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What is this guide?

The Learning Difficulties Information Guide—Literacy is a foundation for understanding learning difficulties in literacy, including dyslexia, and a guide for what teachers can do to support this cohort of students.

This resource will sit alongside two accompanying guides:

- The Learning Difficulties Information Guide – Numeracy
- The Learning Difficulties Information Guide – School Leaders

The School Leaders guide contains information to help schools understand how supporting students with learning difficulties fits within the broader vision of the Education State.

This guide and the numeracy guide are more specialised, designed to help build the confidence and practical capability of teachers to identify, assess and implement interventions to support students with learning difficulties in day-to-day practice.

While the advice in all three guides is intended to help support students with learning difficulties, its application will help to improve the literacy and numeracy of all students (Gettinger & Stoiber 2007; Marston 2005).

Background

In June 2018, the Department of Education and Training (the Department) released its Literacy and Numeracy Strategy Phase 2 (the Strategy), outlining Victoria’s plan to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes for all students. The Strategy ensures that teachers have access to relevant support and resources to meet the learning needs of their students and continuously improve their professional practice in the classroom.

The Strategy aims to support teachers in their daily practice and thereby lift literacy and numeracy achievement, so that every Victorian student, including those with learning difficulties, can expect:

- to receive the quality teaching they need to achieve success in literacy and numeracy (regardless of their background, circumstances or prior achievement)
- to be engaged in their learning, including working with their teachers to set immediate and longer-term literacy and numeracy goals, and to have their voice heard in designing their own learning.
What is the difference between a learning disability and learning difficulty?

Approximately 15–20 percent of students in every school, in every classroom, will have a learning difficulty (AUSPELD 2014). This is an umbrella term to describe students who are experiencing difficulty with learning because of a variety of reasons (for example, disability, living in out-of-home care) and who are unable to access the curriculum through high-quality instruction alone. This group of students, if they are provided with greater knowledge and practice, are more than capable of closing the gap between them and their peers.

Understanding the reasons why a student may be experiencing difficulties while learning is an important first step to help them better access the curriculum.

Learning disabilities are a subset of learning difficulties and are classified as congenital, neurological differences (that may or may not be diagnosed) which include specific learning disabilities, such as dyslexia and dyscalculia. Students with learning disabilities are predisposed to difficulties with their learning, no matter the circumstances they are born into, their school environment, or the quality of teaching they experience.

Not all students with neurological differences will present with a set of recognisable traits, which can make it hard to identify a learning disability. It is likely, however, that students with learning disabilities will respond less effectually and more slowly to intervention compared to those with other learning difficulties.

For the purposes of this guide, ‘learning disabilities’ will be viewed as a sub-set of the larger group of students generally referred to as experiencing learning difficulties.
Legal responsibilities

One in five Australians will have a disability at some stage in their lives. For some, the disability will be temporary. Others are affected for a lifetime. Whatever the case, everyone has the right to be an active member of their community and to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives. As a teacher, your attitudes, words, and actions have a huge impact on the lives of students with disability.

The Disability Standards for Education 2005 (the Standards) were developed under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA). The Standards clarify the obligations of education providers under the DDA, and seek to ensure that students with disability can access and participate in education on the same basis as other students. The definition of disability in the DDA includes physical, intellectual, mental health and learning disability.

School leaders and teachers should be aware of their obligations in supporting students with learning disabilities to ensure their compliance with the DDA and the Standards. Among other things, schools are obliged to make reasonable adjustments to ensure students with learning disabilities can access education on the same basis as their peers.

The DDA and the Standards in a nutshell

Together, the DDA and the Standards help to ensure that Australian school students with disability get the same opportunities at school as everyone else.

- The DDA is Commonwealth legislation that aims to eliminate disability-based discrimination and promote equal rights, opportunity and access for people with disability.
- The Standards help to clarify the DDA. They provide a framework for the educational rights of students with disability to enable them to access and participate in education on the same basis as other students.

Further information to help schools and other education providers understand their obligations under the DDA and the Standards is available on the Department’s website as professional learning.
Personalised learning and support planning

To maximise engagement and outcomes for students with learning difficulties, a four stage personalised learning and support planning process is recommended. The four stages of Assess, Plan, Teach and Evaluate serve as a guide for identifying students’ learning strengths and needs and for designing, implementing and evaluating tailored teaching and intervention strategies, including the development of Individual Education Plans.

Individual Education Plans

An Individual Education Plan (IEP) describes the adjustments, goals and strategies designed to meet the educational needs of an individual student to enable them to reach their potential. An IEP is a living document that is essential in guiding the educational planning and monitoring of a student’s unique learning needs.

