

# **An innovative approach to personalised planning and self-determination for students with special needs**

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## **Introduction**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century curriculum is increasingly characterised by an emphasis on human needs and the development of the whole person. (Holistic Education Network <http://www.neat.tas.edu.au>) Holistic, local and universal worldviews underpin teaching and learning strategies that are contextual, collaborative and flexibly delivered. This leads to the potential for meaningful learning to be transformative and creative. It has been suggested by Loudon, Chan, Elkins, Greaves, House, Milton, Nichols, Rohll, Rivalland and Van Krayenoord (2000) and Mitchell (1999), that over the last decade there has been a paradigm shift in the way we see service provision for students with disabilities and learning difficulties. These Australian and New Zealand commentators argue that there has been an international shift away from categorising students in terms of their disabilities to making judgments on their needs for educational support and to a greater concern for ecological factors. Increasingly there is a focus on students' strengths and potential when barriers to learning and participation are removed.

Interest in personalised planning as a vehicle for identifying these strengths and barriers comes from fields such as: disability, learning difficulties/learning disabilities; gifted learners and behaviour, while others such as Jenkins and Keefe (2002) and Phillips, Prue, Hasazi and Morgan (2000) have suggested its potential value for *all* students. Teaching and learning styles, curriculum content, methodology and assessment can then be appropriately matched to individual student's strengths and needs. The process of inclusion is enabled by legislation, however, Deschler, Schumaker, Harris and Graham (1999) and Algozine and Yssledyke (1997) agree that inclusion will not be successful unless a range of supports is put in place. In practice, one of the strategies that support inclusion, is that of 'person-centred' planning (Morningstar, Kleinhammer-Tramill and Lattin 1999). Jenkins and Keefe (2002) believe that personalisation of learning has the potential to become 'the cornerstone of school renewal', indeed, 'the basic grammar of schooling' leading to practices that are inextricably related to quality of life (Morningstar et al 1999).

## **Historical perspectives**

The concept of person-centred planning in special education is not new. Over a hundred and thirty years ago, in 1866, Dr Edouard Seguin discussed personalising education for learners with special needs. Dr Seguin wrote that: 'the individuality of the children is to be secured, for respect of individuality is the first test of the fitness of a teacher. [Personalised planning] will secure the sanctity of true originality against the violent sameness of that most considerable part of education, the general training' (1907 p 26).

This was a plea to include the notion of personalised planning into teacher training so that uniqueness of the learner could be accommodated. Dewey acknowledged that learners' needs differ and many years later this philosophy of education in the USA had a profound affect on educators. Dewey wrote that each child is 'entitled to equal opportunity of development of his own capacities, be they large or small in range, each has needs of his own, as significant to him as those of others are to them' (Abernathy, 1959, p 254).

In recognition of this, educators began using a number of strategies to meet the individual needs of learners. Schrag (1996) included among these strategies: team teaching, practices for determining strengths and weaknesses, and acknowledgment that learners have different learning styles. Dewey's ideas and approach to education have been given a fresh perspective by those who currently follow the paradigm of the constructivist theory (Goddard, 1997). The notion that difficulties in accessing and participating in the curriculum result from mismatches between the student and the learning environment (Chan and Dally in Louden et al 2000 following Wiest and Kriel 1995) highlights the need to develop a person-centred planning process whereby issues surrounding this mismatch may be addressed and rectified. Meighan 1999 makes the point strongly: 'uniform approaches to all, are intellectual death to some' and includes personal learning plans as an element in his vision of much needed educational reconstruction and reform.

## **Legislation**

Initial legislation, such as Public Law (PL) 94-142, the Education for all Handicapped Children Act (1975) was developed in the United States of America. This Act was the first step to mandating the responsibility of educators who were required to include students with special needs in curriculum planning (Webster & Came, 1996). This was enabled through the Individual Education Plan (IEP) process. The term IEP was used to refer to a plan for curriculum, social adjustment, vocational education, physical education and adaptive behaviour related to special education and related services (Rodger, 1995). In 1990, the Individuals with Disabilities

Education Act (IDEA) (PL 101-476) not only retained the IEP, but expanded its scope to include 16-year-old students in transition from school.

