

Supporting Students with Specific Learning Difficulties

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30th November 2021



Outline of Presentation

- Introduction to Dyslexia
- Assessment – how is dyslexia diagnosed?
- Impact at Third level
- How can we support students at 3rd level



Snowling (2012)

- Dyslexia appears to arise principally from a weakness in phonological (speech sound) skills, and there is good evidence that it can be ameliorated by systematic phonic teaching combined with phonological awareness training.



The Irish Government Task Force on Dyslexia (2002) definition is as follows:

*'Dyslexia is manifested in a continuum of specific learning difficulties related to the acquisition of basic skills in **reading, spelling and/or writing**, such difficulties being **unexplained** in relation to an individual's other abilities and educational experiences. It is typically characterised by inefficient **information processing**, including difficulties in **phonological processing, working memory, rapid naming and automaticity** of basic skills. Difficulties in **organisation, sequencing and motor skills** may also be present'.*



Reid & Kirk (2001)

- state that

‘one of the key issues is that people with dyslexia will not all exhibit the same characteristics, nor to the same degree’



Dyxlisea

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Co-Occurring Difficulties

Dyspraxia
/ DCD

Dyslexia

Autism

Dyscalculia

ADHD

Mental Health
difficulties



Assessment

- The assessment covers a range of literacy skills including reading of single words (both real and non-words), phonological awareness, reading fluency/speed, reading accuracy, comprehension, spelling, and writing fluency/speed.
- Related cognitive skills including memory, information processing, rapid naming and other language skills are also investigated.



Assessment

- Background information is also gathered as part of the assessment process including educational, social, medical and family history.
- This information is analysed alongside results of tests that are administered by the educational psychologist on the day of the assessment.



Assessment of SLD (Dyslexia)

- no longer required to use the **ability-achievement discrepancy model** to assess eligibility for specific learning disabilities (SLD).
- Alternate models for SLD eligibility have been proposed, including the **Response to Intervention (RTI) model** (e.g., Bradley, Danielson, & Doolittle, 2005; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006) and the **Pattern of Strengths and Weakness (PSW) model** (e.g., Flanagan, Fiorello, & OrAz, 2010; Hale et al., 2010).
- The PSW model has been increasingly promoted by researchers and has gained the support of School Psychologists in the US (Christo & Jones, 2014)



DARE

- **A psychological assessment report of any age**, which clearly states that the applicant presents with a Specific Learning Difficulty (SLD; other acceptable terminology includes: Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, Specific Learning Disability/ Disorder).
- IQ Score or General Ability Score is no longer a requirement for DARE. IQ score and General Ability level are not considered exclusionary factors for DARE.
- Applicants must have **two literacy** or **two numeracy attainment scores** at or below the 10th percentile (Standard Score of 81 or below).



Dyslexia – impact at 3rd level

- The individual needs to reread to gain understanding
- Reading fluency / accuracy / speed
- Sequencing difficulties
- Erratic spelling /persistent spelling errors
- Difficulty getting ideas down on paper
- Written examinations, particularly if timed
- Following a number of instructions if given at the same time



Dyslexia – impact at 3rd level

- Difficulty reading new words – phonetic decoding
- Poor concept of time
- Planning & Organising difficulties
- Word retrieval when speaking / writing
- Misreading / miscopying information
- Grammatical structure
- Memorising facts & formulae
- Taking notes – e.g. in class
- Transferring learning from one situation to another



Strengths include:

- Good problem-solving skills
- May have good visual skills
- Ability to process information holistically
- Good oral skills
- Awareness of own difficulties
- Can quite readily utilise compensatory strategies
- Creative
- Persistent
- Determined
- Hard working
- Resilient



Protective Factors

- Good visual reasoning skills ability to use visual schema e.g. mind maps, spider diagrams, “picturing” words,
- High level of verbal reasoning skills –can use context/activate prior knowledge...
- Rich vocabulary/good expressive language
- Intrinsic qualities :persistence, motivation, positive temperament
- Supportive family.....exposure to books
- Good teaching, early identification & availability of good LST



Dyslexia: Individual Impact

“Debbie”

- 18 Years of Age
- Received diagnosis: age 7
- Maximum amount of early intervention
- Positive school experiences, successfully completed secondary school
- Experienced success, developed confidence and self-belief as a learner
- Progressed to third level education
- Happily studying for her chosen degree and has career plan mapped out

