**AUTISM HUB - SUPPORTING EDUCATORS - WEBINAR**

**TRANSCRIPT**

- My name is Beth Saggers, and I'm from Queensland University of Technology. The webinar today is going to discuss two Autism CRC funded projects that looked at supporting educators to meet the needs of students on the autism spectrum. At the end of the presentation, we will draw some parallels between the findings of this research or these research projects, and how this might influence the practices that we put in place for our learners in a pandemic.

The two projects that will be discussed are the Autism CRC Early Years Behaviour Support Project, which is now completed, and the Autism CRC Middle Years Behaviour Support Project, which is a follow-up from the early years project, and this project is still in progress. The focus of these two Autism CRC research projects was to trial a novel approach to providing ongoing cost-effective support to educators in rural and remote regions to meet the needs of learners on the autism spectrum in their care. This approach provided both a combination of face-to-face and more remote modes of ongoing support across the school year.

So what do we know about teaching? We know that 21st century teaching is increasingly complex. We know that classrooms are comprised of a diverse group of learners, and this learner diversity makes the contemporary teachers work both multi-dimensional and remarkably complex.

One group of learners within these 21st century classrooms are learners on the autism spectrum, and it is this group of learners that can often present some unique challenges to schools that they often require support with. While it's often stated educators need more professional development or understanding of the needs of the autism spectrum, it goes far beyond that. I like to draw the analogy between educators and carpenters. So, educators are the builders of the educational world, trying to take on board, a range of different viewpoints. Architects engineer drawings, and put them into practice and make them work within their own context.

With this in mind, educators are under enormous pressure to use research evidence to inform how they meet the needs of this particular group of learners. The use of evidence-based practices has been shown to improve student outcomes, but they don't always work with all students, or you need to be selective about what practices you use with what students. As a result, it's critical therefore, that educators are able to understand how they can select and implement best practices with the students they are currently teaching, and that will ensure that they can most effectively meet individual students' needs.

One of the issues that is often faced with trying to implement evidence-based practices, is they often lack social validity. This makes it difficult for educators to translate them into practice. When we talk about social validity, what we're referring to is the acceptability of, and satisfaction with intervention procedures, which are usually assessed by soliciting opinions from the people who receive and implement them.

So in this case, it's about what teachers and educators perceptions are of these procedures in practice. Alarmingly, a recent review of evidence-based practices and emerging interventions that were identified by the National Autism Centre and National Professional Development Centre on autism spectrum disorders, found that only a mere 26.7% of 828 articles cited direct evidence that social validity measures had been used. Meaning that many of these evidence-based practices may have been trialled in clinical settings rather than in educational settings. Two recent Autism CRC funded research projects, that acknowledge the difficulties that teachers experienced both in the complexity of their work, and translating evidence-based practices into their context, are the early years and middle years behaviour support projects.

So some of the things that we know about professional learning, that's to support teachers and their knowledge translation of practices into their context is that professional learning needs to address, specifically address the needs of that cohort of teachers. It needs to be ecologically valid, and be able to be modified to suit the specific context in which they work. It needs to be jointly collaborative, and it also needs to be able to provide them with the opportunity to reflect with others. It also needs to be concrete and specific to their context, and it also needs to take on board the teacher's own experiences and understandings. It needs to address relationships and have understanding of relationships within the context, and be able to be generalised, but also recognise the heterogeneity in the different teacher's needs.

So transforming research to practice in educational context requires a context of supportive and professional peer interactions. It requires an easily accessible, frequent and regular support. Most importantly, it requires this ability to be able to transfer to the real world context, which is often called the reality principle, which is where my analogy before about the educators having to translate the plans of a range of different other people into practice, and that means it's got to be translatable into those real world contexts. It needs to be, where there's work collaboratively, with knowledgeable coaches and advisors, and be able to evaluate the implementation of these practices based on the outcomes that you want to see.

So the two projects we're talking about today, actually focused on supporting professional learning for educators in rural and remote regions. The focus was on increasing their confidence to support students on the autism spectrum within their care, increase their communication and connections between all of the key stakeholders, increase the supportive use of inclusive practices, and promote the social emotional wellbeing, school connectedness, and academic success of the learners involved. and academic success of the learners involved. So the professional learning that we were focused on needed to be contextual, timely, affordable, feasible, and responsive to the needs of the context and the students involved.

