

Book Review: Learning disorders: A response to intervention perspective

Reviewed by **Wendy Moore.**

Peter Westwood, Learning disorders: A response to intervention perspective, Routledge, 2017.

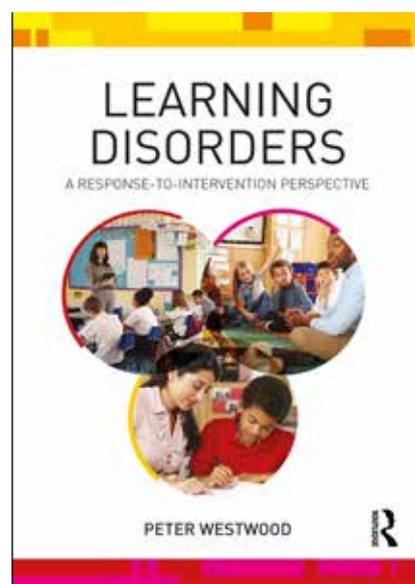
I am very much committed to making sure that students at my school are given the support they need to be successful, so was delighted to receive this little gem to review. Peter Westwood is a prolific and assured authority in the field of learning difficulties and disorders, and this short, clear and practical guide communicates directly with schools and teachers about how they can make a difference. I would have been a little disappointed if I had been able to read this book without it challenging any of my current beliefs and practices; I don't undertake professional reading just to have my current thinking corroborated! No fear of that though: *Learning Disorders* got me delving back into the research, questioning assumptions, and emailing teachers at my school about things I am now wondering about. In short, it has proven to be a great little poke in the ribs.

The book is of very manageable length, but still covers plenty of ground. First, Westwood sets the scene, clearly explaining how learning disorders have been conceptualised over time, and how they are currently understood in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom. For Australian readers this is an absolute boon – while there is a focus on our context, this is

balanced and enriched by international perspectives. Next, he carefully explains how learning disorders might be distinguished from other causes of poor academic performance, and how they might be exacerbated by these other factors. He then clearly describes the characteristics and learning needs of students with reading disorders, writing disorders, and mathematical learning disorders. In the last part of the book, other difficulties that can impact on learning are discussed.

We can all get hung up on terminology: is it a learning difficulty, specific or otherwise, or is it a learning disorder? Should we call it dyslexia, or reading disorder? Does dysgraphia refer to handwriting specifically, or writing more broadly? Westwood handles these issues deftly, explaining how each term has been used, but stubbornly refusing to enter into arguments about which term is 'best' or 'right'. While practitioners and theorists will have particular reasons for their nomenclature choices, they have little bearing on what should happen in classrooms, and that is the approach taken in this book.

A particular strength of *Learning Disorders* is its adoption of the three-tier *response to intervention* model as the basis of its recommendations for supporting students in schools. Westwood thus places responsibility for the progress of students with learning disorders where it belongs: with whole school policy and resourcing. He makes clear that schools must make the necessary provision for providing quality teachers, effective instructional models and robust learning programs at each of the recommended three tiers of support: the mainstream classroom context, regular small group remediation for those at risk, and daily individual intervention for students who require it. The book thus provides a very clear guide for school leaders.



In the chapter about dyslexia, Westwood notes that the three-tier intervention model should begin at Tier One with effective teaching that focuses in the first years of school on phonemic awareness, phonics, and the automatic recognition of frequently occurring words. He argues that reading instruction should begin with the systematic teaching of letter-sound correspondences using a synthetic phonics program, and explains what this might look like. Usefully, he lists some available programs that are good examples of this approach. He explains that this learning should never occur in isolation, and that providing students with appropriate decodable texts that allow them to practise the phonic patterns that they have learnt is critical. Westwood notes that flash cards and digital resources offer appropriate practice activities, and that linking phonic learning with early spelling practice is very useful. He also emphasises the importance of teaching reading comprehension strategies, and reminds us that young students need to

have engaging stories read to them daily. Westwood notes that despite effective delivery of good early instruction, some students will require additional support. Some students will require second tier, or even third tier support, and the earlier these students are identified and remediation provided, the better.

The model of Tier Two support for reading disorders described in this book includes intensive daily teaching in groups of up to four students, preferably using a program with carefully sequenced steps. Active engagement, accelerated pace, frequent positive (and corrective) feedback and mandatory re-teaching to mastery are all required, and are the hallmarks of an explicit instruction approach. Westwood suggests that commercial programs are often effective ways to achieve these outcomes, and provides *MacqLit* and *Success for All* as examples.

