LITERACY SKILLS AND THE JOY OF READING - HOW LITERACY ACHIEVEMENTS CAN IMPROVE SELF ESTEEM - A CASE STUDY

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Dyslexia Association of Singapore (DAS)

DAS is a non-profit organisation providing specialist remediation services to students with dyslexia and other co-morbidities, aged 6 - 16 years old. Educational Therapists at the DAS are specially trained with the Orton-Gilligham principles to provide quality teaching to help students cope with their learning disorder. Additionally, the DAS curriculum is integrated with the teaching of reading comprehension and writing to enhance the literacy skills of students.

Intensive Remediation at DAS

A monitoring system undertaken by the Educational Advisors that provides extra support to Educational Therapists with students who face:

- significant struggle with literacy at the foundation level
- severe behavioural challenges which impede learning and the learning of other students
- a combination of both where students' literacy and their behavioural challenges are affecting learning to a large extent

INTRODUCTION

The purpose and rationale for this presentation is to highlight the importance of the right kind of intervention for children with dyslexia in achieving literacy acquisition that will raise self esteem and confidence.

Literacy skills are essential to mastering academic content. They are needed for access to reading comprehension as well as composition writing. In Singapore, young children are taught basic literacy skills such as alphabet knowledge and their corresponding sounds, and recognition of high frequency words at the preschool level. However, acquiring these skills can be a demanding task, especially if these children are diagnosed with dyslexia and other co-morbidities. According to Shaywitz and Shaywitz (2005), there is a strong consensus that supports the phonological deficit theory to be a predictor to poor reading acquisition. However, this ability to identify phoneme in reading and spelling is missing in children with dyslexia. At a beginner level, children learn to read through decoding. However, as decoding skills improve and at a higher level, children need to read with understanding (Ricketts, 2011). When presented with text passages, reading difficulties in children with dyslexia can impact on reading comprehension as there is a strong correlation between reading decoding and reading comprehension (Watson, Gable, Gear and Hughes, 2012). These children might be frustrated if every attempt to decode is a struggle as reading fluency is affected. This could then lead to low self esteem and confidence towards academic work as they face low to non success in school. Poor academic performance has been linked to poor self esteem (Oei, Lee and Lim, 2016). However, as these children improve in their literacy skills, so too will their self esteem and confidence.

At the Dyslexia Association of Singapore (DAS), students with reading and literacy challenges are identified and supported by trained educational therapists who work on meeting their learning needs. These students may require a smaller class for intervention to be beneficial as closer attention and guidance can be given to them. This presentation will highlight three case studies of students who display literacy challenges and how achieving literacy and reading skills have led to improved self-esteem and confidence. The data for these cases was collected through classroom observations of students, interaction with the educational therapists and feedback from parents/caregivers. After a period of three terms (30 weeks), these students were observed to be less hesitant to attempt reading activity in class and borrowing a book from the library to read at home. During in-class observation, these students were seen to be more receptive when instructed to read and was more confident to read aloud. Parents acknowledged that the students were less resistant to pick up a book when requested to read at home. Additionally, the parents commented that improvements were seen in their children's school work. Strategies and suggestions to reading techniques based on phonics instructions are provided to instill the joy of reading and learning for these students. One strategy is based on the Orton-Gillingham approach which is a form of phonologically based intervention and has been found to be effective in remediating reading difficulties (Lim and Oei, 2015).

Keywords: dyslexia, learning difficulties, self-esteem

CASE STUDIES

The case studies presented here are taken from among 50 cases on the Intensive Remediation monitoring system that are reviewed regularly by the educational advisors. These three cases are specifically chosen as they depict the challenges faced by the students in reading and other literacy skills, and how their confidence and self-esteem were affected as a result. However, this outcome was rectified when phonics instructions was provided in remediating learning for these students.

Case Study 1: Student A

Cognitive profile: GCA = 92, VIQ = 85, PIQ = 100, PSI = 102

Background

A 10 year old student who has dyslexia and ADHD. His case was highlighted by his preschool teacher as he was observed to have learning and behavioural difficulties. He had received counselling at K1 due to his risky behaviours in school such as running out of class and tampering with sharp objects. Student A attended Primary 1 with very little knowledge of the alphabet and phonics. He was unable to identify the letters in his name when the letters were shown in isolation. In school, his learning difficulties and behavioural issues persisted as he continued to struggle with reading, spelling and writing. He had difficulties with blending letters and was not aware of written grammar and punctuation. His behavioural issues such as throwing tantrums, biting or pushing other people often resulted in him being sent to the Principal's office. At the DAS, Student A is often impulsive and had been caught running out of the learning centre without permission a few times. His special learning needs were identified by his educational therapist when he was taught in a group setting and a recommendation for him to be in a 1-1 setting was raised.

