



Mini Review

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Transitioning Learners with Intellectual and Developmental Disability Back to School



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There are inevitably existing and new barriers to supporting the transition of learners with intellectual and developmental disabilities back into schools following the unprecedented extensive off campus situations that schools have faced over the past two years. The likelihood of these restrictive stances continuing in an ad hoc approach remain high; especially in some countries that are still working to contain the pandemic while endeavoring to return a sense of normality to schooling. Such major changes to schooling inexorably affect students' learning styles related to achieving academic outcomes. More importantly though, as academics can usually be redressed over time, affects to emotional and behavioral outcomes are not as easily overcome. Such concerns are heightened exponentially when reviewing the needs of learners with disability.

According to UNESCO [1], the Covid-19 pandemic is having a disproportionate impact on learners with special education needs who were already experiencing social and educational disadvantage. Learning at home has resulted in many additional challenges for these learners who require special attention and individual support from their teachers [2]. To achieve the Sustainable Development Goal for Education (SDG 4), all learners and especially those in marginalized groups, need support to get the education they need and deserve. Yet according to UNESCO [3], "... the education and economic fallout from the pandemic threaten progress toward the (SDG 4)". Learners with disability are often provided with less help and inadequately trained teachers, emphasising the importance of specific attention being given to their transition back into schools. This is particularly noticeable for learners with autism spectrum disorder and severe emotional disorders who rely heavily on structure and consistency to function

in their daily lives. Transitioning from a face-to-face environment with highly developed routines and schedules, to a home-based schooling approach where direct contact with teachers may have been limited to less than one session per day, has been very traumatic for many learners [4]. Expecting these learners to now transition back into a highly structured schooling system, with the possibility of continued and unpredicted absences, will only heighten any emotional challenges they are facing.

To provide an appropriate transition back into a more formalized schooling approach will require consideration of a range of suitable adjustments that will enable these learners to access educational content and achieve valued outcomes without undue stress. A range of possible adjustments or modifications to teaching and learning may include curriculum, instructional, or environmental adjustments. They may also include specialist support adjustments such as those involving clinical specialist assistance including occupational therapy, speech therapy, psychologist support, physiotherapy, and personal care support. Following this new challenge of returning after extensive or disjointed absences, greater emphasis must be placed on emotional support and understanding, with professional assistance to assist teachers in their new role. Talapatra et al. [5], draw attention to the critical need for increasing the involvement and contribution of psychologists in transition services for students with disabilities who require the highest levels of support.

Given the current potential extant need for emotional support, and with consideration of the actual availability of appropriate professional support, adjustments that are reasonable will be needed to provide effective support to learners with a disability to enable them to access education in alignment with their non-

disabled peers. Effective best practice inclusive approaches may involve whole school adjustments to cultures, policies, and practices, the development of revised support structures, and consideration of regimes of funding support to provide access to equitable learning opportunities [6]. It may also require considerations to in-class support regarding differentiating curriculum or introducing alternative curricula, use of information technologies, and updated individual planning through the individual education plan (IEP). These adjustments should be based on a student's level of functional and emotional need and deemed to be reasonable given ideal best practice opportunities [7], to help support their transition back to face-to-face schooling by maximizing their access to learning and minimizing emotional stress.

Of key importance will be a focus on quality teaching. Schools must ensure that teachers have sufficient professional learning opportunities to understand the role they will need to play in supporting additional challenges likely to be experienced by learners with high levels of emotional or behavioural need. Listening to the views of learners and their parents or carers will provide helpful guidance to identify factors that are supportive of establishing positive transitions back into school [8]. Working collaboratively with peripatetic professionals will further enhance the capacity of teachers to provide effective support to learners with emotional and behavioral issues; provided there are clearly articulated roles and responsibilities for the various professionals, leadership support, and training, to develop the participants' collaborative skills [9].

As schools transition back onsite, vulnerable learners already experiencing challenging emotional and behavioural issues, will require additional support to enable an effective transition. This will require a multi-level structured and systemic

approach to ensure sufficient manpower, adequate resources, and opportunities for professional learning, so that all stakeholders are fully prepared to undertake this demanding but exciting transition.

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