Rātā Foundation

SUPPORT FOR LEARNERS WITH LEARNING NEEDS - LITERATURE REVIEW

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By Tātai Aho Rau Core Education

EMPOWERED TO THRIVE

CONTENTS

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Mihimihi

Tātai Aho Rau | Core Education would like to acknowledge the support of the Rātā Foundation kaimahi who provided advice and guidance on the report as it was being developed. Despite some limitations in the data, our team were able to access a large body of literature about current responses for learners with additional learning needs in our education system. In particular, we also want to acknowledge the experiences of those whānau, tamariki and rangatahi, their resilience and frustrations as they navigate and advocate for inclusive and accessible supports.

He whakarāpopoto | Executive Summary

Span and complexity of learning needs

Our increasing ability to identify, describe, and differentiate educational learning needs gives deeper insight into the span and complexity of learning needs in our education system.

However, any increasing prevalence of additional needs is difficult to assess, given that publicly reported data is not consistent over time (Bourke, Butler & O'Neill, 2021). Learning support in Aotearoa New Zealand may be offered to children in the short- or long-term, depending on the nature of the additional needs. At the same time, children and young people can present with one or more of various broad categories of need, inclusive of neurodiversity, dyslexia, disability, behavioural, speech language needs and visual and hearing impairment.

Terms and definitions used in learning support

In this report, we often use the terms **disability** and **disabled people**, as used in the New Zealand Disability Strategy (Office for Disability Issues, 2016) and defined by the UNCRPD (page 13, Ministry of Social Development, 2106). Increasingly, **inclusion** is understood to be about more than ensuring that all children and young people enjoy equitable access to education. It is also about the quality of education and whether it provides them with the knowledge and competencies they need to participate fully in society and achieve their potential (UNESCO, 2009). Inclusion is about ensuring equality and fairness for all. It is a process not a fixed state.

Learning supports are a means to removing barriers to learning and participation, facilitating an inclusive educational environment that promotes equity and respects the diverse needs and rights of all students. It encompasses behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement, highlighting the interconnections between these areas. Effective learning support addresses these dimensions holistically to promote active participation in school, foster a sense of belonging, and enhance overall student success.

We also know that the **intersectionality** or combination of educational learning needs and ethnicity, disability, health, and low socio-economic status amplifies these equity gaps (Roy et al., 2021).

Perspectives on disability continue to evolve in all cultural spaces. They are multifaceted and complex, shaped by cultural beliefs, social norms, family dynamics, traditional values and advocacy. In Aotearoa, perspectives from te ao Māori, Pacific peoples, and western science all contribute to emerging Aotearoa descriptions and definitions, which respond to calls for culturally responsive service design and delivery.

The evidence about need and inequalities in learning support

We applied a rapid-review methodology for the literature search (Efron & Ravid, 2019), and an analytical framework to identify key themes about strengths, needs, and inequities across a broad range of evidence. In this way, we were able to develop robust, evidence-based recommendations.

Gaps in the data

Reviewers were challenged by gaps in the data that reflect systemic issues in our ability to understand and respond to the needs of tamariki requiring additional support. They found that:

- entrenched bias in data collection made it it difficult to highlight inequities in the system (Bourke, Butler, & O'Neill, June 2021)
- the convention of reporting on the basis of prevalence of individual need rather
- than by child, made it difficult to know whether more children are presenting with multiple or complex needs (Bourke, Butler, & O'Neill, June 2021)
- data was disaggregated by factors such as gender, ethnicity, and school decile but not the provision of services across different regions (Bourke, Butler, & O'Neill, June 2021)
- the reach (availability and accessibility) is not being measured and so how many children are missing out is not known (Marks et al., 2023).

Consensus about the issues

We found some agreement across the literature about the issues that confronted those seeking learning supports.

- The changes in learning support responses have not been sufficient to ensure all disabled learners are included within the education system (Briefing notes to the Minister of Education (Ministry of Education | Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga. (2023, 2024a, 2024b).
- While there is a growing recognition of what 'disability, neurodiversity and neurodisability mean, and there are established evidence-based teaching strategies, implementing these remains inconsistent across schools.
- Disability impacts learning for many more young people than are currently acknowledged in statistics. Evidence suggests that almost a third of learners with identified learning needs are missing out on learning support entitlements (Mhuru, 2020).
- Accessing the Ongoing Resourcing Scheme1 (ORS) remains a major challenge, with 86% of professionals reporting increased difficulty in accessing the scheme. This difficulty directly impacts tamariki/rangatahi whaikaha abilities to participate in school activities and achieve academically. The average wait time for the start of service has not decreased over the last

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[1] ORS provides specialist service learners with the highest ongoing levels of need for learning support. As at 1 July 2023, there were 10,905 students receiving ORS funding. These students represented 1.3% of the total schooling population. Boys made up 68.6% of students receiving ORS funding. There were 8,234 ORS students (75.5%) funded at High Need and 2,671 ORS students (24.5%) funded at Very High Need (Education Counts, 2024).

seven years, and there is wide variation across the speed of accessing each of the core services.

- Advocates and whānau report that children with disabilities are, at times, prevented from enrolling in early childhood services and schools, or asked to enroll somewhere else. They can be excluded from extracurricular activities and may be sent home due to a lack of teacher support and even formally excluded from school because of their disability.
- In a sector already experiencing inequities, the intersectional impacts for whaikaha Māori are disproportionately disadvantageous. Support services are fragmented, variable, and often, not culturally appropriate (Bevan-Brown, 2013; Riwai-Couch, 2021; Pūaotanga, 2021).

Current directions for system learning supports

In April 2024, the Minister of Education announced six priorities for education, with one being "targeting effective learning support interventions for students with additional needs." The Ministry's priorities for a more inclusive education system are focused upon:

- embedding inclusive practice in everyday teaching and learning
- improving data and evidence
- improving the effectiveness and efficiency of their investment in learning support.

The details of the revised work programme have not been announced, but it is to include the following key features.

- Operational changes to make the system easier to navigate and to improve data
- collection.
- Creating a data-driven funding model that is focused on:
  - o delivering high-quality interventions, programmes, and supports as well as:
  - o optimising the learning support workforce
  - o building teacher capability to meet diverse learning needs.
  - o developing a network plan for specialist and alternative provision (Ministry of Education, May, 2024).

Recommendations

Decision-making about where to invest effort and funding depends on knowing the landscape and understanding how the current systems and local supports are structured. Evidence about the impact of learning supports in the Rātā takiwā is limited.

The recommendations below are mindful of the current learning support context, and where they may be opportunities for systemic change and positive outcomes. We hope the recommendations we are proposing will be a springboard for creative discussion regarding opportunities for positive and sustainable change.

Table 1. Recommendations and strategic focus

Recommendations	Strategic focus
Identify and respond to unmet needs in the community	Promote research and development of programmes designed to address the unmet needs of specific groups of underserved learners.
Strengthen early intervention and support seamless transitions in communities	Invest in early identification and intervention strategies. Strengthen pathways across critical transition points. Ensure that whānau and community partnerships are central to co-designing transition strategies, fostering a collaborative approach that meets the needs of learners at every stage.
Build awareness and effective use of existing tools and resources	Continue to build relationships with the sector and encourage fuller use of these resources. We recommended where tools, for example technological tools, are used and their impact evaluated from multiple perspectives (disabled learners, whānau, teachers). The Enabling Good Lives principles and ways of working provide a strong foundation for integrating their use in ways that are truly responsive to learners.
Community connectedness to benefit disabled learners	Consider partnering with others within a specific rohe to design and deliver pilot programmes with a focus on navigating the system to mitigate the lack of coordination and coherence experienced currently by the disability sector.
Culturally sustaining strategies that empower disabled learners and whānau.	Advocate with mana whenua, local communities and advocacy groups to enable the voices of disabled learners and their parents and whānau to be heard and influence the current system. This work sits at the heart of the community and has been identified as a gap for Māori and Pacific communities in particular.
Support innovative learning support delivery	Consider funding pilot projects exploring new learning support models, such as technology-driven interventions or community-led solutions. To prevent disengagement from education, support alternative learning environments for students who do not thrive in mainstream settings.

Tirohanga whānui | Overview

Tātai Aho Rau | Core Education (Tātai Aho Rau) was commissioned to undertake a literature review to provide insights into how the Rātā Foundation might strategically and positively impact inequities for children needing learning support across its takiwā.

The brief required a high level, evidence-based set of recommendations about the contexts and communities in which there are gaps, barriers, and opportunities in the current system for young people and their whānau to access equitable learning support.

The literature search aimed to uncover the conditions and contexts where the need is greatest, where the "sharp edge" of educational inequities may be located, and where learning supports for some cannot be freely accessed in a timely way.

Our increasing ability to identify, describe, and differentiate educational learning needs gives deeper insight into the span and complexity of learning needs in our education system. However, any increasing prevalence of additional needs is difficult to assess, given that publicly reported data is not consistent over time (Bourke, Butler & O'Neill, 2021). Learning support offered to children and young people in Aotearoa New Zealand may be short-term or long-term, depending on the nature of their additional needs. At the same time, children and young people can present with one or more of various broad categories of need, inclusive of neurodiversity, dyslexia, disability, behavioural, speech language needs and visual and hearing impairment. We know that the intersectionality or combination of educational learning needs and ethnicity, disability, health, and low socio-economic status amplifies equity gaps (Roy et al., 2021).

