

11. Supporting Pupils with Dyslexia: Emotional or Mechanistic Approaches to Literacy

**Seán MacBlain,¹ Angela O'Neill, Kelly Weir
and Mario MacBlain**

Each year, a significant number of pupils in Northern Ireland fail to engage with the curriculum because of the disability known as dyslexia. Some will develop high levels of anxiety following years of failure. It is suggested that schools typically employ mechanistic approaches to remediation, which in many cases, fail to address effectively the emotional and social needs of these pupils. Should these needs be ignored, pupils can then find themselves increasingly isolated and disaffected. This situation is exacerbated by the number of children whose first language is not English and who now reside in Northern Ireland. Some will have dyslexia, which may go unnoticed because of the emphasis placed on improving language and teaching word recognition skills. In September 2005 dyslexia became a recognised disability in Northern Ireland, placing greater responsibility upon schools to meet the needs of pupils with dyslexia, including those whose first language is not English.

Introduction

The *Special Educational Needs and Disability Act* (SENDA) became law in England in 2002, with a similar order becoming law in Northern Ireland in September 2005. Under this new legislation, schools who fail to offer appropriate provision for pupils with a disability, which now includes dyslexia, can be challenged in law on the grounds of discrimination. At the same time that this new legislation has been adopted, there has also been a rapid and sustained growth in the number of families in Northern Ireland

¹ Address for correspondence: Education Department, Stranmillis University College, Belfast, Nr. Ireland. BT9 5DY. Email: s.macblain@stran.ac.uk

whose first language is not English. Children from these families are now attending our schools, and it is possible that some will have dyslexia. This poses obvious challenges for teachers, as not only will they have to support these pupils in developing their skills and knowledge in English, but they will also have to address the specific problems relating to their dyslexia (see Cline and Fredrickson, 1999). More particularly, these factors have huge implications for how teachers are trained, and for the quality and type of continuing professional development that is offered to practising teachers.

Recommendations made in a relatively recent seminal report, entitled *Dyslexia, Literacy and Psychological Assessment* (Reason, Frederickson, Heffernan, Martin and Woods, 1999) have increasingly filtered into the practice of teachers. This is due, in large part, to the increasing awareness amongst policy and decision makers at school and local authority level regarding the importance of responding to the new disability legislation. This report, we suggest, offers a unique opportunity for teachers in both primary and secondary schools to address effectively the wider needs of pupils who have the disability of dyslexia, and who, in addition, do not speak English as their first language. This is because the report emphasises the importance of providing ‘appropriate learning opportunities’ and creating educational environments, which meet the specific needs of pupils through a ‘staged process of assessment’ (McCurry and MacBlain, 2005: 290-294).

By emphasising the provision of appropriate learning opportunities the report challenges schools to view the teaching of reading and spelling differently. Providing such opportunities extends far beyond the mechanical teaching of reading and spelling, to include equally important issues relating to anxiety, low self-esteem and even acute feelings of failure (Rosenthal, 1973; Humphrey, 2002, MacBlain, Hazzard and MacBlain, 2005). Such a view is not new.

Some twenty years ago, the psychologist Tom Ravenette (1985) argued that the pedagogical model employed at the time was essentially a mechanistic one, which failed to take account of the social, and more particularly, the emotional problems of those children who had specific literacy difficulties. Ravenette went so far as to argue that pupils with dyslexia were typically viewed by their teachers as ‘learning machines’ in

which a number of the parts were 'defective or inefficient' (Ravenette, 1985:36). When a pupil's feelings and emotions were, in fact acknowledged, he further argued that these were typically seen as barriers to learning rather than as fundamental aspects of cognitive functioning and behaviour, which were at the very core of the relationship between teacher and pupil. Such thinking, we suggest, continues to underpin much current practice in primary and secondary schools. In addition, mechanistic approaches to teaching may well be applied to those pupils with dyslexia whose first language is not English, at the expense of meeting their important emotional and social needs.

