

2023

Equitable Treatment of Students with Dyslexia

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Recommended Citation

Cooper, Aubrey (2023) "Equitable Treatment of Students with Dyslexia," *Georgia Educational Researcher*. Vol. 20: Iss. 1, Article 3.

DOI: 10.20429/ger.2023.200103

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/gerjournal/vol20/iss1/3>

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Equitable Treatment of Students with Dyslexia

Abstract

In recent years, dyslexia legislation and awareness has become more prevalent. Dyslexia is a specific learning disorder that affects a student's ability to read because they have deficits in their overall phonological awareness skills. While federal and state legislation has been passed regarding dyslexia, awareness surrounding dyslexia is still very minimal. Educators, parents, and other school faculty members many times do not have a strong knowledge of dyslexia. Thus, students with dyslexia may not receive an education that is as equitable as their peers. This article discusses the federal and state legislation surrounding dyslexia, knowledge surrounding dyslexia, and the effects of the learning environment on students with dyslexia. Applying the principles discussed in this article will help create an environment in which dyslexic students receive equal and just treatment inside and outside of the classroom learning environment and help them to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally.

Keywords

Dyslexia, Equitable Treatment

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My first year of teaching brought with it many challenges as I tried to navigate the best practices in which to teach my students and discovered the ways in which I was not adequately prepared for teaching. In my undergraduate degree program, I learned a great deal about different disabilities and the ways in which to accommodate and differentiate my instruction for students with these disabilities in my classroom. However, in my first few months of teaching, I learned that I knew very little about reading disabilities and how to best accommodate students with reading disabilities. I was working with my struggling readers each day and doing every intervention that was provided by my school system, but I was still not seeing growth in the area of reading with one of my students. It was then that I decided to conduct more research on my own.

Through my research, I learned about dyslexia and its characteristics. While I thought that dyslexia was mainly characterized by the reversal of letters, this is actually not a true determination of dyslexia. The research that I conducted on my own using peer reviewed journal articles and books like *Overcoming Dyslexia* by Sally Shaywitz allowed me to better understand dyslexia. Raschle, et al. (2012) states, “Developmental dyslexia (DD) is a specific learning disability that affects about 5–17% of all children. DD is characterized by difficulties with accurate and fluent word recognition and poor spelling and decoding performance.” Dyslexic students have poor decoding skills as it takes them longer to sound out unknown words. Students with dyslexia struggle to recognize spelling patterns and many times they have trouble with fluency skills. They usually do not like to read aloud because their reading is slow and spelling is labored. The difficulty that dyslexic students have with each of these tasks affects their ability to read and a lot of times affects students’ self-confidence because they think that they do not have the intelligence to read. However, through increased knowledge of dyslexia, teachers, parents, and other school faculty members can provide students with the support that they need to help them to understand that they just learn in a different way than their peers but do possess the ability to accomplish great things and be successful in the classroom.

My student exhibited many of the characteristics of dyslexia, so with this knowledge in mind I was then able to tailor my instruction to best accommodate this student and the academic needs that they had. I learned that dyslexic students benefit from direct and explicit instruction. Students need to be taught phonics and spelling rules, as well as practice with them in hands-on ways. If I had not done my own research though, I would not have learned more about dyslexia and been able to give this student the individualized instruction that they needed to succeed academically. For months, this student was not receiving equitable, or fair treatment in my classroom because I did not have the proper training needed to determine their instructional needs. My experience led me to complete a

dyslexia endorsement program. This program provided me with the resources I needed to feel more comfortable teaching students with dyslexia as I had the proper training and understanding of the disability.

My goal through this research was to determine if other students with dyslexia were receiving equitable treatment. I also hope that this article helps to make other educators aware of dyslexia and the effects that dyslexia can have on students when it is not diagnosed, or students are not provided with the proper interventions and supports. Through this article, I have mentioned my findings on the treatment of students with dyslexia and ways in which educators can make sure that students are receiving equitable treatment. Educators need this information, so that they can make sure that all students in their classroom are receiving the free and appropriate education that they are guaranteed, as well as make themselves more knowledgeable about some specific ways that they can help their students with dyslexia succeed. If educators are not knowledgeable about dyslexia, then students will continue to struggle academically, socially, and emotionally as they are not receiving the support that they need. This can affect their self-confidence and make it so the student cannot live up to their full potential.