In Britain, as a result of the Education Act (1993), schools are required to follow a national Code of Practice that provides a range of structures and processes designed to support children and students who have a wide range of learning needs. One example that can be found in the Code of Practice in Britain requires that schools consider how they involve students in planning processes.

In Australia, the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) was developed in 1992. This act reflected shifts in international legislation and policy. Implementation of the DDA has resulted in non-compliance penalties for direct and indirect discrimination in all walks of life including education. The DDA legislates against discrimination relating to students with disabilities and learning difficulties. The DDA recognises that students learn differently and may require personalised planning in order to access, participate and achieve in the curriculum.

Focusing with in South Australia, the inclusion of children and students with disabilities has been facilitated by the Students with Disabilities Policy that was written in 1991. A key action of this policy was the Negotiated Curriculum Plan (NCP). The NCP was first developed in South Australia in 1991 and then revised in 1997. Learners eligible for the NCP were those with a 'physical, intellectual or sensory impairment and/or disabilities in communication and language. These students would have been referred for special education support by the psychologist or speech pathology service' (Students with Disabilities Policy, Education Department of South Australia, 1991). The NCP documented curriculum access and participation needs and services that underpinned and supported learning.

## **The Negotiated Curriculum Plan**

One of the early influencers of the initial NCP was June Bigge (1989), working from America. Bigge advocated that learners with disabilities needed to access curriculum that was describable, accessible, achievable, assessable and powerful. Prior to the first NCP in 1991 there was little documentation of children/student involvement in the key learning areas, little accountability and the curriculum did not necessarily empower learners with disabilities to excel prior to that.

Therefore, the first NCP, which was developed after the implementation of the Students with Disabilities Policy, supported the documentation of curriculum access and participation needs. The rationale for this policy was that: 'All young people in South Australia have the right to gain through the public schooling system, a broad balanced education that will prepare them for

effective participation in society' (Educating for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, 1990). Among this group of young people were learners with disabilities who required support in order to access and participate in a broad balanced curriculum.

The priority at that time was to ensure that students with disabilities were able to access the valued curriculum. Therefore, the Negotiated Curriculum Plan (NCP) was developed. The NCP provided a framework for the identification of barriers and necessary supports for student access and participation.

In 2000, the need to review the NCP was identified because of imminent policy changes in the education department in South Australia. These included the rewriting of the Students with Disabilities Policy (1991) and the 2002 implementation of the 'South Australian Curriculum, Standards and Accountability (SACSA) Framework' for all learners <http://www.sacsa.sa.edu.au/splash.asp>. Currently, the Students with Disabilities Policy and Support Services are under review. It is intended to increase the scope of this policy to include children and students as well as learning difficulties/disabilities. This is reflected in the name of the new document, the Negotiated Education Plan (NEP).

## **From Negotiated Curriculum Plan to Negotiated Education Plan**

Research into a range of national and international IEPs found that there were many consistent elements such as the need for a planning document that would incorporate: the strengths and needs of the student; a simplified format; accountability; and educational relevance. Other common aspects involve including and valuing parents and students in the process, the importance of simple jargon-free language and a clear process checklist.

These elements were confirmed in the findings of the South Australian NCP focus groups, conducted in 2000 as part of the continuing research and school community consultation process. The revised planning tool was developed from researching national and international literature and conducting a series of 33 statewide focus groups.

The focus groups were discretely composed of educators, parents, students and agencies as key stakeholders in the process. Data from the focus groups was developed into a set of recommendations that called for an electronic version and sign-posted the need to further incorporate and value the contributions of all those involved in the process. A number of focus group participants believed that children and students were underrepresented in the NCP meetings and rarely had the process explained to them. Participants also believed that there was not enough student involvement in the NCP process.

Focus group participants wanted the product written in jargon-free language so that the process of developing plans could be simplified, with less paperwork. They suggested a CD ROM format with graphics that would reflect learners' needs and interests. A strong emphasis on the knowledge and the value of parents' contribution was also requested. Participants reported that the product should allow access to information and resources parents would need – both in English and in community languages.

The findings from the literature review and focus group research were used to develop an electronic planning resource renamed the Negotiated Education Plan (NEP). The recent launching of the NEP in South Australia focused attention on the importance of personalised planning for children and young people with special educational needs.

