The value and impact of professional conversations to support teachers to enact inclusive education

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BACKGROUND

Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD; United Nations, 2006) articulates that all students with disability have a legal human right to quality inclusive education, defined as "...a process of systemic reform embodying changes and modifications in content, teaching methods, approaches, structures and strategies in education to overcome barriers" (United Nations, 2016, para 11).

Regular classroom teachers are at the chalkface of implementing inclusive education. Professional learning and development may support educators to build skills and confidence to provide accessible, high quality, whole class instruction (Brennan & King, 2022).

Each classroom is unique, and it is important to identify and account for factors that influence and impact the implementation of inclusive practice (Woodcock et al., 2019). Effective professional development must therefore be classroom-embedded and context specific (Mockler, 2022).

To support teachers to refine their practice, professional learning must include intense professional learning interactions over a sustained period and have a focus on specific skills, and active learning (Desimone & Garet, 2015; Mockler, 2022).

RESEARCH DESIGN

The Accessible Assessment ARC Linkage project adopted a mixed-methods waitlist design and was conducted in partnership with three Queensland state secondary schools. One focus of the project was a pedagogical intervention with 21 Year 10 English teachers, who participated in two groups.

The Accessible Pedagogies Program of Learning (Graham & Tancredi, 2023) formed one arm of the pedagogical intervention and included multiple touchpoints across a school term (see Figure 1), including fortnightly professional conversations with a research team member (up to four per participant).

Conversations occurred on MS Teams at a mutually convenient time and were audio recorded. Discussion focused on pre-determined topics (Accessible Pedagogies Domains), using structured conversation prompts, which included discussion of the video-recorded classroom observations (viewed by both the teacher participant and researcher) and discussion about target practice refinements in alignment with Accessible Pedagogies. After each conversation, the researcher sent a follow up email summary that included target Accessible Pedagogies practice refinements.

Figure 1

The Accessible Pedagogies Program of Learning
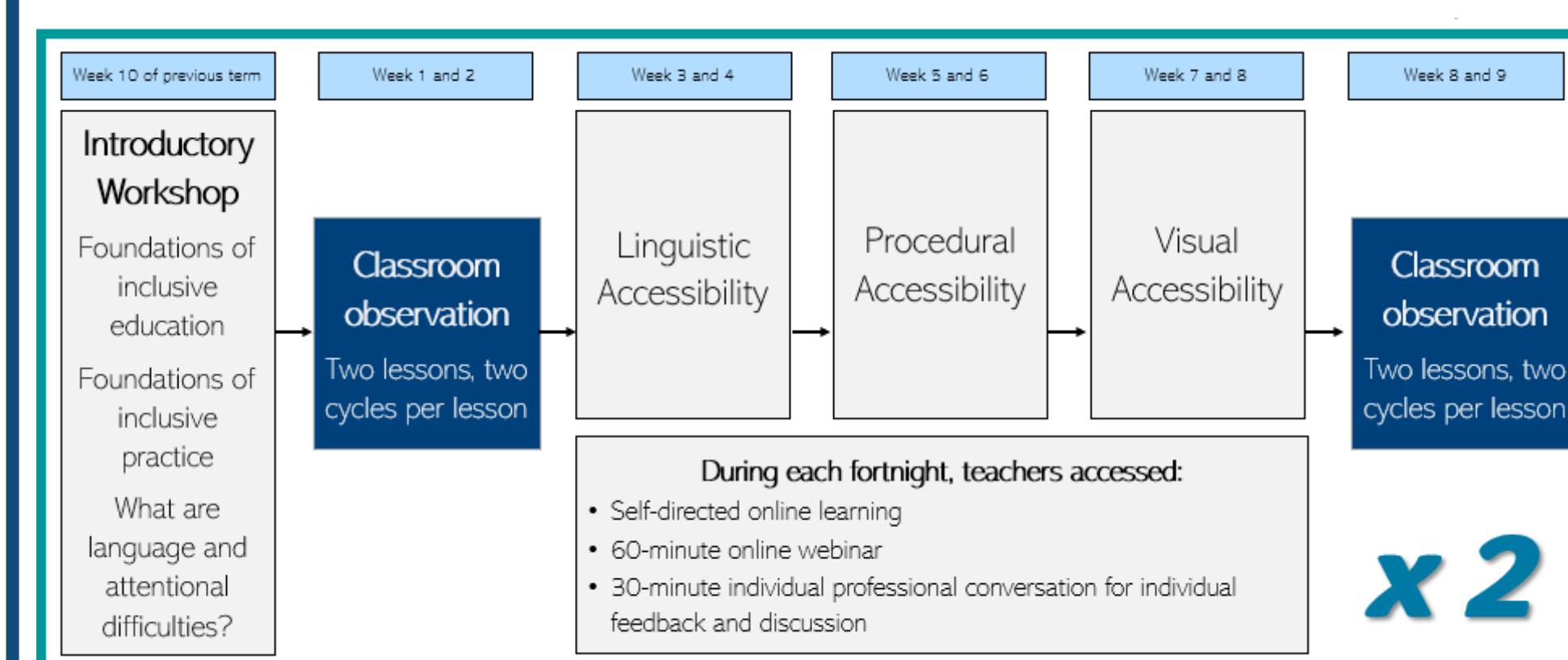
RESULTS

