

Supporting Teaching Practice

Introduction to Literacy,
Communication and Social Skills for
students with Down syndrome and
Learning Disability

Christchurch

Evaluation report

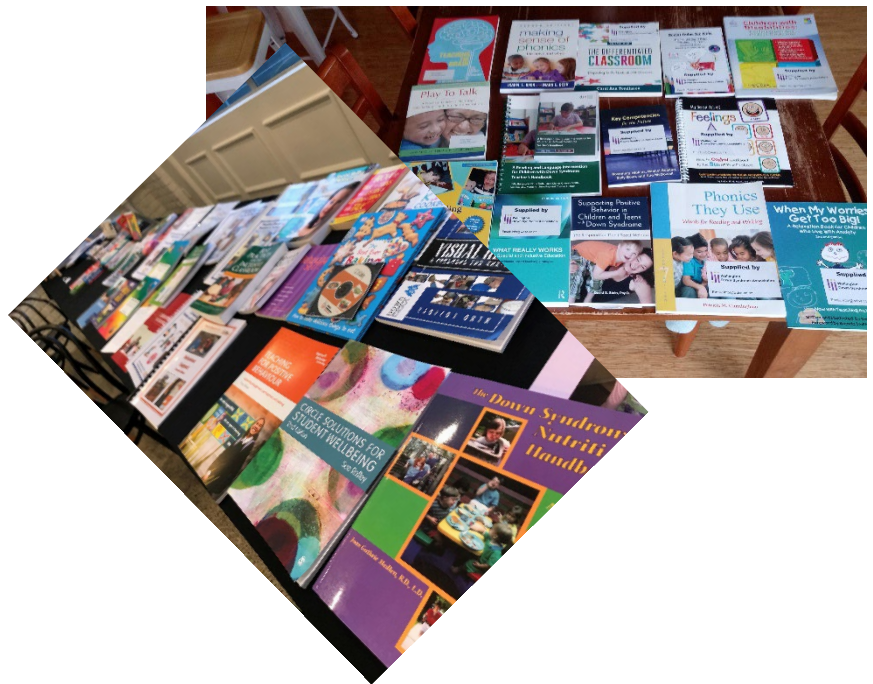
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For:

Canterbury Down Syndrome Association

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Background

Down syndrome is one of the few conditions associated with intellectual disability and speech and communication difficulties. There are an estimated 14,300 students with intellectual disabilities in New Zealand schools. Down Syndrome International, an established Research and Development organisation, reaches out to the community of those with intellectual disabilities, termed learning disabilities in New Zealand. Due to changing data collection processes in New Zealand, child disability data is unclear, with the last full child disability survey conducted in 2013. However, published data consistently states that 25% of school children have learning support needs, and 58% of those have learning disabilities (Education Counts, 2021; Children's Commission, 2022). These data are substantiated across data sets, showing consistent trends in the New Zealand data. This means children with an intellectual disability comprise 63%, and those with a speaking disability comprise 64% (Statistics New Zealand, 2006; 2014).

Currently, the specific student population group with Down syndrome and learning disability identifies poor educational achievement, poor health, frequent changes of schools, less educational choice, less inclusion in regular mainstream classes, limitations in taking part in school activities, and less involvement in out-of-school activities compared to the regular student population. These students are at higher risk of leaving school without qualifications and are less likely to have employment opportunities.

The Thriving at School Report identifies several key issues (Education Review Office, 2022):

1. Lack of Understanding Among School Leaders:

- Many school leaders and boards do not fully understand their legal obligations to disabled learners, despite robust legislative expectations.
- There is no national tracking of progress for disabled learners.

2. Teacher Confidence:

- Many teachers lack confidence in teaching disabled learners, especially those with complex needs requiring significant adaptations.
- A significant proportion of disabled learners and their whānau are not satisfied with the quality of education provided.

3. Utilization of Guidelines and Tools:

- Although the national curriculum and assessment framework is flexible, it is not always tailored to the needs of disabled learners.
- Guidelines and tools for disabled learners are not well-aligned or easily accessible and are rarely used by teachers.

4. Partnerships with Learners and Whānau:

- There is insufficient involvement of disabled learners and their whānau in planning their learning.
- Few schools have effective processes for gathering feedback from disabled learners and their whānau, and some whānau are not aware of their child's educational rights or how to raise concerns.

In Christchurch, there are 62,207 school students in 144 schools, and in Canterbury, there are 100,864 students in 292 schools, with 25% of these students requiring learning support. In Christchurch, 15,551 students require learning support, with 815 receiving Ongoing Resource

Scheme (ORS) funding, an unchanged figure from 2020. Across the Canterbury region, 1,273 students receive ORS funding, indicating a significant shortfall.

