Australian Education Research Organisation

Collaborating with support networks

Supporting students' diverse needs

February 2025

The support teachers provide is crucial to ensure that all students have the opportunity to engage in learning in safe, supportive and well-managed learning environments. Students may require varying supports depending on their strengths and needs. This practice guide is part of a suite of resources developed in partnership with MultiLit and the Institute of Special Educators to help teachers refine or refresh their understanding and practice of supporting students with diverse needs.

Not all students who require additional support will have a diagnosis of disability or a health condition, and some students may have a combination of needs. Teachers and school leaders must reasonably support all students to access and participate in education. This may require making reasonable adjustments to the learning environment, teaching or the curriculum in collaboration with students and parents/primary caregivers, specialist and support staff, and medical and allied health professionals.[1]

This practice guide will support you to work collaboratively with students, parents/primary caregivers, communities and school and external professionals to develop respectful relationships so that effective instruction and reasonable adjustments can be made for students' diverse needs. The guide has been designed to complement, not replace, existing school and system policies, procedures and guidance.

Collaboration is a way of working that incorporates shared goals, shared responsibility for decisions taken, shared accountability for outcomes and shared resources.[2] Working within a collaborative approach involves transparency and the development of trust and respect. For collaboration to be effective, sufficient time needs to be allocated and the practice should lead to documented results.[3]

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1   Alice Springs [Mparntwe] Education Declaration, 2020; Disability Discrimination Act 1992, 2015; 2020 Review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005, 2021.
2   Cook & Friend, 2010.
3   Friend, 2000.

Seeking input from students, parents/primary caregivers and a range of professionals is important if students are to get the most out of their educational experience.

Students' support networks may include:

- parents/primary caregivers, other family members and community members

- teachers and school leaders

- teaching assistants and other educational support officers

- support teachers, such as specialist teachers, learning support teachers and inclusive education teachers

- school counsellors and guidance officers

- social and youth workers

- school nurses

- school chaplains and welfare workers

- allied health professionals who may be engaged by families directly or employed by education or health systems – for example:

  – psychologists supporting behaviour, mental health, learning and self-regulation

  – occupational therapists supporting functional motor skills, activities for daily living (e.g., self-care skills), equipment support and environmental adjustments

  – physiotherapists supporting gross motor skills, coordination, balance, walking, equipment support and environmental adjustments

  – speech pathologists supporting communication (including augmentative and alternative communication, or AAC), language, swallowing and eating.

Practices to support collaborating with support networks

This guide outlines the following practices to collaborate with students' support networks:

- Involve students, parents/primary caregivers and communities in planning and decision-making.
- Work closely with in-school support staff and external specialists.
- Involve students' support networks in regular reviews of adjustments, supports and progress.

It is also important to consider how you can plan to support students' diverse needs, including students' communication skills, emotional regulation, physical needs, sensory differences and social interactions.

Support networks for students' diverse needs are strengthened when:

- positive, collaborative connections and relationships with students and their support networks are established and maintained

- culturally safe and inclusive learning environments are created

- all students are taught and encouraged to understand and support each other's strengths and differences.

Always display calm, consistent and controlled emotions and behaviour. This models safe emotional expression and behaviours and helps to create a supportive learning environment.

Involve students, parents/primary caregivers, families and communities in planning and decision-making

All adjustments to students' educational programs, including selecting academic and social/behaviour learning objectives and varying instruction and practice, should be made in collaboration with students (when appropriate) and parents/primary caregivers. Parents/primary caregivers have in-depth knowledge and understanding of their children, their experience with professional services outside the education system, and strategies for engaging their children that work at home. For students with disability, consultation with students or their parents/primary caregivers on adjustments is mandated.

Students

The message to students must be that you value them and will work as part of a team to ensure that all decisions made about their education will be in their best interest. To effectively involve students in planning and decision-making:

- Ask them about their interests and what they think they do well.

- Ask them about their priorities and goals at school, preferred activities and supports they find most useful.

- Introduce them to support staff. This may help the students feel comfortable with those people and begin to build relationships.

Parents/primary caregivers, and family and community support

The message to parents/primary caregivers must be that you value their child and will work as part of a team to ensure that all decisions made about their education will be in the child's best interest. When working with families it is important to consider how the parents'/primary caregivers' needs are being met during the process. Be mindful that parents/primary caregivers may have previously received multiple requests to provide information about their child to the school and a range of professionals. Aim to minimise duplicate demands, while also respecting confidentiality, and be considerate of their experience. In a primary setting, the classroom teacher will likely be the primary contact person for parents/primary caregivers. This is unlikely to be the case in secondary settings where students often have multiple classroom teachers so schools should identify one staff member (e.g., year coordinator, home room teachers, student support specialist) to be the primary contact, with information then disseminated to relevant colleagues. Should parents/primary caregivers exercise their right to opt out of collaboration activities, you should still focus on identifying and making adjustments to support students' full participation in learning.

