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An Investigation into Provision
for students with dyslexia in Primary
School in England

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Abstract:

This study investigates students with identified dyslexia/ specific literacy difficulties, the study depends on four main research questions revolve around the strengths and difficulties, of students with dyslexia/ specific literacy difficulties and how do these relate to their background factors, comparing between the progress and the level that the students have made over the last six months, students attitudes towards literacy classes and finally teaching methods and additional provision for students with dyslexi. Three students with dyslexia were selected, a classroom teacher, a special educational need coordinator and a teacher assistant. Data was collected through interview, observation and documents. The data from this study suggested that there were elements of good practice from which all on the school staff could learn, the data also suggested that support for literacy was observed in almost every classroom whether it was in the form of instructional templates to help students in their writing, word banks or the use or paired reading of passages in order to aid in comprehension. I would recommend that a programme of peer observation be undertaken to showcase best practice with regard to the teaching of literacy.

Key words: dyslexia, specific literacy difficulties, provision, primary school.

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Introduction:

"Being appropriately equipped with skills is like being appropriately dressed" (Kauffman, 2003) - it is the responsibility of educators in partnership with parents and society as a whole to ensure that young people are provided with learning experiences which equip them with the skills that they need for the whole of their lives. This is particularly true for those who have dyslexia which may not immediately be apparent to those around them as they are not as obvious a form disability as those who are physically disabled. The aim of this study is to investigate the literacy provision for students with dyslexia in a Primary School setting. The specific research questions are:

- How are students who are identified as having dyslexia taught literacy and what additional provision is made for them?
- What do the students feel about the provision that is made for them?
- What is their progress in response to that provision over the last six months?
- What features can be identified as being typical strengths or weaknesses of these students and are there any background factors which contribute to their attainment levels?

The importance of the study:

The genesis of the investigation has been my experiences in supporting students who have special needs in the classroom. All too often children who have what could be termed as 'hidden' disabilities are labelled as 'disruptive' or 'naughty' prior to having the cause for their behaviour properly investigated. This is not only an immense source of frustration for the students themselves but also the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO), the Special Needs Department staff and Teaching Assistants (TAs) who work with disadvantaged children intensively on a daily basis to build both their skills and confidence in order that they can be included in mainstream education. In seeking answers to these questions, I felt that I might be able to highlight important features of dyslexia so that some formalised documentation might be produced for practitioners in the school to be able to pick up

warning signs or markers so that they are not so quick to place disparaging labels on individual children but rather seek to help them instead. I feel that it would prove advantageous for all those who are on the staff of the school to be aware of any background factors that affect those with learning issues and their subsequent behaviour both inside and outside of the classroom. It could also prove useful to showcase specific methods which work with individual students in order that all teachers and indeed departments across the school could use in approaching their issues so that the students are receiving uniform quality support in their learning. The focus of the study is literacy which in the primary school environment is something which is taught in every classroom across the school as "literacy skills are enhanced and developed in specific subject areas as part of learning and teaching processes but also subject knowledge from a range of areas of learning can and should be used to inform and develop literacy" (Primary Framework for Literacy and Mathematics, 2006, Para 5).

Literature Review:

1- Overview

Before one can begin to look at how those with learning difficulties are taught literacy one needs to understand how they have been assessed as having special needs as "the first part of an effective set of strategies is good assessment, which is vital to determine the young person's particular strengths and weaknesses" (Cross, 2004, P. 117). Cross observes that this is important "… because of the role that communication skills play in the development of emotional social and cognitive skills" (2004, P. 118) with it being "…vital that teachers find out as much information as possible about the individual students that they teach, rather than make assumptions based on stereotypes" (Brooks, Abbott and Bills, 2004, P. 275). Via these tests schools will be in a better position to "…enable students to gain new skills, knowledge and understanding" (Tilstone and Rose, 2003, P. 14) irrespective of their ability and to deliver the aims of the Every Child Matters documentation – to "be healthy …, stay safe …, enjoy and achieve …, make a positive contribution…

and achieve economic well being" (Department for Education and Skills, 2004, P. 25) through "… minimising of barriers to learning and participation and the maximising of resources to support learning and participation" (Booth, Ainscow, Black-Hawkins, Vaughan & Shaw, 2000, P. 13).

The standard diagnostic test used to assess children in Year Four (Talking Point, 2008, Para 8) in the United Kingdom is the Cognitive Abilities Test (CAT) which children passively work through that "… measures the three principle areas of reasoning – verbal, non-verbal and numerical – as well as an element of spatial ability, allowing you to test the full range within an entire class or year" (GL Assessment, 2010, Para 1). Students who have dyslexia usually display an uneven profile which provides "… a starting point for hypothesise and questions which will require further detailed investigation" (CATS – Cognitive Abilities Test, 2009, Para 18). The Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC) is used by Education Psychologists to assess the children's verbal ability and performance. It consists of the child being read a series of questions which includes a time restricted mathematics section. Based on these assessments special needs students can be placed in the groups which will best suit their needs and enable effective support to be provided for them.

