

A photograph of children in a science classroom. In the foreground, a child is wearing clear safety goggles and looking towards the right. In the background, another child is also wearing safety goggles and looking towards the camera. A globe is visible in the lower left, and a worksheet with diagrams and text is in the lower right. The text on the worksheet includes "re does electricity come form ?" and "n for kids".

British Dyslexia
Association

**Evidence to Future Perfect
Education Commission**

August 2019

Contributors

The British Dyslexia Association has developed this submission with the support of...

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Helen Boden

CEO, British Dyslexia Association

The education system just isn't built for dyslexic children and young people. We teach a knowledge focused curriculum and assess it through written exams. It's no wonder successful dyslexics talk about succeeding despite school.

We know that dyslexia - whilst bringing weaknesses in reading, writing, short-term memory - gives huge strengths in high-level reasoning and visual-spatial abilities, gist memory and problem solving, interpersonal communication - which are often recognised as enhanced creativity.

In the right environment, these strengths can be immensely powerful.

The creative sectors report many fold the number of dyslexics than in the general population, for example the highly competitive Royal College of Art reports that 29 percent of its students are dyslexic¹ compared to five percent across higher education².

Forty percent of self-made millionaires are dyslexic³, around three or four times the level in the general population.

Yet, in the wrong environment (often our current education system), the results can be disastrous. A dyslexic student is three and half times more likely to be temporarily or permanently excluded⁴ and youth offending institutes have dyslexia rates between 31 and 56 percent⁵.

¹ <https://www.rca.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/rebalancing-dyslexia-and-creativity-rca/>

² Academic Attainment in Students with Dyslexia in Distance Education, 2015, John T. E. Richardson

³ 2003 survey of 300 British self-made millionaires commissioned by BBC2 for Mind of a Millionaire

⁴ Timpson Review of School Exclusions, 2019

⁵ 52 percent, Morgan, 1997. 40-50 percent, Klein, 1998. 31 percent, Davies and Byatt, 1998. 31 percent, Alm and Andersson, 1997. 41 percent, Jensen et al, 2000. 50 percent, Kirk and Reid, 2001. 50 percent, Svensson, Lundberg and Jacobson, 2001. 56 percent, BDA, 2004

With around a million young people in education dyslexic⁶, it is crucial to give dyslexics an education that allows their strength to be nurtured and recognised not just because it is fair but because doing so offers huge benefits to our society and economy.

However, an education system that give students the opportunity to demonstrate skills like understanding broad information, problem solving, and creativity is not just beneficial to young dyslexics. These are the skills we are told time and time again will be the key to future jobs. Teaching these skills, as well as more traditional ones, will not just give dyslexics an opportunity to shine but also help everyone develop relevant skills.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit evidence to the Future Perfect Education Commission. We have used this submission to highlight some key themes of the education system that embraces dyslexic thinking and where possible found examples of this already happening - these examples are sadly most often restricted to the fee paying sector but in many cases the approaches are down to the flexibility the sector allows rather than purely financial resources.

We hope you find the evidence relevant and useful. We look forward to hearing the progress and supporting your work.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'H Bauler', written in a cursive style.

⁶ Between ten to 15 percent of people have dyslexia, meaning between 800,000 and 1.3 million young people in education have based on 2018 DfE figures, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/719226/Schools_Pupils_and_their_Characteristics_2018_Main_Text.pdf

Overview

Three priorities to create the Future Perfect system

1. **Teach and measure problem solving, understanding and communication on an even standing to knowledge.** This will not only empower dyslexic pupils to reach their full potential, but also better equip all pupils for society and the workplace.
2. **Make technology mainstream, like in the workplace.** Allowing anyone who wishes to use a laptop (with the adequate anti-cheating provisions enabled) in any exam has no drawbacks for universities or future employers but means that everyone's abilities to operate in today's communications environment are accurately reflected, ending an unnecessary discrimination against dyslexic pupils.
3. **Have a specialist dyslexia teacher in every school.** For £3,900 a teacher can be trained to AMBDA level 7 enabling them to diagnose and support young people with dyslexia. In almost all cases, these specialist teachers can provide excellent support without the need for the complexity and rigour of an EHCP.

