



Chapter 24

Dyslexia in Lebanon

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Introduction

In this chapter, the authors will provide a realistic picture of the situation, services, and opportunities for individuals with dyslexia. The goal was not to provide an extensive review of the suggested themes, but to offer exemplars of what is occurring in Lebanon. The authors based their findings on electronic searches, personal communications, a handful of interviews, and their extensive personal experience in the field of dyslexia. Instances are presented to illustrate local legislation and educational policy regarding dyslexia, organizations and their level of activity, teacher training, community awareness, assessment practices, interventions, attitudes regarding dyslexia in Lebanon, and immediate goals.

Definition of Dyslexia

“From being a dubious term, dyslexia had blossomed into a glamorous topic (Frith, 1999, in Mather & Wendling, (2012, p. 1).

Originating from the Greek words dys-(impaired) and lexis (word), dyslexia can be defined as “a neurobiological disorder that causes a marked impairment in the development of basic reading and spelling skills (Mather & Wendling, 2012, p. 3). It is manifested in deficiencies in the ability to read accurately and fluently and spell correctly (British Dyslexia Association, 2019), resulting from deficient phonological awareness, verbal memory, and verbal processing speed that are unexpected, despite average or above average cognitive abilities and adequate instruction, as indicated by international organizations that are considered authorities in the field, namely The British Dyslexia Association (2019) and International Dyslexia Association (2018).

As for the prevalence of this condition, the most recent findings consider dyslexia as highly common, affecting around 20% of the population and both genders equally (Shaywitz, Shaywitz, & Shaywitz, 2021), but the need for a clear and precise diagnostic benchmarks persists.

Lebanon's Educational Sector

A small multi-confessional, multilingual and politically unstable country in the East Mediterranean basin established in 1920, Lebanon extends for no more than 10,452 square kilometers, and is home for over 6, 859,000 people, between Lebanese inhabitants and refugees (UNESCO, 2021), mostly Palestinian and Syrian, but this data is inconclusive in the absence of an official census.

By the turn of the 20th century, Lebanese educational institutions, established by the early Christian missionaries, became an educational landmark in the region (Baytieyh, 2016).

The schooling system reflects the multilingualism of Lebanon . For the better part of the 20th century, the Lebanese schools followed the French system under the French mandate (1920-1943), but with the increasing globalization in the past decades, English gradually superseded the French influence (Bahous, Bacha, & Nabhani, 2011).

Lebanon enjoys a high literacy rate, and access to schools in Lebanon is among the highest in the Arab World. For instance, in 2014–2015, 1,002,277 male and female students were enrolled in both private and public schools (Baroud, 2018)

Dyslexia Legislation in Lebanon

Lebanon had been dealing with dyslexia at various levels, from the establishment of a speech and language therapy institute at the Université Saint Joseph (USJ) in 1995¹ that put dyslexia on the map, to the inception of special education departments and resource rooms in a few private schools, and from raising awareness about dyslexia in the media to conducting regular teacher training workshops across the country. However, a landmark date became closely associated with the history of dyslexia in Lebanon: the Ministerial Decree 16417 written into law on 24 February, 2006², which allows students with learning disabilities (namely dyslexia, dysgraphia and dyscalculia), among other special needs, to be exempted from the official 9th grade exam, thereby duly giving dyslexia official recognition at the ministerial level.

On December 2012, a new ministerial decree was authorized (Decree 9533)³. Its focus was mostly procedural (i.e., detailing the profile of the Ad Hoc committee members in charge, the lines of authority, the qualifications of the members, the period of time needed to review student files, and the terms of remuneration, and also the school and clinical documentation needed for exemption eligibility).

The last legislation in relation to dyslexia was passed on March 22, 2013 (Ministerial Decree 10148) and introduced several amendments to the 5697 Decree (authorized on June 6, 2001) pertaining to the official examinations in Lebanon. Chief among the amendments was the

¹ In the French system, the speech therapist is the specialist who is primarily in charge of diagnosing and treating dyslexia

² The author A. Oweini was one of the two psychologists who drafted the text of the decree

³ All information related to legislation was retrieved from the Center for Research and Studies in Legal Informatics (www.legallaw.ul.edu.lb/LawArticles.aspx?LawTreeSectionID=236326&lawId=234088)

authorization of holding official exams (for 9th and 12th grades, respectively) outside of Lebanese territories, and allowing dyslexic students, among other students with special needs, to receive appropriate accommodations.

