Australian Government Department of Education
More Support for Students with Disabilities 2012-2014

Evaluation Case Study

Speech pathology support services

MSSD Output 4: Working with health professionals

Northern Territory
Department of Education
Speech pathology support services

Abstract
Following consultations with key stakeholders, the Northern Territory (NT) Department of Education (DoE) identified the need for improved access to consultancy services for teachers and school support staff working with students with Autism Spectrum Disorder and speech, language and communication needs. DoE initiated a specialist consultancy service aimed at integrating speech pathology services with classroom-based approaches for targeted students. The provision of specialist expertise was expected to build school capacity and more generally strengthen support for students with disability across the NT. This case study reports on the development of the speech, language and communication initiative of ‘whole classroom – whole school’ across the NT and the consequent shifts in the focus from specialist support for individual students to building teacher capability and school capacity.

Key elements and actions
The DoE has consolidated specialist services to improve the quality of these services and to provide timely support for students with disability. The group identified was students with Autism Spectrum Disorder and speech, language and communication needs. DoE research revealed that there were significant demands for speech and language services in NT government schools. Services to students with speech and language needs were being provided by speech pathologists within the NT Health Aged and Disability team and the Children’s Development Team, NT Department of Health. Major gaps were evident in the delivery of services to meet the demand, as well as in the provision of professional learning for teachers in schools, and the practical translation of assessment data into a differentiated curriculum.

A ‘whole classroom – whole school’ service strategy
A consultancy team of a speech pathologist and a speech, language and communication resource teacher was formed to work with schools to build teacher capability. The services delivered included specialist assessment of students, collaborative planning with school staff and families, modelling of strategies and demonstrating the use of resources in the classroom. Hand-in-hand with this was the specialist team’s facilitation of whole staff professional learning sessions, to build school capacity. This refocused the approach from intervention at the level of individual students to that of a school-based service model. The critical element of this model was the specialist speech, language and communication (SLC) team, which enabled the direct application of the recommendations from assessment, to resource development and modelling of the implementation of classroom programmes and strategies.

Collaborative practices within and across agencies
Links were formed at the outset of this initiative with allied health professionals in other agencies and sectors such as the Department of Health’s Children’s Development Team, Aged and Disability professionals, private speech therapists and Indigenous medical services. Cross-agency processes were established to facilitate information sharing with allied health professionals, the schools and families, and professional learning amongst allied health professionals. For special educators, professional learning communities/networks were
encouraged across each region to disseminate information, facilitate members’ learning, and share practice. A Special Education Reference Group was formed to guide the approach with a wide range of representation, along with a Special Education Stakeholder Group that includes parents, established associations, and interest groups.

Concurrent with this, the team is delivering its ‘whole classroom-whole school’ strategy which aims to encourage and inspire schools to focus their effort on developing new processes, practices and roles, or refining existing ones, for example: implementing whole school planning and clear processes for teachers to access special education support within the school; shaping roles for special education teachers as coaches for other staff and support staff as mentors for identified students; rethinking and revising existing strategies; embarking on more integrated ways of developing expertise across the school. The general view is that:

*Classroom teacher capability has changed. Students with high needs are now not in a separate group with the Special Education Support Assistant, but part of the class ... We have seen a decrease in behaviour management issues...*

**Professional Learning**

The Speech Language and Communication teacher provided a range of professional learning support activities for teachers throughout the Territory including team teaching and modelling strategies to help modify lessons for students with communication disabilities. By 2014 the specialist SLC team extended its reach in the area of professional learning, with the facilitation of online professional learning programmes in speech, language and communication and the documenting of strategies and resources. The team also recorded vignettes for the ‘iSupport’ site on the DoE website, to ensure that teachers can easily access these in the future.

**Lessons Learned**

**Key observations**

The initiative has had a considerable impact. It has created a stimulus for change in the planning and delivery of services at the classroom level, for students with speech, language and communication needs. However there have been some challenges, particularly in terms of the capacity of the system to respond to the high numbers of students who were identified as needing curriculum differentiation. This was much higher than anticipated at the outset. Likewise the range of needs was greater. This required a sophistication of knowledge of staff regarding speech, language and communication needs of students.

The initiative has acknowledged the challenges of remoteness, staff and student mobility in the NT. It has taken a pragmatic approach to work within this framework and set in place an approach for the future that stresses access to professional support and advice, and empowerment of staff irrespective of location.

A number of factors have had a cumulative effect on outcomes: the greatly respected expertise of the SLC team, its strong culturally sensitive way of working, and its ability to model practical strategies which have improved the way students access the curriculum. This must be seen in combination with schools’ openness to working collaboratively with the team and implementing changes in practice. Teacher capability has consolidated within the case study schools impacting not only on individual school capacity, and also on other schools, through sharing of learning and expertise.
Effective integration of specialist services

The innovative team approach of allied health professional and resource teacher working collaboratively with schools has been highly effective in producing tangible changes for students and families, teachers, schools, other agencies and the system. The success of this approach has been due mainly to the integration of specialist assessment data with educational adjustment plans and the implementation of practical classroom strategies.

