishing what is wrong with the child/young person in order to make them 'better,' to what is right in the classroom in order to enhance the effectiveness of learning. The following principles provide an overview to the approach:

- Dyslexia Friendly approaches benefit all children.

- Many of the strategies that help children with dyslexia are relatively simple to establish.
- A whole-school approach means that all children are included.
- All adults in the school will understand the difficulties and approaches to support these.
- Children will experience consistency in good practice from year to year.
- Dyslexia Friendly schools recognise the importance of working together with parents and carers.

2 Framework for support *See Appendix 3 for further guidance.*

The Code of Practice (2014) provides statutory guidance for organisations that work with children/young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), on duties, policies and procedures relating to Part 3 of the Children and Families Act 2014. The Code stipulates a process of Assess, Plan, Do, Review in identifying and meeting children and young people's SEND needs. This is also referred to as the Graduated Response.

2.1 Assessment *See Appendix 4 for further guidance.*

An accurate assessment of literacy skills is required to identify the specific areas to address. The content of this intervention will depend on the areas of literacy causing concern and their associated pre-requisite skills.

When a child presents with difficulties in acquiring literacy skills, schools should also review the following:

- The child/young person's overall background history and progress. Information about their medical history, including vision and hearing is important.
- The Vision Questionnaire should be used to highlight any concerns with a child/young person's vision– see Appendix 4.2
- Information about a child/young person's language skills including language development and history of support. If a child speaks two or more languages, information is needed about their skills and progress in those languages.
- History of attendance and changes of school.
- Children/young people's progress through the school's chosen phonics programme should be closely monitored.
- Rate of learning progress: some children/young people learn more slowly than others. This is often because they need more exposure and practice in order to remember what they are being taught.
- The child/young person's approach to learning.
- Where children/young people's progress is particularly slow, schools should carry out more detailed assessments of their literacy skills following the guidance outlined in Appendix 4 of this guidance.
- The school should put in place well-founded interventions based on the results of these assessments and follow the Assess, Plan, Do, Review cycle, amending these interventions in the light of progress.

2.2 Interventions in school *See Appendix 5 for further guidance*

It is important that the teaching methods used within any intervention are shown in research to be effective. Research emphasises that focusing on how and what children/ young people are taught is more important than school structures, organisation, or where they are taught. If the teaching is structured well, this is more effective than other factors such as ability grouping, class size, individualised teaching and spending more money.

Research shows that teaching is most effective when it includes the following:

- Distributed practice, i.e. short, frequent teaching sessions that incorporate practice of identified skills, as this addresses any identified working memory deficits;
- Teaching of skills to fluency and generalisation, as well as accuracy, by ensuring that there are sufficient opportunities for children/young people to practise the skills before moving on;
- A structured approach using task analysis that ensures one new skill is taught at a time, and includes mixing old and new learning, which minimises forgetting;
- Ensuring children/ young people are fully informed about the purpose of interventions, their achievements and rate of progress;
- Peer-assisted learning (e.g. Paired Reading);
- Utilising teaching assistants to implement well-founded interventions.
- Interventions should be “structured, cumulative and multisensory” and be delivered by a well-trained practitioner.

3 Partnership with Parents/Carers

Children/young people’s literacy needs are best met when schools and parents/carers work in partnership, where there is mutual trust and where information is shared. In line with the SEND Code of Practice, parents/carers must be included in discussions and fully informed about the Assess, Plan, Do, Review process undertaken in school to meet literacy needs. *See Appendix 5 for further guidance*

4 Educational Psychologist (EP) Involvement

4.1 The majority of children/young people’s needs in this area should be met within the graduated response as described in the SEND Code of Practice within mainstream schools via SEN Support. It is the school’s statutory responsibility to meet these needs from their delegated budget.

Most children and young people’s needs are met using a structured and systematic framework within school that incorporates the recommendations detailed above to varying intensity.

If a child’s difficulties persist despite rigorous assessment and interventions over time, as evidenced by the Assess, Plan, Do, Review process, the school may consider requesting EP involvement.

4.2 EPs will work together with school staff (not necessarily directly with the child) to achieve a better understanding of the factors that may be helping or hindering progress and to identify ways of reducing the barriers to effective learning.

4.3 Where a detailed assessment from an educational psychologist is called for in order to achieve this understanding, the EP will consider the child’s progress using the ‘assessment over time’ model. This is in addition to maintaining an interactionist perspective and a holistic view of the child / young person.

EP involvement aims to develop an overall understanding of the child's needs and relationships.

The EP aims to develop 'working hypotheses' and possible intervention strategies and to help school staff to systematically evaluate the impact of interventions.

4.4 The EP always aims to develop a working partnership with the parents / carers, the young person and the school.

4.5 The assessment will seek information about a number of areas including:

- the learning opportunities the child has had and the teaching methods s/he has experienced
- evaluation of additional support and classroom teaching across the curriculum
- the severity and persistence of the problem with reading and spelling
 - cognitive skills such as memory and processing
 - the role that social and emotional responses, including the child/young person's self-perception and self-esteem, may be playing in contributing to the literacy difficulties

EPs undertaking any detailed assessment will make use of the most recent professional guidelines available to them on appropriate assessment tools as well as up to date research relating to development of literacy skills and the barriers to such development.

The EPS believes that the main aim of EP involvement is to provide an assessment for intervention.

4.6 The assessment will however, clarify difficulties by evaluating the three sections of the British Psychological Society (1999) definition of dyslexia:

- that the pupil is learning/has learnt accurate and fluent word reading and/or spelling very incompletely, or (in older children) continues to have difficulties in applying learnt skills in a classroom context
- that appropriate learning opportunities have been provided
- that progress has been made only as a result of much additional effort/instruction and that difficulties have, nevertheless persisted

4.7 Schools may need support to identify whether a child's needs fall within the dyslexia continuum.

We understand that for some children and/or young people, identification and use of the terms 'dyslexia / on the dyslexia continuum' may help them to understand why they are experiencing difficulties. EPs may use the term 'on the dyslexia continuum' in such instances to support a child/young person, their family and school staff to understand their difficulties and put in place appropriate strategies and interventions.

References

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Websites

Dyslexia Action

<http://www.dyslexiaaction.org.uk/>

Training at various levels designed to strengthen the expertise and confidence of teachers who support students with dyslexia

Education Endowment Foundation

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/>

Guidance Reports - Preparing for literacy (2018); Improving literacy in Key Stage 1 (2020); Improving literacy in Key Stage 2 (2017); and Improving literacy in Secondary Schools (2018)

Inclusion Development Programme (IDP) – Primary and Secondary: Teaching and supporting pupils with dyslexia

<http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/450517>

PATOSS

<http://www.patoss-dyslexia.org/>

The professional association of teachers of students with specific learning difficulties

November 2021

The British Dyslexia Association
<http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/>

The Dyslexia-SPLD Trust
<http://www.interventionsforliteracy.org.uk/> Free online tool listing evidence-based interventions.