Changing the roles of special education teachers

MSSD Output 9: Modifying lesson plans

New South Wales Department of Education and Communities (DEC)
Changing the roles of special education teachers

Abstract
As part of its Every Student, Every School initiative, the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities (DEC) sought to have a specialist Learning and Support Teacher (LST) in every mainstream government school in the state. This required extensive reorganisation of human resources, skills development for staff deployed as LSTs — coaching, mentoring and coordination — as well as specialist teacher skills and knowledge. DEC used resources provided by the More Support for Students with Disabilities (MSSD) initiative to achieve this. The case study examined the role of LSTs in one primary and one secondary school.

Key elements and actions
As part of its Every Student, Every School initiative, the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities (DEC) sought to have a specialist Learning and Support Teacher (LST) in every mainstream government school in the state, to skill classroom teachers and support students with additional learning and support needs.

Implementing the LST role
LSTs are a part of improving the DEC’s response to the Disability Standards for Education 2005, which require all schools to make adjustments to cater for the specific learning needs of students with disabilities. They also address the spirit of the Local Schools, Local Decisions initiative: principals (in this case, through school learning and support teams) can determine how their school best uses its resources to meet the learning and support needs of its students.

LSTs do not replace longstanding arrangements for students in mainstream schools with a disability who get moderate, complex or highly specialised support. Rather, LSTs are specialist staff who help classroom teachers develop skills to meet the learning needs of all students in their class.

DEC changed the role of former Support Teacher Learning Assistance (STLA) teachers in their school and placed former itinerant support teachers (behaviour/integration/learning difficulties) in ongoing positions in individual schools (whereas they previously worked at several schools). DEC also redeployed special education teachers and employed casual teachers with appropriate skills and qualifications to fill remaining positions.

Organisational arrangements
DEC’s Central Office is responsible for resourcing the LST initiative while the regions manage implementation at the local level. Implementation started with a statewide meeting of regionally based assistant principals, who then held meetings (regionally or with networks) of all LSTs, delivered professional learning modules, and adapted the role to suit individual schools. Statewide guidelines set out the LST role, including how more than one person can discharge the role in a school, and what to do if an LST does not have all the required skills and experience.
Working with classroom teachers to support assessments of students

LSTs work with classroom teachers to help them identify students' specific learning and support needs and work with students in the classroom. LSTs also help with classroom observations and consultations with parents to identify specific needs and strategies to address them. Where relevant, they also provide follow-up assessments and sometimes refer students to external support services.

Supporting schools to plan and implement teaching programmes

LSTs also work with classroom teachers to plan, implement, model, monitor and evaluate teaching programmes for students with additional learning and support needs. For example, the secondary school drew on the services of two assistant principals, who helped teachers plan for and implement teaching programmes for particular students. The LSTs then helped staff plan for other students with additional needs, as well as develop individual education plans for them if required. LSTs also consulted with feeder primary schools and collated NAPLAN results, information from school reports and other information to determine if particular students transitioning from primary to secondary school needed extra support.

Similarly, at the primary school, class teachers developed an individual learning plan, called a Learning Assistance Profile, for every student, with help from LSTs where required. The class teacher developed the plans at the beginning of the year and updated them regularly throughout the year.

Supporting planning for adjustments

The primary school classroom teachers developed each student’s Learning Assistance Profile, with support from the LST if required. Profiles were key points of reference during parent-teacher interviews each semester.

Although profiles for students within any particular class tended to be similar, many had points of differentiation—ranging from acceleration and enrichment to gaps in learning—and associated needs and required adjustments were recorded. Where students required adjustments, primary school teachers had established ‘Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound’ (SMART) goals and monitoring actions to achieve them.

LSTs in the primary and secondary schools also helped develop individual education plans for students with complex needs. The school leader (principal and/or deputy), relevant class teachers, parents and often students and allied health professionals worked together to develop these plans.

Modelling exemplary classroom practice

At the primary school, two of the teachers were 0.5 instructional leaders and 0.5 LSTs. This meant they could combine instructional leadership—whether delivering modelled lessons for beginning teachers or team teaching with more experienced colleagues—with explicit guidance about planning, delivery and assessment adjustments.

Beginning and experienced teachers in the secondary school expressed their appreciation of what the LSTs offered. As one said:

*It can be as simple as seating arrangements or modelling effective strategies in group work. When we teach together, we not only plan what we do but we take time*
at the end of the lesson to reflect on what has worked and what hasn’t. As a beginning teacher, I find this level of support and guidance invaluable in building my repertoire of skills.

Providing direct support for students with additional learning and support needs

LSTs directly support students with additional learning and support needs, including students with disabilities. They do this by instructing them, delivering adjusted learning programmes, assessing them and monitoring their progress. Areas covered include social integration, language and communication, literacy, numeracy and behaviour.

The secondary school’s LSTs delivered a QuickSmart literacy programme. Participating students were withdrawn from their classes for three half-hour sessions a week. The primary school conducted intensive 1:1 teaching programmes, delivered in class by trained school learning support officers (SLSOs, or teacher aides).

Both schools had systems to identify students with additional learning and support needs, and to plan and monitor the effectiveness of actions to meet those needs. These systems included regular learning and support team meetings of key personnel, including the principal or deputy principal, LSTs, counsellors, year-level coordinators and relevant class teachers.

Providing specialist advice

LSTs provide specialist advice, support and mentoring to classroom teachers and the school’s learning and support team. The primary school strongly emphasised differentiated learning across all curriculum areas, particularly literacy. Their LSTs provided guidance in pre-learning, enrichment and extension, including skilling teacher aides to provide in-class support in these areas.

