Evaluation Case Study

Building a culture of professionalism

MSSD Output 11: Engaging paraprofessionals

Queensland
Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETEQ)
Building a culture of professionalism

Abstract

Strategies to engage teacher aides aimed at strengthening their skills have been a feature of a number of MSSD projects. Queensland Government Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETEQ) have used the Quality Schools, Inclusive Leaders (QSIL) programme to clarify best practice approaches for using teacher aides. This case study provides an example of good practice in a remote state school with 23 teachers and support staff, and nine teacher aides. It illustrates the importance of building a culture of professionalism across all aspects of the school operations to develop personal competencies in teaching students with disabilities. The approach of the school is distinctive in that the focus goes beyond providing skills training and using teacher aides as a resource. The school has capitalised on the experience and expertise of teacher aides, and builds them into its succession planning: they are a core element in developing personal competencies for all staff.

Key elements and actions

The Quality Schools, Inclusive Leaders (QSIL) programme developed by the Queensland Government Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETEQ) in consultation with Professor Loretta Giorcelli, an internationally recognised expert in the field of Inclusivity in Education, supports school leadership teams in adopting best practice approaches. This includes engaging of teacher aides as a key resource (Output 11).

The case study example is a remote state school with 23 teachers and support staff, and nine teacher aides. The composition of staff is typical of regional and remote schools with a high turnover of young staff each year. In contrast, teacher aides are more often settled in the area and are therefore a source of continuity for school programmes, which makes their ongoing professional development critical to the success of strategies to improve the teaching of students with disability and the inclusive philosophy.

Embedding teacher aides in school programmes

The school has aligned its MSSD initiatives with four key ideas: its current programmes; differentiated instruction; on-line training; and assistive technology. The culture of professionalism to develop personal competencies in teaching students with disabilities embraces both teachers and teacher aides as the key element in the strategy.

Teacher aides are fully engaged in the whole school approach aimed at embedding the MSSD initiative in every aspect of school operation. The school has capitalised on the experience and expertise of teacher aides, and builds them into its succession planning: they are a core element in developing personal competencies for teachers and teacher aides alike.

QSIL Programme

Under the National Partnership, DETEQ initiated the QSIL instructional leadership package, which aims to: increase the skills and understandings of school leadership on school-based management of inclusive practices; delivery of differentiated curriculum; pedagogy; and, complex case management.
The package includes a suite of materials supporting a two-phased programme of professional learning complementing a 3-4 month school improvement project, including completion of the University of Canberra modules on Disability Standards for Education (DSE).

In Phase 1, the principal and leadership team from the case study school completed the face-to-face and online elements. They found the process highly valuable and the main message they took from this experience was that, in an era of changing expectations, a new mindset on inclusivity was needed. One teacher aide summarised an early outcome of the inclusiveness strategy in terms of the impact it has had on the social engagement of students with disability such as those in wheelchairs: “They were the kids you never saw and now they come to the school dance, and the teachers dance with them.” The point was also made that this change in approach works because there is now consistency in the expectations and attitudes of all staff.

The planning around inclusivity, based on the data identifying the number of students who required adjustments, generated a new and evidence-based strategy for the school. Access to online training opportunities in this phase was a major factor in developing the teacher aide roles.

In Phase 2, the school was one of 40 identified by DETEQ as a site with a track record of significant commitment and potential to do more. The school engaged in a project planning exercise centred on the QSIL2 Coach-Mentor Action Plan. This supports ongoing planning and the clarification of objectives for workforce planning, including the engagement of teacher aides. A regional professional development officer provides further support for capability development across schools. The Coach-Mentor Action Plan pro forma invites mentors to identify their development goals and needs with guiding questions such as:

- What do you see as your main strengths and areas for development as an inclusive educator?
- What is currently happening in your leadership practice that you would like to either further develop or not continue? What might this change look like?
- What specific developmental actions/support are you seeking from your QSIL coach?
- What areas of their inclusive teaching practice will you be targeting your mentor support?
- What specific actions need to be taken to provide this targeted support?

The MSSD initiative has prompted a closer look at everyday practices related to students with disability. For example, the case study school is using the Pedagogy in Practice Process (PIP) to focus feedback on differentiation by way of adjustments, and strategies to support the adjustments. A key element of the PIP programme is the use of lesson observations to improve inclusivity in the classroom — now an established part of the school’s professional approach to practice.

