Teacher, Pupil and Parental Perceptions Surrounding the Study of Latin for Pupils Identified with Dyslexia

by Andrea Parker

Introduction

Having taught Latin to a considerable number of pupils with varying degrees of dyslexia throughout my Newly-Qualified Teacher (NQT) year, I was keen to explore how such pupils learn it despite their difficulties with language. At the early stages of the academic year, I encountered several anxious parents of dyslexic pupils who assumed, understandably, that their children would struggle with Latin. However, as the year progressed, both parents and pupils reported that they were surprised and pleased by the level of success achieved in the subject. Some parents of pupils identified with dyslexia even mooted the idea that Latin was helpful for their children. During my next teaching post at a coeducational independent preparatory school (‘the Case Study School,’ henceforth CSS) both the School and I were interested in exploring this topic further. From September 2011, Latin became a new and compulsory subject at CSS for all pupils from Year 5 upwards, 13 of whom have been formally identified with dyslexia.

Little research literature addresses Classics education and how pupils learn ancient languages. The lack of academic literature is particularly apparent when considering how pupils with dyslexia learn Latin. In some schools I have visited, pupils with dyslexia are withdrawn from a particular subject, usually a Modern Foreign Language (MFL), in order to receive additional support in English. In attendance at a Classics teaching conference at another school, I was intrigued to learn that it was the school’s policy to withdraw pupils from French for learning support, but never from Latin due, to the belief that Latin was particularly beneficial for pupils with dyslexia.

This research project took the form of a mixed methods study comprised of two layers; a small case study embedded within the national picture. The national layer was intended to generate largely quantitative data through national surveys of Classics teachers and pupils studying Latin respectively, and also, if possible, of parents of pupils. To offer a more detailed investigation of the topic within a particular setting an embedded case study was designed, focusing on my own professional context at CSS. This more closely focused aspect of the study provided rich qualitative data exploring pupils’ experiences of Latin, with particular emphasis on those with dyslexia.

Figure 1: Research Design
### Table 2.1 | Symptoms of Dyslexia (BDA, 2012)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language based Indicators</th>
<th>Non-Language based Indicators</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Has difficulty with reading and spelling</td>
<td>Poor coordination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixes up letter order in words</td>
<td>Very good orally - very bright</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty recalling information</td>
<td>Low Confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confuses similar letters or words e.g. ‘d’ ‘b’</td>
<td>Poor Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has difficulty with reading and spelling</td>
<td>Low Self-Esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs extra time to complete tasks</td>
<td>Confusion of similar elements e.g. right and left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggles to concentrate for long spells</td>
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</tr>
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</table>

It should be noted that the definition of dyslexia has been a topic of contention for some time, although the word is in common usage (Bender, 2008). Developmental dyslexia, the focus of this study, is taken to refer to 'a specific learning difficulty in reading and spelling' (Nijalsowska, 2010, p. 1). The most typical manifestations are listed in Table 2.1 below.

Secondly, that dyslexia did not directly hinder students with learning Latin as opposed to a MFL. Perhaps Latin is therefore a more suitable language for pupils with dyslexia?

Ancona's article (1982) is an interesting exposition of one teacher's experience of teaching Latin to a mature dyslexic student ('John') and the efforts made by an American university to accommodate his learning needs. The student showed awareness of his need for an aural / oral approach to learning the language, arguably one for which Latin is not immediately suited. John was proactive in his approach and as a result, Ancona observes that his efforts were largely successful, although he did encounter difficulties along the way – though how far these were due to his dyslexia and how far they were due to tackling a complex and strange language is difficult to gauge. Ancona went on to offer conclusions that Latin can be accessible to students with dyslexia and the nature of the language may in fact lend itself to study by dyslexics (Ancona, 1982, p. 35).

