



**National Council of  
Women of New Zealand**

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Wahine O Aotearoa

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**Submission to the Education and Science Committee for the  
Inquiry into the identification and support for students with the  
significant challenges of dyslexia, dyspraxia, and autism spectrum  
disorders in primary and secondary schools**

**About NCWNZ**

The National Council of Women of New Zealand, Te Kaunihera Wahine o Aotearoa (NCWNZ) is an umbrella group representing 288 organisations affiliated at either the national level or to one of our 20 branches. In addition to our organisational membership, about 260 women are individual members of branches. NCWNZ's function is to represent and promote the interests of New Zealand women through research, discussion and action. This submission has been prepared by the NCWNZ Education Standing Committee after consultation with the membership of NCWNZ.

**Executive Summary**

The overall picture presented by NCWNZ members who responded is of a Special Education support system for children with dyslexia, dyspraxia and autism spectrum disorders which is inconsistent, difficult to negotiate, and is highly dependent on the knowledge, attitude, skills and choices of individuals within the system. The system reinforces and reproduces the inequality currently present within society rather than education being a way to improve individuals' and families' future quality of life. These children's right to education are often not being upheld; if the Ministry of Education's aim is to ensure that ALL children succeed, it is clear that the current system is not an effective way to achieve that. There is a lot of evidence here to suggest that money spent on an effective support system for these children would have long term benefits for society and the economy.

There are three main gender issues that NCWNZ sees in the current Special Education support system.

- These disorders disproportionately affect boys, and ineffective educational support generally leads to disruptive and antisocial behaviour, and later, it often leads to prison. It is extremely necessary that the causes of these behaviours are identified and dealt with, rather than being

dismissed with the gender stereotypes of “boys will be boys” or “boys are slower learners”. Gender stereotypes help no-one.

- Education Support Workers are vitally important to successful outcomes, and require a high level of skill, knowledge and empathy. As a women-dominated field, it is historically underpaid and undervalued. This contributes to the inconsistency of support offered for students due to a lack of understanding of what is required in the role and a high turn-over, particularly of the most capable staff.
- Parents are placed under enormous pressure to advocate for their child, to fight the system, and to financially provide resources for effective education. In the majority of cases, this burden falls disproportionately on the mother, as mothers still do the majority of caring in our society.

There have been many reviews over recent years that have highlighted a fragmented, under-resourced and inconsistent support system for these learners who have significant – but not severe – special educational needs. NCWNZ would recommend to the Committee that there is no need for further reviews, but there is an urgent need for effective policy action.

The above issues are discussed in six sections with selected quotes from the received responses: screening and diagnosis; what works best; available support; teaching staff; longer-term consequences; and time for action. This is followed by an appendix with five separate case studies from two parents, one teacher, and two people with special educational needs.

## Screening and Diagnosis

### Obtaining a diagnosis is an expensive and long process

A common theme among members who responded was that diagnosis was difficult to get and was paid for by the parents as the Ministry of Education does not pay for screening<sup>1</sup>. Support is available only after diagnosis. As screening tests can be between \$400-\$1000 according to our members, (which is financially impossible for many families), there would be many students excluded from accessing support because of a lack of a confirmed diagnosis. Further, the assessments only last for a limited period of time, which is a further financial and logistical barrier.

The length of time it takes to get a diagnosis was also of great concern to all our respondents, where diagnosis ranged from ages around 4 years through to not being diagnosed until tertiary study, and with a peak diagnosis period in the mid-primary years. Dyslexia is a particular issue in this regards as there are not the same amount of physical symptoms that are recognisable in the early years, as this primary school teacher explained:

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<sup>1</sup> Min Ed website <http://www.education.govt.nz/school/student-support/special-education>; Response from one of our members: “No screening is provided by MOE Special Education (although the service constantly receives calls from parents unaware of this)”

- Children with dyspraxia and autism had been diagnosed with their conditions as pre-schoolers. Those who were displaying signs of dyslexia were more difficult to confirm.

### Parental advocacy is essential

In order to get a screening and a diagnosis, many parents had to advocate hard to be taken seriously. Examples of experiences were:

- I pushed to have her assessed through school but time went by and nothing happened. We then decided to have her assessed ourselves (privately) through SPELD.
- The kindy teachers recommended we get him assessed through the MOE. He was assessed after a lengthy wait, to be told that he was “moderately delayed” and didn’t qualify for assistance. ... . I have been fighting the system ever since. At the end of Year 4 a gap came up at Hagley Diagnostic (three term waiting list) – he was diagnosed with Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, auditory processing and memory delays.
- While her first preschool teachers picked up something was not quite right, and I had many talks with my GP about things which most certainly did not seem right to me, no one ever got to the heart of the matter. Her preschool teachers referred us to the NZ Association for Gifted Children, which declared she was gifted but its programmes didn’t work for her. When she started school, teachers recognised she was very bright but couldn’t quite put a finger on some of the issues she experienced. It wasn’t until I read a magazine article – of all things – when she was seven that I heard of Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) and realised this sounded remarkably like her. We then self-referred to the occupational therapist who specialises in SPD (I went first to see my GP but, once again, my concerns were brushed off) and she gave us a diagnosis of SPD and mild dyspraxia.
- There was no screening and my daughter (his mother) struggled to get teachers to understand his problem. Everything including Pro-ed diagnosis fell on deaf ears.

The amount of advocacy required by parents to obtain a diagnosis is also of concern, as not all parents have the access to the social capital that is required to be an effective advocate. It sets up a system where the privileged, both financially and culturally, are able to access support whereas others cannot.

