

Chapter 1

Dyslexia: The Context

This opening chapter will set the scene for this edition of the book. Since the fifth edition in 2016, there have been a great deal of changes in the UK and elsewhere, regarding all aspects of dyslexia particularly in the definitions, assessments and interventions. There has been a great deal of interest in dyslexia from government circles, particularly noted in local and national initiatives, assessment processes, interventions and professional training. These will be commented on throughout this book. This first chapter will therefore define dyslexia and discuss the range of research and some of the issues that teachers, assessors, parents and management have to consider. Additionally, the chapter will provide a focus on the key area of positive dyslexia, looking at what people with dyslexia *can* do, not what they can't do and also discuss the concept of neurodiversity and the implications of this for individuals in both education and life in general.

Defining Dyslexia

One of the questions I raised at the beginning of the fifth edition of this book is, 'can we define dyslexia and should we attempt this'? It was felt that the concept was so broad that attempting to define it in several paragraphs would be misleading and perhaps futile. Since then, however, the landscape has changed considerably. The impact of research journals, individual initiatives and powerful pressure groups, led in part by the significant discussions and determination of UK nationally recognised organisations—e.g. The SpLD Assessment Standards Committee (SASC), Professional Association of Teachers Of Students with Specific learning difficulties (PATOSS), British Dyslexia Association (BDA), Dyslexia Action, the Helen Arkell Dyslexia Charity (HADDC), and many others such as Positive Dyslexia Ltd. (<https://www.positivedyslexia.co.uk/>), has resulted in undeniable acceptance, clarity, collaboration and a much clearer vision of the concept and our understanding of dyslexia. Additionally, we have seen developments in our understanding of the concept of neurodiversity and the positive strengths associated with those individuals hitherto labelled as having a 'learning disability'.

Definition by Consensus

After much effort, including lengthy discussions over a period of several years grappling with the multiple issues associated with a dyslexia definition, a working group initiated and led by SASC was able to provide a new definition that has been by and large accepted nationally in the UK. It was able to formally respond to many of the issues that have clouded the concept of dyslexia for many years, and it is now fair to say that these have been addressed in a positive and conciliatory manner through the Delphi process¹ led by the team nominated by SASC.

The work of SASC on this (see following paragraph) has been timely, as there has been a continuing movement of change in the UK regarding assessment, interventions and policy and practice, as well as an increasing range of different perspectives on dyslexia and associated challenges. It is interesting to note that a similar process of developing a new updated definition of dyslexia was also addressed by the International Dyslexia Association in the USA (Catts and Haynes, 2026).

The SASC working party which ran from 2021 to 2023 represents the most notable advancement on dyslexia for decades, and the subsequent report became the basis for the Delphi Definition of Dyslexia (Carroll et al., 2024). The authors indicated that ‘The nature and developmental trajectory of dyslexia depends on multiple genetic and environmental influences’. Some of the points made had already been incorporated in established views and perceptions of dyslexia, such as ‘Dyslexic difficulties exist on a continuum and can be experienced to various degrees of severity’ and ‘Dyslexia frequently co-occurs with one or more other developmental difficulties, including developmental language disorder, dyscalculia, ADHD, and developmental coordination disorder’. Additionally, other pointers such as ‘In dyslexia, some or all aspects of literacy attainment are weak in relation to age, standard teaching and instruction, and level of other attainments’ and ‘The nature and developmental trajectory of dyslexia depends on multiple genetic and environmental influences’ are also quite widely accepted.

The authors however are more explicit in the role of fluency and indicate that ‘across languages and age groups, difficulties in reading and spelling fluency are key markers of dyslexia’. This clearly has implications for assessment practices and intervention. Additionally, although it has been widely accepted that phonological difficulties are key markers in dyslexia, the authors indicate that ‘phonological difficulties do not fully explain the variability that is observed’. Similarly, the authors are explicit in noting that working memory and processing speed that were also seen as key markers may have a lesser role, but they do indicate that ‘working memory, processing speed and orthographic skills can contribute to the impact of dyslexia’. This is different from ‘do’ impact! But it is still widely accepted that many children and adults with dyslexia will have some working memory and processing speed issues.

¹ The Delphi process is a structured forecasting method that uses a panel of experts to reach a consensus on a topic through multiple rounds of anonymous questionnaires.

The new definition of dyslexia is as follows:

(<https://www.sasc.org.uk/media/3imfgx54/sasc-briefing-paper-delphi-dyslexia-study-may-2024-final.pdf> [accessed November 2025]).

