Research Review

Literature review of ESOL for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities

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October 2003

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Summary

The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) commissioned the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) to investigate the experiences of adult learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities as well as English language requirements, and to write a short review of the literature on this topic. This literature review aims to provide a background for the development of research on English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) and learners who are deaf or hard of hearing, blind or visually impaired, have mental health difficulties, are dyslexic, have physical disabilities, or learning difficulties. In particular it aims to identify gaps in our current knowledge in this field.

This issue has become more pertinent because there is an "...increasing pluralisation of ethnic and cultural identities within European societies." (Lyons and Stathopoulos, 2001: 62). Global conflict and unrest have led to a highly transient global population, with Britain providing refuge and a chance for a better life to many. In response to the current trends, there has been a corresponding change within educational provision, to address the specific educational requirements of this sub-population of learners.

The national **Skills for Life** strategy describes the relationship between low literacy and numeracy levels and social exclusion and poverty, and identifies the two most vulnerable populations as immigrants and disabled people with literacy and numeracy difficulties.

Breaking the Language Barriers (DfES, 2001) advocated the development of a specific adult ESOL core curriculum for English for students of other languages in order to maximise the life chances of these learners. In addition, *Freedom to Learn* (DfES, 2000) suggested that learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities may need alternative means of accessing the core curriculum documents and demonstrating achievement.

These reports resulted in the establishment of the Adult ESOL Core Curriculum, the Adult Pre-entry Curriculum Framework and Access for All, a guidance document on making the adult literacy and numeracy core curricula accessible. Yet the presence of disabled people within the refugee and asylum seeking population is, almost without exception, completely ignored within the education sphere (Roberts, 2000: 943).

Historically, there has been considerable confusion between ESOL needs and the needs of people with learning and/or other disabilities. There has been no comprehensive review of the literature in this area and limited understanding of the main gaps in research, leaving practitioners to adopt ad hoc strategies rarely supported by sound research evidence. This review contains an account and analysis of the literature, and suggestions both for the development of practice and for possible further research.

The Literature search

A range of theoretical, practical and research-based materials has been collected and reviewed. Education, social science and medical databases around the world were searched to identify existing research and sources of information on ESOL, English as an Additional Language (EAL), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), English as a Second Language (ESL) and students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities (SLDD). The resulting information was analysed for evidence of good practice, actual and potential, and gaps in the existing literature identified.

A practitioner consultation seminar was organised at the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) conference on 14 March 2003 and a further discussion took place at a DfES consultative meeting held on 1 April 2003. The NRDC conference was a rich source of material presented by researchers, while the consultative meeting included a mix of academics, practitioners and representatives from ESOL Pathfinders.

There are very few research studies, globally, which span adult literacy and numeracy, ESOL and SLDD. In the majority of cases the literature intersected two of the three categories in various ways. Consequently, in order to generate some sort of report, a 'best fit' approach was adopted, incorporating data which related to the experience of school-aged children and also the literature around health issues for migrant adults. Some of the information used within the review is anecdotal: the rationale for its inclusion was that it was provided by professionals in the field.

A summary of the findings from the main report

There is a need to understand the extent of the provision that is required by identifying the target population. However, this is impeded by the shortfall in research data available in the UK. Quantitative data is required to assess the numbers of people who need provision, while qualitative data would describe the quality of the educational experience they receive.

Our knowledge of the characteristics of immigrants (especially asylum seekers and refugees) suggests that these groups are more likely than the general population to have some sort of physical or mental disability due to the difficult conditions that they have endured. However, there is very little research evidence spanning all three of the target populations considered in this review (i.e. adults with disabilities with ESOL need). As a result, data has been included from the fields of school-based education and the literature on health-related issues for adults.

Much of the UK-based literature that has spanned the issues of literacy, ESOL and intellectual impairment has been research around school-age children who have or are suspected of having dyslexia or a reading difficulty. This was published in the 2000 special edition of the *Dyslexia Journal*. Questions must be asked about the accuracy of applying information that is child-focused to the experience of adults. However, a pragmatic approach was taken as there is so little evidence in this area. Further, targeted research is desperately needed.

Adult literacy and numeracy learners, disabled people and migrants are frequently stigmatised groups of people who are in danger of social exclusion.

The national **Skills for Life** strategy has prioritised these target groups. However, ESOL tutors may lack confidence in teaching disabled students while teachers using the Adult Pre-entry Curriculum Framework may lack the skills necessary for teaching ESOL students. Accordingly, the needs of learners in both groups may not be being met.

School-based literature has suggested that assessment of literacy and numeracy needs should be undertaken in the student's native language. At the consultative meeting, tutors who taught students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities had difficulty in assessing

ESOL students, while ESOL tutors did not know how to assess, for instance, students with dyslexia. However, there is a shortage of language interpreters and qualified ESOL staff.

Our review and consultations support the claim that research is not informing teaching practice for this population. However, the evidence is patchy and often anecdotal.

Information from school-based research and from the literature within the social welfare sphere indicates that inter-agency working for impaired immigrants is frequently reactive rather than proactive. This causes lengthy delays in service provision, where provision is available at all. The problem is particularly acute for young disabled immigrants in the 16-18 age range. In addition, these practitioners suggested that research and development of co-ordinated services in ESOL and SLDD should take place. ESOL tutors and tutors of impaired students would like to observe each other's work but this does not happen at present.