One part-time LST at the primary school was shared with another school, and had extensive experience in behaviour management. This teacher engaged in whole school planning to establish consistent expectations and actions.

Both the primary and secondary schools had learning and support teams that met weekly or fortnightly. They had mechanisms to identify students with additional learning and support needs, develop and implement responses to these needs, and to monitor their impact. The primary and secondary school LSTs had strong working relationships with allied health professionals and drew on their expertise as required.

Assisting with professional learning

LSTs help class teachers and SLSOs with their professional learning. At the primary school, this involved in-class mentoring and team teaching, one-to-one guidance and strategy setting for learning and behaviour management, and enhancing the role of SLSOs. The school also encouraged class teachers and SLSOs to undertake the professional learning modules developed by Online Learning Australia and tailored for use in the department’s schools. Most staff of the primary school had completed at least one module.
Lessons learned

Key observations

Both schools consider the LSTs are improving educational outcomes for students with disabilities, and so improving school performance. At the same time, the schools are developing a sense of how the roles will become part of day-to-day operations.

Role transitions

At a planning and structural level, there is a clear commitment to move away from a deficit model where previously Support Teacher Learning Assistance (STLA) teachers were assigned responsibility for remediating students with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or behaviour problems. Figure 1 illustrates the main elements and direction of the transition.

Figure 1: Role transition: STLA to learning and support framework

Orientation towards students – deficit focus (STLA model)

Orientation towards staff – capability focus (Learning and support framework)

While some aspects of the former role remain at the secondary school setting, the primary school has moved completely to the new role. Rather than being peripheral to classrooms and school operations, the LST role needs to be integrated with pedagogy, whole-school initiatives about student behaviour and well-being, professional learning, and planning and decision-making. There also needs to be clear links between literacy and learning support.

In both schools, the LST role was continuing to evolve and the teachers in particular were keen to get feedback about how they were performing.

New skill sets for evolving roles

The transition from the support teacher learning assistance model to the LST role takes time. LSTs reported that initially some colleagues found it hard to accept their changed role. As one said “You get a sense they think you are shirking your responsibilities”. One LST acknowledged the difficulty letting go of one-to-one interactions with students. They felt the collaborative nature of the role—in which team teaching, modelled lessons, classroom observations and shared planning become the norm—challenged some staff. They said:
“Not everyone will be comfortable with this. For some, it will be quite threatening and trust will need to be established. Ultimately, you can only work with those who are willing to involve you in their classrooms.”

LSTs must be able to:

- draw on assessments and testing data at the individual, cohort, whole-of-school and system levels, to inform their decisions and guide their planning
- understand students and their education needs (with input from the students, their teachers and families, and by drawing on their observations and research about learning)
- work with classroom teachers to identify the additional learning and support needs of students, and help them plan and implement teaching programmes to address those needs.

LSTs also need to be able to integrate their work with mainstream activity as it is not an isolated ‘add-on’ to school programmes but an integral part of day-to-day classroom activity. At both schools, LSTs were seen in this light, not as someone to send students to if teachers struggled to meet their learning needs in the classroom.

**Parent perspectives**

LSTs have helped build stronger working relationships between schools and parents. At the secondary school, this was largely through the teachers analysing information from primary schools, as part of students' transitions, about areas where students might need extra support.

At the primary school:

- class teachers contact all parents, before interviews
- the Learning Assistance Profile is the key point of reference for parent-teacher interviews in the first semester, and might be adjusted at parent-teacher interviews in the second semester
- parents meet with teachers to plan to address any additional learning and support needs their children may have.

Parents greatly appreciate this level of interaction, and the degree of continuity provided by Learning Assistance Profiles. They were optimistic that knowledge of their children's additional learning support needs would continue at the secondary school.

The secondary school parents similarly appreciated how the school proactively gathered information about students' learning needs and relayed it to relevant staff. However, they also felt the school focused mainly on resolving any issues at the start of the school year, and there were few opportunities to discuss and reflect on the success of interventions.

**Sustainability**

The LST role was accepted at both schools. At the primary school in particular, the learning and support team (and the LSTs) were central to the school's operations, and their work was integrated with literacy reforms, teaching and learning strategies and student well-being. This indicated the role would be sustainable after the MSSD initiative concluded. However, those consulted at both schools were concerned about the constant pressure on schools, and teachers specifically, to respond to an ever-increasing agenda of reform.
Under Every Student, Every School, MSSD Output 9 is one of several priorities requiring a response. Others include: implementing the national curriculum; Local Schools, Local Decisions; the Learning Management and Business Reform Programme; and a new resource allocation model. Schools and teachers are under intense pressure to respond, adjust and implement change on several fronts that are not necessarily aligned or mutually supportive. From a systemic perspective, these initiatives create the potential to improve schools' decisions about student learning and support, and not be an imposition on schools. They are intended to increase the capacity of schools to provide personalised learning and support for students with disabilities. Schools may not yet see this potential.

**Potential for adoption in other contexts**

There is good potential for the LST role — that of specialised coaches working collaboratively with classroom teachers — to be adopted in other contexts, to address the requirement of the Disability Standards for Education 2005 that schools make adjustments to cater for the specific learning needs of students with disabilities.

**Notes**

Site visits were conducted at two participating schools—a metropolitan high school and a primary school in western NSW—in 2012 and again in 2014, including consultations with school principals and learning and support teams. Consultations were also conducted with two regional personnel responsible for managing the professional learning programmes and overseeing support for implementing the LST role.