

# Language Dispatch Interview Series

Hello and welcome to this edition of the Language Dispatch Interview Series.

This is in fact issue **number 1**.

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This is a transcript of an interview I completed recently with Andrew Taylor, the disabilities coordinator for the **Barwon South West** region in Victoria, Australia. Andrew has been in this role for several years now and is renowned for being an excellent and reliable source of information on any aspect to do with disability support in the school system.

Before Andrew took on the role of disability coordinator he was in the trenches for many years as a school-based speech pathologist.. He has a wealth of experience and knowledge as a speech pathologist, so makes a most suitable subject to kick off the **Language Dispatch Interview Series**.

**David Newman:** Hi, my name is David Newman, speech pathologist. Today I'm interviewing a colleague and old friend of mine, Andrew Taylor. I'd like us to start Andrew by you telling the readers of this newsletter a little about your background.

**Andrew Taylor:** Yep, sure. Well, I'm a Geelong boy, born and bred. I went to school locally, through the state school system. When I got to year 12 I had to make a decision of what I wanted to do next in life. I had to fill out a form stating preferences for courses and I had no idea what I wanted to do.

My life plans at the age of 17-18 were only really planned out for 2-3 days ahead, so I had no career aspirations, but I knew I wanted to go University.

I remember looking through the job guide and found **speech pathology** and thought, 'that sounds ok.' I had an image of playing games with kids on the carpet...'

**David Newman:** Yep, and that's pretty much what we do.

**Andrew Taylor:** *(laughs)* That's pretty much it. And I thought if I could get paid to do that then that sounds like a good job. I also read the course description which listed metalinguistics, psychology and neurosciences, so I thought that would be a good course to do. 12 months later I got a high enough score to scrape in, and now consider myself fortunate to have chosen this profession.

**David Newman:** I know that you no longer work specifically as a speech pathologist. Could you tell us a little about your current role?

**Andrew Taylor:** I currently work as the Disabilities Coordinator for the Barwon South Western region, for DEECD (**Dept of Education and Early Childhood Development** – Victoria, Australia). My role is to provide support and coordinate disability services for approximately 140 schools in the Geelong and South West Victoria region.

**David Newman:** That's a very large geographical area.

**Andrew Taylor:** Yeah, it includes Geelong, and also regional cities like Warrnambool, Colac, Camperdown, Hamilton and Portland. My role focuses on providing advice to parents, allied health workers, principals, teachers and anyone involved in providing services for students with disabilities and special needs.

A big part of the role is providing advice about the various funding schemes and processes available for individual schools. But my most important role is to provide advice on best practice principles on supporting kids with disabilities.

**David Newman:** Tell us a bit more on what best practice means in your role as disabilities coordinator.

**Andrew Taylor:** I'm really talking about inclusive practices. Inclusion is the buzzword in disabilities support. Inclusion means students are included and get to participate in school life as much as their peers. It's the responsibility of the schools to adapt and modify programs to the student's needs, rather than it being the other way round.

Perhaps in the past schools may have expected students to fit in, and if they didn't, the attitude was often, '*bad luck.*' That sort of thing is no longer acceptable. Even if the student's needs are out of the ordinary, and puts pressure on a school's ability to support the student, the school is required to expand, grow or cater to that student's needs.

Sometimes the roles and responsibilities can cause stress to teachers and support staff. Part of my role is to support them through that process. That can be difficult at times, because expectations from different stakeholders can vary, of course.

**David Newman:** Is it a bit of a juggling act?

**Andrew Taylor:** It can be. It involves a lot of negotiation between separate parties in terms of conflict resolution.

**David Newman:** Is it a little about making everybody happy?

**Andrew Taylor:** It's a *little* bit about making people happy, but it's also about making people *unhappy*. It's part of the job. The reality is you can't make everybody happy. I just have to be fair and consistent and always explain my reasoning.

Not everybody wants or accepts the advice they're given, but the student's needs come first. And that is the focus. And underlying everything we do is the legal obligation that we work within the guidelines of the **discrimination act**.

Look, it's a good job and I think my background as a speech pathologist has been invaluable. I probably couldn't do my current job as well, without my background as a speech pathologist, working within the school system.

**David Newman:** What used to annoy or frustrate you when you worked as a speech pathologist?

**Andrew Taylor:** Probably on a philosophical level I used to have a problem with certain educational systems and philosophies that were prevalent in schools at that time. I remember back in the 1990's I used to be frustrated how literacy was taught in schools, for instance.