There also needs to be an investigation into the barriers to disabled ESOL students accessing information about the services and resources available to them. ESOL students already have a difficulty in accessing information due to language and literacy barriers. This problem may be compounded for people with physical, sensory or intellectual impairments or mental health difficulties. As the national *Skills for Life* strategy has adopted the proactive approach of taking education to the people, so a concerted effort has to be made to inform and persuade the target population to enrol on an appropriate educational course, since overcoming inertia was one of the aims of this strategy. ESOL practitioners identified an additional barrier for disabled immigrants, which was the potential for cultural stigma about impairment. This prevents people who need these services from attending. Issues around cultural stigma were therefore identified and highlighted as being in need of research.

Introduction

One of the key recommendations of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) report *Freedom to Learn* (2000) was that learners with learning difficulties or disabilities may need alternative means of accessing the core curriculum documents and demonstrating achievement. The Access for All guidance manual supports teachers in making the literacy and numeracy curricula accessible to learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The purpose of this literature review is to provide a background from which to undertake new research on the development of guidance for teachers using the adult ESOL core curriculum with learners who:

- are deaf or hard of hearing
- are blind or visually impaired
- have mental health difficulties
- are dyslexic
- have physical impairments
- have learning difficulties.

Historically there has been considerable confusion between ESOL needs and the needs of people with learning and other disabilities. Yet there has been no comprehensive review of the literature in this area and there continue to be significant gaps in research in this field, leaving practitioners to adopt ad hoc strategies that are rarely supported by sound research evidence.

Information from the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) conference on 20-22 March 2003 informed the material in this report, as did the DfES consultative meeting held on 1 April 2003. The NRDC conference was a rich source of material presented by researchers, while the consultative meeting included a mix of academics, practitioners and representatives from ESOL Pathfinders.

This report reviews the literature in the field of ESOL and disability, as well as making suggestions for the development of practice and for further research.

An outline of the structure of the report

The first section of the report describes the scope of the literature review, its methodology and main sources, as well as identifying the main groups to be considered and specific issues relating to these groups. The next section examines the legislative interventions and strategies that the government has put in place to support impaired immigrants and some of the gaps in provision are also highlighted. Particular consideration is given to the aims of the national *Skills for Life* strategy; the impact of dispersal policies upon specialist provision; the role of education in relation to disabled learners from diverse ethnic minority backgrounds; and strategies for teaching and learning for this particular group of people. Section 3 of the report is concerned with multi-agency working, highlighting the problems that exist, and how they might be overcome. The conclusion of the main report summarises the key points of the review and offers an overall evaluation of the literature, identifying gaps and areas for future research. Section 5 identifies points raised at a consultative meeting that took place on 1 April 2003.

Scope of the review: disabled learners and ESOL

A range of 'white' and 'grey' data was collected from a variety of sources that included educational databases, social science databases, health journals, research-led and practitioner-led seminars. It is important to emphasise that the review revealed there to be very few research studies which span adult literacy and numeracy, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) and students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Some of the information collected, for instance from consultative seminars, was valuable but none the less anecdotal rather than grounded in rigorous research. Only rarely did we find evidence of research that covered all three of the dimensions of our review.

Consequently, a 'best fit' approach was adopted in this review, incorporating data that related to the experience of school-aged children and sources focused on health issues for migrant adults. However, as a member of the audience at the NRDC conference cautioned, assumptions about similarities and differences between the learning strategies of children and adult learners, or between able bodied and disabled people, can easily lead to misconceptions when research relating to the one is generalised to the other.

Methodology and design

Research databases in the UK (BEI, IBSS), Australia (ProQuest) as well as the US and Canada (ERIC) were searched to identify existing research and sources of information on ESOL relevant to the needs of learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and their teachers and, at a general level, on second language acquisition and learners with learning difficulties and disabilities. As far as was feasible in the time available, the UK "grey literature" was included. Theoretical, practical and research-based materials were collected, as well as policy documentation. In addition, consultations took place with experts in the field, including practitioner experts.

Initially a website search was conducted to provide, in particular, an indication of the 'practice' materials that were available and circulated through this medium. Other sources consulted included the *British Education Internet Resource Catalogue*, a double special edition of the *Dyslexia Journal* (published in 2000) dealing with the specific issue of multiculturalism, bilingualism and dyslexia, and a Proquest search from 1999 to the present day on race and disability. This revealed 24 articles whereas, by contrast, a search of disability and English as a second language revealed only 4 articles. A full list of sources consulted can be found at the end of this review.

Definitions: ways of talking about disabled learners and their needs

The divisions of disability, race, gender, sexuality, age and class are complicated by the fact that they all cut across one another. Moreover, the experience of disability is often modified or exacerbated by the presence or absence of other social identities and whether they conform to or deviate from established and valued norms. The stigma of being impaired and black and/or female and/or gay interacts in varied and complex ways in shaping people's daily

experience. On an individual level, the experience can vary considerably from day to day depending on the context and it is not always possible to identify and separate the precise cause for discrimination in a particular situation. However, despite some apparent differences in the daily experience of different groups of disabled people, one critical similarity is the stigma of impairment (Vernon, 1996c).