- Dyslexia is primarily a set of processing difficulties that affect the acquisition of reading and spelling.
- In dyslexia, some or all aspects of literacy attainment are weak in relation to age, standard teaching and instruction, and level of other attainments.
- Across languages and age groups, difficulties in reading and spelling fluency are a key marker of dyslexia.
- The nature and developmental trajectory of dyslexia depend on multiple genetic and environmental influences.
- Dyslexic difficulties exist on a continuum and can be experienced to various degrees of severity.
- Dyslexia can affect the acquisition of other skills, such as mathematics, reading comprehension or learning another language.
- The most commonly observed cognitive impairment in dyslexia is a difficulty in phonological processing (i.e. in phonological awareness, phonological processing speed or phonological memory). However, phonological difficulties do not fully explain the variability that is observed.
- Working memory, orthographic skills and processing speed problems can contribute to the impact of dyslexia and therefore should be assessed.
- Dyslexia frequently co-occurs with one or more other developmental difficulties, including developmental language disorder, dyscalculia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and developmental coordination disorder.

SASC have subdivided this as follows:

The Delphi Definition of Dyslexia

Nature

- The nature and developmental trajectory of dyslexia depend on multiple genetic and environmental influences.

Manifestation

- Dyslexia is a set of processing difficulties that affect the acquisition of reading and spelling. The most commonly observed cognitive impairment in dyslexia is a difficulty in phonological processing (i.e. in phonological awareness, phonological processing speed or phonological memory). However, phonological difficulties do not fully explain the variability that is observed. Working memory, processing speed and orthographic skills can contribute to the impact of dyslexia.

Impact

- In dyslexia, some or all aspects of literacy attainment are weak in relation to age, standard teaching and instruction, and level of other attainments. Across languages and age groups, difficulties in reading and spelling fluency are a key marker of dyslexia.

Variance and co-occurrence

- Dyslexic difficulties exist on a continuum and can be experienced to various degrees of severity. Dyslexia can affect the acquisition of other skills, such as mathematics, reading comprehension or learning another language. Dyslexia frequently co-occurs with one or more other developmental difficulties, including developmental language disorder, dyscalculia, ADHD and developmental coordination disorder.

From <https://www.sasc.org.uk/media/3imfgx54/sasc-briefing-paper-delphi-dyslexia-study-may-2024-final.pdf>

The HADC asks, ‘what has this study achieved?’ (McMullen, HADC, 2024). They suggest that it has accomplished the following:

A definition of dyslexia that:

- reflects current scientific knowledge that has been achieved by consensus,
- highlights fluency as a key marker across all ages and languages,
- emphasises the range of underlying processing difficulties that impact the development of reading and spelling skills,
- focuses on co-occurrence and secondary consequences, and it can be translated into workable guidelines for assessment, identification and education policy.

Muter (2025) on discussing the latest developments in defining dyslexia agrees that it is not appropriate to define this in a few paragraphs, and she responds to this by presenting 10 key questions about literacy disorders. She suggests that we need to distinguish between dyslexia (word-level literacy difficulties) with children who read accurately but cannot understand or remember what they have read (often referred to as hyperlexia). She also mentions key points from the Delphi definition, such as processing difficulties, weak age-related attainments, difficulty with fluency, the continuum of difficulties and the multiple genetic and environmental influences that can impact the presence of dyslexia. She also notes the impact of dyslexia on other areas such as maths, challenges in phonological processing, the potential impact of working memory, processing speed and orthographic difficulties, and the well-known issue of overlap/co-occurrence with other areas such as ADHD.

Positive Approaches to Dyslexia

One of the earliest pioneers in this area was Tom West, whose landmark book *In the Mind's Eye* (1997) provided a launch pad for a new wave of research into the positive aspects of dyslexia. Perhaps one of the more refreshing statements regarding the potential attributes

of people with dyslexia is made by West himself when he says, ‘it is becoming increasingly clear [that much of the success attributed to people with dyslexia] is because of the dyslexia, not in spite of it’ (West, 2014, p. 78). West goes on to say that for years now we ‘have too often focused on fixing the problems—and have totally ignored the development of talents’ (p. 87).

These points have been acknowledged and extended by a range of professionals working in this area. Organisations such as Positive Dyslexia Ltd. (<https://www.positivedyslexia.co.uk/>), ‘Succeed with Dyslexia’ (<https://www.succeedwithdyslexia.org/>), ‘Made by Dyslexia’ (<https://www.madebydyslexia.org/>) and many others have conceptualised positive dyslexia as the main basis of their professional activities.

Another useful source of information is the Dyslexia Advantage website (<http://www.dyslexicadvantage.org>). This website highlights why it is important to understand the advantages of dyslexia and helps children and adults gain personal insights into their own learning traits, thereby providing the means for them to become independent, more insightful and more successful learners.