IEPs are recommended for students with learning difficulties. An IEP:

- supports schools in developing a meaningful learning program for students and to track progress against SMART goals
- provides a means to share information between school, student, family and other support professionals
- helps schools to determine how best to use resources to support students
- promotes agency and student voice by involving the young person in the process
- serves to establish the process by which teachers and schools are meeting their legal obligations for students with learning disabilities under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 and the Disability Standards for Education 2005.
Literacy learning difficulties

Not all students become literate with the same degree of ease. Some students encounter significant difficulty mastering basic reading and writing skills (Odegard 2019), while others may experience challenges as they move through to upper primary and secondary school.

Print literacy comprises our ability to read (that is, decode words and understand written text), spell (that is, encode words from speech to print), and write (that is, form simple words and phrases, and ultimately generate extended written text). In all cases, reading is the starting point for learning to be literate.

Why is literacy important?

Literacy is essential for developing the relevant knowledge and skills to interpret and use language confidently for learning and communicating, and to participate meaningfully in society. For students, literacy includes successfully understanding and creating different types of texts, analysing and evaluating information, making meaning, and using and modifying language for different purposes in a range of contexts.

Becoming literate is more than just knowledge and the application of skills. Certain behaviours and dispositions also assist students to become effective learners who are confident and motivated to use their literacy skills broadly. They include students managing their own learning to be self-sufficient, working collaborating with others, being open to ideas, opinions and texts from and about diverse cultures, returning to tasks to improve and enhance their work, and being prepared to question the meanings and assumptions in texts (ACARA 2019).

Characterising learning difficulties in literacy

There are many reasons why a student might struggle to master reading or related literacy skills. Factors that can compound an underlying reading difficulty include:

Student related factors
- chronic absenteeism
- sensory impairment(s)
- delayed acquisition of language
- speech sound errors
- social-emotional difficulties

Social and/or environmental factors
- limited early language and literacy exposure
- low socio-economic status
- family history of learning disabilities
- gaps in reading instruction
- disrupted learning (for example, school refusal)
- if English is not a student’s first language, or the primary language spoken at home, this may contribute to initial difficulties while the child masters the language.

Other students may struggle with reading due to underlying difficulties with word decoding or oral language comprehension.
Identifying literacy learning difficulties and dyslexia

Given the range of skills and abilities that are involved in becoming literate, it is important to understand the processes and abilities that are needed to read, write and communicate effectively when seeking to identify literacy learning difficulties.

**Understanding reading**

The aim of reading is to comprehend or extract meaning from text. To successfully understand written text (reading comprehension), students need to be able to decode written words and must have adequate oral language competency to attach meaning to those words, and to phrases and longer passages. Gough and Tunmer’s (1986) Simple View of Reading model (Figure 1) illustrates how reading comprehension is a product of these two core competencies.

Word decoding means being able to map written symbols (graphemes) to the corresponding sounds (phonemes). This is also known as ‘phonics’.

Learning to decode words is a skill that must be taught explicitly, ideally through structured and explicit instruction. This is particularly important for English, because the sounds of speech do not always correspond directly with letters.

For example, the sound ‘f’ corresponds directly to its matching grapheme in words such as ‘fork’ and ‘if’. However, the sound ‘f’ does not match directly with the letter ‘f’ when the former appears in words such as ‘phone’ or ‘cough’.

In English, there are 26 letters, 44 phonemes and more than 200 ways to represent phonemes in spelling. All children, including those with dyslexia, will benefit from being taught explicitly and systematically to decode words (Castles, Rastle & Nation 2018; Rose 2006; NICHD 2006).
Oral language comprehension

Oral language comprehension refers to the ability to take in and process spoken information in order to derive meaning. Vocabulary and grammatical knowledge (such as understanding of verb agreement, prefixes, suffixes and complex sentence construction), are all key to strong oral language comprehension.

Reading demands across school years

Reading instruction should align with the increasing reading demands that students face as they progress through school. Figure 2 is an overview of the reading skills that a typical student acquires (as they relate to word decoding and reading comprehension) as they move through the school years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foundation and Year 1</th>
<th>Students learn to decode and read words. This involves skills needed to decode words: phonemic awareness, letter-sound knowledge and recognition of high frequency words.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 2 toward upper primary</td>
<td>Students build reading rate, accuracy and automaticity. Reading comprehension becomes an increasingly vital instructional focus as students move from learning to read, to reading to learn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper primary years and beyond</td>
<td>Students are required to read as a means of learning, researching topics and broadening their knowledge base. Reading comprehension skills are crucial to academic success.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: Alignment of reading instruction based on students’ increasing academic demands.

