Classroom Adjustments: Dyslexia

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| SERPIL | So, Danielle, I thought that dyslexia was when you write words sort of back to front and they look a little bit mumble-jumble. Have I got it wrong? |
| DANIELLE | Yeah. I write usual, like, left to right. Yeah. You got it wrong. |
| SERPIL | So, if you write usual, then, what is the barrier in dyslexia, then? |
| DANIELLE | The way you learn because some people can do, say, mental maths. I find it really hard to do that because I have to write it down and work it out. |
| SERPIL | OK. Good start. So dyslexia is not simply about letters in the wrong order. |
| DANIELLE | To my friends, I say it's a learning disability that disadvantages me on how I learn in different ways and they pretty much accept that. |
| SERPIL | And how have teachers or other people explained to you what dyslexia is? How have they defined it for you? |
| DANIELLE | They say it's different ways you learn. |
| SERPIL | Thanks for setting me straight, Danielle. Hi. I'm Serpil Senelmis and this podcast is part of an NCCD portal series. In this episode, we'll drill down into the definition of dyslexia, we'll highlight some adjustments that can be made in the classroom to enable students with dyslexia to participate like their peers, and we'll hear more from Danielle and her teacher Mr Davies as well as a couple of dyslexia experts with some evidence-based approaches. |
| MANDY NAYTON | So, my name is Mandy Nayton, and I am the CEO of the Dyslexia SPELD Foundation in Perth and the President of AUSPELD. |
| SERPIL | Now, Mandy, will you be able to define to me what dyslexia means? |
| MANDY NAYTON | Dyslexia is essentially a difficulty with words. That's what dyslexia means, difficulty with words, and it really does mean that it's a problem that some students have actually learning to read at a single-word level, and then consequently whole sentences, paragraphs, books and so on. These students have a persistent and enduring difficulty learning to read. |
| SERPIL | I'm assuming that, then, this is picked up in the early years of school when they actually first encounter textbooks. |
| MANDY NAYTON | Well, it would be great if it was picked up early, but it's not always the case. Children can appear to be learning to read simply by memorising text on the page, learning the kind of sequence of a story, having had it read to them many times, and sometimes when they're little, they can use guessing techniques and so on that mean that they appear to be doing OK. And particularly if they're, you know, reasonably clever kids and they've got good access to language development, these children may slip under the radar. |
| SERPIL | So, how does a teacher look carefully? What are the signs that a student might have dyslexia? |
| MANDY NAYTON | Many children with dyslexia have an underlying phonological processing difficulty, and by that, we mean they have difficulties actually processing speech. They don't have difficulties necessarily using speech or understanding speech. What they have difficulties with is the kind of finer units within words, so our ability to actually identify the individual sounds inside a word, that a word like shop is made up of three sounds - SH-O-P - and in order for us to learn to read and write, we really do need to be able to get down to that level. Kids do need to be able to hear the components of words, and then be able to use those and manipulate those in order to learn how to read and write. |
| LYNNE IVICEVIC | Yeah, hi. I'm Lynne Ivicevic. I'm the Learning Support Coordinator at my school. |
| SERPIL | So, can you give me an example of a strategy that you might recommend to a teacher to implement in the classroom? |
| LYNNE IVICEVIC | Well, I'd be looking at my classroom practice, and when I taught lower primary myself, I actually put in a direct instruction spelling program, and that was to the whole class. |
| SERPIL | Lynne works in a high school in Perth where she supports teachers who have students with dyslexia and she works directly with students who opt in to her class. |
| LYNNE IVICEVIC | You're capturing those who need that very specialised instruction. I have used, in the high school, things like Reading Mastery and Spelling Mastery, so anything that's explicit or direct instruction will get the best results because what's happening now is time is going on and we need to really capitalise on that. |
| SERPIL | And are there any technological tools that can be really helpful in the adjustment process? |
| LYNNE IVICEVIC | I know of students who use speech-to-text. That takes a little bit of training. There's also some predictive technology on a computer and it gives them alternatives, so that's a technological advancement that we didn't have, I suppose, even five years ago. |
| SERPIL | And is early intervention and early adjustments the key to success for students doing well in school if they do have dyslexia? |