Among the other methods is dynamic assessment which has its origins in the work of Vygotsky; traditional methods of assessment have been changed to allow the facilitator to intervene as necessary to guarantee the best performance possible from the child; the administrator might rephrase a question (Testing the Limits), ask a question to help the child to understand their thinking processes (Clinical Interview), through giving verbal clues (Graduated Prompting) and by testing, teaching and testing again (Testing-Teaching-Resting) to ascertain the extent of the learning which occurs (Fast Facts, 2002). The data that is gained from this type of process gives educators an idea about how an individual with special needs responds to interventions, which types are appropriate for their condition and help in the writing of Individual Education Plans (IEP) through being able to specify areas of weakness about

which there need to be specific targets (Dynamic Assessment, 2009). Dillon attests that dynamic assessment "… of intellectual abilities provides more reliable, valid, and diagnostically and prescriptively useful estimates of tested abilities" (1997, P. 164) than other methods providing a more accurate guide to an individual's potential for learning in the future as there is a better understanding of each individual child and their learning challenges (Moore-Brown, Huerta, Uranga-Hernandez and Pena, 2006). Clearly ongoing assessment continues as a part of an effective education system which ensures the rectifying of results of students who performed poorly on the day of testing and the monitoring of interventions which are put in place for children which should be "… an integral and continuous component of school practice and policy" (Reid, 2003, P. 146).

2- Definitions of Dyslexia/Specific Literacy Difficulties:

Dyslexia, which literally means difficulty with words from reading to pronunciation and writing (Pollock, Waller and Politt, 2004, P. xiii; echoed in Doyle, 1996, P. 69), has a variety of definitions: "… an unexpected difficulty in learning to read, write and spell" (Riddick, 1996, P. 1: echoed by Orton Dyslexia Society Research Committee, 1994 and the Task Force on Dyslexia, 2001); a conglomeration of factors that "…affect the learning process in one or more of reading, spelling and writing… It is particularly related to mastering and using written language" (Peer, 2001 in Peer and Reed, 2001); "… a processing difference… often characterised by difficulties in literacy" as well as other "… cognitive areas such as memory, speed of processing, time management, co-ordination and directional aspects… visual and phonological difficulties… [alongside] some discrepancy in performances in different areas of learning" (Reid, 2002). It is a disorder which shows itself in a number of different ways (Snowling, 1987) not falling into neat categories (Ellis, 1993). Frith has determined that the condition is a neuro-development disorder which has a "… biological origin and behavioural signs which extend far beyond problems with written language" (2002, P. 45) It is suggested that the condition has two potential causes: 'acquired' develops as a result of brain injury whereas 'developmental' occurs through

the passing on of genes from one of both of the sufferer's parents. Hultquist explains that during gestation the brain is connected differently leading them to be "… born with brains set up to respond differently to words than brains of children who will most likely become good readers" (Hultquist, 2006, P. 17). He lists distinct versions of the condition: Phonological – difficulties in hearing sounds make the decoding process necessary for reading difficult; Orthographic – difficulties in remembering what letters and words look like; Retrieval problems – this can be a combination of difficulties in memory with regard to letters, words and sounds as well as sporadic ability to decode writing leading to slow reading which has little comprehension of what is being read; Deep Dyslexia – function words are read incorrectly (for example 'are' for 'all') as well as frequently replacing words in the text with others that have a comparable meaning; Mixed – a combination of issues and difficulties manifest themselves together in the child's learning leading Chivers to comment that "it is now indisputable that dyslexia is a neurological condition whose symptoms are most often demonstrated with difficulties in reading, writing, spelling and sometimes numeracy" (2001, P. 22). A number of dyslexics "also have trouble with other things, such as writing neatly, being organised, and expressing their ideas in writing beyond just trouble with spelling" (Hultquist, 2006, P. 37).

It is argued by some that "dyslexia should be seen as a different learning ability rather than as a disability" as it only becomes this if "… it goes unrecognised and teaching is inappropriate, resulting in the child's failure to gain competence in literacy" (Pollock et al, 2004, P. xiii). Even though "underachievement is one of the hallmarks of a dyslexic student" (Hannell, 2003, P. 2) a balance must be found so that the emphasis on the acquisition of literacy skills does not leave any individual feeling at best inadequate or at worst stupid (Pollock et al, 2004, P. 52). It is crucial to recognise that every sufferer will have areas where they will have strengths on which they must be able to capitalise – they may be overtly musical or good at art. Typical features or characteristics of a dyslexic are mispronunciation of words, confusion over similar sounding

words, misunderstanding of words that look and sound the same but mean different things in different contexts, difficulties with connectives and prepositions, verb tenses and sentence structure, learning by rote, difficulty in processing multiple instructions, inability to understand idioms, euphemisms and proverbs, difficulties with polysyllabic words, using 'whatsname' or 'thingy' if the correct word cannot be found and an inability to pick up on nuances and social cues (Pollock et al, 2004, Ps. 20 – 22).   Other observable behaviours include issues with time management, difficulties with writing and copying (to the point where some children will go to great lengths in order to avoid having to do it), discernable patterns in the errors made while reading and writing and variable levels of performance across the whole curriculum (Reid, 2003, P. 14).

