

In search of magic bullets



ANN HARTLEY, Chair of the Maori and Pasifika Educational Initiative (MPEI), remarked in a recent article printed by the New Zealand Herald that, "It's already clear that educational underachievement is unlikely to be overcome by a single silver bullet, but rather by a number of magic bullets".

So what magic bullets work in dyslexia-aware classrooms across New Zealand, and how can these strategies also benefit Maori and Pasifika students who are not dyslexic but who may have certain preferred ways of learning?

The motto of the Maori and Pasifika Education Initiative is "We speak for ourselves," while the mantra of the Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand and its 4D initiative is "No student left behind". So the first magic bullet must be an increased emphasis on the importance of talking, sharing ideas and concepts, and valuing these skills through formal assessment procedures. The key competency "use of language" is of particular importance in terms of the ability of both groups to show what they know in preferred ways, despite weak skills in spelling, sentence construction and paragraphing.

The next magic bullet is a willingness to teach and assess across a range of alternative evidence of



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achievement – such as contributions to discussions, oral presentations, video evidence, mind maps, story boards, flow charts etc – without always requiring them to be in written form.

When English is a second language, or when thinking is faster than reading, it is important that students are given the opportunity to be assessed and given credit for higher order skills such as inference and synthesis through talking as well as writing.

The third magic bullet is to use talk to transform preferential/alternative evidence into formal written evidence.

Turning any form of alternative evidence into writing is a teachable skill, but one which is often implied or assumed in lesson planning rather than being explicitly taught as a technique. For example, producing a mind map, with one student scribing ideas onto post it notes on behalf of the rest, means students with vivid ideas and language, and those who may think and talk more effectively than they write are included in the process and their contributions add value to the

group. Chunking or breaking lessons up into bite size chunks is the next dyslexia aware magic bullet. The beauty of planning for chunking is that each chunk requires talk in order to review what has just been done and prepare for the next bit. Something as simple as "Tell your partner three things you have discovered about....." is a valuable technique as is "Next we are going to look at.....Tell your partner / group what you know about it."

The National Curriculum presents education as a journey, with individual entry and exit points. Te Marautanga Aotearoa emphasises the importance of starting points which are defined by a learner's own knowledge, linking the new to the old and stressing the importance of personalisation – learning how to learn.

These approaches, translated into action suggest that much dyslexia-aware best practice is also likely to be best practice for Maori and Pasifika students. The Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand seeks to empower all learners to be the best they can be and is proud of the links it has developed

with Maori educators through its programme of workshops in 2009. So, to return to the question posed at the start, does getting it right for dyslexics mean we get it right for all? The answer must be a very positive and resounding "Yes!" **SI**

The Dyslexia Foundation is running workshops by British dyslexia expert Neil MacKay, sponsored by the Ministry of Education, from the end of May until June 4. The workshops range from basic knowledge about dyslexia through to advanced strategies and techniques for working with students with dyslexia.

For more information see www.4d.org.nz/workshops/

- By Neil MacKay, an international consultant and trainer, with 28 years teaching experience in secondary and primary schools, specialising in inclusive, whole class approaches to Dyslexia.