

EDUCATION

Seeking a new deal on dyslexia

Australia can take some tips about learning disabilities from schools in other countries, writes **Elisabeth Tarica**.

ANATION as self-confident as Australia doesn't expect to receive lessons in advanced education practices from such humble places as Irvinestown, a small village two hours west of Belfast in Northern Ireland.

Yet that's what Nola Firth found this year when she visited the 250 students at the village's St Paul's Primary School, where sophisticated and effective strategies were being used to deal with dyslexia. St Paul's is one of many schools in the UK that have been awarded dyslexia friendly status by the British Dyslexia Association.

Dr Firth, a research fellow at the Royal Children's Hospital's Centre for Adolescent Health and the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, travelled to the UK, the US and Canada to visit dyslexia-friendly schools as part of a Churchill fellowship. She found that in these schools students spoke freely and without stigma about having the learning difficulty, the hurdles they face and what support they need to help them cope.

They had easy access to text-to-speech and predictive typing software and specially trained teachers.

Each school formed its own dyslexia policy. One of these set down that students with dyslexia would not be asked to read aloud, would have access to alternative assessment methods and would receive assessment that did not include spelling accuracy.

"There's an awareness that you don't have to be necessarily doing things that are written down to show that you have knowledge," Dr Firth says.

"They were still getting the best of literacy but on top of that there was this awareness that there are some people who need other ways of

expressing information and getting information in. It works for everyone, not just the kids with dyslexia."

Since the initiative was introduced at St Paul's in 2007, literacy results had jumped higher than the Northern Ireland average.

This picture is in sharp contrast to the way dyslexia is treated in Australia — where, apart from New South Wales, it is not legally recognised as a learning disability and debate still centres on whether the condition really exists.

Used to describe a range of persistent difficulties with reading, writing, spelling and sometimes mathematics that result in a child performing significantly below their chronological age, dyslexia is a lifelong genetic condition that has a neurological cause.

It is often referred to as an invisible disability because it manifests differently in each person. It is estimated that one in 10 struggle with dyslexia yet few are assessed and given support.

Experts say teachers have limited training to identify dyslexia and learning difficulties, and are generally unaware of dyslexia's genetic

and permanent nature. It is why many students arrive at secondary school struggling to read or write.

Research shows that, without intervention, students with dyslexia risk developing behavioural problems at school, giving up, withdrawing socially and eventually dropping out and suffering delinquency, depression and unemployment.

Victorian schools do not have a tailored program to deal with dyslexia, which falls under the general umbrella of specific learning disabilities (SLD) and does not attract separate funding.

"SLD/dyslexia teacher education is compulsory for incoming teachers in the US, Canada, and the UK but this is not the case here in Australia," says Dr Firth.

"Many teachers do not know that SLD is a particular phenomenon that is inheritable, independent of intelligence, so that children can also be gifted, and that it is often highly resistant even to skilled teaching, including synthetic phonics teaching."

Because it isn't recognised as a disability, dyslexia's isolated symptoms — such as problems with reading — are often addressed in reading recovery programs that do little

to overcome the underlying problem.

Dr Firth says Australia is being left behind in its response to the condition. "What really struck me is that

it is recognised and specifically stated as a disability in America, Canada and England," she says.

"Policy and practice have followed from this legislation, most of which either do not exist or exist in a much weaker form in Australia. These legal and practical supports indicate significant commitment to giving equal access and opportunity for success for those who have dyslexia."

Compared with Australia, there is far greater acceptance and awareness of dyslexia in the educational and general community in these countries.

"When I told a school principal and a teacher educator at the University of Toronto that in Australia we do not recognise specific learning disabilities, including dyslexia, as a disability, the surprise on their faces was memorable," she says. "They were truly astonished because they think of us as a progressive country

and we are . . . but they were truly astonished that we didn't have dyslexia categorised as a disability and that these people were not being systematically found and supported."

The US and Canada, for example, have schools dedicated to students with SLD.

"They cater for students who cannot be adequately catered for in mainstream schools and are dedicated and set up for people who have SLD including dyslexia not intellectual disabilities," says Dr Firth.

One such school, the Frostig School in Pasadena, Los Angeles, catered for 120 students, each with an individual education plan. There was a ratio of 10 students to one teacher, plus a teacher aide. Five professionals including a speech therapist, educational consultant, psychologist and counsellor, were on-site.

Dr Firth says recognition of the problem and extra school support are urgently needed.

She was a member of the national dyslexia working party that in January presented a report on the shortfall of services for people with dyslexia

to the federal parliamentary secretary for disabilities and children's services, Bill Shorten.

It calls for national recognition of dyslexia as a disability under the Disability Discrimination Act through legislation at state and federal level and for the dyslexia friendly school model to be implemented in Australia.

It also recommends mandatory teacher training to help in identifying and supporting students with dyslexia.

The introduction of dyslexia-friendly practices in workplaces was also flagged.

"I experienced the widespread and significant positive change these initiatives can make," she says. "The dyslexia friendly school model is something that could be translated here easily . . . it is about teacher training and teachers are dying to know what to do about these kids. They know about these clever kids they've got who have trouble with their reading and spelling."

LINKS

- ▶ ldaustralia.org/359.html
- ▶ churchilltrust.com.au/fellows/detail/3340

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NOLA FIRTH, research fellow



Nola Firth
says
Australia's
attitude to
dyslexia
raises
eyebrows
overseas.
Picture:
Gary
Medlicott