

An Investigation into the Effectiveness of Paired Reading on the Reading of Children with Dyslexia

Dyslexia is a learning difficulty which impacts a wide number of pupils in Ireland. This article examines what we mean by dyslexia and the effect it has on a pupil's competency in reading. The effectiveness of paired reading as an intervention to tackle these reading difficulties is analysed. The author contends that this intervention, while not the only solution, has proven to be an effective teaching approach model which develops the self-esteem, fluency and reading skills of pupils with dyslexia.

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INTRODUCTION

Dyslexia¹ is a condition which affects the lives of large numbers of the world's English speaking population (Casserly, 2003; Dyslexia Association of Ireland (DAI), 2010). Research indicates the number to be in the region of six to eight percent (Ball, Hughes and McCormack, 2006) while others maintain the figure with dyslexia-type difficulties could be as high as ten percent (Peer, 1996). Though this is by no means a conclusive figure, as shall be discussed later, it highlights the task faced by educators. With such numbers of pupils passing through our schools it is essential that appropriate practices and methodologies are in place to alleviate difficulties pupils may have in relation to learning. Therefore, this article will attempt to review some of the literature on one such intervention, namely the effectiveness of paired reading, with particular emphasis on paired reading involving peer tutoring, on the reading of children with dyslexia.

¹ Though the Department of Education and Science (DES) use the term 'Specific Learning Difficulty' (DES, Circular SP ED 24/03) the term dyslexia will be used here for the reasons outlined by King (2004) i.e. that is preferred by people with dyslexia and by the psychomedical practice and it is used by the *Report of the Task Force on Dyslexia*.

Rationale

The writer's rationale for choosing this area is based upon a combination of experience, interest and need. As a classroom teacher the author has worked with pupils with mild dyslexia as well as pupils with severe dyslexia and witnessed at first hand the challenges and difficulties these pupils encountered with reading. With those pupils various successful interventions were used; paired reading, however, was not one of them. Having spoken to other educators who used this strategy and listened to the many positive descriptions of paired reading the author was interested in researching this area in further detail. Finally, there is a need in our education system for effective interventions to tackle our current literacy difficulties which are outlined in *The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People* (DES, 2011).

The main methodologies used in this research were meta-analysis or quantitative synthesis of the literature as suggested by Mertens and McLaughlin (2004). This method, as defined by Glass (1976), is an "analysis of analyses" in an attempt to integrate the various findings while enabling agreements or disagreements between theorists to be discussed and for any possible gaps in knowledge or inconclusive evidence to be ascertained (Hart, 1998). This research is based on the selection of studies on dyslexia over the past twenty years and the effectiveness of paired reading (Topping and Lindsay, 1992; Ireland, 2001; Brooks, 2002; King, 2004; Singleton, 2009). These studies are supplemented by research into specific areas such as the role of self-esteem in pupils' reading attainment (Keshner, 1991). The article will begin by examining what is meant by the term dyslexia and what challenges students with dyslexia face in the area of literacy. Secondly, paired reading will be discussed and its value as a means of ameliorating these challenges will be investigated.

DEFINITIONS OF DYSLEXIA

Despite the myriad of studies in this area there is no universally accepted definition of dyslexia (Tansey and Ní Dhomhnaill, 2002). Indeed, Hammill (1990) was able to find forty-three different definitions. The differing views of dyslexia arise because the term dyslexia covers a broad range of characteristics and is, in some ways, an "umbrella term" (Hornsby, 1995, p. 3). The lack of precise agreement upon a definition means it is difficult to accurately say what percentage of the population has dyslexia (Ott, 1997). The international figure of six to eight percent is used by the DAI (2010), though it notes that there is no figure for Ireland, while others maintain that four to five percent have severe difficulties of a dyslexic type (Frith, 1999). The challenge of defining dyslexia is further

complicated by the fact that the issue is approached from different perspectives. Riddick (2001) argued that there are three differing models of dyslexia. Firstly, there is the *medical model*, which examines dyslexia in terms of cognitive difficulties with, for example, phonology (Snowling, 1998). Interestingly, the first attempts at recognising and labelling dyslexia came from medical practitioners such as William Morgan and James Kerr who referred to it as ‘word blindness’ (Ott). Secondly, the *causal model* which proposes that dyslexia should be understood in terms of biological, cognitive and behavioural factors. The third model that Riddick (2001) discusses is the *educational model* which emphasises the need to monitor and mediate the child’s environment so as to alleviate the child’s learning difficulties. Definitions currently in use can be regarded as falling, generally, into these categories.

