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Supporting the Transition of Learners with Learning Disabilities into a Special Class: An Informal Transition Support Training Model

Abstract

The transition plan for learners with learning disabilities is a critical aspect that involves various key components. This paper focuses on the importance of transition planning in facilitating the successful integration of such learners into a special class, highlighting the benefits of family, school, and community partnerships. The plan establishes clear goals and objectives that align with the learner's aspirations and abilities, encompassing academic achievements, social integration, skill development, and career exploration. Moreover, the plan identifies specific strategies and interventions to address potential barriers and challenges during the transition process. The paper draws on research conducted in a school situated in Johannesburg South and a longitudinal research program conducted at the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin. Utilizing the insights gained from these studies, the paper proposes an informal Transition Support Training model. This model emphasizes the assessment of learner strengths, challenges, and needs, allowing educators and support teams to construct an Individualized Education Transition Plan that optimally supports learners with learning disabilities throughout their transitional journey into a special class. By delivering the transition plan effectively, educators and support staff can facilitate a smooth transition for the learner's well-being and set the stage for their success in the new educational setting.

Keywords: transition, learners with learning disabilities, transition plan, special class

Introduction

Transition is a term that encompasses change and movement (Patton & Kim, 2016). As described by the transition theory, transitions can occur at any time and may be predictable or unpredictable (Anderson et al., 2018). While some individuals may navigate transitions successfully without a formal plan, it is widely recognized that the transition process can be challenging, particularly when faced with the need to adapt to new environments or settings. This holds true for learners with learning disabilities (LD), for whom unprepared transitions can be even more difficult when they have to transition from the mainstream class into a special class. Therefore, implementing a transition plan becomes crucial to support their successful transition into a special class.

Transition planning is a strategic approach employed during critical transition periods to ensure a smooth and effective process for learners with LD as they move into a special class. Buthelezi and Maseko (2023) stipulate that support for learners with LD involves the collaborative efforts of the family, school, and community to develop and

implement a comprehensive transition plan tailored to the unique needs of each learner transitioning into a special class. By embracing a proactive approach, transition planning aims to minimize potential obstacles and maximize opportunities for success (Trainor et al., 2020). Olcese (2019) states that at the core of effective transition planning is the creation of a transition plan, which serves as a guiding document throughout the transition process. This plan outlines the necessary steps, resources, and support mechanisms required to facilitate a successful transition. It addresses various aspects, including academic, social, emotional, and vocational considerations, based on the individual learner's needs and goals (Wehman et al., 2020).

Challenges faced by learners with learning disabilities during transition

Transitioning between educational settings can present unique challenges for learners with LD. These challenges can impact various aspects of their academic, social, and emotional well-being. Understanding these challenges is essential to effectively support learners during periods of transition. These are some of the challenges that learners with LD experience during transition which emanated from research conducted in a school located in Johannesburg South:

- *Academic expectations*: Moving from one class to another or transitioning from one educational setting to another often involves a shift in academic expectations. Learners with LD may struggle to adjust to new curriculum requirements, instructional methods, or assessment formats. They may require additional support to bridge any gaps in their academic skills and knowledge (Buthelezi, 2020).
- *Learning environment*: Transitioning to a new learning environment can be overwhelming for learners with LD as they may struggle to adapt to changes in classroom routines, structures, or physical layouts. Navigating the new classroom and adapting to the setting may pose difficulty (Patton & Kim, 2016).
- *Social interaction*: It has been established that learners with LD may struggle to develop and maintain social connections during transitions and they may experience social anxiety, struggle with communication skills, or find making friends in new settings challenging (Cavendish et al., 2017) as such the loss of familiar peer networks and the need to establish new relationships can be particularly challenging for these learners.
- *Self-advocacy*: Transition periods may require learners to become more self-aware and develop self-advocacy skills and it has also been established that LD may find it challenging to express their needs, seek support, or communicate effectively with teachers, peers, and other stakeholders. They may require assistance in understanding their learning strengths and weaknesses and developing strategies to advocate for themselves (Buthelezi, 2020).
- *Executive functioning*: It was further established that executive functioning skills, such as organization, time management, planning, and task initiation, are crucial for academic success (Buthelezi, 2020). Furthermore, it was found that learners with LD may struggle with these skills and transitioning to a new educational setting can further exacerbate these difficulties. They may require explicit instruction and ongoing support to develop and strengthen their executive functioning abilities.

