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Abstract

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**EDITORIAL
SPECIAL THEME ISSUE**

**Higher Education Students with Reading
and Writing Difficulties**

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The papers in this special issue address research and practical issues surrounding the growing number of students in higher education with literacy difficulties. This introduction raises some of the salient issues and provides a road-map to how the issues are woven into the papers.

Two factors are contributing to an increase in the number of students in higher education with difficulties in reading and writing. First, as universities and colleges raise their goals to attract a greater proportion of the population as students, more and more students who would previously have not been seen as suitable will be coming to campus. At least some of these “new” students will have lower reading and writing skills. Improved elementary and secondary education may counteract this to some extent, through improved literacy education. Second, and more central to this special issue, is the growing realization that some students with serious reading and writing difficulties, those termed reading disabled or writing disabled or learning disabled, have enormous talents that are constrained or even hidden by relatively specific difficulties with literacy. We are still coming to grips with the idea that it is no more fair, or just, to deny these latter students a place in higher education than it would be to deny a place to students with, for instance, mobility difficulties.

Broadly speaking, the six papers in this issue address three overlapping themes: (a) the identification and description of the students with literacy difficulties, (b) theories about the causes and mechanisms of their difficulties, and

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(c) issues about how such students compensate with their difficulties and how institutions should accommodate them.

Identification and Description

Who are the students with literacy difficulties, what are they like, and how should we identify them? It is not even clear whether we should describe them as having a *disability* or a *difficulty*, the former suggesting a more permanent trait, the latter a more malleable characteristic. The traditional approach, often enshrined in law, is that learning disabled individuals must show a discrepancy between their cognitive ability (e.g., IQ) and achievement (e.g., reading scores), and that the formal assessment process should be in the hands of a certified psychologist. This can be an expensive and slow process, and is often omitted – see the results of A. Harrison, Larochette and Nichols in this issue, who point out that students without formal diagnoses are usually not eligible for special treatments or accommodations. Are the formally-identified individuals different from those who are described by teachers as having reading or writing difficulties, or for that matter, different from those who self-report having those difficulties? How, and what are the implications? Two papers in this issue explore the nature of those who describe themselves as having literacy difficulties, often in the absence of formal diagnoses: McGonnell, Parrila and Deacon, and Parrila, Georgiou and Corkett. The provocative suggestion is that self-report may be a valid way to identify reading disabled students, especially those who have compensated to some degree for their difficulties.

Several of the current papers examined the issue of diversity in students with literacy difficulties. Parrila et al. and McGonnell et al. both found evidence for considerable diversity in strengths and weaknesses in students with reading difficulties. G. Harrison and Beres explored writing difficulties, a topic of central importance to many university instructors. Writing difficulties were not explored in the other papers, but we can assume that this is another dimension of variability.

Each of the papers in this issue shows that individuals in higher education with current diagnoses, and those who report having had difficulty learning to read, continue to demonstrate weaknesses in various aspects of reading and writing, though the results are far from consistent. Some of the key characteristics of reading disability in children, such as phonological awareness and naming speed (Rapid Automatized Naming) are less apparent in these adults.

These papers document the extraordinary accomplishment of these students, to survive and even thrive in higher education in spite of an enduring and profound difficulty with literacy.

Theories of Causes and Mechanisms

The predominant theory of reading disability implicates phonological processing (e.g., Torgesen, Wagner & Rashotte, 1994). With children, the first choice of treatment would attempt to remediate that phonological processing. In adults who have presumably had a great deal of remedial experience, it seems more reasonable to search for alternative means by which they can carry out their reading. One possibility is that extensive practice and re-reading can build up dyslexics' orthographic knowledge. Grant, Wilson and Gottardo investigate print exposure, a factor that is involved in building up orthographic knowledge and may help reading disabled students cope with or compensate for their disability. Their finding that print exposure predicts reading comprehension in dyslexics supports this. That this happened for untimed but not timed reading comprehension underlines the difficulties adult dyslexics continue to face with reading speed.

One current theory is the so-called Simple View of reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; see also Johnston & Kirby, 2006), in which reading comprehension is seen as the product of listening comprehension and word decoding. This view stresses that both higher level (oral comprehension) and lower level (decoding) processes contribute to skilled reading. Savage and Wolforth apply this to their reading disabled university students, finding that the model, whether seen as the product or the sum, does a good job of accounting for variability in reading. G. Harrison and Beres apply a similar conception to the writing of their university students with and without writing difficulties. Contrary to previous findings, they find that their participants have difficulties with both the higher and lower level processes in writing. These two papers illustrate that instructional interventions may have to target multiple processes.

Compensations and Accommodations

Perhaps the most intriguing question is how these disabled students have managed to survive in those most literate of environments, universities and colleges. As Lefly and Pennington (1991) suggested, many individuals have developed approaches or tactics with which to compensate for their original

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problems (see Parrila et al. for more). But what are these compensations, and could other students learn them? Hard work and re-reading (perhaps increasing print exposure; see Grant et al.) are undoubtedly involved, and higher verbal ability would help (see Savage & Wolforth), but further research on the nature of compensation is clearly required; some compensations may have implications for our theories of reading.

The notion of compensated dyslexics and the likelihood that many of these are difficult to detect (McGonnell et al.) suggest that there may be many more students with reading and writing difficulties than we currently think. It may also be the case (A. Harrison et al.) that these students do not wish to be identified formally. It is an interesting challenge for future research and practice to offer assistance to these students.

One lingering question is what institutions of higher education should do to support these students with reading and writing difficulties. Most institutions offer *accommodations*, in the form of extra time for exams, assistance with note-taking and reading, etc. Many also offer learning support, in which students are taught such skills as note-taking, studying, time management, and writing. It seems likely, given A. Harrison et al.'s results, that many students who could benefit from these accommodations are not applying for them.

Conclusion

Reading and writing difficulties are a serious problem in higher education, but it is a good sign that leading researchers such as those represented in this issue are turning their attention to it. I hope that this special issue encourages further research and contributes to our knowledge of how to address these difficulties.

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