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I have set myself the brief of considering firstly, some of the barriers to learning which can impact learning to read, particularly at the early stages, and secondly, some of the ways in which policy (particularly government policies) could support teachers in the teaching of reading.

Barriers to learning

The learning process is complex. But learning to read is made more challenging because it is not a natural learning process. It is essentially a taught process, unlike learning to walk, talk and figure things out. For the child it is a risky business. To teach a child to read whilst maintaining his/her self confidence and motivation to learn is a high but also a worthwhile ideal. This means that barriers to learning a child already has are both recognised and addressed whilst ensuring that new barriers are not placed in his/her way.

When the child begins formal schooling, "bushy-tailed and bright-eyed", as we hope, he/she comes with an underlying optimism. It is society's responsibility to ensure that the aforementioned barriers do not deter him/her, just as we would do for a child with physical or sensory impairments.

In this, the early years teachers in particular have a sizeable challenge facing them since:

1. The child's needs may not have already have been identified (especially now with cut-backs in pre-school Education Authority provision)
2. The child's needs may not be immediately evident
3. Maturation may still be the issue
4. The cause of a presenting problem may require specialist assessments which may not be readily available (for example, speech and language therapy or physiotherapy)
5. Information (such as a Record of Transfer from a pre-school setting) may not be forthcoming from parents
6. A teacher must have the knowledge to make informed judgements about what actions he/she must take to ensure the barriers have been accurately identified
7. Observations must be made and reflected upon in order for these to be translated into practical classroom interventions

8. These interventions need to then be evaluated, reviewed and modified as necessary
9. Adults supporting the child must all be aware of both the need and the planned interventions, and be able to contribute to the review process

All this requires from the teacher, time, knowledge, and confidence in the strategies selected.

All children have innate strengths and weaknesses in learning. The impact these have on the process of learning is, however, variable. Personality, learning style dispositions (e.g. visual, auditory, kinaesthetic), cognitive skills, and innate social confidence will all impact a child's ability to learn. These innate traits have been fixed at conception. However, effects upon the foetus (e.g. the ill-effects of maternal substance abuse) and effects at birth (e.g. a premature birth) can impact the innate learning ability.

Home circumstances will impact a child's development. This is particularly true in the case of emotional experiences, including the quality of both key (primary carer) attachments and family dynamics. A child's social experiences and learning opportunities, at home and in pre-school settings will impact learning in school. A child's relationship with authority will have been shaped in the home and impacted by other experiences.

Language and communication skills will have been impacted by pre-school experiences, at home and elsewhere. A child generally has an innate motivation to acquire a first language, since it enables communication. Communication begins non-verbally, with smiles, gurgles, grasping a finger, offering a toy, progressing to increasingly sustained interaction, with sound making and experimenting, and the adoption of increasingly refined and consistent sound and word utterances. Communication involves acting within the world, upon the world, and with the intention of eliciting a response from the world. The desire to communicate is almost universal.

There are a number of circumstances in which this communication process can be hampered in its early development. A child with language difficulties , such as articulation, or a specific language disorder (affecting articulation, syntax-development, understanding of concepts and vocabulary, phonological awareness and auditory memory) is already likely to be experiencing frustration in the process of communication. For a child with specific language difficulties learning to read is likely to be affected, although, interestingly, there are schemes which employ reading to help develop an understanding of syntax. A child with social language difficulties (including autism) may not see the purpose of communicating (or reading) because it will often not fulfil any need or interest. A child who is slow to process experience, in this case the world of spoken language, and generalise from it, is very likely

not only to have a more limited vocabulary and syntax but may have difficulties with phonological awareness, which is needed for "phonics teaching" to be effective. A child who has a short attention span, whether because of personality, Attention Deficit Disorder, hyperactivity, cognitive ability or up-bringing is likely to have listening problems, affecting language development, as well as having a tendency to use language more predominantly to achieve his/her own desired outcome than for a wider range of purposes (such as reflecting and predicting). Such a child is likely to require short focussed periods of teaching with little distraction, including the social distraction of other children. A child whose personality is innately timid or who is reluctant to take risks socially (whether with peers or adults) is likely to be less socially adept and therefore less able to participate freely in informal interaction, including shared reading time.

All of these difficulties, already impacting language development, will be likely to require teaching interventions which are differentiated by need. In some cases "remediation" may be possible, through compensatory strategies, but in other cases the child will require sustained additional or differentiated support. Finally, it must be noted that a child may have almost any combination of the above needs, and/or one or more of these needs in combination with other barriers to learning such as dyspraxia or dyslexia.

Finally, the language of the school may be the child's second language, which is likely to mean he/she has varying degrees of knowledge (of pronunciation, vocabulary or syntax) of that language. It can be hard moreover for the teacher to ascertain whether such a child has any other barriers to learning.

If a child has sensory impairments these should have been identified before school entry, by health professionals. The teacher's task will probably focus on adapting the environment for the child, using augmentative equipment, adapting teaching materials, and in some cases teaching other children how to support that child. Some of these children will have statements of special need which will include the provision of support from an additional adult with whom the teacher will liaise. In addition, it is worth noting that a child can experience temporary hearing loss or fluctuating hearing loss during or after an ear/nose/throat infection which is likely to affect auditory discrimination as well as listening.