Explicit reading skills, as a component of literacy, are vital for lifelong learning and achievement. The Victorian Curriculum F-10 sets out the skills that students need to succeed in reading and viewing, writing, and speaking and listening.
Reading profiles

As previously noted, there are many reasons why a student might struggle with reading and writing skills (Odegard 2019). It is important to understand why a student is having difficulty with different aspects of their literacy in order to provide effective support.

Using the core competencies of the Simple View of Reading, students can be classified according to four reading profiles. These profiles can give teachers an initial indication of the type or types of difficulty a student might be experiencing. Figure 3 displays the four profiles.

**Profile A – Able Reader**
Students have adequate core competencies and are well-equipped to learn to read without difficulty.

**Profile B – Word Reading Difficulty**
Students often struggle to gain proficiency decoding words despite adequate oral language comprehension. These difficulties are often seen in students with dyslexia.

**Profile C – Specific Reading Comprehension Deficit**
Students can decode words but have difficulty understanding what they have read because of poor oral language comprehension. Typically, this reading difficulty presents in mid-primary years. These students do not have a reading profile that aligns with dyslexia.

**Profile D – Mixed Reading Difficulties**
Students have not yet developed adequate skills in word decoding and oral language comprehension. They have difficulty learning to decode and read words, and in extracting meaning from text.

Figure 3: Subtypes of reading profiles based on the Simple View of Reading.
Difficulty with word decoding

Students who have difficulty with word decoding may struggle to identify and segment all of the word parts (that is, they struggle with phonemic awareness). They may also have difficulty understanding the relationship between graphemes and their corresponding phonemes (that is, difficulty with phonics).

What does difficulty with word decoding ‘look’ like?

The severity of word decoding deficits varies, but students with poor word decoding will typically read slowly and with difficulty. They are likely to read aloud in a monotone and without fluency, and to find reading exhausting and not enjoyable.

In most cases, students with poor word decoding will consistently make grammatical errors in sentence construction. They will likely have poor punctuation, capitalisation, and messy handwriting.

Difficulty with oral language comprehension

Oral language comprehension refers to the ability to take in and process spoken information in order to derive meaning. Broadly speaking, oral language comprehension, is reliant on vocabulary knowledge, grammatical knowledge, familiarity with narrative structure genres, and working memory.

What does difficulty with oral language ‘look’ like?

Students with poor oral language comprehension will have difficulty understanding what is said to them. Unlike reading difficulties, there is no standard set of symptoms that indicates poor oral language comprehension. Common characteristics may include some or all of the following:

- appearing not to listen or have difficulty maintaining attention when spoken to
- difficulty recalling spoken information
- difficulty following multiple instructions or complicated sentences
- trouble understanding inference in spoken information.
Specific reading comprehension deficit

These readers have difficulty understanding what they have read, despite appearing to read accurately and at a reasonable pace. Typically, these students make a strong start when learning to read in the early years of school, but face challenges in mid to upper-primary years as texts become increasingly complex.

What does specific reading comprehension deficit ‘look’ like?

Students with a specific reading comprehension deficit perform poorly on reading comprehension tasks, despite the fact that their word-level reading skills are adequate.

This reading difficulty subtype has also been referred to as ‘hyperlexia’ which emphasises the fact that these students have strong word reading skills but have difficulty comprehending or drawing meaning from what they read.

Specific reading comprehension deficits are underpinned by a fundamental deficiency in oral language skills. For these students, it may be that their comprehension of conversational language is adequate. Deficits may become evident when complex language demands arise.

This is because written language, as found in textbooks and age-appropriate literature, is typically more sophisticated than spoken language in terms of density, formality, grammatical complexity and breadth of vocabulary. It requires students to apply conceptual, inferential and metaphorical thinking. It is at this level of language-processing that specific reading comprehension deficits will often become apparent.
Dyslexia

Dyslexia, the most common form of specific learning disability, is characterised by **difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word decoding and poor spelling** (Lyon, Shaywitz & Shaywitz 2003). Reading and spelling deficits, together with a delayed response to intervention, are also central features of dyslexia (Odelgard 2019).

Dyslexia is a lifelong condition. Nonetheless, students with dyslexia can learn to read with fluency and accuracy given intensive, evidence-based intervention over extended periods.

It is important to note that dyslexia is not connected in any way to a student’s intelligence or effort in learning to read. Dyslexia is not caused by visual processing deficits and, contrary to popular belief, is not characterised by seeing letters or words backwards (Velluntino et al. 2004).

