Sharron Scurr

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Dear Sharon

We write in response to the opinion piece you have published on the deb.co.nz website, namely the webpage regarding the Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand (DFNZ).

The purpose of this letter is to invite you to reconsider your comments on DFNZ.

Currently your webpage takes DFNZ information out of context, and includes incorrect assumptions and assertions about what DFNZ stands for and the work it does. It inaccurately portrays DFNZ and its trustees as promoting interventions that it describes variously as “quackery”, “dangerous” and “doing harm” to the people DFNZ intends to help. It also asserts that DFNZ does not bother to investigate companies and tutors featured on its website. Most alarmingly, it invites readers to conclude that the trustees of DFNZ promote harmful and dangerous approaches to dyslexia out of self-interest, in conflict with the interests of the individuals and families DFNZ intends to help. Those are serious and damaging allegations that are plainly defamatory, wrong and entirely indefensible.

For your clarification, some key facts about DFNZ are as follows:

* DFNZ is a registered charitable trust, established in 2006 to promote recognition, understanding and action around dyslexia and its effects across all of society. It is an advocacy and lobby group and works with individuals, families, businesses and numerous government agencies – including Ministry of Education; Ministry of Justice; Police; Principal Youth Court Judge; Children’s Commissioner; Ministry of Disability Issues; and Defence Forces.
* DFNZ takes a big picture view and inclusive approach. In its advocacy, DFNZ has noted that experiences and issues for individuals with dyslexia are often similar to those for other neurodiversities. For a number of years, therefore, it has included other neurodiversities within its scope of work.
* In terms of dyslexia, DFNZ supports the International Dyslexia Association definition of dyslexia but notes that ‘difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and … poor spelling and decoding abilities’ can be part of a wider spectrum of issues. As evidenced by Professor Sally Shaywitz’s Yale University research, Sir Jim Rose’s seminal report in the UK and a wealth of international studies and reports, affected areas may also include auditory and information processing, planning and organising, motor skills, and short-term memory and concentration. Many more impacts can be seen for other neurodiversities.
* In terms of various approaches to addressing dyslexia and other neurodiversities, DFNZ signposts to various organisations but does not recommend a one-size-fits-all solution. To do so would be like telling a blind person they can have a guide dog but not a white cane, audio, braille and digital resources, or adaptive technology. Dictating a solution in our view would do a serious disservice to the more than one in ten New Zealanders who have dyslexia and other neurodiversities and who have every right to find an individual approach that works for them.
* In that regard, DFNZ is conscious that dyslexia and neurodiversities have a range of implications for individuals at different life stages and across the socio-economic spectrum. Large numbers of the prison population, other marginalized groups and older adults live with dyslexia/neurodiversities that may never have been properly diagnosed or managed. The implications and effects for those individuals are quite different from those experienced by school-age children today, who are far more likely to receive appropriate interventions at an early stage. For example, improving literacy may not be the primary goal for some older dyslexics who would rather focus on self-esteem or life management issues.

We understand that Dyslexia Evidence Based (the deb) has a specific focus on Structured Literacy and does not support other approaches or mindsets in addressing dyslexia. For clarity, DFNZ recognizes the effectiveness of Structured Literacy as a specific educational intervention. However, DFNZ takes a broader view that considers that a single approach to dyslexia, and neurodiversities, is not appropriate for all.

If the deb disagrees with DFNZ’s position, a simple statement to that effect would be appropriate, rather than an inaccurate, selective and reductive ‘unpack’ of the DFNZ ‘approach’. Regarding some specific statements on your webpage:

***Your comment: “the focus of the Dyslexia Foundation has been on gifts and strengths and how dyslexia is a ‘superpower.’” And your comments under the headings ‘Is Dyslexia a Gift’ and ‘Supporting Strengths’.***

This is incorrect. DFNZ has four focal areas for its work – education, justice, workplace, and family. Our position is that dyslexia and neurodiversities can bring creative strengths IF properly supported and addressed. If not properly supported and addressed, self-esteem is impacted as the individual struggles to comprehend and engage in the early school years.

Perceived barriers to engagement can produce disruptive classroom behaviour, and can lead to alienation, anti-social behaviour, truancy, depression, suicide, drug use and crime. Disengagement from education can be a significant marker for youth offending, hence our work with the Ministry of Justice, Police and the Principal Youth Court Judge.

***Your comment: “Its other focus to date has been about accommodations, which they call ‘notice and adjust,’ as well as building self-esteem and acceptance.” And your comments under the heading ‘Notice and Adjust’.***

This is incorrect. For DFNZ, ‘notice and adjust’ is not ‘all about accommodations’, as you state. It is simply noticing where students, or adults, are struggling and making suitable adjustments. Small changes can make a big difference. These may or may not include paid programmes, according to individual need.

In the classroom, DFNZ fully supports evidence-based interventions and believes individualised, personalised learning is critical – taking account of socio-economic, cultural and learning differences. For dyslexia and neurodiverse individuals, this could range from reviewing seating layout and noise levels through to use of new technology, chunking of tasks and instructions, and accepting work in different formats such as mind maps, diagrams, photos, videos and other media. Best practice would comprise early identification; a ‘notice and adjust’ teaching approach; and, if no improvement, further accommodations and/or interventions to specifically target issues.

In the justice system, youth who are vulnerable due to dyslexia and neurodiversities must be recognised and appropriately responded to. Two vital areas for improvement are for more detailed information to be made available to the court, and ensuring that police are better equipped to recognise and manage interactions with vulnerable youth. Simple changes here would include keeping questions short and simple, addressing one issue at a time, and not asking multiple questions all at once.

In the workplace, everyday tasks like processing instructions, filling in forms, and dealing with predominantly email and social media communications can be ongoing sources of challenge. A few examples of simple changes include more focus on verbal interactions, picking up the phone rather than emailing, and drawing a diagram to explain a page of words.

Your misplaced criticisms of DFNZ focus solely on classroom issues, but as already noted DFNZ is not focused solely on that context.

***Your comments under the Self-Esteem heading.***

This section is rife with misinformation, assumptive and defamatory comments, some of which have been addressed above. However, we do not see any value in engaging at the level of individual statements in this section, all of which appear designed only to discredit DFNZ and its trustees. That aggressive stance does not suggest an interest in good-faith dialogue. For example, we would have expected reasonable enquiries to be made before the publication of damaging statements about DFNZ’s work and defamatory allegations of conflicts of interest. There have been none.

In fact, we have previously invited you to reach out if you require clarification or to discuss DFNZ’s work, but that has been ignored. The invitation remains open. After all, our two organisations are both intent on achieving better outcomes for dyslexic individuals and their families. We enjoy constructive and synergistic relationships with stakeholders and organisations working in the neurodiversity field, and we would prefer the same with your organisation.

With regards to your webpage, we look forward to your response within seven days as to how you propose to remedy the present situation.

Kind regards

Guy Pope-Mayell

Chair of Trustees

Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand

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