Universities have also developed a positive angle to the range of support offered. For example, the University of Southampton, School of Health Sciences, has provided an informative booklet for students on placement practice that underscores the positive aspects of dyslexia while also recognising other factors such as the emotional impact of dyslexia, aspects of organisation and time management, and literacy factors. The approach is both theoretically sound and pragmatic—they emphasise that ‘dyslexia affects students in different ways and strategies that might have worked for one studentmay not be helpful for another’ (p. 1). They acknowledged as many other now do that ‘dyslexia people are often considered as having a different way of thinking and learning. They can have a variety of strengths which they can draw on to develop strategies: an ability to think holistically and see the big picture, creativity and imagination ... and good problem-solving skills’ (p. 3). (Supporting dyslexic students on practice placements: for the use of supervisors/mentors working with students on health and social care courses www.soton.ac.uk/studentsupport/ldc)

Dyslexia: A Range of Characteristics

To reiterate in the fifth edition of this book, I asked how do we define dyslexia. I responded to that question by suggesting, ‘do we really need to define dyslexia?’ The point made here and noted in the previous section is that dyslexia can have a different meaning and impact for different children and adults. For some, it can be a problem transferring their knowledge into written work. For others, it can be a desire to read books, but not getting past the first page and for others, the main issues can be relating to difficulties retaining information and planning and organising their lives and their study. This can relate to challenges with executive functioning. Some people believe that the characteristics of dyslexia have shaped and defined their personality and the choices they have made in study and life. For example, some very successful adults with dyslexia may be reluctant to accept promotion and career advancement because they have lost an element of self-belief and are reluctant

to try something new in case of failure. There can also be the feeling of frustration, confusion and perhaps embarrassment, although most specialists and many teachers trained in dyslexia are now aware of this and can do much to pre-empt and diminish the impact of this. All accredited courses in the UK on dyslexia will have an element on self-esteem and will reinforce the view that a positive self-esteem can hold the key to success for many children with dyslexia.

Definitions in Practice

Definitions of dyslexia have the potential to be cumbersome, lengthy and over-generalised and therefore can turn out to be quite vague. For education and research purposes, however, a definition is necessary. Definitions can help to provide a label that, for many, can kickstart the support process. For adults with dyslexia, it can help them develop self-knowledge and eventually coping strategies. For teachers, it can provide explanations as to why the child may not be responding to the intervention provided. A definition therefore can be an important catalyst in this process. This is why it is important to emphasise the positive aspects of dyslexia, and that is why a widely accepted definition such as the Delphi definition can act as a creditable launchpad for parents, teachers and the individual child or adult.

The problem, however, lies in the lack of a universally accepted definition of dyslexia. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) (American Psychological Association, 2013) does not help the cause much as 'specific learning disorder' is now the generic term to be used for reading, writing and mathematical difficulties. There are certainly sub-categories, but the authors of the DSM see the generic term as a positive aspect and believe that it is less restrictive and less limiting than previously. DSM-5 indicates that the diagnosis requires persistent difficulties in reading, writing, arithmetic or mathematical reasoning skills during the formal years of schooling. Symptoms may include inaccurate or slow and effortful reading, poor written expression that lacks clarity, difficulties remembering number facts or inaccurate mathematical reasoning.

A very crucial comment made in the factsheet that accompanies DSM-5 suggests that the many definitions of dyslexia (and dyscalculia) mean that those terms would not be useful as disorder names or for diagnostic criteria.

As indicated earlier, dyslexia is multifaceted, and that cannot be accurately and usefully explained in a universally accepted single definition, but the Delphi definition is as close as one needs to be and clearly pinpoints the key areas and characteristics of dyslexia.

This has also been taken up very strongly by the International Dyslexia Association (IDA). After a lengthy period of discussion and a rigorous, collaborative process reflecting the latest research and the lived experiences of individuals with dyslexia, they formed the definition below. The respondents in the formation of the new definition included people with dyslexia and those with a personal relationship to them (e.g. parents, siblings and spouse), administrators, advocates, evaluators, teachers, researchers and policymakers. Secondary consequences of dyslexia, e.g. reading comprehension, have been quite problematic about whether these should be included in a definition. However, over 80% of the respondents in the research sample were adamant that these should be included. Catts and Haynes (2025, 2026), who presented on the development of the new definition, stated

that the sample detailed how this should be included and that secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth in vocabulary and background knowledge. They also indicated that this point about secondary consequences is also validated by the Rose Report (2009) and the UK Delphi definition (2025). (<https://www.patoss-dyslexia.org>).

The definition that was formed by the IDA is shown below.

