

DYSLEXIA, LITERACY AND INCLUSION – A JOINT NORTH SOUTH CONFERENCE

Friday 12th March 2010 – date of conference

Saint Mary's University College, Belfast

Ms Louise Long (St. Mary's University College, Belfast)

Mr Damian Knipe (St. Mary's University College, Belfast)

Dr Michael Shevlin (Trinity College, Dublin)

Dr Therese McPhillips (St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra)

This research conference, which was generously funded by SCoTENS aimed to provide a dynamic, multi-agency approach for policy-makers, practitioners, school leaders and researchers from across the island of Ireland to share their expertise, experiences and ideas on the provision of high quality, child-centred educational experiences to pupils who have dyslexia. It also facilitated networking opportunities that have the potential to lead to further partnerships, which should inform the inclusive education debates in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The overarching aim for the day complemented the Every Child Matters Agenda in terms of identifying best practice in safe-guarding and promoting the well-being of young learners with dyslexia so that ultimately they fulfil their potential and embrace adulthood with high levels of academic, social and emotional self-efficacy.

61 delegates from Northern Ireland, 21 delegates from the Republic of Ireland and 2 delegates from England attended the conference. The participants included the following relevant stakeholders: school principals; educational psychologists; literacy support specialists and advisors; teachers; lecturers; and inspectors. Professor Peter Finn, Principal of St. Mary's University College who warmly and robustly welcomed every-one, opened the conference. Dr Sean MacBlain, Reader in Child Development and Disability Studies at University College Marjon, Plymouth went on to deliver a sensitive and challenging keynote speech on the ethical issues that arise when assessing learners for dyslexia. Sean drew on his own research and broad range of experiences in the field of special educational needs to examine some contemporary issues including the emotional world of pupils with dyslexia, the need for a sharper focus on personalised learning pathways and the dynamic of power in parent-professional partnerships. Sean concluded with a colourful challenge to the status quo in current assessment practices, which set a critically reflective and concurrently relaxed tenor for the remainder of the day.

It has been almost ten years since the then Minister for Education, Martin McGuinness, raised the focus for policy development and public interest in dyslexia when he commissioned a regional task group that mirrored an existing model in the South of Ireland. The papers that followed Sean's address related to the development of this early pioneering work by building capacity to remove barriers to learning so that pupils with dyslexia are provided with well-targeted child-centered support. There was one morning and one afternoon session each containing three parallel presentations, allowing delegates to attend two presentations.

Speakers and Abstracts

Keynote Address: Dyslexia: the ethics of assessment

Dr Sean MacBlain (University College Marjon, Plymouth)

The United Nations holds an entitlement to literacy to be a fundamental human right. Moreover, it is accepted almost everywhere that our lives are now, more than ever, dependent upon communication through the written word. At the very heart of our education system is the Every Child Matters agenda, introduced by government, which is a relatively new approach to the well-being of children and young people from birth to age 19 (Department for Education and Skills, 2004). The aim of government is that every child, whatever their background or their circumstances, has the support they need to: be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution, and achieve economic well-being. In practice, this should mean that the organisations involved with providing services to children – from hospitals and schools, to police and voluntary groups – will be joining together often in new ways to share information and work together, not only to protect children and young people from harm, but also to help them achieve what they hope for in life. It is now generally recognised, perhaps now more than ever before, that children and young people will have more to say about issues that affect them, both as individuals and collectively. For many children with dyslexia this is not happening. One primary barrier to the meeting of their needs is the assessment processes and procedures that these children, and their families, must navigate. Children, as well as young and less young adults with dyslexia most typically face difficulties with literacy. They also face the difficulties of coming to terms with and understanding their own experiences of “being dyslexic” and the ways in which others relate to their difficulties and to them as learners in the broader sense. Central to the difficulties experienced by too many individuals with dyslexia is the manner in which they have been, and continue to be assessed. Behind these difficulties lie many ethical issues that need to be addressed right across the education system, most particularly the manner in which assessment is perceived and managed. For example, the lack of understanding that still surrounds dyslexia, what it is and how children and young people with dyslexia should be taught. What types of intervention actually work, and are these underpinned by accurate and informed assessment? Who, in reality, teach children and young people with dyslexia and to what extent are they involved in the assessment process, and subsequent interventions? What is the real nature of partnerships with parents? Are Individual Education Plans accessible to parents to inform them as to the best way to support their child? In the assessment process, do better informed and educated parents have the advantage? These issues, amongst others, pose important questions for all of us involved in the education of children and young people with dyslexia, and most especially, perhaps, for those of us involved in initial teacher training/education. They are also most relevant to school principals/head teachers planning professional development, and addressing the means by which members of the teaching profession maintain, improve and broaden their knowledge and skills and develop the personal qualities required in their professional lives.