To address the gap in specific educational resources and provision for students with Down syndrome, the Canterbury Down Syndrome Association ran the Supporting Practice evidence-based programme and STPDS Education Resource Pack©. This regional initiative introduces Literacy, Communication, and Social Skills through a two-day seminar series, aiming to enhance educational outcomes for these students.

Overview of the programme

Date	Topic
11 June 2024	Introductory Seminar Dr Maree Kirk
	Introduction Specific learning profile for students with Down Syndrome & Learning Disability <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disability profile in New Zealand – experience for children • Down syndrome and development- what do we know • Specific learning profile of strengths • Implications for interventions and education within home, school and community • Evidence based practice, what the research tells us
	Inclusive Classroom Practice
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Universal design for learning guidelines • Learning contexts • Roles within the inclusive context • Interactive seminar
	Literacy, Communication & reading
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speech and language in the school years • Vocabulary and grammar, language and communication • See and Learn Resource • Reading and language intervention • Reading and writing: Research evidence • Inclusive Literacy Design
	Key Competency Thinking, Understanding symbols and text
12 June 2024	Getting on with Social Skills
DAY 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visually mediated communication • Social communication and language • Schedules • Home /school schedules and help with communication and behaviour
	Key Competency Participation and contribution
Module 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interactive seminar- brainstorm approaches • Learning contexts • Social skills and behaviour: Research evidence • Social inclusion strategies for success
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conversation Starters • Social Stories
	Key Competency Participation and contribution
	STPDS Education resource pack ©

Introduction to Evaluation

Evaluation Approach and Data Collection Tools

To comprehensively assess the impact and effectiveness of the professional development seminars, four data collection tools were used:

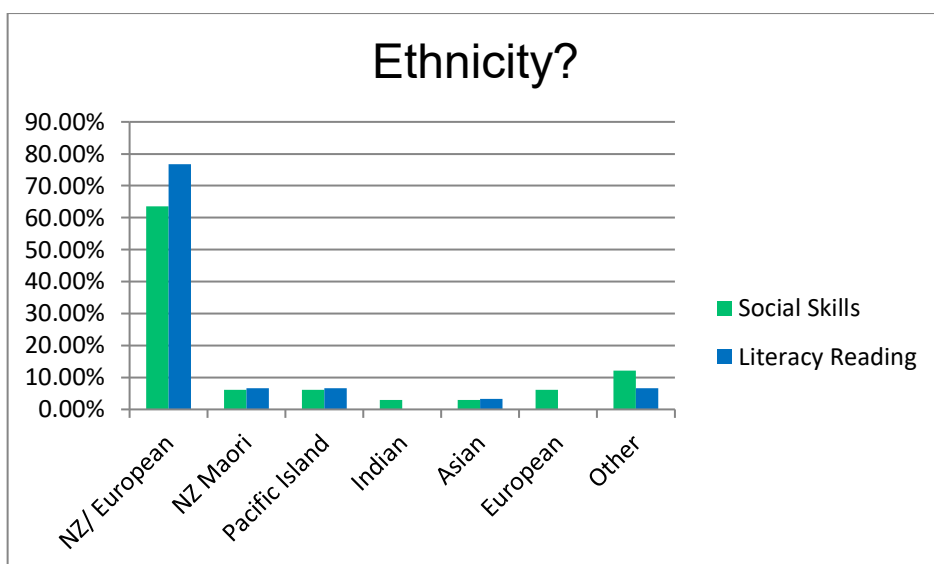
- Survey Monkey
- Open-ended responses from group work
- Photo record
- Statistical information

The primary method of data collection was through two Survey Monkey surveys administered after each seminar programme day. The participants provided rich data, that is, some participants or participant groups wrote a page response to the open-ended questions that asked participants for their perspectives on actions following the professional development seminars. These tools and demographic details provide a robust framework for evaluating the effectiveness and relevance of the professional development programme.