3- Provision and Support for students with dyslexia:

It is important to remember that "not all dyslexic children will require the same type of provision and support" necessitating provision which is personalised to each individual depending on their "… preferred learning style and cognitive profile" (Reid, 2003, P. 150). Mixed approaches must be accommodated in order to engage all of the pupils with their various intelligences and needs; interactive literacy board games help children to develop all aspects of their language irrespective of their age; counselling to aid the learner in their acceptance and subsequent management of their literacy difficulties (Hales, 1990; Biggar and Barr, 1993, 1996; Miles and Varma, 1995) and raise their levels of self esteem (Lawrence, 1985) thus improving their levels of performance. Assisted learning strategies are useful in helping those with learning difficulties as they are able to interact with others and gain support in their efforts. Paired reading is a good example of this; studies have illustrated that this approach helps to improve the child's understanding of what they are reading (Neville, 1975; Wilkinson, 1980; Evans, 1984; Bell, 1991) as it facilitates auditory and visual input at the same time. The child selects the reading material which is then read with the adult; appropriate corrections are made by the adult or mentor who also uses praise to reinforce good work; after the five minutes session (which is

an everyday occurrence) there is a conversation about what has just been read or this can happen during the course of the text if that is appropriate. This provides the child with positive reinforcement from their partner (Topping, 2001; Topping and Bryce, 2002), helps to overcome the 'stop start' reading problems that have been highlighted (Bradley, 1990; Snowling, 1993a, 1993b) and reduces their fear of failure (Topping, 1993; Topping and Hogan, 1999). Computers are an invaluable aid in the modern teachers' armoury with many specifically designed programmes which give supervised one to one tuition or reinforcement exercises via a medium with which the child is often more proficient than the practitioner due to having "… particular strengths with the visual-spatial skills required to manipulate computer graphics and data" (Pollock et al, 2004, P. 177). Lastly it is critical that the dyslexic's ability to access the curriculum is enhanced through the provision of differentiated work in all subjects which will further help their literacy skills.

As we can see there is a considerable body of research into dyslexia which stresses the need for an understanding of the condition, accurate assessment and subsequent provision to meet the learner's needs. What is not known about this condition and others which fall into the Autistic Spectrum is a definitive cause and reasons as to why all children are affected differently displaying different strengths and weaknesses.

Methodology

In order to address the research questions qualitative methods were used as the findings will not be "… arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, P. 17). The sources for the data were observation and interviews which followed a set pattern and completed by staff and students in one school. Initially the thought was to have questionnaires to be completed but this was thought to be too problematic when dealing with students with dyslexia with the conclusion that interviews would be a better vehicle for data collection. The information have then been collated and analysed followed by a discussion from which conclusions and recommendations have been drawn.

It is crucial from the beginning that the researcher is clear about their responsibilities to both the study and its participants. All people who are asked to participate must be made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any point prior to its completion. All participants must be fully aware of all the details of the study such as when and how it will be conducted, how the data will be used once it has been generated and their rights to receive detailed feedback about the completed study (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2004). All participants must be confident that their contributions will remain anonymous, that the data generated will solely relate to the aims of the study and will be accurately handled, analysed and written up. Informed consent must be given by all who are involved in any study and to that end, following the guidance as issued by BERA, I used a 'Certificate of Ethical Research Approval' signed by the Chair of the School's Ethics Committee which negated the necessity to ask permission from individual parents.

I have always had the interests and well-being of the participants uppermost in my mind not only in terms of safety and confidentiality but also their emotional security as well as the veracity of the study itself. The interview questions for the children would have to be designed and implemented sensitively in order to allow for their age, cognitive ability and emotional well-being; their overall vulnerability has to be considered "… in a broader way than age alone, with the responsibility on the researcher to err on the rule of caution" (Lewis and Lindsay, 2001, P. 13). I wanted all those involved in the study to enjoy the process and for the children not to regard it as just another form of assessment. I wanted not only to get adult perspectives about the educational experiences of dyslexic children but also their views too as often "the competencies young children display are made visible or are hidden by the 'lenses' adults use to view children and childhood" (Clark, 2004, P. 1); I wanted to gain an insight into their likes and dislikes about their provision and what motivates them to engage in literacy activities in order to understand how best to provide support for their learning needs.

The design of questions have to be accurate in order to produce the information which will directly address the aims of the study and produce "… uniform information, which assures comparability of data" (Kumar, 1996, P. 109) and enables the research to hold its integrity over time with the capacity for repetition if desired in the future (Joppe, 2000, P. 1 in Golafshani, 2003, P. 598). Questions need to be jargon free, simple and as explicit as possible (Burton and Barlett, 2005) in order to avoid the possibility of misinterpretation and the fear generated as a result of not being able to understand the requirements of any question. The questions will be designed to be open enough to give the opportunity for participants to give more detailed responses which might provide additional information to the benefit of the research (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000).

The advantage of employing interviews as a means of information gathering is that the researcher is able to extend or modify questions in order to elicit responses and it is more personal than a questionnaire. The issues with this method are the time-consuming nature of them, the laborious task of writing up notes and the potential for tainted data due to uncontrollable variables like the mood of either party at the time, poor interaction between the two parties or a lack of time for the process to take place. Observations carry the same time-consuming penalty as regards writing up notes but the advantages are that the researcher is able to see work 'in situ' and can form opinions based on first hand experience of the provision in the classroom. I have attempted to overcome any potential bias by the careful design of questions, meticulous transcription of interviews and observations and the precise collation and analysis of data.

