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Dyslexia and the implications for 14–19 and adult learning

Chapter overview

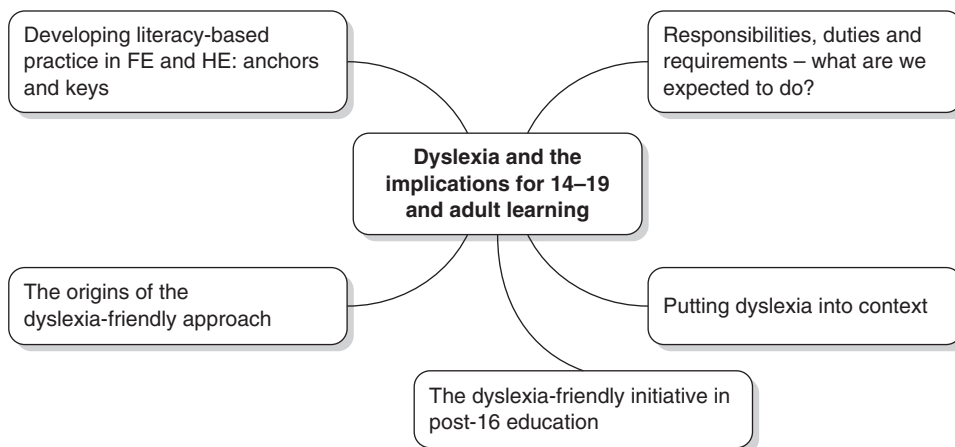


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Responsibilities, duties and requirements – what are we expected to do?

The provision of a state education system is an act of social engineering based on social and political beliefs that the intervention offered therein will improve quality of life, both for individuals and for society as a whole. Underpinning this is a conception of society which may or may not be questioned by educators themselves. Currently, educational function in the UK is focused on the targets of developing expertise in STEM subjects

(science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and on employability and entrepreneurship, supporting a vision of an economy based upon the generation and development of ideas and knowledge.

Policies and guidance underpin this movement, promoting lifelong learning and widening participation. For learners with difficulties and/or disabilities, the world of education has duties to provide access and to promote equality of opportunity. Included within these are the duty to make special adjustments and the duty not to treat disabled people less favourably, even to the point of treating learners with disabilities and difficulties more favourably (DRC, 2005: 23).

In the UK, the 2001 SEN and Disability Act amended the Disability Discrimination Act of 1995, becoming Part IV of that act, thereby extending the DDA 1995 to include provisions for education. A further statutory instrument, which carries the same legal obligation as the act itself, brought in regulations for further and higher education in 2006. These legislative provisions bring the UK in line with the European Employment Framework Directive (DRC, 2007: iv), contributing to a suite of initiatives, policies and legislative actions, intended to lead towards employability and employment for a wider population. Added to this is the continuing importance of literacy, and accordingly dyslexia has gained an increasingly higher profile.

The trend towards a changing population in FE and HE is not without resistance. It may therefore come as a surprise to some that legislation and policy have firmly settled on the side of learners with difficulties and/or disabilities. For many people, when, or if, they think about disability it is with a view to treating students 'fairly'. However, this is not only incorrect, it is dangerous for institutions.

From time to time the popular media may carry accusations of unfairness when adjustments are made to take account of disability, particularly in the case of dyslexia. This is particularly the case when the argument is directed against learners who seem to be unfairly advantaged, perhaps because their dyslexia is towards the milder end of the range, as is frequently the case in HE. This is because the concepts of social justice, upon which reasonable adjustments are based, are not widely understood. These concepts are founded upon earlier ideas about the politics of recognition and the politics of distribution. The origins of these may be attributed to Rawls' work in considering justice through distribution (first principle) and then advantageous redistribution (second principle) in *A Theory of Justice* to Taylor's work ('The politics of recognition') and to Honneth's work on the concept of justice through recognition, which could itself include redistribution. In brief, the redistribution concept is based upon the perspective of fair shares, while the recognition concept is based upon the perspective of making special arrangements and particular adjustments in favour of disadvantaged people, in this case, people experiencing dyslexia.

There should be no doubt that present-day policy, practice and legislation are oriented around the politics of recognition. Anything else operates against disadvantaged groups and individuals; fair shares are not fair when one sector of the population is disadvantaged already. However, there are other challenges of unfairness in the popular perception of dyslexia. These come from

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the continuing scepticism that surrounds dyslexia, and has its origins in the lack of certainty about what dyslexia is, or might be, how we understand and describe it and how we assess it.

