

# Scottish Network for Able Pupils

# Able Pupils With Dyslexia

Georgina Gabor

A guide for teachers of able children,  
commissioned by the Scottish Network for Able Pupils



University  
of Glasgow

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## INTRODUCTION

This booklet focuses on able pupils with dyslexia: the challenge of defining who they are, the process of identification, and their characteristics.

"There is considerable evidence to suggest that when high abilities and learning disabilities appear together, they may cause a special talent", says Gyarmathy (2000 p.76). Defining able pupils with dyslexia, however, is not an easy task. This booklet looks at existing definitions of giftedness/high ability, dyslexia, and the first definitions that attempt to provide a description of gifted students with learning disabilities. Throughout the booklet the term *able pupils with dyslexia* is used, except when existing literature is quoted where a frequently used term is gifted students with learning difficulties, or double exceptionality since to date no agreed definition of able pupils with dyslexia exists.

The process of identification of able pupils with dyslexia is guided by two questions:

- ★ If an able pupil is dyslexic, at some point they are likely show literacy skill difficulties that reveal their dyslexia. What might those signs be?
- ★ If a child with dyslexia is able, at some point they are likely show signs of exceptional abilities or the potential of abilities. What might those signs be, and how can I recognise those signs?

In the attempt to find answers to these questions, both the literature and examples of student work are examined to give teachers practical guidelines that are applicable in the classroom.

Finally, the booklet looks at learning characteristics and personality traits of able pupils with dyslexia paying attention to characteristics that are observable by the teacher, and to those that are not immediately or easily observable.

At the end of each section, the reader is provided with a brief summary of the main points .



# WHO ARE ABLE PUPILS WITH DYSLEXIA?

## The challenge of defining able pupils with dyslexia

Without doubt, able pupils with dyslexia exist and many of these children may not be able to demonstrate their special abilities and talents unless their education is modified to suit their needs.

### Who are able pupils with dyslexia?

Defining able pupils with dyslexia is not an easy task. Part of the problem is that many people become involved in working with these children: the psychology profession, the educational profession, even the medical profession, and everyone wants a definition that serves their own purposes. Able pupils with dyslexia belong to a largely unidentified population, sometimes also referred to as twice exceptional children. Not only do these children often remain unidentified because interest in research in this area has only recently increased, but also because able pupils with dyslexia can cover their difficulties by their high abilities. At the same time, their difficulties may cover their high abilities making identification, at least with the current methods, challenging.

Lovett and Lewandowski (2006) mention that it has long been realised that intellectually gifted students may have additional support needs, however, it was not until 1990 that the first attempt to define these students emerged. The earliest studies were based on biographical studies of eminent individuals who might be characterised today as having some form of learning difficulties. Albert Einstein had poor grades in school, Thomas Edison, Walt Disney, Pablo Picasso, Leonardo da Vinci, Lewis Carroll, Hans Christian Anderson, Winston Churchill and Igor Sikorsky, a pioneering aviator, were all gifted individuals with learning difficulties. There are thousands of more contemporary examples, such as Steve Jobs, founder of Apple Computers; Richard Branson; Tom Cruise; Whoopi Goldberg; Steven Spielberg; and Jackie Stewart, a three-time Scottish Formula One racing champion, just to name a few.



| <i>WHO DEFINED ABLE PUPILS WITH DYSLEXIA?</i>         | <i>HOW ABLE PUPILS WITH DYSLEXIA ARE DEFINED</i>   |
|---|--|
| <i>1990 (Baum)</i>                                    | Described gifted children with learning difficulties, 'those who exhibit remarkable strengths in some areas, and disabling weaknesses in others'   |
| <i>1991 (Baum, Owen, Dixon)</i>                       | Suggested that gifted children with learning difficulties demonstrate "superior abilities in forming broad concepts and manipulating abstract ideas combined with a difficulty expressing these ideas through organised, written products" (Eileen et al 2004 p85)   |
| <i>1997 (Davis)</i>                                   | Considers dyslexia as a result of a perceptual talent (1997 p7)  |
| <i>1997 (La France)</i>                               | Added that gifted children with dyslexia have the ability to perceive the world intuitively and creatively (Eileen et al 2004 p85)   |
| <i>1998 (National Association of Gifted Children)</i> | Described three kinds of gifted students with learning difficulties <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>★ Gifted students with subtle learning difficulties</li> <li>★ Students with learning difficulties whose giftedness has not been identified</li> <li>★ Unidentified students whose gifts and learning difficulties may mask each other by average school achievement</li> </ul> |
| <i>2000 (Gyarmathy)</i>                               | "There is considerable evidence to suggest that when high abilities and learning disabilities appear together, they may cause a special talent" (p76)  |

Figure 1 *Descriptions of gifted students with learning difficulties*

Montgomery is of the opinion that "dyslexia is one of the most common forms of double exceptionality and has serious consequences for bright children" (2003 p43). These are not only educational consequences, but consequences affecting the whole child. Educationally, delays to literacy development can be very damaging for able pupils and can lead to frustration and anger. In addition, children may develop false belief systems about their abilities which, in the long run, will affect them both socially and emotionally. Once a false belief system develops, it is very difficult to reverse the process, but given enough knowledge about the nature of able pupils with dyslexia, it is not difficult to prevent the damage. An attempt to define what we mean by able pupils with dyslexia for educational purposes, therefore, is crucial as a good working definition can greatly aid the identification and assessment of these children. In other words,

*until we can define, we cannot identify;  
until we can identify, we cannot provide  
these children with appropriate education.*





## WHAT MIGHT BE A WORKING DEFINITION FOR DYSLLEXIA?

Drawing on these results, the British Psychological Society's (BPS) working definition of dyslexia below was found to be in line with the findings.

