

## Quick Information Guides for Educators

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### SNAPshot No 2

### Supporting pupils who are highly able and dyslexic

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Original text: Georgina Gabor

Adapted for the SNAPshot by Dr Katarzyna Borkowska, University of Glasgow

## Able pupils with dyslexia

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Highly able students may have additional support needs. Highly 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 highly 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 challenging. Dyslexia is one of the most common forms of double exceptionality and might have serious consequences for children. Delays to literacy development can be very damaging for pupils and can lead to frustration and anger. In addition, pupils 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 having enough knowledge about the nature of highly able pupils with dyslexia, it is possible to support them appropriately.

## What are characteristics of able pupils with dyslexia?

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Highly able pupils with dyslexia may show exceptional abilities either in one specific area of interest or in a wide variety of areas. At the same time they experience difficulties with the fluent and accurate acquisition of reading, writing, especially spelling skills despite appropriate learning opportunities. In the classroom highly able pupils with dyslexia may display some of the following:

- ✿ Strong oral skills
- ✿ Excellent communication skills
- ✿ Above average vocabulary
- ✿ Superior performance in class discussions
- ✿ A sophisticated sense of humour

These skills, however, are unlikely to be transported to written work. If a highly able pupil is dyslexic, at some point and like any other pupil, they are likely to show literacy skill difficulties such as:

- \* 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

In relation to **personality traits**, highly able pupils with dyslexia (like many other children) 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, pessimistic feelings may overshadow positive feelings. Their overdeveloped sense of **perfectionism** often paralyses them rather than helping them to produce the work. Highly able pupils with dyslexia set very high (often unrealistic) 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. They have a **strong sense of the truth**. Unfortunately, highly able pupils who are dyslexic 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 and, in extreme cases, withdraw completely. These are a kind of defence mechanism. In social situations, relating to peers often poses a problem. Intellectually, they prefer the friendship of older students and they often choose the company of an adult.

## How do I identify highly able pupils with dyslexia?

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The process of identification of highly able pupils with dyslexia can be problematic as many achievement tests identify reading and writing as key indicators of ability. 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. Teachers might gather information through:

- \* Classroom observations including: *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)
- \* Parent interviews
- \* Teacher nomination
- \* Self-nomination and peer-nomination surveys: 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.

Based on the information gathered from all involved in the pupil's progress, teachers can design a teaching programme that suits the needs of the pupil.

## How can I support highly able pupils with dyslexia in their learning?

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Good practice in the classroom will help all pupils whether or not they have learning difficulties and/or high abilities:

- \* Treat all pupils 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

Pupils are willing to work outside their comfort zone if learning is challenging and motivating. However, highly able pupils with dyslexia may prefer:

- \* Visually presented materials
- \* Kinaesthetic learning
- \* Using computers
- \* Holistic teaching

## What does not work in the classrooms?

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Carrie Winstanley suggests a list of things which teachers should avoid in their classrooms:

- \* Asking 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.
- \* Correcting 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.
- \* Comparing with other pupils – inappropriate comparisons can affect children’s self-esteem and embarrass the pupils whose work is being held up as exemplary.
- \* Giving long spelling lists – shorter tasks are more manageable and these can be distributed frequently resulting in the same outcomes.
- \* Making children rewrite their work – this is the most disheartening task. Using a computer make editing less laborious, but sometimes getting ideas down is sufficient. There is little merit in rewriting without redrafting.

## In Summary

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- \* High ability and difficulties can mask each other out in a variety of ways
- \* Highly able pupils with dyslexia might demonstrate certain learning characteristics and personality traits
- \* Identification of highly able pupils with dyslexia needs to be an on-going process and it is important to collect information from as many sources as possible
- \* Teaching methods that are suitable for highly able pupils with dyslexia are beneficial for all
- \* Certain learning tasks might discourage pupils from engagement in further work and affect their self-esteem