

Supplementary Information Paper
Services for Students with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD)

Purpose

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

What is Specific Learning Difficulties

2. Students may manifest one or more types of SpLD, the most common type being SpLD in reading and writing (dyslexia). These students have serious and persistent difficulties in learning to read and spell/write, despite their having normal instructions and learning opportunities. In general, they have difficulties in working memory and are slower in information processing. They also tend to be relatively weak in phonological processing, visual and auditory skills, concentration, telling left from right, sequencing skills and organization. These students' learning difficulties are not related to a lack of intellectual capacities nor are they caused by brain damage.

3. Overseas research findings indicated that SpLD exists in different languages. The prevalence rate of SpLD is estimated to be about 3 – 5 % of the population, in varying degrees of severity. The prevalence ratio of male to female is about 4 to 1.

4. With appropriate teaching, the learning of the SpLD students will improve. Based on research findings, the special teaching approaches which benefit students with SpLD are also beneficial to students in general. With appropriate lesson design and effective teaching methods, teachers can meet students' diverse needs and help develop their potentials.

Early Identification of SpLD

5. Every year in June, the Observation Checklist for Teachers (OCT) is sent to all primary schools for identification of primary one students suspected to have significant learning difficulties, including SpLD.

6. Students at primary two or above levels who are suspected of having significant learning difficulties may be referred to ED by school heads, Student Guidance Officers/ Teachers (SGOs/SGTs) and teachers whenever necessary. The subject of SpLD is also incorporated in the induction course for SGOs/SGTs.

7. In March 2001, the “Hong Kong Specific Learning Difficulties Behaviour Checklist for Primary school Pupils” was distributed to all primary schools to help teachers identify this group of students. An accompanying “Guide on Teaching Suggestions” on how to support students with SpLD was also distributed to advise teachers on some basic teaching strategies.

Assessment Services

8. ED provides a thorough professional assessment to students suspected of having SpLD. Aside from assessing the students’ intelligence, reading and writing abilities, and social adjustment at school and at home, educational psychologists also design appropriate educational intervention plans for them.

9. In August 2000, the “Hong Kong Test of Specific Learning Difficulties in Reading and Writing” jointly developed by the University of Hong Kong, The Chinese University of Hong Kong and ED was published. It was the first local assessment tool for SpLD available for use by psychologists in Hong Kong.

10. In recent years, the number of students assessed to have SpLD by ED is noted to be on the increase (Table 1). Most of these students were referred by primary schools through the “Early Identification of Learning Difficulties” Programme.

Table 1 **Number of Students assessed to have SpLD**

School Year	98/99	99/00	00/01	01/02 (1.9.01 to 21.2.02)
No.of students	221	284	463	269

The increase may be attributable to parents’ and teachers’ increased awareness of SpLD.

11. A referral system has been established between ED and the Department of Health whereby the Child Assessment Centres and the Student Health Service will refer students assessed to have SpLD to ED for educational services.

Educational Services

12. The educational psychologists provide follow-up support for each student assessed to have SpLD and discuss with parents and teachers ways to help the student, e.g. the development of effective study habit, study skills and management of emotional difficulties. Whenever necessary, they will also visit schools to conduct case conferences and to provide

consultation and advice to teachers. Students with SpLD are also provided with intensive remedial service at school or at the resource teaching services centres operated by ED.

13. In order to help parents understand better the nature of their children's specific learning difficulties and to master the basic skills to support their children's learning, ED shares with parents techniques to enhance their children's reading and writing skills, to conduct multi-sensory teaching and paired reading etc. In addition, there are parent groups to provide them with psycho-social support.

14. ED provides intensive remedial services to students with learning difficulties, including those with SpLD. These services include Intensive Remedial Teaching Programme (IRTP) in primary schools, Resource Teaching Centres (RTC) service and School-Based Remedial Support Programme (SBRSP) in secondary schools.

15. Schools are responsible for regular monitoring of students' progress in learning. ED encourages schools to draw up a policy to cater for students with special educational needs, as well as to upkeep a register of these students for provision of support and follow-up service as appropriate.

Home-School Cooperation

16. Each school is provided with SGO/SGT service to provide school-based support. Seminars and group activities for parents on raising children's reading and writing abilities are organized. Strategies such as paired reading, multi-sensory learning are introduced. Regional Education Offices also organize regional seminars for parents.

