Dyslexia Through the Eyes of Primary School Teachers

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Abstract

In this paper we intend to explore how the teachers feel about dyslexia and compare this with what research has shown us about this subject. It’s also my goal to discuss the difficulties shown by the school when dealing with language pathologies alerting to the fact that schools aren't ready nor equipped to answer efficiently to the challenge of working with special needs related to language difficulties, in what reading and writing are concerned, bearing in mind the lack of proper knowledge concerning the lack of success in school learning.

In this study we counted with the participation of 100 teachers from the districts of Oporto, Braga and Lisbon, to whom were made questionnaires composed mainly of closed questions. After the analysis of these questionnaires we were able to conclude that, regardless of the teachers working experience, teachers don't have the necessary knowledge or strategies to detect, evaluate or intervene in students with the specific pathology of dyslexia. The purpose of this study is to be a wake up call for the introduction of subjects in the Higher Education Courses that help teachers to deal with this kind of disabilities in order to proream adequately for students who show difficulties in some tasks.

Key words: learning difficulties; specific learning difficulties; special needs; dyslexia; evaluation; intervention; re-education; language problems.
1 – Introduction
In Portugal, with the enlargement of the school attendance, we’ve verified that school has become a more diversified and multicultural space, whose population is more and more heterogeneous and complex (César 2000; Vieira, 2011). It is necessary, therefore, to respond to the challenges that this brings making the transition from what is written in the educational documents to what we really experience in practice becoming a School for Everyone.

Defending the principles of the Inclusive School corresponds to believing in the educability of every human being and in the ability of teachers and educators to promote the full development of their students. The concept of Inclusive School is broader than we would have thought, because when celebrating the difference it concerns itself with the singularity and uniqueness of every human being (César, 2000).

Having in mind that the process of culture and knowledge appropriation is carried out through the master of the written language, we must emphasize the importance of knowledge concerning the different kinds of difficulties, characteristics, manifestations, evaluation and adequate intervention and re-education related to children who show reading and writing disabilities.

The reality in which this topic is seen is very complex and most of the times it goes unseen in the educational background. As we can see in Correia (1997), it is essential that every child with any kind of disability has the same access to education which is said to be public and free for everyone.

According to some investigations carried out by Pletsch (2009), Correia (2003) and Ainscow (2000), it is possible to see that even though this is not a recent topic, the same is very current because it gives us an account of the reality lived at schools, there being many teachers who don’t have the necessary training about this topic and who don’t know the detection and intervention strategies concerning learning disabilities, as their initial training doesn’t deal with this issue.

The subjects taught at higher education courses don’t provide future teachers with the necessary knowledge to face and teach special needs students. Here we can ask: why is teachers initial training so poor regarding this topic? What kind of difficulties do teachers with special needs students face? How can they overcome these difficulties?

While responsible for the teaching and learning of the most valued and important cognitive skills that a human being can achieve, reading and writing, teachers play a fundamental role which lead us to some questions: what do teachers know about dyslexia? Is this notion adjustable to the scientific knowledge in the field?

In this investigation we will try to answer these questions.

1.1. - The acquisition of reading
Reading and writing are complex activities which involve several operations and a broad set of knowledge, therefore, in order to master it we must develop, at the same time, the recognition and production of written words (i.e. reading decoding and written coding), as well as text comprehension and production (i.e. comprehensive Reading and written composition) (Cruz, 2007). This way, according to Cruz (2007), reading and writing are characterized by two complementary phases, receptive and expressive, being the receptive aspect of the written language (i.e., reading) related with the expressive aspect (i.e., writing), both depending on the verbal function which integrates the audio-visual (i.e., writing) as well as the visuo-auditive (i.e., reading) equivalentes.

This way, we can conclude that the auditive signals (i.e., phonetic) become visual signals (i.e., graphic), showing that the learning of reading lays in a signal transference problem (Cruz, 2007).
2. - Dyslexia: conceptual delimitation

Etymologically, the word dyslexia means “diction or speech difficulty” (Torres e Fernández, 2001). However, most authors defend that the concept includes a difficulty in the learning of reading. According to the above authors, in the last few years the concept has gained specificity, designating a certain syndrome which is characterized by the difficulty in distinguishing and memorizing letters or groups of letters, as well as problems related to the rhythm and structure of sentences affecting both reading and writing.

It’s a fact that for many years teachers of several levels of teaching have faced the strange dilemma of certain students who show regular or upper intelligence levels, having no economical nor emotional absence, and who, despite all, show profound difficulties in the learning of reading and writing (Critchley, 1970).

This problem appears in any social group, regardless age, sex, race or economical or cultural conditions. The awareness of parents, teachers as well as of the whole educational community to this problem allows these children to be adequately treated and oriented preventing the rate of school drop-outs.

2.1. - Behaviours and school problems related to Dyslexia

When students enter first grade, we can notice a great expectation from parents and teachers. This expectation is directly related to the success (or not) in learning, mainly in learning how to read and write (Viana e Leal, 2002). Nevertheless, it’s with school entrance that these skills come out. Therefore, the importance in the acquisition of these two skills excels, as it contributes to the positive image that the child builds of himself as a student, it influences the relation the child establishes with school and with his family.

Research shows that reading disabilities are present in about 30% of individuals with nine or less educational levels, however we can only detect them in 1% of the individuals with at least twelve educational levels (Morais, 1998). The reading of these numbers allows us to conclude that the diminish in the percentage of the reading disabilities lays in a similar abandonment rate, that is to say that it’s believed that the reading difficulties lead to school dropout.