Reliability and validity are always difficult to guarantee in qualitative research due to the fact that the study is chiefly concerned with a series of human beings, all of whom are subject to different mood and patterns of behaviour – one person will not always react to a given situation in the same way at different times. Attempts to establish reliability can be made through making the conduct of the study as simple as possible,

in ordered steps which can be repeated to the letter in future if required. Validity can be assured through the use of targeted questions to produce information which purely focuses on the needs of the research. Perhaps it is better to use terms like trustworthiness, quality and rigour with this type of research in an effort to reduce the chances of bias through triangulation which is "a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study" (Cresswell and Millar, 2000, P. 126).

Utilising interviews to gather data has also afforded the opportunity for me to gauge the emotional reaction of participants to what was being asked (enthusiasm, joy, amusement, confusion). I acknowledge that the data that has been generated is subjective in nature (Ainscow, Howes, Farrell, and Frankham, 2003) but it is up to date and relevant in addressing the questions posed by the research questions.

This research has been undertaken in a primary school in Exeter, United Kingdom. The school that I have visited, has been a school for over 130 years during which time it has been boys' and girls' school, an infant and junior school, a primary school, a first school and now a return to being a primary school. Over the years this school has developed a firm reputation as a caring school teaching children who have a range of abilities from academically gifted to those who need more support. The school is a small community school of about 150 children, which helps them to know each child individually. It is known as a friendly and happy school. They admit about 20 pupils annually and some children are taught in mixed age classes. They benefit from a Speech and Language Centre for about fifteen children with special educational needs in speech and language.

The data was collected from three students with identified Dyslexia/Specific literacy difficulties in Year Five, two have Statements of Special Educational Needs and the other, now works with an IEP under School Action Plus. Student A is a female, students B and C are male. I have also collected data from a teacher of Religious Education who is a member of the

Special Needs Department, the SENCO and a TA who works with two of the three pupils who have taken part.

The pupils engaged in this exercise with enthusiasm. However, the questions as I had written them for use in the interview were too complex in terms of sentence structure for the students to readily understand and therefore, I had to rephrase the questions as best I could in order to gain the information that I needed. I am aware of and acknowledge the potential for the pupils to provide me with the answers that they think I want to hear rather than their genuine thoughts and feelings in this situation.

Findings

As mentioned above I conducted a qualitative study, the findings are presented by cases with descriptive and analytical interpretation.

1- The students

All three students stated that they felt that they were better at reading and writing than they were at the beginning of the year. They intimated that they felt more confident and able to complete tasks that they were given including homework. All stated that they found the school website invaluable in that the homework tasks were updated regularly so that if they had been unable to write the task down or needed to be reminded, the task was there for them. C also commented that he had been helped by homework task sheets which he filled in for each subject that teachers helped him to complete if he became short of time. He said that writing frames had helped him to become more adept in his writing stating that they helped him to 'understand where to put things'. B thought that he was a little better but found it difficult to concentrate on the words but had found it better since using 'my blue glasses' as the words 'stayed still' on the page. A said that she had 'done better' in both reading and writing and she felt more able to sound words out if they were not familiar to her.

Both A and B indicated that they read at home once a day with their parents. A also reads at the weekends once a day with

each parent at either end of the day. A particularly enjoys the Harry Potter books and reads the copies that she has over and over again (to her parents frustration – she says). She says that she has begun to write little scenes using the characters from these books but that they are 'not very good'. She has also begun to write a personal diary using the family computer which helps her with her spellings; this activity came about as a result of the SEN department's daily log which the students are asked to complete in order to monitor areas in which the children are experiencing frustration in their work for instance if they are experiencing difficulties with researching for a project or understanding part of any book that they are using. B says that he only reads from the computer other than when he is completing his homework. C says that he enjoys films especially action movies. He spends time reading about them on the internet – he was excited about 'The A-Team' which is due out soon. He likes football and reads a weekly magazine about this, although he still finds some parts challenging. He did comment that he likes to read notice boards – 'I couldn't really before, so I find them quite interesting which my mates find strange'. He is also part of the gaming club at school which involves him writing up the battles that he has had for his records at the suggestion of the teacher who is himself dyslexic.

