Evaluation Case Study

Supporting students with Autism: Building systemic and school capacity

MSSD Output 10: Collaborative teaching practices

Victorian Department of Education and Training
Supporting students with Autism: Building systemic and school capacity

Abstract

The Victorian Government Department of Education and Training (DET) developed five projects as part of the MSSD plan to support students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): the appointment of school based Autism Inclusion Support Coordinators; and the provision of regional Autism Teacher Coaches. Autism Inclusion Support Programmes (ISPs), embedded in 15 schools across Victoria, focused on creating effective whole school practices and inclusive environments that respond to the needs of students, assisting schools to engage with each other as well as with a range of key disability and regional stakeholders. Nine Autism Teacher Coaches across the state established ASD specific communities of practice and implemented sustainable practice models throughout metropolitan and regional locations. The coaching group met regularly to promote effective practice experiences between regions, providing collegiate support and collaboration and resource sharing opportunities. A trial period involving more than 6,500 teachers in nearly 700 schools demonstrated the benefits of the whole school community working together to ensure that inclusive practices are in place for students with Autism.

Key elements and actions

Under the More Support for Students with Disabilities National Partnership, the Victorian Government Department of Education and Training (DET) implemented three outputs supporting teachers to meet the needs of students with Autism: Inclusion Online Professional Learning Teacher, and Specialisation Scholarships ASD (Output 5); Expert Consultation in ASD, including ASD Certification for schools (Output 3); and the state-wide introduction of collaborative teaching practices across the regions under Output 10 which is the focus of this case study. Output 10 involves two projects: the appointment of Autism Inclusion Support Coordinators, and the provision of Autism Teacher Coaches. The approach was to trial the effectiveness of targeted support from Autism specialists over a three year period with the overall goal of creating sustainable change to whole school practices.

Autism Inclusion Support Coordinators

Schools across metropolitan and regional Victoria were selected for participation in the trial, and the Inclusion Support Coordinators (ISCs), appointed by schools, commenced their work in 2012. ISCs have been embedded in 15 Autism Inclusion Schools across Victoria. The three year trial included working with students and teachers to demonstrate effective teaching practices to support students with Autism. The ISC’s work with school teams focused on creating effective whole school practices and inclusive environments that respond to the needs of students, assisting schools to engage with each other as well as with a range of key disability and regional stakeholders.

The 2012-2014 trials provided valuable information at a systemic level about future provisions for students with Autism.
Autism Teacher Coaches

Autism Teacher Coaches were also trialed across Victorian regions from 2012-2014. They provided professional coaching for teachers and school staff in supporting students with Autism to work with schools both upon request and by focusing on schools with high numbers of students with Autism. It was intended that the coaches would have sufficient time over the trial to make a sustainable difference to the targeted school communities, and refer schools to existing models of good practice within their local area.

Nine Autism Teacher Coaches across the state established Autism specific communities of practice and implemented sustainable practice models throughout metropolitan and regional locations. The coaching group met to promote effective practice experiences between regions, providing collegiate support and collaboration and resource sharing opportunities.

Over the trial period, coaches worked with approximately 6,500 teachers in nearly 700 schools across all schools types, primary, secondary and specialist, to build their knowledge and skills to implement strategies to support the learning needs of children and young people with Autism.

Approaches to service provision were individualised to meet the needs and priorities of each region. In the case study region the activities of the coaches included: building strong relationships between schools and families; and developing resources and materials available to schools.

The engagement of coaches with schools is proactive and preventative in nature, typically involving whole school professional learning, developing an internal coaching group, and identifying a school based project as a point of focus directly relevant to the needs of students.

Building regional capacity

The Autism Teacher Coach put detailed training strategies in place to ensure schools throughout the region had access to training; concentrating on developing communities of practice where a critical mass of teachers, support staff and agency staff support their own professional learning. In a rural area where services are limited, this is seen as a critical strategy to support teachers, families and students. These activities include after-school training programmes, which bring the training to the schools, whole day training supported with teacher replacement costs, and supporting schools to participate in the Inclusion Online Course. In addition, training of teaching teams through the Autism Teaching Institute has allowed the development of demonstration sites at a number of schools.

Lessons learned

Key observations

The trial period demonstrated the benefits of the whole school community working together to ensure that inclusive practices are in place for all students, including those with Autism. The case study schools reported increases in the number of students with Autism presenting for enrolment and that parents are seeking enrolment for their children on the basis of the growing reputations of these schools as models of good practice. Schools also believed that the parents of children with Autism are better catered for as a consequence of teachers having greater insight into the needs of families, particularly through their involvement in parent support meetings. Some schools have developed sufficient confidence as a result of
their work with the Autism Teacher Coaches to provide support and information directly to parents, and rely less on external agencies for advice.

