

**DYSLEXIA**

# Reconceptualising dyslexia provision in a primary school by applying the five ‘special educational needs in mainstream school’ EEF recommendations: meeting identified need in order to thrive

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**This article reports on an action-research improvement project undertaken in a primary school setting in London in collaboration with local authority advisors and a reference school. It describes the journey towards the goal of becoming a dyslexia-friendly school framed by the five key recommendations of the Education Endowment Fund recently published guidance report *Special Educational Needs in Mainstream School*. I argue that this framing supports the thriving of individuals, rather than perpetuating a reliance on outdated diagnosis-led support. I conclude that the EEF recommendations can support practitioners to embed inclusive practices that take individual needs seriously but reject deficit models of disability.**

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## Introduction

This article reports on an action-research (McAteer, 2013; Wilson, 2013) improvement project undertaken in a primary school setting in London in collaboration with local authority advisors and a reference school. It considers the journey towards the goal of becoming a dyslexia-friendly school framed by the five key recommendations of the Education Endowment Fund (EEF) recently published guidance report *Special Educational Needs in Mainstream School* (EEF, 2020). The EEF is a UK-based charity that supports teachers and senior leaders to raise attainment and close the disadvantage gap and roots its response to this educational challenge in the best available evidence. The guidance report provides a starting point for schools to review their current approach and offers practical ideas that they can implement (EEF, 2022).

In the first section I will contextualise the study by evaluating how the dyslexia definition put forward by the Rose Review (2009) has withstood the test of time, and by reviewing literature to examine how dyslexia can be supported in an inclusive learning environment. In the second section I will discuss the rationale and focus of the action-research improvement project. The final section will consider the five EEF recommendations.

## A critical review of dyslexia literature and definitions

### *Dyslexia, functional and critical literacy*

In the current Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015), dyslexia is described as a special educational need (SEN) that may require provision that is ‘different from and additional to’ that which is usually provided, but it is also a disability recognised in the 2010 Equality Act and therefore requiring schools to ‘make reasonable adjustments’ for those identified with dyslexia. This can lead to confusion around who is responsible for

identification of a SEN or a wish for a diagnosis; who should be making relevant provisions or adjustments; and how these will be financed and reviewed. This confusion is reflected in a lively debate in literature whether dyslexia in the 21st century should be viewed as a learning difference (Reid, 2016) to be celebrated as a function of our increasing understanding of neurodiversity; as an individual learning difficulty (Laurence, 2009) that needs to be supported through personalised interventions; or as a deficit construct imposed by a disabling society where attempts to distinguish between categories of ‘dyslexia’ and ‘ordinary poor reader’ are scientifically unsupportable, arbitrary and thus potentially discriminatory (Elliot and Gibbs, 2008). The authors question whether dyslexia exists at all or whether it is rather a reflection of parents wanting to achieve special status for their children, colluding with the wishes of some teachers to be regarded as specialists. Such a label, they argue, may also relieve a self-critical teacher’s self-esteem if they have not been successful in their teaching and provide children and their families a route out of self-blame.

The debate whether dyslexia exists and how to address it speaks to different understandings of what literacy is and what it is for, as it will influence how it is taught and whether barriers to literacy will be located within the child or in their socio-economic context (Macdonald, 2009). For example, analytic phonics and whole-word approaches to reading acquisition are currently not recognised as being as effective as synthetic phonics in official policy documents, and this might be as much a reflection of prioritising functional over critical literacy skills, as it is of promoting evidence-based practice (Macblain *et al.*, 2015). The decision whether to focus on functional or critical literacy skills in the classroom is therefore a political as well as an educational issue and is important to consider when designing intervention packages for individuals that may remove them from class experiences that could develop critical literacy skills in favour of over-learning functional skills.

### ***The Rose Review definition***

The Rose Review (2009) remains the most influential report in recent years that has summarised what is known about dyslexia, and more importantly articulated what should be done about it in an educational context. The lengthy definition offered by Rose remains an excellent vehicle to consider both of those dimensions, although there are also notable omissions that I will address. The World Health Organisation’s (WHO, 2019) definition of developmental learning disorder with impairment in reading is a more recent and more succinct version but has a similar emphasis. In what follows, I will discuss the Rose definition and draw on literature to explore

aspects of the definition in more detail. The action-research school has adopted this definition as their basis for understanding and addressing special educational needs relating to difficulties with reading and writing, including those of a dyslexic nature.