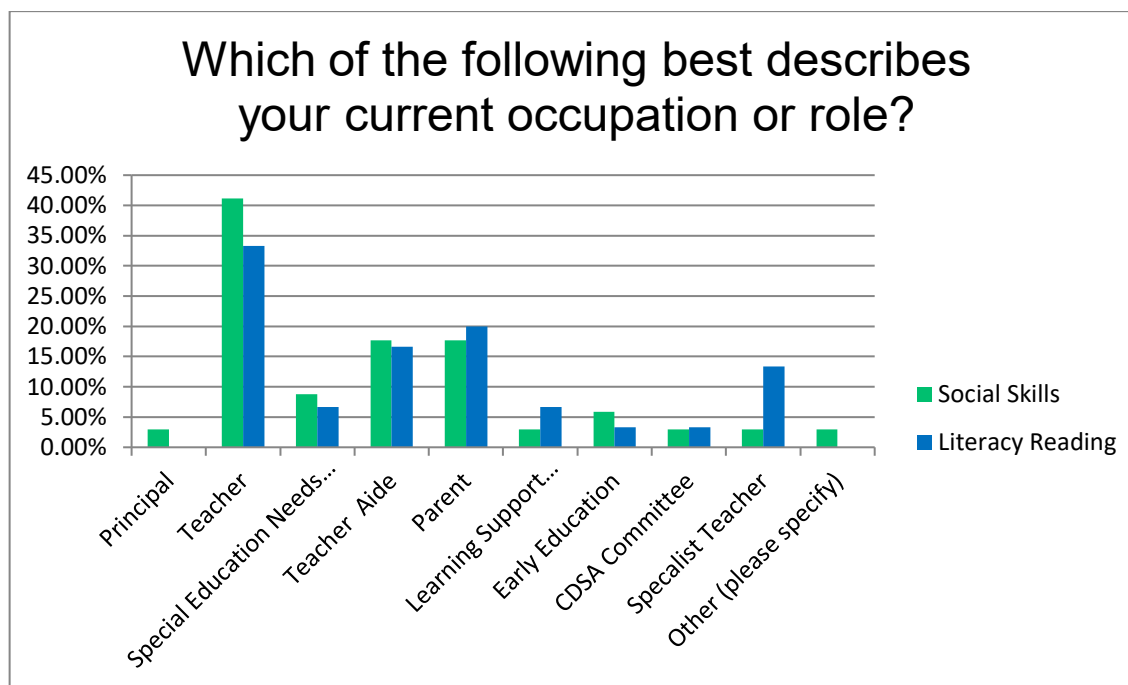
Attendance

The seminars saw positive engagement with 57 registrations. There composition of the schools in attendance was well covered. There were two Early Childhood Centres, seven primary schools including full primary schools Years 1 through to Year 8, one Intermediate School, Year 7 and Year 8 students, one school with students Year 1 through to Year 10 and seven Secondary Schools with students ranging from Year 1 through to Year 13, Year 7 through to Year 13 or Year 9 through to year 13. Of the schools attending there were state schools and integrated schools with Christian Charter.

The participant demographic was predominantly female and New Zealand European, reflecting a specific subset of the broader educational community in Canterbury. Other ethnicities attending included Fijian Indian, African, USA and Middle Eastern. There was representation of a range of ethnicities and male teachers and parents.



The highest groups represented were teachers, then parents, then teacher aides, Special Education Needs Coordinators, then Early Childhood Teachers followed by Specialist Teachers and teacher for First Talk (Deaf Aotearoa). Of note was that some of participants were in dual roles in education and as parents of children with Down syndrome. All participants were from regular schools and some schools had teams of three to five teachers in attendance for the two days. This highlighted a significant range of teaching positions and a parent from several of the fourteen plus schools represented over the two days.



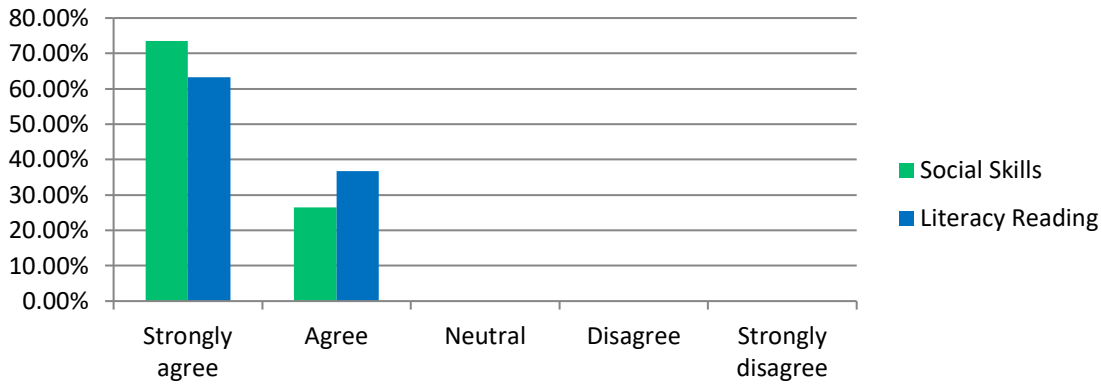
Introduction to Participant Findings

The recent professional development seminar on literacy, communication, and social skills was met with an overwhelmingly positive response from participants. The evaluation results indicate a high level of engagement and satisfaction, reflecting the relevance and effectiveness of the content presented. Participants particularly appreciated the opportunities for discussion, with a notable majority expressing a strong motivation to continue their learning journey. This introduction highlights the key findings from the participant evaluations, demonstrating the impact and value of the professional development provided.