Irish Context and Definitions in Use

The DAI describes dyslexia as a difficulty, which can be mild or severe, with language processing, particularly in the area of literacy (DAI, 2010). This difficulty is a complex mix of both processing activities and abilities needed to read fluently and accurately (Barry, 2005). Dyslexia in general terms may be regarded as a difficulty with words in their written form (Critchley, 1981; Thomson and Watkins, 1990). In the context of Ireland, dyslexia is regarded as a specific learning difficulty (SLD) which is defined by the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) as an impairment in a specific area such as reading which is not attributable to low ability, difficulties with vision or hearing or emotional or physical factors (Ireland, 1993). For a student to be formally diagnosed with an SLD he/she must be assessed by a psychologist and meet the DES criteria of being of average intelligence functioning at the second percentile or lower in literacy, that is to say there must be a discrepancy between their ability and their achievement in “suitable, standardised, norm-referenced tests” (DES, 2002, p. 6). In 2001 the Report of the Task Force on Dyslexia was published and it defined dyslexia as:

...a continuum of specific learning difficulties related to the acquisition of basic skills in reading, spelling and/or writing, such difficulties being unexpected in relation to an individual’s other abilities and educational experiences. Dyslexia can be described at the neurological, cognitive and behavioural levels. It is typically characterised by inefficient information processing, including difficulties in phonological processing, working memory, rapid naming and automaticity of basic skills. Difficulties in organisation, sequencing, and motor skills may also be present (Ireland, 2001, p. 28).

This is the definition that will be used in this study and it possesses both positive and negative aspects. The definition recognises that dyslexia is a continuum of learning needs which encompasses a broad range of difficulties. The Task Force adopted a positive view in that it maintains that the learning difficulties associated with dyslexia can be alleviated through appropriate intervention (Ireland, 2001). Commentators such as Day (2003) and Jordan (2003) regard this definition as being both positive and inclusive. However, though the Task Force was conscious of the criticism of the discrepancy criteria and the need for a phased approach to assessment (Ireland) it still upholds this criteria in the absence of alternative measures (Day).

Circular 24/03 (DES, 2003) outlines the staged approach to be used in identifying children with special educational needs (SEN). While this phased approach is welcome the final arbitrator of a formal diagnosis of an SEN is the *discrepancy* model. Though a child may be regarded as having dyslexia it is not until he/she is diagnosed by an educational psychologist that such a description can be officially used. The belief that dyslexia is identified because of this discrepancy between IQ and reading ability is based on assumption that lacks empirical evidence (Stanovich, 1994; Kelly, 2006). As Hornsby notes you can have low intelligence and dyslexia, the terms are not mutually exclusive (1995). The danger inherent in the *discrepancy* model is that it is a “wait to fail” approach which goes against the philosophy of early intervention (Turner and Greaney, 2009) which in turns results in the gap between the weak and strong reader widening (Fuchs and Fuchs, 2006). If early intervention does not take place the ‘Matthew Effect’ may occur; that is where an initial gap between a poor and good reader widens because the child who is experiencing reading difficulties enters into a downward spiral of achievement and negative self-perception resulting in a reduced exposure to written material (Stanovich, 1986). The problems of this criteria can be lessened if, as the Task Force argued (Ireland, 2001), schools used a phased approach to intervention and if the DES examine the possibility of other criteria such as the gap between oral and written comprehension in pupils with dyslexia. Though not an ideal method, it is the one we must currently operate under and as there must be some criteria in place we must make do with it as “few alternative measures are currently available, and none in widespread use” (Ireland, p. 12)

Reading Difficulties Related to Dyslexia

The Task Force on Dyslexia not only provided a definition it also identified learning difficulties encountered by students with dyslexia. In the area of reading the main areas identified were: fluency; accuracy and by extension comprehension; grapheme phoneme correspondence; phonemic awareness; decoding and word