*"Dyslexia is evident when accurate and fluent word reading and/or spelling develops very incompletely or with great difficulty. This focuses on literacy learning at the 'word level' and implies that the problem is severe and persistent despite appropriate learning opportunities."(BPS 1999)*

The BPS definition acknowledges dyslexia as a condition that manifests itself in difficulties with the fluent and accurate acquisition of reading and spelling and focuses on dyslexia as primarily seen in education.

### The Scottish Government defines dyslexia as follows:

Dyslexia can be described as a continuum of difficulties in learning to read, write and/or spell, which persist despite the provision of appropriate learning opportunities. These difficulties often do not reflect an individual's cognitive abilities and may not be typical of performance in other areas.

The impact of dyslexia as a barrier to learning varies in degree according to the learning and teaching environment, as there are often associated difficulties such as:

- ★ auditory and /or visual processing of language-based information
- ★ phonological awareness
- ★ oral language skills and reading
- ★ short-term and working memory
- ★ sequencing and directionality
- ★ number skills
- ★ organisational ability

Motor skills and co-ordination may also be affected.

Dyslexia exists in all cultures and across the range of abilities and socio-economic backgrounds. It is a hereditary, life-long, neurodevelopmental condition. Unidentified, dyslexia is likely to result in low self esteem, high stress, atypical behaviour, and low achievement.

Learners with dyslexia will benefit from early identification, appropriate intervention and targeted effective teaching, enabling them to become successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens.

*(Learning and Teaching Scotland)*

The next question is,

## WHAT MIGHT BE CONSIDERED A WORKING DEFINITION FOR GIFTEDNESS?

Defining what is considered high ability also poses a special challenge in education where all participants, including the teaching staff, the students and their parents come from a diverse cultural and linguistic background because "...definitions of high ability vary across cultures...[and] social and political issues affect how talent is perceived, understood, and harnessed" (Winstanley, 2004 p23). Similarly to dyslexia definitions, existing definitions of giftedness/high ability between 1982 and 2003 have been examined and a few signs of agreement were found in the following. Gifted individuals have exceptional abilities or the potential of abilities in areas that we know as either left or right brain activities (see Figure 3 below) in one or more areas, and there is a need for differentiated educational programmes.

Other indicators listed, for example, were

- ★ leadership skills
- ★ perceptiveness
- ★ intensity
- ★ inquisitiveness
- ★ sensitivity
- ★ awareness
- ★ high levels of task commitment
- ★ sense of humour.

The results of the examination of definitions of giftedness represented in a form of a word cloud looks like this.



**Figure 3** *Signs of high ability/giftedness as mentioned in existing definitions between 1982 and 2003 (created by <http://wordle.net/create>)*

Based on the above findings it may be suggested that

*Gifted/able individuals appear to be different to peer groups by showing exceptional abilities or the potential of abilities in one or more right or left brain performances. In order to fully develop their abilities, they require differentiated educational programmes.*

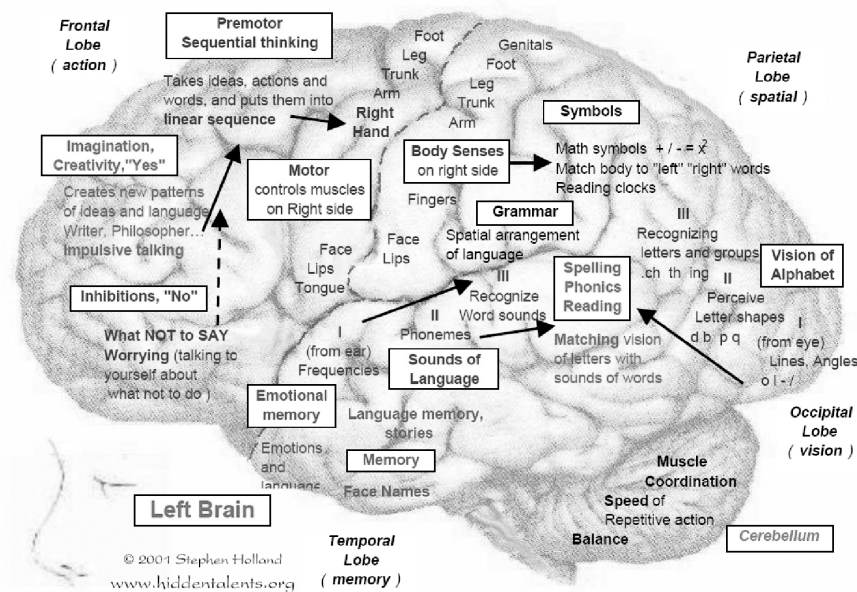


Figure 4a A simplified model to show some of the left brain functions (photo used with permission)

