Exploring children's difficulties with language and literacy *Tackling dyslexia*

Narr:

Sir Jim Rose is a consultant to the government on nursery and primary education, and produced a report into the primary curriculum. He has reviewed the evidence and made recommendations on the identification and teaching of children with dyslexia.

Sir Jim Rose:

I think all the evidence is pointing to as it were dyslexia as a continuum and for some children living with dyslexia is probably the best we can manage. That's not to say that they can't be helped to read, write and so forth, but I don't think it's one of these situations where there's a cure, a magic bullet. It must be obviously a neurological condition, but if it is a neurological disorder of the kind which I think the evidence is now pointing to, in the inability to you know deal with phonological processing of sounds then it's not easily as it were corrected in that physical sense so it is a matter of how we adjust resources and all the rest of it to help those children as best we can.

I think what we've now got is a much better perspective on the typically developing brain, if you like, and how the brain learns to read. Maggie Snowling and Charles Hulme have already made very clear in their book that we should look at this from a developmental perspective, which seems to me to say that we should first of all consider how, as it were, typically developing children learn to read and in that context we can then begin to think in terms of how we both identify dyslexia and in a sense get a look at the fine grain difficulties that children are having within it.

By far the best developed theory is that it arises from a phonological deficit, and this dominant phonological deficit theory of dyslexia attributes the child's reading difficulties to an inability to establish the phonological pathways that obviously other children can develop. Now that is a bit of a mouthful for me, I know, but it does seem to me to be very sound ground from which to move forward.

Narr:

How well does Sir Jim think these ideas match up with the way literacy is currently taught?

Sir Jim Rose:

The provision that we've been used to stems I think very much from the national strategies when they were introduced around about 1998 and structures like the literacy hour came into being. What we saw quickly developing was this idea that there should be three waves of provision. Wave one was described as quality first teaching for typically developing children, the idea being of course that you know they should receive excellent teaching of literacy. within that of course the teaching of reading, and it was from within that matrix that one would be able to identify those children who were not doing so well as others and begin to think about the reasons why that was happening. Wave two provision was thought of as being the first wave of intervention and this was variously I think targeted at children who may have been say missing school lengthy absences and so forth and the general term 'catch-up' came into being, so in a nutshell that was very much 'catch-up' provision. And then wave three of course was for those children who we would I suppose more classically think of as being in need of resources for special educational needs and the expertise that's needed for much more specific learning difficulties. So as a structure for intervention it seems to me that there is a certain logic in that that still holds true. The issue, however, is can we absolutely ensure that mainstream provision obviously hits the high quality note that it requires and that same expertise in terms of the quality which is required for children at the extreme end of reading difficulties not least dyslexic difficulties is also in place. And I think what we've got now is an interesting situation where we're asking all the right questions as to just what that expertise

for wave three should be and look like, how it should be provided, and what support teachers and schools need to build that expertise.

We've had as everyone might imagine very interesting discussions on so called co-occurring difficulties with dyslexia and I think our view is that where these things for example short term memory impacts really seriously on a child's ability to read we need to think about the broader context as to how that might be looked at and indeed improved, so the simple view of reading appeals very strongly in this respect and indeed in many others and people will I hope by now understand the two dimensions of that, so language comprehension and word recognition intersect, both are important and this is not a linear model. You don't do one and then the other. The whole idea is to make sure they're both robustly supported from birth I suppose and if we're talking about something like short term memory then that which is now being studied and guite a lot is known I think about in terms of language comprehension needs to be thoroughly embedded in whatever literacy programmes we're talking about, so I would expect a very strong recognition that speaking and listening, some people prefer to call it oracy, is well developed and given as much power as it were as possible from the word go, so if we look even at the primary curriculum review much turns on that because all the research is telling us that in fact we can do something about boosting children's language facility at the oral level, so that that must only be to the good, reaching right into how we're hoping dyslexia will also be overcome. I want to stress we want very high quality systematic phonic work going on and all that means, with a particular perspective on that I think about dyslexia, at the same time we must not forget that you know we're talking sometimes about very young children and the idea of enriching their vocabulary, dealing with aspects of comprehension which will help them remember is extremely important er and I think that message is getting across to schools now very strongly and we see some really exciting work going on in that direction.

Narr:

Sir Jim Rose also points to an interesting link between the processes of reading and writing, and goes on to discuss the progress in our understanding of dyslexia.

Sir Jim Rose:

I think it was guite a surprise to some when the view was expressed that encoding is the reverse of decoding, so we decode for reading and we encode for writing, and it was a very straightforward simple explanation that was being put forward there, whereas in the first case. the text is in front of you, you don't have to invent it you know. In that sense it's there and its ready prepared and you simply decode. How very much more difficult it is when you have to come to encode and there's nothing there except what's between your ears as it were and you have to recall those things and so forth. I mean that immediately I think should ring a bell that there will be children who find difficulties at the dyslexic level harder when it comes to writing than probably, even though its difficult for them, they find in reading, so this is all for me part of this cognitive mix that we need to make sure is better understood, and again we're seeing interesting, I think, work in in those directions. Whatever else we do we should remember that decoding and encoding are joined at the hip. It actually helps children if we can get them to understand that one is the reverse of the other and along with that and we've had some quite interesting debates in our advisory group about this, is what we are terming multi-sensory experience, and again we come back to young children and anything we can do using mnemonics and all the rest of it to mimic sounds or make the thing fun and reinforcing can only be to the good of all children but I think particularly for those who have got the developmental difficulties that we're talking about with, with regard to dyslexia.

It's not so very long ago when we were kind of in the position of being blindfolded and feeling ourselves around a black box called the brain. I think that's changed remarkably in the last ten years. I mean if you look at the work of the Wellcome Trust and what Hulme and Snowling have done and so forth and many others, we're now much more confident I think about how the brain learns the cognitive aspects of, of all of this, which underpin, or don't as the case may be, the models that we have been using, and I think that sorting process of you know what works and is consistent with pure research, put it that way, in neurological studies and so forth, is very interesting at this point in time, so that there is a sort of consistency between the pure and the applied which I find really quite refreshing.