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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Supporting Students With Disability: Learning and Support Teachers and Learning Support Teams in NSW Schools†

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Abstract

There are various models for supporting students with disability and their teachers in mainstream schools. In New South Wales, each school has a learning and support teacher allocation and the New South Wales Department of Education recommends each school have a learning support team. This paper draws on in-depth interviews with school staff from 22 schools, including 16 learning and support teachers, 20 class teachers, 25 school executives and other stakeholders. We report here on the role of learning and support teachers and learning support teams in planning, implementing and evaluating adjustments and on the operation of learning support teams. Qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts revealed two kinds of learning support teams: those that focus on a particular student and those that oversee the education and resource provision for all students with disability in a school. Some teams had more of a focus on administration and resourcing, while others dealt more with educational adjustments. Similarly, some learning and support teachers were more involved in administrative and liaison roles, while others were more active in supporting teachers and providing services directly to students. The most detailed descriptions of support were provided by learning and support teachers with special education qualifications.

Keywords: inclusion; support; reasonable adjustments; decision-making; teams; learning and support teachers

As more students with disability are included in mainstream classrooms, education systems have developed different strategies for providing support. Australia, the USA and the UK have differing arrangements, but all have a focus on provision of individualised planning and support and the involvement of specialist teachers. In the USA, students have a legal right to an education that meets their needs and must have a documented individualised education plan developed with families and the student where possible. Schools are likely to have a special education administrator who will oversee special education programs and the work of qualified special educators (Crockett, 2018). Special educators may provide support in resource rooms where students are withdrawn for specialised instruction, or they may provide consultancy and support in inclusive classrooms by co-teaching, for example. Core roles include instruction and design and implementation of individualised programs and supports (Woolf, 2019).

In the UK, schools are also required to make reasonable adjustments in consultation with families and students. Class teachers retain responsibility for students with disability in their class and may receive additional support from teacher assistants or specialist teachers. Each school has a designated special needs education coordinator (SENCO) whose role is primarily administrative in coordinating

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provisions for students with disability, acting as a liaison with families and agencies, and providing record keeping and advice to teachers (Curran & Boddison, 2021; Department for Education and Department of Health, 2015). SENCO positions are typically filled by a teacher who retains responsibility for a class but is allocated time for SENCO work. SENCOs must be qualified or become qualified within 3 years of appointment. It is recommended that SENCOs be part of school leadership teams, but this may often not happen (Smith & Broomhead, 2019).

In Australia, data indicate that around 7.7% of children under 15 have a disability, and of these, around two thirds were in mainstream classes (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). In the state of New South Wales (NSW), it is estimated that around 12% of students in public schools have a disability and require educational support (such as specialised teaching or curriculum adaptations), with the majority (80%) enrolled primarily in mainstream classrooms and the remainder in support classes within mainstream or special schools (Audit Office of NSW, 2016). Under the Disability Standards for Education 2005 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005), Australian schools, like those in the USA and UK, are obliged to make suitable adjustments to help a student with disability access education on the same basis as their peers. Decisions about adjustments should take into account the student's learning needs and be made in consultation with parents/caregivers and the student (NSW Department of Education, 2021). Planning adjustments requires support structures and processes in schools to facilitate decision-making, implementation and evaluation. Although in NSW Department of Education schools class teachers take responsibility for all students in their class, including those with disabilities, these students can also be supported by learning and support teachers (LASTs) and by school learning support (LS) teams (NSW Department of Education, 2021). In addition, schools have additional discretionary funding, such as state integration support funding, allocated to assist with supporting students with recognised disabilities. While this funding is allocated on the basis of enrolment of students with disability who require additional support, school leaders, including LS teams and LASTs, have the responsibility for deciding how funding will be used, with funds able to be spent on additional teachers, teacher assistants or other resources as needed (NSW Department of Education, 2015).

