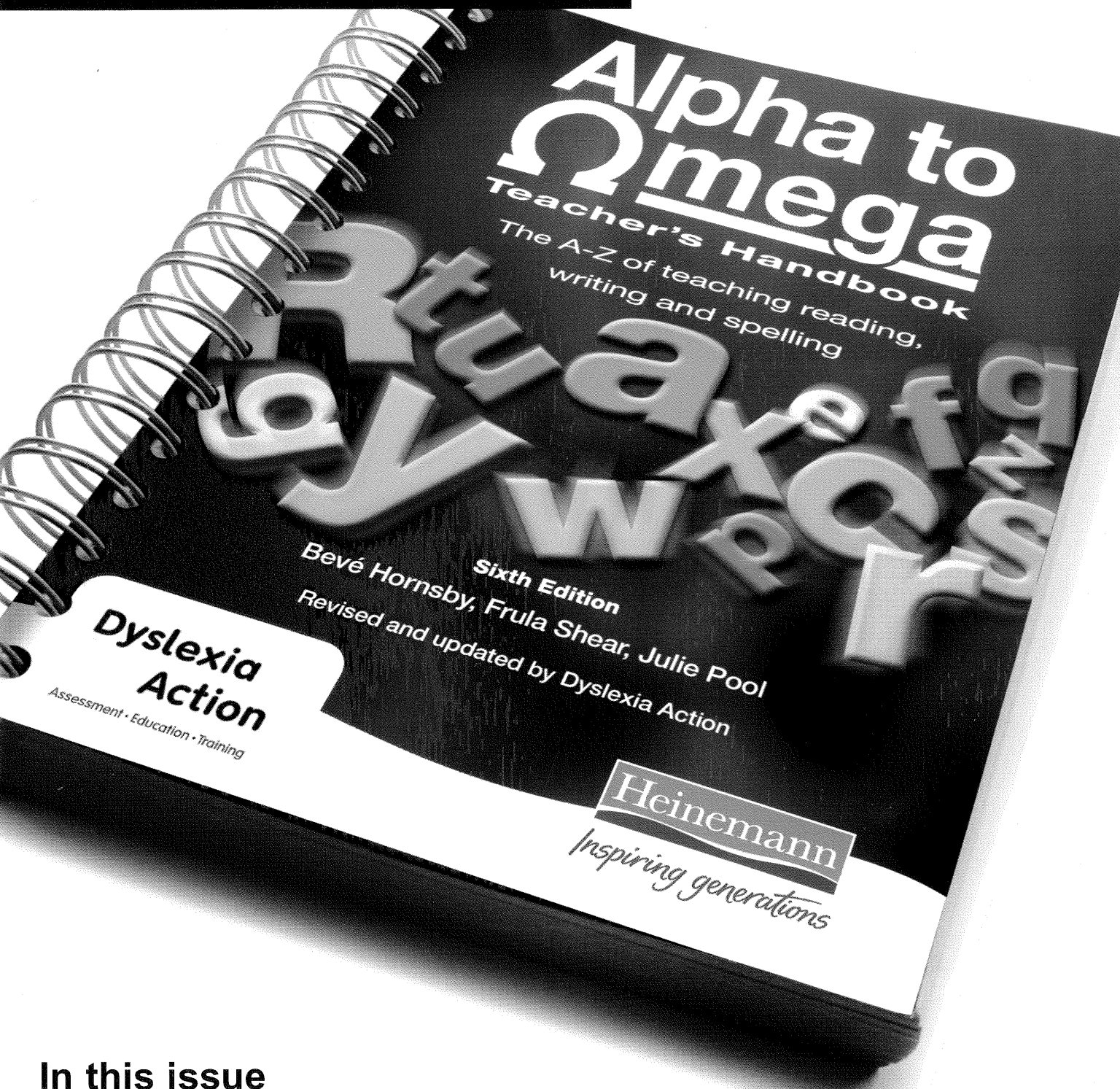


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# GREEK TEACHERS AND THE FIELD OF DYSLEXIA

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## Abstract

Recent studies on dyslexic students suggest that integrating them into mainstream schools is the best way to identify and remediate their dysfunction. Additionally, special or resource classes and supporting personnel are essential to serve their needs. Mainstream teachers left to devise ways to teach dyslexic students generally find their efforts rewarded with limited success. Research shows that educators are not equipped to assume the added responsibilities of teaching dyslexic students without having appropriate training and adequate support and resources.

