

# Literacy difficulties – the Driver Youth Trust position

## Introduction and background

**The Driver Youth Trust (DYT) is a charity which aims to improve the outcomes of young people who struggle with literacy. The Trust was established in 2007 by Sarah and Mark Driver after systemic failures in the education system led to difficulties for their children, 3 of whom are dyslexic. This position paper begins by defining literacy and literacy difficulties. It then looks at the impact of low literacy skills, focussing on learners between the ages of 5 and 16, and critiques how the education system is supporting learners with literacy difficulties.**

## Key points

### Definition of literacy and literacy difficulties

- The National Literacy Trust (2017) defines literacy as ‘the ability to read, write, speak and listen in a way that lets us communicate effectively and make sense of the world’.
- A number of young people experience literacy difficulties, finding the skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking difficult. This difficulty is not necessarily related to intellectual ability, but it does make life more challenging and often impacts on lifetime opportunities and success.
- There is much debate around the causes of literacy difficulties, particularly with regard to specific disorders. There is, however, agreement that some learners have difficulty achieving the automaticity and proficiency required to be literate.
- Literacy difficulties do not simply involve accessing English but rather the whole curriculum, increasing the impact on life chances.
- When literacy difficulties are recorded as a special educational need (SEN), they most frequently fall into one of two categories: a Specific Learning Difficulty (SpLD) or a Speech, Language and Communication Need (SLCN).
- SpLDs affect one or more specific aspects of learning. This encompasses a range of conditions such as dyslexia, dyscalculia and dyspraxia. Sir Jim Rose argues that dyslexia is an effective term for describing the most stringent difficulties with literacy. His 2009 review highlighted some of the main features of dyslexia, including: difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed. Other difficulties, while not markers of dyslexia, often occur alongside it. Some of these are difficulties with aspects of language, motor co-ordination, mental calculation, concentration and personal organisation. Forty-nine per cent of all classes have at least one pupil with a diagnosis of dyslexia.
- There is an ongoing debate over the definition of dyslexia, its scientific basis and the rigour of diagnostic procedures. Some academics have claimed that the use of the term leads to less teacher efficacy to address the problems faced by their pupils. However, DYT considers that the term is useful for identifying learners with significant and persistent difficulties in reading and spelling and for ensuring that required support and access arrangements are in place.
- Research commissioned by DYT in 2018 found that 49 per cent of all classes have at least one student with dyslexia and The British Dyslexia Association (BDA) claim that 10 per cent of people in the UK are dyslexic.
- The Bercow *10 years on* report (2018) states that 1.4 million children and young people have long-term Speech, Language and Communication (SLCN) needs. SLCN is an umbrella term that relates to a wide range of difficulties. These may relate to a specific condition, such as Developmental Language Disorder which affects the way learners understand and express language. Other children may experience difficulties due to other developmental reasons. Early identification and support of those with SLCN has been shown to be highly effective in overcoming existing difficulties and preventing problems from becoming more intractable.
- Although it is difficult to determine the precise number of children with literacy difficulties, there are some significant headline statistics, mostly from DfE reports.
- Five per cent of learners in mainstream education have a diagnosed SEN that will significantly impact their literacy skills. Twelve per cent of children leave primary school unable to read at a secondary standard. Twenty-one per cent of children identified as having SEN are categorised as having SpLD. Eighteen per cent of learners do not meet the expected standard in the phonics screening check at the end of Key Stage 1.
- When schools report their number of pupils with SEN to the DfE they are asked to record the primary need. If the need is not a literacy one, this means that literacy difficulties may go unreported. Furthermore, the recording system relies on the timely and accurate identification of SEN which might include a range of assessments, or none. Sometimes, learners who have a literacy difficulty are not categorised as SEN at all.

### The impact of literacy difficulties on life chances

- Research shows that there is a significant overlap between disadvantage and literacy difficulties. 17 per cent of learners with SpLD and 24 per cent of learners with SLCN are eligible for free school meals.

