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Lost for words

by Sally Blundell

While other countries argue over how best to meet the learning needs of children with dyslexia, our Ministry of Education refuses to acknowledge the problem.

The sentence you're reading suddenly begins to fall apart. The word that you think you should know – something like “this” – doesn't look like anything you've seen before. And the letters you are trying to write just won't stay on the thin blue line.

For an eight-year-old boy in a primary-school classroom such small mysteries may take some figuring out. If most of his classmates are already on to the next page, he'll begin to think he's not as clever as everyone else. And if the teachers tell him to stop dreaming and get a move on – for the third time that day – he'll feel angry. With himself, with the teacher, with the whole stupid school.

“Dyslexia presents in so many ways, but the overall experience is very predictable,” says Guy Pope-Mayell, father of two children with dyslexia and trustee of the Cookie Munchers Charitable Trust, which supports children through the Davis Dyslexia Correction programme.

“Children start to recognise the negative associations with dyslexia at about five. By seven or eight, it's created a number of difficulties for them and their parents. They begin to doubt themselves, they start to internalise a belief that they are stupid and inadequate. And that leads to a reasonably predictable set of behaviours. If you're feeling stupid or 'less than', you're not in a good place for learning to occur.”

Statistics vary on how many people have a dyslexic mind. On a spectrum from severe to subtle dyslexia, there seems to be agreement that somewhere between four and 10 percent of the population has a way of perceiving and processing information that differs from the rest of the population (see panel opposite). With

a national school roll of 748,000, we're talking about between 29,900 and 74,800 pupils.

The Ministry of Education, however, refuses to acknowledge dyslexia. Assessment is not part of standard teacher training and there is no specific support or funding for the particular needs of dyslexic children. As Education Minister Steve Maharey told a TV1 Close Up interview last month, the ministry recognises learning difficulties associated with dyslexia, but considers the range too broad to be defined by one word.

The problem with this, says Pope-Mayell, is that teachers are able to observe and document the symptoms and the resulting behaviour, "but they don't know what label to use, so often those children are labelled lazy, disruptive or attention deficit – they're picking up the behaviour, but not what's behind the behaviour".

When parents pick up the common expectations of society and schools, their child starts to fail in their eyes. And that, says Pope-Mayell, leads to more frustration.

"Everyone has good intentions, but because there's no agreement on what dyslexia is and how it can be helped, those intentions can have devastating outcomes."

Dyslexia can be regarded as a specific reading disability among a catalogue of "dys's" (dysgraphia – difficulty with writing; dyscalculia – difficulty with numbers; dyspraxia – difficulty with co-ordination). Or it can be used as an umbrella term for all of these conditions. Either way, there are common indications: a child of average or above-average intelligence is dramatically below in two components of their learning (maybe sequencing, reading or writing); and there is a tendency to think visually.

Thinking in pictures is common among preschoolers, but at about the age of seven, when the "neurotypical" child starts to specialise in words and sounds, those with dyslexia tend to specialise in visual images, seeing in their mind's eye the flip side of a "p", for example, which can look very much like a "b" or a "d"; or reading "house" in terms of a 3D mental picture of the place they call home. Coming across a letter they no longer recognise or word that cannot be visualised – such as "the" or "from" – the child gets confused.

It is this confusion that leads to the behaviour that can drive teachers up the wall – the daydreaming, the fidgeting, asking classmates what they should be doing,

clowning around, or sitting in the middle of the classroom trying not to be noticed.

“My son was the one always at the bench sharpening his pencil,” says Lorna Timms, a facilitator with the Davis Dyslexia Correction programme.

“He’s bright, articulate, but he just wasn’t reading. He’d read to me every night but he was just memorising the words from school. He couldn’t even read the word ‘and’.”

At his first school Matthew was told he was naughty and that he wasn’t trying. The next school noted his extreme marks – a 98 percent grade in listening, 30 percent in writing – but his behaviour wasn’t so bad as to warrant intervention by the school system.

Like so many other children, says Timms, “he just didn’t get it”.

Yet there is nothing in place to assess or respond to the dyslexic mind. Why not?

“It’s whether you look at the difficulty as inherent in the child or at what we can do with teaching,” says the ministry’s operational policy manager, Sally Jackson. “Our approach is that all children are learners, so what do we have to do differently to enable this child to learn? Classroom teachers use their range of assessment tools to look at the areas where a child is having difficulty. They can assess individual needs, put in individual programmes and get special support where needed.”

Jackson points to a range of support services and funds catering to children with special needs – resource teachers to work alongside classroom teachers, itinerant learning-support teachers, a special education grant and resourcing schemes for children with severe difficulties. Out of a total education budget of \$8.9 billion for 2006/07, special education cost the country \$434 million, including \$173 million for special education services, a \$31 million special education grant, staff salaries of \$129 million and the first instalment of a \$9.5m fund to be spent over four years on tackling disruptive behaviour.