### **What is the Negotiated Education Plan?**

The NEP is designed particularly for those groups of students who need individualised programs to help them achieve learning outcomes. It also provides assistance for teachers adapting the curriculum to meet their students' needs. In South Australian government schools, approximately 6% of students have disabilities and a further 18% have other learning difficulties. The NEP provides particular support for these students, however it can be used as an individual planning support for all students if required. NEP records will be linked to Achievement SA: a statewide database for reporting achievement levels.

The NEP is a user- friendly way of developing personalised education plans for students. It has been produced as a CD-ROM package that supports parents and students to collaborate with teachers. Users can negotiate individual learning programs, set goals, record achievement and track learning over time. The NEP uses web-based technology to access a wide variety of information sources and web access to agencies that can assist the planning process and provide support for schools and families. Disability organisations, as well as parents and teachers find the package useful and indeed, the web based access to government and non-government organisations, available through the NEP itself facilitates improved communication and joint planning between service providers and their clients. This is important because of the increasing incidence of diagnosis of disability and learning difficulties reported by most countries of the world.

There are other advantages of using CD ROM technology. Approximately 25-30% of students in South Australia government sector change schools frequently. The NEP can provide detailed learning information, electronically, immediately on transfer. Similarly, complex information

about students with multiple needs is readily available. In addition, the electronic nature of information used in the NEP supports 'on line' delivery of services through distance education technology.

A final innovative feature is that the package uses graphics with humorous and positive depictions of ability. It helps users identify student strengths and takes a very positive view of disability and learning difficulties. It has an emphasis on what students can do and motivates them to engage in planning for achievement.

### **Target groups for the Negotiated Education Plan**

The NEP has three target groups. First, it caters for all students who need an individualised learning program. The NEP was first used for/by students with physical, sensory, intellectual and language and communication disabilities. However, the NEP was found to be so useful and innovative by both educators and parents, it was taken up for students with learning difficulties, gifted learners, distance education students and Aboriginal students. Next, the NEP was designed for use by parents to work with teachers in developing learning programs for their children. NEP material has been translated into 12 different languages and provides sources of information and support for indigenous communities. Finally the NEP targets teachers. It provides a set of planning tools and ways of obtaining information that are easy to use and allow teachers to plan individual programs and monitor progress effectively.

### **Benefits of the Negotiated Education Plan CD-ROM**

The profile of students with disabilities in South Australia has lifted and teachers and parents are reporting much greater satisfaction with the achievement of students requiring individualised learning plans. A particular strength of the NEP is its ability to demonstrate progress and accountability for students for whom achievement was not thought possible and who had previously been excluded from the core curriculum. Significantly, relationships between representatives of non-government disability organisations and educators have improved as a result of the involvement of those organisations in the development of the NEP. A major benefit of the development is that the method of monitoring and reporting student achievement used in the NEP is influencing the development of learner achievement software that will be used by all schools to report the achievement of outcomes. The NEP has also led to changes in student data management systems used across the education department.

The NEP can be easily adapted to any educational setting. At a recent Australasian Senior Educational Administrators Conference it was proposed that the NEP be developed as a national concept. and planning for this project has begun. The Australian Science and Mathematics

School has requested approval to use the NEP as a planning tool shell that incorporates their own information. The Enterprise and Vocational Education section of the South Australian education department wants to take a similar approach and build a transition portfolio for students moving from education to vocational training.

### **Participant Comments**

A teacher commented that 'you have to build in more chances and opportunities for the students to get involved, because at the moment I don't see that they get much involved in the NCP at all'. One parent commented that '15-year-olds have the right to know what we are talking about and be involved in it'. Involving learners in the planning process may assist in engaging children or students if they have been part of the negotiations. The new NCP will encourage the involvement of children and students.

One of the senior students that took part in the focus groups commented that until three weeks before when the researcher had contacted the school to ask for participants, he had not known that he was on an NCP. He said that he would have liked to have been part of the process from at least year 7 so that he could know what was going on and have input. He remarked that 'it is our education and we are the ones who know more about what we need because it is actually us who it is affecting'. Involving students in a process that focuses on their strengths and identifies the barriers to learning, enables schools to provide appropriate, personalised opportunities for students to reach their full potential (Horrocks 2001).

