Dyslexia: Teaching Approaches
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Factors to Consider

This article will comment on the practice and principles of selecting appropriate teaching approaches for use with children with dyslexia. Teaching approaches can be divided into four broad areas: individualised approaches; support approaches; assisted learning and whole-school approaches. In determining the most appropriate programmes and strategies for children with dyslexia, a number of factors must be considered, the most important of which are:

- **the context** – the nature of the learning and teaching provision and the age and stage of the individual,
- **the assessment** – in what way does the assessment inform teaching, can the individual's strengths and difficulties be readily identified from the results of the assessment,
- **the curriculum** – how can the teaching programme be related to the curriculum – are any gains made by the programme readily transferable to other aspects of the curriculum,
- **the learner** – what are the individual factors which can help the learner make appropriate gains from the programme – is the programme suitable for the individual's learning style?

It is important therefore to view teaching programmes in relation to the individual and not in relation to the syndrome – 'dyslexia'. Some programmes may be highly evaluated by practitioners and have an established reputation as a successful multi-sensory programme, but this does not necessarily mean that the programme will be effective with all dyslexic children. Each child has to be viewed individually.

The Context

The context relates to the classroom, the type of provision and the teaching situation. The issue of one-to-one tuition, withdrawal and within class support for children with dyslexia is an ongoing issue of debate – there are many pros and cons to each type of provision. This underlines the importance of recognising that not all dyslexic children will require the same type of provision and support to the same extent.

In many schools, specialist teachers work cooperatively with class teachers, and in this situation intervention may be of a different nature to that where specialist teachers withdraw children for individual tuition and indeed where specific provision is provided out with the mainstream school. Each of these systems can be effective. It is important therefore that the teacher uses the context to its maximum benefit through the provision of materials and teaching and learning programmes that can be effectively adapted to different teaching situations and contexts.

Assessment and the Curriculum

One of the objectives, perhaps the principal objective, of an assessment is to provide some guidance to help in the development of teaching programmes. It is important therefore to find out which teaching programmes and strategies have already been used and how successful they have been. It is also important to attempt to find out why particular approaches have or indeed have not been successful. This will help to determine which teaching approaches should be implemented for that student.

It is important to examine the assessment findings in a holistic manner by looking at all aspects of the assessment, such as strengths, weaknesses, self-concept, interest and motivation and the learning preferences of the student and to link these factors to an appropriate teaching programme.

The Learner

It is important to adopt a holistic perspective, looking not only at the learner's strengths and weaknesses, but the preferred learning style, i.e. under what conditions would the child be most likely to learn. Which approaches may be preferred by the learner? In what way would these approaches help to maintain the learner's interest and motivation as well as enhancing self-esteem?

These questions and issues must be considered before deciding on appropriate intervention and teaching programmes. Although children with dyslexia have some common core difficulties they do not represent an identical discrete entity with identical profiles. Therefore intervention and teaching programmes will be tailored to the profile of needs of the individual learner, and this will vary depending on the preferred learning style and cognitive profile of each dyslexic child. The knowledge of the learner which can be most readily recorded by the class teacher is therefore of extreme importance. This knowledge will help to successfully match the needs and learning style of the child with the teaching and the requirements of the curriculum.

Programmes and Strategies

It is important to link programmes and strategies together because while there are a considerable number of well evaluated and effective commercially produced programmes for dyslexia, it is very seldom that the programme can be used by untrained teachers. Even if a programme has clear instructions, there is some skill attached to implementing such programmes, therefore the teacher needs to be aware of strategies which can be used to re-inforce the programme and to evaluate the effectiveness of the learning which can take place through the use of the programme.

Considerations – automaticity, overlearning and challenges

There is a considerable body of evidence that intervention strategies for teaching reading and spelling skills to dyslexic children should be both multisensory and phonic and that this type of teaching can benefit most children in any class at most stages. Additionally it is a well established view that dyslexic children require considerable overlearning to achieve automaticity. Automaticity is important for the learning of any skill, but it is particularly important for children with dyslexia. This means that children with dyslexia will require additional time to develop automaticity in any skill, but particularly in literacy, and this factor needs to be considered in a teaching programme.

As well as the additional time factors needed to acquire automaticity, it is also important to develop a carefully planned structure for a teaching programme that takes automaticity into account.

Automaticity can be acquired through overlearning, but it is important that this is not seen as rote repetition of the material to be learned. Overlearning provides a good opportunity to utilise a range of materials and a variety of techniques. There are a considerable number of games and 'fun type' activities available that can help to vary the learning experiences and promote automaticity. For example games where children have to find picture cards beginning or ending with specific sounds or where children have to think of the most words ending in that particular letter sound, can be fun and can also help to develop automaticity. There are also games available (see resources in appendix) which include homophone games designed to improve spelling and recognition of key words and vowel discrimination game which helps to increase auditory awareness and improve word attack skills. Many types of word games and activities also include memory games, sequencing activities, mnemonics, free writing games and rhyme songs.

These game activities can be used by the class teacher as they do not require any specialist training. It is important however that class teachers have some awareness of dyslexia so that these activities can be used appropriately in a teaching programme.