Stigma, which has often led to a deficit construction of their experience, manifests itself in negative representations and to interventions and approaches that may pathologise and/or create dependency (Lyons and Stathopoulos, 2001: 62). Thus, those who speak other languages and who are disabled may be directed towards the disability services rather than towards language support services because professionals may start from the perspective of disability, regardless of other factors or the wishes of the learners. None the less, some practitioners at the ESOL and SLDD consultation held on 1 April were aware of this issue and acknowledged that their students gave precedence to self-identifications based on ethnicity rather than disability.

Definitions are important as they can make clear the focus of concern and the ways in which issues are understood by policy makers and practitioners. From a practical point of view, it is important for tutors to be aware of the implications of different definitions and how learners perceive these, as this knowledge can significantly reduce any awkwardness when talking to disabled students. Surprisingly, though, this review could not find any academic or practitioner articles concerned with adult education in literacy or numeracy, which discussed the implications of different ways of talking about students' physical or sensory impairments.

Many theorists have tried to establish how the various disadvantages impact upon one another, or have debated which is the greater oppression: racism, disability or class (Vernon, 1999). For instance, it has been argued that in British society disabled black people experience both institutional disablism and racism simultaneously (Vernon, 1994). They are a minority within a minority, both within the black non-disabled community and within the white disabled community, and are therefore on the margins of a margin (Begum, 1992). Thus, it has been argued that disabled black people experience `double disadvantage', that of being black in a racist and disabled in a disablist society (CIO, 1984).

Disability can also be seen as a social class issue (Priestley, 1995; Vernon, 1997a). Disabling attitudes, stereotypes and policies ensure that disabled people, more often than not, remain in a lower socio-economic group. Hence, there are important similarities as well as differences in the experience of all disabled people.

Social class is also an important determinant of experience. As class privilege increases, the effects of other penalties (stigmatised identities) are likely to decrease. Equally, the effects of other penalties may be exacerbated by lower social class positioning. For example, the importance of the socio-economic context on disabled people's lives is aptly illustrated by Morris (1991: 141) as she contrasts the situation of two people, both of whom are paralysed but whose options and lifestyles are very different. For some, their higher social class status may modify their experience of disability. Thus, class background as well as the degree and severity of impairment, ethnicity, sex, sexuality and age can exacerbate or modify the experience of disability.

Asylum seekers and refugees

The UN Population Division defines a migrant as someone outside his or her country of birth or citizenship for 12 months or more. It is estimated that the number of migrants rose 46 percent in the 1990s, from 120 million to 175 million. These migrants include refugees and asylum seekers, foreign students and other long-term visitors, unauthorized foreigners, and naturalized foreign-born citizens of Australia, Canada and the US (*Migration News*, 2003).

There are likely to be significant differences in the experiences of individuals. However, virtually all migrants will have experienced temporary or permanent loss, possibly of family members, friends, home and, by definition, country (Lyons and Stathopoulos, 2001: 61). In addition, some will have experienced physical brutality, psychological torture or the stress of discrimination and poverty. The health of many will have been adversely affected by previous living conditions or the search for refuge (Lyons and Stathopoulos, 2001: 61).

Practical needs often take precedence over psychosocial needs (Lyons and Stathopoulos, 2001), requiring knowledge of welfare rights and skills in accessing resources. The value of community work and a development approach to migrant groups has also been recognized. Hovy et al (2003) have suggested the need for a better understanding of the effects of the resettlement and migratory process itself, and have noted the need for increased appreciation of diversity and the cultural needs of particular populations.

Always recognising that "…migrants are not a homogenous group" (Lyons and Stathopoulos, 2001: 61) and the challenges the host country, educators and migrants might face, there is a desperate lack of information in this area, which must make it difficult to provide appropriate educational provision.

"There are no official figures for the number of child asylum seekers or refugees in Europe… this seems to be an area where more research and comparative statistical information would be useful" (Lyons and Stathopoulos, 2001: 60)

However, it might be reasonable to assume that refugees and asylum seekers are more likely to have some sort of impairment and literacy and numeracy needs due to:

- war – physical injuries or psychological trauma (loss of family, friends, community or country)
- torture – physical or psychological
- disrupted education (may have been limited or non-existent)
- disrupted medical systems
- lack of food and nutrients.

Policy and Provision

What is startling, when looking at these groups individually, is the overlap in the perceptions that other people have about disabled people and immigrants in relation to the support that they receive. Barnes (1991) suggests that there is a misconception that disabled people are well provided for by the state. Additionally, there is a belief that British citizens are treated worse than asylum seekers and refugees when it comes to public amenities such as housing, benefits etc. Both groups are implicitly viewed as being a drain on resources, which can generate feelings of hostility towards them. Lyons and Stathopoulos (2001) have argued for the importance of invoking empathy with immigrants' situations in order to counter hostile attitudes.

It seems that provision is more important than ever as,

"The increase in conflict and ethnic tensions around the globe suggest that the issue of migration, including of those seeking asylum, is a concern that will persist and educators would do well to increase the capacity of social professionals to address the resulting issues at a range of levels and within the wider context of host communities and public attitudes." (Lyons and Stathopoulos, 2001: 62)

Deponio et al. (2000) argue that frequently it is only when a condition has been recognised that policies and provision are put in place by local education authorities to support students. Dyslexia, for instance, has been recognised relatively recently as an impairment.