- *Emotional well-being*: Transitions can evoke a range of emotions for learners with LD, including anxiety, stress, and fear of the unknown (Patton & Kim, 2016). It has also been found that learners with LD may worry about their ability to meet new academic demands, fit in socially, or navigate unfamiliar environments. Emotional well-being supports, such as counseling services or access to a trusted adult, can help address these concerns and promote a positive transition experience.

Addressing these transition challenges requires a collaborative approach involving educators, support staff, families, and the learners themselves. It was thus recommended in the study conducted by Buthelezi (2020) that individualized transition plans, regular communication, targeted interventions, and ongoing support can help ease the transition process and facilitate successful adaptation to new educational environments.

Between the year 2010 and 2015, the School of Education at Trinity College Dublin conducted a longitudinal research program called "Inclusion in Education and Society" (Doyle, 2016). This program focused on investigating the transition of learners with disabilities as they moved from post-primary education to higher education (HE). The program consisted of three simultaneous studies. Study Three specifically examined the effectiveness of transition planning resources designed for learners, parents, and practitioners involved in supporting learners with disabilities during their transition journey. These resources were uniquely created for the study (Doyle, 2016).

The research program identified critical factors influencing successful transitions, including the importance of self-awareness, self-determination, self-advocacy, and independence. Recommendations from the findings suggested the need for a flexible planning instrument that could be adapted to individual needs and contexts, serving as a modular portfolio covering the senior cycle of education.

As a result of the above research, a model of the research was developed, known as the Education Transition Planning (ETP), serving as an informal Transition Support Training toolkit.

Theoretical framework

Transition planning models are built upon theoretical frameworks that prioritize support for learners with LD. The Education Transition Planning (ETP) model is grounded in two distinct but complementary theories: transition theory and family, school, and community partnership framework. The first theory, Schlossberg's transition theory, acknowledges that transition is a challenging process for individuals. While Schlossberg's theory primarily focuses on adult transitions, it can also be applied to young people, including learners with learning disabilities.

Schlossberg's theory is based on several premises (Anderson et al., 2011). Firstly, individuals consistently experience transitions, and their reactions to these transitions depend on the type of transition, whether it is an event or a non-event, as well as their perception and the context surrounding the transition. Secondly, transition is a continuous process without a fixed endpoint. It involves different phases, including assimilation and continuous assessment, as individuals progress through three stages of transition: moving in, moving through, and moving out. These stages are guided by four essential factors, referred to as the four Ss: Strategies, Support, Self, and Situation.

Secondly, ETP incorporates support for transition through Epstein's Family School Community Partnership (Epstein, 2018). The involvement of key stakeholders, such as

the learner's family, school personnel, and members of the community, is essential in the development and execution of the transition plan (Epstein, 2018). Collaboration among these stakeholders ensures a holistic approach to support the learner during this critical phase. It enables the exchange of information, the identification of strengths and challenges, and the establishment of clear roles and responsibilities for each party involved. Through shared decision-making and active participation, all stakeholders contribute to creating an inclusive and supportive environment for the learner's successful transition (O'Neill et al., 2016).

To ensure a comprehensive and seamless transition, the plan also addresses the need for collaboration between the sending (mainstream class) and receiving (special class) classes where the learner with learning disabilities moves in, moves through, and moves out of the transition process. This collaboration facilitates the smooth transfer of relevant information, such as previous report cards, individualized education plans (IEPs), and any additional accommodations or supports required. It promotes continuity of services and ensures that the learner's specific needs are understood and met in the new educational setting (Cavendish et al., 2017).

Regular evaluation and monitoring of the transition plan are vital to its success. This ongoing process allows for adjustments and modifications based on the learner's progress and changing circumstances. It also provides an opportunity to identify and address any emerging challenges, ensuring that the learner's transition remains on track.

