Developing an Inclusive Pedagogy - Listening to the Views of Children with Dyslexia

This article emanated from a qualitative study regarding the views of children with dyslexia (O' Brien, 2017). The rationale for the research was to enhance the learning experiences for children with dyslexia in both mainstream and special schools through sharing the children's perspectives with practitioners. The research was conducted in one "reading school" and the children were encouraged to speak openly and frankly about issues which they thought to be important. Data were collected using focus group interviews and in-depth analysis revealed that the participants demonstrated high levels of satisfaction with the school and, in particular, the teaching approaches adopted by staff at the school. Although the strategies mentioned could not be considered specific to dyslexia, they were viewed positively by the children. Therefore, there may be a case for using these "insider" accounts to develop an inclusive pedagogy to support children with dyslexia (and others) in special and mainstream schools.

Keywords: student voice, inclusive pedagogy, dyslexia, reading school

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INTRODUCTION

In this article, the views of children with dyslexia towards teaching and learning are presented and the purpose of the paper is to share these views with teachers who may have children with dyslexia in their class. The participants spoke about the teaching strategies which they found beneficial and these insights could be used to support those with dyslexia in both mainstream and special schools. There were six children at the centre of the study who attended a special reading school for up to two years before returning to a mainstream setting. There are four reading schools in the country as well as approximately twenty reading classes attached to mainstream schools (SCOTENS, 2015). All of the children who participated were in attendance at a reading school at the time of the research. The research involved

two consecutive focus group sessions, where children were free to express their views on their experiences in this school. It was deemed necessary to conduct two sessions so the children were given enough time to share their thoughts on the questions posed as well as other issues they felt were important.

While the topic of student voice has become an important part of educational discourse, it has not permeated much of the research and practice to date (Billington, 2006; Jones, 2005; Motherway, 2009). Furthermore, the term could be considered tokenistic if it does not have real impact in schools (Lundy, 2007). The limited Irish research on children with dyslexia affirms the place of the special reading school in terms of student experience and satisfaction (Casserly and Gildea, 2015; Casserly 2012; McPhilips and Shevlin 2009; Nugent 2008; Nugent, 2007). Although several themes emerged from the current project, the focus of this piece is on one such theme, namely, "Inclusive Pedagogy". This was chosen as it is most directly associated with school practice and offers educators in both mainstream and special settings some worthwhile ideas for reflection when striving to include children with dyslexia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this review, some inclusive evidence based practices are critiqued. These practices may be considered beneficial to all children with challenges, and not just to the dyslexic population. While children with dyslexia often benefit from specific strategies (and these are acknowledged), the focus of this section is on inclusive strategies which can be used to improve the experiences of children with a wide variety of differences, including dyslexia.

Much of the research regarding successful inclusion of children with special needs points to the fact that these children do not need radically different approaches to other children (Ainscow and Miles, 2008; Davis and Florian,2004; McPhilips and Shevlin, 2009; Norwich and Lewis, 2001). There appears to be a tension between the position that all learners benefit from the same interventions and the position of support for specialist teaching (Norwich and Lewis, 2001). While most studies do not support specific strategies for children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) (Ainscow and Miles, 2008), some experts in the area of dyslexia maintain that sometimes more intensive, structured and ongoing phonics interventions may be necessary (Brady, 2011; Pavey, 2012; Rose, 2009; Scamacca et al., 2007; Singleton, 2009). Although this may be the case, it is incumbent on all practitioners to seek ways to develop an inclusive pedagogy, where all children are afforded

