

Learning differences in a nutshell

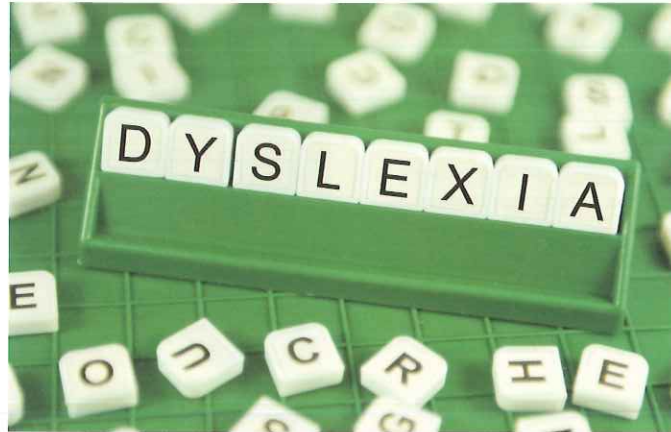
Academics agree that the single most common characteristic of dyslexia is a problem with reading and/or spelling. As a spectrum of neuro-differences however, dyslexia can impact motor skills, cognitive processing speeds and comprehension [written and verbal], auditory and visual perception, planning and organising, and short-term memory and concentration. Dyslexia is often co-morbid with other conditions – communication disorders, Asperger's and autism, ADHD, dyspraxia, dysgraphia etc.

Brain research, including Auckland University studies and fMRI mapping at Yale University, has shown that while it is common to use the 'verbal' left side of the brain to understand words, dyslexic people use the 'pictorial' right side. Dyslexic individuals thus tend to think in pictures rather than with the sounds of words, receiving and retrieving information in a different part of the brain to neuro-typical, word-based thinkers. Put simply, translating these 'pictures' back into words, whether spoken or written, can take extra time and considerable effort.

Bottom line, difficulties with the acquisition of basic skills are a symptom of the different ways the dyslexic brain processes information. This is a fundamental point to grasp as it shifts the focus from difficulties with reading and spelling to an understanding of the root cause. Dyslexics are therefore often less able to navigate the education system.

Failings in the system

Schools that are succeeding in this area have one thing in common – a clear and transparent educational pathway to create successful learning outcomes. This pathway reflects and facilitates strong leadership, provides students, parents and



teachers with confidence, and allows difference to manifest into success. Unfortunately, this type of pathway is most often absent or dysfunctional, and as a result we see all the problems that underlined the urgent need for the Select Committee Inquiry. Where no educational pathway is identified and implemented:

- Too many principals, teachers and support staff are not sufficiently trained or knowledgeable on learning differences
- Early identification is not sufficiently prioritised and resourced and too many children wait too long for appropriate intervention
- Children are progressing through the education system with unmet needs which often create long-term negative effects
- There are poor transitions through school years, with minimal to no forward planning for learning outcomes
- Access to services and decision-making is unnecessarily complex, for example, there are currently 10 ways for a child to access funding for a teacher aide
- There is a lack of transparency and certainty of services, for example once an intervention is complete, often no further support is mapped out

Interventions and accommodations

Often, dyslexia's greatest difficulty is self-esteem – it only becomes a disability if not appropriately addressed. If addressed, dyslexia can become a key driver for creative thinking and problem-solving, enhanced spatial understanding and innovation. By prioritising and addressing dyslexia in schools we avoid flow on adult-related expenses from social, mental health and prison services.

Once dyslexia is understood, it is not difficult to see what changes would benefit dyslexic students. Best practice is a fully inclusive learning environment, ensuring that legal rights to inclusive learning and accommodations are delivered on. Best practice comes down to three things – early identification; a 'notice and adjust' teaching approach to accommodate difference and, if no improvement; interventions to specifically target problem areas.

Key to success – an educational pathway from Year 1

At NCEA level, provision of NCEA Special Assessment Conditions (SACs) such as reader or writer assistance, computer use, and/or extra time, have created a 'route to success' for students with learning differences. Schools already au fait with SAC applications and accommodating student needs are seeing better NCEA results and student

engagement. However, this 'route to success' currently only applies to students at NCEA level.

As mentioned earlier, a critical step to meaningful change therefore is to create a clear-cut, accountable pathway to successful learning outcomes that starts at year 1. Such a pathway would outline what constitutes effective teaching training and professional development in respect of learning difference. While there is plenty of information available, this is not finding its way into the daily interaction between student, teacher, school, and parent.

Best practice in action

Despite the challenges, some New Zealand schools are providing effective support for dyslexic students. As noted earlier, in each instance these schools have aligned around a clear and transparent educational pathway that celebrates inclusivity and diversity.

Kapiti College is one such school where creation of a dyslexia-friendly environment has seen significant improvements in self-esteem and academic achievement, plus reductions in negative and destructive behaviour. Sarah Sharpe, Kapiti College teacher and SENCO, says families from throughout New Zealand and even overseas are now choosing the school because of its approach. "While it is undoubtedly flattering, it seems shocking that whole families are relocating because of the limited choices available within the education system".

For more information about dyslexia, how a school can become more dyslexia-friendly or how to advocate for dyslexia, go to:

<http://www.dfnz.org.nz>

<http://www.4d.org.nz>

<http://www.dyslexiafoundation.org.nz/claw2015/> or like us on Facebook and be part of the community.

<https://www.facebook.com/dyslexiafoundationNZ>



Esther Whitehead

Managing Trustee,
Dyslexia Foundation
of NZ