Building on the Strengths of Students with Special Needs

How to Move Beyond Disability Labels in the Classroom

TOBY KARTEN
Building on the Strengths of Students with Special Needs

How to Move Beyond Disability Labels in the Classroom

Introduction ................................................................................................................................................ vii

1 Students with Dyslexia and Other Reading Differences ........................................................... 1
2 Students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) ........................................... 14
3 Students with Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Differences ............................................... 26
4 Students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLDs) .............................................................. 35
5 Students with Executive Function (EF) Disorder ...................................................................... 48
6 Students with Speech and Language Disorders ..................................................................... 56
7 Students with Auditory Processing Disorder (APD) .............................................................. 68
8 Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) ................................................................... 73
9 Students with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) ............................................................................. 86
10 Students with Deafness and Hearing Impairments ................................................................. 96
11 Students with Blindness and Visual Impairments ................................................................. 103
12 Students with Physical Disabilities ......................................................................................... 110
13 Students with Multiple Abilities ............................................................................................. 116
Appendix A: Capitalize on Strengths ......................................................................................... 123
Appendix B: Strategy-Rich Practices ......................................................................................... 125
Introduction

*Building on the Strengths of Students with Special Needs* describes the characteristics and strengths of specific disabilities as well as inclusion strategies to implement in your classrooms. Inclusive curriculum scenarios for younger learners and secondary students in elementary, middle, and high schools are included. Each chapter highlights a specific disability, but it is essential to note that students are individuals, regardless of whether they share a disability label. In addition, characteristics of certain disabilities often overlap with one another. In other words, a student who is classified with a specific learning disability may also have attention and social differences. A student with dyslexia may demonstrate signs of ADHD, whereas a student with an intellectual disability may also have a speech or language difference. Therefore, the classroom inclusion strategies in this book are not restricted to their respective chapters.

Also typical is a combination of symptoms and characteristics with a range of severity. All human beings, whether they have a disability or not, exist on a spectrum with a profile of strengths and weaknesses. A student with dyslexia may have weaknesses in reading and writing skills yet also exhibit strengths that need to be recognized and nurtured. Perhaps he or she is a wonderful musician or artist, in which case you provide opportunities to create a rap or folk song, collage, or digital presentation about a novel. A student with emotional disturbance may be an excellent writer, or a student with a hearing impairment may have an affinity for science. The bottom line is that teachers and other staff can ease the classroom struggles a student may have by capitalizing on his or her stronger skills, interests, and abilities and by valuing who the student is with responsive, appropriate inclusion interventions. Our aim is to circumvent a disability label from defining that student.

My first year of teaching, back in 1976, was in a private school in a Brooklyn brownstone. The population of learners was diverse. The students had varying socioeconomic levels, ethnicities, and cognitive, communicative, sensory, and physical abilities. Some carried the labels of Tourette’s, scoliosis, cerebral palsy, autism, emotional disturbance, and learning disability. Some were classified with terms that are
no longer used today, such as *mental retardation* (now known as intellectual disability) and *minimal brain dysfunction* (generally referred to today as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD).

When I handed one student any two writing implements—whether it was two crayons, two pencils, or two markers—he would shout out “Sword fight!” and duel with himself. I had a student who swore a lot, another who only wrote capital letters, and yet another who had echolalia and would repeat what was said to him or what he heard from television commercials. Some students spoke English, some used sign language, and some spoke languages other than English as their primary language. Some learners entered the classroom with a lovely packed lunch, some had no lunch, and some came off the bus with physical and emotional bumps and bruises.

Even though the public school system decided that these learners were best educated in a separate environment—that was not their neighborhood school—I never viewed any of these students as broken or unable to learn. All of them shared a few commonalities: they were in the same school, in the same class, and had me as their teacher. As a young new educator, I eagerly and enthusiastically figured out how to teach and reach each student. Some of the methods were conventional, and some were unconventional at the time. We recited rhyming words, read books, wrote captions for pictures in magazines, created stories, wrote in journals, solved math word problems, and completed research reports. We also traveled the New York City transit system to visit museums, took nature walks, spent time in local parks, bought items in bodegas, rode through a car wash, and visited Chinatown.

