

Nomthandazo Buthelezi & Nonhlanhla Maseko

Family Support for Learners with Mild Intellectual Disabilities during Transition

Abstract

Family support is essential for academic success and the creation of resilient learners. Support is a complex and contested terrain that is variously described based on disparate philosophical lenses through which it is viewed. It cannot be denied that learners are bound to encounter several challenges during their educational expedition that might require support. In this study the focus is on learners with mild intellectual disabilities (MID) who are firstly assessed, diagnosed then recommended placement into a special class. Subsequently, they may well be required to transition from the mainstream class to a special class. Transition tends to be a challenging time for learners in general, however, it may particularly be more challenging for learners with MID for several reasons (i.e., fear of change, attachment issues, bullying from other peers etc.). Essentially, family support becomes critical in facilitating this process since it is construed for positive transition processes. Furthermore, it increases the motivation and confidence of a learner with MID who may potentially encounter discrimination and marginalisation during transition. Notwithstanding, the numerous benefits of family support for learners with MID, a variety of challenges experienced by families in the provision of support to a learner with MID have been identified in a school located in a semi-rural part of a South African province. Such challenges include but are not limited to poor communication between families and homes, lack/limited of knowledge and lack of functional family-school partnerships. Drawing from this, the current study aims to provide possible approaches to mitigate the challenges experienced by families in providing support to learners with MID during the transition process.

Keywords: family, support, transition, mild intellectual disabilities, special class

Introduction

This study is primarily focused on learners with MID who transition into a special class. Researchers such as Dockett et al. (2012) write that family support is influential during the transition process of a learner from a mainstream class to a special class. In support, McIntyre et al. (2010) indicate that families often want to receive communication regarding how best they can assist the learner with his or her transition, this includes seeking information pertaining to academic and behavioural expectations through school-led transition activities such as school visits, family meetings, and developing parent and professional alliances. Over the years empirical findings have demonstrated a positive association between family support during transition and coping mechanisms (Dockett et al., 2012). According to Dockett et al. (2012), family support is a powerful, preventive mechanism that supports resiliency and has a

significant impact on the successful entry of learners with learning disabilities into a special class. This section of the paper has introduced the core subject of the study, the next section grounds the study into context.

Background of the study

In South Africa the government through the provisions in the South African Schools Act of 1996 (SASA) promotes family support in learner education for positive school outcomes and learner participation in schools (DOE, 1996). Regardless of the mandated policies, research indicates that families are still lacking in providing the holistic needs of their children in all school programmes and activities (Sedibe, 2012). SASA (DOE, 1996) correspondingly acknowledges that despite governmental efforts in enhancing family support there are still challenges that hinder with these efforts. Congruently more intervention strategies are required in South African schools to promote family support (DOE, 1996). In concurrence Ellman et al. (2020) point out that despite government interventions the problem continues to exist in South African schools, predominantly in underprivileged schools. Research shows that family support continues to be minimal in SA, which consequently affects learner progress, especially for learners with mild intellectual disabilities (Sedibe, 2012).

Learners with MID are mild functioning and require support although not as intensely as those with profound or severe intellectual disabilities since they do not require continuous care and management (Odongo, 2018). However, this does not suggest that they are to be deprived of any additional support particularly when they are transitioning to the next class. One of the best ways of ensuring that learners with MID succeed is through family support. For many families, limited or lack of knowledge concerning intellectual disabilities, might be the contributing factor that may hinder family support during the transitioning process. In education, transition typically refers to the three major transitional points in the public education system, which include moving from pre-school to primary school, from primary school to high school, and from high school to college or university (Little, 2015). While learners experience other transitions during their educational journey such as advancing from one grade level to the next, these types of transitions are referred to as the three “major” transition points that are particularly focused on teacher and school reformers as advised by Little (2015).

When transitioning, learners may often experience significant academic, social, emotional, physical, or developmental changes that may adversely affect their educational performance (Little, 2015). Further, throughout these transitions, for example, learners with MID may move from a familiar school to an unfamiliar school, where they encounter new teachers, peers, academic expectations, social issues, and school configurations which could increase the likelihood that they may feel overwhelmed, anxious, frustrated or insecure (Rowe et al., 2015). At this point, they may require the support of their immediate family to cope with these emotions. Odongo (2018) similarly concedes that support may be neglected due to lack of knowledge in transition and learning disabilities which maybe a reason why families are seemingly not initiating or attempting to implement strategies which could be beneficial in the transition process. Moreover, the lack of support may sometimes be attributed to families being intimidated by the school system which may leave them feeling as if they have nothing of value to contribute (Odongo, 2018). Subsequently, this also prevents families from effusively engaging in school matters on a regular basis

(Little, 2015). This study explored the primary question: Which strategies could be implemented to mitigate the challenges experienced by families in supporting learners with MID during transition?