‘Dyslexia is a specific learning disability characterized by difficulties in word reading and/or spelling that involve accuracy, speed, or both and vary depending on the orthography. These difficulties occur along a continuum of severity and persist even with instruction that is effective for the individual’s peers. The causes of dyslexia are complex and involve combinations of genetic, neurobiological, and environmental influences that interact throughout development. Underlying difficulties with phonological and morphological processing are common but not universal, and early oral language weaknesses often foreshadow literacy challenges. Secondary consequences include reading comprehension problems and reduced reading and writing experience that can impede growth in language, knowledge, written expression, and overall academic achievement. Psychological well-being and employment opportunities also may be affected. Although identification and targeted instruction are important at any age, language and literacy support before and during the early years of education is particularly effective’.

(<https://dyslexiaida.org/2025-dyslexia-definition-project/#:~:text=IDA%202025%20Definition%20of%20Dyslexia,vary%20depending%20on%20the%20orthography> [accessed November 2025]). It is also important to note that 99% of the sample were in favour of literacy support before and during the early years being included (Catts and Haynes, 2025). They also proposed that the aim of the new definition, with references to parents and persons with dyslexia, is that it would give them validation—in that the struggles of persons with dyslexia are real and not due to lack of effort. In relation to the different causes of dyslexia, they maintained that blame of any kind should not be apportioned and proposed that targeted instruction will work and progress is possible at any age.

In Scotland, a new definition was also formed (2025) and developed by the Scottish Government, Dyslexia Scotland, the Cross-Party Group on Dyslexia in the Scottish Parliament and a wide range of stakeholders. The Delphi definition was considered, and the two definitions are similar, although the Scottish group acknowledged that the contexts and systems differed. The Scottish Working Definition of Dyslexia is below:

‘Dyslexia can be described as a continuum of difficulties in learning to read, write and/or spell, which persist despite the provision of appropriate learning opportunities. These difficulties often do not reflect an individual’s cognitive abilities and may not be typical of performance in other areas. The impact of dyslexia as a barrier to learning varies in degree according to the learning, teaching and working environment, as there are often associated difficulties such as: auditory and/or visual processing of language-based information, phonological processing—awareness, processing speed and or memory, oral language skills and reading fluency, short-term and working memory, sequencing and directionality, number skills, organisational ability. Motor skills and co-ordination may also be affected. Dyslexia exists in all cultures and across the range of abilities and socio-economic backgrounds. It is a hereditary, life-long, neurodevelopmental condition that can impact on well-being. ‘Unidentified, dyslexia is likely to result in low self-esteem, high stress, atypical

behaviour, and low achievement. Learners with dyslexia will benefit from early identification, inclusive ethos, approaches and environments, appropriate intervention and support' (<https://addressingdyslexia.org/what-is-dyslexia/> [accessed November 2025]).

A great deal of impetus for dealing with dyslexia in Scotland came from the Making Sense: Dyslexia and Inclusive Practice Programme 2014 to 2019 and the subsequent publication of the report in January 2020 (<https://www.gov.scot/publications/making-sense-programme-final-report/pages/2/>), which reviewed the progress since 2014.

The Making Sense Programme focused on supporting schools and local authorities to embed approaches which support dyslexia and literacy difficulties within their literacy and wider inclusion strategies with the aim of supporting all learners. The progress report noted that the National Development Officer, working collaboratively with Dyslexia Scotland and partners, has supported local authorities to develop their policies, approaches and professional learning on dyslexia and inclusive practice, and this included a wide range of initiatives. One such initiative includes a free online module for teachers on Introduction to Dyslexia and Inclusive Practice.

One major advance in Scotland included the refreshing of the Addressing Dyslexia Toolkit in 2017, including improving the navigational experience for practitioners, increasing access to the Toolkit on a range of digital devices such as mobile phones and tablets and providing professional learning opportunities. The development and review of the Toolkit is an ongoing process.

The important point is that this shows a clear government commitment and moreover an endeavour to work with associations and groups such as Dyslexia Scotland and other stakeholders, including those with dyslexia and families.

Sir Jackie Stewart, who for many years has been, and still is, a strong advocate for dyslexia and commented positively on previous editions of this book, said:

'I cannot emphasise how important it is for all teachers—and I mean all teachers—to use this free, comprehensive and informative Toolkit. For the sake of the 10–15% of children and young people with dyslexia in Scotland, my hope is that teachers, schools and local authorities actively promote this invaluable guidance and the accompanying online training. My sincere thanks go to the expert working group that has made this possible'.

(<https://www.callscotland.org.uk/blog/john-swinney-and-sir-jackie-stewart-launch-the-revised-addressing-dyslexia-toolkit/> [accessed November 2025]).

How Definitions Can Be Useful

Definitions of dyslexia, particularly those used by education authorities, school districts, voluntary organisations and associations, can vary, although the Delphi definition seems to be incorporated by many organisations and authorities in the UK, and this will help to achieve consistency and recognition among the education community.

Function of definitions. Definitions are useful for a number of reasons, including those outlined below.