Subsequently, it became more commonplace for students with dyslexia to receive accommodations rather than exemption, such as extra time, a reader, and a scribe, which still need better planning and implementation.

Local Non-Profit Organizations

Founded in 1999, CLES aims to help children with specific learning disabilities like dyslexia, who may fail at school and are socially excluded. In collaboration with the Ministry of Education, CLES established learning support classes in public schools all over Lebanon, ongoing teacher training centering on early identification and inclusion strategies.

As for outreach activities, they encompass a wide array of awareness activities such as **theatre** by way of short skits that dramatize the learning difficulties experienced from a child's perspective, awareness campaign consisting of short videos by local celebrities, the translation **of** informative books from French to Arabic, and an **interactive platform** for parents to help them acquire accurate information about their child's difficulties (www.cles.org).

CLES has helped 1650 children and 8,013 Syrian refugees, 120 professionals, clocking more than 83,500 hours of work (www.cles.org)

Another NGO renowned for outreach in relation to dyslexia is SKLD (Smart Kids with Individual Learning Differences). Founded in 2011, SKILD offers diagnostic services, therapy, parental guidance, life and social skills, school support and summer camps (www.skild-edu.org). It also has a publishing department that produces guides for inclusive schools, parenting of students

with special needs and strategies for dyslexia. It partners with 9 private schools and other public schools and refugee centers. The website does not address dyslexia per se, Hiba Al Jamal, the director, asserted that the SKILD therapy team had been trained by professors of dyslexia in universities from Mississippi, to screen, diagnose and treat dyslexia using specialized screeners and corrective programs like Reading Readiness and Language Enrichment. Their outreach activities include a virtual conference to help parents with online teaching, and an e-library with 74 three-minute videos for parental guidance (H. Al Jamal, Personal Communication, February 7, 2021).

The Mental Health of Students with Dyslexia

M. sits among his peers in the classroom and feels increasingly anxious as his reading turn approaches. The teacher calls his name to continue reading the passage where his classmate left off. His eyes sweep the word; he hopes he will not mix up the letters like before. His lips open up, but nothing can be uttered. He tries again, and some letters come out, not the whole word. He feels very frustrated. This seems to be the story that characterizes most dyslexic students in Lebanon.

Many disorders cast a shadow over an individual's psychological state. When it comes to children, it becomes more delicate, because at this stage, they have not yet mastered the skill of expressing what they are feeling, and often fall prey to their negative feelings.

The biggest nightmare for children with dyslexia is to be put on the spot, and be asked to read. Intense competition, peer pressure and the anxious anticipation of being asked to read aloud drive most of these children to the edge.

Seven parents and seven teachers (including 3 special educators) from both English and French language, public and private schools in Lebanon were interviewed for the purpose of this chapter. They maintained that for children who go untreated, or who are diagnosed after a long period

of failure, there are detrimental effects on their mental health. They are often perceived as lazy or stupid, which may lead to low self-esteem, and in turn to pangs of anxiety and depression.

Understanding children's frustration is paramount. Sona⁴, a teacher of a dyslexic child in a private school and a dyslexic herself, urges parents to praise their child based on effort, not result. Dina relates several success stories, including one with a boy with dyslexia who regained his self-confidence thanks to the awareness of his family and the support of his teachers.

Knowing she is different without recognizing her dyslexia label, Sandy learned coping strategies to become independent. Yet, she continues to need reassurance and guidance. Finally, Nora developed a cynical and self-deprecating attitude to shield herself of the harshness of a world that does not understand her reading struggles.

It is our firm belief that the children with dyslexia thrive in an inclusive environment that provides special academic and emotional support.