According to Rose (2009, p. 10), ‘dyslexia is a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling’ and so does not include those readers who are able to decode but do not easily comprehend what they read, an issue for some children on the autism spectrum (ASD) as well as those with moderate learning difficulties (MLD) (Tennent, 2015). Rose maintains that ‘characteristic features of dyslexia are difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed’ (p. 10) and thereby prioritises cognitive differences over biological or environmental factors that have all been discussed as causal factors of dyslexia since Frith (1999) developed her famous causal modelling framework. MacDonald and Deacon (2019) suggest that socio-economic status significantly affects issues of diagnosis, educational experiences and employment outcomes for those identified with dyslexia and their findings illustrate the intersectional relationship between socio-economic status and disability inequalities that is not fully addressed by Rose. However, Rose’s definition requires educators not to explain away reading difficulties as a function of socio-economic disadvantage or inadequate cultural capital.

Rose further states that ‘dyslexia occurs across the range of intellectual abilities’ (p. 10) and with this addresses head-on the criticism expressed by those who see dyslexia as a middle-class syndrome of parents who cannot accept a ‘diagnosis of averageness’ for their children and those that imply that dyslexia is limited to high functioning individuals who surprisingly have difficulties with reading (Elliot and Gibbs, 2008). Rose also addresses the controversy around whether dyslexia should be identified as a special educational need or be diagnosed as a ‘have or have not’ disability by arguing that ‘it is best thought of as a continuum, not a distinct category, and there are no clear cut-off points’ (p. 10). For schools who take this assertion seriously, there is therefore no need to wait for a diagnosis through an often-expensive and lengthy diagnostic process, as the important consideration is an identification of barriers to learning and how to address these. Rose summarises this by stating that ‘a good indication of the severity and persistence of dyslexic difficulties can be gained by examining how the individual responds or has responded to well-founded intervention’ (p. 10). Here his definition foreshadows what the 2015 SEND Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015) has conceptualised as ‘assess, plan, do, review’ as part of a ‘graduated response’ to special educational needs.

## **Co-occurring difficulties, resilience and psycho-social functioning**

Rose further describes ‘co-occurring difficulties’ that ‘may be seen in aspects of language, motor co-ordination, mental calculation, concentration and personal organisation, but [...] are not, by themselves, markers of dyslexia’ (p. 10). An interesting omission is that this definition does not address the link between dyslexia and mental health and well-being and the importance of resilience (Miller, 2002) that can explain at least in part why dyslexia is experienced by individuals in such divergent ways. An updated definition to incorporate the growing understanding of the link to mental health would be welcome, especially following the recent experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic. Dyslexia has been associated with a range of psychological well-being issues in childhood (Jordan and Dyer, 2017). However, with the exception of some conduct difficulties, psychological well-being issues appear to only commence upon starting school, which is a sobering finding as it suggests that schools create or contribute to rather than alleviate difficulties. A recent study (Brimo *et al.*, 2021, p. 1) confirmed that dyslexia often overlaps with other neurodevelopmental disorders such as ASD or ADHD and supports ‘the move beyond isolated diagnostic categories into behavioural profiles of co-occurring problems when trying to understand the pattern of strengths and needs in individuals with dyslexia’.

While the Rose definition does not refer to co-occurring social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) difficulties, the report itself nevertheless states that ‘overcoming [...] adverse emotional consequences depend on building strong individual resilience and coping strategies, and school and family support for learners experiencing dyslexic difficulties’ (p. 122). Terras, Thompson and Minnis (2009) have highlighted the links between dyslexia and disruptive behaviour disorders as well as internalising problems such as anxiety, depression and social withdrawal in their exploration of dyslexia and psycho-social functioning. They discuss the importance of self-esteem and the development of a sound academic self-concept; a consideration of social-cultural perspectives, and the role of parental support in addressing these problems. Miller (2002) suggests that identifiable success experiences, recognised areas of strength, self-determination, special friendships, encouraging teachers, an acknowledgement of the learning difficulty and distinctive turning points in the learning journey contribute to building individual resilience. Where a comprehensive support system from the first indication of difficulty is missing, the frustrations of reading failure might lead to a cycle of learning failure, loss of self-esteem and disaffection as well as lower aspirations.

## **Cognition and metacognition**

As mentioned, Rose predominantly highlights cognitive difficulties when identifying and addressing dyslexia. Cognition in this context refers to phonological and visual processing, working memory, processing speed and automaticity. Phonological processing difficulties are seen as fundamental to dyslexia and can be found to a greater or lesser degree in all individuals with dyslexia. A recent study (Mundy and Hannant, 2020) extends this work by exploring individual differences in phonological ability and identifies respective predictors for decoding, word recognition and comprehension difficulties. By contrast, metacognition refers to planning, thinking ahead, checking and evaluating, all of which are important general learning skills that need to be explicitly taught (Mortimore, 2003).

