

Working in a Regional Health School

Jenni and Laura work in a regional health school and are the only two SLTs in the country who do so. A relatively new and evolving area for speech-language therapists to be involved in, Jenni and Laura work in a school that provides education in forensic mental health, community mental health, youth justice, care, and protection.

Kia ora Jenni and Laura. Many of our members will not be familiar with the regional health school setting. Who attends a regional health school?

Regional health schools are for students (new entrants to Year 13) with significant health needs who can't attend their local school because they are hospitalised, recovering at home, or gradually returning to school. At the Central Regional Health School, we also work with students in Youth Justice and care & protection residences and those under specialist mental health inpatient care. Health schools are not alternative education services but provide educational support whilst students transition back to their mainstream school or onto another pathway.

How does your work in a regional health school differ from other school settings?

Where we work with our students varies. Students may be seen at home, a hospital, a health school hub or their local school of enrolment. For our work in residential facilities, there are significant restrictions on the physical resources & materials we can use in the classroom with students. Due to medical or legal appointments, students aren't always present and available in class. We often liaise with external agencies such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), Infant, child, and Adolescent Speciality Services (ICAFS), Oranga Tamariki, other medical professionals, and other schools.

What does a typical work day look like for you?

Our day starts by travelling to the location we are working at that day. Across the day we will work with a number of cases. This may involve attending a meeting, working with the teachers, working with a student, planning, preparation and reporting. Due to the diversity of students, no two days are the same and things can change very quickly.

What are some new skills or knowledge you've developed since being in this emerging space?

We both have previously worked mostly with children at pre-school and early primary years, so the learning curve of working with mostly teenagers has been steep!! We have also increased our knowledge and awareness of the huge impact of trauma & mental health challenges on a young person. We are developing a larger kete of culturally appropriate, informal communication assessments/interventions with a wider lens and a focus on functional & life communication skills.

Your role intersects between the health, justice, and education sectors. Could you elaborate on how you support students with youth justice and mental health support needs?

Our goal is to work across the three-tier model to reflect the He Pikorua framework (Ministry of Education). Many of the activities we undertake will be familiar to education-based SLTs, but they may vary in detail and specifics due to the age, needs and complexity of our students. For example, supporting teachers with screening students for communication needs, mentoring and discussing

with a teacher about how to support young people's communication in the classroom, sharing information with teachers about the link between language and learning, providing information and demonstrating to teachers about specific strategies to target an identified area of communication need, detailed assessment of student's communication skills, group sessions with students focusing on communication, co-planning & teaching sessions, incorporating therapy intervention for a student, individual sessions to support building communication skills, contributing to IP goals and attending review/transition meetings, providing professional development to teachers.

You've mentioned that there are only two of you in this space in Aotearoa. Are SLTs working in regional health schools in other countries? How do you stay up-to-date on current research, professional development and best practice, when this is so new?

Whilst there are other SLTs in Aotearoa who work in the mental health and justice spaces, we feel that our role to support these students within an education setting is quite unique. We engage with others in similar spaces, e.g. communication assistants and practitioners contracted to assess within residences. We look to SLTs in other countries where this work is more established, e.g. Australia and the UK, who produce useful content such as research materials, podcasts and webinars whilst reframing this within Aotearoa as we strive to uphold Te Tiriti O Waitangi and bi-cultural practice in our work. We keep abreast of other new and current changes in the NZ curriculum so that we can support the teachers and students at our school.

It sounds like the students you work with have complex, multifactorial support needs. How does your team collaborate with each other, whānau, and the wider community to meet these needs?

Due to the complexity of their needs, students at our school have individual plans that are reviewed regularly. Our school works hard to maintain quality relationships with whānau, other agencies, and local schools to facilitate smooth transitions for our students.

What's a current 'big topic', issue, or challenge that you and your colleagues face in 2024? Do you have any thoughts to share about this topic?

Like most schools, our school's current big topic is the changes in the curriculum. The requirement to sit the co-requisite assessments adds another layer for many of our students. The increase in mental health needs among young people means many more students are finding it challenging to attend their local school.

What advice would you give to someone starting out in this profession?

Your skills as an SLT can be used by a wide and diverse range of clients. Always keep your eyes open for new opportunities and challenges.

Any last thoughts?

Whilst we are in quite a new and unique space within Aotearoa, we feel fortunate to have had experience working in the health service (UK) and education setting (Ministry of Education). This gave us a solid foundation to build on as we moved into this work. We are grateful that there are the two of us so that we can support one another in this work and bounce ideas around together! It is a great privilege, responsibility and joy to be able to work with some of Aotearoa's most vulnerable rangatahi.

Many thanks, Jenni and Laura, for shedding some light on the valuable work you do. Hapaitia te ara tika pumau ai te rangatiratanga mo nga uri whakatipu. Foster the pathway of knowledge to strength, independence and growth for future generations.