

30 Sept 2021 – school attendance

Terms of reference for the inquiry: please see my comment under each section below

1. Investigate the long-term trends and determinants of student attendance, engagement, and non-enrolment over the last twenty years.

This is a very welcome and important inquiry, thank you. I spend a lot of time with students who are not at school. Their families desperately want them there, but the students' anxiety about attending is MASSIVE.

The vast majority of students are having good to great experiences at school.

Today I am focused on the students who are falling through the cracks or worse. When these students, or their families, ask for what they need, there currently often is no way to provide the essential and internationally accepted practice to meet these needs. We can and need to do better for this group – so again, this is an essential inquiry.

2. Gain insights into societal, system, and demographic factors, and patterns of school-level practice that have been associated with improvements and declines over time.

It is essential that we carefully consider both push and pull factors. When I was young, I saw students be pulled from school by the pull of family and the needs of their loved ones. We also know that school can have incredible potential and power to pull children and young people into learning and school engagement.

In my current professional experience, I am seeing numerous push factors that could be changed. These are situations where the school system inadvertently become stressful for students. It is rarer, but I also see cases of school itself being a hostile and traumatic experience. I have a few students who can not hear someone mention the words *school* or *classroom* or they have a PTSD experience. I also see that some schools and families are struggling with the ways that MOE provides support and services.

I urge you to carefully considering the following in your inquiry:

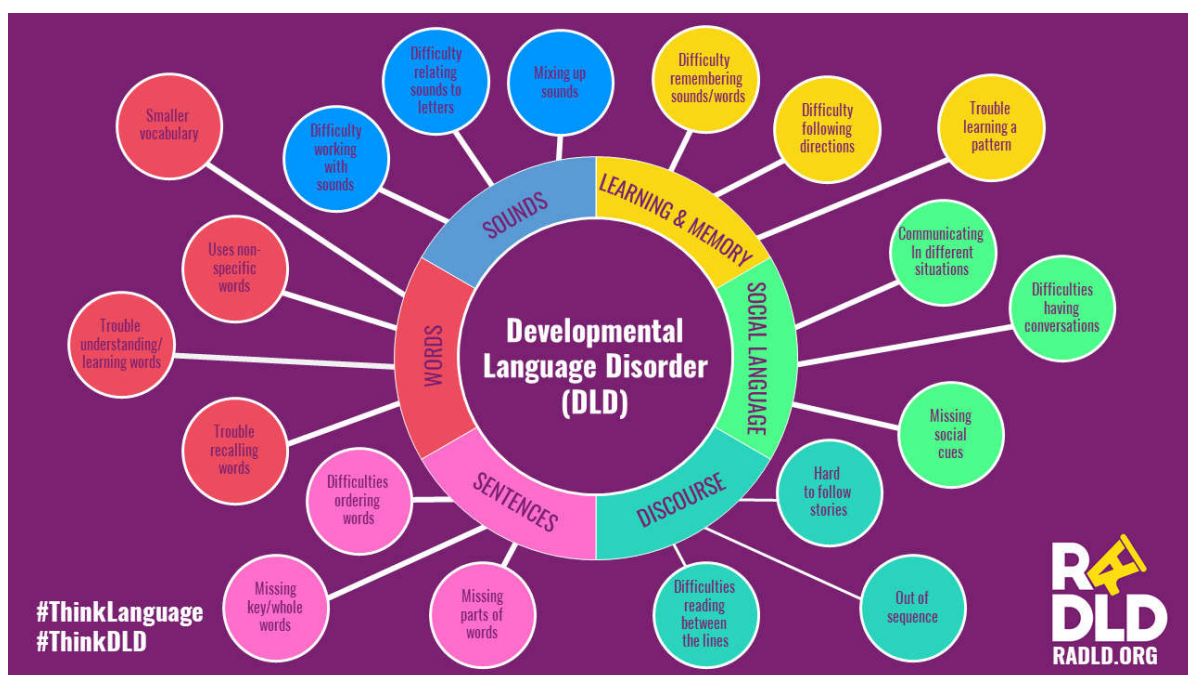
1. How well /poorly do our systems meet the needs of ākongā with:

- **Language disorders** including Developmental Language disorder (7% of general population), Dyslexia (which is primarily a language difficulty), and language issues secondary to other conditions
- **Neurodiversity** – including autism, ADHD, FASD, and many other conditions
- **Giftedness** – many gifted students find school incredibly challenging, stressful, and difficult to endure
- **Intellectual disabilities** which could related to a wide range of conditions and causes

Remember – nearly all of school is about language. We teach through language. We do classroom management through language. Kids socialise through language. And most of all we TEST and ASSESS through language. All of our educational investment depends on children being able to understand and use language

There are also students who are in very early stages of communication. Some are still learning their first words. Some are still learning how to put words together. We need a system that is universally welcoming and accepting of all learners – including those who do not arrive at school with the language skills expected of a typically developing 5 year old. Some will not have these skills even in secondary school. We need to plan and support these students well.

When I collaborate on educational projects, I am seeing that these two groups of students (moderate language challenges and very early stages of communication development) are not consistently being considered or planned for when it comes to assessment, instruction, building design, pedagogy, and PLD for teachers. These students need to be considered in all future planning.



<https://radld.org/dld-awareness-day/resources-media-ideas/teacher-kit/>

2. Literacy practices

- Are you seeing improvements in engagement and attendance in schools who have made the shift to **structured literacy** and **strong oral language** (e.g., OLI program) and moved away from whole language and reading recovery?
- How are schools using the **Better Start literacy programme** roll doing when it comes to attendance ?

3. Modern Learning Environments

- Are you seeing differences in attendance over time with these environments?
- Many of my students / clients with autism, ADHD, and other forms of neurodiversity are finding these spaces visually and acoustically overwhelming. They don't know where to look, listen, attend, or be.

4. Learning support provision

- We continue to see concerns that our students, particularly older students, do not **have access to the supports** to help their teachers and schools deeply understand the needs
- Students are waiting years for **assistive technology** to allow them to speak and write
- Students are not being provided **with speech-language therapy input** in the older years to ensure that they have the skills to engage socially, understand the language of instruction, express their needs, and participate in school assessments.

In the past 12 months I have met a child over the age of 8 with no means of spoken language, no assistive technology, and an SLT who was being pressured to discharge the student from MOE's learning support books.

I have 7 children with autism on my caseload who have been out of school over 6 months (some over 3 years) because school is very inaccessible and in cases traumatic for them.

I have another dozen students enrolled in intermediate and high schools on my private caseload who struggle at school and are being provided behavioural services, but no publicly funded language supports. In all of these cases, the student is not understanding the language of school – both social and academic. We aren't addressing the core issues.

I also am seeing many students who cannot manage independently in classrooms be denied ORS – which often means they cannot attend school successfully. Or they are not well supported in classrooms, which leads to stressed out students and teachers.

Other students are waiting for various silos of support – IWS then a gap, then HCN, then months of nothing, then back in IWS, etc. Rather than a smooth continuous support structure that ramps up and down nimbly with the need.

As students age, the demands of school increase often exceeding their language capabilities. Often after the age where most Ministry of Education services start to taper off... SLT first, then RTLB and Ed Pysch etc.

5. NCEA and other forms of assessment

- Are we testing language skills or content?
- I see students who understand the material not achieving because their language skills are not strong enough (I also see the reverse where some

students do not fully understand the material, but their writing and language skills are so strong that they get passing marks)

