

**Oral Submission to the Petitions Committee
of the New Zealand Parliament**

Further Comments on My Paper Entitled

**“Dyslexia: Its Benefits to Society and
How They can be Secured for New Zealand”**

By

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My name is David Mellor. I am an 80-year-old, *dyslexic* Professor Emeritus from Massey University, who, at age 10, was virtually illiterate.

Then, dyslexia was unknown. I was rescued by a wonderfully gifted teacher. The result. I can now draw on 55 years of post-PhD scholarly experience and advisory roles as a biomedical scientist, animal welfare scientist, and bioethicist. I have authored or co-authored 560 scientific publications, and since retiring 4 years ago, I have written five eBooks on other subjects using my penname of James Garnham

Here, I wish to make only three points.

1. If we focus on disability, that is all we will see.
2. The gifts of dyslexia are apparent at all levels of achievement and in many different occupations.
3. Teachers face significant obstacles in the “dyslexia space”.

Point 1:

If We Focus on Disability, that is All We Will See

- 1.1. Key inter-related objectives of education are to develop each youngster’s *abilities*, to help them to develop any *special skills* they may possess, and thereby to *enable* them to give full expression to those *abilities*.
- 1.2. Differences in brain wiring that accompany dyslexia are often linked to great creativity, big picture perspectives and/or other forms of originality in the areas that engage the enthusiasm of youngsters with the condition.

- 1.3. Many teachers are apparently blind to these youngsters' gifts. Instead, they focus on the youngsters' difficulties in acquiring literacy skills when taught using conventional methods. At one extreme, some teachers blame the youngsters for the failure of these methods, regarding them as unteachable, lazy or stupid no-hopers.
- 1.4. Another response by other teachers is to regard dyslexia as an often-intractable *disability*. This rationalization may provide some relief from a sense of failure these teachers may have when their conventional literacy teaching methods do not work with dyslexic youngsters. However, any relief will likely be short lived. Inwardly they will know that dismissing these youngsters as unteachable will guarantee that their condition will be *disabling*. It follows that, in these cases, it is their attitudes towards dyslexic youngsters that *disables* them.
- 1.5. This is especially the case as there are well-tried *alternative* teaching methods that *enable* these youngsters to succeed. They are supportive and encouraging. They build the youngsters' confidence by helping them to recognize, develop and apply the special skills, or gifts, that often accompany their dyslexia. They learn *how* to learn. They learn that they *can* learn. They learn that they are just as smart as their non-dyslexic peers, and often smarter, but in different ways. "Smart" means that they have the knowledge and/or skills required for them to succeed in their chosen occupations. Clearly this approach is *enabling*, not *disabling*.

Point 2:

The Gifts of Dyslexia are Apparent at All Levels of Achievement and in Many Different Occupations

- 2.1. A disproportionately high number of entrepreneurs and highflyers have dyslexia. They are applauded as individuals who have learnt how to successfully express the creative, innovative, organizational and other gifts that have accompanied their dyslexia. Their great success might suggest that other people with dyslexia would be less gifted, especially those whose occupations do not engage much public attention.
- 2.2. However, this is not so. It is self-evident that people with dyslexia will all have the distinctive brain wiring that gives rise to the condition, and its associated gifts. Provided they have not been demoralized by their educational experiences, and especially if they have found ways to access their gifts, they are known to deploy them successfully at all levels in a very wide range of occupations. Thus, there are numerous

examples of dyslexic individuals whose enthusiasm within their areas of interest enables them to do well. They include practical occupations involving gardening, house building, woodwork, metalwork, mechanical work, farming, horticulture, food preparation and cooking; artistic activities such as painting, sculpture, vocal and instrumental music, dance, and clothing design; also sports of all sorts; planning and project management; plus, a wide range of intellectual pursuits, and *numerous other occupations*.

- 2.3. Note however that learning by dyslexic youngsters is usually slow and demanding. Even when enabled by patient, empathetic and knowledgeable family members, teachers, mentors, and others, they still need the tenacity to keep trying when the going gets tough, which it often does on the rocky road to success. But the struggle is worth it. *Enabled* thus, these youngsters can become constructive members of society who can collectively contribute at many different levels of achievement through the wide range of occupations from which they can choose.
- 2.4. Therefore, not only do the individuals benefit, but also society benefits when they become valuable *assets* and positive *contributors* to their society.
- 2.5. On the other hand, when *disabled* by teachers' poor understanding, disregard, victimization, or especially, the seriously limited time available for remediation, dyslexic youngsters' prospects become severely limited; at worst they become casualties through mental illness and/or within the criminal justice system.

Point 3:

Teachers Face Significant Obstacles in the "Dyslexia Space"

- 3.1. Let me be clear. The great majority of teachers are conscientious, caring people who want to do the very best they can for their students. Until recently, however, dyslexia was not covered in their teacher training, leaving them ill-equipped to deal with it. Accordingly, when imparting the fundamentals of literacy, those teachers use the same tools and methods *they* were taught. As these are effective with up to 90 percent of all youngsters, many such teachers are perplexed when they do not work with the rest of them. Dyslexic youngsters are also perplexed because they do not understand speech in terms of letters and words; rather, their brains are wired to understand the written constituents of speech more in terms of pictures. And they learn best with the spoken word. Also, the other methods that are effective with

them require more repetition, individual tutoring, and time, which is problematic with large class sizes.

- 3.2. Viewed thus, any teacher frustration at student inattention and slow progress, and the actual causes of that inattention among the students, are explicable. As the Ministry of Education only officially recognized the existence of dyslexia in 2007, it is to be hoped that its currently stated dyslexia-focused initiatives will bear fruit and will better equip both existing and future teachers to more effectively *enable* dyslexic youngsters to thrive.
- 3.3. It is equally to be hoped that these Ministry initiatives will be given the required budgetary support and will not simply disappear into a “black hole” of unrealized good intentions.

Summing Up

- 4.1. Dyslexia is not a brain *disorder* or *pathology*. In fact, it is a naturally occurring neurological *difference*; a *difference* which is thought to have been genetically retained from the times millennia ago, before writing was invented, when traditions, lineages and histories were memorised and passed on orally.
- 4.2. When dyslexic youngsters are taught with patience and understanding, they exhibit the capacity to think and operate in worthwhile new ways at all levels in many different occupations.
- 4.3. Thus, if such teaching were to occur in most schools, its diverse benefits would potentially be felt throughout society.