1

Developing an Understanding of Dyslexia

This chapter sets the scene for a discussion covering the development of our present understanding of dyslexia. It tells you about:

- the background of our understanding of dyslexia

- definitions, research trends and the present position

- the social construction of dyslexia, the social model of disability, and the development of the dyslexia-friendly turn of thinking

- principles and practices related to dyslexia awareness.

A medium-sized primary school might have around 300 pupils, of whom, according to current perceptions, about 30 will experience dyslexia, although they may have different learning characteristics within that experience. Around 12 of the 30 children will experience dyslexia to the extent that it interferes considerably with their learning.

In the primary school, this is likely to appear as a difficulty in gaining basic literacy skills, and a linked difficulty in producing written work. Some children will be non-readers or read at an elementary level; others may have gained reasonable reading skills but be struggling with spelling. A few may have neat handwriting, while the work of others may be distinctly scruffy and a matter of despair to teachers, parents and, perhaps, to the children themselves. Certain children will keep a low profile while one or two will be angry and unhappy. Some will seem clumsy and disorganised, while others will seem super-organised yet somehow unable to produce the level of work of which their teachers think they are capable.

A number of children will already have been identified as experiencing dyslexia and may receive a certain amount of extra tuition and additional support in class, possibly provided through a statement of special educational needs (SEN). Additionally there will be children who may have been identified as 'at risk' of developing dyslexic-type difficulties, depending on whether they have undergone a screening process or, perhaps, on whether they have close relatives who also experience dyslexia.
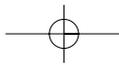
Sadly, a minority of children may not have their difficulties recognised until a later stage in their education. There are a number of reasons why this might be the case. Children may appear to be reading at an appropriate level for their age, when, intellectually, they have much more to offer so that their relative difficulty is not recognised. Alternatively, a particular literacy difficulty may just be seen as one weak skill among a number of weak skills demonstrated by a child described as experiencing moderate learning difficulties, and its significance may not be identified. Sometimes literacy difficulties will not become apparent until a later stage when the work level becomes harder. For other children, dyslexia may not be considered when they develop reading skills but continue to have difficulty with spelling or written expression.

A number of the children experiencing dyslexia in primary school are likely to start becoming aware at an early age that literacy work for others seems to be easy, while for them it is difficult, tiring, and defeating. Within the school, in spite of any efforts on the part of the staff to be even-handed and avoid ascribing blame, every child will have an exact knowledge of where they are in the 'pecking order' of readers in their class, and be aware of their own consequent social status within the class. They will perhaps perceive themselves to be at the bottom of the heap, possibly carrying that thought with them throughout their educational lives, until they can leave and find their own way forward, and even then the difficulty will remain. Just as there is a range of difficulty among children experiencing dyslexia, so there will be a range of responses, which must surely be linked to the awareness and responses of the adults around them. The ones who manage most successfully will, in their young lives, find the patience to keep trying and to work harder to reach a similar standard of outcome to their peers.

A dyslexia-friendly turn of thinking

If they are lucky, the children described above will find themselves in the care of practitioners who understand something of the characteristics of dyslexia, and who make corresponding adjustments within teaching and learning. This basic facilitating ethos is one of the central tenets of the dyslexia-friendly approach that is gaining ground in schools today. The term 'dyslexia-friendly' sounds as though it means being sympathetic to children and adults who experience dyslexia, but it means far more than this. Indeed, it reflects the latest development in efforts to understand and provide for dyslexia and to help children who experience it.

The dyslexia-friendly approach involves building on what is known about dyslexia to date and applying that knowledge in the regular classroom, in day-to-day teaching, on the grounds that what benefits children with dyslexia, benefits all children. In addition, it requires a commitment by schools to acknowledge, respect and support dyslexia by including among the staff at least one person who is trained in dyslexia and who will disseminate this knowledge to other staff members. It includes an expectation that all school members, including governors and ancillary staff, will support this approach and monitor it to improve their performance in the characteristics of a dyslexia-friendly school.

