Dyslexia in the Secondary School

Improving whole school achievement through dyslexia aware best practice

The creation of a dyslexia aware secondary school initially depends on a common understanding among all staff of what dyslexia is and how it manifests as a learning and teaching issue. A key issue is to arrive at a description of dyslexia that resonates with classroom practitioners. Presenting dyslexia as a specific learning difficulty is not helpful – in secondary schools this often leads to it being seen as a problem which is the responsibility of someone with "special training". Consequently during whole school training the writer always refers to dyslexia as a specific learning difference. Subject specialists have related well to this, especially when challenged to identify students who have "unexpected difficulties" in reading and recording aspects of the subject in comparison to ability appropriate understanding of themes and concepts. Now, as teachers strive to adopt new techniques such as personalised learning and assessment for learning, a new description – dyslexia as a learning preference – is beginning to have a significant impact internationally.

The case for this paradigm shift is seductive and compelling; if dyslexia is a learning preference it means that there is nothing intrinsically "wrong" with the student as implied through terms such as specific learning difficulty or even disability. Instead student learning needs are defined by preferred ways to access, process and present knowledge, skills and concepts.

Having delivered hundreds of hours of whole school dyslexia training to secondary schools in the UK and abroad the writer is very clear about one thing - experienced and pressured teachers do not value or appreciate training which focuses on identification through checklists and their "responsibilities" to a small group of dyslexic students with severe learning needs. For better or for worse, what they do want is to know how to identify and respond effectively to individual learning needs within whole class settings in order to improve achievement and attainment.

They also appreciate guidance on how to make use of readily available data that has been "collected once and used lots". In other words they are looking for strategies and responses which fit seamlessly into current whole school imperatives based around monitoring, tracking and adding value though effective learning and teaching. This is not to marginalise the needs of severely dyslexic students; rather it is to acknowledge the current reality that most dyslexic students in secondary schools around the world spend most, if not all, of their

time in mainstream classes being taught by subject specialists with little awareness of or interest in the reasons behind their specific learning needs. The final objective of effective whole school training is to support all staff to develop their "dyslexia radar," not to label students but to identify those who will benefit from being taught as if they are dyslexic. Getting it right means more needs met through Quality First teaching resulting in higher quality intervention being available for smaller numbers of students.

Interestingly, one impact of effective whole school training is a definite interest in causation. It is as if effective training removes scales from the eyes of previously cynical teachers who, now they understand, somehow feel better able to "notice" dyslexic type learning needs and "adjust" their teaching accordingly, especially when they are shown how close best practice is to what they are currently doing. Indeed it is often the most suspicious teachers who end up as champions of their dyslexic students.

So being dyslexic in a secondary school can be a rewarding experience; it can also be extremely uncomfortable. The determining factor seems to be the commitment and vision of the Senior Management Team (SMT) and experience shows that this may be even more important to the educational and emotional well being of dyslexic learners than a lead person with a specialist qualification. The ideal scenario, of course, is to have the specialist backed by the senior management. However a specialist without support can only influence a small number of students whereas a   strong management team communicates a message that all learners are important, institutes rigorous monitoring to identify "stuck" pupil, plans intervention to move them on and tracks to make sure the movement continues.   This style of management embodies the principle of "no learner left behind" which is an appropriate mantra for an aspiring dyslexia aware secondary school. Effective whole school training offers directions for senior managers as well as subject teachers especially, with regard to criteria for lesson observations and performance management interviews and also the way subject /team leaders manage by walking about – "learning walks" with clearly understood and communicated criteria for the observation of dyslexia aware best practice are very effective in identify and promoting desired learning and teaching outcomes.
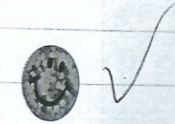
The challenge is always to justify changing the way a school works on behalf of the 10% or so of learner's who are dyslexic to some degree. "What about the rest?" is a common refrain, especially from staff who feel it is their job to teach the syllabus, rather than secure learning. Appreciating this subtle distinction between teaching and learning is at the heart of developing a dyslexia aware school, a distinction which is very current in the UK in particular and also likely to be a major issues in countries like New Zealand, where a new National Curriculum has just been launched, and in Hong Kong where changes are being implemented to public examinations to include more dyslexic learners.   Ironically it is the flawed UK national curriculum which is leading to exciting and intrinsically dyslexia aware developments as teachers struggle to come to terms with prescriptive syllabi, programmes

of study which assume that all learners are ready to move to the next stage at the same time and an culture which places a premium on the acquisition and recall of knowledge rather than the development of skills. Effective responses to pressures to deliver the undeliverable have included initiatives to personalise learning and to assess through and during learning as well as at the end of a sequence of instruction. Although these measures were not put in place with the needs of dyslexic learners in mind they both epitomise dyslexia aware best practice, offering significant opportunities to improve achievement and attainment.