Participant Findings

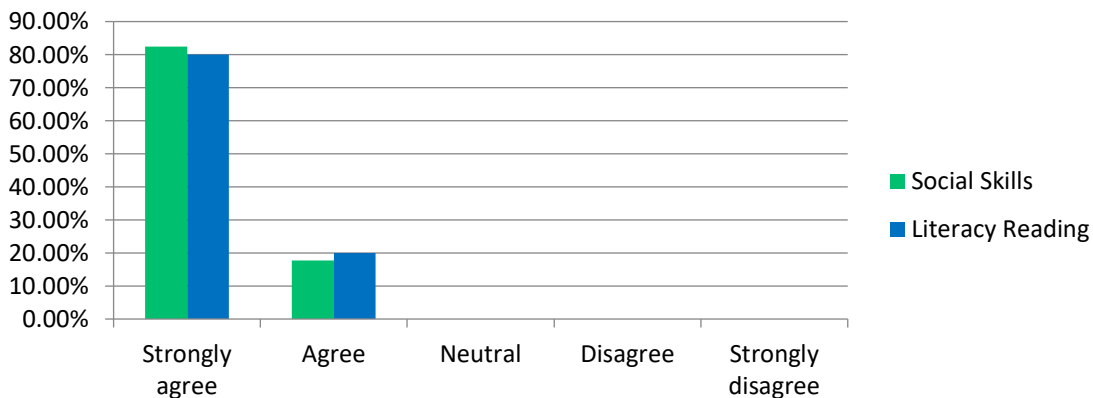
Participants were asked if the literacy, communication, and social skills professional development provided opportunities for discussion. From their evaluation, 31% of respondents agreed and 69% strongly agreed that there was ample opportunity for discussion. Furthermore, 29% agreed and 71% strongly agreed that the presenter motivated them to pursue further PLD/programme opportunities.

The presenter/s motivated me to want to continue to learn within further PLD / programme opportunities

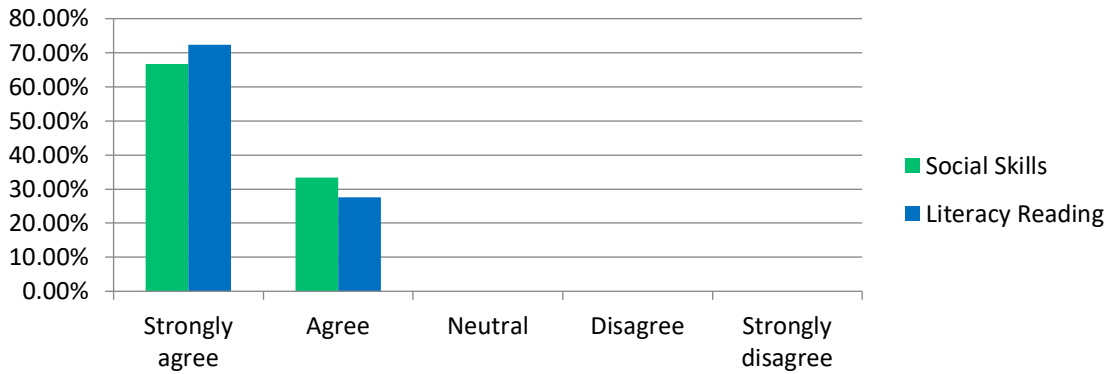


The motivation of the participants was substantiated by their positive responses, reflecting the relevance of the Professional Learning and Development (PLD) to both their work and family life, effectively meeting their needs.

Were the PLD course material and resources relevant to your teaching and learning practice and family life.

