Improving literacy outcomes for children with dyslexia/SpLD

Best practice in identifying need, providing support and implementing effective interventions

Conference Report
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Introduction

This report covers topics discussed at a LiteracyActionNet conference, “Improving literacy outcomes for children with dyslexia/SpLD: Best practice in identifying need, providing support and implementing effective interventions”, which took place on November 21st 2013.

Speakers were:

- Gerard Lemos, Project Director, LiteracyActionNet
- Dr Greg Brooks, Emeritus Professor of Education, University of Sheffield
- Dr John Rack, Head of Research and Development, Dyslexia Action
- Mel Byrne, Director, The Dyslexia-SpLD Trust
- Bernadette McLean, Principal, Helen Arkell Dyslexia Centre
- Jane Trapmore, Dyslexia Advisor, Cornwall Council
- Mel Childs, SENCo, Chichester High School for Girls
- Susan Mulkern, Librarian, Chichester High School for Girls

This report discusses reforms to the management of special educational needs by local authorities and schools and how they are likely to affect practitioners. More generally, it covers current best practice in literacy teaching for students with dyslexia/SpLD as suggested by speakers at the conference.

The coalition government has announced plans to reform the Special Educational Needs (SEN) Code of Practice in 2014. When the reforms are implemented, schools, service providers, parents and students will face a new range of issues and challenges in achieving good outcomes for students with dyslexia/SpLD.

A revised Special Educational Needs Code of Practice will be produced by the Department for Education which is intended to be significantly shorter, clearer and more concise than previous versions. ‘School Action’ and ‘School Action Plus’ are to be replaced by a new single special educational needs category. Special educational needs services available in a local authority will have to be set out in a local offer put together by the local authority, schools and other education providers. While some aspects of the reforms will be welcomed more than others, practitioners and family members involved with students with special educational needs will need to be equipped with as much knowledge as possible when the changes are made.
1. Policy: Special educational needs reforms

The Coalition Government has proposed an overhaul of the current special educational needs system in an aim to improve the support and services available for children and young people with special educational needs. Some of the proposals will require a change to the law. Politicians are currently discussing these proposals, many of which are set out in part three of the Children and Families Bill 2013, so further changes may be made before the bill is passed. These reforms will be implemented through a revised Special Educational Needs Code of Practice when the bill is eventually enacted.

The reformed special educational needs system attempts to simplify what can be a complex maze of school staff, health workers and social care workers for parents, students and professionals. The new system aims to provide support which is easier to understand, making options easier to choose from and the system more equal.

Changes to the Code of Practice

The Code of Practice provides practical advice for teachers and families of children and young people with special educational needs. The current Special Educational Needs Code of Practice was devised in 2001 but a new special educational needs framework was first called for in 2006 by the Education Select Committee. Several inquiries were conducted between 2007 and 2010.

The revised Code of Practice (2014) will cover children and young people with special educational needs from birth to the age of twenty five. The Code of Practice will provide new guidance on the support which pupils and students should receive in education and training settings. There will be a clearer focus on the views of children and young people and their role in decision making. The revised Code of Practice will include guidance on the joint planning and commissioning of services to strengthen cooperation between education, health services and social care. For children and young people with more complex needs, a coordinated assessment process and the new 0-25 Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan will replace statements and Learning Development Aids (LDAs). The categories ‘School Action’ and ‘School Action Plus’ will be replaced with ‘Additional SEN Provision’. Overall, the reforms seek to encourage a greater focus on support that enables those with special educational needs to succeed in their education and make a successful transition to adulthood.

Code of Practice and schools

The Code of Practice says that teachers are responsible and accountable for the progress and development of pupils in their class. High quality differentiated and individualised teaching is fundamental in responding to pupils who may have special educational needs. The majority of pupils are able to make progress in this way. Schools should regularly review the quality of teaching for pupils at risk of underachievement. Teachers’ should understand the strategies available to identify and support vulnerable pupils and be aware of the special educational needs which are most frequently encountered. The identification of special educational needs should be built into the overall approach to monitoring pupils’ development.

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Where pupils are falling behind or (given their age and starting point,) making inadequate progress they should be given additional support. For higher levels of need, schools should make arrangements to draw on more specialised assessments from external agencies and professionals. These arrangements should be agreed and set out as part of the local offer.

Local offer

As part of the special educational needs reforms, all local authorities will be required to publish a local offer for parents and children with special educational needs. The local offer has two key purposes. The first is clear, comprehensive and accessible information about provision availability. The second is to respond to local needs and aspirations by directly involving young people with special educational needs, parents, carers and service providers in its development. Clear information about what schools provide is intended to drive up standards and reduce conflicts as it becomes easier to compare available provision with agreed standards of good practice.

