

Reflections on observations carried out education essay

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Joe is a 13 years old student. During the Primary school, his behavioural and learning difficulties and his academic progress were the teacher and parents' main concern. He was unable to concentrate and complete his work and was having problems to keep up with the curriculum. The Education Psychologist assessed him with severe dyslexia when he was 8 years old. It was noted that although attention difficulties were affecting significantly his literacy tasks, his literacy difficulties were more indicative of insufficient exposure to reading and spelling rules. Furthermore, it was reported that Joe has severe dyslexia, which was hindering his progress at school. At the Child Guidance Clinic he was also assessed with oppositional defiant disorder. Joe manifests low self esteem and confidence in the way he behaves. He frequently mentions that he is not good for anything and when someone praises him, he does not believe it. He has difficulties to read and write, despite the fact that he has an amazing spoken vocabulary and fertile imagination. Joe receives the support of a shared learning support assistant which has to support three other students.

Introduction

" For a dyslexic who does not yet know they are dyslexic, life is a big high wall you never think you will be able to climb or get over. The moment you understand there is something called dyslexia, and there are ways of getting around the problem, the whole world opens up" (Successful People with Dyslexia - Jackie Stewart, international race car driver). The world we live in today is full of print so it is very easy to understand why both spoken and written language is so important and necessary in human communication. Also at school we are still depending too much on literacy. One can easily

understand the concern of both parents and educators when they notice the first signs of specific learning problems such as dyslexia, when a student despite of adequate intelligence and educational opportunities is still not making the desired progress in areas of learning which involve literacy but at the same time he is doing extremely well in subjects which do not involve reading and writing." All right," I told myself, " you may not be the brightest boy in the school, but you know as much about cars as any of your friends. You may have to work a bit harder, do things in a slightly different way. You may have to pay extra attention to detail, but you can do it."(The Telegraph 2007 - Jackie Stewart, international race car driver). Usually when we hear about the word dyslexia, we associate it with reading, writing, spelling and Maths problems but that is only one face of the learning disability. According to Ronald D. Davis, an author who he himself has dyslexia, there is the positive side of Dyslexia. He mentions several celebrities with dyslexia and insists that these people are geniuses because they have dyslexia. Davis mentions eight basic abilities which according to him all dyslexics share. These eight abilities according to Davis if not suppressed, invalidated or destroyed by guardians or teachers, will result in two characteristics: higher than normal intelligence and extraordinary creative abilities. (Davis, 1997).

Reflections on observations carried out

Parents should be a valued source of assessment When I was given the approval to observe Joe, I was advised that unfortunately due to familiar problems it would not be wise to observe him in out of school environment. At the same time I was informed that instead I could fix an appointment with his mother at school. As I know that parents are an excellent resource of

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information, I didn't hesitate to fix this meeting. " Parents are an invaluable part of the education team and if they are not fully included both the school and the pupil will be disadvantaged."(Grech Louisa & Philip sighted on Azzopardi A., 2010: 52). I learned that Joe is very creative at home, especially in home decorating chores. His mother also informed me that she herself has dyslexia and so she could empathise with his frustration when he has to read and write and when he experiences reluctance to attend school due to feelings of failure. She still remembers what she had to go through back in time, when there was less awareness about learning disabilities. This shows that when a family member is experiencing a learning disability all the family is affected often in a negative way (Dyson, 1996)." The term ' specific learning disability' means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or do mathematical calculations" (IDEA 2004) (as cited in Falzon course notes 2013). Difficulties in literatureSpellingI observed that spelling is one of the activities which pose most challenges for Joe. Spelling mistakes could be noticed even in short words and across both languages. He was observed using phonemic spelling for non phonemic words. Joe experiences difficulties with jumbled spelling. As he cannot rely on his visual memory to help him, he attempts to spell words in a way in which all correct letters are present but are written in the wrong order. " Jumbled spellings' show that the child is experiencing difficulty with visual memory" (Dyslexia Teacher). I've often observed that Joe becomes very frustrated when he hands over his assignments to his