**David Newman:** Can you give an example?

**Andrew Taylor:** Oh well, there has always been a huge debate between whole language and phonological awareness. I have always been evidence based. I was working directly with the kids with literacy problems and could see clearly what the gap was. I could also see how simple the solution was and would often get frustrated to see how ideology had got in the way of common sense.

**David Newman:** The whole language versus phonics wars haven't really gone away. There was an article just recently in the **Australian** newspaper about the two literacy philosophies clashing.

**Andrew Taylor:** Yeah, there has been a shift, and I've let go of that now. I think the battle has been won. I think that schools understand now what needs to be done and allow good reading/literacy programs to be put in place. The Dept of Education have

certainly recognized the importance of phonological awareness and written that into the framework of learning.

Other frustrations I've had include working in a large organization, such as the Dept of Ed, where you tend to have conflict with people who have their own agendas. I've had to deal with frustrating parents, principals, and teachers. But that's unavoidable. And it does make the job colourful. It would be a pretty bland existence if we all got along swimmingly.

What I've learnt since I've taken on this role is that I now how have a much greater appreciation for the decision making process of the dept. (DEECD) I used to believe that dept decisions were ad hoc and not reasonable. But the closer you get to the decision making process the more you understand that a fairly detailed consideration goes into the decisions that are made.

**David Newman:** Andrew, I'd like you to put your speech pathologist hat on for a moment. What would be your advice to new grad speech pathologists about to work in the Dept of Education?

**Andrew Taylor:** As a new speech pathologist working in the school system there will never be a dull moment and always a new challenge coming at you. You will certainly get to work with a diverse range of people, so you will never have a sense of isolation. A fantastic thing is you will get to form so many rewarding relationships with people from all walks of life.

The most important thing; I found was knowing the *culture* of schools. There is a culture in education. That includes knowing the language and the philosophy. Once you know the language, the culture, and you're on the same page as teachers you can work much more efficiently and well within the school system.

The most important thing for any speech pathologist working within the school system is to have an effect on school culture.

For instance, you can bang away 1 to 1 with students, day in, day out, but you'll have a much broader and sustained influence on a large number of kids if you can influence the work practices of teachers. That means getting into the classrooms and working with the teachers, at times.

**David Newman:** Those are really good points and a lot of good stuff. I certainly agree with a lot of what you have just said.

What, in your experience, are the long term consequences of language disorder if not assessed and treated effectively?

**Andrew Taylor:** It's critical that language disorder is picked up early in a child's life. Language is the foundation of learning; it's the foundation of social interaction; it can be used to resolve conflict and make friends and form relationships. I can't think of many aspects of life where language *doesn't* play a role.

Also, language and literacy opens up a world of employment and life opportunities. We find that kids with language disorders are more likely to end up in the juvenile justice system because they often have limited verbal expression, or don't understand cause and effect, and will strike out physically when frustrated.

This often stems back to language disorder. We can't wave a magic wand and eliminate language disorder, but we can limit as much as possible its impact on kids' lives, and provide alternative ways of getting on in life.

**David Newman:** Final question Andrew. What are the top 5 resources you've used in the past as a speech pathologist?

**Andrew Taylor:** I'd have to say **Social Stories** was one of the more powerful and successful resources I've used.

**Cued articulation** was also highly useful. Any speech pathologist working in the field of articulation and phonological awareness would find cued articulation one of their top tools.

Another one would be a pack of **picture cards**, which is very simple tool. A random pack of picture cards could be used in any number of ways. I would often use them for articulation therapy, or grammar use, or for vocabulary acquisition. They really had unlimited learning opportunities. Picture cards just require a little imagination.

My fourth resource was **crocodile dentist**. When working with kids with ADD (**attention deficit disorder**) or other kids with attention problems you've got to have a way of engaging them, while doing fairly repetitious stuff - particularly younger kids. Crocodile dentist was a simple plastic toy where students had to manipulate a toy crocodile's teeth.

The crocodile would randomly snap its jaws down. It was the randomness of the thing that would have people sitting on the edge of their seats. It was harmless of course, and kids used to love it. It used to fit in my pocket and I must have used it every day for seven years.

Number 5 was something I helped develop called **Clever Cue Cards**. The cards were based on **Visualizing and Verbalizing**, by Nanci Bell. Visualizing & Verbalizing is a terrific book that has great prompts for promoting language. Our cards were based on that theory. It worked very well. We sold several thousand copies and they were something I used everyday.

**David Newman:** Thanks Andrew for answering these questions for the Language Dispatch newsletter.

**Andrew Taylor:** Thanks David