Difficulties with reading comprehension are an inevitable consequence for students with dyslexia because of the time and effort needed to decode words, along with the risk of reading words inaccurately. The cognitive load required simply to get the words ‘off the page’ can leave students with insufficient energy to attach meaning to the text.

**What does dyslexia ‘look’ like?**

Students with dyslexia will present with many of the same markers as students with poor word decoding. Typically, however, non-dyslexic students who have difficulty with word decoding will progress more quickly than students with dyslexia, following evidence-based intervention.

In the early years, other common indicators include:

- difficulty learning sequences (for example, reciting the days of the week)
- difficulty identifying rhyming words
- difficulty detecting sounds within words, or detecting alliterated words
- persistent articulation difficulties (for example, saying ‘wabbit’ instead of ‘rabbit’).

As students progress to upper primary and beyond, further difficulties may become apparent, including:

- becoming easily fatigued while reading
- poor text comprehension
- poor spelling
- messy handwriting
- poor organisation of spoken and written narrative
- difficulty comprehending instructions
- difficulty completing tasks.

Some students may present with features associated with dyslexia for other reasons, such as chronic illness, that have hindered their opportunity to master word decoding. As with students who have a formal diagnosis of dyslexia, non-dyslexic students who struggle with decoding can also be taught to read given additional supports and intervention.
Understanding writing

Writing encompasses many skills and competencies. These include spelling, language construction, narrative discourse (of which there are many genres), cohesion of ideas, cognitive operations such as planning and organising, fine motor coordination, and visuospatial and visuoperceptual skills. For this reason, there are two categories of writing difficulty: non-language-based difficulties and language-based difficulties.

Non-language-based difficulties

These include:

- Fine motor coordination difficulty. This can manifest in a student pressing too hard when writing, or as messy handwriting with poor lettering. For some students, difficulties with fine motor control for handwriting may be part of a Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD). Other signs a student may have a DCD include:
  - uncoordinated or ‘clumsy’ movements
  - difficulty with tasks requiring fine motor skills (for example, buttoning clothing, tying shoe laces, cutting in a straight line) and/or gross motor skills (for example, running and jumping)
  - tires easily
  - takes a disproportionate amount of time to change clothing (for example, for physical education or swimming)
  - difficulty eating without making a mess.

As DCD most commonly affects handwriting, students may produce less written work in a set time than their peers. Legibility can also decrease considerably with increases in speed. More information about DCD and strategies to help make classrooms and learning more physically inclusive can be found on the Department’s website.

- Visuospatial and/or visuoperceptual awareness difficulty, manifested by:
  - difficulty with spacing of writing (including spacing letters and words appropriately)
  - difficulty aligning writing on a page.

Language and/or cognitive-based difficulties

Language-based writing difficulties often overlap with reading difficulties (Hendren 2018). This is particularly evident in spelling, which is impaired for students who have difficulty with decoding.

Indicators of language and/or cognitive-based difficulties include:

- difficulty with spelling
- mixing up capital letters with lower-case letters and omitting or making errors using punctuation markers
- difficulty constructing sentences and extended narratives. This is associated with:
  - impaired oral language competencies; written expression may be poorly constructed and/or grammatically simple, use limited vocabulary and lack narrative cohesion
  - impaired cognitive operations; written expression is not well-planned, reflecting poor organisation of ideas, and/or not adhering to the task requirements.
Literacy intervention

The best outcomes for students with literacy learning difficulties are achieved when need is identified early and students are provided with high-quality, evidence-based instruction and interventions. Research shows that early identification protects against the growing divide between children who do not make a strong start learning to read at school and their classroom peers (Snowling & Hulme 2011).

These students should not be left to ‘catch-up’ on their own (Catts et al. 2015; Smart et al. 2005). Instead, they should receive additional support that targets key skills, knowledge, and abilities.

Response to Intervention and literacy learning difficulties

The Response to Intervention (RTI) framework can be helpful for thinking about how to implement approaches to support students with learning difficulties.

Described below, RTI is a framework of academic support that is often embedded within a Multi-tiered System of Support (MTSS), alongside School-wide Positive Behaviour Support. RTI divides support into three tiers of increasing intensity, organised according to need (Figure 4). RTI provides a useful model to consider how best to embed academic support for students with learning difficulties within a school-wide approach to teaching and learning.

The RTI framework is a functional, dynamic means of identifying students who are struggling with literacy, based on how well they are responding to the instruction or interventions being provided at each tier.

