

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into services for people with autism spectrum disorder

Melbourne — 10 October 2016.

Members

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Ms Cindy McLeish — Deputy Chair

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Witnesses

Mr Stephen Williams, and

Mr Dom Williams.

The CHAIR — Welcome today, Mr Dom Williams and Mr Stephen Williams. I thank you again for attending today. All evidence at this hearing taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Constitution Act 1975 and is subject to provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003 and other relevant legislation. Any comments you make outside the hearing will not be afforded such privilege. It is a contempt of Parliament to provide false evidence. Recording of the proceedings will commence today, and you will be sent a proof copy of the transcript and be able to make factual or grammatical corrections if necessary.

Welcome back, Stephen and Dom. Thank you very much for your attendance. We were quite excited to have you appear before the committee, because we have not had too many young people wanting to present at our public hearings. We are very much looking forward to having a presentation from you. Thanks very much.

Mr D. WILLIAMS — I would like to thank you for this opportunity to talk about ways to possibly help other children with ASD, because I have certainly struggled and I have tried to help children with ASD or similar problems in my classes cope with it. I have tried to help teachers cope with it, and I have been sort of mid successful. I have helped certainly several children at all the schools I have been to — not my first one particularly. I helped a girl in my second school with some meltdowns. I gave the teacher some advice. I have helped a few more people at my current school, my third school, which is by far the best of all the schools I have been to. I just think this is a great opportunity for me to help a wider group of students and children.

Mr S. WILLIAMS — Dominic, if you would, please start with some of the difficulties that you have experienced.

Mr D. WILLIAMS — Probably the largest difficulty I have had is with, from my opinion, bullying because of ignorance. This was more prevalent in my second school, with some resolved bullying in my third one. In the second school — this is mainly in my third and fourth years of school — I came under fire from bullies who were sort of taking a jibe at the fact that I was different to other students. Certainly one of the main things that students use to bully me over is I am not very good at maths or spelling, so they would attack me over that. They attacked me over the fact that I was different.

In my other school now I am more used to it, because me and my friend always joke about each other and play. I am better with them taking a jibe at me than other people, because they have disabilities like me, so I can do the same to them and they do the same to me — resolved. But people who consider themselves ‘normal’ attacking someone like me — verbally, not physically — because of my differences, I get very angry about that because they always make me feel like a failure because they always bring up the things I am bad at rather than the things I am good at.

The CHAIR — What is your particular interest at school, Dom?

Mr D. WILLIAMS — It would be hard to pick between science and history because they are my two favourite subjects. Science because there have been so many people who have had autism or disabilities — Stephen Hawking cannot even walk, for goodness sake. They are the sorts of people who inspire me, but then again in history there are all these different civilisations that focused on aspects of a person that I have just in my life found lacking. Like, the ancient Greeks focused very largely on teamwork, together, to make a formation. I focus a lot on military history of these peoples. The Greeks used a formation called the phalanx, which relied on the strength of all people within it. There were three lines of, I think, 10 men, each with a large, round shield. The front line would lock together, and the other lines would push forward to create the strength. A Spartan saying was, ‘You are only as strong as the man beside you’. I have lacked friends throughout my experience, so peoples like them — I just find the ideas of them exciting and welcoming.

The CHAIR — Do you understand, or do you have an understanding of, the term ‘neurodiversity’?

Mr D. WILLIAMS — Sort of. It is the difference between how people’s minds and brains work.

The CHAIR — In thinking about that — what neurodiversity is — what would you say your strengths are?

Mr D. WILLIAMS — It depends how the people think and work — I am good at ‘pressing buttons’ on some people. Usually I press the wrong buttons!

Mr S. WILLIAMS — What do you mean by that, Dominic?

Mr D. WILLIAMS — I mean I can figure out what would make someone angry, and I can avoid that or use that.

The CHAIR — Obviously one of your strengths is communication.

Mr D. WILLIAMS — Yes. It depends what I am talking about.

The CHAIR — Obviously your interest in terms of where you are on the spectrum is something that has actually given you a great deal of strength because it has given you something that you are interested in and want to talk about, and you want to communicate to us around all that, so that is a really good strength to have.

You mentioned bullying at school, and for you that has been more verbal bullying, so have you not had any experiences of physical assault or anything — pushing, shoving?

Mr D. WILLIAMS — I have had people push me, kick me, shove me. That has been dealt with. It has mostly been verbal. In many cases the worst of the bullying has been incredibly verbal. There have been attacks on the fact that I am not extremely competent in physical subjects. Other than that I have not really had physical bullying. Occasionally I have been kicked or pushed, but other than that the only real physical bullying is verbal attacks on my low physical ability.

Ms McLEISH — Thank you for coming up. We apologise for being a little bit late. Dom, how old are you?

Mr D. WILLIAMS — Twelve.

Ms McLEISH — And you are in year 7?

