Summary Report -

‘Supporting Students Living with Disability in the Home Learning Environment’ Online Forum, 6 May 2020

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## Introduction

COVID-19 has caused significant disruption to education in Australia and globally. Schools needed to swiftly set up remote teaching and learning and find ways to engage and support students while not on the school site. This includes students living with disability who, due to various factors such as increased vulnerability to COVID-19 infection, were unable to attend during term 1 and may not have returned on site this term.

The Inclusive School Communities Project hosted an online forum via Zoom to discuss frustrations and challenges, brainstorm solutions, and share best practices and resources for remote learning with a focus on inclusive education. The forum was hosted by Inclusive School Mentors - Anu Francis, Leeanne Marshall and Madde Mackenzie. They are young women living with disability who have completed secondary and tertiary education and who have a broad collective knowledge base about inclusion, education, and youth leadership.

15 school leaders, teachers, teacher aides, and parents/caregivers from South Australia and Queensland engaged in a rich discussion about remote learning in their region during COVID-19. Participants were encouraged to submit questions beforehand and the discussion was facilitated around a set of questions that the school mentors had prepared (see appendix for the full list). The event was conducted via Zoom. The following is a summary of key points and examples drawn from the verbal conversation and chat during the online forum.

## Implementation of Remote Learning in Response to COVID-19

Schools in different regions had to consider the nature of their school communities when determining how to approach remote learning during COVID-19. Some schools with their families not having a computer/internet at home were provided with learning packs in blocks (e.g., two-week); these were collected by families or some schools were able to deliver learning packs to students at home. The approach to remote learning described by schools in SA and QLD was similar.

Some schools in SA used their existing online learning management systems. For example, at one school staff underwent an orientation/take-up process of Canva and within three weeks they were up and running. Various learning programs/platforms were discussed as well as how these were used by schools:

* Canva, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Hangouts, Google Classrooms, and Edmodo - especially for secondary students.
* Seasaw and ClassDojo – especially for primary students.
* Some of these platforms were also used specifically by school staff for checking in with students, especially around wellbeing. Google Hangouts become more of a wellbeing space for students who wanted to ‘hangout’ with each other or ‘check in’ with staff.

“The students did love chat times during the day. They loved the messaging features.”

* Some schools reported having their teacher aides working with students individually through Zoom.
* Phone calls via the learning platforms were made to students – some schools reported using as audio only and others used video as well.

“What kids taught us is they know way more than we do about technology.”

One SA school reported arranging around 80 computers that were loaned to students with the school’s IT staff setting these up for use at home and internet dongles were provided to those who didn’t have this already.

*Zoom*

The discussion explored Zoom and its various uses for remote learning:

* Morning Zoom meeting with all students in that year level and afternoon Zoom meeting by class. In the morning staff would explain to students what would be happening that day.
* Zoom assembly – the students enjoyed using it as a means for communicating with other people and are keen to learn to use it more. The assembly included watching a video and each class speaking about their goals and plans for the term. This school is attempting a whole school assembly via Zoom (1200 students) with all classes having the Zoom meeting open on their interactive whiteboards/other device in classroom.
* Zoom ‘class roll call’ – in week 10 students and staff logged in for a 9am daily roll call.
* Using Zoom meetings was positive for staff as well since they were able to meet online while following social distancing requirements.

## Status Now in Term 2

According to the webinar participants in SA, attendance at their schools this term is 79-97% so they are back to regular, in-class teaching and learning. There were a few participants from QLD who reported that attendance is still very low, maybe 15-20%, with many families keeping their children home and some families have gone out bush.

Although schools in SA didn’t get much of a chance to practice using the online learning platforms, they agreed this experience will be helpful moving into the future and indicated they are better equipped to support any student who is learning from home.

“We have over 70 per cent of our students back right from the beginning of this term so a lot of that training that staff did in order to get prepared has been awesome in that we now know how to do this and we can help any student who is at home for whatever reason but a lot of it has not been used to the full extent yet. It was amazing learning nonetheless.”