Their feedback with regard to their literacy lessons and the literacy support that they receive across the curriculum was very positive. They indicated that they enjoyed the time that they spent working at improving their reading and writing because it was made fun by those helping them and that it had helped them to have more confidence in themselves. A and C said that they did not feel pressured in any way just supported, feeling that they were able to turn to the SEN department and support staff for help at any time ('they would find time to help' – C). They both indicated that they particularly enjoyed the paired reading that they were involved in every day. B said that he occasionally found that he was frustrated at having to go over the same thing but that being able to work at things through playing games and working with others in a group helped him. All said that the use of word games and word banks was of helped to them. C

indicated that he liked the lessons of the teachers who seemed to take notice that he (and others) did not learn in the same way, providing the class with a number of ways to tackle any given task. One teacher said that each pupil had to keep a list at the back of their book or in their homework diary to track which method they had used to complete a task so that they were able to vary their approach, i.e. storyhill for one task, followed by newspaper report or diary entry, then a poem with some pictures in order to extend their writing and creative skills. Many teachers use templates for writing so that people who need help in writing sentences and paragraphs feel more confident and have examples displayed in the classroom to help. All agreed that the specific literacy sessions and the support that they received in school had definitely enabled them to make improvements to their reading and writing. The indications were that the uniform approach that was taken in the school was a great help to them; for example the use of 'Look, Cover, Write, Check' for spellings was a technique that was supported from as early as possible in the school. Comments were also made to the effect that teachers who were explicit as to how an activity would help their literacy helped them to understand its relevance and helped to motive them, for example writing a letter in a History lesson from a soldier to his family at home – helps you to empathise with the person at war, teaches you how to structure a letter and to express yourself properly.

2- The Class Teacher:

When interviewed the class teacher, Mrs. T, was incredibly enthusiastic about working with children with dyslexia. In fact she came across as being enthused about teaching any child because 'they all need differentiated work of some form or another in order to reach their full potential'. She showed me around her classroom where she taught both RE and literacy to special needs groups. It was full of vibrant displays of children's work, word lists, pictures and large display about dyslexia which highlighted a great many famous people who suffered from the condition. It featured the likes of Sir Richard Branson, Tom Cruise, Whoopi Goldberg, Sir Winston Churchill and Albert Einstein all of whom are documented as having had the

condition – the display served to boost the confidence of sufferers in that it illustrated that having dyslexia did not doom you to failure and helped the other students to appreciate that having the condition didn't make you 'dumb' or weaker just different in the way that you learn. The beginning of the extra support for the children was in evidence on the walls – colourful displays of pictures and words; she also highlighted the use of cue cards, word cards, subject based word games which helped with the sounds of letters, syllables and whole words; one to one reading of texts which were related to the child's studies but (more often than not) books of the child's choice which were rooted in their interests; extra support was also afforded through the seating plan in the classroom – those who have difficulties with working from the board are placed at the front in order to help them with this but also to facilitate one to one help without drawing too much attention to themselves. There were standard patterns of support which are used in all classrooms to support not only those with dyslexia such as the 'Look, Cover, Write, Check' method of learning spellings but also more specific methods which worked on things such as matching sounds to letters and picking out letter patterns in words – the comment was made that teaching literacy to these children has to be systematic and repetitive in order to be successful – 'the trick is to keep it as varied and interesting as possible'. The teaching method which is in use is synthetic phonics; this concentrates on speech sounds (phonemes) being matched up with their written form (graphemes) that can be either single letters, groups of letters or combinations which are blended together. The school uses the 'Letters and Sounds' programme for literacy tuition which is followed up when pupils make the transition to secondary school – this means that they are working with some familiar methods when they arrive in a new environment which aids their sense of security. She said that the children build up their command of language gradually using all of their senses which accommodates every kind of learner in one way or another. When asked about the development of ideas to help with the teaching of literacy Mrs. T indicated that there had been individual and staff training courses which had provided useful information which could be used in the classroom but that most

of the new information was disseminated through the SENCO. Regular meetings did take place to discuss strategies for the department as a whole but more often than not teachers relied upon the IEPs to inform their planning and the hard work of the TAs who were able to give the most up to date reports on those whom they were specifically supporting.

Mrs. T felt that pupils generally enjoyed their literacy lessons in that they were afforded one to one attention, they were able to discuss what they had been doing and work at tasks to completion and it enabled them to talk about their learning as well as to engage in it. She felt that the students' enjoyment of their learning was tempered by occasions when they were not able to grasp a concept which led to frustrations and in some cases a loss of temper control. She added that it was important to understand why these incidents occurred (which were quite rare) as they were often a manifestation of other background issues for the children for example difficulties at home or with friends, bullying, their emotional state or other underlying medical conditions.

3- The SENCO:

The interview with the SENCO was quite short as she had a Senior Management Team meeting to attend. She indicated that the levels of support that pupils are given in literacy lessons are dictated in the first instance by the results of the assessment of the child concerned. It was stressed however that all in the SEN team were experienced and trusted to develop the programme as best suited the individual focussing on their learning strengths and preferences. As each child was different, she said it was difficult to be too prescriptive but careful notes were made about each child in order to be able to best cater for their developing needs and assess whether the provision that was being made was enabling them to make progress. All followed a phonics programme which built around the 'Letters and Sounds' programme with their extension work being tailored to their personal needs. It is structured, building up the child's language bank, cumulatively constructing new learning on the foundations of secure knowledge through a multi-sensory

approach. Each had access to a variety of computer programmes (Clicker 5 for example) which helped with their literacy as well as paired reading with adults or a trained reading mentor and group sessions. New materials were constantly being investigated and tried out which would clearly be to the benefit of the students – the most recent that were mentioned were 'Toe by Toe' and 'Integrated Learning Systems'.

