Paper presented at the Twentieth Annual International Conference on Special Education, IATSE, St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin, 12-14 June 2008.

Identification and Intervention for Primary Pupils with Dyslexia in Ireland and England: Finding a Path Through the Maze

Both within Ireland and England there is concern from government level down about how to address literacy standards in primary schools in general and to improve support for learners with dyslexia/specific learning difficulties. This article draws on data that was collected in Ireland and England and compares the provision and organisation of dyslexia support and the role of specialised staff. Identification, assessment, programmes and materials used in overcoming barriers to learning are also discussed.

THÉRÈSE McPHILLIPS is a lecturer in the education department, St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin. SHEENA BELL and MARY DOVESTON are senior lecturers in the Centre for Special Needs Education and Research (CeSNER), University of Northampton, UK.

INTRODUCTION

Within the current context of inclusion there is growing evidence of government intervention to address literacy standards (Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), 1999; Department of Education and Science (DES), 2005; DfES, 2006). In both Ireland and England there has been recognition of the need to improve support for learners with dyslexia. There is an expanding body of international research and information on the identification and education of children with dyslexia (DfES, 2001; DES, 2001; DfES, 2004; Reid and Fawcett, 2004). In view of this, there has been concern over how to identify and support primary school children with dyslexia (Brooks, 2002).

This article describes the similarities and differences between the provision and organisation of support for pupils with dyslexia in Ireland and England. It draws together research findings of two related studies. The first, original doctoral research was carried out in Ireland to evaluate the current provision of support for pupils with dyslexia in both special and integrated settings (McPhillips, in press). The second, parallel study was conducted in England and sought to compare the provision for teaching pupils in England with dyslexia with provision in Ireland (Bell and Doveston, 2008).

The combined research findings highlight a number of key issues which influence the identification and support of pupils with dyslexia in primary schools in both England and Ireland. The nature and quality of the support of these learners will depend in part on the way dyslexia is understood by special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs), teachers and teaching assistants (TAs) in England and by teachers in special and mainstream settings in Ireland. This has implications for our understanding of special educational needs and how dyslexia fits within this conceptualisation.

The main research questions focused on the instruction of basic literacy skills taught, the teaching methodologies and approaches and the materials and programmes used. Although the comparison of data between the two countries is necessarily limited by differing educational contexts in both countries, issues were raised which deserve further clarification and investigation.

PROVISION FOR PUPILS WITH DYSLEXIA

In England, support for the student with dyslexia is provided in ordinary state schools according to the Code of Practice (DfES, 2001), using a staged process of identification and support. This staged process of identification and assessment is mirrored in the Irish system (Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI), 2002; DES, 2003). In England, SENCOs have responsibility for the management of special education in their school under the Code of Practice (DfES, 2001). The SENCO may not always be involved in direct teaching but will coordinate learning through class teachers and TAs. In some smaller English schools, head teachers themselves can take on the role of the SENCO. Teachers in England now work very closely with TAs or learning support assistants (LSAs). These are classroom helpers and their role has evolved rapidly in the past ten years. They now have a professional career structure and often receive training in helping children with special education needs (Doveston and Cullingford-Agnew, 2006).

In Ireland, since 2003, there has been a significant change in support for the pupil with dyslexia from individual resource teaching to a model of school based support (DES, 2003; DES 2005). This is in line with recommendations of the *Report of the Task Force on Dyslexia* (DES, 2001) and follows a three stage model of support. In the first instance, in-school support is provided by the class teacher, learning support or resource teacher. This generally includes some form of supplementary teaching. Where further intervention is considered necessary, a third stage of support draws on specialist consultation and/or a psycho-educational assessment of the pupil.

In addition to mainstream provision in Ireland, there also exists a system of special educational establishments funded by the state which is not present in England. Special and intensive literacy support is available in a reading unit or a reading school for children with dyslexia, aged eight to twelve years. Pupils who are assessed as having literacy scores at or below the second percentile and whose intellectual ability is in the average range are eligible to attend a special placement. Enrolment in a reading school or reading unit is for a period of up to two years after which time the pupil returns to his/her ordinary school. There are four reading schools in the country, three in Dublin and one in Cork. There are twenty-three reading units attached to ordinary primary schools around the country.

