IS DYSLEXIA A FORM OF SPECIFIC LANGUAGE IMPAIRMENT? A COMPARISON OF DYSLEXIC AND LANGUAGE IMPAIRED CHILDREN AS ADOLESCENTS

Nata K. Goulandris,
University College London, United Kingdom

Margaret J. Snowling
University of York, United Kingdom

Ian Walker
Max Planck Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience, Bennewitz, Germany

Two groups of adolescents with a childhood history of language impairment were compared with a group of developmentally dyslexic young people of the same age and nonverbal ability. The study also included two comparison groups of typically developing children, one of the same age as those in the clinical groups, and a younger comparison group of similar reading level to the dyslexic students. Tests of spoken and written language skills revealed that the adolescents with dyslexia were indistinguishable from those with resolved language impairments on spoken language tasks, and both groups performed at age-expected levels. However, both dyslexic readers and those with resolved specific language impairments showed deficits in phonological awareness. On written language tasks, a different pattern of performance was...
apparent. In reading and spelling, adolescents with dyslexia performed only as well as those with persistent oral language impairments and younger controls. However, their reading comprehension was better. The theoretical and educational implications of these findings are discussed.

Specific language impairment (SLI) and developmental reading disorder (dyslexia) are usually considered two distinct conditions (e.g., DSM-IV, American Psychiatric Association 1994). The term dyslexia is usually used to describe a child who has a disorder of written language skills despite ostensibly normal oral language abilities, and there is general agreement that such children have specific phonological deficits (Snowling 1991). In contrast, the term specific language impairment is used to describe children who have problems with the acquisition of spoken language despite normal nonverbal ability (Bishop 1997). The language difficulties of SLI children tend to encompass a wide range of linguistic processes including vocabulary impairments and grammatical deficits (Leonard et al. 1987; Bishop and Leonard 2000).

However, many dyslexic children have a history of language difficulty (Rutter and Yule 1975) and it is common for children with language impairments to go on to have reading difficulties (Scarborough 1990; Tallal, Ross, and Curtiss 1989; van der Lely and Stollwerck 1996). Such findings suggest that the two disorders exist on a continuum of language disorder, both groups of children showing deficits in phonological awareness and phonological processing (Catts 1989, 1993, 1996; Stackhouse and Wells 1997). Within this view, dyslexia is conceptualized either as a mild form of language impairment, affecting only the phonological system, or as a residual problem that remains when oral language difficulties have resolved (Aram, Ekelman, and Nation 1984; Scarborough and Dobrich 1990).

An alternative interpretation of these findings is that language impairment is a risk factor for dyslexia (Snowling, Bishop, and Stothard 2000). According to this view, phonological skills are critical to reading development (Byrge et al. 1997; Share 1995) and, to the extent that children have phonological difficulties, they will be at risk of reading failure. However, whether or not they show specific reading difficulties/dyslexia depends on how this phonological deficit interacts with other cognitive and language skills (Snowling 2000). For children who have good semantic skills, a degree of compensation is possible (Nation and Snowling 1998), and it is likely that the common dyslexic profile of better reading comprehension than word-