Literacy difficulties
The DYT position

Contents

Introduction

This paper sets out Driver Youth Trust's position, definition and understanding of literacy difficulties. It focuses on learners affected between the ages of 5 and 16, the impact this has on their lives and the features of good practice for supporting this group of young people.

There are a group of learners in our schools, who are persistently underperforming in literacy tasks because of underlying disorders that are not responsive to standard educational approaches and show resistance to high-quality intervention. Overwhelmingly, these children are in mainstream schools (DfE, 2018a) and it is DYT's mission to help the education system to focus on solutions for all young people with literacy difficulties.

1. What is literacy?

Literacy is the ability to read, write, speak and listen in a way that lets us communicate effectively and make sense of the world (National Literacy Trust, 2017).

1.1 What are 'literacy difficulties'?

Compared to their peers, for some young people, the skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening are more difficult to learn, perform accurately and / or consistently. This difficulty is not necessarily related to intellectual ability, but it does make life more challenging and often impacts on lifetime opportunities and success.

The causes of reading, writing, speaking and listening difficulties – what we will refer to here as literacy difficulties – are an area of ongoing academic conflict and debate, particularly around definitions of specific disorders and how these are diagnosed. However, there is general agreement that some learners will have difficulty achieving the automaticity and proficiency required to be literate.

Literacy difficulties are not solely about trouble accessing English but rather the whole curriculum. Therefore, they are a great strain on educational experience and life chances for these learners.

When literacy difficulties are recorded as a special educational need (SEN), they most frequently fall into one of two categories: a Specific Learning Difficulty (SpLD) or a Speech, Language and Communication Need (SLCN).

Driver Youth Trust's definition of literacy difficulty

Persistent difficulty in reading, writing, speaking and/or listening that may not be responsive to standard education approaches and requires further intervention.

Dyslexia: one of the most prevalent literacy difficulties

Literacy difficulties exist on a continuum of severity. SpLDs affect one or more specific aspects of learning. This encompasses a range of conditions such as dyslexia, dyscalculia and dyspraxia. Sir Jim Rose argues that dyslexia is an effective term for describing the most stringent difficulties with literacy, in his 2009 review the following definition was adopted:

Dyslexia is a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling.

- **Characteristic features of dyslexia are difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed;**

- **Dyslexia occurs across the range of intellectual abilities;**

- **It is best thought of as a continuum, not a distinct category, and there are no clear cut-off points;**

- **Co-occurring difficulties may be seen in aspects of language, motor co-ordination, mental calculation, concentration and personal organisation, but these are not, by themselves, markers of dyslexia;**

- **A good indication of the severity and persistence of dyslexic difficulties can be gained by examining how the individual responds or has responded to well-founded intervention (Rose, 2009).**

There is an ongoing debate over the definition of dyslexia, its scientific basis and the rigour of diagnostic procedures. Some academics have claimed that the use of the term leads to less teacher efficacy to address the problems faced by their pupils (Barnet Educational Psychology Team, 2017).

DYT believes the term is useful for identifying learners with significant and persistent difficulties in reading and spelling and for ensuring that required support and access arrangements are in place, whilst also recognising that dyslexia is not solely a difficulty in these areas.

49%
of all classes have at least one student with dyslexia

10%
of the population is thought to have dyslexia

Determining the prevalence of dyslexia is difficult. Research commissioned by DYT in 2018 found that around half (49%) of all classes have at least one student with dyslexia, meaning that it is one of the most prevalent literacy difficulties in English schools (Wespieser, 2018). The British Dyslexia Association (BDA) claim that 10% of people in the UK are dyslexic (BDA, 2018), others such as Snowling (2012), Elliott and Grigorenko (2014) have suggested that individuals who have severe reading difficulties make up around 4-8% of the population.

SLCN: the link between language and literacy

SLCN is an umbrella term that relates to a wide range of difficulties. Some of these may relate to a specific condition, such as Developmental Language Disorder which affects the way learners understand and express language, but equally some children may experience difficulties due to other developmental reasons. Either way, early identification and support has shown to be highly effective, not only to overcome existing difficulties but also to prevent these becoming more intractable problems (RCSLT, 2018).

Learners with SLCN have difficulty in communicating with others. This may be because they have difficulty saying what they want to, understanding what is being said to them, or they do not understand or use social rules of communication. The profile for every child with SLCN is different and their needs may change over time. They may have difficulty with one, some, or all of the different aspects of speech, language or social communication at different times of their lives (DfE, 2015).

The Bercow: Ten Years On report states 1.4 million children and young people have long-term SLCN (ICAN, 2017).