METHODOLOGY

The research reported is based on a survey of teachers in Ireland and England who were supporting pupils with dyslexia. Postal questionnaires were completed by

teachers in Ireland (n=72) and England (n=57). The Irish questionnaire was part of a more extensive study to evaluate provision for pupils in both special and mainstream settings. A purposive sample of teachers who were supporting children with dyslexia (n=72) was used in the Irish study, with a sixty-one percent response rate. The English questionnaire was sent to an opportunistic sample of schools (n=399) in the English Midlands generating fifty-seven responses, a return of fourteen percent.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to collect and analyse the findings. Although a similar questionnaire was used and the same questions were asked of respondents in each country, the comparison of data is necessarily restricted by the differing educational jurisdictions. Quantitative information was collected and analysed, using an Excel database. Tables were created to illustrate the range and frequency of teaching methodologies, materials and programmes used. Respondents had been asked to indicate the frequency of approaches used to support students and the range of materials and programmes used.

The qualitative data gathered from the open questions were analysed by coding and categorising the responses. The search for themes and patterns followed the procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) for thematic analysis: familiarising oneself with data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes. A theme was chosen because of its prevalence or its significance to the research study. The two researchers in England each worked separately on half of the total responses, examining key words and creating codes for emerging issues. They then exchanged the questionnaires thus repeating the procedure with previously unseen scripts.

Categories were worked out collaboratively, following discussion of emerging issues. In Ireland, although the postal questionnaire formed part of a larger survey, immersion in the data involved repeated reading of the open questions in order to be familiar with all aspects of the data while searching for meanings and patterns. Key phrases were collated into categories and these categories were coded from all the open responses. Emerging themes were reviewed and ‘mapped’ across the entire data set.

FINDINGS

The combined main findings from the studies can be organised under three main headings:

- **Identification and assessment of dyslexia**
- **Teaching methodologies and materials and organisation of support**
- **Teachers’ conceptualisation of dyslexia**

The first two of these areas will be discussed here.
The English data cover mainstream provision in one English region. Most of the teachers responding to this survey and therefore taking responsibility for the education of learners with dyslexia were SENCOs. The vast majority of respondents were working in primary schools (age five to eleven years). The Irish respondents included teachers from both specialist and mainstream settings. Support for the

student with dyslexia may be provided by the class teacher, learning support or resource teacher in mainstream school.

Identification and Assessment of Dyslexia

Ireland

Teachers in the Irish sample reported using a wide range of tests (n=37) to measure pupils' progress in reading skills. However, they did not report using any tests specifically designed to assess for dyslexia or dyslexia screening tests. Although learning support and resource teachers may be supporting pupils with dyslexia, a full psycho-educational assessment is required to identify dyslexia at primary level. This is in contrast to the English teachers who mentioned a number of screening tests specifically designed for dyslexia.

Individually administered diagnostic tests associated with dyslexia were reported by Irish learning support and resource teachers, such as Neale Analysis of Reading Ability (*NARA)* (Neale, Whetton, Caspale and McCullock, 1997) (n=7), *Schonell Spelling and Word Recognition* tests in the *Aston Index* (Newton, 2003) (n=10), *Jackson Phonics Skills* (Jackson,1980) (n=3), *Marino Graded Word Reading Scale* (O'Suilleabháin, 1970) (n=2) and *RAIN Sentence Reading Test* (Navan Education Centre, 1998) (n=3). The data returned from the mainstream schools showed no single standardised test used across all schools for all pupils receiving resource/learning support. These respondents also reported using group administered screening tests; *Drumcondra Primary Reading Test* (Educational Research Centre, 1994) (n=6) and *MICRA T* reading test (Wall and Burke, 1991) (n=5). These assessment tests were reported to be used to record individual pupils' progress in reading and spelling. All schools in Ireland are now obliged to administer a standardised reading test at the end of first class (age seven) and at end of fourth class (age eleven) (DES, 2006).

Teachers in the reading schools and reading units generally have a school policy whereby pupils are assessed on enrolment in a special placement and a baseline assessment in reading, spelling and word identification is recorded for each child. Teachers in the special settings reported using *NARA* (Neale et al., 1997) (n=15), *Young Cloze Test* (Young, 2002) (n=10) and *Schonell Spelling Test* in the *Aston Index* (Newton, 2003) (n=18). These teachers reported using this information to inform and plan individual learning programmes.