Methods

This paper draws upon the findings of two studies (O'Neill, 2005; Weir, 2005), which sought to examine the perceptions of primary teachers in Northern Ireland regarding dyslexia and, in particular, their knowledge regarding the identification and assessment of this group of pupils and their level of skill in teaching them. Both studies were used to gain data that could inform the future training of student teachers in Northern Ireland and assist in the continuing professional development of practising teachers working with dyslexic pupils, and more especially, those whose first language is not English. A conceptual framework based upon the findings of both studies is currently being trialled by one of the authors as a model for initial teacher training.

The first study undertook a survey of primary teachers of junior classes. The second was a case study of a particular primary school. With the former, questionnaires were sent to 40 primary schools in Northern Ireland, chosen on a random basis, with an invitation to add additional comments as considered necessary. In the case study, individual semi-structured interviews were carried out with all teaching staff in the case-study school, and a focus group discussion was held with the Senior Management Team over a six-month period. The school had an enrolment of 325 pupils, 12 full-time permanent teachers, one nursery teacher, one part-time special needs teacher and a non-teaching principal.

Results

Responses were received from 27 teachers, giving a return of 67.5%. Nineteen respondents had over ten years teaching experience, four had up to three years experience and four between four and six years. Ten were teachers of Primary One (teaching children aged 4 to 5), eleven of Primary Two (children aged 5 to 6) and six of composite Primary One and Two classes. Fourteen respondents had up to 25 pupils in their class and the others had classes sizes between 26 and 30. Fifteen percent of respondents teaching at Key Stage One had originally trained to teach Key Stage Two.

Data from both the survey and case study were considered under four headings and these will be considered in turn below:

- Teachers' understandings of dyslexia
- Identification and assessment
- Teaching pupils with dyslexia
- Perceived training opportunities

Teachers' understandings of dyslexia

When asked to rate their knowledge of dyslexia, just over half of the respondents (55%) rated this as fair and 44% as poor. When asked to define the term dyslexia, it was notable that those who had indicated that they had not received specific training gave brief and simplistic descriptors, such as: 'Failure to sight read key words' and 'Difficulty reading text which is not necessarily linked to being a slow learner'. Those who had received formal training in dyslexia offered responses with greater detail: 'Difficulty with reading/writing which prevents child from performing at a level commensurate with their IQ'.

A fifth (19%) identified literacy difficulties as the key indicator of dyslexia. Only five percent included mathematical problems in their definition and only two teachers made reference to Intelligence Quotients. Less than 50% referred to other difficulties common to dyslexia, such as: sequencing and memory difficulties, problems with processing information, emotional and behaviour difficulties, and problems with organisation.

Identification and assessment

Less than a third (26%) of respondents felt confident in their ability to identify dyslexia. Most respondents (93%) felt that it was very difficult to identify: 'I feel quite apprehensive about labelling a child with dyslexia if I am unsure. In many cases it is very clear, but in borderline/mild cases it can be quite difficult'. Over half (60%) felt that pupils could display signs of dyslexia prior to commencing formal education and 63% believed that it was possible to label a child as dyslexic as early as Primary One.

Two-fifths of respondents (41%) reported that, within their own schools, there were procedures in place to help identify dyslexia, which were included within the school's special needs policy. A minority (11%) however, responded that their schools had no recorded procedures whilst a further 11% indicated that they did not know if such procedures were in place within their schools. Over half (60%) of respondents reported that the writing of their school's special needs policy had been a whole-school exercise, with a number stating that issues relating to the formation of the special needs policy had been discussed in detail at a whole-school level. Of the 22 teachers who reported that the policy had been written as a whole-school activity, several emphasised their belief that responsibility for the writing of a school's SEN policy should, ultimately, lie with the SENCo (Special Educational Needs Coordinator).

Information was sought with regard to the type of assessments undertaken by teachers. Two-fifths (41%) of respondents indicated that they were aware of the existence of tests for dyslexia, whilst 48% responded that they were not and 11% that they were unsure. Of the respondents who indicated awareness, only two could name examples. One respondent emphasised the difference between types of training for dealing with literacy difficulties:

I feel that teachers are poorly trained to identify dyslexia. There is also a possibility of misinterpretation of pupil behaviour and work in the early years, e.g. poor spelling in the early years. Although I am Reading Recovery-trained, I do not know the tests for dyslexia.

