

Inclusive Literacy: Overview of the Skill of Writing Development in an Inclusive Classroom

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Abstract: *This study reports on an observational study that dwells on conventional views of literacy that how in the most of our literacy class rooms a conventional approach to teaching literacy is dominant, at least to pupils with SLD. Children are being taught words and phonics, how to get information from books and other kinds of text, and lessons we observed looked very similar to those that can be seen in mainstream classrooms all around the country. There is a greater variation for pupils with profound learning disabilities, but even so, many lessons look, in essence similar to the prescription for the Literacy Hour.*

Keywords: *Effective instruction, learning difficulties, learning disabilities, teaching, writing, written expression, difficulties faced by those with profound learning disabilities, storytelling ideas*

1. Introduction

Teachers are one of the key factors in delivering instruction that leads to the development of competent literacy learners. From the earliest studies of effective instruction (Bond & Dykstra, 1967) to more recent studies (Alton-Lee, 2003; Darling Hammond, 2000; Hattie, 2002; Timperley, 2005), teachers have been found to be pivotal in influencing students' literacy achievement. Some of these teachers may be described as "exemplary teachers", defined as those teachers who consistently use effective practices and "demonstrate the quality of excellence in every action they perform ... both in what they and their students do" (Collins Block & Mangieri, 2003, p. 35). Investigations of exemplary teachers have provided detailed pictures of the curricula, instructional practices, classroom interactions, assessment tasks and classroom environments they have used or created.

Researchers from various famous universities (Universities of Birmingham, Manchester Metropolitan and Plymouth) studied the way schools approach teaching literacy to children with severe learning difficulties. Although not the main focus of the study, pupils with profound learning disabilities featured in the information we collected. This article is an attempt to share some of what we found.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conventional Literacy

Most definitions of the word 'literacy' contain reference to reading and writing text and the reality in schools (special or mainstream) is that Literacy on the timetable is about learning to read and write or to engage in activities that are eventually meant to lead to reading printed or written text as well as generating written text and writing. The original National Literacy Strategy material (DfEE, 1998) answers its own question of 'what is literacy?': with 'Literacy unites the important skills of reading and writing'. It does go on to include speaking and listening as important, but the rest of the materials are about reading and writing: speaking and listening are hardly mentioned again.

This position has changed with the new Primary National Strategy (DfES, 2006), where speaking and listening are much more prominent under the literacy heading, with 4 of the 12 strands relating to 1) speaking, 2) listening and responding, 3) group discussion and interaction and 4) drama. The other 8 all relate specifically to reading and writing, with the emphasis at an early stage on learning through 'synthetic phonics', where children need sophisticated knowledge about the segmental nature of spoken language and to be able to match speech-sounds and letters.

2.2 Students with Learning Difficulties

Students with learning difficulties are generally described as those underachieving in academic areas, most commonly in literacy (Elkins, 2007; van Kraayenoord, 2006). They are students who often need instructional support or extra assistance. While there are authors who suggest that learning difficulties are caused by neurological deficits, in Australia most researchers in the field argue that problems in literacy can be the result of many, often interacting, variables, such as limited opportunities and exposure to literacy, the quality of instruction and lack of motivation (see van Kraayenoord, 2008).

In Newcomer and Barenbaum's (1991) meta-analysis, the written texts of students with learning disabilities were characterised by a "paucity of ideas that prevents them from developing or embellishing their ideas" (p. 583), and a lack of cohesiveness.

Specific problems were identified with a lack of planning and ongoing revision which would enable prevention and recognition of inconsistencies and organisational errors.

The meta-analysis also identified that these students had difficulties with spelling, punctuation, word sequencing and fluency (that is, the number of words in a story).

Other research has shown that while skilled writers pay attention to planning, revising, organising and evaluating (Graham & Harris, 2003), struggling writers are known to have difficulty with mastering these process elements of writing (Graham & Harris, 1997; Graham, Harris, Finz-Chorzempa, & MacArthur, 2003; Graham, MacArthur & Schwartz, 1995; Hillocks, 1984). Sandler, Watson, Footo, Levine, Coleman and Hooper (1992) found that students with writing disorders also had difficulties with the rate at which they produced text, that is, they were considerably slower than their peers and their written language lacked sophistication.