The NSW Department of Education has issued consistent recommendations for LASTs and LS teams (NSW Department of Education, 2021; NSW Department of Education and Training, 1998). The department has recommended that LASTs work collaboratively with the LS team in planning, delivering and evaluating educational programs and supports (NSW Department of Education, 2021). To facilitate this, in 2011, the Every Student, Every School initiative provided a staff allocation for a LAST in every public school in NSW (Rawsthorne et al., 2015) as well as encouragement for LASTs to move from providing individual support to students to providing support to class teachers (Rawsthorne et al., 2015). It was intended that LASTs draw on evidence-based practice to provide specialist help for individual students and their teachers, and would have a role in consulting with families and students during decision-making about adjustments (NSW Department of Education, 2021).

LS teams have been a recommended means of enabling schools to address the different needs of students, including those with disability, for a number of years (NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2013; NSW Department of Education and Training, 1998). It is recommended that LS teams support whole-school processes to coordinate, oversee, monitor and evaluate resource use, educational programs for students and relevant professional learning for staff. In addition, it is expected that the LS team plays a key role in planning for students with disability and additional learning needs, including making decisions about supports. The composition of these teams may vary depending on the needs of the school, but it is recommended that teams include the principal, deputy or assistant principal, head teacher (in secondary schools), classroom teacher, LAST, school counsellor and the LS team coordinator (NSW Department of Education, 2021; NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2013; NSW Department of Education and Training, 1998).

Although teachers and schools have consistently reported difficulties in making adjustments for students with special education needs, such as inadequate support, lack of planning time and lack

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of knowledge and expertise (Audit Office of NSW, 2016; Shaddock et al., 2007), LS teams and LASTs offer a potentially valuable means of support for teachers in planning and implementing adjustments and making decisions regarding resourcing (Datta et al., 2019). However, there has been little research on the practical aspects of how LS teams or LASTs fulfil specific roles within NSW schools to support schools' implementation of strategies to support students in mainstream classrooms (Carlson et al., 2012). In one study, Carlson et al. (2012) interviewed six teachers in NSW and asked about support systems. Only one participant mentioned the value of the LS team in planning and no participant mentioned the LAST. Teachers have reported they found LS teams 'were a useful way to seek advice on disability' (Audit Office of NSW, 2016, p. 23) and noted that LASTs provided advice on the use of teacher assistants. There was concern that, as some LASTs had no additional qualifications, teachers believed they did not have the ability to perform their role.

Given the lack of information about how LASTs and LS teams work in schools and the extent to which LS teams operate in accordance with the suggested guidelines for the NSW Department of Education, it is timely to report on firsthand experiences in schools relating to LASTs and LS teams. This paper draws on data from a larger study that examined decision-making concerning adjustments for students with disability in mainstream classes to describe the roles and modes of operation of LASTs and LS teams in a sample of NSW schools. The specific research questions addressed were as follows:

1. What is the role of LASTs in relation to planning, implementing and evaluating adjustments?
2. What is the role of the LS teams in relation to planning, implementing and evaluating adjustments?
3. How do LS teams operate in relation to other school programs/support systems and which staff are involved?

Method

The data for this paper are drawn from data collected from a larger project designed to explore decision-making processes about adjustments for students with disability included in mainstream classes (Carter et al., 2020). The research was approved by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee (5201600837) and the NSW Department of Education (SERAP: 2016531), and all participants gave informed consent.

Participants

Participation criteria for schools were that the student population included students with a disability as defined by the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005) who required extensive or substantial adjustments according to the Australian Government's Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD) framework. Substantial adjustments means adjustments are made 'at most times on most days' (Australian Government Department of Education, 2019) and can include adjustments to curriculum, instruction, the physical environment and support from specialist staff. Extensive adjustments occur in the same areas at all times and are more highly specialised than substantial adjustments. Schools that had support classes for students with disability were excluded to reduce the possibility that schools would report on students in support classes. A random sample of 800 schools was approached by the NSW Department of Education to participate and 22 schools (18 primary and four secondary) joined the study.

The proportion of primary and secondary schools reflects the proportion of schools across the state. Geographic distribution also approximated whole-state distribution, with 15 metropolitan schools, three inner regional and five outer regional. School size varied from fewer than 50 students to over 1,000.

