

# **UP** **USEFUL** **PSYCHOLOGY** **FOR TEACHERS**

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities  
(SEND)

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|   |          |
|---|----------|
| <b>1. Terminology</b> .....                             | <b>3</b> |
| <b>2. Proportions</b> .....                             | <b>3</b> |
| <b>3. Categorising SEND</b> .....                       | <b>4</b> |
| 3.1. Global .....                                       | 4        |
| 3.2. Specific .....                                     | 5        |
| 3.2.1. Dyslexia.....                                    | 5        |
| 3.2.2. ADHD .....                                       | 5        |
| 3.2.3. Developmental Co-ordination Disorder (DCD) ..... | 5        |
| <b>4. Group differences</b> .....                       | <b>6</b> |
| 4.1. International differences .....                    | 6        |
| 4.2. Gender Differences .....                           | 6        |
| <b>5. Summary</b> .....                                 | <b>6</b> |

## 1. Terminology

The terms disability, disorder, difficulty and difference are often used when talking about how students differ in the classroom. Each term is subtly different with different implications. For example, some practitioners prefer to talk about learning differences rather than learning difficulties. They would likely argue that the child they are referring to would not be experiencing difficulties if educational provisions were responsive to their learning difference. These students difficulties arise not because of how they learn, but because of the learning opportunities they have.

Personally, I tend to use the term difficulty. Having worked with thousands of students who have been identified with dyslexia, ADHD, DCD or something similar, it seems evident to me that certain study tasks will always require a lot more effort for these people than for their peers, and I think it is important to acknowledge the immense additional effort and determinism it takes to counter their difficulties.

The important thing is that you reflect on these terms, consider which seem appropriate to you, and remain open to changing your mind as you learn more.

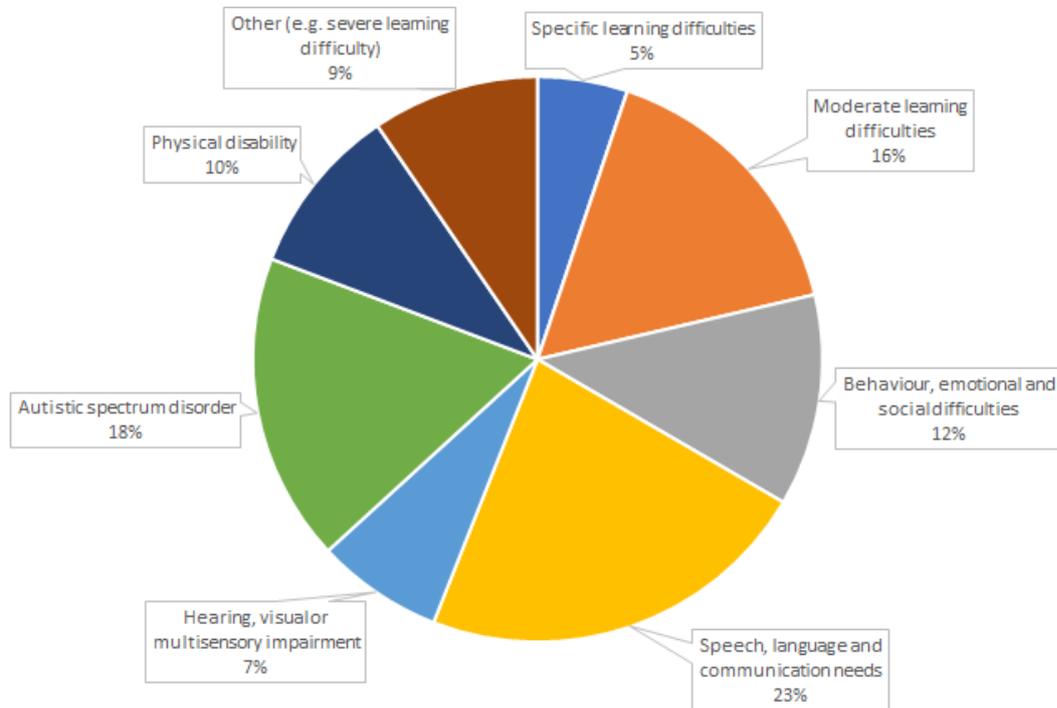
UK government guidelines on appropriate language can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-communication/inclusive-language-words-to-use-and-avoid-when-writing-about-disability>.

## 2. Proportions

Students in the UK who require additional tailored support have, until a recent revision in policies, received something called a Statement of Educational Needs. The UK Government provides statistics about the relative categories of students with such Statements.

This may not reflect the proportions seen in actual classrooms. For example, some students with sensory impairments might be educated in specialist schools, as might those with severe learning difficulty.

Furthermore, it is unlikely that different categories are likely to equally attract support. A child with behaviour, emotional and social difficulties might be more likely to be identified as needing support when compared to a student who struggles to read. The former may be more disruptive in lessons and so draw attention to their needs. The latter may have put a great deal of time and effort into masking their difficulties and so will not require as much attention.



### 3. Categorising SEND

It is important to consider if and when it might be useful to think about categorising children as having either specific or global Special Educational Needs. For example, a child might experience a temporary delay in an area but will soon catch up. Labelling this child as having any kind of learning difficulty would be inappropriate. At the very least this may result in the misallocation of resources. More dramatically it may lead to stigmatisation or for the child to think of their own learning incorrectly.