Along with direct-skill, whole-class instruction, and individualized learning, I provided my students with more real-life experiences (infused with academic and functional skills) so they could be part of their community and city. The school was not a microcosm of the world, since it had learners with atypical behavior and learning characteristics that did not emulate those of their age-level peers. These students had what others viewed as obstacles, but I viewed their differences as educational challenges that were mine—not theirs. It was *my* challenge to teach them. And, happily, I did.

Years later, I taught learners in both public and private schools in several states; coached special and general educators; collaborated with administrators in school districts; prepared university students to become educators; and presented professional development sessions in several different countries. Having met so many diverse learners, I realize that a student’s label is inconsequential. A label may be legislatively required to ensure that a student receives services, but that label does not offer insights into his or her likes, dislikes, interests, strengths, and potential.
The infancy of groundbreaking legislation for students with disabilities coincided with my preservice years in special education. During my junior year in college, Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA), was passed. The year was 1975, more than four decades ago. This landmark legislation has since been amended, improved, reinterpreted, and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Prior to 1975, students with disabilities were often not included in classes or schools with nondisabled peers. The mindset was that students with learning, attention, memory, emotional, social, behavioral, communicative, developmental, and physical differences were not on par with students who were considered to be typical learners. Limited access, lower expectations, and negative stereotypical thoughts yielded a generation of learners who often dropped out of school (Vaughn, Danielson, Zumeta, & Holheide, 2015).

Today, as a requirement of IDEA, each student who receives special education services has his or her learning needs identified in a legal document known as an individualized education program (IEP). The contents of an IEP include, but are not limited to, a statement of the learner’s present level of academic achievement and functional performance (PLAAFP), learning goals, and related services provided, such as occupational and/or physical therapy, psychological, audiological, vision, orientation and mobility, and speech and language services and supports. The IEP also outlines the rationale for the placement, the extent of participation in the general education classroom, types and length of time for the services and supports provided, the specific location of the delivery of services, and necessary accommodations and modifications (e.g., additional time on tests; closer proximity; visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile presentations). As necessitated, transitional services are planned for in a student’s IEP, and extended school year (ESY) services—if required—are also specified if it is determined that the learner will regress over the summer months.

The I in IEP mandates that the goals and instructional decisions are individualized ones—never based on a school district’s availability of services but linked to a student’s determined current level of performance. The goals are also measurable, designed to involve the student in the general education curriculum to the maximum extent appropriate. The general education classroom is considered to be the least restrictive environment (LRE), with other placements on a continuum from least restrictive to most restrictive. This continuum ranges from a general education classroom with supplementary aids and services to a general education classroom with a coteacher and/or consultative services. These services could also include a combination of in-class and pull-out services with a resource teacher, services provided in a self-contained special classroom, placement in a special school or through homebound or hospital instruction, or separate placement in a residential school or
Building on the Strengths of Students with Special Needs

IDEA’s intent is to offer each learner with a disability a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) with continuous monitoring and communication of progress achieved toward outlined learning goals. IEP teams include school staff, families, invited guests who have information to contribute, and the learner if he or she is willing and able to participate in the process. A student is evaluated to determine his or her level of functioning. There are 13 disability classifications under IDEA, which include autism, visual impairment (including blindness), deafness, deaf-blindness, hearing impairment, specific-learning disability, emotional disturbance, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, traumatic brain injury, speech or language impairment, and other health impairment. Developmental delays include learners from birth to age 3 and children from ages 3 to 9. Children with developmental delays are identified by each state in areas of development that include cognitive, physical, social, emotional, communicative, and adaptive-behavior.

If a child does not qualify for services under IDEA, then he or she may be eligible for services under what is referred to as a 504 plan. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is intended to eliminate discrimination against students with disabilities, regardless of the nature or severity of a disability (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2015). As an example, a learner with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder may not qualify under other health impairment (OHI) under IDEA but instead receives educational services with a 504 plan. A student who receives services under a 504 plan is determined to have a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities (e.g., breathing, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, learning, working). Services and placements include, but are not limited to, general education classrooms with supplementary supports and/or the provision of special education services in a separate setting. As with an IEP, a 504 plan is individually based and collaboratively planned, monitored, and evaluated to determine the location and appropriateness of services. Funding differs, but services are always individually based.

