

Teachers sign up for course on dyslexia

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By [Jacqueline Smith](#)

An international expert claims that by fine tuning their lessons to help dyslexic learners, teachers can lift the achievement of all students and ultimately reduce youth crime.

Thousands of teachers have signed up to dyslexia expert Neil Mackay's workshops in New Zealand this week which bear his message: "If you get it right for people with dyslexic-type learning needs, you actually get it right for everyone."

At the same time Principal Youth Court judge Andrew Becroft is calling for a study into the percentage of criminals in New Zealand youth prisons with dyslexia. Last year he identified what he called "a route to offending" which he said started with classroom difficulties, caused by undiagnosed learning problems.

"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," he said.

Mr Mackay said in Scotland it was expected that 50 per cent of all prisoners were affected by dyslexia, and he would expect similar ratios in other countries.

"I think you would find that a majority of young offenders have had unfortunate school experiences and unresolved learning difficulties. Some of those will be dyslexic, no question at all," he said.

On the other hand Mr Mackay said there was no doubt some of the most creative people in the world had achieved what they had because of dyslexia, but added: "However many say that they needed to get out of compulsory education to be the best they could be."

Experts claim 10 per cent of any population in the world would have dyslexia in some form, and 4 per cent would require specialist teaching for it.

Mr Mackay said one of the main difficulties was that traditional teacher training did not equip teachers to understand how straightforward it is to meet the needs of dyslexic learners in the classroom.

His workshops aim to help teachers identify children with dyslexic-type learning early on, and encourage them to meet those students needs.

"The challenge is to encourage schools to take that step and be brave enough to fine tune what they do to meet the needs of dyslexic learners.

'It's a willingness to accept alternative forms of assessing achievement."

And, he said, this fits in "superbly" with the format of NCEA.

While dyslexic learners struggled to demonstrate their learning through essays or writing paragraphs, getting them to do mind maps or diagrams could be just as effective in terms of assessment, Mr Mackay said.

Allowing students to learn in that way did not seem to lower the bar of traditional literacy, he said. Research showed that youngsters who had been able to show what they knew in their own way were better able to remember what they had learned when they went into public exams, and achieved higher marks.

Mr Mackay's school, Harwarden, in North Wales, ran the first specialist dyslexic programme in Britain, and

found that as teachers became better at meeting the needs of dyslexic learners, the public examination results went up significantly.

"In a nutshell, if you're dyslexic you learn best if your teachers use a multi-sensory way of working – lots of touching lots of visuals, lots of sharing, auditory, talk – but in fact everybody learns better that way," he said.

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