 It is important at this time to distinguish between achievement and attainment; achievement is about a learner's journey from where they were to where they are now and can be measured by, for example, comparing work done in September with work done in March. The sample of work below is an example of student achievement in the form of a learning journey over a period of some seven months for a 12 year old learner.

Wednesday 20th Septer
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It is samath Saooly.
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tay hav Loon Feto.
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12/3/07

draft letter

Dear Mr. Jones,
I am writing to you
because this sitey needs
better public transport.
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While there can be little doubt that this dyslexic student is achieving, actual attainment may be harder to measure, especially in terms of norm based results and/or the sorts of "level descriptors" that can typify a national curriculum approach. In these contexts student performance is measured against either a large age related sample or an arbitrary statement about what "should be" achievable at a given age. Both contexts embody a traditional view of attainment and tend to discriminate against dyslexic students because few are traditional learners. Interviews with high achieving dyslexic adults tend to support this view – Richard Branson is reported to have found school a "nightmare" before going on to found the Virgin group while Einstein's teachers apparently considered him to be "mentally slow"! In consequence both highly successful individuals needed to get out of compulsory education in order to achieve their potential, something which is often still the case today, especially in schools which find it difficult to establish a culture in which achievement is valued as much as attainment.

In reality the situation is not a black and white case of either attainment or achievement – dyslexia aware schools acknowledge that facilitating achievement is the first step towards attainment, especially as success breeds success. Students who work in a culture of achievement soon cast off the baggage of years of perceived failure to attain and, as self image and confidence improve, they begin to make progress against a variety of measures. This is one benefit that a dyslexia aware school brings to a wider range of students –the measures that are put in place to ensure that no dyslexic student is left behind seem to improve the opportunities of students with a range of learning needs, including those with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorders (ADHD), Asperger's Syndrome and Dyspraxia/Developmental Coordinational Disorder. In the case of the writer's school, as dyslexia aware best practice became common practice, measurable improvements were recorded in a number of areas, including exam results, attendance and, evidenced by the number of new families choosing to move into the school catchment area, parental confidence.

All too often teachers with management responsibilities for student progress find themselves trying to do everything for everybody, with inevitable compromises in terms of quality and efficiency. On the other hand, the only way to eat an elephant is to take one bite at a time. Beginning with a focus on the achievement and attainment of dyslexic students offers a manageable opportunity to develop effective monitoring, tracking and response strategies within a clearly defined target group. Then, as confidence and expertise develop, the focus can be extended across a range of target learners – perhaps more able and talented or those failing to make expected progress – using techniques developed with dyslexic learners. Also, as schools "drill down" through the layers of data relating to dyslexic students and respond to findings, the seismic vibrations inevitably influence other groups. So, almost by default, a focus on one group can secure tangible benefits for all. Why then begin with dyslexic learners? Simply because they are the largest definable group of vulnerable students within any school and their learning needs respond to well to the types of fine tuning of lesson preparation, materials and delivery that represent the very best of current and future classroom practice. In other words, defining and delivering a basic curricular entitlement for dyslexic students sets the standard for all.

The Basic Entitlement

There are two key questions that must be addressed by any school aspiring to improve whole school achievement and attainment through a focus on dyslexia aware best practice.

1. Which students may not be benefitting enough from their education?

The only way to answer this question is to have measures of ability and achievement as well as current attainment. To rely on measures of current attainment alone, for example public examination scores passed on from primary school, is likely to be ineffective and potentially damaging. Some secondary schools in the UK use the scores from the SATs public examinations taken in primary school to set pupils on entry. In a dyslexia aware school this is an inappropriate use of such data for various reasons:

- It is unlikely that the results are a true reflection of the true ability of dyslexic learners, leading to underestimations of ability and subsequent placement in low sets

- It gives far too much importance to an artificial assessment procedure which has little to do with the education of students but everything to do with inspecting and assessing schools.