### **The Negotiated Education Plan and the Department of Education and Children's Services**

In South Australia, education is delivered and managed locally. The Department of Education and Children's Services in South Australia (<http://www.dete.sa.gov.au>) employs 36,000 people and has a budget of \$1.8 billion. Planning and goal setting occurs at the school level, but it occurs within a system wide accountability framework. The NEP acknowledges this important aspect of the work of schools by providing direct links to the South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability (SACSA) Framework. The NEP helps to ensure that all students, particularly students with disabilities, are included within that framework.

### **Benefits and barriers to personalised planning**

Identification of the benefits and barriers to personalised planning as a vehicle for inclusion focuses attention on the responsibility of systems to provide for the needs of individuals. This perspective foregrounds the sociocultural aspects of individual's learning problems in contrast to traditional approaches which tended to focus on the deficits of the learner rather than the

strengths (Eber and Nelson 1997, Morningstar et al 1999, Louden et al 2000). The UK Index for Inclusion (2000) similarly highlights the value of a model in which barriers to learning and participation are seen to arise through an interaction between students and their contexts. Personalised planning is able to help identify and support the inclusion of individual needs within a particular context and may even contribute to *changing* that context. Branson, Miller and Branson (1989) highlight the importance of context by stating that: 'the problems are historical, social and cultural and the solutions lie in the transformation of attitudes through the transformation of relationships' (p15)

### **Benefits**

Personalised planning offers the potential to build relationships and connections, thereby enhancing students' coping style, self-esteem, internal locus of control and problem-solving (Beardsley et al 1988 in Linke 2001).

### **Mentors and the importance of student achievement**

Successful personalised planning provides supports toward the development of self-regulation as suggested by Crozier, following Vygotsky, (1997) with a supportive figure acting in the role of mentor. The mentor is then able to assist home and school to work together to build resilience that will in turn enhance success.

The literature suggests that to build resilience, at least one good scholastic achievement and good support from family is required (Rutter 1985 in Linke 2001). Schools can have a useful influence by encouraging contributions, decision making, positive feedback, positive discipline and ways for dealing with mistakes and failure (Brooks 1994 in Linke 2001) as well as genuine partnership between parents and professionals (Brendtro et al 1990 in Linke 2001 and Horrocks 2002).

### **Personalised planning should reflect classroom practice**

Van Krayenoord, Elkins, Palmer, & Rickards 2000 recommend that a personalised plan, such as the IEP or NEP, is used as a living, working document that reflects classroom practice and is reviewed and changed as the needs of the learner change. It would also seem appropriate that changes to the IEP or NEP document should regularly occur as a result of research and policy changes and feedback from all participants including students who can become leaders in the planning process.

### **Student involvement**

Benefits of including students are outlined by Hapner and Imel (2002), who describe the outcomes of student-led IEPs or NEPs as encompassing increased enthusiasm and new levels of

partnership between students, families, administrators, and mainstream and special education teachers. Hapner and Imel (2002) indicate that outcomes of the process are likely to include:

- greater student self-determination skills
- increased understanding of students' learning needs
- heightened student knowledge about their own learning differences, learning styles
- useful accommodations
- self-advocacy skills including an awareness of laws, rights and accommodations
- greater teacher respect and involvement.

At one US secondary school, Montpelier High School in Vermont, personalised learning plans (PLPs) based on students' strengths and goals have been found to enrich the educational experience of *all* students, not only those with disabilities (Phillips et al 2000). A powerful element in the process is the initial meeting in which students meet with their teachers and parents to talk about the young person's dreams, aspirations, fears, concerns, strengths and needs. Students' strengths are clearly articulated. Teachers reported seeing students in new ways, parents and teachers viewed the process as a way to establish positive relationships between home and school and students were aware that their voices were being heard and their personal goals being addressed.

### **Barriers**

Historically, proposed ideals have not always translated into practice (Smith 1990, Rodger 1995 & Horrocks 2001). Lytle and Bordin (2001, p40) remind us that 'barriers to the IEP process are well documented' and include issues such as finding time to meet, dealing with communication styles, different perspectives and varying understanding of the issues.

### **Time and student strengths**

Phillips et al (2000) noted that finding time to prepare for, participate in and advise in the sessions was often an issue. They also call for the 'often routine processes associated with the annual mandated IEP meeting to reflect a more holistic and strengths-based perspective.'

