Evaluation Case Study

Achieving inclusiveness through Abilities Based Learning and Education Support (ABLES)

MSSD Output 8: Assessing learning levels and adapting curriculum

Victorian Department of Education and Training
Achieving inclusiveness through ABLES

Abstract

In collaboration with The University of Melbourne, the Victorian Government Department of Education and Training (DET) developed the Abilities Based Learning and Educational Support (ABLES) framework using the Australian Victorian Essential Learning Standards (AusVELS). ABLES directly supports Output 8, supporting school staff to assess the current learning level of students with disability, adapt the teaching curriculum to suit their current level of ability, and report on student progress against adapted curriculum. Student needs addressed by ABLES range from intensive support due to a moderate or severe disability, to those that require programme adjustments.

Two western suburban schools in Melbourne, a Special Developmental School and a P-12 College, illustrate the application of ABLES in schools with students with disability. Both schools have distinctive elements in their approach to inclusiveness and improving the experience of students with disability.

Key elements and actions

In collaboration with The University of Melbourne, the Victorian Government Department of Education and Training (DET) developed the ABLES framework using the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS, now the AusVELS). The framework is based on a substantial investment in research and development on assessment, curriculum and reporting for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Two western suburban schools in Melbourne, a Special Developmental School and a P-12 College, illustrate the application of ABLES in schools with students with disability. The Special School has 140 students with moderate to severe intellectual disability. Both schools have distinctive elements in their approach to inclusiveness and improving the experience of students with disability. It is noteworthy that both schools have also embedded their approaches in core school philosophy statements and provided detailed guidelines to support implementation.

The ABLES framework in practice

ABLES directly supports Output 8, supporting school staff to assess the current learning level of students with disability, adapt the teaching curriculum to suit their current level of ability, and report on student progress against adapted curriculum. Student needs addressed by ABLES range from intensive support due to a moderate or severe disability, to those that require programme adjustments. ABLES introduces fundamental change in teaching and learning for students with disability in which students are assessed on the basis of their abilities, not their disability. Individual learning plans are tailored to meet student learning needs for students working within the A to D pre-foundational level of the AusVELS.

Teachers are provided with explicit guidance material and resources, including assessment tools and reporting systems that assist them to effectively plan and teach for the individual needs of students. The ABLES Assessment Tool is an observation survey conducted by the teacher that identifies a student’s readiness to learn along a particular developmental learning pathway.
The ABLES project culminated in the release of a comprehensive professional learning programme across Victoria. More than 1,000 teachers have participated in the blended learning delivery of the programme with the support of 120 ABLES leaders.

**ABLES in the Special Developmental School (SDS)**

The case study school curriculum is adapted to student needs from the AusVELS Level A – 10, linked directly to the ABLES Learning Readiness Reports. Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) document the goals developed and devised by each teacher in consultation with the parents and allied health staff. A half-yearly and annual report on these goals is provided to parents/caregivers.

**Curriculum implementation cycle**

The comprehensively documented ABLES framework provided by the Special School guides its cycle of implementation across three broad developmental stages:

- The early years focus on “Laying the Foundations” concentrating on skills for learning such as communication, attending to tasks, developing independence and the appropriate skills required for play and social interactions. The school supports students to reach developmental milestones in the curriculum areas of English and Mathematics.

- In the middle years the framework concentrates on building breadth and depth. In addition to reaching developmental milestones in English and Mathematics, students work towards becoming increasingly more independent with a more focused approach to personal and interpersonal development and learning.

- In the later years the school focuses on providing experiences for students beyond their immediate surroundings and community. It aims to open up suitable pathways, skills and knowledge students will need as young adults preparing for leaving school.

**Assessment and Reporting Schedule**

The Assessment and Reporting Schedule at the SDS is a guide to observe and measure learning to inform teaching practice and classroom curriculum design. It enables teachers to regularly reflect on the curriculum delivered to students ensuring that a consistent and informed learning and teaching cycle is implemented. Formal assessments including Learning Readiness Reports along with a range of interrelated assessment tools, advice and strategies available through ABLES to inform classroom practices and engagement of students.

The tools provide teachers with signposts that will assist them to identify the most appropriate curriculum for the student and identify outcome targets. The ABLES cycle of four steps guides the process:

- **Assess.** The online ABLES Assessment Tool takes approximately 20 minutes to complete based on the teacher’s observations of a student.

- **Data reports.** The Assessment Tool produces three types of reports: Learning Readiness Report, Student Profile Report, and Class Report.

- **Plan.** In collaboration with the teacher, the school Student Support Group sets learning goals to be included in Individual Learning Plans.
Teach. ABLES strategies for teaching and learning for students with disability have been developed through research conducted with teachers of students with additional needs.

Maintaining rigour through a Special School Local Network

A local network of schools active in implementing ABLES has been a powerful influence in changing instructional practice and increasing accountability arrangements. The network arrangement commenced out of a strong commitment to build and improve instructional practice, and more broadly, to build teacher and school capacity to improve student learning. The case study school is keen to emphasise that this is not simply a collegiate experience: it provides rigour to the network through transparency and accountability in sharing the ABLES data and the curriculum adaptations from AusVELS. The network has recently expanded from a group consisting of principals and assistant principals to the formation of other networks around ICT, specialist programmes, allied health and recently to the business managers.

