



Empowering Students' Futures: Learners with Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, and other Learning Disorders



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Y's Words is an intensive literacy and numeracy course for students aged 16–24 run by the Christchurch YMCA Education Centre. There is no other course within the YMCA nationally such as Y's Words, making it a unique prototype for not only the YMCA but for other such providers.

Designed for learners who have specific learning needs including dyslexia, dyspraxia and dyscalculia, the course runs for 25 hours per week, and the students tend to stay for 6 months or longer – in some cases for more than two years. In our experience learners with these major needs bring with them a large number of personal problems as well as their literacy and numeracy issues. When literacy levels are low the learners have often had little success in mainstream education or further training. The aim of this course is to foster a supportive, family-orientated atmosphere where the tutor, through trust and humour, encourages the learners to feel secure and 'at home', thereby promoting learning in a more positive, effective and productive manner. The underlying principle of Y's Words is that no student is left behind – students who take part will graduate from the course able to function as an adult in society.

As recent research shows ([ABC-Canada Literacy Foundation Report Summary](#), [ALL Survey May 2005](#)), lack of functional literacy and numeracy removes confidence, esteem and self-belief, often leading young people to a life on the fringe of society, where they may well become involved in crime, drugs, or alcohol, as well as existing on a state benefit. In our experience, when tutors believe in learners, give them permission to learn in their own way, and also support them in their wider life through respect for their belief systems, these learners develop, mature, and learn to believe in themselves in ways they had thought impossible.

The factors that contribute to Y's Words success include:

- Individual learning plans designed for each student, with work at their own individual skill ability
- Toe by Toe (Cowling & Cowling, 1993), a reading phonics-based programme accessed through Linwood College/Lane Trust:
- An initial assessment that shows where the learner is at on enrolment, and what needs to be taught next according to the learner's weaknesses
- Computer work, including programmes that reinforce literacy and numeracy
- Positive tutor attitude to the students
- Easy access to individual portfolios
- Student inclusion and involvement with the complete Youth Training Programme.

Our records show that Y's Words learners have a higher attendance rate than other learners in other courses on site. This is rewarding as these same learners were often the truants in the state education centres.

Within their individual folder is a progress graph showing their current level/achievement in all their subjects. If a learner has a particular passion or pathway mapped out for him/her then where possible this is included. Their Individual Learning Plan (ILP) is specifically for them, about them, and at their own level of ability. The Toe by Toe programme takes each learner through the extensive one-to-one programme with a specialist tutor, providing on-going progress for each student within their reading programme. Each portfolio contains those ability needs, based on the Foundation Learning Progressions, which each student must meet. All standardised tests, the tutors' own assessments, along with pathway booklets are easily able to be viewed by each student. Some of the programmes used on the computer include Word Shark – spelling, Mathletics – maths, Free Rice – grammar and word comprehension, as well as other games that reinforce literacy and numeracy. The family environment allows for trust, safety and security to develop naturally for each student.

On entry into Y's Words the learner's ability statistics are very low, e.g., a reading, writing and or numeracy age of a five- to ten-year old. Learners come to the course through agency referrals, such as Action Works, state schools, word of mouth, or walk in off the street after hearing or seeing some of our advertisements. Once enrolled in the course, each learner undertakes an assessment in all areas of literacy and numeracy using assessments designed by the tutor and TEC under the Foundation Learning Progressions criteria. These progressions have been written for learners such as those involved in Y's Words, based on guidelines that each learner can aspire to achieve, from step one, which is at a new entrant level through to step six, which is a university level. The step-by-step progression shows what the learner is currently achieving, and what the tutor needs to teach next, which means goals for their ILPs can be written.

We are funded for a class of ten students; our reports to TEC must show at least one progression in one area or more for each learner, since the last report. As the speed of the learner's progress is slow, TEC allow students to remain on the course until their 25th birthday. A learner who enrolled at age 16 could therefore remain in the course for eight years. This is a unique criterion for which the course has fought through TEC, as Y's Words was initially only open to 16–20 year olds. However, we found that the 20–22 year old learners were already aware that their dysfunctional literacy and numeracy levels had prevented them finding any reasonable jobs, in fact any jobs at all.

The weekly timetable consists of literacy, numeracy, computers, cooking, and physical activities that develop the attitude that learning is fun, even when learners don't realise they are learning. For example, in cooking lessons learners believe they are just being fed – in reality they are developing their

literacy and numeracy skills. They shop for the ingredients on a budget, read labels, source value for money, measure ingredients, read recipes, mix and make food, cook using time and temperature together with the social norm of eating, followed by cleaning up – so much learning in one morning! The physical activities vary from playing a game of pool, swimming, and badminton, kick boxing, walking and working out at the gym, along with a variety of other activities. These activities help their left and right brain to work together; therefore, learning retention and developing their educational skills have a higher chance of succeeding.