### **Teacher training**

Adelmann and Taylor (2001) assert that teachers are not being taught the fundamentals of how to help young people with behaviour, learning and emotional problems. To underscore this, Lytle and Bordin (2001) quote a comment from a parent who said that 'almost any discussion about one's child raises protective emotions that are not present in other types of meetings. ...Staff need to be respectful of that' (2001). Smyth, Hattam, Cannon, Edwards, Wilson, and Wurst,

(2000) and Adelman and Taylor (2001) also agree that teachers need to learn how to 'enable' learning by addressing barriers to learning and teaching, especially those factors leading to low motivation for schooling.

### **Teaching self-advocacy and self determination skills**

Not only do teachers benefit from being taught how to address behavior, learning and emotional problems, it is also important to equip young people themselves with the skills for self-advocacy and self-determination. Unless these skills are taught gradually from an early age, argue Morningstar et al (1999), students' involvement in planning may be superficial and may result in Student's disengaging form learning.

### **Student voice-is it heard?**

Student voices have traditionally been excluded from debates and decisions affecting their lives. The recent 'voiced research' conducted by Smyth, J., Hattam, R., Cannon, J., Edwards, J., Wilson, N. & Wurst, S. (2000) with young school leavers highlights the importance of talking with students about their learning needs. As part of the senior secondary subject *Study Skills*, the students in one school were asked to identify what helped and what hindered their learning.

### **Students' comments**

Students commented that they benefited an individualised approach that focused on different ways of learning, organization and time management. They also indicated that they found it difficult to work with teachers who did not understand their difficulties in learning and were not easy to approach. Many of these students had not previously had an avenue with which to express the frustration and sense of powerlessness that arose from not being able to communicate their needs to teachers and have them listen. An example of this is contained in the quote below, from an essay written for the Study Skills subject by a young woman with an intellectual disability.

*Teachers try and help me by giving me less work than the other students in the class. They given me more time and spend a lot of their energy trying to explain stuff to me. I don't like this because I feel different. The teachers also get angry with me because they have other people to help as well as me.*

Another student with a learning disability who had attended many schools wrote about what it was like to be continually taken out of her regular class for literacy and numeracy interventions which made her feel 'dumb'. She had not felt confident enough to speak up and request that she stay in her regular class. An issue such as this could be deal with in a personalised planning meeting where students were encouraged to 'find their voice.'

## **Student Retention**

Schools have the capacity to extend and develop the student wellbeing by promoting social and emotional growth. This is assisted by the creation of positive learning environments and frameworks such as the NEP. Learning and behavioural strategies can then be supported at the classroom, whole school and community level helping to address mismatches between individual needs and the learning environment.

In their study, *Dropping out of High School, the Role of School Organization and Culture*, Lee and Burkam (2002) argue that it is possible for schools to 'push students out' particularly those who exhibit academic and social risk factors, even contributing to their behaviour difficulties (2002). This argument is underscored by Smyth et al (2000), in their report *Listen to me I'm Leaving*. Positive social relationships can create powerful incentives for students to come to school, even those who report that schoolwork is difficult and expectations are sometimes hard to meet. Collaborative planning can provide a supportive structure to facilitate greater student retention for at risk students.

## **Collaborative planning**

Personalized planning is underpinned by an emphasis on collaboration. The key features of collaborative planning as identified in the literature are that: it is community-based, tailored to meet the needs and identify the strengths of learners and families, and the unique values, strengths and social characteristics of learners are built upon. Also of importance are family access, voice and ownership, flexible funding and processes that are developed and owned by the community (Eber and Nelson 1997).

An example of collaborative planning from the USA is Eber's *Wraparound Process*. Wraparound is an approach to planning and implementing child and family centred services and supports that was originally designed for learners with emotional problems (Eber & Nelson, 1997). Wraparound planning depends on blending natural supports with traditional services, for example, parents or caregivers as partners, community mentors and respite providers (Eber and Nelson, 1997). The holistic approach to the Wraparound Process is mirrored in the South Australian Curriculum, Standards and Accountability (SACSA) Framework <http://www.sacsa.sa.edu.au/splash.asp>.

The inclusive principles of SACSA are underpinned by a holistic approach that incorporates cross cultural and community perspectives, equity issues, the fostering of the individual's

potential and accountability. The SACSA framework is based on the constructivist theory, which cannot be ignored in relation to education plans for learners with disabilities.

