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An “invisible wall” is crippling NZ classroom achievement: experts

Our educational system is failing one in 10 students

Schools and teachers across the country are largely unaware of, and badly equipped to deal with, invisible learning difficulties faced by one in every 10¹ students in their classrooms, according to a charitable trust working with neurodiverse children. A wide range of invisible brain-based disabilities impact this cohort and hamper learning but are rarely addressed, writing off talent and costing New Zealand dearly in terms of both lost potential and economic burden.

Teachers, psychologists and early childhood educators are using Neurodiversity Celebration Week (18-24 March) to highlight these concerns. They are calling for early identification of neurodivergence in the classroom, and for schools and teachers to be better equipped with simple strategies that have been shown to improve educational outcomes for both affected children and neurotypical children.

The trust leading the call, Acorn Neurodiversity, provides support services for neurodivergent children, youth and their whānau. Chief executive Tami Harris said there was an “invisible wall” impacting learning in every New Zealand classroom, that many teachers don’t even know is there².

“Sometimes, as in the case of the hyperactive/impulsive variant of ADHD, the children can be more easily identified,” Ms Harris said. “But they’re just the tip of the iceberg. I can guarantee that in any classroom, anywhere in New Zealand, there are at least a couple of children who live with some other form of learning difference or disability like ADHD, autism or dyslexia.”

The scary thing, Ms Harris says, is that it’s highly likely to be undiagnosed.

“These young people are going through life wondering what the heck’s wrong with them. Their parents are often at their wits’ end worrying about why they’re falling behind in class or in their social lives. Their teachers are writing them off as lazy or naughty. Yet these are children who, given a diagnosis and the proper supports, could be doing far better at school and realising more of their potential. Not to mention feeling a lot better about themselves.”

Ms Harris illustrates her point with a story about a child with the inattentive type of ADHD.

“This is not a child who rushes around the place disrupting lessons. Typically, this type of ADHD presents as lacking in focus and ‘away with the fairies’, an inability to follow detailed instruction and a tendency to be distracted from set tasks.

“Importantly, these are not behavioural shortcomings that can be fixed with conventional teaching or coaching methods – the child has a developmental difference in her brain that renders her physiologically less able than her peers to plan more than one or two steps ahead, to develop a picture in her mind of what she needs to do in order to accomplish a task, and to concentrate on tasks that don’t deliver an immediate dopamine rush.

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¹ McCain, Kelly. Health Care Initiatives, World Economic Forum. Explainer: What is neurodivergence?. October 2022

² Education Review Office and Office for Disability Issues. *Thriving at School? Education for disabled learners at school*. Report September 2022.

“But this child will also likely have a keen sense of justice, creativity and a huge EQ. She will hyper-focus on tasks that interest her. These and other attributes could be harnessed to help her achieve in the classroom.

“But how many teachers know how to do this? And how many would simply write this little girl off as one of life’s losers?”

Acorn has this week written to the Minister of Education, Erica Stanford, and Associate Minister of Education (Charter Schools) David Seymour, calling for an urgent review of the knowledge and skills teachers need in order to identify neurodivergence more effectively when it presents in the classroom, and to engage these children most effectively in order to deliver better educational outcomes.

“This is absolutely worth doing, in our view. One in 10 is a very significant cohort of students in any school. Imagine how much easier it would make teachers’ and parents’ lives if they knew what was going on with these children and how to support them.”

Acorn believes that neurodivergent students account for much of New Zealand’s poor statistics around school attendance and engagement³. It maintains that the spill-over benefits to society from early identification and intervention include reduced economic burden through a decreased need for special education and long-term residential care, decreased involvement with the justice system⁴ and increased resilience and well-being in families.

The Trust’s parent advisory group, a collection of parents and grandparents of neurodivergent children who participate in Acorn programmes, has also submitted an action plan to the education minister for what Ms Harris calls “greatly-needed joined up thinking” between the country’s education, health and disability systems to better cater for the needs of neurodiverse children.

This comprises:

- Early identification of autism, ADHD, and learning differences
- A clear pathway to assessment and diagnosis
- Publicly-funded early support services so that children can learn and reach their potential.
- A funding model in education that supports a continuum of services and needs, not just two categories
- A support system which is responsive to the needs of families and enables choice.
- Implementation of the Learning Support Action Plan and the 3rd edition Autism Guidelines for children, both of which recommend flexible support and access to specialists.

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About Acorn Neurodiversity

Acorn provides the international gold standard model of multidisciplinary support for neurodiverse children, filling a huge gap in service provision. It has grown from two professionals providing speech and language therapy to 22 professionals across two centres providing multidisciplinary services to children from all over Auckland in their homes, schools and Acorn centres.

Acorn is a team of advocates and experts dedicated to providing evidence-based support giving neurodiverse children the tools they need to reach their potential. It provides speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, behavioural therapy, and psychology services all in one place with coordinated care, giving every family a support team.

Originally started as a business, Acorn Autism was transformed into Acorn Charitable Trust in late 2021 to allow it to partner with community stakeholders to increase equitable access to support for more neurodiverse children.

³ Ministry of Education, Attendance and Engagement Strategy. 2022

⁴ Banks, Nigel. 2017. *Investing in prison education: New approaches to improving educational outcomes and reducing re-offending*. The New Zealand Corrections Journal. Volume 5:1