Colored Overlays
A strategy for students with visual stress or dyslexia

Colored overlays are simply tinted sheets of acetate plastic that students place over text to reduce visual stress. Other methods of implementing colored overlays include tinted lenses worn by students, tinted films for computer screens, and simply using colored paper instead of white paper.

Research has shown that students diagnosed with visual stress and dyslexia can improve reading speed and comprehension by using colored overlays (Bouldoukian, Wilkins, & Evans, 2002). In some studies, control groups of students without either diagnosis have also shown small improvements in both speed and comprehension when using colored overlays, so additional students may benefit from the use of colored overlays in an inclusion class (Evans & Allen, 2016).

The exact mechanism by which colored overlays work is still unclear. Hypotheses for the effect include ameliorating the sensory overstimulation of highly contrasting black-and-white text, reducing visual distortions, and the simple placebo effect.

Note: Colored overlays have not been conclusively proven to treat visual stress or dyslexia. The actual effect size in most studies was small, and even these results may be due to the placebo effect (Griffiths, Taylor, Henderson, & Barrett, 2013; Henderson, Tsgoka, & Snowling, 2013). The American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Ophthalmology, and several other professional organizations officially do not endorse colored overlays and actually caution against their recommendation because of the lack of scientific evidence (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2009).
In the classroom:

Students can be issued their own colored overlays in a preferred color or an entire set in a range of colors. The acetate sheets can also be trimmed down to be more discrete, which may make students more likely to accept the strategy.

Alternatively, assignments and other texts can be printed on colored paper. Colored copies can be provided for all students, regardless of diagnosis.

References

Options for implementation:
- Sheets of colored plastic
- Tinted lenses
- Using colored paper instead of white paper

Populations:
- Students diagnosed with visual stress
- Students with dyslexia
- Students who complain of headaches or difficulty seeing words on the page
- Students with ADHD
- Students who are learning English as a second language