

Supporting dyslexic trainee teacher

Abstract

Dyslexic PGCE and graduate-teacher trainees face a busy time table and may not have time to attend specialist 1-1 support sessions. As part of my work for Dyslexia Support at the University of Southampton, I led a project developing a resource outlining practical strategies aimed at addressing some of the difficulties experienced by dyslexic trainee teachers on teaching placements. The resource: *Supporting dyslexic trainees and teachers* is available both as a booklet and as an on-line tool accessible to all.

All the findings and strategies in the booklet are based upon information gathered through focus groups and an on-line survey with trainees and teachers with SpLDs. It explores the challenges facing this professional group and includes a range of strategies for dyslexic teachers to draw upon.

Using this resource as a starting point, I have since run a number of group workshops at the University of Southampton for dyslexic trainee teachers. These sessions provide a forum for dyslexic teacher trainees to explore a range of practical strategies for teaching placements, to share their thoughts on some of the aspects of being a teacher with dyslexia and to offer further practical suggestions.

This article outlines the background and key results from the original survey; it explores some of the findings, and presents suggestions on using the resource to support dyslexic teacher trainees.

Background

The project started when Dyslexia Support was asked by the Southampton Education School at the University to develop a set of practical strategies to support dyslexic teacher trainees on placement. The aim was also to give mentors a better understanding of the strengths of dyslexic candidates rather than focusing on what might be perceived weaknesses. A similar collaborative resource had previously been developed by the university for health professionals *Supporting dyslexic students on practice placement*.

It was recognised that while there are many resources to help in the teaching of dyslexic pupils, there are not many to support the teachers who are dyslexic themselves. Resources for workplace support tend to focus on the office-based individual and so are not easily transferable to the teaching environment.

The first step was to gather information about the experiences of dyslexic trainee and qualified teachers in order to compile a menu of practical and realistic workarounds or strategies recommended by the individuals who use them. The initial evidence was gathered through a focus group, the ADSHE-jiscmail and individual feedback in 1-1 dyslexia sessions at the university. This was followed by an on-line survey sent to all Hampshire schools which drew the largest number of respondents - all self-selecting; anonymity was preserved. The final resource, *Supporting dyslexic trainees and teachers*, reflects the responses of over 40 dyslexic teachers, ranging from trainees to those with years of experience, drawn from all sectors of education and teaching a diversity of subjects. Comments from the participants have been reported verbatim whenever possible so that the voice of the dyslexic teacher is heard.

As well as collecting practical strategies, information was gathered on issues such as the **impact** of SpLD on a teacher's career and whether trainees had disclosed their dyslexia/SpLD.

Over two thirds of the respondents had considered or were considering how dyslexia might impact on their teaching; for example,

"I went into teaching age 30, fully aware that my dyslexia would be challenging for me, but confident enough in my abilities that it would not prevent me from doing the job well."

When it came to **disclosure**, approaches were mixed; the majority who were open about their dyslexia spoke mainly to colleagues and their students. Some had turned disclosure into a positive teaching experience for themselves and their students.

"I disclose to the children because in my school so many are dyslexic that it's important for them to see that they can achieve."

But not all had chosen to disclose. “I don’t disclose because I wouldn’t want other teachers to misunderstand.”

Respondents were asked to grade a range of teaching skills from one to eight according to the level of difficulty caused by dyslexia. Spelling, writing on a white board and marking caused most concern; many mentioned the length of time it took to complete tasks. Comments included:

“It is hard to learn pupils’ names, especially with so many classes.”

“I didn’t realise how much paperwork was involved. “

“You need to do two or three times more preparation. Once you have the resources then it’s done for future lessons.”

The majority of the respondents (63%) considered that dyslexia had a significant effect on their teaching. Other challenges included colleagues who do not understand the nature of dyslexia and facing questions of competence from other teachers, pupils or parents.

Overwhelmingly, dyslexic teachers showed that they were not only aware of the challenges but had developed a host of ways to cope. These teachers and trainees showed that they draw upon a range of inner and external resources to find strategies. Many have been able to turn a perceived weakness into a teaching strength, as the following characteristic quote shows:

“Being aware of my spelling weakness meant I made sure to put key words onto lesson plans so I am always able to quickly refer to them if needed.”