When trying to study implications for dyslexic learners, automaticity is an important cognitive function to consider. Some tasks may be less 'automatic' for dyslexic individuals and may take up more of their concentration and attention than is the case for neuro-typical individuals. Lack of automaticity in basic skills such as reading and writing could mean that dyslexic learners are more likely to experience processing overload when they are required to carry out new or complex tasks. They may need far more practice at any skill before they achieve automaticity and this explains why many of the interventions designed for dyslexic learners place a huge emphasis on over-learning (Nicholson and Fawcett, 2010). Working memory is used to hold new information in the mind for a short time before it is rejected or transferred into long-term memory. Some theorists regard inefficient working memory as being a key underlying factor in dyslexia (Reid, 2016).

There is a consensus in literature by those that support specialist dyslexia teaching that it needs to be structured, cumulative and sequential. Teaching programmes should be consistent with three principles: phonetic teaching, over-learning and multi-sensory teaching. It requires accurate assessment to identify a child's needs; planned interventions that are appropriate to the identified needs; relevant practice with relevant materials; sufficient time for over-learning, but with appropriate differentiation; immediate, informed, corrective feedback; and consistent evaluation of progress that informs future planning (Kelley and Phillips, 2011). While these recommendations are formulated for specialist teaching programmes, they are arguably also applicable to more recent understandings of what constitutes high-quality teaching (DfE/DoH, 2015).

## Evidence-based interventions and responding to individual learning needs

The EEF (2020) report that has informed the current action-research project argues that the model of SEND implied in the 2015 Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015) shifts the focus from securing a diagnosis of an identified condition to considering individual learning needs. A key question therefore should not be ‘What is most effective for pupils diagnosed with dyslexia?’, but rather ‘What does this individual pupil need in order to thrive?’ (EEF, 2020, p. 7). This is a welcome perspective, but one that has been challenged by those who fear that focusing too much on individual need allows for a return to ‘within-child’ deficit models of disability (Norwich, 2009) rather than focusing on how universal designs of learning (CAST, 2018) can aid inclusion.

Another consideration is the debate around effectiveness and ‘what works’ and the current focus on evidence-based interventions. Special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) and class teachers are expected to demonstrate the impact of their teaching interventions and so it is understandable that the question of effectiveness looms large in their thinking. The ‘what works’ discourse has, maybe unintentionally, contributed to the undermining of professional confidence and intuitive responses that foreground thriving (Terzi, 2005) as school leaders have been urged to adopt scripted interventions that promise results. Some authors (Knight, 2018) also continue to argue that evidence-based teacher training, which informs teachers of the up-to-date research on the biological, cognitive and behavioural aspects of dyslexia, is essential to combat misconceptions and ensures that teachers have a more nuanced and informed understanding of dyslexia. The EEF’s recommendations, by contrast, place a premium on knowing the child, rather than their condition.

### Inclusion by design

This article reflects on an unfunded action-research project undertaken as part of a NASENCO qualification in a London primary school. It was supervised and given ethical clearance by the awarding university. A SEND Review (<https://nasen.org.uk/send-reviews>) conducted by local authority advisors had previously identified the following issues relating to specific learning difficulties (dyslexia): (1) inconsistent early identification (Poulsen *et al.*, 2017) of reading underachievement that may suggest difficulties of a dyslexic nature in some cases; (2) lack of training

for staff (Knight, 2018) and of robust evaluations of evidence-informed interventions (NASEN, 2021) for those identified as needing additional support; and most significantly, (3) an uneven and unreliable understanding of how differentiated support as part of high-quality teaching approaches (Woodcock, 2021) should and can address many of the identified needs.

The qualifying SENCO was supported by an experienced SENCO in the reference school and by a local authority advisor. A co-authored action plan was implemented over a period of 6 months, supported by informal interviews with class teachers and support staff, observation of practice, document analysis and a reflective diary (McAteer, 2013). Insights were benchmarked against a series of observational visits to the reference school. While the action plan focused on improving documentation and practice, the action research focused on becoming a 'knower' and to 'understand and improve practice in order to influence other people's learning' (McNiff, 2014, p. 53).

