

Cross Party Group on Dyslexia (Scottish Parliament) response to the Education Scotland report 'Making sense: Education for Children and Young People with dyslexia in Scotland' (May 2014)

Introduction

The Cross Party Group on Dyslexia (CPG) welcomes the publication of the report as it reflects many of the issues and concerns that have been regularly raised at meetings of the cross party group.

The CPG discussed the report at its meeting in the Scottish Parliament on Wednesday 21st May 2014 and agreed that a response should be submitted reflecting the discussion and seeking further information and clarification regarding aspects of the data gathering process.

The overall view of the CPG was that the report's conclusions reflected an accurate but frustrating picture of the inconsistency of policies and practices across and within local authorities and that the recommendations were helpful and, if actioned and resourced, would make a significant difference to the lives of children and young people with dyslexia and their families.

The following issues were raised during discussions:

- The report refers to the Scottish Government Cross Party Group on Dyslexia. It is the Scottish Parliament Cross Party Group on Dyslexia.
- The report repeatedly describes progress in terms of 'meeting the additional support needs of children and young people, including dyslexia.' It was acknowledged that there has been significant developments in terms of overall additional support needs and, since the 2008 report, in terms of dyslexia at a national level, but there is little evidence of the same degree of progress in relation to dyslexia at a local level. The report paints a very disappointing and worrying picture of the inconsistencies across and within local authorities resulting in virtually a 'school post-code lottery' in terms of attitudes, policies and practices. It appears that many of the areas for development included in the 2008 report have simply not been addressed by a significant number of local authorities.

- The Group were interested in how data was collected to inform the report and would welcome clarification on the following:
 - a. With reference to information from school inspections during the period (Easter – October 2013), what specific questions and measures were taken to enable information about dyslexia to be gathered over and above the normal information gathered relating to additional support needs? If this was simply part of the standard inspection process, how did inspectors ensure the views of dyslexic children and young people were represented?
 - b. How many parent's focus groups took place and how were the parents identified?
 - c. How many 'Focused visits' took place, in what areas and how many pupils were involved?

- The report (Page 62) identified North Lanarkshire Council as having the lowest recorded levels of dyslexic pupils in Scotland yet it is quoted in the report giving the impression of good practice (Page 10). This is concerning as in previous Parliamentary debates on dyslexia the situation in North Lanarkshire Council has been raised by members of the Scottish Parliament and at a meeting of the CPG in June 2013, to discuss the scope of the review (attended by Ken McAra) a specific request was made by a young person from the area that the review should consider the Council's practices. The CPG could not understand why, given prior knowledge and information, this example was used as it potentially detracted from the credibility of the report.

- The report fails to include or reflect the views of an important stakeholder – young people. The CPG felt this was a flaw in the report given the Scottish Government's own commitment to engaging and empowering young people and involving them in their own learning, central themes in the Curriculum for Excellence.

The report includes the views of parents and carers and notes suggestions on ways in which the system could be improved. It fails to acknowledge that young people have a voice or include suggestions for

improvements from their perspective. It would have been helpful to have had a synopsis of the views of young people expressed, for example through the focus groups.

We strongly suggest that young people with dyslexia are included in the co-design and co-production of actions in response to the report.

- The report rightly places a focus on links to literacies. It does, however, only include a small reference to non-literacy impacts of dyslexia such as health, behaviours and well-being. This is dis-proportionate because of the significant affect dyslexia has on daily life, on self-esteem, mental health, on ambition and aspirations and on behaviours resulting from frustration, lack of reasonable adjustments etc. The importance of this was highlighted at the launch by pupils at Kyle Academy when they clearly stated that although reading and writing were issues and important, 'emotional impact' had the biggest impact on young people with dyslexia.

In responding to the report, the CPG suggests that a whole person approach is taken and not simply a response in terms of literacy. We support the Scottish Government's current work exploring the concepts of 'dyslexia friendly authorities' and 'dyslexic friendly schools'.

Specific Comments

Inconsistencies across and within local authorities

The CPG was not surprised at the conclusions regarding inconsistencies of policies and practices across and within local authorities. This has been an issue raised on many occasions. The group recognises that addressing these inconsistencies falls, in the main, under the responsibility of individual local authorities.

This strikes at the heart of the matter. Local authority policies and practices on dyslexia appear to discriminate against children and young people and may, in

some cases be in breach of a number of articles under the rights of the child legislation.

We are aware that the Cabinet Secretary has in the past written to local authorities encouraging them to promote and adopt the agreed definition of dyslexia and to promote the use of the Toolkit.

The findings of this report paint a very disturbing picture showing the extent to which that these requests have been ignored resulting with practices in some areas which may be preventing teachers from accessing quality resources and knowledge and denying children and young people appropriate learning methodologies and support.

The CPG consider this situation unacceptable and asks the Scottish Government to consider further actions to ensure consistency across and within local authorities.

Agreement of a definition

The fact that some local authorities are still trying to agree a definition of dyslexia is unacceptable. We believe this situation is resulting in young people being denied access to appropriate resources and support including assistance with examinations.

The report's conclusions state that 'there is evidence that local authorities and practitioners have moved closer to a shared understanding of what dyslexia is'. Given the initial report was published in 2008 and a definition was agreed in 2009, we ask the Scottish Government to seek clarification from these specific local authorities to identify the issues which are preventing the adoption of the agreed definition and take steps to resolve them. There is a clear role for the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (CoSLA) to raise this matter with local authorities and to work with Dyslexia Scotland and others to address this issue at a national level.

