

The way I read it

In the article "In their right mind" (May 8) Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand chairman Guy Pope-Mayell said it in a nutshell: "[Dyslexia] is not just about an inability to read, or a difficulty in spelling – it's the way [dyslexics] process information." But literacy problems are the face of the neurological basis for the condition, and if they can be overcome or mitigated, they will open eyes to earlier self-confidence and encourage sounder learning.

Studies have shown that English spelling is a major contributor to dyslexics' difficulty with literacy learning. In 1997 a German/English team comparing the impact of spelling consistency on dyslexia found that English children "suffered from much more severe impairments in reading than the German children".

Four years later, Eraldo Paulesu and 11 others reported that although the neurological basis for dyslexia is the same across English, French and Italian languages, the disorder manifests itself in different ways according to the regularity of the spelling. The reading disorder is twice as prevalent among dyslexics in the US (and France) as it is among Italian dyslexics. This was seen to be because of Italian's "transparent" orthography.

The 2005 OECD-Ceri Learning Sciences and Brain Research "Learning to Read" report stated: "The studies so far undertaken in individual countries are building evidence for the hypothesis that shallow [ie, simple] orthographies are a real advantage in terms of acquiring reading proficiency for both normal and dyslexic children."

In your article, US dyslexia researcher Tom West says what happens to children learning literacy in school is "in many cases, really child abuse for 12 years".

We could alleviate a lot of this, and not just for dyslexics, if we upgraded our irregular, hard-to-follow English spelling. The function of the alphabet and spelling is to make written language easy to read and write. English spelling fails to do this.

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Recently I received my dyslexic 11-year-old's first report using the National Standards. It contained his scores from six tests (spelling, reading, listening, comprehension, numeracy and maths).

On all these he was below or well below average. It then showed his level on the three national standards – reading, writing and maths. Again on each of these he was either just below or below the standard.

My son had a diagnosis of dyslexia from an educational psychologist last year (at considerable personal expense, because this is not government-funded). Although I knew about my son's struggles with literacy and numeracy, I found his report extremely depressing. There was no mention of his progress in sport, art, social studies, science or any of the other curriculum areas (in which he does much better), as these are not reported on. Nor was there any mention of his social skills – how he gets on with his peers. How happy he is at school. Nothing on this.

It is vital that parents are given a comprehensive picture of how their child is doing at school. It is vital to parents and child that all strengths are identified and highlighted. There was nothing positive about my child in that report. Additionally, there was no indication of the kinds of support that will be put in place as a consequence of his scores.

A number of children with significant learning needs will never meet the National Standards. How would you feel to be told you are failing, report after report, year after year? This can surely only deepen the sense of shame and fear experienced by many dyslexics.

The glossy taxpayer-funded propaganda that National sent out to all households to promote the National Standards said that millions of dollars had been put aside to help children identified as struggling. This is great news. However, when I contacted the Education Minister's office, staff were unable to tell me which programmes and interventions were in place to help my son and the thousands like him who struggle with literacy and numeracy.

Parents want assurance that communication from schools about their child's progress contains some good news as well as bad; they want a full picture of the child's abilities and they want reports to contain details of what the school is doing to help the child's learning. It is with the Ministry of Education that the deep shame rightfully belongs.

NAME AND ADDRESS WITHHELD