Consideration of these complexities shaped the literature research method and questions. We applied a rapid review methodology that synthesises the available literature related to specific target areas, focusing on overviews of literature, key messages, and understandings related to access and equity (Efron & Ravid, 2019). For clarity, the report begins with the terms and definitions that we found in recent literature about learning supports in order to be consistent and present current understandings.

The literature review takes account of three areas of focus.

The first section of the rapid review looks across the literature to evaluate any progress being made for learners and whānau in accessing equitable learning supports, instances of local successes, and where gaps and issues are still being highlighted.

Secondly, decision-making about where to invest effort and funding depends on knowing the landscape and understanding how the current systems and local supports are structured. Pathways for learning supports in education contexts, the political landscape and likely directions for learning support were considerations. Evidence about the impact of learning supports in the Rātā takiwā is limited.

We were deliberate about amplifying the voices of those who experience educational inequities, since navigating the system reveals the real nature of the barriers to equity (Kania et al, 2022). The premise here is that communities are best placed to support solutions to inequities and know what will work in context.

The final part of this report notes the evidence-based opportunities in the complex learning support environment – from strategic partnerships to investing in localised solutions to support or amplify sustainable change for tamariki, rangatahi, and their whānau.

Key perspectives and terms

Perspectives

Perspectives on disability continue to evolve in all cultural spaces. They are multifaceted and complex, shaped by cultural beliefs, social norms, family dynamics, traditional values and advocacy. In Aotearoa, perspectives from te ao Māori, Pacific peoples, western science and international organisations all contribute to emerging Aotearoa perspectives, which respond to calls for culturally responsive service design and delivery.

Traditionally in te ao Māori, children were regarded as having gifts or talents rather than disabilities or impairments (Jones et al. 2024 citing Tikau et al., 2009). Current kaupapa Māori research continues to take a strengths-based view, which is embedded in frameworks such as Durie's Te Whare Tapa Whā.

In Pacific contexts, concepts about disability are encapsulated in metaphors and proverbs (Taleni et al., 2023). Connectedness to culture, language and values such as respect, humour, and spirituality are shared across Pacific nations and are important to research, policy and practice. Pacific frameworks promoting inclusive approaches that are grounded in cultural practices, include **talanoa** and **teu le va** – the process of identifying and understanding the va or 'spaces' between different stakeholders (Airini, Mila-Schaaf, Coxon, et al., 2010).

Traditional western perspectives of disability were deficit-based (Jones et al. 2024; Marks et al., 2023). However, this is an evolving space, with growing advocacy for strengths-based approaches and descriptions.

> *My thought is that having a disability doesn't define who I am. From a Western worldview they try and [to] categorise us. They put us in that one box and go, "You're disabled." But from a te ao Māori [Māori worldview] perspective it's who we are, and we walk with that journey, and we continue to embrace our te ao Māori.* (Koromiko cited in Ingham, 2022, p. 7)

Internationally, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) uses the definition: "those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory

impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others…" (Article 1, UNCRPD cited in Office for Disability Issues, 2016, p. 12). Aotearoa NZ ratified the UNCRPD in 2008 and in so doing obliged governments past and present to align our legislative framework with the UNCRPD and to report regularly to the United Nations on progress and issues.

Terms and definitions

In this report, we use the terms **disability** and **disabled people**, as used in the New Zealand Disability Strategy (Office for Disability Issues, 2016) and defined by the UNCRPD (Ministry of Social Development, 2016, p. 13). This concept of disability arises from the **social model of disability**. The social model says that disability is about the way a person is able to interact with their environment, that is, the barriers and opportunities placed before them. It contrasts with the **medical model of disability**, which sees disability as something that is inherent within an individual.

The term **whaikaha** focuses on a person's kaha (strengths), while also invoking the lived experiences of Māori who, in English, are characterised as 'disabled'. The term is gaining usage in a widening range of discourses (Ingham et al., 2021).

Talanoa in Pacific communities drew on a variety of Pacific language terms related to the English term 'disability'. However, '**Pacific disabled person**' is a generalised term used in line with the Disability Strategy. (Whaikaha Ministry of Disabled People, September 2024)

Inclusion is about ensuring that all children and young people enjoy equitable access to education. It is about the quality of education and whether it provides knowledge and competencies all children and young people need to participate fully in society and achieve their potential (UNESCO, 2009). Inclusion is not a fixed state but a process. Key features of the term are captured in the following descriptions.

> *Inclusion … is focused on presence, participation and achievement; …[it] involves the active combating of exclusion; and inclusion is seen as a never-ending process.* (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006, p. 25)

> ***Inclusive education*** *('or inclusion') is an international response to the view that all children have the right to educational opportunity. It involves significant changes in thinking and action in education, from the level of education policy through to classroom practice, so that teachers can reach out to every child in the classroom.* (MacArthur, 2009, p. 8)

The concept of inclusion is closely connected with that of **diversity**. In an inclusive school, diversity is celebrated.

Learning is orchestrated so that teaching and learning activities are made responsive to the diversity of young people within the school. Children are encouraged to be active, reflective, critical learners and are viewed as a resource for each other's learning. Adults work together so that they all take responsibility for the learning of all children. (Booth & Ainscow, 2011, p. 46)

The term **'learning supports'** refers to a range of means to remove or prevent barriers to learning and participation, facilitating an inclusive educational environment that promotes equity and respects the diverse needs and rights of all students. It encompasses cultural, behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement, highlighting the interconnections between these areas. Effective learning supports address these dimensions holistically to promote active participation in school, foster a sense of belonging, and enhance overall student success (Tait, et al, 2023).

Strategy and approaches

The New Zealand Disability Strategy

The New Zealand Disability Strategy was developed to guide the work of government agencies and other organisations on disability issues (the Strategy, Office for Disability Issues, 2016). Its development was informed by two main documents: Te Tiriti o Waitangi and UNCRPD.

Foregrounding te ao Māori concepts of disability alongside Western perspectives, the Strategy envisioned the following for Aotearoa:

New Zealand is a non-disabling society – a place where disabled people have an equal opportunity to achieve their goals and aspirations, and all of New Zealand works together to make this happen. (Office for Disability Issues, 2016, page 6)

The use of the term 'non-disabling' was deliberate:

Non-disabling is about removing the barriers in society that disable people with impairments. We consider this to be stronger and more meaningful than 'enabling', which will only help disabled people get around barriers rather than remove them completely. (Office for Disability Issues, 2016, page 11).

Figure 1. *New Zealand Disability Strategy 2016–2026* (Office for Disability Issues, 2016, p. 16)

This approach envisions a whole of life, long-term approach to social investment paired with a twin-track implementation that delivers mainstream and specific support. Underlying these approaches is a belief that diversity is beneficial to our society, which is now deemed 'superdiverse' (Education Review Office, 2023). An aspiration is that this rich diversity, which is also apparent in the disabled community, will ensure people with disabilities are included and represented in initiatives designed to disable barriers to participation and contribution.

The right to education

The Education and Training Act 2020 enshrines in law every child's right to enrol and attend a state school or a charter school. Students with special education needs have the same rights as others. Effectively, that means that all children in Aotearoa NZ have a right to an education that is fit for purpose, supports their learning potential, and enables them to contribute to society. Even though these rights should be integral to the responses specifically designed by the education system, how they are implemented varies (Manaakitia ā tātou Tamariki | Office of the Children's Commissioner & Oranga Tamariki, 2021; CRAANZ, 2022).

Learning support provision in Aotearoa New Zealand has evolved from one that, in the past, was informed by the medical model of disability to one that is informed by the social model. In 1989, the government enshrined in legislation the rights of all learners to attend their local school. Our current legislative framework sets expectations that early learning services, schools, and kura will cater to diverse learners. These can be found in the National Education and Learning Priorities (NELP), the objectives for school boards under Section 127 of the Education Act, 2020, and the new planning and reporting framework for schools (Te Whakangārahu Ngātahi | Planning Together, Ministry of Education, May 2024).

Methodology

The research methodology for the report was shaped by its purpose to support decision-making about investment in the learning supports area of education. We approached the literature search with an analytical framework that would locate key themes across a broad range of literature.

Rapid-review methodology

We applied a rapid-review methodology for the literature review. A rapid-review does not aim to synthesise and critique an exhaustive list of all the literature available related to the target area; instead, it focuses on key sources of literature, key messages, and understandings related to access and equity for learning supports (Efron & Ravid, 2019).

Review questions

The following questions were outlined in the project brief from Rātā Foundation.

- What does the evidence tell us about need and inequalities in this area?
- Where are the opportunities to amplify or make sustainable change?
- Where is Rātā best placed to make a difference?

