

SPELD NZ Connections

Volume 92 – July 2026

ISSN 3142-1148



**Coming
Full Circle**



**Former SPELD NZ student Katie Fisher
writes the book she needed as a child**

Contents

03: Our People

05: Courses/Training

06: Feature

Former SPELD NZ student Katie Fisher on overcoming anxiety and writing the book she needed as a child

11: Profile

Dr Ruth Gibbons on how she's navigated neurodiversity in tertiary education.

13: Hacks and Tips for Neurodivergent Tertiary Students

15: Student Contributions

20: Thank you

Connect with SPELD NZ

Subscribe to our webinar
and event newsletter [here](#)



www.speld.org.nz

0800 773 536



Word from the Chair

Mānawatia a Matariki!

Wishing you all the very best for the Māori New Year and the longer days and warmer months ahead. Matariki's resurrection as a New Zealand public holiday has brought with it a wonderful chance mid-year to reflect on what has happened, remember those who have passed, and to plan for the future. It's also a great time to connect with family, friends and whānau.

SPELD NZ has achieved a lot for our learners and their whānau, but there is still so much unmet need. While neurodivergence is much better understood in New Zealand, the support and learning assistance in the education system has a long way to go. The Board and I are very committed to creating a more sustainable future for our work and seeing how new ways of working might benefit both the work of SPELD NZ and the learners themselves.



I would like to take a moment to thank our hard-working, diligent and dedicated team who give so much to our purpose. Also a very big thank you to all our members who, in communities across Aotearoa New Zealand, create such great outcomes.

I'm sure it hasn't escaped you that in November we have a General Election. I encourage you to ask any of the candidates you come across what they are doing to support better education outcomes for neurodivergent learners. Politicians, whatever their stripe, take notice of what they are asked about.

Heoi anō - That's all for now
Dale Bailey
SPELD NZ Chairperson

SPELD NZ Staff Profile – Maria Ashmore

I'm SPELD NZ's new(ish) Northern Regional Coordinator, based in our busy Auckland office. I started in January this year and, having come from a background primarily focused on sales, transitioning into the non-profit sector has been an exciting new territory for me. However, the learning curve has been incredibly rewarding, thanks to the exceptionally talented and hard-working team around me.



In my time here so far, I've been amazed by the sheer volume of daily enquiries hitting my desk. It's a reminder of just how vital SPELD NZ's services continue to be to our community, and how much support is needed for families and individuals with a specific learning disability.

When I'm not in the office, I enjoy spending time with my two adult children and my two delinquent dogs – though, depending on the day, I'm not sure I have those descriptions around the right way! To recharge, you'll usually find me playing tennis, exploring local art galleries, or eating out.



Bookmark Design Competition Update

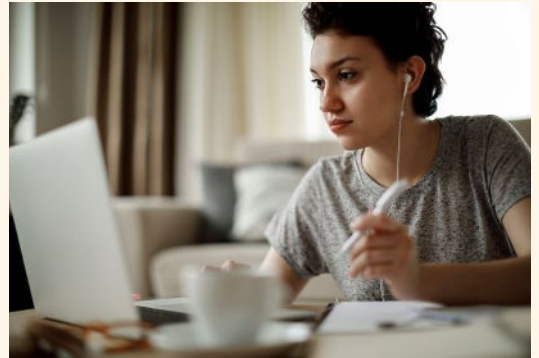
A huge thank you to all the talented SPELD NZ students who entered our bookmark competition. We've been absolutely delighted by the creativity and care that's gone into every design. Choosing the winners will be no easy task!

We'll announce the winning creators very soon and they'll be sent prizes. Their designs will be professionally printed and shared at expos, book fairs, conferences and other events.

SPELD NZ Kōwae Ako/Learning Capsules

Our online knowledge hub. Designed to help educators and families seeking skills and wisdom to better support those who struggle with dyslexia and other specific learning disabilities.

Explore our Kōwae Ako [here](#).



Introduction to Specific Learning Disabilities

Our signature two-day course delivered face-to-face and via Zoom. A great way to learn why specific learning disabilities (SLD) occur and what it's like to have dyslexia or other SLD. It also offers evidence-based, constructive, practical tools and strategies to help these learners in the classroom and at home.

Find out more

SPELD NZ Certificate in Teaching Individuals with Specific Learning Disabilities 2027

“The most valuable PD I have ever had the opportunity to undertake. I have loved all of it.”

