Evaluation Case Study

LitCon Special

MSSD Output 3: Developing support centres

South Australia
Department for Education and Child Development (DECD)
LitCon Special

Abstract
To support schools and teachers to plan for and monitor literacy development for students with disabilities, the Gordon Education Centre in regional South Australia developed and trialled an online tool, LitCon Special. Drawing on the Australian Curriculum, LitCon Special provides teachers with the means to map student development along a fine-grained continuum in reading and viewing, speaking and listening. This case study outlines key elements of the design and development of LitCon Special, the approach to implementing it, and outputs and outcomes. It concludes with some observations about the potential for collaboration with jurisdictions that are developing similar learning and support tools.

Key elements and actions
LitCon Special draws its name from two words – literacy and continuum –to emphasise that it supports students’ literacy development on a continuum of learning. The tangible output of the LitCon Special project was a tool for teachers to map students against levels in literacy development (reading, writing, listening and speaking), but its development and implementation across several sites was equally a story about professional learning and pedagogy.

Development of LitCon Special
LitCon Special had its origins in a decision by staff at Gordon Education Centre to purchase licenses for Reading Eggs, an online literacy programme that takes students through a continuum of learning from identification of letters and sounds through to blends, sight words and simple stories. This led the staff to gather visual evidence of literacy (photographs and videos) from all classes from Reception (the first year of school) to Year 12. These steps laid the foundations for actions that led to developing an online tool. The actions included:

- collaborating with a Flinders University academic to give staff a deeper understanding of how professional learning aids student learning
- making available to staff articles about literacy in the special education context
- analysing and interpreting data to use to develop a literacy continuum.

The continuum drew on the idea that literacy acquisition is a developmental process that requires various teaching and learning strategies for the different stages of development. The photographs and videos staff gathered reflected the key development stages.

As staff developed the continuum, they concluded that day-to-day use of the visual evidence was not practical or effective. They then decided on eight development levels, and identified practical examples, teaching strategies and professional learning resources for each level. The eight levels of the continuum are adult interaction, awareness, recognition, making connections, practice, transference, functional and independent.

The curriculum was designed for special school students, and spans the equivalent of entry level / preliteracy to Year 2 for a regular school student.
Since the continuum was conceptualised in 2010, staff have formatted it as an Excel spreadsheet, with links to detailed explanations of strategies and resources. The spreadsheet can show data for individual students as a chart, to identify what they have learnt and what their learning gaps are. LitCon Special is also now available online.

**Governance and management**

The LitCon Special Steering Committee included:

- the Gordon Education Centre Principal (as Project Manager) and Project Coordinator
- a Department of Education and Child Development (DECD) Disability Coordinator based in a regional office
- a speech pathologist with extensive experience working with students with disabilities in the region
- an information and communications technology specialist.

There was also input from Flinders University academics, including visiting professorial staff from the UK with internationally recognised expertise in education for students with disabilities. The steering committee provided DECD with regular reports about planning processes, outputs and outcomes, on which basis DECD distributed MSSD funds.

**Trial process**

As part of putting LitCon Special online, a trial was conducted to test it with students with an identified intellectual disability or significant cognitive delay in several schools in the Limestone Coast region. Of schools in the region 90 per cent expressed an interest in participating in the trial and, in 2012, 56 additional students were added to the LitCon Special database.

Since the trial, LitCon Special has expanded to support literacy development for 500 students in 33 schools in South Australia. It has engaged 160 teaching and non-teaching staff in the professional learning and support offered by the Gordon Education Centre.

**Mapping learners and learning**

In the general capabilities established by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), literacy involves students in listening, reading, viewing, speaking, writing and creating oral, print, visual and digital texts; and in using and modifying language for different purposes in a range of contexts. To fit with the English component of the Australian Curriculum, LitCon Special features four domains: reading and viewing, listening and understanding, speaking and writing. Each domain has key areas, which teachers can use to drill down into each student's learning needs and then decide how to best meet them:

- the reading and viewing domain's key areas are print recognition, phonics, comprehension and visual literacy
- the listening and understanding domain’s key areas are following instructions, responding to questions, vocabulary and concepts, and phonological awareness
- the speaking domain's key areas are vocabulary and concepts, taking part in conversations, grammar and sentence structure, and oral recount and narrative
- the writing domain's key areas are print knowledge, conventions and composition.
Professional learning and manual

Through the professional learning provided as part of implementing LitCon Special, and using a manual that explains each area, teachers can locate a student in their ‘zone of proximal development’—between what they can and cannot do without help—in each component of literacy. After the student is so located, LitCon Special provides teachers with insights into the pedagogy related to each area. This enables teachers to identify teaching and assessment strategies to meet targets for each area. LitCon Special stores students’ data, and teachers can access it online or in print.

Links with Negotiated Education Plans (NEPs)

LitCon Special provides schools with the means to establish a consistent structure for the literacy components of Negotiated Education Plans (NEPs). These plans result from collaboration between a student with disabilities' parent/caregiver, support services and school. According to the LitCon Special manual:

…. the NEP enables educators, families and students to jointly develop an appropriate curriculum using the Australian Curriculum adjustments, interventions and monitoring processes to meet the academic and social needs of the student.

Planning, monitoring and reporting on literacy development

LitCon Special has both formative and summative uses. As a formative tool, and for each domain, it helps teachers record each student’s existing literacy strengths, learning strategies, evidence to demonstrate they are achieving outcomes, and adjustments required. The table below shows an example of this.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Reading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Objective based on existing strengths</td>
<td>The student can segment each sound in a word recognising ……</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning strategies</td>
<td>Playing matching games to identify the first, medial and final letters of words, for example, c-a-t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes/evidence</td>
<td>In 80% of attempts, student will recognise first, medial and final letters of three letter words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjustments</td>
<td>Use large print</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Improvement data in the continuum provides staff, students and families with information about the student's progress, with summative reports of what they learned in a given time.