“If our education system was built in this way our country would see the increase of citizens who are great leaders, big picture thinking, problem solvers (generally). We would see more creatives entering into society and we would see our UK wide business enhanced. I believe that we would see more dyslexic young people confidently explore their potential and we would see less of our dyslexic students enter into crime related activities and the resultant downward social spiral.”

John Hicks, Parenting Dyslexia

Curriculum

It is not as simple as saying dyslexics are good at art or bad at English, a curriculum must be both a broad range of subjects but also shift away from a bias towards knowledge. The benefits of this are not just to young dyslexics, all will rise.

Teach and measure problem solving, understanding and communication on an even standing to knowledge

Dyslexics can excel across all subjects. Even in areas perceived as a no go for them, like writing, you find successful dyslexics.

AA Gill was proud to be a dyslexic writer, Sally Gardner champions for more dyslexic authors like herself, and there is evidence that some of the all-time literacy greats were dyslexic - Agatha Christie, F Scott Fitzgerald, WB Yeats to name but a few.

What this shows us is that it is not simple enough to say dyslexia suits x, y and z subjects. It begs the question, if dyslexics are struggling so much in education, is it because we are teaching only a narrow part of subjects?

Let's take a basic example, "amo, amas, amat".

Our knowledge-based curriculum would focus on teaching a pupil that this is "I love, you love and he, she or it loves" in Latin. It may extend to teaching some hard or fast rules about why the words are formed the way they are and the correct grammatical use of them.

In this system a dyslexic pupil is going to be at a major disadvantage. It is going to be many times harder for them to retain this knowledge and be able to reproduce it accurately for an exam.

This would be forgivable if it were the entirety of topic. Yet, through focusing just on knowledge, we fail to educate young people (not just dyslexics) fully. Whilst the currently knowledge-focused curriculum disproportionately disadvantages dyslexics, the benefits of broadening education to put problem solving, understanding and communication on an equal footing to knowledge better equips all for life.

Coming back to our Latin translation example, those three words are so much broader than knowing their English equivalent and rules surrounding them.

Understanding them needs pupil to grasp why they came to be and the significance on them, and more broadly why we use language and the evolution of the communication of feeling and love specifically through it. An understanding (not knowledge) of the Roman Empire (and realistically Ancient Greece) is also going to make the knowledge of these three words much more useful.

“...research has shown that dyslexic pupils excel when they are able to process work and information as a whole rather than in steps.”

Kannangara et al, 2018

Problem solving comes into play when pupils must begin to explore texts and examine why and how the words are used. This involves skills around big picture thinking, meshing together lots of different types of information - historical context, grammatical rules, knowledge of the words meaning, why we use written language, how we write about feeling, understanding of love, the author's personality - to reach conclusions.

Lastly, we must be able to communicate all this. Whether it be through structuring an argument, creative writing, debating, performing arts or having a conversation with friends, these are skills our education system must teach and are equally as valuable as the knowledge we share through them.

Whilst knowledge is easy to define in a curriculum and measure in exams, a young person entering the workplace educated in how to understand a topic, bringing

together broad information to solve problems and communicate their thoughts is going to be immeasurably more valuable in the workplace and to society than someone who's education has been focused on absorption and regurgitation of knowledge.

Whilst this approach puts dyslexic pupils on a more even footing with their peers, it is a system to the benefit of all. “Schools need to be aware of the creative and ‘out of the box’ thinking that dyslexic children possess. Failing to recognise their potential is what disadvantages them”

Michelle Catterson, Moon Hall Schools Educational Trust

The current curriculum, of course, allows for these skills to be taught, but it does not oblige it or measure it on an even standing to knowledge.

