

Dyslexia and Inclusion: Five signposts for Inclusion

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The challenge

The challenge facing educators today in relation to inclusion results from conflicts arising from traditional pedagogical perspectives, social attitudes, conventions and perceptions. These challenges are encapsulated in the five signposts for inclusion shown below.

Five signposts to inclusion

Signpost 1 Acknowledging differences

While it is accepted that there are common factors in dyslexia, (BPS, 1999; Report of the Task Force on Dyslexia, Republic of Ireland, 2001; Reid, 2003), it is essential that these do not dictate pedagogical approaches and that the individual differences of children with dyslexia are acknowledged. It is more helpful therefore, rather than ask the question, 'what is the best approach for dyslexic children', to ask 'what are the barriers that prevent that child from learning?' (Wearmouth, Soler and Reid, 2002). This implies that the needs of each child should be viewed within the learning situation, and environmental and curricular factors should also be considered alongside any cognitive aspects that may impinge on learning. Morton and Frith (1995), Frith (2002) provide a framework, the causal modelling framework, that can be used to help identify these barriers. The framework consists of biological, cognitive, behavioural and environmental factors and emphasises the interactive nature of learning. The framework also emphasises the different profiles that can be associated with dyslexia. Indeed in the UK the BPS working party report on dyslexia (BPS, 1999) identified ten different hypotheses that can relate to dyslexia. Additionally the Task Force Report (Government of Ireland, 2002) indicated that '*since the difficulties*

presented by students with dyslexia range along a continuum from mild to severe, there is a need for a continuum of interventions and other services' (p31).

Therefore, it is crucial that the identification and planning for intervention for children with dyslexia acknowledges this continuum and the individual differences associated with this as well as the role of classroom and environmental factors.

Signpost 2 Recognising Strengths

There has been considerable pressure from many groups and individuals (Johnson and Peer, 2003; Sayles, 2001; Reid, 2003, West 1997) to recognise the strengths of children with dyslexia. If the barriers to literacy can be removed or minimised these strengths can be revealed, and the child will be able to access the curriculum and fulfil his/her potential. It is important, therefore, to ensure that literacy, however important, does not impede progress in learning and thinking.

Multiple intelligences approaches (Garner, 1999; Lazear, 1999) highlighting eight ways of learning and, of course, effective differentiation in terms of presentation of material, can both be used as a pathway to effective learning.

The multiple intelligences framework can have particular applicability for students with dyslexia. Lazear (1999) highlights how these can be used, not only in individual subjects, but across the whole curriculum to ensure metacognitive transfer. One example of this can be the use of visual imagery combined with music – practice at this can help the student develop visual abilities and if he/she were to verbalise these it can have a spin-off effect on language and storytelling. He also indicates how the reverse can apply when students can try to impose appropriate sound into a story they have read. Similarly bodily/kinaesthetic intelligence can be applied in all subjects – in history a dramatic account of a historical incident can help develop kinaesthetic/bodily intelligence, as can learning particular folk dances from different cultures and different historical periods. Bodily/kinaesthetic intelligence is one that is often overlooked in class subjects and this, and some of the other 'intelligences' in the multiple intelligences model, can highlight the strengths of young people with dyslexia.

The work of Galaburda (1993), and the examples from West (1997, Reid 2003) highlight the potential creativity and problem solving skills of children and adults with dyslexia.

Signpost 3 Understanding inclusion

Wearmouth, Soler and Reid (2002) suggest that the current educational context is one that attempts to reconcile the principles of individuality, distinctiveness and diversity with inclusion and equal opportunities. This, however, can highlight inherent conflicts, tensions and contradictions. There is a drive to raise the learning and achievement standards of all pupils through whole-class and whole-group teaching, standardised assessment and the encouragement of competition between schools through a focus on league tables based on academic performance. Yet at the same time there is a statutory obligation to acknowledge the principle of inclusion for all pupils, including those with significant difficulties in the development of literacy skills such as children with dyslexia. One of the key dilemmas in understanding inclusion is the reconciliation of the challenges of diversity with the need to provide common curricular objectives and a whole-class pedagogy for all. It is important, therefore, to develop inclusive models of support that can take into account the individual needs of children with dyslexia. These may not always be met, for all children, all of the time, within mainstream, but for most they can. It is realistic to appreciate that not all children will benefit from mainstream provision without some preparation on the part of the child and the teacher. This point is made by Johnson (2001) when he quotes an extract from the DfEE guidance on inclusion:

‘For most children (with special educational needs) placement in a mainstream school leads naturally on to other forms of inclusion. For those with more complex needs, the starting point should always be the question, “Could this child benefit from education in a mainstream setting?” For some children a mainstream placement may not be right, or not right just yet.’ (DfEEa 1998, p23).

This implies that full inclusion in a mainstream setting for some groups of children, although socially desirable, may not be educationally appropriate at a given point in

time. This means that with support all children can aspire towards an inclusive educational environment, but there should not be an assumption that for all this is the best practice at every point in their school career. There are examples in practice of children with dyslexia, who have initially failed in an inclusive setting, but after a period of supportive and appropriate teaching in a structured and dedicated resource for dyslexia, are able to return to a mainstream setting and benefit more effectively, socially and educationally, from mainstream school (Lannen, 2002; Calder, 2001).