Classroom Observations at DAS

- Very poor working memory which was further hindered by his inattentiveness
- Very poor phonological awareness and decoding skills which led to an inability to read e.g. primary phonics books
- Poor fine motor skills e.g. poor pencil grip, incorrect letter formation, untidy handwriting
- Required a lot of time to process information and needed silence to think
- Had a tendency to veer from tasks to distract classmates e.g. run around the classroom, crawl under the table, climb on chairs, bite pencils
- Showed inappropriate social behaviours towards classmates e.g. repeated burping on purpose, picking his nose, yelling unsavoury phrases to shock his classmates
- Had difficulty releasing anger and frustrations in a healthy manner e.g. kicking chairs and dustbin, tear down posters in the classroom, throwing worksheets around, thus affecting his learning when he was not allowed to do as he pleased

Strategies at DAS

- Structured lessons – activities of each lesson written on the whiteboard
- Explicit phonics instructions to reading and spelling
- Activities - student's ability and interest (e.g. keywords for letters using insects)
- Literacy and behaviour chart - indicate what student should achieve in class (e.g. complete 3 words to read and spell; be seated during card drill)
- Picture cards targeting specific behaviours - reduce verbal reminders (e.g. seated at desk while doing work to replace verbal reminder of 'come back to your seat')
- Boundaries - to prevent any attempt at risky behaviors such as running out of class (e.g. a line drawn on the floor where he could not go beyond)
- Short breaks - to encourage participation in literacy based activities
- Multisensory teaching (e.g. use of foam letters, tracing letter shapes on textured material)
- Occupational therapy - to correct handwriting
- Progress tracking on literacy attainment and behavioral goals via a point-reward system - reward given after earning 200 points in 20 lessons

Case Study 2: Student B

Cognitive profile: GCA = 89, VIQ = 72, PIQ = 91

Background

A 10 year old student whose difficulties in learning and acquiring phonics instructions were highlighted by her preschool teacher. She was noted to be extremely weak in phonological awareness and phonological decoding, as well as poor in single word reading and spelling accuracy. She often displayed letter reversals in [b/d] and [p/q]. Student B was observed to have extremely low confidence and self-esteem when she realised that she was the only one in the class who was unable to decode words of the consonant-vowel-consonant, consonant-vowel-consonant-consonant and consonant-consonant-vowel-consonant patterns. As a result, Student B often resorted to look at the work of her classmates when she was unable to undertake tasks given if help from her educational therapist was not easily available. As the lesson progressed, Student B was noted to exhibit signs of reluctance and hesitation which stemmed from the weariness of reading and spelling procedures which then impacted her confidence and self esteem. Her special learning needs were identified by her educational therapist when she was taught in a group setting and a recommendation for her to be in a 1-1 setting was raised.

Classroom Observations at DAS

- Very poor working memory where repeated instructions had to be given to her
- Extremely poor phonological and phonemic awareness
- Required intensive support for literacy based activities such as reading and spelling
- Confusion with short vowel sounds which impeded her ability to blend and read, as well as spell accurately
- Lost focus on work quickly - easily distracted by classmates
- Task avoidance as a result of poor confidence and self esteem - did not want to appear 'unable' in front classmates
- When accused of looking at her classmates' work, Student B would deny vehemently, sulk and refused to continue with her own work
- Poor executive functions as she was unable to follow through with instructions given during class and unable to control her emotions when situations were not favourable to her

Strategies at DAS

- Explicit phonics instructions to reading and spelling
- New concepts were introduced in chunks - to aid in retention e.g. word reading began at the vowel-consonant pattern before progressing to consonant-vowel-consonant pattern and longer word patterns
- Multisensory teaching e.g. use of sand box for letter tracing, using colours to identify small words in big words
- Introduction of sight word drill to increase Student B's repertoire of sight word acquisition to aid her in reading
- Picture cues - as reminder B to stay focused on tasks, control emotions and organize materials
- Executive functions skills were woven into each lesson to instill the importance of remembering and following instructions, paying attention, keeping organized, self-monitoring, regulating emotions etc.