teacher or LSA as when they check his work he always has many mistakes. It would help if educators adopt certain strategies when correcting. Correction should be done discretely and away from peers. Red ink should be avoided and only one type of mistake should be corrected at a time so the student will not feel embarrassed. Using the phoneme count game during correction can help Joe. In this activity, Joe listens carefully to the sounds and counts them out and also segmentation. He then tries to write these words either on a laminated sheet or else he uses sandpaper letters. In this way he can run his fingers over the letters and feels them. The most important thing is to reinforce regularly the words learned. ReadingJoe also experiences reading difficulties. Dyslexia is a specific difficulty that mainly affects reading and spelling. Dyslexia is characterised by difficulties in processing word-sounds and by weaknesses in short term verbal memory; its effects may be seen in spoken language as well as written language (Dyslexia Action, formerly Dyslexia institute 2007(as cited in Falzon course notes 2013). Fortunately during my observations, he was never asked to read in public but I've had the opportunity to listen while he was reading to the LSA. Joe reads very slowly and when he tries to read faster he makes a lot of mistakes. I also observed that Joe makes up the story using illustrations or his imagination. This has little or no relation whatsoever to the text which he is reading. He also adds words which do not appear in the text. Joe can sound out parts of words but cannot synthesize all the sounds into the whole word. His phonological skills are not yet fully developed and so he finds it difficult to sort out the sounds within words or to recognise syllables within a word. Joe experiences segmentation difficulties and needs a lot of reinforcement to

remember the order of sounds in a particular word. Joe should never be asked to read aloud in the class. If he is willing to do so passage for reading should be given beforehand and text and fonts be adapted according to his preferences. Also colour of paper may reduce reading difficulties (Irien 2005) (as cited on Azzopardi, 2010, pg100). Writing Many students with learning disabilities who have reading difficulties also may have trouble writing (Walker, Shippen, Alberto, Houchins, & Cihak, 2005 as cited in Salend, 2008, p. 68). While he is writing I observed that he reverses letters like " d" and " b" and " q" and " p". Joe takes very long to write as he keeps spelling each and every word while he is writing. Also he has difficulties to generate ideas and organise these ideas into meaningful sentences. Also while he writes his vocabulary is rather restricted. " An examination of their writing may reveal problems in the areas of idea generation, text organisation, sentence structure, vocabulary usage, spelling and Grammar. These writing difficulties can affect their performance across the curriculum" (Salend, 2008). For written assignments, Joe should be given extra time and be praised for his creativity. Also computers, word-processors and spell-checks are very important. For a student like Joe who has issues with his handwriting and his spelling, ICT can be of enormous benefit (Pollock et al)." Every child has the right of access to the curriculum, yet we take away that right from so many students" (Thomson, 2003) as cited on Azzopardi, 2010, pg. 97). The National Minimum Curriculum states that " We need to cater for the fact that all children come to school with a different baggage and the Universal Designed learning (UDL) adheres to it. UDL is a framework to eliminate barriers and make curriculum accessible for all students by providing:*

Multiple means of representations of information to students.* Multiple means of expression by students to express what they know.* Multiple means of engagement to stimulate learner's interest and motivation. We as educators should start seriously thinking about differentiated learning experiences if we really believe in inclusion. Difficulties in Maths

While I was observing Joe during various Maths lessons it was very obvious that he was finding it difficult to sustain attention. Joe can do arithmetic very easily but for him word problems and algebra are a real headache. He also shows poor memory for sequences, facts and information that has just been given. Geller and Smith (2002) suggested that: problems in the perceptual register, as well as short-term memory, may negatively impact the math achievement of students with learning disabilities (as sighted on Bender, 2004, pg. 216).

During Maths, Joe shows dependence on finger counting. Fortunately nobody ever asked him to stop using this method. I commend the Maths teacher for providing Joe with handouts and worksheets to prevent him from copying from the whiteboard. The only objection I have is that he should have given them to everyone else in class. In this way, Joe would not be seen as the odd one out. I also admire the way in which the LSA works with Joe during this lesson. He reads the problems for Joe and highlights the key parts. At the same time he encourages Joe to jot short notes about those key parts. The LSA also draws diagrams to help him organise and understand better the information presented in the problem as it is being presented in a visual manner. I also support the way in which the LSA encourages Joe to look for words which are clearly highlighted on the handout instead of spelling them herself thus reducing learned helplessness. According to Martin Seligman "

