

Dyslexia and Inclusion: supporting classroom reading with 7-11 year olds

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Part One

A socio-cultural view of dyslexia

Part One of this minibook sets the scene for the practical advice that follows in Part Two. In the first chapter a new way of looking at the concept of dyslexia is introduced, and in the second the author's research study is briefly described.

Chapter 1

Looking at dyslexia differently

Introduction: the puzzling case of Percy

It is now well over a hundred years since an article entitled 'A case of congenital word blindness' appeared in the *British Medical Journal* (Pringle Morgan, 1896/1996). This told of the perplexing problems experienced by a fourteen year old boy called Percy, who despite being 'bright and intelligent' (p.146) and having received seven years of tuition in basic literacy skills, still could not read or spell most words correctly apart from those of the highest frequency in the language. The author, a medical doctor, related his puzzlement that the boy mis-spelt his own name as 'Precy' but was unaware of his error, and yet was described by his schoolmaster as potentially 'the smartest lad in the school if the instruction were entirely oral' (p.146). Teachers today operate in a very different educational context, but many can relate similar stories of pupils whose significant difficulties with literacy development are totally unexpected given their overall intellectual potential and level of exposure to learning opportunities.

Dyslexia as a specific learning difficulty

Since the later part of the twentieth century, pupils like Percy who have problems that impact only on certain areas of their learning, have been regarded as being affected by one of a number of specific as opposed to

generalised learning difficulties. The term 'dyslexic' is often used to describe those whose problems with reading stem from poor phonic decoding skills and the inability to build up an adequate sight vocabulary rather than with global understanding of texts. Couched in terms of the four different patterns of performance put forward as part of the 'simple view of reading' in the revised Primary National Strategy (PNS, 2006a), these are the set of pupils classified as having 'poor word recognition; good comprehension' (p.5).

The psychological view of dyslexia

Despite the fact that the term 'dyslexia' was given official credence in the original Special Educational Needs (SEN) Code of Practice (DfE, 1994), the concept has remained controversial within educational circles because of a lack of agreement over whether it is appropriate to regard it as a medical syndrome with a particular pattern of 'symptoms' and a defined cause. Most academics in the dyslexia field are psychologists who regard an individual's learning as consisting of sequential stages of skill acquisition, and because of this, problems with reading are viewed as stemming largely from cognitive defects or deficits associated with phonological processing of language (Hall, 2003). A huge literature has arisen on this subject, but the search for the definitive cause of dyslexia is ongoing (for a comprehensive review of the various theories, see Reid and Wearmouth, 2002). There has also been much debate over proposed definitions of dyslexia that expand on its literal Greek meaning 'difficulty with words' (Hornsby, 1992: 3), and the result is that no two definitions are alike. However, they do tend to have features in common in that most include a possible cause and many suggest that a certain amount of discrepancy will be demonstrated between actual and expected levels of literacy skills, given overall intellectual potential. A consequence of this way of looking at dyslexia is that psychological testing is needed prior to identification, with the result that only the most severely affected pupils are likely to be formally assessed.

An inclusive definition of dyslexia

At the end of the 1990s the British Psychological Society set up a working party to look at the whole issue of dyslexia assessment, and as part of this a new more inclusive definition was proposed. This stated that:

Dyslexia is evident when accurate and fluent word reading and/or spelling develops very incompletely or with great difficulty. This focuses on literacy learning at the 'word level' and implies that the problem is severe and persistent despite appropriate learning opportunities.
(Reason, 2002: 188-9)

This definition, like all those before it, proved controversial in official dyslexia circles, but it is useful for classroom teachers. This is because pupils whose specific problems with literacy learning at the 'word level', to use the terminology of the original National Literacy Strategy (DfEE, 1998), are not severe enough to merit formal assessment but remain a significant barrier to learning despite targeted support, can be described as dyslexic.

A socio-cultural view of literacy learning

Academic educationalists tend to view literacy development in a different way to psychologists because they see it as a social process which is influenced by a child's physical and cultural environment. This is often referred to as the 'socio-cultural' perspective (Hall, 2003), and those who ascribe to this view regard learning to read and write at school as taking place within a particular 'community of practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991), i.e. the class group, where experts (teachers) support novices (pupils) and gradually introduce them to increasingly complex forms of learning by working within their 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD). This term was coined by the influential Russian educationalist, Vygotsky (1978), and refers to the process of moving learning forward known as 'scaffolding', by which means pupils are able to achieve with adult guidance what they would be unable to accomplish alone. Viewed from this perspective, the causes of literacy difficulties are often situated in problematic interpersonal relationships and environmental mismatches which interfere with effective learning, and scepticism about the psychological concept of dyslexia has therefore been the result.

Integrating the two perspectives - a socio-cultural view of dyslexia

Some years ago I found myself in the position of being on the one hand a literacy support teacher whose practice was founded on the psychological view of dyslexia, while at the same time an academic educationalist attracted to the socio-cultural perspective of how reading and writing develop. At first

I found this discomfiting, but gradually I began to feel that an integration of the two perspectives was possible, and in fact around that time an edited text by Reid and Wearmouth (2002) appeared in which this stance was taken. In it Burden (2002) provided an insightful discussion of how terminology around the word 'dyslexia' reveals different ways of looking at the subject:

The difference between describing someone as 'having dyslexia', 'being dyslexic' or 'displaying learning difficulties of a dyslexic nature' becomes highly significant. In the first instance, 'dyslexia' is used as a noun and is therefore defined as a 'thing'... In the second example, the adjectival use of the term 'dyslexic' defines the whole person in a particular way... [who] may thereby come to be seen as 'handicapped'... The third example, by contrast, has descriptive and action implications with regard to the nature of the learning difficulties exhibited at a particular moment in time. (Burden, 2002: 271-272)

It is the third way of using the term that fits best with a socio-cultural view of the concept and in this minibook the term 'dyslexic' should be regarded as shorthand for the rather cumbersome descriptive phrase 'dyslexic-type literacy difficulties', by which is meant problems with reading and writing at the single word level.

Because of the dominance of the psychological view of dyslexia, there have been relatively few studies that have explored the 'human side' (Burden, 2005: 1) of the subject (for a notable example see Riddick's (1996) *Living with dyslexia*). I therefore decided to plan research in which I would retain the concept of dyslexia, but would view the subject through a socio-cultural lens. My focus of investigation then, in what became the *Coping with classroom reading* study, was what it was like for affected pupils to function at school on a daily basis. Although I acknowledge that for some dyslexic pupils, writing is the most problematic area, I decided to concentrate on reading because of my belief that it is the fundamental 'gatekeeper of learning' (Fokias, 1998: 28). As I began the research in the early years of the 21st century at a time when digital technology was becoming more and more common in schools, I soon became aware that a consideration of on-screen as well as conventional types of reading would be vital (for full details see Anderson (2007)).