The phenomenon of Dyslexia has been the subject of several studies in Greece during the past few years. However, in the past, political changes in the country forestalled research on the topic. Consequently, confusion is still prevalent regarding this important issue. Furthermore, the legislative provision providing for oral exams for dyslexic students and promoting their integration into mainstream schools is not always fully implemented.

## Introduction

'The comment 'could do better' has echoed down the history of education. It continues today, particularly in the field of Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD) and Dyslexia. Whether made on a pupil's school report, or verbally by a teacher to a parent or a pupil concerning the pupil's performance, it signals concern' (Pumfrey & Reason, 1991, p. 37). Indeed, the characteristic picture of the pupil described above, is one of a bright child whose academic performance is labeled as poor and 'unexpected' (Dobbins, 1998).

Teachers are pivotal in the identification and remediation of SpLD /Dyslexic students. Therefore, teachers need to be part of a cooperative team and acquire more knowledge in the field of SpLD /Dyslexia to be effective. Smith (1995) describes effective teachers highlighting the difficult role they are called to play in their classrooms every day:

'Effective teachers often combine the manners of a doctor, the incision of a lawyer and the charisma of an actor. In a sense, teachers really are a mixture of other professionals, and are often complicated, sensitive persons who need encouragement and understanding as they are expected to show to their pupils.'

Educators lacking information, specialized guidance, resources, and training are isolated and lack the

wherewithal to teach pupils exhibiting learning difficulties (Dobbins, 1998). The field of SpLD/dyslexia in Greece is still in its early stages and is included in the broader concept of Special Education. Greek legislation refers to the topic, but falls short as to offering concrete solutions. That is, the legislation does not provide appropriate interventions for these students or sufficient support to enable their teachers to work collaboratively (Efstathiou, 1997).

## Definitions

The existence of numerous ambiguous terms and definitions to describe children's learning difficulties are evident in current studies by researchers from different disciplines such as medicine, psychology, and education. For instance, in Great Britain, 'Specific Learning Difficulties' and 'Dyslexia' are the terms more often used. Of course, the term 'specific' depends on how everyone explains it and permits a distinction from other groups such as backward readers, whose reading failure is not expected (Pumfrey & Reason, 1991). Dyslexia presents a difficulty with the language, but generally, the two terms seem to be used synonymously, as it is previously mentioned (Miles, 1995). It is worth mentioning that in the United States many scientists currently use the term 'Specific Learning Disabilities'.

In Greece, the term 'dyslexia' is used to explain the phenomenon of specific difficulties in reading and spelling, which are not connected with other functional or cognitive disorders (Porpodas, 1993). In Greece the domain of Special Education has an old history. The starting point was in 1906 with the establishment of the first Special School for blind children, but it was in 1985 with the Presidential Edict of Bill 1566/1985 that a formal reference to dyslexia initially appeared (Stasinou, 1991).

## Greek Teachers and the Identification of Dyslexia

Classroom teachers, particularly in primary schools, should be aware of the dyslexic characteristics in learning so that they can help dyslexic students to function effectively and feel less isolated. Therefore, it behoves the educational system to ensure teachers have the crucial information that will prevent them from working in a vacuum.

Greek teachers usually interact with mainstream students having average intelligence but unexpectedly perform poorly in reading and spelling. However, educators have nowhere to turn to determine the causes of these difficulties and thus feel isolated. In Greece, the degree of teacher isolation is of great concern. Mainstream teachers are alone, unaware, lacking in-

depth knowledge of the issues, and the support and resources at their disposal are deficient. Therefore, even when teachers become aware of troubling symptoms in their students, they cannot address them, because, they are not privy to other facts that could be impacting the students' performance (Dounias, 1995).

The author of this study, an experienced teacher, finds that when educators approach parents to report their suspicion that their children might be suffering from SpLD/Dyslexia, they encounter denial. Apparently, Greek parents not only choose to ignore the problem, but they are also afraid of the negative reaction from acquaintances. Adding to the dilemma, the identification of this puzzling disorder by classroom teachers is often pure guesswork. At this juncture it must be mentioned that there have been a few efforts to provide useful information to teachers. However, expert advice to aid teachers in this important area should be given as the norm rather than the exception. Is vital assistance readily available in any educational system? It is a subject worth exploring.

In the United States and in the United Kingdom educators function in a collaborative environment, but in Greece teacher isolation is a serious problem. Perhaps the use of screening tests to identify students with SpLD/Dyslexia should be implemented. These tests might alleviate teacher isolation if schools inform their faculty of their existence and uses. In the United Kingdom this method flourished in the late 1970s and most of the 1980s. Greece, finally introduced one such test in the last ten years.