### Early intervention is delayed by lack of diagnosis

The delay in getting diagnoses is a problem, as for special educational needs it is well established that early intervention is crucial for achieving satisfactory educational, emotional and social outcomes<sup>2</sup>, as eloquently explained by one respondent:

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<sup>2</sup> For example the Autism Spectrum Disorder guidelines <http://www.education.govt.nz/school/student-support/special-education/supporting-children-and-young-people-with-autism-spectrum-disorder-asd/the-asd-guideline-that-shapes-our-approach/> recommends “intervention and support as soon as possible”.

These children need help from the start. Waiting until Year 2 to prove that a child won't naturally have the "penny drop", turns a one year gap into two. It is hard for a child with a learning disability to learn and close the gap faster than an able learner. This leaves them permanently behind and at the bottom of the class.

### Gender attitudes hinder effective screening

The impact of gender on attitudes toward children with learning difficulties was a worrying theme amongst some respondents' stories, as these attitudes appeared to mask the actual problem. Some comments made were:

- I kept asking questions and was told "she will be fine she is a lovely girl".
- The School (Decile 10) did not offer assistance in the first year. It was expected that some boys were "slow to get it" and assistance would be withheld until a learning deficit was proven.
- The school just kept saying they were boys, they would grow out of it, and they weren't going to be academic anyway!!!

### What works best for these learners

#### Individualised programmes

The NCWNZ members who responded were very clear that each learner should be treated as an individual and that many problems arose from the learner being taught to the norms of a particular grouping within which they struggled to fit. These norms created expectations about learner characteristics that might relate to appropriate pedagogy for boys or girls, for a particular age group, for certain ability streaming, or for diagnosis. Yet many learners have multiple issues and present a unique profile that requires an individualised response. Some comments were:

- Every child is different. What works for some may not work for others. Individual learning plans within school with an individual tutor or teacher aide during school time would be ideal. Due to funding this is not always possible.
- We have to be careful about categorising all students under one label. Each child has his or her own requirements.
- Because my sons performed poorly on their entrance exam to the college for class placement, they were placed in the lower classes where there were children with behaviour issues; the distraction of these children in the classroom made an already difficult learning environment a more challenging learning environment.

- Individual basis – supporting each child’s needs. It is important for the teacher to understand different children's learning styles and to remember they are first and foremost children/human beings.
- First and foremost, the prior knowledge of the student’s background and successful teaching strategy used by the primary/ intermediate teachers to be communicated to the high school teachers.
- “Every dyslexic child is different. Teachers have to have a range of ways of treating them and find one that works for that child” (Brando Yelavich, dyslexic author of Wild Boy, invited guest at an NCW branch meeting).
- National Standards, with such a narrow focus on reading, writing and numeracy, is stifling these children. These children are slower to pick on things and develop new skills. While no one disputes reading, writing and numeracy are the foundations for learning and, as such are extremely important, the pressure to hit these standards at prescribed times is putting too much pressure on the children and their teachers. There needs to be a wider recognition of the way these children learn and resourcing needs to be appropriate.

### Assistive technology

The use of adaptive or assistive technologies was highly recommended by many respondents, parents and teachers alike. However, there were issues around the costs of such technology, who had the responsibility to pay for it, and fundamentally, the teacher’s willingness and ability to incorporate such technology.

- As parents we provided our sons with laptops to enable them to record the lessons.
- Computer software is available which makes writing and listening to text easier. Augmentative equipment (i.e. laptops, iPads etc.) are very useful. Audio books can be listened to with head phones, Dragon Dictate and similar programs are available instead of keyboard typing. However, it all comes down to the classroom teacher and his/her willingness to adapt, differentiate or think outside the square.
- When H, who couldn’t/and still can’t speak, found out at the age of 12 that he could type, his first sentence was: I want to learn.
- Dyspraxic child at their school, got a computer at 8 or 9 yrs, could work a lot better on the computer. Sometimes he would dictate to the teacher aide. But this worked well.
- Assistive technology in the classroom such as iPad/laptop (my son typed his stories as his handwriting was slow & hard to read).
- The school applied for an Assistive Technology grant but it was turned down, I don’t know why. In the end, the school purchased a tablet that my son has used exclusively for the last two years for writing (they were not set up for BYOD). This helped enormously & I’m grateful

for the school for fulfilling this need for him. I understand the school does what it can with what it's got. We have had no choice but to plug the gaps privately or watch our bright son fail even more so.

- Assistive technology!! There is a flood of wonderful products coming on to the market that can assist students with learning difficulties to master and consolidate any number of skills and knowledge acquisition. A priority for the Government should be funding specialists within schools whose role is to match-up appropriate assistive technology packages to individual students and develop ongoing learning programmes in conjunction with teaching and teacher aide staff.

### Private programmes outside of school

Several of our members had positive experiences with different privately run programmes for children with learning difficulties, and in general spoke highly of them even whilst acknowledging the extremely high costs. The programmes or companies recommended were Hagley Diagnostic assessment (\$800), Seabrook McKenzie assessment (\$400 because only a partial assessment), The Dore programme (\$5000 + trips to Christchurch), the Davis Dyslexia course (\$2500). The cost of these programmes put them out of reach of lower income families, or force the families to make sacrifices in other areas which can negatively impact on those families, but they consider it worthwhile:

- We had heard about the Cookietime Trust and applied for a scholarship for our daughter to do the Davis Dyslexia course. She was not successful but we had heard so many good things that we decided to take a loan to cover the cost and try this. This was a huge success and changed our daughter's way of thinking. Within a year she was up to speed with her reading and her writing was now legible. She is now in Year 12, is a very hard worker and achieving well.