The SENCO stressed that all teachers were charged with delivering literacy and there were core elements for the teaching of reading and writing with which they were all familiar. Each had a booklet, produced by the department on a yearly basis that detailed the pupils who were in need of support and the level of the support that was necessary. Copies of individual IEPs were kept centrally and copied to teachers who needed them to aid in the planning of lessons. Clearly there were specialist teachers who delivered the phonics based programme but basic reading can be encouraged for example through reading a text with a pupil or having students read texts in pairs, the sounding out of unfamiliar words, the 'Look, Cover, Write, Check' method for spelling and the use of scaffolding templates, mind mapping, prompt cards and word lists as aids to writing. The development of literacy can also be affected through the sound selection of textbooks– often older dyslexic pupils are consulted prior to purchasing books to ascertain whether they are, or could be accessible to them. Access is provided to professional development courses for the whole teaching staff to further enhance their skills in providing a rich environment in which to learn to read and write and to be able to use those skills across the curriculum.

Her impression was that the children who were subject to withdrawal for specific literacy lessons liked the structured nature of them with the security of the pattern and the way of working being familiar to them. She indicated that pupils liked to see the results of their written work displayed on the walls – for them it indicated success. The SENCO concluded by saying that everything which a child experiences has an effect on their attainment at school. It was important that teachers were careful

to be observant in changes in the demeanour of individuals in order to be better able to anticipate issues and to act accordingly.

4- The TA:

The TA whom I interviewed conducted paired reading with a number of students including A and B. Otherwise she helped out with various students as assigned by the SENCO. She echoed the thoughts of the other professionals by saying that there were basic strategies which were in use across the school to promote literacy but that clearly there was a need for additional time to be spent on those with specific issues; the degree of support would be dependent on the severity of the person with whom they were dealing. She felt that phonics was the most effective strategy as it enabled pupils to link the skill that they had – the ability to make sound – with a skill that they were working to acquire – a fluent command of words to be able to read and write. The TA reflected that her duties were defined by the needs of the individual children whom she was supporting following the guidelines for focus which are listed in their IEP; she indicated that the 'better teachers' asked for her advice due to her experience of approaches for the pupils, but one just ignored her presence leaving her to help the individual concerned. She commented that there were still some teachers who saw those with literacy difficulties merely as lazy which she, as the mother of a dyslexic child, felt was 'disgusting'.

Discussion

The first thing that is apparent in this school is the ethos of inclusion and support that has been developed from the Head Teacher, unashamedly sporting blue spectacles to help to ease his dyslexia, right through to the children who occupy the classrooms. Of course there are still those who are unkind about others who learn in a different way which is unfortunately the case in all schools across the country but any sort of behaviour of that kind is swiftly dealt with here where diversity is not only welcomed but celebrated. This attitude reinforces the notion that the condition needs to be understood before the best support can be made available and that it only becomes a problem if it goes

undetected thereby preventing individuals from becoming literate (Pollock et al, 2004).

The students who were interviewed all indicated that they felt that they had improved in their literacy skills over the last six months. On reflection it would have been better had there been some statistical evidence to back this up as with any programme or initiative people are always going to indicate that it has made a difference (Brooks, 2007, P. 18) to their learning. The data that has been collected is purely speculative and would have benefited from the children being tested and a comparison made with their standards at the beginning of the year which is a weakness in the study. Each student indicated that they were had undergone and were continuing to receive structured approaches to improve their reading and writing skills and the indications were positive that they were having a measure of success which confirms the assertions of Townend (2000) about structured approaches (echoing the thoughts of Miles, 1989 and Singleton, 2009). In spite of this it is impossible to provide a definitive answer to this research question due to the misjudgement with regard to the necessity of including statistical data in order to assess the extent of literacy progress over the last six months and a lack of specific questions to the teaching staff about the progress of the targeted pupils.

Students clearly enjoyed the literacy provision that was being made available to them as is indicated above. Paired reading, for example, is seen to be very successful by these pupils. This was borne out in my observation of lessons; I observed two sessions, one with A and another with B. A had asked to read a short passage from a History book which her class was using as she had found it a little difficult to understand. The passage was describing how people were press ganged into the Navy; the teacher and A read the piece together with A being given help where it was necessary by repeating words as she heard them (and writing them in a notebook afterwards); she displayed characteristics while reading that are seen to be typical for a dyslexic such as the mispronunciation of words and difficulties with polysyllabic words as highlighted by Pollock et al (2004); a discussion followed about the content

with A commenting how cruel it was to do that to people; when asked why there had been an issue with the piece she commented that the class had not been given enough time for her to read it properly. Time had been made available here for the child to discuss not only the work but their worries providing them with a boost to their self esteem in that they felt valued. Although this sort of process is teacher intensive it provides both short and long term benefits for the child. B had a similar session with the teacher reading one of the Hank Zipzer books written by Henry Winkler (AKA 'The Fonz') who is himself dyslexic. He read well but I was taken by the animation in his voice as he discussed the seemingly 'silly things' that Hank does (having understood what he had read) which he could relate to like looking everywhere around the house for his backpack only to realise that it was on his back. It struck me that he was only just beginning to realise that he was not alone in his predicament. I could see his self worth growing as the teacher explained how the writer was a big star on American television and pointed to his picture which was part of the display on the wall reinforcing the thoughts of Lawrence (1985) about the enhancement of self esteem. These examples concur with the findings of Neville (1975), Wilkinson (1980), Evans (1984) and Bell (1991) with regard to the benefits of paired reading above.