| LYNNE IVICEVIC | I think it is. Your opportunity for the greatest effect for remediation is up to the end of Year 3, so every year after that, it becomes less effective. Early childhood teachers, they have the greatest power for the greatest change. So, yes, right at the beginning. I do know of students who have had a lot of work, even with speech pathologists, right through primary school. They do fantastic work. So, yes, you should keep at it, but the earlier, the better. The longer you leave it, it's harder, then, to remediate. |
| MICHAEL DAVIES | 10 seconds or you're staying at lunchtime. 9, 8, 7, 6... You've got your timetable. You know where you need to be.  I guess spelling was a focus that I had this year with some of the students, and in turn, that's just to give a bit more confidence for when they are writing that they're not worried about the words too much. So, when a student identifies with dyslexia or I think even has dyslexic tendencies, I don't circle every word that's spelled wrong. We look at the writing as a whole and try and talk about the language features and the grammatical processes as such to make sure the writing is good, which a lot of them do actually write really, really well. They are very creative and imaginative, but if you do assess it just on the spelling side of it - and even sometimes, the grammatics can be a bit jumbled - but if you just go on the spelling aspect of it, yeah, then it can shoot their confidence down pretty quickly. |
| SERPIL | Michael Davies is a primary school teacher who initiated his own professional development when he first encountered a student with dyslexia a few years ago. |
| MICHAEL DAVIES | It's different for every kid, pretty much.  So, yeah, so each student has their own, I guess, strategies and recommendations that you use for them. So, one of the students, I do encourage her to write more and actually use traditional methods, whereas the student that's struggling a little bit, I encourage him to always use technology so he can have more success in the work that he's doing because, you know, I guess, in our daily life, we're using technology more and for him to be successful in life, he is going to need to rely on those technologies. |
| DANIELLE | Hi. I'm Danielle and I'm 12 years old and I'm in Year 6.  Sometimes, you have to say it again for me to, like, know what you mean. |
| SERPIL | And so give me an example of what your teacher does to help you so that you can actually understand. |
| DANIELLE | Usually, he will say it in a different way or, like, explain it again and show me. I like how people show me it. |
| SERPIL | Danielle is one of Mr Davies's Year 6 students and she's found his adjustments in the classroom very beneficial. |
| DANIELLE | Well, I'm more confident in how I learn and more confident in the ways. Like, if I'm doing division, I'm more confident doing it. Sometimes before, I wouldn't be comfortable doing a division sum because I wouldn't know what to do but now I'm alright. |
| SERPIL | While adjustments can make a huge difference in a student's life, be sure to check in with them to see that they are working. Not every approach is going to be effective, as Danielle points out. |
| DANIELLE | Once, I had a green sheet over my work to make it so it's easier. |
| SERPIL | Do you mean easier to see, easier to read the words? |
| DANIELLE | Easier to, like, read the sums and stuff like that because I used to put it on my worksheets, but I said that wasn't working because it was just annoying me. But now if I just use normal white sheets, it's fine. |
| SERPIL | Why was the green sheet annoying you? |
| DANIELLE | I don't know. I think it's just the colour and just, like... Sometimes, when the light hit it, it was annoying because you couldn't see and you had to make it, like, sort of dark so you can kind of see it. |
| SERPIL | So, once a learning disorder like dyslexia has been diagnosed, there's plenty that can be done to enable that student to participate in the classroom at the same level as their peers. |
| MANDY NAYTON | The accuracy, the fluency and the comprehension allow students to become more efficient readers who can read effortlessly and really enjoy what they're reading. That's a big and important part of the intervention, and even though we know that students will often take longer than their peers to get there, we do know that the vast majority of students who have learning difficulties, and, in particular, a disorder such as dyslexia, can become good readers.  Having said that, there are some students who continue to struggle, who never really develop that same level of fluency and accuracy as their peers, and for those students, we need to put in place some adjustments and accommodations in the classroom. We need to look at ways that they can access the text alongside their peers so they're participating in the same activities at the same time. |