Schools were asked to nominate a suitable target student and key stakeholders who were involved in decision-making for this student. Stakeholders were invited to participate in interviews, and students

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Table 1. Participants

Participant role	Number in primary schools	Number in secondary schools
Parent/caregiver	18	4
Mainstream teachers	18	2
LASTs	13	3
Qualified or studying for qualification	6	1
Unqualified	7	2
Principals	14	2
Teaching principals	2	0
Executive staff other than principals	5	2
School counsellors	13	1
Teacher assistants	6	2
Itinerant support teacher (vision)	0	1
Students	0	1

Note. LASTs = learning and support teachers.

were invited where school staff believed this was appropriate. Across the 22 schools, 107 stakeholders agreed to be interviewed, with a mean of five per school (range: 3–6; see Table 1). Information about the level of adjustments reported on NCCD was provided by interviewees, with 13 students reported as receiving substantial adjustments and eight extensive adjustments. For one student, different information on adjustment levels was provided by different interviewees.

Nominated students had a range of diagnoses, including autism spectrum disorder (11), ADHD (six), visual impairment (five) and Down syndrome (three). Many students had multiple diagnoses. Apart from an overrepresentation of students with visual impairment, the proportion of students with cognitive, physical and social/emotional disabilities was similar to the state average (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2018).

Instrument

An interview schedule was developed, piloted and refined, with slightly different questions for different stakeholders. Further details about the interview process are available in Carter et al. (2020). Demographic information related to position, qualifications and experience was collected first. As a common approach to the interview, participants were first asked a general question to reduce the risk of leading; for example, 'Can you describe how the decisions about the specific supports and adjustments provided for N. were made?' This was followed, if needed, by more specific probe questions; for example, 'How was the school learning support (LS) team involved?' Interview sections relevant to this study included questions about who was involved in developing adjustments and the role they played, who was involved in implementing and/or monitoring adjustments and who was involved in evaluating the impact of the use of the adjustments/supports. Specific probe questions followed regarding the involvement of the LS team and the LAST in all these areas.

Procedures

Individual interviews were carried out by a trained research assistant, either in person at the school or over the phone. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, with transcriptions member checked by interviewees. Interview length varied between 13 and 75 min ($M = 41$ min).

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Data analysis

For the overall project, analysis was undertaken in three stages using NVivo 11 software (QSR International, 2015). In the first stage, analysis focused on identifying codes related to surface meaning, consistent with a semantic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2013). All interviews from three schools were coded by the research assistant and one of the authors. Coding agreement was 91% based on a sentence-by-sentence agreement. Further adjustments were made to the coding, and the research assistant coded the remaining interviews. In the second stage of analysis, all interviews from one school were examined by one of three investigators to further develop the coding. Of particular relevance to this paper, codes were developed relating to the involvement (or noninvolvement) of the LS team and LAST in developing adjustments or other activities, such as monitoring and evaluation of student progress. During the second stage of coding for the overall project, the investigators held weekly meetings where they reviewed the coded schools and the coding to refine the themes. Finally, in the third stage, the framework developed was applied to all schools and investigators carried out a final coding of all schools, again meeting approximately weekly to discuss the schools and coding. Further details of the methodology may be found in Carter et al. (2020, 2022).

Specifically for this paper, all quotes from interviews relevant to LAST and LS teams that were identified in the third stage of coding were used to develop a descriptive analysis reflecting each school's environment, culture and practices relating to LASTs and LS teams (Kozleski, 2017). There was no broad thematic analysis undertaken, as the aim was to focus on the information provided by the interviewees to develop descriptions of the roles and operations of the LASTs and LS teams, rather than developing themes that might be more removed from the data (Bradshaw et al., 2017; Sandelowski, 2010). The first author reviewed the surrounding material of all quotes initially coded as referring to LS teams or LASTs in the original transcripts to clarify coded sentences and to extract any additional descriptive information. A description of the role of the LAST and the LS team for each school was written based on these quotes. Each description was reviewed by the second author and the few differences were resolved by discussion and further examination of quotes. These descriptions, along with relevant quotes, were then used to answer the research questions relating to LASTs and LS teams.

