Addressing Dyslexia

Definition of dyslexia

The definition of dyslexia has evolved as researchers have gained a better understanding of dyslexia. Recent advances in neuroscience and genomics have led to the current definition put forth by the International Dyslexia Association and adopted by many states: “Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede
growth of vocabulary and background knowledge.” Dyslexia, one of several reading disorders, is a clinical diagnosis and therefore cannot be diagnosed in schools. Thus, the phrase “students with characteristics of dyslexia” is used in this paper. There is much that researchers know about how to serve students with characteristics of dyslexia related to instruction, screening and progress monitoring, and providing support.

**Instruction**

Multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) is an instructional framework that can be used to support all students. In this model, Tier 1 is core or classwide instruction, which must be research based. Reading research shows people do not acquire reading naturally; instead, the phonetic code to the English language must be directly taught.\(^2,3\) Core instruction should include the five pillars of reading development: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.\(^4\)

While all the pillars of reading instruction are important for students with characteristics of dyslexia, phonics instruction is of special note. Core phonics instruction must be explicit, systematic, and sequential.\(^5\)

- **Explicit** - Phonics must be directly taught. Students should not be expected to infer or “pick up” phonics knowledge through exposure to books.

- **Systematic** - Phonics should not be left to chance based on what letters or letter combinations students encounter with curiosity, though curiosity should also be encouraged. They should be taught in a methodical manner.

- **Sequential** - Phonics instruction should follow a research-based curriculum that progresses from simpler skills (e.g., letter-sound relationships) to more complex ones (e.g., vowel patterns).

Explicit, systematic, and sequential phonics instruction in Tier 1 is necessary for almost all students who are learning to read and absolutely vital for students with characteristics of dyslexia. Phonics instruction should accompany, not supplant, other language-rich literacy strategies. At the early elementary level, daily phonics lessons should work alongside read-aloud experiences that include higher-order thinking questions, a vocabulary-rich classroom...
environment, and opportunities for students to read connected text and write with invented spelling.

Even with excellent Tier 1 instruction, some students will need more support to learn to read: this is called a supplemental, or Tier 2, intervention. Students in a Tier 2 intervention meet in a small group with a teacher anywhere from 3-5 times per week and for a duration of 15-99 sessions. Students with characteristics of dyslexia benefit from targeted intervention according to their area of need. If a student is below a “cut score” on a literacy screening assessment, then their area of need should be pinpointed. Students with characteristics of dyslexia may need additional phonics instruction or another intervention due to secondary effects of dyslexia (e.g., support with comprehension or vocabulary).

Finally, some students need ongoing support or Tier 3 intervention. The most effective Tier 3 interventions for elementary students with characteristics of dyslexia are focused on phonics, taught by licensed teachers, and implemented one on one, though small groups can also be effective.

Screening and Progress Monitoring

Screening in schools is the process of using assessment data to identify students at risk for poor learning outcomes or challenging behavior. Assessing students’ reading difficulties typically occurs in a two-stage process. The first stage, universal screening, is a brief, valid and reliable assessment of grade-level reading skills for all students. For example, all second graders may take a reading fluency test to determine how many words they read per minute. Students who score below a school-determined “cut score” on the universal screener then receive targeted interventions and undergo the second stage of assessment.

The second stage involves ongoing testing known as progress monitoring. Instead of grade-level skills, students receive weekly or bi-weekly tests in a particular reading skill they are working on in their intervention (for examples of skills targeted in intervention, see Instruction section). This process allows teachers to see whether or not their students’ reading is improving over time and decide what each student needs next.

Progress monitoring data may reveal that a student is responding positively to their intervention and as a result can receive less intensive support. If the data show that a student is not making progress, teachers must make changes to the intervention based on the student’s needs – for example, working with the student on a more foundational skill or conducting the intervention.
in a smaller group. Students who display characteristics of dyslexia may show growth, but will likely continue to require and benefit from ongoing, individualized reading support. Screening and progress monitoring are both essential to accurately determine which students display characteristics of dyslexia. Screening ensures that all students struggling in reading are identified and receive support. Progress monitoring is essential to determine which students experience persistent difficulties in reading despite this support. Fortunately, schools in many states are required to use this rigorous screening and progress monitoring process to identify students displaying characteristics of dyslexia.

**Supports**

Though people with characteristics of dyslexia can become proficient readers with data-based, individualized instruction, dyslexia does not go away. For students with characteristics of dyslexia to experience success in school, accommodations and social-emotional supports are necessary. The following highlights some potential actions:

- Allow students to dictate answers verbally.
- Offer audiobook options in conjunction with written text.
- Provide audio recorders for students to verbally record the rough draft of writing projects.
- Consider multisensory options for instruction.
- Provide verbal or pictorial instructions, alongside written instructions.
- Allow the use of speech-to-text software in some instances.
- Reduce distractions (auditory or visual).
- Teach organization and study strategies, such as using highlighters, color coding, and visualization or retelling shortly after a lecture.
- Promote self-efficacy by teaching students about growth mindset, in which effort is valued over innate talent.
- Encourage positive self-image by pairing a student with characteristics of dyslexia with a successful adult who had similar struggles and is willing to serve as a mentor/role model.
- Suggest to parents that their child select audiobooks related to their interests to increase their enjoyment of reading and oral vocabulary.
Schoolwide/Districtwide Recommendations

• Seek state guidance in selecting a universal screener assessment to administer to all students every fall and spring.
• Implement a consistent phonics curriculum across Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 settings whenever possible. Students should not use one program of phonics in their classroom and another program of phonics for an additional Tier 2 or Tier 3 intervention.
• Provide staff development for teachers in explicit, systematic, sequential phonics instruction, especially in grades K-3.
• Provide staff development for teachers of secondary students, including those in content areas, on phonics techniques for decoding multisyllabic words, and utilizing information on Latin/Greek root words to aid comprehension of vocabulary words.
• Provide resources for teachers and parents seeking more information on dyslexia (see starred references for ideas).
References


Additional References

Minnesota Department of Education. (2015). Navigating the school system when a child is struggling with reading problems or dyslexia: Answers to frequently asked questions about providing evidenced-based supports for students with dyslexia and those who struggle with reading. Retrieved from https://mra.onefireplace.org/Resources/Documents/dyslexia-guide_FINAL-accessible.pdf