A SENDCo's PERSPECTIVE

THE USE OF C-PEN EXAMREADER AND READERPEN IN

A MAINSTREAM PRIMARY SCHOOL WITH

DYSLEXIC STUDENTS 2017-18

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A SENDCo's Perspective – The use of *ExamReader* and *ReaderPen* in a mainstream primary school for students with dyslexia or reading difficulties 2017-18

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT

We commenced this study wishing to gain greater understanding of the role of the SENDCo and how they identify and understand the needs of the disabled student, particularly students with reading difficulties such as dyslexia. We understand dyslexia is a disability which impacts on 750,000 children in the UK (Dyslexia Research Trust, 2018), and we are also aware of the difficulty's teachers have reported when teaching children with reading difficulties (Driver Youth Trust, 2016) and how this may impact on the student's achievements and outcomes at primary level.

Recent stark statistics from the Dyslexia Research Trust (2018) revealed that 75% of convicted criminals are illiterate; therefore, a logical process when reviewing this statistic, could be the requirement to consider how reading is taught from an early age and a need to screen young people for dyslexia as a potential starting point to reduce this figure? However, this simple premise does not provide clear cut answers to the issue of dyslexia and crime; there are so many other aspects and difficulties experienced by young children. So, what can be done?

There is no magic wand but if the current strategies and programmes are only working for some children, what else is needed? We have decided to undertake a long-term study following a group of students who have been identified with reading difficulties. We introduced handheld portable assistive technology, namely the *ReaderPen* and *ExamReader* into their lives.

This article introduces the cohort and our initial findings. Results were encouraging and helped support the value of early reading difficulty identification, the need for teaching support and implementation plans to encourage teaching staff's understanding of the student's individual learning needs. In addition, we were able to see that positive reflection helped the students achieve success independently.

INTRODUCTION

The following qualifications are required by those wishing to take on the role of SENDCo/SENCO;

- to be a qualified teacher and
- achieve a recognised award in Special Educational Needs Coordination within three years of their appointment.

Which, in layman terms, indicates a large amount of on the job training. Furthermore, a successful SENDCo requires a great deal of knowledge, understanding and personal qualities to excel in this challenging role, such as:

- planning and organising,
- adapting to the changing needs of the child, knowledge of the impact the disability/difficulty has on the child to enable them to access education,
- effective communication with children, the family and other professionals,
- understanding the myriad challenges each child's disability or need will present throughout their educational journey.

However, before choosing to become a SENDCo, you must first qualify as a teacher, therefore how much training does a teacher receive to support and understand the variety of disabilities and difficulties a student may present with? Research on the confidence which newly qualified teachers felt about their training when working with dyslexia revealed that:

"While a Government survey of newly qualified teachers (NQTs) indicates that training for teachers in how to teach reading has improved slightly in recent years, a third (32%) of NQTs in primary schools still rated their training in teaching children to read as satisfactory or poor." (Driver Youth Trust, 2016)

The Driver Youth Trust (DYT), is a charity which supports children and young people who struggle with literacy, particularly dyslexia. The DYT wish to challenge and change current policies to improve knowledge around dyslexia and to promote understanding of consequences a child can experience when unable to read; not only with their self-esteem but also their long-term goals, (The Dyslexia Research Trust, 2018).

Whilst newly Qualified Teachers may naturally feel a degree of uncertainty and worry about their skills in literacy education, surprisingly mature and experienced teachers also express concerns when teaching children with reading difficulties.

"8 out of 10 (84%) teachers thought it was very important that teachers are trained in teaching children with dyslexia. They do not want to be sent into classrooms without the skills they need to teach dyslexic children." (DYT, 2016).

Well-established literacy strategies being used in schools may only suit the needs of a proportion of children. For the remainder of children, an individual approach is required for their specific need to be assessed. A teacher who feels confident teaching children with reading difficulties may explore and consider alternative methods, so the use of identification is a powerful tool in finding the right approach for each child.