In the UK, something is considered a disability when it has a **substantial, adverse and long term** impact on someone's ability to **carry out day-to-day activities**. These three elements can be useful to keep in mind when thinking about learning difficulties.

There may also be cultural and other reasons why parents may or may not want their child to be considered to have either a global or specific learning difficulty. For example, some might worry that categorising their child in a certain way might lead to discrimination. Alternatively, parents might push for categorisation if they believe this will result in their child receiving more appropriate support.

Learning about different categories is important, but it is always essential to think about the needs of the individual learner.

#### 3.1. Global

Global Learning Difficulties affect a wide array of learning activities and are evident throughout someone's life. Appropriate support can be very useful, but people with Global Learning Difficulties are likely to always struggle with education.

Global learning difficulties can be associated with other disabilities such as Downs syndrome and Williams syndrome. However, children with difficulties such as these often show relative aptitude in certain areas. For example, research suggests that people with

William's syndrome have stronger verbal skills than non-verbal skills.

### 3.2. Specific

Specific Learning Difficulties tend to have particular manifestations in particular aspects of learning. For example, people with dyslexia typically struggle with reading and writing, people with ADHD struggle with attention.

Whilst the deficit is often specific, the impact can be considerable. A child who struggles to read is going to find English lessons hard, but they will also struggle to read instructions in Chemistry lessons, or to read from textbooks in any of their subjects.

For these individuals, addressing their specific difficulty should have a positive impact on all aspects of their studies. However, for several reasons, this is not as straight forward as it sounds.

Firstly, there is often overlap between different specific learning difficulties (this is known as co-morbidity). Secondly, the core deficit is not always known. For example, one child might struggle with reading because they have difficulties with sounding out words, another might struggle to see the words clearly; both might be considered dyslexic. Thirdly, interventions may not be very effective, or may only be effective in specific areas. For example, strategies to help improve working memory seem to be very domain specific and do not lead to improvements in different types of working memory tasks.

Finally, the definitions of specific learning difficulties are not fixed but change over time as more research is conducted. This research may even lead to certain difficulties being renamed as it becomes evident that the original name is not an accurate reflection of what is being experienced by people. This final point is why it is important that any 'diagnosis' of specific learning difficulties is only made by a relevant professional such as an educational psychologist or specialist teacher. It takes considerable training and an ability to weigh numerous important factors when concluding if a child might or might not have a specific learning difficulty.

#### 3.2.1. Dyslexia

Dyslexia is traditionally thought of as a difficulty with reading, but many other areas can also be implicated. For example, students with dyslexia also often struggle with working memory, written expression and organisation.

#### 3.2.2. ADHD

ADHD (or AD/HD AD(H)D) is characterised by difficulties with attention. It can manifest in two main ways: **Inattention** and **Hyperactivity**. Children with ADHD might display one or both of the above at different times and in different situations.

#### 3.2.3. Developmental Co-ordination Disorder (DCD)

CD was originally called Dyspraxia. The Dys element of the word denotes "difficulties with" the 'praxia' element of the word indicates difficulties with movement.

Research has indicated that DCD is not a problem with movement, rather it is usually a difficulty with **visual / motor coordination**. Hence the more appropriate name Development Coordination Disorder.

## 4. Group differences

Not all children have the same chance of being identified as having Special Educational Needs. Understanding more about these chances can help us learn more about individual students and the various SENs they might have.

### 4.1. International differences

Research has identified potential international differences in a variety of specific learning difficulties (SpDLs). For example, Italian children are about half as likely to be identified as having dyslexia as their USA counterparts.

There is a strong genetic component to most SpDLs so it is initially hard to understand why there might be international differences. Dyslexia provides a great way to think about this. English is an extremely complex language, which breaks its own rules almost as often as it follows them. Italian is much more straight forward as there is a clear and simple relationship between how words sound and how they are written. A child who struggles with reading will struggle more in English than in Italian. The same logic could also explain other international differences in diagnostic rates. However, there are likely to be many other reasons too. Examples might include: differences in nutrition, cultural differences, the age at which compulsory schooling starts and finishes, whether students are streamed by ability. The list is literally endless.

### 4.2. Gender Differences

Gender differences in Special Educational Needs and Disabilities might be explained by genetics. However, environments can be just as effective at explaining these differences. Take Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) for example.

ASD is defined by a triad of impairments. The 3 central elements are impairments in imagination, social communication, and social interaction. In addition there is a strong tendency towards repetitive behaviour - There will be more on this in a later unit in this module.

It could be argued that girls are traditionally expected to be introverted and orderly. Boys, on the other hand, are often expected to be outgoing and unpredictable.

As such, it may be that boys are more often identified as having difficulties on the autistic spectrum as these difficulties are quite distinct from 'boyish' behaviour.

This is just one possible explanation and again there might be many more.

## 5. Summary

All children differ in their abilities. They differ in the subjects they prefer, they differ in the rate at which they develop and mature, they even differ throughout the day. Some students may have better focus in the morning, some after lunch.

In addition to this 'normal' variation, some students may also exhibit variation that is consistent with specific or global learning difficulties. Responding to the needs of these

students based on a thorough understanding of difficulties typically associated with their particular difficulties can be invaluable.

However, it is important to remember that these students are by no means 'abnormal'. Somewhere between 25% and 33% of the students in any classroom may be experiencing specific learning difficulties. Working to help these students find their best educational experience can have an immeasurable impact on their education and later life.