



**SUBMISSION on 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**

Paper 079/15

Prepared on behalf of COMET Auckland, 2 October, 2015

Whakatauāki

E kore e taea e te whenu kotahi
ki te raranga i te whāriki
kia mōhio tātou ki ā tātou.
Mā te mahi tahi o ngā whenu,
mā te mahi tahi o ngā kairaranga,
ka oti tēnei whāriki.
I te otinga
me titiro tātou ki ngā mea pai ka puta mai.
Ā tana wā,
me titiro hoki
ki ngā raranga i makere
nā te mea, he kōrero ano kei reira.

The tapestry of understanding
cannot be woven by one strand alone.
Only by the working together of strands
and the working together of weavers
will such a tapestry be completed.
With its completion
let us look at the good that comes from it
and, in time
we should also look
at those stitches which have been dropped,
because they also have a message.

- Kūkupa Tirikatene

About COMET Auckland

COMET Auckland, Te Hononga Akoranga (Community Education Trust Auckland) is a charitable trust and Council Controlled Organisation (CCO) of Auckland Council. Our role is to support education and skills across Auckland, contributing to the relevant social and economic goals in the Auckland Plan.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on 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. We would welcome the opportunity to speak to this submission, if this can be done in Auckland.

Overview

This submission is based on COMET Auckland's connections with our stakeholders, from both the schooling sector and community organisations that support children, young people and their families with challenges related to disability. Everything we hear tells us that children and young people with "invisible" disabilities such as these are often identified far too late to make a difference; generally receive less support than would be needed for them to learn effectively; and experience negative outcomes as a result. Systems issues around screening processes, equity of access to support, and teacher training all contribute to the above problems. This submission focuses on these systems issues, and leaves the detailed science to others who will no doubt make their own submissions.

We note that the inquiry focuses only on children in the compulsory education system. Some of the issues that prevent children from getting the timely support they need relate to transition from early childhood into school, and from school to tertiary and/or work. More needs to be done to ensure seamless systems of support for children and young people with disabilities (and especially for those with the "invisible" disabilities discussed in this inquiry). This seamlessness needs to apply over time (i.e. providing the support needed at each stage of a child's development) and also across sectors (recognising that success in education depends on, and contributes to, health, social development and employment).

Early identification

The most common message we heard from our stakeholders was the importance of early identification of children who need additional support, and the need for flexible support that fits the child's needs and is able to be accessed as early as possible, so children can gain full benefit from their education.

This is especially important for children with dyslexia, dyspraxia and autism spectrum disorders, because "invisible" disabilities like these are currently even less likely than other disabilities to be

picked up early enough. Children are reaching secondary school without their disability being identified, which means they lose years of potential learning time and are at risk of disengagement and negative social outcomes.

Ideally children with learning support needs should be identified before reaching school, through the health system or through early childhood services. Failing that, it is essential that schools are equipped to pick up signs of learning difficulties early, so children do not struggle through several years of school before receiving tailored support. The priority should be on identifying children who need extra support, and ensuring that support is provided, rather than waiting for a formal diagnosis.

There is potential to expand the B4 School Check, and/or to increase follow-up systems where young children are identified with possible developmental delay or learning difficulties, in order to pick up and address invisible disabilities more quickly.

Easy access to a range of support services

In order to learn well, children with dyslexia, dyspraxia and autism spectrum disorders need a range of support at school and at home – including health and social development as well as explicit education support. This requires much greater alignment between the support provided by different government departments, with communication between services about the needs of each child, and aligned criteria and ways of working.

The complexity of support systems makes it almost impossible for parents to identify the types of support their child is entitled to, and to understand the various processes needed to access that support. Even within education, there are multiple funding pools with different criteria, offering different kinds of support. Even if the systems are simplified and aligned as recommended above, parents will still need help to identify and access services for their child. Websites, while useful, are not sufficient. Parents need personalised support from someone who knows the system well and who can help help tailor the available support services to what the particular child and family need. A number of community organisations are currently offering this type of support and there is potential to make this navigation service more widely available by explicitly funding it and by making it more visible to parents.