1.4 million
children have long-term speech, language and communication needs

1.2 How many learners have literacy difficulties in England?

It is difficult to define the precise number of learners that have literacy difficulties. Literacy difficulties exist on a continuum scale of severity; all should be recognised and supported.

Different approaches have been taken to try to determine the scale of the problem:

- 5% of learners in mainstream education have a diagnosed SEN that will significantly impact their literacy skills (DfE, 2018a);

- 12% of children leave primary school unable to read at a secondary standard (Allen, 2018);

- 13% of students identified as having SEN are categorised as having SpLD, 21% of are categorised as having SLCN (DfE, 2015);

- 18% of learners do not meet the expected standard in the phonics screening check at the end of Key Stage 1 (DfE, 2018e);

- 49% of all classes have at least one student diagnosed with dyslexia (Wespieser, 2018).

1.3 Are we under-reporting literacy difficulties?

Statistics about SEN pupils are collected by the DfE during an annual census. School staff are asked to record 'primary type of need' for SEN learners. Literacy difficulties are grouped under the wider category of 'cognition and learning', however if a young person has another more apparent need, the literacy difficulty may not be identified and recorded at all under this system. In addition, this record relies on the timely and accurate identification of SEN which might include a range of educational, medical or psychological assessment, or none. We also know that sometimes, learners who have a literacy difficulty are not categorised as SEN at all. Therefore, the government's statistics are likely to be underreporting the prevalence of literacy difficulties.

Literacy difficulties exist on a continuum scale of severity; all should be recognised

2. What is the impact of literacy difficulties on life chances?

2.1 Embedding economic disadvantage

There is a plethora of evidence to show the correlation between socio-economic disadvantage and poorer performance in education and beyond, as less-advantaged children fall behind their more affluent peers (DfE, 2019).

Research shows that there is a significant overlap between disadvantage and literacy difficulties.

17% of learners with SpLD and 24% of learners with SLCN are eligible for free school meals (DfE, 2018a). Children living in poverty face a much greater risk of falling behind: 1 in 3 (35%) do not have the age-appropriate language skills expected of a five-year-old (Save the Children, 2015).

There is also a significant body of evidence that suggests that literacy can be delayed due to family circumstances and background, especially due to the "word gap," where pupils enter primary school with a vocabulary far below age-related expectations (Oxford University Press, 2018). On average, primary school teachers report that 49% of Year 1 pupils have a limited vocabulary to the extent that it affects their learning (*ibid*).

The DfE states:

vocabulary at age five is a key predictor of whether a child from a disadvantaged background is likely to 'buck the trend', succeed at school and become socially mobile in later life (2017b).

The Sutton Trust found that vocabulary development lags behind other cognitive developments and suggest that beginning to address this at age five might already be too late (Sutton Trust, 2010).

2.2 Cost to the economy

Low literacy is associated with lower earnings and employment rates, particularly for women. Failure to master basic literacy skills costs the economy £2.5 billion each year (National Literacy Trust, 2014).

Over half the adult working population (56%) in England are reported as having literacy skills below GCSE grade C with 5.2 million of these people reportedly lacking functional literacy (Beanstalk, 2013).

Learners with literacy difficulties are more likely to be eligible for Free School Meals

(Data source: DfE, 2018a) — % eligible for Free School Meals

	%
Pupils with SLCN	24
Pupils with SpLD	17
All Pupils	14
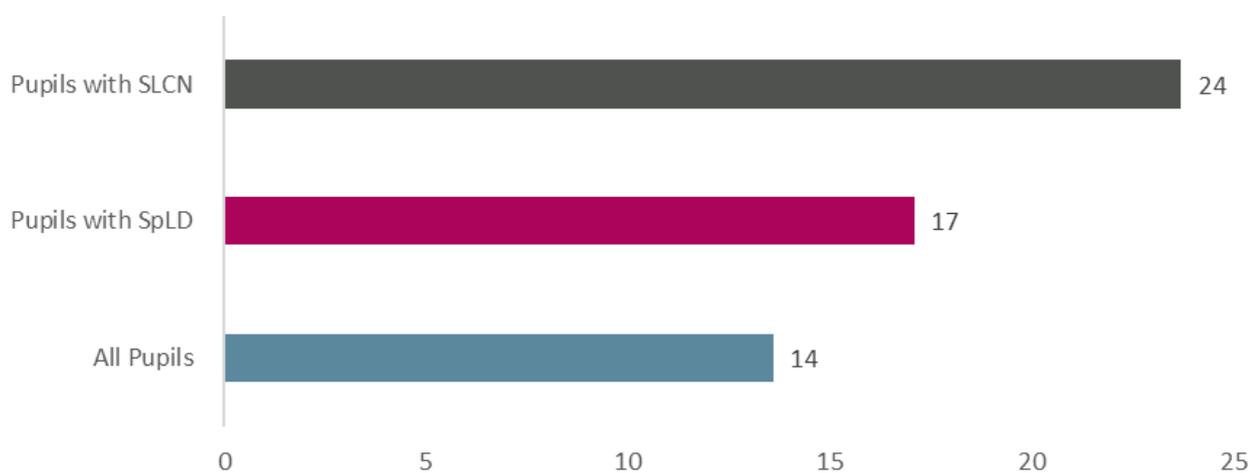
56%