Another piece of legislation, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), was first enacted in 1990 to prohibit discrimination against people with disabilities—in reference to employment, public accommodations (including school settings), commercial facilities, and access to transportation. Like IDEA and Section 504, ADA has been amended over the years to improve services. ADA broadened the definition of disability in the latest amendments to prohibit discrimination and ensure equal opportunities for people with disabilities. School examples include a bathroom or classroom door widened to permit access for a student in a wheelchair, note takers
provided for learners who have difficulty writing, sign language interpreters provided at a school play, and other classroom and extracurricular supports as necessitated. Children who qualify for IDEA eligibility criteria are also protected by Section 504 and ADA, with identified impairments.

Even though legislation protects the rights of learners with disabilities, both within and outside school settings, diversity is often viewed through different lenses. Thankfully, much progress has occurred since policies such as sterilization, institutionalization, and exclusion of people with differences went into effect. The so-called ugly laws (Schweik, 2011), which prohibited deformed—or what was considered “unsightly”—people to be seen in public in some locations of the United States, gave birth to substantial civil rights legislation. However, some disabilities today are viewed through more positive lenses and given more acceptance than others. For example, there is still a lack of information and a stigma for students within certain disability categories. Before brain research revealed that differences such as dyslexia and ADHD were not willful but had brain etiology, some people viewed learners with these labels as lazy or deliberately defiant.

The characteristics and effective classroom strategies that capitalize on the strengths that a student with a difference, such as emotional disturbance or deafness, possesses are often misunderstood. Some categories of disability are more tolerated than others considered “hidden” or less visible to the eye. As examples, a staff member would never ask a student seated in a wheelchair to just stand up and walk like everyone else does, a student who is blind to see, or a student who is deaf to listen, so why would a student with an emotional disturbance be asked to behave differently or a student with a specific learning disability be asked to perform classroom expectations without the necessary supports and scaffolding? A student with a physical disability may require a wheelchair or braces, whereas a student with a visual impairment will need magnified pages and digital recordings. Accordingly, students with learning and behavioral disabilities also require specific evidence-based strategies to succeed in school settings. The definition of diversity has greatly widened in today’s classroom to view a disability as a characteristic—not a deviance to be hidden or erased. The definition of normal often indicates that a problem exists within a student instead of expecting or requiring educational contexts to be more responsive (Moore, 2013).

All students are exceptional, whether or not they have a label. As stated throughout this book, each child is different. Reinforcement, motivation, modeling, collaborative planning, and scaffolding help educators provide learners of all ability levels with opportunities to achieve greater academic, social, emotional, and behavioral goals. No student has a monopoly on being a learner, and no learner is perfect. Special and general education teachers collaborate to intervene with strategies that
are tailored to personalize instruction. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) speaks about challenging and personalizing student learning. This includes providing diverse supports, interventions, and assessments that reveal and measure individual growth. Each child is born as a unique individual that personalized education addresses, whether or not a student has an IEP or an assigned label. ESSA describes a competency-based approach that values not only summative assessments but also formative and performance-based ones.

Learning is a process. As a novice yoga practitioner, I can finally almost maintain a tree pose for a full minute without toppling over—after more than a year of classes. A yoga instructor pointed out that we are each at a different stage of development and that yoga includes a mind-body connection. She poignantly told the class not to measure our worth by what others are doing but to praise ourselves for being part of the class—each of us cherishing our efforts and unique levels of participation.

Change is an evolutionary process. Learn how to value the plan, stay the course, and weigh options. Not every day is a perfect one—nor does the perfect child or the perfect lesson plan exist. We are all malleable, inclusive educational partners on the journey together—whether we are considered gifted, autistic, twice-exceptional, or are identified as having a learning, speech/language, or emotional disability. We require professional knowledge, a plan to move forward, and the fortitude and patience to stay the course. It is okay to mess up, but it is not okay to stay that way. Most important, a positive attitude and a belief that all students are capable of achieving self-efficacy and making strides alongside their peers are critical.

I once stopped a lesson when one of my students was overly concerned with a comment that another student made to him and took personal offense. No matter what I said or did, he would not let it go. I then wrote in large letters on the board, “BIG DEAL, SO WHAT—NOW WHAT?” Suddenly, I had the attention of the whole class, and the student paused to think. We all need to pause to think and then plan our next move. We use data to guide our decisions, regardless of the perceived obstacles or hurdles presented. Always keep the inclusive wheels turning.

This book maintains that diversity is first identified and then embraced to honor learner differences with the appropriate systematic instruction. Students should never be viewed as failures but as learners who require the effective strategies that capitalize on and strengthen their levels of performance. Typical instruction needs to match the diversity of atypical learners, without viewing a disability as being on a lower rung of the educational ladder.