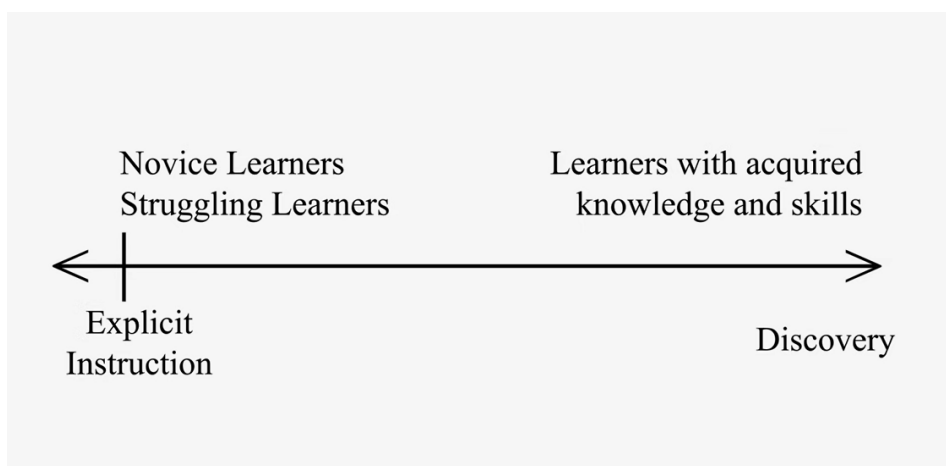
- The Special Assessment Conditions are very inequitable and favour those with money to pay for private assessments

As one year 9 told me "Shannon everything here is English. Maths is English. Social Studies is English. PE is English. Music and drama too! Everything is English, except English. When are they going to teach me to write and stop just telling me to write for assignments/ internals!?"

3. Identify examples of effective practice on the part of schools, and other actors where relevant, that have led to strong attendance and engagement outcomes or a turnaround in attendance and engagement trends.

- Really strong connections and deep sense of safety
- Being accepted for who you are and being allowed to be fully yourself – this includes all aspects of one’s identity (culture, religion, neurodiversity, gender, language(s), disability etc)
- Excellent literacy and maths instruction that is evidence-based that works for all students, including the 7-15% with learning support needs
- Comfortable environments that accommodate the sensory needs of students and staff
- **And as we start to address ventilation – PLEASE carefully consider acoustics.** I have students not attending school because the noise of it HURTS.
- Teaching staff that are well-supported, not-burned out, and following good practice
- Sufficient ratio of adults:students – there needs to be more adults, when there is more neurodiversity in a classroom
- Excellent PD related to inclusion, neurodiversity, dyslexia, and language disorders - Our PD system currently has very limited focus on these areas
- Explicit instruction balances with inquiry-based forms of pedagogy and gradual release of responsibility. Let the experts SHOW kids how to do things and not overly rely on students to discover and teach themselves. This is very anxiety provoking for many students!

Anita Archer on explicit instruction: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-qNpFtcynI>



4. Identify potential strategies that could be used to increase attendance.

- Early childhood years having a strong language focus and social-emotional practice
- Prepare teachers to do explicit instruction as well as discovery. Prepare teachers to do structured literacy
- And support teachers with the right kind of PLD throughout their years
- Structured Literacy and strong oral language in schools
- More teaching less testing
- Reasonable workloads for teachers
- Excellent and sufficient learning support provision – including speech-language therapists, psychologists, etc and support them to work in an ethical, effective manner
- A revamp of the funding systems for disability so that need is actually met and met in a timely and humane fashion (no more traumatising application processes)
- Make school engaging – so that students feel the right amount of challenge (not too bored and too stressed)
- Make school safer – so that students feel safer from bullying
- Make schools trauma-informed (and also not trauma inducing) – this will need to include training about Autism and neurodiversity that actually understands this unique ways of being and doesn't try to force these children into pretending to be like the other children at a huge cost to their mental health and wellbeing.
- Do not add and possibly remove some of the punitive measures.
- And is there any way to help school have technology that doesn't send automatic text messages about attendance in a way that people find shaming and stressful?!

6. Make international comparisons on attendance rates and strategies used to successfully increase attendance.

- Look into the research and understanding about school anxiety/trauma (sometimes referred to as *school refusal*)
- Looking into the ratios of funding, learning support provision, etc in other countries when it comes to students with additional learning support needs – don't borrow strategies without also looking at the resourcing in those countries that back those strategies.
- Look also our local pockets of brilliance – where we are getting it right in Aotearoa, what are people doing?
- Be prepared to be creative looking at what IS working in New Zealand – people have started to hide innovative practice because people don't always feeling safe to talk about practices may be working, but go against the expected collective thinking.

Ngā mihi nui

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