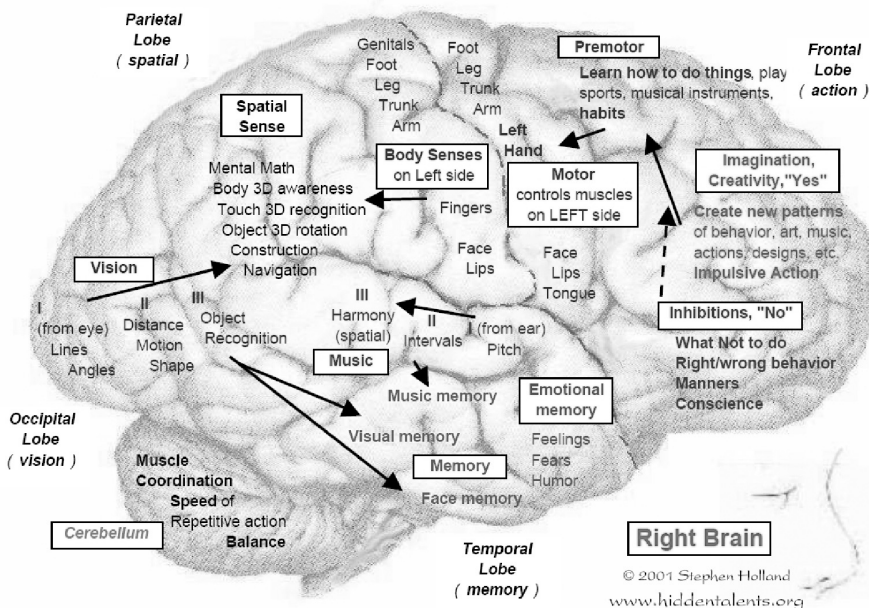


Figure 4b A simplified model to show some of the left brain functions (photo used with permission)

Considering the results and the existing definitions of both dyslexia and giftedness/high ability, and drawing on the findings, a suggested working definition for educational purposes might be the following.

*Able pupils with dyslexia appear to be different to peer groups by showing exceptional abilities or the potential of abilities in one or more right or left brain performances, at the same time having difficulties with the fluent and accurate acquisition of reading, writing, especially spelling skills despite appropriate learning opportunities.*

## HOW CAN ABLE PUPILS WITH DYSLEXIA BE IDENTIFIED?

As a starting point to the identification of able pupils with dyslexia, we may want to consider the following two questions.

- 1. If an able pupil is dyslexic, at some point they are likely to show literacy skill difficulties that reveal their dyslexia. What might those signs be?*
- 2. If a child with dyslexia is gifted/able, at some point they are likely to show signs of exceptional abilities or the potential of abilities in one or more right or left brain performances. What might those signs be, and how can I recognise those signs?*

Numerous studies have been undertaken regarding the identification of able pupils with some form of learning difficulty, but not enough has been done about the identification of this specific group. Silverman (1989) found that 17 per cent of 1,200 students were gifted and had learning difficulties. In a study of 280 nine year old children Gyarmathy (2003) found that 12 children showed signs of learning difficulties, at the same time they achieved far above average in special tests. These statistics and the dynamic nature of dyslexia and ability only yield to assumptions about the prevalence of able pupils with dyslexia. Experience and anecdotal information suggest that teachers would find at least one student in their class who meets the criteria for being able and dyslexic at the same time.

*Early identification is important, but just how early is it appropriate to identify able pupils with dyslexia?*

Since dyslexia is a difficulty with the acquisition of reading, writing, especially spelling skills, it would be unfair to identify a child as being dyslexic until s/he has received a sufficient amount of appropriate education. It is recommended that we avoid identifying a child as being dyslexic in pre-school, and in the first two years of school. During this time, skills needed for academic success develop rapidly, and in a stimulating environment unequally developed skills may get into balance in a relatively short period of time. Gyarmathy's (2003) developmental model (see my visualisation in Figure 5) emphasises the importance of sensory development as a crucial prerequisite for later academic success including the acquisition of literacy skills.