England

Responses from teachers in England showed that many different tests (n=36) are used to assess learners with dyslexia. There is no single standardised test used by schools to measure progress in literacy skills. Responses about the types of tests used included those that are used to monitor whole school progress in literacy skills. For example, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) tests are used annually to track pupil progress against the National Curriculum levels. This is in addition to the Key Stage assessment and tests taken in state schools at the end of Year 2 (seven years) and Year 6 (eleven years). Thirty-four schools used some form of standardised reading test and twenty-seven used a standardised spelling test. *Vernon Spelling* (Vernon, 1983) (twenty-three schools) and *Salford Reading Test* (Bookbinder, 2004) (thirty schools) were the most commonly used tests.

Almost half of the English schools (n=25) were using tests specifically designed to assess for dyslexia, some using more than one. The *Phonological Assessment Battery (PhAB)* (Frederickson, Frith and Reason, 1997) which assesses underlying difficulties associated with dyslexia, was cited by two schools. Nineteen schools used *LUCID* (Lucid Software, 2008) a computer based dyslexia screening test recommended by one of the local authorities involved in the sample. There was evidence that some schools were using individually administered standardised tests which included *Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT)* (Wilkinson and Robertson, 2006) (n=11) and *NARA* (Neale op cit) (n=11). It was evident from the English teachers' written responses that dyslexia assessment is associated with access arrangements rather than for diagnostic information to inform teaching programmes.

A wide range of tests were used by teachers in both countries to measure progress in literacy skills, and these tests to a large extent assess the underlying traits associated with dyslexia. Availability of tests and current practice in each school influences the selection of assessment tests used by the learning support and resource teachers in Ireland. Teachers in England however, reported using screening tools for dyslexia, a practice not evident from the Irish sample. Respondents in both countries reported using or selecting tests which appeared to be based on current school practice, or teacher preference.

Organisation and Teaching Methodologies in Ireland

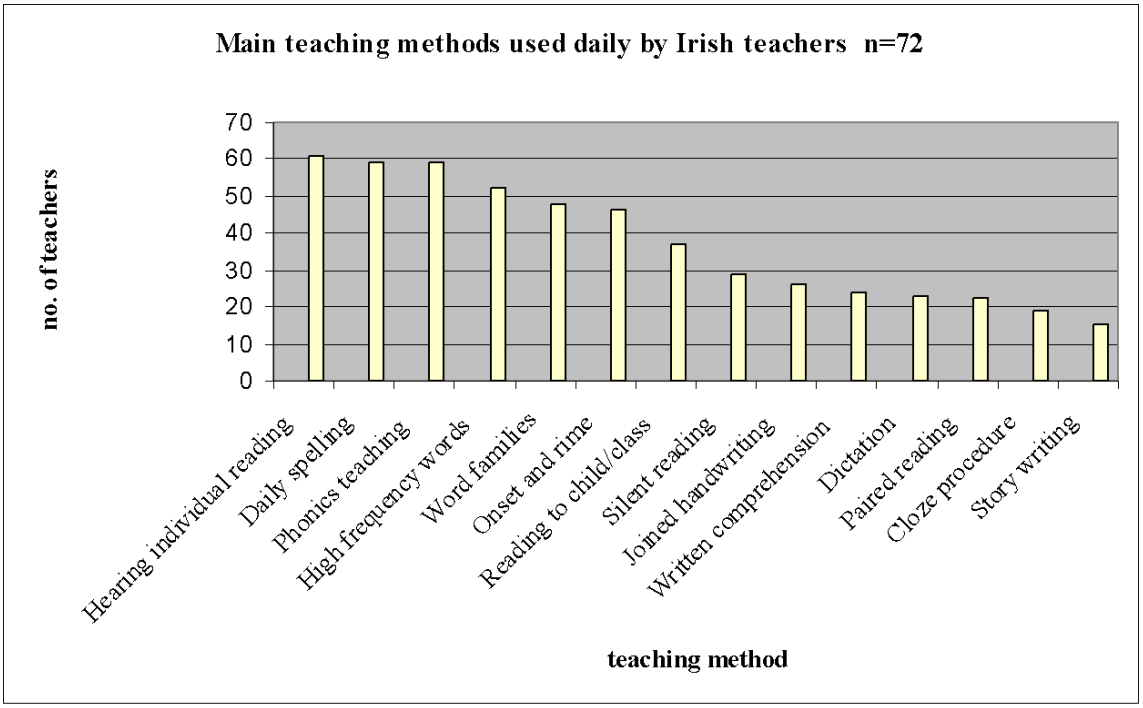
Pupils who are enrolled in a reading school or a reading unit in Ireland receive two hours a day literacy instruction. Support is provided in small groups or individualised and the maximum number of pupils is nine per class. Pupils who are receiving learning support or resource teaching, on the other hand, are generally withdrawn from class for supplementary teaching in small groups for an average of forty minutes per day. It would be expected that the special settings provide a more intensive and focused support for the pupils with dyslexia.