Points to emphasize in your classroom include the following:

- Each student is different!
- Reinforcement should be consistent, realistic, and enthusiastic.
• Motivators can be both extrinsic and intrinsic.
• Desired responses need to be modeled.
• Appropriate collaborative planning, pacing, and step-by-step scaffolding increase skill sets.
• Academic, social, emotional, and behavioral objectives are often intertwined.
• Data should drive instructional decisions.
• Classroom organization includes multitiered systems of support (MTSS).
• Accountability includes staff, students, and families.
• Every moment of the day is an educational one!

References


Students with Dyslexia and Other Reading Differences

The Possible Whys

Brain scans indicate that people with dyslexia have differences in a part of the brain called the corpus callosum. The corpus callosum is composed of nerve cells that connect and transport information and messages back and forth from the left and the right sides of the brain. Balance and communication between the two sides yields optimum learning. Each side—or hemisphere—is programmed to perform different functions. The left side of the brain sees things from their constituent parts to the whole. Someone who is predominately left brained notices the details before seeing the whole. For example, they may gaze at the night sky and focus on each star rather than see the big picture of the sky.

As related to reading, the left side logically lines things up in a structured manner to

- Match letters with sounds.
- Separate a word into its constituent sounds.
- Decipher grammar and syntax.

By contrast, the right side (often referred to as the creative part of the brain) sees words in their entirety as pictures, shapes, and patterns (not a mixture of individual sounds).

The characteristics of the right side of the brain are collectively analogous to gazing at the night sky and not seeing individual stars or viewing the ocean without seeing the crests of the waves. Words are composed of letters that make discrete sounds, but a student with dyslexia has difficulties understanding these individual phonemes. Faulty signals between the two sides of the brain result in an inability to decipher and interpret written language. Dyslexia tends to run in families, with
Building on the Strengths of Students with Special Needs

genetic implications evidenced (Lyon, Shaywitz, & Shaywitz, 2003; Siegel, 2006; Wagner & Torgesen, 1987).

**Characteristics and Strengths**

Dyslexia has cognitive correlates underlying reading that affect phonological and orthographic processing, rapid automatic naming (RAN), processing speed, working memory, attention, and executive function (State of New Jersey Department of Education, n.d.). Simply put, phonological processing affects understanding, learning, and remembering how to associate sounds with the letters that make up the word and how to break up a word into its discrete sounds. Students with orthographic processing differences have difficulties learning how to form or copy letters and remembering sight words. Although letter reversals may be a characteristic of dyslexia, it is only a slice of the orthographic processing difference that a student with dyslexia experiences. At times, students with dyslexia confuse similar-looking letters and words and have difficulties encoding (spelling) and decoding (reading) words. Even though these characteristics are evidenced, a student with dyslexia is often able to tap into stronger modalities. Learners can decipher words through appropriate multisensory instruction such as touching raised letters to increase spelling skills, snapping or clapping out each syllable in a word to pronounce it, listening to a digital recording of a book, recording a lecture, illustrating concepts as a demonstration of comprehension, and using syllabication to break up more difficult vocabulary presented in an algebra, science, or history text.

Warning signs of dyslexia include—but are not limited to—differences in language, reading, writing, and social-emotional domains (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2015). Students may experience inaccurate or nonfluent word recognition. They may also be good word memorizers, but they’re not learners who have cracked the phonetic code and “own” the individual sound-symbol connections they see and hear. Some learners with dyslexia get by in the early grades because they are excellent memorizers and can retrieve a file of sight words that they have stored in their brains. Beginning in kindergarten and 1st grade, these students exhibit low levels of phonemic awareness and cannot take apart the individual sounds that make up words. They also exhibit similar deficits with respect to phonics and an inability to learn the unique sounds associated with letters. Other types of reading disabilities include specific difficulties with reading comprehension and processing speed (i.e., reading fluency). Generally, students with dyslexia do not read with automaticity.
Dyslexia affects reading from the early grades, and primary symptoms include complications with the following literacy skills (International Dyslexia Association, Professional Standards and Practices Committee, 2010):

- Word recognition
- Spelling
- Reading fluency
- Comprehension
- Written expression