Results

LS Teams: Roles

Of the 22 schools, participants from 20 schools provided a description of an LS team when asked how the learning support team was involved with the focus student. A definition was not provided as part of the interview question and responses revealed that schools had varying interpretations of the term 'LS team'. For 11 schools, the LS team was described as a school-based team that was involved with all students with difficulties. In four schools, interviewees talked about a team that was specific to the focus student. One very small school did not have a team, and in another small school, the entire staff was involved in whole-school learning and support meetings. For two schools, it was not clear whether the team was specific to the focus student or not.

Teams with a whole-school focus

The most frequently described model, in 11 schools (one secondary and 10 primary), was an LS team that could be involved with any students with disability in the school. These teams were described as being involved in a range of decisions, including assessment, resourcing, timetabling, supports across the school and consultation and discussion of the needs and adjustments for specific students. Although most LS teams provided advice and consultation to class teachers about adjustments, in addition to carrying out an administration role and documenting decisions, four teams were described as having a primarily administrative function. One team had only minor oversight of support for a student with vision impairment, as primary responsibility for planning adjustments was provided by the itinerant support teacher (vision).

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Teams that provided support to teachers gave advice. One primary school LAST described how the LS team dealt with individual students:

> *We bring their name up and we discuss different strategies that we can use, so there's about six of us in the room, all very experienced teachers, executive, things like that. We basically bounce ideas off each other about how we can help N and then we go back to the class teacher and say, we think this might work or that might work or things like that.*

Similarly, a school principal described how LS teams received feedback from teachers:

> *. . . it's all well and good to say, 'These are the programs that you need to do', or, 'This is the extra training that you need to attend', but it's seeing how that's implemented, reporting back, and having that feedback again then to the learning support team of actually where we add value and where we can change practice that then assists in best meeting the needs of the student as well.*

Four teams had more of an administrative focus, setting priorities for how funding was spent and allocating teacher assistant time. These teams were more concerned with allocating materials and staff than with the provision of advice about curriculum and teaching adjustments in the classroom. For example, one primary school principal described the role of the LS team:

> *. . . they make all of the decisions regarding support for each of the children in the school. We have a prioritisation kind of process of who needs what and then we use that bucket of money that we're given and go, 'Right, this child needs this, this child needs this' and then we keep some in reserve so that if teachers throw their hands in the air and go, 'Help me please', we can support them a little bit.*

Team membership and operation. The 11 school-based teams differed in composition but all included the LAST and the principal or other executive. All except two included the school counsellor. Other members included teacher assistants, classroom teachers and year- or stage-level supervisors/advisors.

Teams typically met weekly or fortnightly. Typically, teachers would refer a student or a problem involving a student to the team before attending a meeting to discuss possible actions. A primary school LAST described the process:

> *We meet once a fortnight. The school learning support team and teachers refer students if we're concerned about a child or worried about a child coming. N was referred to the learning support team before she started school. That's happened again this year, so the teacher has concerns about how N's going, she puts in a referral and then we give her new fresh ideas, I guess.*

Class teachers also attended LS team meetings that reviewed the progress of a particular student, as described by one LS team coordinator:

> *N would regularly be brought up maybe two to three times in the year and discussed at that level. So, basically, we invite [N's teacher] along to report on how he is going and then that gets minuted through our teams.*

LS teams with a focus on an individual student

The other model, described by four schools (two primary and two secondary), was a team that focused on educational planning for one particular child. These teams usually involved the family. Three of these LS teams met infrequently, usually a few times a year, to develop and review the student's individual learning plan. In some schools, professionals from outside the school were also involved, and for

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one school where the focus student had a vision impairment, the itinerant support teacher (vision) was involved.

