

READING PERFORMANCE

Remedial methods 'outdated'

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Education reporter

A "long tail" of more than 70,000 New Zealand children are falling behind in reading.

New Zealand's gap between the best and worst readers is among the widest in the world, and experts say it is getting wider.

Professor James Chapman, organiser of a two-day Dyslexia Conference in Wellington, said the Reading Recovery programme was "past its use-by date" and useless for dyslexic children.

"Its claims about effectiveness just cannot be sustained," Chapman, pro-vice-chancellor of education at Massey University, said.

The programme was developed in the 1960s and implemented in the 1980s.

"It was based on reasonable theory at the time but research has just simply overtaken the views of how children learn to read and what happens when kids struggle learning to read," Chapman said.

The spread in achievement between the weakest-performing and strongest-performing Kiwi pupils is large by international standards.

Official figures show 18 per cent of Maori and 16 per cent of Pacific Island pupils do not reach the low international benchmark of 400 points. Only 3 per cent of Asian and 4 per cent of European-Pakeha pupils fail.

They show the proportion of pupils from low-decile schools who do not reach the low international benchmark is 18 per cent, compared with 5 per cent of pupils from medium-decile schools and 3 per cent from high-decile schools.

Chapman said there was a fall in New Zealand children's reading abilities compared with those

of other developed countries.

"They tend to develop problems in other learning areas and they also tend to give up on themselves and develop negative self-concepts," he said.

"Their level of confidence tends to go down as well, and that can be compounded into more major behaviour problems downstream."

Ministry of Education group manager of curriculum teaching and learning Mary Chamberlain said the Reading Recovery programme worked for 85 per cent of those who took part.

Ten per cent of New Zealanders, including 70,000 schoolchildren, are affected by dyslexia.

The chairman of trustees of the Dyslexia Foundation, Guy Pope-Mayell, said Reading Recovery "in most instances" would not do a dyslexic person any harm.

"But from what we have heard from our membership and their experiences, it's certainly not a solution," he said.

Matthew Colee, 11, of Kirwee, made no progress on Reading Recovery, his mother, Mary-Jane Colee, said.

"He didn't seem to improve," she said. "I decided that there was something maybe more than just his reading, so that's when I decided I would get Matthew tested."

Matthew was diagnosed with dyslexia and went on to a new programme called Steps to Literacy.

"His self-esteem has improved. The teachers at school couldn't believe the success, and all in all it was really good," Colee said.

Since starting on the new programme nine months ago, Matthew's spelling and reading ages had improved from seven to 11, and his favourite subject was spelling.