People with dyslexia may also display characteristics of other differences or disorders, which is referred to as comorbidity (Germanò, Gagliano, & Curatolo, 2010; Snowling, 2012). Ben Foss, an entrepreneur, advocate, and author of *The Dyslexia Empowerment Plan*, explains comorbidity in relation to his dyslexia:

> Everyone in Dyslexia carries a passport that allows easy entry into a number of bordering countries, including the nations of Dyscalculia, Dysgraphia, and ADHD, to name some of the major ones. In my view, we are all “in the club”—my catchphrase for the broad family of people who experience the non-obvious disabilities generally housed under the umbrella of “specific learning disabilities” . . . holding dual citizenship with each one of these. (Foss, 2013, p. xi)

This quote sheds light on the fact that dyslexia interventions need to be comprehensive ones that address deficits in reading, writing, mathematics, and attention, along with behavioral, emotional, and social domains. As an example, learners with dyslexia who evidence signs of dysgraphia experience weaker writing skills. These learners may be unable to accurately copy, organize, or read class notes. To capitalize on stronger modalities, offer these students alternative ways to capture information, such as a digital pen that records information, graphic organizers, or peer scribers. A student with a reading and math difference such as dyscalculia or an attention difference such as ADHD requires math and behavioral strategies as well as reading interventions. He or she benefits from a digital version of a math lesson to stop and then play back, as well as feedback for time on task, effort given toward mastery, and recognition of positive class participation. Acknowledgment of reading strides achieved and progress toward IEP goals is essential.

Even though a learner with dyslexia often has difficulty decoding and encoding words and formulating written expressions, he or she may be highly creative, possess strong personal skills, and have an excellent oral vocabulary. Nurturing these strengths with the appropriate classroom interventions is essential (Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity, n.d.). For example, instruction and assessments are not exclusive to verbal
and written ones, but they also include debates, cooperative learning projects, and multimodal engagements. Using technology to represent, access, and demonstrate knowledge minimizes some of the weaker characteristics that often challenge learners with dyslexia. The strategies in this chapter (and subsequent ones) are not only instructional but also have practical classroom, school, and “real-life” applications.

Classroom Implications

School staff require training in specific ways to identify students who show signs of dyslexia at early ages before their language processing difficulties spiral and multiply into additional academic, social, emotional, and behavioral domains. These concerns also need to be addressed before the reading demands increase. In addition, students who have advanced a grade—being socially promoted but are still educationally underserved—should be recognized as learners who require specific strategies to close their reading gaps.

School staff members need to collaborate effectively to intervene with strategies and interventions. As examples, a physical education, art, music, science, math, or social studies teacher needs to provide appropriate scaffolding. This includes interventions that do not permit a student’s reading difficulties to interfere with successes (e.g., access to the content in each discipline and an ability to interpret the directions on a worksheet or an assessment, follow safety procedures in a science lab or gymnasium, and effectively answer a document-based question in social studies). Students should not be penalized for a diagnosed difficulty but instead offered multiple avenues of access, such as digital text, alternative reading levels of the same content, math word problems read aloud, science lab procedures verbally communicated, and increased visuals across the disciplines.

The primary characteristics of dyslexia include difficulty reading real words in isolation, decoding nonsense words, spelling, and accurate oral reading. The secondary consequences of dyslexia include but are not limited to inconsistencies in schoolwork with lower levels of reading comprehension and writing skills, and increased distractibility (Moats & Dakin, 2008). The secondary consequences often lead to frustration with school assignments and anxiety when students are required to read in front of peers (Torgesen, Foorman, & Wagner, 2007). Since staff members and students with dyslexia do not always understand the disability, blame is often incorrectly applied to an individual’s lack of effort. A student with dyslexia requires the appropriate academic and behavioral interventions that honor his or her strengths. Weaknesses need to be remediated—not highlighted or magnified. It is vital to note that the educational practices for literacy instruction are never exclusively limited to students who have reading goals listed in IEPs or 504 plans but are applicable to
all students. Learners across skill sets and grades benefit from systematic instruction that honors diverse interests and levels. Read on for more specific strategies.