According to Calder this formula is based on ‘an eclectic mix of strategies and approaches; pragmatism; customisation of the balance of the child’s needs and his/her preferences and the reconciliation of a well-established collaborative approach with some specialised interventions to suit the students’ needs’. It is clear that the example cited by Calder is the product of considerable planning and preparation – this, including the training of staff, is essential.

Inclusion, therefore, should be seen as a comprehensive package specifically tailored for the individual to ensure the social and educational benefits are maximised for all. This package is recognised in the Republic of Ireland Task Force Report when it recommends that *‘special schools for students with specific learning difficulties, including dyslexia, should be developed as resource centres for special class teachers and resource teachers working with students with learning difficulties arising from dyslexia, through the development of links with local education centres.’* (p.113)

Signpost 4 Planning for practice

The learning environment is one of the most influential factors in relation to planning intervention. It is important to engage in multi-disciplinary assessment and collaboration to plan programmes which should be embedded into the whole-school curriculum. Wearmouth (2001) argues that the complexity of the issues relating to inclusion must be tackled and policy-makers need to understand the long-term nature of embedding change of this nature in relation to the teacher development and the provision of resources and technology. On the one hand, therefore, while inclusion can be seen as a desirable outcome in terms of equity, it can also be seen as a threat and a potential conflict between meeting the needs of individuals within a framework that has to be established to meet the needs of all.

Differentiation and curricular development are both challenges and indeed responses to meeting the needs of students with dyslexia. It is important that the learning experiences of children with dyslexia are contextualised and meaningful. Differentiation can help to make subject content meaningful and curriculum development such as developing thematic units of work can make curriculum content cohesive and meaningful.

There are many examples of differentiation that have been the product of consultative collaboration within school departments (Lucas, 2002; personal communication, Dodds, 1996). Ideally the needs of students with dyslexia should be met in this way and the resources and guidance on differentiation can provide a framework for the development of a differentiated approach. One of the important points to consider is that, although the language and sentence structure may be different and the overall plan of the page designed in a user-friendly fashion in a differentiated text, the underlying concepts that are to be taught should be the same. Therefore, the cognitive demands and the learning outcomes should be the same for all learners – differentiation, therefore, means that the routes or modes of learning to achieve these outcomes will be different, but not the conceptual outcomes.

This indicates the importance of multi-disciplinary collaboration and particular between the various organisations and agencies at an administrative level as well as those professionals who represent them. Examples of this can be noted in a number of government initiatives in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland. One example of this can also be noted in the Task Force Report (Government of Ireland, 2001) the recommendation, as a medium-term goal, of the establishment of an inter-departmental committee that includes *'representatives of the Departments of Enterprise and Employment, Health and Children, Social, Community and Family Affairs, Justice, Equality and Law Reform and Finance to ensure the needs of students with learning difficulties arising from dyslexia are addressed in a co-ordinated manner.'* (p.112)

Signpost 5 Attainable outcomes

There is a current trend, perhaps an obsession, with measuring educational 'progress'. This means that greater importance is placed on these variables that can be easily measured. That is not to say that such assessments cannot help to inform practice (Shiel, 2002). But it can be argued that traditional forms of assessment can disadvantage the dyslexic student because usually there is a discrepancy, and this may be a significant discrepancy, between their understanding of a topic and how they are able to display that understanding in written form.

There is evidence that portfolio assessment, which has the potential to exam the performances of students with dyslexia in a much fairer way than a one-off test or national examinations, should have a greater impact on the examination system.

It can be argued that any deficit or difficulty may not lie with the student with dyslexia, but with an assessment process that is unable to accommodate for the diversity of learners. It can be advocated, therefore, that both teaching and assessment should be differentiated and diversified.

It is also important that learning outcomes should be clearly specified and attainable. For students with dyslexia this may mean some reference to additional support or examination accommodations, but the key aspect to attainable outcomes lies as much at the heart of curriculum development as it does in the assessment process.

Key factors

Some of the key factors in relation to successful inclusion and, in particular, children with dyslexia, include:

- a commitment by the education authority and the school to an inclusive ideal;
- a realisation by staff of the widely embracing features of inclusion and the equity issues inherent in these features;
- awareness of the particular specific needs associated with children with dyslexia and accommodation for these through curriculum and teaching approaches;

- acceptance that inclusion is more than integration and that it embraces social, cultural and community equity issues as well as educational equality;
- regard for the cultural differences in communities and families and acknowledgement that children with dyslexia require flexible approaches in assessment and teaching; and
- honouring not only the child's individual rights, but the individual differences.

Comment

The five signposts to inclusion for children with dyslexia – acknowledging the differences, recognising strengths, understanding inclusion, planning for practice and attainable outcomes, highlight the challenges and the needs of children with dyslexia if full and effective inclusion is to be a reality. It is recognised that one of the most crucial elements in effective learning is self-esteem. In the wrong setting and learning environment, using inappropriate curricular and learning materials, self-esteem can be adversely affected. It is important, therefore, that while inclusion is desirable for all children, including children with dyslexia, that flexibility prevails and that the individual needs of children are acknowledged.

References

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