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Effective Instruction for Students With Dyslexia and Related Learning Struggles

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Effective Instruction for Students With Dyslexia and Related Learning Struggles

Abstract

Dyslexia has received increased emphasis with recent legislation requiring universal screening, added dyslexia training in educator preparation programs, and professional development specifically addressing dyslexia. In addition, KY created the Dyslexia Toolkit to inform and support teachers. This article discusses how Structured Literacy and High-Leverage Practices can support learning for students with dyslexia and related reading struggles.

Keywords

Dyslexia, struggling readers, Structured Literacy, High-Leverage Practices, Dyslexia Toolkit, Non-Traditional Instruction

Instruction for Students With Dyslexia

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Kentucky recently joined numerous states in supporting students with dyslexia through The Ready to Read Act (KY House Bill 187, 2018). This legislation is designed to better prepare teachers to meet the instructional needs of students with dyslexia through professional development, increased emphasis in educator preparation programs, along with systematic screening and increased intervention for K–3 students with dyslexia and other types of learning disabilities. Additionally, the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) created the Dyslexia Toolkit (2019) to provide teachers with increased knowledge, effective teaching strategies, and a defined process to identify the educational needs of struggling readers. This article highlights the instructional approaches found most effective for students with dyslexia and related reading struggles.

What is Dyslexia?

Dyslexia is classified as a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin (International Dyslexia Association, 2017). It affects students' ability to decode and spell, resulting in struggles with accurate and fluent word recognition. It is a language-based disability stemming from a phonological deficit that is unexpected based on the individual's cognitive ability (International Dyslexia Association, 2015). Because dyslexia is a specific learning disability, this diagnosis is given to students of at least average intelligence and often is found in individuals possessing exceptional strengths (e.g., Albert Einstein, Tom Cruise, Charles Schwab). Dyslexia is a lifelong disability, but through effective, language-based instruction many of the symptoms can be diminished (Shaywitz, 2003). This is important because dyslexia and similar reading struggles are very common, affecting nearly 20% of the population

Instruction for Students With Dyslexia

(Shaywitz, 2003). This means that approximately 1 in 5 students are affected, so for a classroom of 30 this equates to six students.

Brain imaging confirms that dyslexia is neurobiological in origin. Individuals with dyslexia show less brain activity in the temporoparietal and occipitotemporal regions when reading and completing rhyming tasks compared to their neurotypical peers (Kearns, Hancock, Hoeft, Pugh, & Frost, 2018). The good news is that effective instruction results in “rewiring” where brain activation patterns actually change. Therefore, it is critical teachers understand how to effectively implement proven, evidence-based practices designed specifically for students with dyslexia.

Instruction Proven Effective for Students With Dyslexia

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (Pub. L. 94-142), along with the subsequent passage of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2006), mandates the need for specially designed instruction for students with learning disabilities. More specific to students with reading disabilities, research clearly supports the need for intensive, explicit instruction especially in the areas of phonemic awareness and phonics (Coyne & Koriakin, 2017). The International Dyslexia Association, through decades of research, further defined effective instruction specific to students with dyslexia to include explicit, systematic, cumulative, structured, and multisensory. Instruction should be language-based and include cognitive explanations that incrementally break down the structure of language (Sayeski, Earle, Davis, & Calamari, 2018).

Including all these components into literacy instruction can be challenging. This is true not only for new teachers, but may be especially challenging for more veteran teachers because it requires instructional strategies that may not have been taught in their teacher training programs.

Instruction for Students With Dyslexia

This is why providing training not only at the preservice level, but also at the in-service level is critical. In particular, training should focus on the explicit delivery of phonics instruction. Phonics is one of the five key literacy areas (i.e., phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) deemed critical by the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). In their meta-analysis, several different systematic delivery methods for phonics (i.e., synthetic phonics at the phoneme-grapheme level, onset-rime approach, and analogy phonics using word families) were all determined effective. However, more recent research suggests better literacy outcomes for struggling readers when phonics instruction is explicitly focused at the most basic phoneme-grapheme relationship level rather than larger-unit phonics instruction such as chunking or word families (Foorman et al., 2016). After mastering the sound-symbol relationships, instruction should move into the common orthographic patterns (e.g., oa, ar, igh) followed by explicit instruction in morphology (i.e., the word parts carrying meaning including prefix, roots, and suffixes). Now with the adoption of high-leverage practices (HLPs, McLesky et al., 2017), specially designed instruction emphasizing these components can best be delivered through intensive, explicit instruction incorporating the use of HLPs (Riccomini, Morano, & Hughes, 2019).

