

Playing to their strengths



Special educator Tsering Sherpa works with Joey as part of the Positive Outreach School Service.

Baltara School's unique outreach program is helping at-risk students, and supporting their teachers too. KATHERINE WILSON reports.

SPECIAL educator Charlie Kotiw was gazing out the staffroom window when he first noticed “a young man sitting by himself fiddling with something”.

It was 11-year-old Jack Staples*.

“I couldn’t quite work out what he was fiddling with but whatever it was, it had his total attention.”

Charlie knew that Jack routinely sat alone during lunchtime, playing with twigs, rocks and bits of metal. He had read the assessment which the school had prepared on Jack, as part of their application to Baltara School’s Positive Outreach School Service.

Charlie teaches as part of the Positive Outreach program, which is a mobile arm of Baltara School, a specialist school that supports students with social, emotional and behavioural challenges. Offering students a positive and caring curriculum, it works on evidence-based methods to re-engage at-risk kids and improve their learning outcomes.

Charlie is one of a team of special educators who go into schools – from Whittlesea to Thornbury – to support students for two days a week, over the course of one term. Demand is so great for the specialist services of Charlie and his colleagues that the program has branched out into regional Victoria.

Jack was identified as an ‘at-risk’ student who needed specialist attention. His teachers were worried about his poor attendance history, including a year of absence in Grade 4 during which he was home-schooled. The school’s submission to the Positive Outreach program also documented Jack’s ‘extreme frustration’ when confronted with literacy tasks that he was unable to complete. Jack’s behaviour tended to be directed ‘inward’, such as head-banging. There were instances where his frustration escalated into assaults and property damage.

Uncertain of how a conversation with Jack might start, Charlie first approached Jack in the playground.

“When I arrived in his space, I did receive an acknowledgement of sorts,” he recalls. The boy had “a quizzical look” and then immediately returned to the task at hand.

“I took a seat on a bluestone wall within a couple of metres and didn’t speak.”

There, Charlie waited. Eventually, Jack started speaking about his construction, remarking that it had “many colours and complicated bits”.

“Jack had invited me into his world. We spent the next half-hour talking about many things with a particular emphasis

on the things that we didn't know. He felt that there was still much to learn about our world and the stars," says Charlie.

"During this initial meeting I noticed Jack's gentle nature and broad smile."

What followed was trained, focused and personal attention that many school communities, stretched for time, resources and expertise, simply cannot dedicate to individual students. In line with Victoria's RTI (Response to Intervention) framework, Baltara's Positive Outreach program has a three-tiered strategy. First, it personalises its approach; then it builds teacher confidence and skills; and finally, it helps to develop 'universal approaches' to change the culture in a holistic way within the school community.

Specialist teachers like Charlie draw on a range of inclusive strategies, including a trauma-informed approach, to devise individual learning and behaviour plans.

During Charlie's next encounter with Jack, the boy confided that he was anxious that he couldn't read or write. Jack was starting secondary school the following year, and although excited, he was concerned about his literacy levels.

"Cognitive testing had cleared Jack of any major delays, but speech pathology reports were more concerning," Charlie recalls. Both tests had occurred years earlier, and Jack's teachers felt retesting for speech was needed.

Charlie also conferred with the boy's class teacher, Brett, with whom Jack had formed a sound, trusting relationship.

"Brett had determined that Jack's literacy skills were equivalent to a Grade 1 level at best. He was particularly concerned with the potential stressors that Jack would face during his transitional period to secondary school."

So Charlie developed a twofold approach. Initially this involved discussions with transitional support workers in Jack's secondary school, to come up with some strategies to support Jack's literacy problems.

Then, Charlie organised a DET speech pathologist to reassess Jack, and from there, used the Positive Outreach program's 'Team Around the Learner' model to develop learning and behaviour plans.

The school had already set up student support group sessions for Jack, but it had been difficult to get his parents to attend.

This isn't always the case. Vaso Elefsiniotis expressed deep gratitude for proactive measures taken to support her Grade 2 son, who had high intelligence scores but had trouble adjusting socially. He was diagnosed with ADHD and then with high-functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Elefsiniotis

was initially worried about intervention.

However, "after working with [POS special educator] Tsering Sherpa, as well as the terrific education support staff at his base school, Joey's doing really well and still loving school," she says.

"It was touch-and-go for a while, but I'm grateful to all his teachers and aides for having the patience and the love in their hearts to help my son travel well at school," smiles Vaso. "The outreach program fills a great need in mainstream schools."

Tsering's approach was to observe Joey and create a behaviour support plan for him which focused on identifying his behaviours and finding ways that teachers could relate to him in a supportive, rather than a dismissive or punitive way.

"It was touch-and-go for a while, but I'm grateful to all his teachers and aides for having the patience and the love in their hearts to help my son travel well."

She says that her role is to support the great work that many classrooms teachers are already doing. "They often already have an individualised plan in place," she says.

After observing the student in various school environments, Tsering will then help teachers to develop 'SMART' goals for the student: "Specific, Measureable, Achievable, Realistic and with a Timeframe," she explains.

Once the goals are determined, Tsering and the teachers meet with parents and support staff. "We collaborate and provide a consistent approach and level of support."

This can be transformative.

"I frequently touch base with the classroom teachers and see how the student is progressing," she explains. "More often than not, they notice an improvement ... [and] the teacher also feels success."

Positive Outreach encourages schools to identify at-risk students as early as possible. Early indications include challenging behaviours, social and emotional issues, high student absenteeism and learning disabilities.

After meeting Jack's parents, Charlie worked with teachers to determine what Jack could "hang his self-esteem hat on". The answer, he says, "came during a conversation

with his classroom teacher. Brett said that Jack loved drawing and was really quite good at it."

It turned out to be the spark they needed. Charlie encouraged Jack's teachers to engage with him through encouraging his artwork.

"It worked," Charlie says. "Brett was tenacious in his focus on providing Jack with opportunities to feel success. Jack rewarded him with an equally tenacious and excited response."

From here, Charlie worked with the school to develop goals for Jack's Individualised Learning Plan.

"I suggested that Jack should produce, from scratch, a child's picture-story book," says Charlie. "Jack would draw the illustration, create and write the narrative", which would help to build his self-esteem, levels of engagement and ultimately, improve his learning outcomes.

In Jack's case, approaching the problem through focusing on his strengths – his artwork – "also ticked a box when it came to supporting Jack during times where he was stressed," explains Charlie. "He could always go to his art folder."

As a result, says Charlie, "Jack has spent little time under the tree by himself lately." ●

* Some names and small details have been changed to protect privacy.

Schools and teachers are able to access Baltara School's Positive Outreach School Service to support students with concerning behaviours.

Schools can refer students at any time. An Enrolment Committee considers each referral against the suitability and availability of outreach teachers. Referrals are accepted from primary schools in two areas of the North Western Victoria Region: metropolitan Melbourne and Greater Bendigo.

Outreach teachers work with each school two days per week over the term. They can work with up to three students from each school that provides progressive documented inclusive supports. The aim is to better understand the learning needs of the student, and to support positive engagement with their learning. At the end of the term, outreach teachers will schedule fortnightly follow-up visits for consultation and monitoring.

Call **9465 2405** or visit **baltara.vic.edu.au** for more information.