of the adult working population in England have literacy skills below GCSE grade C

Each year, failure to master basic literacy skills costs the economy

£2.5 billion

2.3 Attainment

Despite progress made in improving literacy over the past 10 years, outcomes for those learners with literacy difficulties have remained significantly below the national average – especially if they are from a disadvantaged background. National tests, at all levels of the education system reveal that learners with literacy difficulties fail to attain the expected standards, or standards close to their peers.

Learners with literacy difficulties are not counted

Data from the 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) revealed an increase in the number of low-performing learners reading well and subsequently boosted England's position in the global rankings (IEA, 2018). However, this did not take into account learners with SEND, so presents only a partial picture of literacy in England.
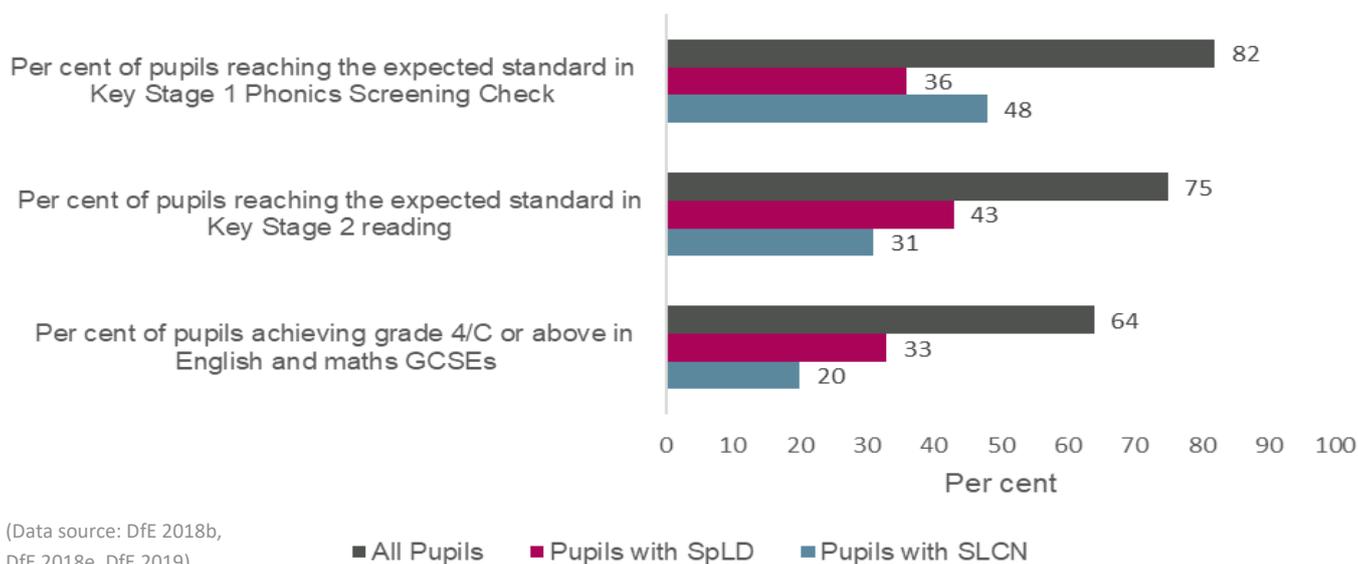
2.4 Behaviour and mental health

If you cannot read, you cannot access the curriculum. The result can often be poor behaviour and truancy.

[Research has linked reading difficulties to] externalising behaviours, such as classroom discipline problems, bullying, and aggression, as well as 'internalising behaviours', such as depression and anxiety (Pierce, 2017).

The National Literacy Trust claims that 9% of "very poor readers" are persistent truants compared to 2% of those who are 'average' or 'above average' readers.

