

Institution: Stranmillis University College, Belfast.		
Unit of Assessment: Education		
Title of case study: Difficulties in Literacy Development		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2007-2016		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Sharon McMurray	Principal Lecturer	2006 to present
Dr Claire McVeigh	SENLPR Assistant Project Manager (2013-2015) Curriculum and Research Officer (2015-2020)	2012 to present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: September 2013- December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>A fourteen year programme of research into difficulties in literacy development, led by McMurray, has resulted in three main types of impact on policy, teachers and children: (i) new understanding of how children learn to read and spell provides irrefutable evidence highlighting the limitations of synthetic phonics and other approaches that advance one predominant teaching method, resulting in a group who are unnecessarily disadvantaged; (ii) CPD interventions changed teachers' knowledge and practice through a transformative model of teaching reading and spelling; (iii) The significant impact on improving children's literacy learning is evidenced in improved outcomes and raised standards in reading and spelling.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>The 2009 baseline research into the incidence of dyslexia indicators amongst 6-7 year olds in 10 mainstream primary schools in Northern Ireland (NI) was undertaken by McMurray and formed the basis of a successful funding bid to Department of Education (DE) in 2011/2012 for two projects. The first project was the <i>UDLD CPD</i> programme (R4, S1). The second project was the SENLPR research (S9). The overall budget was £4.3m from 1/04/2012 - 31/02/2015 for both projects with £722k of this for the research. McMurray managed two entirely separate teams (research team and CPD team) and was Principal Investigator for the research.</p>		
<p>The 2012/2013 SENLPR baseline research into the incidence of dyslexia amongst 6-7 year olds (n= 2450) in 60 schools in NI confirmed McMurray's 2009 research findings (S9, S10). This highlighted the scale of dyslexic-type difficulties despite the roll out of synthetic phonics throughout NI 2006-2008 for teaching reading and spelling, led by the Education and Library Boards (ELBs, renamed the Education Authority in 2015). Between 2009 and 2013, despite teachers having more experience of teaching using this approach, there had been no reduction in the percentage of children who struggle.</p>		

Pre and post intervention standardised reading and spelling scores were collected. Progress in reading was monitored to evaluate the impact of specialist teaching implemented by teachers working one-to-one with children experiencing significant literacy difficulties, as part of the dyslexia specialist modules they were undertaking. The baseline testing in reading confirmed that the introduction of synthetic phonics, as a predominant element of the beginning reading curriculum, had not reduced the incidence of reading difficulties in 6-7 year olds as expected by DfES and the ELBs who promoted its implementation as a cure for reading difficulties.

The assessment of literacy difficulties by teachers emerged as an issue and McMurray's research (2015-2016) found that greater rigour was required to ensure that children received an accurate and fair assessment ([R2](#)).

Insight /Originality:

Reading ([R5](#))

Synthetic phonics, as the predominant strategy when learning to read, is a cause of dysfluent reading, and for children with working memory and orthographic processing difficulties, it is the cause of reading failure. McMurray & Thompson (2016) propose a new model of reading development drawing on the research and development of the Harberton Reading Programme by McMurray (2000-2002).

Spelling ([R1](#))

McMurray (2020) provides evidence that children who do not have literacy difficulties, when attempting to spell a word, draw on phonemic, orthographic and morphemic knowledge ([R3](#)), via their implicit learning capabilities when reading. Spelling practice and policy in England has failed to recognise the importance of an integrated approach to developing all three sources of knowledge in parallel, through intentional teaching. Consequently, the group of children who cannot acquire this knowledge implicitly from their reading experience have been seriously and unnecessarily disadvantaged.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

The quality of the underpinning research outputs is demonstrably above the REF threshold of two-star quality by virtue of the rigorous peer-review process involved in the publication of the following articles in high-ranking international peer-reviewed journals:

R1 McMurray, S. (2020) "Learning to spell for children 5-8 years of age: the importance of an integrated approach to ensure the development of phonic, orthographic and morphemic knowledge at compatible levels". *Dyslexia*, 26:4, 442-458 <https://doi.org/10.1002/dys.1663>

R2 McMurray, S., O'Callaghan, P. and McVeigh, C. (2018) "Quality assurance issues in the teacher-based assessment of students with literacy difficulties for examination access arrangements". *Dyslexia*, 24:1, 3-16 <http://doi.org/10.1002/dys.1576>

R3 McMurray, S. and McVeigh, C. (2016) "The case for frequency sensitivity in orthographic learning" *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 16:4, 243-253 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12079>

R4 McMurray, S. O'Neill, S. and Thompson, R. (2016) "An Innovative Model for Professional Development" *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 16:S1, 145-149
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12139>

R5 McMurray, S. and Thompson, R. (2016) "Issues in Inclusion and Individual Learning Needs Learning to Read" *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 16: S1, 679-683
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12200>

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words).

Impact on Policy

Following McMurray's 2009 research into the incidence of dyslexia (see sources **S9**; **S10**) McMurray was invited to provide a full day's CPD for DE in February 2011. The "inspiring, stimulating and well-judged" training day had a "mix of evidenced practice, research findings and implications for teachers, ETI and policy makers." (**S3**)

On 9 September 2018 McMurray was invited to provide training for "all ETI regarding the effective teaching of spelling. This training has developed further the understanding of how children learn to read, write and spell, and has proved to be extremely helpful for inspectors when inspecting primary schools." (**S2**)

McMurray was asked by the Education Authority (EA) to provide training on the importance of an integrated approach to teach phonemic, orthographic and morphemic knowledge in parallel, to all of the EA literacy service (n=140) 30 August 2019 (**S5**). The EA literacy service support children with literacy difficulties and provide advice to schools. The [presentation](#) was recorded for further dissemination to other EA staff. Working with McMurray (2019/2020) 300 samples of independent writing were collected by the EA Literacy Service from Year 4 and Year 5 children referred to the service. Analysis of these samples confirms the SENLPR findings.