“Peter”

- 41 Years of Age
- Received diagnosis: age 40
- Unidentified, no intervention
- Negative school experiences, reported academic anxiety since primary school (age 7), early school leaver age 15
- Experienced a series of failures, developed negative views of self, complicated anger and frustration
- Developed alcohol dependency (has been in recovery for 8 years) – rejected life changing opportunities
- Studying for his chosen degree, making sense of his entire past and life experiences – hoping he will be successful

Supporting Students at 3rd Level

- Handouts and class notes on the web before class
- Informal discussions with students
- Suggest students try to help themselves – teach students strategies to manage difficulties
- Use of AT
- Emphasise strengths
- Foster positive self-esteem
- Flexible teaching & assessment methods
- Use visual and oral stimuli in the classroom



Supporting Students at 3rd Level

- Consider oral/aural exercises, of the right standard, instead of written ones
- Add extra time for all types of assessment, if it is useful, but don't add to a student's agony by giving too much time
- Cloze (gap-filling) exercises are often too difficult
- Consider allowing the use of a PC / laptop / tablet
- Assignment extensions
- Recording of lectures



Student Experience

Jennifer is a mature student, 30 years old, in Final year, diagnosis of Dyslexia in her late 20's and has undiagnosed depression and anxiety.

J presented with **low mood, low self- esteem and low motivation**

J missed a significant amount of time in college and was behind on her workload and did not feel she could get through the year successfully.

J had difficulty regulating her emotions, which in turn had an impact on her ability to meet academic demands.

NLN psychologist supported her by working with her on a **weekly basis** over the academic year. She often felt overwhelmed with the amount of outstanding work and so the psychologist focused on supporting her with **organisation skills and managing her workload** in order to feel that she was making progress with her assignments.

As she had some trouble with emotional regulation the psychologist provided **psychoeducation around thoughts, feelings and behaviours, explored negative thinking habits and maladaptive avoidance behaviour**. The student was taught how to engage in activities like **rationalising negative thought exercises** and worked with SC to **develop a wellness toolbox**.

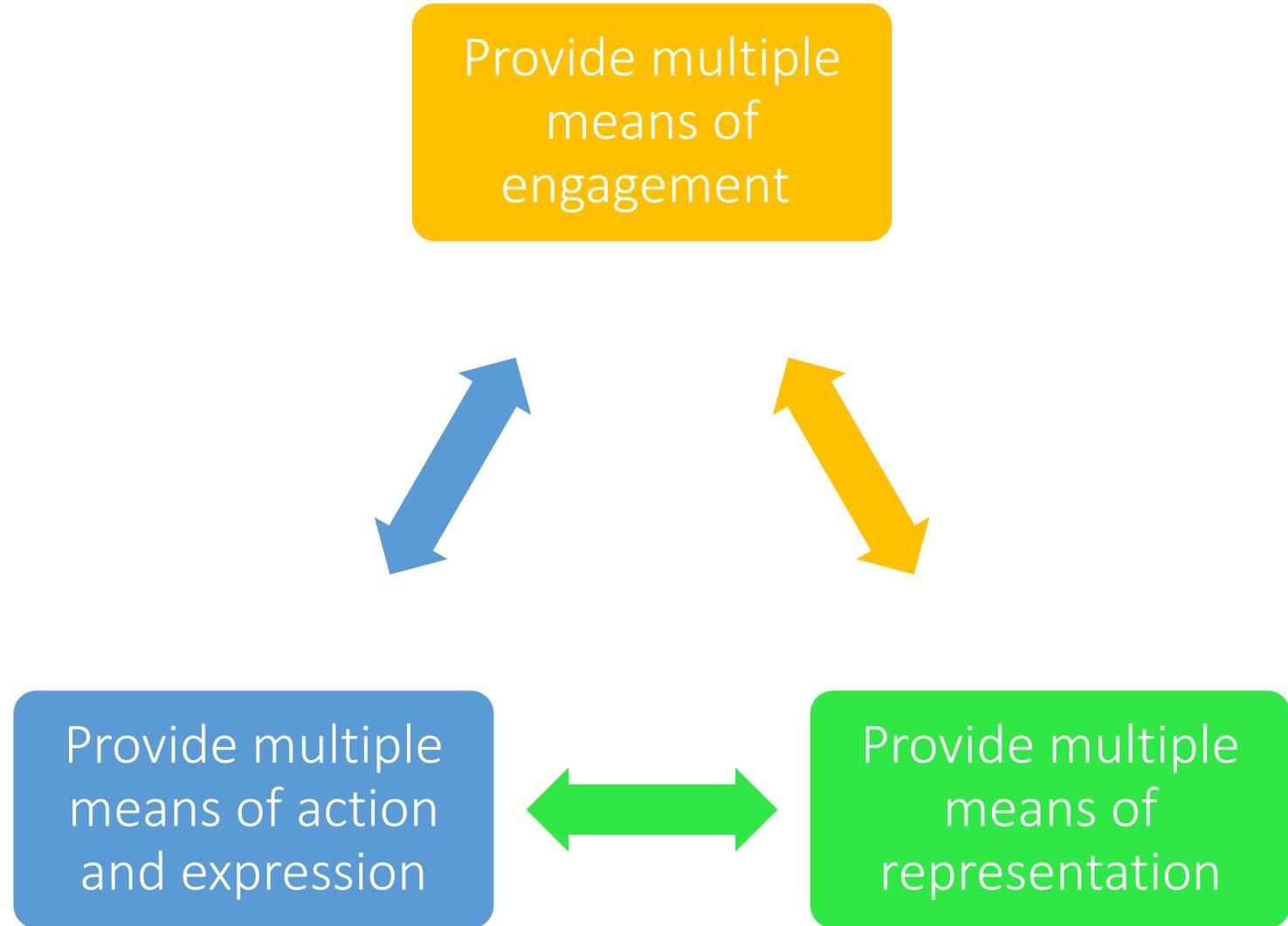
A really important piece for this student was giving her a **safe space** and providing her with a **listening ear, validation of her feelings and emotions and providing positive affirmations**, which highlighted her many strengths.