Case Study 3: Student C

Cognitive profile: GCA = 80, VIQ = 77, PIQ = 77, PSI = 70

Background

Student C is a 10 year old student,diagnosed with dyslexia and ADHD. His challenges, observed in his preschool years included: difficulties with fine and gross motor skills, difficulties expressing himself and communicating with others, poor working memory, poor retention of concepts, task avoidant, attention issues, and anger management issues. Due to his extremely poor literacy attainment and behavioural issues, he had to repeat kindergarten and was asked to change preschool as the teachers could not handle his behavior. Student C has a history of speech and language difficulty and had attended Speech and Language Therapy, as well as received Occupational Therapy. When he started his remediation at DAS, he portrayed a lot of anger and frustrations, especially when his classmates were able to do literacy tasks that he could not. Thus, he often showed task avoidance behaviors such as walking away from the desk, sulking at a corner of the classroom, and scrawling dark scribbles on his worksheets.

Classroom Observations at DAS

- Weak recognition of the alphabets
- Poor phonological decoding and processing skills which led to poor blending and reading, as well as spelling ability
- Had difficulty regulating his emotions e.g. displayed his impatience and frustrations when he made mistakes, threw tantrums and showed outburst of anger
- Sociable towards other students but did not have appropriate social skills
- Responded well to firm instructions and encouragement

Strategies at DAS

- Explicit phonics instructions to reading and spelling e.g. using onset and rime
- Structured lessons – activities of each lesson written on the whiteboard
- Concepts are taught in small chunks to aid in retention
- Activities - student's ability and interest e.g. having pictures of his favourite cartoon characters on his worksheets
- Point-reward system implemented as motivation for literacy based tasks e.g. reward given when 150 points were attained after 20 lessons
- Learning is made enjoyable through games and use of multi-sensorial manipulatives
- Short breaks - for Student C to relax himself before resuming other tasks
- Proper social skills are taught e.g. turn taking, social responsibility was modelled for him, emotion control through rationalisation

DATA COLLECTION

A case study presentation is favoured as it facilitates an exploration of an incident within its context using a variety of data sources (Baxter and Jack, 2008). The data collected was accumulated through classroom observations by educational advisors, interaction with educational therapists as well as feedback gathered from parents. Classroom observations were conducted once every 10 weeks (1 term) as this ensured that the educational therapists could implement and work on strategies that were recommended to them by the educational advisors to track the students' progress in their literacy skills acquisition. A progress monitoring report of each student was produced after 30 weeks (3 terms) to document what had taken place in class. Students' confidence level when undertaking tasks given and their general self-esteem throughout the lessons were observed and recorded weekly.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this presentation is to highlight the importance of appropriate remediation in improving students' confidence towards literacy tasks and self-esteem towards learning in general. The phonics approach adopted at DAS in its Main Literacy Programme is key in remediating learning challenges for students with dyslexia. It has proven to benefit students in providing them with scaffolds to reading and general literacy skills such as phonemic awareness, awareness to print, spelling, vocabulary and reading comprehension. Furthermore, the DAS Curriculum involved explicit teaching of phonemic and phonological awareness, vocabulary, reading comprehension and writing. The structured approach to learning remediation that the Main Literacy Programme advocates enabled educational therapists to plan lessons that will integrate these aspects in each lesson thereby, supporting students in acquiring mastery in basic literacy skills.

These 3 case studies exemplified that students with severe learning challenges can thrive when appropriate remediation techniques are employed and suitable learning tools are used. These students had joined the DAS programme with low confidence and self-esteem which manifested in task-avoidance such as refusing to read and spell, slow to embark on activities, and incessant chats. However, as their progress was monitored, it was evident that when their literacy skills improved, so did their confidence and self esteem. Classroom observations also informed educational advisors on how eager, more confident and prompt these students were to begin each lesson. This was noted via the time taken for the students to begin on the tasks presented to them as it was noticed at the initial stage that these students took more than ten minutes to start on any tasks given by the educational therapists. Consequently, as the students improve in their reading and other literacy skills, the time taken to start on tasks given shortened and subsequently, they did not display any dalliance when tasks were presented to them.

Ultimately, students' improved confidence and self esteem in literacy activities led to a more fruitful and productive learning experience for them as well as a positive teaching outcome for the educational therapists. As they progressed in their literacy skills, they have been able to accept and work with new classmates and are no longer in a 1-1 classroom setting.

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