Reference: Department for Education and Skills (2004) *The Children Act*. London: HMSO

Morning session A

Consulting pupils on the assessment and management of their literacy needs

Ms Louise Long (Principal Investigator, St. Mary's University College Belfast)

Dr Michael Shevlin (Trinity College Dublin)

Dr Therese McPhillips (St. Patrick's College Drumcondra)

Chair: Miss Donna Murray, St. Mary's University College, Belfast

This exploratory qualitative study, which was funded by SCoTENS aimed to consider the views held by upper primary pupils on their level of participation in managing their additional literacy needs with aspirations to utilise these views to transform practice and enhance the likelihood of successful academic outcomes. The rationale for the study was based on three premises: the increasing recognition and commitment by the UK and the Republic of Ireland governments to give voice to children with special educational needs in research, evaluation and consultation; the growing body of research highlighting that when learners are able to talk about learning and teaching there are positive outcomes from both an educational and citizenship perspective; and a holistic model for education that reasserts the affective experience and concurrently aims to raise standards in literacy.

An opportunistic sample of eight schools - four in Northern Ireland and four in the Republic of Ireland were chosen by the researchers to take part in the study. The sample schools reflected a range of relevant school factors including: size; rural/urban; socio-economic status; single-sex/co-educational; ethnic mix; Catholic/non-denominational. There was one research group per school; in five of the groups the participants were aged between 10-11 years and in three of the groups the participants were aged between 9-10 years. Each research group comprised 4-6 learners who were receiving additional within-school support for literacy. A vignette, aspects of solution-focussed brief therapy and creative methodologies were used within the context of these focus groups to engage the learners in sensitive and participatory dialogue. The use of collages and images provided an ethically secure, child-centred container for the learners to collectively communicate their inner and outer academic, social and emotional worlds and the end result was tangible products that can be revisited and revised. The entire commentary from each session was recorded and transcribed. Content analysis of the visual and written data from all eight schools allowed collective themes to be mapped.

This paper discusses these emergent themes in the context of pupils' views on nurturing relationships, the social/affective dimension of learning and effective strategies for learning and teaching. Learners' self-awareness of their additional needs and possible remediation pathways are considered in terms of structuring opportunities to increase pupil participation and encouraging teachers to move away from a protectiveness value system to one that facilitates metacognitive talk by communicating high expectations to learners and fostering open and positive relationships between them and teachers.

Morning Session B

TEST2R: a new approach for early screening and intervention

Ms Pauline Cogan (Scoil San Treasa, Dublin)

Chair: Dr Sean MacBlain, University College Marjon, Plymouth

The TEST2R Project is a prospective longitudinal study. It aims to develop an early screening test to predict which children may experience literacy difficulties in their school careers. It is inspired by research, which shows that if children at risk of literacy difficulties receive sensitive, early intervention, targeted to their needs, then 82% of them may have a normal school trajectory (Strag, 1972).

The TEST2R framework is theoretically eclectic encompassing the major theories of literacy difficulty. The project has two phases. This presentation briefly describes the large battery of subtests and subtest rationale pertaining to Phase 1. It also describes participant selection (n=1037), the teacher- training process and subtest administration by which Phase 1 data were harvested. The construct validity of the composition of the test is being evaluated using Factor Analysis.

Phase 2 involves psychological assessment of the children as they approach their tenth birthday. This leads to a second data set. Statistical analyses of both databases will determine which of the tests from the screening battery will be included in a short classroom-friendly early screening test.