It is worth noting that self-motivation played a major part in this student's perceived success. As Nicolson and Fawcett state, 'If a learner has a personal interest in a topic (ownership), motivation and success follow naturally' (Nicolson and Fawcett, 2008, p. 64). Chanock (2006), in her study of Ancient Greek for a dyslexic student, notes the link between success and motivation for dyslexic students. Motivation must play a significant role in success for any student, but particularly so for those with additional barriers to learning like dyslexia (Nicolson & Fawcett, 2008).

A larger study by Sparkes, Ganschow, Fluharty and Little (1996) aimed to discover whether the study of Latin could be beneficial to students both with learning difficulties and without and also whether teaching Latin through a multi-sensory approach could be helpful to those with learning difficulties. This study took the form of an experiment on three groups of American college students in their first year of learning Latin. This paper suggested that learning Latin may be beneficial for those with learning difficulties such as dyslexia if an appropriate adapted teaching method is used.

Ashe (1998) explored how pupils with learning disabilities at Louisiana State University could successfully fulfill their Foreign Language requirement through the study of a Latin course. By using a multisensory approach designed specifically for pupils with learning disabilities, 13 out of 15 pupils were able to complete the introductory Latin course (Ashe, p. 249). Although not exclusively referring to dyslexia, Ashe expressed the conviction that Latin was beneficial for pupils with learning difficulties, intimating that it may be the ideal language to fulfill compulsory language requirements.

Indeed, it appears from the literature that Latin may be a relatively accessible subject for pupils with dyslexia, provided that the appropriate means to support those pupils are in place (Hubbard, 2003). Latin is a phonetically based language with clear association between written word and pronunciation, and with little emphasis on word order (Ancona, 1982). As an inflected language, Latin may be more suitable for dyslexic students since 'verbs and nouns can be broken down into smaller units' and decoded accordingly (Ashe, 1998, p. 238). Likewise, Ashe states 'Latin may be preferred to a modern language since the primary emphasis in the Latin classroom is upon reading and translating rather than oral communication.'
Indeed, the British Dyslexia Association (BDA) website does note that French causes considerable difficulties for those with dyslexia and provides a list of nine potential problems (shown in the left-hand column of Table 2.2). Interestingly, the majority of this list focuses on pronunciation (BDA, 2012).

As a language where the emphasis is not placed as strongly upon the spoken or aural aspect, this should immediately make Latin more accessible for dyslexic students as it is pronounced as written and has no emphasis on accents (Ash, 1998). This does not imply that Latin should pose no problems to dyslexic students; but may suggest that the difficulties presented by the Latin language may be fewer in comparison with French (see Table 2.2). In fact, Ashe unequivocally declares that 'Latin may be the best choice' (Ashe, 1988, p. 238) for pupils with learning difficulties. The key to success, according to Dal, is ensuring that pupils are motivated and engaged and 'to make the language seem “doable” by providing the supports necessary' (Dal, 2008, p.443).

### Research Questions (RQs)

1.) What are non-dyslexic and dyslexic pupils' perceptions of Latin as a subject?

2.) Why should pupils study Latin?

3.) How far does parental and student motivation play a part in success for dyslexic students?

4.) Do dyslexic students do worse in Latin than their peers?

### Methodology

As I was interested in exploring both breadth and depth of response, it appeared that a mixed methods research design would be the most suitable means of gathering the appropriate data since several different methods would all contribute to answering my research questions. These are tabulated in Table 3.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Most appropriate means of answering the question:</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.) What are non-dyslexic and dyslexic pupils’ perceptions of Latin as a subject?</td>
<td>Large scale survey of pupils from as many schools as possible. Focus group of pupils without dyslexia. Paired interviews with dyslexic pupils.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.) Why should pupils study Latin?</td>
<td>Large scale survey of Latin teachers. Interviews with Latin teachers and SENCO. Pupil interviews. Informal discussion with SLT.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.) Do dyslexic students do worse in Latin than their peers?</td>
<td>Large scale survey of Latin teachers. Interviews with teachers - focus on examination marks. Interviews with dyslexic pupils.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.2 | Table comparing potential obstacles posed by French and Latin ('French content' based on information from BDA website, 2012)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Potential obstacle posed by French</th>
<th>Does this apply to Latin?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unfamiliar Sounds</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accents / Inflection</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phonemes / Confusion of similar words</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disparity between the written word and it’s pronunciation</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different grammar rules to English</td>
<td>Yes, but Latin follows rules more rigidly than French</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word order / Syntax</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homophones</td>
<td>Not as common in Latin</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The embedded case study at CSS was an integral aspect of the study which was included in the research design as a 'close-up' lens to focus on the 'micro-level' of one particular school setting and to generate rich data from the interviews of pupils, parents and staff and a focus group of non-dyslexic pupils.