### **Constructivism**

Constructivist learning is described as a process where new meanings are constructed in the context of the learner's current knowledge. It is aimed at the enhancement of individual learners' personally meaningful knowledge, not curriculum mastery (Reid, Kurkjian & Carruthers, 1994; Goddard, 1996; DETE, 2000). Constructivism has the potential to enhance the relevance of education for learners. Therefore, a personalised education plan based on the constructivist theory may have the benefit of being seen to be more relevant, beneficial and inclusive by educators, parents/caregivers and learners. Personalised education plans should reflect high expectations for students.

### **High expectations**

If educators and parents have high expectations for students with special learning needs, their learning will be interpreted differently. When all teaching proceeds on the basis of planned high expectations then learner achievement will reflect this (Solity, Deavers, Kerfoot, Crane & Cannon 1999). Student involvement in setting their own goals in the IEP process has also been advocated by McGahee-Kovac (1995), Imel (1999), Hapner (2000), and Hapner and Imel, (2002). The importance of this is stressed by Zickel and Arnold (2001), who argue that once students have learned that they can set goals and identify strength-based strategies for themselves, they can become effective self-advocates. Such students are actively involved and own their own learning.

### **Conclusion**

Involving the learner, caregiver and teacher (as well as any other relevant personnel) in a partnership, can be powerful way to facilitate greater involvement and motivation for all participants, as well as providing support. Many young people, along with their parents or caregivers, teachers, behaviour support workers, psychologists, psychiatrists and youth workers have found that many positive outcomes can result from the personalised planning process (see appendix) The vignettes included there highlight how a personalised approach can contribute to school and community renewal by enhancing the ability of systems and schools to accommodate and even celebrate individual difference and diversity in learning, leading in turn to more positive outcomes for individual students.

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## APPENDIX I

### **Vignettes**

In order to convey a sense of the diversity and uniqueness of the learners' experiences, a range of case studies drawn from metropolitan and country South Australia are included.

Vignettes include the stories of:

Alex	a year 10 student with multiple severe disabilities without speech or movement
Josh	a year 8 student with dyslexia
Penny	a year 6 student with intellectual disability and cerebral palsy
Stuart	a year 10 student with learning difficulties
Tan	a year 8 student with Reactive Attachment Disorder, Central Auditory Processing Disorder and a learning disability
Sam	a highly gifted year 8 student who has ADHD and Asperger's Syndrome
Tammy	a gifted year 11 student with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome and dyslexia

### **Josh- a year 8 student with dyslexia and high intelligence**

Josh has particular strengths in understanding how historical movements have shaped modern times. He is passionate about history, is a very able reader and sophisticated user of technology. He has major handwriting difficulties however, and finds it hard to get his ideas down on paper in any sort of logical sequence.

Josh had been refusing to go to school. The teachers had their own views about why he was not attending school, which related to their idea that he was lazy. When asked directly what he would like to do, he said without any hesitation, that he wanted to go back to school. However, he didn't think the teachers understood how frustrating it was to be in the gifted learner category in some areas but have very weak skills in literacy and handwriting.

With this knowledge, it was possible to identify strategies with Josh that would support his return to school. These included developing a Teaching and Learning Plan which documented his strengths, areas of difficulty, recommended alternative teaching and assessment strategies, agreed upon goals and to work through this with teachers, gradually incorporating more and more of their own suggestions of strategies they used which proved successful. It was decided to trial the use of a small battery operated computer (Alphasmart), which was a far less expensive option than a laptop and was also lighter and much easier to take from class to class.

### **This was the catalyst for change!**

Arrangements were made with the school to set aside time and computer so that work done on the small device could be downloaded for editing and printing. This process was an extremely valuable one, and one that was appreciated by the young man. His father told me that he had been impressed at the interest in his situation and the time taken to work through issues, so much so that felt motivated to put in his own efforts towards making a successful return to school. He has also agreed to be part of a small research project to trial to value of the Alphasmart device in the secondary classroom, along with another student in an area school.

Josh's case was complicated by the fact that his older brother had also experienced attendance difficulties and his father had been out of work for some time. Through the NEP process of including and supporting his parents in meetings and information sharing, Josh has been assisted to access, participate and achieve in the curriculum, reflected in higher grades and increased satisfaction with learning. This has led him to begin to think more optimistically about his future possibilities. His last English essay was graded 19/20!