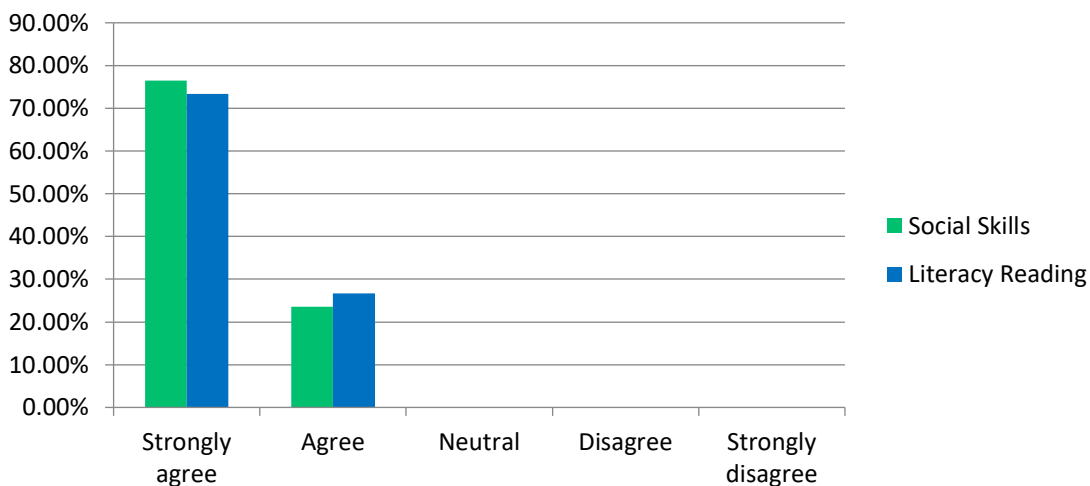


Overall, how would you rate the professional quality of literacy PLD was able to begin to meet your needs or questions?



Participants responded positively to the professional development seminar, highlighting its valuable insights, practical resources, and the opportunity for collaborative learning to enhance inclusive educational practices and to then share these with others.

Will you be able to share ideas and or practices from the introduction to SOCIAL SKILLS/LITERACY READING AND STUDENT PROFILE as worthwhile



Overall Feedback and General Appreciation:

Participants expressed profound gratitude and positive sentiments regarding the seminar.

Many participants thanked the organisers and expressed how helpful and informative the seminar was. The comments highlighted the inspiration drawn from the seminars, especially regarding understanding children with Down Syndrome.

The impact of the Professional Development was noted by several participants stated this was the best professional development they had experienced in their teaching careers. Participants also stated the seminars provided valuable new ideas, particularly for those who rarely can attend professional development seminars. Furthermore, the relevance and timing of the Professional Development / seminar's timing was noted as perfect for those with students transitioning to school. Lastly, of key significance was the number of participants having a collaborative team approach (parent, specialist teacher, teacher aide, and class teacher) was highly valued. Here are some key takeaways:

- **Some Quotes Reflecting and Sharing Knowledge:**

Reflect on my everyday role. Share knowledge.

I have been teaching a long time and am in a senior role and this is the Best PD I have attended in 25 years!! Thank you So much!!

Will take time to reflect and talk to the team that attended. Will develop a to-do list of priorities.

The links and resources were SUPERB - it all related to primary school.

All staff should use this.

I found lots of downloads FREE.

Maree - I loved your passion through your presentation.

What joy ... Arohanui. You have made me SMILE LOTS!! and shed a tear.

Implementing ideas into the classroom for the student with Down syndrome and their peers.

Work on building vocabulary to maintain and have a surge in learning.

So good! Very much so for many students. Helpful for IEP planning. Staff meeting & Team meeting

This is really helpful when meeting with teachers.

This information gives us all a really clear path or direction of where students with DS and learning disability can go.

Bring the parents in and build on their knowledge – really great

Participant Reflections on Sharing Resources and Training Actions Post-PLD

Participants were asked to provide a brief statement on their planned actions to share ideas and/or train colleagues or family following the professional learning and development (PLD) seminars, and the resources received. In addition, several of the participants worked in small groups and gave additional responses to this section of the evaluation. The participants provided rich data, that is, some participants or participant groups wrote a page response to

For participants following the PLD and the resources received, several actions were planned to be taken to share ideas and train colleagues and family members. In literacy, visual prompts and flashcards were introduced to enhance speech and engagement, with team discussions leading to well-prepared, structured programs for Term 3. Collaboration with ORS teachers and TAs facilitated the integration of new literacy strategies, and regular meetings ensured the continuous sharing of resources and notes. Upskilling teacher aides and planning for effective implementation were prioritized.

In the area of social skills, hands-on learning was emphasised, with resources and video clips shared at staff meetings to illustrate best practices. Inclusion was a focal point, with efforts made to develop confidence among teachers to take responsibility for their students. Social stories were used to aid understanding and navigation of social interactions, promoting relationship building among students. Continuous consolidation of notes and sharing of new activities ensured ongoing improvement in social skills education. Overall, these actions fostered a collaborative and informed environment, enhancing support for students with disabilities.

Analysis of the Evaluation Themes

Literacy and communication

1. Enhanced Speech Encouragement

Introducing flashcards and other resources to encourage speech is crucial for literacy development. Structured team discussions and planning ensure that literacy programs are well-prepared, with a strong focus on visual prompts to support learning.