Children and young people with special educational needs, parents and carers may have a host of questions, which are likely to increase as special educational needs reforms come into practice in 2014. A good local offer will answer these questions. Information covered in the local offer might include:

- how the authority will know if a child has a special educational need and if a child is making progress towards targets;
- how the school develops its overall teaching and adapts its curriculum;
- how successful transitions from one provision to another are made;
- how additional services and expertise can be secured;
- how services can be contacted;
- how services’ effectiveness is assessed;
- how facilities are made available to all; and
- how complaints can be made.

‘Special Educational Needs (Local Offer) Regulations’ provide a common framework for the local offer. They specify the requirements that all local authorities will have to meet in developing, publishing and reviewing their local offer. The requirements cover:

- the information to be included;
- how the local offer is to be published;
- who is to be consulted about the local offer;
- the publication of comments on the local offer and the local authority’s response; and
- how children and young people with special educational needs and their parents will be involved in the preparation and review of the local offer.

The local offer should offer provision for three waves of need. It should cover universal support available to all children and young people from 0 to 25 years with special educational needs; targeted services for young people who require additional short term support above that which is provided routinely as part of universal services; and/or support for those students with special educational needs who require specialised, longer term support.

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Further guidelines about the local offer advise that it should not be merely a description of what is on offer in a local authority but should be built upon strong principles such as the ‘Early Support principles’. It should tell parents what every child with special educational needs should expect from their education. The local offer should focus on outcomes not processes; the Department for Education claims that the new approach ‘will focus the system on the impact of the support provided to that individual child, rather than how children access support according to the category they fit into’. Those creating their region’s local offer are encouraged to see the changes as an opportunity to provide an offer that is dynamic and aspirational.

**Professional development**

The Literacy and Dyslexia-SpLD Professional Development Framework is a tool to support professional development in educational settings and will provide guidance for those likely to be affected by the reforms. When the reforms are implemented, the framework will support professionals to deliver a comprehensive offer for those with specific learning difficulties including dyslexia. The framework explains how to review existing resources and materials which can support graduated responses within new school funding reforms. The framework helps professionals to locate and select good practice from existing resources to enrich their understanding of specific learning difficulties and dyslexia. It can be used as a guide to delivering training to teachers, practitioners, parents and governing bodies to increase their understanding of the single special educational needs category. The framework and new guidance will explain what the changes will mean for pupils with SpLD and dyslexia.

Mel Byrne, Director at the SpLD trust, explains that the Literacy and Dyslexia-SpLD Professional Development Framework is designed for individuals; inclusion managers with responsibility for teams within academies; academy chains involved with strategic planning towards improvement in dyslexia-friendly provision; and training providers as a reference for designing learning outcomes.

With the forthcoming reforms, good communication between practitioners, parents and students has never been more important. Sharing knowledge and working with local authorities and other professionals will ensure effective local offers are developed and delivered. The use of professional development frameworks such as this is likely to teach practitioners what they need to know while reinforcing what they know already.

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1Department for Education and Department for Health (2013) SEND Pathfinder Information Pack Introductory Version 2, Local Offer (n.p.)
2. Methods for improving outcomes for students with dyslexia/SpLD

Sir Jim Rose and Dr Greg Brooks have both expressed the view that mixing literacy models does not make for effective teaching. However, many practitioners believe phonics can be complemented by the use of multi-modal techniques and creative real life projects.

Early intervention

When dyslexia testing and intervention should take place has been much debated since testing and intervention began. With increasing awareness about dyslexia, many parents request a test for their child and many teachers are aware of the benefits. However, dyslexia is not considered a medical issue in the UK\textsuperscript{10} and the costs are therefore not covered by the National Health Service. The cost of a private assessment is unaffordable for many families. Yet the benefits of screening for dyslexia in those who show signs of it are wide ranging. Brooks stresses the importance of early intervention, arguing that "if reading difficulties are to be prevented from arising, accurate, early identification of children at risk is essential"\textsuperscript{11} and that while a very small proportion of people are able to catch up later in life, the “late developer is a myth”\textsuperscript{12}

Jean Augur has written that the period between three and seven years is “a most important time for learning”\textsuperscript{13} and that the earlier a child is given activities which build sound foundations for learning, the better chance the child will have. Many children are currently tested for dyslexia in Key Stage 2 but the first signs of dyslexia can be detected even before the age of six\textsuperscript{14} if, for example, a child struggles to put shoes on the correct feet or clap with a simple rhythm. It can also be spotted in difficulties with speech and language development, in confusion between directional words (such as up, down, in and out) or in jumbled phrases such as “tebby-dare” instead of “teddy bear”. Young children with dyslexia may exhibit particular strengths such as being very good with colour, the computer keyboard or constructional toys such as Lego.\textsuperscript{15} Despite the usefulness of these cues, dyslexia is not defined by motor organisation or spoken language. These issues are potential signs of what should be considered the core problem for literacy learners - phonics.

