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Dyslexics at risk early

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If New Zealand schools fail to embrace the new New Zealand Curriculum, they will continue to put pupils with dyslexia on a path to crime, a visiting authority has told Otago teachers and parents.

A Trinity College Carmarthen (University of Wales) teaching fellow and creator of Britain's Dyslexia Friendly Schools concept, Neil MacKay is in New Zealand to host a sold-out nationwide series of workshops for more than 1300 teachers and parents as part of Dyslexia Action Week (which ends on Sunday).

Mr MacKay told more than 100 teachers and parents in Dunedin yesterday the traditional ways of dealing with dyslexia in the classroom were a formula for failure, and were creating low self-esteem, which was pushing youngsters towards a life of crime.

One in 10 New Zealanders had dyslexia, including 70,000 school children, and Mr MacKay said the country was 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 antisocial behaviour, 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 new curriculum and sorely needed during tough economic times," he said.

As part of his role as a consultant to government and educational organisations in the United Kingdom, Hong Kong and Malta, Mr MacKay created a nine-step guide on how to create a criminal, which outlines what the present education system does wrong for dyslexic pupils.

He believed many New Zealand schools were unwittingly following that guide, starting with schools putting too much emphasis on reading at the expense of thinking and other core skills.

During the workshop, Mr MacKay showed teachers how to notice learning issues in the classroom and



Neil MacKay warns the traditional ways of dealing with dyslexia in the classroom are a formula for pushing youngsters towards a life of crime. Photo by Jane Dawber.

adjust teaching to allow for personalised learning.

Personalised learning included 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 said.

He also advised parents about what to expect from schools and what key questions to ask to make sure their child did not get left behind.

This included asking what extra support their child would get, setting targets for progress and what should happen if none was made.

Mr MacKay said his views on the links between dyslexia and youth offending were controversial, but were in line with those of New Zealand's principal youth court judge, Andrew Becroft, who identified a route to offending which began 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 said.

Neil MacKay's nine steps for turning a dyslexic pupil into a criminal.

- 1.** Teachers should focus on reading accuracy at the expense of thinking and the other core skills of the national curriculum.
- 2.** Fail to share concerns with parents, dismiss parental concerns, tell them their child is young/naughty/not ready yet.
- 3.** Dismiss, or ignore, achievements or aptitudes in other subject areas because of basic skill weaknesses.
- 4.** Put pupils in remedial groups despite average performance in subjects other than English.
- 5.** Treat escalating bad behaviour as a problem with the pupil, their home, background or environment, rather than looking for causes within their schooling.
- 6.** Ensure the pupil, on transfer to secondary school, is labelled "naughty" rather than in need of support. Ensure none of their teachers is aware of dyslexia or of how needs may have been identified or met in primary school.
- 7.** If the pupil gets 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 or organisation.

"Death by phonics" is essential, especially if the pupil prefers 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. Ensure the pupil leaves school with minimal or no qualifications, despite being of average ability.

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