This book is about the dyslexia-friendly initiative, and its scope for helping children experiencing dyslexia in primary schools. Its purpose is not to attempt to 'skill up' classroom teachers to become dyslexia specialists, or to add in any major way to the workload that teachers already carry. Instead, its purpose is to contribute to a change of approach that will enable teachers to feel empowered rather than to feel that such work is the province of the Special Educational

Needs Coordinator (SENCO), specialist teachers, or trained teaching assistants. It takes this approach in the belief that practices that help children experiencing dyslexia will help other children with disabilities and learning needs, and will also help those who do not have disabilities and learning needs.

For the purpose of this book, the focus is upon the primary school. Perceptions of dyslexia are explored, tracing the processes leading to the dyslexia-friendly initiative, and considering the questions that arise along the way. It is intended to clarify the present position in ways that support parents and carers, practitioners, and children, and to offer them strategies for the improvement of provision. The practical guidance draws on the dyslexia-friendly initiative, with its aim of maximising potential in an educational climate where reading is seen to be of increasingly fundamental importance, and where anxieties about reading can make headlines.

Background: a developing understanding

Dyslexia can be something of a sensitive subject in the UK. There is a great deal of information now available about dyslexia, yet at the same time there can be confusion resulting from policies, provisions and practices. It is perhaps time that the understanding of dyslexia should spread further than the realm of the specialist, and should become part of the knowledge and skills of the regular class teacher, a view maintained by Gavin Reid (2005a), who has probably written the most about dyslexia.

Nevertheless, dyslexia remains controversial. Some local education authorities and some educational psychologists do not use the term, preferring to focus on how to help children rather than label them. Some sources feel that reading difficulty is linked to obstructive teaching approaches, and believe that the National Literacy Strategy is unhelpful to children. Others point out that children who experience difficulty with literacy have less rehearsal of reading, writing and spelling skills simply because literacy activities take them longer. The process is more frustrating and is therefore less rewarding for them, so that difficulties are reinforced. However, although the concept of dyslexia continues to be challenged at times, it has become increasingly accepted as a factor in children's educational progress, and an aspect of learning which must be addressed if a school wishes to consider itself inclusive.

The process of understanding dyslexia has developed since its investigation began toward the end of the nineteenth century. There was a growth of understanding about a particular learning difficulty in the area of literacy that did not seem to be linked to brain injury, and that then came to be known as developmental dyslexia, to distinguish it from the acquired condition that resulted from brain trauma (Thomson, 1985). Since then, dyslexia has been the subject of continuing investigation as to how it might be identified, and how children and adults experiencing dyslexia might be helped.

For some time, then, dyslexia was understood in terms of an inability to gain reading skills, although some did not accept that there was any such difficulty, linking it with laziness, disaffection, or lack of practice. The general understanding of dyslexia seemed to be that it was characterised by a child of above average ability, who inexplicably could not grasp the skills of reading, no matter how hard he tried – the difficulty was usually seen as the problem of boys. However, some commentators saw dyslexia as a way of describing reading or other educational
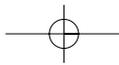
failure in terms found acceptable by the middle classes when explaining, and seeking help for, their own children's learning difficulties (Tomlinson, 2001).

During the latter part of the twentieth century, dyslexia enquiry became established as a significant area of educational research, development and expertise. Dyslexia interest groups specialised in developing training, publications, research and representation, providing a valuable resource for parents and practitioners. This interest in dyslexia continues, gaining an international dimension, as researchers explore the context of different language and graphic systems.

Increasing understanding of the learning characteristics described by the term 'dyslexia' shows that they are not confined to class, gender or cultural groups. Many families can describe older family members who had difficulty in gaining literacy skills, and who consequently were thought of as lacking intelligence. In present-day terms, with dyslexia in mind, their learning difficulties might be considered differently. Today, although dissenting voices may still be heard, for the most part, dyslexia is accepted as a significant learning characteristic experienced by a number of children and adults.

