

Reading and the Moderately Mentally Handicapped

Children who are moderately mentally handicapped can acquire and employ word analysis skills according to research. Indications from a small-scale survey in Dublin suggest that teacher practice reflects otherwise.

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The issue of whether to teach reading to children with moderate mental handicap has long been a contentious one in that the individual character of mental handicap and the intellectual limitations involved, have created much difficulty in arriving at a common consensus regarding approaches, materials and assessment procedures.

Often given a low priority in the overall school curriculum, little research has been conducted into actual teacher practice with the result that little or nothing is known in any systematic sense, regarding the teaching of reading in schools for the moderately handicapped. It was with this in mind, therefore, that this study was conceived to examine teacher practice and relate it to currently available research literature on the subject.

Procedure

The major components of the reading process as defined in the literature were related to current research findings on moderate mental handicap. These components were represented in a questionnaire and nine copies of this questionnaire in all were circulated to three special schools for moderately mentally handicapped children in the Dublin area. One teacher at each of the three levels - junior, middle and senior level - in each school was requested to complete the questionnaire. Teacher practice with regard to these basic reading components (sight vocabulary, word analysis and comprehension) was examined in the light of teachers' responses to the questionnaire and was further related to the current research findings.

Research Findings

"To read fluently, a student must be able to instantly recognise a large number of words as well as quickly determine new words through sound analysis and context clues" (Smith, 1974).

As the above statement indicates, reading fluently requires that the child has ready access to a substantial store of sight words and has the skills necessary to decode unknown words. The issue is whether the child with a moderate mental handicap can achieve mastery in these two areas and furthermore, to what degree the child, though fluent, can be said to read with comprehension.

Sight Vocabulary

Many different approaches have been developed to consolidate the acquisition of sight vocabulary by the child with a moderate mental handicap. Among the more successful and impressive, the "Errorless Discrimination" approach as described by Singh and Singh (1984), and the approach of Sue Buckley working on the Portsmouth Down's Syndrome Project (1981-83) must be mentioned. Both are whole word approaches whereby modelling, close approximation and colour code strategies are employed to facilitate the child's learning.

During the present survey, it became evident that the whole word approaches were highly favoured by all the teachers though, for the most part a simple 'look/say' approach was employed with modelling and repetition being the main features of the teaching procedure.

Sue Buckley, in summing up the report, expressed her view with regard to sight vocabulary and the development of the reading potential of children with moderate mental handicap:

"Some Down's Syndrome children can learn to read completely at five or six and can have reading ages way ahead of their IQ's or even their chronological ages" (1981-83).

In conclusion, the evidence suggests that a child with a moderate mental handicap can acquire a sight vocabulary sufficient to beginning reading.

Word Analysis

When we come to consider word analysis skills, similarly, we find that despite the fact that many teachers in their responses to the questionnaire indicated otherwise, a fairly substantial body of research suggests that the child with a moderate mental handicap can acquire and employ analysis skills. Moreover some programmes seem to be more efficient in consolidating the child's mastery of such skills; in one study by Richardson, Winsberg and Bailer (1973), where two phonics-based programmes were used for comparative purposes, the 'P.A.T.,1,' proved to be more successful in that the children involved in the study generalised their newly acquired skills to new contexts.

Generally speaking, as indicated by Neville and Vandever (1973), where whole word and phonics approaches were used in comparative studies, the phonics programme proved to be the more successful as outlined above.

The teachers involved in the present study relied heavily on whole word approaches for the most part in the teaching of reading. Assuming that their pupils could not use word analysis skills, phonics did not feature strongly in their methods. It raises the issue of how far teacher practice might affect perceptions of pupils' potential. Some programmes have proven to be successful in teaching word analysis skills to children with moderate mental handicap.

Comprehension

The evidence in this area is perhaps the most inconclusive of all since it has yet to be established whether the child with a moderate mental handicap is capable of reading beyond the literal levels reading signs, following instructions and suchlike. In this

connection, however, it might be of interest to point out that the only teacher involved in the survey who reported using a phonics programme in teaching reading, also perceived her pupils as capable of both using word analysis skills independently of reading at the inferential level. How far and to what degree one affected the other is debatable, though overall this teacher was the most positive in her perception of her pupils' reading potentials.

Teacher Practice

All the teachers involved in this study reported teaching reading to their pupils. For the most part, basal readers such as the *Lets Go* or *Rainbow* series were employed and adapted to individual needs.