Our analytical framework

An important feature of a rights-based approach for children with disabilities is access to appropriate, adaptable services which are available when they are needed. There are numerous models for designing and evaluating rights in education. However, many are not well-known or promulgated among professionals in education, social services and health (see for example, Riwai-Couch, 2021). These models establish criteria that can be adapted to different and diverse contexts.

For this review, we adapted a model from human rights approaches to education (Tomaševski, 2001, see Fig. 2). We used this adaptation to interrogate the literature from several angles. This enabled us to code the themes we found in the literature, bringing us a step closer to understanding the areas of greatest unmet need.

Figure 2. Human rights framework (adapted from Tomaševski, 2001)

The final steps in our methodology were to align our findings and recommendations with the Rātā Foundation focus areas. We considered how the recommendations could ensure community-led responses by prioritising and mobilising their findings in order to contribute to system influence for learners who may not be able to access learning supports that are adaptable and acceptable for their communities.

The learning support landscape

This section describes a high-level scan of government provision and offers a closer view of the people and mechanisms that are funded for disabled learners.

The Government supports early childhood services, schools, kura, and learning support services to meet its expectations through funding, infrastructure, and services. It directly employs 1,090 learning support specialists and 287 support workers (teacher aides/paraprofessionals). It also funds and provides support and guidance to the broader learning support workforce employed by schools and contracted providers.

The learning support framework: Te Tūāpapa o He Pikorua

The framework within which learning support is offered is called Te Tūāpapa o He Pikorua. It is designed as a method for identifying supports that increase in intensity, depending on the needs and the context. It is intended that information gathered about the strengths, needs, and progress of mokopuna supports collaborative decision making. Its overall purpose is to build inclusion, placing learners and whānau at the decision-making and positioning services and support alongside everyday teaching and learning.

Te Tūāpapa o He Pikorua
A foundation for inclusive learning communities for all mokopuna and their whānau.

Te Matua
Universal
Strengthens inclusive environments, cultures and practices.

Te Kāhui
Targeted
Offers focused approaches to enhance participation, learning and wellbeing.

Te Arotahi
Tailored
Provides more specific supports for unique needs and contexts.
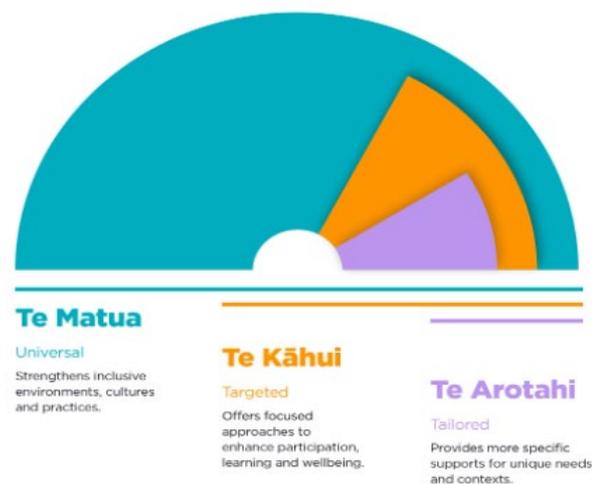
Figure 3. Te Tūāpapa o He Pikorua (Ministry of Education, 2022)

Appendix 1 sets out the support services currently funded by the government through the Ministry of Education (Education Review Office, 2022b). Table 2 below summarises government's investment in learning support across the early learning and schooling systems (Education Review Office, January, 2024)

Table 2. Summary of learning support provision in 2021

Licensed early learning services	Schooling		
Overall population of around **195,000** learners $65M provided for universal learning support Around **17,400** children received Early Intervention Services	Overall population of around **826,500** learners $191M in operational funding for universal learning support		
	Around **58,500** learners received Ministry-funded or tailored learning support in a mainstream school (e.g., assistive technology, teacher aides, specialist teachers).	Around **4,000** learners are enrolled in specialist schools (e.g., day specialist schools and their satellite services, residential specialist schools, sensory schools, regional health schools)	Around **9000** learners are enrolled in some form of alternative provision, (e.g., alternative education, activity centres, teen parent units, Te Kura)

Consensus about the issues

There are long standing concerns for children with disabilities. Evidence suggests that almost a third of learners with identified learning impairments are missing out on learning support entitlements. In addition, research revealed large pockets of unmet needs (Mhuru, 2020). Teaching professionals report they are experiencing high stress due to high workloads and a feeling that they are ill-prepared for the wide array of disabilities manifesting in their classrooms. The education system has neither understood nor implemented the Enabling Good Lives vision and principles that were developed by the disability community over a decade ago (visit https://www.enablinggoodlives.co.nz/about-egl/).

Across the literature reviewed, there is widespread consensus that a comprehensive shift in our education system is needed to address key barriers to achieving potential for children and young people with disabilities. Teachers, teacher aides, and principals have observed increased diversity, more children and families living in hardship and more children with additional and complex learning needs. These observations have highlighted inequities in learning support. The intersectionality culture, ethnicity, language and identity and socio-economic status all affect your ability to access disability support services.

Barriers to meeting disabled children and young people's rights appeared numerous times across multiple reports. These barriers breach their rights to an education that enables them to reach their potential. Advocates and whānau report that children with disabilities are, at times:

- prevented from enrolling in early childhood services and schools, or asked to enroll somewhere else.

- excluded from extracurricular activities and may be sent home due to a lack of teacher support.

- have been formally excluded from school because of their disability.

In a sector already experiencing inequities, the intersectional impacts for whaikaha Māori are disproportionately disadvantageous. The same inequities impact Pacific, refugee and migrant learners with disabilities (Bevan-Brown, 2013; CRAANZ, 2022; Riwai-Couch, 2021).

Support services are fragmented, variable, and often, not culturally appropriate (Bevan-Brown, 2013; Riwai-Couch, 2021; Pūaotanga, 2021). There are capacity and capability issues for the workforce. Good intentions to work collaboratively are undermined by limited funding (Pūaotanga, 2021). Despite the fact that a wide variety of resources and guidelines are available, there is a lack of awareness that these exist. These resources can be hard to find and there is limited support or guidance for putting them into practice.

There is an overall impression of a lack of coherence, so while the rhetoric articulates inclusivity, too often disabled children are excluded from participating alongside their peers in education (see, for example, GUiNZ, 2023; Robyns, 2023; Nobilo, 2024).

Patterns and trends across time

A report commissioned by the Ministry of Education, NZEI, and PPTA sought to examine **the prevalence of children with additional needs, the complexity of need, and how this has changed over time** (Bourke, Butler, & O'Neill, June 2021). The report drew on national and international data and a secondary analysis of Aotearoa New Zealand data, retrieved largely from Education Counts (maintained by the Ministry of Education) and the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDS - maintained by Statistics New Zealand). These reviewers were challenged by limitations that reflect systemic issues in our ability to understand and respond to the needs of tamariki requiring additional support. These include:

- Changing definitions of additional need across different countries and agencies and across time and improvements in our ability to recognise and assess need.
- The lack of reliable time-series data, so that service provision, generally based upon a formal diagnosis, often has to be used as a proxy for experience.
- The convention of reporting on the basis of prevalence of individual need rather than by child, so that it is difficult to know whether more children are presenting with multiple or complex needs.
- The impact of biases underpinning the data from research design to analysis which obscures equity.
- While data can be disaggregated by gender, ethnicity, and school decile, it cannot be disaggregated by other important factors, including the provision of services across different regions.

Bourke, et al. (June 2021) also looked at **patterns across core service provision**: the Behaviour Service, Communication Service, Early Intervention Service, and Ongoing Resourcing Scheme

(ORS). Unfortunately, the data is insufficient to analyse service provision by region. However, they did report the following:

- Pākehā and Māori students access ORS at a similar rate to their representation in the general population.
- Boys consistently make up around two-thirds of those accessing ORS[2].
- The proportion of ORS-funded students is lower among students at higher decile schools than at lower decile schools[3].
- The average wait time for the start of service has not decreased over the last seven years, and there is wide variation across the speed of accessing each of the core services.