Twice-Exceptionalities - Gifted/Talented Students with Dyslexia

Twice exceptional is a term used to describe students who are both intellectually gifted and learning disabled, which includes students with dyslexia. Such students tend to be mislabeled, misunderstood, or receive inadequate intervention. While no research on this unique condition has been conducted in Lebanon, information on twice-exceptional children was culled from parents' and teachers' interviews. One mother describes her gifted-dyslexic son as being good at higher order reasoning yet deficient in phonological decoding and naming speed, skilled at generating fluent excuses for why he could not complete an assignment. Another student was described as bright but does not invest his brightness in the right place. Despite his inquisitive nature, his limited skills in

⁴ All proper names are pseudonyms

reading, writing, and spelling prevented him from achieving good grades that are commensurate with his abilities. Sona, a special educator, remembers one of her gifted-dyslexic students who managed to camouflage his reading disability through his exceptional school achievement and endearing personality which assured him smooth academic sailing until college.

How to help such unique students?

“Treatment is not just fixing what is broken; it is nurturing what is best (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 7).” It is through talent development that gifted learning-disabled students thrive and develop a positive sense of self. It is by feeling smart and accomplished that they can find the drive to overcome their challenges.

Teacher Training Efforts and Preparations Including Pre-service and In-Service

Various training entities compete to offer dyslexia workshops for teachers and graduate students, making Lebanon a busy hub for educators who seek professional development in this field. Some teacher training is offered on an ongoing basis; others are more sporadic, not exceeding a one-time session.

Haigazian University’s Continuing Education department has been regularly offering dyslexia training. The course “A Closer Look at Dyslexia”, destined for teachers of grades 1 to 6 is attended by teachers from over 12 private schools across Lebanon.

(www.haigazian.edu.lb/continuing-education/in-service-teacher-training/workshops)

Starting in 2002, CLES has been organizing free annual training workshops for hundreds of teachers from public and private schools. Focusing on dyslexia and other specific learning difficulties, these workshops facilitated by a Belgian-Lebanese multidisciplinary team aim at equipping teachers

with skills to screen signs of specific learning disabilities among students and provide proper referral (<https://cles.org/trainings-3>). CLES has trained over 200 teachers through 40 trainers and speakers both Lebanese and international.

USJ offers continuing education classes annually which often include some workshops on dyslexia (www.ile.usj.edu.lb).

As for noteworthy training initiatives, in 2014 over 800 teachers, trainers and school children attended a weeklong series of workshops and a one-day conference, as part of the British Council's commitment to raising awareness of Special Educational Needs (SEN). Dyslexia experts Sally Farley and Marie Delaney delivered sessions on strategies for memory and cognition, among others (www.britishcouncil.org.lb/en/partnerships/success-stories/special-educational-needs).

SKILD launched in 2020 a free and popular online course with Edraak, the online course platform of Queen Rania's Academy in Jordan titled "Introduction to Overcome Learning Difficulties". It is a four-week course that focuses on inclusive classrooms and differentiated learning (<https://skild-edu.org/portfolio-item/online-course-with-edraak>).

Another training event worth mentioning is the one sponsored by the Department of Speech Therapy at the Islamic University of Lebanon which hosted the Foundation of Orton-Gillingham for the first time in Lebanon in March 2020. The Canadian team of trainers held sessions for 4 consecutive days, attended by 52 speech therapists, linguists and special educators from different universities in Lebanon.

Finally, Dyslexia International hosts a free online course named “Basics for teachers: Dyslexia – How to identify it and What to do”, originally developed in French and English by Vincent Goetry in 2010. It was adapted to Arabic by Ahmad Oweini and Katia Hazoury in 2016 and is accessible for teachers and parents who deal with dyslexia in Lebanon and the Arab World (www.dyslexia-and-literacy.international/our-projects/on-line-teacher-training-course).

In terms of formal pre-service training programs at the university to prepare future dyslexia educators and specialists, a survey of all universities in Lebanon yielded the following results:

Dyslexia prominently figures as a course title in 2 universities: The Lebanese American University and Phoenicia University. In the former, it is offered as part of the post-graduate teaching diploma requirement, “Dyslexia and Reading Difficulties” (<http://catalog.lau.edu.lb/2016-2017/courses/edu561.php>). In the latter, it is a core undergraduate requirement under the speech therapy department and titled Dyslexia Learning Disorders, Assessment and Rehabilitation. (https://pu.edu.lb/sites/default/files/speech_therapy.pdf).