One identified difficulty in the action-research school was that many of the teaching and support staff persisted with entrenched views that responsibility for SEND sits solely or mainly with the SENCO. This view has been very clearly challenged in the 2015 SEND Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015) and also by the recently published Educational Endowment Foundation (EEF, 2020) guidance report that has looked at evidence-informed practice around supporting SEND in mainstream schools. The report makes it clear that 'evidence tells us that teachers should prioritise familiar but powerful strategies to support their pupils with SEND' (p. 2) and weave 'specific approaches into everyday high-quality classroom teaching' (p. 2) in order to ensure that inclusion is supported by design rather than as an afterthought. In the next section I will consider how the action-research school re-designed some of their practices in line with the five key EEF recommendations.

## **The five recommendations from the EEF Report and its application to dyslexia**

### ***Create a positive and supportive environment for all pupils without exception***

Research has shown that teachers who believe that inclusive education is an effective way to teach all students provide greater positive feedback, feel less frustrated and hold lower expectations for future failure, in comparison to their



colleagues with more negative inclusive educational beliefs. Teachers need to believe that inclusive education is an effective way to teach all students, and that they, as teachers, are capable of managing this (Woodcock, 2021). The EEF's first recommendation addresses the need to be inclusive by design (Reid and Came, 2009), including by creating a learning environment that anticipates and pre-empts some of the difficulties that learners with dyslexia may experience. Achieving the Dyslexia Friendly Quality Mark Award (BDA, 2021) addresses some of these concerns head on. Anticipatory design may include a list of 'non-negotiable' resources that all teachers in all lessons need to make available and that is championed in all-staff training sessions and through learning walks and in formal observations. Visual timetables, timers, desk-top resources and topic word-banks are examples. It also includes high-quality teaching approaches including broken down instructions, checklists, think-time and careful seating arrangements. And where children are withdrawn for extra interventions, a routine is put in place to make sure the teacher is aware what the child is going to do, and that the child has time to discuss their learning afterwards with the teacher.

Creating a supportive learning environment for all pupils without exception emphasises distributed responsibility (EEF, 2020) for SEND. The important insight from the report is that this does not require detailed understanding of dyslexia or other kinds of SEND, but an understanding of individual pupil profiles and a maximising (and possibly adapting) of effective general teaching strategies that teachers already use. One example might be how reluctant pupils can be motivated to share their views with the whole class.

An vital aspect of creating a positive learning environment is developing a whole-school behaviour management strategy that rewards positive learning behaviours consistently and that emphasises the need to understand the reasons behind a pupil's behaviour that might challenge teaching staff, including where presenting behaviours may need to be understood as unidentified SEN. This may include difficulties of a dyslexic nature in more able children who do not want to be found out as struggling readers, and for those where the strain of underperforming has affected their mental health and well-being (Glazzard, 2010). Distributed responsibility requires close collaboration between the SENCO and behaviour and mental health leads to discuss ways forward for whole-school approaches and repeated reminders to teaching staff to refer children of concern so that joint review cycles of the graduated response can support the identification of children who need to be placed on SEN support, even if their attainment is at the expected level.

## **Build an ongoing, holistic understanding of your pupils and their needs**

The focus of this recommendation is to distinguish between need and diagnosis, which is an ongoing debate in literature and speaks to the powerful voices of support agencies who champion formal diagnosis of dyslexia. The action-research school does not have many parents who would push for a diagnosis and maintains that it is a child's presenting need, rather than a diagnosis that would lead to special provision being made. However, not all of the teachers have the skills or the will to identify needs, based on observation and on an evaluation of how individuals respond to interventions (Knight, 2018). The 2015 Code's 'graduated response' provides a helpful framework and encourages schools to develop early-concern systems (for example a 'Cause for Concern' form), as well as SEN support plans to better support teachers to think in terms of 'assess, plan, do and review'. The recommendation asks for gaining a more holistic picture of learning needs, gathered from various sources, and the willingness to generate a hypothesis about the type of *support* (rather than about a diagnosis) that could work (EEF, 2020, p. 16). Lewis and Norwich's (2005) model of thinking about common learning needs, specific needs that are shared with a similar group (e.g. most children with dyslexia) and individual needs based on a personal strengths-and-needs profile is very helpful here and teachers should be encouraged to use this model when thinking about their graduated response.