opportunities to access the curriculum (EADSNE, 2015; Florian and Rouse, 2009). Furthermore, teachers who view inclusion as part of their role are more likely to succeed in helping students to engage in meaningful tasks (Florian and Rouse, 2009; Rix, Hall et al, 2009). The success of inclusion is, therefore, largely determined by teachers' attitudes and how they interpret inclusion in their own contexts (Allan, 2003; Starczewska, Hodkinson & Adams, 2012). By considering what it means to be inclusive, teachers enter the political arena as issues of power and fairness arise, which may include incorporating the voices of children and parents (Allan, 2003). In order to develop an inclusive pedagogy, it is imperative that teachers begin with an understanding of learner differences and acknowledge that it is their responsibility to recognise and address these differences (Florian and Rouse, 2009). It is also vital that schools challenge views of difference, not only as it relates to SEN but also to socio-economic differences, race and gender (Miles and Ainscow, 2008). Furthermore, schools that do understand and adopt inclusive policies and recognise differences to develop effective teaching methods, are more likely to succeed in raising standards for all children (Florian and Rouse, 2009). It may be beneficial for schools to adopt a "connective pedagogy", providing opportunities for children to make connections between experiences in and out of school (Smith and Barr, 2008). These connections facilitate all children to make sense of tasks presented to them (Smith and Barr, 2008; Westwood, 2013). To this end, it may be important to consider the fact that "successful schools focus on connections" (Smith and Barr, 2008, p.414).

It may also be useful to consider the concept of teacher collaboration (Allan, 2003). Evidence exists that if teachers adopt a whole school approach and teaching is collaborative, then children are more likely to be included (Rix, Hall et al., 2009; Westwood, 2013). Moreover, research indicates that improvements are unlikely to happen without exposure to quality teaching, capable of catering to differences (Ainscow and Miles, 2008). It may be advisable that a common space is created where teachers have the opportunity to reflect on and critique practice, ultimately benefiting all children (Smith and Barr, 2008). While collaboration between teachers is important, establishing and maintaining relationships with other professionals in the school and professionals from other sectors may result in better outcomes (Smith and Barr, 2008).

While it is acknowledged that there is a dearth of evidence which highlights effective teaching approaches to include all children (Rix, Hall et al, 2009), some aspects are considered particularly important. For example, much of the research points to the effectiveness of a multi-sensory approach (Davis and Florian, 2004; Rix, Hall et al., 2009; Westwood, 2013) as well as the practice of peer interaction

(Nind and Wearmouth, 2006; Rix, Hall et al., 2009; Smith and Barr, 2008). The use of purposeful group work, where roles are clearly delineated and maximises social opportunities, is regarded as particularly beneficial as children may begin to develop social and cognitive skills in a socially relevant and meaningful manner (Nind and Wearmouth, 2006). Where children are afforded opportunities to make relevant connections based on prior knowledge through interacting with others, they may begin to perceive themselves as active agents in their own learning, improving confidence and self-efficacy (Rix, Hall et al, 2009). Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a common approach to learner differences, involves using a variety of resources and approaches which best suit learner preferences (Westwood, 2013). The aim of UDL is to include all children in the learning tasks without compromising standards. The various means of instruction needs to incorporate different ways of engaging with tasks, understanding how students demonstrate learning and assessing learning in different ways (Westwood, 2013).

While a differentiated and adapted curriculum may be used with all students, some research has shown that small-group (less than four) and individual teaching was the most effective type of instruction for children with dyslexia (Nugent, 2011; Singleton, 2009; Scamacca et al., 2007). As noted in The Rose Report (2009), "some children with dyslexia may respond very slowly even to the most effective of teaching approaches. These children will require skilled, intensive, one-to-one interventions" (p.14). Davis and Florian (2004) also acknowledge that some children do benefit from specialised teaching; however, they assert that the responsibility lies in the mainstream classroom and what may be required is an adaptation of common pedagogical approaches. This adaptation of strategies is central to inclusive teaching. When evaluating inclusive teaching approaches, it must be done with all children in mind. In other words, what is considered effective teaching for children with dyslexia is, for the most part, effective teaching for all (Davis and Florian, 2004; McPhilips and Shevlin, 2009; Smith and Barr, 2008).