Figure 4 illustrates the type and prevalence of additional learning needs in children (Bourke, et al. June, 2021). This reveals a wide range of disabilities experienced by learners, and impacts teachers who may or may not have an understanding of the types of learning disabilities presenting in their services. As well, teachers may not have strategies to respond to these learners' additional needs.
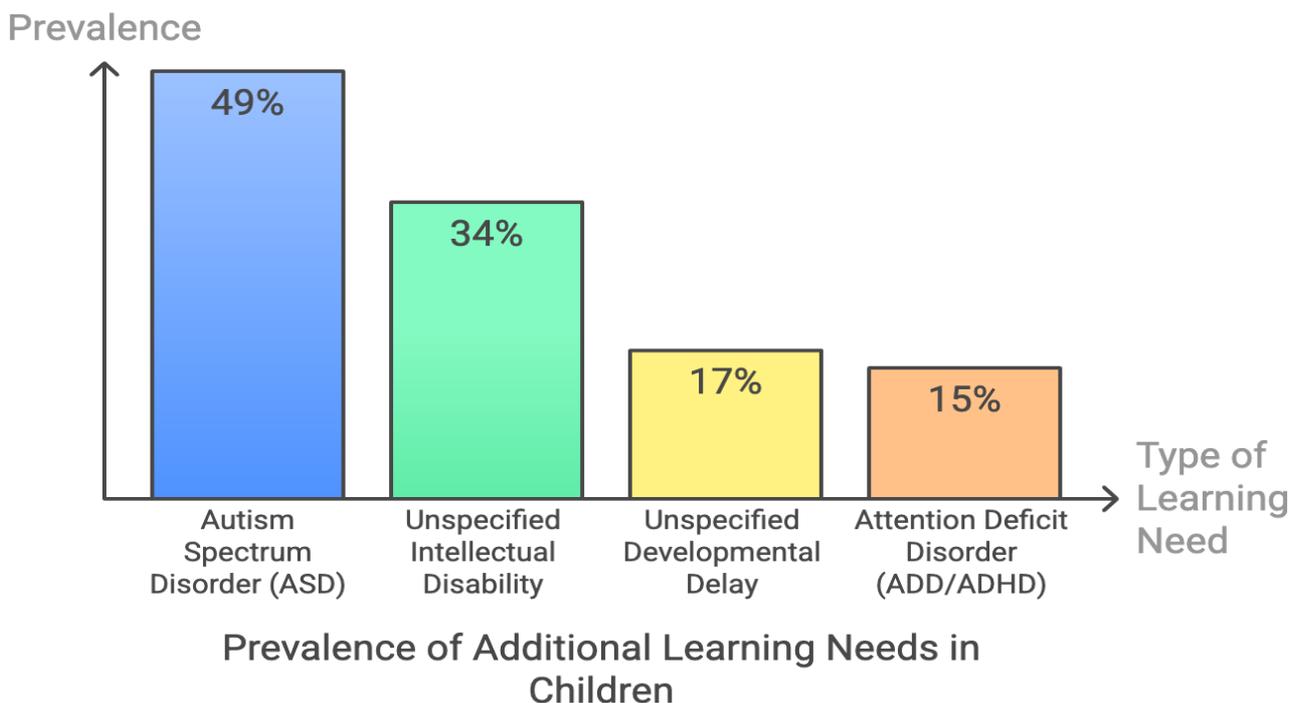

Figure 4. **Prevalence of additional learning needs** (Bourke et al., 2021)

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[2] While exact statistics vary, the trend of more boys utilising ORS funding is often attributed to a combination of factors including potential differences in how certain learning difficulties manifest in boys compared to girls, diagnostic biases, and societal expectations regarding male behaviour, which can sometimes lead to earlier indication of learning needs in boys.
[3] This data was compiled before the Ministry of Education's Equity Index was introduced.

Shifting priorities at a system level

The learning support system has evolved along with the broader disability support system but changes have been insufficient to ensure all disabled learners are included within the education system (see, for example, Ministry of Education | Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga, 2023, 2024a, 2024b). Change has been continuous, with the Learning Support Action Plan 2019-2025 promising transformational change supported by a significant 10-year work programme.

Following feedback from the sector, and advice from the Treasury, this programme has been supplanted by a more modest effort to achieve a more coherent and evidence-based approach to inclusion making the best possible use of existing levers.

In April 2024, the Minister of Education announced six priorities for education, with one being "targeting effective learning support interventions for students with additional needs". The Ministry's priorities for a more inclusive education system are focused upon:

• Embedding inclusive practice in everyday teaching and learning;
• Improving data and evidence;
• improving the effectiveness and efficiency of our investment in learning support.

The details of the revised work programme have not been announced, but it is to include the following key features.

• Operational changes to make the system easier to navigate and to improve data collection.
• Creating a data-driven funding model that is focused on delivering high-quality interventions, programmes, and supports.
• Optimising the learning support workforce.
• Building teacher capability to meet diverse learning needs.
• Developing a network plan for specialist and alternative provision (Ministry of Education, May, 2024).

Needs and inequities

In this section, we use the adapted human rights model (Tomaševski, 2001) to group the findings above into a set of themes. In essence, the concepts of availability, adaptability, accessibility and acceptability describe the future state for equitable learning support services.

Overall, despite pockets of success, our current system still sets up unfair barriers related to the four interconnected concepts above.

Knowledge gaps impact disabled learners

An overarching theme across much of the literature we read was that lack of data hinders the ability to understand what is happening in education for our disabled learners. This impacts the system's ability to respond appropriately to need and to evaluate the impact of new interventions.

Our rapid review of reports written between 2012 and 2024, identifies gaps in research and evaluation literature regarding impact of support services. The reasons why are complex. Despite a degree of satisfaction with some learning support services, this is not generalised, and neither is it comprehensive. We know some groups of children and young people miss out. These include Māori, Pacific, migrant and refugee, and rural children and young people. Since the reach (availability and accessibility) is not measured, it is unclear how many children are missing out (Marks et al., 2023).

Appendix 2 provides examples of how gaps in the data impact upon our understanding of what is happening for disabled learners and the ability to make decisions that will benefit them and all who care for them. The impact is evident at all levels of the system.

Accessibility and adaptability: A pathway of exclusion

In 2022, the Education Review Office (ERO, 2022a, 2022b) conducted companion reviews of education provision for disabled learners, creating a comprehensive picture from early childhood through to secondary school.

In early childhood education, most disabled children felt safe and had a sense of belonging, but many were excluded from activities like excursions. Children with complex needs faced more exclusion and had less communication with educators about their learning progress, leaving parents feeling less confident about their child's safety and inclusion.

In schools, most disabled learners enjoyed school, but often struggled to progress in academic learning. Many felt unsupported, especially in secondary school, and were excluded from learning opportunities. Parents often felt that their child's learning progress was inadequately reported. Teachers lacked confidence in teaching disabled learners, leading to exclusion in learning

opportunities. While school leaders were more confident, this didn't always translate into inclusive practices. Schools in lower socio-economic areas and those with a high Māori student population showed more inclusivity.

ERO found several areas for improvement, including strengthening leadership accountability, increasing teachers' confidence and capabilities, enhancing partnerships with parents, improving coordination of support services, and ensuring disabled learners' educational rights are better understood and advocated for (see Appendix 1).

Acceptability: What matters to disabled learners

What about me.nz (NZ Government, 2022) is a comprehensive survey that seeks to benchmark the circumstances, issues, and concerns children and young people experience in Aotearoa NZ. Children and young people ranked themselves.

Disabilities were categorised using the Washington Group Short Set, a set of questions developed "...to address six areas of functioning which, if restricted, are most often found to result in limitations in social participation" (NZ Government, 2022, p. 33). Referred to as thresholds, these are:

- **Disability 1**: At least one domain/question answered 'Some difficulty' or 'A lot of difficulty' or 'Cannot do at all'.
- **Disability 2**: At least two domains/questions answered 'Some difficulty' or any one domain/question answered 'A lot of difficulty' or 'Cannot do at all'.
- **Disability 3:** Any one domain/question answered 'A lot of difficulty' or 'Cannot do at all'.
- **Disability 4**: Any one domain answered 'Cannot do at all'. (NZ Government, 2022, p. 34)

The *What about me.nz* survey set a high threshold for categorising disabled learners at Disability 3 (see Figure 5 below) resulting in 29% of children and young people self-identifying as disabled. Significantly however; a large number of children identified Disability 1 (77%) and Disability 2 (49%) issues. Those selecting Disability 3 and 4 were significantly fewer. This supports the contention of others (for example, Bourke et al., June 2021) that disability impacts learning for many more young people than are currently acknowledged in statistics.
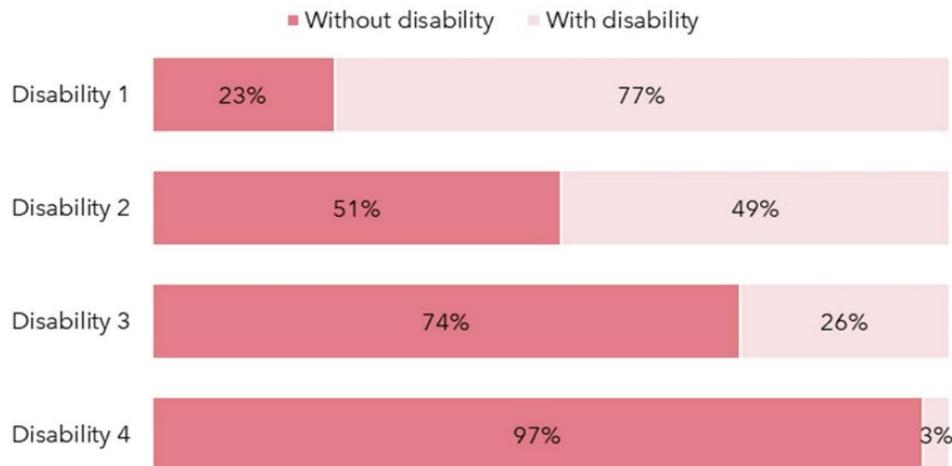
Figure 5: Disability thresholds (NZ Government, 2021)

The *What about me.nz* survey (NZ Government 2022) revealed that educationally, disabled learners felt less likely to achieve their aspirations and qualifications than their peers and importantly rated their experiences of school less positively overall (NZ Government, 2022).

