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CHAPTER 3

Dyslexia, family and the school

Introduction

Imagine how a parent feels if, despite doing all the right things—such as reading books to them every night and buying them lots of children’s books—their child struggles to learn to read when they start school? It comes as a total surprise in that there is no apparent reason why this should happen. The child seems normal in every respect, they have a wide vocabulary, they have a really good understanding of things explained to them or read to them, and yet they find it hard to get into reading and writing. As time goes on at school the young reader starts to lose confidence and thinks they never will learn to read and write. They may get grumpy, not want to go to school, and avoid reading and writing altogether. This is often the profile of a student with dyslexia. In this chapter we start to look at how parents and teachers can approach this problem. Detailed discussion and advice about specific interventions are provided in Part Four.

Are schools able to deal with dyslexia?

If a child fits the profile of dyslexia, we recommend that their parents talk with the school about it, and if possible see an educational psychologist to get an opinion. If parents are unable to afford an assessment like this, then choosing the right school will be really important. Parents should find out as much as they can about the school. Does it recognise dyslexia? Are there teachers at the school with specialist training, or with a particular interest in dyslexia or reading difficulties? How does the school keep parents informed of the help that is offered? What type of training have they had? Does the school operate a pull-out programme (i.e. students pulled out of their normal classroom for specialist tuition), or is the additional help classroom based? Are extra-curricular activities offered? In other words, what systems are in place to help students with dyslexia?

It may be that the school doesn't have systems in place, and this is understandable in that schools have only recently become aware of the nature of dyslexia. Dyslexia is officially recognised by the New Zealand Government, and the Ministry of Education have a working definition (see Chapter 1) and have published a brochure on dyslexia, *About Dyslexia*, which is easily downloadable from the internet,¹ but many schools may still not be totally up to speed with dyslexia.

We base this claim on the results of a survey we emailed to school staff in December 2011 and December 2012 to gauge their understanding of dyslexia and how they assist this group of students. We sent the survey to more than 500 schools in the Waikato and Auckland areas and received responses from 42 schools in the first survey and 26 in the second survey. The responses were from a range of school staff—from teacher aides, to teachers, to school leaders, including principals. The survey only tapped into a small number of schools, but given that there is very little information from schools in the literature, we thought it worth sharing the results. (We do understand that schools must receive many survey requests: one principal wrote, “I didn't respond to your survey. I receive so many surveys that I simply can't respond to them all”.)

Table 3.1: School survey on dyslexia

Survey question	Percentage responding yes	
	2011	2012
Do you have students with dyslexia in your school?	98	96
Can your school identify students with dyslexia?	64	65
Do you have procedures to deal with dyslexia?	62	54
Is your school equipped to teach students with dyslexia?	40	12

¹ literacyonline.tki.org.nz/content/download/15836/.../About+Dyslexia.pdf

Our interpretation is that the results were fairly similar for 2011 and 2012, except for the question about being equipped to teach students with dyslexia: in the 2012 survey 12 percent of respondents felt they were equipped to do this, whereas in 2011, 40 percent felt they were equipped. The *overall* results for the two surveys were that 97 percent of the respondents said their school had students with dyslexia, 64 percent said they could identify such students, 59 percent said their school had procedures to deal with dyslexia, and 29 percent felt equipped to deal with dyslexia. It was interesting that nearly all respondents said their schools had students with dyslexia and that most of the respondents felt they could identify them and had procedures to help them, but the result of most interest to us was that less than one in three respondents felt equipped to deal with dyslexia. The results of this small survey suggest to us that staff in schools are still a long way from feeling comfortable about their ability to help students with dyslexia.

Dyslexia and stress at school

Stress factors in the classroom

While there is a fun factor associated with school (e.g., playing or hanging out with friends, school trips), we also know that school is associated with stress (Thomson, 2004). Many high school students become stressed when they sit tests, when assignment deadlines are near, when preparing and presenting speeches, and when NCEA exams are looming. Students from the age of 5 can also experience school-associated stress. Stress is simply a part of life. However, school-related stress is exacerbated when students experience reading and writing difficulties, or if a student is dyslexic. One reason for dyslexia-related stress at school is that it takes a student with dyslexia longer to process and produce text.

Stress is part of everyday life, but it becomes threatening when it is “pervasive and invasive, when it affects too many areas of our lives and when we have neither the strategies nor the energy to cope with it” (Thomson, 2004, p. 3). If each day at school you encounter reading material you should be able to read yet are unable to, or you are required to write answers, stories, or articles and you struggle to spell, it is likely that stress levels will increase and become “pervasive and invasive”. Even if a student with dyslexia can decode the text, they do so without fluency. When decoding and encoding are required, dyslexic students are always behind. Dyslexia simply robs people of time. There is a fine line between stress that inhibits or debilitates, and stress that enables individuals to achieve: “If stress levels become intolerably high, many dyslexic children develop their own inappropriate strategies, becoming disruptive, aggressive, withdrawn or school phobic” (Thomson, 2004, p. 4).