17. ED is currently producing a multi-media CD ROM for the use by SGO/SGT to introduce characteristics of SpLD and guidance to parents. It will be ready by the end of 2002 and part of its content will be uploaded onto the ED Homepage.

18. With parental consent, information on primary six student with SpLD can be forwarded to the secondary school concerned to facilitate arrangement of timely support to help the student's adjustment.

19. Parents in need of advice can approach the school development officers and work with the school to improve their children's educational opportunities. Schools requiring additional support can in turn contact ED for advice.

Professional Development and School-based Support

20. ED has distributed to all schools the booklet 'Helping Children with SpLD -- Teaching Suggestions' and the teaching guide 'Understanding and Helping Children with SpLD'. They aim to introduce relevant teaching strategies and also accommodative measures for these students in school's internal examinations and tests. ED will convey the needs of these students to the Hong Kong Examination Authority for special arrangement in public examinations.

21. In the latest policy address of the Chief Executive, the support to primary schools will be strengthened. Starting from the 2002/03 school year, schools will have extra funds to employ additional services of the student guidance teachers or social workers to manage students' problems. School-based educational psychologist service will be introduced to primary schools as from 2002/03. By 2007/08, 200 primary schools will be provided with such service. Schools are to use the additional resources flexibly to cater for the needs of students with SpLD.

22. In pursuance of professional development, ED often invites local and overseas experts to provide training for teachers and ED staff such as the school development officers, curriculum development officers, inspectors, student guidance officers, etc.

23. ED organizes territory-wide or regional seminars, workshops and experience-sharing sessions for teachers, especially language teachers and resource teachers, to enhance their knowledge and to introduce effective teaching strategies and management skills in supporting students with SpLD. Overseas experts are also invited to conduct the training.

24. To increase teachers' awareness on understanding and helping children with SpLD, ED has organized school-based staff development programmes for more than 100 schools. In the school year 2002/03, similar training will be provided for at least 60 primary schools and 12 secondary schools.

25. To facilitate SGOs/SGTs to organize school-based development programme in their respective schools, ED has produced a multi-media CD ROM on helping children with SpLD in September 2001.

26. A multi-media teaching kit on teaching primary school pupils with SpLD will be published by ED in July 2002. Teaching demonstration and worksheets will be included and they will also be uploaded onto the ED Homepage.

27. ED will continue to convey to the teacher training institutes the need to strengthen the pre-service, in-service and refresher teacher training programmes to better equip teachers to help pupils with SpLD and address individual differences in learning.

28. ED strongly advocates the ‘whole school approach’ to helping students with special educational needs. Various services will be streamlined to maximize their effectiveness.

Public Education

29. Information about SpLD is being provided in the Teachers’ Digest, as well as in the Homepage of the Special Education Service Centre.

30. ED has also prepared a booklet for parents to help them in early identification of learning difficulties (including SpLD) of their children and seeking appropriate professional support when necessary. It also suggests guidance methods and explains that through understanding, caring and appropriate guidance, children’s problems can be minimised.

31. ED also provides training to non-government agencies (such as the Boys’ and Girls’ Club Association and children’s homes) to enhance social workers’ and related professionals’ understanding of SpLD.

32. ED has been actively promoting public understanding of SpLD through the media, e.g. attending interviews on TV and by news reporters, submitting articles to newspapers, etc.

33. Pamphlets for teachers and parents on the Code of Practice on Education under the Disability Discrimination Ordinance have been produced by ED and will be distributed in March 2002.

34. ED has distributed to all schools the ‘Information Guide to Support Services for Students with Special Educational Needs in Ordinary Schools’. It provides school personnel with relevant information and easy reference on educational support services and community-based resources in catering for the diverse needs of students.

Research & Development

35. Since 1998, ED has participated in a joint research project with the University of Hong Kong and The Chinese University of Hong Kong, with a view to developing assessment and screening tools, as well as remediation programmes for children with SpLD. They have recently produced the “The Hong Kong Specific Learning Difficulties Behaviour Checklist”

for primary one students and aim at publishing a set of computerised teaching kits on improving the Chinese word reading ability of children with SpLD by the end of 2002.

36. ED has close liaison with local and overseas experts and will continue to invite them to share their expertise and provide training for teachers and ED staff so as to enhance the quality of our education services.

37. ED will continue to collaborate with other agencies to develop assessment tools to be used by teachers and education softwares for students. Input from parents associations will also be invited to develop softwares to improve children's English word reading ability.

Education Department
February 2002