attack skills and low self-confidence (Ireland, 2001). These difficulties correspond to the four main features of dyslexia as identified by Irish primary school teachers (Tansey and Ní Dhomhnaill, 2002). King (2004) also maintains issues such as fluency, accuracy, phonological awareness and word recognition are key difficulties faced by learners with dyslexia. Such issues would seem to corroborate Frith's (1985) belief that children with dyslexia do not get beyond the logographic phase of reading acquisition. They remain at a predominately whole pattern sight-word stage and do not reach the alphabetic stage of grapheme-phoneme conversion or the orthographic stage of knowledge of written language orthography. As a result of these difficulties pupils with dyslexia often suffer from low self-esteem (DAI, 2000). This low self-esteem creates a vicious circle which results in the pupil reading less which in turn causes him to fall further behind (Turner and Greaney, 2009). This deficit of reading experience is further exacerbated by the fact that students with dyslexia need to over learn material (Ireland). Having substantially less reading experience also impacts negatively on comprehension (Turner and Greaney, 2009). Therefore the amount of time the pupils spends reading and receiving literacy instruction needs to be increased (McPhillips and Shevlin, 2009) with one report suggesting the figure of ninety minutes per day (Eivers, Sheil and Shortt, 2004). If this time is to be used successfully it must tackle the issues raised above; it must be enjoyable and give pupils an opportunity to succeed (Ireland); it needs to be a structured multisensory approach which can aid the pupils development of accuracy and fluency by using several channels of input (Thomson and Watkins, 1990; Casserly, 2003; Westwood, 2003) and finally it must be inclusive and recognise the pupil as an individual with difficulties and strengths (Riddick, 2001). Can paired reading be the answer to these problems?

PAIRED READING

The methods for teaching pupils with dyslexia are not esoteric; they are the same as those applied in class situations by class teachers (Barry, 2005). Pupils with dyslexia require good teaching practice applied in an intensive and structured way (McPhillips and Shevlin, 2009). Paired reading, which is a type of choral reading undertaken by two readers with one more proficient than the other (Westwood, 2003), is a strategy which, it will be argued, is an appropriate intervention to tackle the aforementioned literacy difficulties encountered by pupils with dyslexia. Paired reading was devised by Morgan (1976) as a simple to administer intervention which would meet the needs of children who were encountering difficulties with reading. It was further developed and researched by Topping and Lindsay (1992) and is currently one of the main teaching methodologies used by over twenty percent of teachers in Ireland in teaching pupils with dyslexia (McPhillips, Bell

and Doveston, 2009). The specific type of paired reading that will be discussed in this article is one which involves peer tutoring, that is a paired reading approach where children read with other children in the role of tutor and tutee (Topping, 2003). Peer tutoring can involve pupils of the same age or cross age peer tutoring where the tutee is younger than the tutor (Connolly, 2009). The organisational and structural methodology used in paired reading is outlined in Topping (1995). Paired, or peer, reading has a long established history of success and extensive research, with large samples, has identified significant reading gains for participants (Brooks, 2002; MacDonald, 2010; Nugent, 2011). Paired reading is successful, enjoyable and pupils like it (Butler, 1999; Ball, Hughes and McCormack, 2006). It also represents an opportunity to increase in-class support thereby creating a more inclusive environment.

Circular 08/02 states that the child should spend most of their time with the class teacher and the resource teacher would provide additional support (DES, 2002). Circular 24/03 goes further by declaring that excessive use of withdrawal is contrary to the principle of inclusion and that support teaching should, wherever possible, take place within the classroom (DES, 2003). The *Learning Support Guidelines* (DES, 2000), also advocate a reduction in the levels of reliance on withdrawal as the vehicle of support teaching. Studies have shown that pupils with literacy difficulties make better progress in small peer group arrangements than in a whole class teacher directed setting (Vaughan, Hughes, Watson Moody and Elbaum, 2001; Greenwood, Tapia, Abbot and Walton, 2003). However, it must be noted that in class group support is not suitable to every task and there are instances when withdrawal or one to one tuition is required (Cowne, 2003). While individual tuition is effective, paired reading has the advantage of delivering intervention to a wider group of pupils thereby making most use of the time available (Nugent, 2011). Paired reading is appropriate to the challenges previously discussed and provides an opportunity for both locational and social inclusion; the pupil receives extra support in reading within his/her classroom and in the company of his/her peers.

To give children a sense of belonging, schools need to instigate a systematic change whereby teaching methodologies are adapted to a pupil's needs rather than vice versa (UNESCO, 1994). This "inclusive turn" (Ainscow, 2007, p. 3) develops a pupil's ability to be an independent learner as it gives them ownership of and responsibility for their work (MacDonald, 2010). As the British Dyslexia Association maintain, the focus in schools should be on inclusion and differentiation rather than exclusion and remediation (British Dyslexia Association, 2012). Paired reading allows for differentiation and inclusion because

it is something everyone in the class is doing and through the use of carefully selected graded readers everyone is reading at an appropriate instructional level. This is the type of individualised approach that the Task Force on Dyslexia (Ireland, 2001) and others recommend (Vaughan et al. 2001; Westwood, 2003). Paired reading is also cost effective in terms of both reading material and staff resources (Murphy, Nugent and O'Neill, 2008). Studies also indicate that peer reading can result in considerable gains in reading (Nugent, 2001).

