Diverse reasons for learning difficulties

There is an increasing number of definitions for children with learning difficulties, but do they help parents, students and schools better tackle the problems?

ARNET HANN reports.

Students who struggle with basic skills would probably once have been labelled as slow or stupid but today there is a plethora of definitions to explain their problems.

Dyslexia, one of the best-known learning difficulties, has recently been officially recognised by the Education Ministry but that is just the tip of the iceberg.

There is dysgraphia - a problem with co-ordination and motor skills - dyscalculia - a problem with handling or understanding numbers and dyspraxia - struggling with skills and other concepts such as time and schedules.

A quick search on the Internet will find an ever growing number of definitions and diagnoses which might surprise a child's parents.

It is estimated 70,000 children have dyslexia-related difficulties every year. However, parents are unsure whether the apparently growing numbers are a result of increasing problems or simply better detection.

Canterbury University education lecturer Kathleen Liberty says we are getting better at identifying learning difficulties and people are becoming more interested in getting a "careful identification".

More and more jobs require literacy and numeracy skills and a high proportion of school leavers completing school is also seen as contributing to the social fabric of society.

"For children who have low skills in reading and writing or maths in terms of employment opportunities, as people want to identify problems at an early stage."

However, Liberty says there are indications the number of children with learning difficulties is actually rising.

She refers to the United States where standard definitions of learning difficulties have been in place for 25 years or more, as have standardised procedures for identifying them.

There, the processes have not changed but the country is still seeing rising numbers of children with problems.

Liberty cites social and environmental factors for some of the increases.

"We know that things such as smoking, alcohol and smoking during pregnancy can have an impact on children's learning ability," she says.

"An increase in family stress can be another one. Single parents or families where both parents have to work mean less time for things such as reading with children and just sitting down and talking to them, which are important for setting them up for learning."

Liberty also questions the benefit of a multitude of names but thinks it could continue.

"If we go down the medical route, I think we will continue to see more definitions appearing. However, I don't think that having more specific definitions will necessarily lead to better treatments," she said.

There can be lots of overlaps in treatments. I don't know if getting a more specific diagnosis will necessarily help in special classes or schools which a lot of other countries do."

"I think that is a great thing, but we need to look at class sizes as well as equipping our teachers with the best tools to teach them, which might mean reintroducing four years of teacher preparation or providing additional resources in schools," Liberty says.

Liberty's manager for curriculum, Mary Chambers, said schools were unlikely to work on a specific diagnosis.

"Schools will generally take the approach of identifying a student's symptoms, and remedying them, rather than focusing on diagnosing a disorder," she said.

"The ministry has the right of first refusal, but some other disorders which had similar symptoms could potentially be treated with the same programmes, she said.

There was a range of support on offer including literacy intervention and support from resource teachers. For students with severe needs, Special Education funding was available.

For Timmins, the New Zealand approach is on the right track and her hopes teachers will be given support to recognise the strengths and weaknesses of each child whether they have been diagnosed with a learning difficulty or not.

"If we start challenging the difference between children and work to develop their strengths, then we can make a difference."

If Daniel can't hear it, he struggles to learn it

Max back on track

Max has always been a hard worker, so when he was not getting the results his mother, Lorraine, believed he deserved, she began to wonder if there was something wrong.

"Max put in 10 times the amount of work required and got half the result of other children," she said.

"His teachers at school are fabulous and after noticing the input wasn't matching the output, we discussed it and decided it was best to have him professionally assessed."

The assessment led to a diagnosis of dyslexia, and Lorraine is pleased to have something to go on.

"I have a background in education and I have seen how hard it is for parents that know something is not right but have nothing tangible to back their concerns, so I was grateful," she said.

"I'm not sure how happy as such that their child is not going to glide through the mainstream education system, but I am certainly not unhappy that Max's different style of learning is now recognised within this system."

"Knowing that his learning style is different allows us to help equip him with the skills and tools he will need throughout his education."

Despite the stigma attached to dyslexia, Lorraine has not shied away from telling seven-year-old Max about his diagnosis, but says she has been keen to emphasise the positive aspects - a move she says has helped to keep his self-esteem.

"He knows he has been assessed as above-average intelligent and he knows his learning style is different," she said.

"He is aware of all the high achievers that have dyslexia. Max knows he has to work harder than away of his friends, but he is willing to do this and is proud of the different way he learns. We see it every day. He is doing well. He talks more about life and is as sharp as a tack."

"I am not sure what is going to happen at school but I am sure he will carry on doing the same thing."

"They said he had non-verbal learning disorder but we feel they have no idea what that means," Louise says.

"Having a diagnosis that few people recognised has made things harder."

"It is hard to get any funding for help. The school has been great but I feel a bit sorry for his teacher," Louise said.

"They have to deal with something they don't really know anything about as well as dealing with all the other kids in the class."

"It would be great if we could find someone else who has been through this. For now it is about trial and error, trying to find things to help with his weaknesses but also developing his strengths."

They have not spoken to Daniel specifically about the diagnosis "because we don't really want to label him".

"But knowing more about it has helped us to manage his behaviour more."

After a year of tests and observations on her son Daniel, the diagnosis of a learning difficulty came as something of a relief to Christchurch mum Louise (not their real names).

"The diagnosis of the little-known difficulty is proving to be just the first step on a long road to help the seven-year-old."

"The result was disappointing and not right," Louise said.

"I am really proud of him and not sure whether the other children had learned from it."

Since that initial conversation just over a year ago, Daniel's family have embarked on a long journey to discover the root of his difficulties.

The journey has included a resource teacher of learning and behaviour (RTLb), a psychologist and numerous specialists.

At first they suggested Daniel had attention deficit.

"He is always bouncing off the walls and has found it hard to settle down and listen to the teacher."

Hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), which concerned his mum so she was relieved when another option was put forward.

However, that new diagnosis has posed a new set of problems.

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