Emotional issues may impact the child's confidence in taking the risks involved in learning to read. Social issues, of any variety, may affect disposition, determination and the level of regular independent reading outside of school. Behaviour issues may make sustaining attention difficult, either because these are coupled with underlying emotional issues or because there is a lack of willingness to concentrate, particularly in a class or group environment. A differentiated approach may be necessary over and above normal class behaviour management. This will impact the methods used to teach the child to read.

Physical needs may not seem to be a barrier to learning to read, but there may be related emotional needs requiring recognition, adjustments necessary in terms of the suitability of furniture or equipment and social integration issues which affect teaching approaches.

Dyspraxia is a difficulty which can go un-noted, although it is likely to manifest itself in poor balance and coordination. It is a developmental disorder, which can affect short-term memory, attention-control, and directionality, all attributes required in reading. Dyspraxia can also make sitting still very difficult, which can be a handicap during whole class teaching time, particularly during "carpet" teaching where the child can be readily distracted by the proximity of other children or have involuntary movements (i.e. appear to be "fidgeting") in an attempt to remain still. Children who have dyspraxia benefit from physical programmes designed by physiotherapists but referrals may take time.

In addition, it is worth noting that tiredness significantly affects a child's ability to learn.

Cognitive levels can be regarded as an underlying aspect of a child's ability to learn, but it is nonetheless possible, and socially important to develop the potential which exists. A child with cognitive learning difficulties is likely to require small-step teaching, repetition and a slower pace of teaching to take account of slower processing than the child within the average to above average range of cognitive ability. The child with cognitive learning difficulties is likely to be delayed in understanding abstract concepts, which may affect reading, and may have difficulties with phonological awareness and auditory memory making a phonic word-building approach to reading difficult without adequate non-phonic, more visual, approaches being in place first.

A child with a specific learning difficulty has one or more specific difficulties, but has at least average underlying cognitive ability. The child's ability to perceive, discriminate and/or process visual or auditory input is adversely affected, as is either/both short-term visual or auditory memory. A child with dyslexia, as it is commonly referred to, will find reading more difficult than would be expected from his/her understanding of the world. It is always useful if the teacher is aware of the particular difficulties a child has, so that these can be supported by the child's comparative strengths. Computer programmes exist to help identify the specific difficulty. It is important to note that a child with visual perceptual difficulties is likely to continue to experience these unless referred to a specialist. Visual perception, if left undetected can seriously affect a child's ability to read.

Learning to Read- the Big Discovery, Not the Road to Despair

Children are confronted with text. It is like a complicated code, and codes are for deciphering. Children can be very excited initially by the fact that they are going to discover how that code works. Even children who are going to encounter barriers, apart from emotional issues, start out optimistically. But to maintain that optimism and confidence every child must experience success. As we have seen, though, it is difficult in the case of a child who has already lost a lot of confidence, for whatever reason, before he/she has come into school, because inevitably taking on the challenge of learning to read involves taking risks. What matters now, in the classroom is that no child gets left behind on the journey of discovery. Some can travel more slowly, some are encouraged to travel more carefully, some can race ahead, but none should feel they have failed to keep up, or failed to understand what they have been told, and therefore become too demoralised to take reading, or themselves as new readers, seriously. The code needs to unravel for each child at a rate and in a way that he/she can experience success, in order to be willing to take the risk again tomorrow.

Maintaining motivation and determination to succeed is key in teaching children to read. Failure breeds disappointment and eventually disillusionment. Not only is teaching children something they cannot yet understand or translate into practice a waste of time, it is also counterproductive in terms of a child's attitude both to him/herself and to the cause of his/her discomfort, that is to say, in this case, deciphering the code.

Barriers which can be overcome

If a child enters school with limited experience of print then he/she will require activities deliberately designed to ensure that the "concepts of print" are established as soon as possible. These may include:

- Conventions of print in English-the front and back of a book, top to bottom and left to right of print on the page
- Tracking lines of print with the eyes and moving the eye successfully between words, between lines of print and from illustration back to a word
- Understanding that print, unlike speech, is a formalized system of communication, which needs to be decoded by a reader if it is to be understood
- Understanding that print is a means of communication and that it can be used by the child him/herself to communicate
- Understanding that words are symbols, as are the letters within them and that the pictures can be used to support the code-breaking

- Recognising that pictures support the story line (and can help with predicting the action, for example) but may not help with decoding the single word
- Appreciating that print has meaning and can be enjoyed

A child must also have developed phonological skill before he/she can successfully access the teaching of "phonics", that is to say, the interrelationship between a symbol (grapheme) and its phonemic counterpart (phoneme, or sound). Rhyme, rhythm and repetition all contribute to the early stages of phonological awareness, and the more securely aware a child is that letters can be manipulated, through structured experimentation the more confidently he/she will approach the phonic components of words. "Synthesising" orally from an auditory input is a discreet skill, which must be mastered either before or alongside the introduction of phoneme-grapheme correspondence. Children with specific barriers (such as a limited short-term auditory memory or weak auditory discrimination) will require reinforcement or additional scaffolding to progress through this process. They are likely to benefit from a greater emphasis on the use of a "sight vocabulary"