Professional learning

Professional learning delivered at a whole school level and on-line has generated great interest, enthusiasm and commitment to try new approaches. The momentum of this approach is clearly evident in the schools with growing confidence that the skills, abilities and knowledge acquired will make a difference.

Student access to the curriculum

The initiative has created improved opportunities for students with identified disabilities to access the curriculum. Clear learning pathways have opened up for students in urban, regional and remote settings. The development of a resource bank of appropriate assessment and resource materials for staff in schools, together with the use of targeted resources has led to schools becoming more independent and confident in their approach to catering for this group of students.

It is important to note that the approach taken in remote communities has been sensitive to context, respecting local knowledge and expertise. Wherever possible, assessments have been conducted with the assistance of local language speakers, so that the resulting assessment data is based on the students’ home language.

Supporting reflective practice

Teachers have been equipped to more systematically and effectively assess the speech, language and communication knowledge, skills and needs of their students. They have developed skills to modify lesson plans for the targeted student group, successfully implemented speech and language strategies in classrooms and provided advice for families. Teaching and support staff are increasingly in a stronger position to reflect critically on these strategies and to make informed decisions for students. They have learned how to work with the specialist team, and are seeing the benefits for students as they take their professional learning into the classroom.

Schools are implementing and disseminating successful practices and demonstrating greater capability to cater for these students, as well as make decisions on when to refer students to Student Support Services for additional input and advice on educational adjustments for students. Enhanced insight and expertise of teachers and support staff is evident in their communications with families about educational adjustments.

Impact of professional collaboration

Increased professional collaboration across sectors and regions, and across agencies in the NT is creating a more open exchange of information, and an evolving service model with a greater degree of integration and influence on student outcomes. Collaborative work across teams, such as other support specialists in Autism Spectrum Disorder, Curriculum, English as a Second Language, Literacy, and Allied Health, is stimulating professional discussion on big questions such as “What is appropriate for specific school contexts and their students?”. This is leading
to evidence-based approaches, tailoring programs for student need, accessing specialist support for specific targeted areas, using culturally appropriate assessments, and building expertise across schools.

**Changes in attitude of teachers**

There have been notable shifts in the perspectives of teachers in regard to curriculum differentiation in speech, language and communication. There seems to have been three catalysts for this shift in both attitude and behaviour. Firstly, the professional learning aspect of this initiative has resulted in a much more positive outlook within schools in relation to how teachers view what is possible. Secondly, the way in which the specialist team has operated, has influenced schools. There is great respect for the team and its skills, its collaborative way of working, its evidence-based approach and hands-on modelling of effective classroom practice. Schools have responded to this with significant attitudinal shifts and changes in practice. Thirdly, school leadership development and support for changing practice has influenced changes in attitude and teaching practice.

Underpinning these changes in attitudes is a more informed approach: teachers have made an important shift from relying on anecdotal evidence to more rigorous forms of assessment and data collection, for example, an action planning approach for a group of transition students, which has resulted in a more thorough evidence-based approach.

**Sustainability**

From the beginning of this initiative, DoE emphasised improving systems and processes, building on established structures and creating new ones, with the expectation that the outcomes from this initiative would be sustained. There are encouraging indicators for sustainability, including:

- moving from awareness and commitment to the implementation of new classroom strategies
- targeting professional learning in speech, language and communication through key professional learning communities
- creating a bank of expertise across networks
- teaching staff taking on co-ordination roles
- the emergence of informal meetings in between formal networking sessions
- schools placing value on new practices, particularly through the modelling process
- ease of access to online strategies and resources for teachers through an ‘iSupport’ service on the DoE website
- opening up new and virtually limitless opportunities for ongoing professional learning and resource support
- participating schools forming a network of practice as a base for future delivery of support services.

Overall, the DoE reports that the initiative has resulted in a well-developed and clear referral process critical for a sustainable transition to existing services post 2014. It has established efficient processes to manage student referrals, professional learning partnerships and a common approach.
Potential for adoption in other contexts

This initiative has the potential to transform specialist speech, language and communication consultancy services in a range of contexts. The service model will be of particular interest to administrators, school leaders, teachers, specialist staff, and families across regional and remote Australia. It has lessons for other systems in the planning and delivery of specialist services to diverse schools and regions, in developing professional learning communities, and sustaining stakeholder collaboration on learning outcomes for these students.

Notes

Case study interviews were held with relevant support staff in 2013 with NT DoE, including the Director Student Support Services, Manager Disability Services, and the MSSD speech, language and communication team. Follow-up interviews were conducted from March to September with the speech, language and communication team, director and relevant staff in schools, and Student Support Services staff.