- The assessments create unhealthy levels of stress in students, parents and teachers

This is not to dismiss information gained by these assessments but the effects of the current process on the emotional and mental health of students is a growing concern in the UK and also in Hong Kong, where examinations to get into Band 1 schools are causing similar high levels of stress. In the UK it would make a tremendous difference if secondary stopped using primary SATs results as the basis for setting after transition.
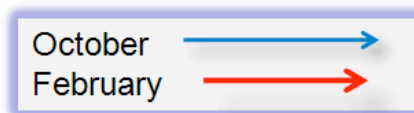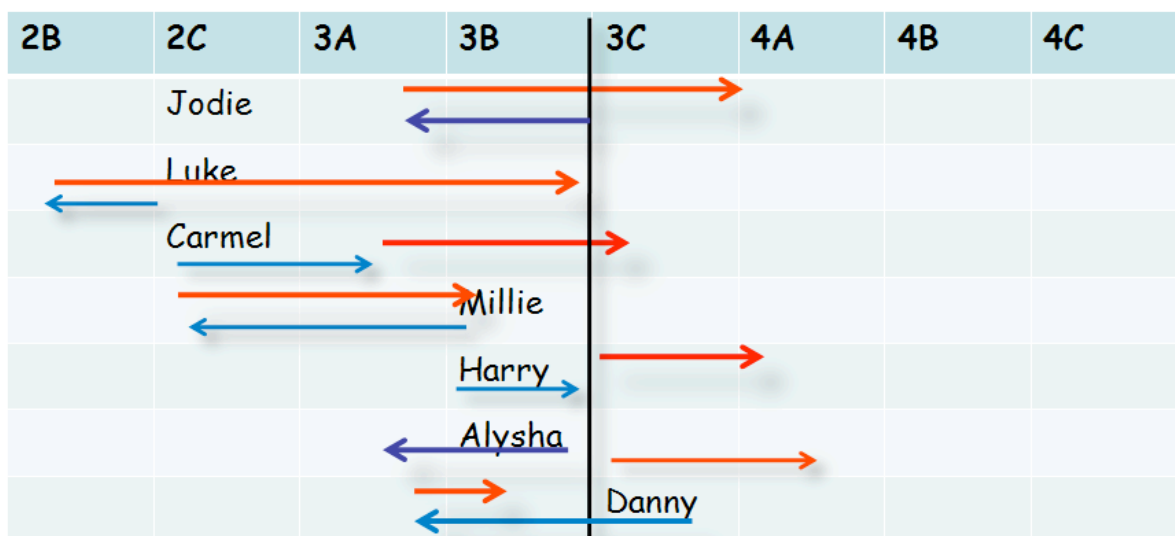
The use of data to establish "expected progress" is proving to be very useful in the UK and, it is fair to say, results of public examinations taken at age 11 and 14 contribute greatly to this. Once this benchmark is in place student progress can be monitored very easily. However the process is perhaps rather "blunt" for dyslexic learners as current weaknesses in some aspects of basic literacy and numeracy may artificially depress a student's expectation of progress and also fail to take into account age/ability appropriate conceptual development. One solution is to ensure that all data used to establish expected progress for dyslexic learners is supplemented with a measure of non-verbal reasoning, either via an individual test or as part of a group test such as NFER's CATs test which includes this element. Like all assessments, non verbal reasoning tests are only a snapshot of performance at that moment in time, but they do give a measure of how a student thinks and reasons, skills which are essential for the achievement of potential. Therefore a student with weak basic skills but age appropriate non verbal reasoning is clearly not a "slow

learner" – s/he will definitely learn some aspects of literacy and/or numeracy slowly but learning in other areas can be in line with national expectations.

When dyslexic students transfer from primary to secondary schools or move between year groups they often experience "transition dip" – their achievement and attainment dips while they adjust to new teachers and different course requirements. A simple but effective technique to monitor this is the "Arrow Tracker". This example is using English National Curriculum English levels as the basis for monitoring.

When a teacher receives the levels for a new class they are recorded on the tracker as in the example. Student names are recorded under the attainment level they achieved prior to transition. In October and February informal assessment of current levels are made and arrows used to indicate "where students are now". It can be clearly seen that the attainment of a number of students has deteriorated following transfer to the new group. However, when a further assessment was carried out in February some are now making good progress.