This large-scale project is a work-in-progress. Preliminary results from Phase 1 will be reported at this session. Results from Phase 2 will be available in September 2010 when the last of the children will have been assessed. Following statistical analyses the final composition of TEST2R will be decided.

Phase 2 of the TEST2R Project is funded by the Department of Education and Science. The project is managed by the Blackrock Education Centre, Dublin.

Reference

Strag, G.A. (1972). Comparative behavioural ratings of parents with severe mentally retarded, special learning disability and normal children. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 5, 631-635.

Morning Session C

Second level students with dyslexia: effective instructional practices

Mr Alan Sayles (Department of Education and Science, Dublin)

Chair: Dr Brian Hanratty, St. Mary's UC, Belfast

Reading research over the past few decades has confirmed what common sense might predict, that poor response to intervention is a valid indicator of long term reading disability. We know that reading disabilities persist over time – they do not go away. Shaywitz *et al.* (1996) indicated that approximately 75% of children with reading disabilities at age nine have reading impairments at age fifteen. Despite this

knowledge, adolescents have been largely overlooked in reading instruction and in reading research (Chhabra & McCardle, 2004). Adolescent literacy issues have been marginalised (Vacca and Vacca, 2002) and even neglected (Alvermann, 2008). Second-level teachers of students with dyslexia are faced with significant challenges. Such students continue to struggle with basic literacy tasks, which will interfere with academic achievement. In addition, these students are likely to suffer serious psychological consequences, including anxiety, low motivation for learning, and lack of self-efficacy.

This presentation will review and summarise some of the evidence base regarding teaching reading to adolescents and, in particular, teaching students with dyslexia. While it is accepted that there is no single instructional programme or method that is effective in teaching all children to read, research has concluded that there is some evidence that some practices are likely to be more successful than others when working with students with dyslexia and that successful teaching programmes and practices share some common attributes that should be considered when developing school-based programmes and selecting teaching methods.

Mindful of the various manifestations of dyslexia during adolescence, the presentation will provide an overview of evidence-based instructional practices, which have been shown to be effective in developing literacy skills at second-level and in responding to the individual needs of students with dyslexic difficulties. When there is diversity in ability for learning to read, there must be diversity in the educational response.

References

Alvermann, D. (2008). Why bother theorising adolescents' online literacies for classroom practice and research? *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 52(1), 8-19.

Chhabra, V. & McCardle, P. (2004) Contributions to evidence-based research in P. McCardle and V. Chhabra (Eds). *The Voice of Evidence in Reading Research*. NY: Brookes Ltd

Shaywitz, A., Fletcher, J.M., Holahan, J.M. and Shaywitz, S.E. (1996). Discrepancy compared to low achievement definitions of reading disability: Results from the Connecticut longitudinal study. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 25, 639 - 648.

Vacca, R. and Vacca, J.A. (2002). *Content Area Reading: Literacy and Learning Across the Curriculum* (7th Ed.) Boston: Allyn and Bacon

Afternoon Session A

Paradigms of ICT supported supplementary reading instruction

Dr Marty Holland (Mary Immaculate College Limerick)

Chair: Mr Dermot McCartan, St. Mary's UC, Belfast

This paper will present some of the findings from recent research on the use of ICT for supplementary reading instruction in Irish primary schools. The research was motivated by the lack of a clear model of ICT use for supplementary reading instruction. The focus of the research was on the use of the technology for pupils with high incidence special educational needs including those with dyslexia and mild or borderline general learning disability. Recent changes in support teaching provision for pupils with high incidence SEN, under the general allocation model, added a further imperative to the work.

In the research more than 5000 messages on an E-mailing list or E-list used by learning support and resource teachers in Irish primary schools were analysed for evidence and examples of how these support teachers use ICT in supplementary reading instruction. Based on the findings of the E-list research, fieldwork was conducted in 33 technology-rich Irish primary schools to analyse and identify the role of ICT for supplementary reading instruction in these schools. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with support teachers, class teachers, principals and pupils. Observations of ICT being used in reading instruction were also carried out.