Allocation. It can be used to allocate resources and develop provision; definitions can identify those who need additional support and special provision. The controversial issue may arise with children who have very high ability and whose reading or writing

is in the average range; they may not get the support they need, as they will be seen to be coping. Clearly, however, they are underperforming and do need additional support, but because they are not failing in reading, they may be overlooked. It is crucial, therefore, that a full assessment is administered and takes in the whole picture, looking at the child's complete profile.

Explanation. Definitions can help explain to teachers and professionals some key points for intervention and highlight the child's strengths and weaknesses. These definitions may have a list of statements and characteristics and can merge into operational or working definitions, which provide explanations of the difficulty and how it can impact practice. Ideally, this should be contextualised for the school and utilise the available resources provided by the education authority.

Understanding. Definitions can help parents and teachers (and indeed the person with dyslexia) understand what it is and how it may impact their learning. Often parents want to know the cause of a difficulty, as this helps them more fully understand the extent of the problem and how it might be tackled. Since it is difficult to encapsulate this in a definition, it is advisable to spend time with parents or the person who has been identified, explaining exactly how dyslexia can impact their child's learning. This is very important as one of the crucial aspects of dealing with dyslexia is the necessity for harmonious and effective links between home and school.

Research. A definition can help provide a discrete and well-defined sample for researchers. This might include a set of criteria that are measurable, such as IQ scores and achievement scores.

Statement definitions. These have been quite common, where organisations have their own definition, almost as a statement or a mark of status. Increasingly, organisations are seeking to have their own definition of dyslexia. This might be called a statement definition, which is developed and contextualised by the organisation, whether it is a voluntary body, parent group or an education authority. As indicated earlier however the Delphi definition has the potential to be widely accepted by many groups (e.g. PATOSS, BDA and HADC) as well as education authorities and this will help achieve a degree of consistency across the country.

It can be argued however that the definitions that are in current use do have some commonalities. For example, the definition used by Reid (2016) in the fifth edition of this book can still be pertinent in the current context.

'Dyslexia is a processing difference, often characterised by difficulties in literacy acquisition affecting reading, writing and spelling. It can also have an impact on cognitive processes such as memory, speed of processing, time management, coordination and automaticity. There may be visual and/or phonological challenges and there are usually some discrepancies in educational performances.'

The BDA definition is also a case in point:

Dyslexia is a specific learning difficulty which mainly affects the development of literacy and language related skills. It is likely to be present at birth and to be lifelong in its effects. It is characterised by difficulties with phonological processing, rapid naming, working memory, processing speed, and the automatic development of skills that may not match up to an individual's other cognitive abilities. It tends to be resistant to conventional teaching methods,

but its effects can be mitigated by appropriately specific intervention, including the application of information technology and supportive counselling (<http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/whatisdyslexia.html> 2008).

Similarly, in the USA, the new IDA definition (2025) (see earlier in this chapter) has clear similarities with the Delphi definition.

Research

The range of research supports the view of the multifaceted nature of dyslexia (see also Chapter 2). Although there is some agreement on the broad constellation of factors that can contribute to dyslexia, the respective weighting of these factors may differ and be a point of contention.

For example, the range of factors that can be associated with dyslexia includes the following:

- Structural and functional brain-related factors (Silani et al., 2005; Galaburda and Rosen, 2001; Hynd et al., 1995).
- Genetic factors affecting the developmental migration of magnocells in utero and influencing their subsequent function (Stein, 2008).
- Genetic correlations (Gilger, 2008; Mountford et al., 2025).
- Gene variants can be shared across disorders—the same variants could create risk of developing both DLD and dyslexia—so explaining their high rate of co-occurrence (reported in Muter, 2025).
- Procedural timing of sequences in task accomplishment (Fawcett and Nicolson, 2008).
- Processing speed (Wolf and Bowers, 2000).
- Inter-hemisphere transfer (Breznitz, 2008).
- Difficulty in automatising skills (Fawcett and Nicolson, 1992).
- Working memory difficulties (Jeffries and Everatt, 2004).
- Phonological deficit (Snowling, 2000).
- Language features—orthographic transparency (Wimmer, 1993; Share, 2008; Everatt and Elbeheri, 2008).
- Comorbidity between learning disabilities (Bishop and Snowling, 2004; Visser, 2003).
- Literacy achievement levels and the role of IQ in diagnosis (Siegel and Lipka, 2008; Joshi and Aaron, 2008; Wagner, 2008).
- Wagner et al. (2023) discuss unexpected reading failure, i.e. reading levels not in line with oral language skills.
- Positive skills (West, 2014; Nicolson et al., 2012; Nicholson, 2014).
- Neuroimaging studies, e.g. MRI, show that dyslexic individuals show structural abnormalities and reduced activation in the left insula region, a language ‘connectivity’ area as shown in studies by Brunswick et al. (1999) and Paulesu et al. (2001).
- MRI voxel-based morphometry—patterns of grey and white matter density suggest reduced connectivity in the distributed temporo-parietal and frontal networks known

to be involved in reading and particularly phonological processing and decoding (Silani et al., 2005) in dyslexic individuals.