Defining dyslexia

There are many definitions of dyslexia. One of the most widely used current definitions comes from the British Psychological Society:

> Dyslexia is evident when accurate and fluent word reading and/or spelling develops very incompletely or with great difficulty. This focuses on literacy learning at the 'word level' and implies that the problem is severe and persistent despite appropriate learning opportunities. It provides the basis for a staged process of assessment through teaching. (British Psychological Society, 1999: 20)

This definition emphasises a difficulty that does not respond to regular learning interventions, but it does not explain what is meant by 'appropriate learning opportunities', nor whether these refer to learning within the regular classroom or to learning by means of individual tuition.

Another widely used definition is from the British Dyslexia Association:

> A combination of abilities and difficulties that affect the learning process in one or more of reading, spelling and writing. Accompanying weaknesses may be identified in areas of speed processing, short-term memory, sequencing, auditory and/or visual perception, spoken language and motor skills. It is particularly related to mastering and using written language, which may include alphabetic, numerical and musical notation. (Reid, 2002: 86, citing Peer, 2001)

This definition is more descriptive, but, like others, it focuses upon a child's perceived shortcomings.

There are many additional definitions. In addition to identifying difficulties, some definitions also focus on strengths such as the creativity or practical skills that may be part of the learning style of a child who experiences dyslexia. While definitions so far have taken a within-child view, increasingly there are changing perspectives which focus less on dyslexia as a deficit.

Dyslexia and research

At present, there is a considerable research focus upon brain configuration, phonological processing, and genetics in dyslexia. Just as research into differences in brain characteristics confirms the legitimacy of dyslexia, so, too, does genetic research. Dyslexia is currently being linked with around 13 genes (Tolmie, 2006), and the enquiry continues. Twin studies confirm that dyslexia is approximately 50 per cent the result of genetic factors and about 50 per cent the result of environmental ones (Stein, 2004).

There has also been considerable interest in the relationship between diet and dyslexia. This tends to focus on the value of supplementing highly unsaturated fatty acids, linking these to the development of the nervous system. It is considered that supplementing diet with fish oils can improve functioning in literacy and can help pupils who experience other particular learning difficulties that may be linked with dyslexia (Cyhlarova et al., 2004; Richardson et al., 2004).

For classroom practitioners, and for parents and carers, the value of research lies in the knowledge it can contribute on ways to improve the learning environment, and in the legitimacy conferred by the scientific view. If dyslexia is only about 50 per cent likely to be the result of genetic factors, then there is a good level of potential impact for the learning environment in the other 50 per cent. This encourages practitioners to believe that what they do can make a real difference.

Morton and Frith's frequently described three-stage causal model (Morton and Frith, 1995, cited by the Working Party of the Division of Educational and Child Psychology of the British Psychological Society, 1999) has become widely acknowledged because it brings together the different approaches to understanding dyslexia. The model shows dyslexia to be considered in three related ways; in terms of the brain or biology, that is, the linkages or anomalies in the brain structure, and the contribution of genetics; in terms of cognition, that is, the thinking process; and in terms of behaviour, that is, the things that children do when tackling the process of gaining skills in reading, writing and spelling, and mathematics. Alongside all three elements runs the recognition that environment, including the learning environment, is a factor.

A dyslexia-friendly focus upon the three-level causal model acknowledges that while there are different ways of viewing dyslexia, all three suggested elements (brain processes, thinking processes and learning behaviour) are affected by environmental factors. This indicates that greater attention paid to the learning environment can have an impact upon the other elements. Such an approach matches current perspectives that move away from traditional deficit-based or medically based views and toward a more socially mediated view of disability.

The present position

In contrast to earlier perspectives, a social model of disability is gaining in importance. The social model embodies the principle that while an individual may have impairments, it is society, that is, the social context, that disables. It stands in contrast to a medical model, which interprets disability in terms of a medical difficulty with a medical solution, and a deficit-based model which places the focus squarely upon the individual, discussing disability in terms of his or her perceived shortcomings. While it also has its critics, the social model perspective is gaining in

importance, and is the basis for the position taken in the highly influential Index for Inclusion (Booth and Ainscow, 2002). Taking a social context view suggests possibilities for improving learning by improving the learning environment, and this is at the heart of both the Inclusion Index and the dyslexia-friendly initiative.