Tier Three support for the three percent of students with the most entrenched reading disorders requires daily, individual sessions. The argument here is that this remediation should be provided by a very experienced teacher rather than a paraprofessional. As well as intensive and accelerated teaching, this daily tutoring can involve counselling. In *Learning Disorders* Westwood describes some different Tier Three interventions. He describes the efficacy of *Reading Recovery* (RR), but notes that, to be optimal, this approach will require modification through a supplementary focus on phonics. He cites research suggesting that individual tutoring, as required by RR, may be too expensive an option for students who can be helped just as effectively by strong Tier One and Tier Two programs, and notes that RR may have limited applicability for students with the highest levels of need. Westwood then describes the evidence available in support of both the *MultiLit Reading Tutor Program* and *QuickSmart Literacy* (from the University of New England in NSW), as well as linking to other systematic reviews of a range of online and face to face programs which focus more heavily on Tier One and Tier Two interventions, many of which appear to have good efficacy.

Learning Disorders includes a really useful chapter on writing and spelling disorders, again from a three-tier response to intervention framework. Westwood emphasises the need for teaching, rather than just encouraging, spelling and writing structures and processes. While he supports the view

of writing as a communicative and social process, he is wary of classroom writing environments that lack direct teacher guidance. He notes that, at Tier One, all students need to become confident with handwriting and spelling, typing and word processing, constructing and punctuating sentences, and with creating paragraphs. He also emphasises the need for teacher vigilance in identifying students who require support from the very first year at school. He is critical of a developmental perspective that assumes that writing will emerge in due course given enough encouragement and opportunity. Rather, Westwood encourages Tier Two interventions from early on. The important message here is that dyslexic students and others with difficulty framing their ideas to compose text will require structures to scaffold the writing process.

One minor concern I have about this book is the relatively brief discussion of students who have a significant difficulty with the oral language requirements of reading comprehension and broader academic engagement. While Westwood does discuss the additional needs of students with *specific language impairment* (now more commonly referred to as *developmental language disorder*), he suggests that this is a relatively small group compared to those presenting with dyslexia. However, co-occurrence is common: around half of students with reading difficulties, including those who are the most resistant to intervention, may also experience DLD (see the review by Adlof & Hogan, 2018). Westwood makes the sensible suggestion that students with oral language-based difficulties will require additional support with vocabulary and other aspects of language, but makes no specific suggestions for the content of these interventions. This omission reflects the reality in schools: short of individually designed speech pathology interventions, comprehensive oral language enrichment programs are difficult to source.

The chapter on mathematical learning difficulties, like the earlier chapters, is organised into tiers of intervention. At Tier One, Westwood makes sensible suggestions about how to balance the need for learning basic arithmetic facts with the need for students to be engaged in meaningful mathematical problem solving. Appropriate focus areas and teaching methodologies for Tier Two and Tier

Three are provided, and include judicious selection of digital learning resources. Suggested resources include *Math Recovery*, *Numeracy Recovery*, and the *QuickSmart Mathematics Intervention*. There is also reference to reports and reviews which evaluate a number of other resources.

This handy reference book is balanced, up-to-date, and a very useful reference to assist schools and teachers to decide how to organise intervention and where to start with program selection. Even more importantly, it is a reminder that meeting the needs of students with learning difficulties is not only an educational imperative, it is actually very achievable. Use it as a guide to make a start, or to do even better.

Reference:

Adlof, S. & Hogan, T. (2018). Understanding dyslexia in the context of developmental language disorder. *Language, Speech and Hearing Services in Schools*, 49, 762-763. doi: 10.1044/2018_LSHSS-DYSLC-18-0049

Peter Westwood is a former teacher and teacher educator, as well as an academic researcher, who now freelances as an education writer and editor. He is widely published in the field of education with several bestselling books on special education, learning difficulties and inclusive education, including his bestselling title Commonsense methods for children with special needs (Routledge), first published in 1993 and now in its 7th edition. Peter is a Life Member of Learning Difficulties Australia.

Wendy Moore, PhD, is a member of LDA Council and a school principal from Western Australia with a strong interest in supporting students with literacy, language and learning difficulties. Email wendy.m.moore@gmail.com