

Achieving whole-school support for students with learning difficulties: 10 things to consider

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Providing support to children who struggle to learn at the same rate as their peers is a perennial and challenging problem for schools. It is clear that some children will take longer to master the basic skills required for higher order learning and teachers have to accommodate the learning needs of these students as well as others who are progressing at a more typical rate. This is hard to do in a class of students but a coherent whole-school approach can help ensure that all (or the vast majority of) children are being provided with the support that they need in school.

There are some guiding principles that can help schools deliver the support required, summarised below as the 10 Cs.

- 1 **Conviction:** The first prerequisite for an effective whole-school approach is the belief or conviction that all children can learn. We need to resist the temptation to rush to identify ‘within child’ problems as the reason for learning difficulties. Obviously, there are some children who have endogenous conditions that make learning more difficult but there are many more children who are struggling who do not. Difficulties may arise that have more to do with the environment that the child is in rather than some characteristic of the learner. Similarly, we should be cautious about explaining a child’s difficulties by aspects of their home environment or background. While what goes on at home can be an important factor in a child’s learning journey, we don’t have control of the home environments of children who struggle. But we do have control over what occurs at school. And what occurs at school can be powerful indeed. We are wise to bear in mind that familiar idiom, “If the student hasn’t learned, the teacher hasn’t taught.” In other words, the buck stops with us.
- 2 **Champion:** Appointing a champion for a cause is an important part of leadership. This has to come ‘from the top’. The Principal must drive a whole-school approach by nominating an effective learning support champion. In addition, the Principal must commit to having adequate time and resources dedicated to learning support across the school. As in any venture that we undertake in the school system, the need for a committed school leadership is absolutely essential. Principals and their executive need to make sure that adequate resources are made available and that learning support is a priority for the school.
- 3 **Commitment:** Time and resources (human and material) have to be committed to learning support if it is to be successful. Providing a child with a weekly half-hour or hour-long session of learning support is just not going to do it. Frequent instruction (and repeated exposure) is required for most students who have learning difficulties. Managing resources is a key element in making sure that the right support is delivered in the right



'dosage' for a successful whole-school approach. While it is tempting to try to offer support to as many children as possible at any one time, it is important to limit the size of small groups in Tier 2 interventions. Having more than four students in a group may limit the effectiveness of the intervention. It is also important to provide a lot of resources (if needed) early on so that problems can be nipped in the bud with a bit of targeted intervention. Don't wait for the problem to resolve itself. Go in early and go in hard. Spreading precious resources too thinly is just a waste of both time and effort.

- 4 **Competence:** Providing time and personnel to deliver learning support is not sufficient either. Staff members providing support need to be using evidence-based approaches. What and how it is taught really matters. A person with relevant special education qualifications should be responsible for the programs of all children receiving learning support across the school. This is not to say that all the delivery has to be done by special educators. Well trained and monitored paraprofessionals can be highly effective in delivering targeted learning support. The need for competent delivery is critical to successful intervention for learning difficulties.
- 5 **Consistency:** Learning support should not occur in a vacuum. What is taught in learning support sessions should not be substantively different to what is taught in the classroom. For instance, if a student is being taught to blend and segment words in learning support using synthetic

phonics, then the same approach should be evident in the classroom. It is cruel to teach a child one way in one context, and then have them try to achieve in another using different skills. More broadly, learning support should be seen as part of a continuum of all learning that is taking place in the school. The Response to Intervention framework helps us to conceptualise how this looks, with students moving in and out of increasingly intensive tiers of instruction depending on their need of support.