Figure 4: Response to Intervention tiers of academic support (adapted from Buffum, Mattos, & Weber 2012).
Tier 1 - Instruction

Instruction should be delivered by teachers who are well-informed about what constitutes evidence-based reading instruction, and who understand how to implement such teaching.

Core components

Table 1 describes the components essential to effective reading instruction. These should be taught as part of a comprehensive reading program using explicit instruction and a structured literacy approach.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Detail</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phonemic awareness</td>
<td>• Knowledge that words are made up of individual sounds (phonemes) and that these sounds can be segmented, blended and manipulated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phonics:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthographic conventions of print</td>
<td>• Sound-symbol (phoneme-grapheme) correspondences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Letter patterns that signify sounds (phonemes) such as ‘ck’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Spelling conventions, such as never having ‘ng’ at the start of English words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Punctuation markers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading fluency</td>
<td>• Word reading accuracy, speed and/or fluency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>• Semantics: meaning conveyed by a system of words and strings of words. The meaning of words and word strings may be relatively stable, such as ‘swim’, or more abstract, such as ‘she swims like a fish’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral language competencies</td>
<td>• Morphology: meaningful parts of words, such as:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ base words, such as ‘think’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ affixes, such as ‘re’ (added to ‘think’ to make ‘rethink’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ grammatical markers, such as ‘s’ added to ‘dog’ to make ‘dogs’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Syntax: conventions of grammar and word order including:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ ‘active’ and ‘passive’ voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ phrase and clause structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ conjunctions used to join phrases and clauses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Narrative language: extended discourse using a variety of genres.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Components of an evidence-based approach to teaching reading
Reading comprehension

Reading comprehension should be considered the end-product of a number of different skills and competencies (these are listed in Table 2). Unlike learning to decode, reading comprehension cannot be considered a discrete skill that can be taught in isolation.

- Word decoding
- Oral language skills
- Background knowledge about general information
- Working memory capacity
- Executive functioning such as attention, concentration, problem-solving and self-monitoring
- Inferring information from text or ‘reading between the lines’
- Knowledge about different text types such as story grammar, expository texts, persuasive texts.

Table 2: Skills and competencies required for reading comprehension.

Teaching reading comprehension strategies, such as summarising, paraphrasing and identifying key or main ideas, is one way to enhance students’ ability to comprehend what they read. However, it is essential not to underestimate the importance of the key skills and competencies that contribute to strong reading comprehension (Elleman & Compton 2017).

For example, students need a wide-ranging vocabulary bank, as well as broad and deep knowledge about a range of topics. Explicit teaching of curriculum-based and/or content-based vocabulary, coupled with critical discussions about content and sophisticated questioning are essential to boost students’ abilities to comprehend written text.

High Impact Teaching Strategies

The High Impact Teaching Strategies (HITS) are 10 instructional practices that reliably increase student learning. For students with literacy learning difficulties, the HITS represent a collection of evidence-based strategies to help support teaching and learning. For example, research into effective literacy intervention shows that instructions that directly address the information a student needs to learn (Explicit Teaching) have the greatest effect size for reading among students at every year level, supporting both low and high-level word comprehension (Hattie 2009).

Appendix 1: Explicit Teaching provides more detailed information about this specific strategy. For overviews and examples that illustrate each of the strategies in action, see the Department’s Excellence in Teaching and Learning resource.

Teachers, who know their students and their students’ learning styles well, can readily judge whether a HITS or another strategy will work best to teach a particular concept or skill. Note, however, that using HITS to teach any concept or skill reliably increases the chance that students will learn it, regardless of whether they have a learning difficulty.
Tier 2 & 3 - Intervention

It is essential that students who do not respond sufficiently to classroom instruction alone are identified early and provided with evidence-based intervention.

Students’ literacy skills should be thoroughly assessed and interventions tailored accordingly.

For example, some students may have difficulty accurately segmenting sounds in multi-syllabic words (difficulty with phonemic awareness), while others may guess words because their word decoding skills are not yet consolidated.

Tier 2 Intervention

In addition to high-quality, differentiated instruction, Tier 2 intervention may be required for students who have not responded adequately. Tier 2 is not a departure from the curriculum, but a more intensive and ‘scaffolded’ version of general classroom instruction.

Generally, effective Tier 2 intervention:

- is aligned closely with the strategies and approaches being taught in the student’s classroom
- is provided early, so that gaps in the student’s achievement compared to that of their peers do not widen further
- seeks to accelerate students’ learning so they can successfully engage in a general education classroom
- accords with scientific, evidence-based approaches for teaching reading (see Table 1).

