

Media Release
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Visiting expert: NZ schools put children on path to crime

Traditional ways of dealing with dyslexia in the classroom are a formula for failure – creating low self-esteem and pushing kids towards a life of crime, according to a visiting international dyslexia expert.

Neil Mackay is in New Zealand to host a sold-out nationwide series of workshops for teachers and parents during Dyslexia Action Week (15-21 June).

A consultant to government and educational organisations in UK, Hong Kong and Malta, Mr Mackay has put together an ironic nine-step guide to 'How to Create a Criminal', outlining what the education system does wrong for dyslexic students. He says that right now, many New Zealand schools are unwittingly following that guide – starting with schools putting too much emphasis on reading at the expense of thinking and other core skills.

Mr MacKay's controversial but powerful views on the links between dyslexia and youth offending are in line with those of New Zealand's Principal Youth Court Judge Andrew Becroft, who has identified a "route to offending" which begins with classroom difficulties caused by undiagnosed learning issues.

"I am seriously concerned as to the number of young offenders who have slipped through the 'educational net' because of undiagnosed learning disabilities, especially dyslexia. Overseas a pathway to eventual offending, originating from undiagnosed and unaddressed dyslexia is well-known," Judge Becroft says.

Research is currently being planned to ascertain how many young offenders in the three youth justice custodial residences in New Zealand suffer from dyslexia or other learning disabilities. "There is a real need in New Zealand to analyse this important issue more closely," Judge Becroft says.

In his workshops, Mr MacKay will advise teachers how to notice learning issues in the classroom and adjust teaching to allow for personalised learning. Personalised learning includes strategies based on developing comprehension through use of context, syntax and grammar, and looking at areas such as organisation of ideas, planning skills, learning to remember, raising self esteem and valuing emotional intelligence

He also has advice for parents on what to expect from schools, and what key questions to ask to make sure their child doesn't get left behind – from what extra support will my child get, through to setting targets for progress and what happens if none is made.

Mr MacKay says that one in ten New Zealanders have dyslexia, including 70,000 schoolchildren, and that the country is at a crossroads.

"New Zealand has a choice whether dyslexic individuals become part of a problem, or part of the solution. If not addressed appropriately, dyslexia can lead to low self-esteem, disruptive and anti-social behaviours, truancy, depression, drug use and crime."

"On the other hand, if addressed properly, dyslexia can become a key economic driver. Because of their alternative way of thinking, dyslexic individuals often excel in entrepreneurship, innovation and creativity – all implicit within the National Curriculum and sorely needed during tough economic times. Internationally, research is now focused on the unparalleled contributions dyslexics can make to the workplace and the economy."

Over 1200 teachers and parents will be attending Mr MacKay's workshops, organised by Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand. They will be held in Christchurch (13-14 June), Dunedin (15 June), Wellington (16 June), Palmerston North (18 June), Hamilton (19 June) and Auckland (20-21 June).

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To interview Neil MacKay or attend a workshop, please contact Kym Beggs, kym.beggs@sweeneyvesty.com 027 254 3174

About Neil MacKay

Neil MacKay is one of the world's leading thinkers on dyslexia and author of the acclaimed resource book *Removing Dyslexia as a Barrier to Achievement*. The creator of Britain's Dyslexia Friendly Schools concept, Mr Mackay is an experienced teacher with 26 years in mainstream schools, he has also been an HM schools inspector. Mr MacKay is also a teaching fellow at Trinity College Carmarthen (University of Wales), and runs interactive workshops on dyslexia, Masters level courses for teachers at several higher education centres, and courses on revision and study techniques for students.

Neil MacKay's 'How to Create a Criminal': Nine Steps to Failure

Suppose someone was perverse enough to want to ensure that a NZ student ended up in prison. How would they achieve it? Simple, find a dyslexic student and ensure that:

1. Teachers focus on reading accuracy at the expense of thinking and the other core skills of the National Curriculum
2. Fail to share any concerns with parents – dismiss parental concerns – tell them “S/he's young/naughty/not ready yet”
3. Dismiss/ignore achievements/aptitudes in other subject areas (including, sports, the arts, drama, ICT etc) because of basic skill weaknesses
4. Put in “remedial groups” despite average performance in subjects other than English
5. Treat escalating bad behaviour as something “wrong” with the student, home, background, environment etc rather than looking for causes within his/her schooling (in the UK, school inspectors say the major cause of bad behaviour is an inflexible curriculum)
6. On transfer to secondary school, ensure that s/he is labelled as naughty rather than in need of support and ensure that none of his/her teachers have any awareness of dyslexia or of how needs may have been identified/met in primary school
7. If, by some chance s/he gets any support, ensure it is focused on improving reading accuracy at the expense of functional reading with little or no emphasis on learning to learn, planning, organisation etc – “death by phonics” is essential, especially if the student prefers/needs to acquire literacy skills in other ways.
8. As attendance and punctuality decline, see it as a self-fulfilling prophecy rather than an institutional failure
9. Absolutely vital – make sure s/he leaves school with minimal/no qualifications, despite being of average ability

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