Sight Vocabulary

With regard to sight vocabulary, eight out of a total of nine teachers employed a 'look/say' approach to the development of same. Five of these teachers consolidated this approach with the 'language experience approach' including a senior teacher in one school who replied that she used the 'language experience approach' in an experimental sense only.

The remaining three teachers use the 'look/say' approach, exclusively leaving one teacher at senior level who adopted a 'language experience' and a 'phonics' approach. Of all the teachers, this one was the most positive in her response regarding the pupil's abilities to use word attack skills and comprehension skills.

Word Analysis

In relation to word analysis, six out of a total of nine teachers, did not teach such skills at all to their pupils. Furthermore, only the teacher employing a phonics approach, as above, considered her pupils capable of using them independently. The inference is that her pupils generalised the skills taught to them and applied them to new words and contexts. In this regard, research, as quoted earlier, seems to support this teachers practical experience.

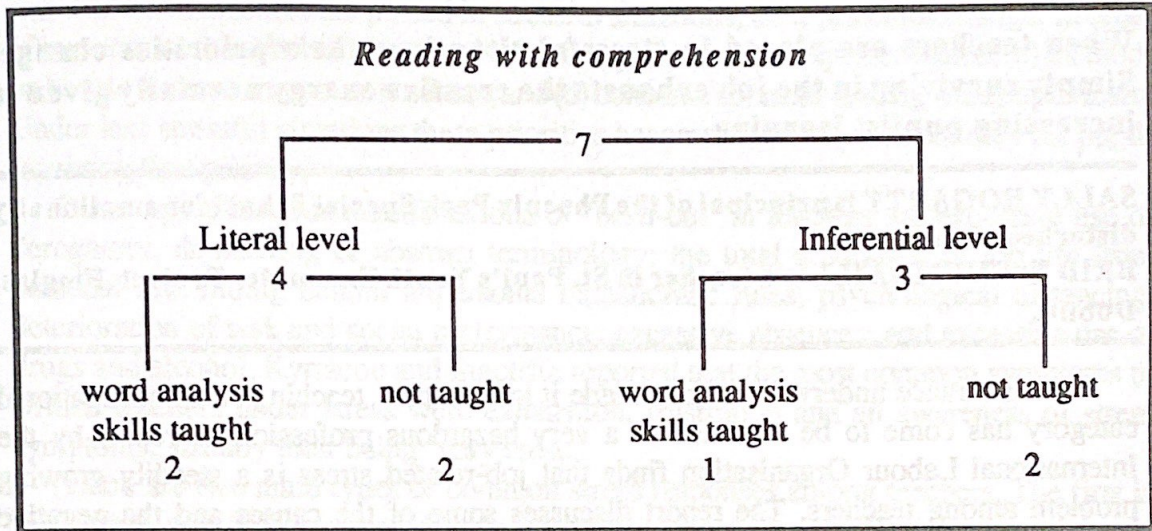
Dissappointingly, however, six teachers perceived the pupil with a moderate mental handicap as being unable to use the word analysis skills though this did not seem to affect their perception of pupils' comprehension levels. As the senior teacher in one school responded: "moderately handicapped children are not capable of word analysis skills."

Comprehension

Generally speaking, teachers' perceptions in this area were positive with only two out of a total of nine teachers viewing the pupil with a moderate mental handicap as being incapable of reading with comprehension. Three, moreover, of the seven teachers who responded positively, indicated that some of their pupils were capable of reading at the inferential level. Two of these teachers, both from the same school at the junior and senior levels did not teach word analysis skills to their pupils, whilst the third teacher was the teacher of phonics referred to above. All in all, out of a total of seven teachers who perceived their pupils reading with comprehension, four including the two above, did not teach word analysis skills. The remaining three included the teacher who employed a phonics approach.

The breakdown is as follows:

DIAGRAM



It appears that the teaching of word analysis skills does not affect appreciably teachers perceptions of their pupils comprehension levels.

Conclusions

1. Research literature suggests that children with moderate mental handicap can acquire a substantial sight vocabulary, can master word analysis skills and use them independently and to some degree, are capable of reading with comprehension.
2. Teacher response suggest that whilst whole word strategies are being employed to develop sight vocabulary, very little is being done to develop effective skills though this does not appear to affect teachers' perception of their pupils comprehension levels.
3. Children who experience difficulty in using word analysis skills are usually severely limited in reading. In the absence of such skills being taught, it is a matter of conjecture whether reading fluency can be considered a realistic objective for the pupil with a moderate mental handicap and in this regard, teacher practice as reflected in this study (albeit very limited) cannot but be received negatively.

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