A third of young people in Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) and Alternative Provision (AP) have SEN (Education Select Committee, 2018) and over half (54%) of people entering prison are assessed as having the literacy skills expected of an 11-year-old (Prison Reform Trust, 2018). This shows a link between literacy difficulties and problems with behaviour.

Attainment of learners with literacy difficulties is significantly below their peers

	All Pupils	Pupils with SpLD	Pupils with SLCN
Per cent of pupils reaching the expected standard in Key Stage 1 Phonics Screening Check	82	36	48
Per cent of pupils reaching the expected standard in Key Stage 2 reading	75	43	31
Per cent of pupils achieving grade 4/C or above in English and maths GCSEs	64	33	20

Per cent

(Data source: DfE 2018b, DfE 2018e, DfE 2019)

1 in 3
children living in poverty do not have the age-appropriate language skills expected of a five-year-old

Only 36%
of children with SpLD reach the expected standard in the KS1 Phonics Screening Check

3. How is the education system failing learners with literacy difficulties?

3.1 Lack of training

Initial Teacher Training (ITT)

Literacy difficulties are a challenge for teachers in all phases and sectors of education. Data collected for DYT in 2018 found that less than half of teachers report that they feel confident teaching young people with literacy difficulties (Wespieser, 2018).

DYT has long campaigned for teachers to receive training on dyslexia (DYT, 2013). The *Carter Review of Initial Teacher Training* (2015) identified SEND as an area of weakness. DYT analysis of the 354 inspections of ITT providers over the past 10-years, found that 1 in 7 do not mention SEN at all.

Unsurprisingly, the 2018 DfE survey of newly qualified teachers (NQTs) found that 'teaching reading and comprehension in secondary schools' and 'assessing the progress of SEN pupils' were the two areas where NQTs felt least prepared from their training (DfE, 2018c).

Continuous Professional Development

The issue persists in terms of quality of Continuous Professional Development (CPD). 91% of teachers report there are barriers to accessing effective CPD and 1 in 4 teachers don't believe that there's appropriate training in place for teachers to support SEN pupils (DfE, 2019). Despite the multi-million-pound investment by successive governments in improving the teaching of literacy and the relative success this has brought to outcomes, especially in phonics, few if any of these programmes focus on children who face the most intractable barriers to achievement, those with literacy difficulties.

It is crucial that expertise in this area is developed within the profession. The recent Early Career Framework supports this ambition. However, the framework can go further in the area of supporting pupils with SEN, by, for example developing National Professional Qualifications (NPQs) in the areas of SEN and literacy to provide additional capacity in schools to support pupils in making good progress and securing good outcomes.

1 in 7
ITT inspection reports do not mention SEN

Improving awareness and knowledge of literacy difficulties is essential to enable teachers to meet the professional standards required of them. Without effective training, either at ITT or CPD level, we are setting teachers up to fail.

3.2 Lack of accountability

Accountability for effective in-school provision that improves attainment for learners with literacy difficulties can be broadly split between performance management (of teachers and teaching assistants) and external measures.

Given the different performance management arrangements across schools it is unclear as to what extent this supports teacher development and improved outcomes for learners with literacy difficulties. Internal accountability, either by school leaders or those in governance roles, must be strengthened to both raise awareness of the urgency of this issue and to identify areas of development in relation to people management and systems and processes.

External accountability is provided by a number of stakeholders, although those by Ofsted are the highest profile, and highest stakes. Accountability is also evident, albeit at a greater distance than by the inspectorate, by:

- The Secretary of State's involvement in academies;
- The DfE and its agencies (including Regional Schools Commissioners and the exams regulator, Ofqual);
- Local authorities and the ombudsman which oversees their work.

We acknowledge that these stakeholders play an important role in holding the education system to account. However as we set out in our *Through the Looking Glass* report, there is rarely sufficiently nuanced debates about learners with literacy difficulties to enable broader considerations of systemic failings to improve the progress and attainment of these young people (DYT, 2017). The lack of regulatory power in this area is an example of how even when issues are identified, there is a lack of decisive action which holds schools to account on the ground.

The accountability carrot

One area in education where accountability has driven a change in school behaviour is the focus on socio-economically disadvantaged learners. Schools must clearly account for how Pupil Premium funding is used, there is no such expectation for the SEN notional budget. The way that the SEND notional budget is spent should be transparent and published so that all schools are accountable for the impact this has on pupils.

The government introduced pupil premium awards to encourage schools to use pupil premium funding carefully, this means that as well as the 'stick' of accountability, there is a 'carrot' to encourage and support schools with their spending. There is no equivalent system for literacy difficulties.