Putting dyslexia into context

The understanding of dyslexia continues to develop and evolve, yet the dyslexia debate continues, with no definition currently in existence that completely satisfies all interested parties. This is partly as a result of the different discourses within dyslexia, both psychological and sociological, and partly because there is, as yet, no complete agreement as to the nature of dyslexia. Denials of dyslexia generally turn out to be challenges to the way dyslexia is discussed or assessed. In consequence, there is no guarantee that discussions about dyslexia are considering the same factors. Contributing to this disparity is the fact that there are views of dyslexia that consider it to be a cause, while others see it as an effect.

A fundamental issue in dyslexia remains that of whether dyslexia is a separate entity, a characteristic that exists in some learners and not in others, or whether it is the expression of the extreme end of the range of difficulty in acquisition of literacy skills. The latter argument might merge with the former by considering whether there may be a point in this range where the difficulty becomes so extreme that it can be identified as a characteristic in its own right. However, this view would need to be explored further.

A further key issue is the point that conceptualisations of dyslexia are so wide and varied that they seem not to be describing one particular phenomenon. Consequently for some, dyslexia might now be understood as an umbrella term, while others focus upon subtypes (about which also there is a lack of strong agreement) or upon consideration of whether the main dyslexia theories can be reconciled.

Regardless of the conceptualisation of dyslexia, there is no doubt that for some people the skills of literacy acquisition are very difficult, to the extent that they may consider themselves, or be considered by others, as illiterate. It is also clear that this difficulty is particularly resistant to regular teaching and learning for literacy, but may also be both unusual and striking in terms of other skills and potential for learning that a person might have. Discussions continue as to whether other characteristics, such as creativity or practical ability, are associated with dyslexia in any firm way.

Whether it is conceptualised as a disability, difficulty or difference, dyslexia is a hidden characteristic and the time and effort spent on checking, double-checking and correcting by people who experience dyslexia is not noticed by others and therefore not respected or understood. Further, the support now available to dyslexic learners in FE and HE may be viewed simplistically as compensating for dyslexia, so that it effectively disappears. This is not the case. Dyslexia continues and while many learners overcome their difficulties brilliantly, this still requires time, effort and practice, and causes additional fatigue.

The education system attempts to provide a safety net, recognising the increasing importance of literacy in the modern world. In addition, a reconsideration of the developmental process of learning as embodied in the Lifelong Learning initiative now supports the view that it is never too late to learn. So while it is unlikely that a person with severely reduced literacy skills will be studying in HE, there may be students whose higher level literacy skills were acquired later in their lives, and who have taken advantage of Access programmes. Additionally, FE colleges and independent providers of work-based training may find, within their intake, learners with only a rudimentary level of literacy. For some students their literacy difficulty is likely to be owing to unidentified dyslexia.

The origins of the dyslexia-friendly approach

The British Dyslexia Association's (BDA) dyslexia-friendly initiative in local authorities and schools, launched in 1999, received a positive response. Five years later it was followed by a quality mark process aimed at local authorities. The dyslexia-friendly approach did more than move the focus of provision into schools; it included the environmental aspects of the learning setting, by seeking to make learning more accessible to children and young people experiencing dyslexia. It also caught the mood of the ethical and philosophical change that was pervading education through increasing awareness of the social rights model of disability. The social model supports the view that while an individual may experience impairments, it is the social situation, both practical and attitudinal, that is disabling.

The dyslexia-friendly approach does not take an individual-deficit focus, and this may present some difficulties to people who prefer such a view. The dyslexia-friendly approach places the emphasis upon creating a learning setting, from the top down, that is sensitive to the learning requirements in dyslexia. It includes the belief that effective teaching for learners with dyslexia is effective teaching for all learners with special educational needs, learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Much of the initiative is concerned with creating a supporting ethos with an inbuilt expectation that this will develop and grow, pervading the whole learning setting. This expectation extends to elements in the infrastructure, including those within local authority policy and practice.

The dyslexia friendly initiative in post-16 education

The dyslexia-friendly approach expects that what is good for dyslexic learners is good for all learners. The possibility of gaining the BDA's dyslexia-friendly quality mark has now been extended to FE colleges and college departments, and to independent trainers and providers, transferring dyslexia-friendly principles to the post-16 setting. The mission statement for FE is:

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To promote excellent practice by the college as it carries out its role of supporting and challenging its staff to improve accessibility for more learners. (BDA, n.d.)

For practitioners this includes sharing good practice and encouraging colleagues to review their practice in the classroom. This removes inherent barriers to learning and thereby increases the opportunities for learners with specific learning difficulties, including dyslexia, to achieve their educational goals.

The FE and training provider protocols are very similar. As with the LA Quality Mark process, the institution or department assesses its dyslexia-friendly characteristics against four categories: focusing, developing, established and enhancing. The process is comprehensive, addressing pre-determined standards in the following five areas:

- the effectiveness of the management structure
- the identification of dyslexia/SpLD
- the effectiveness of resources (physical environment, teaching and learning)
- continuing professional development
- partnership with learners, parents or carers and external agencies.