So what have we done to date? Across two research projects, one that's now completed, and one that's still in progress, by the end of both projects, 10 rural and remote school communities across New South Wales and Queensland will have been involved, and along the way we will have captured data from the participants about the effectiveness of what we have implemented through our novel approach to the remote support, which we've titled the tele-classroom consultations. So in each school, they've received this tele-classroom consultation assistance across a school year, and the aim being to help them develop the skills to meet the needs of learners on the autism spectrum.

So how was the support offered? As previously mentioned, we've trialled remote support. This sort of telehealth model has been used a lot in the health field, but has had limited application within education. So often this sort of telehealth is considered to be purely online collaboration through different collaborative software and video conferencing tools, but what we've defined tele-classroom consultation as is a range of different options, or technology options, whether that's email, telephone, or video conferencing to provide ongoing support across the school year. The support and collaboration focused on a positive behaviour support focus. It used a conjoint behavioural consultation approach, which I'll discuss in a moment, and it actually focused initially with a face-to-face meeting to get a better understanding of what was required in the individual context, and we'll talk about that a little bit more as we move through the webinar. The biggest and most novel thing about this approach was the flexibility and individualised approach that was taken, and which determined at every point in the project what was done and how that occurred.

So what did we use, what do we define tele-classroom consulting as in this project? So in this project, it was using technological means to provide remote support, and the focus was on a problem-solving consultation approach, which can be defined as indirect support to identify student or students that's delivered by an educator who is supported by a multidisciplinary team. This type of approach is borrowed from psychology. So in the early years, we had individual students that schools had put their hand up to say they would like additional support to help meet their needs. In the middle years, we're actually trying to extend this approach to look at, how do we deliver this problem-solving consultative approach to key stakeholders across the whole school environment, who then support other educators and learners in that setting. The remote support, as I've already mentioned was across a variety of different modes, whether that's email communication, phone calls, video conferencing, software was also used on a regular basis. The type of remote support and the regularity was determined in consultation with the schools and the individuals involved. and the individuals involved, and also took into consideration the participants preferences. So for example, some of the participants were very technologically savvy, but were not keen to use video conferencing software to have remote support delivered in this way, and often would prefer email communication and phone calls with the occasional conferencing. The approach that was taken ensured that it was responsive to the participants' needs and preferences within the individual schools.

So while the projects rolled out, have rolled out very differently in every school that's been involved, there is some framework to the process that was followed. So initially, there's an identification of areas of need. Firstly, for what are the needs of the learner or learners, but most importantly, what are the needs of the educators? What are they highlighting as a priority? What are the priorities of the school that this type of consultation and support can help support across the school year? The situation and the context is examining consultation, and as a result of this needs analysis, priorities and goals for success were determined, and a plan of what's going to happen, and how it's going to happen, and what sort of strategies might be introduced or reinforced are actually developed. So, then it's a matter of implementing and monitoring progress. So often it's the remote support at this point is used to check in with teachers. How they're going? How's it working? Giving them the confidence sometimes to keep trying or keep going with a particular strategy, or helping them to fine-tune what's happening, or maybe decide no, we need to try something else. There's this sort of action research cycle that goes on then it's around checking in, monitoring, reviewing progress, refining, and this constant reflective process to help refine what's happening and how, what supports put in place? How that's delivered? And then what happens at the school level?

So what are some of the outcomes we've discovered so far? Firstly, we do know that this provides a good cost effective alternative to regular face-to-face support. So while the teachers involved say you know, they prefer face-to-face, this was an excellent alternative, and they found that it was as good as that face-to-face in most situations. The importance of having a flexible and needs based approach to support, where the consultation and support that's provided to schools, is flexible and responsive to what their needs are was essential to the outcomes being achieved. This also helped to take on board any context specific information, or influence that might need to be considered in what was done and how it was done. The ongoing consultation in this manner was definitely allowed for this ongoing professional learning for staff, and also we are actually currently trialling the application school-wide. The participants found that it did increase their confidence and reduce their feelings of isolation, and also showed that there were demonstrated improvements in the student outcomes. So for example, one student had been sent home nine or ten times in Term One due to a range of different aggressive behavioural incidents and by Term Four, he was at school all of the time, and there was no recorded incidents of him being sent home. The other thing that this consultation highlighted was the ability to encourage positive collaboration and communication across all key stakeholders, and helped support this notion of everyone being on the same page with what are our goals, and how are we going to meet the needs of this particular student.

