

We should not get rid of the term dyslexia

Linda Siegel



The proposed solution of getting rid of the term dyslexia is like using a machete to slice a lemon. The problem is not the word dyslexia. Reading and other learning disabilities are a serious problem for society. Dyslexia and other learning disabilities are not being properly recognised and treated in our educational system. These learning disabilities cost society a great deal, not just in money but in social and emotional problems. Antisocial behaviour (as in prison populations and juvenile detention centres), homelessness, drug addiction, suicide and emotional difficulties are often a result of dyslexia and other learning disabilities that have not been properly identified and/or treated. These social, emotional, and educational costs can be significantly reduced if we identify and treat the problem of reading difficulty.

We do not differentiate between dyslexia and a reading disability. They are one and the same and involve difficulties with reading. Whatever you call it, difficulties with reading are a problem for our society. However, abandoning the term dyslexia will not solve the serious challenges that the field faces.

- 1 Dyslexia (reading disability) is defined as a severe difficulty with accuracy and/or fluency or reading words and/or pseudowords. There may also be difficulties with spelling, writing, and reading comprehension. Note that I did NOT include spelling in the definition, as there are many individuals who are good readers and poor spellers. If we advocate for this definition, then it will remove much of the definitional chaos. Of course, it does not deal with the continuum and cut-off issue but at least it is a step forward.
- 2 The discrepancy definition, that is, using a large difference between IQ scores and reading achievement as a definition of dyslexia, should be abandoned. We have ample evidence that individuals with reading problems and high IQ scores (the discrepancy definition) do not differ from individuals with reading difficulties whose IQ scores are not significantly higher than their reading scores. In addition, IQ scores do not predict the ability to benefit from remediation. This issue is a real one; many jurisdictions still use the discrepancy definition and require an IQ test, which is unnecessary.
- 3 Considering the definition of dyslexia, all that is strictly necessary are measures of accuracy and fluency of word and pseudoword reading. Measures of reading comprehension, spelling, arithmetic calculation and mathematical problem solving may be helpful. Measures of cognitive processes do not contribute to the definition and are not necessary for appropriate interventions.



- 4 There is an undemocratic and inequitable distribution of resources in regard to individuals experiencing reading problems. Extensive psychological testing is expensive and not affordable for many families. Yet individuals are denied access to interventions and accommodations without this testing. Appropriate assessments should be used as described in #3. Many public schools do not provide appropriate resources for children with reading difficulties. Parents who can afford it send their children with reading difficulties to private – usually expensive – schools.
- 5 Classroom instruction in reading is often woefully inadequate. Teachers need to be trained in appropriate interventions, including but not limited to, phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, syntactic, morphological and orthographic awareness.
- 6 Assessments to identify children at risk for reading problems need to be instituted. Measures of phonological awareness and letter naming are essential.
- 7 Intervention for reading difficulties is too little and too late. Children at risk for reading difficulties are not identified at a young age and are not provided with interventions that

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would reduce the likelihood of later reading difficulties. In fact, students with reading difficulties at any level are not properly identified. Adults with reading problems cannot get assessments of, and interventions for, their difficulties because of the costs and the lack of availability.

- 8 An RTI model should be widely used. The essential components of this model are frequent monitoring of progress and intervention provided as soon as it is necessary.

Merely getting rid of the term dyslexia without addressing these problems will not solve the serious issues that society faces in regard to individuals with reading problems.

Why keep the term dyslexia? It is familiar and comforting to people. That is not a reason in itself but it is a consideration. From my point of view, it is important to deal with the basic issues that I have outlined above without arguing about the term dyslexia or trying to invent some other term.

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