Critical role of the base room

Base rooms are considered the key to success for students with disability in the case study school. They have a commitment to integration with primary aged students attending a classroom with specialist teachers and resources within one of three primary schools in its network.

ABLES in the P-12 College

The College is a P-12 setting with co-located specialist provision. The College is committed to providing a learning community that is inclusive of all students, including students with complex and multiple needs. At any one time the College has a number of students on the cusp of participating part-time in regular classes. Students move from environments that best suit their learning and social needs through assessments such as ABLES. In some cases students might spend around 3 days each week in the specialist environment and 2 days in a mainstream setting.

Role of the Support Centre

The Support Centre is a significant aspect of the inclusive community at the College. It offers a specialised learning space for small class groups and specialised curriculum delivery to ensure that the needs of all learners are met. A key task for the special education staff at the College is on facilitating inclusiveness across the school, providing professional knowledge and non-specialist staff see opportunities to enhance their own practice. The challenge for mainstream teachers is making adjustments to the curriculum; and in this case there was clear whole school commitment and strong leadership to support all teachers. The teachers support the educational programmes for students with disabilities in the supported learning environment.

In 2014 the College developed a co-teaching model. This required building the skills of regular classroom teachers with the key task of formally aligning marginalised students in mainstream classes. An important and perhaps unanticipated element to emerge from this is that mainstream students are also accessing ABLES. A ‘Goal Bank’ for the ABLES area of Interpersonal Development was developed and used in conjunction with the ABLES assessment tool. Considerable time was also invested in training staff to moderate goals to ensure the learning goals set are reachable.
Further support was provided through coaching for the 20 leading teachers across the College: the aim is to have 80 per cent of all staff with some coaching. The college’s ultimate goal is to have 80 per cent of the staff coached in Literacy / Numeracy. Currently 3 Leading Teachers have provided coaching to 6 staff within the support centre.

The Alliance Model

To achieve its aim of becoming fully inclusive, the College has co-located campuses and created support centres for students with special needs. Students spend time in the support centre based on personal learning and support needs and the time can vary from week to week or even from term to term. The school wanted something stronger than integration and focused on developing a culture of inclusion, as one teacher observed: “Inclusive opportunities aren’t just about the classroom; it’s the whole-school culture”.

In the Alliance Model, support centre classes are aligned with regular classes as much as possible:

This enables positive, safe and flexible learning environments, ensuring all students feel accepted. The Alliance Model encompasses the Instructional Model capabilities by promoting enquiry-based learning, establishing shared learning goals and strengthening connections.

In practice this means, for example, that 20 students are based in the regular classroom and eight in the support classroom with two teachers working in collaboration between the groups. It also means that regular teachers are “exposed to special education and how to differentiate and create the best learning environment for special needs...while the special education teacher stays connected with the regular world of teaching.”

Lessons learned

Key observations

Timely data informing approaches to teaching

In both cases the schools saw the introduction of ABLES as a way of filling a major gap for teachers by providing data about students with additional learning needs, and providing a consistent approach in every aspect of teaching. ABLES also stimulated enthusiasm and support for a new whole school approach to inclusiveness.

At a basic level this involved improvements such as providing more time for task completion and focusing on the classroom strategies needed to make a more substantial difference to student learning outcomes. The Special School principal also noted that ABLES created a data continuum for student learning growth, that enables the school to track where students are heading, and drives the SMART goals in teacher planning.

Setting meaningful expectations for student learning

The ABLES framework and tools in both schools have been pivotal in setting meaningful expectations about student learning. Where previously teachers would have set goals around what they define as student needs, the special school reported that the introduction of ABLES has generated different attitudes across staff to students:
The tools provide an evidence-base that counters the mind set that the progress of students with disability can’t be measured. ABLES has encouraged high expectations for students based squarely on the evidence of performance and potential ...

One of the strongest features of ABLES is its use as a highly effective tool to inform parents about the progress of their child. More generally, it appears that having a curriculum framework has given the special schools involved a sense of validation that their work is valued and connected to AusVELS.

**Sustainability**

Implementing the ABLES framework has been a major investment for DET based firmly on a substantial research and development programme representing a step change in approach. The case study schools provide clear examples of this step-change reflected in the school initiatives. With this level of commitment at both state and local levels the strategy is clearly sustainable.

**Potential for adoption in other contexts**

Both the ABLES framework and the implementation approaches of each of the case study schools can be readily adapted to a wide range of contexts. The level of investment is critical as is the commitment to research and ongoing development over a significant time frame.

**Notes**

Site visits to the two case study schools were conducted in October 2014 and included interviews with key staff, a video presentation, and in one instance included the school principal. Both schools provided access to detailed school plans and guidelines. The case study was also informed by DET and school presentations at MSSD information seminars.