- Risk and resilience models (Catts and Petscher, 2022).

These points illustrate the diversity found in the dyslexic population. Each can have an impact on how dyslexia is perceived and how assessment and intervention are portrayed. Additionally, Haynes et al. suggested a number of profiles associated with dyslexia including the following, but they noted that these do not and cannot stand alone on the basis of current research: Neurological basis—Dobrynin et al. (2025); Cognitive profile—Hulme et al. (2015); O'Brien and Yeatman (2021), Multifactorial Causal Models of Dyslexia (can explain the complex interaction between environmental factors and the multiple genes).

Strengths

It is important to recognise the strengths, which can also form part of a dyslexic profile, and it is worth remembering that people with dyslexia may need support to be able to utilise these strengths. There will invariably be individual differences and individual variation, and it is therefore important to consider individual learning preferences as well as the education and work context when planning and implementing interventions and accommodations. Factors such as those outlined below therefore need to be considered:

- *Individual differences.* It is important to recognise that students with dyslexia are individuals and their individual learning preferences and differences need to be acknowledged. Not all children and adults with dyslexia will have the same profile, although they may meet the criteria for dyslexia.
- *Strengths.* Recognising the strengths of a person with dyslexia is essential, not only in terms of boosting self-esteem but also to identify the most appropriate strategies that can be used by the teacher and the parents.

Education and Work Context

Some educational and work contexts can highlight the person's dyslexic traits, while others can minimise these traits. For example, if a dyslexic person is attempting to locate information in a library, they may have difficulty in accessing an index, finding the appropriate book and locating the information in that book. Without guidance, this kind of task can be challenging for students with dyslexia. Other tasks such as those that involve some degree of creativity or visual processing may be easier. Getting the task and the environment right for learning is highly important for the person with dyslexia. It is important, therefore, to ask yourself questions about the task before presenting it to the child or adult. In other words, there is a possibility they may need more information to be able to successfully respond to the task.

For example, some tasks that could be demanding for people with dyslexia in the work-place include:

- difficulty following a number of instructions if given at the same time;
- following a technical manual;
- reading reports quickly;
- writing short memos and responding to and writing emails at speed;
- remembering what was said at meetings and recalling telephone numbers;
- filing documents and diary-keeping.

Barriers to Intervention

Policies on dyslexia are important, and increasingly educational authorities have such policies. There are some barriers however that can prevent policies from being fully implemented in practice—for example:

- concern over the number of children requiring support—this can have budgetary considerations, and this may prove to be an unnecessary barrier;
- the need for additional training that might exceed budgetary estimates for an authority;
- some educational authorities may have a reluctance to label too early;
- there may also be a lack of awareness that can result in late identification;
- dyslexia is only one of a range of specific learning difficulties that need to be catered for in an inclusionary learning environment, and this may impede prompt intervention;
- despite recent initiatives, some authorities may still have a lack of clarity on the nature and concept of dyslexia;
- ‘the “waiting for an assessment” approach among some teachers may not be helpful—they should be encouraged to use their skills and experiences to intervene appropriately even if an assessment or diagnosis has not been conducted’.

This last point is of crucial importance. Teachers are at the front line, and they have some responsibility for identification, and early identification in particular, but they can only do this successfully if they have sufficient training and have opportunities to follow this up. This is important as early identification is usually a key factor in an operational definition and overall policy strategy.

Training

The key is certainly teacher training, and this is of crucial importance. The ‘No to Failure Final Report’ (The Dyslexia-SpLD Trust, 2009) in the UK proposed that schools should re-examine their budget to ensure that they were improving outcomes for students with special educational needs, including dyslexia. This emphasised a layered approach to training, whereby all teachers would understand dyslexia at a basic level, at least one

teacher in every school would have specialist training and therefore have the capacity to screen for dyslexia, and there would be at least one expert specialist teacher in every school who could carry out full diagnostic assessments and liaise with external professionals. This is very much in line with the proposals formulated by the Scottish Dyslexia Trust in 1992, and although great strides were made in this, it was very challenging for authorities to meet these types of objectives. But at least it generates a need and a demand for training and lays a firm framework legitimising such training. This, in fact, is one of the bonuses of the Rose Report in Dyslexia (Rose, 2009). It is interesting to note that the Addressing Dyslexia Toolkit in Scotland, which was updated in 2023, has an inbuilt training component (<https://www.callscotland.org.uk/blog/john-swinney-and-sir-jackie-stewart-launch-the-revised-addressing-dyslexia-toolkit/>)—training in fact has a very high profile nationally in the UK, with an increasing amount of accredited courses being developed throughout the UK.