Challenges experienced by families in supporting transition

Garbacz et al. (2017) established that there is a positive impact in education and academic achievement when families are involved. Family support has also been associated with improvement of children's self-esteem and academic performance (McIntyre et al., 2010). Additionally, Garbacz et al. (2017) are of the opinion that when families increase their interaction and discussion with their children it could consequently result in more responsiveness and sensitivity towards their children's social, emotional and intellectual developmental needs at home as well as at school. Conversely, there are challenges to family support such as lack of interest in the learner's academic life, time constraints of working parents and families assuming that their involvement is not pivotal towards their children's education (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018) resulting in minimal family support. Another challenge is the family's attitude towards their role and the importance it has on the learner's academic journey.

Liu et al. (2020) argue that when families of children with MID fail to execute their responsibilities of caring and supporting their children's education, it results in disconnection between the home and the school (Liu et al., 2020). When families are not aware of what transpires during transition, they fail to critic the effects of transition in order to provide the necessary support. Family support is key to the smooth transition of learners with MID, as such it is imperative for schools to develop a level of trust and rapport with families to augment transition (Liu et al., 2020). One of the ways that schools can develop these relationships is through transition activities with families and children: activities that build and strengthen the relationships between families and primary school, ultimately supporting the learner's entry into a special class (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018). Withal, families may encounter challenges when having to provide support to learners with MID, below the challenges are conversed.

Poor communication

Poor communication between the school and families can be attributed to many factors such as lack of resources or lack of family involvement. For learner success in school the study by Hornby and Blackwell (2018) reveals that communication is one of the most important factors in making that possible. To acquire an understanding of the complex term Hornby and Blackwell (2018) define the concept of communication as sharing of emotions, thoughts, knowledge, news, or skills. Liu et al. (2020) further assert that healthy communication is not always possible between schools and families, it can therefore not be disputed that communication barriers exist, and these can hinder with making the transition process smooth. These barriers may be identified as physical, technical, psychological or social and organisational communication barriers (Liu et al., 2020).

Lack of knowledge

In some cases, families of learners with MID may well be identified as being uneducated which may contribute to lack of knowledge (Odongo, 2018). For this

reason, families might not know how to be or get involved with their child's education. Another reason for this could arise when families feel intimidated by the school system and feel that they have nothing of value to contribute towards the education of their child with MID (Odongo, 2018). Since the school selected for this study is in a semi-rural part of the province in SA, they could also lack access to information avenues. This results in the school being the only source of information and failure to disseminate this information, it could subsequently contribute to limited knowledge pertaining to transition support amongst families.

Lack of functional family-school partnerships

The South African Schools Act (SASA) (DOE, 1996) states that it is vital for parents to be involved and participate in schools. SASA in its efforts to augment family-school partnerships (FSPs) put in place guidelines to be implemented in schools such as the SIAS policy document. One of the guidelines recommends commitment from all stakeholders involved in FSPs so that they can be functional. The establishment of school governing bodies (SGBs) is another imperative approach set to warrant the involvement of families in school-related activities as well as the administration of the school (DOE, 1996). Irrespective of these governmental strategies, research by Ellman et al. (2020) attests that there are still challenges in schools which delineates families from their roles as stakeholders in the partnership. As suggested in this study, these could be contributed by several factors such as power struggles, lack of knowledge and training resulting in lack of functional FSPs.

Family involvement through support could therefore play a substantial role in ensuring that there is a smooth transition of learners into a special class. However, the importance of family support in addressing the challenges faced by learners with MID during the transition process to the special class is not clearly documented in the South African policy guidelines. Fundamentally, this poses a gap in policies established by DOE (1996) which advocate for holistic learner support.

Approaches to mitigate family support challenges

The Department of Education (DOE, 1996) emphasizes the importance of family involvement in the education system. Policies such as the South African Schools Act (SASA) of 1996 mandate parents to participate in all school's activities to support the progress of their children (DOE, 1996). Family support in the education of learners with MID has been found to have positive outcomes in improving their performance, moreover, it creates a motivating and conducive learning environment (Oranga et al., 2022).