Inconsistent, incoherent systems

According to both professionals and disability advocacy groups, successive governments have tweaked a broken system, rather than rebuilding (CRAANZ, 2022; IHC, 2022). The impact has worsened the situation for children and young people where statistics indicate a staggering 95% - 100% failure of available funding to deliver adequate resources. For those at the centre of the disability sector, there is a sense of disillusionment with government processes (IHC, 2022; Pūaotanga, 2021).

The Education Review Office (2022) noted that there had been 11 evaluations into education for disabled learners over the past 18 years. In each, learning outcomes for these students lagged behind their peers. This indicates that the introduction of numerous policy changes, while well-intentioned, does not seem to be offering a holistic pathway to the future. The result is that:

- professionals, advocates, families and learners are left feeling overwhelmed
- teachers and teacher aides feel overwhelmed and inadequately prepared for the high numbers of learners with complex and varied needs in their classrooms
- each type of support service has its own application processes and these tend not to intersect usefully in the best interests of the child or the family
- fragmented services marginalise and discriminate against learners in need of support.

Inequitable access to acceptable, available, and adaptable services

Survey data highlight several significant barriers to support for tamariki/rangatahi whaikaha (see for example, IHC, 2022; NZCER, 2020; Pūaotanga, 2021). Accessing the Ongoing Resourcing Scheme[4] (ORS) remains a major challenge, with 86% of professionals reporting increased difficulty in accessing the scheme. This difficulty directly impacts tamariki/rangatahi whaikaha abilities to participate in school activities and achieve academically.

An ongoing concern is the exclusion of children and young people with disabilities from school activities. More than a third of families reported that their children were regularly sent home early, which violates at least three UN Conventions. This exclusion prevents students from participating alongside their peers. Forty-seven per cent of educators attributed this exclusion to a lack of funding and resources. Compounding these issues is an overall lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate support for Māori and Pacific children with disabilities.

Additionally, more than 25% of families felt that their child's learning was not adequately monitored or reported on. Furthermore, 65% of families expressed concerns about the insufficient support for disabled students as they transition into employment or further training.

When families raised concerns about their disabled child's challenges at school, 75% reported doing so, but only a third of these problems were resolved. Another significant barrier is the time it takes to access specialist support. According to the Pūaotanga Independent Review Panel (2021), the Ministry of Education acknowledged that it could not respond quickly enough. Wait times for eligible learners ranged from 50 to 75 calendar days, with support still dependent on the availability of specialist staff.

An overall lack of coordination impacts whānau, teachers and principals

Unmet, unrecognised, undiagnosed learning needs is a significant gap in provision of learning support services. The evidence is clear that, especially from a parental and whānau perspective, the lack of coordination between, within and among learning support services at all levels is frustrating and disheartening (IHC, 2022; Pūaotanga, 2021; Riwai-Couch, 2021). Policy initiatives have tried to address the gaps and to streamline the pathways for children, young people, and their whānau.

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[4] ORS provides specialist services for learners with the highest ongoing levels of need for learning support. As at 1 July 2023, there were 10,905 students receiving ORS funding. These students represented 1.3% of the total schooling population. Boys made up 68.6% of students receiving ORS funding. There were 8,234 ORS students (75.5%) funded at High Need and 2,671 ORS students (24.5%) funded at Very High Need (Education Counts, 2024).

One such initiative is the Learning Support Coordinator role, introduced in 2020. Set up to better meet mild to moderate, neurodiverse, or high-and-complex learning support needs (Andrews et al., 2022) the policy intentions were sound – to add capacity, capability to kura and schools through a coordinator. However, reviews of the role found that poor understanding and a lack of collective infrastructure about the LSC role and how this would work across multiple sites created unforeseen 'ownership' issues leading to perceptions of inequitable access for those in need. Added to this was a lack of awareness of te ao Māori in both the design and implementation of the role.

Two national online surveys of the LSC role quantified issues from the perspectives of teachers and principals. Both groups found there were insufficient resources which prevented learners from accessing the support they needed. Wait times were still unacceptably long. Secondary schools found the levels of funding grossly inadequate to meet the needs of learners and support their wellbeing. Ninety-four percent thought that every school should have a SENCO or LSC (Pūaotanga Independent Review Panel, 2021).

Another initiative that did not serve disabled learners well were innovative learning environments (ILEs) promoted by the Ministry of Education as a way to encourage collaboration, exploration, and discussion[5]. ILEs have some reported benefits, but for learners with disabilities, evidence suggests that they struggle with the number of people in the space, the noise levels and the fact that there are multiple workspaces (Alansari & Li, 2024). Whānau report that their children find it more difficult to regulate their behaviour as they have to cope with more than one learning area operating concurrently. Forming and sustaining friendships becomes more challenging because there are no set seating arrangements. The combined effect of different teachers, different groups of learners, and different learning areas is overwhelming for some learners and teachers (Alansari & Li, 2024).

Intersectionality amplifies inequities for individual disabled learners

Rarely, if ever, does anyone have a single identity (Ramalho et al., 2023). International research has found that intersectional approaches can add value to education policy development. Although this is not widespread, there are long term benefits that support community connectedness and social responsibility. In education, intersectionalities can create a complicated set of circumstances for learners with disabilities to navigate.

Reports agree that children with disabilities have complex needs that intersect with health, social welfare, and education. Juxtaposing criteria for entitlements to services have resulted in children with disabilities missing out (Brown et al., 2023; Sinclair & Lyndon, 2023).

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[5] ILEs are large, open, flexible, non-traditional learning spaces with moveable furniture and walls. Up to 100 learners and four teachers typically work in ILEs.

Māori experience multiple intersectionalities

Children with disabilities experience higher levels of intersectionality, especially if they are Māori (Jones et al., 2024; Nobilo, 2024; Sinclair & Lyndon, 2023).

Kaiako and tumuaki Māori felt doubly discriminated against when it came to accessing and providing support Māori learners with high and complex needs, arguing that it requires more than a tweak to create a Māori space. Too often, it seems, the specialist support services are unable to deliver in te reo.

That said, ERO research (2022b) found that whānau and tamariki/rangatahi whaikaha in low decile schools had better educational outcomes, felt a stronger sense of belonging and that communication between whānau and teachers was more open than in high decile schools.

Research also suggests that racism is prevalent and there are inexplicable barriers for kura kaupapa to using Urgent Response Funding in ways they deem most suitable for their contexts. As with their Pākehā counterparts, a lack of support staff and staff with specialist training was an ongoing issue that impacted the allocation of resources and funding. As one tumuaki from a kura and iwi said:

> *We don't just have a financial commitment; we have a whakapapa commitment. We are ensuring the survival of our iwi*

Pūaotanga, 2021, page 50

The systemic inequities experienced by tamariki/rangatahi whaikaha have been entrenched more deeply since the COVID 19 pandemic (CRAANZ, 2022; Brown et al. 2023). The issue is a lack of responsiveness; the gap is a lack of good evidence to show exactly how the intersectionalities experienced by a disabled child who is also Māori or Pacific, or migrant manifest across the social service sector (see for example Marks et al., 2023; Ingham, 2022, Brown et al. 2023).

> *Tamariki Māori experience high rates of disability. In the 2013 Disability Survey, it was reported tamariki Māori experienced a disability rate that was 36% higher than the overall child disability rate (StatsNZ, 2014) – and even this inequitably high rate faced by Māori is likely to be under-reported due to identification barriers and access barriers.*
> (Sinclair & Lyndon, 2023, p. 5)

Pacific families have unique needs

In 2013, Pasifika whānau and learners shared their experiences of what was then called 'special education'. Their responses reflected both satisfaction with certain learning supports and the need for culturally responsive practices, effective communication, and the removal of barriers to access. These insights underscore the importance of understanding and addressing the unique needs of Pasifika families in the context of special education (Ministry of Education, 2013).

Recent talanoa (Whaikaha Ministry of Disabled People, September 2024) with Pacific communities revealed many concerns, broadly summarised below:

- a lack of cultural know-how amongst professionals in education, including language barriers
- poor collaboration between services and communities, fanau, and āiga
- low levels of awareness about services, processes and entitlements in Pacific communities.

It is notable that the issues raised in 2013 and in 2022 (ERO, 2022a, 2022b) persisted in 2024.

Learners in residential care

Every year around 700-800 young people are placed in residential care, under the discretion of Oranga Tamariki or by court order. They are disproportionately Māori and are very vulnerable young people, who have often changed schools many times and are disengaged from learning. They are more likely than other students to be dealing with a range of challenges including self-regulation, language, and communication; neuro-diversity disorders; and behavioural, emotional, mental health and learning difficulties. These can intersect with past trauma or attachment issues and fears for safety. Their time in care offers an opportunity to transform their lives, and so the quality of the education they receive matters.

ERO (2021) found there was considerable variability in the quality of provision. The report identified seven 'enablers' that need to be strengthened to improve overall practice and especially to smooth out the current variability:

- growing specialist skills for teaching in residential care
- inter-agency collaboration focused upon improving student wellbeing
- better planning and IT systems to support student transitions
- a systematic approach to partnering with Māori
- a shared model of quality practice
- using evaluation for improvement
- growing whānau agency.