So as I've mentioned, one of the key things to the strength of this approach, was the importance of being able to identify the needs, preferences, and strengths of all of the key stakeholders, whether that's the educators involved, the families and the learners. This would influence what was delivered, how it was delivered, with what regularity, and really informed the plan moving forward. It also helped to understand, develop an understanding of the educational context and ensure that the strategies had a contextual fit that gave them validity to that particular context or environment, and help the teachers and educators involved to translate that professional learning into their own practice within their own context. So the needs analysis informed every aspect of the project, how it rolled out, how the consultations with schools occurred, with what regularity, and what mode those consultations took, and with what medium. The multidisciplinary perspective that was used to assess the needs, gave breadth and depth to the information that was gathered from the educators, families, and students, and this approach also helped ensure there was maximum uptake by participants of the inclusive practices suggested through the consultation process. The ongoing nature of the support also helped to increase the likelihood of uptake by participants, because there was this constant fine-tuning and refining of what was done, and how it was done. Participants could talk about the issues they were having with what was being suggested, or how well it was working or not working, and get support and use the consultations as a sounding board or a reflection to help them work out how to move forward.

This approach also helped to determine what support could best meet the needs of the educators, what sort of professional learning might help, and then help them as educators to more effectively support the students and their needs. So what else was it that the educator could put in place? What sort of professional learning was required? What training might need to be provided as part of this consultation, with teacher aides that were involved? What sort of training across the whole school might be needed to help give staff a better understanding? So that when they're in the playground dealing with particular students on playground duty, they had a better understanding of what that student might need, or why they might be doing what they're doing. So the support was flexible and responsive, and it was responsive to a range of different individuals involved and their strengths, preferences, and needs.

The current research, this collaboration with participants meant that we were considering what support was needed, what that support would look like. How will the remote support work best? What platforms would be used to deliver the remote support, how frequent would that support be, and we would often find out there'd be a need to have more frequency of support early on, and then to slowly phase it out as teachers gathered more confidence. Who would be the key people involved, how would there be, how would communication with these key people work? Were there going to be sort of a case manager involved, and how would the information be shared with others in the education community?

One of the most important things to come out of this project, or both of these projects, has been the importance of relationships and connections when you're providing remote support, or any type of support in school communities. It's important to consider how you're going to initiate and sustain communications, connections, collaboration, relationships, and reflection if you're going to be providing or delivering any type of support in schools. It's the foundation to good inclusive practice, and it's the foundation to this sort approach.

So how do these findings inform or possibly inform, what happens in schools in pandemic conditions? As we know globally, pandemic conditions are in place due to COVID 19. This has put a spotlight on teaching and how teaching is delivered in schools, but with that has come an enormous stress on education systems, schools, and families to engage learners in remote ways. As this webinar is being produced, there are some areas of Australia who are still in lockdown and there are school closures around the nation. One of the key issues with this current focus is that, too often the focus is on the technology being the educator, rather than technology as a tool educators can use to deliver good inclusive teaching practices.

It's important to remember when remote support is being delivered, that good teaching is good teaching regardless of the conditions or the modality being used, or the context. Teachers still need support to provide all students with high quality inclusive teaching practice, to help promote the social, emotional wellbeing, of students, and to help prepare learners for their place in this ever-changing, often unpredictable and unstable landscape of the 21st century world, which is evidenced by what we're currently experiencing in these pandemic conditions.

So what are some of the take home messages and the parallels that we can draw? The current research that I have talked about today, focused on supporting educators in rural and remote regions to support learners on the spectrum. But there are parallels between supporting teachers and supporting learners. The current research highlights the importance of elements that are foundational to any inclusive practice, whether it's face-to-face or remote.

So what are they? It's important to identify the needs, preferences, and strengths of the people that you are supporting. It's important then to help that inform what support might work best to meet these needs, and most importantly, it's important whether you're in a face-to-face or remote modality, to consider how are you going to maintain, develop and maintain those relationships and connections with the people you are supporting. Particularly, when it is in a remote format.

So, it's important to continue to provide support to teachers and learners that is responsive to their needs. Particularly, when the modes of teaching are impacted by events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Laying the foundations for this support is, as I've mentioned, the developing connections, building positive relationships, and collaborative partnerships, and most importantly, considering how you will maintain regular, open, and effective communication.

So I hope you found this webinar useful. If you have any further questions, or would like to provide any comments, my contact details are on this slide. Thank you.