



to the Education and Science Select Committee

Inquiry into the identification and support for students  
with dyslexia, dyspraxia, and autism spectrum  
disorders in primary and secondary schools

September 2015

## 1. Introduction

The PPTA is the union representing around 17,000 teachers in state secondary, area, manual training and intermediate schools, as well as tutors in community education institutions and principals in secondary and area schools. PPTA represents the professional and industrial interests of its members, including those working in alternative education centres and activity centres.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 *Dyslexia, Dyspraxia and Autism Spectrum Disorders*

While the general area of 'special education' has been the subject of much comment and attempts at policy solutions over many years in New Zealand, we are not aware of any inquiry up to now focusing on these particular disorders, so this select committee inquiry is well overdue. The Youth Court of New Zealand in Issue 67 October 2014 clearly outlined the link between 'neurodisability and youth offending', and it is reasonable to conclude that better support for students with these disorders would have a positive impact on the rates of youth offending. But more importantly than that, students with these disorders need better support so that they can fulfil their potential and experience happy lives. However, the needs of each of these groups of students are specific and should not be conflated. It would be useful for the Ministry of Education to define the different disorders for the sake of clarity, and provide material to assist identification of students and particular support needs. We do not propose to go into specific identification matters in this submission. We do, however, outline some school stories in section 4 and give some guidance around resourcing.

2.2 PPTA has consistently supported inclusion in education for special needs students, with the proviso that adequate resourcing to support teaching and learning must be put in place. We have also supported a parent's right to choose options other than full inclusion, including special needs units that support partial inclusion as appropriate, and residential special schools if they feel that they are more appropriate for their child.

2.3 Dyslexia, dyspraxia and autism spectrum disorders, as with other forms of special needs, involve a range of significant demands for which schools are poorly resourced and poorly supported. The remainder of our submission focuses on some of these inadequacies in provision.

### 3. System Issues

#### 3.1 *Professional Learning*

PPTA sees the need for the Inclusive Practices work undertaken by the Ministry of Education to be brought to teachers' attention more effectively and to be supported by PLD provision in schools. While some progress has been made, the project seems to have stalled due to a lack of national centrally-led PLD infrastructure before any noticeable delivery has begun to have an impact in classrooms.

PPTA supports in-service PLD for teachers, teacher aides and learning support assistants that is resourced, standardised and available across the country. This should also reach down into pre-service training so that newly qualified teachers come with a basic skill set.

#### 3.2 *Information*

The only comprehensive handbook for Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) that is currently available is privately produced and costs \$90. There is demand for common practice and good practice to be articulated in ways that are readily (and nationally) accessible. This means that the Ministry of Education has a responsibility to provide written frameworks and guidelines – such as this book provides.\* PPTA recommends that a set of SENCO frameworks and guidelines – including requirements and best practice examples – be published, publicised and distributed to all schools and ITE providers and updated regularly.

\* <http://www.learningnetwork.ac.nz/shared/products/productBook.aspx?id=book545>

Again, the Inclusive Practices work has the ability to influence more positively by providing more information to schools, but has yet to have a discernible impact. This is largely because there is no PLD alongside it. There has also been a request for more best practice case studies in this specific area to be made available for schools.

Information on Inclusive Practices is available on the Ministry's website at <http://inclusive.tki.org.nz/>

### 3.3 *Resourcing*

To help mainstream schools succeed, appropriate environments, class sizes, space and equipment are needed, so that all classrooms and areas of a school are equipped to support inclusion and integration for all students and, where appropriate, to support students with very high and/or multiple needs in a homeroom environment. This includes equipment and resources that would not normally be found in secondary schools (except where there are students with specific learning/communication/mobility needs). Schools are not currently funded to this level. As an example, students with autism often have a hypersensitivity to noise; very few schools would be able to provide them with the quiet environments that they require for successful learning.

### 3.4 *Inclusion*

The multi-teacher model of secondary education makes inclusion challenging and complex. This needs to be recognised in managing and maintaining funding, staffing and support for special education (SE) in the secondary context.

For secondary schools trying to offer inclusion the costs are increasingly outweighing their ability to do so effectively. Schools find it more and more difficult to make ends meet, let alone maintain quality service provision and learning programmes, offer safe and inclusive learning environments and ensure that staff are given reasonable working conditions. In a system that has always relied to some extent on balancing 'unders and overs', the 'overs' now heavily outweigh the 'unders'. This means that those students who bring in funding that can be used beyond themselves are far outweighed by students who bring in insufficient funding to meet their needs. This adds up to significant stress for schools and teachers with fund-holding responsibilities. It is critical that schools are supported to manage this responsibility. Ideally, this support would take the form of adequate funding, time allowances that enable SE unit managers and SENCOs to oversee staffing, liaise with parents, specialist and other agencies, and manage the related administrative load.