Review of Research

Dyslexia Legislation

Educators are told that every child deserves a free and appropriate education. However, federal and state legislation dictates what services are appropriate for students to receive. In recent years, increased federal and state legislation has been passed regarding the identification and interventions necessary for dyslexia. Gonzalez (2021) states, “The number of states with dyslexia legislation has more than doubled (International Dyslexia Association [IDA], 2018) between 2013 and 2018. Currently, in 2021, there are only two states without dyslexia-specific laws”. While increased legislation is being passed surrounding dyslexia, there are still many grey areas for school districts and individual schools to carry out dyslexia legislation. Current legislation categorizes dyslexia as a specific learning disability that typically affects an individual’s phonological skills and results in inaccurate and/or slow word recognition, poor spelling and decoding abilities. Federal legislation covers dyslexia under the Individualized Education Act (IDEA) as a specific learning disability, but this legislation fails to give specific information on the criteria needed to diagnose a student with dyslexia and what supports are required for dyslexic students to receive. Thus, federal legislation leaves much open to interpretation on the treatment of students with dyslexia. States have gone on to propose or pass more

specific laws for students. These laws would give students additional rights that are not covered in federal legislation and thus make sure more equitable treatment is given to students with dyslexia (Duthie & Ward-Lonergan, 2018). However, state legislation still varies in defining dyslexia and supports given to students such as providing teachers with appropriate training, so that they can teach students using research-based programs like Orton-Gillingham (Zirkel 2020). According to gadoe.org (2023), “As of May 2019, Governor Kemp signed Senate Bill 48 into law. SB48 provides for identification of and support for students in kindergarten through third grade with dyslexia.” However, as an educator that teaches at a Georgia public school, besides the endorsement classes that I took at a private university on my own accord I have yet to receive training or any information on how to identify or support students with dyslexia.

Odegard, et al. (2020) explains, “Youman and Mather (2018) reported that 18 states had passed laws requiring public schools to screen students for behavioral characteristics of dyslexia universally, and an updated listing provided by the NCIL a year later indicated that 29 U.S. states had screening provisions specified within dyslexia legislation (NCIL, 2019).” In one year, eleven more states added laws requiring public school to screen students. However, the numbers of reported dyslexia students are not showing this increase. Odegard, et al. (2020) states, “As expected, behavioral characteristics of dyslexia from universal screening were associated with school-assigned dyslexia classification. However, dyslexia classification was less likely for minority students and individuals attending schools with a higher percentage of minority students. While strides have been made in passing legislation surrounding dyslexia, we still have to look at if it is helping students to receive equitable treatment.

According to Zirkel (2020), the federal Individualized Education Act gives school personnel the ability to request a comprehensive evaluation of a student if they have reasonable suspicion that the student is eligible to fall under IDEA. Many teachers use the response-to-intervention (RTI) model in their classroom with students that are struggling. However, many times teachers do not know what to do once they have exhausted all available interventions. By showing that a student has not made progress with the use of different interventions, a teacher can request that a child receive a further comprehensive evaluation to make sure that they are receiving the services and equitable treatment that they should receive. However, if educators are not aware of current legislation surrounding education, then they may not be aware of the rights of their students and are inhibiting them from receiving a fair and just education (Zirkel, 2020).

In a study conducted across ten countries, many countries had legislation in place to ensure that students were receiving a free, inclusive, and appropriate

education. While on the other hand the United States Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is reporting that in many countries students are less likely to complete primary or secondary school if they have disabilities (Agrawal et al., 2019). Based on this finding, are students with disabilities receiving the education that they need? Legislation has been passed surrounding dyslexia and while more specific legislation would be beneficial, it is necessary to educate teachers on the legislation that is already in effect, so that they can advocate for their students. Knowledge of dyslexia, legislation surrounding dyslexia, and effective evidence-based interventions is crucial for dyslexic students to succeed in an academic and social setting.