This mainly online programme is the pathway to becoming a SPELD NZ Teacher. Also open to others who wish to extend their knowledge and expertise in teaching or learning about people with specific learning disabilities (SLD).

Learn more



SPELD NZ Assessor Training

Could you be the one to uncover why someone is struggling to learn and show them the pathway to success?

Find out how to become a SPELD NZ Assessor

Navigating Big Emotions & Hidden Hurdles

Former SPELD NZ student Katie Fisher shares her journey from highly anxious child to resilient adult, passionate about helping others.

When Katie Fisher looks back on her childhood, she remembers feeling capable but misunderstood.

“I’ve spent a long time learning to understand myself,” she says, “and even longer learning to embrace everything that comes with being neurodivergent.”

Today, Katie is an author, artist, illustrator and passionate advocate for neurodivergent children and their families. She lives with what she describes as ‘The Triple Threat’: dysgraphia, dyscalculia and ADHD. Her mission is to share what she’s learned to build confidence and emotional resilience in others who struggle.



The teacher who transformed her life

As a young child, Katie loved books and storytelling. Ideas came easily but getting them onto paper was another matter. Spelling, grammar, sentence structure and organising her thoughts were exhausting.

Everything changed when Katie began lessons with SPELD NZ at the age of 11. Her teacher, Diane, recognised Katie’s strengths and nurtured them through creativity rather than repetition. Together they planned and handwrote Katie’s own storybooks, carefully mapping out each page before binding them into real books that she proudly shared with other students.



“She didn’t try to make me learn like everyone else,” Katie recalls. “She leaned into what I loved. That creative approach changed everything.”

High school presented fresh challenges. Katie could confidently discuss complex ideas but translating them into written work remained difficult. Like many girls with ADHD, she quietly slipped under the radar.

“Back then, it was the ‘naughty boys’ who got noticed,” she says. “I was struggling quietly.”

Bullying further eroded her confidence, but one compassionate art teacher offered her a safe classroom to spend lunchtimes in and became someone who believed in her potential.

“I’ll never forget that kindness,” Katie reflects.

Like many girls with ADHD, she quietly slipped under the radar.



Making sense of adulthood

That same secondary school teacher continued to mentor and encourage Katie through university, often proofreading her assignments. After graduating with a Bachelor of Communications Studies, Katie entered the advertising industry, where her creativity and communication skills flourished. But jobs requiring precise measurements and meticulous calculations, such as working on billboards, exposed the full impact of her dyscalculia.

“I’d triple-check everything and still make mistakes,” she says. “My manager was frustrated and I carried a huge amount of shame.”

Eventually, Katie left the industry and became a personal trainer, discovering regular exercise as a hugely effective way to manage anxiety. It wasn't until her thirties that she received an ADHD diagnosis.

"I didn't really know what ADHD was back then," she says. "Suddenly my whole life made sense."

That understanding became the catalyst for her next chapter.

Coming full circle

In 2024, after completing a Postgraduate Diploma in Creative Practice, Katie was asked to illustrate a book about ADHD. That opportunity reignited her lifelong dream, and in 2025 she wrote and illustrated her first children's book. The story follows Freya the fairy, who struggles to fit into fairy school and learns gentle, evidence-based strategies to regulate overwhelming emotions.

"Freya is essentially me," Katie says. "What she experiences is what I went through as a child."

"The creative spark lit by my SPELD teacher never left me."



Every one of the book's 50 pages was illustrated by hand – a project that took around 400 hours to complete. Katie also worked alongside a psychologist to ensure the emotional regulation techniques woven throughout the story are grounded in evidence.

"The creative spark lit by my SPELD teacher never left me and now I've come full circle," she says. "SPELD gave me a world I could exist in. And that brought me back to stories. When that's fostered rather than corrected, I believe neurodivergent children can tap into something genuinely remarkable."



Katie's next book will focus on developing positive self-talk. It's another area she believes is often overlooked for neurodivergent children.

"I want to give children the language to understand what's happening for them so they can get the care and support they need."

Katie's dream is for her books to be picked up by a large publishing house so they can have a greater reach. She wants every neurodivergent child growing up to know what she took years to discover: That struggling doesn't mean you're broken – you may just need different tools to thrive.



Katie's illustration 'Glitter Critter' is the way she explains her ADHD to others.

"It's like I have raccoons driving my frontal lobe. If the raccoons come to work, it means I can get something done. So I guess it's kind of ADHD personified. It makes it less frustrating for me to give it a physical form. I'm more likely to be kind to a little raccoon – even better if she's glamorous!"

