



Understanding Dyslexia, a Specific Learning Disability

Have you ever been in a world where you see everything upside down?
Where everything you think you see is not really how it seems?

Well, in my secret life, this is how I see it every day...like when you're in school...What do you do when you need help?

Well you,
You probably call for help on the outside
Like raising your hand
But me

Hiding my secret from everyone
But yet teachers still come and help me
It's like they can see it in my eyes that I have dyslexia
Me trying to be independent is hard
Know that if I see a 6 that 6 could be a 9
And with the numbers moving upside down
And the letters moving all around
There's nothing I can do but just watch the letters and numbers play with my mind
I feel like I'm on a merry go 'round and they have me spinning to the point where I want to get off
But sadly, there is no ending to this ride
I was embarrassed, ashamed-
Trying to keep my hide in the game
Asking god...why did you choose me, why me?

Excerpt from "My Secret Life" By Gloria Clark (1)

Specific learning disabilities (SLD) represent a diverse group of neurological conditions that impact an individual's ability to acquire, process, store, or communicate information effectively. These disabilities are not attributed to intellectual disabilities, environmental factors, or lack of educational opportunities. Rather, they are neurobiological in nature and affect various cognitive processes. There are three specific types of Specific Learning Disability: Dyslexia, which involves difficulties in reading, spelling, and decoding; Dysgraphia, which affects writing abilities, leading to difficulties in handwriting, spelling, and expressing thoughts coherently on

paper; and Dyscalculia which pertains to challenges in understanding and manipulating numerical concepts. Additionally, there are SLDs related to specific aspects of language, such as expressive or receptive language disorders, impacting verbal communication skills. Dyslexia is the most prevalent SLD diagnosed in school aged-children, and therefore, it will be the main focus of this discussion.

Dyslexia is a specific learning disability characterized by persistent difficulties in accurate and fluent word recognition, spelling, and decoding, despite adequate intelligence and educational opportunities. An estimated five to 15% of school-age children struggle with a learning disability. An estimated 80% of those with learning disorders have an impairment in reading. (2) Dyslexia is a term that refers to difficulty in acquiring and processing language that is typically manifested by the lack of proficiency in reading, spelling and writing. People with dyslexia often struggle with phonological processing, the ability to recognize and manipulate the sounds of spoken language. They may exhibit a difficulty connecting letters they see on a page with the sounds they make. As a result, reading can become slow and effortful, and it is not a fluent process for them. This difficulty in connecting written symbols to corresponding sounds can manifest as slow and inaccurate reading, difficulty decoding unfamiliar words, poor spelling, and challenges in understanding written text. Early identification and intervention are crucial for effective support and long term achievement. Problems in reading can begin even before learning to read. For example, children may have trouble breaking down spoken words into syllables and recognizing words that rhyme. Kindergarten-age children may not be able to recognize and write letters as well as their peers.

Children and adolescents with dyslexia often try to avoid activities involving reading when they can (reading for pleasure, reading instructions). They tend to gravitate to other mediums such as pictures, video, or audio. As a result, early on, dyslexia and other specific learning disorders can be mistaken as an inability to focus or an unwillingness to complete work. For instance, a child struggling with reading may try to avoid a task involving reading aloud to the class by asking to use the bathroom. Or, a student who is struggling to decode may look out the window to take a break from difficult work, and it may be perceived as inattention. Some children have concomitant disorders and may also have an attentional difficulty, such as ADHD, while other children present as task avoidant or inattentive merely as an outgrowth of an untreated learning disability. A full and comprehensive educational evaluation will tease out the nuances and shed light onto the appropriate instructional approaches to address the specific areas of need. For students with dyslexia, these often include structured phonics instruction and multisensory teaching techniques that are tailored to the individual's needs.

Under federal law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), students with learning disorders are eligible for special education services. The law requires that if a child is suspected of having a specific learning disability, the public school district must provide an

evaluation. Those found to have specific learning disorders are eligible for special education services through the public school system. A team, including school personnel and parents, will develop an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for the student. The federal law requires that a free appropriate public education (FAPE) be offered to all students, including those requiring special education. In a private school setting, if the parents, teachers, and administrators determine that the students' learning needs can be met within the private school setting, a school-based plan for accommodation can be implemented. Private schools are not required to follow the IEP provided by the public school system. However, the private school team can use that document to determine accommodations and modifications that can be met within the private school environment. For instance, students with a specific learning disorder often benefit from accommodations, such as additional time on tests and written assignments, using computers for typing rather than writing by hand, and smaller class size. Successful interventions, strategies and accommodations for a child may change over time as the child develops and academic expectations change.

Specific learning disabilities encompass a range of neurodevelopmental conditions affecting various cognitive processes. The most prevalent SLD is Dyslexia, affecting one in five people and representing 80–90 percent of all learning disabilities (3). Understanding the neurological basis, early identification, and targeted interventions are essential for empowering individuals with specific learning disabilities to navigate academic challenges, capitalize on areas of strength and unlock their full potential.

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References

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