In the French system, institutes of speech therapy train their students on dyslexia under written language deficits, within a sequence of two courses, one focusing on theory and the second on intervention. At the Lebanese University, the theory course includes an extensive review of corrective multisensory programs (A. Hammoud, Personal Communication, January 24, 2021)

At USJ and Islamic University of Lebanon, students address atypical written language development and its clinical manifestations in reading, encoding, reading comprehension, and metalinguistic abilities (H. Kassir, Personal Communication, February 13, 2021).

Research on Dyslexia

There is an emergent Lebanese research focusing on learning disabilities and inclusion in Lebanon, but very rarely on dyslexia. The handful of available studies combined published and unpolished output with inconsistent quality, dealing with a disparate set of topics that do not build up to a clear research agenda.

Some recent articles focused on the effectiveness of teaching strategies in reading comprehension in inclusive and non-inclusive settings for students with dyslexia (Awada & Plana, 2017) and perceptions of the usefulness of a combined strategy instruction, featuring a number of metacognitive learning tools on reading comprehension (Awada, 2018).

Bendak (2010) published an informative book on dyslexia in Arabic, from causes to symptoms, assessment to intervention, generally translated from Western sources, and a study on the importance and role of Individual Educational Plans (IEP) in helping students with dyslexia enhance their reading skills (Bendak, 2011).

Khansa (2015) surveyed 50 instructors in private Lebanese universities on their attitude towards inclusion of and willingness to provide accommodations for students with disabilities, including dyslexia.

Katia Hazoury developed a multisensory remedial kit for dyslexia in Arabic, *My First Letters* (Second Edition published by Apprentice Center, 2012), drawing on general Orton-Gillingham principles and her own framework which she developed through her extensive experience as a reading specialist (Hazoury, Oweini, & Bahous, 2009).

As for unpublished manuscripts, Moarbes (2020) focused on reading and working memory skills in multilingual students with dyslexia, whereas Jurdi (2012) conducted a case study on the effectiveness of the Lindamood Phoneme Sequencing program (LiPS) on phonemic awareness (PA), reading, and spelling in a bilingual teenager diagnosed with dyslexia.

Finally, Matta Abizeid (2006) investigated the typical psychomotor deficits of children with dyslexia, in a sample of 100 students, ages 7-12, half of whom identified as having dyslexia, with respect to left-right orientation, visuo-spatial and temporal thinking, and eye-hand coordination (oculo-motor processing).

Awareness Levels of Dyslexia and Perceptions of Community

Parents and teachers who were interviewed all reported that the perceptions of Lebanese society about dyslexia greatly depend on the level of education of individuals, and range from referring to it as a disability, a source of shame, a condition one can outgrow, a letter reversal problem, and a stigmatizing label that has made most of the parents refrain from telling their own family about it. One mother reported that a school principal advised her to place her son in a school for the handicapped.

When asked about their understanding of dyslexia, parents responded: inability to read and write, inability to concentrate for a long time, engagement of disruptive behavior and low achievement. Hence, even parents' understanding of this condition is inaccurate or fragmented.

As for their attitudes, parents reported having experienced negative feelings such as frustration, stress, and disappointment. One mothers confessed, "I always experience anxiety, lack of sleep, fatigue and fear regarding my child's academic achievement and future life." Mothers have also reported some form of prejudice towards their children from teachers and peers.

The regular teachers who were interviewed complained that children with dyslexia tend to be overactive in class, difficult to teach, lack intelligence, do not apply themselves, and use their condition as a crutch to avoid working. In sum, they are a burden and hold back other students.

The reasons behind stigmatization of dyslexia are mostly related to lack of knowledge, misinterpreting signs of disability, and discrimination. Through awareness training, most concerned parties develop a more positive attitude toward these children and start treating them fairly and respectfully.

The electronic informational platforms developed by the afore-mentioned NGOs and ongoing awareness campaigns in the social media are instrumental in raising awareness, offer support, guide parents, and inform viewers about available resources to reach for children with dyslexia.