Teaching this broader range of skills is also not a new idea or one that has completely lost favour. Recently, an Eton master was advocating for a move away from a knowledge-focused curriculum as he called it “slow education”⁷. School 21, a free school opened in a deprived area of east London by Peter Hyman, advocates this approach.

The British Dyslexia Association would advocate for a curriculum that teaches problem solving, understanding and communication on an even standing to knowledge because it gives dyslexics a chance to shine whilst improving education for all. It is a win-win.

Support a broad curriculum

Whilst there will always be a few core subjects for good reason, the model of more esteemed hard subjects - core sciences, history and the like - and less valued soft subjects - arts, design and newer sciences - needs to be rebalanced.

⁷ https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/aug/13/eton-master-wants-pupils-learn-slow-education-mike-grenier?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

This model needs to extend to types of qualification too. A hierarchy with GCSEs and A-Levels at the top and then euphemistically termed “alternatives” like T-Level, BTECs and apprenticeships as lesser options also needs to be readdressed.

Dyslexics tend to be better represented in these softer subjects and alternative qualifications not because they are less able but because the strengths of dyslexia are often immensely valuable in them.

This comes at a time when the demands of workplaces are mismatched with the areas the education system is channelling to young people, meaning a desperate need for exactly the subjects we have traditionally neglected, and more vocational focused qualifications.

“Perhaps the government should look to companies providing these jobs of the future and work backwards to then create courses that will best equip the learners?”

Michelle Catterson, Moon Hall Schools Educational Trust

The approach must be two-fold. Yes, it is partly funding a broader curriculum and qualifications. But it is also ensuring that the rigour is there in those subjects and exams to end their perception as easy options and demonstrate their value to employers.

Dyslexics are often more able to excel in “soft” subjects and want ways to be pushed in these areas and be recognised on even footing to those that excel in traditionally more venerated subjects. They don’t want an easy option, they want to play to their strengths on an even playing field.

Assessment

Assessments can empower dyslexic pupils and still be rigorous. The traditional handwritten essay is outmoded, exams need to be brought into line with the modern workplace.

Make technology mainstream, like in the workplace

When was the last time you hand wrote something more than some notes to yourself for work? When was the last time you asked someone to? When was the last time you heard of this happening?

Laptops and tablets are the standard medium of written workplace communication today. Yet, we subject young people with dyslexia every summer to doing handwritten exams.

“Given that the majority of written work in the modern workplace is done digitally and with access to spell checking facilities, an ideal education system would place less emphasis on assessing spelling and presentation. Instead, there would be greater focus on assessing whether what a pupil has learnt can be communicated.”

Faye Favill, St David’s College

It makes no practical sense and it means that thousands of young dyslexics receive grades that do not reflect accurately their communication skills in a modern context. This is particularly an issue in English Language GCSE.

Allowing anyone who wishes to use a laptop (with the adequate anti-cheating provisions enabled) in any exam has no drawbacks for universities or future employers but means that everyone's abilities to operate in today's communications environment are accurately reflected.

Whilst "human" readers and scribes are permissible access arrangements, in practice, they are usually confined to acute cases and not allowed for English Language GCSE.

Measuring spelling, grammar and punctuation doesn't assess communication skills

In 2011, the coalition government announced the return of spelling, punctuation and grammar (SPaG) marks on most GCSE and A-Level exams.⁸

Whilst, given the volume of communication that is written, it is important to assess a young person's English language ability - which is done by the GCSE English Language exam - it seems disproportionate to penalise someone weak at spelling, punctuation and grammar on exams that are not primarily relevant to these.

An employer or university interested in a young person's spelling, punctuation and grammar can look at their GCSE English Language result and if they are interested in their ability in say history, they can look at their result in GCSE or A-Level History.