The Department of Education invited McMurray (June 2020) to write chapters on reading (**S6**), spelling (**S7**) and working memory (**S9**) for the SEN online resources. McMurray was invited to give a presentation to 29 ETI Inspectors (2 October 2020) on learning to read. This resulted in a request for a chapter on phonics (**S8**).

Impact on Teachers

Two-thirds of primary schools in NI voluntarily enrolled on the UDLD CPD programme, with all available teachers in each school completing the whole school, online course. This impact on teacher knowledge is significant as 5142 teachers in 563 schools completed the UDLD whole school, online course (**S1**):

- 1062 teachers completed the UDLD face-to-face course on dyslexia: 60 gained one Master's module on dyslexia, 470 gained 2 Master's modules on dyslexia and 29 achieved 3 Master's modules.
- 263 achieved Approved Teacher Status (ATS) from the British Dyslexia Association (BDA)
- 29 achieved Associate Member of the BDA (AMBDA)

- Currently 300 teachers have ATS and 50 have AMBDA.

The UDL CPD programme has had a significant impact on promoting quality literacy amongst class teachers as well as specialist provision as detailed by the ETI (2015: **S1** below). Recognition of the significance of the impact of McMurray's research resulted in her receiving an MBE in 2017 for Services to Children with Literacy Difficulties and those with SEN (**S4**). ETI (2015) found that: (i) teachers now have a better understanding of factors impacting learning and are better equipped to evaluate interventions; (ii) teachers employ a range of proactive strategies to prevent difficulties; (iii) teachers have increased confidence in making professional judgements on the best methods to be used based on a child's learning profile; (iv) schools work more effectively as teams; (v) assessment data in schools clearly demonstrates improvement for children receiving one-to-one intervention. The UDL CPD programme written by McMurray and underpinned by McMurray's research was completed by three cohorts of schools: 130 in 2012/13, 287 in 2013/2014 and 146 in 2014/2015.

Impact on Children

McMurray's SENLPR data on reading and spelling was collected in October and June for each cohort in the year they participated in the CPD programme. All Year 3 children were tested. The average standardised score for reading increased from 94.18 to 102.53, (eight standard points) for Year 3 children in the 60 research schools. This result placed the final average score for this sample 2.53 standard points above the norm for this age group. Improvements were particularly notable for pupils with the lowest reading scores pre-intervention. A subgroup of children (n=123) who scored <78 and >69 (>1 standard deviation below the mean), traditionally seen as being resistant to intervention and improvement, had an average standard score increase of 20 standard points.

The writing samples collected in the SENLPR clearly demonstrated that in schools using only a synthetic phonics approach to teach reading and spelling, children are dependent on using a phonemic spelling strategy which has led to entrenched spelling difficulties for children with working memory and orthographic processing difficulties and underachievement for the rest of the class. (**S9**)

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

S1 - ETI (2015) *Report of a Survey Inspection: Understanding Difficulties in Literacy Development* Continuing Professional Development Programme, Crown copyright
<https://www.eti.gov.uk/publications/evaluation-report-understanding-difficulties-literacy-development-continuing>

S2 - Testimonial

S3 - Bennett, M.J. (2011) Assistant Chief Inspector, ETI Letter of thanks

S4 - MBE for Services to Children with Literacy Difficulties and those with SEN (2017) Queen's Birthday Honours List 17th June 2017. See the London Gazette page B20
<https://www.thegazette.co.uk/all-notices/content/101133>

S5 - S. McMurray asked to provide guidance on learning to spell which was recorded by the Education Authority on 30th August 2019 for dissemination purposes. See video link <https://bit.ly/2o5oAFz>

S6 - McMurray, S. (2020) "The beginning reading programme, the importance of a balanced approach" in *DENI: A Resource File for SEN*. Bangor: DENI <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Resource%20File%20%E2%80%93%20new%20Chapter%20The%20beginning%20reading%20programme%2C%20the%20importance%20of%20a%20balanced%20approach.pdf>

S7 - McMurray, S. (2020) "The importance of an integrated approach when learning to spell" in *DENI: A Resource File for SEN*. Bangor: DENI <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Spelling-%20the%20importance%20of%20an%20integrated%20approach.pdf>

S8 - McMurray, S. (2020) "The importance of ensuring that all children can develop an effective phonics strategy" in *DENI: A Resource File for SEN*. Bangor: DENI.

S9 - McMurray, S., McVeigh, C., and Bennett, M. (2015) SEN CPD Literacy Project: Research Report for the Department of Education [Confidential]

S10 - McMurray, S. (2020) "Understanding Memory Difficulties" in *DENI: A Resource File for SEN*. Bangor: DENI. (See page 5-7 for incidence of dyslexia in NI in 2009 and 2012/2013.) https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/SEN%20Resource%20File%20-%20Understanding%20Memory%20Difficulties%20Chapter-%20Final%20Proof_0.pdf