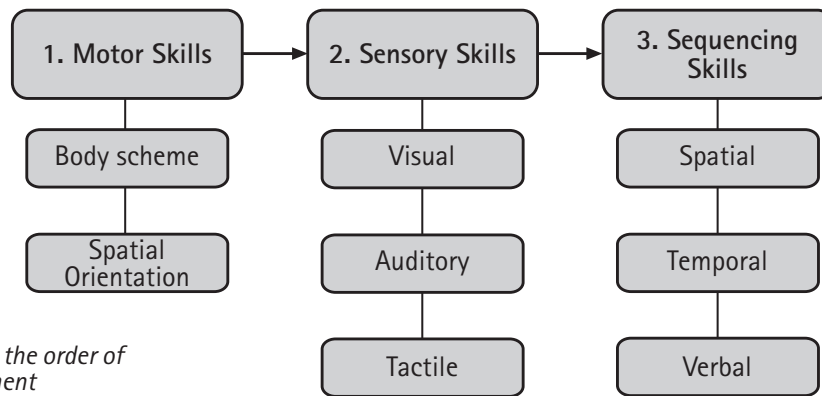


Figure 5 to show the order of sensory development

During the period when the development of these skills are improving rapidly, it is important to notice slower improvement of any of the subskills, but observations should serve only as a basis for establishing developmental goals for the child. Appropriate development in early childhood can greatly reduce later risk factors.

According to Montgomery (2003 p 49) the two best predictors of later dyslexic problems are

- ★ failure to develop sound-symbol correspondence
- ★ inability to name or say the sounds of the letters of the alphabet

Since "spelling can be seen as a core problem in dyslexia" (Montgomery, 2003 p 45), for identification of dyslexia it is best to use "children's marks on their papers", says Montgomery (2003 p 49) based on studies of samples of work from thousands of children. Teachers may ask them to write a story without the help of a teacher. The following are examples of able pupils' work. All have been identified as being dyslexic.

Japan a new land founded by  
the Kami. This piece of land that I live  
on is prosperous because my daimyo  
is kind to the people but for  
me life is not all that great.  
The Emperor saw all the soldiers  
in for the hardest battle of  
every samurai life. The battle was  
against the mighty Mongols they were  
very hard to beat coping with  
the fact that the Mongols use  
flaming bombs and very accurate  
arrows men. Now that the war  
is over the Emperor is trying to restore  
peace and trying to pay the samurai  
for the victory. Now the emperor has  
banned everyone from leaving or returning  
from Japan. I wonder what will  
happen to Japan being left alone  
and I pray there be no more  
wars.

Figure 6 a written sample of an 11 year-old able pupil with dyslexia



Figure 6 shows a written sample of an 11 year-old boy, Figure 7 shows a written sample from a 12 year-old girl. None of the samples show the students' actual abilities and the depth and quality of knowledge they would be able to demonstrate verbally.

I dt this year yove  
wect on weaving techinges  
Drawusting bags bot my  
feverete was the patten,  
We wod cote aout ar pater  
on a poteto then we pote some  
paint on the poteto and potet on  
the paper dand we wod 'do some  
mero emeges and oters. emeges. it was  
ghet for to have mrs melina and he  
grat adias.

Figure 7 a  
written  
sample of an  
11 year-old  
able pupil  
with  
dyslexia

What gives the rationale to look out for spelling mistakes in the case of able pupils is the fact that "most do learn to read satisfactorily and some never have any reading difficulties at all. Their spelling, however, remains disabled..." (Montgomery, 2003).

In summarising what we have discussed so far, if an able pupil is dyslexic, at some point they must show literacy skill difficulties that reveal their dyslexia. What should I pay attention to?

- ★ Delayed skills development in the early years (see Figure 5)
- ★ Failure to develop sound-symbol correspondence
- ★ Inability to name or say the sounds of the letters of the alphabet
- ★ Reluctance towards writing despite excellent verbal skills
- ★ Spelling problems

Now let us examine the identification of able pupils with dyslexia from another angle. If a child with dyslexia is gifted/able, at some point they are likely to show signs of exceptional abilities or the potential of abilities in one or more right or left brain performances. What might those signs be?

Although there is still very little that we know of the brain and its functioning, Geschwind and his colleagues in their studies of foetuses nearly thirty years ago showed a connection between the development of the brain and dyslexia. In their work, summarised by Gyarmathy (2000 p77) they concluded that "dyslexia is caused by a defect in the development of the left hemisphere. Although functions of the left side of the brain are poor, the functions connected to the right side can work higher than average". Based on this, we may expect that those pupils with dyslexia who show special abilities and talents will display their abilities in areas that require right hemisphere functioning such as above average creativity, musicality, visual skills, artistic abilities, non-verbal skills, divergent thinking, imagination, and intuition as shown in Figures 4a and 4b. This explains why "highly able pupils may be dyslexic but mask this by having very good visual memories and so read at the level of age peers but have severe problems with spelling" (Montgomery, 2003 p 58). Visual memory is a right brain function.