It is pivotal that the family provides support to the learner during the whole process of transition. As mentioned above families appear to be unaware or uninformed about their role in the transition of learners with MID into the special class, which consequently leads to little or no involvement in the process (Oranga et al., 2022). According to Rowe et al. (2015) lack of functional partnerships constitutes challenges particularly when the school, families and the community do not see the value of educating and supporting learners with MID during transition. To mitigate the challenges the following have been recommended as approaches to endorse family support: positive communication; establishment of transition plans; and family-school partnerships (Oranga et al., 2022).

Positive communication

Positive communication was identified as an area of need to enhance family support. Increased, positive communication makes families feel more comfortable and welcomed into the school. Families want to hear beyond the negative and learn about their child's achievements (Foley et al., 2012). Also, teachers can show that they value family involvement by communicating what the family's role in transition could look like and invite them to school to discuss and plan for transition. When families feel that the school really values and encourages their involvement and inputs, they are more likely to participate. Providing a sense of openness and welcoming is another strategy that may make families feel comfortable. Congruently, when families feel comfortable they are more likely to be involved. Welcoming them as they enter the building or personally inviting them into classrooms are some of the simple steps suggested to breaking down the barrier of discomfort for families (Foley et al., 2012).

Transition plans

Findings from this study also established that transition plans do not exist at the school and therefore transition support cannot occur if there is no transition planning. Concomitantly Rowe et al. (2015) stipulate that it is vital for schools to partner with families in transition practices. However, that is also highly dependent on the school's clear understanding of transition processes and principles as well as who should be involved in the transition process. Transition plans are effective, in addition they also aid as one of the approaches that may well promote family support (Foley et al., 2012).

Establishment of functional family-school partnerships

Family-school partnerships are an effective strategy in supporting and empowering family support and bringing together schools and community resources in the enhancement of a smooth transition (Lindstrom & Beno, 2022). The family-school partnership framework contains a vision for effective partnerships as it contains a set of principles to guide families and schools in developing partnerships, it also sets out strategies that provide practical guidance to school communities and school systems in the implementation and fostering of family school partnerships to enhance family support (Lindstrom & Beno, 2022).

Additional recommendations

Based on the above discussion, the researcher thus recommends that further studies should focus on the development of transition programmes in South Africa as part of the screening, identification, assessment and support policy framework which could work in assisting learners during the transition from a formal to a special class. Ellman et al. (2020) are of the opinion that the education system should develop transition policy guidelines that may assist learners with MID and their families prepare for any challenges which may arise during the transition period. When a transition tool exists, it would contain step by step guidelines on how or what to do when facing transitional challenges. Such information when easily accessible can assist in ensuring that those concerned (learners) have enough confidence in navigating from one space to another without much exacerbation (Ellman et al., 2020).

Implementation of support structures for families and learners with MID when transitioning into the special class could prove difficult when done without additional

support (Ellman et al., 2020). A family-school partnership where families, the school and community work collectively as a team could be used as a strategy to plan and facilitate transition. Moreover, this strategy could alleviate the challenges that come with transition. FSPs could also involve external stakeholders such as social workers, psychologists and registered counselors could assist by providing counseling sessions before, during and after transition.

Consequently, when support is neglected during transition it may possibly become difficult for learners with MID to confront transition challenges that may arise (Ellman et al., 2020). Thus, the implementation of FSPs is recommended since, it is intended to upsurge the learner's self-esteem, motivation, as well as independence and overall character during transition.

Conclusion

This study was concerned with the approaches to mitigate challenges experienced by families in supporting the transition of learners with MID. What emerged from the pragmatic findings was that families experience these challenges due to poor communication, lack/limited of knowledge in MID and no functional FSPs. As a result, recommendations suggested that schools ought to involve families in school activities and partner with them in fostering functional FSPs. These recommendations, furthermore, could aid in information sharing and strengthen family support in the transition of learners with MID transition. Furthermore, recommendations might also additionally improve learners with MID's resiliency, attendance, and academic performance at school and beyond.

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Nomthandazo Buthelezi, M.A., University of Johannesburg, South Africa

Dr. Nonhlanhla Maseko, University of Johannesburg, South Africa