

Supporting literacy difficulties in the mainstream classroom

All students must be provided with equal educational opportunities– the DfE and Ofsted make that quite clear – which is why catering to the wide-ranging needs of students with dyslexia or other literacy difficulties can be so awkward to manage in a class of thirty pupils. **Gareth D Morewood** and **Emily Watson** detail some simple strategies observed during their own research to make supporting these students easier.



One of the most common literacy barriers is dyslexia – a learning difficulty inhibiting reading, spelling, verbal memory, and processing ability. Students with dyslexia cannot be directly categorised into specific groups as their learning needs vary greatly. This requires individualised plans for students to support their needs and what suits one student may not suit all.

A variety of methods of communication therefore, help to facilitate the inclusion of dyslexic

students within lessons. Some enjoy detailed descriptions, whereas others will enjoy using pictures to trigger their memory as a visual support. Sir Jim Rose¹ found that lessons organised to ensure students were learning in small, frequent ‘chunks’ really helped those with low literacy levels.

Using a range of learning styles and approaches ensures there is a focus on a larger portion of preferences, enabling an increased opportunity of inclusion for all. However, there is a need to guard against focusing the majority of the lesson to the

This month's **Practitioner Research**

teacher's preferred learning style, as this could alienate some learners. Rose explained that focusing on one learning style that a student finds difficult could lead to low self esteem.

Providing strategies to support students' needs therefore reduces the risk of them becoming detached from learning, and also helps support them to reach their full potential. The success of inclusion depends upon the teacher's attitude to modifying and adapting these strategies and practices to suit the needs of their students. When approaches are modified according to a student's specific learning needs and the student feels included, he or she has more chance of achieving.

We observed a female Year 10 student who had low literacy levels and dyslexia in a range of learning contexts. By taking the time to observe this student, we increased our knowledge of her needs, identifying and understanding the specific difficulties she experiences

and then enabling us to employ successful strategies to support her.

Multiple questions and instructions

During observations and conversations with staff, it became evident that teachers adapted the way in which they communicated with students dependent upon need. Instructions were usually broken down into small steps, allowing

students to fulfil one task before moving on. This ensured all students were able to follow instructions and kept the pace of the lesson sharp. On occasions when multiple instructions were given, students appeared confused – therefore not achieving as much as when shorter instructions were provided.

Observations highlighted that during questioning, the student answered separate questions in turn

to develop answers, rather than leaping straight into one complex question. Encouraging teachers to use a series of questions also supported an inclusive environment as understanding could be clarified, thus preventing leaving the student behind.

Worksheets

When observing one catering lesson, we noticed using questions to support learning was done in an anonymous way – students were allowed to write any questions that they had on a worksheet. Staff then identified the questions and either answered them to the individual, or posed the question to the group, allowing the high achievers to support the inclusion of those of a lower ability. The sheet also supported an inclusive learning environment in other ways, allowing students to highlight what they identified to be the key facts, differentiating their learning to their target grade.



This month's **Practitioner Research**

Care was also taken to ensure that all teachers followed simple guidelines about the production of worksheets, in order to universally support students' possible difficulties with accessing the written text. (See box at the end of article)

While completing worksheets in the catering session, students with specific literacy needs utilised key words lists, ensuring correct spelling. Lists were produced by the students as a homework task, and contained visual aids alongside descriptions. This supported a variety of learning styles and increased independence in lessons.

'Chunking' and clear lesson structure

To facilitate an inclusive learning environment for students with dyslexia and literacy difficulties, the Department for Education² suggests that lessons should be highly structured. This allows the students to clearly identify what they should be doing, and allows them

to see what they need to do to reach the objectives.

Using a variety of tasks to support learning in small 'chunks' has also been suggested, as this can reduce the chances of students becoming disengaged when they are not working in their preferred learning style. It was felt that this also supported the learning of others as it kept the pace of the lesson moving and catered for a variety of preferred learning styles. This also ensured that the students had an understanding of the structure of the lesson from the start, so they knew what to expect.