Tier 3 Intervention

At Tier 3, the intervention strategies employed at Tier 2 are delivered with greater intensity, frequency, and duration.

Intervention support is often delivered one-on-one. It is important to note that students with learning disabilities (such as dyslexia and dyscalculia) will respond slower and less effectually to intervention strategies than students with other types of learning difficulties.

Supporting students in secondary school

The ability to decode words efficiently and automatically allows students to read accurately and fluently. This, in turn, frees up energy for comprehending text. However, many readers with learning difficulties, including upper-primary and secondary students, may still have gaps in foundational skills, such as phonemic awareness and/or phonics.

As these skills are crucial for becoming a competent reader, such students often require Tier 3 intervention, in addition to adjustments that support their access to the curriculum. Regardless of age or year level, these students will benefit from a program to build and consolidate phonemic awareness and phonemic decoding. Older students are likely to progress quickly through the early phases of such a program.

Tier 2 and 3 resources

The Department has a range of resources to help teachers understand students’ learning needs.

Teachers may consider using:

- The Diagnostic Assessment Tools in English
- Teaching assessments and strategies available on the Department’s Learning Difficulties web pages.
**Adjustments for students with learning difficulties**

In addition to targeted intervention, adjustments can be implemented to help students with learning difficulties get the most out of classroom instruction. Accommodations can be made also in relation to undertaking assessment tasks and completing school work (including projects, in-class tasks and homework).

Table 3 lists potential adjustments and accommodations, which will vary depending on a student’s particular learning needs. It is followed by links to resources for further ideas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adjustments to help students get the most out of classroom instruction include:</th>
<th>Environmental adjustments can include:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• simplified worksheets</td>
<td>• a desk close to the teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• highly explicit, direct instructions</td>
<td>• limiting distractions when the student is working.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• displaying task instructions on a whiteboard</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• printed notes (instead of requiring the student to copy from the board)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• audio-recordings of instructions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• summary outlines of the lesson plan (before class, if appropriate)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• instructions that are broken down into smaller steps</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• topic-specific word banks with definitions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• additional opportunities for practice and questions.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adjustments to help students fully demonstrate their knowledge when being assessed, and/or when completing school work include:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• audiobooks, audio-recordings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• assistive technology (such as text-to-speech and speech-to-text tools)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• graphic organisers and other scaffolds to assist with extended writing tasks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• additional time to complete work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• allowing work to be presented in a different mode or format (for example, verbally, or visually instead of being written).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 3: Examples of adjustments and accommodations to support students with learning difficulties.*
**Student support services**

Student support services (SSS) assist children and young people facing barriers to learning by providing a range of strategies and specialised support at the individual, group, school and area levels.

SSS comprise a broad range of professionals employed by the Department, including: psychologists, speech pathologists and social workers. SSS staff work as part of an integrated health and wellbeing team within areas of schools, focusing on providing group-based and individual support, workforce capacity-building and specialised services.

The SSS Referral Process identifies children and young people with the greatest need, and matches student/school needs with the expertise of SSS team members.

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**Professional learning**

**Analysing English Online Interview data to improve literacy outcomes**

This online learning program:

- supports teachers to interpret, identify, measure and address capability gaps
- provides information about the causes of early literacy difficulties
- demonstrates how data from assessments such as the English Online Interview can help to identify students with literacy learning difficulties
- provides information about other tools, resources and supports available to teach students who need additional support.

**Inclusive Classrooms – Supporting Students with Learning Difficulties including Dyslexia**

This eight-week blended learning course is designed to develop teachers’ knowledge of evidence-based practices to support all students to become competent readers.

Registration is via the [Inclusive Classrooms professional learning program](#) website.

**Learning Difficulties including Dyslexia webinar series (LD Bites)**

LD Bites are short, sharp webinars designed to increase the capability of school staff to support students with learning difficulties, including dyslexia.

These webinars look more closely at particular skills required for literacy learning.
Learning difficulties in the classroom | Connections
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Sarah is a Year 8 student in Mr. Abadi’s class. She is an engaged student who enjoys classroom debates and participates actively in English.

Mr. Abadi notices that Sarah often appears to have difficulty completing tasks that involve reading long passages of text. He also notices that, while her writing is rich in its use of vocabulary, Sarah appears to have difficulty organising her thoughts on the page and is prone to messy handwriting, poor punctuation and spelling.

Mr. Abadi organises a meeting with his school’s Learning Specialist to look over some examples of Sarah’s writing and discuss his observations. Based on this data and the Simple View of Reading model (Figure 1), the two of them suspect that Sarah has difficulty with decoding and reading individual words (that is, word decoding).