### **Stuart – a year 10 student with learning difficulties**

Stuart has excellent social skills and is able to quickly establish rapport with children and adults. He is very skilled in any 'hands -on' area such as Physical Education or Woodwork.

Stuart, a year 10 student was facing exclusion due to a series of escalating incidences of 'refusing to following instruction.' His mother phoned the Learning Difficulties Team in desperation, saying that she knew he was not just misbehaving and that there had to be a reason. She said he taught year 2 children to swim in the VACSWIM program, that he had a job at the local service station and he got on well with people of all ages. At school Stuart had been in trouble for the whole year because he refused to carry his diary and to present it for signing. His mother told me that she had always wondered if he might have a learning disability. I suggested she set up an assessment with a psychologist who also administered a handwriting test. It was found that 99% of young men his age would have faster handwriting, plus he had dyslexia.

This meant that the was not able to get homework and assignment details written down in his diary in the allocated time and therefore was prepared to risk time-outs, rubbish duty, suspension and even exclusion, rather than to make this obvious. Stuart's deep-seated shame and difficulty in expressing his needs led to outbursts of frustration and anger and contributed to the negative view most teachers had of him. They knew he was intelligent and assumed he was lazy. This case is an excellent example of important it is to look deeper than the surface behaviours to find out what is really happening.

The process also gave him an opportunity to be supported to reflect on his own experience, how it affected his behaviour and to see that other ways are possible. Gradually he began to trust his teachers again, his work output increased and he was no longer getting into trouble about his diary as teachers gave him home and assignment information in the form of handouts.

Stuart's teachers were assisted to apply Special Provisions for curriculum content, methodology and assessment since he was a student who 'learnt differently'. This enabled Stuart and his teachers to concentrate on what he was capable of learning rather than focusing mainly on what he was able to write down on paper in a limited amount of time.

**Tan – a year 8 student with Reactive Attachment Disorder, Central Auditory Processing Disorder and a learning disability**

Tan has skills in art, drawing and design, as well as Maths and French. Tan was adopted from an orphanage in Vietnam, when he was 6 years old. His psychiatrist recommended that the parent contact the Learning Difficulties Team for support in working with the school towards a greater understanding of his particular difficulties. Research into RAD was necessary as this is a relatively new field and information needed to be synthesised and presented in a form which busy educators were able to access quickly.

Tan, now in year 8, and his caregiver and teachers met with a member of the Learning Difficulties Team to develop a teaching and learning plan as an ongoing dynamic process to support the 'fit' between a young person with such special needs and the school. RAD has such an effect on Tan because an early attachment to a caregiver did not take place due to abuse and neglect in the orphanage

This has led to a general lack of trust and security. Educators needed to be made aware of the importance of managing their own emotions as their reactivity can trigger intense feelings of fear and anxiety. An example of this occurred recently when a teacher seized Tan's work and threw it across the room because he was late to class. As a result, Tan became extremely violent at home. Clearly working through issues with teachers and documenting Tan's situation and his need for a particular kind of learning environment may lessen the likelihood of a similar situation re-occurring. Tan's teachers have begun giving him very structured homework with clear instructions as he tends to become confused about what he is to do. This has lessened some of the tensions at home. Teachers are positive about working with Tan and enjoy teaching him.

**Sam – a highly gifted year 8 student who has Asperger’s Syndrome and ADHD**

Sam has skills in abstract reasoning and a love of applying these skills to real, challenging projects.

Sam was facing exclusion due to his challenging behaviours until it was decided to try setting up an alternate program through the teaching and learning plan process. It was intended that this program would build on his significant strengths in problem-solving, Maths and Physics through making and launching a rocket. Weaknesses in social skills and literacy could be addressed at the same time as he would be interacting with others and preparing a PowerPoint presentation. Staff were assisted to make the appropriate modifications to assessment in order for him to be successful, build his confidence and encourage his participation.

The principal (who has a background in Physics and an interest in rockets) said he although he was spending the same amount of time with the student, it was now a positive, meaningful and enjoyable learning experience for both of them. For the first time in Sam’s schooling, a relationship was being established. This commitment to trying an alternative approach communicated to Sam that he was valued and welcome at the school, even though his behaviour at times made it very difficult for school personnel and even his peers. The teaching and learning plan process facilitated the school to accessing support. At times, this took the form of simply listening and providing encouragement to school personnel.