Although many countries still argue over how best to meet the learning needs of children with dyslexia, the fact that there is a problem is widely accepted. In the UK, the primary national strategy advocates early assessment and intervention for children with dyslexia (and students diagnosed as having dyslexia are given up to 25 percent extra time in exams). In Australia and in the US, legal provisions are

in place to protect the needs of people with learning disorders such as dyslexia. Scotland has just launched a project to train new teachers to help children with dyslexia and other learning difficulties.

Clearly, there are criteria for assessment. In New Zealand, parents are paying between \$250 and \$350 for learning assessments through private clinics, SPELD branches or Christchurch's Seabrook McKenzie Centre.

"Children with dyslexia have common traits," says Tacy Gillanders at the Diagnostic Centre in Christchurch. "We look at the discrepancies in the pattern of their literacy skills – they tend to have similar difficulties, and we see similarities in what they are trying to do with words and spelling. Some schools know exactly what it's about and they use a different approach with these kids. But there are schools, often with large classes, who don't have the awareness of what you can do about it."

Should we not be at least training teachers to recognise dyslexia?

Faye Parkhill from the Christchurch College of Education is wary of adding yet another subject to an already crowded teacher-training curriculum. And she is unconvinced of the need.

"There's a heap of reasons why kids aren't learning to read and I have severe reservations about labelling all children who aren't responding to current classroom practices. The term 'dyslexia' has become terribly overgeneralised. It's a comfort for a lot of parents because they find an excuse for why their child can't read, but if we start accepting that term holus-bolus, we'll then have an excuse for the poor literacy teacher. The dyslexic model is going back to the medicalisation of school failure."

The college does run in-service or post-graduate courses in learning difficulties, "but with three-year training you don't have a show of addressing something as complex as dyslexia".

But can we afford not to?

A recent UK survey of 34 young offenders showing that more than half were dyslexic has alerted educationalists to the importance of early intervention.

In New Zealand, principal Youth Court judge Andrew Becroft has added his voice to those calling for similar research to be undertaken in this country.

“We see a constant stream of young offenders facing recurring issues and one of these is that they are not involved in the education system. All that I read indicates that there may be a link between a lack of engagement with school and undiagnosed learning disabilities, and this is something we as a community need to take very seriously. If it was addressed early, there’s reason to believe that some of that offending might not take place.”

Although Becroft appreciates the reluctance to label a child dyslexic, such a diagnosis, he says, is preferable to some of the more serious labels they may attract later on in life.

“I understand that concern of labelling, but if it avoids the label of ‘criminal offender’ or ‘prisoner’, surely that’s a lesser concern.”

Anne Stercq, director of the Seabrook McKenzie Centre, is adamant that early diagnosis is vital.

“Providing intervention is costly, but if it’s done in the early years you’ll get less problems later. A lot of children with learning difficulties end up with depression and behaviour problems in the mental health system. Look at how much the government spends on the unemployment benefit or the justice system. Teachers should be aware of the symptoms. Instead of being called lazy or dumb, these children could be understood and compensated for differently in the classroom.”

As Gillanders says, diagnosis can be pivotal in children’s attitudes to learning.

“Then they can say, okay, I’m not dumb, there’s a reason for this. Suddenly these kids are motivated. There’s a huge sense of relief. And parents will say, this explains so much.”

Kirsteen Britten, widow of the award-winning inventor John Britten, recognises that sense of relief. Although John was dyslexic, Kirsteen’s own struggle with reading and writing was not diagnosed until recently. Like so many others, she thought dyslexia simply involved putting letters or numbers around the wrong way. Now she helps other children with dyslexia.

“When I say to these kids, I understand that you think in pictures, and I know that funny feeling when it all gets too much and you can’t hear or think any more, they look at me and you can just see the relief on their faces. It’s huge.”

Talk to any parent whose child has been diagnosed as dyslexic and the word

“relief” appears time and again – relief that a name can be put to the learning difficulties, relief that their child is not lazy or of low intelligence, relief that there is something they and the classroom teacher can do to stop their child opting out of learning altogether.

Simple things like outlining main points on a whiteboard, giving out homework on handouts rather than asking children to copy from a board, bypassing the reliance on the written word through the use of videos, dictaphones, laptops (after nearly 600 years of dependency on the printing press, the computer is far more user-friendly for the visually astute dyslexic mind), fewer time restraints in tests and the availability of reader/writers for exams.

Such methods would not only allay the confusion and low self-esteem, but also give space to what Pope-Mayell describes as the very positive benefits of dyslexia.

“Behind the difficulty lies a gift. If you’re thinking in pictures, your mind is working much faster; you can see the bigger context very rapidly. We want people who can look at situations laterally, who can think outside the square, and the dyslexic mind does that all the time. Imagine all those gifted individuals becoming accepted by society; imagine if we could unleash that potential.”

Weta Workshop’s Richard Taylor, a dyslexic, agrees. “Dyslexia may not complement a traditional schooling system but it certainly can develop an active and fervent mind. It lessens a child’s ability to grasp certain things, but it also opens up the mind to lateral thought and creative thinking.”

Dyslexia doesn’t recognise socio-economic status or colour of skin. It exists across the board and everyone, says Pope-Mayell, has someone in the family or knows someone who is dyslexic.

“This is important. This touches every New Zealander. There’s just no getting away from that.”

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