"Arrow Tracking"
Year 7 Reading

2B	2C	3A	3B	3C	4A	4B	4C
	Jodie						
	Luke						
	Carmel						
			Millie				
			Harry				
			Alysha				
				Danny			

October	(blue arrow)
February	(red arrow)

The tracker indicates the following individual peaks and troughs in performance for SpLD students following transition and then later in the academic year:

- **Jodie** lost ground briefly on transition but is now making good progress

- **Luke** was at Level 2C on transfer but slipped back a sub level in October. However he then found his feet and made good progress. A specific intervention triggered this progress. See Group Provision Map

- **Carmel** had no problems on transition and continued to make progress

- **Millie** went back by 3 sub levels on transition and, by February, had only managed to catch up to her original transition level

- **Alysha** lost ground but has more than caught up and is now doing fine following successful intervention – see Group Provision Map

- **Danny** went back nearly 3 sub levels on transition and has still not caught up in February.

So this tracker suggests that Millie and Danny are not benefitting enough from their education.

It can also be interesting to compare performance on the arrow tracker with the group's provision map (the plan of interventions provided for individual students)

Year 7 SpLD Group Provision Map

	Speech+ Language support		Learning. Mentor		Phonic programme		Teaching Assistant Support	
	Sep	Feb	Sep	Feb	Sep	Feb	Sep	Feb
Jodie	#	#						#
Luke						#		
Carmel					#		#	
Millie			#					
Harry					#			
Alysha							#	#
Danny			#	#				

When viewed with the Arrow Tracker this provision map demonstrates the impact of certain interventions. For example, having noticed that Luke was losing ground, the school adjusted his education by building in a phonic programme. The impact has been very positive. The situation is rather different for Alysha. She did well during her final year in primary school and it was decided that she no longer needed support from a Teaching Assistant (TA) in the secondary school. As can be seen from the arrow tracker, Alysha lost ground until the TA was reinstated in late September. Since then she has continued to progress. Danny is an interesting case - despite having the support of a Learning Mentor and starting on a phonic programme, he is not making expected progress so it is time to re-visit his provision. Perhaps TA support may have more impact? One intervention which can have a major impact on the achievement of dyslexic students in the secondary school is anger management. In some cases this can be more effective than traditional learning support.

2. How are we responding to specific learning needs without underestimating intellect?

The monitoring and tracking strategies used to identify those dyslexic learners who may not be benefitting enough from their teaching also help school respond to specific learning needs without underestimating intellect. Dyslexic students tend to think faster and more effectively than they read, write and spell. Consequently it can be depressingly easy to underestimate their ability and make unsafe judgements about groupings and sets based on solely on weak basic skills. This is compounded when secondary schools make decisions based on performance in national examinations and/or fail to liaise effectively with primary schools in order to assess achievement as well as attainment.

A characteristic of a dyslexia aware secondary school is a willingness to place dyslexic learners in ability appropriate groups and sets despite current weaknesses in basic literacy and/or numeracy. It is important to view these weaknesses as current rather than in any way permanent – with quality first teaching, reasonable adjustments and effective intervention as required, dyslexic learners can achieve their potential and go on to be the best they can be. However this will only occur if schools have measures of ability to set alongside data on achievement and attainment. Therefore dyslexic learners of high intellectual ability will be placed in appropriate sets and supported with reading and recording while developing conceptual abilities alongside their intellectual peers. This accommodation will apply to dyslexic learners of all abilities who are receiving support with basic skills to enable them to access lessons at ability appropriate levels.

Another important characteristic is the willingness of the school to take a flexible view of the curriculum. UK inspectors are keen that all students have the right to a broad balanced curriculum which can be a major problem for some dyslexic students because it causes subject overload. So rather than being a right, being subject to a broad balanced curriculum can be a tyranny! The issue of curricular overload is reported to be compounded by a message from School Improvement Partners that everything must be taught to everybody; to fail to do so is somehow unprofessional. In a dyslexia aware school, the curriculum is driven by local perceptions of individual student needs, with subject managers empowered by the SMT to look carefully at the programmes of study and "ignore, adapt, pick and mix" aspects of content. To put this in context, it would be reasonable to find dyslexic students with a good understanding of Science being supported to function in ability appropriate sets while much of their English time is spent on "catch up" to improve basic skills to a functional level. Also it may be necessary to consider reducing the number of subjects studied, especially for public examinations to allow for consolidation of learning and the explicit teaching of revision and study skills.