The level of support available in education for children with dyslexia, dyspraxia and autism spectrum disorders also needs to be increased. Schools find it hard to get sufficient support for children with

invisible disabilities, which means children often have in-class support for less time than is needed, and have minimal access to specialist support. In some cases parents are being asked to provide additional funding for in-class support, or to attend school with the child to provide support.

Skimping on the level of support available to children is a false economy, because it limits the child's ability to engage with learning, making it more likely that they will fail to gain a qualification, and will drop out of school early. In the long term, the cost to the social welfare and corrections budgets will be far greater than the small amount saved by rationing learning support.

Children whose parents are least able to advocate for their needs can sometimes miss out to an even greater extent. A more equitable system is needed for assessing the level and type of support that each child needs in order to learn to their full potential.

Where children need specialist support (for example one on one expert reading support for children with dyslexia), this is rarely available within the system. Parents are being asked to pay for these specialist services themselves, which means children from low socio-economic homes often only have access to more generic support such as the RTLB service.

Many of the comments above apply to all disabilities, but are especially acute for children with invisible disabilities. One parent commented that "when faced with more visible - and more basic - educational rights issues e.g. we have the need for a disabled toilet and shower facilities actually in (or less than the current 5 minute walk from) the special needs classroom. Competing in the system with something as tangible as this for a child with unspecified, undiagnosed learning needs is challenging."

Parent engagement

Family engagement needs to take account of cultural and linguistic diversity. Schools need to be able to communicate with parents in their own language so they fully understand the complex issues around their child's learning disability. Schools and decision-makers also need to be aware that families from some cultural backgrounds are less willing to have children overtly identified as disabled, so may be less likely to push for services.

Dyslexia, dyspraxia and autism spectrum disorders all have a hereditary component, which means parents of children with these challenges often faced the same challenges themselves, but may not have been diagnosed or well-supported. This can mean they are wary of talking with teachers or

engaging with schools in any way. Schools need to be aware of this and take time to build positive relationships focused on supporting the child's needs while recognising the child's strengths.

Classroom issues

Where teachers take a deficit view, children can conclude that they are not capable of learning, and so disengage. Teachers should instead recognise that these children learn differently, but not necessarily less – they have strengths as well as needs, and recognising the strengths help children engage and learn.

Teachers also need to provide spaces where children can learn without distractions. Modern classrooms are busy places and children with learning difficulties can find it hard to concentrate in an open classroom. At a systems level it may be valuable to consider quiet spaces when designing classrooms in new schools.

Teacher training

It may once have been the case that only teachers in special classes needed to know how to identify support children with significant disability, but now, every teacher can expect to have at least one child with an invisible disability in every class. Unfortunately, teacher training has not caught up with this reality. Initial teacher education programmes include little or no compulsory training on teaching children with special needs. Unless a student teacher specifically elects to take a class on teaching children with special needs, they may only have a one or two-hour introduction to the topic, which is now sufficient to prepare them for the role they will play when in a school.

Anecdotal reports suggest that in at least some initial training institutions, teacher trainees are being discouraged from doing a practicum in a special school or classroom because it is seen as “narrowing” their training. This is sometimes the case even if a trainee has indicated a desire to specialise in this area. We suggest that every trainee teacher would benefit from some time in a special school or class, so they are well-prepared to support the whole range of abilities they will teach during their career.

Summary of recommendations

- Include the transition to school, and the transition out of school, within this inquiry

- Provide guidelines and training for teachers of junior primary classes on how to identify children with additional learning needs
- Expand the B4School Check to pick up children with additional learning needs
- Develop common criteria and systems across MOE, MOH and MSD for identifying and supporting children with invisible disabilities
- Fund community organisations to provide navigator services to help parents identify and access the specific support their child needs
- Increase the amount of support available for children with invisible disabilities, recognising that it is an investment in the future and will save government funds in the long term
- Consider quiet spaces when designing new classrooms
- Include compulsory courses on teaching children with disabilities in initial teacher training, and actively encourage teacher trainees to include time in a special school or class in their practicums

Contact for communications:

Susan Warren, COMET Auckland Chief Executive

www.cometauckland.org.nz

Email susan.warren@cometauckland.org.nz

Ph 09 307 2101. Fax 09 379 5053; Mobile 021 757 048.

COMET Auckland, PO Box 3430, Shortland Street, Auckland 1140.