Survey Respondent

Teaching pupils with dyslexia

Over a third (37%) of respondents felt confident in their ability to effectively teach a dyslexic pupil, whilst 44% reported that they were not confident and 19% that they were unsure. No significant difference emerged between newly qualified teachers and those with experience. Over half (56%) of respondents indicated that their school provided a wide variety of resources for pupils with dyslexia, whilst 44% reported that their school did not.

The majority (93%) reported that they had experience of drawing up individual education plans (IEPs) for pupils with literacy difficulties but not for dyslexia. Almost two-thirds (63%) acknowledged that IEPs were 'very useful' in planning an effective learning environment for dyslexic pupils, whilst 26% indicated they were 'quite useful' and 11% that they were 'useful'. The majority of respondents viewed the writing of an IEP as the responsibility of the class teacher. In most cases, however, the SENCo was seen as having a central role. Interestingly, two respondents indicated that the SENCo was not involved in the writing of IEPs. Less than half (44%) reported that parents were closely involved in the writing of IEPs whilst 18% reported that parents had no involvement. Over half (55%) reported that IEPs were reviewed between one and three months after they had been written, 44% between four and six months, and one respondent claimed that, in her school, IEPs were not reviewed until 10–12 months after being put in place.

Perceived training opportunities

Lack of training was an issue that was frequently raised by respondents. Three-quarters (74%) reported that they had received no specific training in the area of dyslexia during initial teacher training, with the majority claiming that few courses had been available to them as serving teachers after their initial teacher training. Most (89%) responded that they had never attended any in-service training in the area of dyslexia. Two respondents had attended in-service training offered by their schools and another had attended in-service training offered by their Education and Library Board. Responses indicated that the training was thought to be beneficial. All respondents indicated that they felt the need for more training. Most (89%) indicated that in-service training would assist them in

identifying pupils with dyslexia and 93% suggested that in-service training would assist them in providing appropriate teaching programmes.

Case study

Understandings of dyslexia

When asked to define the term dyslexia most (eight) of the twelve teachers in the case-study school gave descriptive responses as opposed to offering clear definitions e.g.: 'jumbled words', 'difficulties with spelling, handwriting and reading', 'difficulties with letters and words', 'difficulties recognising words and letters on a page', 'lack of understanding of words, how they look and their shape, how words relate to sentences', 'word blindness', 'not being able to compartmentalise', and, 'I really don't know, I'm not terribly sure of a definition'.

Identification and assessment

When asked how they might identify dyslexia, most responded with uncertainty. The majority (nine teachers) focused on literacy to the exclusion of other factors such as: working memory, motor coordination, articulation, organisation, co-ordination, verbal mediation, and automaticity.

With regard to assessment, the majority suggested using standardised testing and running records of literacy, but they were quick to point out that this would only help to identify general literacy difficulties, and that in the case of dyslexia, they would need to seek support from the SENCo. One teacher appeared to speak for the others when she emphasised that she was:

... not qualified to assess these pupils... I wouldn't even try to assess a child because I wouldn't have a clue where to start.

Teacher D

Two of the case-study teachers pointed out that only an educational psychologist could carry out a proper assessment and give a 'diagnosis' of dyslexia.

Teaching pupils with dyslexia

When asked if they had ever taught a pupil with dyslexia the majority (nine) responded that they had not. They did, however, admit to having some uncertainty about this: 'Probably, but did I know it... probably not' (Teacher J), 'Not that I'm aware of' (Teacher C), 'Not to the best of my knowledge' (Teacher D), and, 'I am not qualified to diagnose dyslexia and so it is hard to say if I have taught a child with dyslexia' (Teacher H).

Half of the teachers (six) stated that if they were concerned about a child in their class they would seek advice and discuss the issue with the SENCo as a first resort. Teacher G stated: 'I would seek help from someone who knows more about dyslexia than I do.' This begs the question as to whether the SENCo had themselves undergone appropriate training. Teacher H acknowledged this point: 'The SENCo should be able to disseminate good practice... unless the SENCo has had training then she will be in the same position as the class teacher.' Teacher G emphasised that, in many schools, the SENCo was a full-time teacher and, consequently, it would be difficult for them to provide the time and the necessary level of in-class support that class teachers would find useful.