The fourth team focused on a secondary school student with severe disabilities and met fortnightly. Team meetings included the head teacher learning and support, teacher assistants who worked with the student, and others on occasion, although not the parent. The principal of a secondary school described this team's role:

> *. . . that team is made up of people that work directly with her during the school day in a variety of settings, and so their input is based on their interactions with her, their observations of her. Their role provides the information around patterns, so patterns of behaviour that are an indication of growth and achievement as well as patterns of behaviour that are cause for concern that we then need to address.*

LASTs: Roles

LASTs from 16 schools were interviewed about decision-making related to adjustments for students with disability. In the other six schools, a LAST was not a nominated stakeholder, and thus was not interviewed. In two of these schools, the itinerant support teacher (vision) took responsibility for student support. Two small schools had no LAST, while in another small school the teaching principal, who was interviewed, also fulfilled the LAST role. At two schools the LAST had no direct role with the focus student. In one school, other interviewees did not mention the LAST at all, and the LAST was only mentioned once at the other school. At two schools, there was some confusion about the terminology, and some interviewees talked about teacher assistants when asked about the LAST. As with LS teams, LASTs fulfilled a range of roles, ranging from mainly administrative and liaison work to having considerable involvement with the student.

Of the 16 LASTs interviewed, only five had a qualification in special education (three at bachelor level and two at master's level); two were studying for a master's level qualification in special or inclusive education. Eleven had been in the LAST position for 5 years or more and five had held a LAST position for less than 5 years.

In four schools, the LAST reported having no direct formal involvement with the focus student. In one of these schools (a primary school), the LAST was primarily responsible for implementing Reading Recovery, a one-to-one literacy intervention for young children (https://www.readingrecovery.ac.nz/) and other remedial reading programs and was not involved with either the focus student or the LS team. In a second school, the student had a vision impairment and primary responsibility for planning adjustments rested with the itinerant support teacher (vision), leaving the LAST with only administrative involvement. In the two other schools, the LAST also took a primarily administrative role with involvement with the student, limited principally to the LAST's membership in the LS team. One LAST did report she liaised with the family and ordered equipment for the class teacher. This LAST saw her role as primarily undertaking administrative tasks and liaising with families and outside agencies rather than providing direct support:

> *Different schools use their learning support teachers in different ways too. But I'm really fortunate that I am off class and so I'm able to do a lot of that legwork. Quite a lot of the learning support teachers can be either on class for some of the day or constantly taking small groups that they're locked into so they can't do parent interviews. A lot of my time is parent interviews, planning meetings. Whereas a lot of learning support teachers don't have that luxury. And that's very, very difficult. I don't know how they do it.*

Of the remaining 11 LASTs, all were directly involved with the student and performed some administrative tasks related to the provision of support for students with disability. For example, one primary school LAST stated,

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I've sort of got my fingers in the pie all the way along with different things. I guess I'm overseeing things a lot more than what I am anything else. I do work one on one with him. I do the intervention budget, looking at the money that comes into the school with each child and I'm part of the decision-making process about where do we spend the money, where is it best served for N as far as does he need an SLSO [teacher assistant], does he need an iPad, does he need whatever else that he might need?

All LASTs reported that liaising with the student's family was part of their role, except in one school, where the class teacher took that responsibility. Some contact with parents was relatively informal, as described by one LAST:

Mum's here every day . . . so she's in the office every morning and every afternoon, it's really easy to catch up and she's very approachable as she likes to approach us to find out what's going on . . . Lots of informal chats.

LASTs who advised teachers were generally involved in writing the student's individual learning plan:

. . . I was sort of the facilitator for her to put together some goals for him, and make some choices about, you know, what she wanted him to do and where she wanted him to be at the end of the year.

One secondary school LAST reported that she designed adjustments that were primarily delivered by teacher assistants that she supervised, whereas teachers were responsible for their own adjustments.

In contrast, a primary school LAST stressed the importance of collaboration with class teachers:

A class teacher's always involved. It is their environment that I'm working in and, of course, in the sort of role where you are acting in a capacity-building area you need to make sure that you've got that strong relationship with a teacher. So anything I did I did in collaboration with a teacher, or if I was unable to do it in collaboration, I made sure that I met with him prior to, to discuss the changes and whether or not he was comfortable with that in his room.