### Special Education in Greece

Similar or perhaps even more confusion than the one just described prevails at the department of Special Education. No matter how strange it may sound, Special Education, that is, special provisions, social help, and protection of the disabled, started years ago in Greece. As was mentioned previously, special education started with the establishment of special schools for the blind in Greece in the early 1900s. Later several other special schools would be designed for other disabilities. For instance, in 1937 the first public primary school for 'retarded' children, 'Protipo Special School of Athens' opened to service children with special needs.

In the 1950s, medical issues prevailed in the area of Special Education. However, in 1969 the Ministry of Education established the first Office for Special Education. As a result, the systematic study of special education began in the 1970s. During that same period, the in-service education of teachers started with a two-year course for a few teachers. In 1976, the Directorate of Special Education appeared in the Ministry of Education.

Finally, the first law concerning Special Education came into existence in 1981 (Bill 1143/81). Four years later, this law was reformed and improved under Bill 1566/85 covering general education (Ministry of Education: Pedagogical Institute 1995; Ministry of Education: Special Education Department, 1994). The Greek Ministry of Education keeping pace with the contemporary trends in special education has reexamined its objectives and concentrated on mainstreaming education. It has become clear that placing children exhibiting learning disabilities in separate special schools exerts an adverse effect on their education.

The integration of special needs students and offering supportive teaching aides in mainstream classrooms or, in some cases, in special classes (resource rooms), are the guidelines issued by the Ministry of Education. Everything seems to be under development in this arena with one exception, the teachers' role. Unfortunately, this important issue is still unclear and despite the improved educational goals, most teachers remain misinformed or uninformed (Dounias, 1995).

Currently the education of children with special needs in Greece is integration oriented and most of these students attend mainstream schools. Moreover, some mainstream schools have special or 'resource' classes and children with special needs can attend conventional classes and benefit from additional help in special classes. There are also some state-run special schools and numerous private institutions. However, the program as a whole is dysfunctional, because mainstream teachers lack appropriate training and special education teachers are underutilized in special classes.

The Greek Education Act in 1985 and Bill 1566/85 established that dyslexic students should be included in the groups of students under the aegis of Special Education. Therefore, it is remarkable that although dyslexic students were to be mainstreamed, there was no guidance or sensitization sessions offered to the faculty in the receiving mainstream institutions. Mainstream teachers were on their own as they attempted to educate the incoming special needs students. Also, there was an analytical curriculum available and employed by some special teachers to help them with students having specific learning difficulties, but few educators knew about it, thus it was useless. To make matters worse, the number of school counselors in the area of special education was inadequate to provide effective support to teachers (Ministry of Education, 1985).

Circular Γ6/636/27.11.1986 and the one that followed Γ6/106/3.4.1992 sent by the Ministry of Education to all primary and secondary education principals and

counselors, allude to the problem of dyslexia and attempt to explain it. They state its multi-etiology, and define dyslexia as a deficiency in reading and spelling. Moreover, the Circular suggests that dyslexic children need to be taught in mainstream or special classes, whenever available, by teachers using an individualized approach, in a well-organized classroom environment. In addition, the Ministry's directives allow officially diagnosed dyslexic students to be assessed orally instead of in writing (Ministry of Education, 1986; Ministry of Education, 1992).

A new law, 2817/2000, has introduced some changes recently. It replaces the Medicopedagogical Centers with the Diagnostic, Evaluation, and Supportive Centers (ΚΔΑΥ). These centers aim to operate with an interdisciplinary team and offer formal diagnosis, evaluation, and support to teachers of students with special educational needs. Additionally, they are going to provide support and information to classroom teachers and parents. The centers aim to recommend the registration of special needs children in the institution that is best for them and suggest adequate intervention programs, appropriate materials, and when indicated, the replacement of written evaluations with oral assessments (Ministry of Education, 2000).

They are going to function in the centre of each prefecture. In Athens, their staff consists of one teacher from each of the following educational levels: pre-school, primary, and secondary, plus two speech therapists, three psychologists, one psychiatrist, two physiotherapists, and four social workers. The centers will also have specialists for blind and deaf children. The number of specialists on the staff is reduced in less populated areas of the country and centers in some districts will not be staffed by professionals in every area of specialization (Law 2817/2000).

