***Promoting Research-based Practice by Teachers of Students with High Support Needs.***

Australian Association of Special Education Research Award to **Jennifer Stephenson and Mark Carter of the Macquarie University Special Education Centre in collaboration with Frank Fogliati,** **Principal of Black Mountain School, ACT.** The research data collection was carried out in 2009 and 2010.

***Publication details***

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***Background***

Black Mountain School, enrols secondary students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities and other disabilities. The school identified programming, assessment and reporting as key areas for and embarked on a major improvement project to bring a consistent school-wide approach to program and instructional planning and documentation as well as assessment and reporting. Regular professional learning sessions, supported by coaching and mentoring were instituted progressively to introduce the changes.

Researchers have established a set of good practices that characterize quality teaching for students with severe intellectual disability and these practices have been endorsed by Australian special educators. Included are practices such as regular data collection on student performance on individual goals and objectives, regular review of data, and the use of data to amend programs and objectives. Necessarily associated with data collection and program implementation are practical and technically adequate student goals and objectives and clearly documented program procedures.

The staff development program at Black Mountain School embodied these practices in their school-based program. If such a localised, small scale professional development program can be successful it would provide a model for other settings that may, like Black Mountain School, have particular professional development needs related to the nature of their students.

***Study Aim***

The aim of the study was to evaluate the quality of programming and planning documentation over a four-year period, beginning in the year before the professional development initiative began. This would provide one objective measure of any changes in the quality of documentation over time.

***Study Procedures***

Once ethics approval and approval of the study by the ACT Department of Education had been obtained, school staff choose a sample of 12 students from across the school who they thought would be likely to have programming documentation available for 2007 through to 2010. Parent and teacher consents were obtained for the use of the documentation. All the relevant documents, such as individual learning plans, were collected electronically and de-identified.

***Data Coding and Analysis***

In order to evaluate improvement over time, we developed a quality coding system for elements of programming including long and short-term goals; instructional objectives; program procedures and monitoring procedures. We coded every element in every program for the four years of documentation, drawing on all the available documentation to extract as much information as possible. Each element was given a numerical score to allow comparisons from year to year.

A sample of programs was coded by two people to establish the reliability of the coding. Inter-coder reliability, calculated as agreements divided by agreements plus disagreements multiplied by 100 was over 80% for all elements.

***Results***

**Long-term Goals**

In 2007, the mean number of goals per student was 7, but this decreased over the study reflecting the introduction of programming guidelines during 2007 to encourage teachers to focus on a smaller number of goals and program for them more carefully. This reduction in the number of long-term goals was reflected in a reduction in the number of short-term goals and program procedures. Although scores increased from 2007 to 2010, this increase was not statistically significant.

**Short-term Goals**

Short-term goals increased in quality and the difference was statistically significant.

**Objectives**

There were no objectives in any of the documentation reviewed until the final year, 2010 and then the overall mean score was 10.5 out of 14.

**Program Documentation**

There was an increased score from 2007 to 2010 which was statistically significant.

**Monitoring**

No systematic records were found.

***Conclusion***

Overall the results show that there was an increase in the quality of documentation over the years of the project. Objectives were only included in the 2010 documentation, and this inclusion is a major improvement in program documentation. Clear instructional objectives are generally regarded as an essential component of an ILP and allow for high-quality monitoring of student progress.

The school executive and staff are to be commended on the results of their professional development and school improvement programs. The school executive is dedicated to implementing research-based practice in the school and to supporting and mentoring staff to achieve their goals. This significant improvement has been achieved despite the constraints of regular staff turn-over and of staff who have no qualifications in special education or experience with students with severe disabilities.