To effectively involve parents/primary caregivers in planning and decision-making:

- Begin discussions with parents/primary caregivers focusing on students' achievements and strengths rather than difficulties.

- Involve parents/primary caregivers in decision-making from the first meeting with the school and/or the first day of a student's enrolment.

- Introduce yourself as their child's teacher prior to or at the beginning of the school year. Depending on the age of the students and the school context, this may be face-to-face, a phone call, a note home or an email.

- Ask about the parents'/primary caregivers' preferred method of communication (e.g., communication book, face-to-face, phone call, text or email) and use it. Additional support, such as interpreters and advocates, may be required.

- Ask an experienced colleague to review written communication before sending it to parents/ primary caregivers.

- Prearrange a system for contacting the school that is convenient and suitable for the families and the school. Be careful not to assume that families do not have information to share if they do not make regular contact.

- Promote ongoing communication to prevent misunderstandings and ensure that all parties agree on the decisions made about students.

- Respect cultural and family values to assist with establishing effective, collaborative partnerships.

- Provide the family with information about students' short-term and long-term progress, including positive achievements and any concerns. Do this yourself, not through the teaching assistant.

- Share information in a positive way.

- Report on student progress, including in the half-year and end-of-year reports, in relation to students' individual learning objectives as well as broader subject-specific outcomes. Selected student learning objectives and the steps towards achieving them should be included in the reports. Progress may be at a slower rate; therefore, monitoring and discussing student progress should be ongoing.

- For First Nations students and families, and with the parent/primary caregiver's permission, invite a community member, an Aboriginal Education Officer or Aboriginal Education Worker to meetings and include them in communication strategies. It may make the family and student more at ease and comfortable to engage.

Parents/primary caregivers may suggest strategies that have no research support, strategies that may even have been found to have negative effects, or that you are not able to include in your classroom. Listen respectfully to these suggestions and ensure that all strategies included in your classroom or school setting have evidence to support them. Be honest with families and be prepared to respectfully outline what the evidence shows are effective in-school practices, and how you propose to use these to support their child's learning. This will help you constructively discuss next steps together. If needed, seek support from school leaders for these conversations.

Work closely with in-school support staff and external specialists

Specialist teachers

Specialist teachers on staff at the school can assist with the collection of assessment data through observations or direct assessment to help identify students' specific needs. They can also train teaching assistants to support students' social and academic development. Using this approach, it is possible to provide support in whole-class settings, deliver small-group instruction within the regular teaching program and assist in teacher skill development.

To effectively work with specialist teachers:

- Call on specialist teachers to co-teach with you to help develop practice to meet students' diverse needs. Co-teaching involves a classroom teacher and a specialist jointly teaching a class. This might involve:

  - team teaching, where both the classroom teacher and the specialist teacher equally share the responsibility for teaching the class and leading instruction

  - one teacher teaching while the other provides support, with each teacher teaching the same or varied content to different class groups

  - taking time to plan together, ensuring that you are regarded by students as equals in the classroom, and taking advantage of the skills of each member of the co-teaching partnership.

- When required, provide small-group or extra instruction and structured practice for students with diverse needs, using the specialist teacher for support.

- Ask for specialist teacher assistance with one-off assessments and help to find available resources to assist you in supporting students' diverse needs.

Teaching assistants

Teaching assistants can help provide targeted instruction and support to students. This may include supporting their physical and self-care needs and providing additional guided practice of academic and social skills.

When teaching assistants are well-trained, supported and guided, they can provide essential support for students with diverse needs. Without this training and guidance, their support can sometimes create dependence on assistance and inadvertently hinder students' relationships with their peers, as well as their relationship with the classroom teacher. It is important, therefore, that the classroom teacher is clear about the role of the teaching assistant, ensuring that it is clearly defined and executed, and provides support and guidance as needed.

To effectively work with teaching assistants:

- Meet teaching assistants at the beginning of the school year, or when they are allocated to support the class or student, to discuss how they will work in the classroom. This should be done at a time and place that allows focus and access to necessary information and resources, not during class time. Discuss the teaching assistants' role and responsibilities, and identify what skills and knowledge are required to support students and what support the teaching assistants need.

- Where required, ask teaching assistants to periodically move around the room and assist a range of students. In this way, it is not obvious that one student is being singled out. This can reduce dependence on assistance and provide general classroom support, which benefits all students in the class. By providing more general support, teacher time is freed up to give extra assistance to students who need it.

- Establish how you will communicate plans for student learning, ongoing and changing needs, adjustments, support and activities (e.g., emailing teaching assistants the learning tasks and resources the day before the lesson).