Principles

The principles of a specialist teaching programme for children with dyslexia should include:

- Structure – the progression should be logical and in small steps and importantly the links between the steps should be explicit.
- A multisensory element – this should be active and interactive as well as incorporating elements of all the modalities- visual, auditory, kinesthetic and tactile.
- Be reinforcing – skills which are learnt need to be practiced, learned and preserved in long term memory. This can be achieved through re-inforcement and is in fact necessary for automatic access of the word or skill which has been learnt.
- Include skill teaching – teaching is not only about providing information, but about accessing useful and transferable skills - for example phonological awareness skills can be later transferred and utilised in writing skills.
- Incorporate metacognitive aspects – this should be seen as an integral component of all programmes – this helps with bridging and transferring knowledge, understanding and skills. Essentially it involves thinking about

thinking and the learners self-questioning of how a particular response was arrived at.

Factors

An effective teaching programme for dyslexic children should include, apart from phonological aspects, other factors such as the promotion of attention and listening, the development of spoken language, development of fine motor skills and handwriting, sequencing and directionality and the development of short and long term memory skills. It has been well documented that the principles of a teaching programme for dyslexic children include multisensory, structured, cumulative and sequential aspects. Additionally it is likely the programme will also have a phonic emphasis although a number of dyslexic children may present with more pronounced visual difficulties, rather than those of a phonic nature. It is important as indicated earlier that each dyslexic child should be viewed as an individual and therefore any programme formula should not be too prescriptive.

It is important that the principles of constructing a teaching programme for dyslexic children and the factors which should be recognised in implementing such as programme are acknowledged. It is also important however that programmes should not be used too prescriptively – it is important that commercially produced programmes fit into the aims of the school and the teacher should be ready to discard or adapt a particular programme for a child if it does not seem to be making real headway. This point is emphasised by Dr. Sionah Lannen head teacher of the Red Rose School for children with dyslexia and other specific learning difficulties. Lannen indicates that any programme needs to fit into the overall context of the classroom environment. She suggests that role of the school ethos and the holistic nature of the intervention required for children with dyslexia cannot be underestimated.

Programmes in Practice

It is important therefore that other factors apart from the components of the actual programme need to be considered. Some of the various types of programmes and strategies that can be used are outlined below.

Individualised programmes

These are usually programmes which are highly structured. These can be seen as essentially free-standing and can form a central element of the overall strategy for teaching children with dyslexia.

Support approaches and strategies

These may utilise the same principles as some of the individual programmes, but can be used more selectively by the teacher thus making it possible to integrate them more easily within the normal activities of the curriculum.

Assisted learning techniques

These strategies utilise different and a variety of methods but a central, essential component is the aspect of learning from others. These programmes could therefore involve either peer or adult support and interaction and utilise some of the principles of modeling.

Whole-school approaches

These approaches recognise that dyslexia is a whole-school concern and not just the responsibility of individual teachers. Such approaches require an established and accessible policy framework for consultancy, whole-school screening, and monitoring of children's progress. Early identification is a further key aspect of a whole-school approach.

It is important to consider the rationale for using particular programmes and strategies. Within the areas described here of individualised learning, support approaches and strategies, assisted learning and whole-school approaches, many effective means of dealing with the dyslexic-type difficulty are at the teacher's disposal. Therefore the criteria for selection – the context, the assessment, the curriculum and the learner – must be carefully considered. These factors are as influential in the selection of teaching approaches as the actual programme or strategy itself.

Individualised Programmes

Most individualised programmes incorporate some, or all, of the following principles and approaches.

- multisensory
- over-learning and automaticity
- highly structured and usually phonically based
- sequential and cumulative

Multisensory methods utilise all available senses simultaneously. This can be summed up in the phrase 'hear it, say it, see it and write it'. These methods have been used for many years and have been further refined by Hornsby and Hickey in phonic structured programmes which incorporate multisensory techniques.

Over-learning is deemed necessary for children with dyslexic difficulties. The short-and long-term memory difficulties experienced by dyslexic children mean that considerable reinforcement and repetition is necessary.

The structured approaches evident in programmes of work for dyslexic children usually provide a linear progression, thus enabling the learner to complete and master a particular skill in the reading or learning process before advancing to a subsequent skill. This implies that learning occurs in a linear developmental manner. Although there is evidence from learning theory to suggest this may be the case, there is still some doubt in the case of reading that mastery of the component sub-skills results in skilled reading. In reading, a number of cognitive skills such as memory and visual, auditory and oral skills interact. This interaction is the key feature so it is therefore important that the skills are taught together and purposefully with the practice of reading as the focus.

Sequential approaches are usually appropriate for children with dyslexia because it may be necessary for them to master sub-skills before moving to more advanced materials. Hence a sequential and cumulative approach may not only provide a structure to their learning, but help to make learning more meaningful and effective.

Support Approaches and Strategies

Conceptually most of the individualised programmes have much in common, emphasising aspects such as structure, multisensory aspects, over-learning and automaticity. Support materials, however, do not necessarily provide an individual programme, but rather can be used by the teacher to help the child develop some competencies to allow access to the full range of curriculum activities.