As previously indicated, dyslexia is a disability, but one which may not necessarily be apparent compared with a child who has a visual or physical disability. A disabled child requires the right support and tools to enable them to 'live' and access their education. A dyslexic child may not require a pair of glasses or a wheelchair to enable them to access everyday living but, equally they have a right to access education. If teachers could have greater awareness and understanding around the wide range of differentiation within dyslexia then a variety of assistive tools could become accepted within education, which should not be considered 'cheating', but can enable a dyslexic child to have increased access to learning.

We have been very fortunate to work with a SENDCo who supports these concepts. She wishes to work with the teachers within her school to enable them to feel confident when teaching children with literacy difficulties. Furthermore, the school not only wishes to gain insight in how to improve and increase reading within all lessons, but to think 'outside the box', to enable each child to have a toolkit of strategies that will continue to help them in their future beyond school.

Our research hypothesis: Focused use of the ReaderPen and ExamReader alongside Teacher/SENDCo led support and belief in the assistive technology, will help a child to gain improved knowledge, confidence and result in a marked increase of positive attitude towards education leading to the fostering of independent learning skills; which can be used both for education and life outside the school environment.

METHOD

We aim to follow the same students throughout their primary education to test our hypothesis by assessing the skills and behaviours which the children display both within and outside the classroom. We have followed five students using the *ReaderPen* or *ExamReader* for three half terms. A sixth student has been followed for two years using the *ReaderPen*. We have three Year 4 students, (aged 9 years) and three Year 5 students, (aged 10 years). The children possess various reading and writing difficulties; some have been identified as dyslexic, others with moderate learning difficulties and low attainment/poor literacy skills.

The School makes use of several programmes which have been part of the SENDCo and School's approaches based on success for past students. These include:

- Toe by Toe a decoding and fluency strategy
- Phonics – including Bug Club, Letters and Sounds

- Sight learning words, including the use of multi-sensory activities
- Personalised spellings
- Accelerated reading programme
- Colour reading guides, page covers, reading rulers and coloured paper
- *Dragon* software

Communication is clearly identified as an important approach in this school, to help pinpoint the specific need of each child, and using a positive attitude by giving tried and tested strategies a chance to embed for each student. The *ReaderPen* and *ExamReader* have been added to existing tools available at the School. Both pens can 'highlight' a word or line of text and read this back aloud to the user via headphones. The *ReaderPen* has a variety of other uses, including a dictionary, the ability to scan a larger body of text to a file or directly to the computer screen, and can also function as an audio recorder.

The *ReaderPen* was introduced to our students within targeted SENDCo sessions within groups or 1:1. Students were also able to use the pens within their everyday classroom lessons. Prompts and concepts were devised to enable the students to remember to use their pens; such as a written note in their learning packs, verbal support from each other and teacher encouragement.

The SENDCo was able to identify several students who were able to use the pen easily and was able to commend their independent use of the pens in the classroom environment. However, other students struggled for a variety of reasons, including holding and using the pen correctly. Careful consideration was required as to whether pushing these students would be of benefit or create further anxiety or undermine what little confidence they may hold. The SENDCo liaised with the teachers to ensure the best plan was made for these students. Student 6 was a confident user of the pen due to being part of a longer-term study, so the implementation and lesson plans were easily put in place for her.

All students were encouraged to make use of their pen in specific Reading and Literacy class sessions. They were not to use their pens during general reading time, as the books they read should be accessible to them, in line with the student's ability/reading levels. The pens were designated as a support for students when reading material in their lessons was of a larger volume and to enable them to answer questions as an alternative to relying upon the teaching assistant, teacher or peer to help them read or de-code the information; to enable the student to work independently of adults, to make use of their existing strategies and to validate what they believed was being asked of them during the learning task.