- There is also a significant body of evidence suggesting that literacy can be delayed due to family circumstances and background, especially due to the “word gap,” where pupils enter primary school with a vocabulary far below age-related expectation. The DfE pointed out that vocabulary at age five is a key predictor of whether a child from a disadvantaged background is likely to ‘buck the trend’, succeed at school and become socially mobile in later life.
- The Sutton Trust found that vocabulary development lags behind other cognitive developments and suggest that beginning to address this at age five might already be too late.
- Low literacy is associated with lower earnings and employment rates, particularly for women. The national Literacy Trust estimates that failure to master basic literacy skills costs the economy £2.5 billion each year.
- A 2013 report by the charity Beanstalk found that 56 per cent of the adult working population (56%) in England are reported as having literacy skills below GCSE grade C.
- National tests at all levels of the education system reveal that learners with literacy difficulties fail to attain the expected standards, or standards close to their peers.
- Lack of access to the curriculum because of low literacy skills can often lead to poor behaviour and truancy. The National Literacy Trust claims that 9 per cent of very poor readers are persistent truants compared to 2 per cent of those who are average or above average readers.
- An Education Select Committee report stated that a third of young people in Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) and Alternative Provision (AP) have SEN. According to the Prison reform Trust, 54 per cent of people entering prison are assessed as having the literacy skills expected of an 11-year-old.

#### **How the education system is failing learners with literacy difficulties**

- There are clear indications that literacy difficulties are not sufficiently addressed within initial teacher education (ITT). The Carter Review of Initial Teacher Training (2015) identified SEND as an area of weakness. DYT analysis of the 354 inspections of ITT providers over the past 10-years found that 1 in 7 do not mention SEN at all. The 2018 DfE survey of newly qualified teachers (NQTs) found that ‘teaching reading and comprehension in secondary schools’ and ‘assessing the progress of SEN pupils’ were the two areas where NQTs felt least prepared from their training
- The problem persists after training. According to a recent DfE report, 1 in 4 teachers do not believe that there is appropriate training in place for teachers to support SEN pupils (DfE, 2019). Despite significant investment in improving the teaching of literacy and the relative success this has brought to outcomes, especially in phonics, few if any of these programmes focus on children who have literacy difficulties. Without effective training, either at ITT or CPD level, teachers are being set up to fail.
- As DYT have pointed out in a previous report, there is a lack of sufficiently nuanced debate about learners with literacy difficulties to enable proper examination of systemic failings to improve the progress and attainment of these young people. The lack of regulatory power in this area is an example of how even when issues are identified, there is a lack of decisive action which holds schools to account.
- The government has introduced pupil premium awards to encourage schools to use pupil premium funding carefully, meaning that as well as the ‘stick’ of accountability, there is a ‘carrot’ to encourage and support schools with their spending. There is no equivalent system for literacy

difficulties.

- Reforms to curricula and exams, which include a greater emphasis on spelling, punctuation and grammar involving extended writing, as well as changes to exam content have put candidates with persistent literacy difficulties at a disadvantage. It is vital that learners with literacy difficulties are able to access the curriculum and that the door to a more rigorous education and curriculum remains open to them. It is the role of accountability to ensure this accessibility is enforced.
- There are three areas in which a lack of resources is failing learners with literacy difficulties: identification, specialist support and a lack of an evidence base. Firstly, funding pressures have led to a high degree of inconsistency in identifying pupils’ literacy needs and the creation of a postcode lottery. Secondly, there is a lack of clear evidence about the best ways to support learners with literacy difficulties. Finally, pressures on education funding have led to a reduction of specialist staff. Research by DYT has found that a third of local authorities in England do not have sufficient specialist dyslexia teachers. The decline of the specialist teacher also perpetuates the lack of expertise in the system, meaning teachers have nowhere to turn to for advice on literacy difficulties.

#### **Recommendations**

- Ofsted should judge ITT providers on the quality of training delivered to trainee teachers on SEN including supporting learners with literacy difficulties.
- The DfE should ensure that all funded literacy CPD includes training on literacy difficulties.
- Teacher educators should develop National Professional Qualifications (NPQs) in SEN and literacy as part of the new plan to support teachers to develop and progress their career without needing to pursue a traditional leadership route.
- Researchers should develop a “what works” evidence base for learners with literacy difficulties and discover how many learners with literacy difficulties there are.
- School Leaders should ensure their provision enables learners with literacy difficulties to access the curriculum and that the door to a more rigorous education and curriculum is open to all.
- Teachers, across all areas of the curriculum and all school phases, should know how to adjust their teaching for learners with literacy difficulties.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.driveryouthtrust.com/literacy-difficulties-the-dyt-position/>