The quality of learning, teaching and awareness available to a student with dyslexia should not be a "timetable lottery" – a student should be able to move from lesson to lesson and be completely confident that every teacher has a basic understanding of dyslexia, knows how to address dyslexic type learning needs in general and has been properly briefed regarding specific issues for individual students. A whole school approach is the obvious answer and this is best secured through whole school training, preferably committing a full day to the issue. Although the focus is on teaching dyslexic students, the most effective training also concentrates on subject based "notice and adjust" strategies within the context of on-going school improvement targets rather than going in to exhaustive detail about causation and neurology. Basically what teachers and Teaching Assistants seem to appreciate from training is a rationale to justify the fine tuning of current practice and to find out what they can do slightly differently next lesson in order to be more effective.

Effective whole school dyslexia aware training has the potential to pull together a range of current educational imperatives into one coherent strategy. In the UK for example, the impact of three important initiatives, mind friendly learning, assessment for learning and personalised learning has been significantly reduced by a lack of joined up thinking and communication between implementing agencies. In consequence the measures are often seen as separate entities rather than sides of the same coin. Schools which are able to accept dyslexia as a learning preference are already open to the notion that students do not learn according to curriculum manuals or national decrees. Therefore responding to the

"non-traditional" preferences of dyslexic learners in terms of the ways they prefer to access, record and provide evidence of learning becomes a normal part of what the school does. "if they don't learn the way we teach them, we'll teach them the way they learn." Unfortunately the key message of mind friendly learning, that it is about improving opportunities for achievement and attainment, has somehow become lost due to a lack of rigour in terms of outcomes.

 Part of the problem has been the use of the phrase "intelligences" which can label students in an unhelpful way and restrict the ways they feel able to organise and present their learning. Indeed it is not unusual for students to challenge an assignment because "I am a kinaesthetic learner and I can't be expected to do it like that." Substituting "preferences" for "intelligences" creates an important paradigm shift for students and teachers alike and introduces the important concept of comfort zones. So students may well prefer to produce evidence in one way but appreciate that they can also do so in a variety of less comfortable ways in order to achieve a result – effectively becoming strategic learners. Dyslexic students in secondary schools are particularly appreciative of opportunities to "show they know" in creative and eclectic ways which minimise current basic skill issues and capitalise on a range of strengths.

If dyslexia is a learning preference it is important to qualify the position; dyslexic students do not prefer to acquire aspects of basic skills slowly and definitely do not prefer to have to deal with typical memory and information processing issues. On the other hand, a learning preference is just that – a preference to acquire and demonstrate knowledge, skills and concepts in certain ways. So, just as a student with a strong mathematical sequential preference may use flow charts and bullet points rather than mind maps, a dyslexic student may prefer to use a core strategy based on the use of colour, visual imagery/metaphor and mind maps within an overarching kinaesthetic format. The concept of dyslexia as a preference was recently presented informally to psychologists and teachers in the UK and Asia and received guarded approval as an idea worthy of further discussion and debate; what is certain is that it definitely strikes a chord with non-dyslexia specialist subject teachers in secondary teachers since it offers notice and adjust strategies without the need to label or assess.

Once mind friendly teaching and learning is cut loose from the confines of VAK (visual, auditory, kinaesthetic) and embraces seven or eight preferences, the stage is set for a significant contribution to classroom and examination performance. From this position it is but a small step to personalising learning.

Like mind friendly, personalised learning has suffered from the way it has been introduced and arguably has failed to regain the credibility lost through mixed messages communicated during the initial roll out. The message often received by teachers is that they are somehow expected to plan for an individual approach for each student, a message which has not been helpful. However students are perfectly capable of personalising their learning when given the opportunity to make informed choices within a framework of metacognition (understanding how to learn) and strategic learning preferences. Lesson planning based around the personalisation of learning through student choice is a very different process to attempting to personalise by effectively differentiating for each member of the class – definitely not recommended.

Personalising learning through choice can work like this:

3. Use a learning preferences questionnaire (try, for example, the free questionnaire available through www.acceleratedlearning.com or other free web resources) to identify two or three preferences for each student. This cluster becomes a student's "core learning strategy" and forms the basis of preferential approaches to the organisation and presentation of learning.