Mr. Abadi consults with Sarah’s previous English teachers who confirm that she has, in the past, encountered difficulty with phonics and phonemic awareness.

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Mr. Abadi speaks with Sarah in-class about her goals in English for the year, and what she would like to improve on. Sarah expresses a desire to improve her essay writing and spelling.

Mr. Abadi uses Sarah’s goals and the data he has collected as the basis for his planning with the school’s Learning Specialist. Together, they prioritise some immediate literacy goals, these include:

- increasing Sarah’s familiarity with narrative structure genres (including critical writing)
- advancing Sara’s grammatical knowledge, as well as improving her ability to use punctuation accurately.

They also set some long-term literacy goals, these include:

- improving Sarah’s ability to identify, segment and blend word parts (phonemic awareness)
- advancing Sarah’s knowledge of the relationship between graphemes and their corresponding phonemes (phonics).

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Improvements to teaching practice and student learning are strongly dependent on effective implementation within an evidence-based improvement cycle. The four stages of the FISO improvement cycle supports teachers to focus on better outcomes for our students and can be used at different levels, from the whole-school to the classroom, and over different time periods, from four-week cycles to annual cycles.

**Case example**

- **Evaluate and diagnose**
  ‘What is the problem?’
  (Collect and use data and evidence to consider reasons for a student’s performance)

- **Understanding literacy learning difficulties (p. 9)**

- **Prioritise and set goals**
  ‘What outcome do we want?’
  (Set immediate and long-term goals in the context of understanding need and required support)

- **Understanding literacy learning difficulties (p. 9)**
Learning difficulties in the classroom

Mr. Abadi reviews the instructional strategies he uses to teach reading and writing. He has recently attended professional learning on supporting students to use text structure in their writing, and feels confident in his approach with high-quality differentiated instruction (Tier 1). However, he is less confident about his use of explicit instruction to support the development of Sarah’s phonemic awareness.

Mr. Abadi decides to utilise the existing reading and writing groups in his class to provide Sarah with support to advance her phonics and grammatical / punctuation knowledge (Tier 2). He also calls home to check-in with Sarah’s family and to recommend Sarah attend the school’s Homework Club once per week, where a literacy specialist can work with her one-on-one to improve her phonemic awareness (Tier 3).

Mr. Abadi records the details of this planning in an Individual Education Plan (IEP) and shares this document with Sarah and her family.

Mr. Abadi identifies the criteria that will be used to evaluate the impact of the plan:

- improvement in Sarah’s spelling accuracy both in day-to-day writing tasks and spelling tests
- improvement in Sarah’s sequencing of writing and narrative structure
- increased grammatical complexity in Sarah’s writing, with accurate use of punctuation.

At the end of the term, Mr. Abadi meets with Sarah and her parents through a parent teacher conference. Mr. Abadi notes that there has been an improvement in the structure of Sarah’s writing and her use of punctuation, but that issues with her spelling, phonics knowledge, and phonemic awareness still exist.

Nonetheless, Sarah is responding well to the interventions and is making incremental, but consistent progress. Sarah, her parents, and Mr. Abadi agree to continue with the plan and to review her progress at the end of next term.

Connections

- **Develop and plan**
  ‘What will be done about it?’ (Develop a plan of action that details what will be done, when, where, and with what support)

- **Using RTI to support literacy learning difficulties** (p. 14)

- **Individual Education Plan** (p. 7)

- **Implement and monitor**
  ‘How will we know it worked?’ (Continue to monitor student progress and evaluate the student’s response to instruction / intervention)

- **Understanding literacy learning difficulties** (p. 12)

- **Using RTI to support literacy learning difficulties** (p. 14)
Learning difficulties and student wellbeing

Students with learning difficulties often face daily struggles at school as they attempt to deal with various challenges. Research suggests that students with learning difficulties are at greater risk of having a poor sense of academic self-concept and may hold negative beliefs about themselves that are directly linked to their performance in class, such as ‘I am no good at reading’, ‘I can't spell’, or ‘I am stupid’ (AUSPELD 2014).

While students with high self-esteem are typically more adaptable and do better in social environments, students with learning difficulties who have low self-esteem tend to be less effective in engaging with others, experience feelings of powerlessness, feel disconnected from their peers, and have difficulty coping with setbacks (Hattie 2009).