SENCOs should exist in every school and should have oversight of dyslexic, dyspraxic and autism spectrum students, as well as other students with special needs, to ensure a level of resourcing appropriate to need is applied. To do this they need adequate support. Currently, there is no provision in the secondary

school staffing formula for a SENCO to coordinate the school's special education work.

### 3.5 *How could schools work together to succeed?*

A key message from PPTA is that local solutions work well when schools are supported by strong, coherent, national frameworks. Inclusion and collaboration take significantly more time than the current resourcing (staffing and funding) allows. Account needs to be taken of the complexity of SE work, particularly in the context of secondary schools and their communities.

SENCOs and other SE staff in secondary schools value opportunities to network, problem-solve and to share good practice. However, the organisational time for this does not sit within schools' current staffing resources. The Ministry of Education could fulfil this role by providing networking at the regional level for special education teachers, special needs units and schools.

There is also a lot of variation in practice between different regions and different clusters of schools, particularly with regard to service delivery by the Ministry of Education; some of this adaptation to local conditions is both unnecessary and undesirable.

Within secondary schools there is a clear need to ensure there is one designated middle, and one senior, manager (other than the principal) with a thorough understanding and overview of SE provision, funding and need. This happens currently in some schools, but not others. Once each school is confident in its overview of special education, and key people are known, schools will be better able to liaise and work in co-ordinated, coherent ways.

Schools need support to ensure that all students are offered suitable pathways and transitions from school. This holds true for special needs and mainstream students. However, students with special education needs generally have more complex needs making this transition process more demanding. It is also sensible to have brokering/support services available to all schools in an area, rather than having this type of work replicated by every school or provider. Again, examples of this type of practice already exist, but are not necessarily available across the country.

PPTA members would like to see Ministry regional offices being more proactive in their leadership of special education and in creating opportunities for cross-school, cross-sector and inter-agency communication and collaboration. This may mean that additional resourcing is required in regional offices.

The co-operation and collaboration which underscores the Investing in Educational Success initiative should have a positive effect on schools working together and, where possible, inclusive practices should be considered by clusters of schools.

- 3.6 The NZ Curriculum (Nzc) is a rich document that has the potential to frame excellent teaching and learning practice in special education. However, the current funding does not support this. PPTA reiterates the desirability of better funding for the current system – including clearer requirements on schools in their use of tagged funding (including SEG, TFEA) – and diverting money from contestable funding pools into a more effectively targeted SEG. Money currently spent on private schools and charter schools would offer a far greater return should it be redirected into public secondary schools for students with special education needs.

#### **4. School Based Issues**

##### **4.1 *Reader Writer Support and Verification***

There is a specific problem with verification of reader writer support for identified dyslexic, dyspraxic and students with conditions on the autism spectrum. This stretches from the junior school right up into NCEA where Special Assessment Conditions (SAC) has become a highly contested and fraught area for students sitting external assessments.

Once students enter for external assessments for NCEA they can access centrally funded support for reader-writer assistance, but there are still a number of barriers. To access support, they are expected to have had similar assistance for other, internally assessed, NCEA tasks and for in-school practice assessments for the externals. There is no public funding for this.

Also, the ability to present an Educational Psychologist's report makes support more easily available to those who can afford to purchase such a report. Students in high decile schools are much more likely to have accessed such a report.

Recently, a change was made to try to remedy the serious inequity in access to Special Assessment Conditions, and there is now no absolute requirement for an Educational Psychologist's report, however some teachers feel that the forms are extremely long and are 'somewhat arbitrary in their requests'. The Ministry of Education has required Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour (RTLBs) to assist schools, especially low decile schools, with applications, but the process is still described as far too long with a lack of readily available diagnostic tools to help with identification of relevant students.

Furthermore, RTLBs can only be enlisted to help fill in the forms once the students have been identified, and there appear to be significant differences between deciles as to the percentage of students identified as having the kinds of special education needs that would merit the provision of special assessment conditions.

Apart from adding this to RTLB workloads, there has been no PLD offered to SENCOs in how to administer the required assessments. They are assumed to know and understand the process an Ed Psych would go through to ensure a student is verifiable. This needs to change.