With respect to motivation, students with learning difficulties have low motivation and maladaptive beliefs about the causes of success and failure (Sexton, Harris & Graham, 1998). They often have lower academic self-concepts than their peers, and this is manifested in areas such as reading and writing (Chapman, 1988; Haager & Vaughn, 1997; Hay, 1996). In the *WriteIdeas* Project workshop and written materials for teachers, we argued that knowing students as learners is important to informing instruction and differentiating it. We suggested that the teachers' awareness of individual student characteristics, for example in relationship to their cognitive skills, rate of learning, motivation and engagement, would allow them to be more responsive to individual students' needs.

Teachers could use the information to maximize the achievement of the learning outcomes related to writing and make adaptations to instruction and assessment of writing as necessary. In addition, we argued that teacher awareness of the students as adolescent, middle-school learners was important.

I have dwelt on conventional views of literacy because when we went to schools for pupils with SLD/ PMLD, we found that most of them were taking a conventional approach to teaching literacy, at least to pupils with SLD. Children were being taught words and phonics, how to get information from books and other kinds of text, and lessons we observed looked very similar to those that can be seen in mainstream classrooms all round the country. There was a greater variation for pupils with profound learning disabilities, but even so, many lessons looked, in essence similar to the prescription for the Literacy Hour.

3. Objectives of the study

The study was conducted to enable Special Education Teachers to reflect on aspects of teaching and learning in relation to pupils with profound (and multiple) learning disabilities. So that they should be able to reflect on their literacy sessions and decide how they might be developed even more to be an even better story teller for pupils with PMLD and consequently they might enable pupils with PMLD to participate effectively in inclusive class rooms lessons.

4. Method

The study took about 18 months to complete and during that time, the researcher carried out four different activities:
desk-based research using books, journals, magazines and web-sites
observations in classrooms, in both literacy lessons and others lessons where literacy skills might be being used
interviews of the teachers who taught those lessons
focus groups of teachers to discuss our results

5. Observations

Typically, a class of children with severe and profound learning disabilities were seen sitting in a semi-circle around a teacher holding a big book. The book was read or a story told using the pictures and staff engaged the pupils in the story through pictures and objects. Following the story, again typically, the class divided into smaller groups for work related in some way to the book but pitched at a level that was right for the individuals in that group. Usually, the whole class met again for a plenary session at the close of the lesson where pupils' work was recalled and celebrated.

The work the researcher observed that was specifically designed for pupils with profound learning disabilities was often sensory in nature. It was usually centred on a story or a book, but access to the activity was often through objects to touch and activate or odours to smell, things to look at and listen to or even food to taste. The researcher saw stories being told through a range of sensory experiences.

There were also examples of what might be called 'pure communication', rather than anything specifically related to conventional literacy or pre-literacy skills. These were variations on Intensive Interaction (Nind and Hewett, 2000) and usually began from the child him or herself, rather than from a book or a story. The intention appeared to be to engage the child and achieve even minimal social interaction using little games associated with typically developing infants and caregivers. One game observed involved the adult having a conversation of 'ahs', following the lead of the child's vocalisations. It is not known whether the adult thought that what was happening was part of literacy but it was happening in a Literacy lesson.

6. Inclusive Literacy

One of the central concepts that developed through the study was the idea of 'inclusive literacy'. Conventional literacy is clearly not open to children (or adults) with profound learning disabilities as they are not going to learn to read and write. However, if the researcher conceives of literacy as 'inclusive', there may be ways in which even the most profoundly disabled can take part. So what did the researcher mean by 'inclusive literacy'? The researcher identified a range of activities (with the help of literature available) for learners with SLD that the researcher wants to argue could legitimately be identified as 'inclusive literacy' even if there was no use of text at all, and many of these can include those with profound learning disabilities. The researcher identified:

- Objects of reference
- Life quilts and life history boxes
- Personal storytelling
- Sensory stories & multimedia stories
- Cause and effect software
- Photo albums and scrap books
- Picture books & stories
- Graphic facilitation
- Reading icons and symbols
- Talking books
- Early conventional reading skills
- Simple conventional books
- Drama and role play
- Simple software for computer
- Television and films
- Navigating websites (eg: Eastenders)
- Creating websites
- Still photography to create books
- Film-making

The list includes some activities that definitely do not fit into conventional literacy relating to letters, words and text. Some can be seen as 'new literacies' belonging to the media age of television, ipods and computers (Lankshear and Knobel, 2003) and others are seen as, perhaps simplifications of, or substitutions for, the whole business of traditional text-based literacy, such as objects of reference, life quilts and sensory stories.

6.1 Objects of Reference

The first few in the list seem to have the greatest potential for learners with profound learning disabilities. Objects of reference (Ockelford, 2002), for example could be seen as the first real step into learning about symbols, which in conventional literacy might lead to more and more abstract symbols and eventually into letters, words and text. In the absence of this kind of progression, learning to use objects of reference can be seen as an early and important form of literacy in its own right for those learners who are unable to progress further down the conventional literacy or even the new literacies route.

6.2 Life Quilts and Life Boxes

Life quilts (Grove, 1996) or life history boxes can be seen as akin to books about a person. A life quilt is literally a quilt made from sewing together pieces of material from the clothes, curtains, cushions, duvet covers that have meaning for that person from early childhood through to adulthood. There can also be objects sewn into the quilt: anything that might spark familiarity. If this started at an early age and continually added to and enjoyed, it can become an important 'book'. Alternatively or in addition, a box can be used to collect important objects such as slippers, a personal cup, a toy or birthday candles. These can be used regularly to 'tell the story' of the person's life.

6.3 Sensory Stories and Multimedia Activities

There are many examples of sensory stories in schools and colleges: published and home-made, although perhaps fewer multimedia stories. If you haven't already found Pete Well's disgusting stories, you might try them especially with teenagers or young adults. The following links can help in this regard:
<http://www.portland-school.co.uk/Petes-stuff/PetesStuff.htm>,
www.priorywoods.middlesbrough.sch.uk/ and
<http://atschool.eduweb.co.uk/meldreth/textandinfo/Powerp/Media2.html>.

6.4 Pictures and Moving Pictures

The activities on our list that are related to pictures (still or moving) may or may not be meaningful to an individual with profound learning disabilities. Learning to understand and 'read' pictures is an important skill for learners with SLD and the first rungs of that ladder may be relevant to someone with profound disabilities, especially recognising themselves, their family and friends on video. For some people, attaching the camera to the television and watching themselves in real time can be motivating and interesting.

6.5 Film-making and Drama

There are some other activities on our list above within which learners with profound disabilities could be included, for example film making or drama. Nicola Grove and Keith Park have many suggestions for how this can be achieved and if you haven't come across their work, you might start with their book 'Odyssey Now' (Grove and Park, 1996) or 'Macbeth in Mind' (Grove and Park, 2001) or find Keith's many articles published in SLD Experience. Keith's work can also be seen on Teacher's TV online in a programme called 'Special Schools: Access the Curriculum' <http://www.teachers.tv/video/1403>.

7. Conclusions

From our research we were able to see examples of activities that we called 'inclusive literacy'. We recognise, as did the teachers in the study, that literacy for learners who don't learn to read and write is not conventional. It includes a wider view of communication than might typically be seen as literacy, as well as some of the new literacies that are more often associated with creative, performance or media studies or information and communications technology. For the most profoundly disabled learners, to be inclusive, literacy must also embrace the use of objects as a kind of text and perhaps even see someone learning to anticipate a favourite activity as learning to 'read' what is happening. I don't want to stretch literacy to a ridiculous degree but there is definitely more to it than the conventional reading and writing of text.

Hopefully, the inclusive literacy activities that have been briefly discussed in this article will inspire you to be as creative as you can in providing experiences for learners with profound learning disabilities. Although joining in a

conventional literacy hour with more able peers is one activity, there are lots more that appear to us as legitimate responses to teaching literacy to learners who are not going to learn to read and write. Have fun in Literacy!

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