Inclusion Strategies

Identify, Screen, and Individualize

Because students with dyslexia exhibit different characteristics, it is imperative that accurate screening continually drives individualized interventions. This includes informal phonics inventories as well as formal evaluations by trained professionals who determine skills through rapid naming of letters and sounds, identification of real and nonsense words, and activities around vocabulary, phonemic segmentation, spelling, verbal fluency, rhyming, and passage interpretation. Early literacy skills include—but are not limited to—knowing the sounds and names of letters, sequencing letters and numbers, and speaking in simple sentences. Levels of performance are screened with oral reading tests, checklists, parent interviews, nonverbal reasoning assessments, written assessments, and more. Alphabetic principles and phonemic awareness skills are often addressed as early as preschool. Screening for phonological awareness, rapid naming and memory begins in kindergarten, and testing in 1st grade includes word reading, decoding, and spelling. All learners across the grade levels who struggle need to be screened so they receive the appropriate instruction. Older learners also require screening, since high-quality literacy instruction is appropriate for high school and beyond (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006).

Appropriately Tier Literacy Instruction

Educators also need to infuse multitiered systems of support (MTSS). In MTSS models, learners receive literacy interventions in tiers. There is no template for tiered literacy instruction since it is generated by the data. For example, a model with three tiers has all learners participating in the first tier: core literacy instruction. This core instruction includes an entire class learning together with a combination of direct instruction and literacy instruction in smaller cooperative groups. Based on progress monitoring, supplementary literacy instruction is provided to secondary groups of students who require additional literacy practice with skills for fluency, automaticity, and mastery. As indicated by formal and informal literacy assessments, more intensive instruction is given to a third tier with small-group or individualized instruction provided.

When students read slowly, their comprehension is negatively affected. They read each word so slowly that they consequently struggle to determine text meaning; they laboriously read letters and words, which interferes with comprehension
flow and text meaning. Students who try to decode irregular sight words inappropriately (e.g., people, could, whose) lose the gist of a passage read. When this happens, it’s important to increase oral and shared readings with the whole class, small groups, and individual students as appropriate. Interventions that offer increased guided oral reading assist with fluency. This includes learners becoming more strategic with both oral and silent reads (e.g., interest-related readings on students’ instructional level and modeling) (Guerin & Murphy, 2015).

Strategies for fluency also change as students advance through the elementary grades. As learners advance, their reading fluency is affected by several factors, including the display of different skill sets and frustrations. The fluency of 1st graders is more dependent on listening skills, whereas reading fluency and comprehension play a larger role in grades 2–4 (Kim & Wagner, 2015).

Alternatively, for older students who require basic reading skills, present age- and level-appropriate readings with motivating content and appropriate vocabulary that is not insulting to a learner’s age. Even though a secondary student may be reading at a primary level of instruction, do not offer juvenile text. For example, if short vowel sound instruction is required, then replace a sentence such as The cap is on the cat with a more sophisticated sentence such as The raft capsized on Saturday. There is no need for staff to rewrite texts since many publishers and online sites provide high-interest, lower-level text for older learners. Online sites such as Smithsonian’s Tween Tribune and Newsela provide the same content for nonfiction articles on multiple Lexile levels. A site such as Starfall may have an excellent video on how to chunk a word for a 2nd grader, but it would be an inappropriate choice for a secondary-level student who requires the same skills. Benchmark, Steck-Vaughn, Perfection Learning, Curriculum Associates, High Noon, and Saddlebrook are just a few of the many publishing sources to explore. In other words, offer age-appropriate reading selections and tools that entice readers to decode and encode words. High-interest topics such as fashion, music, and sports and alternative presentations such as tweets, texts, and cooperative projects are viable secondary engagements.

🔗 Structure, Monitor, and Communicate

Direct, structured, and systematic instruction includes teaching phonemic awareness; segmenting words; and advancing spelling, writing, fluency, and reading comprehension across the genres. Reading progress requires monitoring and employing sensitivities to teach and communicate the appropriate skills and strategies to learners. Set up timetables that embrace IEP goals and literacy lesson objectives. Most important, allow students to own their reading strategies with structured task analysis and feedback. Encourage students to see how their perseverance has
positive long-range effects by charting improvements (e.g., in fluency, comprehension, decoding) on graphed index cards and by listening to digital passages before and after set instructional timeframes. Keep digital portfolios and share these with students as visual and concrete reminders that monitor their efforts and increase awareness of literacy levels. Help students read words they may not have seen before by teaching strategies with proactive step-by-step visual and verbal directions. The following steps offer models that empower students to figure out a potentially tricky multisyllabic word, use context clues, and apply prior knowledge. A self-directed learner reads fluently with comprehension, knowing both pronunciation and word meanings both in isolation and with context.