Gathering the data

For the teachers' survey, I designed a web survey comprising of 18 questions using an online survey creator in order to make it easier to distribute, without the inconvenience of returning a questionnaire by post. For the pupils' survey, I designed an online survey of ten questions.

In terms of the case study, I decided to run semi-structured paired interviews with children with dyslexia, individual interviews with parents, a focus group of non-dyslexic pupils and individual interviews with a Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) and two teachers of Latin.

Data Collection

The data collected from the online surveys was exported and collated using an online survey package. I used basic descriptive statistics such as calculating percentage rates in order to inform my data findings for the quantitative elements of the mixed methods study. The qualitative data produced by the sweep question was coded iteratively, according to emergent themes. I was able to apply filters to the data in order to look at responses according to variables such as gender, age and so on. After transcribing the semi-structured interviews and focus group, themes were identified in each respectively and the transcripts were then thematically coded and compared.

Findings

Online survey responses were logged from 179 pupils (93 boys, 86 girls) from three schools. Of these, 23 pupils had additional learning needs, ten of whom (five girls and five boys) have been formally identified with dyslexia. The pupils surveyed came from Years 5-13, had experience of learning Latin ranging from less than one year to over five years and were studying a range of different Latin courses.

The quantitative and qualitative data generated by the research methods are addressed synthetically according to each research question. Data from the embedded case study are presented alongside the main survey in this discussion.

RQ1: What are non-dyslexic and dyslexic pupils' perceptions of Latin as a subject?

71 per cent of pupils surveyed believed that their parents were pleased that they were studying Latin. 68 per cent of pupils stated that they enjoyed Latin. Despite a high expressed interest in etymology, only 47 per cent of pupils said that Latin helped them with English; 27 per cent declared that it did not. It seems that Latin has a positive perception in terms of enjoyment, but its use is perhaps less clear.

It was interesting that so many pupils (75 per cent) disagreed with the statement that Latin was too challenging for them; in fact, 58 per cent of pupils felt that Latin was not markedly more difficult than their other subjects. Additionally, a high percentage of respondents (72 per cent) reported doing well in the subject. It was also instructive that 59 per cent of pupils disagreed with the statement that there is no point in learning Latin. This indicates that Latin is perceived positively in terms of accessibility and achievability for the majority of pupils surveyed. Almost half of all pupils surveyed felt that studying Latin made them seem clever (62 per cent agreement; 68 disagreed). However, success in a subject perceived as academically challenging must magnify achievement, thus promoting the self-esteem of the individual. Only 27 per cent of pupils felt that it was pointless to study Latin as it had no immediate spoken use.

The open question at the end of the survey invited general comments from pupils relating to the study of Latin. 73 pupils (41 per cent of respondents) chose to answer this section. The responses were coded according to themes and shown in the bar-chart (Figure 4.1.1). Of those who felt strongly enough to comment further as to how they perceived the study of Latin, it is clear that the majority of these responses (56 per cent) felt defensive towards the subject and were keen to assert its worth.