The identification of "giftedness in students with disabilities requires a procedure different from those in a typical giftedness assessment" say Lovett and Lewandowski (2006 p 516). In the case of these children, "there is an unexpected discrepancy between the child's apparent higher ability and performance on literacy tasks. This discrepancy widens as the child grows older..." (Montgomery, 2003 p49), therefore action needs to be taken as early as possible. It is best if we involve everyone interacting with the child in the process of identification: the staff, the parents, the child, and even his/her peers. Lovett and Lewandowski (2006) summarise a number of recommended identification methods by researchers (Body and Mills, 1997; McCoach et al., 2001; Nielsen, 2002; Silverman, 2003) . These methods are

- ★ structured interviews
- ★ behavioural observations
- ★ creativity tests
- ★ teacher nominations
- ★ IQ tests
- ★ achievement tests
- ★ curriculum-based assessment
- ★ portfolio reviews

- ★ rating scales of creative behaviour
- ★ classroom observations including:
  - vocabulary
  - contribution to class discussions
  - moral sensitivity
  - extensive knowledge in a given domain

Lovett and Lewandowski (2006 p520) question the usefulness of IQ tests saying that they "narrowly define human ability, focusing on some areas (e.g. verbal expression, mathematical reasoning) to the exclusion of others (e.g. artistic ability, physical agility)". Most assessments and observations, however, can be easily carried out by the teacher working with the child. In addition, experience suggests that children know themselves as well as each other, therefore, self-nomination surveys, and peer-nomination surveys can serve as very effective tools in the identification process. Students usually respond to these surveys well, and even enjoy becoming the centre of attention. On the next 2 pages (Figures 8 and 9) are two examples of surveys that might be used with students. They may be copied and adapted for your use. The questions are based on a course study of *Realising the Potential* by Draper and Gibson (2004). One of my students responded to the survey by shouting out with excitement, "Finally, someone is asking me these!"



## STUDENT SELF-ASSESSMENT SURVEY

I am a genius. Is that true? \_\_\_\_\_

I have abilities to do very well in certain areas. Is this truer? \_\_\_\_\_

What are you good at? \_\_\_\_\_

Your favourite subjects? \_\_\_\_\_

Subjects you do not like? \_\_\_\_\_

What would you like to learn more about? \_\_\_\_\_

Who would you like to be invited as a guest speaker at school? \_\_\_\_\_

What do you like to do best in your free time? \_\_\_\_\_

Where would you like to travel? \_\_\_\_\_

What career would you like to follow when you leave school? \_\_\_\_\_

What do you do to help you remember things? \_\_\_\_\_

What is the most important thing for you? \_\_\_\_\_

What books do you enjoy? \_\_\_\_\_

What sports do you play? \_\_\_\_\_

What clubs do you belong to? \_\_\_\_\_

What competitions have you ever entered? \_\_\_\_\_

What summer camp would you like to go to? \_\_\_\_\_

What frightens you? \_\_\_\_\_

If you could share a special skill with us, what would it be? \_\_\_\_\_

How long do you think you will continue with school and learning? \_\_\_\_\_

How often do you read books about subjects that are not taught at school? \_\_\_\_\_

What do you collect? \_\_\_\_\_

## STUDENT PEER-NOMINATION SURVEY

### In your class...

Who would be the best in taking charge in a responsible manner if your teacher was called out of the room?

Who is a good leader? \_\_\_\_\_

Who makes the most sense in discussions? \_\_\_\_\_

Who is good at problem solving? \_\_\_\_\_

Who has the best sense of humour? \_\_\_\_\_

Who thinks up the best ideas for misbehaving? \_\_\_\_\_

Who is the most sensitive? \_\_\_\_\_

Who produces the most original art work? \_\_\_\_\_

Who is the best in remembering things? \_\_\_\_\_

Who is the best in Maths? \_\_\_\_\_

Who is the most curious? \_\_\_\_\_

Who complains of being bored because the task is too easy? \_\_\_\_\_

Who works well independently? \_\_\_\_\_

Who has a strong sense of fairness? \_\_\_\_\_

Who has a lot of good ideas but usually does not tell the teacher? \_\_\_\_\_

Who imitates adults well? \_\_\_\_\_

Who cares most about the environment? \_\_\_\_\_

Who is aware and enjoys beautiful things? \_\_\_\_\_

Who is caring and considerate of others? \_\_\_\_\_

Who does not mind being different? \_\_\_\_\_

Who manages to finish their work despite distractions? \_\_\_\_\_

Teachers may want design their own class observation form that may include some of the following categories in order to gather more information about the students.

### SKILLS

- ★ Leadership
- ★ Persuasive
- ★ Initiative
- ★ Artistic

### CHARACTER TRAITS

- ★ Expressing strong feelings
- ★ Sensitivity
- ★ Independence
- ★ Creativity
- ★ High energy level
- ★ Humour

### ACTIONS

- ★ Takes on too much
- ★ Criticises her/himself too much
- ★ Asks good questions
- ★ Persevere
- ★ Expresses strong opinions
- ★ Produces elaborated work

Based on the information gathered from all involved in the children's progress, teachers can design a teaching programme that suits the needs of the child, however if the child's support team feels it necessary the child may be referred for further psychological assessment. In order to successfully address the students' spelling, reading and writing difficulties, a synthetic phonics based Alphabetic-Phonetic Structural-Linguistic (APSL) type programme in a small group setting is recommended at least three times a week .