It was noteworthy that responses relating to strategies that were used for teaching pupils with dyslexia were strategies that could also be used for pupils with a wide range of learning difficulties. Responses included such statements as: 'being patient, using praise to boost confidence and self esteem, giving additional help where possible and setting realistic targets' (Teacher D).

Perceived training opportunities

Opinions were sought on the subject of training in the area of dyslexia. All of the teachers emphasised that they had not received any specific training, either through school inset or through their Education and Library Boards. These particular findings support those highlighted in the report of the Task Group on Dyslexia (Department of Education/ An Roinn Oideachais/ Mannysterie O Lear, 2002), which reported that the target audience for courses on dyslexia has traditionally been: SENCos, teachers of pupils with a Statement of Special Educational Needs for dyslexia, and teachers

who work in units or schools for pupils with moderate learning difficulties (MLD).

Conclusions

The findings of both studies illustrate the powerful position of the class teacher, a position which can be further empowered through the support of Higher Education Institutes, Educational and Library Boards and school management. By reshaping the role of the teacher through their knowledge and involvement in assessment and provision, then it can be argued that a quantifiable difference can be made to the lives of pupils with dyslexia, and importantly, those dyslexic pupils whose first language is not English.

Specifically, four key areas where training for teachers could be provided emerged from the data. These were:

- Initial Teacher Training.
- Education and Library Boards who provide continuing professional development.
- In-service training days organised by school management teams through discussion with teaching staff.
- Teachers' own personal study, for example undertaking further study in a specialist area, for example, completion of postgraduate studies as with Masters in Education (MEd) degrees

The research highlighted the need to have a clear framework for training both during initial teacher training and with the continuing professional development of practising teachers. One such framework has emerged from the research and is to be trialled by the authors in the forthcoming year for the training of undergraduates in their final year of a four-year degree programme. In conclusion, it is argued that the challenges confronting teachers in supporting pupils who may not only have a reading difficulty but who may, in addition, be acquiring English as a second language, have huge implications for how teachers are trained, and for the quality and type of continuing professional development that is offered to practising teachers.

References

- Cline, T. & Frederickson, N. (1999) Identification and assessment of dyslexia in bi/multi-lingual children. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 2, (2), 81-93.
- Department of Education/ An Roinn Oideachais/ Mannysterie O Lear (2002). *The Education of Children and Young People With Specific Learning Difficulties: Report of the Task Group on Dyslexia*. Northern Ireland: Department of Education.
- Humphrey, N. (2002). Teacher and pupil ratings of self-esteem in developmental dyslexia, *British Journal of Special Education*. 29 (1), 29-36.
- MacBlain, S.F., Hazzard, K., and MacBlain, M.S. (2005). Dyslexia: the ethics of assessment. *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, 9, (1), 54-57.
- McCurry, N. and MacBlain, S.F. (2005). Inclusion in Northern Ireland: Cracking the code, *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, 9, (2), 290-294.
- O'Neill, A. (2005). An investigation into primary one and two teachers' perceptions of dyslexia. Unpublished MEd. Dissertation, Queen's University of Belfast.
- Ravenette, A. (1985). *Specific Reading Difficulties: Appearance and Reality*. London: Newham Education Authority.
- Reason, R., Frederickson, N., Heffernan, M., Martin, C., and Woods, K. (1999) *Dyslexia, Literacy and Psychological Assessment. Report of a Working Party of the Division of Educational and Child Psychology*. Leicester: British Psychological Society.
- Rosenthal, J. (1973). Self-esteem in dyslexic pupils, *Academic Therapy*, 9 (1), 27-39.
- Weir, K. (2005). A Case study of the issues surrounding the identification, intervention and assessment of pupils with dyslexia in the primary school setting. Unpublished MEd. Dissertation, Queen's University of Belfast.