

# Schools fail dyslexic learners

Dyslexic students are often creative thinkers and have different needs to other students, which must be addressed from an early stage, argues GUY POPE-MAYELL.

**D**yslexia is an alternative way of thinking that if effectively addressed, can be a gift. Often found in the creative professions from artists to musicians, actors, chefs, and even iconic leaders, a world without dyslexia would be a much less colourful and diverse place.

The theme for this year's Dyslexia Awareness Week (June 16-22) is *Blessing in Disguise*, which is all about recognising the creative gifts that dyslexia can bring. But for most of the 70,000 dyslexic school children in our education system, recognising dyslexia as a gift won't be the norm.

This is because their learning needs are not being recognised or supported by the mainstream education system. Dyslexia's biggest disability is self-esteem. Every day dyslexic people of all ages see themselves as failures instead of embracing their unique talents and way of looking at the world around them.

And too many of our children share a shockingly similar story, told they are lazy, losers, academically challenged, only good for manual labour and so on. It is no surprise then that dyslexia is not only at the root of many education difficulties, but flows through to social issues; for example, youth depression and youth suicide. It is also estimated that 50 per cent of youth who find themselves in court are dyslexic or have an identifiable learning disability.

This has been recognised by Andrew Becroft, Principal Youth Court Judge, who has identified a route to offending, which often starts with classroom difficulties caused by undiagnosed learning problems.

It is also no surprise that the Government's recently announced Schools Plus programme will be hard pushed to address any of this. Schools Plus, designed to reach about 14,000 young people (25% of school leavers) who exit school without even a Level 1 qualification, is fundamentally flawed. It's too little, too late, the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff

for underperforming school-leavers who are already disengaged and disenfranchised, and have had years of inadequate support.

To me, it's a simple choice: help 70,000 school children with dyslexia and make a real difference all through their school lives, or leave it to the last minute and put sticking plasters on the 14,000 early school-leavers who can't wait to get out the school gate.

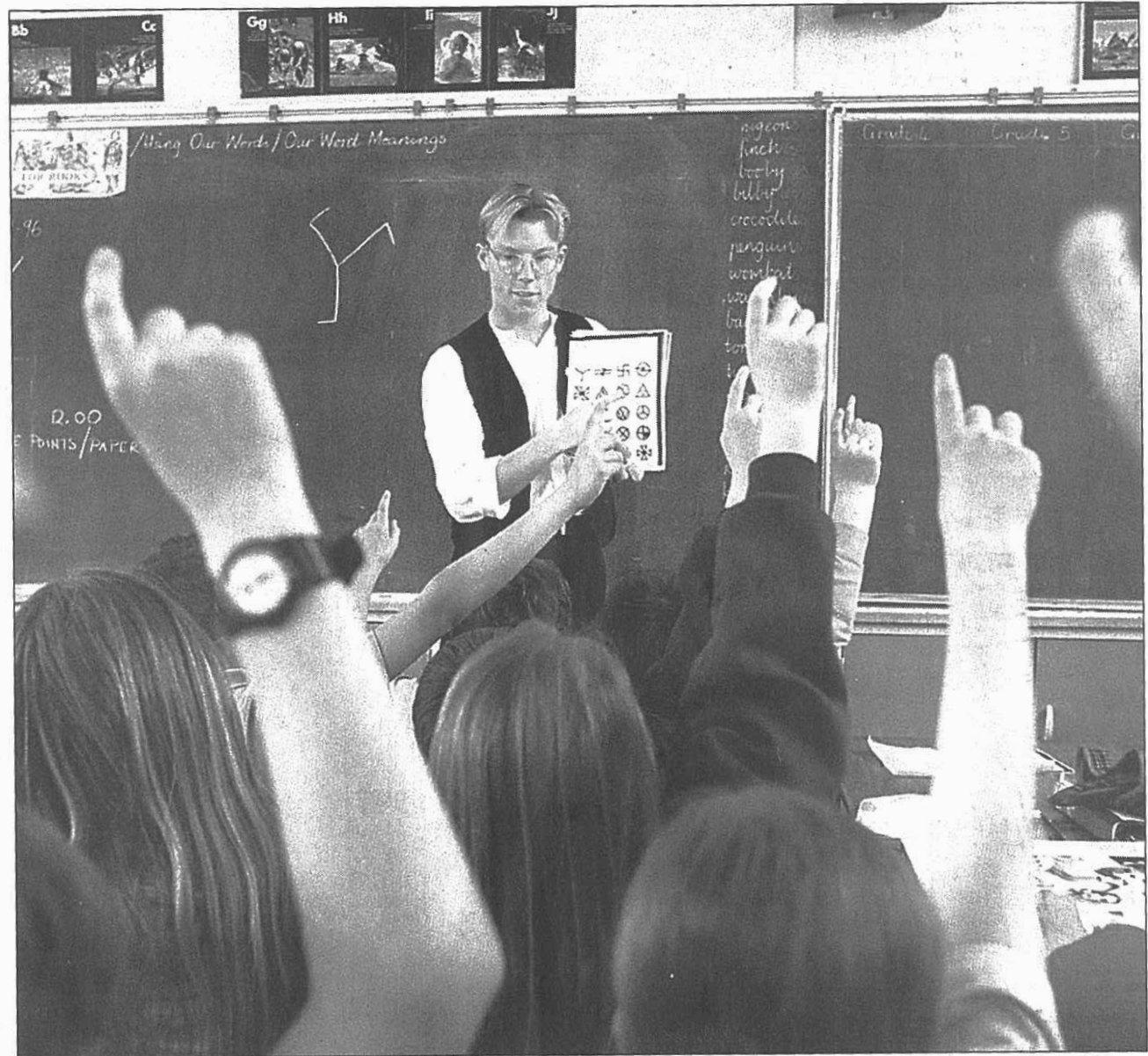
The bottom line is that the vast majority of those early school-leavers would not be in that position if their educational needs were correctly addressed at an early stage. We see dyslexia as the sharp end of the stick in that if you get the learning environment right for dyslexic students early on, it will work for and benefit others. We estimate the percentage of underqualified school-leavers could be reduced by up to half simply by getting the environment right.