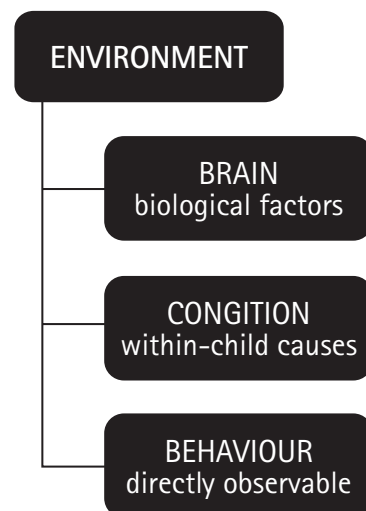
In summarising what we have discussed so far, if a child with dyslexia is gifted/able, at some point they must show signs of exceptional abilities or the potential of abilities in one or more right or left brain performances. What might those signs be and how can I recognise those signs?

- ★ Above average right hemisphere functioning (see Figures 4a and b)
- ★ Gather information through
  - Observations
  - Parent interviews
  - From the students
- ★ May need to refer the child for
  - Psychological assessment
  - Additional Support for Learning

## THE CHARACTERISTICS OF ABLE PUPILS WITH DYSLEXIA

Numerous studies deal with the characteristics of dyslexic pupils, and the characteristics of able pupils, however seldom are the characteristics of a pupil who is able and dyslexic considered. Able pupils with dyslexia appear to be different to peer groups. In reviewing the literature, and based on my own experiences working with able pupils with dyslexia, I tried to keep the focus on those elements that best describe the pupil who is able and dyslexic. Both directly observable characteristics, and those that are not directly observable will be discussed. Special focus will be placed on learning characteristics and personality traits, as these are the most immediately observable characteristics for teachers when working with their pupils.

In order to conceptualise the characteristics of able pupils with dyslexia the Morton-Frith (1995) model serves as a good starting point. Although the framework was originally developed in relation to autism, it is used to conceptualise theories of dyslexia, and seem useful in the understanding of the origin of able pupils with dyslexia. The model (Figure 10) takes into consideration biological factors that affect the functioning of the brain, within-child causes that affect cognition, and directly observable aspects that affect the child's behaviour. According to the model, external environmental factors influence all three levels.



**Figure 10** *Factors affected by the environment based on Morton and Frith's model*

It is clear from the model that the child's behaviour that is directly observable is greatly influenced by the environment. The child's cognition and the functioning of the brain is not directly observable, but signs are observable at the level of behaviour such as personality traits and learning characteristics.

## WHAT ARE THE PERSONALITY TRAITS OF ABLE PUPILS WITH DYSLEXIA?

Able pupils with dyslexia can be bright and sensitive, which is why they are acutely aware of their difficulties. Since there is a great discrepancy between their abilities and what they can produce in writing, they get easily frustrated. Over time, as noted by Baum (1990), pessimistic feelings may overshadow positive feelings that are usually connected to what they can accomplish at home on their own. Their overdeveloped sense of perfectionism often paralyses them rather than helping them to produce the work. Stewart (2003 p27) summarises several studies (Lupart 1989, Baum 1990, Conover 1996) that support the perfectionist attitude of able pupils with dyslexia saying these students "set extremely high goals for themselves and are very critical of themselves when they fail to reach these goals". They are curious and enthusiastic which often manifests itself in impulsivity. In addition, Roeper's (2008) observation is that they have a strong sense of the truth and global awareness and can react strongly, even aggressively "when their need for truthful global awareness is thwarted. They know when they have not been told the truth..." Therefore, it is important to have an adult in their lives whom they can trust. Indeed, often they prefer adult company.

Unfortunately, able pupils with dyslexia sometimes

- ★ express boredom
- ★ criticise teachers or the school
- ★ become a class clown
- ★ creatively avoid tasks that they consider difficult
- ★ divert topics to those they feel comfortable with
- ★ may refuse to perform in areas of their weaknesses
- ★ in extreme cases, withdraw completely

Stewart (2003) believes these are meant to be a kind of defence mechanisms. In my experience, these are often messages from the students to me communicating that what I am doing is not working for them, and I need to find another way.

In summarising the personality traits of able pupils with dyslexia, what should I look for? They might include:

- |                         |  |
|-------------------------|--|
| ★ Curiosity             | ★ Often set unrealistic goals                    |
| ★ Sensitivity           | ★ Easily get frustrated                          |
| ★ Enthusiasm            | ★ Skilled at creatively avoiding difficult tasks |
| ★ Perfectionism         |  |
| ★ Strong sense of truth |  |

## WHAT ARE IMMEDIATELY OBSERVABLE CHARACTERISTICS OF ABLE PUPILS WITH DYSLEXIA?

Immediately observable characteristics of able pupils with dyslexia are likely to be related to behaviour. In the classroom they may stand out with

- ★ strong oral skills
- ★ excellent communication skills
- ★ above average vocabulary
- ★ superior performance in class discussions
- ★ a sophisticated sense of humour

They thrive in an environment where they have an opportunity to use their problem solving skills and often surprise the teacher with unusual and creative solutions.