Teachers in the Irish sample were asked to indicate the teaching approaches they use most frequently in teaching pupils with dyslexia. Table 1 illustrates fourteen different teaching methods respondents reported they used every day. These could be categorised into areas of reading accuracy, reading comprehension, and writing skills. Teachers were asked how often they use each method – every day, once a week or seldom/never.

The findings from the questionnaires showed that the main teaching approaches focus on reading accuracy. Hearing individual reading ranks overall as the dominant teaching methodology used. Daily spelling practice and teaching phonics skills and teaching high frequency words occur every day. The least amount of time is spent on expressive writing (story writing). Further analysis by setting showed no significant difference between the methods used in the special settings and the mainstream settings. The specific approach of onset and rime was reported to be used every day by the learning support teachers. *The Phonological Awareness Training Programme (PAT)* (Wilson, 1993) is the single most frequently used literacy programme used by

teachers in the study. A typical comment is that the *PAT* programme is "very effective for children who have difficulty recognising rhyming words".

Table 1: Teaching methodologies in Ireland



Teaching of Literacy Skills

Teachers were also asked to prioritise the skills taught according to the time spent teaching these literacy skills. Teachers' responses indicated a predominant focus on teaching phonic skills. Teachers reported spending more time on teaching phonic skills than any other literacy skill. Comments referred to an awareness of the importance of over-learning phonic skills as follows: 'constant reinforcement, revision and revisiting'. Multi sensory materials were regularly reported and included activities such as 'word games, word bingo, snap, "Fish in the Pond", and nursery rhymes. Specific strategies used for teaching phonics which were reported included, 'Reading rods, word boxes, magnetic boards, word houses, dictation with cvc words, word banks, stile tiles…making words with plasticine/magnetic letters, tracing words on textured surface.'

Word identification skills were also prioritised among teachers in each setting and written responses described ways of developing these skills, for example, 'word families, rhyming words, word wall based on current phonics.' However, reading comprehension skills received less attention among all teachers (with the exception of resource teachers who spend equal time on phonics and reading comprehension). There was no significant difference between the teachers in mainstream and special settings. Expressive writing skills such as story writing and handwriting were not reported as a concern among respondents.