To understand what you are reading . . .

1. Put your finger under the word to ex-am-ine and chunk it. See if there are syllables and word parts such as un-der-stand and read-ing. Find smaller words (e.g., fan in fantastic) or compound words (e.g., bird’s-eye).

2. Look at illustrations that accompany the text and other words in the sentence or paragraph for clues that help you figure out what a word or sentence might mean. Ask yourself if you could substitute another word that means the same as the one you are reading. For example, He admired his friend’s decision implies that He respected his friend’s actions and behaviors.

3. Skip the word and read to the end of the sentence and paragraph to see if the context clues help you interpret the word’s meaning. Give the words a chance to develop meaning. Sometimes, you need to read on before you understand what the author is saying.

4. If you still need help to read a “tricky word,” then use an online or digital tool to pronounce the word, look it up in a dictionary, or ask a peer or adult.

Although using etymology, context clues, and a dictionary may be considered standard instruction for all students, learners with dyslexia require additional practice, varied engagements, multiple representations, and more time—along with vigilant progress monitoring—to achieve mastery. Ongoing feedback toward partial mastery acknowledges efforts toward achievement, which encourages more progress.

Implement Multiple Representations

Providing representation options for learners with dyslexia means that instruction is not limited to printed text. Multiple representations reduce barriers and provide the same information through various modalities to ensure easier access and comprehension (CAST, 2011). When literacy instruction exists beyond
two-dimensional worksheets, learners whose brains are wired differently are allowed multiple ways to decipher words and interpret text meaning. This includes offering learners diverse tools and resources (Cervetti, Damico, & Pearson, 2006).

The Orton-Gillingham approach (Academy of Orton-Gillingham Practitioners and Educators, 2012; Hwee & Houghton, 2011), which is based on neuroscience, propagates multisensory approaches for reading, spelling, and writing difficulties. Complex academic vocabulary in expository text in disciplines such as science and social studies sometimes fail to engage students (Marino, Gotch, Israel, Vasquez, Basham, & Becht, 2014). Increased auditory, visual, and kinesthetic-tactile approaches are employed to strengthen reading fluency and comprehension skills to better encode, decode, write, read, decipher, and understand written language. For example, students use their fingers to indicate or tap out the individual sounds of letters in words, which adds a tactile component. Other tactile approaches include forming and writing letters with clay, with shaving cream, on sandpaper, and in salt trays. Increased visuals allow some students to concretize letter sounds.

Another option is to present key words for vowel sounds; associate the short e sound with a picture of an elephant or the digraph sh with a picture of a finger by one’s mouth to indicate quiet. When showing a video, activate the closed captioning so the auditory presentation is accompanied by the associated words. This assists primary- and secondary-level learners. In early grade levels, label classroom items and encourage families to do the same at home. If possible, provide advanced notes and partially filled-in organizers to lessen the writing requirements. As an example, allow students to concentrate on the content of a presentation instead of on the laborious task of taking notes. Notes available ahead of time also allows students to be more familiar with vocabulary that may not be in their prior knowledge. Sites such as Quizlet allow students to hear vocabulary read aloud and preview a word’s meaning in isolation with digital and printed flashcards.

Use both low-tech and high-tech digital tools that honor and tap into students’ stronger modalities and preferences to increase reading acumen. As an example, a student can use a sticky note to jot down a fact or question as he or she is reading text. A learner may prefer to use an app such as Post-it Plus to start conversations with peers and store information that is then looked at later. Handheld highlighters also offer digital ways to annotate and record text; the C-Pen uses Optimal Character Recognition (OCR) software. This higher-tech option captures text, decodes it, and then has the capability to transfer that information to a computer or smartphone. With this technology, unfamiliar and multisyllabic vocabulary is defined and spoken with reference tools and text-to-speech features activated. Each decision requires looking at each learner to determine the best instructional decision that may or may
not include technology. The goal is to find a method that eases students’ weaker areas and builds on each student’s skills. Resources to consider include alternative reading formats, such as graphic novels, infographics, posters, e-books, apps, audiobooks, and online sites that target specific reading skills. Encourage struggling readers to pre-read while listening to audio or digital versions of the text to prepare them for class instruction. Use technology in class with instruction on how to use tools such as a digital thesaurus and spell check. Have students live-tweet answers to discussion questions on a Google Doc.