These skills, however, will not be transported to written work. When the tasks are not presented in a way that are both sufficiently challenging and motivating, they will be the ones who are often described by teachers as the most disruptive, who are frequently found off task or escape into daydreaming. Others will complain of headaches and stomach aches, or appear to be withdrawn. In social situations, relating to peers often poses a problem. Intellectually, they would prefer the friendship of older students, however, they are often emotionally not mature enough to join them and have not had all the experiences of their older peers. Therefore, they often choose the company of an adult. During break time and lunch time they may prefer to talk to a teacher who shares their interests rather than take part in their friends' 'silly games'.

## WHAT ARE NOT IMMEDIATELY OBSERVABLE CHARACTERISTICS OF ABLE PUPILS WITH DYSLEXIA?

Characteristics that are not immediately observable are especially challenging to describe. Some of these are determined by genetic factors, others by the environment. In an attempt to understand characteristics of able pupils with dyslexia that are not immediately observable, I tried to design a simple model (Figure 11). The model will almost certainly change as more research will be carried out in the area of able pupils with dyslexia, but it will provide a useful starting point.

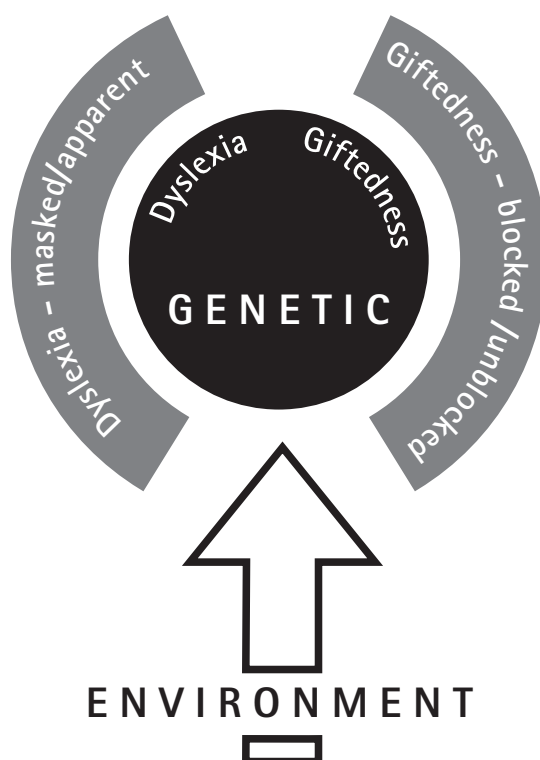


Figure 11 a proposed model of the characteristics of able pupils with dyslexia

The black circle in the centre represents the genetically determined factors within the child. At this level dyslexia and giftedness are genetically determined characteristics of an individual that are life-long. The grey belts surrounding the centre represent the manifestation of giftedness and dyslexia. At this level both dyslexia and giftedness appear to be dynamic, sometimes clearly apparent, at other times not directly observable. In order to better understand what this means for us teachers, let us have a closer look at each.

In explaining the dynamic nature of giftedness, my starting point is that "gifts may take varied forms and appear in unexpected situations at different points during a life-time" (Freeman, 2000). "Theorists have suggested that giftedness is a dynamic concept and...always changing..." (Wintansley, 2004 p7). If this is the case, an alternative interpretation of the nature of giftedness is that while gifts may be genetically determined, they do not always manifest themselves in the child's behaviour. In other words,

*gifts may be partially or completely blocked, partially or completely unblocked.*

Whether the gift is blocked or unblocked may depend on the individual's readiness level, or the environment. The environment can act as a catalyst to help the gift manifest itself, or block the gift. An anecdote from my personal experiences is a story of a boy with whom I was in the same class from kindergarten until high school graduation. This boy had musical talent and sang beautifully. Every morning his voice filled the classroom and he sang the most cheerful songs. One day he stopped singing. Only much later did I find out that his parents went through a divorce at around that time. The boy never sang again. Another example is a gifted child who, due to the relocation of her family to a new country, had to change school. In her home country she was happy and well-liked by her peers, but in the new school she did not feel welcome at all. At the beginning, she worked equally hard as in her home country, but when she was ignored, she gave up trying, became sad and depressed, and unable to perform to her previous standard. This took two years and in the process she has learnt to let go of her desperate need for love, approval, and appreciation. The real turnaround, however, came when she met a teacher who was nice to her, helpful, and understanding. Her abilities were unblocked again. Often, all these children need is one person whom they can trust and who equally believes in their abilities.

Moving on to how dyslexia manifests itself in the case of able pupils, my starting point will be the masking hypothesis. Silverman (2003), quoted by Lovett and Lewandowski (2006 p 518), argued that "giftedness and difficulties can 'mask' each other out in a variety of ways". In the case of an able pupil with dyslexia, very often the only sign that reveals their dyslexia is their spelling because "it is characteristic of gifted children that they have very good memories and they may learn to read very quickly purely based upon visual memorising" (Montgomery, 2003 p 42-43).

In summarising characteristics of able pupils with dyslexia that are not immediately observable, how can I help them manifest their gifts and recognise dyslexic tendencies?

Carrie Winstanley suggests there are some things teachers ought not to do in their classrooms!