| MICHAEL DAVIES | We're lucky that we have one-to-one iPad.  We try to have speech-to-text functions, so, depending on what task we're doing, that it can read the text to them, but also, if it's a writing task, that they can actually talk it because we all think quicker than what we talk and sometimes they're in overdrive, so, yeah, we do use that speech-to-text function so they can talk what it is, and then there might be that myself or a support teacher in the room that we can then help edit the work for them. |
| MANDY NAYTON | So, if you've got any Year 9 students and they're all studying 'Romeo and Juliet' and you're working with a student who really is going to struggle to read 'Romeo and Juliet', then giving that student access to that text electronically is going to allow them to participate in the same activities as their peers or, perhaps, using a reading pen, something that allows them independently to scan the material that they're looking at, read it, hear it, know that it's accurate, read it alongside the pen, the technology that we now have will provide that student with access to the material on the same basis as their peers, which is what really does need to happen. |
| SERPIL | Can you explain to me what an electronic pen is? |
| MANDY NAYTON | So, there is a scanning pen that's available now. This is something that, a few years ago, sort of was initially developed and the first scanning pens were quite chunky, but these newer pens, they look a little bit like a highlighter, really. They actually have a tiny inbuilt camera that scans across the text, so you roll it across the text and you listen to the text that's on the page. It works very effectively on most typed text. It's not so efficient on handwriting, which can be a problem if that's something that students are wanting to access, but for most written fonts, it's a very good way of accessing material on the page. |
| MICHAEL DAVIES | That seems to be something that a lot of people are tending to use, and on a lot of dyslexia forums, it is a technology that is talked about a lot, but, also, they just do talk about this speech-to-text functions and the different accessibilities. |
| DANIELLE | Well, sometimes if I'm reading a book on my iPad, I'll make it speak to me, but sometimes that's not the best because it just kind of just says it as the word, not expression, but, yeah, I do that sometimes. And I do all different, like, times tables apps and all those. |
| MICHAEL DAVIES | There's a lot of students, and it's not just the students with dyslexia. Like, I think every student will benefit by that. All kids are visual learners, so we try to make sure things are visual for them to see clearly and hear clearly and that just helps every kid in the room. So, we've done a variety of tasks where we've used clay or blocks for letters, and all the kids have got to do it, so it doesn't look like students with dyslexia are singled out as such. And every student has used text-to-speech functions in the room. Every students have had the work where it's been read to them, and we play with it and explore it and, at times, they have options to use those as well. |
| SERPIL | While there are some amazing technologies available to help students with dyslexia, they can be prohibitively expensive, and, as Mandy points out, it's often a change in behaviour or practice in the classroom that can be the most beneficial. |
| MANDY NAYTON | Sometimes, that means they simply need more time. Sometimes, it may mean kind of an adjustment that's based on some sort of technology, but very often, it's other avenues. It simply may mean having something repeated more regularly or having access to a cheat sheet or a structure that will take a student through a particular sequence of activities that will help them to achieve the same end goal as everybody else. |
| SERPIL | So, how regularly do you talk to your teacher to let them know that something's working really well, others aren't working so well, and that you need some more help with something else? |
| DANIELLE | Well, usually, when I need help, I'll ask whenever, and if I'm going good with stuff, I'll tell him, like, after I've done, say, a task or something. |
| SERPIL | And do you talk to your friends about it too? So, if you're having trouble with something that you're doing in the classroom, will you work with some of your friends as well? |
| DANIELLE | Yeah, they help me a lot too. Yeah. |
| SERPIL | So, what do they do? |
| DANIELLE | They usually help me work out sums or whatever question there is, and they explain it really nicely too. |
| SERPIL | They don't just give you the answer. |
| DANIELLE | Yeah, no. |
| SERPIL | That's good. So, does everyone just openly speak about it in the class? And maybe if your teacher's helping you in a way, maybe your friends get help as well. |
| DANIELLE | Well, say, if Mr Davies, he will say something, like, a thing we have to do, and then I'll ask a question, and it's kind of like helping them as well because they might want to know that question, but I say it because I wouldn't have a clue what it is. |