Key words and rote learning

Reading words repeatedly strengthens the connection students have with the words, according to Downes and Gilligan³, as it enables them to understand the concept as they see or hear the word multiple times.

However, a dyslexic student's process of understanding is more complicated than that. Dennis Brooks⁴

explains that there needs to be a strong focus on phonics, and that each word needs to be broken down into syllables so that the students can focus on spelling and pronunciation.

During the observations, the key words list that students constantly made reference to supported their learning, and the teacher commented on the improvement the focus student had made in the use of key terms in her work. The key words list also supports the research identified during this work, which highlighted graphic representation to reinforce and support learning.

In future lessons using a key word list with the students, they will have an additional opportunity to attend a session where they can go through the pronunciation of words and write down the phonetic spelling of the vocabulary as an additional strategy. This may allow students to gain a better comprehension of the key words, allowing them to show a greater understanding within lessons.

Focus on wider inclusion

Inclusion enables students to make the most of opportunities both within society and education by reducing segregation and prejudiced views. This should therefore lead to students being included regardless of features for which they may be viewed as different. Although this would be the case in an ideal world, Boyle and Topping⁵ highlight the reality of inadequate funding, morals and the social claims for all to be included in education – although it would be ideal to include all, regardless of differences, funds and resources are appointed to those with the greatest needs which may restrict opportunities for others.

Nevertheless, teachers try to ensure inclusion in schools for numerous reasons. Firstly, it is a required feature of secondary education set by the Department for Education and Ofsted to ensure all students are engaged in a broad and balanced curriculum. These requirements also ensure that

This month's **Practitioner Research**

teachers have high expectations of students, and that they have targets set that are suitable for their needs and ability⁶.

In addition to this, an inclusive environment within a school also works towards countering negative attitudes, which is often the goal of both teachers and educational institutes. Helping to break down this barrier in school assists the creation of a more supportive community, thus ensuring all students – regardless of their differences and additional needs – have an opportunity to reach their full potential. Increased focus on inclusion at secondary school drives students into post sixteen educational institutes to pursue their career aspirations, regardless of their differences⁷.

To facilitate inclusion of all students, teachers need to constantly reflect upon the success of their lessons, and share good practice with colleagues. Removing the barriers and providing support also increases

students' potential within PE⁸.

Within this school, there is a strong focus to improve literacy across all subject areas. This is part of the inclusive whole-school approach developed over the last decade. The focus student had low literacy levels and dyslexia, causing her to struggle significantly with word recognition and reading comprehension speed, among other literacy based skills. Additionally, the student was also identified as having Moderate Learning Difficulties.

Family engagement and involvement

Family involvement in a student's school life can have a positive impact upon literacy achievements, research has suggested⁹.

This school has been continually working to try and strengthen the relationship with parents and carers, to enhance the support students receive for their learning, both in school and at home. They

have worked to improve their communication and strengthened their involvement within school life. Additional focus with regard to parents/carers of students with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) is evidenced through the first author's recent research into parental confidence¹⁰. Additionally the school has recently been awarded with The Leading Parent Partnership Award, which illustrates the parents' involvement, thus supporting the positive impact on students' education.

The DfE suggests that long breaks from education are not beneficial to dyslexic students, as they may regress with their learning. This is another way parents and carers could help support the students' education, by encouraging them to keep revising and refreshing their memory with topics covered in prior lessons. This will help the students narrow the gap between themselves and their peers and maintain learning momentum.

A focus on strengths

Many of the aforementioned strategies, such as rote learning, involve working on students' weaknesses to help them to improve. Squires and McKeown suggest that teachers should work to improve both students' *strengths* and their weaknesses – by planning and delivering a multi-sensory learning environment. Students will then not become too de-motivated when their weaker learning style is used, as they know other learning styles will be used within lessons so that they can strive to achieve.