Experiencing low self-esteem / efficacy for long periods of time can also increase the possibility of developing mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and behavioural problems. Students with learning difficulties may become withdrawn, appear disengaged, disruptive, rude or even aggressive as a result of the frustration they may feel not being able to keep up with the demands of the classroom. These behaviours often become more pronounced as students become older, as their identity and sense of self-worth becomes increasingly associated with their experiences of academic and social success.

On the other hand, when students begin to cultivate a positive self-view and feel connected to their peers, teachers and their learning, there is a marked improvement in academic achievement (Suldo, Thalji & Ferron 2011; Howell 2009). As teachers you have an opportunity to assist all students, including those with learning difficulties, to become determined, resilient, and committed learners.

Empowering students

Students’ success is strengthened by a robust sense of self-efficacy; that is, a firm belief in their ability to succeed at school. This sense of achievement in their learning, and what students see as the meaning and purposefulness of their actions, come together to build a strong sense of agency and self-determination.

‘Learning with agency is an entirely different cognitive and physical activity leading to powerful learners who choose to take on challenges with their whole being.’ (Williams 2017)

Developing a strong sense of agency and self-efficacy is particularly important for students with learning difficulties, who are more vulnerable to feelings of powerlessness, and to feeling that they have limited control over their learning and futures (AUSPELD 2014).
Students with a strong sense of agency...

Figure 5: Generating a positive cycle of learning (Johnston 2004).

Engaging with families

The partnerships between schools and families are incredibly impactful throughout students’ school years. Incorporated in productive ways, these relationships have the potential to:

- support differentiated instruction and study at home
- improve student outcomes
- enhance satisfaction for all stakeholders (Forlin & Hopewell 2006).

It is important that teachers are proactive in their communication with families and acknowledge the contribution that parents, guardians, and carers make in a child’s development. This is crucial, since research demonstrates a clear and positive relationship between family involvement at home and students’ academic achievement (Bakker et al. 2013; Castro et al. 2015). To achieve a positive relationship it is important that families have confidence in their child’s teachers, feel welcome at school, and experience reciprocity in their communications with school (Epstein 2018).

However, establishing this relationship comes with challenges, and barriers can exist that hinder a constructive relationship between school staff and families. Considering how to involve students in this process, as individuals who are familiar with the cultures of both home and school, is important to help bridge these potential barriers and achieve a positive and productive partnership.

See the Department’s website for advice on building positive partnerships with parents to help support students’ literacy and numeracy development at home.
Bibliography and professional reading

Australian Federation of SPELD Associations [AUSPELD] 2019, Understanding Learning Difficulties, retrieved 22 August 2019, auspeled.org.au


Catts, H, Herrera, S, Nielsen D & Bridges, M 2015, ‘Early prediction of reading comprehension within the simple view framework’, Reading and writing, vol. 28, no. 9, pp. 1407-1425.


National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHDD] 2006, Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction, Rockville, Maryland.


Appendix 1

High Impact Teaching Strategy
Explicit Teaching

Effective teachers use explicit teaching to provide instruction, demonstrate concepts and build student knowledge and skills. In explicit teaching practice, teachers show students what to do and how to do it, and create opportunities in lessons for students to demonstrate understanding and apply the learning.

Strategy overview
When teachers adopt explicit teaching practices they clearly show students what to do and how to do it. Students are not left to construct this information for themselves. The teacher decides on learning intentions and success criteria, makes them transparent to students, and demonstrates them by modelling. In addition, the teacher checks for understanding, and at the end of each lesson revisits what the lesson has covered and ties it all together (Hattie, 2009).

How effective is it?
Explicit teaching is effective in accelerating student performance. The aim is to teach generalisations beyond rote learning, and to sequence learning. In explicit teaching practice, teachers constantly monitor students’ progress towards challenging goals.

The effects of explicit teaching are similar for students in all school settings. In addition to numeracy, explicit teaching also has the highest effect size for reading among students at every year level. It supports both low and high level comprehension.

This strategy is demonstrated when students:
- understand the learning goals and success criteria
- have access to multiple examples before undertaking the learning task
- master the new knowledge and skills before moving on
- receive feedback as needed.

This strategy is not demonstrated when:
- the teacher is didactic, with few opportunities for students to be active in the learning
- classroom discussion is restricted and student input is discouraged
- the teacher responds judgmentally to students’ attempts at problem solving activities rather than treating each attempt as an opportunity for further learning.

This strategy is demonstrated when the teacher:
- explains what students need to know and be able to do by the end of the lesson or unit
- uses worked examples to show students how to do something
- allows students sufficient time to practice what they have learned
- guides student practice by monitoring their work and providing help when it is needed
- reinforces the main points at the end of the lesson.

Resources:
- AITSL – Explicit instruction