Deponio et al. (2000) also note that the current emphasis on literacy development initiatives in early years education and early intervention for children with dyslexia have attracted considerable funding. However, they have not (so far) been extended and replicated in respect of adult learners although there is now an adult dyslexia project in progress.

While US research suggests that the assessment or placement of disabled students may be influenced by their ethnic origin (Warner et al. 2002: 501), Lorenz (1998) has suggested that social work with migrants and refugees should not be seen as a distinct or separate area of work that requires specialist training.

Legislation

The 1993 Education Act provided for a Code of Practice to be established for the identification and assessment of special educational needs (DfEE, 1994; DfES, 2002). The Code follows previous legislation in this field which explicitly distinguishes between special educational needs and the needs of learners for whom English is a second language. Thus,

"Children must not be regarded as having a learning difficulty solely because the language or form of language of their home is different from the language in which they will be taught" (DfES, 2001: 6)

However, this has led to concerns that children with special educational needs may not be properly identified as needing special intervention as a direct result of their ESL needs. For instance, Deponio et al. (2000) note that the Commission for Racial Equality *Special*

Educational Needs Assessment in Strathclyde: Report of a Formal Investigation, CRE, London (1996) highlighted the significant under-representation of bilingual children among pupils assessed as having specific learning difficulties,

"… it is likely that the identification of dyslexia in bilingual pupils is a neglected area because of the often mistaken assumption that the primary difficulty is second language learning and not dyslexia." (Deponio et al. 2000: 30)

Dispersal strategies

Lyons and Stathopoulos (2001) have written about the advantages and disadvantages of dispersal strategies as opposed to specialist provision for asylum seekers. The advantage of dispersal strategies is that there is less chance of building ghetto areas, with people more likely to be integrated within the local educational system and mixing with the host population, thus promoting faster social integration. This policy also ensures that the resources of certain local education authorities are not over-stretched. However, ESOL providers have noted the impact of a dispersal policy on funding arrangements. It has been claimed that the lack of information about the numbers and basic demographics of asylum seekers arriving in their locality affects the ability of local education authorities to plan or secure appropriate budgets (Griffiths, 2003: 5).

Specialist provision

The benefit of allowing larger concentrations of specialist resources in one area is that they can meet the requirements of the migrant populations more easily and be more understanding of culturally sensitive issues. Difficulties such as a lack of interpreters are eased if specific populations are in one place, while other members of their community can provide support and information (Lyons and Stathopoulos, 2001). On the other hand,

"The pending Nationality, Immigration and Asylum bill 2002 would send the children of asylum seekers to schools located in asylum accommodation centres rather than to local schools. Many local teachers oppose the segregation of asylum children, saying that the presence of asylum children has a positive effect on local schools because they work hard and behave well, and enable local children to learn about other cultures." (*Migration News*, 2002).

This debate might be more pertinent for adult ESOL and SLDD populations.

The *Skills for Life* strategy

The **Skills for Life** strategy adopts a proactive approach to seeking out priority groups and taking newly developed strategies to the people in a variety of educational settings, working with different organisations. In order to increase standards in literacy and numeracy, the **Skills for Life** strategy aimed to develop more efficient screening and assessment tools and to develop specific curricula for priority groups.

Consequently, the ESOL core curriculum, the Adult Pre-entry curriculum and Access for All

were recently produced to engage and support these specific types of learners. The development of new learning materials, together with training on how to use them, was supported by this initiative. Importantly, professional qualifications were perceived by the strategy to be vital to increase the status of teachers (DfEE, 2001).

English for speakers of other languages

The ESOL core curriculum was designed for people who have a first language other than English and offers a framework for English language learning. It identifies those with needs in this area as belonging to the following groups:

i   Settled communities, including communities from the Asian sub-continent and Hong Kong. Some would-be learners work long and irregular hours and therefore cannot attend classes regularly.
ii   Refugees who sub-divide into:
     – asylum seekers, most of whom are very keen to learn despite the challenges of resettlement and the trauma resulting from their recent experiences
     – settled refugees, many of whom have had professional jobs in the past, though some may have suffered a disrupted education because of war and unrest.
iii Migrant workers, mostly from Europe, who are here to work and settle for most or all of their lives.
iv   Partners and spouses of learners from all parts of the world, who are settled for a number of years and need to participate in the local community but are prevented by family responsibilities or low income from attending intensive EFL courses.

"Within all these groups the needs of learners will vary considerably depending on their aspirations, educational background, language and literacy background and aptitude for learning languages." (DfES, 2001: 4)

This document acknowledges the diversity of migrants' experiences both prior and subsequent to arriving in the UK, and that educational starting points might vary drastically. Yet it is not always clear where the distinction between English and non-English speakers falls: for example, where "English-based Caribbean speakers may be on the continuum between their English-based Caribbean Language and Standard English." (Jamaica2K, http://www.jamaica2k.org.uk/)

Indeed, little significant work appears to have been published on the Caribbean language issues relating to adult education in the UK since the work produced by Roxy Harris in 1979, *Caribbean English and Adult Literacy*, published by the Adult Literacy Unit (pre ALBSU). The exceptions to this include the work of the Adult Basic Education Team and students led by Judy Craven and Frances Johnson at Manchester Central Area of Continuing Education, who published *Whose language? A teaching approach for Caribbean Heritage Students* in 1985, and the group of teachers working with ILEA Afro-Caribbean Language and Literacy Project in Further and Adult Education who published *Language and Power* in 1990. All these publications are now out of print, so there is little information available to inform and guide those working in the fields of education, health services, legal services and other areas.