- Observe teaching assistants working with individual students initially, and then periodically to ensure that instruction is delivered as you intended.

  – Identify and communicate any areas for development with the staff member who oversees the support of students with diverse needs to inform future professional learning opportunities.

  – Model ways of working with students by demonstrating a strategy, observing teaching assistants and providing feedback.

  – Value feedback from teaching assistants as part of respectful two-way relationships.

- Check in regularly with teaching assistants before, during and after lessons to discuss student progress and any emerging or changing needs.

School leaders

School leaders have overall responsibility for managing the team supporting students and managing the smooth transition of students through subsequent years. Depending on the school, this may be the learning support lead, head of curriculum, year or house co-ordinator, senior leader or principal. They may provide information and other forms of indirect support, such as information about students' diagnoses or needs, special equipment, advice regarding applications for varying support, information about access to curriculum and learning and how best to communicate with parents/primary caregivers and external supports.

School leaders should ensure that teachers have the time to liaise effectively with students, parents/primary caregivers and students' professional supports.

To effectively work with school leaders:

- Identify the person in the school who manages the support for students with additional support needs.

- Collaborate with them in understanding and applying school protocols for:

  – communicating with parents/primary caregivers and professionals

  – requesting additional support or advice, arranging review meetings and reporting meeting outcomes

  – reporting to parents/primary caregivers about student progress

  – transitioning across the school years.

Other professionals

Other professionals, including allied health professionals, may be engaged by families directly or employed by education or health systems to undertake assessments, provide support to students and provide recommendations regarding adjustments and supports for helping students to engage with and participate in learning and school life.

To effectively work with other professionals:

- Familiarise yourself with their roles supporting students. Check with the person in the school who leads support for students requiring additional support. Do they liaise with other professionals, or can teachers liaise with them directly for certain students?

- Establish the best means of communication (e.g., email, phone call).

- Invite professionals to review meetings if families agree.

- Request and review written reports to help inform meeting discussions about planning, adjustments and support.

- Consider and be prepared to discuss the practicalities of suggestions from other professionals in the classroom context.

Involve students' support networks in regular reviews of adjustments, supports and progress

Review meetings should be organised to discuss and celebrate students' progress, review the effectiveness of adjustments, seek feedback and input, and plan for adjustments and support. A review will include the parents/primary caregivers, the classroom teacher or a representative teacher at the secondary school level, and a member of the school executive. It may also include a family support person, the school counsellor or psychologist, a specialist teacher and allied health professionals supporting the student and family. Where appropriate, students might also attend the review meeting.

For members of the students' support network who cannot physically attend meetings, you may need to arrange online meetings and be flexible with their timing. Families may request additional meetings, and these should be arranged.

To effectively arrange regular reviews of students' adjustments and supports:

- Organise formal meetings in advance and provide an agenda to all meeting attendees.

- Seek out relevant information from other teachers involved in teaching students who may not be available to attend the meeting.

- Allow all attendees to add items to the agenda. Not all members of students' support teams may be able to attend every meeting, but all team members should have the opportunity to provide written suggestions, a report, or request that another team member provide information on their behalf.

- Offer the parent/primary caregiver the option to bring a support person to formal meetings (e.g., a family member, friend, support professional or community member) as parents/primary caregivers may feel intimidated if they are outnumbered by school staff or professionals from within the education system.

- Offer the use of a professional interpreter during formal meetings for parents who speak a language other than English. If an interpreter is not available, the family may want to include a trusted support person or community member who is fluent in English to accompany them.

- Ensure you and all professionals attending the meeting:

  – communicate clearly and avoid using jargon

  – use active listening strategies

  – encourage contributions from all attendees

  – respectfully acknowledge the contributions of all participants

  – be open to different ideas and perspectives

  – plan for the future

  – commit to finding joint solutions.

- Present and interpret the data collected for initial and ongoing assessments.

- Arrange to have a member of the school staff attend the meeting to take notes, specifically detailing decisions made, action items and noting the team members responsible for actioning them. The notes should be:

  – written in plain language, and be strengths-focused, positive and respectful of students

  – distributed to each attendee for comment or suggested changes

  – agreed to by all members of the team who attended the meeting

  – shared with parents/primary caregivers, classroom teachers, any in-school support staff and external professional support as necessary.

- Inform parents/primary caregivers that they can ask questions about the notes, and provide an opportunity for further discussion or clarification.

Reflection questions

- How have you contacted parents/primary caregivers early and established clear lines of communication?

- How have you involved students, parents/primary caregivers and other support staff in decision-making?

- How have you considered both student strengths and needs in decision-making?

- If students are not achieving their goals, are the supports in place suitable for them?

Further reading

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