Barbara Riddick (2001) describes how the Warnock Report (DES, 1978) and the resulting Education Act 1981 took a social model perspective on SEN. These landmark events removed categorisation, replacing it with the principle of making learning accessible to children by tailoring resources to their learning needs. Educational legislation since then has directed policy for children with learning difficulties toward a more context-based view, particularly since 1997, when a change of government began supporting a more socially oriented and inclusive approach.

Government education policies and guidance generally acknowledge dyslexia, although not always using that particular term. The Primary National Strategy refers to children who have difficulty in gaining literacy skills, describing help for their learning needs in terms of three waves of intervention, increasing in intensity. The first wave is represented by the National Literacy Strategy, and the second by catch-up programmes and interventions that may be put in place by the school, but which are not necessarily seen as indicating that children experience SEN. The third wave involves focused interventions, involving specialist advice. To support these interventions, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) has produced a CD-ROM, *Learning and Teaching for Dyslexic Children* (DfES, 2005).

The SEN codes of practice for England and Wales both place dyslexia within the context of cognition and learning, which includes general and specific learning difficulties and their associated learning needs (DfES, 2001; National Assembly for Wales, 2002); in both codes, this information is found in Chapter 7, paragraphs 7: 58/59). Within the codes, children experiencing specific learning difficulties, including dyslexia, developmental coordination disorder (dyspraxia), dyscalculia and other related difficulties, are identified as a separate group from children experiencing moderate, severe or profound general learning difficulties, although the codes acknowledge the potential for overlap.

The position of the codes brings some form of resolution to the earlier debate about whether dyslexia should or should not be described as a specific learning difficulty. The debate centred on whether dyslexia is seen in relation to particular cognitive characteristics, or whether it is identified in terms of a discrepancy, usually with an expected intelligence level. The terms are generally now used interchangeably, with a reference to literacy distinguishing this particular difficulty from others.

In spite of inclusive perspectives, a focus on labelling and categorisation continues. In the school context, this can be seen in the collection of Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC) data. This contains 12 categories, and dyslexia would fall within the category of 'specific learning difficulties'. It seems as if the government seeks to satisfy contradictory perspectives. On the one hand, it is identifying and counting pupils with specific learning difficulties, including dyslexia, suggesting an individual deficit view. On the other hand, the SEN codes of practice and current policies support the view that social and environment factors are crucially important. Such tensions are not unusual within discussions of SEN and dyslexia provision.

The SEN codes of practice are careful to consider all factors. In discussing children who might need statutory assessment for a statement of SEN, they focus on levels of attainment, but are also concerned that rate of progress and style of progress should also be considered. The codes

cover all bases by pointing out that attainment should be considered in line with what is understood or expected of a child's ability, suggesting a discrepancy model, at the same time acknowledging that a child so identified would have difficulties that are exceptionally complex and entrenched. This relates to views of dyslexia as an unexpected difficulty that does not respond to regular teaching approaches. In addition, the codes embrace something of the social model in their view that, among other possible external factors, school organisation, rather than any inherent learning difficulty or disability, may result in a child's reduced performance. It is such factors of school organisation that a dyslexia-friendly approach seeks to address.

The social construction of dyslexia

There is a growing interest in the ways in which dyslexia may be said to be socially constructed; put simply, this says that what we understand about dyslexia is shaped by social expectations, discourse and requirements. Kevin Woods (1998) has pointed out the extent to which the discussion of dyslexia has fallen within the area of cognitive psychology, calling this 'narrow'. He feels that it would be helpful to examine the different perceptions of dyslexia, to build a definition of dyslexia that includes broader social understandings. Ruth Paradice (2001) continues this theme, focusing on the ways in which parents, educational psychologists and SENCOs view dyslexia. She points out that the term 'dyslexia' has passed into common usage to describe children who have difficulty in gaining literacy skills. As a term, 'dyslexia' has acquired everyday meanings that exist in social contexts and that coexist with professional and technological meanings.