Katie's top tips:

- **Assume effort, not laziness.** Neurodivergent children often work much harder than others realise. Focus on encouragement rather than criticism.
- **Protect their flow state.** Deep, uninterrupted play helps many neurodivergent children regulate, recharge and develop their strengths.
- **Join their world.** Observe what fascinates your child and engage with their interests when invited. Shared moments build confidence and connection.
- **Make abstract ideas concrete.** Visual examples, real objects and simple comparisons can make concepts like numbers much easier to understand. For example, Katie's husband explains household finances using avocados, which makes more sense to her.
- **Use supportive tools.** AI, visual planners, colour-coded notes and personalised lists can all reduce cognitive load and increase independence.
- **Look after the body as well as the mind.** Regular exercise, movement breaks and reducing sensory overload – such as wearing noise-cancelling headphones in busy environments – can significantly reduce anxiety.

Deep, uninterrupted play helps many neurodivergent children regulate, recharge and develop their strengths.



Katie shares her personal story and more practical tips in SPELD NZ's webinar **Navigating Big Emotions and Hidden Hurdles in Neurodiversity.**

For more on Katie and her book, visit:
www.freyathefairy.com
[@katie_fisher_art](https://www.instagram.com/katie_fisher_art)
[@thatfairykatie](https://www.instagram.com/thatfairykatie)

Dr Ruth Gibbons

Seeing the World Differently

Researcher, anthropologist and entrepreneur Dr Ruth Gibbons comes from what she describes as a proudly neurodivergent family.

“At one time I identified four generations,” she says. “And it’s always been a place of difference. It’s never been a place of disability.”

This perspective has shaped Ruth’s work and research throughout her career.



Dyslexia as a subculture

Ruth completed a PhD exploring the everyday experience of dyslexia from a dyslexic perspective. Rather than relying solely on traditional academic methods, she incorporated art, film, animation and sculpture into her thesis.

Her goal was to challenge preconceived ideas about dyslexia and expand how it can be understood.

As an anthropologist, Ruth views dyslexia not simply as a learning difficulty but as a different way of being in the world – almost like a subculture.

“There are practices and rituals and things that people who are dyslexic do that all dyslexics do, so it’s normal,” she explains.

Beyond words

Ruth lectured for nine years at Massey University and now creates online courses for neurodivergent students, alongside running the ideas company Ponderables, which has a focus on neurodiversity.

While plenty gets written about the negatives, Ruth emphasises there's much to celebrate in the creative and original worldviews of neurodivergent minds.

“What gets missed is the complexity – the creative, layered, non-linear thinking that so many neurodivergent students bring to the table,” she says.

Ruth relates this to her own experience. “I never got past level four spelling at school,” she says. “During my undergraduate studies, I taught myself to spell by turning off the automatic spell check and typing the corrections myself.”

Rather than focusing on these negatives, Ruth says she learned that systems are often designed in ways that do not value dyslexic thinking – but there are other ways of doing things.

“Words alone cannot always capture the dyslexic experience, which is why art played an important role in my research,” she says. “It helped explore ideas that participants found difficult to express through language. I was one of the first PhDs at that time in anthropology to include arts and a written thesis. It's now becoming a lot more common.”



For more on Ruth Gibbons, check out her [website](#) and her [exhibition using art to tell stories from a dyslexic perspective](#).

This included the piece above ‘Exploring Dyslexic Life as a Gathering of Openings’.

Ruth's hacks for tertiary students

Struggling to keep up at uni? That's understandable.

Neurodivergent tertiary students often feel they are in a constant uphill battle with confusing assignments, readings and feedback that knocks their confidence. Identifying ways to hack the learning process spurred Ruth into creating N@Skills, an online toolkit to empower neurodivergent students "to flourish in an environment that is not designed for you," as she describes it. N@Skills also provides support for staff training.

All students face a huge leap from school to university where self-directed learning is required. As Ruth explains, one university paper is estimated to take 15 hours a week, but only two hours are lectures and tutorials – the rest is self-managed.

"You're not necessarily taught how to manage that time, or what you're meant to gain. As a lecturer, I saw a lot of neurodivergent people beating themselves up, believing that as a student at uni, you have to suffer and you have to struggle. So, they were studying, but they weren't learning."

Some simple tips from Ruth for starters

- Ruth says **neurodivergent learners can find visual cues useful** – and building those into learning notes is a great tip for both absorbing and revising notes. "I teach a technique where, along with the reading, you do a visual summary of each paragraph." She says, "It gets you to think outside the box, and learn more when you take something from one form to another because you have to analyse and think it through."