Students with learning difficulties and disabilities

Some writers have noted that the educational provision for children (Thomas and Loxley, 2001) and young people (Jones et al. 2001) who have some type of impairment often neglects the issues of race and ethnicity and is even less prepared to meet the educational needs of those within this group who are ESOL students (Deponio et al. 2000). Historically, diversity within special educational provision has been neglected and rendered invisible. Indeed, Warner et al. (2002) note that official records on the ethnicity of disabled students in the US were not kept until 1998-99.

Accessing services

Literature from the health sphere suggests that lack of information on arrival is a significant issue for immigrant populations. With regard to educational provision,

"Reports by the Further Education Unit (FEU, 1994) and DfEE (2000) noted that a lack of advice and guidance about ESOL was also preventing refugees from gaining access to courses, and, in particular the right types of courses." (Griffiths, 2003: 6)

This view was corroborated by Linda Shohet, from the Centre for Literacy in Quebec, Canada, in her presentation to the NRDC conference about *What counts as Evidence in Health and Literacy?* (21 March 2003). Shohet also emphasised the disadvantages experienced by speakers of other languages who may lack the skills in English language that would allow them to advocate on their own behalf.

Lynch (2001) notes that accessing information from education systems in the country of origin might be problematic if records require translation, or might be impossible to obtain particularly in the case of refugees. Some disabled people may not have received any form of formal education within their own country, because of the cultural perception of disability or life expectancy. In addition there might be significant barriers to self-disclosure and seeking help.

Assessment

As adult education has matured and become more sophisticated, it has begun to acknowledge that learners may have 'spiky profiles'; that is, students will be stronger in some areas than others.

"...opportunities for learning tend to be obstructed where the enquirer (such as the teacher) does not question his or her own assumptions and assumes ignorance in others, whilst failing to consider whether they themselves are ignorant." (Davis and Watson, 2000: 217)

Moreover, a 1996 Home Office study in the UK found that a high proportion of those seeking refugee status were well educated and held professional qualifications, despite lacking skills in the new language sufficient to gain employment (Lyons and Stathopoulos, 2001).

There is evidence that most progress in relation to SLDD and ESOL has been made in the assessment of dyslexia in children. Yet there are still critical voices to be found here such as

that of Deponio et al. (2000), who expressed surprise about the low incidence of dyslexia identified among non-native speakers of English compared with first language English speakers. They argue that this raises questions about the appropriateness of assessment techniques for multicultural Britain. Assessments should be more culturally sensitive and measure smaller incremental steps for people such as students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who have greater challenges in communication, literacy and numeracy.

Deponio et al. (2000: 31) argue that professionals must assess whether learners are literate in their first language before testing for dyslexia can take place. They also refer to Cline and Reason (1993) who have suggested that dyslexia in children tends not to be considered as the sole cause of reading difficulties where other variables such as low socio-economic status or bilingualism can be adduced to account for poor literacy performance.

However, some assessment and support materials for adults and young people for whom English is an additional language have been produced. These include diagnostic interviews, reports and a wide range of strategies that can be used to support dyslexic bilingual learners. A British standardization of the Phonological Assessment Battery has been conducted which included children for whom English is an additional language (Deponio et al. 2000).

The most frequently used indicators that alerted schools to the possibility of dyslexia,

"...were difficulty or pronounced difficulty with reading and/or spelling, perceptual and organizational difficulties, discrepancies in performance and phonological awareness." (Deponio et al. 2000: 34)

The use of observation and informal classroom assessment suggests that teachers appreciate the complexities involved and tend to adopt a cautious approach. They might monitor the situation rather than immediately attempting to confirm dyslexia, so that there is a tendency not to reach a decision (Deponio et al. 2000).

"Observation, ongoing assessment and teacher consultation were popular strategies for monitoring. Less popular strategies were parental consultation, pupil consultation and screening tests/checklists." (Deponio et al. 2000: 34)

Testers look for phonological awareness as a sign of reading difficulties. Learners may be excellent decoders but have comprehension difficulties that are not picked up. Meanwhile, other tests (such as the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC) may not pick up poor decoding.

"The wide range of assessments used could reflect the various assessment approaches used by different authorities but could also indicate uncertainty as to exactly what the best assessment instrument may be." (Deponio et al. 2000: 37)

"Taking all the cases together, the lack of the learner's English language competence in literacy skills, the lack of provision for first language assessment and the level of staff awareness of issues relating to bilingualism and dyslexia caused the greatest levels of difficulty during the assessment process." (Deponio et al. 2000: 36)

The assessment process can be particularly protracted for ESOL learners with impairments as there are limited specialist resources in this area. Deponio et al. (2000) talk about the

difficulty of getting an assessment in the learner's first language. Moreover, ESOL tutors are reluctant to assess students they regard as having SLDD, and Access for All tutors are reticent about assessing an SLDD learner because of the language barrier.