It is easy to overload a child's memory system. When a child reads any book, he/she may have to resort to "sounding out" perhaps the first three letters of a word but the process of "synthesising" these must take place as quickly as possible, so that he/she can still mentally access contextual cues (the story so far) and syntactic cues (where the word occurs in the sentence) to support successful decoding. To decode, even when later he/she is able to break words into syllables, requires a temporary suspension of meaning if it is not to over-stretch the memory capacity. This is one reason why teachers encourage children to go back and reread a sentence for meaning when they have "struggled" with a word and have had to resort to de-coding the letters.

It is important for a child to know that it is okay to "struggle" with a word if it results in contributing successfully to understanding the meaning of the text. Unfortunately, "struggling" is often frowned upon by parents and other adults and this attitude can spill over onto the child's thinking. But it is important to have a systematic approach, in which decoding is the final stand.

Reading is a skill which many people see as an "acquisition", and learning to read as a process towards that acquisition, rather than as an adventure which it is beholden upon adults to see as worthwhile for the child, rather than for society, and international and government-led national league tables. Adult attitudes quickly rub off on the "bushy-tailed" learner I referred to earlier, who brings home his/her reading book to read. The role of books as a source of shared pleasure is pushed sideways as the "skill" of reading begins to take centre stage. We do children a disservice when we sabotage the desire to read

(whatever the strength of that desire) with our anxiety that they learn to read "properly" as soon as possible.

This view can be reinforced negatively by some uses of "reading schemes" when the (possibly unspoken) message received by the child can be that he/she is not a "real" reader until he/she comes "off" the scheme in use. Furthermore a diet in which "reading-books" predominate, without sufficient sustained imaginative nourishment from children's books can be likened to a diet of pre-prepared packaged food. It can, at least, become monotonous. It can also affect interest in other texts. Moreover, it can put strain upon a child's interest in reading when he/she knows full well that he/she cannot "move on" to another book until the current one has been mastered. Reading schemes can also make children aware of which "strata" in the class they are being fitted into, with its ensuing loss of confidence and thus, motivation.

Other barriers to learning to read

The potential barriers mentioned above can be addressed by curriculum planning and teaching style. There are issues of the physical environment however, which can only be addressed by decision-makers operating outside that remit. The child's physical well-being in the class has an additional impact on all learning. The physical environment can have an adverse effect on a child's ability to concentrate. It can also in some cases, adversely affect his/her ability to see or hear clearly. Attention should be given to:

- Lighting
- Light reflection on computer monitors and whiteboards
- Sound insulation
- Heating and ventilation
- Access to drinking water
- Sufficient space to allow for some movement whilst learning
- Seating which is rigid and provides postural support, and is of the correct height for the child's feet to reach the floor
- Tables of the correct height for the child
- Ready access to sloping writing and reading surfaces, to ensure the correct angle is achievable between the child's body and working surface. Being hunched over a table or slouching during periods of learning, both positions associated with the child trying to find the best physical position in which to concentrate are both undesirable not only physically but also in terms of sustaining attention.

Implications for policy makers and budget holders

1. The implementation of fully funded in-service training so that all teachers are enabled to make sound judgements about the barriers to learning encountered in an inclusive class.
2. Ensuring all teaching assistants have basic training in how children learn, including learning to read, as a matter of course
3. Less emphasis on offering prescriptive "fix-it" solutions to the "problem" of literacy, and greater emphasis upon recognising the significance and impact of teachers supporting the differentiation of the curriculum to take account of the range of barriers they are presented with in the inclusive class
4. The recognition that early years teachers in particular require time to assess children's needs, and plan and implement differentiation, including liaison time.
5. A Review of support received from outside agencies, especially speech and language therapy, particularly in relation to levels of provision for school age children nationwide, with recommendations or statutory guidance to health authorities
6. A Review of the current provision of Early Year SEN advisory teaching posts nationwide with statutory guidance to local authorities
7. A consideration given to establishing a new, more equitable, distribution of government funding between secondary and primary schools to allow greater funding at the foundational stages of learning. Also, consideration given to a shift from the current levels of funding for additional support services for students in higher education towards young children with similar barriers to learning might provide a more equitable and appropriate access to public funding
8. Encouraging public recognition of the complexity of the process of learning to read for many children, and the complexity of teaching in this context
9. A realistic view to be taken by policy makers, of the changing make up of the school population, as an increasing number of children enter schools with barriers to learning, some of which have been mentioned here
10. Despite decades of debate and many shelves full of academic research there is still no agreed single approach which is effective in teaching all children to read, and to imply that one exists is disingenuous
11. The ergonomics of the classroom environment should receive the same attention as the work place
12. More attention should be given to visual perceptual difficulties, including the use of appropriate colour contrast and font in technology as well as printed text, but in the case of specific visual perceptual difficulties which can present as dyslexia, access to behavioural optometrists should be made available.