

New Zealand

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Education for Children with Visual Impairments in Regular Schools in NEW ZEALAND

Statistics

New Zealand is approximately 75% of the size of Japan, but has a relatively small population of 3.8 million, or approximately 3% of the total population of Japan.

The most recent census of 2001 found that there were 847,743 children and young people aged 0 - 14, of whom an estimated 13,200 were blind or had trouble with their eyesight that could not be corrected by glasses or contact lenses. 17% of these young people (2,244) had been diagnosed as being blind by an eye specialist.

Also as of 2001, there were 2,718 schools in New Zealand, 96% of which were state schools, employing 46,208 people (41,579 FTTE) in teaching positions.

Where do young people with visual impairments go to learn?

In 1989, changes were made to the Education Act that allowed all children and young people to attend their local school. Since then, the majority of students who are blind and vision impaired attend regular schools.

There is one national school for children who are blind or vision impaired, attended by 53 students, many of whom also have significant and complex inter-related disabilities such as cerebral palsy, autism and intellectual disability. 36 students live in hostels at the school during termtime. The special school also provides a national specialist assessment service, whereby children and their parents come to the school for a week-long intensive range of assessments and consultations.

A further 21 students attend special schools that cater for a range of disabilities and special needs, and 17 learn in special units attached to regular schools. Of the remaining children and young people, a very few learn at home through correspondence school, but the vast majority attend their local early childhood services or schools. Many of these are small schools in rural areas.

Specialised services

Special education services for young people with vision impairments in regular educational settings are provided by itinerant specialists. These include resource teachers vision, developmental

orientation and mobility instructors, early intervention teachers, educational psychologists, speech-language therapists, physiotherapists and occupational therapists. There are many challenges in providing high-quality, nationally consistent, itinerant specialist services.

Recent research in New Zealand indicates that of all the factors that impact on learning outcomes for students, it is the quality of the individual teacher's practice that makes the most difference. Clearly it is not possible to upskill all 46,000 teachers to specialist levels. Instead, the Ministry of Education is working in partnership with vision education specialists to design professional development modules for regular classroom teachers and teacher aides. These will be provided across the country to teams working with individuals or groups of students with vision impairments.

Literacy

Many issues about learning for students with vision impairment are essentially literacy issues, which in turn are heavily dependent on access to a rich variety of literacy materials. Through a contract with the Royal New Zealand Foundation for the Blind, learning materials are transcribed into Braille, audio and large print formats. Most of these resources are created for individual students, but some form a national library. Tactile materials are also created at both national and local levels. The Ministry commissions and provides a huge collection of regular teaching and learning materials for all learners. These materials include computer CD activities, audio tapes and large print early reading resources which are ideal for young people with vision impairments.

Other forms of support

Teacher and parent information and support resources are commissioned and published. An Expanded Core Curriculum has been developed to guide teaching strategies.

Many individual students are provided with assistive equipment such as Closed Circuit Televisions (CCTV), Mountbattens, BrailleNotes and computers with specialised software. Significant specialised training is funded, not only when the equipment is first provided to the student, but also when the student changes school or members of the support team change. Since 1997, there have been three New Zealand research projects looking at use of assistive equipment in schools and homes, and all have identified the vital importance of training and support.

The Ministry of Education funds a web-based teaching and learning portal, Te Kete Ipurangi (TKI). This bi-lingual site contains many 'kete' (Maori for basket) on different topics, and includes a special education kete that exceeds international guidelines for accessibility. The website design incorporated requests from people with visual impairments and was tested by people with disabilities.

The Ministry is committed to making publications available in accessible formats, including alternatives to the .pdf format.

Voice of the students

In 2001, the New Zealand Disability Strategy: Making a World of Difference - Whakanui Oranga was launched. Underpinning the New Zealand Disability Strategy is a vision of a fully inclusive society. New Zealand will be inclusive when people with impairments can say they live in: 'A society that highly values our lives and continually enhances our full participation.'

The 15 objectives include 'Provide the best education for disabled people' and 'Enable disabled children and youth to lead full and active lives'. There is an underpinning emphasis on disabled people speaking for themselves. The Ministry of Education, like all government departments, is required to implement the Strategy and is increasingly embedding the principles and objectives in all its work. For instance, students have been asked to comment on the services they receive and to contribute to research and publications.

The future

Recently the Ministries of Health and Education jointly commissioned a Sensory Stocktake of services and issues for children and young people with sensory impairments aged 0 - 21. The resulting 'snapshot' of information (which included substantial input from young people with vision impairments) will be used as a basis for future work, some of which will be carried out jointly by Health and Education, while some will be of more relevance to one or other sector. A particular need has been identified for improved early intervention services for young children and their families, as well as for young people who are moving from school into the community. There are significant issues around provision of culturally appropriate services for Maori and Pacific students. Teacher capability remains a high priority.

The Ministry of Education is committed to working in partnership with children and young people who are blind and vision impaired, their families, their support teams and specialist agencies to improve learning outcomes and social inclusion.