Crossbow Education specialise in games for children with dyslexia and produce activities on literacy, numeracy and study skills. Learning Works (UK) have also a good range of resources.

It is also important that top-down approaches to reading are considered, in order that dyslexic children receive enriched language experience. This can be achieved through discussion and activities such as paired reading described above. It is important that even if the child cannot access the print content of some books, the language, concepts and narratives should be discussed. This helps to make literacy motivating and emphasises the view that literacy is more than just reading. Literacy embraces many of the social conventions in society and is a powerful tool for social awareness, essential for young people when they leave school. Literacy also has a powerful cognitive component and can help to develop thinking skills in young children as long as reading is seen as much more than accuracy. That is one of the reasons why the experience of extended language and language concepts are important even although the child may not have that level of reading accuracy.

The Hi-Lo readers from LDA, Cambridge and other similar books such as those from Barrington Stoke Ltd. can be beneficial in relation to motivation. These books, particularly those from Barrington Stoke have been written with the reluctant reader in mind and they can help children with dyslexia with reading fluency and also help to develop reading comprehension and reading speed.

Text Help

The programme known as TextHelp is particularly useful for assisting with essay writing. Text help has a read back facility and has a spellchecker that includes a dyslexic spell check option that searches for common dyslexic errors. Additionally TextHelp has a word prediction feature that can predict a word from the context of the sentence giving up to ten options from a drop down menu. Often dyslexic students have a word finding difficulty and this feature can therefore be very useful. This software also has a 'word wizard' that provides the user with a definition of any word; options regarding homophones; an outline of a phonic map and a talking help file.

Inspiration

Inspiration is a software programme to help the student develop ideas and organise thinking. Through the use of diagrams it helps the student comprehend concepts and information. Essentially the use of diagrams can help to make creating and modifying concept maps and ideas easier. The user can also prioritise and rearrange ideas, helping with essay writing. Inspiration can therefore be used for brainstorming, organising, prewriting, concept mapping, planning and outlining. There are 35 in built templates and these can be used for a range of subjects including English, History and Science. Dyslexic people often think in pictures rather than words. This technique can be used for note taking, for remembering information and organising ideas for written work. The inspiration programme converts this image into a linear outline.

Assisted Learning

Assisted learning approaches are essentially teaching approaches that require considerable interaction between the learner and others. This interaction may take the form of some kind of participant modelling. There may be an element of repetition and even simplicity in these approaches but, based on the principles of modelling and of facilitating the learning process, they can be successfully utilised with reading, writing and spelling.

Paired reading, peer tutoring, cued spelling and the apprenticeship approach to reading are examples of this kind of approach. Metacognitive approaches can also come under this category as such approaches can be based on interaction between teacher and student and this interaction can help the student acquire concepts and knowledge of the learning process. Metacognitive approaches will however be dealt with in some detail in the following chapter. As an example of assisted learning paired reading will be described and discussed below.

Paired Reading

Paired reading was originally devised to meet the need for a reading approach which could be both applied generally and utilised by non-professionals with a minimum of training.

Studies have shown that releasing children from the burden of decoding can facilitate or enhance comprehension.

The two principal stages of paired reading are reading together and reading alone:

- *Reading together* is when the parent/teacher and child read all the words aloud, with the adult adjusting the speed so that the pair are reading in harmony. The adult does not allow the child to become stuck at a word and if this happens will simply say the word to the child. This process, together with discussion, can help the child obtain meaning from the text and therefore enjoy the experience of language and of reading.

- *Reading alone* occurs when the child becomes more confident at reading aloud. The adult can either read more softly, thus allowing the child to take the lead, or remain quiet. This can be done gradually to allow the child's confidence to build up.

  When the child stumbles at this stage, the adult immediately offers the word and then continues reading with the child again, until he/she gains enough confidence to read unaided.

Comment

Assisted learning implies that learning, quite rightly, is an interactive process and the role of peers and adults is of great importance. This form of learning in many ways minimises the adverse effects of failure, because if the child cannot respond to a particular text or situation then assistance is provided. The important point is, however, that assistance is not necessarily provided because the child is not succeeding, but because it is built into the reading or learning strategy. The learner, therefore, is not necessarily obtaining the sense of failing but rather of working cooperatively with another person.

Summary

It is fair to say that no one single approach holds the key to completely dealing with dyslexic difficulties and many of the programmes and strategies briefly described in this article can be used together and can be complimentary to other teaching and curriculum approaches. Irrespective of the type of provision that is being provided for dyslexic children, it is important that at all times every opportunity is taken to help access the full curriculum. This can present real difficulties for some dyslexic children,

but this challenge can be met through careful planning, utilising the skills of teachers and being aware of the abundance of approaches and strategies available.

Other factors that are important include metacognition, study skills and learning styles. These emphasise the importance of considerations such as the learner, learning environment and the teaching and learning process. These can help programmes and approaches to be effectively integrated within the school curriculum.

References

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