Schools fail dyslexic learners

Dyslexic students are often creative thinkers and have different needs to other students, which must be addressed from an early stage, argues GUY POPE-MAYELL.

Dyslexia is an alternative way of thinking that is often effectively addressed, but is not always obvious. Dyslexic learners can be found in the creative professions from actors to musicians, actors, chefs, and even leaders of large companies. A world without dyslexics would be a much less colorful and diverse place.

The theme for this year’s Dyslexia Awareness Week (June 16-22) is ‘Blessing in disguise’, which is all about recognizing the creative gifts that dyslexia can bring. But for most of the 70,000 dyslexic school children in our education system, recognizing dyslexia as a gift won’t be the norm.

This is because their learning needs are not always recognized or supported by the mainstream education system. Dyslexia’s biggest disability is self-esteem. Every day dyslexic people of all ages are themselves is failures instead of embracing their unique talents and areas of the world around them.

And too many of our children share a shocking story, told by the 150,000 people with dyslexia today, that every child has a story of struggle, pain, and loss. It is an estimated 50 percent of students who find themselves in court are dyslexic, or have an identifiable learning disability.

This has been recognized by Andrew Yetts, Principal Youth Court Judge, who has identified a pattern of offending, which often starts with classroom difficulties caused by undiagnosed learning problems.

It is also a surprise that the Government’s recently announced Schools Plus programme will be hard pressed to address any of this. Schools Plus, designed to reach about 14,000 young people (25% of school leavers) who exit school without even Level 1 qualification, is fundamentally flawed. It’s too little, too late, the intervention at the bottom of the cliff for underperforming school leavers who are already disengaged and disenchanted, and have had years of inadequate support.

To me, it’s a simple choice: help 70,000 school children with dyslexia, and create a real difference all through their school lives, or leave it to the last minute and put weakly plasters on the 14,000 early school leavers who can’t wait to get out of school gate.

The bottom line is that the vast majority of these early school-leavers would not be in that position if their educational needs were properly addressed at an early stage. We see dyslexics as the sharp edge of the stick in that if you get the learning environments rigt for dyslexic students early on, it will work for and benefit others. We estimate the percentage of underqualified school leavers could be reduced by up to half simply by getting the environment right.

The process of developing engaged young people at the primary school level requires learning difficulties to be identified early and addressed through appropriate classroom strategies and specific interventions implemented across the whole school.

Education is a fundamental right for children, yet the system in New Zealand prolongs the pain for a child who learns differently. Acknowledging that children learn in different ways is one of the biggest factors impacting students’ participation, engagement, and achievement at school.

British educationalist Neil MacKay says that to operate effectively, children must begin their learning from a platform of strength and competence. This means reinforcing their strengths and providing opportunities to maximise those rather than minimising those who learn in non-traditional ways. It’s the self-esteem issue again.

Recognising learning differences and accommodating a number of learning methods, materials, and approaches will enable children to develop a stake in their own learning, and will create buy-in from an early age. To quote William Yeats, “Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire”.

Since 2004, the Government has implemented a $3.8 million a-year Literacy Professional Development Project. This programme focuses on improving teacher knowledge, targeting the bottom 20% of students to improve learning and achievement in literacy.

While it’s great that 700 Kiwi kids are involved and benefiting from the programmes, it’s simply not enough. Just like the Schools Plus programme, the Literacy Professional Development Project focuses dyslexics and thus misses the opportunity to address the bigger picture. Again, focusing attention on dyslexics would cause immediate impact and provide positive benefits for at least half the 20%.

Last year, the Ministry of Education laid the foundation for change when it formally recognised dyslexia. This year it’s time to turn these words into action.

We firmly believe that specific funding to address learning difficulties is of paramount importance and will have critical and lasting benefits for students throughout their time at school, and as they transition into the workplace.

GUY POPE-MAYELL is the chairman of trustees of the Dyslexia Foundation of NZ and the father of four children, two of whom are dyslexic.