

A Country Practice – meeting Kate Munro in rural Mudgee

Ann Ryan interviews Kate Munro, an LDA Consultant Member located in Mudgee, NSW.

Kate established and now works as a specialist teacher for struggling students in a private business, Advokate, in Mudgee. This rural city with close to 10,000 people, in the central west region of NSW about three hours drive from Sydney, is known as a coal mining and wine producing region.

What led to you to specialise in the field of learning difficulties?

I am a primary teacher. When she was in Year 1 my daughter experienced unexpected difficulty in learning to read, and being in a regional area, no one seemed to know what to do. It didn't make sense to me that a bright young student (since assessed as being in the 90th percentile on a cognitive assessment) with good language skills was unable to read. At that time there were no services or supports available in our rural area, so I knew that I had to become my daughter's teacher.

How did you learn the skills to support a student with specific learning needs?

First, I attended a two-day SPELD workshop in Orange where I met the inspirational Lin Meeks. Empowered and excited by my new learning, I followed this with an online Graduate Certificate of Education in Learning Difficulties from Edith Cowan University in Perth. I learnt so much doing that course, and I guess it generated a passion for learning more about learning difficulties, especially

how to teach children who struggle with literacy and numeracy. Reflecting on my past teaching practices, and the number of students that I had taught, my studies opened a new way of looking at things – which of course has now become my day to day practice.

What does your day to day work look like?

I am self-employed and work privately. My business name, Advokate, is a helpful play on words to reflect the nature of my business which provides intervention and advocacy. As a parent and past classroom teacher, I feel that I am in a good position to advocate for students who are struggling. Where possible I try to work with the child, parent, school and health professionals. While most teachers are open to receiving assessment reports and recommendations, this is not always the case. Sometimes I feel like the stand-alone person.

Most students come to me after school, although I see five students while they are at school. Sessions mostly run for one hour, with some delivered in two half hour sessions. I am trialling three 20 minute remote sessions for early years students. Three of my current students are remote and their online sessions are facilitated by Zoom.

How do students find you?

My clients have all found me through word of mouth. I have no need to advertise although I have joined the LDA Online Tutor Search. This is particularly helpful in situations where a paediatrician or educational psychologist recommends that parents seek the services of an LDA Consultant. Since starting my business with one student eighteen months ago, soon after my family moved to Mudgee, I am now at



full capacity with 24 students and I have a waiting list of 26 (this is down from 30 as I have employed another teacher who works under my supervision).

How do you know what support students need?

I get as much information as possible through health reports, school reports, my standardised assessments, parents and sometimes the child. I then draft an IEP which I send to the family for suggested adjustments. If the parents would like to access advocacy services, they will then usually organise a meeting with the school and I attend. It is a positive process, and it allows for collaborative sharing and review. Many parents do not realise that they should have input into the development of the IEP and regular reviews. I can support them through this process.

What are the challenges of living in a remote rural area for assisting students with specific learning difficulties?

Firstly, diagnosis. It is costly both in terms of dollars and time for a family to travel to a major centre or city for an assessment by an educational psychologist. It can also be exhausting for the child. The trip often requires an overnight stay for the family. Then there is the difficulty for teaching staff to access the guidance needed to interpret the report and to respond with appropriate interventions, particularly when the support of an educational psychologist is not immediately available. I think the situation is changing, but slowly.

For teachers and specialist staff it can be a tough thing to get to professional development sessions that are specific to the needs of students with learning difficulties. For many small rural schools who are strapped for funding, it is especially difficult to send staff to a PD and to provide cover with replacement staff. So being in a regional area often seems to make it ten times harder.

What programs do you regularly use?

Among other programs I use Toe by Toe for secondary students and Cracking the ABC Code for early years students. I introduce Dibels from K to Year 9 to monitor the development of reading skills. I send decodable reading material home – often from the Totem or Talisman series, Little Learner's Love Literacy program and Fitzroy Readers.

How do you determine and monitor student progress?

The formal assessment reports from educational psychologists that some students arrive with are an excellent starting point, along with NAPLAN

results and school reports. I usually do a Woodcock Reading Mastery assessment on the initial visit. I use Dibels progress tracking for accuracy and fluency, and Dibels DAZE for monitoring comprehension. The data from the Dibels program is especially useful when sharing progress reports with parents.

If you could recommend only one text, what would it be?

Equipped for Reading Success, by David Kilpatrick, is my go-to favourite. The power of that book allows me to teach phonology to older students – it is wonderful and the kids love challenging themselves with the one minute activities.

And what if you could wave a magic wand?

For my business/consultancy practice I would love to see more qualified people available to work alongside me. I have recently employed a teacher who has completed the SPELD teacher training course which ran over six months, one weekend per month – quite a commitment. Not many local people are willing or able to commit to this training. To find a local LDA certified Specialist Consultant Teacher would be wonderful as at the moment I am the only one here registered to work with LDA referred students.

So why did you join the LDA Specialist Teacher Team?

When doing my Graduate Certificate through Edith Cowan University, I met Lorraine Hammond. Both she and the course inspired me with such great and valuable information that I wanted to be closely involved with LDA. Being in regional NSW, having other like-minded people to network with was really important. I love the collegiate support and ongoing learning I am exposed to through LDA Consultant membership.

Last words?

The work we do as specialist teachers is extremely important. Unfortunately, there are too few specialist teachers to cope with the need but hopefully one day this will change. I would be very happy to be made redundant!

Ann Ryan is the Convenor of the LDA Consultants Committee, email convenor.consultant@ldaustralia.org

Kate Munro is an LDA Consultant Member based in Mudgee, NSW. Kate runs Advocate Educational Solutions which supports students with Learning Difficulties/Disabilities through evidence based tuition and advocacy. She is an accredited SPELD NSW Tutor and Learning Difficulties

Australia Specialist Literacy and Numeracy Teacher. Kate provides assessments and intervention programs for students from Kindergarten to Year 10. Individualised programs are delivered on a one on one basis. Kate can also work with pre-school students to develop pre reading skills before starting school. Along with providing intervention, Kate can work with parents, schools and health professionals to develop Individual Learning Plans for students with disabilities. If you have any questions please contact Kate on 0427298357 or kate@advokateeducational.com.au

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