

EDUCATION

Diverse reasons for learning difficulties

There is an increasing number of definitions for children with learning difficulties, but do they help parents, students and schools better tackle the problems?
ARWEN HANN reports.

Students who struggled with basic skills would probably once have been labelled as slow or stupid but today there is a plethora of definitions to explain their problems.

Dyslexia, one of the best-known learning difficulties, has recently been officially recognised by the Education Ministry but that is just the tip of the iceberg.

There is dyspraxia – a problem with co-ordination and motor skills; dysgraphia – a problem with hand writing; or dyscalculia – struggling with maths and other concepts such as time and schedules.

A quick search on the internet will find an ever growing number of definitions and diagnoses which might explain why a child struggles.

It is estimated 70,000 children have dyslexia-related difficulties but experts remain unsure whether the apparently growing numbers are a result of increasing problems or simply better detection.

Canterbury university education lecturer Kathleen Liberty says we are getting better at identifying learning difficulties and people are becoming more interested in getting a "careful identification".

"More and more jobs require literacy and numeracy skills and a high proportion of school leavers completing school is also seen as contributing to the social fabric of society.

"It is difficult for people who have low skills in reading and writing or maths in terms of employment and opportunities, so people want to identify problems at an early age."

However, Liberty says there are indications the number of children with learning differences is actually rising.

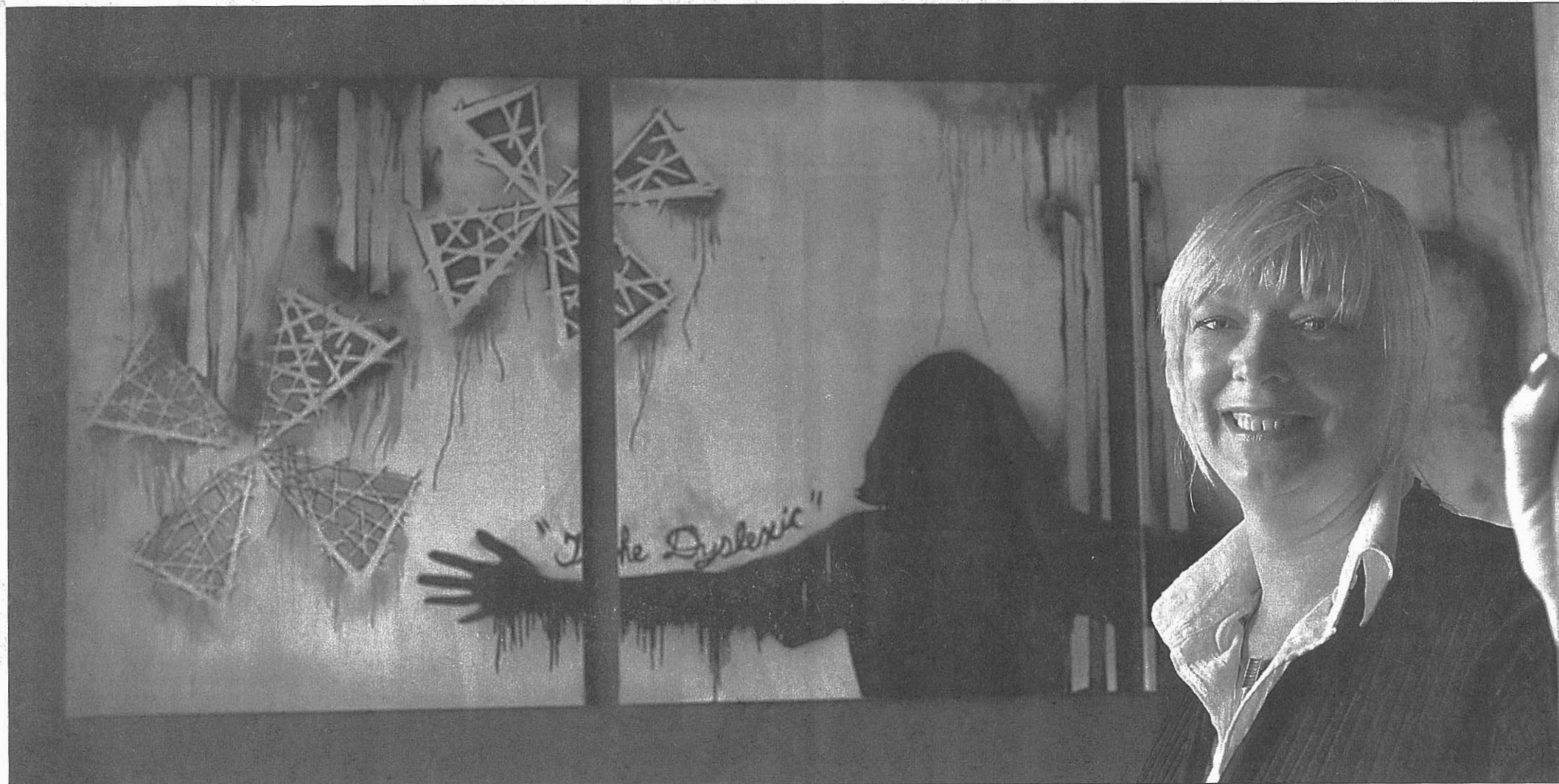
She points to the United States where standard definitions of learning differences have been in place for 25 years or more, as have standardised procedures for identifying them.

There, the processes have not changed but the country is still seeing rising numbers of children with problems.

Liberty cites social and environmental factors for some of the increase.

"We know that things such as drinking alcohol and smoking during pregnancy can have an impact on children's learning ability," she says.