## Challenges with Remote Learning During COVID-19

* Problems with keeping in touch with students and families during this period since many of these families are on prepaid credit or plans – if they don't keep up with their payments the phone becomes unusable then they get a new SIM. A school in QLD reported that many of the families’ contact numbers are not up to date and they cannot contact them however "the bush telegraph works well”. A school reported that they worked very hard in the beginning to get the phone numbers right so they could keep in contact with students/families. If families ran out of internet credit meaning their students couldn’t access the online learning, they were encouraged to send their children to school like the essential workers.
* Some parents have multiple children with high needs and home learning creates quite a lot of pressure. It is hard for them to ensure each child is getting adequate supports.
* Some parents/caregivers have found it hard to motivate their children to do the work and they discovered how difficult it is for the school to engage their child. Parents/caregivers have sought advice on how to motivate their children to engage with the reading/learning demands of the task.
* Some students are not doing any of the work or minimal and they are not coming online.
* Time and task management can be a challenge for students, especially those who haven’t developed these skills or who, due to the nature of their disability, have difficulties in this area.
* It can be hard to know what engagement and learning is happening when students aren’t at school.
* A parent reported that her child’s school didn’t do videos (except some YouTube’s for learning) and all interactions were through online forums in SEQTA. Using SEQTA requires a lot of computer literacy as well as general literacy. This is a big challenge for students with literacy difficulties.
* A parent reported that this term, their child’s school wanted students to log into the forum each class time to keep to the regular timetable. This meant the family didn’t have the flexibility to do things at their own pace if they wanted their child to attend 100%. The family found that when their child skipped some classes, she was able to do a lot of high-quality work. At school, the child she was missing learning because she was much less engaged, getting very overstimulated and opting out of class times, and taking lots of breaks outside the classroom.
* Participants reported that some students don’t have a parent/caregiver, sibling or support worker to monitor and motivate their learning at home, so schools had to explore ways to support them i.e., using teacher aides to work with students via Zoom.

## Examples of Quality Practices and Ideas for Remote Learning

* Instructional videos were discussed as an effective means for engaging and teaching students. One participant reported that their school principal is making YouTube cooking clips with the school mascot. However, it was noted that instructional videos should include a practical component (where possible) rather than students just watching a video.
* Various suggestions were made to get students doing physical activity while at home:
  + One school had all students participate in running, walking and physical activities for 45 minutes each morning.
  + Athletics SA was doing online challenges e.g., throwing different household items and recording distance.
  + Domestic Olympics - students challenged to do different household chores over a week and submit evidence of themselves doing the tasks.
* There was a lot of discussion about approaches to providing learning/tasks to students and many webinar participants spoke about providing small chunks of work or helping students/families to break down the learning/tasks one day at a time so it’s easier to complete. A school reported that the work was released day-by-day to students with autism who become overwhelmed when confronted with what appears to be a lot of work. Strategies such as “do what is difficult for a short time” can be helpful for some students. Another suggestion was ‘pacing guides’ that set doable timelines for the small tasks that make up a big task/assignment.
* Creating and sticking to a routine was discussed as essential for students and for families while learning from home – being mindful that some students will want to keep a routine similar to their school timetable and others will want more flexibility.
* Working with students/families to come up with a learning program/routine that works for them and being flexible to what the family has capacity to do. For example, a family who has multiple children at different year levels and complex learning profiles at home discussed with the school and agreed to aim for academic learning until 12pm and then outdoor play and sport in the afternoon. Another example was a family with two students with autism who are still remote learning this term; this family has meetings altogether on Sunday evenings to plan for the week and workout a roster. This family decided to have Wednesdays off schoolwork and were able to get the same amount of work completed in the four days with the day off in the middle.
* Suggestions were made about ways to keep students engaged and enjoying the learning such as building in home activities they wouldn't normally do, incorporating everyday tasks into learning (e.g., using maths in cooking), providing hands on/building/creating options, and using students’ passions, interests and strengths. For example, a student who loves being on film makes mobile film clips to showcase her learning and shares them online with the other students.
* Several quality teaching practices were discussed such as brain breaks (e.g., do something outside), break jar, movement activities (e.g., design a chalk movement path then draw on the driveway), and oral language activities with family (e.g., talking sticks shuffle).
* Visual aids (i.e., timetables, infographics) were provided to students to support their learning as well and any visuals had appropriate font, space, etc. One participant reported that having a visual plan showing if they do this THEN they get a break can be highly effective with some students.
* A few ideas were offered around motivating students and using positive reinforcement to support engagement (e.g., rewarding students with time for online gaming and YouTube after learning is complete).
* Adding audio and visuals, especially to accompany PPTs was reported as a practice used by several schools.
* The importance of continuing to provide adjustments to students who require them as would be done at school and ensuring language used with students is accessible.
* Participants highlighted the necessity of “listening to students’ voice and supporting their choices”; making sure you ask students and provide opportunities for students to have input into their learning. Several participants discussed the importance of giving students autonomy and input into how they approach their learning, especially with remote learning.
* A point that was mentioned but not discussed in depth was using students to teach and support one another with learning. “Students in the classroom are a huge resource that educators can use.”
* Assessment was discussed briefly with some participants suggesting their school did short quizzes to check students’ learning and retention of the learning materials.