4. Demonstrate how to use each learning preference within the core as an organisational and processing tool within a given subject and provide safe, stress free opportunities to develop personalised strategies. Challenging students to "show they know" or requiring homework tasks to be presented within certain preferences are effective ways of developing preferential strategies in real classroom situations. The keys to success include:

- Well planned teaching and learning opportunities to gain mastery at a range of preferential organisational techniques

- Consistent opportunities to make choices in the formative and summative presentation of work.

Recent work in Wales with infant children offers insights into effective personalisation techniques with older students. An innovative learning project organised in conjunction with Powys Children's Service challenged an experienced teacher to lead her class to develop mastery of three organisational strategies, mind mapping, story boarding and flow charting. The strategies were built in to the current class project on pirates and, having been taught each one, the children used templates as scaffolding tools to develop mastery.

It was when the children were invited to choose a preferred strategy to deliver a piece of work that the power of personalized learning became clear. The children chose their template, gave reasons for their choice and went to work. Several interesting things happened – Josh, who had not finished a piece of work all year, was one of the first to complete his task and other "poor completers" were soon to follow. Also the teacher expressed surprise both at the quiet and effective way the class settled to work and the choices made by some students. She observed that a significant number of students chose to work outside of their normal preference or comfort zone because, as they explained, they thought they would do better another way. So pupils perceived as strongly preferring to draw and organise work with storyboards may have chosen, instead, a very linear flow chart for the activity in hand. There were clear examples of a significant number of students choosing to work out of apparent comfort zones in order to gain perceived advantages through another strategy.
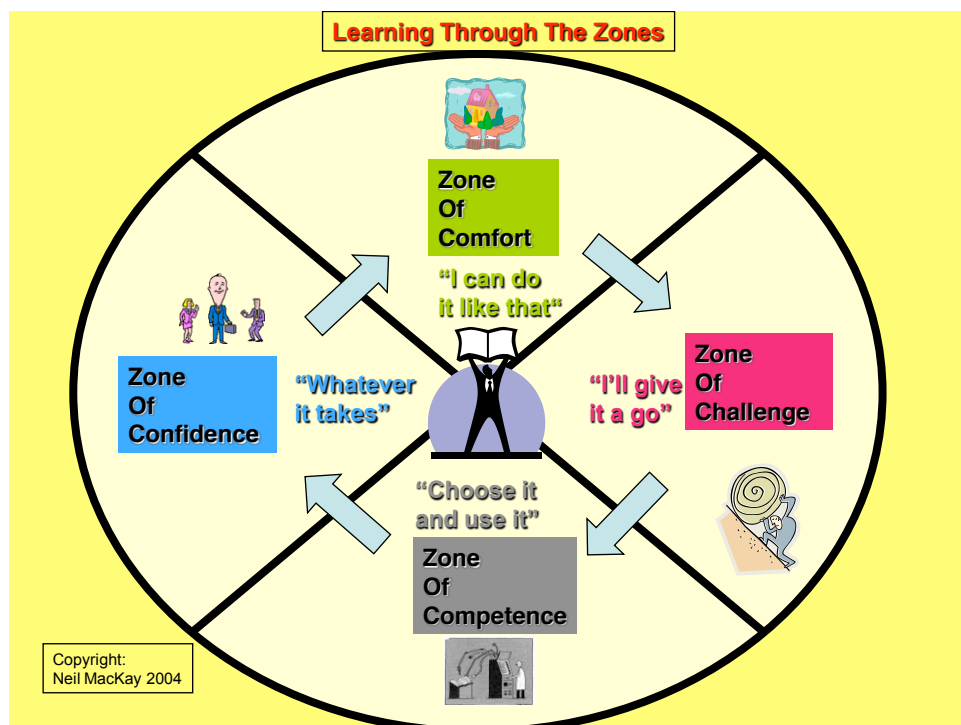
In the context of the chart, these very young students had been supported to move out of their comfort zone by being challenged to attempt different planning approaches. Having become competent in a range of approaches they found themselves in the zone of confidence, happily doing whatever was necessary, even to work in relative "discomfort" in order to plan and deliver a good piece of work. The teacher also observed that, had she differentiated the task by outcome – allocated planning scaffolds to pupils based on her

knowledge of preferred learning strategies, she would not have been able to predict with any accuracy actual preferred choices – individuals made strategic choices based on personal reasons which actually defied teacher predictions. If this result can be informed by future research it may call into question a great deal of conventional wisdom about the value of teacher planned differentiation, especially differentiation by task, where the teacher allocates tasks to individual groups based on a perception of ability, aptitude and interest. It would appear, from this example, that the concept of differentiation by task may be flawed, especially with regard to the allocation of tasks involving information processing and/or the organising of writing.