Summarising the issues and gaps

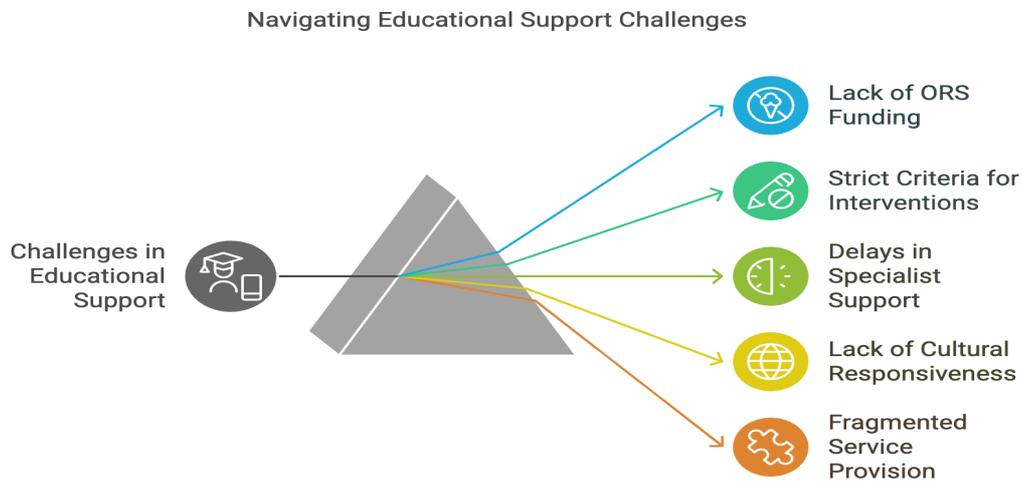Navigating Educational Support Challenges

Figure 6. Challenges faced by learners with unmet needs

While there is a growing recognition of what disability, neurodiversity and neurodisability mean, and there are established evidence-based teaching strategies, implementing these remains inconsistent across schools. Teachers require further professional development to effectively support neurodiverse learners, and while technology has the potential to enhance learning, its rapid advancement requires educators to stay informed about best practices. Collaboration between schools and families is also critical, as engagement with whānau provides valuable insights into students' needs. However, systemic barriers, such as limited resources and a lack of specialised training, continue to hinder progress.

While there are strengths in the current system (see the Strengths and Opportunities section), learners with disabilities still face significant barriers to equitable education. Deficit-based approaches to disability, social stigma, and cultural insensitivity often prevent learners from receiving the support they need. Resource-related challenges, including funding limitations, inadequate learning materials, and socioeconomic disparities, further exacerbate these difficulties. Additionally, systemic issues such as bureaucratic delays, inconsistent policy implementation, and insufficient early intervention services create obstacles for both students and educators.

Ultimately, the evidence emphasised that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work for children and young people with disabilities. Instead, a more individualised and flexible support system is needed, where collaboration between schools, families, and specialist services is strengthened.

Addressing these challenges will require continued efforts to provide educators with the necessary training, improve resource allocation, and ensure that policies prioritise the unique learning needs of children and young people with disabilities.

Strengths and opportunities for sustainable change

This section moves to how we can build on strengths that have been identified in system and local responses. These underpin the shift to acceptability of learning supports that have respected and responded to those that are experiencing the learning support services.

The rallying call of the disability community is "**Nothing about us without us**." This section foregrounds the voices of learners, whānau, and the wider disability community. While the needs and inequities are real, it identifies the very real strengths and opportunities for making changes that matter for the learners at their heart.

Learner and whānau-centred practice

Educational research is clear that quality education is centred upon learners and recognises the place of parents and whānau as "first teachers". It provides insights into how learners and whānau perceive the current system and what they want to change.

We have insights into what learners want

In an extensive nationwide survey, children and young people were asked about their experiences and school and what could be improved (Mana Mokopuna 2018). A key insight from disabled children and young people was that they often felt excluded, unsafe, bullied, or discriminated against. Their voices were not being heard. Many felt they were judged as inferior or a burden to their peers. Teachers' attitudes had a big impact upon their educational experience. They perceived that the education system was rigid, unresponsive, and not designed to meet the unique needs of disabled students.

Disabled learners reported strong support from their whānau and valued the support of friends and communities, though they often felt unsafe outside of these circles. They emphasised the importance of being listened to and wanted others outside their whānau to make a more concerted effort to understand how they could contribute to their own lives.

Learners with disabilities made the following recommendations:

• Keep us safe, at all times, in all places, and in all circumstances.
• Work with our parents and whānau so they feel supported.
• We want you to help us transition from school into employment or training.
• Ensure we are accepted. This means suspending judgement.
• Listen to understand what our experiences are like.
• Make sure that learning support services are available, accessible and adapted to suit us.

In other research, learners and whānau have told us what effective learning support looks like.

- Strong, positive relationships between teachers and students are crucial to fostering a sense of belonging and support.
- Collaboration between schools and families is essential, families can offer valuable insights and support.
- Learners want to have agency in their learning through opportunities to make choices and take control of their educational experiences.
- Learning support services should help students understand and manage their own behaviour, promoting self-regulation.
- Learning support should be offered within the context of inclusive educational settings that actively promote diversity and where all learners feel accepted and valued. (Ingham, 2022; Mirfin-Veitch, et al., 2020; Whaikaha Ministry of Disabled People, September 2024).

Children with disabilities, like all children, are diverse in terms of culture, social background, and disability type, meaning that the challenges they and their families face are varied. This diversity should be considered when involving them in decision-making. Methods to gather their views and involve them in the process, including those for non-verbal or very young children, are available but not yet widely practiced (Condor et al., June 2016).

In sum, learners and whānau advocate for the use of diverse teaching methods tailored to individual needs, ensuring that learning is accessible and meaningful. They want everyone's voice to be heard and responded to.

We have insights into what culturally responsive practice looks like

Culturally responsive practice is vital for supporting Māori and Pasifika learners, including those with additional needs. Insights from various reports highlight the importance of integrating cultural values, practices, and frameworks into education.

The over-representation of Māori in exclusion statistics indicates that the current education system does not adequately address the language, culture, and identity needs of Tamariki/rangatahi whaikaha. Addressing this requires policy and practice transformation based on Te Tiriti o Waitangi and te ao Māori values. This transformation should include an understanding of 'additional needs' from a Māori perspective that emphasises mana-enhancing practices. It should incorporate kaupapa Māori values, holistic practices, and an understanding of whakapapa (genealogy). Agencies and professionals must empower and listen to whānau and ensure they feel valued and appreciated. Professional development is critical for educators to achieve this change (Bourke, Butler, & O'Neill, June 2021).

Two reports offer recommendations for improving the responsiveness of the system for Pasifika learners with disabilities and their families. The first recommended improving cultural intelligence, working holistically with families, strengthening local community support, providing professional

learning opportunities for teachers, and increasing resources for Pasifika families (Ministry of Education, 2013). More recent discussions with Pacific communities have echoed these points, emphasising the need for strength-based, relational approaches that align with Pacific cultural values (Whaikaha Ministry of Disabled People, September 2024). The communities involved expressed a desire to be included in decision-making processes, which aligns with the teu le va framework (Airini, Mila-Schaaf, Coxon, et al., 2010). This framework, based on collaboration, authentic talanoa (dialogue), and the inclusion of Pasifika voices, is seen as an effective approach to shaping policy and delivering services.

In sum, both Māori and Pasifika communities advocate for education systems that are culturally responsive, grounded in their respective cultural values, and inclusive of their voices in decision-making. By transforming the system to reflect these values, it is hoped that the educational needs of these learners, particularly those with additional needs, will be better met.

We have insights into what disabled people across Aotearoa New Zealand want

Outcome 1 of the New Zealand Disability Strategy is: **Education - We get an excellent education and achieve our potential throughout our lives.**

Outcome 1 means:

- Disabled people are consulted on and actively involved in the development and implementation of legislation and policies concerning education, including early childhood, primary, secondary and tertiary education
- Access to mainstream education is inclusive (including policy, practice, and pedagogy)
- Services that are specific to disabled people are high quality, available and accessible.
- Inclusive education is a core competency for all teachers and educators.
- Decision-making on issues regarding education of disabled people is informed by robust data and evidence.

There are strengths in the current educational landscape

- There is a growing commitment to inclusive education practices within the education system. This commitment is essential for creating environments where learners can thrive and participate fully in their education.
- There is an increasing awareness and recognition of neurodiversity within the education system. This helps validate the experiences of disabled learners and promotes a more inclusive approach to education.
- Established evidence-based strategies, when effectively implemented, can lead to positive educational outcomes for disabled learners.