Handheld cue cards, checklists, and posted classroom wall charts are visual references that concretize what some learners with dyslexia view as abstract text. The letters, words, sentences, paragraphs, novels, and longer texts are not read with automaticity by most learners with dyslexia. Therefore, the provision of resources and accompanying strategies strengthen weaker reading skills and thereby increase self-efficacy. This includes dated progress reports and high-interest text across a variety of genres (from decoding words in poems to extracting information from online sites). If multiple students answer the same question, then the peer models offer additional insights for some learners. The goal is to guide students on a reading path that increases skills and self-efficacy. Provide the support with multiple representations, and then fade the scaffolding as students consistently and independently demonstrate literacy skills.

**Teach Decoding**

Students who read slowly may require help with decoding and phonological awareness. Consider creating a classroom syllable wall chart (which continually grows as students add to it) to increase awareness of the various syllable types (see Figure 1.1). In addition, have students record the syllable charts in individual reading note-books. Consider also dictating both simple and more complex sentences for students to hear, write, and self-correct. It’s important that you’re not the one who corrects errors. Offer opportunities for students to self-correct with a model provided. Provide instruction with both nonsense words and actual words to be certain that students are comfortable breaking the phonetic code—and not just memorizing words.

**Figure 1.1** | Syllable Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Closed</th>
<th>Open</th>
<th>Vowel-consonant-e</th>
<th>Vowel teams/Diphthongs</th>
<th>Consonant-le</th>
<th>r-controlled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mat, wet, big, top, cup</td>
<td>go, me, hi, label, my, cozy</td>
<td>plate, mile, rope, time</td>
<td>air, boat, heat, stay</td>
<td>candle, little, noble</td>
<td>car, first, fur, burst</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Collaborate

Collaboration with staff, families, and students decreases the negative effects of dyslexia and highlights students’ potential with moving their reading plans forward. Keep an eye on academic and social-emotional reading implications, with fidelity to the students, and share strategies with their families regarding the reading programs selected. Share reading progress and upcoming vocabulary and books on the school/class website or through regular (i.e., weekly or monthly) family newsletters. Communicate individual student progress in school-home journals and emails.

It’s also important to collaborate with specialists, such as the speech-language pathologist for interventions that relate to phonics and phonemic awareness and occupational therapists for handwriting strategies and physical issues associated with dyslexia (e.g., slant board, alternative writing implements, specific handwriting programs, and ways to increase stamina).

In summation, it’s critical that you can

- Identify characteristics of students with dyslexia and other reading disabilities and connect them to each learner’s strengths.
- Use differentiated strategies to strengthen skills with sound-symbol association, fluency, spelling, comprehension, written expression, auditory and visual processing, and memory.
- Review multisensory ways to teach language with direct systematic instruction that honors learners’ visual, auditory, and kinesthetic-tactile modalities.
- Use both low- and high-tech tools to help increase students’ reading acumen.

References


---

**Professional Resources**


Dyslexia Buddy Network: www.dyslexiabuddynetwork.com

Flocabulary Songs and Videos: www.flocabulary.com


International Dyslexia Association (IDA): http://eida.org

IDA-Testing and Evaluation: https://dyslexiaida.org/testing-and-evaluation/


Newsela: https://newsela.com


Quick Phonics Screener: www.readnaturally.com/products/qps.htm

Quizlet—Vocabulary, Flashcards, Games: https://quizlet.com


Readworks: www.readworks.org

Smithsonian Tween Tribune: http://tweentribune.com

Starfall: www.starfall.com


Storyonline: www.storylineonline.net

Tar Heel Reader: http://tarheelreader.org


Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity: http://dyslexia.yale.edu
Toby Karten—a staff developer, instructional coach, educational consultant, author, adjunct professor, and inclusion specialist—has taught populations of learners at levels ranging from preschool to graduate school. She has collaborated with administrators, staff, students, and their families at local, national, and international school sites and educational conferences as an invited speaker and inclusion coach. She has an undergraduate degree in special education from Brooklyn College, a master’s degree in special education from the College of Staten Island, a supervisory degree from Georgian Court University, and an honorary doctorate from Gratz College. Ms. Karten has been recognized by the Council for Exceptional Children and the New Jersey Department of Education as an exemplary educator, receiving two Teacher of the Year awards. She has instructed learners across every setting in the continuum representing the least restrictive environment. Her ongoing professional goal is to help learners achieve successful inclusion experiences in school and life.