A Scottish study of dyslexia surveyed 351 mainstream schools from nine Scottish education authorities. Findings indicated that ESOL speakers were *under-represented* within the dyslexic population. This suggests that they were less likely to be identified as having special educational needs and that difficulties in learning would be attributed to a lack of English language proficiency.

"...there appears to be a reluctance to confirm specific learning difficulties/dyslexia in bilingual pupils, as revealed by their under-representation in provision compared with monolingual native speakers of English in England. (Inner London Education Authority, 1985) and Scotland (Curnyn et al., 1991)." (Deponio et al., 2000: 31)

For adults, where commitment to early identification of dyslexia is not as pronounced, the process must be even more protracted, if it occurs at all (Deponio et al., 2000). However, there is very little information on how these issues affect those in adult education (see Sunderland et al., 1997).

Assessment and the voices of learners

Also emerging from this review of the literature, is the lack of voices coming directly from the targeted groups. There is a wealth of information around the general area of assessment and identification for school-age learners. However, this information is not replicated within adult education and the voice of neither group of learners comes through clearly. By collecting the opinions and experiences of learners about the services they receive, professionals could become more attuned to the learners' specific requirements. However, a factor that makes conventional course evaluation problematic is the high mobility of both asylum seeker and refugee groups, which can mean that the student body changes throughout the course (Griffiths, 2003: 5).

Assessment and cultural diversity

Assessment is frequently centred on Anglo-centric notions of normality that do not account for culture and context (Woodhead, 1998; Woodhead and Faulkner, 2000; Alderson, 2000; Davis and Watson, 2000). Difficulties encountered by bilingual pupils may be due to unfamiliar cultural schemata that put them at a disadvantage (Deponio, 2000). If appropriate access to the cultural context is limited, bilingual pupils' listening skills do not always develop ahead of reading skills. Therefore the development of listening skills in bilingual pupils may be suppressed and the search for a discrepancy becomes irrelevant.

It is well known that intelligence testing is regarded with some suspicion when connected with cultural diversity since critiques of its euro-centric bias have been recorded on numerous occasions. Yet Warner et al. (2002) discovered that these tests were still being used in the absence of other instruments.

The education system finds it difficult to 'process' people from different ethnic backgrounds

who might have some sort of impairment. This can be seen even during the years of compulsory education. A statistical analysis of UK figures reveals that native speakers from ethnic minority backgrounds (particularly Afro-Caribbean boys) are *over-represented* in special education provision (Thomas, 2001). The over-representation of African-American boys within the categorization of emotional difficulties (ED) is also evident in the North American literature (Coutinho et al. 2002). Yet although these groups may be seen as culturally and linguistically diverse, they are unlikely to be as diverse as immigrant populations.

The differences observed among ethnic groups emphasize the importance of describing identification rates by ethnicity. However, there is substantial evidence that the probability of being identified as having ED varies by gender as well. More than two-thirds of all students with disabilities are male (US Department of Education, 1998a). The overall ED identification rate was positively associated most strongly with the non-white and limited English proficient predictors (Continho et al. 2002: 110).

Curriculum and teaching

It has been recommended by some writers that, initially at least, assessment of learning needs should ideally occur in the native language of the learner. However, a shortage of language interpreters and qualified ESOL staff are some of the biggest barriers that migrant learners face (Griffiths, 2003). These shortfalls will impede the progress of any ESOL learner and the problem is especially magnified for people with learning difficulties.

Discussions with practitioners at the consultative meeting held on 1 April revealed that many ESOL students had traditional preconceptions about teaching and learning, and expected to be taught via the traditional knowledge transition approach, with conventional teaching materials. Resistance was frequently exhibited to what might be regarded as 'progressive' approaches to teaching and learning.

Recommendations put forward by teachers in Deponio's study (2000: 37) included classroom-based or small-group withdrawal support and continued support by the (LS) teacher in two-thirds of cases. Slightly less than half recommended support or continuing support by EAL, and around one-third recommended support by parents to reinforce class work and undertake paired reading. One-third intended to introduce an IEP, and a few indicated that an L1 assistant would support. Speech and language support, classroom assistant (L2), special exam arrangements and the use of a voluntary tutor were also mentioned.

Numeracy

There is a notable absence of literature around numeracy, disability and ESOL. Priority may be given to supporting numeracy through language acquisition, for the reason that mathematical terms need to be understood before problem solving can be undertaken. This, however, reinforces a view of mathematics as encompassing activities that are 'abstract' and primarily conceptual. By contrast, mathematical activities that adult learners can do are frequently regarded as 'common-sense' and not maths at all. This view was strongly expressed at the NRDC conference and Albert Tuijnman, during his NRDC conference presentation, proposed adapting his next international survey of literacy and numeracy to measure problem solving rather than literacy in numeracy.