By implementing a well-structured and comprehensive transition plan, learners with LD can experience a smoother and more successful transition into a special class. The collaborative efforts of the family, school, and community, coupled with proactive strategies and ongoing evaluation, create an environment that supports the learner's growth, development, and overall well-being. Guidelines in the planning process should include:

- *Collaboration and coordination*: Effective collaboration among key stakeholders, including educators, support staff, families, and community members, is essential for delivering the transition plan. Regular communication and coordination ensure that everyone involved is aware of the plan's goals, objectives, and specific actions to be taken (Young et al., 2011).
- *Individualized approach*: According to Cavendish et al. (2017) it is imperative that when planning each learner's unique needs and strengths are recognized. The delivery of the transition plan should be tailored to meet these individual requirements. Personalized supports, accommodations, and interventions should be provided to address specific academic, social, emotional, and behavioral challenges.
- *Timely implementation*: It is important to initiate the delivery of the transition plan on time this includes starting preparations well in advance of the actual transition period to allow for adequate planning, resource allocation, and necessary adjustments. Early intervention ensures that learners have sufficient time to acclimate to the upcoming changes (Herring, 2019).
- *Supportive environment*: Create a supportive and inclusive environment in both the sending and receiving educational settings. This entails fostering a positive and welcoming atmosphere that values diversity and promotes acceptance. Educators and peers should be encouraged to provide support, understanding, and

encouragement to learners with LD throughout the transition process (Dakwat, 2023).

- *Continuity of services*: Ensure a smooth continuity of support services during the transition. This involves facilitating the transfer of relevant information, such as IEPs which form part of the SIAS policy (DoE, 2020), assessment records, and accommodations, between the sending and receiving classes. Clear communication channels and collaboration between educators help maintain consistent support and minimize disruptions.
- *Monitoring and evaluation*: Regular monitoring and evaluation of the transition plan's implementation are crucial. Assess the progress of the learner, identify any challenges or gaps in support, and make necessary adjustments accordingly. Ongoing communication with the learner, family, and relevant stakeholders allows for timely intervention and ensures that the transition remains on track (Etscheidt et al., 2023).
- *Transition support team*: Consider establishing a transition support team consisting of professionals with expertise in special education, counseling, and related fields. This team can provide guidance, support, and expertise in delivering the transition plan. They can offer additional resources, training, and assistance to educators and families involved in the transition process (Patton & Kim, 2016).

Conceptualization of the transition plan training program

The delivery of the transition plan plays a critical role in ensuring a smooth and successful transition for learners with LD. It involves the implementation of strategies and actions outlined in the transition plan to support the learner's adjustment to a new educational setting. Designing a comprehensive training program for the delivery of the transition plan is crucial to ensure that educators and support staff have the necessary knowledge, skills, and strategies to effectively support learners during the transition process (Dakwat, 2023). Below is an outline of steps to be considered when implementing a training program focused on the delivery of the transition plan:

Step 1: Introduction to transition planning

It is thus important to ensure that there is provision of an overview of the purpose and importance of transition planning for learners with learning disabilities. This according to Dawkat (2023) assists in ensuring that the key components of a transition plan and its role in facilitating a smooth transition for learners with learning disabilities are explained. Furthermore, it highlights the benefits of collaborative teamwork for stakeholders involved in the transition process.

Step 2: Understanding the needs of learners with learning disabilities

In the program it is imperative as stipulated by Patton and Kim (2016) that the characteristics, strengths, and challenges commonly associated with learning disabilities are thoroughly explored. Furthermore, the impact of learning disabilities on academic, social, emotional, and behavioral aspects of learners' lives should be highlighted as this assists in providing insights into the specific needs and considerations of learners with learning disabilities during transitions.

Step 3: Legal and policy framework

During the implementation of the training program participants must be familiarized with relevant regulations, and policies related to transition planning for learners with learning disabilities such as the SIAS policy framework (DoE, 2020). Explain the rights and entitlements of learners with disabilities during transitions, including accommodations and support services aids in ensuring that legal aspects are made clear for participants to avoid legal implications that may arise.