![Figure 4.1.1 | Pupils' Survey Responses - Perception of Latin as a subject relative to the rest of the curriculum](image-url)

Teacher, Pupil and Parental Perceptions Surrounding the Study of Latin for Pupils Identified with Dyslexia
In the final survey question, 66 pupils expressed a desire to carry on with the subject at least to GCSE level, indicating that they felt Latin would be a 'useful' qualification to have. This contrasts with earlier statements in which over a quarter of pupils surveyed indicated that they did not readily appreciate the usefulness of the subject either in helping with English or in an immediate sense. Perhaps pupils perceive Latin as useful in a different way – as being a useful GCSE subject to demonstrate their academic ability.

From the pupils’ survey it was evident that Latin is recognised as a challenging but enjoyable pursuit. It was interesting that responses specifically mentioned that Latin was easier than French, since French often has a more prominent presence in the timetable:

‘Latin sounds hard but it is easier [sic] than French.’

‘Latin helps in French, but is a lot easier than French when pronouncing words.’ (Year 7 girls, pupils’ survey responses (henceforth PSR))

When asked about the difficulty of Latin relative to other languages, it was interesting that opinion was split almost equally between those who said they found Latin harder than other languages (33 per cent), those who said Latin was easier than the other languages (34 per cent) and those who said it was about the same (33 per cent). This is surprising considering the traditional perception of Latin as a ‘hard’ subject – clearly 120 pupils out of 179 felt that Latin was easier than other languages or at the very least, no more challenging than French or Spanish.

As part of the case study, I questioned pupils as to why they were studying Latin when it is not spoken anymore. They suggested that learning Latin provides a framework for language learning. This framework idea was also expressed by non-dyslexic students in the focus group.

Having applied gender filters, I decided to explore using basic comparative statistics whether girls were more positive or negative than boys in their attitudes to the subject. The results are displayed in Figure 4.1.2.

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**Figure 4.1.2 | Comparison of Responses from Boys and Girls (%): Agreement with various statements relating to the study of Latin**

[Diagram showing comparison of responses from boys and girls on various statements related to the study of Latin. The diagram includes bars for each statement, with percentages indicating the agreement level of boys and girls.]
The boys' responses were overwhelmingly positive and differed significantly from the girls' responses in relation to enjoyment of Latin, its relative difficulty, use, and their intentions of further study. That said, the responses from the girls were positive overall and it was interesting to see the instances in which the responses closely mirrored those of the boys.

Although meaningful statistical analysis was not possible with so few responses from dyslexic pupils, it was interesting to explore how the survey responses from pupils with dyslexia fit in with the general trends. In terms of responses to the survey from these ten pupils, results largely echoed the wider picture of their non-dyslexic peers. However, half of the dyslexic pupils felt that Latin is harder than their other languages, whereas the other five felt it was either easier or about the same level of difficulty as French or Spanish. Five pupils said that they enjoyed Latin, six said they felt Latin was important and seven expressed an interest in etymology. Two declared that Latin was pointless as no one speaks it anymore. There was an interesting spread of opinion amongst the dyslexic pupils regarding whether Latin was too difficult for them. These pupils disagreed, three pupils agreed that it was too hard for them, and four reserved judgment. It may be then, that it very much depends on the individual and rather than make blanket decisions about the implications of dyslexia for the study of Latin, decisions should be made on an individual basis once pupils have had the chance to try this subject. Perhaps the most tantalising answer of all was in the question where pupils had the opportunity to make any other remarks about the study of Latin:

'I think Latin is useful because it helps me with my English.' (Year 6 dyslexic boy, PSR)

It was a shame that this response was without qualification as to how it was helpful for this pupil's literacy. It was also noteworthy that a Year 13 dyslexic girl said that she found Latin helpful for her English even though she found it more difficult than her other A Level subjects, thus perceiving the heightened challenge in a positive sense.

RQ2: Why should pupils study Latin?

Certainly, the assumption is that dyslexic students, as primarily having difficulties with language, will struggle even more with Latin than their non-dyslexic peers. One teacher in the survey noted:

'...there is usually the expectation that the [dyslexic] child will find the subject difficult.' (Teachers' survey response ('TSR'))

This hints at a wider issue of circularity – in some schools invited to participate in the survey, students identified with dyslexia are automatically withdrawn from the subject. Therefore some Latin teachers may not have responded to the survey because of this, when this is precisely the assumption and situation that needs investigating and challenging.