Sam is soon to lead a rocket launching activity on the oval, which all the Middle School students (and teachers!) will attend.

### **Tammy a gifted year 11 student with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome**

Tammy is gifted in the areas of visual and spatial skills and is a hands-on learner.

Tammy was attending school sporadically and refusing to complete any work. Her foster mother contacted the Learning Difficulties Support Team when she became concerned that the next suspension could result in exclusion. Tammy had significant difficulties accessing the curriculum due to her memory and concentration problems relating to having been born with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome. This led to the development of behavior problems.

As part of the teaching and learning plan process she was asked what she thought might help her to learn. Tammy clearly indicated that it was helpful when teachers sat down to explain a task using a pleasant tone, and reminded her when work was due. It was also helpful when teachers tried to understand her, didn't put too much pressure on her, did not judge her, repeated instructions and reminded her pleasantly to stop talking and focus on her work. She knew she did not have the self-discipline to stop herself and needed this support.

Tammy also had a part-time job at the local hairdresser's but wanted to stay at school to complete at least the first year of senior schooling. Personnel from the learning difficulties team, the school, Tammy and her foster mother met and decided to contact a local employment agency that specialised in young people with disabilities and learning difficulties. The agency agreed to work with Tammy to prepare her for a possible hairdressing traineeship at the end of the year. Tammy decided she was going to continue her voluntary work in the school canteen. The district disability coordinator provided support for the school to incorporate this into the curriculum. As a result, school staff had a greater understanding of Tammy's strengths and learning needs. These had not been in evidence prior to the negotiations.

The teaching and learning plan process accommodates this kind of linking with community and agencies as part of transition planning.

**Alex, a year 10 student with multiple severe disabilities – no speech or movement**

Alex has skills in writing poetry with the aid of a switch and software; he has an excellent sense of humour and people skills. He loves working with words and learning about history from an interesting and dynamic teacher.

Alex was originally enrolled in a special school in another state in Australia. Because the family moved to Adelaide, South Australia, where there is a philosophy of inclusion, Alex chose to enroll at his neighborhood school. The first step was to ensure that he was able to access classrooms, toileting issues were addressed and mealtimes managed. All of this needed to be documented using the Negotiated Education Plan (NEP).

Alex represented particular challenges for his teachers. He needed a stimulating curriculum due to his unimpaired intellect and receptive language ability. His lack of speech and movement meant that he communicated through lip and tongue signing and was in a wheelchair.

Through the NEP process he was assisted to write poetry, journals and assignments, and to answer tests through computer software activated by a switch placed beside his chin. A lengthy process of assessment by outside agencies resulted in appropriate choice of software and switches to facilitate curriculum access and participation.

The teachers also needed support through an extensive disability awareness program provided by a statewide service specialising in physical impairment. Teachers were also assisted to modify programs for Alex's particular needs.

Parents were closely involved in all aspects of decision making.

This was a highly successful example of collaborative planning that had positive spin-offs for everyone involved.

**Penny, a year 6 student with intellectual disability and cerebral palsy**

Penny has strengths in word processing and is interested in people. She has written many pieces of personal, biographical writing about her experiences growing up with a disability. One powerful piece described how she had been encouraged to give up trying to walk with her sticks and calipers and to concentrate on 'being a good sitter' when she was quite young as she regularly broke her limbs through falls.

When Penny was initially enrolled at her new school, the necessary changes to the physical environment were identified through the NEP process. The Crippled Children's Association (CCA) gave advice as to the changes that needed to be made. They also recommended that the Royal District nurse would attend the school daily at recess time to teach Penny independent toileting skills.

Penny needed a tray on her wheelchair that would accommodate a laptop and her teachers were given assistance to modify her work so that she was able to be successful. Support from CCA was accessed so that she could participate in physical education classes with her peers. Awareness raising sessions about physical disabilities were provided for the students in Penny's class. What could have been a difficult transition to a new school was made simpler and more successful through the NEP process.

Penny has been assisted to find work experience locally, using her word processing skills. An outside agency focusing on employment for people with disabilities is gradually preparing her for her transition to supported employment.

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