Continued...

- Ruth also addresses the ‘overwhelm’ that students can face, with tips on how to make it work for the neurodiverse brain and avoid disappearing into a rabbit blackhole – a frequent trap for the inexperienced. Ruth suggests **breaks to manage the nervous system spikes**. Rather than setting a timer to make you work, set a timer to help you stop and manage your adrenaline spikes.
- Ruth observed what many parents can vouch for: **being able to move** – to fidget, to get up and stretch – is crucial in the learning journey. “I did some testing with adults, and we found that made a major difference to people’s ability to focus. I’ve learned that for all neurodivergent people, movement is incredibly important, because if they don’t move, they’re using up all the energy to stay still. So, if you think about the classroom environment where you sit still, you are actually switching off some of your ability to focus because of that.”
- Ruth recommends trying **breathing techniques that calm the vagus nerve** - a critical part of the parasympathetic nervous system that controls resting heart rate, respiration and digestion. If that doesn’t work, flick your hands like you’re shaking off water or try lifting and dropping your shoulders to help dissipate the built-up stress reaction.



Ruth offers free advice on lecture notes, handling academic reading and making sense of essay questions in her **Dyslexic Collective videos on YouTube**

For more in-depth support, see **N@Skills** or Ruth’s **website**.

Our thanks to contributor Wendy Colville



Starfish

By SPELD NZ student Aila (12)

The starfish is a little animal in the big ocean, but it seems to survive – how?

Starfish survive because they make so many babies. Each baby has lots of arms so that it can slither to many places or escape from predators. If an enemy does eat a leg, they will just grow a new one. Also, on their arms there are nasty barbs which keep the enemies away.

In addition, starfish grow two tummies. These tummies can come out and wrap around the food. They can turn hard shells into mush in their tummies, to digest. When one tummy digests the mush, the other tummy might be finding new food.

I think starfish are weird but that is how they survive in the marine environment.

Aila's SPELD NZ Teacher Julia Miller writes:

"The main focus for Aila in previous months had been decoding and correct word writing. More recently, Aila learnt about locating key facts in a text. She used a nonfiction text, 'Starfish' by Betsy Sewell, to read about – and then summarise – interesting features of starfish. Following that, she used her new knowledge to answer: What adaptations (special features) does a Starfish have to survive in the ocean?"

Takahe Hunt

**By SPELD NZ student
Sarah Smith (13)**

We're going on a Takahe hunt, we're going to see a small one, we're not scared, we're not scared. Uh oh – the potato patch, the sticky, muddy potato patch! We can't go over it, we can't go under it, we'll have to go through it! Left, right, left, right.

We're going on a Takahe hunt, we're going to see a small one, we're not scared, we're not scared. Uh oh – a corn maze, a tall, thick corn maze! We can't go over it, we can't go under it, we'll have to go through it! Shove, push, shove, push.

We're going on a Takahe hunt, we're going to see a small one, we're not scared, we're not scared. Uh oh – the McKenzie Burn, the deep, wide McKenzie Burn! We can't go over it, we can't go under it, we'll have to go through it! Splash, splosh, splash, splosh.

We're going on a Takahe hunt, we're going to see a small one, we're not scared, we're not scared. Uh oh – Mount Lyall, tall, steep Mount Lyall! We can't go under it, we can't go through it, we'll have to go over it! Grunt, puff, grunt, puff.



We're going on a Takahe hunt, we're going to see a small one, we're not scared, we're not scared. Uh oh – an orange beak, thick legs, large body – a Takahe! A mean, protective Takahe protecting her young!

Back down Mount Lyall – grunt, puff, grunt, puff. Back through the McKenzie Burn – splash, splosh, splash, splosh. Back through the corn maze – shove, push, shove, push. Back through the potato patch – left, right, left, right. Into the farmhouse; oh no, the door! Quick! Shut the door – under the bed – we're not going on a Takahe hunt. We're too scared.

**Sarah's SPELD NZ Teacher
Raewyn Forsyth writes:**

"Sarah has made significant progress in her spelling, reading and writing. We've been working on sentence structure, and this piece was written at home, inspired by her studying Takahe at school."

The Pumpkin

The biggest, cutest, weirdest and ugliest
Cattle scales weighted them all
Each started from a seed
Home grown, giant gourds
Different shapes, colours and patterns
The finest and favourites
celebrated with joy

**By SPELD NZ Student
Holly Deery (11)**

**Holly's SPELD NZ
Teacher Judith
Hickman writes:**

"Holly selected words for her poem from an article in the local newspaper on a giant pumpkin-growing competition. Holly has become a confident writer and now finds herself inspired to write her own little poems when she is on her family's farm."