The results of the teacher survey were very interesting and gave perspectives from 96 teachers across the country. The issue is clearly regarded as an important one, since 76 per cent of teachers surveyed reported that Latin was a compulsory subject at their schools. Given that 85 per cent of 96 teachers have students with dyslexia in their Latin classes, the issue of who should study Latin and why is clearly a pertinent one. Some added that numbers of dyslexic pupils per class were in double figures. It was surprising that, despite this high instance of pupils identified with dyslexia in Latin classes, of 84 respondents (12 did not answer this part of the survey), more than half (54 per cent) reported that they had not received any training as to how to support students with additional learning needs in their subject. 64 out of 84 respondents expressed confidence in helping pupils with additional needs within their classroom: only eight said that they did not know how to support these pupils, with a further 12 saying they were not sure.

When enquiring as to whether teachers felt that dyslexia made it harder for pupils to learn Latin, opinions were split, as detailed in Figure 4.2.1.
Therefore, in terms of overall percentages, 44 per cent agreed that their pupils identified with dyslexia appear to struggle more with Latin, whereas 36 per cent disagreed with this claim. Others were 'not sure'. Tellingly, 87 per cent of respondents disagreed with the statement that Latin is too hard for dyslexic students. Only two felt that Latin was too hard for those with dyslexia. Clearly, there is thought here that students with dyslexia ought not to be denied the opportunity to learn the subject on the basis of their learning needs. Yet over 34 per cent of teachers in the survey (of 96 respondents) said that pupils were withdrawn from Latin in order to receive support in English or other languages.

Crucially, however, 99 per cent of teachers said that they felt the study of Latin was particularly worthwhile for pupils with dyslexia. Therefore there are children who could potentially stand to benefit from studying Latin that are being withdrawn. Why did teachers feel that the study of Latin is so worthwhile for dyslexic students and could this be objectivised in any way? 68 reasons of differing length and complexity were offered, which were coded according to emergent themes. Some responses fell into more than one category. These data are displayed as a pie chart (Figure 4.2.2).

The most striking result from the open question was the strong conviction with which Latin teachers believe that study of the subject improves literacy of students with dyslexia by encouraging close analysis of the language. Several responses noted how studying Latin can be of benefit in terms of confidence and competence with their native language, since Latin does not rely on word order, syntax or pronunciation.

In other words, learning Latin is a chance for all students to relearn a language structure, a framework, which is distinct from but related to their own, which then can be applied to English or MFL. The fact that the vocabulary in many modern foreign languages comes directly from Latin roots was noted repeatedly as a reason why any student should study Latin. These were noted as general benefits for all students of the language, but for students identified with dyslexia, the study of Latin was noted to have a particularly beneficial impact.

Some teachers note that allowing students with dyslexia to study Latin alongside their non-dyslexic peers is essential in terms of their self-esteem. Removal from Latin classes has been noted as particularly detrimental to the self-esteem of the dyslexic pupils.

Several teachers suggested that Latin is a language more suited to students with dyslexia than French for example, due to the non-oral aspect, the regularity of the language and the fact that Latin rarely breaks rules. This was supported by the pupil interviews, where dyslexic pupils frequently said that they found Latin easier than French.

**RQ3: How far does parental and student motivation play a part in success for dyslexic students?**

Open comments from the teachers’ surveys frequently declared that an interest in the background material was important for students with dyslexia to persevere with the complexities of the language. In terms of parental motivation, it was clear that how positively parents view Latin has a direct impact on the motivation of the pupil.

The parents’ survey gained only 11 responses, but still highlighted some interesting results around the topic of motivation. Seven parents had studied Latin at school, and four of these said that Latin had been a consideration when choosing a school for their children.