Learned helplessness is the state of mind created when an animal or human being learns to behave helplessly, even with the means to escape or avoid an unpleasant situation (Helping Psychology, 2010). Difficulties in Organisation" You also can encourage students to work independently by helping them develop their organisational skills" (Finstein, Yao Yang & Jones 2006; Mizelle, 2005) as cited on Salend 2008, pg. 245. From what I observed, Joe needs to be taught ways and means of how he can be more organised. During most of the lessons Joe needed prompting to fetch his textbooks and files. He was not sure which ones corresponded to the lesson which was going on in the class. For him all the books seemed the same. Also he often came to school without his homework. I soon realised that something had to be done in this regard. The LSA and the teachers should work cooperatively to implement organisation strategies. Books, copybooks and files should be colour coded according to the subject. This would enhance recognition. Also as the LSA has to assist more students he can encourage peer collaboration where other students assist Joe. Also an enlarged copy of the timetable should be glued to his desk thus making it easier for him to know what is next. Before the student leaves the class, the LSA should make sure that Joe has packed all the books needed for studying and homework. The teacher should also do his or her part. Home works should be written on the board as early as possible during the lesson and the LSA should check what he has written. The communication book is another important tool to improve organisation skills. Difficulties in Behaviour During my observations I observed that Joe has difficulties to understand social cues and to behave in a socially acceptable way in various settings. He lacks interpersonal skills

and this impairs negatively on his ability to form meaningful friendships. Unfortunately he is regarded by some of his peers and teachers as socially troubled and this impinges on his self-esteem and the self-esteem attributed to him by other students. Children commonly react to academic failure by failing in behaviour. Why? Because then all eyes are on your child's bad behaviour and not on her failure in reading and writing. She's labelled as unruly, but that's much easier for her to bear than being thought of as "dumb" (Wood, 2006, pg. 64). Often bad behaviour is masking the student's stress and he is using such behaviour to express emotions. But it is very important that the educator prompts Joe to change behaviour. People with dyslexia must also be encouraged to use their strengths to overcome their weaknesses. This will minimise bad behaviour." They have many special strengths which they should always be encouraged to develop to the full. Their intelligence and normality in every other sphere of life must be emphasised at all times, so they can fulfil their potential" (Blight, 1998, pg. 6). Joe should be supported to build meaningful friendship. This can be done by establishing classroom communities and circle of friends. By doing so we would be creating a supportive and caring community around the student and would also be promoting the idea that diversity is healthy." Such community-building group activities promote friendships and acceptance by creating a class identity that recognises the similarities and differences among students and the unique contributions of each class member" (Harriott & Martin, 2004; Obenchain & Abernathy, 2003) (as sighted in Salend, 2008, pg. 234). Difficulties in motor skills Deficits in fine motor skills, have also been identified in terms of the characteristically poor handwriting

(Benton, 1978; Miles, 1983), and copying in young children (Badian, 1984; Rudel, 1985), coupled with difficulty to tie shoe laces (Miles, 1983) as cited on Reid et al 2008, pg. 83. Although the psychological report states that "Gross motor developmental milestones featured age-appropriately", it should have mentioned the fine motor skills which as I have observed still need to improve and dysgraphia. Joe still has difficulties in cutting, drawing, and tying his shoe laces. He holds his pen too tightly and exerts heavy pressure when writing with the result that his movements are restricted. This is one reason why he finds writing so difficult and tiresome. I have also observed that spacing between words is not standard and frequently his writing looks like a whole block of text. Also he cannot keep within the lines while writing. Joe's writing floats above and cuts down through the lines and his letters are often uneven. I also had the opportunity to observe Joe's posture during the lessons. He often slouches in his chair and sits awkwardly at his desk. This continues to impinge negatively on his handwriting. It is an absolute necessity that Joe's handwriting is improved. This can be done by teaching him and providing him with opportunities to practice the continuous writing style." The most widely recommended handwriting style is called continuous cursive. Its most important feature is that each letter is formed without taking the pencil off the paper - and consequently, each word is formed in one, flowing movement" (British Dyslexia Association). Also we should ensure good posture, where the chair and desk are in the right height and the student is sitting straight with his feet flat on the ground. I would also recommend that Joe is seen by an Occupational therapist which could give him regular exercises to strengthen his fingers and hands muscles." Daily

practice is the ideal. A little and often is better than a weekly marathon session. Motor skills develop with maturation, practice and experience" (Branson, 2007, Pg. 54). Difficulties in Self-Esteem" I come to school. I see all the other friends. Who can rite and read. But me, I'm all on my own Not good at riteing. Not good at reading. I site on my bed, I cry I cry and I cry. But I boh't see why. It's so hared for me. Can't you see?" By Jodie Cosgrave, age 11. (as cited in Social and Emotional Aspects of Dyslexia by Dr. Gilda Palti, 1996). As literacy skills are so strongly emphasized in our current educational system, student like Joe often experience a great deal of failure as I had the opportunity to observe. These experiences adversely affect his self esteem. We as educators need to show him that he has both strengths and weaknesses exactly like anybody else. Praise at the appropriate times is very important to increase motivation. Educators can encourage Joe to do activities where he can experience success so he will be able to increase his self-esteem. That's why it is important for Joe to have arts, physical education and IT lessons during the week. These are the areas in which he can excel and feel satisfied about his schooling experience. With a lot of hard work and perseverance, the educators can contribute to minimise the effects of dyslexia and maximise the " I am good as anyone else" factor. Self-determination is the ultimate goal where the students use strengths to overcome weaknesses." One essential element of empowerment is self-determination" (Wehmeyer, 1993, 1994). Self-Determination is the opposite of learned helplessness. When students have control over their life, their self-esteem is boosted. Also when students are responsible for planning and decisions, people view them differently." Self-determination refers to

