Learning Disabilities Fact Sheet

Irlen Syndrome

What is Irlen Syndrome?

Irlen Syndrome is a sensitivity to brightness and glare. Psychologist Helen Irlen believes that half the people with dyslexia have this difficulty.[1] Some people with reading difficulties say that reading makes them tired and uncomfortable. They say the page blurs, letters move, the white spaces appear too bright – and all of this distracts them.

What specific strategies can help?

Irlen helps people with this visual problem by modifying the amount of light that enters the eye. She uses coloured sheets of plastic to cover the printed page or special coloured lenses. A trained psychologist or special educator does screening tests and decides the exact colour of the plastic sheets or lenses.

What can we do in our literacy programs in Nunavut?

If you or the learner suspect vision problems, a visit to the health centre and possibly a referral to an ophthalmologist is important – to rule out any serious abnormalities.

You can try coloured transparencies to cover the learner's page as she is reading. Put a blue, then a green, then a red transparency on the page and see if any of the colours make a difference to her reading.

Some learners may want to use sun glasses while reading. They can experiment with different coloured lenses. Some learners may have trouble reading certain coloured chalk or markers (e.g. green markers on a white board). Talk about this possibility with the learners, experiment with different papers or boards and writing tools and make changes where you can.[2]

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[1] Goldstein, Ricki. Taking the Mystique out of Learning Disabilities, A Practical Guide for Literacy Tutors. Laubach Literacy of Canada, Saint John NB, 2000.

[2] Adapted from Purvis, Sheila. Adult Basic Education SPECIAL NEEDS a Handbook for Instructors