Mr D. WILLIAMS — Six.

Ms McLEISH — And you have had, what, three different schools?

Mr D. WILLIAMS — Yes.

Ms McLEISH — You talked before about having some differences in things. When did you realise that you might not be the same as some of the other kids?

Mr D. WILLIAMS — In my second school, because certainly in my first school I had a larger group of friends that were sort of isolated — —

Mr S. WILLIAMS — Dominic, it might just help the committee if you tell them where your first school was. Your first school was where?

Mr D. WILLIAMS — Sydney.

Mr S. WILLIAMS — And how long were you at that school?

Mr D. WILLIAMS — A year and a half.

Mr S. WILLIAMS — That is right. And so we moved to Geelong in 2011 and you did the second half of grade 1 at a school in Geelong.

Mr D. WILLIAMS — Yes, at my second school. I never really settled there because I had left friends that I was really good friends with. I never settled because I was there and I could not really focus. I was bad at writing, I was bad at all these things, I could not settle. Usually I kept to myself or to a small group of friends that I could focus on. In my third year of school older kids began to bully me. Some of them protected me, some of them bullied me.

The school did not have the best facilities for children with disabilities — autism, ASD, all those things. It had one teacher who was fairly experienced, but judging by how she reacted to some of the children having meltdowns I would not say she was the most experienced I have seen. They had a group of support teachers in a thing they called recess club. At recess and lunch people would go in with an iPad or a computer or something and they would just spend recess there with people like them. That is where I found mainly all my friends in that

school. In my third year I had probably more friends than I had ever had at that school, because I like to think of it as a stronger connection to them. I could relate more to them.

Ms McLEISH — What did you say to yourself? When you were at this new school, compared to the old school, what sorts of things did you say to yourself?

Mr D. WILLIAMS — The best way I can describe it is that I was feeling sort of betrayed because I had been snatched out of an area where I had friends, I was happy and all these things. Then I had been thrown into this very hostile environment. I felt very confused. I felt very sad. I often kept to myself. I started telling stories to myself and I still do tell stories to myself a lot. I play video games and things like that. That really helped me to cope with things like bullying and loneliness and things, because outside in the real world, I can say, by far I am not the best person, I am not the most popular, I am not the most experienced or any of that, but when I play role-playing adventure games, action games and those sorts of things, I get removed from that. I get put in the steps of someone who goes on these amazing adventures and does all these epic feats, and people like him and look up to him. I like those sorts of stories and being able to experience that and make those things; that is really a happy time for me.

Mr FINN — Can I say, Dom, that despite the bullying, despite the changes of schools and despite the obvious difficulties that you have faced over an extended period of time, you appear to me to be an extremely impressive young man, and I think from what we have seen here today you should be very, very proud of yourself — very much so.

I too want to focus a little on the bullying, because I think that is something that does have a severe impact on anybody who is the victim of it. If there was one single way that you could stop the bullying, how would you go about it? What do you think needs to be done?

Mr D. WILLIAMS — I would say in schools — because most of the bullying I have received has been from public school — raise more awareness in students. Do not make them drill through textbooks or long speeches; very few people like that. Show them something like a video message from people who have experienced it. Make them experience greater awareness. I know that these kids might not necessarily like science or history or anything but they can feel an interest and an inclination. They feel smaller to be with people like Albert Einstein and people like that who had autism and various things. Show them people like that who have autism and they will stop looking at it in a hostile way. Raise awareness, show them some powerful examples of people with autism and similar things. I would say that will help. It may not stop the bullying entirely, but it will certainly help lessen it.

Mr FINN — Have you had, particularly in previous schools — it sounds like you have got a good one now — any difficulties with teachers because of your autism?

Mr D. WILLIAMS — I have not had any difficulties with teachers. When I had meltdowns in grade 2 — I learnt to control them by 3 and 4 — I did not have difficulties with teachers. I did notice other students had difficulties with teachers. My grade 4 teacher at that school was the best teacher I have ever had at school by far. There was a girl in my class who had, I am not sure if it was autism or something like that, but she often had very extreme meltdowns. It got better towards the end of the year, but at the start she was hitting teachers, biting them and the teachers either responded by pulling her away to an enclosed solitude space or locking her in the bag area. They were good teachers, but they were not — —

Mr S. WILLIAMS — It sounds terrible, but it was not anywhere near like the cage stories that we have heard at all, and the teacher needed to do that actually to protect the other students from physical harm. So we had no problems about what she did.

Mr D. WILLIAMS — They were very good teachers, but I do not think they were very equipped to deal with some sort of situation like that.

Mr FINN — Dom, thank you for coming in today. Just for your own information, I was lousy at maths too. Keep going.