The following two case studies demonstrate the benefits to the learners enrolled in Y's Words. Their names have been changed to protect their identity.

Kurt's Story:

Kurt entered Y's Words in 2007 from one of our Youth Training courses. He had been at the centre for about two years. His literacy levels were around an FLP step of 1 in reading, spelling and writing; his numeracy level was at an FLP step of 4–5. Kurt's battle with dyslexia over the years has inhibited his traditional learning. As a result of a lack of positive learning experiences he didn't want to learn, or work or do anything other than computer games and art. Combining his learning styles with multiple intelligences and his values, his own ILP was developed using reading, spelling, and art, leaving out writing until his reading and spelling increased.

To date Kurt has done a mural about Y's Words, which is on the wall outside the course door. He completed a fantasy piece showing staff members for a past tutor and did a mural on invitation for the YMCA hostel in Christchurch. He plans to formalise his art training at Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology (CPIT), when he graduates from Y's Words.

The statistics show his progression over the past two years:

2007 – Reading 6.8 year old

2009 – reading 9 year old.

Recently Kurt was reading books we both thought were above him. Sitting next to him I found that he read using the Toe By Toe strategies he had learnt and completed the book without help from me. I told him that he had gone up at least a level his response:

“Really?”

“Yes”

“Truly?”

“Yes!”

He then beamed from ear to ear, laughing and hitting the air with his fists several times. Well on his way to new heights.

Jack's story:

One of the original Y's Words students, Jack had been at the centre for two years in Youth Training. One of the first things this angry young man said to the tutor was,

“You are not going to make me read!”

The comment was a red rag to the tutor, so began the challenge, debates and hard work. Jack’s ADHD, along with aspects of dyslexia, made learning difficult for him. He often wanted to give up, which was far easier than persevering but he hung in there. He is currently on work experience once a week to develop employable skills, and devotes his free time to Mainline Steam Trust working on the old locomotives. Two years on his progressions are really visible.
2007 – Reading 6.10 year old 2009 – Reading 9 year old 2007 – Spelling pre-5 year old
2009 – Spelling 9 year old

Jack comments:

“Val’s encouragement and telling me that I can do it made me realise that I have the ability to do it. When I first came to Y’s Words I was stubborn, swore often, and threw tantrums. Eventually, Val got hard on me and wouldn’t take my nonsense anymore. I realise now that there is no point in doing that as it wasn’t getting me anywhere.”

Through the development of the learners’ literacy and numeracy their individual confidence, esteem and belief in themselves have increased markedly. Jack wrote out the class contract at the beginning of the year for wall display – something he never thought that he would do. Kurt is now willing to have writing put into his ILP so that he can prepare for the formalised assignments at CPIT.

These results are typical of other students in Y’s Words. The examples below show progressions for various students:

2009 Term one Spelling High Frequency words 5 year old ability – Term two Spelling 7.5 year old spelling ability.

2009 Term one Reading 10.5 year old – Term Two Reading 13 year old.

The tutor is constantly looking for better ways to enhance learning and during term three in 2009 will be trialling some philosophies and teachings from the UK based Neil McKay who has a wealth of experience in teaching and working with dyslexics (www.actiondyslexia.co.uk). He has teamed up with the 4D Schools Charitable Trust, which has won recognition from the New Zealand Government for changing the way learners with dyslexia are taught within the state education system. The statement, ‘not to leave any student behind’, has been the driving force of the development of Y’s Words.

Trials of some of the 4D strategies listed below are underway:

- Paired reading with a peer for supportive and empowering approach
- Spelling practice using manipulation of clay, play dough or such like
- Computer programmes and games for reading, writing, spelling and math learning.

Comparison of student progressions after using some of these strategies will be interesting.

In conclusion, Y’s Words’ key success factors can be separated into two main parts:

- Tutor characteristics – open minded, flexible, and adaptable, willingness to source other strategies for teaching, honesty, respect, a family atmosphere, pastoral care and humour, constant searching for ways to evolve teaching to enhance student learning.

- Programme characteristics – meeting individual needs, transparent access to their record of learning, flexibility in strategies used, evolving techniques, use of a wide range of resources, listening to learner needs and wants, going outside the square, and knowing that each student is different and catering for those differences within the programme.

References

Cowling, K. & Cowling, H. (1993) *Toe by Toe: A Highly Structured Multi-Sensory Phonetic Approach to Literacy*, Bradford: Cowling & Cowling



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