COVID-19 and Dyslexia

The Corona virus has changed teaching and learning in unprecedented ways. The lockdown, closure of schools, and the shift to online teaching have created many challenges to teachers, parents and students alike.

Paradoxically, the switch to virtual learning has been advantageous to students with dyslexia. Parents reported that their children felt more confident as they were able to get adult support immediately during reading assignments, or were more comfortable expressing themselves without fear of being criticized by their classmates, to the point that one mother shared her daughter's apprehension of going back to school one day. Others received individualized attention from the teacher through private channels and extra drill and practice activities. In fact, according to one special educator, when students were allowed briefly on campus, intervention sessions were undermined by the compulsory wearing of masks, making it difficult to practice lip movement, phonemic awareness activities, and reading in general. Hence, virtual learning became a blessing in disguise.

Assessment of Dyslexia Methods and Practices

As dyslexia is manifested differently in different languages, there is no consensus among researchers on the best way to assess this disorder, although it is commonly accepted that such assessment should include a measure of cognitive abilities, achievement, and “literacy-related cognitive deficits (Elbeheri, Everatt, Reid, & al Mannai, 2006, p. 150)”.

In the Arab countries, the issue of assessment of dyslexia poses an even larger problem, especially for monolingual Arab students in the absence of comprehensive standardized tools validated in the Arab context, taking into consideration the unique orthographic and morphological characteristics of the Arabic language (Elbeheri, et al, 2006).

While in Lebanon, this issue is not as thorny given that most Lebanese children are bilingual, albeit with varying degrees of proficiency, assessment of dyslexia in Lebanon is far from being a unified practice among various clinicians.

Based on their long experience in the field of assessment and a thorough review of several sample reports written by specialists from both schools of thought, the authors synthesized their impressions in the section below.

Diagnosticians come from mostly two schools of thought in Lebanon: The French system and the Anglo Saxon approach.

In the French system that is guided by the belief that speech therapy is firmly rooted in the medical field (www.usj.edu.lb/formations/form.php?diplome=136#), speech pathologists are in charge of the assessment. They follow a common qualitative assessment model, consisting of a battery of standardized or informal tests in French or English, tapping several aspects of cognitive

abilities and oral language, and a brief sampling of the student's decoding and spelling, along with a detailed error analysis.

In their conclusion, speech therapists abstain from using the term *dyslexia*, and prefer to refer to the child's condition as 'reading difficulties'. Their recommendations almost always involve referral for language therapy sessions, and for psychomotor evaluation and remediation, as these two professions are inseparable and complement each other in assessment and treatment of dyslexia in the French system.

On the other hand, the Anglo-Saxon school endorses the neuropsychological approach to assessment which is typically carried out by a psychologist who uses a standard protocol, with minor variations, depending on the level of training of the diagnostician. The battery of assessment typically consists of an IQ test (commonly the Wechsler Scales or the Kaufman Assessment Battery), tests of achievement, and on occasions, some specialised screeners (for example, Dyslexia Screening Test), a comprehensive measure of phonological processing (e.g, CTOPP), a test of graphomotor skills or informal symptoms checklists. Since comorbidity of dyslexia is common with ADHD and behavior disorders, many psychologists opt to screen for such co-existing conditions to get the full picture.

In their diagnosis, specialists schooled in the Anglo-Saxon approach are generally reluctant to use the term *dyslexia* explicitly, and may substitute specific reading disorder for it.

In the absence of locally validated tools, the issue of assessment of dyslexia in Lebanon remains an art and a science. Except for the Arabic version of the WISC-IV (adapted by Liban Test Editions), diagnosticians struggle to adapt Western tests, and are confronted with a number of biases and ethical issues when interpreting the results of language tasks and phonological processing. The picture gets further complicated by the interference of diglossia, the dual form of

the Arabic language, classical and colloquial. For many students, classical Arabic is perceived as yet another foreign language, and find difficulty in understanding and expressing it, both orally and in writing (Oweini, Awada, & Kaissi, 2020; Schiff & Saiegh-Haddad, 2018).

It should finally be noted that psychoeducational assessment is prohibitively expensive in Lebanon, and is not covered by any form of insurance. On the bright side, the Ministry of Social Affairs offers free diagnostic services for disenfranchised children, but their breadth and depth leave much to be desired.

