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### ***The Vision, Challenges and Reality***

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***An Engaged University: Unlocking leadership potential in schools to support  
children with special needs***

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## **An Engaged University: Unlocking leadership potential in schools to support children with special needs**

Significant changes within the higher education sector have led to a growing interest in the way in which universities seek to engage with their communities. This has resulted in the emergence of numerous visions and discourses surrounding the notion of community engagement, including social capital, community partnerships and sustainability. Engagement is central to a university and its overall mission and teaching, its learning and its research roles. This paper outlines a successful initiative that brings together Australian Catholic University, Canberra, the Catholic Education Office (Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn), school Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) and members of the wider educational community for the development of a one year university-accredited LSAs' Professional Development Certificate course. The design and implementation of the course is discussed, including approaches to curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. Now in its fourth year, the course continues to receive strong support and course evaluations reflect an increase in the self-efficacy of the participants, not only in their improved understanding and practice but also in their ability to assume a leadership role in their school communities. As 'quiet' leaders working behind the scenes, these LSAs are able to effect considerable change through the cumulative effect of the many small changes they make toward building more inclusive learning environments. Long-term, the value of this LSAs' course is its success in creating: stronger synergies between the University and members of the wider educational community; leadership capacity within schools; and, more equitable learning outcomes for all students.

### **University - Community Engagement**

By their very nature, universities have always made a significant contribution to the societies in which they reside and through their engagement in communities throughout the world have enhanced the lives of many individuals. This commitment stems from a belief that universities have a civic responsibility to enhance the well-being of their community and, in doing so, bring about mutually beneficial outcomes for universities and the community in terms of 'long-term social, civic and economic benefits' (Muirhead, Graham & Brown, 2002, p.5). Through the development of strong, mutually reciprocal partnerships and relationships, engaged universities are often able to stimulate significant transformations in community life and practices, while also

undergoing substantial change themselves as a result of that interaction and connection (Muirhead, Graham & Brown, 2002).

While the Government's focus on 'competitiveness, commercialisation and funding cutbacks as key drivers of higher education policy' (Winter, Wiseman & Muirhead, 2005, p.3) poses some threat to the nature of the relationship between universities and their communities, the development of strong community-focused initiatives should be encouraged given their potential to enhance learning and build dynamic communities of practice (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002).

Such a joint initiative has been developed between Australian Catholic University and the Catholic Education Office (Canberra and Goulburn) that has provided leadership within the Catholic school community, through its recognition of the important contribution made by Learning Support Assistants (LSA) in supporting teachers to provide more effective, inclusive learning environments for all children.

### **The Role of Learning Support Assistants**

Inclusive education remains a controversial topic in education with clear advantages and disadvantages highlighted in the literature (Foreman, 2005). As the research has grown supporting the benefits of inclusive education, parents have become more assertive in their belief that the best education for their child with a disability is in an inclusive setting. This has continued to be the case regardless of the resources available, their child's level of functioning or the willingness of those involved (Marks, Schrader & Levine, 1999). According to Foreman (2005), separate schools for students with special needs have not improved academic outcomes, especially for those with mild disabilities, and research is now available suggesting that students with more severe and multiple disabilities can benefit more from an inclusive education.

To facilitate effective inclusive education, schools must be engaging and supportive places for all; children, teachers and caregivers alike. The aim is to build strong communities that celebrate, value, respect and respond to diversity. As highlighted by Slee in the Education Queensland Report (2005, p.3), 'inclusive education is for everybody and is everybody's business'. An essential element of this model is the role of Learning Support Assistants,

previously referred to as teacher assistants and then special needs teacher assistants. Ashbaker and Morgan (2001) state that learning support assistants are 'typically long term, local residents, mostly women who work part-time for modest wages' (p.60). They typically have experienced little formal education since leaving school (Wallace, 1995) and the general pattern of employment begins with the parent (usually the mother) volunteering to assist in the classroom. This often results in a request or suggestion from a school executive member to the parent to accept a more official role (Brown, 2001).

While little research is available on the long-term effects of Learning Support Assistants' involvement in classrooms, there is sufficient evidence to suggest they can grow to be significant adults in the lives of students and impact positively on the development of the students' attitudes, skills and learning (Wasykowski, 2002). Skilled teamwork is also an essential component of effective inclusion (Ashman & Elkins, 2002; Foreman, 2005; Westwood; 2003). Research conducted by Neill (2002) indicates that eighty percent of classroom teachers recognise the potential benefits of Learning Support Assistants. This can lead to the development of a strong professional relationship between the class teacher and the LSA, as highlighted in the following comments:

*I serve as another set of eyes and ears for the teacher.... I can get to those kids the teacher can't get to, so I double her reach....I view the relationship as a partnership... (Lytle, 1994, p. 5).*

The increasing use of Learning Support Assistants to support and enable classroom teachers to extend the learning opportunities of students has been a significant development in recent years. As the number of enrolments for students with disabilities has increased in the regular classroom, there has been a similar increase in the need for more LSAs. Students with special needs often require additional personal attention and classroom teachers rely heavily on LSAs to support these students.