A LAST in a secondary school described a similar approach when working with multiple teachers:

So, often, we don't impose that but we say, 'Well this is what we're thinking'; it's not necessarily trial and error but it's generally a pretty good educated guess that these adjustments are made may work in the environment, and then we seek feedback. So we often send emails to say, 'Well, how's he going in class? Is there anything we need to reassess? Do you have any suggestions?' and then we take that on board and that plan will change and evolve.

Another commented that unless staff agreed with adjustments, there was little point in trying to implement them:

I haven't really implemented it unless everyone has wanted it. Because there's no point, if you implement something and then, you know, I can implement it in the classroom, but I'm not the classroom teacher, so as soon as I leave, if she doesn't want it, then it's going to fall by the wayside.

Most (eight) of the LASTs worked with students to implement interventions individually or in small groups, or they supervised students who were removed from class because of challenging behaviour. Some provided individual intervention by withdrawing students from their mainstream classroom for one-to-one instruction. Instruction was frequent and covered a range of areas. Small group instruction was generally in reading or mathematics and sometimes within the mainstream class.

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Some LASTs, particularly in secondary school settings, had considerable involvement with the student outside of a teaching role. Although in one school adjustments were mostly planned by the itinerant support teacher (vision), the LAST took a major role in ensuring teachers implemented adjustments. She met with the itinerant support teacher (vision) weekly to discuss the student, ensured teacher assistants were appropriately trained, kept staff informed about the student and met with the student regularly to check he was accessing the curriculum. Another secondary school LAST was the crisis support person for the student who was able to go to his office at any time for support:

> *. . . so teachers will let you know, 'Okay, N's got up and walked out of the class, he's hit himself on the head, he's frustrated, he's refusing support, he's self-sabotaging'. And they all give me that feedback and then I'll generally debrief with him and have a conversation, say, 'What's going on at the moment? How can we address the situation?' and then I'll feed that back to the teacher.*

Seven LASTs mentioned providing oversight or training of teacher assistants as part of their role. One LAST who was at her small school only one-half day a week described how she worked with the teacher assistant who implemented an individual reading program:

> *. . . every now and again I come on a different day so that I can meet with her learning — with the SLSO [teacher assistant] and we keep a whole folder of records of where she's up to.*

Two LASTs specifically described training teacher assistants in the use of adjustments. For example, one LAST devised a reward system to break up long tasks because staff were insisting the student work without a break:

> *. . . I've been teaching them how to implement the rewards system for when I'm not there. So, 'This is what you have to do. If he does this, this or this, he gets a tick. If he finishes his work, he gets a tick. We're going to do this, and then we're going to have a break'.*

A few LASTs (three) played a role in monitoring student progress. One conducted assessments that came with a specific reading program. Another LAST conducted standardised reading assessments, and a third was responsible for all assessment for the focus student. No LAST described conducting assessment to monitor progress against the student's specific goals. Two LASTS (who were also qualified special educators) had carried out functional assessments to assist in the design of supports for students displaying behaviours of concern.

LASTs infrequently mentioned other roles, such as team teaching or co-teaching. One executive in a secondary school mentioned that the LAST would co-teach, but the LAST themself did not mention this role. One primary school LAST described how she worked: 'It's been sort of up to me to design and implement the adjustments and then sort of show the teachers how to implement it in the classroom and sort of give them the support needed to do that . . . '. Another primary school LAST worked in the classroom with the class teacher but did not describe herself as fulfilling a coaching or team-teaching role. Many LASTs liaised with school staff generally and made information about the focus students and adjustments available to staff through staff meetings, distribution of minutes from meetings and by placing information on servers accessible to school staff.