The paper will present a model of ICT use based on the two main approaches to reading instruction, i.e. a skills-based approach and a whole language approach. Examples of how teachers are using content rich and content free software applications to support supplementary reading instruction will be presented. Some key findings arising from the research will be discussed.

Afternoon Session B

Preabhlár na Litearthachta (Lift off to literacy in the Irish medium school)

Dr Gabrielle Nig Uidhir (St. Mary's University College Belfast)

Chair: Liam Mac Giolla Mheana, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta

The *Lift-off to Literacy* programme is an intensive, literacy programme, modelled on the Reading Recovery intervention programme for young children. It involves a structured, daily sequence of literacy activities where 5 teachers manage literacy stations and children rotate in groups around the stations. This programme was redeveloped in Irish and piloted in an Irish-medium primary school during the spring term, 2009. Significant findings from the administration of the pilot programme in Irish will be discussed, including qualitative and quantitative data relating to pupils' literacy achievement, as well as the advantages and challenges associated with the implementation of the programme.

The aims of this project are aligned to the vision expressed by the Department of Education, *to ensure that every learner fulfils his or her full potential at each stage of*

their development. The programme is designed to accelerate the literacy achievement of the whole class by focusing on the quality of the teachers' interactions with pupils within a structured and stimulating literacy programme.

Concerns about levels of literacy and numeracy attainment in schools, addressed in *Every School a Good School* (Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI), (2008)) highlights many complexities associated with patterns of underachievement that have been identified. Within the Irish-medium sector, end of Key Stage results in English and Mathematics compare favourably with English-medium schools. Nevertheless, Irish-medium schools face their own challenges, one of which is a severe shortage of resources (DENI, 2008, 43). The range of resources available for Irish-medium teachers and other professionals to assess and support pupils experiencing learning difficulties has improved in recent years, but remains limited. It is hoped that work carried out on this project will further advance the effective use of resources relating to literacy development.

A diagnostic tool linked to the Reading Recovery programme was redeveloped into Irish at St. Mary's University College and piloted in schools throughout Ireland. (Clay and Nig Uidhir, 2006) This tool, *Ais Mheasúnaithe sa Luathlitharthacht (ÁML)* was used to assess outcomes in the „Preabchlár“ project.

Research questions aimed to:

- Explore the appropriateness of this programme for the Irish-medium context;
- Address the important issue of resources in the Irish-medium school;
- Examine the management challenges for implementing this programme;
- Consider the outcomes of the programme in comparison to a control group;
- Consider the potential for professional development for teachers and student teachers that this programme would require.

Research methods included:

- Consultation and planning (viewing the English-medium model in a school) with Reading Recovery tutors;
- Programme design – redeveloping in Irish the structure and activities of the existing model;
- Collecting reading and levelling suitable texts in Irish in cooperation with teachers;
- Observation and recording (DVD) of teaching sessions.

SCoTENS funded this project. Participants in the project were Dr. Gabrielle Nig Uidhir, St. Mary's University College (researcher and contributor to teaching group); Sr. Elizabeth Connolly, Monaghan Teachers' Centre (advisor and consultant on programme); Aine Nic Giolla Cheara (school principal and contributor to teaching group); class teachers, classroom assistants and pupils of Bunscoil Phobal Feirste, Belfast.

References:

Clay, M. and Nig Uidhir, G. (2006) *Áis Mheasúnaithe sa Luathlitharthacht: Treoir do Mhúinteoirí*. Dublin: Carroll Education Ltd.

Department of Education Northern Ireland (2008) *Every School a Good School. A Strategy for raising achievement in literacy and numeracy*. Bangor: Department of Education.

Department of Education Northern Ireland (2008) *Review of Irish-medium Education Report*. Bangor: Department of Education.

Afternoon Session C

Dyslexia in primary school: implications for policy and practice

Dr Therese McPhillips (St. Patrick's College Drumcondra)

Chair: Ms Louise Long, St. Mary's University College, Belfast

In recent years there has been a growing body of international research and information on the identification and education of children with dyslexia. The debate continues among researchers, educators and policy makers regarding the definition and use of the term „dyslexia“. Dyslexia International acknowledges that the distinction between learners with dyslexia and poor readers or „garden variety“ is irrelevant as far as practice is concerned. Appropriate literacy based interventions help all children with literacy difficulties whatever the cause (Brooks *et al.*, 2007).