During our observations, it became apparent that providing opportunities for students to personalise their learning in the planning stages allowed all students to be catered for. This ensured the student with dyslexia could work to her strengths, and even take a leadership role within activities.

Clearly then, there are numerous strategies and ideas of ways to create

This month's **Practitioner Research**

a more inclusive learning environment for those with low level literacy and dyslexia. As identified earlier, what suits one student may not suit all. With this in mind then, it is essential to highlight that teachers must have an increased awareness and should not treat all dyslexic students the same. Instead, they should strive to understand their students' individual needs and strengths.

The simple adjustments observed and trialled, such as pictures and key words on worksheets and handouts, helped the focus student to be more included in her lessons and to succeed alongside her peers. This straightforward strategy supports the inclusion of all students, regardless of their differences, and also allows students to work towards achieving their aspirations. Although this may not be the case for all groups, it is a simple strategy that can be used to help students with low literacy levels and dyslexia.

With every student being unique,

it is of high importance throughout any teaching career to reflect on the success of lessons and share successful practices with colleagues. This supports the breaking down of barriers and allows students to strive to their full potential.

Gareth D Morewood is Director of Curriculum Support at Priestnall School and an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Manchester.
Emily Watson is a Secondary PGCE Physical Education student at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Inclusive ways to prepare and present worksheets to support the needs of all students:

1. Use a plain, sans serif font such as Sassoon, Comic Sans or Verdana. Alternatives include Tahoma or Trebuchet.
2. Font size should be 12-14 point.
3. Pastel shades of paper should be used, not white. Try cream, pale green or pale blue.
4. Avoid underlining or italics. Use bold for emphasis instead.
5. Avoid text in capital letters. For headings, use a larger font size in bold, or try boxes and borders.
6. Don't make text too dense but include lots of space. Line spacing of 1.5 is preferable.
7. Use numbers as bullet points rather than continuous prose (easier to follow and track).
8. Use left-justified with ragged right edge (as uneven lines are good if you lose your place).
9. Avoid starting a sentence at the end of a line (always start new points at the left).
10. Use short, simple sentences and a direct style.

References

- 1 Rose, J. (2009) Identifying and Teaching Children and Young People with Dyslexia and Literacy Difficulties. Research Report: DCSF Dyslexia Report. Nottingham, DCSF Publications.
- 2 Department for Education (2009) Identifying and Teaching Children and Young People With Dyslexia and Literacy Difficulties [Internet], London, Department for Education.
- 3 Downes, P. And Gilligan, A. L. (2007) Beyond Educational Disadvantage. Dublin, Institute of Public Administration
- 4 Brooks, D. (2011) Dyslexia Treatment and Prevention: Non Medical Solutions [Internet].
- 5 Boyle, C. And Topping, K. (2012) What works in inclusion? Berkshire, Open University Press.
- 6 Department for Education (2012) Inclusive Schooling: Children with Special Educational Needs [Internet], London, Department for Education.
- 7 Csolik, K., Bennett, S., and Gallagher, T. L. (2009) Ready or not, here they come: Inclusion of Invisible Disabilities in Post Secondary Education. Teaching & Learning, 5 (1), pp. 53-62.
- 8 Hayes, S. and Stidder, G. (2003) Equity and Inclusion in Physical Education. London, Routledge. Cited in: Capel, S. & Whitehead, M. Learning to Teach Physical Education In the Secondary School. Oxon, Routledge.
- 9 Clark, C., Poulton, L. And McCoy, E. (2011) A Route To Addressing Child Poverty? Research Report: National Literacy Trust Research Review. London, National Literacy Trust.
- 10 Morewood, G. D. & Bond, C. (2012) Understanding parental confidence in an inclusive high school. A pilot study. Support for Learning. Vol 27, No. 2 pp 53-58. Wiley-Blackwell Publishing.