The process of developing engaged youth starts at primary school and requires learning difficulties to be identified early and addressed through appropriate classroom strategies and specific interventions implemented across the whole school.

Education is a fundamental right for children, yet the system in New Zealand predetermines failure for a child who learns differently. Acknowledging that children learn in different ways is one of the biggest factors impacting students' participation, engagement and achievement at school.

British educationalist Neil MacKay says that to operate effectively, children must begin their learning from a platform of strength and competence. This means reinforcing their strengths and providing opportunities to maximise these rather than marginalising those who learn in non-traditional ways. It's the self-esteem issue again.

Recognising learning differences and accommodating a number of learning methods, materials and approaches will ensure children develop a stake in their own learning,



**Meeting the needs:** the number of underqualified school-leavers could be reduced by up to half simply by addressing the needs of dyslexic students early on. Photo: Fairfax

and will create buy-in from an early age. To quote William Yeats, "Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire".

Since 2004, the Government has implemented a \$3.8 million-a-year Literacy Professional Development Project.

This programme focuses on improving teacher knowledge, targeting the bottom 20% of students to improve learning and achievement in literacy.

While it's great that 7000 Kiwi kids are involved and benefiting from the programme, it's simply not enough. Just like the Schools Plus programme, the Literacy Professional Development Project ignores dyslexia

and thus misses the opportunity to address the bigger picture. Again, focusing attention on dyslexia would create immediate impact and provide positive benefits for at least half the 20%.

Last year, the Ministry of Education laid the foundation for change when it formally recognised dyslexia. This year it's time to translate recognition into action.

With subtle changes such as dyslexia-specific professional development for all teachers and dyslexia modules in teacher training courses, we will see a much-needed shift in understanding and attitude that will result in changes in the classroom and improvements in

levels of student engagement. Add to this dyslexia assessment tools and targeted interventions, and we will start to see real progress that supports the Government's education objectives.

We firmly believe that specific funding to address learning difficulties is of paramount importance and will have critical and lasting benefits for students throughout their time at school, and as they transition into the workplace.

■ Guy Pope-Mayell is the chairman of trustees of the Dyslexia Foundation of NZ and the father of four children, two of whom are dyslexic.