According to Serra (2008), children with learning disabilities like dyslexia, disgraphy, disortography or discalculy are the ones we can see most in schools and which are most neglected by our educational system.

Torres e Fernández (2001) say that these children develop a low self and heteroconcept which is linked to demotivation and depression, as well as to a low educational attainment. The student is pressured to work and pay attention and, in a certain way, he is cast aside due to his learning ability.

Most of these children are insecure or excessively vain and, as a consequence of their school problems, they exhibit an unstable attention which is a consequence of the fatigue that comes from the endeavour in the overcome of the perceptive difficulties, as well as a lack of interest towards school activities because their educational attainment and grades are low causing lack of motivation and curiosity (Torres e Fernández, 2001).

Among the school subjects in which these difficulties show themselves the most we have history (problems dealing with time sequences), geography (problems in establishing coordinates) and geometry (problems dealing with space relations).

2.2. - Causes, evaluation and intervention in Dyslexia
As we can see in Snowling (2000), the heterogeneity found in the behavioral data concerning the causes of dyslexia doesn’t defy the fundamental idea that it reflects a phonological deficit, being these variations attributed to differences in the severity of that same deficit. According to Ferreira (2008), this phonological deficit complicates the discrimination and processing of language sounds, the conscience that language is made up of words, the words are made up of syllables, the syllables are made up of phonemes, and the knowledge that the letters of the alphabet are the graphic representation of those phonemes. Therefore, it is important that every intervention considers the phonological abilities (Snowling, 2000).

Even though so far we have centered our attention in a remedial way when talking about individual with dyslexia, it is necessary to point out the importance given to prevention and to early intervention. The problem identification is the key that allows its resolution. Undergoing an evaluation is the first step to outline an intervention strategy. However, this is a complex process due to the large number of factors needed to control to ensure precision in this process (Torres e Fernández, 2001).

Due to the controversy and the lack of consensus in the field of this investigation, it is difficult to define a unique and complete evaluation and intervention protocol.

2.3. - The teachers role when dealing with dyslexia

According to Serra (2008), when dealing with children with learning disabilities, Special Education teachers should be consulted in the field of finding educational answers to these students who reveal high intensity problems even though they are rated as being of low frequency. Nevertheless, according to the present legislation, these students are conducted to Educational Support, but the fact is that teachers in this area don’t have specialized education in order to provide students the intervention they need. This worry is not only related to Educational Support teachers but to all educational community which doesn’t have the knowledge to deal with the problem dealt here.

When a dyslexia problem appears at a school, most teachers don’t know how to deal with it. When this happens the feeling of frustration takes over: the child can’t answer to what he’s being asked; the teacher doesn’t understand the cause of the child’s difficulties; the parents feel lost. Teachers should bare in mind that dyslexic students can succeed in their learning, needing, sometimes, different ways to achieve learning. The teachers have as their task to ensure that they create a educational environment respecting the necessities and singularity of each student, bearing in mind that the student with learning disabilities can take more time to learn, being essential that the teacher expresses clear instructions and promotes the students self esteem.

Above all, teachers must know that a dyslexic student learns in a different way, but he’s capable of learning.

In this way, teachers’ education becomes essential. A teacher with no proper education will never be able to provide his students with the kind of education they need. According to Silva (2009) some investigations show that teachers reveal anxiety and insecurity when dealing with “different” students in their class, being this fact directly related to the resistance they reveal towards inclusion. Therefore, it is essential to provide knowledge to all educational community.

3. - Method and goals

Our main goals were: check if the teacher’s initial education fits dyslexia demands and check if they are aware of what dyslexia is, as well as how to detect it and how to intervene in a proper way. We also wanted to see how teachers act when facing students with reading and writing disabilities.

Participants
In this study we had the participation of 100 Primary School Teachers from the districts of Oporto, Braga and Lisbon. 88% are female and 12% male. The age average is 40.5.

The participants answered a two parts questionnaire. The first part was composed by 10 open and closed questions related to several aspects of dyslexia and the second part referred to the socio-demographic data. As we intended participants to answer all the questions, the questionnaires were anonymous.

3.1. - Results

According to this investigation results we can conclude that there is still a lot to clear in what school dropout is concerned, especially when it involves reading and writing disabilities.

Experienced teachers as well as teachers who have just finished their education referred lack of knowledge about dyslexia and asked for an enlightenment in this area.

Regardless the awareness of lack of knowledge in the field, most teachers have already dealt with dyslexic students. Teachers say that psychologists are the best source they have to send a child with reading and writing disabilities and check if they are dealing with a dyslexia problem. Participants in this study say they are unaware of how to act with a dyslexic student. This can make the student feel frustrated, showing low grades that can lead to a low self-esteem leading, in some cases, to school dropout.

Fonseca (2008) says that the teacher should build his/her own evaluation instruments in order to program for every child in particular, especially for those who reveal learning disabilities.

As we could see in this investigation only few teachers know what dyslexia is and how to act when facing a dyslexic student in order to promote his learning, therefore, higher education courses should introduce subjects that deal with this and other real problems that teachers face every day at school preparing them for what is now still unknown.

Also, schools should do everything in their power to promote education for everyone, that is to say that the curriculum should be flexible and adaptable to all students.

Inclusion is not about making everyone equal, but about respecting the differences (Correia, 2003). Every case is a different case. As teachers we must be aware of this thought and when looking at our whole class we must see every student as a singular individual putting aside labels that most of the times aren’t correct. This subject is of high importance at an individual and social level and it’s our job, as education professionals to be aware of it.

References