These are matched against the development criteria. Guidance from the BDA clarifies these, confirming that the meaning of 'focusing' is that an area requiring further development has been identified; 'developing' indicates that work in the relevant area is progressing; 'established' means that identified dyslexia-friendly processes are taking place as standard; and 'enhancing' means that practice that is taking place beyond the level required by the standard.

Like other quality mark procedures, assessment is carried out by a self-audit, supported by documentary evidence. This is scrutinised by verifiers and the paper evidence is augmented by interviews and discussion. As with the LA and school Quality Mark processes, the aim is to raise the standard of dyslexia awareness and practice, and to embed it throughout colleges and training establishments, rather than consigning it solely to the province of specialists.

Developing literacy-based practice in FE and HE: anchors and keys

For professionals in FE and HE trying to negotiate the territory of reasonable adjustment, fair treatment and the demands of marking criteria in dealing with the written work of students who may experience dyslexia, it is useful to know of the points at which discussion no longer applies. These points are 'givens' and are incontrovertible (or nearly so), thus they are described here as 'anchors':

- 1 The politics of recognition, giving rise to legislation and policy expressed in the duty to anticipate the need for reasonable adjustments.
- 2 Avoid switching modes during assessment. This means avoiding a change in style of answer or a change such as moving from looking for positives

(for example, looking for features that are alike) to looking for negatives in a task (for example, looking for features that are different), without warning the reader.

- 3 The descriptors of scholarship and academic attainments that form the QAA's academic framework (QAA, 2001; 2008) and that are given expression via institutions' marking criteria.
- 4 Rights under the Disability Discrimination Act, as amended by the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA) 2001 and revised in 2005. These rights apply to all students studying within the UK, whatever their country of origin;
- 5 Codes of Practice and practice guides, especially those of QAA, DRC, and SEN, plus the dyslexia policies predicated upon these.
- 6 Students' learning support agreements, or individual learning plans, which indicate what professionals should do to meet students' learning needs.

Knowledge about these anchors and of what they consist, can and should be applied to professional work in FE and HE to ensure dyslexia-friendly practice in written work and in all scholastic tasks. The following 'keys' to dyslexia-friendly practice clarify how these principles may be applied.

In assessment tasks we can:

- present assessment tasks so that they are easy to read and follow
- avoid switching modes during the assessment (e.g. from looking for positives to looking for negatives in a task) without giving strong advance signals
- vary the methods of assessment (e.g. by using portfolios, presentations, posters, etc.)
- arrange assessment feedback so that students know how to make progress, (e.g. by target setting.)

In an assignment tutorial or seminar we can:

- graphically organise, e.g. by using Mind Maps® (Buzan 2007), the assignment for an individual, group or class, converting it to a list if some find that easier to follow
- ask students to verbalise their assignment ideas; we can then graphically organise or otherwise record what they say as discussion progresses (preferably on tinted card), then give them the notes of their own words to take away
- avoid assuming that starting points or key points are the same for the tutor and the student. Linear thought may have less relevance or clarity for a dyslexic student than for the tutor leading the discussion.

In teaching and lecturing we can:

- use multisensory methods
- 'chunk' the tasks
- give the 'big picture' before linear progression

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- take care with font size and style
- arrange text in small blocks and place these near relevant pictures or diagrams
- allow extra time
- use and offer tinted paper as standard
- give handouts in advance
- avoid setting long copying tasks
- avoid expecting students to take copious notes
- find ways of teaching that do not depend on pencil and paper tasks
- look for quality rather than quantity.

The debate: is there such a thing as dyslexia?

Arguments continue as to whether there is or is not such a thing as dyslexia. Debate is framed around the lack of agreed understanding about what does or does not constitute its characteristics and how these may be identified. Challenges are made on the basis of descriptors being too wide and vague, or the means of assessment being compromised by bias or weakness, or the lack of an agreed definition, which may be seen as proof that no single characteristic called 'dyslexia' can be said to exist.

In contrast, policies and preferences that do not use the term dyslexia may be denounced as avoidances, pretences and excuses for not helping learners. Such policies may actually be based on decisions not to use a term that seems ambiguous, or on a wish to focus upon providing help rather than a label, or on a resource model that seeks to support learners in accordance with their level of need. The debate continues in spite of any government willingness to use the term 'dyslexia' and recognise its existence as a discrete condition.