| SERPIL | So, they might not know the answer either... |
| DANIELLE | Yeah. |
| SERPIL | ..but because you're the brave one asking, they get the benefit. |
| DANIELLE | Yeah. |
| SERPIL | Is that right? |
| DANIELLE | Yeah. |
| SERPIL | Does that happen a lot in the classroom? |
| DANIELLE | Usually, yeah. |
| SERPIL | So, what sort of questions do you usually ask Mr Davies? |
| DANIELLE | Well, it depends what subject. Like, if I'm writing a story or narrative, I'll ask him different ways to write it. If it's maths, usually just, like, how to, like, work it out. |
| SERPIL | When making adjustments, Mandy Nayton from Auspeld recommends getting an understanding of the underlying challenges for the student, before putting any changes in place. |
| MANDY NAYTON | So, it's important to think about the functional impact that dyslexia is having on that student. Is their dyslexia resulting in them reading very slowly? In which case, do we need to look at a way that we can give them access to the written material at a quicker rate, so that when they're listening to that material through electronic versions of the text, they get access to it more quickly? Is it that their difficulty is particularly with accuracy so they misread a lot that's on the page? And for those students, does that mean that we need to look at more opportunities for ways of accessing that text in a different way? Some students just simply need, as I say, more time, and for those students, perhaps, their individual response may be simply, when it comes to things like exams and those things, that they need to be given more time to read the questions. |
| SERPIL | And often these adjustments can be made available to the whole class, promoting an environment of inclusion. |
| MANDY NAYTON | I think providing ways of accessing material, providing ways of demonstrating knowledge and understanding across a whole class with choice for everyone in the class means that those students aren't singled out in some way. That, then, reduces the anxiety or potential for issues around self-esteem. I think, one of the things that we've noticed in terms of self-esteem is that some students with dyslexia have issues with self-esteem, but other students don't. |
| MICHAEL DAVIES | Definitely. I do think that. I've seen some kids, just their self-esteem, their confidence, grow massively this year, and I often sit there and go, "Man, imagine if they had done this in prep or Grade 1 or Grade 2, even." It's been amazing. We had some kids go off and do a week-long intense program somewhere a few years ago, and they came back, these two boys, they came back different kids, just totally different kids, and their teacher saw it in their work. They were willing to write, they were willing to attempt reading tasks and do tasks, whereas prior to that, they didn't want to do any of that. |
| SERPIL | For some students, dyslexia is just a part of life. That's why it's important to arm them with tools that will assist them throughout their education and onward into their adult lives. |
| LYNNE IVICEVIC | Generally, it's lifelong. I would like to say that there's some miracle cure, but there isn't, but the younger you can catch them, the impact will be minimised. But we must give them the tools. So, my vision when they come in Year 7 isn't about today. It's about their life when they're gone from here. |
| SERPIL | Can you give me an example of one of those success stories? |
| LYNNE IVICEVIC | Well, I have quite a few students with dyslexia, and I had a girl who had dyslexia and she went on to do nursing and now she's actually doing a PhD herself, so that was really nice. But many success stories of just getting into uni. So, they either got into university on their own score or alternate entry. Someone from, I think, three years ago went to one of the universities, did the bridging course and she said that was very difficult, but now she's in her third year of Early Childhood Teaching. |
| SERPIL | So, Danielle, as a student who has dyslexia, what would your advice be to teachers in the classroom to help students such as yourself? |
| DANIELLE | Like, I think you should say in different ways the questions or whatever is on the board and the subject that you're doing, say it in different ways. |
| SERPIL | So, if it doesn't make sense the first time? |
| DANIELLE | Yeah. Usually, you can say it again and you might get it, or just say it in a different way, but, like, saying the same thing. |
| SERPIL | This podcast is part of a series that highlights adjustments that can be made in the classroom to enable students with disability to access and participate in education on the same basis as their peers. You can find all episodes on the NCCD portal. I'm Serpil Senelmis. Thanks for listening. |
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