

Removing Dyslexia As A Barrier To Achievement – promoting and evaluating Dyslexia Friendly Schools

Article circulated to Dyslexia Friendly Schools Steering Group November 2005

The Rationale

Over the last 12 months the British Dyslexia Association has provided an umbrella organisation to standardise dyslexia friendly approaches and to accredit Local Authorities to award a quality mark based on nationally agreed criteria. Anecdotal evidence suggests that benefits seem to be accruing but it is currently impossible to say, with any authority, what these are and how they can be identified, measured and evaluated.

However what is certain is that more and more schools, with the active and enthusiastic support of their Authorities, are aspiring to become dyslexia friendly. Liverpool, Cornwall, Staffordshire, Somerset and Warwickshire Children's Services are already recognised by the BDA as Dyslexia Friendly organisations which are able to confer the BDA Quality Mark on successful schools. These Authorities are working hard to ensure that the monitoring and evaluation of a school's "dyslexia friendliness" is part of the wider process of school improvement.

One consequence is that Inspector/Advisers from a range of specialisms are being trained to identify dyslexia friendly good practice and to support their schools to move forward. There can be little doubt that the ideas and challenges launched by the BDA Dyslexia Friendly Schools packs are striking a chord across the UK and beyond as Children's Services, schools and teachers begin to realise that the fine tuning needed to make school dyslexia friendly has the potential to improve the learning of all pupils.

The BDA initiative is driven by the fact that dyslexic learners spend most, if not all of their time in mainstream classes, being taught by class/subject teachers who do not have specialist dyslexia qualifications: these are the people who need to understand how to identify and remove "dyslexic" barriers to achievement. Therefore the focus is on the mainstream classroom and the way school policy and practice establishes monitors and evaluates the quality of provision for dyslexic learners.

Making it work

The most successful launches of Dyslexia Friendly Schools initiatives have been high status events involving members of Senior Management Teams from primary and secondary schools – the people who make decisions about policy, practice the allocation of time and resources and who are in a position to initiate whole school change. In contrast the least effective launches tend to be where schools send their part-time SENCO or even, in a number of occasions, Teaching Assistants, who do not have the authority to make changes and so have to “report back,” almost inevitably diluting the inclusive, whole school message.

Top down or Bottom up?

The initiative started at grass roots level in North Wales and was sparked and driven by SENCOs and advisory teachers. It was interesting to note that the Cornwall model, which began with focus groups and involved a range of senior Local Authority staff from the very beginning, is being acknowledged by some Children’s Services to be the way to go.

Defining a Dyslexia Friendly Local Authority/Children’s Service

The five Children’s Services currently holding the Quality Mark have some things in common including:

- Well developed internal systems to develop, acknowledge and certificate dyslexia friendly schools which were in place before applying for the Quality Mark. These Services monitor their schools, often through a “Level 1” audit and action plan process, and organise high prestige award ceremonies to celebrate success.
- They recognise the Leadership and Management strand to be a particular challenge and are working to embed the monitoring process within the normal Service responsibility and routine – the SEF forms are recognised as being a powerful tool. Dyslexia Friendly is seen as having implications way beyond SEN.

- In an interesting development, Liverpool has moved responsibility for the process to the School Improvement team. This sends a powerful message about the importance of “quality first teaching” and places an imperative on making “reasonable adjustments” in the classroom – whether it is called Wave 1 or Classroom Action, it is about the basic entitlement of children to be taught the way they learn in their mainstream classroom
- Training is a major element, particularly for “non SEN specialist” Inspectors and Advisors. As they begin to take a role in the monitoring process, training makes them more aware of the range of inclusive strategies available to skilled class and subject teachers. While the quality of training for discrete, specialist qualifications continues to be exemplary, more time is rightly being devoted to training which focuses on identifying and meeting the needs of dyslexic children in the inclusive classroom. Training for senior managers is also becoming a priority, in recognition of the fact that a SENCO may not have the position or authority to secure the necessary whole school change. The potential role of School Improvement Partners in this context is being explored
- There has been a considerable investment of time and energy in the production of useful materials – some materials are quite outstanding. Early materials which were clearly intended to support a Dyslexia Friendly Schools Initiative were still driven by an SEN ethos and culture and, while excellent for supported learning situations, did little to help mainstream, non specialist class and subject teachers. This gap is now being filled by material which is clearly “inclusion driven” and which is meeting a wide range of diverse learning needs.
- Central policies all contain the word “Dyslexia” or the phrase “Specific Learning Difficulties” – in other words Dyslexia, usually alongside AD(H)D, Asperger’s Syndrome, Dyspraxia etc, etc is acknowledged to be a discrete issue. I see this as a fundamental principle - Children’s Services cannot reasonably aspire to become recognised for a Dyslexia Quality Mark if the target word/phrase is not in the policy.