Parents also commonly arrange for extra tuition from such places as Kip McGrath and SPELD, and the support of SPELD is well acknowledged and appreciated. However, extra tuition brings difficulties for children for whom schooling takes more effort than for their peers, as they are already tired from their school day and extra tuition is sometimes approached as yet another penalty:

- My sons both attending SPELD to assist with the Dyslexia. Neither the primary nor secondary school would allow them to attend during school hours, they therefore attended after school. As young children this made their day long and in fact set up a barrier for learning. It must be remembered that children with dyslexia have to work so hard in class to try to decipher the lesson that extra work at the end of the day adds to their tiredness, and is not conducive for learning to occur.

### Mainstreaming works if there is enough support

Respondents were generally in favour of mainstreaming of children with special education needs, both because of the socialisation for the child with learning difficulties and also for the benefits

accrued to other children. However, sufficient support was seen as essential for this to work, as these comments show:

- My main comment is to say how much benefit disabled kids get from mixing with able kids. The able kids also develop a sense of social responsibility. Have observed this in a granddaughter who has been paired up with a special needs student. There is mutual benefit.
- The most successful outcomes I encountered were in a school with an attached unit. These children had access to teachers with specialised knowledge, teacher aides trained in this area and support staff such as an Occupational Therapist, Physiotherapist, the Special Education Service, the Guidance Units and Advisors to the Deaf and Blind. They were mainstreamed into the main school with support and included in all school activities. Links between school and home were well maintained and rewarding for all. The best of both worlds.
- I support the inclusion of children with challenging and sometimes violent behaviour in the mainstream but there must be support and supervision so that the impact on other class members is not an issue. Having seen the value of socialisation of this inclusion – it has to continue, but to maintain the support of both the other children, their teachers and their parents, there must be full support available. No teacher should fear for their safety.
- Parents are always afraid that their SE child will be rejected. They want their child to be part of the group, have an influence on the group if possible but the sober realisation is that the SE children and the non-SE children form two groups and they are quite separate. Parents want society to move from not-excluded to automatically included.
- Unless they are academically low and need to be placed in specific support learning programmes they are just dumped into mainstream classes and pretty much told to get on with it. Because they are capable academically they are expected to perform, however social anxiety and lack of organisational skills means these kids then fall through the cracks and can be targets for bullies. (As we experienced).
- Many children diagnosed with these conditions are being denied their rights to have the best education due to a lack of knowledge in the schools and inadequate specialized resources. This is the result of inadequate funding and commitment by Government to ensure the success of children with special needs placed in a mainstreamed situation.

### **Focus on the learner's strengths and build self-esteem**

A very strong theme running through responses was the effects of negative educational experiences on the learners' self-esteem, and the damage that this caused in the longer term. This often happened because of labels that were applied to them, often by teachers, such as "lazy", "naughty", "didn't try very hard", and the way they might be treated such as being punished for "poorly completed work", being "ridiculed in front of his class", or excluded from sports. The amount of effort that is required for these children to learn effectively is enormous, and this requires a

correspondingly high degree of motivation and self-belief. Unfortunately, like all children, self-belief and self-esteem are fragile entities and easily damaged. It is therefore important that there is a focus on strengths, and steps are taken to protect self-esteem:

- Three years were wasted in an important time in her academic life and because of this she does have gaps with grammar etc. and also the self-esteem issue took a lot of building, luckily she is very good at sport so this was helpful.
- Students with learning (and other difficulties) do not want to be made an exception. Both son and grandson did not want to be taken out of class for separate tuition and yet did not qualify for teacher-aide teaching.
- At the age of 15, students are very conscious of being seen to be helped individually by a teacher aide in class.
- She finds reading and spelling difficult. As most tasks involve reading and writing at school she can become frustrated and her confidence can be affected.
- This particular student had very good oral skill and was given the opportunity to lead in drama production by being an MC. He has shown his talent and was later chosen to be a head boy and is now managing a sales department within a store and he plans to go to university later.
- One thing that works well for children is having individual programmes – assess what the child can do, and work with that. For example, I know of a Dyslexic child who liked fishing, so I used resources related to this and it opened the door to learning for him.
- When asked about how he should be treated, my friend H said: Talk to me about important things – about the things I CAN do. Never yell at me.

### Teamwork approach

The importance of active and genuine communication between all people involved in helping a child with learning difficulties was emphasised in many responses. There were examples of poor communications between teachers and teacher aides, between teachers and the school management team, between parents and schools, and between external professionals and the school. There were some examples of good communication, but these were in the minority. A particular frustration was the waste of precious resources because of poor communications, for example if the school chose to ignore the advice of external professionals. Some representative comments were:

- I was formally informed about only one of these three cases I have given. In all other later teaching and till now, information regarding the specific learning difficulties of individual students are poorly communicated to the teachers who should be informed in details and be guided on how to deal with such cases. I suggest through professional development training.

- Once her son was diagnosed with dyslexia she approached the school to allow him to sit an Australasian maths test as this was one of his strengths. As he had reading difficulties she requested a reader/writer as this was an entitlement and one of the recommendations of the assessment. The school refused her request and said he was to sit the test on his own. This resulted in him being unable to sit the test as it required the reading of the mathematical problems.
- The school I work at has a sound transition process, with in-depth briefings to staff prior to arrival of new students at beginning of year.
- For children with dyslexia the Educational Psychology report provides ideas and effective methods of teaching these children, all the children's teachers should read these and apply.
- With the way the school management works these days and being very PC about everything personal, any such diagnosis information may not necessarily be shared with the very frontline personnel- the classroom teachers - when it is of utmost important link so that teachers can implement different strategies for more effective teaching and learning to take place.