- Many educational institutions are demonstrating a commitment to inclusive practices. These are essential for creating environments where disabled students can thrive.
- There is an emphasis on building positive relationships between teachers and students. While these are not always as focused upon learning as they should be, they do contribute to improved learning experiences and overall wellbeing.
- There are existing policies and frameworks aimed at supporting diverse learners and providing educators with guidance on effective strategies.
- Collaborative efforts between schools and families can enhance educational experiences and provide additional support for disabled learners.
- We can build upon and spread examples of good practice. For example, Sustainable Networks and Pathways (SNAP), is a three-year, collaborative, personally tailored transition programme that builds students' confidence, provides them with purposeful, meaningful, long-term work, and enables them to participate actively as members of their school and local community. (Hutt Valley High School, 2020; Mirfin-Veitch, et al., 2020; NZCER, 2020, Riwai-Couch, 2021).

These strengths indicate that while there are significant challenges, there are also positive aspects that can be leveraged to further improve outcomes for disabled learners (Mirfin-Veitch et al., 2020).

Existing guidelines and tools

The Government, through the Ministry of Education, funds ongoing efforts to create resources and guidelines to support early learning services and schools cater to diverse learners. These include interactive tools to find out about learners' experiences of wellbeing and inclusion, guidance on inclusive assessment approaches such as narrative storying, the Inclusive Education Guides (curated collections of strategies, suggestions, and resources) and modules for learning about inclusive education practice. Teacher aides are often the 'go-to' for in-class support, but this needs to happen carefully, so as not to inadvertently add to learners' experience of exclusion. There is considerable guidance about how to do this.

Teachers and educational leaders often feel they don't have time to locate and learn to use resources in ways that integrate easily into their current practice. Raising awareness of existing resources and how to use them need not be an expensive exercise but could be very helpful.

Existing advocacy groups are paving the way forward

Enabling Good Lives (EGL) is a transformative approach to disability support that was created by the community. It has the vision:

In the future, disabled children and adults and their families will have greater choice and control over their supports and lives and make more use of natural and universally available supports.

EGL works on the basis of the following principles: self-determination, beginning early, person-centred, ordinary life outcomes, mainstream first, mana enhancing, easy to use, relationship building.

The EGL approach works to make change in two ways:

- disabled people and their whānau and communities use it in their daily lives to work things out with services and supports and ensure they have a say
- as a social movement, EGL seeks to influence system change.

EGL offers specific ways in which disabled learners, whānau, and carers can work towards enabling good lives in education through adopting its vision, principles, and language. Along with other advocacy groups, it offers ideas and strategies for making positive social change. Those other groups include:

- [Disabled Persons Assembly NZ (DPA)](#) and its constituent members
- [Inclusive Education Action Group (IEAG)](#)

Strengths in Te Waipounamu

ERO (2022a - ECE) found that early childhood services in the South Island were consistently doing better than those in the North Islands. Kaiako were consistently more confident in their teaching practice and the quality of children's transitions. They were more likely to report regularly working with other services and schools around transitions. ERO found a similar pattern in its reports on 'learning in lockdown' and surmises that the Christchurch earthquakes and terror attacks may have enhanced connections between services, the Ministry, and other support networks.

Evidence-based priorities for action

Qualitative data about areas of unmet need offers insight into where government investment is needed:

- Respond to the consistent, significant growth in recorded instances of ASD and ADD/ADHD with a well-resourced, targeted national foci.
- Investigate the needs currently reported as unspecified intellectual disability or unspecified developmental delay (which may in fact be FASD) to enable better identification and shape appropriate interventions and supports.
- Align work on additional need identification with the development of additional resources so they are sufficient to address the need and are allocated in an equitable, timely, and culturally appropriate way. This includes actively monitoring and reducing wait times for access to services. It also includes engaging with diverse communities in ways they themselves regard as most appropriate (Bourke, Butler, & O'Nell, June 2021.

Alignment with Rata's priorities

While there is limited evidence about the prevalence of needs and the impact of learning supports in the Rātā takiwā, The researchers found the evidence of need aligns with Rātā's current Learn Funding Area and priorities set out below:

Learn Funding Area

We want people to have equitable opportunities to learn throughout their lives as a pathway to reach their potential. Equitable opportunities include access to quality early education, culturally responsive learning, and learning support to move through different stages of life

- Connecting families/whānau and communities to children's learning and schools based on need.
- Enabling the lifting of educational outcomes of Māori and Pasifika children, those with learning needs and those coming from low socio-economic backgrounds.
- Reducing barriers to accessing culturally responsive or whānau-centred early childhood education based on need.
- Enabling people who face barriers to develop skills, knowledge and confidence throughout their life.

Summary and Recommendations

The summary of the needs, inequities and intersectionalities, gaps and strengths identified through this research are summarised below. It includes the multiple voices of tamariki rangatahi, whānau, and advocacy groups.

- The span and complexity of learning needs in Aotearoa New Zealand's education system have increased, making it challenging to assess the prevalence of additional needs due to inconsistent public data.
- There are significant unmet needs, especially for those whose needs are not captured in the current approach to data collection.
- There is limited evidence about the prevalence of needs and the impact of learning supports in the Rātā takiwā.
- The combination of educational learning needs with factors such as ethnicity, disability, health, and low socio-economic status amplifies equity gaps.
- There is a lack of coherence and cohesion across the system that sets up barriers to inclusion.
- Teacher and educational leaders are trying to implement inclusive practice but there are gaps in knowledge, capability, and awareness of existing supports.
- Inclusion is about more than equitable access; it also involves the quality of education and whether it equips students with the knowledge and competencies needed for full societal participation.
- The system is not responding meaningfully to learner and whānau voice.
- Transitions can be traumatic, and become more so as learners get older and look to move into work and further education.

Recommendations for sustainable change

The recommendations emerged from the gaps and strengths identified. Some require system change and some can be enacted at the community level. We believe they would make a positive difference for learner and whānau, teachers and leaders.

We hope the recommendations we are proposing will be a springboard for creative discussion regarding opportunities for positive and sustainable change. We acknowledge a degree of overlap in some of these. The recommendations are mindful of the current learning support ecosystem and who is in the sphere of influence for positive outcomes. Figure 8 (below) illustrates the areas our recommendations address to depict how these issues are interconnected.

Empowering Communities Through Strategic Support and Innovation

Early Intervention

Invest in early strategies and seamless transitions for learners.

Resource Awareness

Build awareness and effective use of existing tools and resources.

Community Connectedness

Foster partnerships to improve coordination in the disability sector.

Unmet Needs

Focus on research and programs to address underserved learners' needs.

Culturally Sustaining Strategies

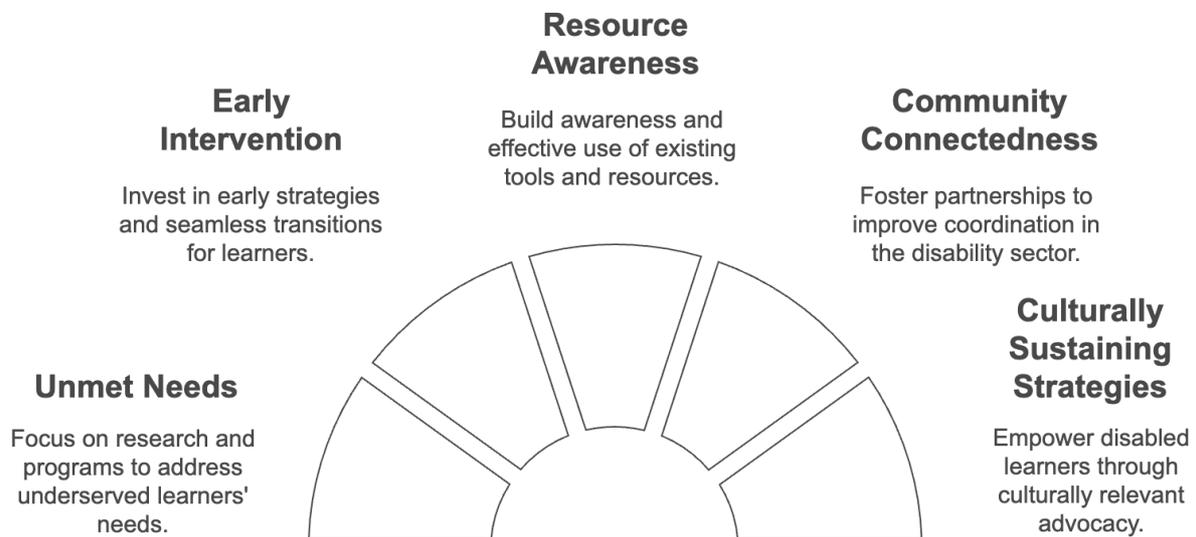Empower disabled learners through culturally relevant advocacy.

Figure 8: Focus areas for strategic support and innovation

Table 1 (below) presents our recommendations alongside its strategic focus. The text that follows includes our rationale for each recommendation. These are informed directly by the issues revealed in the literature.