Some challenges for Quality Mark Authorities

- What form are “reasonable adjustments” taking in the classroom?
- How many learners, identified by their schools as being dyslexic to some degree, are being supported in mainstream settings by quality first teaching?
- What evidence is there that Wave 1, quality first; classroom action is having an effect?

Defining a Dyslexia Friendly School

- Dyslexia Friendly schools usually have a Head Teacher with a passion for inclusion and a burning desire to identify and meet all learning needs. A recent meeting of colleagues from the South West acknowledged that the most Dyslexia Friendly SENCO in the world was powerless to move a school if the head and/or senior managers had other priorities. On the other hand a Dyslexia Friendly management team can drive an initiative when the SENCO would prefer to focus on other issues.
- The pursuit of alternative evidence of learning and the use of alternative assessment techniques is policy driven through explicit wording. One primary school undertook an audit to ensure that a full range of learning preferences was addressed across the programmes of study. This ensured that all children had the opportunity to work within their comfort zone for some of the time.
- Where appropriate, the social, emotional and intellectual inclusion of dyslexic learners is achieved through sensitive withdrawal opportunities, both 1:1 and small group.
- Great emphasis is placed on the development of self esteem and emotional intelligence
- Weak basic skills are not a barrier to achievement, nor do they bar learners from ability appropriate groups and sets

- Parents recognise the efforts being made on behalf of their children and value the way the school empowers and includes their children

Once again it is important to re-emphasise the point that this initiative is about learning differences rather than learning difficulties and so is not necessarily the responsibility of Special Needs Coordinators unless they are already members of the school's senior management team. Becoming a dyslexia friendly school requires a review of the implementation of major whole school policies, especially teaching and learning, monitoring and assessment, marking, differentiation and inclusion. The issue then becomes one of how these policies are monitored, evaluated and reviewed to ensure top quality learning across the range of ability and need.

Does a Quality Mark make a difference?

To generate this evidence four broad areas of questioning are envisaged:

- What are Children's Services doing?
- What are schools doing?
- What is working?
- How do we know?

Measurable indicators are likely to include changes in patterns of attendance, exclusions, tribunals, performance in national assessments etc. Anecdotal indicators may include increased parental confidence, reduced calls to LA helplines, improved self esteem among learners and increased teacher awareness/ability to meet needs in mainstream settings. "Removing barriers to Learning," "Excellence and Enjoyment," and "Personalised Learning" are current DfES initiatives which are closely linked with a number of strategies, including inclusion. Conventional wisdom among those closely associated with dyslexia friendly schools initiatives is that schools who meet the BDA criteria will remove many barriers to learning and become more effective and inclusive. While there is currently little hard evidence to support this view, positive anecdotal evidence is accumulating. The priority for the coming 12-18 months will be to sample the evidence that Children's Services and schools already collect as part of their school effectiveness evidence and identify whole school, whole class indicators which measure a school's improvement due to the Dyslexia Friendly Schools Initiative.

Pulling it all together with a "SWOT"

A SWOT analysis looks at Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats.

Strengths:

The BDA's Dyslexia Friendly Schools Quality Mark is beginning to have an impact on the way dyslexic learners are taught in their mainstream classes. Anecdotal evidence suggests that pupils are happier and more successful, parents have more confidence and there are fewer tribunals and teachers are recognising that they can work very effectively with dyslexic pupils.

Weaknesses:

The monitoring and evaluation of individual schools by Local Authorities often remains the responsibility of the SEN/Inclusion teams rather than part of the role of all Inspector and Adviser. Real progress is being made, but currently this responsibility is not sufficiently embedded and may still be a bit "bolted on." However Local Authorities are genuinely aware of this and are "working towards" a solution with energy and enthusiasm. In one Local Authority, achievement of the Quality Mark was a performance management target for the lead officer.

Opportunities

Working towards the Quality Mark offers Local Authorities an opportunity to build inclusion into the mainstream agenda through the systematic training of the advisory service. The BDA has raised awareness of the importance of a range of elements being in place and actually visible in everyday classroom practice and Local Authorities are rising to the challenge of empowering all officers to make effective evaluations of current provision and offer realistic improvement strategies

Threats

The biggest threat is a failure to recognise that the focus for Dyslexia Friendly Schools Initiative is what happens in mainstream classrooms rather than on discrete SEN provision. In consequence there is a danger that issues for dyslexic learners will continue to be seen as the responsibility of the SENCO and "somebody else's problem." The most successful Local Authorities are challenging schools to respond to this change of perspective

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22/12/2005 13:34:40