The teachers’ survey invited teachers to comment on how positive parents of dyslexic pupils were towards their child studying the subject. Of the 76 comments, 74 per cent of responses recorded that parents were positive about their child learning Latin. However, 12 per cent of teachers’ responses recorded that parents have been negative about the study of Latin for dyslexic students, largely due to misconceptions about difficulty or assumptions that pupils will find Latin difficult. A further 20 per cent of responses reported that parental attitudes towards Latin are mixed or vary depending on how well the child performs.

During the individual pupil interviews, the pupils who said they did well in Latin also said that their parents had studied Latin and that they were regularly tested by their mothers on vocabulary. Again, this indicates that success in Latin is strongly linked to whether parents have studied it and whether they believe there is merit in study of the subject.

**RQ4: Do dyslexic students do worse in Latin than their peers?**

Whilst teachers noted the regular parental assumption that pupils with dyslexia would find Latin harder than non-dyslexic students, this was not to say that such pupils would not succeed in the subject. The problem seems to lie in the association of dyslexia as a specific educational need and the perception of Latin as an unusually demanding and highly academic subject.
In the individual interviews with Latin teachers at CSS, it was noteworthy that they did not perceive a difference in the performance or ability of dyslexic and non-dyslexic students in their classes, but felt that pupils identified with dyslexia did differ in terms of their approach to the subject.

From the online survey, 55 per cent of 84 teachers disagreed with the statement that dyslexic students’ class and test results are lower than the rest of the class, with 10 per cent of this number strongly disagreeing. 26 per cent felt that this statement was a fair reflection and that their dyslexic students performed worse on the whole. Only two teachers out of this number strongly felt that this was the case. The results of the individual teacher interviews also reflected the general trend; that pupils with dyslexia on the whole do not perform worse in Latin than their peers.

It is evident then that the majority of Classics teachers do not perceive that their students with dyslexia perform worse than their non-dyslexic peers.

### Discussion

**What are non-dyslexic and dyslexic pupils’ perceptions of Latin as a subject?**

The survey data indicated that overall, pupils perceive the study of Latin in a very positive way, particularly in terms of enjoyment of the subject, but were perhaps less clear about the immediate use of studying Latin. This may be due to the fact that 53 per cent of pupils had only been studying the subject for less than one year. However, given that the majority of pupils felt that there was a point in studying Latin, despite it being a so-called ‘dead’ language, it can be inferred that they are at least indirectly aware of the potential benefits of studying the subject. The usefulness of the subject was perceived by some pupils not only in terms of potential benefits in literacy, but also as a means of expressing academic ability in public examinations.

It is certainly the case that many pupils perceive Latin as a challenging subject, but this is not necessarily in a negative sense. Pupils were keen to dismiss the notion that the subject was too hard for them, and in terms of the other languages they were studying, Latin did not emerge as more difficult. As such, a key finding was the counter-intuitive idea that Latin is not as difficult as its reputation suggests – it is more accessible than initially presumed.

It was interesting that pupils felt that it was beneficial to study Latin, but could not articulate why. The survey indicated that boys were more positive about Latin than girls in terms of enjoyment of the subject. As for the responses from the ten students identified with dyslexia, these seemed to reflect the general trends of the pupil survey, but perhaps slightly skewed towards them finding it more difficult. However, it was noteworthy that the majority of students with dyslexia enjoyed the subject and two even claimed that it helped with their literacy, although did not articulate in what way.

**Why should pupils study Latin?**

It was unsurprising that 59 per cent of Latin teachers felt that the study of their subject was worthwhile for pupils with dyslexia in terms of close reading skills. It goes without saying that such respondents will be naturally very defensive of an optional subject which so frequently comes under criticism for its perceived lack of relevance. One teacher who felt that Latin was not particularly worthwhile for dyslexic students did not offer any reason for this assertion.