The findings indicate, in answer to how students with dyslexic are taught literacy including additional provision, that for the most part the literacy provision is uniform throughout the school following a synthetic phonics format. All teachers are encouraged to help those with literacy difficulties to sound out letters and words and relate those to their written form through the use of cue cards, word banks and general reading. This is standard practice within an inclusive school environment. The additional provision sees the withdrawal of some students for work on their levels of literacy which sees them engaged in further activities that are phonically based which are specific to their need and preferred learning style. The structure of the provision is systematic in nature each graduated step proceeding from the last with that having been practiced until it is remembered by the student which is in line with the approach

which is advocated by Townend (2000), Cheminais (2006) and Singleton (2009). Almost every space as you move around the school is occupied by a rich variety of creative displays that provide a vibrant spectacle which encourages literacy. Teaching and support staff clearly work hard to ensure that not only the necessary policy documents are displayed but more importantly (and visibly) children's work and informative pictures with text celebrate the joy of the English language and the quality of learning which takes place in the school. Particularly good are the displays in the SEN area which highlight dyslexia issues for the benefit of all concerned demonstrating excellent empathy with those who are affected. Support for literacy can be observed in almost every classroom whether it be in the form of instructional templates to help students in their writing, word banks or the use or paired reading of passages in order to aid in comprehension. The literacy lessons that I observed were well planned and contained elements which involved the children in using a multi-sensory approach as advised by the Dyslexia Association of Ireland and other leading bodies in this field (Dyslexia Association of Ireland, 2021.). Each part of the lessons from the starter to the main activities and the plenary were structured to build from each other on prior learning (see comments above about systematic teaching). Students were seen to be comfortable in their environment and challenged to improve their literacy skills. The main body of the lessons involved working with sounds which were linked to letters or letter combinations followed by the recognition of words. Games in groups with the teacher or TA provided instant reinforcement of the learning often with the use of the 'Look, Cover, Write, Check' method. I was also impressed by the way that they children were placed at ease. Having been asked to combine some of the 'er' words that they had discovered either in a one verse poem or in a short paragraph the children were told just to write things as they came to them and that if there were spelling errors 'it did not matter' as they could put them right later – 'your ideas are the most important thing to begin with'. Immediately the children set to work without having to worry about the process of writing but rather enjoying the creative writing in itself which was clearly a boost to their

confidence and willingness to write as there was no fear of 'messing up' (which echo the thoughts of Lawrence (1985) about self esteem). This reinforced the impression that the children were enjoying the literacy provision which was in place for them in the school.

The hallmark of good teaching for all children but particularly those with dyslexia is structured piece by piece learning and reinforcement in order to ensure that the information is retained. This type of instruction is akin to the behaviourist approaches employed by Skinner in order to ensure through reinforcement that skills are mastered but they really come alive when they are shared and enjoyed during interaction with other people. However the instruction will only be successful if it is pitched at the right level which relies upon accurate assessment of the needs of each child as advocated by Cross (2004) and the teaching staff using dynamic ongoing assessment of the progress and potential of each child in order to enable them to get the best from themselves (as suggested by Dillon, 1997; echoed by Reid, 2003); this process occurs every day in the literacy lessons in that children are challenged to undertake tasks which stretch their abilities if they are ready for that stage which can only be determined by the teacher at that precise moment. Clearly students will be given the opportunity to make progress only if the planning for each lesson is based on their individual needs as determined by formal and informal assessments, IEPs and Statements which are in place. A very useful tool to aid with this in this school is the booklet which is produced for each member of staff which lists all the students who fall under the SEN umbrella, the nature of their condition and their levels of attainment; coupled with this teachers are supplied with copies of IEPs in order to better facilitate differentiated planning which supports not only literacy skills but improved access to the curriculum.

Being literate and having access to the curriculum as a whole can be facilitated by the selection and use of good texts in the classroom as well as effective use of TAs and support staff. This school makes effective use of support staff and uses their expertise when it comes to the provision of literacy materials

and differentiated resources for its dyslexic pupils; an example of this which I witnessed was a conversation between the TA and the teacher with regard to a History topic as to the best way to approach the searching of documents for a pupil known to the SEN department. It was decided that larger copies of documents would be produced for this individual and a one off lesson of support would be offered to him to get him started on his project. The students made comments about those who made an extra effort to understand or to get to know them – C commented on a teacher who encouraged their class to tackle topics in ways which suited them but encouraged them to rotate their methods in order to develop their skills, noting down which they used when in order to avoid repetition and avoidance of methods that they found most challenging. What made this easier was the selection and use of an excellent text book (in consultation with SpLD students) which was very aware of the different intelligences and learning styles, presenting information in a variety of forms (photographs, diagrams, cartoon and text) that made access to it easier for those with literacy problems. The book was systematic in its task setting as was its use by the teacher – which encouraged a systematic exploring of their strengths in order to work on their weaknesses, encouraging critical thinking leading C to comment that it was 'the way every lesson should be'. This particular classroom also had word banks specific to each group displayed on the wall with pictures in order to aid all of the pupils in their learning. This is a model of good practice which further endorses the thoughts of Townend (2000), Cheminais (2006), Brooks (2007) and Singleton (2009) about systematic working which dyslexic children.