Personal experiences of dyslexia: Henry Winkler

The American actor Henry Winkler (the Fonz from the 1974–1984 television series *Happy Days*) knows about school and stress. He experienced considerable challenges at school due to dyslexia. Winkler has shared some of his not-so-positive school experiences with writer Lin Oliver, and together they have co-authored a series of children's books based on an 'underachieving' boy, Hank Zipzer. The 17 books have become a *New York Times* best-selling series.

The series stars a child who has learning disabilities (or dyslexia) yet is "really smart and fun".^a Winkler and Oliver wanted to "speak to kids and to let them know that inside each one of them they have a special and unique contribution to make". As Winkler put it, "No matter what obstacle might be in your way there is a way around it. There is a way to beat the obstacle and continue to your dream."^b

The titles in the Hank Zipzer series by Henry Winkler and Lin Oliver include:

- *Help! Somebody Get Me Out of Fourth Grade*
- *Summer School!*
- *What Genius Thought Up That? The Night I Flunked My Field Trip*
- *I Got a "D" in Salami*
- *Niagara Falls, or Does It?*

Many plots in these stories link directly to negative school experiences, such as *I Got a "D" in Salami* and *Niagara Falls, or Does It?* Both of these books demonstrate that school was not stress-free for the main character, Hank, which draws on Winkler's own school experiences. Hank is bright, intelligent and enjoys having fun. One thing Hank does dread is school. Is this a typical characteristic of children with dyslexia?

The following is from the book description for *I Got a "D" in Salami* (Winkler & Oliver, 2003a):

It's report card day—the most dreaded day in Hank's school year. And when Hank gets his grades, they're his worst nightmare come true: a D in spelling, a D in reading, a D in math. After school, Hank and his friends go to his mom's deli. His mom is on the prowl—she knows a report card day when she sees one. Hank tries to stall her, but she's going for his backpack. He's cornered. Hank hands the report card off to his friend Frankie, who gives it to his friend Ashley, who gives it to Robert, who puts it into a meat grinder! Hank watches as his Ds are ground into a big salami, and this particular salami is being made for a very important client. How will Hank get out of this one?

Here is the book description for *Niagara Falls, or Does It?* (Winkler & Oliver, 2003b):

For Hank, fourth grade [Year 5] does not start out on the right foot. First of all, he gets called to the principal's office on the very first day of school. Then the first assignment his teacher gives him is to write five paragraphs on "What You Did This Summer". Hank is terrified—writing one good sentence is hard for him, so how in the world is he going to write five whole paragraphs? Hank comes up with a plan: instead of writing what he did on vacation, he'll show what he did. But when Hank's "living essay" becomes a living disaster, he finds himself in detention. Strangely enough, however, detention ends up becoming a turning point in his life.^c

^a <http://www.hankzipzer.com/video.html>.

^b <http://www.hankzipzer.com/video.html>.

^c Both quotations are from <http://www.hankzipzer.com/books.html>

Eissa (2010) assessed 56 12–18-year-olds, who were divided into two groups: poor readers ($n=35$) and typical readers ($n=21$). There was no significant difference in chronological age, IQ or socioeconomic status between the two groups. Eissa found that most of the poor readers were male, and that dyslexia “caused them to feel different” (p. 19). Dyslexia had a negative impact, either “quite a lot” or “very much” on their self-esteem. Most of the poor readers felt their difficulties with reading and writing had had a negative impact on their relationships with their peers. Some had been bullied or teased. Two comments reported in the study were, “The best moments in school were the breaks” and “the only thing I enjoyed was playing with my classmates” (p. 19). Students also reported feeling uncomfortable in school (e.g., “I felt I was the most stupid child in class”) and feeling optimistic about the future: they will be “better off” once they leave school.

Providing the kind of help and support for dyslexic students so that they do not feel embarrassed is not easy. A New Zealand interview study (Rowan, 2010) of four New Zealand university students with dyslexia asked them about their high school experiences. One participant reported that “they made me go to an English tutor” and “they treat you like a kid” (p. 75). Another student said the high school support was “embarrassing and humiliating” (p. 75). The same student felt embarrassed the way the teacher singled her out in front of her peers. The student said, “I’d be sitting in class and the teacher would go like talking about something and then just turn around and look at me and say ‘did you understand that’ in front of everyone!” (p. 76). Rowan (2010) reported that the relationships the four participants had with their friends, teachers and parents/family “played an important part in their attitude to learning and acceptance of their learning struggles” (p. 76).