"An increase in family stress can be another one. Solo parents or families where both parents have to work mean less time for things like reading to children and just sitting down and talking to them, which are important



Learning difficulties: Dyslexia Foundation trustee Lorna Timms says teachers need support to help struggling pupils.
Photo: David Alexander

More and more jobs require literacy and numeracy skills.

Kathleen Liberty
Education lecturer

for setting them up for learning."

Liberty also questions the benefit of a multitude of names but thinks it could continue.

"If we go down the medical route, I think we will continue to see more definitions appearing. However, I don't think that having more specific definitions will necessarily lead to better treatments," she said.

"There can be lots of overlaps in treatments. I don't know if getting a more specific diagnosis will necessarily help in working out what help a child needs and I question the benefit of labelling people too much."

Dyslexia Foundation trustee Lorna Timms also queries whether increased definitions are helpful.

"You can often get two things which are essentially the

same but sound different or have different names," she says.

"I question whether that is a good thing or whether it is just getting too wide."

However, Timms says an increase in readily available information makes it easier for parents to look at conditions and reduce the stigma around learning differences.

"Dyslexia, for example, seems to be more talked about now," she said. "It is allowing people to see the strengths that come with it as well as the problems."

Both agree supporting teachers to deal with a diverse range of students and develop their strengths is a better key to success but for that, more resourcing is needed.

"New Zealand schools are very good at keeping these kids in the classroom rather than sending them to special classes or schools which a lot of other countries do," Liberty said.

"I think that is a great thing, but we need to look at class sizes as well as equip our teachers with the best tools to teach them, which might mean reinstating four years of teacher preparation or providing

additional resources in schools."

The Education Ministry's manager for curriculum, Mary Chamberlain, said schools were unlikely to work on a specific diagnosis.

"Schools will generally take the approach of identifying a student's symptoms, and remedying them, rather than focusing on diagnosing a disorder," she said.

The ministry had recently recognised dyslexia, and some other disorders which had similar symptoms could potentially be treated with the same programmes, she said.

There was a range of support on offer including literacy intervention and support from resource teachers. For students with severe needs, Special Education funding was available.

For Timms, the New Zealand approach is on the right track and she hopes teachers will be given support to recognise the strengths and weaknesses of each child whether they have been diagnosed with a learning difference or not.

"If we start celebrating the differences between children and work to develop their strengths, then we can make a difference."

If Daniel can't hear it, he struggles to learn it

After a year of tests and observations on her son Daniel, the diagnosis of a learning difficulty came as something of a relief to Christchurch mum Louise (not their real names).

But the diagnosis of the little-known difficulty is proving to be just the first step on a long road to help the seven-year-old.

Daniel has Non-Verbal Learning-Disorder (NLD) which means he struggles to interpret non-verbal messages like body language and written instructions.

Mum Louise said Daniel had always had some problems – at kindergarten he struggled to write his name, preferring to play in the sandpit and even at school trying to get him to write anything could still be a struggle. But he appeared to be a bright pupil, articulate in speech with ideas developed beyond his years so no-one thought there was an issue.

A little way into his schooling Daniel's behaviour began to

cause problems. He had always had some behaviour issues, Louise said, but it still came as a shock when his classroom teacher suggested there might be a bigger problem.

"In the playground he was very spontaneous and domineering in the classroom. He was still displaying a lot of the behaviour the other children had learned not to do."

Since that initial conversation just over a year ago, Daniel's family have embarked on a long journey to discover the root of his difficulties.

The journey has included a resource teacher of learning and behaviour (RTL), a psychologist and numerous specialists.

At first they suggested Daniel had attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) which concerned his mum so she was relieved when another option was put forward. However, that new diagnosis has posed a new set of problems.

"They said he had non-verbal learning disorder but we had no idea what that meant," Louise says.

Having a diagnosis that few people recognised has made things harder.

"It is hard to get any funding for help. The school has been great but I feel a bit sorry for his teacher," Louise said. "They have to deal with something they don't really know anything about as well as dealing with all the other kids in the class."

"It would be great if we could find someone else who has been through this. For now it is about trial and error, trying to find things to help with his weaknesses but also developing his strengths."

They have not spoken to Daniel specifically about the diagnosis "because we don't really want to label him".

"But knowing more about it has helped us to manage his behaviour more."

Max back on track

Max has always been a hard worker, so when he was not getting the results his mother, Lorraine, believed he deserved, she began to wonder if there was something wrong.

"Max put in 10 times the amount of work required and got half the result of other children," she said.

"His teachers at school are fabulous and after noticing the input wasn't matching the output, we discussed it and decided it was best to have him professionally assessed."

The assessment has led to a diagnosis of dyslexia, and Lorraine is pleased to have something to work on.

"I have a background in education and I have seen how hard it is for parents that know something is not gelling but have nothing tangible to back their concerns, so I was grateful," she said.

"I'm sure no-one is happy as such that their child is not going to glide through the mainstream education system, but I am certainly not unhappy that Max's different style of learning is now recognised within this system."

"Knowing that his learning style is different allows us to help equip him with the skills and tools he will need throughout his education."

Despite the stigma attached to dyslexia, Lorraine has not shied away from telling seven-year-old Max about his diagnosis, but says she has been keen to emphasise the positive aspects – a move she says has helped to keep his self-esteem.

"He knows he has been assessed as above-average intelligence and he knows his learning style is different," she said.

"He is aware of all the high achievers that have dyslexia. Max knows he has to work harder than many of his friends, but he is willing to do this and is proud of the different way he learns. We see it every day. He is caring, with a great sense of humour and is as sharp as a tack."