The question about supportive environments and whether a special placement is an appropriate setting for children with dyslexia or other learning needs may be a distraction from a deeper question as to the value, worth and usefulness of what is really happening in the special setting (Florian, 2005). This implies that questions about process and pedagogy are more important than discussions about place.

This presentation reports on a study, which examined and evaluated special provision for pupils with dyslexia in three different settings: reading schools, reading units and mainstream support. The research focused on the teaching and learning context for pupils with dyslexia, the methods and approaches used and the experience of the student. The study shows that there are academic and social benefits for the child with dyslexia who is enrolled in a special setting. However, placement in a reading school or reading unit per se, does not guarantee a child will „catch up“ with his peers.

In England, support for the dyslexic learner is provided in mainstream state schools. However, recent government initiatives have focused on literacy support to increase the confidence and expertise of mainstream teachers in programmes such as Every Child a Reader (Department of Education and Science (DfES), 2005) and the Inclusion Development Programme (DfES, 2008). A follow up comparative study was conducted with teachers in England to investigate and compare current practice in dyslexia support in England and Ireland.

The presentation will also review and summarise some of the findings from this study and ask if there are lessons to be learned about how to support pupils with dyslexia. Are there specialised teaching approaches and methodologies that are more effective for this group of learners? Can the pedagogies and instructional approaches in the specialist settings offer a framework for effective literacy teaching for all pupils? The

challenge for teachers must be if this child fails to learn the way you teach, can you teach him the way he learns.

References

Brooks, G., Burton, M., Cole, P. and Szczerbin'ski, M. (2007) *Effective Teaching and Learning Reading*. London: National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy

Department of Education and Science (2005) *Every Child a Reader*. Dublin: DfES

Department of Education and Science (2008) *The Inclusion Development Programme*. Dublin: DfES

Florian, L. (2005) "inclusion"; "special needs" and the search for new understandings. *Support for Learning*, 20 (2) 96-98.

Plenary

Chair: Dr Michael Shevlin, Trinity College Dublin

Dr Michael Shevlin, Trinity College Dublin, elegantly facilitated the plenary. In a cordial and energised ambience Michael highlighted that the inclusive ideology had underpinned discussion and the exchange of ideas throughout the day, and it was in this context that Michael offered delegates the opportunity to put questions to the panel of speakers. Some debate ensued around assessment issues and raised questions such as: does every child with dyslexia need to be assessed by an Educational Psychologist; can teachers identify dyslexia at Stage 2 of the Code of Practice; should experienced teachers' qualitative observations of pupils' progress in literacy be accepted as valid assessment "tools"? There was also some discussion around effective models for delivering Continuing Professional Development courses on dyslexia to teachers and relevant practitioners. Michael concluded by thanking Damian Knipe and Louise Long of St. Mary's University College for their hard work in making the day such a pleasant and worthwhile experience for all the delegates.

The conference was formally evaluated under the headings of organisation, quality of presentations and appropriateness of content. 98% of respondents rated all three aspects as excellent. Please find below some of the delegates' written comments on the conference.

It was all very enlightening and informative. I was very pleased that there was such an emphasis on a balanced approach to reading. I look forward to trying out new approaches, for example, the creative methodology approach. I will share what I have learned today with my colleagues. Thank-you all for an excellent day.

It was great to meet colleagues who are working in the same area.

A diverse range of presentations linking research to practical school-based interventions.

Excellent presentations from highly knowledgeable speakers.

Good to hear about ongoing research that provides affirmation for strategies that we are using in the classrooms as well as some new ideas. Sean's sharing of specialist knowledge and years of experience and the emphasis on pupils' views and roles in the assessment process were the most useful aspects of this event.

Very nicely organised – thanks for this.

The conference was also featured in the education section of the *Irish News* on 15th March 2010.

Appendices



Conference organisers and presenters



Delegates relaxing and catching up over lunch.



Delegates relaxing and catching up over lunch.