Organisation and Teaching Methodologies in England

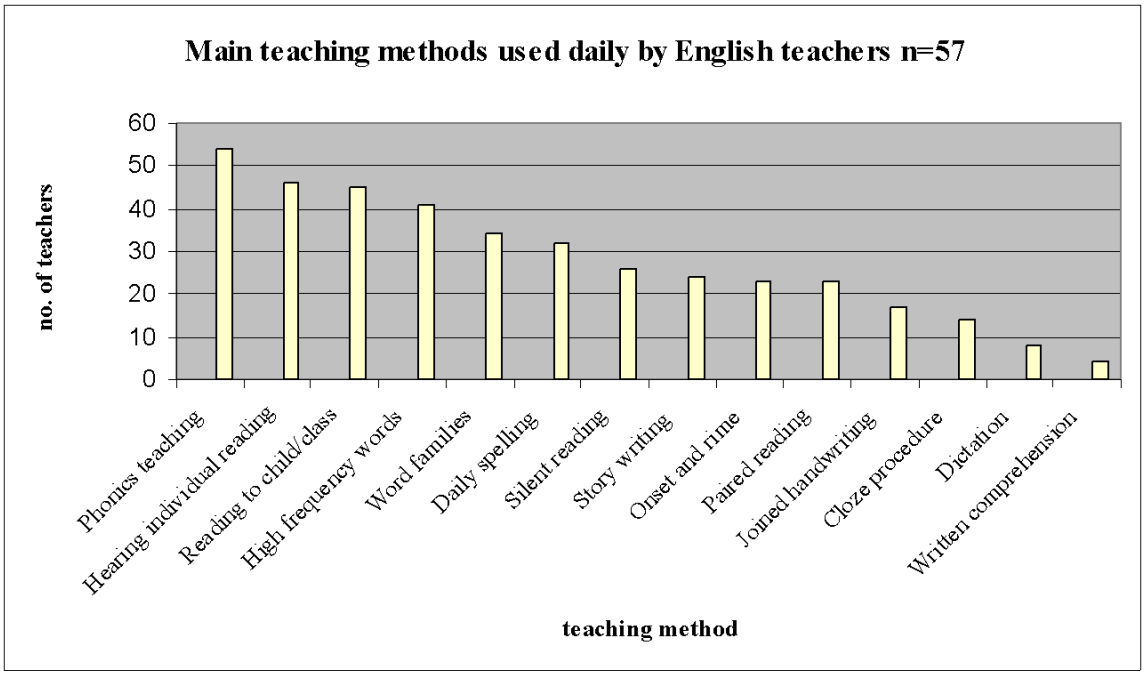
The majority of respondents in the English sample were SENCOs and not necessarily teaching students who were identified as dyslexic. Although respondents were not asked directly whether they were using a TA for teaching individual students, it is estimated that a good proportion of the sample were doing so. The SENCOs were, however, responsible for managing the learning programmes of the students with dyslexia. Teachers in the English sample were asked to say what approaches and methods they found most useful in teaching learners with dyslexia. Their responses were analysed and four themes were generated; organisation, methodology, access strategies and resources.

Organisation of support emerged as an important element of their programmes. Teachers referred to the importance of individualised, regular and short teaching sessions for learners with dyslexia within a mainstream setting. The following response is representative of teachers' comments concerning the organisation of teaching, "Frequent short sessions which allow for the re-learning/over-learning of specific skills". Other comments highlighted the importance placed on individual work, "Individual reading/discussion and comprehension. Phonics and high frequency work. Short sharp daily sessions to underpin main literacy lessons". A significant number of responses (n=14) mentioned phonics as a very important aspect of the teaching methodology, "Short daily, one to one activities based on phonics". Structured approaches and group work were cited less frequently. Teachers were asked to list the three main published literacy programmes they used and a total of thirty-five programmes were identified, twenty-four of which were only cited by one or two teachers, illustrating the enormous range of resources available to choose from. The most commonly used literacy programme (n=16) was *Toe by Toe* (Cowling and Cowling, 1993) which uses a phonic approach to reading. *Read Write Inc.* (Miskin and Archbold, 2006) which uses a synthetic approach to phonics combined with text level reading is used by fifteen schools. Eleven out of the fifty-seven either gave no response indicating they are not using a published scheme or referenced materials provided freely through the primary framework, including programmes designed for learners falling behind age-appropriate attainment for a wide variety of reasons not necessarily associated with special educational needs.

Multi-sensory teaching emerged strongly as an important aspect of the preferred methodology for teaching learners with dyslexia. It was surprising therefore that the use of games was mentioned by only two respondents. Repetition and over-learning, recognised as an important feature of teaching learners with special educational needs including dyslexia was identified by eleven respondents, "Regular repetition, frequent practice in multi sensory methods". Other approaches mentioned were access strategies reflecting a wide variety of approaches to overcome barriers to learning and promote inclusive practice in the classroom e.g. class word banks, visual timetables. The use of assistive technology and information communication technology was mentioned directly by only ten respondents despite the fact that there has been considerable investment in the design and marketing of programmes for dyslexic learners.

Table 2 shows that phonics teaching is the main teaching method used daily by English teachers. Hearing individual reading and teaching high frequency words are used every day by the majority of teachers. Expressive writing (story writing) is reported as a daily method and is used more frequently than by the Irish teachers. Reading to a child or class could have been interpreted by teachers as a practice recommended by the Literacy Hour (DfEE, 1998).