Table 1. Recommendations and strategic focus

Recommendations	Strategic focus
1. **Identify and respond to unmet needs in the community**	Promote research and development of programmes designed to address the unmet needs of specific groups of underserved learners.
2. **Strengthen early intervention and support seamless transitions in communities**	Invest in early identification and intervention strategies. Strengthen pathways across critical transition points. Ensure that whānau and community partnerships are central to co-designing transition strategies, fostering a collaborative approach that meets the needs of learners at every stage.
3. **Build awareness and effective use of existing tools and resources**	Continue to build relationships with the sector and encourage fuller use of these resources. We recommended where tools, for example technological tools, are used and their impact evaluated from multiple perspectives (disabled learners, whānau, teachers). The Enabling Good Lives principles and ways of working provide a strong foundation for integrating their use in ways that are truly responsive to learners.

Recommendations	Strategic focus
4. **Community connectedness to benefit disabled learners**	Consider partnering with others within a specific rohe to design and deliver pilot programmes with a focus on navigating the system to mitigate the lack of coordination and coherence experienced currently by the disability sector.
5. **Culturally sustaining strategies that empower disabled learners and whānau.**	Advocate with mana whenua, local communities and advocacy groups to enable the voices of disabled learners and their parents and whānau to be heard and influence the current system. This work sits at the heart of the community and has been identified as a gap for Māori and Pacific communities in particular.
6. **Support innovative learning support delivery**	Consider funding pilot projects exploring new learning support models, such as technology-driven interventions or community-led solutions. To prevent disengagement from education, support alternative learning environments for students who do not thrive in mainstream settings.

Recommendation 1. Identify and respond to unmet needs in the community

Rationale: There are gaps in what we know about unmet needs of disabled learners ranging from mild to moderate and high and complex. The impact of intersectionalities on disabled learners is unknown in part because these needs are individualised. However, nurturing the identity, language and cultures of disabled learner communities could lead to strengths-based solutions.

Strategic focus: Promote research and development of programmes designed to address the unmet needs of specific groups of underserved learners.

Recommendation 2. Strengthen early intervention and support seamless transitions in communities

Rationale: Timely support for disabled learners is crucial to their success, and early identification and intervention strategies are key to ensuring this. Additionally, seamless transitions across key educational stages – ECE to primary, primary to secondary, and secondary to further education or employment – are vital for long-term outcomes.

Strategic focus: Invest in early identification and intervention strategies. Strengthen pathways across critical transition points. Ensure that whānau and community partnerships are central to co-designing transition strategies, fostering a collaborative approach that meets the needs of learners at every stage.

Recommendation 3: Build awareness and effective use of existing tools and resources

Rationale: Our literature review found many resources to support teachers and school leaders but these are either not well known or underused. Building teacher and leadership capability by sharing examples of good practice that demonstrate the effective use of existing resources promotes inclusion.

Strategic focus: Continue to build relationships with the sector and encourage fuller use of these resources. We recommended where tools, for example technological tools, are used and their impact evaluated from multiple perspectives (disabled learners, whānau, teachers).The Enabling Good Lives principles and ways of working provide a strong foundation for integrating their use in ways that are truly responsive to learners.

Recommendation 4: Community connectedness to benefit disabled learners

Rationale: The current system is frustrating, overwhelming and heartbreaking for both disabled learners and their whānau. Building and sustaining learning connections between learners, parents, whānau, communities, learning settings, advocate groups, and service providers is a huge challenge.

Strategic focus: Consider partnering with others within a specific rohe to design and deliver pilot programmes with a focus on navigating the system to mitigate the lack of coordination and coherence experienced currently by the disability sector.

Recommendation 5: Culturally sustaining strategies that empower disabled learners and whānau.

Rationale: Traditional models of learning support do not work for all learners. New, co-designed approaches are needed to create culturally sustaining solutions for the most marginalised and underserved groups of disabled learners.

Strategic focus: Advocate with mana whenua, local communities and advocacy groups to enable the voices of disabled learners and their parents and whānau to be heard and influence the current system. This work sits at the heart of the community and has been identified as a gap for Māori and Pacific communities in particular.

Recommendation 6. Support innovative learning support delivery

Rationale: Many neurodiverse and disabled learners face social isolation, mental health challenges, and disengagement due to a lack of tailored wellbeing support. For example, new technologies are being used to support inclusive practices but these innovations need to be mobilised throughout the education sector.

Strategic focus: Consider funding pilot projects exploring new learning support models, such as technology-driven interventions or community-led solutions. To prevent disengagement from education, support alternative learning environments for students who do not thrive in mainstream settings.

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https://newzealandcurriculum.tahurangi.education.govt.nz/new-zealand-curriculum-online/teaching-support/diversity-in-the-classroom/5637144676.c

Tahūrangi: Inclusion principle
https://newzealandcurriculum.tahurangi.education.govt.nz/inclusion-principle/5637158087.p

Appendices

Appendix 1. Mainly Ministry-provided services

Mainly Ministry-provided services	Description
Te Kahu Tōī: Intensive Wraparound Service	A comprehensive youth and whānau-centred response for children and young people who are experiencing significant challenges in their lives and whose needs have exceeded existing Learning Support capabilities.
Te Kahu Tōī: Intensive Wraparound Service – Te Awa unit (TAU)	TAU is a service for young people aged 11-17, who are in the care of Oranga Tamariki, and in the Auckland region. It is managed through the Ministry of Education's contracted provider, the Northern Health School and works in cooperation with Oranga Tamariki.
Ongoing Resourcing Scheme (ORS)	Services and supports for learners with the highest ongoing levels of disability and need for specialist learning support.
Early Intervention Service (EIS)	Specialist support for children with an identified need from birth until they start school.
Communication Service	Supports children from school entry with oral language and literacy skills. Targeted at early primary school years (ages 5-8).
Behaviour Services	Supports behaviour issues, focusing on building positive relationships and inclusive learning environments.
School High Health Needs	Provides schools with short-term funding for teacher aides to support students with health needs to develop independence in managing their health condition.
Physical disability services	Provides physiotherapy and occupational therapy services at school/kura to support students with a physical disability to participate and learn.
In-class support	Funding to make a contribution towards providing a teacher aide for learners with continuing high learning needs, who are not funded through ORS.

Appendix 2. Knowledge gaps in the system

Level	Example
System	The Ministry for Social Development (MSD) is responsible for monitoring progress towards outcomes for the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy. Outcome 4 is that Outcome 4: Children and young people are learning and developing. In its 2022/23 Annual report (MSD, April 2024), the Ministry was able to report that there's been no statistically significant change in the proportion of disabled young people in education, training or employment since June 2022. But the data was not sufficient to monitor the following important indicators: early learning participation; regular school attendance; literacy, numeracy, and science skills; socio-emotional skills; or self-management skills. This information is meant to identify the 'levers' for the Government's social investment approach. Without that information, disabled learners and their whānau may well miss out.
Regional	Bourke, et al. (June 2021) were unable to analyse the provision of core services (the Behaviour Service, Communication Service, Early Intervention Service, and Ongoing Resourcing Scheme (ORS) by region. This impacts the ability to explore questions around, for example, the distribution of resources and whether some regions are better resourced than others or about the impact of specific interventions.
School and early learning	ERO (2022a, 2022b) found that many schools and services do not have good information on how they are providing for disabled learners. Consequently, conversations with parents and whānau tend to focus on what learners are doing rather than how their learning is progressing, and schools and services do not have a good understanding of the quality of their provision for these learners. Such information is critical if provision is to improve.
Residential education	ERO (2019) recognises that a high proportion of learners in residential education have a disability, but was not able to compare their experiences with those of their peers.

Appendix 3. Areas to strengthen and recommendations

Areas to strengthen and recommendations (Education Review Office, 2022a; 2022b)

Areas to strengthen	ERO Recommendations (adapted)
Leaders do not fully understand what is expected	Area 1: Strengthen prioritisation of disabled learners, and accountability for how well they are doing.
Many teachers are not confident in teaching disabled learners	Area 2a: Increase disabled learners' sense of belonging and acceptance in early education.
	Area 2b: Increase leaders' and teachers' capability in teaching and assessing disabled learners.
Guidelines and tools for disabled learners are not being used by teachers	
Partnerships with learners and their parents and whānau can be strengthened.	Area 3: Increase disabled learners' and parents' and whānau understanding of their education rights, how to raise concerns or make a complaint, or get someone to advocate on their behalf.
Support for disabled learners to move on from school is not well coordinated.	Area 4: To improve the coordination of supports for disabled learners, and pathways between ECE settings, on to school, and beyond school.

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Figure 4. Prevalence of additional learning needs. This figure illustrates the different categories of disability and offers a quick glimpse into the diversity of educational support required and is based on data from Bourke, et al. (2021).

Figure 5: This figure outlines the disability thresholds defined by the Washington Group Short Set on Functioning, categorising young people based on the severity of experienced difficulties. Reprinted from *What about me survey?* (2021).

Figure 6: We have depicted the challenges faced by learners with unmet need in this visual. It doesn't identify Māori and Pacific as being underserved.

Figure 7: Rātā Foundation Learn Funding Area

Figure 8: Focus areas for strategic support and innovation. This image illustrates possible discussion points to support the Rātā Foundation Learn Funding Area for disabled learners and their communities. It informs Table 1, Recommendations and their strategic focus.

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Table 1: Recommendations and strategic focus

Table 2: Summary of learning support provision in 2021. Sourced from the Ministry of Education, January 2024.

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