Two technological dyslexia tools are worth mentioning here: An externally funded mobile application (DOT Lebanon) that aims at student remediation and parental support was developed by a group of youths in the Digital Training Program parental tips (Obeid, Zakharia, & Alameddine, 2019), but its effectiveness still needs to be validated.

Another tool under preparation is the top-ranking ERASMUS+ project "Partnering Outside the Box", bringing together the University of Tuscia in Italy and Université Paris Nanterre (UPN), with a budget of €446,697, and developed by Lebanese scientist Antoine Harfouche. It aims at designing and implementing a digital platform through artificial Intelligence to support higher education students with dyslexia (Université Paris Nanterre, 2020).

In sum, the field of assessment of dyslexia in Lebanon is hampered by a number of constraints: the incongruous diagnostic approaches, the uneven qualifications of specialists, the lack of locally validated tools, the adverse effect of diglossia and the high costs of test administration.

Inclusion of Students with Dyslexia

According to the special educators interviewed, inclusion of students with dyslexia varies from school to school. In the French system, different specialists work with different aspects of the

child's educational needs. The special educator adapts the curriculum and the speech therapist along with the psychomotor specialist provide therapy. In all schools, inclusion services are commensurate with the severity of dyslexia and are highly individualized. They could be partial or full inclusion. In the former, a special educator visits class to read the exam for the child, makes the text larger, provides extra time on the exam, or gives the student a reading ruler. In full inclusion, a whole team of specialists is mobilized to attend to the child's various academic needs and provide consultation to the regular classroom teacher on the best ways to help such students in class. Inclusion typically requires pull-out remedial services, with hours ranging from a minimum of 4 times to a maximum of 15 per week, usually in one-on-one sessions, or small group of no more than 3 students with similar levels.

Specialist Dyslexia Schools

Based on a national survey published by the Inclusive Schools Guidebook (Nadjarian, 2008), dyslexia, which was categorized under "specific learning difficulty", has a prevalence of 29.6%, according to their national survey, identifying 40 private schools in various Lebanese governorates that provide systematic services to students with special needs, including dyslexia.

On the occasion of naming April 12 a National Day for Students with Difficulties in 2012, a guide prepared by SKILD, in collaboration with the British Council and the Center for Research and Development (affiliated to the Ministry of Education), provided an exhaustive list of schools that cater for students with special needs, centers that provide diagnostic and remedial services to this population, and finally NGOs that are dedicated to helping students with severe disabilities. In this guide, the number of private inclusive schools across Lebanon was 77, including 14 specialized

schools and 6 public schools. Of the specialized schools, two are worth mentioning: DYS, which purports to help students with specific learning disabilities (albeit not exclusively), and Collège de la Providence (Ecole EPI) which is a pilot French school dedicated to students with specific learning disabilities, mainly dyslexia (Directory of Inclusive Schools in Lebanon, 2012)

Immediate Goals for Lebanon

It appears that goals related to dyslexia in Lebanon are closely associated with the NGO work with the Ministry of Education.

In 2013, CLES signed a protocol with the MoE for a 10-year period to fund the establishment of 200 Learning support Classes in 200 public schools across Lebanon.

In a similar vein, SKILD conducted a survey in 2013 to assess the needs of public schools for special education departments which subsequently led to the establishment of special education departments in 30 public schools in 2016. SKILD trained the teaching personnel in 11 of these schools (H. Al Jamal, Personal Communication, February 7, 2021)

Consequently, immediate goals for Lebanon involve a commitment to pursuing the efforts of equipping more public schools in Lebanon and training teachers and personnel to cater for the needs of students with dyslexia.

Finally, diagnostic and remedial dyslexia tools that are currently under development or being validated will soon be available for the public use. With the concerted effort of awareness campaigns, teacher training, the proliferation of private and public inclusive schools for dyslexia, and the expected legislative amendments and ongoing improvement of accommodations on official exams to reach international standards, it can be safely inferred that a lot has been done to promote dyslexia in Lebanon, and more work is in the pipeline, waiting to see the light as soon as the COVID-19 subsides.

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