With the increasing use of LSAs to support the academic and social needs of students there has been recognition of the need for more quality professional learning opportunities that encourage life-long learning and support the career development of LSAs (Causton-Theoharis & Malmgren, 2005; Giangreco, Yuan, McKenzie, Cameron & Fialka, 2005). As Pearson, Chambers and Hall (2003) caution, the provision of additional adults in the classroom does not in itself ensure

enhanced outcomes for students with special needs. Many factors need to be carefully addressed to ensure adequate effectiveness of the Learning Support Assistant model. The British Department of Education document, *Working with teaching assistants: A good practice guide* (DfEE, 2000), identifies the need to create partnerships with teachers and outlines the main issues as clarifying and differentiating roles, ensuring participation in planning and high quality input, developing clear feedback mechanisms, teacher guidance with behaviour management issues, information sharing regarding student needs and encouraging frequent reviews of the team relationship. The benefits of joint professional development programs for teachers and teacher assistants are now becoming more recognised by education authorities given the positive effects these have towards building effective learning and teaching teams within the school (Pearson, Chambers & Hall, 2003).

To assist in overcoming these known difficulties the Catholic Education Office (Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn) has introduced a role statement for Learning Support Assistants (formerly known as Special Needs Teacher Assistants). This allows a more flexible approach for classroom teachers where the Learning Support Assistant is employed to work at the direction of the teacher within the class, where a student or group of students with a recognised disability is included, rather than specifically assigned to an individual student. Teachers and Learning Support Assistants also work together as part of a team to implement tailored individual learning programs for students with special needs.

## **Development of a Professional Development Certificate Program for LSAs**

### **Context and rationale**

The recent increase in Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) employed by the CEO (Canberra and Goulburn Archdiocese) resulted in a clear need for quality professional learning experiences that reflected the emphases and ethos of the broader Catholic school community. This provided the impetus for collaboration between the Catholic Education Office and Australian Catholic University in Canberra in the design of a university-accredited one-year Professional Development Certificate Program (PDC Program) for the Learning Support Assistants (previously known as Special Needs Teacher Assistants). From its inception, the developmental process included contributions from staff from Australian Catholic University, the Catholic Education Office and representatives from the Learning Support Assistants, who expressed

strong support for the development of the Program. The Program was implemented in 2003 and has now been offered for over four years.

The development and design of the PDC Program was underpinned by the strong belief that effective learning outcomes for students with special needs will only be achieved when all members of the school support team clearly understand the specific needs of students, possess the necessary pedagogical strategies to motivate and promote learning, and understand their important role in ensuring all students are engaged in meaningful learning experiences within a whole school inclusive environment.

### **Program Outcomes**

By the conclusion of the Professional Development Certificate Program it is expected that Learning Support Assistants will:

- develop an understanding of the ethos of Catholic schools and the special needs policy and procedures adopted by the CEO and other regulatory bodies;
- gain an understanding of the organisation, general teaching and learning strategies, and the dynamics of the classrooms in which children with special needs will be included in the Catholic and other education systems;
- develop an awareness of the nature of disabilities;
- understand and become proficient in assisting with the basic management strategies that are appropriate to educational settings in general, and to those that cater for children with special needs;
- develop communication and interpersonal skills that will enable them to interact successfully with teachers, parents and other professionals; and
- acquire instructional skills that will enable them, under the direction of the regular class or special needs resource teacher, to assist in the provision of successful learning experiences for the children with special needs.

Prior to the implementation of the PDC Program, the Learning Support Assistants completed two full-day professional development programs offered in consecutive years. The first course focused on the introduction of theory and the practice of inclusion. The program content included a brief overview of suitable approaches for supporting students with special needs. During the first program, the LSAs were required to explore their role statements and the manner in which these were implemented in schools. In the second program, the LSAs developed an understanding of learning processes, including cognition and thinking skills, and explored the relationship of these to effective learning. The second program also included the study of a range of teaching and learning strategies designed to cater for the specific learning needs of students.

### **Selection process for entry to the PDC Program**

To gain entry to the Program, the LSAs were required to submit a short written application including:

- Evidence of having completed the Special Needs Teacher Assistants' Course A and B
- A verbal refereed report from the Principal of their school
- A written Statement of Purpose, including:
  - Reasons for applying for the program
  - Contributions as a team member in their Catholic school
  - As a Special Needs Teacher Assistant, how they had assisted students in the inclusive classroom
  - The way in which they had supported the work of teacher(s) in creating effective learning environments for students with special needs?

### **Program Structure and Curriculum**

The Professional Development Certificate program consists of four modules of study:

- Towards an inclusive Catholic educational community
- Special needs and effective learning

- Creating productive learning environments
- Literacy and numeracy for children with special needs

The PDC Program is offered over a one year period with two modules being presented in each semester of the academic year. Each module requires 18 hours of contact time and is presented during one full weekend session plus one full day. Any participant not currently working as a LSA is required to complete a practicum.