Dyslexia is not always as easy to detect as the above examples. Special educational needs in children who are struggling with other aspects of learning at the same time can be difficult to spot. Equally, very bright and talented children might slip through the net if they continue to meet or exceed expectations despite these extra difficulties. Some have suggested that labelling a child with the term dyslexia too early can affect how they see themselves and that an over-emphasis on testing

\textsuperscript{10}Brooks warned against the medicalisation of dyslexia, which has just been redesignated as a medical problem after thirty years in Bavaria. But ‘Meares-Irlen syndrome’ (previously and erroneously known as ‘scotopic sensitivity syndrome’) is a different condition. Meares–Irlen Syndrome is a form of visual stress which leads to difficulties with fine vision tasks. Although the condition is not yet fully understood, it is known to affect reading ability and affects about half of dyslexics. Those with the condition are likely to suffer from poor comprehension; skipped words or lines; decreased reading speed; losing place and eye strain. Like dyslexia, it cannot be cured but can be treated. It can in some cases be alleviated by coloured overlays or tinted lenses.

\textsuperscript{11}Brooks, G. (2013) What works for children and young people with literacy difficulties? The effectiveness of intervention schemes (4\textsuperscript{th} edition). University of Sheffield

\textsuperscript{12}Brooks, G. (2007) What works for pupils with literacy difficulties? The effectiveness of intervention schemes (3\textsuperscript{rd} edition). University of Sheffield


may deprive students of broader educational experiences but it is widely agreed that leaving a child to struggle without support can be psychologically damaging.

Diagnoses are useful, but they do not create ready-made plans or strategies. Teachers should know their pupils and choose the best approach for the pupil’s needs and the teacher’s professional knowledge. Brooks strongly recommends that teachers research different methods in order to choose the scheme they feel most confident in teaching. This is likely to most benefit the pupil.

**Phonics**

Dr Greg Brooks drew on Sir Jim Rose’s definition of dyslexia as a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling. Characteristic features of dyslexia include difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed. Notably, co-occurring difficulties in spoken language, motor co-ordination, mental calculation, concentration and personal organisation do not form part of this definition of dyslexia.

As he believes the problem of dyslexia to be phonological, Brooks argued that the answer must be in phonics, warning that failure to achieve using phonics in the past should not discourage teachers from using phonics again as it may have been taught inaccurately or inadequately. Phonics is an approach to teaching, reading and spelling “which focuses on the association of phonemes (speech sounds) with particular graphemes (letters or groups of letters) and of graphemes with particular phonemes. The relationships between sounds and letters – grapheme-phoneme and phoneme-grapheme correspondences – are the basis of all phonics schemes.”

To teach accurate phonics, teachers should choose a scheme which has a sound phonic basis and should ensure their own knowledge of basic phonics is accurate. They should also be wary not to confuse spelling and reading. Teachers who are confident in their own knowledge of phonics are more likely to instil this confidence in students.

*Toe by Toe* is a phonic based scheme which encourages slow and steady progress through peer mentoring. The scheme is made up of a highly systematic series of activities which start from the foundations of phonics and gradually builds knowledge from there. Because many of the stimuli are not real words, the student learns to decode rather than rely on guesswork.

While phonics is the core issue that dyslexic students need to address, the opportunity to reformulate learning in new ways can reinforce understanding. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) in America believes that “it is the interplay of meaning-making systems (alphabetic, oral, visual, etc.) that teachers and students should strive to study and produce.” In *Toe by Toe*, the reformulation of tricky words into speech and the action of tracing them with a finger reinforces the groundwork laid out by the wider systematic learning processes.

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As part of its methodology, *Toe by Toe* includes multi-sensory methods in tackling non-phonetic words known as “sight words”. Although the scheme focuses on ordered and rational learning, when a sight word causes a stumbling block the scheme instructs learners and teachers to trace the shape of the word on their table with a finger whilst repeating the sound of the word, then to trace it as accurately as possible in the air, again repeating the sound of the word, and then finally, to repeat the process with their eyes closed. Much of the benefit of the programme may come from its motivational nature arising from working one on one, especially with a peer. Dr Greg Brooks described *Toe by Toe* as unconventional, but accepted that when delivered meticulously and with full commitment, results suggest that *Toe by Toe* can help students to achieve useful gains.