Another important aspect was signposting the student to other services on campus such as Assistive Technology, and supporting the student to link in with academic staff, and the student counsellor.

At times the above was a challenge for both the student and the psychologist. However, with **collaborative work across the university, significant positive outcomes** were achieved. Jennifer **successfully completed her final year**.

*Pseudonyms are used in this example of student experiences

Universal Design for Learning

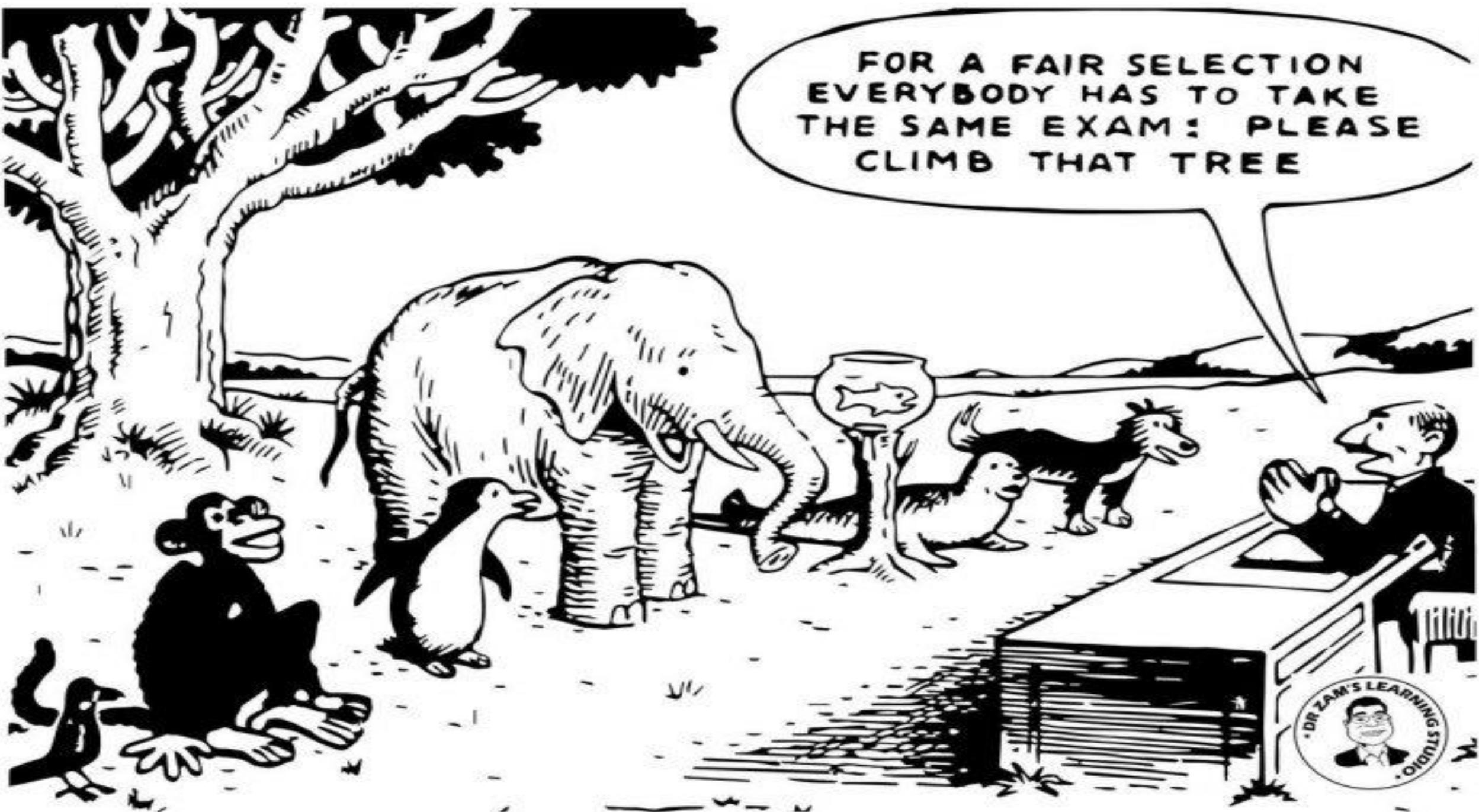


Universal Design for Learning

- UDL is a set of principles for curriculum development that give all individuals equal opportunities to learn
- Aims to improve the educational experience of all students
- Introduction of more flexible methods of teaching, assessment and service provision to cater for the diversity of learners in our classrooms



FOR A FAIR SELECTION
EVERYBODY HAS TO TAKE
THE SAME EXAM: PLEASE
CLIMB THAT TREE



Supporting students at third level

We can draw on theories from education and psychology to inform how we support students with specific learning difficulties at college / university



Evidence based strategies based on.....

Constructivist

student actively
involved in process of
learning

Humanist

– learning is student
centred and
personalised. Sense
of belonging

Behaviourist

– self monitoring,
rewards, goals, targets

Learning Theory

e.g. Transformative
Learning Theory
(Mezirow)

Self-efficacy

Extensive research shows that students who develop appropriate learning strategies and undertake their study activities with a sense of self-efficacy are more likely to progress better and achieve higher (Yusuf, 2011).

Our aim should be to increase the self-efficacy of students by teaching them strategies they will need to successfully navigate all aspects of college life. It is hoped that as their competence grows, so too will their self-efficacy, helping students to enhance their performance, progress steadily and achieve to the best of their potential.



