Podcast Transcript

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Trish Thomas (TT) – Head of the Tutorial Centre at Trinity Anglican College, Albury

(SC) Hello, I'm Sue Cairns, Education Consultant in the Student Services Team at AISNSW. Today I'm having a conversation with Trish Thomas, Head of the Tutorial Centre at Trinity Anglican College in Albury, New South Wales. Trish describes the processes used at Trinity to support the students who were learning remotely and those who continued to attend school. The range of roles played by the Tutorial Centre staff included regular check-ins with students, supporting those students who were attending school, breaking down work given by the classroom teacher, and providing direct support to families about the requirements for learning. Trish also describes some delightful ideas to ensure grandparents were included. For secondary students, the learning platforms used at Trinity provided a variety of tools for ensuring that those students with additional needs could be catered for. This included using breakout rooms and co-teaching as a way to ensure that students with complex needs could have the assistance from learning support to access the content and tasks. A priority for Trish was the maintenance of connection and support for members of the Tutorial Centre team through regular group and individual online meetings. Trish also shares some insights into changes the school will make going forward based on these first experiences. I am sure you will find Trish's ideas and reflections both insightful and interesting.

(TT) Good afternoon, Sue.

(SC) Welcome to our podcast regarding remote learning for students with additional needs. I'm speaking this afternoon to Trish Thomas, who is the Head of the Tutorial Centre at Trinity Anglican College in Albury. Good afternoon Trish.

(TT) Good afternoon, Sue.

(SC) Trish, these are very unusual times for those of us in learning support. How have you found, in general, your students have reacted to being in a remote learning situation?

(TT) I think some students have founded it a really positive experience, especially for students with a diagnosis of autism, but some of them have really flown with this online learning portal because they don't have to worry about any of the social cues. And so they've really taken to it, and we found that some students who didn't ask questions in class, have suddenly been really confident to express their views or ask. There are other students that it's been a little
overwhelming and so we’ve had to support them and their parents through what they can do, what they need to do and have fun with it as well.

(SC) So with your students in K to 6, what role did your learning support staff play?

(TT) Initially our learning support staff supported all the students that were coming to school and coming each day. So they were assigned to a year level and they would work with students that they knew. And just as an aside, a lot of the students that did attend school were students with additional needs. So they came and they were able to work alongside one of the learning support teachers and they would work through the online platform, Seesaw, that the teachers had put the work, uploaded the work and what they needed to do so they would go through the day with the learning support teacher. But at the end of the day, the last lesson of the day, they would always do some sort of physical activity, going and play outside or have some games in the multipurpose hall so that they had a good 50 minutes of physical exercise at the end of the day after being in front of a screen for a long time.

(SC) Did the students themselves find it easy to access, especially the students who have additional needs, did they find it easy to access the learning platform Seesaw?

(TT) No, they needed some initial help, I think, in the early days with how to log in and what to do and where to put the headphones and just basic things like that. Once that was overcome, and they got used to the routine, I think that was OK. And then I think the support was also to look at what they needed to do and the staff that were with them, breaking down the work that the teachers set so it wasn't too overwhelming, you know, it was broken down into easier tasks for them to achieve. And obviously if they needed to get up and have a movement break, our learning support teacher aides were able to direct them to do that as well.

(SC) For some of the students who have additional needs that weren’t coming into the school, how did you assist their families to help them overcome some of the difficulties with logging on?

(TT) The parents, I think, really had to support the students, and I’ve got quite a few emails either directly to myself or through the teachers, that there were students that were still struggling with the work. I think when we move forward next term we will communicate with our parents to say that this is the English task and it shouldn't take longer than say 15 or 20 minutes. So, we’re not expecting tasks to be finished. Obviously, when the work is set, initially it was set straight down the middle so that everyone could access. Next time, when we do that, we'll be looking at differentiating or saying to the family, after 20 minutes it’s ok to stop, we don't expect that this task needs to be finished. But of course, with your high-flyers and your students that need enrichment and extension, then they probably will finish the task. Being teachers, we know that all children would do it at a different rate and at a different level. So we need to communicate that with our parents next term. We probably need to be more proactive in saying to our parents like, “If you don't mind, get the chalk and go out on the pavement and do your Maths or, you
know, do you maths with your cooking”, it doesn't need to be pen and paper. And we probably will share some of the tips and things that we do automatically as teachers to make it more fun and make it more accessible. And if you're OK about having your windows drawn all over, then that's a really good multi-sensory way of learning and a bit more fun, and a bit more out of the box and you know even if you can't see grandma, if grandma walks passed the house she might be able to see your work that you've written on the window for her. Things like that.

