Evaluation Case Study

Down Syndrome Inclusion Support Service

MSSD Output 3: Developing support centres

Victorian Government Department of Education and Training

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A Department of Education and Training (DET) partnership with Down Syndrome Victoria (DSV) provides a case study of a strategy of targeted expert support for teachers to integrate students with Down syndrome into the regular school setting. DSV is a not-for-profit support group whose membership is made up of the parents of students with Down syndrome. The focus of the programme is on providing appropriate pedagogy and curriculum for students with Down syndrome beginning school to ensure a best start approach.

Key elements and actions

The Down Syndrome Inclusion Support Service (DSISS) was established by Down Syndrome Victoria (DSV) to provide a full-time consultant to assist children of parent members in the mainstream school setting. Under the National Partnership a second consultant was appointed to focus on helping teaching staff to appreciate the special needs of students with Down syndrome in the transition period of enrolment and through the first year of school.

To qualify for this support funded by the MSSD National Partnership, schools must be registered with DSV for the students at the school to receive the service. The service includes:

- nine hours of visits annually through day visits of three hours each term
- email and telephone support
- a periodic journal
- access to a specialised library
- access to professional development training programmes.

The approach of the DSV consultants is pro-active, emphasising face-to-face discussions involving the child, teachers and parents focused particularly on helping parents to set achievable goals for each student and provide guidance on monitoring progress. The programme provides a significant resource for teachers and teacher aides supporting students with Down syndrome. The professional expertise of the consultants is a critical element, particularly their depth of understanding of the issues, continuous improvement informed by research on best practices, and their commitment to student success in the regular classroom. From their perspective, a notable measure of success is the quality of the relationship between the student, teacher and aide.

Raising whole of school awareness

The efforts of the DSV consultants are concentrated on raising awareness of the potential for inclusive learning experiences for students with Down syndrome. A form of ‘segregated inclusion’ is likely to occur if the student is largely isolated from the educational work of the rest of the class, and if teachers and teacher aides spend most time occupying students with Down syndrome with limited attention, to the development of learning and life skills. The alternative pursued by DSV experts is to enhance the potential of the student by acknowledging their capacity to learn more than a set of social adjustment skills. This has the additional incidental
but valuable effect of raising the expectations of all students in the classroom and creating a positive climate focused on learning.

In addition to informing teachers and teacher aides as to the most effective ways to manage and support students, the consultants work with staff who do not currently have a student with Down syndrome in their class but interact with them outside the classroom. Teachers are advised on agreed strategies to manage student behaviours when the occasion arises in the playground, during specialist lessons, and during whole school functions.

The whole of school approach extends to shaping the attitudes of the wider school community in understanding the needs of students with Down syndrome. It includes informing school practices that can help in the transition of a student with Down syndrome from one class to another, or from primary to secondary school, which presents particular challenges for these students.

One of the most pressing issues for parents of students with Down syndrome concerns the more immediate task of sustaining the gains made in primary school through to the secondary school experience. The management of the learning continuum for students transitioning into a secondary schooling is a significant and ongoing challenge, not least around those of familiar routines and consistency each day. Ensuring the achievement of learning goals for students with Down syndrome in secondary settings is challenging — from the perspective of parents especially — given changing classroom environments and more complex organisational and learning situations. Effective practices include pre-meetings with the student to explain what will be happening in the following year, visiting the new school classroom and meeting teachers, as well as information sessions for the receiving school and class.

**Direct support in the classroom**

Consultations in the classroom range from first-hand advice to teachers and teacher aides on setting learning goals to behaviour management. The diversity of individual needs is such that there is no single strategy to improve learning outcomes: each approach is highly individualised.

There are many small and constant pressures that make the everyday tasks for teachers and aides highly demanding. The ability of the class teacher and teacher aide to effectively manage behavioural issues is high on the list of challenges and the experience of the case study schools illustrates the point: the nature of each crisis for the individual student is unpredictable and therefore difficult to plan or prepare for. These random events cause high stress levels in the classroom and what schools, parents and teachers valued most is the direct support of a person with expertise and understanding precisely at the time they needed it.

The consultant supporting the case study schools estimated that almost half of the time is spent on showing teachers and teacher aides how to respond to specific outbursts, and providing them with optional strategies and potential approaches to managing them over time. This work is highly valued by the schools and provides a major contribution towards the teachers managing challenging situations that emerge as the student develops and new approaches are needed.