An understanding of dyslexia as having a complex social identity links with ideas about a social model of disability. Barbara Riddick (2001) develops this point when she confirms that dyslexia has become a cause for concern because of the increasing demand for general literacy in the population, and because of the resulting disadvantages and social consequences of illiteracy. In a society differently oriented, dyslexia would not generate the same problems.

Dyslexia is defined as a disability under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 when the impairment has 'a substantial and long term effect on a person's ability to carry out normal day to day activities'. This makes it appropriate to consider the social model of disability in thinking about dyslexia, and to consider how the social environment can be improved to help people experiencing this difficulty, however it may be understood or defined. For children in school, the dyslexia-friendly initiative represents a concerted effort to move support and effective action into the realm of the learning environment and away from the 'narrow' perspective of cognitive impairment, with its focus upon child deficit.

Principles and practices

The suggestions in this section reflect the general theme of the advantages of developing dyslexia awareness.

Some practical points about sending information home

- Schools need to send information home, and the usual form of information sharing is a letter. A child experiencing dyslexia is likely to have trouble in making the transfer without difficulty. This piece of paper may look like many

others, and its content or significance may not be obvious. It may get mixed up with another similar-looking paper. A child experiencing dyslexia may experience organisational difficulties and misplace the letter, or experience memory difficulties and forget about the letter.

● When it arrives at home, parents or carers who also experience dyslexia may then meet a similar range of obstacles in coping with the letter, and all this may prevent the information from reaching its target.

● It is also possible that a letter of this kind would be computer generated, or written from a template. Even if the letter was written personally, dyslexia accessibility might not have been a consideration.

● With all this potential difficulty, it would be practical for school practitioners to share information with families and carers in accessible formats that keep letters and letter content to a minimum, or in formats that make use of modern technology. It would help to indicate clearly when a response is required. Where letters have to be used, they can be made more accessible by following the readability process below, and the text resource guide in Chapter 7.

A case study that reflects the improved relationships resulting from a dyslexia-friendly approach when someone new enters the class

Case Study

Lara

Mrs B had moved into the area with her 10-year-old daughter Lara, and had approached the local primary school about enrolling her. At first, Mrs B was ready for an argument, because at the last school she had experienced difficulty in getting recognition for Lara's learning needs, as she understood them. At that school Lara was eventually tested for literacy problems by the SENCo, and the possibility was raised of dyslexic-type difficulties. The process of referral in that LEA meant that she would be referred to the educational psychologist and the central support team. From then on, Lara sometimes received support in class from a learning support assistant, but, essentially, Mrs B felt that Lara did not get sufficient help, and the answer to her question as to whether Lara was dyslexic seemed to have been put on hold until the educational psychologist could assess her.

Mrs B was relieved to find a different reception at the new school. The first difference was that staff did not seem to see Mrs B as a 'fussy mum' or want to avoid discussing Lara's learning needs in terms of dyslexia. The next difference was that they did not see the responsibility for understanding Lara's learning needs and providing for them as belonging to an expert outside the school. Finally, the school had a number of approaches and processes in place that were designed to help children with dyslexia, and these were explained to Mrs B and discussed with her. Mrs B was able to describe the things that she felt helped Lara to learn, as was Lara herself. Mrs B came away heartened. She still felt that she would be keeping a close eye on the school to make sure they met Lara's needs, but for now she felt more confident.