The resource rooms will be restricted and become accession classes. Aside from these classes, special education will be offered in mainstream classes with the collaboration of special and regular teachers; however, special schools for all educational levels will continue to exist for the severely disabled. Furthermore, the Pedagogical Institute intend to establish a Special Education Department, responsible for research, in-service training for special teachers, and the design of analytical curricula and material.

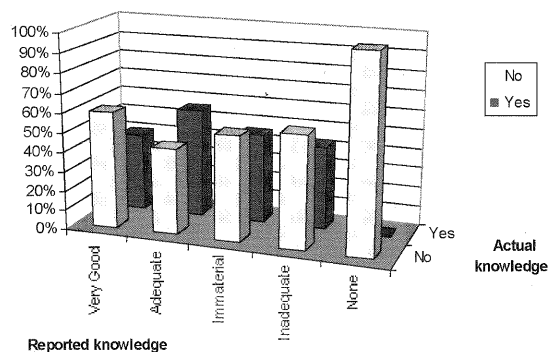
On the other hand, in Greece, there is no formal research indicating the exact number of dyslexic children in the country (Mavrommati, 1995). According to Kaila et al. (1995), of the forty-six children who visited a pediatrician clinic of Athens University to be identified as dyslexic, only nine were diagnosed as such. Moreover, circular Γ6/1 06/3.4.1992 sent by the Ministry of Education to all counselors and principals of primary and

secondary schools reported that about five percent of Greek children are dyslexic ((Ministry of Education, 1992; Ministry of Education, 1994).

The author of this study recently engaged in a study involving 250 primary male and female school teachers, working as permanent or substitute teachers, regular, special, and head teachers, to determine the knowledge and ability of Greek educators to recognize the signs of dyslexia (Pardali, 2002). The sample was selected from the 9 regions of Greece, including urban, semi-urban, and rural areas and revealed that Greek teachers have limited knowledge in the domain of dyslexia. They do not know the definition of dyslexia, its etiology, origin, and appropriate teaching methods. A positive note is the fact that teachers seem to be aware of their limitations concerning dyslexia. Reported knowledge of dyslexia by Greek teachers did not correspond with actual knowledge. Educators reporting good knowledge regarding dyslexia appeared to know as little about the disability as those reporting not having good knowledge (Figure 1).

In order to create objective criterion about the teachers' actual knowledge of dyslexia, a scale was constructed based on items on the questionnaire. The items listed a set of true and false signs of dyslexia that teachers had to correctly identify. The sum total of the accurate true symptoms and the accurate false symptoms constituted the maximum score on the scale. For knowledge to be effective a cut off point of 8 and above was considered appropriate and based on this a pass/fail classification was used to separate teachers who had adequate knowledge of dyslexia (PASS = Yes) from those who did not (FAIL = No).

Dyslexia: reported knowledge and actual knowledge



Additionally, the type of teaching did not seem to affect the level of awareness concerning dyslexia as the knowledge of permanent and substitute teachers appeared to be similar. Moreover, looking at the years of service, it seems that teachers who had been in service longer had a better knowledge of dyslexia. However, the results were not statistically significant and, therefore, were not interpreted (Pardali, 2002).

In the identification domain, it looked as if Greek teachers had difficulty identifying the signs of dyslexia and their correct numbers. Also, they struggled with the types and patterns of dyslexia, designing an adequate test, and referring pupils for formal diagnoses. It should be mentioned that the knowledge of Greek teachers was assessed in relation to their answers to questions concerning identification of signs of dyslexia, such as identification of patterns, types, number of signs, distinguishing from other disabilities, and sending pupils to specialized centres. Examining the relationship between reported knowledge of Greek teachers and identification of patterns it was found that their knowledge is limited to subjects concerning identification. Even teachers with very good and adequate knowledge face great difficulties recognizing dyslexia (Pardali 2002).

Early screening for dyslexia seems to be necessary but is nonexistent in Greece. Also, research seems to indicate that teachers with reported very good knowledge of the disability feel a high degree of confidence referring pupils to Medico pedagogical centers for official diagnosis. Conversely, only a few educators with adequate knowledge recommend students undergo specialized testing for dyslexia (Pardali 2002).

In conclusion, it is worth elucidating that the field of Dyslexia in Greece is indeed developing. Much more must take place in the near future. There are many suggestions, but the most significant is a vigorous and systematic teachers' training. A well-organised system of provision will help both groups, teachers and all students, without any kind of segregation or labeling in a workmanlike atmosphere.

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