Key technique: create a dyslexia-friendly learning setting

In FE and HE a room or venue is not 'owned' by a practitioner in the same way as is a classroom in a school. Some rooms may become accustomed territory when they are regularly used and others are purpose built for specific study. Nevertheless, good practice suggests that learning and study environments should be dyslexia-friendly, and minimise the barriers to learning that can be inadvertently put in place. The departmental self-evaluation/audit tool in Appendix 2 provides a checklist to enable practitioners to do this. It includes sections on: text resources available in the classroom, study room or lecture theatre; room arrangements; affective aspects; room interactions; and general teaching and learning for good dyslexia-friendly practice. The audit tool can be used on an individual level, but as a dyslexia-friendly principle the process should be used by all, and has therefore been framed around departmental or group practice.

What does the Code of Practice say about making reasonable adjustments?

All the Codes support the need to make adjustments for students with difficulties and/or disabilities such as dyslexia. *The Disability Discrimination Act 1995: Code of Practice Post-16* (DRC, 2007) devotes much of its content to this matter. It points out that the duty to anticipate the need to make reasonable adjustments for disabled students is not just focused upon study but extends to all aspects of the educational experience. This includes relationships when someone is no longer a student at the institution, such as when they are invited back to a post-graduation event (DRC, 2007; para 9.51).



Case study: who tutors the tutor?

Dyslexia-friendly FE and HE are not only about supporting students; staff may also experience dyslexia. Mike, aged 42, was working as a support tutor when the head of his department asked him to raise the level of his dyslexia qualification through part-time study, telling him that the institution was willing to cover the fee. As a person who experienced dyslexia himself, Mike, in his role as student, underwent a needs assessment and gained support from his local authority in the form of a computer and software, and a book allowance. However, he found himself in a difficult position when it came to the kind of support that he himself would have given his students. There was no one to talk to about his studies, or to ask for advice, or to help him to improve his written expression. Some techniques he knew from his own work, but he found it hard to apply these to his own studies.


The FE dyslexia specialist comments

There should have been the provision in place for tutor support as part of the needs assessment to be funded by the local authority (LA). The institution should support Mike by helping him to find a private tutor; after all, this is professional development for the benefit of the employers and its 'customers', who are the students. Course teaching teams could provide additional tutorials to ensure understanding of assignments and course topics.

The HE dyslexia specialist comments

If the needs assessor has judged that Mike needs specialist tuition and the local authority has approved this, Mike could then contact the LA and ask if he could find his own specialist tutor and the tutor could bill the LA directly. This would give Mike the freedom to choose an appropriate tutor, perhaps from the Association of Dyslexia Specialists in Higher Education (ADSHE) forum.

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 Points for discussion

- Is the request from Mike's head of department a reasonable one?
- Whose responsibility is it to support Mike in his studies?
- As a professional working in the field of dyslexia, should Mike be able to manage his own study needs?
- Should Mike remind his programme tutors occasionally about his dyslexia?

The outcome was that Mike continued to manage his studies on his own. A learning support agreement for him was on file, but there is no knowing whether all his tutors had seen it, or having seen it, remembered its provisions. His head of department believed that Mike had access to everything he needed and could supplement assistive technology with his own professional knowledge. For Mike the experience of this higher level study was arduous, time consuming and fatiguing. He needed the full amount of time of time available to him to complete the course and the experience was challenging, but ultimately he achieved his higher level qualification.

 Summary

- 1 Widening participation, Access, and lifelong learning policies, together with national drives to increase literacy, mean that more young people with identified difficulties and disabilities, and more adults of all ages, are entering FE and HE. A proportion of new students will be identified as experiencing dyslexia, either before or during their studies.
- 2 Duties reside in legislation, regulation and policy, and are based upon a perception of justice through recognition. These duties are clarified in the relevant Codes of Practice. They place responsibilities on all practitioners, not just to respond to student's learning needs, but to anticipate them, even to the point of making advantageous arrangements.
- 3 Debate continues, both about the nature of dyslexia and about the existence of dyslexia as a separate characteristic. Nevertheless, regardless of debate or opinion, there are duties for professionals in FE and HE to support learners identified with dyslexia.

Further reading 

Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2004) *A Framework for Understanding Dyslexia*. Annesley: DfES Publications.

Pollak, D. (2005) *Dyslexia, the Self, and Higher Education*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.

Reid, G., Fawcett, A., Manis, F. and Seigel, L. (eds) (2008) *The Sage Handbook of Dyslexia*. London: Sage.

Assistive software

The graphical representation at the start of this chapter is constructed with Mindjet software. This is one of several alternative packages available to aid the graphic organisation of work and could be used by practitioners and students alike. Mindjet is available from: www.mindjet.com/en-GB.

With one-to-one tuition you [the student] can set the agenda, work through a series of issues, and plan your work ahead. I think where individual help can be given, you're better for it because it's an invaluable tool. Bernadette