"I really do appreciate it. Having, like, you know, personalised advice and things like that. It's great." (Teacher A3)

"It was really good. It's been an interesting process. Sometimes I felt a little bit overwhelmed and stretched, but no, it's been great." (Teacher C2)

"It's my seventh year of teaching, um, or coming up to being my seventh. And I think it's so important to do things that make you look at the way you do things" (Teacher A2)

Impact

Value

"I guess we started looking at our own practices. For me, it's been really enjoyable to be learning something again and to kind of be forced to reflect. You know, we walk out and look and then we just kind of carry on with our day, whereas now I'm putting in a bit more. Not necessarily more time, but more effort and thinking more about the lessons and really trying to break up the lessons. That first one you filmed, there was just a lot of teacher talk when there would have been a lot of opportunity for the kids to do an activity, like today's lesson. I really tried to reflect on that and get the kids to do stuff, and I have easily kept collecting answers on the board, and I was like, 'No, you do it'." (Teacher C4)

"I've been using the checklist. I try and keep the lessons relatively similarly structured. So, the kids are expecting the same thing every lesson: reading and then a creative writing activity, and then some other kind of activity that's relevant to the task, the assignment, to the content. Um, So there was consistency all through this week, which was really nice to see, and the kids are getting used to seeing that, and they're not asking as many questions." (Teacher B1)

"There just isn't any, like, performance reviewing and, while, it is confronting, like, why isn't there and a performance review? The only thing here is you just set some goals for your performance, and that's it. You get watched once, and then you, kind of you, you get stuck in your ways and no other adults are really there to say 'oh, maybe you should try this' or we don't really get time to see any colleagues. So, it's been, yeah, it's been good. It should be more, like, every teacher has to do something like it." (Teacher A7)

"It's just been really interesting to be able to be very reflective. I guess I reflect on my practice sometimes, but I guess to reflect on it more explicitly and be aligned with certain categories, you know, like with the visual, linguistic and procedural rather than just thinking of a lesson as a whole. I guess it's pretty easy for us to over complicate things sometimes. But, you know, lessons don't always have to be, you know, extravagant. Things that take forever to put together. It's more about, you know, making sure that the right pieces are there for kids to be able to access what you're trying to teach them, because you can come up with a lesson and PowerPoint. But if the kids can't decipher what's on it, you've wasted your time doing it." (Teacher B5)

CONCLUSION

Teachers valued the opportunity to engage in professional conversations, irrespective of years of teaching experience.

Professional conversations are a cost-efficient addition to high-impact professional learning and can foster collaborative, context-specific application of practice refinement.

More research is needed to test this process in primary school settings, with secondary school teachers from other teaching areas, and to test the process of professional conversations at scale.

Interested to learn more? Visit the project website and read a new blog on professional conversations

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ACCESSIBLE ASSESSMENT