Multi-agency working

There is extensive literature on multi-agency working that suggests this is often reactive rather than proactive, with lengthy delays in provision (especially for disabled people). However, a recent small-scale survey of statutory and voluntary organizations in London and the south east (Lyons, 2000) indicated how developments since the mid-nineties could counter this broader trend. This study also suggested that there was a need to develop cooperative strategies with other professionals, particularly in the health and education sectors, and for professionals to become more knowledgeable about immigration legislation, welfare benefits and other forms of financial help. A particular development has been the establishment of asylum seekers teams in a few local authority departments (Lyons and Stathopoulos, 2001: 60). This group of people possibly requires more support from multi-agency professionals.

Research by Griffiths (2003) suggests that coordination and dialogue between ESOL providers and refugee community organizations is crucial for sharing information and expertise, and for contacting some of the more 'hard-to-reach' communities. Many authorities recognize, for instance, that dyslexia assessment is a team responsibility for which the learning support teacher rather than the educational psychologist may well play the lead role (Deponio et al. 2000). However, although collaboration between LS and EAL staff seems to be the norm, there may be a lack of appreciation that in some cases bilingual pupils have multiple needs and therefore require support from a number of agencies. One school reported, "We have access to agencies and current assessment material but coordination of these seems to be missing." (Deponio et al. 2000: 39).

Studies suggest that teachers and learning support assistants collaborate in a reactive rather than a proactive way (Deponio et al. 2000). It should also be pointed out that professionals can pass on (negative) preconceptions that the target group might find particularly difficult to challenge. Davis and Watson (2000) talk about the potential for professionals to assume incompetence based on prior and unfounded preconceptions of a pupil's ability, and attempts to pass this assumption on to another person. They explain that this is because the teacher may fail to be reflexive and may also not build an ongoing dialogue with the person. This could have serious repercussions for the service user, compounding the barriers and difficulties that the individual has to overcome.

Staff development

There is an identified need for training on cultural sensitivity and for greater sensitivity with the use of interpreters. Providers in a study by Griffiths (2003), reported that ESOL teachers required training in the specific difficulties facing refugees. They also suggested that ESOL teachers needed additional support networks because they often act as personal advisors or confidants to refugees and asylum seekers.

It should be noted at this point that, due to the recent development of the Access for All and ESOL curricula, there is very little information about them, nor has there been any evaluation of the training of staff. None the less, the national **Skills for Life** strategy expressed a commitment to staff training in order to increase professional skills and status.

Material does exist on the importance of staff training and the challenges that tutors in adult

literacy and numeracy education face. These mainly relate to increased accountability (Skinner et al. 2000), higher expectations of their performance, and keeping pace with ICT developments (King, 1999). All of these must be supported by continuous staff developments if these expectations are to be met realistically without jeopardising the retention rate of staff. Failure to provide adequate training may reduce the effectiveness of the new curricula and the quality of teaching.

The almost exclusive focus of the literature in this area has been on the benefits of staff training, rather than the delivery of that training and how it could be carried out effectively. However, King (1999) noted that the preference of tutors was for practically-based formats, such as hands-on classroom assignments and lab experiences.

One new area which is emerging from the literature about staff working with traditionally disempowered groups, such as (ALN) learners (Armour, 1998), students with learning difficulties (Sutcliffe, 1994), children (Davis and Watson, 2000) and immigrant populations (Lyons and Stathopoulos, 2001), is the need for critical reflection by the professionals about the people they work with. This is because practitioners are constantly being presented with negative representations of these disempowered groups, as having needs and problems (Armour, 1998; Lyons and Stathopoulos, 2001). Sutcliffe (1994: 16) gives a good example of how staff development could actually exacerbate the problem,

"We have found that on their own, separate severe learning difficulties (tutor) training courses can reinforce prejudices such as 'But my students are different', 'Spelling is not relevant to severe learning difficulties students', etc."

Staff development that challenges rather than reinforces prejudicial attitudes has to be implemented. This might involve periodically giving tutors the time to question pervasive, negative assumptions made about a particular group and to re-evaluate and reposition their perceptions.

Writing about school-age pupils, Davis and Watson (2000) warn against making hasty judgements about the competencies of disabled students, while emphasising the importance of professional reflexivity, of maintaining an open mind, and of establishing channels of communication. Similarly when writing about immigrants, Lyons and Stathopoulos provide guidelines about the role of the social professional in relation to often stigmatised groups of people which,

"...should encompass the ability to critically examine the facts as presented, and to understand the contextual issues which impact on the lives of individuals and groups ..." (2001: 62)

However, Lyons and Stathopoulos venture that this attitude should be carried still further, and implemented at the point of interaction with the student.

"... empowerment strategies (rather than approaches which pathologize or create dependency) need to be stressed." (Lyons and Stathopoulos, 2001: 62)

Conclusion

There is an "...increasing pluralisation of ethnic and cultural identities within European societies" (Lyons and Stathopoulos, 2001: 62) which needs to be addressed within our education system. Furthermore, because of the difficult conditions that individuals may have endured, they are more likely to have some sort of impairment that needs consideration. Yet there is very little research evidence that spans all three groups that are of interest here (ESOL students, disabled students and adult learners). Most of the material has been drawn from the experiences of school-aged children and the literature on health-related issues.

