

Evaluation of Queensland Abilities Based Learning and Educational Support (ABLES) trial for students with disability

Executive summary

Purpose

There is a growing need to support the teaching of students with disabilities and additional learning needs. Support for teachers in various states and territories in Australia is provided through the Abilities Based Learning and Educational Support (ABLES) resource. This resource was developed by researchers at the University of Melbourne in collaboration with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in Victoria in 2008. The ABLES resources can be used by teachers in primary, secondary, and special schools. The resources enable teachers to draw on a set of developmental learning pathways to develop individual learning plans that support student needs (State of Victoria, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2011).

The Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) conducted a trial of the ABLES resources in 20 Queensland schools and commissioned an external evaluation of the use of the ABLES assessment tools and resources. The external evaluation was conducted by Queensland University of Technology (QUT) academics Professor Suzanne Carrington, Associate Dean (Research) and Dr Julie Dillon-Wallace, Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Education.

The evaluation examined how:

- teachers and curriculum leaders from 20 schools in Queensland used the ABLES assessment tools and resources
- teachers' understanding of the resources guided their teaching strategies and use of resources to plan and teach for the individual needs of students with disabilities and additional support needs.

Process

The QCAA arranged for the ABLES resource to be trialled for the first time in Queensland schools in 2019, with 20 mainstream and special education schools across State, Catholic and Independent sectors volunteering to participate in the trial. QCAA organised for a teaching team, comprising a curriculum leader and teacher from each school, to attend a professional development day in Brisbane and then use the ABLES approach and resources in their school over the school year.

Data was collected from each teaching team across the 20 schools. The evaluation drew on a Realist Evaluation Approach (Pawson & Tilley 1997) to develop a theory of how the ABLES program was working in the schools in Queensland. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do the curriculum leader and teacher use the approach in their school to guide their teaching strategies and use of resources to plan and teach for the individual needs of students?
2. Considering a cross-school, intra-program, and inter-context analysis, are there different results in different schools?

Participants were asked to complete an online journal survey which measured their use of ABLES and gauged how effective they found the resource in supporting their teaching, curriculum and assessment goals. These same survey questions were repeated at three different points between April and September 2019 to add a longitudinal dimension to the study. Although there was some natural teacher movement due to employment changes and leave factors, the response rate from participants was close to 100%.

Participants were also invited to attend three phone interviews between April and November 2019. Interview 1 focused on collecting data about how the participants thought they would use the ABLES tools and resources. Interview 2 focused on collecting data to refine the propositions developed by the evaluators from the first data intake. Interview 3 tested the revised propositions.

Conclusions

The study results provide evidence to support the theory that the ABLES assessment tools and resources support teachers in schools to plan and teach for the individual needs of students with disabilities and additional support needs in Queensland. This is supported by the following theory propositions:

- Teachers use ABLES resources to increase their confidence and support their decision-making for students with a range of disabilities and complex needs (Proposition 1).
- Teachers use the profile reports to provide rich data to develop shared understandings and shared language with parents/carers (Proposition 2).
- Staff can use the profile reports to track and monitor individual student progress (Proposition 3).

- Teachers in special schools and mainstream schools can use the ABLES suggested strategies to support adjustments and differentiation (Proposition 4).
- The ABLES strategies helped to inform lesson plans for both the whole class and individual students (Proposition 5).
- Teachers found the general capabilities component of ABLES particularly useful as that area is not well covered in the Australian Curriculum (Proposition 7).
- Teachers in special and mainstream schools can use the ABLES resources to positively support collaboration (Proposition 9).

The evaluators identified two key limitations of the project. These were:

1. a small number of schools involved in the trial
2. the perceived need by the teaching teams for more time to fully understand and use the assessment tools and resources to support their teaching.

References

Pawson, R & Tilley, N 1997, *Realistic Evaluation*, SAGE, London.

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2011, *Abilities Based Learning & Education Support. An introductory guide for Victoria government schools*, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Melbourne.