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- 6 **Check-ups:** Monitoring student progress is a critical part of providing the right kind of support to students with learning difficulties. Identifying students who require support early is the best way of keeping the task manageable. A little bit of support early in a child's schooling can save a lot of grief (and expense) down the track. It really is not too early to be identifying children who can receive Tier 2 (typically small group) intervention towards the end of the first year of school. How children respond to intervention needs to be continually measured and monitored so that decisions can be made about the effectiveness of the intervention for that child – do they need to move into a more intensive tier, for example. Data-based decision-making is a critical feature of effective learning support. And data needs to be kept in a systematic way and passed on to the person teaching the child in the following year. Precious time can be lost when the learning support clock gets reset every calendar year.
- 7 **Communication:** It is an obvious point but still worth making that good communication between the learning support team and the classroom teacher is very important. Learning support should not be seen as something that occurs somewhere else and therefore is not relevant to what is going on in the classroom. The best outcomes will be achieved where the classroom teacher is kept updated about the progress the student is making and how developing skills may be reinforced

and practised in the classroom. Apart from the obvious benefits of more practice, being able to put skills to use in another context will assist with generalisation, which can be an issue with children with learning difficulties. Moreover, a two-way conversation is important so that the classroom teacher and the learning support team can share insights and plan for the student effectively. Time for these discussions should be timetabled (and resourced) so that they happen as a matter of course, not by chance.

- 8 **Cooperation:** Flowing on from communication, it's clear that there has to be a high level of cooperation between the classroom teacher and the learning support team. Each needs to support the other in their work with the child, and also with the parents. An integrated and seamless form of support will give confidence to the child and their parents, an important element in keeping things positive. It can be very confronting for parents to learn that their child is not progressing as well as they would hope. Providing professional and caring support in this situation is very important. Agreeing on how the child's difficulties are conveyed can reduce any confusion and adds confidence that there is timely and appropriate support for the child. Remember that although you may have seen many children with learning difficulties, for a parent this may well be a first in their experience.
- 9 **Continuity:** For some children, the need for learning support will be ongoing. Hopefully, with evidence-based Tier 1 whole class instruction and with effective Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions, the number of children requiring longer term help will be reduced. But there will be some whose needs change over time and require help in other areas. For instance, a child who struggled with decoding early on may master that only to face problems with writing down the track. We need to ensure that we can provide continuity of support to meet the child at their point of need. And we need to

persist; we need to model persistence and not give up. Some children need a lot more support to arrive at the same end point as their peers. This is not failing, it's just a longer and slower (and harder) journey. Our students need to understand the importance of persistence as it likely that this will be a skill that they will need to take with them past school and into their adult life, if they are to succeed.

- 10 **Celebration:** It is easy to feel despairing at times when learning is slow and laborious. But we must look for opportunities to celebrate genuine progress. Obviously, this needs to be done sensitively so that a student is not embarrassed by their relative achievements. But sustained effort, persistence and achievement should be acknowledged and celebrated. In addition, we should be seeking to find the things that the student excels at so that these can be celebrated too. Experiencing difficulties with learning can be very challenging and can lead to problems of self-confidence. We need to look at the whole child and

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watch for signs of disengagement, school refusal, sadness and poor self-esteem. If these features are evident, the intervention approach should be stepped up to take account of this.

When considering if your school is doing all it can to optimise the learning opportunities for students who have difficulties learning, ask yourself:

- Do I (and those around me) have a conviction that all children can learn?
- Does my school have a champion in terms of providing effective learning support?
- Is there a real commitment of time and resources for meeting the needs of children with learning difficulties in our school?
- Are the people who are providing learning support using evidence-based approaches? Are they trained? Are they monitored if they are not qualified special educators?
- Do we check on the progress of students regularly to make sure no one is falling through the cracks? Do we check to see if interventions are being effective?
- Do we have open and effective communication between classroom teachers and the learning support team? Is there a high level of cooperation between these people?
- Do we provide ongoing support for a student's learning difficulties even though they may manifest differently over time?
- Do we celebrate the effort, achievements and strengths of our students with learning difficulties to keep them engaged?

If you can answer yes to all these questions, you are probably doing a great job in your school at supporting students with learning difficulties. Congratulations!

A version of this article was originally published in the Bulletin of Learning Difficulties Australia (Summer 2017).

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