A range of support resources are provided by DSV, such as books and classroom activity guides, for teachers, teacher aides and parents alike. However, personal contact with DSV consultants is regarded as the most highly valued resource of all, particularly timely advice in a crisis situation tailored to suit the specific needs of the individual student.
Supporting parents

DSV support for parents takes a number of forms, from providing individual advice on how they can best support their child in collaboration with the school, to facilitating networking between parents and attending Parent Support Group (PSG) meetings.

A major theme of the DSV approach is to guide change in the understandings and expectations of parents and to assist them directly to support the work of the school, for example by ensuring follow through at home on such things as routines, setting boundaries, consequences and completing homework. Parents are advised on ensuring consistency in the consequences of actions and strengthening relationships with teachers and teacher aides. Student progress is monitored through the school parent support group meetings where discussions around responses matching particular descriptors are discussed and new goals, including learning goals, are set.

School-based professional development

Professional development is a significant element of the DSIS programme. This includes in-house training programmes prompted by requests to meet immediate needs, and the provision of literature and e-resources for teachers and teacher aides. The addition of a second consultant under the MSSD NP enabled DSV to give stronger focus on improving staff appreciation and understanding of the special needs of students with Down syndrome, and addressing teachers’ questions specific to individual students. School coordinators and aides have been encouraged to shift their orientation from improving the life skills of students with Down syndrome to a focus on their learning development. In addition, the specialist consultants support teachers locating students on a learning continuum through the related Abilities Based Learning and Education Support (ABLES) programme.

Lessons learned

Key observations

*Classroom teachers need whole of school support*

Students with Down syndrome can be successfully included in neighbourhood primary school setting if they are given regular and timely support as needed. This means that peers, coordinators, principals, specialist staff, and the parents all should be involved to ensure the best start for students with Down syndrome. In addition, empathy is needed between the teacher and teacher aide to be able to work together effectively and team teaching settings can help further where the opportunity to share thoughts, ideas and work-load is more readily accessible. Support and understanding from the leadership of the school is also crucial.

*Collaborative approaches are fundamental to success*

Successful mainstreaming of students with Down syndrome starts with a collaborative approach between school staff, external specialists and parents, and a clear understanding and appreciation of their respective roles and responsibilities. In the case study schools the teacher is responsible for the learning programme and identifies activities that break down class goals to match needs. The teacher aide provides support in implementing the teacher’s programme drawing on first-hand experience and intimate knowledge of the child’s personality and capabilities.
Focus on achieving greater student independence

The consultant works with aides to assist them to reduce the level of dependency of the student on them and work towards greater independence all round. It is not uncommon to find a school increasing the aide allocation to full-time wherever possible. This strategy seems to be very effective in terms of immediate issues of managing class behaviour of students with Down syndrome, and is well received by teaching staff. However, schools are encouraged to look beyond these immediate challenges to creating the conditions for long-term improvement in independence. The approach needs to be supported at every point of contact the student has with the school.

Maintaining high expectations

An acceptance of some trial and error is needed but at the same it is important to maintain high expectations. This means everyone in the school believing they can provide effectively for the student and his or her learning, and reinforcing the belief that the student needs to have high expectations of themselves as a learner. The consultant supporting schools experienced greatest impact in those schools where the teacher and teacher aide had a common understanding about the learning needs and potential of the students.

Sustainability

A strong message from the case studies is that there is a joint understanding by all involved, that it takes time to implement a sustainable change and requires additional demands to establish the school and classroom climate and routines before real and sustained progress can be made. While the model of support centre specialists working directly in classrooms makes sense, this model has limited viability in the longer term. DSV is not currently in a position to meet the needs of all teachers, parents and students across the state who could benefit from direct support at this level. However, the basic elements of the transition support approach are a more sustainable option for any setting.

Potential for adoption in other contexts

There is potential for the DSV model to be used in other contexts. The notion of providing access to specialist consultants in this form could apply to a range of areas of inclusion of students with disability. Both models of consultancy support — direct classroom support as well as briefing teachers and teacher aides — are highly valued and have a key role in equipping teachers and parents to manage the learning environment for students with Down syndrome. The case studies confirm that the DSV model provides highly effective support.

Notes

The case study commenced with a visit to the offices of Down Syndrome Victoria (DSV) in November 2012 that included a briefing from the Executive Officer of the organisation about the role of Down syndrome specialist consultants in five schools. This was followed by an extended interview with a staff member who visits schools and supports the students in the regular classroom setting, and site visits to two primary schools to see the programme in action. A second round of interviews and school visits was conducted in November 2013.