The development of HLPs, the 22 skills all beginning teachers should know and be able to demonstrate, provides educator preparation programs with the foundation for developing prepared teacher candidates. The HLPs fall into four categories including (a) collaboration, (b) assessment, (c) social/emotional/behavioral, and (d) instruction (McLesky et al., 2017). In particular, the areas of assessment and instruction are particularly beneficial for students with dyslexia and clearly support the teaching practices recommended by the International Dyslexia

Instruction for Students With Dyslexia

Association by incorporating scaffolded supports, explicit instruction, strategies to support active student engagement, and intensive instruction.

Structured Literacy Incorporates HLPs

Structured Literacy incorporates all the components previously mentioned and is the most effective teaching method for students with dyslexia and others experiencing unusual difficulty with print (Moats, 2017). This instruction is effective because it focuses on the language processing weaknesses students with dyslexia experience including phonological skills, decoding, and spelling (Spear-Swerling, 2018). It systematically addresses language instruction at all levels including phonology, letter-sound relationships, syllable instruction, morphology, syntax, and semantics (IDA, 2017). Structured literacy explicitly teaches these concepts through modeling and guided practice (HLP 16). Positive and formative feedback (HLP 8 & 22) is provided with each step and instruction is systematic and cumulative based on the learners' needs (HLP 12). Instruction follows a well-defined scope and sequence with the level of difficulty increasing as students learn progressive and related skills. Skills are taught until mastery (i.e., automaticity) is reached requiring continual student assessment using the students' academic performance to drive decision-making (International Dyslexia Association, 2015).

In addition to instruction, the assessment component of HLPs is critical in effectively delivering Structured Literacy, or any effective instruction. In particular, using student assessment data, analyzing instructional practices, and making the necessary adjustments that improve students' outcomes (HLP 6) is the foundation of effective delivery of instruction. This is paramount because the achievement gap cannot be narrowed unless effective and efficient instruction is provided that allows students with disabilities to gain more growth than their

Instruction for Students With Dyslexia

neurotypical peers. This is especially important for students with dyslexia and related reading struggles because reading is such a critical skill for success in school and adult life.

Supporting Students With Dyslexia Through On-line Learning

Narrowing the achievement gap for students with dyslexia and related reading struggles is a constant challenge for teachers. Even with effective incorporation of HLPs through strong assessment practices and structured literacy, teachers often find it difficult to remediate deficit areas while also providing the necessary accommodations and supports to ensure adequate progress in content areas. With the recent switch from face-to-face instruction to online learning through Non-Traditional Instruction (NTI), the challenge to support learners with disabilities has intensified. Effective instruction necessitates teachers quickly move these HLPs online.

The KDE requires students with disabilities be provided with Individual Education Plan (IEP) services and Response-to-Intervention (RTI) continues despite many students learning through NTI at home. Teachers must use and design tools and instruction that are effective and can be used by all students, especially students with disabilities. Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act (1998) requires federal agencies to ensure all technology is accessible to individuals with disabilities. However, the primary obstacle in online learning, especially for students with disabilities, is not being able to use technology; barriers to accessibility must be considered with digital learning (Hashey and Stahl, 2014). The Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities (2014) found that a vast majority of online learning contains content that is not appropriate for students with disabilities. Students with reading struggles often experience this due to difficulty with the text level.

One possible solution in supporting students with dyslexia and other reading struggles with online access is the use of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), incorporating multiple

Instruction for Students With Dyslexia

means of engagement, representation, and action and expression. Universal Design for learning incorporates the goals of the curriculum along with the learner and the learning environment (Smith and Basham, 2014). Therefore, teachers can use UDL to determine the accessibility and effectiveness of online curriculum and tools for all students. Incorporating multiple means of representation (e.g., text, audio, visual) allows students with various levels of abilities and disabilities to access the curriculum and demonstrates their understanding (Hashey and Stahl, 2014). Providing content, online especially, in multiple means, is crucial for students with dyslexia because they need to be able to process and understand the content. Incorporating HLPs into UDL can further improve online learning. Considering assessment, online learning has the potential for more immediate access to student data allowing teachers to customize instruction to meet individual learning needs (Hashey and Stahl, 2014). By adjusting and designing instruction to the individual needs of each student, students with dyslexia are provided a greater opportunity for learning.

Conclusion

Maximizing learning for students with dyslexia and other reading struggles requires strong knowledge of proven, specially designed instructional practices specifically targeting these students' learning needs. It is now a State mandate, requiring educator preparation programs and professional development to place greater emphasis on dyslexia. It is through this more systematic early detection and intensive, targeted instruction that students with dyslexia will finally achieve reading and language-based competencies that mirror their true capabilities. Incorporating HLPs within this instruction further promotes learning. This is especially critical in today's educational environment that necessitates the incorporation of online learning.

Instruction for Students With Dyslexia

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