## Available support

### Inconsistent support and funding

One of the main complaints across the range of respondents was the inconsistency of support. The current system is dependent upon individuals, and the circumstances that the school happens to find themselves in at any specific time. Experiences for one child vary from school to school, from year to year, from teacher to teacher. This inconsistency makes it hard for children to sustain progress, for parents to plan ahead – financially and otherwise, or for schools to effectively cater for the needs of their students. The under-resourcing is chronic and systemic, as shown by the case studies in the appendix of this submission and by these selected quotes:

- This system does not take into account that some schools have more than their share of special needs children and funding is inadequate to cover all needs. There were cases of some local schools creating barriers to enrolling such children and therefore any school that did provide was approached becoming what was known as “magnet schools”. Funding should be needs based.
- Consistency – of resourcing, both funding and staffing. Ongoing availability of support and expertise in teaching theory, teaching practice and strategies, assistive and other technology and other supports available to these tamariki.
- Stability. Many children with autism, need stability of routine and experience to ensure personal safety and positive reaction
- Support is not consistent or continuous through the education system. For example a child moving from early childhood education must go through another screening for support and

funding at school. They may get less help and a different support person. When children start school, waiting to receive funding stretches teacher aide time.

- Students often come to secondary school having been supported in primary schools, but the system in secondary schools can be very hit and miss, depending on the culture of the school, the expertise of the SENCO, and the co-operation of the classroom teacher. Each student has 6-10 separate teachers, meaning co-ordination of the services or support to the student is vital.

### Special exam conditions

The most common form of special exam conditions is the provision of reader/writers. There were issues regarding the bureaucratic difficulties in arranging this support which include needing an (expensive) assessment before being considered for support, whose responsibility it is for organising the support, dependence on the good will of the school and the reader/writers for a good experience, and lack of recognition that using a reader/writer is a skill that needs to be learnt by both child and supporter:

- At the schools my sons' have attended the only resourcing has been the provision of a reader/writer for exams at the secondary school.
- Special Assessment Conditions are used correctly by the schools I worked in, and continue as a reader/writer.
- It was left up to my sons to organise for teachers to provide notes and also to request reader/writers for internal tests and exams.
- In big city schools, there are plenty of reader/writers: in rural areas, not so much.
- Long story short, with the help of reader writers at College and a lot of help with reading at home he is now studying at Polytech, still with reader writers.
- I understand there are always difficulties finding sufficient numbers of supervisors or reader-writers at exam time. I think resourcing in this area should be a priority for the Government, given the ever-increasing number of students requiring special assessment conditions for in-school or NCEA assessments and exams. It's often the small things that stand out – and with funding so tight, it has become accepted that it is up to the supervisors/reader-writers to supply their own stationery – pens, rulers etc. – when working as an exam reader-writer. I was aware last year at a pre-exam briefing that each of the reader-writers present were paid for an hour of their time to attend, but the admin staff member in charge of the briefing was working outside her scheduled i.e. paid hours to host the meeting.

## Teaching staff

The impact of the teacher on the child with learning difficulties cannot be underestimated. The message was loud and clear that a good teacher can make a positive difference, and a bad teacher can have harmful effects which last for much longer than the time the child spends with them. Teacher knowledge about these learning difficulties was patchy, and contributed to many of the issues around poor teaching. This was especially frustrating to parents who had acquired a lot of knowledge about their child's condition which was ignored by a teacher who obviously did not have that same level of knowledge. There is research currently being conducted by a PhD student at Auckland University which supports the idea that many teachers hold misconceptions about learning difficulties, in this case about autism<sup>3</sup>, and the respondents comments show how much this is a problem in children's education.

- Thankfully, he has had some amazing teachers and in those years he has thrived and made great progress. Other years not so much and it felt like treading water.
- It shouldn't be (but it is) the case that the level of help and respect accorded to the children and their families depends on the empathy of individual teachers. Get a good one and things will be fine; a less understanding teacher(s) and life becomes a living nightmare for our kids.
- The worst was a first year teacher of Asian culture who had little understanding of how to cope with a teenager experiencing many difficulties – learning, family and health.
- Teachers back then had no understanding of dyslexia – in fact refused to believe there was such a condition so made no allowances in their teaching method. ... Life (for this 48 year old) has continued to be a disaster, frustration and anger underlying much of life's experiences.
- The teachers were requested to provide written notes as taking down the lesson is near impossible for them, the provision of notes was infrequent and the teachers needed to have frequent reminders. ... I don't believe that teachers truly have an understanding of the challenges that dyslexic children face.
- What works for these children are patient and understanding teachers who are willing to recognise the wide-ranging affects these disorders can have.

Teachers themselves generally did not feel adequately prepared, informed or supported with regards to these learning disorders. Much of the learning they have acquired has been through their own initiative and reading. This appears to hold true whether the teacher concerned trained many years ago or relatively recently.

- As a classroom teacher of over 30 years, I have come across more of the dyslexia disorder than the other two categories. I must confess my ignorance of the latter two categories.