Professional learning

Teachers participating in the trial of LitCon Special had one day of release time to do professional learning (as one full or two half days). Professional learning covered:

- understanding the structure and navigation of LitCon Special
• assessing students' strengths and weaknesses in literacy, and reviewing their NEP
• using LitCon Special for each student, using assessment data and viewing each student’s improvement data chart
• using LitCon Special to develop NEP targets
• developing SMARTAR (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Time considerations, Agreed upon and Reviewed) goals
• reporting NEP targets.

To support teachers implementing LitCon Special, the Gordon Education Centre developed a manual covering the continuum, each domain and its elements, negotiated education plans and SMARTAR goals. It included a comprehensive list of references and internet resources.

Lessons learned

Key observations
Feedback from a school trialling LitCon Special suggested that it not only delivers some consistency across the school, but also provides the means for a tangible curriculum focus to a plan that might otherwise only address social and life skills needs.

There has been strong take-up of LitCon Special by staff of an Adelaide special school that has introduced it. They used it to plan, monitor and report on learning. Some did so to plan and report on literacy each semester; others used it daily, setting SMARTAR goals as required and monitoring how students' progressed toward them.

Having LitCon Special online has also helped. One teacher said: ‘It is clearer to read [than the Excel-based version], navigate, more accessible and it keeps ongoing records.’

Staff also reported that LitCon Special provides meaningful and relevant information to inform students' reports and as input to NEP meetings.

The general format and ideas are great – it is nice to finally have something that we can base our reporting and NEPs on that we know is made for our kids and not something we have adapted, changed and manipulated.

Staff trialling LitCon Special also emphasised how it informs dialogue across the school. As they said:

It gives us a consistent language when we are discussing students and their learning ...
LitCon puts data about each students at our fingertips: the conversations with parents are much more powerful as a result ... it just makes me a better teacher.

As a comprehensive literacy planning, assessment and reporting tool for teachers of students with intellectual and/or significant cognitive disabilities, LitCon Special provides the means for rigour and practical strategies for literacy learning. It provides a bridge between a student’s negotiated education plan, which otherwise might be too focused on social/emotional and life skills strategies, and the generalised learning requirements of the Australian Curriculum.

By giving teachers a detailed understanding of each student’s literacy profile and the resources and learning strategies that align with this profile, LitCon Special enables them to
set targets and focus curriculum delivery according to each student’s learning needs. To do this effectively, they need experience and curriculum delivery skills, and the professional learning which is part of the LitCon Special implementation process that covers setting SMARTAR goals and strategies and resources for each goal. The learning provides teachers with a meaningful approach to teach, guide and support students to progress along their own, individualised continuum.

Being online, LitCon Special allows for the sharing of teaching and learning strategies between classes and schools. As such, it has the potential to foster moderation and benchmarking activity across and between schools.

**Sustainability**

LitCon Special has sufficient momentum to ensure its long-term viability as a tool to support literacy development for students with disabilities.

> The LitCon Special project to date has had wide implications, all directed toward positive, measurable and trackable outcomes for student learning. Our Governing Council has endorsed the direction this is taking us. Our Whole School Improvement Plan (2014–2017) will include LitCon Special and SMARTAR goals.

Moreover, the level of demand for a similar tool to support numeracy development is further evidence of its viability as a planning, monitoring and reporting tool.

An important factor in LitCon Special’s long-term sustainability is the governance and management structure Gordon Education Centre established. By drawing on the school’s internal skills and on specialist consultants, allied health professionals and academics, Gordon Education Centre ensured the tool is very relevant to the needs of teachers in specialist settings, and to others in regular settings with students with disabilities in their class.

There is, however, one barrier to sustainability. As LitCon Special transitions from a national partnership project to a product and professional learning service for schools, there will need to be a pricing and servicing model that assures its ongoing viability. This will need to respond to growing demand for access to the tool and associated professional learning, without compromising the quality of service delivery. Scaling up the tool is likely to be much simpler than scaling up the highly regarded services and support delivered by the current Project Coordinator.

**Potential for adoption in other settings**

LitCon Special has significant potential for adoption or adaption in other settings. Beyond the continued accelerating use in South Australia (including cross sectoral collaboration with the Catholic sector), there is a growing awareness of it elsewhere, particularly in Victoria where a similar mapping, planning and reporting tool is also being developed.

In New South Wales, the Personalised Learning and Support Signposting Tool (PLASST) has been developed to help classroom teachers identify the strengths and weaknesses of students with disabilities / learning difficulties. PLASST could be complementary to LitCon Special: it could be used to identify students’ strengths and weaknesses in literacy, and LitCon Special used for mapping and to develop teaching and learning strategies to respond to students’ needs. The Victorian-designed Abilities Based Learning and Education Support (ABLES) could
also be used: it is conceptually similar, but covers more areas of learning and development. There has been some preliminary collaboration between the government sectors in Victoria and South Australia.

Notes

The case study included a visit to a special school to meet with the Principal and staff to discuss the manner in which they were implementing LitCon Special, and how it was helping teachers understand students’ learning needs and plan for learning. Interviews were also conducted with staff from the Gordon Education Centre, which was responsible for developing LitCon Special and training and supporting schools to use it.