2. Resource Sharing and Collaboration

Collaboration among teacher aides, ORS teachers, and TAs is key to integrating new literacy strategies into the classroom. Expanding resources like SLT and reading assessments, along with providing a resource kit, strengthens literacy initiatives.

3. Upskilling and Training

Confidence in training teacher aides is vital, especially in using visual prompts and flashcards. Regular get-togethers to share learnings and resources foster continuous professional development and the creation of effective literacy tools.

4. Planning and Implementation

Organising staff and team meetings to discuss new literacy strategies is essential for successful implementation. Prioritizing vocabulary building helps maintain and enhance students' literacy progress.

Social Skills

1. Hands-On Learning and High Expectations

Emphasising hands-on learning and maintaining high expectations for all students are central to social skills development. Sharing video clips from PLD seminars at staff meetings illustrates effective practices and reinforces these principles.

2. Resource Utilisation

Utilising relevant resources and free downloads ensures that social skills strategies are well-integrated into the primary school context. Sequencing and sharing notes and slides with ORS teachers and TAs facilitate better implementation.

3. Building Relationships and Inclusion

Fostering an inclusive environment and building teacher confidence to take responsibility for their students is crucial. Social stories help students with Down syndrome and learning disabilities navigate social interactions, promoting peer relationships and inclusion.

4. Consolidation and Continuous Learning

Consolidating and sharing PLD notes with staff ensures a practical focus on inclusion and social skills development. Continuous knowledge sharing and new activities support ongoing improvement in social skills education.

Summary

Participants have committed to taking several proactive steps following the seminars, including implementing enhanced literacy strategies, fostering collaboration among educators, and utilizing new resources and tools. They plan to prioritize structured planning, reinforce social skills through hands-on learning and social stories, and maintain a focus on inclusion. By sharing knowledge and continuously refining their practices, participants are dedicated to creating a more supportive and effective learning environment that benefits all students.

A sample of the quotes

We all get together after PD and share what was learnt and implications of it.

Resources areas and ideas would be shared together with school team

Brief reflection to be put on shared Teacher Drive under relevant topic headings

Will need to work with subject teachers, in helping them to develop confidence to take responsibility for their students & not assume it is all the job of the Specialist teacher & TAs.

Teach them how to differentiate and include students more.

Will take time to look up websites detailed in presentations. We have a school expectation of feeding back to staff so will consolidate notes for school presentation.

Three Key Takeaways from the Literacy, Communication and Social Skills PLD Seminars

Within the evaluation participants were asked to write three key takeaways from the professional learning and development (PLD) seminars, reflecting on the insights and strategies gained.

Analysis of Identified Themes

The data themes reveal the participants benefited from a focused and multifaceted approach to enhancing education, particularly in the areas of literacy, use of resource displayed and available over the two days, social skills development, and communication. Here's an analysis of the rich data into the four themes that emerged:

1. Literacy

The emphasis on storyboards, flashcards, and sight word stories indicates a strategic effort to make literacy development more accessible and engaging, particularly for students who benefit from visual learning. The integration of visual supports and structured Individual Education Plans (IEPs) highlights the importance of consistency and routine in literacy education. This structured approach is essential in creating a predictable learning environment, which is particularly beneficial for students with diverse learning needs.

2. Resources

The theme of resources underscores the importance of having a variety of tools and materials to meet the diverse needs of students. The inclusion of Te Reo Māori materials and multi-sensory approaches reflects a commitment to cultural inclusivity and the acknowledgment of different learning styles. The emphasis on sharing and creating new resources suggests a collaborative approach to teaching, where continuous improvement is a priority. This also indicates a dynamic teaching environment where educators are actively engaged in refining their practices to better support student learning.

3. Social Skills

The focus on teaching social interaction through hands-on learning and group activities indicates an understanding of the importance of experiential learning in social development. Social stories and group activities are effective strategies for teaching social norms and behaviours, which are crucial for promoting inclusion. The emphasis on high expectations and building relationships reflects a

positive and supportive learning environment where students are encouraged to engage with their peers and develop meaningful connections.

4. Communication

The use of visual and auditory prompts, along with the encouragement of gestures as a form of expressive language, shows a flexible approach to communication that accommodates non-verbal students. The focus on vocabulary development through various communication methods indicates a commitment to enhancing students' expressive and receptive language skills. This theme highlights the importance of adapting communication strategies to meet the needs of all students, particularly those with communication challenges.

Summary

The analysis of these themes suggests the participants understood a holistic and inclusive approach to education, where the needs of diverse learners are met through a combination of literacy programmes, diverse and culturally responsive resources, experiential social skills training, and adaptive communication strategies. This approach not only supports academic development but also fosters social inclusion and communication skills, which are critical for the overall development of students.