Brooks (2007) in his report on Topping and Lindsay's study (1992) which involved 2,372 pupils, recorded ratio gains² of 3.3 in reading and 4.3 in comprehension. Studies continue to show gains similar to these findings (Topping, 2001). Paired reading is also proven to improve reading fluency (Wright and Cleary, 2006) where fluency is accurate, smooth oral reading with effortless decoding (King, 2006). Fluent reading is one of the key characteristics of effective reading (Pumfrey, 1994). A fluent reader whose decoding skills are automatic will be able to concentrate more on the story thereby improving his/her comprehension ability (Pumfrey). The means of increasing the fluency of students with dyslexia are outlined by Vaughan, Hughes, Schum and Klinger (1998) and include the use of graded readers and giving pupils opportunities to practice reading and by modeling oral reading. These are all facets of peer reading as laid out by (Topping, 2001b). Research in Ireland on paired reading, though conducted using small samples, shows similar gains as those identified internationally. In 2003, King carried out an action research project using paired reading involving peers and found it to be an effective model for improving reading fluency; indeed, she recorded an average overall gain of just over seventy-four percent in reading fluency for the three pupils with severe dyslexia (King, 2004). MacDonald (2010), however, in her study in this area, argues that the type and severity of dyslexia can adversely affect the progress of the pupil particularly those students with eye tracking problems. Of the four pupils with significant dyslexia who were part of the sample, three made reading age accuracy gains of over four years in eighteen months, the fourth made gains of just over one year. Interestingly, though, this fourth pupil was the only one described as lacking in motivation (MacDonald, 2010). Murphy, Nugent and O'Neill (2008), albeit with a small sample, recorded mean gains of fifteen months in sentence reading age. Similar gains were also recorded in other studies in Ireland with a greater number of participants (Nugent, 2001, 2011). The general picture emerging from studies is that paired readers progress at 4.2 times the normal rates (Topping, 2001). A primary factor in making and maintaining these gains, it will be argued in the next paragraph, is the pupil's self-esteem.

² Ratio gains are a calculation of the rate of progress over the time of the intervention (Brooks, 2007).

When we speak of self-esteem we are talking about feelings of self-worth, whether we regard ourselves as worthwhile people accepted by others, and self-competence, whether we regard ourselves as competent at a particular task (Miller, Topping and Thurston, 2010). There is a strong link between a pupil's enjoyment of and feeling of self-competence in reading and their success (Brooks, 1999). Some studies have argued that a positive self-concept was a more important factor in children being successful at reading than their IQ (Keshner, 1991). Improvements in self esteem have been recorded in students involved in a paired reading programme involving peers (Wright and Cleary, 2006). By setting realistic targets through the use of individualised programmes pupils are given the opportunity to succeed and thereby improve their self-confidence, which in turn leads them to read more (Connolly, 2009). Cross age peer reading is particularly effective in raising a pupil's self-worth and self-competence (Miller et al.).

Paired reading is not without its problems however. Pumfrey (1994) believes the 'Hawthorne effect', whereby any new or novel approach increases motivation and performance, has not been adequately factored into studies of paired reading. Pumfrey also questions the long term effect of paired reading and maintains that full cognisance has not been given to the large amount of time input this intervention requires (Pumfrey). A certain amount of time is involved at the planning stage in selecting material, organising pairs and planning the programme (King, 2004). However, the advantages of paired reading outweigh the preparation challenges (Topping, 2001). In terms of reading gains, Topping acknowledges that progress rates of 4.2 times the norm are made during the initial period and Singleton (2009) suggests that the rate of progress lessens after twelve hours of any form of tuition. While recognising that the rate of improvement may reduce over time, the child's reading is still improving and research would indicate that gains made do not 'wash out' over time (Topping, 2001).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there is no one single method to ensure pupils with literacy difficulties succeed in reading (Duffy and Hoffman, 1999). Just as there is a continuum of needs there must be a continuum of supports (Ireland, 2001). Paired reading, while not the only solution has proven to be an effective teaching approach model which improves the self-esteem, fluency and reading skills of pupils with dyslexia. It is an inclusive intervention which adapts the teaching organisation and methodologies to meet the individual needs of the pupil. In doing so it corresponds to the Reading Association of Ireland's belief that interventions

should be responsive to the needs of the learners and be active and engaging (Reading Association of Ireland, 2011). If implemented effectively paired reading represents an opportunity to be a powerful agent for literacy development and learning and, in keeping with the *The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People*, ensure that each child is enabled to “participate fully in education and in the local, national and global communities in which they live” (DES, 2011, p. 10).

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