Motivation

There are several psychological theories of motivation, with Self-Determination Theory (SDT), being one of the most prominent.

SDT postulates that students who act with a sense of autonomy, competence and relatedness when engaging in learning activities experience high levels of motivation(Reeve, 2012).

We can teach strategies that aim to support and vitalise student's internal motivational resources, helping to enhance their learning and achievement.



Attribution Theory / Fixed vs growth mindset - The reasons students give for their success or failure.

We can help students:

- develop their knowledge of individual learning strengths and improve areas they find more difficult
- acquire new study skills and learning strategies to help improve their academic outcomes
- normalise failure as something we all experience and empower students with the belief that they can overcome failure in the future by making some simple changes.
- foster the belief that ability is not the sole or even primary determinant of academic flourishing at college



Self-Regulation & Metacognition

Self-regulation could be defined as the extent to which students are “metacognitively, motivationally and behaviourally active participants in their own learning process” (Zimmerman, 1989).

Research suggests that self-regulation is associated with greater levels of cognitive engagement, which results in higher levels of achievement and greater gains in learning (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990).





What are the outcomes for students?

Prepare students for post college

Empowerment

Skill development

Self-manage difficulties

Promote students' independence

Academic achievement

Thank you!

If you have any questions or concerns about the topics discussed today please contact:

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