**Lyndhurst Dyslexia Centre: Grove FM**

Lyndhurst Dyslexia Centre aims to add something extra to mainstream teaching and learning. The centre is a resource base funded by the local authority and attached to Lyndhurst Primary School. Staff use a wide range of approaches to dyslexia/SpLD. They actively use ICT such as text to voice software, touch typing and writing support software such as Clicker 5. When students need to deal with more complex ideas, the centre encourages the use of mind-mapping software, post-it notes or modelling. They provide writing mats, writing frames and cues for success (such as targets, support and strategies) hinged inside book covers. All of which are examples of the broad variety of ways in which literacy can be taught to students with dyslexia/SpLD.

Active learning and real life projects can also encourage dejected or struggling readers that their learning is worthwhile, and even that literacy can be fun. One of the most popular projects at the dyslexia centre is Radio Club. Children learn how to research, write, edit, direct and work as a team to produce a radio programme. Grove FM broadcasts to the school every week. Its content is generated by children in years five and six in Lyndhurst Primary School who attend the club after school once a week. The project encourages children with special educational needs to engage with written and spoken material and to enjoy it in the process.

**Cornwall Book Writing Project**

Another example of a real life project which has been used to engage children with dyslexia is the Cornwall Book Writing Project. The project helps students who struggle with literacy to develop their reading and writing skills. Participants also improved their skills in proof reading; Information and Communications Technology (ICT); photography; interview techniques; sequence; structure; purpose; and writing for a specific audience. Motivation and confidence is built as participants learn to work to deadlines, cooperate, make decisions and negotiate. Through the project, participants are given the opportunity to write about their own passions and interests. A student’s book on steam engines and another student’s book about his experience of living on a farm have both been published. Jane Trapmore, Dyslexia Advisor for Cornwall Council, believes the concept is easily replicable, and is hoping to roll it out to other local authorities and Cornwall schools. Cornwall Council has also spoken to publishers about producing a series of the books.

Providing learners with a whole project inspires and excites students as well as the school as a whole. Where work sheets and text books have come to be associated with difficulty or failure, a brand new project is a clean slate for struggling writers to take responsibility for and have control over their very own project. Trapmore explained how dyslexic children who take part in the project

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22 Andrew writes his own book! (n.d.) Cornwall Council
become more confident and happier in their own writing. Investing in publishing a book shows children that the adults involved in their education have faith in their success and that what the child has to say is worthwhile.

A holistic view

Brooks warned practitioners to be wary of multi-modal approaches, noting that there has been little evidence that different people favour different methods of learning and that, where this is the case, it is rare. Brooks also strongly warned against mixing and matching between two or more strategies as “eclecticism can be a synonym for muddle”. Where a scheme has been developed on the basis of research, Rose has posited that fidelity to the model is essential because dilution leads to less impact. But where phonics is the basis of a literacy strategy, multi-modal approaches (which use speaking, listening, movement and ICT) and real life projects can support and reinforce learning.

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23Jake launches his own book about steam engines (2012)
3. Effective delivery of approaches to dyslexia/SpLD

Local authorities

Jane Trapmore, Dyslexia Advisor for Cornwall Council advised on implementing best practice approaches across a whole authority. The groups that must be coordinated by the local authority include head teachers, SENCos, governors, teachers, teaching assistants, literacy coordinators, parents and the pupils themselves.

Cornwall Council believes that the role of the local authority is greater than coordinating and supporting literacy implementation in schools. Local authorities have the opportunity to empower schools, find creative solutions, devise action plans, enthuse, excite, develop a whole school approach to support, embed consistent good practice, and develop capacity and sustainability for programmes. This can be done through inclusive policies, practice and school culture. Trapmore pointed to three waves of intervention through which students with SpLD can move. The first is inclusive quality teaching. The second is additional interventions which enable struggling children to work at age-related expectations or above. The third is highly personalised interventions which come to understand an individual learner’s difficulties and work to address and rectify these issues. The authority must support these three waves by encouraging a whole school approach by working with teachers, parents and students. A good authority will provide training opportunities such as county based courses, school training, Inset days and annual conferences.

In Cornwall, two assessment and intervention days were held in response to the 2009 Rose Review. Sir Jim Rose visited dyslexia friendly schools and a short film, information pack, booklet (entitled “What works: Case study of good practice”) and Wave 3 feedback sheet were produced. The county still works with individual children and trains in schools as part of a traded service, training towards accreditation and re-accreditation are offered and a booklet entitled “Working with parents: Secondary booklet with the SpLD-Dyslexia Trust” has been produced. The authority is also working to identify good practice in their early years settings. The council is also working with SENCos on memory workshops, phonological awareness workshops, parent support groups and what happens next after screening.