Whilst pupils did not necessarily perceive an improvement in their literacy due to Latin – and this may be due to the fact that many of them have not studied Latin for more than one year – there was a strong conviction amongst Classics teachers nationally that Latin has the potential to improve literacy in students identified with dyslexia. Pupils at CSS (those with dyslexia and without) perceived the usefulness of Latin in providing a framework for language learning.

There was general acknowledgement in the teachers’ survey that the pupils identified with dyslexia may perhaps encounter more challenges in learning Latin than those without. However, the vast majority of teachers were keen to assert that firstly, Latin was not too hard for dyslexic pupils, and secondly, that it was beneficial to them – specifically in terms of literacy, transferrable skills and self-esteem. The notion of withdrawal was recurrent throughout the surveys and interviews as being detrimental to the self-esteem of pupils identified with dyslexia. Self-esteem for dyslexic pupils is typically lower than for other children (Burden, 2008; Riddick, 2010). In removing pupils from a subject perceived as academically challenging, the implication is that the pupil is academically and intellectually inferior to his or her peers, thus potentially lowering the pupil’s self-esteem even further. The emphasis ought to be on helping each individual child to access the curriculum and there should be further collaboration between the SEN departments and individual subject teachers to facilitate this.

The recurrent theme throughout was that Latin may be beneficial for dyslexic pupils by providing a framework for understanding how languages – native and foreign - work. The close reading element necessary in the study of Latin was identified in the teachers’ survey as being a particular way in which Latin may improve literacy in dyslexic pupils. A key finding from the data collected was the strong conviction that Latin is a particularly suitable language for dyslexic pupils – more so than French. Latin appears suitable due to the fact that it is not a spoken language, thus alleviating the stress that dyslexic pupils are said to encounter when being asked to read aloud.

It was noteworthy that the theme of Latin being more suitable and easier than French recurred throughout the teacher survey, the pupil interviews, the focus group, and the parent interviews.

**How far does parental and student motivation play a part in success for dyslexic students?**

Motivation clearly plays a significant role in the success for students identified with dyslexia. If a pupil is interested in cultural aspects of Classics, they were recorded in both the pupil interviews and the teachers’ survey as working harder on the language elements, since they take ‘ownership’ of their learning and are motivated (Nicolson and Fawcett, 2008, p.64). Indeed, motivation and interest in the subject was certainly a key factor to success in the individual cases discussed by Chanock (2006) and Ancora (1982).

It also appeared that if a parent had studied Latin, they were positive about the use of it for their child. The overwhelming majority of parents in interviews and all three surveys were positive about their children learning Latin. The danger is that if teachers make the assumption that their child will not be able to cope with Latin then they will negatively impact upon the
mindset and confidence of the pupil. This will in turn curtail the success that the child experiences, thus becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Do dyslexic students do worse in Latin than their peers?

It appears that the pertinent information is not the fact that a pupil has been identified with a learning difficulty, but what the level of that difficulty is. For those who are mildly dyslexic – and this is hardly a standardised category in itself – the idea of Latin as ameliorative for the manifestation of symptoms was mooted throughout the literature and the data collected from the teachers’ survey. Whilst there is some likelihood that dyslexic pupils will have to work harder to experience the same level of success as their non-dyslexic peers, it is evident from this research that, on the whole, teachers do not perceive that dyslexic students do worse than their peers, thus relating to findings by Downey et al. (2000).

The 55 per cent of teachers who asserted that dyslexic pupils did not do worse than the others will have answered this question according to differing success criteria. It is also unlikely given the nature of the survey that this would have been an empirically sound representation. Similarly, the teachers were not asked if success in Latin depended on the level of difficulty experienced by the child. It was also not clear whether the pupils being referred to in this question were officially identified with dyslexia. It would also have been informative to question the 26 per cent of teachers further as to why they perceived that dyslexic pupils performed worse than their non-dyslexic peers: was there one particular area in which this was evident?