Assessing SPaG is also an incredibly narrow (and increasingly irrelevant) way to assess someone's workplace communications skills (the government's argument for doing so⁹). Whilst SPaG is clearly an element of communication it is far from being a synonym for it.

The system further penalises young people with dyslexia who use an amanuensis:

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/end-for-gcse-modules-and-spelling-punctuation-and-grammar-marks-restored-to-exams>

⁹ "Employers expect people with high grades to be able to communicate and write effectively, with precision and accuracy." Nick Gibb, Schools Minister, 2011

- Students who dictate their answers are eligible for marks awarded for grammar. This is a third of the total marks awarded for SPaG.¹⁰
- Students who dictate their answers and indicate punctuation are eligible for marks awarded for punctuation and grammar. This is two thirds of the total marks awarded for SPaG. The cover sheet must indicate that both punctuation and grammar were dictated.¹¹
- Students who dictate their answers, indicate punctuation and spell out every word are eligible for all SPaG marks. The cover sheet must indicate that spelling, punctuation and grammar were dictated.¹² (It should be noted this is in practice totally impossible.)

This means in practice, a young people with dyslexia who uses an amanuensis will miss out on two thirds of the possible SPaG marks available.

As the GCSE English Language exam provides universities and perspective employers a clear indication of someone's spelling, punctuation and grammar ability (if this is a factor they wish to consider) then there is no great value in having SPaG marks across most exams.

However, removing SPaG marks in exams other than English Language GCSE, would allow young people with dyslexia to demonstrate their ability in that subject unfettered by irrelevant factors.

With SPaG marks making up around five percent of the total marks available, removing SPaG marks will in many cases move someone weak in spelling, grammar and punctuation up to the next grade boundary.

Written exams are not the only way to assess pupils

It has long been acknowledged that dyslexic students take particular interest in spatial activities such as drawing, doing mechanical puzzles and building models

¹⁰ <https://www.aqa.org.uk/exams-administration/special-requirements/access-arrangements/spelling,-punctuation-and-grammar-marks>

¹¹ <https://www.aqa.org.uk/exams-administration/special-requirements/access-arrangements/spelling,-punctuation-and-grammar-marks>

¹² <https://www.aqa.org.uk/exams-administration/special-requirements/access-arrangements/spelling,-punctuation-and-grammar-marks>

(Geschwind, 1982). These strengths are incredibly important in careers such as architecture, science, construction, mechanics, engineering, computing and art and design, in which dyslexic students tend to excel.

“In mainstream education, too much importance is placed on pupil’s ability to read and comprehend large pieces of written text. An ideal education system would recognise that this is not the only way to assess knowledge and understanding.”

Faye Favill, St David’s College

Written essays are not the only way to administer an exam.

Coursework often gives young dyslexics a better opportunity to showcase their aptitude. Increasing the opportunities to be assessed this way will help dyslexics and is more reflective for all the ways a workplace would assess someone’s ability.

“Other forms of assessment such as testing one’s mental reasoning, interconnected reasoning, narrative reasoning and dynamic reasoning are far better suited to pupils with dyslexia; in fact, research has demonstrated that dyslexics perform just as well, if not better, than their peers in these types of activities”

Eide and Eide, 2011

However, where dyslexics can often really excel is through verbal, interpersonal and spatial-visual communication. Giving opportunities to be assessed through different mediums would transform the exam system for dyslexics.

Having assessment through a variety of mediums is also more reflective of the real world, where you will be demonstrating your skills through mediums like presentations and interpersonal communication, as well as text.

“Most pupils with dyslexia are more than capable of articulating their thoughts and knowledge in debates, yet spoken assessments very rarely appear in exams.

John Hicks, Parenting Dyslexia

Teaching profession

With over one in ten pupils dyslexic, it is essential that all teachers have a good understanding of dyslexia.