Acknowledging dyslexia is the first step

The first challenge facing the teacher is to come to an opinion about dyslexia. There are stereotypes of the pupil with dyslexia that teachers need to be aware of. For example, Riddick (1996) reported an interview with a teacher in the UK who was sceptical about dyslexia (pp. 94–95):

Interviewer: Have you done any specialist training in the area of dyslexia?

Teacher: Oh God that. No, no I haven’t [pulls a face].

Interviewer: Why did you pull a face when I asked you that?

Teacher: Well ... I mean, it’s one of those things that has been conjured up by ‘pushy parents’ for their thick or lazy children: quite often both.

Interviewer: What exactly do you know about dyslexia?

Teacher: Well, basically they can’t read or write. It’s supposed to be about problems

with communication isn't it? Generally it's children who are either too lazy or haven't got the brains and their parents can't hack it.

Later in the interview:

Interviewer: If you haven't any training in the field of dyslexia do you think really that you should be making judgements about it?

Teacher: Yeah, it's a gut feeling you know, when you have been teaching as long as I have you get to know which kids have problems and which kids are pulling the wool over your eyes. (Riddick, 1996, pp. 94–95)

The interview shows that there are sceptical opinions about dyslexia, but we believe there is a category of struggling reader who fits the dyslexia profile. As we have noted, the Ministry of Education also recognises dyslexia, and this is another good reason for teachers not to dismiss it and to think about how the classroom programme could be adapted to help a student with dyslexia.

What would a dyslexia-friendly classroom look like? It would be one where the teacher feels they want to help students with dyslexia. That is a great start. The next step is to find out what dyslexia is: to have a working definition that will enable the teacher to assess and identify the pupil with dyslexia and distinguish them from other pupils who have literacy difficulties. In Chapter 1 we did this (gave a definition), and in Chapter 6 we give ideas on what to assess.

The next step is to build some teaching strategies that will help. In Chapters 7 and 8 we give some ideas for doing this in reading and spelling. A final step is to set up communication with the parents of a student with dyslexia so that they are both on the same page and working with each other. We do this in Chapter 10, where we talk in detail about how to make the classroom a dyslexia-friendly place to be. (Refer also to 'The dyslexia friendly school' in the DVD *Talking about Dyslexia*, which comes with this book.)

Dyslexia and the home

For the classroom teacher it is really important to make a connection with the home so that the teacher and the student's parents are working together—are on the same page. In the DVD that goes with this book there is an interview with William's mother (William is one of the case studies; see 'William's story'). William's mother was reluctant to contact the school about his lack of reading and spelling progress because she did not want to "be a middle-class parent breathing down the teacher's neck." The teacher can break down this reluctance by getting in touch with the home.

Establishing good relationships between the child, parents/care-givers and the school is important for all children, but especially for children with dyslexia. Establishing positive relationships involves considerable knowledge and understanding, at many levels. What knowledge and understanding are needed? Both teachers/schools and parents need to have:

- an understanding of dyslexia
- an understanding of the impact of dyslexia on the child's learning (reading/spelling)
- an understanding of the impact of dyslexia on the child's self-esteem and feelings of self-worth
- the ability to communicate with the child
- the ability to communicate with each other.

The pupil with dyslexia will benefit if they have:

- an understanding of dyslexia
- an understanding of how dyslexia affects reading and spelling skills.

The number one goal for parents and teachers is to preserve the child's self-esteem (Shaywitz, 2003). Students with dyslexia are typically bright children, and it comes as a surprise—and often a shock—that they have reading and writing difficulties. Students with dyslexia struggle with reading and writing, and as a result do not usually get their school work completed. This makes it seem as if they are not working hard enough and that they need to do more, when in fact they are really working hard but their reading and writing difficulties are like major traffic bottlenecks that stop them from doing what their classmates can do. If we keep thinking they are not working hard enough and keep giving that kind of feedback, then they will start to doubt that they can succeed (Shaywitz, 2003).

Shaywitz (2003, p. 309) talks about the “extraordinary perseverance” the student with dyslexia must put into their reading and writing, and we can acknowledge this by supporting them, praising them and giving them more time. Shaywitz notes that “all dyslexics who have become successful by any account share in common the unfailing love and support of their parent(s), or occasionally, a teacher or a spouse” (p. 309).

Conclusion

In this chapter we have discussed dyslexia in relation to the classroom and the parents, and have indicated the importance of positive and effective connections among teachers, pupils, their parents, and the school. Schools and teachers may not feel fully equipped to deal with dyslexia, and this is probably because it has only recently become officially

recognised. Dyslexia, when it occurs, takes us by surprise. It usually happens to students who seem to have everything going for them, and if we lived in a society that did not have reading and writing they would seem normal in every way. The key to giving them the best possible help is for teachers, parents and the pupils themselves to work together in a positive and supportive way.