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<sup>3</sup> Zhuoni Cai, PhD candidate at Faculty of Education and Social Work, Auckland University:

[http://www.autismnz.org.nz/conference\\_2014/programme/speakers\\_bios/poster\\_presenters/annie\\_zhuoni\\_cai](http://www.autismnz.org.nz/conference_2014/programme/speakers_bios/poster_presenters/annie_zhuoni_cai)

- I had over 40 years teaching experience and retired 6 years ago. During this time I had children with autism and dyslexia in my class, among those with other special needs. During my teacher training I received no professional development in the special needs of children and it was only after mainstreaming was introduced and I had responsibility in this area that any formal training was given. Prior to that I had read and researched for my own knowledge.
- I developed teaching methods that assisted students with dyslexia, including having a wandering reading specialist teacher in my science classes, on occasion, to assist those pupils who were having difficulty writing words and especially during school tests.
- I had no idea how to teach these students and needed a lot of support and guidance from outside professionals. It has been the on-going PD I have had since from Ministry staff and also my own self-study and most of my learning came from the students themselves. Every student that I have taught with one or more of these conditions has taught me important strategies that I know use every day.
- At college in the 1990s I took an optional 1 term course. But these disorders were not really on the radar. There should be thorough examination and focussed strategies as part of a teaching diploma.
- In my training I did a total of 1 day on special needs teaching. Attended PD courses – but they are costly and require class relievers to attend.
- I trained as a primary school teacher over 20 years ago and haven't taught for 15. These particular disorders were touched on. Hopefully now there is more education for training teachers.
- Not during my training in 1980. Not aware if that is the case now. I see it as on-going professional development training.
- I asked a young mother who was training to be a teacher what she learned during her training. Her answer was "nothing in the course but there was a seminar which was being held in Christchurch which she could go to in the holidays if she wanted to". It should be a component of the basis course.
- As an RTLB, once the Ministry of Education accepted the diagnosis of dyslexia as a genuine educational need, training was organised by the RTLB region for the RTLBs and SENCOs.

An RTLB was an exception to this:

- I am an RTLB working in schools. Over the years I have had several students on my roll with dyslexia, dyspraxia and autism. I have had the opportunity to attend Professional Learning and Development (PLD) in all 3 areas and feel confident in sharing this knowledge with teachers and parents that I work with.

Teachers are also under a lot of stress with many facets of their job, and the lack of support when they are teaching children with learning difficulties contributes to 'burn out':

- I taught senior students how to cope and how to pass examinations, but because this was very exhaustive, I gave up teaching senior science and biology, so I do understand the stress under which teachers work with students with learning disabilities.
- Teachers are often under much pressure to complete other facets of their job – National Standards and NCEA requirements including recording. Energy taken out of what they are trained to do – teach.

Education Support Workers (or the older term Teacher Aides) are another vitally important part of the support system for children with learning difficulties. A good ESW can compensate for a poor teacher, can provide emotional and intellectual support for the parents, and can be vital for integration of a child into a mainstream classroom. The range of skills required to do the job well is wide, and the lack of training of some was very obvious, and detrimental to the child's learning. Further, the low pay was highlighted by many as inadequate recompense for the importance of the job they do, and possibly the effect on discouraging those people with the better skills from taking on this role.

- (From teacher aide perspective.) Working in a range of classrooms, I see a wide range of reaction from teaching staff to the students with these special needs. They are always positive, but there is inconsistency of approach, with some teachers having prepared (and clearly put in much time and effort) specially adapted worksheets etc., while others rely on the teacher aide present to work with the student to modify the tasks according to the student's need and capability. There are seldom opportunities for the teacher and teacher aide to plan an approach together. It does happen, but in an ad hoc manner. Teachers have commented that it is frustrating to have several teacher aides working with the same student or students over the course of a week, and they have expressed a desire for consistency. Having to repeat instructions or provide information to several separate teacher aides is time-consuming and inefficient.
- Teacher aides may be useful in some situations, but once again this is teacher dependent. Some teacher aides are "helicopters", some work with the class while the teacher spends time with the student concerned. Some teachers expect the TA to relieve them of the responsibility of the student. But there are some brilliant teachers. Training of teachers and teacher aides is of paramount importance. TAs are poorly paid, and may have no educational background. Each job is specific to the student involved.
- Children with dyspraxia and extreme autism were covered by the ORRS funding. In saying this, it did not cover the salary of a teacher aide for all the day as it is a set amount and TAs are paid at a rate higher than this allowed.

- Funding for teacher aides does not cover the needs in a school with many children needing extra help.
- There are inevitably many more hours worked than are officially paid. That really goes for all aspects of the education sector, but when the pay rate is so low, as it is for a teacher aide, it is hurtful – a bit of an insult really – knowing that financial recompense does not match hours worked. Staff turnover is reasonably high, and the job is more something one does for experience than for the money!
- Teacher aides working one on one with these students is key to improving students learning.
- The most successful outcomes I encountered were in a school with an attached unit. These children had access to teachers with specialised knowledge, teacher aides trained in this area ...
- Individual learning plans within school with an individual tutor or teacher aide during school time would be ideal.
- Access to teacher aides for practical subjects for students with dyspraxia and ASD – are often minimal, depending on the school's SEG grant and the need of students. Health and Safety requirements may require a TA to be in the class.
- I would love the Ministry to provide free training courses for teacher aides. These people work alongside our special needs students one on one every day and in the main are untrained.

### Longer-term Consequences

What was evident from the respondents was the long term effects of poor educational experiences for students with learning difficulties. Their stories told what had happened after the school years, and showed negative effects not only for the individuals concerned but also for society and for the economy. It is of concern to NCWNZ that many of these children with learning difficulties are boys, and without effective support in their compulsory schooling years they grow up to be angry men. These are the men in our prisons<sup>4</sup>, these are men that have decided that the system doesn't want them so they do not want the system. There are some people with learning disabilities who had bad experiences yet who still succeed in their later lives, or at least in some areas; however, they tend to have succeeded despite the system rather than because of it.