It is interesting to note the approach of the school to the use of computers as a part of the literacy provision. Within the mainstream curriculum they are used as an aide to presentation skills via word processing and the designing of Powerpoint presentations which are clearly helpful to all. During specific literacy lessons computers are used to reinforce and supplement the work that has been carried rather than as a substitute for one to one or group work on literacy. There are a large number of

first class applications which the children can enjoy and use to their advantage. Another thing that is encouraged is the use of the computer to word process a piece of writing or to transcribe it once it has been done by hand with both pieces being seen as of equal value – this is another key with any piece of writing which is completed. Students are seen to be more motivated when their preferred methods of working are accepted and they are aided in the planning and production of their work (concurring with the findings of Knowles, 2006); the systematic reinforcement of this message is seen throughout the literacy lessons in the school and is reflected in both this and the fact that students are encouraged to read literature which is of interest to them.

The findings provide a largely incomplete answer to the question about the profile of a dyslexic pupil. The important thing to notice is that despite it being acknowledged that individuals have dyslexia every person will be affected in different ways – the general condition impedes their literacy ability but this is the only part of any profile which can be common to all as they will have different strengths and weaknesses depending on where their perceptual or cognitive issues lie. The pupils who were interviewed showed that in spite of having dyslexia they were articulate and able to hold a conversation about their schooling, what they liked and what they did not like. Pupil A was seen to be good in areas of the curriculum which enable her to focus on her strengths and preferred learning styles which are visual and kinaesthetic like Drama, Art, Music, Science and English. Pupil B was dyslexic but his problems were exacerbated by his suffering from ADHD. Pupil C displayed problems with his motor skills but the common thread were the difficulties of the condition itself not the strengths of each individual. A weakness in the questioning that was designed for the teaching and support staff was that it was not specific enough to identify any particular tendencies which could contribute in a meaningful way to a generic profile of any sort. The differences in the types of dyslexia are highlighted in the literature review and it can be seen from this that attempts to provide a generic profile for a dyslexic person

would be fruitless. The background factors which can be identified are bound to have an effect on each individual but again the design of the questions was not specific enough to be able to say how much of an influence they might have. Clearly the genetic factor is bound to have an effect as will things like upbringing and environment but these are difficult to quantify in a short study such as this one.

Conclusion

The methods for the teaching of literacy in the school conform to the recommended practices as found in the literature using a using multi sensory phonic based system. The comments of the pupils and the staff are corroborated by the evidence provided by direct observation; these observations were not only of literacy lessons for those with SpLDs with specialist teachers but of lessons across the curriculum conducted by classroom teachers. Common methods were used to reinforce literacy skills such as mind maps, writing frames and the 'Look, Cover, Write, Check' system for spelling in all areas of the school with displays in each room to remind the students (and indeed the staff) to use it. Everything that was presented with regard to the teaching of literacy to dyslexic children was done in a systematic way; learning was designed to be tackled in manageable pieces using a synthetic phonics system which concentrates on speech sounds (phonemes) being matched up with their written form (graphemes) that can be either single letters, groups of letters or combinations which are blended together. It is only through using a combination of visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learning that the needs for dyslexic learners can be met as it encompasses a number of different learning styles. It allows all the suggested groups with dyslexia to be aided in their learning to speak, read and write.

The evidence of the research indicates that there can only really be one statement on the any profile that can be common to all people with dyslexia and that is that they have difficulty with reading and writing. Each have their own personal strengths and weaknesses - how the condition manifests itself with one person is not the same as with another and this is may be due to the

background factors which impact on each individual. Heredity is a factor over which no-one has control; other factors include the personal attitudes of individuals which can be influenced by their temperament, their mood and their ability to interact with others; their home environment can have a huge impact on their learning and as we have seen the influence of the school environment and individual teachers is massive.

I was impressed with the level of literacy provision that I witnessed and the inclusive ethos of the school. From this brief study it is clear that there are elements of good practice here from which all on the school staff could learn and I would recommend that a programme of peer observation be undertaken to showcase best practice with regard to the teaching of literacy.

If I were to conduct the study again I would include a larger sample for the purposes of comparison possibly two boys and two girls who are dyslexic from each year group as well as interviews with staff. I would also seek to involve parents in the process as the home environment is an important background factor which has not really been investigated here. I would also include the use of performance tests to be able to verify levels of improvement rather than merely relying on opinion – the students might have just been providing me with the answers they thought I wanted to hear rather than the truth. I would also be more specific in my construction of questions in order to elicit more specific information with regard to the construction of a profile for dyslexia and contributory background factors. Another interesting area might be to investigate the case for having a specialist SpLD teacher employed in each classroom to help with the literacy provision for example in the production of differentiated work and to help subject staff with their planning and approach to individuals' problems.

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