Some of the LASTs noted barriers they faced in implementing supports. One LAST noted she had discouraged a secondary school student from doing a particular subject because 'the teacher wouldn't be able to cope with him; i.e., she wouldn't make adjustments and she wouldn't care'. Another noted that the time teachers could spend on one student was limited: '. . . she's got a big class, and she's got other kids in there that need extra help. It's kind of hard to spend so much time on one person'. The same LAST noted difficulties that changing staff caused in implementing adjustments: 'Like lots of different people coming in and not knowing what to do. They kind of just wind up babysitting him

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and chasing him around the playground'. Another LAST noted the difficulties of having supports implemented consistently across the whole school and the challenges of everyday variations to routines:

> *You had a large number of transitions every day. You have relief from face-to-face teaching where they go to a different teacher. You may have a casual come in. Principals may walk in and out just to see what's going on or to speak to another child.*

As noted earlier, only a third of the LASTs were qualified special educators, although others had attended relevant professional learning. It was noted that the most detailed descriptions of interventions and supports were provided by qualified special educators. The two LASTs who trained teacher assistants were both qualified, as was the one LAST who described showing teachers how to implement strategies. Two LASTs noted the advantage a qualification gave them, with one commenting,

> *I'm kind of at the moment, because of my expertise with special education, I've kind of been the sort of decision-maker in terms of what sort of supports, like additional supports, we can put in place to try and assist him in a mainstream . . . so all of the stuff that I got from there [special education training], I have sort of used to try and put together all of the supports and things like that, and used it as a base for my observations and everything like that.*

Discussion

The information from interviewees enabled general conclusions to be drawn about the roles of LASTs and LS teams in planning, implementing and evaluating adjustments for students with disability and about the composition and mode of operation of LS teams. It is not surprising that different schools in the study described different models for LS teams and for the roles of LASTs, as the sample included both secondary and primary schools and schools that varied in size, location and in the nature of the focus student with disability. Elements of support and adjustments for students with disability ranged from broad oversight of resource provision for all students with disability in a school to detailed individual planning of educational programs and teaching strategies. The models described here illustrate this range, with some LS teams focusing primarily on resource allocation, administration and liaison for students across the school and other teams specifically supporting an individual student. A similar difference was seen in the roles described by the LASTs. Some were primarily involved in organisation and liaison, while others were actively programming for and teaching individual students. This may in part be due to the variation in LASTs' qualifications, knowledge and experiences. Of note was that LASTs with qualifications in special education provided the most detailed descriptions of adjustments and programs, reflecting considerable involvement in educational planning and delivery. Further research on the practices and impact on student outcomes of qualified and unqualified LASTs would be of value.

LS teams that had a whole-school focus generally appeared to operate according to the recommendations of NSW Department of Education (2021). They met frequently and regularly, coordinated resource provision, provided advice to teachers about adjustments and reviewed student progress and resource use. Within this model there was variation in the apparent focus of the teams. A few LS teams focused more on material resources and staffing, while others seemed to play a greater role in advising teachers on possible adjustments and reviewing student progress. Team membership varied a little, but the LAST and an executive were always involved. The involvement of the LASTs in these leadership teams was likely positive, as it gave them a voice in whole-school planning and budgeting for the inclusion of students with disability (Smith & Broomhead, 2019). Class teachers were generally only present at meetings when they referred a student, were receiving advice or when a student was being reviewed.

Teams that focused on an individual student held meetings only a few times a year. Parents were involved in these meetings, which focused on planning the child's individual program. Descriptions of

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these teams as LS teams may be due to individual interpretation of the questions asked. As the term 'LS team' was not defined and the focus of the interviews was on a specific student and the adjustments provided to them, interviewees may have interpreted this as teams working with students rather than a designated LAST team. It may also imply that the school did not have an LS team with a whole-school focus.

As noted earlier, all the LASTs were part of the school LS team, in accordance with the NSW Department of Education (2021) recommendation that LASTs work collaboratively with LS teams. Similarly, in accordance with recommendations, all LASTs except one had a role in consulting and liaising with families. Some LASTs had a primarily administrative and liaison role and one saw her lack of direct involvement with students as a desirable mode of operation as she had time available for administration. LASTs were typically involved with the class teacher in writing or advising about individual learning plans.