volitional actions that enable one to act as the primary causal agent in one's life and to maintain or improve one's quality of life" (as cited in Wehmeyer, 2007, pg. 6). Difficulties in Attention Comprehension and Memory When the teacher talks for long periods of time, Joe becomes extremely frustrated because he experiences difficulties to sustain attention and because he has weak auditory memory. The LSA adapts the notes which are taken during the lesson and highlights keywords to make it easier for him to remember them when revising. Unfortunately some teachers do carry on with the lesson even when they are fully aware that Joe and other students are not following. To add insult to injury when they use the whiteboard they write in a disorganised way and refrain from using any visuals so Joe finds it totally impossible to follow. To enhance his memory, the LSA could use a voice recorder to record the teacher's explanation. These recordings could then be used back at home to enable Joe to understand at his own pace and to follow print with auditory input. From time to time, Joe could also be asked to verbally paraphrase material taught to assess his comprehension and reinforce learning. Also repetition should be continuous. Cooperative learning, where students are assigned to teams, and they all share knowledge and skills and seek help from others, can also be beneficial." A cooperative learning format that places more responsibility on group members is the learning together approach" (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 2002) (as cited in Salend, 2008, pg. 404). Cooperative learning also avoids labelling. Another strategy which the educators can use is peer tutoring. A peer who demonstrates good comprehension skills can assist Joe in learning a new skill." In peer tutoring, one student tutor assists another in learning a

new skill. Peer tutoring increases student learning across a range of content areas and fosters positive attitudes toward school for tutors and tutees" (Heron, Villareal, Yao, Christianson, & Heron, 2006; Miller 2005) (as cited in Salend, 2008, pg. 403). Peer tutoring also increases motivation as students enjoy working together and their academic performance improves. " It also promotes a greater sense of responsibility and an improved self-concept, as well as increased academic and social skills" (Spencer, 2006) (as cited in Salend, 2008, pg. 403). Educators need to monitor while they are implementing this strategy. The teachers should aid his attention and comprehension by using visuals, writing on the board in an orderly way, using non cursive and clear calligraphy and using different colours on alternate lines so Joe can follow better. Teachers should also be made aware that as students like Joe think primarily with images and feelings the use of structured multi-sensory techniques is greatly encouraged. Multi-sensory methods increase the concentration span of students. Dyslexic children need to use structured multi-sensory methods. This means using as many senses as possible at a time to make learning easier-looking, listening, saying and doing (Dyslexia Teaching Today frequently asked questions). Students with Dyslexia can benefit tremendously from the sensitivity of the classroom teachers who implement some appropriate strategies without necessarily incurring extra burdens. " Low expectations lead to limited effort, high expectations lead to frustration, a realistic appraisal of each subject is therefore essential" (Christine Firman, 1998 as cited on the Malta Independent). The educators are responsible to provide meaningful and motivating learning and should be aware of the students' metacognition.

Also they must not overload students with excessive information. Vygotsky believed that, " teachers should play an instructive role constantly guiding and nurturing their pupils in order to improve their attention span, concentration, and learning skills, and so build up their competence (as cited on Collin et al., 2012, pg. 270).

Conclusion

During these last years there have been greater efforts to increase awareness about dyslexia. However despite all this, stigma about this condition is still rampant. Some educators are still sceptic about dyslexia and this attitude is harming students and affecting their education development and self esteem. Students with dyslexia are still being labelled as stupid and lazy. This attitude is also negatively impinging on the whole concept of inclusion as it fails to provide the appropriate environment and support for all students to learn together. Tanti Burlo', (2010) notes that " it has become more and more evident that the successful inclusion of a child with disability, and of all children at that, depends on the learning environment the children are immersed in".

Limitations of the study

For this study purpose observations at home and in the community could not be included due to serious family problems. Had I been able to observe Joe outside school, it would have given me greater insight and information and findings would have had more strength.