Early identification and tailored support are the long-established cornerstones of successfully managing dyslexia, but to do this every teacher needs an understanding of the signs of dyslexia and what to do for dyslexic pupils in a classroom setting. They need to be supported by specialist dyslexia teachers able to diagnose and provide expert intervention.

Understanding of dyslexia in ITT and CPD

Currently, a teacher can enter the classroom having received as little training on dyslexia as a half day's awareness session covering all SEN. With the sheer number of dyslexic pupils, it is essential that all teachers leave ITT with the skills to identify pupils likely to be dyslexic and provide appropriate classroom interventions for those diagnosed with dyslexia - equivalent to a Level 3 qualification in supporting dyslexia.

“The current education system leads to many dyslexic pupils, regardless of intelligence, being placed in bottom sets and thus not being able to show their full capabilities. This is mostly due to lack of funding available to train teachers in educating pupils with learning difficulties.

“An ideal education system would allow for specialist training of all teachers on the ways to teach dyslexic children. PGCE students and those working towards QTS should have to provide evidence of having worked with neuro-diverse learners. If this provision of training were

to take place this would ensure that thousands of new teachers each year would enter the profession with specialist knowledge.”

Michelle Catterson, Moon Hall Schools Educational Trust

It is also crucial that the teachers’ knowledge of dyslexia is maintained through regular, appropriate and effective CPD.

Specialist dyslexia teacher in every school

Almost all dyslexia identification and support should be managed on the front line of education through a specialist dyslexia teacher led approach.

For £3,900 a teacher can be trained to AMBDA level 7 enabling them to diagnose and support young people with dyslexia. In almost all cases, these specialist teachers can provide excellent support without the need for the complexity and rigour of an EHCP.

If a strategic decision was made to adequately provision frontline dyslexia diagnosis and support in schools, the cost would be balanced out by savings downstream.

It would also undoubtedly see a massive reduction in emotional and mental health issues among young dyslexics and their families, better educational attainment, and a reduction in temporary and permanent exclusions.

What makes a specialist dyslexia teacher special?

A teacher wishing to become a specialist dyslexia teacher able to support and diagnose dyslexia will need to complete a Level 5 programme to develop specialist teaching skills and then a Level 7 programme to develop a deeper set of teaching and assessing skills. These ATS and AMBDA courses are available nationally through a variety of providers and delivered through a variety of methodologies from eLearning, to face-to-face sessions and blended learning.

During the course, they will have to do:

- 30 hours of one-to-one/small group assessed teaching practice delivering specialist dyslexia support.

They will need to demonstrate expert and practical knowledge of:

- Current research underpinning contemporary theoretical explanations of the nature of dyslexic-type and other SpLDs, and their relevance for teaching and learning.
- Theory and practice of psychometrics and educational testing.
- The relationship of that theory to the assessment of cognitive strengths and difficulties of learners.
- The current legal and professional issues that affect dyslexic learners.

They will be able to assess and report in these ways:

- Conduct a full diagnostic assessment for dyslexia, gathering information from a range of stakeholders and assess using qualitative and quantitative tools.
- Produce comprehensive reports stating the strengths and challenges of the individual and the impact of these challenges on their learning, social and emotional development.
- Make specific recommendations for support in the mainstream classroom, for small groups and one-to-one intervention, as well at home.
- Make specific recommendations for reasonable adjustments for examinations and assessments including access arrangements.

They will be support with teaching in these ways:

- Deliver specialist teaching on a one-to-one and group basis using cumulative, structured, sequential, multisensory programmes based on phonics and morphology.
- Appraise and advise on a range of evidence-based teaching and learning strategies and interventions in the classroom, with small groups and on a one-to-one basis.
- Deliver specialist support and advise others on the support required across the broader curriculum.