A sample of the quotes

Inclusion is so important. Opportunity to discuss with others and learn from one another.

Dignity of the student. High expectations. As inclusive as possible.

Social Skills and Interaction, Teach social interaction skills. Invite lots of kids to play groups. Focus on the strengths of DS.

Communication. Encourage social interaction. Teaching Safety with social interactions.

Resources, Expectations, Inclusion - real inclusion.

Social Stories, Universal Design, Lots and lots of Visuals!

Role of the teacher vs Specialist teacher. Many confirmations of positive practice.

Keep having high expectations. Circles resource and appropriate talk.

To start each learning time with something they will succeed at. Take a more holistic approach.

Utilizing available resources, including Te reo Māori materials, concrete examples, and experiential learning methods, makes learning more accessible and engaging.

Building relationships, Positive praise to be very specific - concrete praise. Build stories.

Implementation of literacy and social skills opportunities

Participants were asked to write a brief statement on ideas for implementing the perspective of literacy and social skills opportunities for students with learning disability and Down syndrome following the PLD seminars and resources received.

Analysis of Identified Themes across both literacy, communication and social skills seminar days

1. Enhanced Reading Materials and Group Work

This theme participants emphasised the importance of challenging students with appropriately levelled reading materials while also fostering collaborative learning. By raising the complexity of reading materials, students are encouraged to push their cognitive limits, promoting deeper understanding. The inclusion of group work supports social interaction and peer learning, enhancing both academic and social skills. The use of diverse resources like flashcards, 3D objects, and language tools keeps students engaged and ensures that the learning environment is inclusive and interactive.

2. Visual and Multimodal Supports

Integrating visual aids and multimodal communication methods is crucial for improving comprehension and retention. Visual supports like flashcards and schedules provide clear, structured information that can help students better understand and organize their learning. Multimodal approaches, including movement activities, cater to different learning styles and help maintain student focus. Consistent language use across teaching teams ensures a cohesive and unified approach, which is vital for reinforcing literacy skills and supporting overall learning continuity.

3. Collaborative Planning and Family Involvement

This theme highlights the value of collaboration among educators and the inclusion of families in the educational process. Regular team meetings allow for the sharing of ideas and the development of effective strategies tailored to student needs. Family involvement is key to creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment, ensuring that the strategies used in school are reinforced at home. Consistent, repetitive, and multimodal learning opportunities across all team members help maintain a unified approach, enhancing the effectiveness of teaching.

4. Structured and Sequential Learning

A structured and sequential approach to learning is essential for building a strong foundation in literacy and other subjects. The use of programmes like See and Learn, which break down content into manageable parts, ensures that students can grasp complex ideas more easily. Teaching vocabulary systematically and providing peers with the language and tools to facilitate discussions creates a supportive community that promotes both academic success and positive social interactions.

Summary

These themes collectively suggest participants understood comprehensive approach to education that balances challenging academic content with supportive, inclusive teaching strategies. By incorporating diverse resources, consistent language, and collaborative planning, the educational environment becomes more engaging, effective, and aligned with the needs of all students.

Statements (quote) on Implementing Literacy Opportunities:

Following the PLD seminars and the resources received, participants were inspired to enhance literacy opportunities for students with learning disabilities and Down Syndrome. The approaches included statements regarding the following key strategies:

Employ multimodal communication methods, including movement activities to refocus students and enhance learning.

Incorporate the principles of the See and Learn program, breaking down articles or stories into component parts and teaching vocabulary systematically.

Provide peers with the language and tools to facilitate discussions and offer praise, promoting a supportive learning community.

Involve families in the planning process to create a supportive and inclusive learning environment.

Organise team meetings with teachers, TAs, and specialist teachers to brainstorm and plan effective strategies.

Implementing Social Skills Opportunities a further three themes were specifically recurring within the PLD Insights

1. Inclusion and Social Interaction

Inclusion is essential, requiring not just participation but also meaningful engagement. Effective inclusion involves setting high expectations, respecting students' dignity, and utilizing diverse strategies like social stories, visuals, and tactile methods. Teaching social interaction, particularly for students with Down Syndrome, emphasizes their strengths and ensures they feel valued and included.

2. Resources and Positive Practices

A wealth of resources supports inclusive education, and schools should maximize their use to strengthen inclusive practices. Regular use of social stories can boost social confidence and overall well-being in students. Additionally, fostering a positive environment where both students and teachers receive specific, positive praise contributes significantly to student success and happiness.