Feedback sheets and half termly meetings were arranged to encourage and identify new learning needs and gain insights from each teacher and the SENDCo as to the strengths and functions of the *ReaderPen*, which appeared to suit each student.

RESULTS

Table A sets out the age and achievement of each child to provide context around which level the children are currently working. (Students 1-5 have been participants for three half terms. Student 6 has been a participant of a longer-term study since commencement of Year 3; twelve half terms).

TABLE A: Participant student's attainment.				
CHILD	NEED	READING	WRITING	WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?
Student 1 Year 4	Dyslexia	Year 1 developing	Year 2 emerging	Student 1 is achieving outcomes 2-3 years below his chronological age. His lack of confidence impacts on his learning abilities.
Student 2 Year 5	Dyslexia	Year 5 developing	Year 5 developing	Student 2 is mostly working within the curriculum; her increase in reflective and independent learning has been noted and she will use the *ExamReader* in her SATs next year.
Student 3 Year 5	Dyslexia	Year 4 developing	Year 3 developing	Student 3 is mostly working at 1-2 years below chronological age. However, finding the right strategy for this student continues to be of focus, he may use the *ExamReader* in his SATs next year.
Student 4 Year 5	Moderate Learning difficulty	Year 4 developing	Year 4 emerging	Student 4 is a reluctant learner and has little faith in strategies and tools which may help. The aim is to enable him to self-select and recognise what can support him e.g. *ReaderPen*
Student 5 Year 4	Low attainment and poor literacy skills	Year 3 emerging	Year 3 emerging	Student 5 has been supported by other participant students and is beginning to consider the use of the *ReaderPen* as a strategy that could work for him

CHILD	NEED	READING	WRITING	WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?
Student 6 Year 4 The longer-term study participant	Dyslexia	Sept 2017 Year 1 secure July 2018 Year 3 emerging	Sept 2017 Year 1 developing July 2018 Year 3 developing	Student 6 has been part of a longer-term study since Year 3. We are therefore able to supply a comparison of results for her in Year 4. Student 6 has shown an increase in independent learning, self-belief and confidence during Year 4. Alongside her ability to access the curriculum which will enable her to increase her knowledge in line with her peers.

We feel confident that the results evidenced for Student 6 would be replicated with the other five students in the forthcoming academic year. Student 1 had shown similar starting results as Student 6, working at a chronological age well below their physical age. However, Student 6 had gained in confidence and knowledge during Year 4. We observed her explore and gain self-belief in what she could do, and which strategies worked best for her to achieve these outcomes. Confidence and having opportunities to share her knowledge with others, modelling how to use the *ReaderPen* to peers, experiencing classmate's acceptance of the *ReaderPen* as a normal way of working were all beneficial experiences for the primary aged student.

Our evidence suggests that the optimum time to introduction the *ReaderPen* varies with each student. We felt an earlier introduction to the *ReaderPen* for Student 1 might have enabled development of confidence and self-belief and encourage independent use of the *ReaderPen* but a later start with the *ReaderPen* required increased adult encouragement to reach for the pen; in the coming academic year we recommended support should next focus on encouraging his independent decision making.

Student 2 was a confident primary aged learner, who would be entering Year 6 in the next academic year. At this important point in her education her teacher and SENDCo wanted to enhance the range of tools and strategies she used with the *ReaderPen* in order to help her to take these skills into secondary education. During the group interview this student had identified how important and useful the other functions were for her; we expected in the next academic year this student would use the text-to-file function, further explore the dictionary facility and use the audio recorder to help keep her on track, enabling her to work independently. For this student the introduction of the pen at Year 5 succeeded due to her cognitive abilities and high level of self-esteem.

