

Information Paper

Services for Students with Specific Learning Difficulties

Purpose

This paper outlines the services provided by the Education Department (ED) for students with specific learning difficulties.

Background

2. Specific learning difficulties (SLD or Dyslexia) generally refer to difficulties in reading and writing. In the past two decades, it has been a controversial subject and hotly debated, as researchers have different views regarding the definition and assessment of SLD as well as the intervention strategies.

3. Owing to differences in the definition and assessment of SLD, the incidence rates of SLD may vary from less than 1% to about 10% in different countries. In some countries, children who have marked difficulties in reading and writing are defined as having SLD, irrespective of their intelligence. In other countries, SLD is an umbrella term, which encompasses "Dyslexia", specific language difficulties, specific mathematics difficulties, developmental coordination difficulties, and attention deficit, etc. ED defines SLD students to be those, notwithstanding average intelligence, sufficient learning opportunities and the absence of sensory impairment(s) and serious emotional problems, found to have significant difficulties in learning to read and write.

4. The bulk of the researches on SLD have been carried out in western countries and there are very few researches on SLD in Chinese. Since Chinese is made up of ideographs and English the alphabet, there is a difference in the cognitive skills (including visual-perceptual, orthographic and phonological skills) involved in reading the two languages. ED does not recommend the direct use of western assessment tools and norms (based on English reading and writing) for local students; and is equally cautious about the interpretation of singular test results and labelling students who have insufficient experience in learning to read and write (e.g. pre-schoolers or students newly promoted to Primary One) as having specific learning difficulties.

Early Identification of SLD

5. ED has been identifying Primary One students with SLD through the annual, territory-wide exercise viz. "Early identification of learning difficulties" in all primary schools. Every year in June, the Observation Checklist for Teachers (OCT) is sent to schools to facilitate the identification of Primary One students suspected of having significant learning difficulties (including SLD). These students are then provided with school-based assessment services. ED does not consider it advisable to advance the early identification exercise to kindergartens or Term One of Primary One because pre-schoolers vary in their maturation rate and students newly promoted to Primary One do not have sufficient experience in learning to read and write. An assessment made too early may result in many false positives, causing parents unnecessary anxiety.

6. Students at Primary Two or above levels and suspected of having

learning difficulties may be referred to ED by the school heads, teachers, student guidance officers/student guidance teachers, or parents whenever necessary. To prepare student guidance officers/student guidance teachers to advise teachers on identifying and supporting pupils with SLD, the subject of SLD is incorporated in their induction courses.

Assessment Services

7. Students suspected of having SLD and referred to ED are given a thorough professional assessment. The educational psychologists assess the students' intelligence, reading and writing abilities, and social adjustment at school and at home, in order to design appropriate intervention plans for them.

8. The Department of Health (DH) and ED have a well-established referral mechanism. The Child Assessment Centres and Student Health Service of DH refer cases to ED for follow-up services whenever necessary.

9. In the past three years, an average of 9600 students were assessed by officers of ED each year. The number of students found to have significant reading and writing difficulties is as follows:

School Year Students	95/96	96/97	97/98
Pre-school	0	4	6
Primary	87	85	138
Secondary	1	0	0
Total	88(9,410)	89(10,217)	144(9,407)

* The number in bracket refers to the total number of students assessed by Psychological Services of ED.

Education Services

10. The educational psychologists provide follow up support for each student assessed to have SLD and consult with the parents and teachers in helping the student. They visit schools to observe the student during lessons and discuss concrete intervention plans with teachers whenever necessary.

11. In addition to individual follow-up, parents and students are supported by short-term learning support groups. These groups emphasize parental involvement and introduce remedial strategies such as the multi- sensory approach and paired reading etc. In 1997/98, 82 students and their parents attended these groups. In the 1998/99 school year, ED will be organising seminars on Saturday afternoons to facilitate parental participation.

12. ED is also providing a range of intensive remedial services for students with learning difficulties (including those with specific learning difficulties). These include resource classes in primary schools, resource teaching centres, peripatetic teaching service and school-based remedial support programmes in secondary schools.

Teacher Training and Support

13. ED organises seminars, workshops as well as school-based professional development programmes for teachers, aiming to enhance their understanding, early identification of specific learning difficulties, and skills in supporting these pupils in ordinary classrooms. In November 1998, ED

and the Child Assessment Centres also jointly organised three identical teacher seminars. 220 primary schools with students identified as having SLD were invited to attend these seminars. A total of 340 teachers, school heads and student guidance officers/teachers participated.

14. Every year, ED inspectors make regular visits to schools and organise meetings for experience-sharing to enhance teachers' understanding of special educational needs and introduce effective teaching strategies to support students' special needs.

15. ED has distributed to all schools the guide for teachers entitled 'Understanding Students with Special Educational Needs'. It aims to enhance teachers' understanding of special educational needs and introduce relevant teaching strategies.

16. ED has also requested the teacher training institutes to strengthen pre-service, in-service and refresher teacher training programmes to better equip teachers to help pupils with SLD and address individual differences in learning.

Public Education

17. Since 1990, the pamphlet on 'Helping Students with Specific Learning Difficulties' has been designed to introduce to parents and teachers the characteristics of SLD and to suggest ways of improving these students' reading and writing skills.

18. ED has also prepared a booklet for parents to help them in early

identification of learning difficulties (including SLD) and seeking appropriate professional support when necessary. It also suggests guidance methods and explains that through understanding, care and appropriate guidance, the children's problems can be minimized.

19. ED has been actively promoting greater public understanding of SLD through the media, e.g. attending interviews, submitting articles to newspapers etc..

Future Development

20. ED is currently revising the guide for teachers entitled 'Understanding Children with Special Educational Needs'. A chapter on remedial teaching strategies and skills of helping students with SLD will be included.

21. ED has initiated a joint research project with the Chinese University of Hong Kong in September 1998, with a view to developing a comprehensive assessment battery and a screening checklist on SLD by 2000.

22. In pursuance of the recommendation of the Board of Education Sub-Committee on Special Education, ED will commission a consultancy study to review the existing intensive remedial services, including both off- site and school-based services, so as to improve the services for children with special needs.

Education Department
February 1999