METHODOLOGY

Focus groups were used to elicit the views of the young people and the group met on two occasions. All of the children in the school were eligible to take part. However, six children were randomly chosen. These children were not known to me and the questions I asked emanated from a thorough review of the literature while bearing in mind the overarching research question which pertained to children's views of the reading school. Both sessions lasted for less than an hour each and, as stated in the introduction, they were free to express their views on a

wide range of issues. These issues included their thoughts on what makes a good teacher, how they learned best and what they thought about the label of dyslexia. The second session was not significantly different to the first session.

From the outset, the children were made aware that participation was completely voluntary and that they had the option to opt out at any point, without any consequences. As the research was carried out in the school, the participants were free at any time to re-join their class or speak with the principal. They were also made aware that their names would not be used at any point and that anything they wished to say was entirely confidential and would not be shared with anyone who may be displeased. The purpose of the research was also made clear to the children. Braun and Clarke's model of analysis was used to interpret the data. See Figure 1.

Figure 1: Data Analysis (adapted from Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 87)

Analytical Process	Practical Application
1. Organising data	Transcribing and become familiar
2. Generation of initial codes	Systematic open coding
3. Identifying themes	Categorisation of codes
4. Mapping and Reviewing themes	Designing a thematic map
5. Defining and finalising themes	On-going analysis to refine themes to reduce data.
6. Final report	Relating back to the analysis of the literature and the research questions

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, school practices which children in the group found useful are presented. These practices did not include dyslexia-specific strategies; rather they spoke about strategies which could be considered beneficial to the general school going population, including those with dyslexia. The participants emphasised the importance of a slower pace of delivery, a multi-sensory approach to teaching as well collaborative approaches to learning. Teacher understanding was also considered key.

The Pace of Work

A slower pace of teacher delivery was deemed appropriate by some children and all agreed that this made learning more accessible. One child commented "*If I were to give advice to a teacher, it would be to do it slowly and take your time*". Another child added "*don't rush through it…stop and explain the word*" while another said "*Yes and if you don't rush them, you will probably get it done quicker*". The children did not refer to evidence based, structured programmes advocated by some experts (Brady, 2011; Pavey, 2012; Rose, 2009; Singleton, 2009; Scamacca et al., 2007); rather they espoused the value of explicit teaching and a slower pace of delivery which could be utilised with all children (Ainscow and Miles, 2008; Davis and Florian,2004; McPhilips and Shevlin, 2009; Norwich and Lewis, 2001). Referring to the subjects taken in school, the children spoke about the slower pace involved, with one student stating "*we do the same subjects but it's slower*".

Multi-Sensory Teaching

When the conversation turned to how children learn best, one participant added

> *For me it depends on what we are doing because it's not like you do the exact same thing for every single subject. For Science I like to see and listen because if you can see you sort of know what is going on and what it's going to look like…but listening you are getting more information. For P.E. you have to do stuff, that's how you learn.*

Another student said "*I definitely learn by looking or showing…when he (teacher) shows you how to do it and put it together you understand*". All of the children commented on learning visually with remarks such as "*I learn from pictures*" and "*I have to see it in my mind*". Along with learning visually, some children discussed how they learn differently depending on the subject. This highlights the imperative of a multi-modal approach to teaching, determined by the task and learner preferences. This was also supported by the group's consensus that they were more likely to engage in activities which comprised visual, auditory and kinaesthetic elements. Science was an example given by some pupils. Comments included "*I really like Science*" and "*with science you are making stuff like blue smoke ….it is literally about getting things and putting them together*". Referring again to Science, another girl added " *with science a lot of famous people weren't thinking, they were just doing*" while another remarked "*A lot of the famous artists and scientists weren't always looking at a book, they were just doing whatever they wanted*". While one child mentioned "hating history", another responded *"it's ok if you bring in an object, hold it and watch it*". This reaffirms the value of a multi-sensorial approach to learning along with the importance of designing activities which are both relevant and appealing. This is emphasised in the literature, which

emphasises that children do learn in different ways depending on the task and individual learning preferences (Davis and Florian, 2004; Kirschner, 2016; Krank, 2001; Newton, 2015; Olsen, 2006; Riener and Willingham, 2010; Rix, Hall et al., 2009; Rose, 2009; Westwood, 2013).

