

 UNICAMILLUS MEDICAL UNIVERSITY



UNICAMILLUS

Guide on Specific Learning Disorders (SLDs) and Special Educational Needs (SENs)

by Adriano Acciarino

SLDs and SENs

What are Specific Learning Disorders (SLDs)?

Specific Learning Disorders (SLDs) are neurological disorders with a high genetically specific familiarity. They affect about 3.5 % of Italian students and include dyslexia, dysorthographia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia. The same individual is rarely diagnosed with a single SLD, while more often a comorbidity is observed.

With no balanced educational support, these disorders negatively affect the educational process, in spite of the normal cognitive abilities of the affected individuals. Students diagnosed with SLDs suffer from impaired functioning of their working memory—a system for the temporary storage and management of information. In 2010, Law 170, ‘New regulations on specific learning disorders in schools’, was issued in order to ‘guarantee the right to study and ensure equal opportunities for the development of skills in the social and professional areas for people with SLD’ (Art. 2). More specifically, Art. 5 of the aforementioned law, and Art. 6 of the Implementing Decree no. 5669 of 12/7/2011, establish the rights of students with SLD and guarantee that universities must adapt to their needs in terms of teaching, organisation and assessment.

The guidelines annexed to the Implementing Decree No. 5669, in paragraph 7, highlight that ‘Students with SLD are found in all university courses: if they are properly supported, they can achieve academic qualifications with excellent results [...] even universities, in compliance with the purposes of the law, will have to play an important role, by finding solutions within the teaching and assessment methodologies and promoting the use of strategies and resources.’ The same article outlines a number of dispensatory measures and compensatory tools, as well as teaching flexibility for conducting examinations.

What are Special Educational Needs (SENs)?

The acronym SENs stands for Special Educational Needs. These are special learning requirements, whether permanent or temporary, arising for a variety of reasons, including one or more specific learning disorders (SLDs). In Italy, this term started to gain currency following the Ministerial Directive of 27 December 2012 on ‘Instruments of intervention for pupils with Special Educational Needs and local organisation for school inclusion’, but in fact this issue had already been addressed by Law 53/2003 on the personalisation of teaching resources.

The Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) introduced recognition of students with SENs, i.e. individuals who, continuously or temporarily, have special educational needs, due to physical, psychological, social, physiological or biological causes. SENs are therefore not a diagnostic category, and per se they do not identify a specific disorder, since any student can develop SENs during their studies. All students with learning difficulties have the right to receive customised teaching, as provided for by Law 53/2003. More specifically, three categories of students with SENs have been identified:

- students with diagnosed and documented disabilities;
- students with specific developmental disorders (including SLD, but also language impairment, non-verbal impairment, motor impairment, ADHD);
- students experiencing social, cultural and/or linguistic disadvantage.



Differences between SLDs and specific SENs

According to Art. 1 of Law 170/2010, 'specific' learning disorders are defined by the fact that they occur without any other sensory or neurological impairment and can affect specific individual abilities:

- Dyslexia: speed and correctness in reading;
- Dysgraphia: graphomotor skills;
- Dysorthographia: language transcoding;
- Dyscalculia: automatic calculation and number processing.

Consequently, an individual suffering from dyslexia will have problems reading and understanding exam questions, whereas a student suffering from dysgraphia or dysorthographia will find it particularly hard to process and write an answer to an open-ended question, and finally, a student affected by dyscalculia will have serious difficulties with exams involving mathematical reasoning and calculation. Such differences obviously entail differences in the specific educational needs that arise from each SLD, but even more so in the specificity of the SEN of each individual student suffering from SLD.

However, it is important to keep in mind that in most cases several SLDs are found in comorbidity in the same individual.

Teaching support

UniCamillus University, with the aim of promoting inclusion and accessibility for all students, has drawn up Regulations for the inclusion and right to study of students with disabilities and/or SLDs, in order to regulate the University's services in supporting students with disabilities and/or specific learning disorders, in compliance with the applicable legislation. The aforementioned Regulations can be consulted on the institutional website at the link below:

[Regolamento inclusione e diritto allo studio.pdf](#)