

Different, not disabled

All of us lose from New Zealand's backwardness in embracing those with dyslexia, writes MIKE STYLES.

Humans have always been suspicious of diversity. Historically, we burnt witches at the stake. Even today, we struggle to fully embrace racial diversity. We still have some way to go to fully include the LGBTQI+ community, although tremendous strides have been made. It seems that such neurodiverse conditions as dyslexia languish at the back of the queue.

Evidence of the Cinderella status of neurodiversity is everywhere. New Zealand's human rights provisions are largely silent about dyslexia and, unlike in the United Kingdom, for example, we have no legal framework to provide for neurodiversity/dyslexia. Stats NZ gathers no figures about dyslexia and related conditions, so we rely on international figures to gauge the size of New Zealand's affected population.

Dyslexia is best considered a condition in which intelligent people struggle with text. They struggle with reading, writing and, in particular, spelling. It is not an indicator of low intellect.

Best-estimate data suggests that at least 10% of the population have dyslexia, irrespective of culture, ethnicity, language or gender. That is 500,000 Kiwis, or 350,000 employees in the workforce. In addition, a further 5% of people have other such neurodiverse conditions as ADD, ADHD, autism spectrum condition and dyscalculia. Children with dyslexia grow up to be adults with dyslexia and it is an inherited condition passing down through families.

Despite the best efforts of some dedicated teachers, most neurodiverse/dyslexic children do not receive an education that meets their needs. Disturbingly, pre-service training for primary and secondary teachers still includes little or no instruction in how to identify or support learners with dyslexia. Many children with dyslexia enter adulthood with no explanation for why they have struggled to master literacy skills.

New Zealand pays a high price for this environment of denial and ignorance. The official position of the Ministry of Education until 2007 was that dyslexia was not a significant issue. In 2007, the ministry did a U-turn and conceded that dyslexia was

a significant issue. Sadly, it neglected to send the memo to the other government agencies. Dyslexia and the other neurodiverse conditions affect all parts of the economy and wider society. Sadly, there is collective ignorance both within both government agencies and the wider community.

The effects of low literacy skills last a lifetime. Unidentified and unsupported, dyslexia's effects are multivarious. At school, many children with dyslexia drop out early and those who remain often underachieve. Research on New Zealand

prison inmates reveal that half show up as positive for dyslexia.

In the workplace, the wastefulness of our collective ignorance of dyslexia plays out in two ways. At one end, dyslexic employees struggle to read key documents, shun promotions because they don't have the skills to read and write emails, and stay in the shadows to hide their embarrassing condition.

The other way dyslexia plays out in the workplace reflects the fact that the learning difference comes with many compensating skills and talents including creativity, innovativeness and visual, spatial and 3D skills. Workplaces that are crying out for new and different thinking are often overlooking the very people who could provide it.

How can we do a better job of interacting with dyslexic/neurodiverse people? The best way forward could be a combination of equity and symbiosis. The different brain configuration of people with dyslexia means they struggle with some things that most neurotypical

people find straightforward.

Equally, they excel in many things the regular brain finds difficult.

Equity demands that neurodiverse people be given an environment that enables them to achieve to their potential. Symbiosis says the neurodiverse and the neurotypical need each other, and the best way forward is to accept that and embrace the neurodiverse people among us.

Doing nothing should not be an option. Continuing to ignore dyslexia/neurodiversity hurts us all. ■

Mike Styles is a self-employed dyslexia researcher, trainer and consultant.



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