It is important, however, that any new approach be monitored and validated before it can be used successfully in schools. At the same time, it is important that education authorities are open to new and different approaches and are able to listen to the wishes of professionals and parents and appreciate that the dynamic nature of the field of dyslexia can mean that new approaches and different perspectives can emerge and that these need to be considered.

Around the UK—Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND)

In England, the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice: 0–25 years (Department for Education, 2015) has made an impact in the area of training. The policy that every teacher is a teacher of children with special educational needs and the SEND Code of Practice covers students aged 0–25 years is also beneficial to those who need support beyond the normal school leaving age. As well as schools, colleges, universities and other training providers have to develop a team of specialists. As part of this provision, Education and Health and Care Plans are developed for those children or young people with SEND who need education provision.

SEND Provision

The 2016 initiatives were not without issues, and in January 2025, the Education Committee (England and Wales) launched a major inquiry focused on finding solutions to the ‘crisis’ in special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) provision.

This crisis has arisen due to years of increasing demand for SEND support. It is the intention of the cross-party Committee to focus on how to stabilise the system in the short term, and how to achieve long-term sustainability with improved outcomes for children and young people. The inquiry examines every phase of education and development, from the early years through to the age of 25.

The Committee examined how mainstream schools and other educational settings can become more inclusive to children with SEND by providing high-quality support,

including changes to the curriculum, defining what inclusivity looks like in mainstream settings and improving support and training for education practitioners. Another focus relates to increasing the capacity of SEND provision, including finding ways to help local councils plan sufficient SEND school places and examining capital investment in this area. With many councils facing a financial state due to the huge deficits accrued by spending millions a year on SEND support, and with the statutory override due to end in 2026, the Committee considered reforms to the way SEND is funded.

MPs examined the Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plan system and looked for potential alternatives without reducing the level of support available. They also looked at the effectiveness of multi-agency working across education, health and social care.

With varying quality of provision across the country, the Committee considered how to make provision more consistent between local authority areas. They also looked for examples of replicable best practices, as well as seeking evidence on how to make Ofsted's accountability measures more effective. The Committee investigated how SEND support is provided in other countries with better outcomes for children, parents and carers. During the inquiry, MPs heard directly from young people and families about their experiences with the SEND system as well as professionals delivering SEND support.

Chair's quote: Education Committee Chair Helen Hayes MP said:

'In recent years, report after report has documented the failures of the SEND system to deliver the support children and their families need. Despite the best efforts of professionals in schools and local authorities, across the country, children are being let down. As a Committee we now want to move beyond simply pointing out the problems and focus on finding solutions that are realistic and practical for the Government to implement'.

'This crisis has many symptoms that bleed into the rest of the education system: from attrition in the teaching workforce to soaring levels of pupil absence. There are also symptoms which blight local councils' budgets—ever increasing spending on transporting pupils to settings far from where they live, and the chaos of money being poured into tribunals that parents are expected to win. It's widely accepted that many more councils could face effective bankruptcy if change doesn't come soon. ...There is absolute clarity that as a country we can't continue with this endless cycle of failure. Turning this ship around will likely take years of careful reform, but the cross-party Education Committee will play our part by making evidence-based recommendations that the government can implement'.

The subsequent report, published in September 2025, 'Solving the SEND Crisis' (<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/49536/documents/265373/default/>), essentially proposed that it is important that there is a move towards a system where high-quality support is provided as soon as a need is identified, rather than only once an EHC plan is in place. Additionally, it implied that responding to the needs of children with SEND must become an intrinsic part of the mainstream system, rather than something additional.

In response to the report, the Secretary of State for Education (Rt. Hon Bridget Phillipson MP) indicated that the government aims to meet the reports objective principally that 'a reform programme which will put children and young people with SEND back at the centre of our education system, and in doing so, deliver benefits for the system as a whole' (p. 2 A letter from Secretary of State for Education, Bridget Phillipson, to Helen Hayes, Chair of the Education Select Committee, following their

report Solving the SEND crisis, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-reform-education-secretary-writes-to-the-education-select-committee>).

Although this investigation is aimed at all children with SEND, children with dyslexia should also be beneficiaries of any reforms in line with the reports and the Secretary of State's intentions.

Scotland

In Scotland, SEND is called Additional Support Needs (ASN), focusing on a child's right to needed support via the Education (Additional Support for Learning) Scotland Act 2004 (ASL Act) and the Getting It Right for Every Child framework. This framework provides a national approach to help ensure children are provided with the most appropriate support at the right time.