- I have a family member with dyslexia. She is now 38 and went through school at the time that educationalists laughed at the term dyslexic at conferences. This intelligent young woman finished school depressed and with a very low self-esteem. She now recounts how unkind and lacking in understanding many of the teachers were. No assistance was given at school. Some

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<sup>4</sup> Foundation for people with learning disabilities: <http://www.learningdisabilities.org.uk/help-information/learning-disability-a-z/c/criminal-justice-system/>; Dyslexia Foundation of NZ: <http://www.dyslexiafoundation.org.nz/daw2015/justice.php>

of those teachers may still be in the system. After leaving school she has had a variety of jobs but her work history has been hampered by mental health issues and stress related health problems. She is now the excellent mother of two children but receiving the domestic purposes benefit. She has just begun some tertiary education. This is the story of a woman who could have contributed a lot more if she had had the help when she needed it. Instead she has cost the system more than was necessary.

- He has passed NCEA 2 with credits from chainsaw, and forklift credits along with outdoor education. Anything that doesn't have too much paperwork. He can drive anything and take his motor bike or truck to bits, fix it and put it together again. He will leave school at 17 and work with a fencing company. His school life was a continuing misery.
- Resources are not adequate to provide the necessary assistance for pupils with learning difficulties – failures are evident throughout the life of most – statistics have proven the high number of education-failures in our prisons.
- By this time I decided that my son and our family would no longer engage with an educational institute, it was not worth the stress and my son was not learning anything at school anyway. At least I could plan my work days and know that I was not going to get phone calls to pick him up all the time. My son became happier and learning became easier for him when he no longer had the stress of school to contend with.
- A respected Judge once spoke to a group of women I was in and implored us to go into the local schools and help struggling readers. He said that 80% of prisoners have poor literacy and numeracy skills and I would hazard a guess that 80% of them will have a learning difficulty. How often do you hear when people are speaking of a criminal that they had problems at school very early in their school career? They don't understand so they get bored, get naughty, get sent out of the room – they are not going to learn anything in the corridor- start wagging when they are at secondary school, get into trouble with the law and start a life of crime. I believe passionately that money spent on helping these children at primary school would save millions in the justice system in later years.

## Time for Action

There was a high degree of frustration running through the responses, and a repeated call to action:

- Please, please, please make some changes. Right now, a whole pile of kids are failing unnecessarily and some of them will be greatly affected by that emotionally. It will be evident in their mood/temperament, their self-esteem, their belief in themselves as well as their grades. This will have an impact on them for the rest of their lives, their ability to go to university, their job prospects, career choices (or lack of) as well as their mental health. Do we really want our young people growing up thinking they are “not good enough” when they can achieve with just a bit of the right kind of help. My son is lucky; he has a family that love &

support him. We put his needs & wellbeing before our own. We are proud of him. I know not all kids are so lucky.

- Schools and parents are doing their best with the small funds available. Unmet needs continue to be huge, however, in those children who fall outside the apex-funded purview of MOE Special Education – and these are many. They are also the children where the biggest bang for the intervention buck can be achieved and lives transformed.
- Wouldn't it be great if all schools in NZ were 'dyslexic friendly'? It would make life easier for students, teachers and parents.
- Many people in prison cannot read and write so hence their frustration is high and because they cannot succeed in getting a job turn, to crime. These people are not physically or intellectually disabled. Had they had help at an early age the country would probably be spending less than we are to presently to keep them in prison. HELP IS NEEDED URGENTLY!

It was noted that there have been a number of reviews in recent years, which have given much the same message but has not resulted in enough systemic change to make a difference to these children:

- In many previous (and relatively recent) reviews of the special education sector, MPs have been consistently advised of the critical unmet intervention/support needs of students not in the two categories of "severe" or "moderate-to-high". There is an estimated further 5% of children (their schools and parents) who are struggling with largely unfunded and unmet intervention needs.
- The Committee could be reminded that the key messages in this submission are not new messages but rather the continuing story.

The language of rights was used a lot, in that people wanted to remind the Committee that education should be a right for everyone in this country, even if they have a learning difficulty. This right is also enshrined in the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, all of which have been ratified by New Zealand. Education is seen as a right for children with learning disabilities:

- The teachers/system need to understand that these children are also entitled to an education in the country no matter what it takes for them to get one.
- This is a serious problem as children are being denied the right to be able to read - which in my mind is a basic right- also it stunts their ability to follow their dreams in life.
- These children deserve to have teachers who have at least done some training in disability. Schools also need to be held accountable for ensuring that education is inclusive and that no child is ever subject to the rejection and abuse that I believe my child was.

- He is a bright, intelligent boy who loves to learn, yet despite the best efforts of his teachers he is well below national standards in Writing, Reading and at least 2 years behind in Maths. *He shouldn't be.*

### Oral Submission

We appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry and we request the opportunity to make an oral presentation to the Select Committee.



Rae Duff  
National President



Suzanne Manning  
Convener, Education Standing Committee

## Appendix: Case Study examples

### Case Study: Parent A

Our boy was slow to use words and was particularly clumsy. We took him to numerous doctors. All told me he was fine and that I was neurotic. Bullying started at Kindy. The Kindy teachers recommend we get him assessed through the MOE. He was assessed after a lengthy wait, to be told that he was “moderately delayed” and didn’t qualify for assistance even though he could not communicate clearly or with more than one word and pointing. We paid \$40 per week for private Speech Language Therapy for the next 4 years. When starting school (Decile 10, Christchurch) it was expected that some boys were “slow to get it” and assistance would be withheld until a learning deficit was proven. I have been fighting the system ever since.