Knowledge Surrounding Dyslexia

Educators and school systems lack the knowledge that they need to appropriately diagnose and support students with dyslexia. Teachers are responsible for the majority of a student's education, but they struggle to provide students with equitable instruction when they have not been given the appropriate training to teach students with dyslexia. Many undergraduate programs do not prepare teachers to teach students with reading disabilities like dyslexia (Nascimento et al., 2018). Gonzalez (2020) states, "This lack of teacher preparation in some states leads educators to have continued gaps in knowledge and prevailing misconceptions." In New Jersey, it is a requirement for preservice educators to receive two hours of professional development surrounding reading disabilities each year. A study conducted with 705 New Jersey teachers showed that most of them had a basic understanding of dyslexia and its characteristics. However, most reported that their knowledge was gained through years of experience and teaching students with dyslexia. Gonzalez (2020) concluded from this study that, "A majority of the participants noted that they were not prepared by either their UG or graduate programs for teaching students with dyslexia. It is recommended that teacher education programs evaluate how and if the topic of dyslexia is addressed within their programs and add course content where needed."

Another study gave teachers a two-year course that followed the International Dyslexia Associations (IDA) standards of teacher knowledge and practice. Teachers who had completed the two-year course were more knowledgeable about aspects of phonological awareness than those that were at earlier points in the course no matter their years of teaching experience (McMahan et al., 2019). This study shows that no matter their level of teaching experience educators need training to teach literacy instruction most effectively. Teaching the foundations of literacy to students especially those with dyslexia requires a strong knowledge of the phonological and morphological awareness, so that it can be taught to students in the most accurate and effective way. When training is given, it needs to be more

than a one-day workshop as training surrounding dyslexia and the foundations of literacy need to be intensive and provide opportunities to practice the information and skills that are learned (McMahan et al., 2019).

Teachers are not the only ones that have an effect on dyslexic students, but parents and other school faculty members do as well. Many parents are not aware of dyslexia and therefore have difficulty advocating for their child when they are struggling in school due to reading difficulties. When parents are presented with the information that their child is dyslexic it can leave them with negative feelings because they are unaware of what this means for their child and may not accept this diagnosis for their child because of their ignorance. This can mean that it takes longer for their child to receive the services that they need. Teachers have a hard time explaining effectively to parents what dyslexia means as they many times have not received training on it themselves and are unaware of the policies surrounding dyslexia (Bajaj & Bhatia, 2019). Teachers are the main ones responsible for a student's education in the classroom, but a librarian's knowledge of literacy can be beneficial when trying to diagnose a student with dyslexia and provide them with the appropriate interventions. Librarians advocate for literacy, so they can provide teachers with the tools they need to positively foster literacy instruction in their classroom (Huffman et al., 2020). Teacher's knowledge of dyslexia also affects their perception of students with dyslexia and is responsible for creating a positive or negative learning environment for dyslexic students.

Learning Environment

The learning environment of students greatly affects their ability to succeed academically and socially. A teacher that understands that all students are different and accepts their differences fosters a positive learning environment that is inclusive. Students that do not have a proper learning environment that is positive and encouraging are at a grave disadvantage because their learning disabilities can be multiplied without the proper learning environment (Kalsoom et al., 2020). Teachers that do not have the proper knowledge of dyslexia can be very impatient with students and fail to give them the appropriate attention and support that they need to succeed. Teacher training can remove these barriers between dyslexic students and their teachers, so that equitable treatment can be provided. When teachers get frustrated with students or make negative comments, this also opens up an environment where a dyslexic students peers start to ridicule or bully them.

Dyslexic student that are receiving this type of treatment form their peers tend to feel isolated and suffer from a low self-esteem. Many students with dyslexia do not like to read aloud because their peers may make fun of them

because they read slower than others or laugh at them if they do not know or mess up when reading a word. This can make students feel anxious in the classroom and develop a fear of failure mentality (Kalsoom et al., 2020). Teachers that provide students with support through encouraging words and acceptance of their differences make students with dyslexia feel safe. These actions also foster a learning environment that is positive and allows students to succeed academically and socially thus providing them with equitable treatment. Teachers play a key role in gaining the appropriate knowledge to make student's learning environment appropriate for them and making sure that it is conducive to all the needs of the learners in the classroom (Jaka, 2015).

