



Helping provide 'write' support

Most of us take the ability to read and write for granted, but for some it will be a lifelong struggle.
SALLY BROOKER reports.

DYSLEXIA is blighting the lives of hundreds of people in our community, yet we remain largely ignorant about it.

The Altrusa Club of Oamaru is taking action to change that. It is screening a movie based on the life of actor Robert Redford's dyslexic grandson.

Called *The Big Picture: rethinking dyslexia*, the one-hour movie will be shown twice at the Oamaru Opera House ODT InkBox on Wednesday, at 5.30pm and 7.30pm.

Altrusa member and Waitaki Girls' High School learning support teacher Liz Ballantyne is doing her utmost to have local pupils assessed and better resourced to cope with dyslexia.

She became interested through seeing the condition in her extended family. Twenty years ago, she took a Speld course on working with specific learning disabilities and tutored a few students. She has recently completed a University of Canterbury graduate diploma in teaching students with special learning needs and a master's paper in dyslexia.

Mrs Ballantyne has become concerned that many pupils do not have their dyslexia

identified before they start high school.

Dyslexia is defined as a specific type of learning disability that affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent reading and spelling. Characteristics include difficulties converting letter

combinations to sounds and vice versa, remembering sound sequences, and processing information.

It occurs across all intellectual abilities and does not indicate intelligence or a lack of it. Dyslexia is thought to affect about 10% of the

population to varying degrees and can run in families.

The Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand said brain research at Auckland University showed while most people use the "verbal" left side of the brain to understand words, dyslexic people use the

"pictorial" right side. This makes them slower to process and understand language but stronger in creative areas such as problem-solving, empathy, leadership and lateral thinking.

Mrs Ballantyne said she confirmed her diagnosis of dyslexia when pupils showed very good comprehension but struggled to read and write anywhere near their chronological age.

One of the worst effects of the condition was low self-esteem, she said. Children who could not read and write well were often embarrassed and considered themselves stupid. Poor achievement at school compounded the problem. Their school reports often said they needed to try harder and stay on task.

"If we can provide them with reading and writing support, their true ability will come out," Mrs Ballantyne said.

"I feel quite passionately we need to be supporting these students."

Literacy is more important now than in the past, with reading and writing a major component in the curriculum, even in mathematics.

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Raising awareness . . . Liz Ballantyne, through her work in learning support at Waitaki Girls' High School and as a member of Altrusa, is keen for the community to know more about dyslexia.

PHOTO: SALLY BROOKER



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Waitaki Girls' was helping dyslexic pupils by letting them use electronic dictionaries and giving them printed documents on pale blue paper that could make the black print easier to read.

Subject teachers were asked to provide vocabulary lists and were working on a variety of strategies to help improve learning.

Targeting the specific needs of priority learners, including dyslexic pupils, was a focus in the teachers' professional development, she said. One thing a dyslexic pupil should never be asked to do was read aloud in front of others.

When it came to exams, NZQA allowed dyslexic pupils to use a computer, have a reader-writer to help them, and have extra time to complete their papers. However, to qualify for that level of support, the pupil had to have a psychological assessment.

That could cost parents \$300-\$600 and there was no-one in Oamaru to carry it out, Mrs Ballantyne said. The nearest was in Timaru, or a Dunedin assessor would come to Oamaru if there were at least three assessments to be done.

Mrs Ballantyne and colleagues at the other Oamaru high schools had spent weeks last term preparing information to submit to NZQA to seek special assessment conditions for their pupils for forthcoming NCEA exams.