In professional discussions with the SENCO and class teachers the action-research project explored how school staff work together to ensure that needs are identified early and then addressed through the graduated response. Various documents that ensured that solid evidence was gathered and responses to interventions were recorded to build up a picture of needs and how they can be met were reviewed and finetuned. A strategic provision map was developed and evidence-based interventions the school had adopted were evaluated. This did not only cover phonics interventions, spelling programmes, handwriting programmes and comprehension strategies, but also programmes to support metacognition and to boost confidence and resilience as a learner. In order to ensure that the action-research school increases its capability of reliably identifying learning needs relating to dyslexia, a pathway framework was developed that sets out a timeline of when to screen, intervene and escalate the evaluated responses to interventions relating to various aspects of dyslexia. As the pathway framework is overseen by the SENCO, it mitigates against potential weaknesses of individual teaching staff, but also ensures that provision can be planned effectively, efficiently and strategically.

Another area of work has been to bring together the SENCO and Literacy lead to jointly prepare for the Ofsted Reading Deep Dive and its focus on the lowest 20% of readers. A well-received audit tool enabled colleagues to identify good practice and next steps in preparing for Ofsted, but more importantly in meeting the needs of individuals.

### ***Ensure all pupils have access to high-quality teaching***

The EEF guidance report states that ‘high quality teaching for pupils with SEND is firmly based on strategies that will either already be in the repertoire of every mainstream teacher or can be relatively easily added to’ (EEF, 2020, p. 20) and that ‘any additional interventions and strategies must supplement high-quality teaching and learning and not replace it’ (p. 21). This is in line with the 2015 Code. The EEF report identifies five specific strategies, which are all very relevant to learners with dyslexia: flexible grouping, making cognitive and metacognitive strategies explicit, providing explicit instruction, using technology and scaffolding. The compilation of a toolkit for teaching staff that exemplifies how these strategies can be applied to include learners with dyslexia and collating examples of existing good practice in the school has been extremely beneficial here. One teacher for example has been very successful in mixed-ability grouping for science investigations where a child with an identification of dyslexia was assigned the role of the investigation lead and another child as the scribe, based on what she knew about the strengths of these children. The group produced outstanding work.

### ***Complement high-quality teaching with carefully selected small-group and one-to-one interventions***

The action-research school has currently only a very small range of evidence-based literacy interventions (Brooks, 2016) for small-group and one-to-one work with affected children. Nasen’s SEND gateway (<https://www.sendgateway.org.uk/page/cognition-and-learning>) and advice from specialist teachers who have assessed individual children in the school have informed the future strategic provision planning to ensure that the action-research school has a suite of interventions and trained staff who can deliver these, according to need.

At the start of the project, the action-research school additionally had no way of knowing if any of the existing interventions were effective, and crucially, if there was an effective link between the content of the intervention and

the curriculum covered in the classroom (EEF, 2020, p. 29). The school has adapted an evaluation tool developed by nasen (<https://nasen.org.uk>) and embarked on an assessment of how evidence-informed interventions are used in the setting, what the current outcomes are, and what changes need to be made. As part of this review, the school has looked at ways that could strengthen the links between the classroom and the intervention content.

### ***Work effectively with teaching assistants***

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the development work taking place in the action-research school to transform support staff from ‘Velcro TAs’ to maximising their impact, based on research and support made available from the MITA project (<http://maximisingtas.co.uk>). However, there is a clear recognition that the school’s TAs need further training to ensure that they are able to scaffold learning for children presenting with dyslexic difficulties and to work towards pupils being able to scaffold their own learning. As a consequence, the school has changed the way that they make use of the service level agreement with the local authority’s Specific Learning Difficulty team and have moved away from using them as a diagnostic service and now ask them to model for both teachers and support assistants how to effectively scaffold for identified children. Early signs are that this will have a huge impact on the high-quality teaching as well as the work TAs are doing.

## **Conclusion**

In this article I have used the recommendations from the EEF guidance report to outline what has already been achieved and what will still need to happen to ensure the action-research school will become dyslexia friendly with a deeper understanding of what dyslexia is and how to design and deliver appropriate early identification processes and evidence-based interventions. More importantly though, I have demonstrated how the key EEF guidance recommendations can support the thriving of individuals (Terzi, 2005), rather than relying on outdated diagnosis-led support. The EEF recommendations can support practitioners to embed inclusive practices that take individual needs seriously but reject deficit models of disability. It has been particularly gratifying that after initial resistance from teaching and support staff, many are now enthusiastic and engaged both as learners and as providers of high-quality teaching and support. One class teacher has summed up this shift in thinking well: ‘I

know my children really well, and I now realise that this is more important than knowing about their diagnosis. Knowing this has given me lots of confidence’.

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