In Year 2, I fought for an RTLB assessment. This was completed over a long period of time and an individual education plan was put in place. By Year 3 the next teacher knew best and cancelled the plan and RTLB service without consultation with myself or the head of learning support at school. At the end of Year 4 a gap came up at Hagley Diagnostic – our boy was diagnosed with Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, auditory processing and memory delays. At the end of Year 5 a gap came up with Seabrook McKenzie. His diagnosis was confirmed with this second assessment.

We got the school to agree to a reader-writer in Year 4. This was agreed upon by the Headmaster, but withdrawn at the time of the PAT tests with no explanation. The fight continued for Year 5 and a very helpful teacher ensured this occurred. She sat next to him in class to ensure help was at hand when needed and often acted as a scribe at writing time so he could concentrate on the content. In Year 6 the same was agreed upon again, but the teacher knew best and deliberately didn’t allow a reader-writer to help N.

The School provided three 15 minute sessions each week, for two and a bit terms, over 4 years (Year 2, 3, 4 & 5). In Year 6 we were told that “He has had a sizable slice of the learning Support budget over his time at Elmwood. The decision to not include him in the programme this year was carefully considered. The team reasoned that he needed to work within the classroom programme unsupported, just like his peers.” His current year 6 teacher was holding our son in class at lunch time, and excluding him from his senior roles of road patrol, senior leader and librarian duty as a punishment for poor work. A formal complaint saw this stopped.

Of the help we have had from the Learning Support teacher it has been fantastic. She has been more than willing to show me the methods to help with furthering Nick’s learning at home. She is patient and kind. Of the Hagley Diagnostic and Seabrook McKenzie assessments, the areas covered by school learning support have been “normal” or better. It shows that N does not learn anything by osmosis or extrapolation. He needs to be taught everything.

He is to start at Intermediate next year. I have met with the principal and head of learning support. Both are very supportive and encourage a dyslexic friendly learning environment. The principal has agreed to personally see that he gets a reader/writer for their entrance exam and will work with us to find something for him to excel at. They have one class that is smaller than the rest for children with extra learning needs. They do not push children like him to read out loud to the class and homework is modified to fit the child's needs. We are encouraged by her approach. She runs a fantastic school that specialises in the changing needs of early adolescents. Next year can't roll around quickly enough.

### **Case Study: Parent B**

The difference between learning and not learning for my child was dependent on the attitudes and abilities of his teachers. My little boy was terrified at school, he was laughed at, told off and constantly in trouble because he preferred to act the class clown than be labelled dumb and useless. He preferred to be labelled naughty, he preferred being naughty because it meant he didn't have to sit in the classroom, he preferred being sent to the principal and to sit in the school foyer because that meant that his peers could not watch him struggle to learn, read and write.

He hated school by the time he was 6. He begged me not to send him to school anymore. He would often sob at night because of how mean the kids and teachers were. I would cry too when he couldn't see because I did not know how to help my little boy and protect him from the torment he was experiencing. His school life was marred by teachers refusing to support his learning needs (Dyslexia was not recognised back then and teachers did not understand Dyspraxia.) Most of his teachers and his school principal (who was the worst) preferred to label him naughty and say he didn't learn because he was naughty. His principal preferred to label me too, as "confrontational" because I chose to advocate for my child. The teachers and principal did not want to understand that when they sent him home almost daily, they were rewarding him for his naughty behaviour because he didn't want to be at school anyway. They did not want to understand what would help him because they were the 'experts' and knew more than I or even the specialists who I had engaged.

School taught my boy how to read people, how avoid people, how to manipulate his way out of learning situations. It taught him how to hate learning, how to avoid reading, writing and spelling. It also taught him how to avoid being labelled dumb by being naughty. By the time he was 10 he'd been 'stood down' several times, sometimes for the most insignificant reasons. He was sent home at least two or three times a week (kiwi suspensions). At age 10 he was expelled. By age 12 he was no longer in any education setting; he had left with a reading age of 5 and could barely write a sentence.

He is now 24 and despite the predictions of his primary school principal and a couple of particularly yucky teachers, he has not ended up in prison. He fixes cars, is kind and good. He can read TradeMe and car manuals (slowly and sometimes with help), he still struggles to write anything down, he has since learned to type (which is easier for him – something that was recommended for him at primary school but denied him because they believed he was just naughty). He is no longer ashamed to tell people he can't read, spell or write, he is no longer ashamed to tell people he is dyslexic and he no

longer has to be 'naughty' to hide his disabilities, I have taught him to be proud of his talents, something most of his teachers and his school principal failed to do!

### Case Study: Teacher

I work part-time supporting students with special needs at a Wellington Secondary School. The school has a policy of inclusion, so I mostly work supporting students in their regular, timetabled mainstream classes. Sometimes I work with the students out of the classroom one-to-one, or accompany them on courses outside school. I also work during the exam period as a reader-writer for students who take their exams under special assessment conditions.

There is a vast spectrum of ability amongst the students, and I am aware of many more students who are operating in the classroom (or attempting to operate) with very low literacy and numeracy ability. Those with obvious issues have been identified, (often at an earlier stage of their school career) and have gained ORS funding or funding for Teacher Aide assistance, but there are many more who have been identified (via observation from teachers, or via concerns raised by parents) but do not qualify for extra assistance or funding. Their needs are probably classed as borderline, and where parents have the financial capacity, they may offer to fund teacher aide or similar support for their children. The others will be the ones who 'slip through the cracks'.

Resourcing is always an issue. I am aware of the management team constantly juggling figures to ensure appropriate hours of Teacher Aide coverage and other support for students, or to use all funding allocated. It is like trying to put together a jig-saw puzzle that keeps altering in shape and size. A parent may offer to fund additional hours for their child, additional funding may become available through MOE, and suddenly there is a need to recruit more teacher aide staff. Conversely, a child may be considered no longer eligible for funding, and teacher aide hours are reduced. If one student is absent, the teacher aide hours may be re-allocated for the duration of the student's absence etc. There seem to be so many little pots of funding to access, and it is an administration challenge keeping on top of accessing and allocating funding carefully and appropriately.