The most significant implication of this question is its potential contribution to informing decisions on the withdrawal of dyslexic pupils from Latin. The fact that so many teachers have reported that dyslexia has not caused pupils to perform worse ought to mean that the automatic decision to withdraw pupils on the basis of dyslexia should, at least, be challenged. Dyslexia clearly does not mean that pupils cannot experience success in Latin, but may mean that a different teaching approach is required.

Limitations of the study

The main limitation is obviously the relatively small number of dyslexic pupils who responded to the online survey. This means that it is impossible to make any statistically valid observations from these survey responses alone: comparing across the various data sets went some way to compensate for this, however. A related limitation was the fact that relatively few parents were contactable for the parents’ survey.

Another limitation was that distinction was not made between the severities or levels of dyslexia experienced by those pupils in the survey. Similarly, pupils may not have been aware of their dyslexia or willing to declare it in the survey – there are obviously ethical implications to this, which have no easy answer. It may have been better to ask whether pupils experience difficulties with literacy and ask the questions obliquely in order to avoid what may be for some, a distressing label.

Implications of the study

Several implications arise from this study. Whilst there are not enough responses from dyslexic pupils to make generalisable statements, there are enough data provided by other aspects of this mixed methods study to offer tentative suggestions about the study of Latin for dyslexic pupils. One of the most important implications is that withdrawing a pupil from an academically challenging subject on the basis of their learning needs can be damaging to their self-esteem, which then has repercussions in terms of success and confidence in other subjects. It would have been useful to interview pupils who have been withdrawn from Latin on the basis of dyslexia to see how they view such decisions. As success depends so much on interest in the subject and motivation to overcome the manifestations of dyslexia, perhaps there should be autonomy on the part of pupils to choose whether or not to study the subject in light of their learning needs. Importantly, all pupils ought to be given the same educational opportunities – an educational experience ought to be about allowing access to the curriculum, not preventing it on the basis of a label.

Another important implication is the idea that Latin – perhaps in its early stages at least – may be a particularly suitable subject for dyslexic pupils, more so than French, and not only suitable, but ameliorative. This is due to the logical structure of the language, the lack of oral aspects, the close reading skills, and the links with English vocabulary and MFL. Some teachers have asserted that Latin improves literacy in dyslexic pupils. This is where further research is necessary and indeed, potential a very exciting concept for any Classics teacher and dyslexic pupil. The most immediate implication for teachers is that they need to have the confidence, support and training to help pupils in the subject who are identified with dyslexia. Emphasis ought to be on facilitating access to the curriculum for pupils in order that their self-esteem is not damaged, and subsequently, the subject will be less likely to be perceived as too hard for pupils with dyslexia. There is much diversity in the manifestation and severity of dyslexia that blanket decisions based on the term alone cannot justifiably be made.

Final Thoughts

If, as is the case at some schools, a blanket decision is made to withdraw pupils identified as dyslexic from subjects such as Latin, it seems counterintuitive, given the increasing emphasis on individualised learning initiatives in schools, that the individuality of children is overlooked once they are identified as having an additional learning need. This decision wrongly assumes uniformity in the severities and manifestation and identification of the condition (Ancona, 1982). Indeed, the scope of this study was not such that different degrees of dyslexia could easily be considered or indeed regulated – but this would be an area for further study. It may be the case that those with a mild or moderate degree of dyslexia may stand to benefit most from studying the subject in terms of their literacy. If Latin were potentially ameliorative for the manifestations of dyslexia, as has been suggested in this study and the literature, and could be proven as such, this would have important implications for both the future of Classics teaching and the future of learning support strategies.

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References


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1 A preparatory school is a private / fee-paying school which educates pupils aged up to 13 years, usually following a curriculum designed to facilitate entrance by competitive examination to a private / fee-paying secondary school.

2 In the UK pupils commence compulsory schooling at the age of five in Year 1; thus Year 5 pupils will be about nine years old.

3 GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) is a national examination in the UK for 16 year old pupils.

4 A Level is a national examination in the UK for 18 year old pupils.