## What not to do

- ★ Don't ask children to read aloud in a large group – even if they are making great improvements they are likely to be significantly less fluent than peers.
- ★ Don't correct every single error in a piece of work – instead, 'close mark' a small section of the work and then pay attention to ideas and not mechanics for the rest of the piece.
- ★ Don't compare with other pupils – inappropriate comparisons can affect children's self-esteem and embarrass the pupils whose work is being held up as exemplary.
- ★ Don't give long spelling lists – shorter tasks are more manageable and these can be distributed frequently resulting in the same outcomes.
- ★ Don't make children rewrite their work – this is the most disheartening task. Using a computer makes editing less laborious, but sometimes getting ideas down is sufficient. There is little merit in rewriting without redrafting.

*(Winstanley, Teaching Expertise)*



## What to do

- ✱ Treat all children as if they had high ability
- ✱ Be patient and understanding
- ✱ Make them feel accepted
- ✱ Help them have a mentor or understanding adult
- ✱ Motivate them with appropriate feedback
- ✱ Teach them with enthusiasm
- ✱ Look out for spelling problems

Purposefully, the list focuses on aspects that may help the child to express her/his special ability, and avoids listing factors that may be very stressful for a child and act as a block because what we focus on grows. If we focus on the positives, they will grow. We want the positive attitudes to grow, and not just positive attitudes, but attitudes full of joy and enthusiasm.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

I have attempted to provide a working definition of able pupils with dyslexia. Able pupils with dyslexia appear to be different to peer groups by showing exceptional abilities or the potential of abilities in one or more right or left brain performances, at the same time having difficulties with the fluent and accurate acquisition of reading, writing, especially spelling skills despite appropriate learning opportunities.

The process of identification of able pupils with dyslexia has been guided by two questions:

- ★ If an able pupil is dyslexic, at some point they are likely to show literacy skill difficulties that reveal their dyslexia. What might those signs be?
- ★ If a child with dyslexia is able, at some point they are likely to show signs of exceptional abilities or the potential of abilities. What might those signs be, and how can I recognise those signs?

The signs

- ★ Delayed skills development in the early years (see Figure 5)
- ★ Failure to develop sound-symbol correspondence
- ★ Inability to name or say the sounds of the letters of the alphabet
- ★ Reluctance towards writing despite excellent verbal skills
- ★ Problems with spelling may reveal signs of dyslexia in case of an otherwise able pupil.

Identification needs to be an on-going process and it is good to collect information from as many sources as possible. While the signs of dyslexia are usually observable, gifts can appear, disappear and re-appear at various times during a lifetime.

Able pupils with dyslexia, like many other children, can be

- ★ curious
- ★ sensitive
- ★ enthusiastic
- ★ have a strong sense of truth
- ★ perfectionist and set unrealistic goals
- ★ skilled at creatively avoiding difficult tasks, and
- ★ easily frustrated.

They may prefer

- ★ visually presented materials
- ★ kinaesthetic learning
- ★ using computers
- ★ holistic teaching

They often have a wide variety of interests and may be experts in one specific area. They are willing to work outside their comfort zone if learning is challenging and motivating.

In the classroom they may demonstrate

- ★ strong oral skills
- ★ excellent communication skills
- ★ above average vocabulary
- ★ superior performance in class discussions
- ★ a sophisticated sense of humour

They thrive in an environment where they have an opportunity to use their problem solving skills and often surprise the teacher with unusual and creative solutions.

While there is little doubt that pupils who are highly able and dyslexic exist in every classroom, the teaching methods that are suitable for able pupils with dyslexia are beneficial for all. For great success, teaching and learning should be filled with joy and enthusiasm.

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[www.bda-dyslexia.org](http://www.bda-dyslexia.org) Dyslexia Institute

[www.thedyslexiashop.co.uk](http://www.thedyslexiashop.co.uk) The Dyslexia Shop

<http://www.dyslexia-teacher.com> Dyslexia Teacher A useful site with a range of information relating to dyslexia

Dyslexics [www.dyslexics.org.uk](http://www.dyslexics.org.uk)

[www.ltscotland.org.uk](http://www.ltscotland.org.uk) Learning and Teaching Scotland. The website has useful information about dyslexia

<http://www.londongt.org> London Gifted and Talented. They are based in England but parts of the website are open to all staff.

[www.nace.org.uk](http://www.nace.org.uk) National Association of Gifted Children in Education

[www.nagcbrtain.org.uk](http://www.nagcbrtain.org.uk) National Association of Gifted Children

[www.countmein.org.uk](http://www.countmein.org.uk) Scottish Dyslexia Trust. The work was carried out by a team of education professionals and a parent in co-operation with East Renfrewshire, Argyll and Bute, City of Edinburgh and Orkney Councils Education Departments

[www.ablepupils.com](http://www.ablepupils.com) The Scottish Network for Able Pupils. The website has information about high ability pupils

[www.staeducational.com](http://www.staeducational.com) Surgisales Teaching Aids S.T.A. Ltd was established in 1981 as Surgisales Teaching Aids Ltd. The founders were motivated by the lack of availability of special needs materials in Ireland.

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