It is important to note that ASN can arise, in the short or long term, from a variety of circumstances, including:

- the learning environment
- family circumstances
- health or disability needs
- social and emotional factors

(<https://www.gov.scot/policies/schools/additional-support-for-learning/> [accessed December 2025]). The Scottish education system has an inclusive ethos and mainstreaming is a central pillar of its inclusive approach to education, and detailed guidance on this and how this should be achieved and maintained is available (Guidance on the presumption to provide education in a mainstream setting, Scottish Government, 2019).

Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, the EA SEND policy envisages an effective working arrangement with schools and educational settings to help reduce the barriers to learning that children and young people with special educational needs may experience. The support plan on this is published each academic year in accordance with the SEND Act Northern Ireland (2016) and it was reexamined through a Stakeholder Consultation Report (2023).

(<https://send.eani.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-08/EA%20SEND%20APA%20Consultation%20Report.pdf>)

The plan essentially:

- Provides information for schools, young people with SEN and their parents or carers about EA SEND Services.
- Signposts to the resources available for children and young people with SEN, their parents or carers and educational settings or schools.

- Details the advice and support that each SEND Service provides.
- Explains how schools can access EA SEND Services to support a child or young person with SEN who attends their setting.
- Advises schools about what training is available each year for their staff who may be supporting children and young people with SEND.
(<https://send.eani.org.uk/> [accessed December 2025])

Wales

In Wales, the Additional Learning Needs Code and Regulations (2021) provide a range of documents on policy, access and provision for additional learning needs (ALNs). <https://www.gov.wales/additional-learning-needs>

This includes a code describing practice in ALNs.

<https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2025-01/250124-the-additional-learning-needs-code-for-wales-2021.pdf>

The code defines ALNs, how children can be supported and the parents and carers involved and the role of the additional learning needs coordinator. There are two questions that determine support—one to determine whether the child has ALNs and the other to assess whether the child meets the criteria for an additional learning plan (ALP). There are also a range of guidance documents developed by the Welsh government for different types of disabilities. One of the specific learning difficulties (June 2015) provides an SpLD framework which includes dyslexia. The framework includes a very useful Expectation Statements for SpLD-Friendly Schools (<https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-03/specific-learning-difficulties-framework.pdf> [accessed December 2025]). This focuses on the requirements of and for Schools, Learners and Practitioners. One of the key tenets of this is the need to develop person-centred practices. This applied to school policy, practitioners' practices and learners' needs. It indicates that 'learners with a SpLD should be encouraged to take control of their own learning where appropriate. Person-centred practice helps to give the learner a central role in identifying appropriate learning activities and the support they need to achieve positive outcomes' (p. 8). The guidance describes dyslexia as a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling.

It is anticipated that children receiving support under the SEN system will gradually transfer to the ALN system by August 2025. Under the ALN system, children and young people with ALN receive extra support through an individual development plan (IDP).

It is unlikely that any system that covers a broad area is not without critics, and a report from the University of Bristol (Knight et al., 2024) highlighted the prevalence of ALNs in children under 16 years old in Wales. The researchers found that nearly half (47.9%) of the children born in 2002/2003 were identified with some form of ALN at some point during their schooling, and they indicated that this challenges the notion that learning needs only affect a minority of learners.

Issues on Intervention

Some of the pointers in this debate include

- the long-standing issue over mainstream versus alternative interventions;
- the use of commercially developed interventions in schools;
- the nature of the trials that have been carried out to examine the implementation and the success of the approach.

Fawcett and Reid (2009) suggest a system of benchmarking as the range of approaches available can be confusing to both parents and teachers. They suggest that not all the approaches available are currently evaluated, and those that have been evaluated may not use the same criteria for identifying how successful the approach is. Additionally, some approaches may have an advantage over others because of a heavy commercial thrust and vigorous marketing that makes them well known. This means that the effectiveness of the programme can be misinterpreted.

Comment

This opening chapter has touched on wide-ranging issues—most of which will be developed in later chapters, but it is already clear that although there has been significant progress in all aspects of dyslexia, there is still much to do before parents, teachers and individuals with dyslexia will be fully cared and catered for. Nevertheless, all those involved in whatever capacity should take heart from the enormous progress that has been made. I, for one having worked in this area for over 35 years, am extremely heartened by the recognition and attention given to dyslexia from many quarters, including government, and there is every indication that this progress will continue.

Points to Consider

- What is the value of a definition of dyslexia? What purpose might it serve?
- What is the importance of an operational or working definition?
- What are the barriers in practice that can prevent policy from being fully and effectively implemented?
- What is the role of teacher education in relation to dyslexia? To what extent is this role being fulfilled?
- What are the issues that can stem from new and sometimes controversial approaches?
- Why does dyslexia sometimes generate anxiety among different groups?
- How can these issues be resolved to the satisfaction of the different groups, each of which may have different agendas and priorities?