High stakes testing

Reforms to curricula and exams, which include a greater emphasis on spelling, punctuation and grammar involving extended writing, as well as changes to exam content have put candidates with persistent literacy difficulties at a disadvantage (DYT, 2015). It is vital that learners with literacy difficulties are able to access the curriculum and that the door to a more rigorous education and curriculum remains open to them. It is the role of accountability to ensure this accessibility is enforced.

It is vital that the door to a more rigorous education and curriculum remains open

3.3 Lack of resources

There are three areas in which a lack of resources are failing learners with literacy difficulties: *identification, specialist support and a lack of an evidence base.*

Identification

Pressures on school funding have led to a high degree of inconsistency in identifying pupils' literacy needs. This has created a social justice issue and postcode lottery as some learners are able to access more provision based on the system in place in their school or their parents' ability to pay. This has been exacerbated by Local Authority (LA) funding cuts which has seen identification of learners shift away from LAs to individual schools.

Specialist support

Pressures on education funding have also seen a reduction of specialist staff. Research by Driver Youth Trust has found that a third of LAs in England do not have sufficient specialist dyslexia teachers (Wespieser, 2018). Many teachers who were trained following the Rose review have since moved into the private sector, as demand for their services in the state sector has fallen following cuts to funding (Wespieser, forthcoming). The decline of the specialist teacher also perpetuates the lack of expertise in the system, meaning teachers have nowhere to turn to for advice on literacy difficulties. When supporting learners with reading and spelling difficulties, the most frequently reported strategy is to provide individual or small group teaching (Johnson, 2017), an in-house solution that may, again, be affected by funding cuts, compounded by the reduction in support from teaching assistants and other support services (e.g. parental support workers, pastoral care and counselling services).

1 in 3
Local Authorities do not have sufficient specialist dyslexia teachers

Evidence base

Overall, there is a lack of in-depth evidence on the best ways to support learners with literacy difficulties. Whilst developments such as the Education Endowment Foundation's (EEF) guidance reports for improving literacy (2017) and the DfE's guidance on best practice for SEN support (DfE, 2017a) are welcome, there is more that can be done. The evidence base is strong on phonics, but there is a lack of research on literacy beyond decoding, particularly for helping learners at secondary school.

There are several interventions and technological solutions to literacy difficulties on offer to schools. The EEF and Ofsted could do more to help schools determine the evidence base and identify which are the most cost-effective interventions.

4. What is DYT doing to improve outcomes for learners with literacy difficulties?

DYT works in schools to build capacity and train teachers in the classroom. Our work is rooted in evidence and we draw on a pool of expertise that covers literacy, SEN, leadership and psychology.

Inclusive literacy strategies are effective teaching and evidence-informed techniques that help many students and harm none. Universal strategies in a mainstream classroom are vital to empower all learners including those with language and literacy difficulties.

We are aligned with the government's ambition to transform early literacy for learners with a central focus on the teaching of phonics. We support this mission by helping schools to identify learners who are at most risk from being impeded by their literacy skills and advocating for greater provision to meet their needs.

Drive for Literacy

Drive for Literacy is our flagship, whole school programme for schools. We work in collaboration with leaders to teaching assistants, SENCos to parents and governors to create a culture where outcomes are improved for learners with literacy difficulties.

At DYT, we believe that each school requires a nuanced understanding of its learners to be able to improve their literacy. Instead of offering stand-alone interventions, we work with leadership, we look at systems and we approach solutions with an eye for sustainability, ensuring that inclusive literacy practices can be embedded.

5. Conclusion

Improving education across the board is complex. While those with literacy difficulties are ignored within the system, our overall levels of achievement, and in particular our literacy levels, will always be limited. To ignore those in society who struggle with aspects of literacy, and in failing to promote inclusion, over exclusion, makes us all the poorer in our attitudes, our experiences, and our day to day lives.

6. Recommendations

Ofsted should judge ITT providers on the quality of training delivered to trainee teachers on SEN including supporting learners with literacy difficulties.

DfE should ensure that all funded literacy CPD includes training on literacy difficulties.

Teacher educators should develop NPQs in SEN and literacy as part of the new plan to support teachers to develop and progress their career without needing to pursue a traditional leadership route.

Researchers should develop a "what works" evidence base for learners with literacy difficulties and discover how many learners with literacy difficulties there are.

School Leaders should ensure their provision enables learners with literacy difficulties to access the curriculum and that the door to a more rigorous education and curriculum is open to all.

Teachers, across all areas of the curriculum and all school phases, should know how to adjust their teaching for learners with literacy difficulties.

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