Student 3 was of a similar age to Student 2; his abilities were slightly below her abilities and his self-belief was less evident. However, during the group interview he showed

interest and hoped to continue to use the *ReaderPen* and *ExamReader* in his forthcoming SATs in the next academic year. A successful combination of strategies for this student continue to be explored since he responded better to hearing an adult reading the text to him, this was something the SENDCo was keen to analyse further. The SENDCo did not wish to advocate removing this strategy but considered the *ReaderPen*/*ExamReader* as a 'back up' to help the student develop confidence in his own abilities. We feel for this student the introduction of the pen at this point was right for him and recommended continued use of the pen to support independent learning in the forthcoming academic year.

Student 4 and 5 had differing requirements; Student 4 was a reluctant learner with moderate wider learning difficulties. We feel that due to low self-esteem Student 4 may have benefitted from an introduction to the *ReaderPen* at a younger age, but equally his specific learning need may have led to further frustrations. We feel Student 5 was introduced to the pen at the right time for his learning needs, but his attainment created a barrier to his learning, his lack of self-belief and confidence alongside his abilities made him timid and unsure. Building tools and confidence for a student who finds learning emotionally challenging, particularly when their anxiety causes disruptive behaviour, can lead to teachers to focus on the behaviour rather than the learning needs.

Sir Michael Wilshaw, HM Chief Inspector of Schools, suggested that up to 700,000 UK pupil's progress is impeded by low level disruption in class (cited Haydn, 2014, p.3). This affects all children in the classroom, whether they are struggling with learning difficulties or academically successful and impacts on their educational achievements.

Interestingly, a recent study by the University of Exeter Medical School encouraged teachers to overlook low-level disruptive behaviour and reported a positive increase in teacher's ability to focus on teaching rather than discipline. The study explored the importance of improving mental health, reducing stress, celebrating positive behaviour and listening to students, since these factors encouraged self-discipline and self-identity to achieve belief in one's own abilities, (cited Busby, 2018).

In my view of this research Students 4 and 5 could benefit from time to explore a variety of strategies to suit their needs, such as receiving praise for 'having a go' with the *ReaderPen*.

The introduction of the *ReaderPen* in Year 3 was helpful to Student 6; although she showed improved confidence and abilities it was not until she had moved through Year 4 that a marked improvement occurred, she moved up 17 stages in reading. Her English attainment continued to be below the national average, however her Maths attainment improved to match the national average. Across other subjects she continued to progress well based on her continued interest and use of the *ReaderPen*.

DISCUSSION

The SENDCo identified key findings during the three half terms of the study:

- High functioning students who are responsive learners can develop the skills and strategies (with support from teachers, TAs and the SENDCo), with little disruption to the rest of the class.
- Lower ability students who are passive learners require greater time and support from the teacher, TAs and SENDCo. This can impact on the rest of the class, so use of targeted 1:1 or smaller group sessions can help the student build confidence, understanding and strategies to use, when they are in class. This approach can have a positive long-term outcome for the lower ability student.

The introduction of the *ReaderPen* into the school allowed teachers to identify students who would find the pen useful combined with support from the SENDCo. This process can work as evidence to enable the creation of an implementation guide to assist all schools who begin using the *ReaderPen* and *ExamReader*. The SENDCo introduced a staff training session to give teachers confidence in using assistive technology in the classroom. These CPD sessions eased uncertainty amongst staff by giving them rules such as when to use the *ReaderPen* (for accessing large bodies of text relating to the topic, and lessons when reading isn't considered imperative e.g. Maths and Science), when to avoid the use of the *ReaderPen* (during reading sessions when the book level is set at the ability of the child), how to use the various *ReaderPen* functions, how to understand and provide support to the student in the early stages, allowing the student to be validated by the pen rather than by the adult.

In conclusion, for this School, the introduction of the *ReaderPen* has been a positive experience. The Head Teacher described it as an important tool to encourage independence, help with early reading difficulty identification, reducing barriers to learning, encouraging students to reach their full potential at primary school and giving them strategies to take into secondary education.

Consequently, we feel our hypothesis has initially proved successful and future studies, which will include the use of inferential statistics, will enable us to fully accept the hypothesis.

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