The booklet outlines a range of practical strategies and resources suggested by trainees and teachers grouped into [the following sections](#):

- spelling and writing
- marking and writing reports
- reading in front of pupils/students
- lesson planning

- record keeping and organisation
- taking a register
- remembering student names

Spelling was an area of particular concern, but several teachers outlined how they enlisted the support and help of their students to make spelling a shared learning experience.

“I suggest that if I misspell a word the class has three options: they can let me know; they can come up and change the spelling; or they can tell me later. There is no negativity about this as I am upfront about my spelling difficulties.”

Another teacher had found that taking pauses when reading aloud from a long piece of text (for dramatic effect) allowed her to read ahead and get her bearings

When marking and writing student reports, teachers often made use of free software and downloads with a bank of usable comments such as Report Assistant www.reportbox.com adapting these for their own use.

Strategies for record keeping varied, while some teachers preferred an electronic approach, others adopted a more paper-based strategy

“I lose paper so I do everything on my laptop. IT is my way of organising. I even keep an electronic record of all conversations”

“I try to write everything down in one big book: every conversation, every phone call, every meeting. This has been the simplest thing, but has made the biggest difference. I can always go back and check what I said and when. “

The need for *preparation* was stressed by many teachers, whether it was preparing lessons on PowerPoint so that spellings or a piece of text for reading out loud could be checked beforehand.

The workarounds are as varied as the teachers themselves and offer a menu of possibilities. The full range can be viewed in the booklet *Supporting dyslexic trainees and teachers* available to view on the Adhshe website <http://adshe.org.uk/resources/dyslexia/> and on the University of

Southampton website

http://www.southampton.ac.uk/edusupport/study_support/resources.page?

As well as personal adaptations, the survey also asked what reasonable adjustments a school could provide. A range was suggested: allowing alternative job application formats; providing templates for reports; understanding the strengths and difficulties of dyslexia. Several respondents expressed the view that it helps if the school has structures in place such as clear lesson plans to follow and a supportive environment. But others did not think that it was the responsibility of the school to provide support.

Taking the resource forward

As well as handing out booklets to trainee teachers, this resource has been used as a basis for group support and is included as part of the University of Southampton Education School's special educational needs training days when students are on campus together – a rare occurrence. I start the session with a short presentation about the survey and general issues about dyslexia for the teaching profession as covered in the booklet.

The group is asked to look through the range of strategies and discuss them and then invited to add additional ones. Depending on the size of the group this is either carried out in pairs or as a whole group discussion exercise (group size has varied from 4 to 12).

The sessions have produced lively discussion, email addresses have been shared as a way to create peer support and additional suggestions made. These have ranged from simple and practical ones such as dismissing students from class by name as a way of helping to memorise the names to more technological strategies such as sharing a website listing the latest apps for secondary teachers <http://www.sec-ed.co.uk/best-practice/ten-top-apps-for-secondary-teachers>. Along the way, discussion has covered aspects such as using the Open Dyslexic font to increase readability (<http://opendyslexic.org/>), the usefulness of erasable Frixion pens, ways of producing a five minute lesson plan and issues such as whether so much teaching by Powerpoint removes a degree of lesson flexibility.

It is gratifying that the University's Education School is now requesting the sessions as part of their teaching programme. The dyslexia co-ordinator from another university has observed a session and is planning to roll this out with their PGCE students.

Dyslexia is no longer seen as barrier to entering the teaching profession. As the responses from the original survey participants showed, fostering a proactive approach can go a long way in helping the dyslexic teacher be a successful one.

The resource *Supporting dyslexic trainees and teachers* can be viewed on the Adshe website under resources <http://adshe.org.uk/resources/>

Gail Alexander was a member of the University of Southampton's Dyslexia Support team for 12 years. She now works as an educational and workplace assessor and support coach. She is a member of Health Education Wessex's Professional Support Unit and is currently engaged in a research project on dyslexic doctors and trainees.

Contact details: g.alexander6@tiscali.co.uk