Use of the Addressing Dyslexia Toolkit

Despite significant efforts by the Scottish Government, the Toolkit Working Group and Dyslexia Scotland, the report states that 24% of primary schools are

unaware of the existence of the toolkit. The CPG considered this to be unacceptable and asks the Scottish Government to seek clarification from local authorities as to why this is the case.

Information about dyslexia

It is of concern that some local authorities appear to be failing to meet their statutory requirements in relation to the Additional Support for Learning Act in terms of available information on dyslexia and the requirement to involve pupils and parents or take account of their views. The availability of meaningful information is vital and should not only include information on education aspects such as literacy but provide a wider perspective in terms of support for emotional wellbeing and how dyslexia impacts on daily living.

The CPG asks that the Scottish Government works with Dyslexia Scotland to consider how best to improve the information available for teachers, parents and children and young people.

Identification of dyslexia

The findings of the report relating to the levels of young people being identified at secondary schools compared to primary school gives rise to concerns. Children in primary school may be being denied appropriate support with a negative impact on self-esteem, self-confidence and frustration during those primary school years which can have a life-long impact.

The report highlights the relationship between schools and parents and the 'journey' when parents engage with the school about concerns. We know from many examples of parents having a negative experience leading to confrontation and aggressive meetings. The report, in the section 'Parents and carers views', uses the term 'ongoing discussions' to describe the meetings between parents and sometimes senior management. This does not adequately describe or reflect the nature of these discussions and the frustration and anger felt by many parents because of the inconsistency of attitudes and practices of the school. The example in the report of two schools a few miles apart having completely differing attitudes and responses is one recognised by many parents.

This section also states ‘eventually, most parents and carers realised that an assessment of some sort would be helpful in meeting the needs of their child appropriately.’ In many instances it is the parents who know very early that something is wrong but they feel they have to fight with the school to convince them that an assessment is essential, not just helpful.

The example in the report of action being taken by a school only after parents had to pay for an independent assessment which confirmed what they had been saying to the school but which the school had rejected is totally unacceptable and raises the following issues:

- It potentially raises issues under the Equalities Act in terms of financial discrimination and the ability of parents to pay for assessments.
- The inconsistency in many areas around the acceptance of independent assessments. Dyslexia is a registered disability and therefore should a local authority reject a request for an assessment or not recognise an independent assessment which a neighbouring authority would recognise and which later (possibly years later in secondary school) proves that the child is dyslexic, would that local authority be subject to legal challenge?
- It can also be very intimidating for parents (many of whom may themselves be dyslexic with negative memories of school) to articulate concerns when they are faced by a panel of professionals. In many cases they do not have the confidence and knowledge to challenge the attitude and practices in the school. There needs to be better management of these meetings to make them mutually beneficial.
- The statistics on identification levels within schools (Page 62) clearly show that the current methodology to gather data is flawed and requires urgent action. These figures do not reflect the reality of the situation and if used by local authorities to determine the allocation of resources based on identified need, children and young people may be being denied support which would help them reach their potential.

Teacher Training

The CPG supports the recommendations in terms of both initial teacher training and In-service training including opportunities for Scottish accredited qualifications. The report highlights that there has been a significant increase in training about dyslexia at the initial training stage including knowledge of the Addressing Dyslexia Toolkit. The value of this investment in training is potentially undermined however if, for example a student either goes out on placement, probation or secures a post in one of 24% of primary schools in Scotland which, according to the report, is not aware of the Toolkit. The ability of that teacher to use the knowledge and skills gained from the Toolkit may be restricted because of the views in the school towards dyslexia, potentially denying children and young people appropriate learning materials and denying the teacher the opportunity to put theory into practice.

We fully support the recommendation that Dyslexia Scotland and others to develop a comprehensive dyslexia professional learning package which can be used by local authorities to increase the capacity of teachers to meet learning needs, specifically dyslexia. As with the definition and the existing toolkit, it is not the promotion or adoption of the resource that is the issue, it is the uptake of these opportunities in terms of accessibility and affordability by local authorities.

Qualification achieved and post-school destinations

The CPG was alarmed at the statistics within the report about differences in achievement and post school destinations. It is critical that appropriate support is available to young people particularly in relation to examinations to ensure they have the best chance to reach their potential. There appears to be wide inconsistencies even within authorities as to the ability of young people to access examination support and the CPG requests that this should be an issue which is addressed as a matter of urgency.

Conclusions

The Cross Party Group on Dyslexia has four priority themes:

The impact of dyslexia on:

- education and learning
- health (particularly mental health)
- behaviours
- employment and training

The CPG suggests that the Scottish Government and Education Scotland ensures that the actions from the review reflect the wider impact of dyslexia as described above and not only focus on literacies.

The report offers significant opportunities to improve the outcomes for children and young people with dyslexia beyond educational outcomes in terms of quality of life and well-being.

The main challenge will be to influence and resource local authorities to make the changes necessary to bring consistency to the attitudes and support available to children and young people with dyslexia and their families.

The CPG invites the Cabinet Secretary for Education to a future meeting of the CPG to discuss the Scottish Government's response and to explore how it can contribute to addressing the issues and opportunities highlighted within the review.

David Jones
Secretary

Cross Party Group on Dyslexia.