Teaching assistants

Dyslexia Action has recommended that teaching assistants (TAs) are given training in specific interventions and methods of support in order that their skills and knowledge increase over time. This will allow TAs to have a greater impact, experience greater job satisfaction and achieve higher statuses if they wish. TAs should receive training in legislation and policies, educational theory and specific learning difficulties, supported reading, writing and spelling, supported numeracy and ICT, behaviour, self-esteem and motivation and record keeping and reflective practice.

Bernadette McLean, Principal at the Helen Arkell Dyslexia Centre, suggested that training TAs is a way of making good use of the pupil premium. She recommended creating six sessions in which teachers and TAs work together. Between these sessions, teachers and TAs plan specific targets with teachers working in a mentoring role. McLean’s advice to schools was that money should be invested in staff at all levels. She argued that this allows early identification of problems, which gives students the best chance of receiving the support they need. Ensuring teaching assistants have

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received training on special educational needs provision increases the likelihood that struggling students will be identified and provisions will be made.

As part of Lyndhurst Dyslexia Centre’s aim to add something extra to mainstream education, the centre offers training to all staff members in a school. This training comes in the form of a Graduate Teacher Programme (GTP); a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ); or as part of an in-service training (Inset) day. The centre places particular importance on the role of TAs, and offers courses and advice on supporting the teaching and learning of reading, writing, organisation skills and spelling. Mark Sherin, Manager at Lyndhurst Dyslexia Centre believed that TAs should be “skilled up” so that they are able to confidently take responsibility for larger roles in the development of students’ literacy.

Libraries

Susan Mulkern, Librarian at Chichester High School for Girls, was an advocate of the structured learning provided in the Accelerated Learner programme. Accelerated Learner is a scheme in which the reading level of a student is determined in order that achievable goals can be set in line with this. Students read the books in which they are most interested and which are appropriate for their reading level. Once each book is completed, students take a quiz to ensure comprehension. The student, teachers and parents all then receive instant feedback on progress. This information is used to inform the learner’s next steps. Students cannot slip through the radar as they are being continually and regularly assessed.

Parents

If parents feel overwhelmed by their child’s schoolwork they can become disengaged from school life between compulsory parents’ evenings. Yet parents are able to make a fundamental difference to their children’s school lives. Schools and parents must work together in order to support a student’s education. School staff should talk to and involve parents. Parents should be treated as partners in order that they are motivated and equipped to support students and to address their own worries. Mark Sherin, manager at the Lyndhurst Dyslexia Centre, suggested that parents should not force themselves to engage in literacy exercises which neither the child or the parent enjoys; repeatedly failed attempts to reinforce school learning at home can be both detrimental to home relationships and to academic progress.

The Helen Arkell Dyslexia and Learning Centre runs courses entitled Hints, Encouragement and Liaison for Parents (HELP). The HELP course aims to demystify dyslexia, and provide advice on supporting students and liaising with the professionals in their lives. The course is designed for parents but is open to anybody who wants to provide that extra level of support for their family member. The centre also provides free, shorter information sessions for parents. McLean’s advice to parents was: pay attention and talk to children; expose children to literature; trust your instincts; do your research; talk to schools; and treat teachers as partners.

Sherin believed that the transition between primary and secondary school is particularly important. Schools which include parents in the transition can make a fundamental difference to the difficulties sometimes encountered. He advocated supplying parents with copies of all paperwork exchanged between schools; arranging additional visits to the school and to important routes in their child’s day; introducing parents to key personnel; keeping in contact with parents via email; and encouraging meetings between year sixes and year sevens who have already undergone the transition.
Conclusion

Special educational needs reforms will mean that local authorities, schools and parents will increasingly have to work together to provide and best make use of special educational needs support.

The proliferation of ICT resources gives teachers, librarians and other practitioners new ways to assist and encourage learning. The use of these technologies along with more traditional practices reinforces learners’ understandings of the English language. But these multi-modal methods of learning and real life projects should not overshadow the basis of literacy learning – phonics. Brooks showed how rational and systematic methods of teaching can (and should only) be complemented with wider activities.

Practitioners working at every stage of a child’s learning will need to understand these arguments when the local offer is introduced in 2014 as they are likely to be held accountable for the quality of their services even more than they are now. Changes will undoubtedly be met with mixed reactions, but the 2014 reforms should be seen as an opportunity to improve the relationships between organisations, the skills of those working within them, and most importantly the education of children who need extra help and support with literacy.
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