A suggestion for practitioners: reflecting on our own experience and improving practice

As practitioners, we could usefully think back to what it was like when we were children in primary school. Was there something we could not do, no matter how hard we tried, such as climb a rope, sing in tune, understand fractions, or spell? If we recall what that was like, we may remember despair, dread, a sinking feeling in the stomach, and a sense of release when it was over and could be left behind, only to have to face it all again the next day. We might recall pupils who could not get on with literacy learning however hard they tried. Or we might remember that everyone seemed to know who the best reader was and who the worst reader in the class, with teachers making this a source of public praise or humiliation. These are all valuable experiences, because they serve as a reminder of what children experiencing dyslexia-type difficulties feel like a lot of the time. We can resolve that the learning experiences that we provide for children are better than those negative ones and take heart from the fact that educational understanding about dyslexia has made progress.

A suggestion for parents and carers: reflecting on our own experience and developing partnerships

As parents and carers, we might also think back to those earlier school days, and about the positive and negative experiences we had. For parents and carers who experienced dyslexia themselves at a time when perhaps it was not recognised, and who experienced blame, struggle and sometimes punishment, those memories might be vivid but not happy ones. But for parents and carers as well as practitioners, there is value in what we can learn from that experience, and the resolutions we make that things are going to be different for our children. The beginning of making that learning experience better lies in our partnership with schools. Dyslexia is a slippery concept about which there remains much discussion. Uncertainty about how it is defined, managed and supported may spill over into schools. Nevertheless, we, as parents and carers, can be confident about our right to have our children's needs met in school. We can expect to have a proper discussion of dyslexia. We are entitled to expect a reasonable answer to the question, 'What are you going to do to help my child'? If a child has an educational need, the answer in the present-day UK cannot ever be 'nothing'.
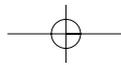
You can try

A technique to enhance learning for children experiencing dyslexia: checking text readability

Text readability

There is a tool in the Word computer program that can be used to improve the readability of text. After loading Word, go to:

Tools

↓

Options

↓

Spelling and Grammar

↓

Check Readability Statistics (tick box to confirm)
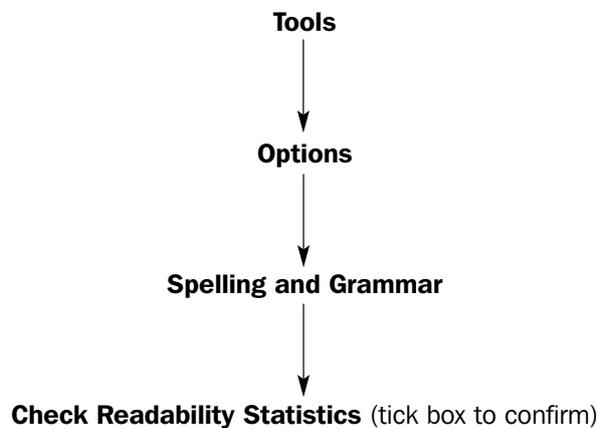
Then close this screen and type the text as a normal Word document.

When you have finished, run the spellchecker.

On completion, the screen will display the readability statistics. You should:

● Aim for the lowest possible percentage of passive sentences.

● Aim for the highest possible measure of 'Flesch Reading Ease'.

● Aim for the lowest 'Flesch–Kincaid Grade level'; this gives an American grade level.

● Add 5 to the Flesch–Kincaid level to get an approximate reading age.

(With acknowledgements to Yewlands School)
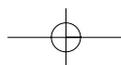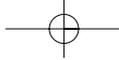
Key Points to Remember

1. Children will be helped by a move away from an individual, deficit-based view, and toward awareness of a social model of learning difficulty and/or disability and its implications. Broadly, the social model takes the position that although people may have impairments, it is society that disables. We can improve the learning environment to lessen the impact of impairment.

2. Children will be helped by demystifying dyslexia and dyslexia specialist teaching. Making dyslexia ideas and techniques more accessible to practitioners and parents, so that they feel more confident about helping children who experience dyslexia, represents recognition of a craft knowledge in the teaching of literacy.

3. One of the valuable aspects of the dyslexia-friendly approach is that it helps children whether or not they experience literacy difficulties described as dyslexia. This is because it is founded on principles that are based on knowledge of helpful practice in teaching and learning.