(SC) And Trish, you're 7 to 12 students, I understanding you use a different platform for the high school students?

(TT) Yes, for high school we use Zoom. We found it pretty successful. And again, there are some things that we've learned and that we will put into place for next term. One of those is that we didn't insist on students having their videos on. This, you know, the funny stories that come up when you know that a student is there, you see their name on the screen and you say to them, “Ben, can you answer this question?” and there's nothing from Ben. So you go into, “Are you there Ben? Ben unmute yourself”. So we have made the decision that for most of the lessons students need to be visible to us, so that we can see that they're actually doing what they need to be doing. But we also found that if students shared their work with us in the Zoom lessons, in a Google Doc, we could actually help and edit and suggest as we went along, so live documents.

The breakout rooms are also really useful for myself and my colleagues and the learning support teacher aide that works in high school would target students in certain lessons, let the teacher know that we were coming, so we could co-host and we could take students out into a breakout room to go through work, to clarify anything they didn't understand, or just to work with them so that we could have that dialogue happening and they weren't just sitting. Because, as you know, often with a lot of our students, especially with complex dyslexia, if they can talk their ideas out, then that's a real bonus for them and we can either scribe or get them to record it so that there's a starting point. My colleague, who does a lot of Maths support, found that one of the document readers, we call them Ziggi, was really useful, so she would share her screen and have the document there, and the students could see the process of working through a Maths problem or any other. So that was a really useful tool to have, when you're at home and you might not have a whiteboard or your camera setup, it's just an instant thing that you can have going and then you can actually share that document with the students after you've written it, you can scan it and share it with them.

(SC) Yeah, that's excellent. And, going forward Trish, are there any particular things that in the next term, we don't know quite what next term is going to look like for the whole term, but there will be a degree, an element of remote learning that will continue? What do you think some of the ideas that you and your team have come up with to further support the students?
Look, I think it will be really important for us to differentiate students’ work and make it clear what the expectations are within a class, because again, with high school I have had some concerned parents who, sort of, when you see it happening, their child’s dyslexia is very obvious to them now because they’ve seen it first-hand. So, it's about setting up the support for those students. Again, my colleague and I, we discussed that we’d like to have a check in with each year level once a week so that we would target our students in Year 7, who we know are on our data, that you know, “period 5 we have got a Zoom invite, we're going to check in with you if there's stuff that you're having trouble with, now is the time you can ask us or email”. Just generally checking with, not only their academic, but their wellbeing as well. So we're planning to do that and yet supporting the teachers with the differentiation of work. What is the baseline expectation that they expect all students to do and how we can support them with that for students with learning needs?

(SC) It’s so important to keep the students connected.

(TT) Yes, and our aim is for them not to learn anything knew, but it's probably to consolidate what they've already known, because we know that there's a lot of other stuff happening with families that were probably not privy to, you know, like dad might not be out working, and it's all very different, so we don't want to put any extra pressure on students in that sense within the lower years, especially.

(SC) I can understand that, and Trish, before we go, is there anything that you and your team have really learnt through this process, or you think, “We will continue to do this or use this going forward”?

(TT) I think it's very important to stay communicating with each other as a team. So, some of us were working offsite so it was very important for me to stay connected with my team and we would Zoom so, you know, we’d organize a Zoom session just to check in with how everybody was going. I think it's very important that we look after each other and well as our students. I think there are families that you know that might need particular support and it's probably about sourcing a wraparound support for them. So it's not only learning support, it might be the school Counsellor in high school, it might be the Head of House or their House Mentor so that there is that connection still, and that it’s OK for them, as we said, not to finish every task that they get given, you know, it's about just keeping them picking over and just consolidating knowledge, I guess, just to ensuring the parents that we're here to support. We're an email away, and I know that sometimes that there are concerns about students’ learning, and as I said, I think for some parents, it's very obvious that their support needs might have been greater than they are, or they’re doing even better than they thought they did, so that's the positive too. So, it's about connection, and I think it's about giving parents the resources that that you feel that they can use to support their child and they're not so much home-schooling, it's just, continuing the students’ learning in a different environment.
(SC) That’s a lovely way to put it and that’s certainly what it is. Well Trish, thank you so much for your insights today. I really enjoyed chatting to you about this and we look forward to what Term 2 holds for us all.

(TT) Thank you, Sue. Thanks for the opportunity.