## Learnings and Insights from Remote Learning During COVID-19

There was a lot of discussion about supporting parents/families with their children learning from home. A school discovered that initially they were giving too much work and had to cull following feedback from students/parents on what was and was not working. Many schools noticed that acknowledging to the parents/families that “it is really tough to do this” went a long way in easing some of the pressure and overwhelm some families were experiencing. Many of the schools had their teachers contacting parents/caregivers by phone through this whole process to check in and find out how things are going. Schools that had “strong collaborative partnerships before now” between the parents/caregivers and the teacher were better equipped for supporting students and families during this period.

A participant shared what she has learned about her primary-school-aged daughter while having her daughter learning at home and the group discussed how parents/caregivers can provide feedback to their child’s school about adjustments and supports that have worked well at home. The following suggestions for parents/caregivers were brainstormed:

* Highlight and make notes/suggestions directly on the hard copy of the task/assessment.
* If the task is electronic, make the changes before your child/children begins the task and forward this back to the teacher.
* Add your feedback in an overview or reflection page and return with your child’s work.
* Give the annotated hard copy and overview/reflection page to your child’s teacher or school leader letting them know that home learning has highlighted a few things that worked well for your child and asking if they could adopt them.
* Regularly ask your child's teachers and other school staff how to support them and then give ideas e.g., peer support.

There was a brief conversation towards the end of the forum about families who have found remote learning has been positive for their children and a participant asked what about if parents/caregivers decide after this they want to keep their children at home. We ran out of time to explore this in depth, however participants acknowledged that some students have benefited from remote learning and enjoyed this period away from school.

Webinar participants from various schools in SA and QLD identified the following benefits of remote learning for students and families:

* There is less overstimulation at home and the environment can be more controlled than is possible at school. Students can complete tasks faster at home than they would at school where they can be distracted. “With shorter, concentrated learning, students are able to maintain the focus for that long”.
* Parents/caregivers have the advantage of knowing their own kids and being able to use what they know works with their kids. For example, a parent found that larger fonts, colored backgrounds, and breaks (limited time) has been effective with her child learning at home. This parent also found that reading and scribing for her daughter was helpful in reducing the limitations of her literacy ability and enabling her to work at her intelligence level.
* Students can spend longer on a subject if needed rather than having to stick to their school timetable.
* Students are less likely to lose their books and resources because at home they’re all on the table in front of them.

Some school leaders and teachers found that their students were more engaged and active in learning from home than they had anticipated, “I have been amazed at how motivated the kids are with being able to do all their work on devices.”

## Summary

School leaders who participated in the online forum emphasized the importance of schools welcoming feedback from their students and families, as well as staff, about their experience of remote learning during COVID-19. One SA school is actively gathering feedback about what worked, what did we learn, and how can improve practice in the future through surveys and discussions via Facebook. There was agreement that schools can learn from this period, especially examining students who positive experiences with remote learning and the strategies and supports that could be implemented back in classrooms.

Inclusive School Mentors facilitated a 90-minuted online forum with educators and parents/caregivers in SA and QLD about their experiences of remote learning during COVID-19. A range of challenges, practices and ideas, and key learnings were shared. Although the forum had intended to focus on inclusive education and students living with disability, the discussion was broad and included more generalized quality teaching and learning practices. It was a collaborative conversation involving different voices and contexts however similarities were shared between the participants in different locations... “Our experiences are not that different regardless of borders!”.

Thank you to those who attended our online forum and contributed your experiences and perspectives on remote learning during COVID-19.

## Appendix

Please note some of the below questions were prepared but not discussed during the online forum on 6 May 2020. You are welcome to use and reproduce the questions.

1. For those who are currently working in schools, can you briefly share how your school went about setting up home learning last term?
2. Which online platform are you using and for what purposes? (e.g. Seasaw, Teams, Zoom)
3. How are you supporting students who don’t have access to a device/internet? (e.g., take home materials and resources)
4. How are staff checking in with students? (e.g., email, messaging, phone or video call)
5. How are staff supported to plan and deliver home learning? (e.g., collaborative planning, instructional coaching)
6. What’s the situation like so far this term?
7. What challenges have you faced with home learning, specifically with students living with disability? What solutions have you found?
8. What specific supports and adjustments would you suggest for students on the autism spectrum learning at home?
9. How can families constructively share with their child’s school what has worked well during home learning? What has worked in communicating with and supporting parents/caregivers?
10. How are you communicating and engaging with students?
11. How are you supporting students to stay connected with each other?
12. What is your school doing to support the mental health and wellbeing of students (and families) while learning from home?
13. How are you using SSOs/ESOs and other school support staff to support home learning?
14. Are there any students who you are struggling to meet the needs of?