The four modules focus on the development of a range of skills and understandings relevant to the enhancement of more effective and inclusive classrooms. Although the content in each of the four modules has been developed around specific foci the PDC Program should be viewed holistically with an emphasis on the relationship between theoretical and professional considerations that stimulate thinking and encourage a deep approach to learning. The assessment tasks are designed to promote independent and self-directed learning through the completion of a variety of focused tasks and development of a Professional Portfolio. Through the adoption of a reflective approach to learning, the LSAs are encouraged to build on their previous experiences and further develop their personal and professional strengths and interests within the context of their school communities. The content of each module is presented in a variety of teaching and learning strategies and active engagement in the learning process is encouraged through group discussions, workshops, role plays, and cooperative learning activities. ACU and CEO (Canberra and Goulburn) staff work collaboratively in the presentation of each module alongside guest presenters where appropriate.

### **Program Evaluation**

At the conclusion of each module a formal evaluation is conducted to ascertain the participants' overall level of satisfaction with the teaching and learning sessions, the content focus of the workshops, and the level of congruence between the Program and expectations. Results collected over the four year period in which the PDC Program has been offered, have been consistently positive in terms of overall satisfaction with ratings in the 4-5 range of a 5 point scale. Suggestions related to requests for additional information or Program improvement are always carefully considered and modifications made where appropriate.

## Reflections on Learning

Any new learning experience can be accompanied by some anxiety and a few challenges, especially if the formal learning process has been interrupted for many years. As highlighted by one LSA, this feeling can be quite strong:

*'We turned up on our first day feeling like a kindy class on their first day at school (now we know how they feel). It was reassuring to see a few familiar faces (all looked as scared as me) and also to have the support of staff from the CEO.*

From the LSAs' responses regarding the way in which the Program assists them in their work in schools, it is clear the Program impacts considerably on their learning and development of confidence, as shown in the following comments:

*It will broaden my thinking and outlook, which hopefully will benefit everyone concerned.*

*Greatly, a new found confidence in my ability as a LSA and that I do have a lot to offer.*

*Has made things clearer, therefore has made me more confident*

Responses related to the Program focus provide evidence of the appropriateness of the content to the specific needs of the LSAs, who consistently rate the specific areas or topics as very relevant to their work, interesting and stimulating. As one LSA comments:

*I found ALL of Saturday's lectures fantastic. I went home feeling so positive and had the biggest adrenaline rush. Ask my kids!*

*Sunday was also very good in that it was easy to see that so much of what we do in terms of supporting all children is interconnected.*

*And others:*

*Very beneficial and thought provoking for my work.*

*Inclusion, and I also found the computer work and referencing good.*

In terms of how the Program might assist the LSAs in other ways, the following responses were presented:

*In my life – dealing with change and understanding that it brings on other changes*

*My research skills and seeking information will hopefully improve.*

An important aspect of the Program is the development of LSAs networks and professional relationships that will assist in building a strong community of learners who are able to support each other outside the formal Program. As the following comments testify:

*Great weekend, really enjoyed the lectures and videos and of course the company.*

*The networks and friendship are great.*

Building leadership capacity within the Catholic educational community also remains a priority. In an extensive review of literature related to quality teaching and school leadership, Watson (2005) highlights the changes that have occurred over the past two decades in the way in which researchers have conceptualised educational leadership. From models that link leadership to people in positions of authority, in particular school principals, there is now greater emphasis on 'studies of whole school change that emphasise the need for leadership to be distributed among many members of the school community' (p.59). From this perspective, LSAs play an important role in effecting change through the cumulative effect of the many small changes they make while building more inclusive learning environments.

## **Conclusion**

The evaluative feedback and reflections provided by the LSAs suggest the outcomes of this PDC Program are being realised, including the development of an awareness of the nature and extent of disabilities, a greater understanding of current policies and procedures, an extended range of targeted strategies, and improved team building and communication skills. Implemented in 2003, the Program continues to support the professional learning needs of Learning Support Assistants within the context of their school environments, and through the development of a wide range of skills and understandings relevant to the enhancement and promotion of more effective and inclusive classrooms. The maintenance of a Professional Portfolio supports the ongoing learning process and the integration of theory and practice.

The initial concerns expressed by some Learning Support Assistants when they first re-engage in formal learning soon dissipate as they become more confident. The development of life-long learning skills and increase in confidence of Learning Support Assistants as a result of their participation in this Program are significant.

School communities hold high expectations for all involved in the development of effective inclusive environments for students with special needs. An effective inclusive environment aims to engage its members in frequent, purposeful conversations involving students, families, all school personnel and community members working to 'construct learning, to document accomplishments, and to adjust supports' (Ferguson, 1995, p. 282). Further, there is general acknowledgement that Learning Support Assistants play an essential role in this process. This collaborative initiative by the Australian Catholic University and the Catholic Education Office (Canberra and Goulburn) has proved successful in supporting this finding and providing leadership opportunities for all participants. The positive effects of this joint PDC Program have worked effectively to build community and connect teachers, Learning Support Assistants, schools, the Catholic Education Office and the University to support the development of more socially just and equitable outcomes for all students within an inclusive learning environment.

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