**Professional learning opportunities**

DETEQ developed a Digital Practice Guide, a two-day face-to-face course for teacher aides that provides a Certificate of Digital Practice mapped against the Certificate IV in Education Support with a Recognised Prior Learning Pathway. Other programmes, such as a one-day face-to-face course have been delivered by web-conference for regional and remote schools such as the case study school.
DETEQ also created seven online interactive courses for teacher aides. These courses have had an exceptionally high take-up and include ‘Teacher Aide Introduction’ and disability-specific courses with options for facilitated or self-paced study. The school has ensured that its teacher aides are given sufficient time to engage in professional learning and their efforts recognised, indeed, they were the first in the school to obtain their certificates of completion. Some teacher aides are becoming more specialised in their roles and that requires support for transition and ongoing evaluation.

The teacher aides meet weekly to evaluate their professional development and plan future directions. For example, since much of their work involves assistive technologies, such as work with hearing impaired children, the teacher aides support one another to ensure they are up to date. The principal is keenly aware of the value added by the teacher aides on a number of fronts, particularly their knowledge of children and families, and local issues, accumulated over time.

DETEQ scholarships were offered to 178 teacher aides across Queensland to gain a qualification in a Certificate IV in Education Support with a focus on students with disability but the case study school was not successful in its applications. As a further indication of the calibre of the teacher aides at the school three of the teacher aides enrolled independently, and on their own initiative, in the course at a personal cost of $600 each. They completed the course successfully, realising their current practice and skills easily enabled them to complete course requirements. Completing the course reinforced the value of the their work at the school, motivated their peers, and contributed to the collective expertise of the teacher aide team.

**Lessons learned**

**Key observations**

**A whole of school strategy**

The school attributes its success to a school wide philosophy of inclusive education. It emphasises the importance of contextualising and embedding MSSD activities as central, rather than a supplement or ‘add on’ to current programmes and processes.

Likewise, engagement with teacher aides is central to building a culture of professionalism that characterises the whole school approach. This included valuing the teacher aides as a group to build capacity collectively. In this school, teacher aides are not simply a resource to be utilised, they are integral to the success of the agenda to make the school genuinely inclusive in all aspects of its operation.

**“De-privatising” classroom practice**

Underpinning the success of the intervention activity to date is, as one teacher described it, a major shift towards “de-privatising classroom practice”. The leadership team, teachers, and teacher aides, work together in a self-consciously transparent process of improving the ways they go about achieving inclusivity. For example, the leadership coaches and mentors are able to see teachers actually doing what they have set out in their action plans, and they provide immediate reinforcement and practical advice. Overall, teachers have moved beyond making adjustments at a basic level, such as providing more time for task completion, to focusing on strategies needed to make a more substantial difference to student learning outcomes.
**Improved Workforce Capability**

The focus on improving performance extends to every aspect of classroom activity. The most obvious element in this process is a planned and systematically integrated approach to professional learning with a series of related activities including: structured and frequent formal meetings; structured professional conversations around school-generated data; and structured classroom observations. Teachers see the first outcome as a shift from greater awareness of student needs to actually catering for differences. A clear additional benefit from the professional development for both teachers and teacher aides is a stronger demand to know more about their students and to work from a sound evidence base.

**Achieving role clarity**

Ensuring professional respect and parity of esteem requires setting clear and appropriate role expectations for teacher aides set directly against the expectations and professional accountabilities of classroom teachers. The case study school considers this a significant factor in its approach to engaging teacher aides and maximising their effectiveness in working with students with disability. This has involved a considerable amount of moderation at the team levels as staff move from knowing the policy requirements to focusing on growing the confidence and competence of staff to work effectively with students with disability.

**Sustainability**

The strategies developed in Phase 2 of the QSIL programme are designed with sustainability in mind, and the school expects it will continue the capacity building process beyond the current MSSD initiatives. The leadership team and staff understand that maintaining the level of engagement with teacher aides will require support for continuous professional development opportunities, not simply funding, but ensuring their roles are valued and firmly embedded in school planning. This also requires managing expectations with explicit action rather than assuming their continued commitment at the current level.

**Potential for adoption in other contexts**

The systematic approach developed by DETEQ to leadership development, and the measures aimed at engaging teacher aides can be readily adopted elsewhere. The example of the case study school illustrates the potential for any system or school to enhance the roles of teacher aides and embedding their contribution in a whole school approach to workforce planning.

**Notes**

The case study followed an MSSD showcase presentation from the school at one of the MSSD Information Sharing seminars in Queensland in August 2014. Interviews were conducted in October 2014 by telephone with the principal, a teacher, teacher aide and a MSSD mentor/coach.