Although the allocation of a LAST position to every school was intended to encourage a move from less individualised support to students to more support to teachers (Rawsthorne et al., 2015), this shift appears to have occurred to a very limited extent in most schools examined in this research. Additional research on efforts to provide effective support and capacity building to class teachers is needed. Withdrawal and small group work outside the mainstream class was a common mode of operation for LASTs. This may in part be due to the high level of support needed by the target students, who were classified as having substantial or extensive support needs under the NCCD, although it could also reflect the training and experience of the LAST. This use of LASTs, although not consistent with the intent of departmental advice, may not necessarily be problematic in terms of improving student outcomes, given that small group interventions for students with difficulties in reading and mathematics is an effective strategy (Dietrichson et al., 2021). However, more research is needed to determine if and how LASTs implement individual or small group interventions that meet student needs.

About half the LASTs reported providing oversight or training to teacher assistants, while allocation of teacher assistant time was often the role of LS teams. More importantly, at least in some cases, adjustments implemented by teacher assistants under the direction of LASTs were not linked to adjustments provided by teachers. This may relate to the finding in the broader study that teacher assistants were commonly described as an adjustment, with little or no description of strategies or evidence-based practices they would facilitate (Carter et al., 2022).

Roles related to training or coaching of mainstream class teachers were rarely mentioned, with only one LAST describing co-teaching and another describing ways in which she demonstrated strategies to a class teacher. This may be because just over a half of the LASTs interviewed did not have a special education qualification and thus may not have the knowledge of evidence-based practices needed to build capacity in other teachers, or may have reflected the way the school viewed the LAST's role. Research indicates that modelling and feedback are important components of professional training to enable teachers to implement effective interventions for students with disability (Brock & Carter, 2017). LASTs with the requisite skills should be encouraged and supported by the organisational structure and by school leaders to provide this kind of capacity building to school staff. It is to be acknowledged that the NSW Department of Education is committed to increasing the number of teachers with special education qualifications (NSW Department of Education, n.d.).

The finding that there was little support provided to class teachers to provide them with new skills can be considered in tandem with other findings from the larger study (Carter et al., 2022), which indicated that in making decisions about adjustments, school staff generally considered only a few options, with limited consideration of adjustments to curriculum and pedagogy. Only 60% of participants reported adjustments related to teaching strategies and 23% reported adjustments to curriculum. More consideration is needed for how qualified special educators with a good knowledge of potential adjustments in these areas could play a significant role in helping staff and LS teams identify a broader range of adjustments and build the capacity of staff to implement these adjustments.

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Overall, consistent with the findings of the Audit Office of NSW (2016), schools do have some strategies in place in which the LS team, often involving the LASTs, coordinates and gathers information to identify the needs of students with disability. Many, but not all, LS teams and LASTs do provide support to teachers, predominantly in the form of suggestions and through withdrawal of students from class. However, support that would effectively build the capacity of classroom teachers through coaching approaches is not often provided.

There are limitations to this study, given that it involved only 22 volunteer schools, of which 20 had described an LS team. In addition, the description of the operation of the LS team and role of the LAST was in relation to a specific student with substantial or extensive support needs under the NCCD, and this may have coloured the data gathered. Thus, the methods of operation described in these schools may not be representative of all students or all NSW schools. The sample did reflect the geographical distribution of schools in NSW and the relative numbers of primary and secondary schools, and a range of different modes of operation of LS teams and LASTs were described. In addition, only 15 LASTs were interviewed, although they were mentioned by others in schools where they were not interviewed. Students with a vision impairment were overrepresented and primary responsibility for planning their adjustments was taken by an itinerant support teacher (vision).

The findings of this study suggest that the administrative and liaison aspects of supporting students with disability are well managed by LS teams and LASTs, using a variety of strategies that suit the needs of individual schools and students. They support the findings of Rawsthorne et al. (2015) that LASTs could do more to build capacity of class teachers but that this requires that the LASTs themselves have the necessary skills and knowledge.

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