It was reported to us by a low decile Auckland school that the onerous nature of SAC applications was so great it had to be taken away from the SENCO to allow them to do the work of supporting their special needs students rather than filling out the endless forms. There may well be other low decile schools faced with these kinds of decisions about how to use their scarce resources in the face of so many and varied needs. This school was able to give the task to another staff member, but not all schools would have other staff members with the necessary skills.

NZQA has suggested that digital assessment tools, including one being trialled that substitutes a computer programme for the traditional human reader-writer, will reduce the costs of providing reader-writers, but digital solutions don't work for all students' particular needs. The whole process of verification and access to reader writers needs significant work.

## Comments from Schools

- 4.2 One of our respondents, a principal from a low decile school, thought that identifying students in his community was a very different proposition to a higher decile community where parents are often proactive about getting a diagnosis. This principal felt there may be undiagnosed students in the school who are on the autism spectrum, but who are seen instead as students who are withdrawn or badly behaved. Again this points to the need for more assistance in the identification of these students.
- 4.3 Another low decile school principal from the central North Island reported that they only had six students accessing SAC. These six are the small portion of their learning support roll with sufficient education and resources to access the assessment process. The school is thought to have at least 40 students who should have SAC. The school simply does not have the resources to process all these or sufficient teaching assistants to provide this level of support. This was described as unsustainable at current funding levels. It was stated that ‘the whole application and funding system for SAC needs a total overhaul’.
- 4.4 Teachers talk about the need to support families as well as students. Families dealing with children with these disorders are exhausted and they are often reported to be going through a ‘grieving process’. These families can find the Ministry of Education incredibly difficult to deal with, blocking rather than finding solutions, and as a result of the absence of a successful relationship between the Ministry and the families, these issues are often dealt with at school level. If secondary schools were resourced to operate as hubs, students and whānau could be better supported by getting the necessary resources through the school rather than having to go through the Ministry. In fact, it would be better if the Ministry came to the school to do assessments, and to conduct meetings with families to consider what support can be provided. This, of course, requires space and resource support for schools to do this.
- 4.5 It is crucial for these students that there are smooth transitions between primary/intermediate schools and secondary school. There is no transition funding currently available unless the students are ORS funded. This needs to change. High quality tools focused not on National Standards, but on whole-of-child information are required to assist here.



- 4.6 According to one school in Auckland - and this was verified by another in Northland - the identification of first language Māori students as having special education needs often does not happen until they begin reading or writing in English. This needs further investigation.
- 4.7 Being in a class where poor behaviour is an issue can cause particular problems for dyslexic, dyspraxic and students on the autism spectrum. Extra staffing for schools where there is a high incidence of behaviour management issues would help teachers to support the learning of these students as well as manage difficult behaviours of other students.
- 4.8 Therefore the PPTA have a policy to continue to press for extra FTTE resourcing in schools to address the needs of pupils for whom behaviour management and severe behaviour is an issue. We also signed up to the needs based staffing policy recommendations that came from the Ministry of Education's 2012 Secondary School Staffing Group.
- 4.9 It has been suggested that some students with autism spectrum disorders might have increased difficulties in Modern Learning Environments (MLEs) because of the more open classroom environments, but this would require investigation and testing for veracity. One MLE school has told us that in their particular design of school, they have sufficient small withdrawal rooms for hypersensitive students to be able to access appropriate learning conditions. MLEs are not designed, however, to a single pattern, and not all of them contain such quiet spaces.
- 4.10 As a result of the extra workload associated with all of the above, a SENCO's time is limited and bureaucratic requirements are taking time away from working with students with specific learning disabilities or other special needs on overcoming their learning barriers. This Parliamentary commission needs to propose real, extra resources to solve this.

## **5. Conclusion**

- 5.1 PPTA believes that all students have a right to learn. Inclusion is central to a strong education system and is central to the New Zealand Curriculum and to New Zealand values. Inclusion should be able to provide equal opportunities for all students to achieve. Currently this ideal is impossible to attain. Efforts have been made with the Inclusive Practices resources produced to provide teachers with

some knowledge, but without PLD to support this resource their impact is likely to be minimal.

- 5.2 Inadequate funding for the full range of students with special education needs means that schools are faced with making impossible choices about how they allocate the limited resources. This is a perennial problem in the special needs area and prevents well intentioned approaches from progressing.