Other comments included "learning is like playing cards…all of the different shapes, pictures, and numbers coming together". Importantly, the "numbers coming together" may indicate the importance of making connections, which may have consequences for inclusive practice. As a means of developing inclusive strategies, a "connective pedagogy" using a multi-sensory approach could be adopted (Smith and Barr, 2008). This may involve using literacy resources which resonate with children's experiences in and out of school. It may have particular benefits for children with dyslexia who, as evidenced in this group, have challenges memorising and recalling information (Rose, 2009).

Collaborative Work

There appeared to be an emphasis on group work and pair work in all curricular areas, which the children found beneficial. One commented "*when we are reading we sometimes read it together…that really helps",* while another added what he considered to be an advantage of choral reading "*more brains, more people, definitely more brains*". Another child stated *"I feel very comfortable here reading aloud, more than at home which is weird".* The use of group work in this setting was described by some children as being worthwhile. Such an emphasis on group work and social interaction noted by the students is also highlighted in much of the literature (Nind and Wearmouth, 2006 Norwich and Lewis, 2001; Smith and Barr, 2008). Other comments included *"I really like working in pairs*" and "*in a group you can ask other people*".

Teacher Understanding

Everybody in the group spoke about the importance of teachers understanding the challenges associated with dyslexia. Some children highlighted the fact that an effective teacher, in their view, was one who modelled new skills before offering students the opportunity to practise these skills. One child said "*you need to show them how to do it…that's the good thing about this school; they show you how to do it*". The imperative of explicit teaching for all children is noteworthy (Florian and Rouse, 2009). Most of the students testified to the effectiveness of strategies such as scaffolding, with one boy adding that "*our teacher helps us to piece things together, that really helps".* The children referred to the importance of teachers understanding dyslexia in order to include all children, with one student remarking that "*the teachers here do it differently*". Another child remarked "*The teachers*

here explain everything all of the time". In order to develop inclusive practices, it is essential that practitioners are adequately prepared (Mitchell, 2009; Rose, 2009). A collaborative and systematic approach to such training may potentially raise standards for all children and not only those with special needs (Florian and Rouse, 2009; Rix, Hall et al., 2009; Westwood, 2013). This need for effective planning for all may take the form of a collaborative approach between all stakeholders, including children (Allan, 2003; Rix, Hall et al.,2009).

The children were satisfied that the teachers understood dyslexia and employed reasonable and relevant strategies to support learning. When prompted to elaborate on this, one boy articulated that *"there are certain teachers who work with each student differently……it's not like they do everything exactly the same with each kid"*. The importance of addressing individual differences appeared to be in evidence in this school and offers teachers some points for reflection when striving to include all children (Westwood, 2013).

CONCLUSION

Student voice highlights the importance of providing a space for children to express their views. However, it is not sufficient to provide a space for children to express their views without listening and, ultimately, acting on these views (Lundy, 2007). It is essential that children's rights to express their opinions are respected "if barriers to participation are to be overcome and literacy standards are to be raised" (Long, McPhilips et al., 2012, p.26). However, Lundy (2007) cautions against using the term "student voice" lightly and insists that "pupil involvement in decision making is a permanent, non-negotiable right "(Lundy, 2007, p.940). While some ideas for reflection have been presented in this article, it may not be enough to merely focus on pedagogical tools devised by teachers. There needs to be an acknowledgement that children are capable of meaningful contributions which may inform best practice. The children in this school demonstrated a strong case for collaborative approaches as well as a compelling argument for multi-sensorial methodologies.

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