Alphabetical Music Instruments

By SPELD NZ Student Fintan Archer (10)



**Fintan's SPELD NZ
Teacher Marilyn
MacLachlan writes:**

"Fintan created a fictional musical instrument for each letter of the alphabet, using his creative skills and imagination."

A Animonium

A microphone that changes your voice to the animal sound you choose.

B Bassoonika

It makes the noise of a bazooka when it hits an object.

C Chimpanzonia

A keyboard that makes a chimpanzee noise.

D Downchoon

A violin that only plays low notes.

E Eggmike

You can drop it and it will crack into two, so you and your buddy can both sing in a half mike.

F Frozen Mike

If you hold it for too long your hands freeze.

G Ghostpian

When you play a Ghostpian, it scans the area looking for ghosts and while you are touching it, you can see the ghosts.

H Highchoon

A violin that only plays high notes

I Icy Guitar

Your hands freeze onto the Icy Guitar when you play it and the only way to get them off is to use a special tool.

J Jellytar

A jelly guitar that makes a guitar sound.

K Klearmike

A microphone that is almost invisible.

L Lunchpian

It is a piano that has two lunch boxes on the side and when you are hungry you can eat food out of them.

M Mimic Mike

The mike mimics a different voice every time you sing into it.

N Namesaxophone

It is a saxophone which says a random name every time you blow it.

O Octomike

It is a stand that has eight mikes connected to it, so eight people can play.

P Panboom

A drumset made of pancakes. They make the drum noise and when you are hungry, you can eat them.

Q Quick Guitar

It is a guitar that makes your hand go two times the normal speed.

R Rowtube

It is a tuba but it has too many buttons, but when you get the hang of it, it makes a good sound.

S Silentphone

A xylophone that is quiet.

T Teacherpian

It is a piano and there is a screen and you pick a song and the piano board lights up with the right notes to play.

U Unituba

It's a tuba and if you are thinking of something when you blow it, that thought comes to reality.

V Violentphone

A xylophone that makes violent noises like gun shots, screaming or monsters scratching.

W Water Guitar

When you are playing it, it is solid, but when you are not playing it, it wiggles around like water.

X Xpian

A piano that you can see through, when you click a button, but the audience can't.

Y Yapdrum

Every time you hit one drum, it makes a boring conversation for one minute.

Z Zoo Trumpet

When you play it, it makes a random noise of a creature that is in the zoo.

Thank you!

SPELD NZ is a not-for-profit charity and receives no government funding. We're continually fundraising to maintain our daily operations and help subsidise services for those who would otherwise struggle to afford them.

We are immensely grateful for the grants, donations and other assistance we have received over the past 12 months:

Acorn Foundation, Ailsa Barr, BDL, Bear Trust, Bella Murdoch, Bernard Chambers Charitable Trust, Central Lakes Trust, Community Organisation Grants Scheme (COGs), David Ellison Trust, D.V. Bryant Trust, E.B. Millton Charitable Trust, ECCT, Flying Phoenix Trust, Frimley Foundation, GABBS Great Auckland Bargain Book Sale Trust, JN & HB Williams Foundation, Julie Goodyer, Kingstone & Associates Ltd, Lindsay Foundation, Lottery Community Grants Board, L.W. Nelson Charitable Trust, Mary Lloyd SPELD Auckland Trust, Otago Community Trust, Phillip Verry Charitable Foundation, Rata Foundation, Susan Gerred, TECT, TG Macarthy Trust, The Lion Foundation, The Phillip Dallow Dyslexia Trust, The Sage Trust, The Sir William and Lady Manchester Trust, Toi Foundation, Victoria Clare, WEL Energy Trust and the many others who have given donations or volunteered their time.



Give the gift of literacy and numeracy

Your donation could provide the precious opportunity for someone to be assessed and receive the one-on-one tuition that could transform their life. Here's what one parent told us about the impact of SPELD NZ financial assistance:

“With Mum recently returning to part-time work on minimum wage, ongoing financial commitments, and inconsistent child support, things have been quite tight. Your support has made a real difference by easing some of that pressure and allowing us to access the support she needs. It has taken a significant weight off our shoulders.”

All donations are tax deductible. For more information, visit www.speld.org.nz/donate or email fundraising@speld.org.nz