Step 4: Developing individualized transition plans

The training program should guide participants through the process of developing individualized transition plans for learners with learning disabilities using a checklist to identify needs a learner may have. An individualized transition plan is a tailor-made plan for the learner based on their uniqueness as such it is imperative that the necessary assessment tools, data collection methods, and collaborative strategies to gather information about learners' strengths, needs, and goals should be outlined (Trainor et al., 2020). This should be done by providing examples and templates for creating effective transition plans tailored to the unique needs of learners with learning disabilities. The importance of this is that it ensures that transition planners can collect sufficient information about the learner (Dakwat, 2023).

Step 5: Collaborative partnerships and communication

During training the importance of collaborative partnerships between educators, support staff, families, and community members should be emphasized. Partnerships aid in ensuring that every person plays a part using their expertise and experience to ensure that the learner's needs are met during transition. Furthermore, the strategies for effective communication, information sharing, and collaboration among stakeholders involved in the transition process should be shared with participants since these key areas aid in ensuring a smooth process. It is suggested by Mazzotti et al. (2018) that techniques for engaging learners, families, and community resources in the development and implementation of transition plans are also shared with participants to equip them in designing an effective plan.

Step 6: Supporting academic transitions

As part of transition planning Bargeron et al. (2015) suggest that strategies and interventions to support learners with learning disabilities in adapting to new academic expectations, instructional methods, and assessment formats should also be addressed. Moreover, the techniques for promoting executive functioning skills, organization, time management, and task initiation during academic transitions should also be highlighted. In supporting academic transitions effective instructional strategies and accommodations to meet learners' diverse learning needs in the new educational setting must also be addressed.

Step 7: Social and emotional support

When dealing with learners with LD it becomes mandatory to examine the social and emotional challenges, they may face during transition so that they can acquire the necessary support to handle the emotions that come with transition stress (Bargeron et

al., 2015). As such the provision of strategies to promote social skills, self-advocacy, self-confidence, and resilience in the new learning environment should form part of the transition plan training. In this training program, the approaches to fostering a supportive and inclusive school culture that values diversity and promotes positive peer relationships need to be shared with participants (Cavendish et al., 2017). It has been found by Patton and Kim (2016) that learners with LD struggle to make friends due to their lack of emotional intelligence.

Step 8: Monitoring, evaluation, and follow-up

Like any implementation program, it is of utmost importance that ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and follow-up to ensure the effectiveness of transition plans are done (Mazzotti et al., 2018). Trainers should explore assessment methods, progress tracking, and data collection strategies to measure the impact of transition interventions in schools and further provide guidance on adjusting, addressing challenges, and modifying transition plans based on ongoing feedback and evaluation from the participants.

Step 9: Professional development and resources

In training programs trainers must share professional development opportunities, resources, and research-based practices related to transition planning for learners with learning disabilities so that participants can be able to refer somewhere to acquire additional information (Trainor et al., 2020). They can also provide participants with access to relevant publications, websites, and online platforms as part of extra support.

Step 10: Case studies and practical application

After training it is also suggested by Cavendish et al. (2017) that participants in case studies and interactive activities are encouraged to apply the knowledge and skills acquired during the training program. Encouraging participants to share their experiences, challenges, and successes related to delivering transition plans for learners with learning disabilities can assist others who have not undergone training and they could share information with others who may require support. Facilitating discussions and problem-solving sessions to address specific scenarios and real-life situations that may arise during the transition process also form part of the ongoing program since communication does not stop when training ends (Mazzotti et al., 2018).

Step 11: Evaluation and feedback

Conduct evaluations to gather feedback from participants regarding the training program's content and delivery since the delivery of the transition plan should be a collaborative and ongoing process (Dakwat, 2023). Transition planning requires flexibility, open communication, and a commitment to meeting the evolving needs of the learner.

Conclusion

In conclusion, transition planning plays a vital role in ensuring successful transitions for learners with LD as they move into a special class. By involving key stakeholders, creating a comprehensive transition plan, and fostering collaboration, we can provide the

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necessary support and resources to navigate the challenges of transition. Through these efforts, we empower learners with LD to embrace new opportunities, thrive in their educational journey, and achieve their full potential.

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