Ms COUZENS — Hi, Dom, it is great to see you again, and Stephen. Thanks for coming. I think you are an extraordinary young person who is not afraid to tell their story. Much of what we hear from you today will be

recorded, obviously, and will help us to help other young people like you. I think the last time I saw you you were telling me about NAPLAN and the difficulties you had with NAPLAN. What I want to hear from you today really is more about what you think are the sorts of things we need to put in place in our public schools to ensure that young people like you have the best possible opportunities, so some of the ideas that you might have that can help other young people.

Mr D. WILLIAMS — I can put one of the solutions in a very simple way — put most of their learning on a computer in a way that does not seem like learning.

Mr S. WILLIAMS — And that is true. That is exactly right. With your permission, please, I would like you to take a step back and tell the committee about SPELD.

Mr D. WILLIAMS — SPELD was a — I know it is an acronym, but I do not know what it stands for. It focused on, I think, autism and children with disabilities like it. We went there, and they did some tests and things. The end result was that I worked a lot better on a computer, and I think that is very true. I do most of my work typing. At my second school in my fourth year I actually made a mini book series of short fantasy stories, and that was very fulfilling — being able to put them down on paper well for the first time, because I could go to my writing book with all these great ideas for a story, and then I would pick up a pen and then it would stall because it was like it was zapped out of my mind and I could not put it in words. But when I went to a keyboard it was much better. I could remember the story much easier. I could write it down a lot easier. I find that really easy. Whether I am running around the living room telling these tales like I am in a play or something or whether I am writing them on the computer, I still find it easy.

Mr S. WILLIAMS — What would be the best way for you to do NAPLAN?

Mr D. WILLIAMS — The easiest way for me to do NAPLAN, plain and simple, would be to make it easier to access and digital. Put it on a computer. Make most of the tests and things digital, because that is the easiest way for me to do it. Other than a few shade-and-colour questions, I find it much easier to do tests or questions on a computer version rather than with paper.

Ms COUZENS — Yes, and Dom, I remember you telling me how using the computer was so much easier because lots of things were spinning around in your head. Are you saying that the computer is the way to teach young people or to do their NAPLAN testing or whatever rather than making them sit there and trying to do that work?

Mr D. WILLIAMS — Certainly for children like me with autism and my friends with various sorts of hearing disabilities or other forms of learning disabilities. The computer is certainly the centre of our lives. If we want to organise something, we talk about it in the yard, we email and we organise. It is how we roll, basically. Yes, the computer is a very good way for children like me and my friends to learn, and I would find NAPLAN a lot easier if it was on a computer.

Ms COUZENS — Thanks, Dom, and I am sure you are going to go far.

Ms KEALY — Thank you so much for your presentation today, Dom. I know that you said that you have been picked on by bullies who looked at your bad points — the things that you are not good at — but I think today we can see there are a lot of things that you are very, very good at. I am just wondering, what do you see yourself doing in the future? After you finish high school, what do you think you are going to do next?

Mr D. WILLIAMS — I am either going to try to get a degree in astrobiology or try to become a historian or an archaeologist, which are two of my passions.

Mr S. WILLIAMS — Tell them the joke.

Mr D. WILLIAMS — Thank you for coming to the beginning of my political career.

Ms KEALY — Dom, I wish you all the very best for fulfilling those fantastic aspirations that you have got. I am sure you will achieve it if you put your mind to it and you work hard — and do all your homework, of course. Can I ask you one more question: would you have one piece of advice to give to a child who had just been diagnosed with autism?

Mr D. WILLIAMS — I would put, ‘Don’t try to fight it; try to embrace it’, because certainly most of my academic traits and all the things I am good at come probably because of the fact that I have autism. My friends often say I am impervious to embarrassment. That is not true, not by a long shot.

Ms COUZENS — You will make a good politician.

Ms KEALY — That is fantastic. Thank you so much for your time, Dom.

The CHAIR — Thank you so much, Dom. I just have one question. Do you know about the I CAN network? Have you heard about the I CAN network?

Mr D. WILLIAMS — No.

The CHAIR — The secretariat of our committee might put you in touch with the I CAN network because I think that both that organisation and yourself, Dom, might benefit from some mutual conversations. Thank you so much for coming along today for the trip to Melbourne. I am sorry that we have had to take you out of school for the day.

Mr S. WILLIAMS — No, it has been terrific. I completely understand the former chap’s dramas. We have heard about those sorts of things as well. I think we have been very fortunate with Dominic’s second school in Geelong. Because Dominic was not settling, the principal had organised support through an organisation called Nirodah. The psychologist came and met Dominic on the school in school time and funded by the program. It was them who pointed us towards getting an assessment, so we are extremely grateful about where the school worked tremendously well.

The CHAIR — Thank you, and we are extremely grateful to you for coming along today and presenting to our hearing. Good luck for the rest of the school year, and good luck for your future. Thank you, Dom. Maybe we will see you in the halls of Parliament one day.

Witnesses withdrew.