Discussion

Based on the research above, the equitable treatment of students with dyslexia varies depending on characteristics such as a teacher's knowledge of the legislation surrounding dyslexia, training on the best ways to support students with dyslexia, and the classroom environment that the student is subject to. Many of the articles discussed the need for more training for teachers, parents, and other school faculty on dyslexia, so that increased awareness and acceptance can be reached. Knowledge is the first step that is needed, so that fair treatment can be given to dyslexic students, and they can feel accepted and safe in their learning environment. The research implies that the majority of dyslexic students are not currently receiving equitable treatment. However, through continued research and advocacy others can be made aware of the prevalence of dyslexia and the importance of knowledge surrounding this learning disability.

Throughout my research, I came across many ways in which to best teach students with dyslexia and best practices to use. Since dyslexic students struggle with inaccurate and/or slow word recognition, poor spelling and decoding abilities, these students need to receive differentiated small-group instruction that is direct and explicit (McMahan et al., 2019). In my own classroom, I implemented the use of a multi-sensory approach to phonics instruction. I met with my student for twenty minutes one-on-one each day and used the same routine for every session so as to maximize our time together. I explicitly taught phonics skills that my student still needed to master and used items such as letter cards, blending boards, and Elkonin boxes. We focused on one phonics skill until the student showed mastery. After two months of conducting this intense intervention, my student had grown by two reading levels and was able to use the phonics skills learned to sound out unknown words in a text. While the student was still performing below grade level in reading, the student showed improvement after the implementation of the intervention. It was a challenge to find the time each day to work with my student and keep my other students

engaged on completing alternate tasks independently. However, the results showed that my student benefitted from the time spent. Many times, students struggle to keep up with the pace of regular instruction, so extra time may need to be given to students with dyslexia or they may need to be given the assignment ahead of time, so that they have time to review it before it is introduced in class. Speech Language Pathologists also have the knowledge of evidence-based strategies to help students when they are struggling to read, write, and spell, so this faculty member may be someone that is able to provide classroom teachers with additional and techniques to make sure a student's instructional needs are met (Duthie & Ward-Lonergan, 2018).

Conclusion

Gaps still exist in legislation and research on the most appropriate way to diagnose students with dyslexia. Federal legislation has failed to establish criteria that set parameters on what scores or deficits a student needs to exhibit to be diagnosed with dyslexia. This makes it hard for school systems and educators to give a student an official diagnosis of dyslexia. Future research could be beneficial to determine the most accurate and efficient measure to determine if a student has dyslexia. As educators, we need to make sure that we are conducting our own research on disabilities like dyslexia if we don't already have this knowledge, so that we can provide each of our students with the education that they deserve.

Through my own research and completion of a dyslexia endorsement program, I used many resources to learn more about dyslexia and to familiarize myself on strategies to best help my students with dyslexia. A very informative book that I used during my endorsement program and would recommend to other educators is titled *Overcoming Dyslexia* by Dr. Sally Shaywitz. This book helps educators and parents to understand the scientific explanation of dyslexia and how dyslexia impacts children and adults. Dr. Shawtitz outlines in the book developmental milestones for reading and warning signs that might suggest that students have a reading disability like dyslexia. A website that I found very helpful is run by the International Dyslexia Association and is dyslexiaida.org. This website helps to further provide information for families and professionals on dyslexia. The website provides educators with knowledge of what dyslexia looks like in the classroom and ways to provide support to students, as well as make your classroom a welcoming learning environment for them.

All students are entitled to a free and appropriate education. According to recent federal and state legislation, students with dyslexia are required to receive supports and interventions to help them succeed academically. Without the proper

knowledge of dyslexia, dyslexic students do not receive equitable treatment and are not in a learning environment that fosters their academic and social success. Teachers must look at their perceptions of dyslexic students to make sure that they are treating these students with the same respect and kindness as other students. This will in turn help create a positive learning environment in which the peers of dyslexic students interact with them in a kind and encouraging manner. As educators we need to be champions for all students and provide them with all the tools necessary to succeed.

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