Working as a teacher aide can be challenging work, with some unpleasant tasks to carry out e.g. toileting a student, and sometimes unpleasant and aggressive student behaviour to deal with. There are inevitably many more hours worked than are officially paid. That really goes for all aspects of the education sector, but when the pay rate is so low, as it is for a Teacher Aide, it is hurtful – a bit of an insult really – knowing that financial recompense does not match hours worked. Staff turnover is reasonably high, and the job is more something one does for experience than for the money!

Training and professional development are scarce resources. Usually there is a transition phase when introducing a new teacher aide to a school, but there is no qualification or formal training required or generally available. There is sometimes specific training or professional development available related to a student's particular needs eg learning sign language. Such training or PD is often in class time, therefore taking a teacher aide away from contact time with their students or outside contracted hours, and possibly – not always – paid.

I also work part time at a Primary School teaching a small group of gifted writers. The small-group approach has been very successful, and I believe the same approach would work well in the Secondary School setting with differently-abled learners, providing a safe environment for discussion and learning.

### **Case Study: Person with special education needs (dictated to a reader/writer)**

I remember I could not wait to get to primary school. It turned out to be a mixed bag. I met and developed a passion for numbers and for art. But then there were these shapes that I did not relate to spoken words. I struggled to make sense of written words. Luckily my school was big on group work. Ideas man, model maker, art work, leader, facilitator that was me. Never writer or recorder. My listening and talking skills helped and I was bright enough and ashamed enough to conceal my struggle with written words. At home my inability to read words it was translated as "b--stupid boy." I particularly remember my report at the end of year 8. It read; Mark has excellent oral communication skills however he will have to improve his written skills if he is to succeed at secondary school. My Dad said 'sort yourself out or you'll be an f...ing loser'. Inside me I was screaming HOW.

I loved comics. I never tried to translate what was in the speech bubbles, just imagined a storyline to match the illustrations. In the third form I started my own comic strip where there were speech bubbles with mathematics shapes, different sized symbols and colours so the characters could convey meaning and emotions. At secondary school it was much of the same. By the seventh form I was doing university mathematics but I was an epic failure at English attempting a range of NCEA English level 1 courses three times and never achieving a pass mark. My Maths teacher saw that I struggled with statistical problems that were explained in words. He recognised that I was dyslexic and, late in my seventh form year, I was tested and given the official diagnosis of dyslexia. My family's response was "real dyslexics mix numbers and words, you're just lazy and looking for an excuse."

I'm now 23 and in my fifth year of a three year Bachelor of Information Technology. I am sitting a law related paper for the third time. Although I have a reader writer for exams trying to recall the legal terms and use them appropriately to answer the exam questions is a real struggle.

This time last year I would not tell my story but in last year's law related exam I had a huge meltdown. I heard every word of self-talk I have used since I was five to put myself down about my inability to read and spell words easily and the panic that trying to work with written words gives me. All of my Dad's criticisms over the years zeroed in on me. I have succeed in the rest of my Bachelor of information technology course by taking about three times as long as other students to complete the assignments and having someone check over my spelling. I have been offered an accommodation that would allow me to complete the law related paper in non-examination conditions as an open book assignment. However if I took that option I would see myself as an epic failure, and my degree would be demeaned in my eyes.

In year one Uni hooked me up with a dyslexic buddy. His dyslexia was recognised when he was four. He received assistance to develop strategies to deal with words. His family supported him, and openly tease him about his dyslexia. It is not a hidden elephant in the room.

I'm telling my story because my struggle with dyslexia could have been different if my primary school teachers had recognised what was happening for me when I was failing in reading and written expression. I could have learnt some strategies that would help me and I would have developed an understanding of how my brain worked and felt better about myself. If my parents knew about what it was like for me I might not have got the 'f-ing loser' title. Most importantly I might felt positive about myself. It does not matter to me that my cartoon strip is now syndicated worldwide and pays for my studies and that I have finished a Maths degree. If I cannot pass this law related paper in my eyes I will remain an epic failure.

### Case Study: Person with autism

Children in Special Education lack autonomy -- they are always at the receiving end of education, very rarely have the slightest say in what they learn. Not just about the topic of a project but about more fundamental issues. Very limited scope for self-determination or to have their views heard. SE people are tested for their deficits and if these are significant they are labelled as having an intellectual disability and the label sticks to the end of their lives. Turn it around: think what this person COULD do in the future - all the different things they might be capable of and enjoy.

Examples:

Some can't read, but they can talk well, debate, argue, without a minder.

Some can't write but they can dictate well - and they dictate very ordered, rational, relevant texts. They can react to texts of others, and to other people's ideas and assertions.

But because they cannot read and write, they are stuck with the label that they have intellectual difficulties, that they are developmentally challenged. When H, who couldn't/and still can't speak, found out at the age of 12 that he could type, his first sentence was: I want to learn. How can SE people overcome being pushed into the SE box and kept there? Don't let what a person CANNOT do blind you to what they CAN do.

Labelling SE kids works against this. Two things happen when you label SE people:

- 1) Ah, now I know what makes me different.
- 2) People match the descriptors of the diagnosis.
  - ... Society is forming the child's view of self, not the child.

Peers and teachers should know how the Special Education (SE) person would like to be treated.

When asked about how he should be treated, my friend H said: Talk to me about important things -- about the things I CAN do. Never yell at me.