Be able to support colleagues and parents by:

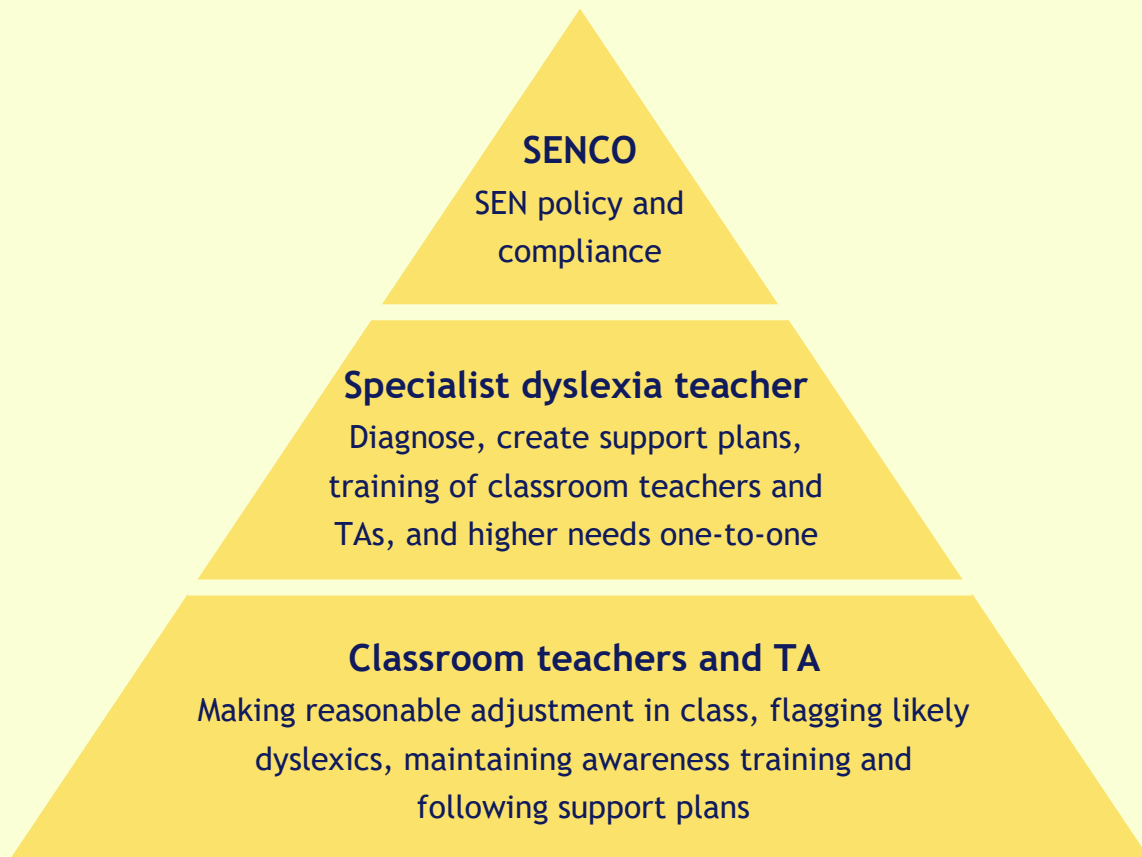
- Deliver staff training on early identification, strategies for support and how to create an inclusive curriculum.
- Provide advice, guidance and training to parents/carers.
- Provide advice and guidance to school senior managers on policy and best practice.

This is contrasted against a classroom teacher, who as part of initial teacher training would usually, at most, receive a brief, broad overview of dyslexia along with other SEN and is trained to teach at a whole class level.

The National SENCO award has enabled more SENCOs to broaden their knowledge of SEN. However, to cover all the needs that present within a mainstream school, the coverage is broad and brief and there is no time to go into the detail of dyslexia.

The National SENCO award is a 60-credit course at master's level, covering a range of needs as well as outlining the full range of managerial and record keeping duties of a SENCO. This contrasts against a Level 7 specialist dyslexia teacher course that is a 120-credit course at master's level focussing just on dyslexia.

Where does a specialist dyslexia teacher fit into a school?





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