3. Role of Teachers and Building Relationships

Teachers play a critical role in creating an inclusive environment by encouraging social interaction, ensuring safety, and maintaining high expectations. Building strong relationships through specific, positive reinforcement and collaborative efforts with parents and specialists is key to a holistic educational approach that supports both academic and social development.

Statement examples:

There are numerous resources available to support inclusive education. Schools should leverage these to build strong, inclusive practices.

Using social stories more frequently can help develop social confidence and happiness in students.

Encouraging a positive view of both students and teachers, alongside specific positive praise, can significantly impact students' success and happiness.

The role of the teacher is pivotal in fostering an inclusive environment. Teachers should encourage social interaction and safety, practice positive reinforcement, and have high expectations.

Building relationships through specific, concrete praise and ensuring students work alongside their peers are critical strategies.

Teachers should work collaboratively with parents, specialist teachers and other staff to provide a holistic approach to education, focusing on both academic and social skills.

Summary

Reflecting on professional learning and development (PLD) insights is important for continuous improvement the participants identified collaborating to develop action plans and adapting strategies based on each child's social needs ensures that interventions are effective and responsive. Advocacy for inclusion is seen as key to developing social skills and overall wellbeing. Emphasising the importance of inclusion to staff and integrating relevant aspects of the PE/Health curriculum can enhance students' social skills and promote a more inclusive school environment.

Participants identified that by implementing these strategies, and the aim would be to create a supportive, inclusive environment where students with learning disabilities and Down Syndrome can develop and thrive socially.

Conclusion

The Professional Learning and Development (PLD) seminars have provided invaluable insights and practical strategies to enhance literacy, communication, and social skills among students with Down syndrome and learning disability. Participants demonstrated a high level of engagement and motivation, reflecting the relevance of the PLD to their work and family life. The interactive seminars facilitated robust discussions, with a significant majority of participants affirming that the seminars offered ample opportunities for dialogue and collaboration.

Key takeaways from the PLD include the effective use of visual supports, the importance of clear and consistent communication, and the utilisation of a wide range of resources to promote inclusive education. Participants expressed their commitment to applying these learnings in their daily practice, sharing knowledge with colleagues and families, and fostering a supportive learning environment.

The PLD seminars have equipped educators and parents with the skills and tools needed to improve outcomes for all students. By continuing to reflect on and implement these inclusive practices, school teams are better prepared to meet reporting and evaluation requirements, support the social and academic development of students, and build strong, collaborative networks within their educational communities.

Next Steps (as supported in the survey findings)

Following the successful completion of the Professional Learning and Development (PLD) seminars, the following steps are proposed to ensure the effective implementation and continuation of the strategies and insights gained:

1. Team Collaboration and Sharing:

- Organize team meetings to discuss and share the notes, resources, and key takeaways from the PLD seminars.
- Encourage ongoing dialogue among teachers, teacher aides, and specialists to continuously refine and adapt inclusive practices.

2. Resource Use and Accessibility:

- Make all PLD resources, including video clips, visual aids, and links, accessible to staff members through a shared platform.
- Explore opportunities to purchase additional resources that were highlighted during the PLD seminars.

3. Professional Development Seminars:

- Schedule follow-up professional development seminars to delve deeper into specific topics, such as differentiated instruction, inclusive communication strategies, and the use of visual supports.
- Consider inviting external experts to provide advanced training and insights.

4. Individual Education Plan (IEP) Enhancement:

- Review and update IEPs to incorporate the new strategies and tools learned during the PLD.
- Ensure that IEPs are living documents, regularly reviewed, and tailored to the evolving needs of each student.

5. Inclusive Practice Implementation:

- Implement the inclusive practices discussed during the PLD across all classrooms, with a focus on maintaining high expectations and providing hands-on learning opportunities.
- Monitor and evaluate the impact of these practices on student engagement and achievement.

6. Parental and Whānau Involvement:

- Engage parents, whānau, and aiga in the implementation process by sharing insights from the PLD and seeking their input and feedback.
- Organise informational seminars or workshops for families to better understand and support inclusive education practices.

7. Building Networks:

- Foster connections with other schools and educators to share best practices and resources, building a local network of support for inclusive education.
- Participate in regional or national forums to stay informed about the latest research and developments in inclusive education.

8. Ongoing Reflection and Improvement:

- Establish a regular schedule for reflective practice, where educators can assess the effectiveness of implemented strategies and identify areas for improvement.
- Encourage a culture of continuous learning and adaptation, ensuring that inclusive practices remain responsive to the needs of all students.

By taking these steps, the momentum gained from the PLD seminars can be sustained and expanded, ultimately leading to improved educational outcomes for students with Down syndrome and learning disability, as well as fostering a more inclusive and supportive school, and home environment for all students.

Thank you for your involvement in this work.

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