Table 2: Teaching methodologies in England



Similarities in Approaches

It is clear there are some similarities between the teaching approaches used in both countries. In both England and Ireland, teachers reported multi sensory methods as a preferred approach when teaching learners with dyslexia. This was particularly evident when reporting on phonics teaching. Developing phonics skills was a key area of teaching for the English respondents, as in Ireland where it emerged as the dominant focus of teaching for the dyslexic learner. The findings also showed that hearing individual reading is used as a key approach in supporting pupils in both countries. Organising one to one instruction was considered to be very important by the English teachers, whilst support in the Irish system reported more small group instruction. The resources used showed that a wider variety of published materials is used in England whereas the majority of the Irish respondents reported using a single phonics programme. It was significant that instruction in writing skills was reported by the English teachers as an integral part of the instruction whereas the Irish respondents did not report any significant time spent on developing writing skill.

CONCLUSIONS

A wide range of assessment tests and practices are used in both countries. In Ireland this is linked to the availability of provision and in England is clearly influenced by

whole school screening and the provision of access arrangements for national tests. This clearly shows the need for training and reliable information about assessment tools. It is also apparent that the information from these tests is more likely to be used to report progress on developing skills rather than to plan learning programmes for the students. This is an area where more training may be needed, as linking assessment with teaching is considered to be essential for effective student outcomes (Rose, 2006).

The teaching methodologies and approaches used in both countries share many similarities particularly in highlighting the importance of multi-sensory teaching and the key role of phonics. Although teachers in Ireland reported the dominance of a single phonological awareness programme in their teaching approach, reference to phonological skills and phonemic awareness, as a key component of dyslexia support was noticeably limited among all the respondents. Given that phonological processing skills are a key difficulty among many pupils with dyslexia, more attention to this aspect of literacy, encouraged by training programmes for dyslexia support teachers, may be needed in both countries.

Teachers in this study considered hearing individual reading to be an important teaching methodology. Further investigation is needed to explore this teacher-child interaction and examine how this support is effective for the dyslexic learner. A follow up study has been planned in this area. Instruction in writing skill is an important component of any literacy programme and it was reported to be a vital part of the approaches reported by the English teachers. In Ireland, linking word level work to text level skills was an area felt to be a potential weakness.

In both countries an enormous range of published materials was cited as being used in dyslexia support, many of which were not produced for this purpose. Although this in itself may not be of concern, as teachers adapt a range of materials for their purpose, the findings highlight the need to provide teachers with clear unbiased information about the quality of the wide range of materials available given the increasing use of marketing to encourage schools to invest in expensive materials. Given the wide variety of materials in use, further investigation into classroom practice would warrant detailed comparative research across both countries to find out how specific schemes are chosen, organised, taught, monitored and evaluated (Murphy, Nugent and O'Neill, 2008).

Although in England the issue of provision of separate schools is not under discussion, as students are usually taught within mainstream settings, there is extensive discussion going on as to what constitutes quality provision for learners with literacy difficulties in terms of both organisation and mode of delivery (National Literacy Trust, 2005; British Dyslexia Association, 2007). As is in Ireland, one-to-one support was valued and used by teachers, but this naturally raises questions of economic feasibility along with issues of training to ensure quality provision (Ware, Balfe, Travers, Prunty, Farrell, O'Riordan and McPhillips, 2007). In England, training for the effective teaching and support of dyslexic pupils has been the focus of a recent government initiative, *Inclusion Development Programme* (Department for Children, Schools and Families (DfCSF), 2007).

Learners with dyslexia can be seen to have a continuum of need, which should be monitored by careful assessment. In both Ireland and England, we need to disseminate good practice but on the basis of a critical evaluation of initiatives, bearing in mind the factors which make them more or less effective. Being clear about how and why a programme works for a particular learner should enable a greater consistency of quality provision for all learners. Good information for teachers, parents and learners, in particular as to what financial investments should be made in terms of materials, training and support, can help avoid the false starts and dead ends that may be a barrier to achievement in a maze of provision. For learners with dyslexia the acquisition of literacy can be a long winding road, but can be achieved.

The writers of this article seek to support and encourage all initiatives which will ensure that teachers of children with dyslexia have the skills and relevant teaching and assessment tools to enable them to effectively address the needs of the individual pupil with dyslexia. This has considerable implications for investment in both good quality research and effective programmes of initial training and continuous professional development.

The authors wish to acknowledge the support received from the Research Committee, St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin, and the School of Education Research and Consultancy Committee (SERCC) at the University of Northampton.

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