Applying this to the secondary setting, it becomes clear that, if young children are capable of becoming strategic learners and personalising their learning by making informed choices, the potential of this approach with older students is huge. Once students are empowered to work effectively across a range of information processing and presentation strategies the teacher can challenge them to personalise their responses by setting assessment challenges as follows (with key words emphasised):

"Your **challenge** is to show me what you know/ have learned about...... Here is the mark scheme/list of assessment criteria. You have the **right** to choose any way that you think is appropriate for the task. Here is a list of possible way: (mind map, flow chart, story board, play script, video diary, model, power point presentation, recorded interview etc) You have the **responsibility** to choose a method of presentation that will generate a **markable outcome**. I have to be able to give you marks for what you do, using the criteria we have discussed. Off you go."

An understandable concern, which is invariably voiced during whole school training, is that students cannot use mind maps or flow charts as evidence of learning in public examinations. While this is sad but true, it is to miss the point that these techniques are actually springboards or stepping stones to the production of traditional evidence of achievement. Marking and celebrating alternative evidence of achievement is a positive and motivating force; students remember what has touched their emotions and success is a powerful thing. However the required next step and one which is all too rarely emphasised in current writing on mind friendly or personalised learning techniques, is to carefully and explicitly teach the process of turning the alternative into the traditional. An effective way is to require students to:

- teach and talk through their alternative strategy with a talking partner

- use visualisation techniques to "photograph" the strategy with their mind

- during the test/exam recall and draw the alternative strategy very quickly as a planning exercise before starting to write

The approach needs to be developed as soon as students enter secondary school and utilised consistently by all teachers using methods appropriate to their subjects. .

This idea was challenged recently by secondary teachers in Hong Kong, who felt that dyslexic students were already failing to complete public examinations during the time limit. The feeling was that if they spent time planning the students would actually answer fewer questions.   However once the principle of planning for writing was explained and discussed it became apparent that five minutes planning and twenty five minutes writing would probably generate a more thorough and perhaps longer response that trying to write solidly for half an hour. Students writing from a plan would be less likely to become blocked and would generally communicate more effectively in the time available.

These techniques are equally effective when used to support dyslexic students to personalise their study and revision skills for school based assessments and public examinations, including GCSE, A level, International Baccalaureate, and degree courses. The same principle of establishing a core learning strategy applies, except that the students need sensitive guidance to cut loose from the baggage of years of failure from trying to learn via "traditional" means; as stated earlier, dyslexic students tend not to be traditional learners and attempts to apply standard revision solutions to non traditional dyslexic learners are unlikely to succeed. Leading dyslexic students to a realisation that they actually can "learn to remember" as effectively as their peers is one of life's great pleasures!

Almost by definition personalised learning approaches require similarly eclectic approaches to assessment, especially with regard to securing alternative evidence of achievement.   This can present a problem in secondary schools where well established assessment procedures, quite understandably, are carefully designed to mirror the requirements of public examinations. Breaking free from the artificial constraints of examinations, while ensuring that students are equipped to deal with them, is a juggling act which a growing number of secondary schools are managing through their commitment to assessment for learning.   At its most simple, assessment for learning is the formative process of working out where students are during a lesson or unit of work, working out where they need to go and how to get there. This is a very different process from formative "end of unit/end of year" assessments which can result in students failing to achieve for significant periods of time before problems are noticed.   Secondary schools which fully embrace assessment for learning are dyslexia aware in all sorts of ways before they even begin to think about the specific needs of dyslexic students. This is because all teachers are already changing what they do, lesson by lesson, in response to their students and are actively encouraged to

modify schemes of work and units of study to meet learning needs. Add to this sound procedures for tracking, monitoring and responding to individual difficulties, linked to individual responsibility for noticing and adjusting to learning needs, and no dyslexic student need ever be left behind again.