A long term view

The case study schools were early adopters of the move towards making their school an inclusive environment. Staff acknowledged the time it has taken to change the culture of the school over several years, and the need to continually build on the cumulative impact of intervention programmes. In both schools, the principals have strongly believed in the importance of catering for the learning and support needs of all students: a key driver in the change process. Both principals set clear directions for their schools to work towards the goal of greater inclusivity and both have recruited staff with expertise in teaching students with Autism as well as skills in developing inclusive practices for all students.

Embedding change in school practice

As the capacity and capability of the case study schools improved, there was less need for close involvement of the coaches since the schools had sufficient confidence in their expertise to meet student needs with considerably less support. The key changes included greater awareness of the needs of students with Autism, better transitions into and out of the school, and improved links to other schools.

Autism coaches from one region identified a number of factors that need to be in place to embed change in school practice:

- focusing on small steps that make an immediate impact
- establishing good working relationships across schools and stakeholders
- focusing on school leaders as central to change
- using expertise to support school leaders and shape their ideas.

Impact of the training

The online training courses have been well-received by staff in schools particularly with respect to teachers being able to complete the modules at their own pace. The regional Autism teacher coach cited examples of whole schools completing both the Autism and Dyslexia courses, with teachers and education support (ES) staff participating. Significant benefits were identified with this approach.

The regional Autism teacher coach and school principals also observed that the training through the Autism Teaching Institute had a sustained impact. This was especially the case with schools where teachers completed the full graduate diploma course. The mainstream and special schools reported a flow-on effect to staff who had not undertaken the course and all schools involved considered the investment of time and resources for this training to be highly effective and influential in improving their approach.

A culture of coaching

The development of a culture of coaching, changing the attitude and expectations of teachers towards professional learning, has been an essential element in the success of the Autism teacher coach initiative. This was particularly evident in the case study region mainstream schools and reinforced by the autism coach and principals of the special schools. The conditions for change include a clear understanding that professional growth should be
continuous with well-planned programmes, expert support, and strategies that take into
account the previous learning of individual teachers and teams.

**Collaboration with agencies and other schools**

DET believes that positive partnerships with key organisations that have expertise and a
shared commitment to supporting children and young people with disabilities will enrich
knowledge and practices within its schools and their communities. Access to expert support in
the area of Autism has been improved through advice and consultation services provided by
AMAZE (Autism Victoria), and targeted consultation and advice for teachers and school teams
has supported schools to meet the individual needs of a student with Autism.

The special schools in the case study region have strong partnerships with key agencies
servicing the area including an autism centre, a private autism school, AMAZE and local
psychologists. This model of agencies and providers working together is critical in providing
the best possible services and support to students, families and staff, but it also depends on
increased collaboration with mainstream schools in the region is also bolstering collective
expertise and a shared commitment to providing the best possible support for students.

**Sustainability**

The Autism Coach support and implementation plan has continued in the case study region
despite key personnel changes, regional restructure and policy changes over the trial period.
Sustainability appears to come primarily from on the ground training, the development of
communities of practice in major locations, the use of expertise from the special schools, and
the strength of interagency partnerships. According to a group of coaches in one region,
sustainability is also more likely to occur with increased understanding about Autism amongst
teachers, the provision of resource banks of support information across the region and the
State, and the use of problem solving approaches as a strategy to identify individual student
needs. These coaches concluded that ‘Autism Hubs’ are a key to ensuring that knowledge is
more accessible to schools.

At the school level there was much to be celebrated in the school planning for sustainability.
Recruitment of trained staff, ongoing professional training of current staff, support from DET
in the way of scholarships in Special Education and Autism certificates and diplomas (through
the Autism Teaching Institute (ATI)) and development of Autism Support programmes in
schools are all aimed at sustainability beyond short term funding.

**Potential for adoption in other contexts**

The Autism Inclusion Support Coordinator and Autism Coach initiatives are both worthy of
further investigation by education authorities contemplating broader and sustainable systemic
change. In particular, the strategy is likely to be effective in reaching beyond specific special
schools or mainstream schools with long-term effects on regional areas. Building systemic
capacity requires cohesive work across a range of components including training, individual
student support and supportive and innovative leadership.

**Notes**

The case study is based on interviews with DET officers, document analysis, presentations
from information seminars and site visits to regional schools over 2012-2014. The site visits to
two special schools included interviews with the Autism Coach and key teachers, examination
of documents and electronic data and visits to two primary schools with students with Autism.
The coach also provided documentation relevant to the case study in addition to data available publicly on DET and school websites. Two schools were suggested as additional sites to see Autism support in action which included meetings with the principal, key staff, an inclusion support officer and visits to classrooms and support rooms for students with Autism.