Much of the UK-based literature has been focused on school-age children who have or are suspected of having dyslexia. However, there are also questions to be asked about the relevance of applying inferences from this narrow research base to the experiences of adult, disabled ESOL learners. Further research may support or question these educated guesses. What is certain is that it is an area that is desperately in need of attention. However, it is hoped that this review might inform further research.

The literature does suggest that those adults with literacy and numeracy difficulties who are both disabled and migrants are likely to be stigmatised in many ways, being seen as a problem group who are defective, and less likely to participate in society or benefit from education. The response of the national **Skills for Life** strategy has been more positive: it has prioritised the needs of these discrete groups and developed the Adult ESOL Core Curriculum and the Adult Pre-entry Curriculum Framework for the SLDD population. However, the curricula appear to be mutually exclusive and ESOL students with LDD can easily fall between types of provision. ESOL tutors may lack confidence about teaching impaired students, while teachers using the Adult Pre-entry Curriculum Framework may lack the specialist skills necessary to teach ESOL students with disabilities. Although there is no research to substantiate the claim, logical reasoning leads to the conclusion that the students who fall in the gap are less likely to reach their full potential.

There is a need to understand the extent to which provision is required and therefore to gain a much clearer understanding of the target population and its needs. Yet this is impeded by the shortfall in research data available in the UK. Quantitative data is required to assess the numbers of people who need provision, while qualitative data would describe the quality of the educational experience they receive. It is reasonable to conclude that, at present, research does not inform teaching practice in respect of these learners. There is a need for much more than the anecdotal evidence about teaching and learning around which practice is currently formulated. ESOL tutors want to know how to teach disabled students, while teachers using the Adult Pre-entry Curriculum Framework want to know how to proceed with ESOL students.

A shortage of language interpreters and qualified ESOL staff has been identified in existing studies but more research is needed to establish future requirements. Research is also needed into the benefits of assessing students in their native languages and of instruction in literacy and numeracy being supported by tutors who share the first languages of these learners. At the consultative meeting, teachers using the Adult Pre-entry Curriculum Framework were very concerned about the difficulties they experienced in assessing ESOL students, while ESOL tutors were similarly concerned about their lack of skills and training in assessing students with disabilities and/or learning difficulties.

There also seem to be constraints impeding inter-agency working in this area, and some anecdotal evidence of professionals guarding their knowledge, which may be a way of maintaining resources (communication from the consultative meeting held on 1 April 2003). In addition, practitioners we have spoken to in our consultations have made clear their views that research should be undertaken on the best ways of developing coordinated services in ESOL and SLDD. ESOL tutors or tutors of impaired students would like to see how each other's services work and how learning can be shared more effectively.

Finally, we would recommend that an investigation should take place into ways of addressing the significant barriers for ESOL students with disabilities in accessing information about the services and resources available to them. There is a concern voiced by ESOL practitioners that cultural stigma around impairment might prevent people who need the services from accessing information. Their families or communities will have different ideas about the level of educational achievement that they could and should aspire to. Issues around cultural stigma were identified as being in great need of research.

Moving forward... The LLLU consultative meeting, 2003

Listed below is a summary of the valuable contributions made by the participants at the consultative meeting hosted by the London Language and Literacy Unit (LLLU) on behalf of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) on 1 April 2003.

Members of the meeting highlighted that:

- there should be more research from the service user's perspective
- research is needed to identify areas of good practice as a starting point but, based on those findings, further development on how to improve practice is necessary
- external definitions of students with learning difficulty and/or disability were imposed on ethnic minority learners, whilst this group identified themselves more with their specific ethnic culture than as disabled people
- there are particular gaps in our understanding of the needs of students who have mental health difficulties, especially in relation to asylum seekers and refugees
- clear guidance would be helpful on whether the progression or retention of learners should be focused upon
- there is a tension between providing structured learning and meeting the learner's demands for immediate, survival skills tuition
- a clearer distinction would be helpful between language learning difficulty and learning difficulties
- there is a desperate need for data on learner characteristics
- it was important to provide ESOL tutors with information on different learning styles developed to help students with specific educational requirements
- there was a need for staff development in respect of teaching styles appropriate to help dyslexic ESOL learners
- evidence is needed relating to the cultural and linguistic features affecting assessment
- there was value in training people from the communities to work with ESOL professionals

■ assessment is difficult where no significant prior education has taken place and specialist support is important in these cases

■ there was a need for greater knowledge on the part of ESOL tutors of SLDD resources that they can access.

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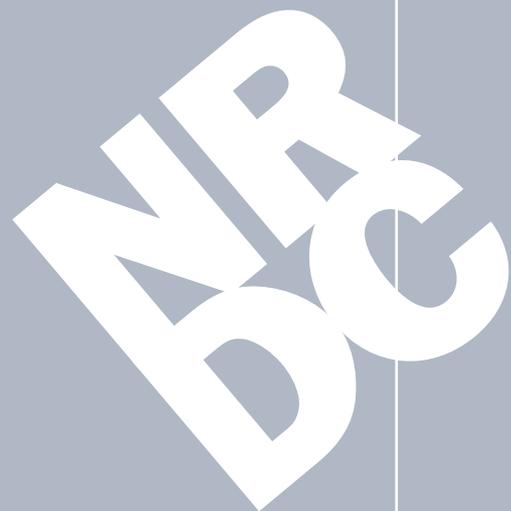
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